

# COMMEMORATION

## *The American Association for State and Local History Guide*

Edited by

SETH C. BRUGGEMAN



- 30. See *Charleston: The George F. Busby Jr. Case: The Charleston AME Church Bombing* (2017). The 430-page volume, published by the University of Georgia Press, was edited by Dr. Cynthia Sims. Scott Miller, a member of the AME Church, provided the foreword by Jack Mosser.
- 31. The service with Dr. Paul F. Williams, Sunday 9, 2014.
- 32. "Black Church and Family Face Tragedy: Charleston's First Church, First Church South Celebrates 150th Birth Day." *The New York Times*, July 26, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/26/us/politics/black-church-south-celebrates-150th-birthday.html>, accessed on March 6, 2016.
- 33. "Protest in Charleston."
- 34. "Protest in Charleston."
- 35. "What's Next? 'Militants in Removal Confession System' Says in Support of Non-Force Laws." March 13, 2016. [http://www.pyrites.com/2016/03/13/what-next-to-remove-what-jerome-says-its-views-on-steps.html?emc=source\\_twitter&utm\\_source=twitter.com&utm\\_medium=social](http://www.pyrites.com/2016/03/13/what-next-to-remove-what-jerome-says-its-views-on-steps.html?emc=source_twitter&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_medium=social), accessed on March 24, 2016.
- 36. "What's Next? 'Militants in Removal Confession System' Says in Support of Non-Force Laws." March 13, 2016. [http://www.pyrites.com/2016/03/13/what-next-to-remove-what-jerome-says-its-views-on-steps.html?emc=source\\_twitter&utm\\_source=twitter.com&utm\\_medium=social](http://www.pyrites.com/2016/03/13/what-next-to-remove-what-jerome-says-its-views-on-steps.html?emc=source_twitter&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_medium=social), accessed on March 24, 2016.



Figure 13.1. People gather in front of the Mother Emanuel AME Church on June 20, 2015 to commemorate a tragedy. Photo by George McDaniel.

## Chapter 13

# Commemorating Tragedy at Mother Emanuel AME Church

George W. McDaniel

*What will it take, ask Rick Beard and Bob Beatty, “to cause a sea change in attitudes toward the Civil War’s causes and consequences?” We might just as well wonder what’s at stake if we don’t. George W. McDaniel’s heartfelt paean to the commemorative labors of a community struck by tragedy suggests one possibility and, in doing so, reinforces Manzullo-Thomas’s observation that “public memory is often formed in the crucible of religious emotion.” The setting in this case is Charleston, South Carolina, where in 2015 twenty-one year old Dylan Roof entered the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church and murdered nine people in hopes of igniting a race war. The shooting occurred at a time, as McDaniel tell us, when mass killings had seemed to become a fixture in American life. And yet, the Charleston shooting was more than just that. What transpired at the old church, itself a monument to the modern civil rights movement, rattled our notion that decades of commemorative work had somehow relegated the terrors of race hatred to memory. McDaniel’s essay is a forceful reckoning with the “dark side,” as he puts it, but its strength lies not only in its emotional power. We find here too, outlined in practical terms, a commemorative prescription for resisting hatred during an era wherein heritage professionals have taken on the unlikely role of first responders.*

—ed.

A black Hyundai parked near a handsome, historic African American church in Charleston, South Carolina. The building dated to 1891 and its congregation to 1816. A young white man with a bowl haircut emerged nicely but informally dressed. He walked through the unlocked side door and into the ground floor parish hall where a Bible study was underway. Twelve people, including the pastor, welcomed him. Gathered around a table, they

discussed the reading for the day, Mark 4:16, Jesus' parable about the sowing of seeds. Close to an hour of discussion and prayer amicably passed by. The young man then stood up, pulled out a Glock semiautomatic pistol, and gunned down nine of the twelve, reloading with at least four clips and firing seventy-seven bullets. Each one was .45 of an inch in diameter upon entering the body and probably wider upon exiting. He hurled racial epithets and proclaimed he had to do this. Before leaving, he told one lady, Polly Shepard, that he had spared her so she could tell the story. When apprehended, he turned out to be not wild-eyed or crazy looking, but instead, the kind of average-looking young white man who may be seen in communities across the nation.

This is but one instance of the hateful killings recently seen in America and across the world. One thing these killers have in common is they are often seen by neighbors and friends as having been "normal." For some reason, these killers have persuaded themselves, or been persuaded, that there are people so different from themselves and their own kind that those people have become the "Other," no longer fellow human beings who deserve to live. Such mental persuasions are not new, for we have heard them for centuries: "Heretic, Commie, Nigger, Fag, Pig, Jew, Gook, Infidel"—the list could go on. Such debasement—and often in America it is grounded in race—is interwoven into the warp and weft of our history and offers teachable moments, so that we can explore the fallacy, indeed the tragedy, of such biased and fearful thinking. We avoid such knowledge at our peril because, as writers have told us for centuries, to deny the existence of evil is hubris, and hubris inevitably leads to tragedy.

For that reason alone, commemorations by historical organizations are important. They help us all understand that the dark side is very much a part of our history. We are not exceptional. We are not innocent. Adam and Eve are part of us all, as is the snake. Commemorations then can offer opportunities for conversations, programs, exhibits, and other means by which we can better inform one another of who we are, amidst our diversity, and thereby develop a deeper and a more nuanced and humane appreciation of our similarities and differences. Being different should not result in being stigmatized as the "Other."

The good news is that in response to these recent killings, people have felt called to commemorate on their own in order to express sentiments opposite to the killers'. They wish to tell us that the victims are not the "Other" but are instead our fellow brothers and sisters. They may communicate this by carrying signs, proclaiming "Je suis Charlie" or "I am AME." They choose words that express their pain and their sense of loss, as well as their hopes and prayers for a brighter world, one in which we may, as John Lennon said decades ago, "come together." As they express themselves, some may wish

to be alone, others may gather with family or in groups, small or large. Still others may testify, meditate, or give voice through music. Time and time again, we also see how people choose to endow tangible things, purchased or homemade, with their spiritual beliefs, feeling that words alone are not enough. By all of these ways, people wish to tell us that no one is the "Other," and that we are all brothers and sisters in one human family.

These were the sentiments expressed by scores of flowers, note cards, banners, posters, teddy bears, crosses, rosary beads, candles, paintings, photographs, and more when I came to pay my respects at Mother Emanuel AME in Charleston on Friday and Saturday, following the murders on Wednesday by that man in the black Hyundai. These things exemplified that moment in time both for Charleston and our nation. It had not rained yet, and as a former director of a historic site and as a Vietnam Veteran who has visited the Vietnam Memorial since its dedication, I was concerned that when the summer storms came, as surely they would in June, they would spoil the signed banners and artifacts left in homage.

Upon returning home, I called my friend Elizabeth "Liz" Alston, a longtime member of Mother Emanuel and its historian, and a former member of Drayton Hall's Site Council. I asked if the church had plans for preserving the artifacts in front of the church. She explained that, as a historian, she was thinking the same way, but that the church was in the midst of grieving and was focused on conducting funerals, caring for the bereaved, and on any number of other things. She too was devastated but nonetheless suggested we meet.

I called museum and preservation professionals, academic and public historians as well as African American descendants of the historic Drayton Hall plantation who had grown up near Emanuel. Each responded positively, and just a week after the tragedy, a small group of us met with Liz in the ground floor room where the shootings had taken place.

It was discomfoting to be in that same space, yet also uplifting. We saw the life of the church continue as members young and old came and went, comforted one another, and got ready for the Bible study that evening, the same class conducted a week earlier with the assassin present. We had our meeting, got the ball rolling for preserving artifacts, and since it had not rained, we brought a number of them into the church, including a large cross, and stored them in a side room.

While we were retrieving artifacts, a half dozen pastors gathered for a press conference in front of the church. Speaking forthrightly into the television cameras, the principal speaker, the Rev. Nelson Rivers, a local pastor and leader in the civil rights movement, explained in no uncertain terms that this was the time for "respect." Protest has its time, but not at this time. These families had experienced loss beyond our understanding. I heard him declare

forcefully: "Malcolm X was about respect. Martin Luther King was about respect. The civil rights movement is about respect. And if you don't understand respect, then you don't belong here at this time." It was a challenge and an assurance for our future. The memorabilia surrounding him underscored his call. That night a thunderstorm struck, making our retrieval just in time.

The next week, our group met again, assessed progress, and retrieved more artifacts. Key to our preservation efforts was the Charleston Archives, Libraries and Museums Council (CALM), which members of our group had called into action. Together, they devised a well-organized process by which artifacts would be systematically photographed in situ and then retrieved from the outside for safekeeping. The Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture provided national input and helped contextualize our work.

Since church space was so limited and in demand, Liz Alston contacted her friend, Mayor Joe Riley, and he quickly responded by offering both staff support as well as temporary storage space in a nearby community center until a more permanent home could be found. Working with church staff, CALM and other volunteers retrieved artifacts from the front of the church in a systematic way throughout the coming months. Their criteria included leaving the perishables like flowers in place and preserving a representative sample of the artifacts, not everything, since time and space did not allow it. Over time, we saved a total of 6,000 artifacts. A moving company, Two Men and a Truck, volunteered to move the artifacts from the church to the community center, where they were secured in a climatized, locked room. CALM and their volunteers also helped Emanuel by processing and cataloguing hundreds of letters and packages, many with Bibles, notes, paintings, sculpture, teddy bears, or quilts enclosed. CALM also reached out to the archival supply company, Gaylord Archival, and they generously donated folders, boxes, and other supplies. The conservation storage company, Iron Mountain, offered secure storage space, which may well be accepted in the near future. What still remains on view are the fire hydrant and crepe myrtles in front of the church, now covered with hand-written messages and signatures and serving as perpetual commemorations.

Since our initiative had been spur of the moment, after several months, it was evident that we needed to develop a long-range plan. John Hildreth, vice president of the eastern region of the National Trust and a member of our group, volunteered to facilitate this effort. Key questions included as follows: What was our relationship to the church? How long were we to remain in existence? What were our responsibilities? What were the conservation and cataloguing needs for the artifacts, and how were they to be met? What were we to keep, discard, or give to survivors, victims' families, or other organizations? What types of facilities were needed for long-term storage, and what

might be available? Who was going to lead and manage this process, and how would it be funded?

Working within the chain of command of the church and not as a separate entity was deemed essential, so we decided to become the Memorabilia Subcommittee of Emanuel's Archives and History Committee, of which Alston was chairman. We also decided that we would operate through the first year anniversary and then, with input from the church, reassess our future later. We also wanted to meet with the leadership of the church and its congregation, convey our condolences, explain what we were doing and why, and answer questions. The curators in our group pressed for decisions about the culling and disposition of artifacts, the proper storage and cataloguing of them, and providing for their professional curation and care. Such decisions rested with church leadership, especially the pastor, and due to other priorities and changes in pastors, delays developed.

In tandem with our preservation of the physical artifacts was a project that represented a now vital and new direction in historic preservation. Undertaken by Lowcountry Africana and the College of Charleston's Lowcountry Digital History Initiative and the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, it sought to document local and national responses in the digital media. This included photographs and video generously contributed by professional and lay photographers, news outlets, both local and national, and individuals on social media, such as Facebook and Instagram. Their work culminated in an online exhibition, *A Tribute to the Mother Emanuel Church*, and was premiered at Mother Emanuel in May 2016. In powerful ways, this graphic account conveyed the outpouring of grief, sympathy, and hope as well as the efforts to address racial injustice and violence in Charleston and across the nation. Especially compelling were images of the many prayer vigils, marches, and protests against symbols such as the Confederate flag and calls for its removal from the SC Capitol grounds. Declared the Rev. Dr. Betty Deas Clark, pastor of Emanuel when it premiered, "We see this online tribute as a healing and educational resource."

To commemorate the first anniversary of the mass shootings, Emanuel developed services, public programs, and marches for June 15–25, 2016, and in early May asked the Memorabilia Subcommittee to produce an exhibit, using the artifacts we had preserved. Time was short, funding uncertain, and the exhibit theme undetermined. In a meeting with the pastor, the committee learned that the theme for the entire commemoration was to be "Victory in the Valley," and so we used words from the twenty-third psalm in writing the titles and language of the exhibit panels. We agreed that the accent should be on "healing," not forgiveness, because a lot of people had not yet forgiven, and it would be presumptive on our part to expect anyone to do so. In contrast, "healing" is a long, ongoing process, not a final state,

and it recognizes both the sickness and the health in all of us. It is something we all need.

The City of Charleston donated the first floor of a building across the street from Emanuel. Thanks to volunteered funds, the History Workshop, a local exhibit design firm, was hired and donated a lot of their time. For the exhibit itself, a church member suggested we showcase quilts from the more than 400 sent to the church from around the world, many with inscriptions expressing heartache, sympathy, and the desire for healing. In addition, church members wanted to see the artifacts, so an exhibit case was filled with a representative samples, not neatly displayed, but placed at random and on top of one another as they had been in front of the church. To give context to the exhibit, a condensed version of the "Online Tribute" was shown on a wide screen. Volunteer docents were recruited and scheduled. A private viewing was offered for the victims' families and the survivors.

Since healing was the theme, integral to the exhibit was a place for visitor interaction. In the middle of one room was a panel inviting visitors to reflect on the exhibit and on their own situation, and then to identify one thing they could do to help "heal" their community upon their return home. They were asked to write that down on a card and deposit it in a box, and then it was for them to carry through with their pledge. In this way, we hoped that visitors would honor the victims and survivors not only by visiting the exhibit and participating in the commemoration programs but also by going back and doing something to help heal their own community and themselves. We hoped to turn museum experience into action.

This commemorative exhibit deeply touched visitors. It recognized the tragedy of the murders, the uplift of the responses, the challenges that lay ahead, and the hope to overcome them. Some of the most beautiful quilts represented the international response to the tragedy. Soon after the massacre, the Charleston Modern Quilt Guild had asked guilds across the world to send 4" x 6" blocks of cloth and to write inscriptions on them. Expecting a response of several hundred, the Guild received thousands from every state in the nation and nineteen countries overseas. They stitched the blocks into a multicolored composite, making a total of six quilts, two of which were exhibited. Upon each block were written brief prayers or words of comfort and the place of origin, which ranged from Australia and Oregon to Scotland and Switzerland. Even Mayor Joe Riley of Charleston submitted one. Inspired by President Obama's eulogy in Charleston, a member lovingly stitched in cursive the first verse of "Amazing Grace" across and down each quilt.

Attracting attention in one room was a large handsome white cloth with "A Love Letter from Dallas to Charleston" handwritten across the top, and in the center was a heart-shaped design filled with flowers, a gift from the Union

Coffee Shop, an outreach program of the Methodist Church in Dallas. On it, people had written prayers in differently colored inks, signed their names, and drawn crosses, flowers, faces, and more. Below the heart-shaped design was a large red stain. An arrow was drawn to it, accompanied by a note from the Rev. Mike Baughman, community curator of Union, which says:

*We celebrated Communion on this banner. Some of the blood spilled. Christ is present, connecting our communities. I don't know you. You don't know me. We both know Jesus and that gives me hope.*

Draping the windows were 1,001 handcrafted origami cranes from a "Japanese Christian" church in California, with a letter explaining that cranes symbolized wishes for good fortune and hope for a better world in Japanese culture and that 1,000 means an abundance, so 1,001 means an abundance of abundances. In the exhibit case, visitors saw teddy bears, wooden crosses, rosary beads, a smooth pebble painted with the word "love," a Boston Marathon medal from the year after the bombing, and much more.

These responses, and others like them, made this commemoration worthwhile. Visitors, including survivors and relatives of victims, were deeply moved. For example, the sister of Myra Thompson, a victim, was so inspired that she wished to communicate with her deceased sister and left this note at the exhibit:

*Dear Myra,*

*Today I experienced the most beautiful display of kind acts, love and deepest appreciation for you and my other brothers and sisters in Christ. All sorts of Art work were hung in your reverence.*

In the interactive exhibit, visitors placed eighty-seven note cards in the box, expressing their pledges to help heal. Some were general, such as a pledge to "be kind to everyone because we don't know the battles everyone is facing," or "initiate random acts of kindness whenever I see an opportunity." Some were specific and personal: "Spend more time and thought with my son who suffered from addiction and divorce"; "donate children's books to the library in memory of Cynthia Graham Hurd," a victim and a beloved librarian; "take every opportunity to add others to my circle of family and friends"; or "I walk past the church every day on my way to work. I will stop and pray every day for y'all." Others dealt more with public action, pledging to "confront and dismantle white privilege and institutional racism," or declaring "In my community, there was an act of violence toward a Muslim woman. I will advocate on her behalf and for religious tolerance." These were private and personal responses, with no monitoring, or follow-up by us, but from conversations with several who submitted cards, the invitation touched a chord.

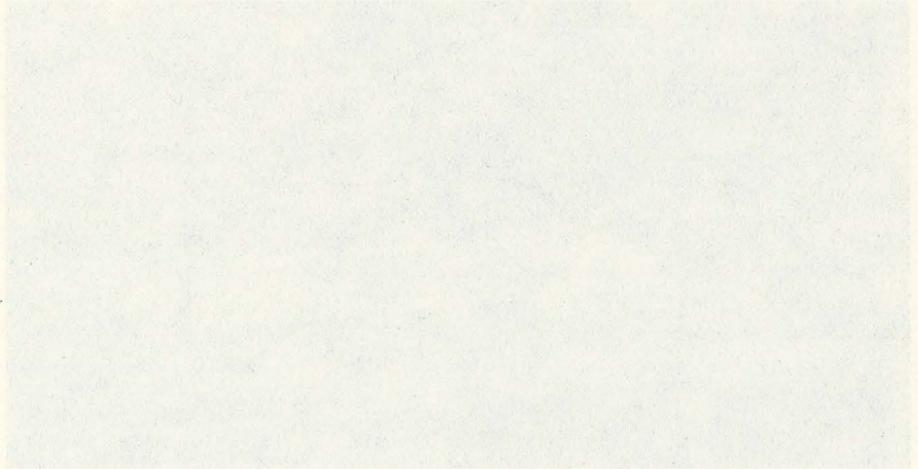
At the end of June, the commemorative exhibit came down, but a number of visitors suggested that it become a traveling exhibit not just to mark the commemoration of the Emanuel tragedy but to generate ongoing efforts to help heal the brokenness of our communities. The Memorabilia Subcommittee supports this idea, and with the arrival of a new pastor at Mother Emanuel, decisions might be made soon. That more and more communities need help healing is tragically evident in the scourge of violence on view since the Mother Emanuel incident. On June 12, 2016, another hate-filled man murdered dozens at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida. In early July, two black men were killed by police officers, one in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, the other near St. Paul, Minnesota, and then an enraged black sniper shot and killed five police officers in Dallas, Texas, in retaliation. In Istanbul, Turkey, a trio of killers went on a rampage in the airport, while on Bastille Day, a man used a truck to mow down eighty or more innocent celebrants in Nice, France. The list could go on, each incident underscoring the fact that what I have described is not unique to Charleston. The man in the Hyundai takes many forms.

As such tragedies occur, historical organizations will be called upon to respond. While we in Charleston followed our hearts and responded on the spur of the moment, if we had to do it again, we would have initiated long-range planning much earlier. In fact, it would be wise for a local, state, or national professional association to begin now to put preliminary plans in place, which could serve as a template to be tailored to specific communities. Questions to be asked as soon as possible include the following:

- What is the mission of your organization, and how does responding to tragedy fit into it?
- What are the partnerships that might be formed?
- What is the chain of command?
- What are possible sources of funding?
- What collection policies best suit different types of memorabilia (e.g., artifacts, photographs, documents, and digital media), and where might these items be stored?
- What is the nature of the place where the tragedy occurred? Is it an open public space, a public building, a private building? Who is in charge of that place and of what happens to it? Who owns the artifacts left there?
- What are the capacities of staff and/or volunteers in light of their other priorities?
- What are the goals of commemoration, for project personnel and for various audiences?
- How does commemoration connect back to the victims' families, survivors, and their families and friends?

- How can commemoration provide teachable moments that help communities to heal and, ideally, prevent more tragedy?
- What can we do to prevent people from stigmatizing the “Other”?

All of us were surprised by what that young man in the black Hyundai did at Emanuel AME that June evening. But the hatred and the fear that consumed him are not new and should not surprise us. Looking to the future and to ensure that we do not forget, it is our responsibility to respond to such occurrences, preserve their history, develop honest commemorations, and seriously engage the public in them. We should strive to use the tragedy and the commemoration as teachable moments, moments that help heal both our minds and our hearts, so that chances for such tragedies to occur again are at least minimized and, we hope and pray, eliminated.



Memories • Commemoration

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“While stone and metal monuments, sanctioned landscapes, and applied commemorative phrases might appear stationary, their value and role will always be fluid and continuously evolving to serve the dynamism of future generations. This collection of essays assembled by Seth C. Bruggeman encourages public historians and other heritage professionals to rattle public memory, to challenge complacent narratives, and to scrutinize and reclaim public memory in order to purposely and productively make remembrances relevant.”

—**Julia Rose**, director and curator, Johns Hopkins University, Homewood Museum, Baltimore, Maryland; author, *Interpreting Difficult History at Historic Sites and Museums* (2016)

*Commemoration: The American Association for State and Local History Guide* serves as a handbook for historic site managers, heritage professionals, and all manner of public historians who contend with the ground-level complexities of commemoration on a daily basis. Its fourteen short essays are intended as tools for practitioners, students, and anyone else confronted with common problems in commemorative practice today. Of particular concern are strategies for expanding commemoration across the panoply of American identities, confronting tragedy and difficult pasts, and doing responsible work in the face of persistent economic and political turmoil. A special afterword explores the role of emotion in modern commemoration and what it suggests about possibilities for engaging new audiences.

**SETH C. BRUGGEMAN** is associate professor of history at Temple University, where he periodically directs the Center for Public History. His books include *Born in the USA: Birth and Commemoration in American Public Memory* and *Here, George Washington Was Born: Memory, Material Culture, and the Public History of a National Monument*.

Cover images: top left: Prince memorial, April 2017, Minnesota History Center. *Courtesy of the MNHS*; top right: Get Territorial: Idaho at 150 capitol steps kick-off event, March 4, 2014. *Photo courtesy of Michelle Wallace, Idaho State Historical Society*; bottom: Pastor Harry Moore, Sr., of Mount Olive Baptist Church, presides over the eulogy of a soon-to-be-demolished rowhome in Mantua, West Philadelphia, May 31, 2014. *Photo by Jeffrey Stockbridge*

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