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Vestiges of slavery outlive Amistad Commission

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

It's Black History Month. The Association for the Study of African American Life and History ([ASALH](#)) has set the theme for this year's focus to be "[African Americans in Times of War](#)" and declares the theme is "filled with paradoxes of valor and defeat, of civil rights opportunities and setbacks, of struggles abroad and at home, of artistic creativity and repression, and of catastrophic loss of life and the righteous hope for peace."

My own focus will be current policy and how I believe it was shaped by the past. I will share observations on education from an organization of which I am a member, the NAACP. The national organization passed a tough set of resolutions last year on the proper characteristics of state statutes regulating charter schools.

I will describe for you characteristics of Illinois tax law that seem designed as if - *as if* - they were intended to make those in poverty and those citizens of color (overlapping constituencies for sure) *subsidize the rest of us* to an extent for services and programs and facilities paid for through the state General Revenue Fund.

I do not presume to speak for African Americans. No one who looks like me could know how feels to live in America with dark skin. But I have life experiences. I grew up in East St. Louis. I served in the Air Force not long after President Harry Truman ordered the services integrated. I [had a great mentor](#) for African American studies.

I'll open my discussion of this topic with a question: *Is the Amistad Commission still awake?* [It doesn't seem to be](#). The members' terms either expired or were never filled. I'm sure there's not been a meeting in years. The record is bare, now, except for an Auditor General's [finding of its lack of fiscal control](#).

The Amistad Commission, named after an historic slave ship, was [created by law in 2005](#). The bill to enact it was passed unanimously in both the House and the Senate. I wrote of it with high hopes that its stated mission - to create materials informing Illinois students honestly of slavery's history - would be achieved.

But it was, like so much Illinois legislation, an empty promise. There was a dinner for a few hundred people that cost more than \$100,000. Four speakers received \$10,000 each. The remaining "vestiges" of slavery have not, to my knowledge, ever been explained to the students of Illinois, as the statute promised.

What would such vestiges look like? Since they were not defined in the bill, I think they would be conditions that singularly affect black Americans as a consequence of circumstances leading directly back to their history of being held in slavery. From personal experience, I can give you a thoroughly documented example.

Back in 1988-89, I directed a campaign to pass a referendum to increase the property taxes for a special district that works to keep the Mississippi River from flooding Illinois communities, as it had in East St. Louis when a floodgate blew out a few years before. My involvement had been sought by [Rep. Wyvetter Younge](#).

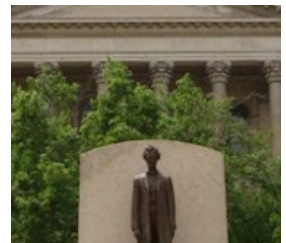
Let me tell you a bit about my friend "Wy." She grew up in East St. Louis (my hometown), was a civil rights attorney there and represented the city in the Illinois House for three decades before she died in 2008. After a severe river flood in about 1983, she was able to get a \$26 million federal grant to repair the levee system.

All the feds required was local participation, about \$2 million in Metro-East Sanitary District funding to replace floodgates and dredge drainage ditches from Cahokia in the south to Granite City in the north, [an area of about 250,000 people](#) and a great deal of industrial, commercial and residential property needing protection.

Business and labor leaders, the schools and medical facilities, the real estate brokers - every interest with a stake in the project participated. We would meet in the office of the Granite City Chamber of Commerce, me and Wy and the business and labor and real estate honchos. There was only one problem.

Granite City was a "Sundown Town." By tradition, or something, black people could visit Granite City to shop or work or obtain health services, but they could not live there - and they could not be there after dark. When our meetings ran long, past dusk, a police car would arrive to *escort Wy as she drove out of town*.

How awful! You might think "sundown towns" are rare and much despised. That's what Decatur native James Loewen, a Harvard Ph.D. (sociology) thought when he started researching the subject for his [2008 book of the same title](#). But in fact he found (or suspected) more than 500 - in Illinois alone.



The book just sends chills down your spine. The message is sometimes subtle, but often it has been flagrant, threatening and peppered with uses of the "n-word" in obscene contexts. Don't let the sun go down on you in this town!

The research has continued, and Loewen gives reports ([on his web site](#)) when officials of former sundown towns pass resolutions acknowledging and expressing regret for their disreputable pasts. Most such disgusting local traditions have surely faded into the past, but it's also likely that examples still remain.

(By the way, we passed that referendum with 76% of the vote.)

Why does "Black Lives Matter" matter? After all, most minorities - Germans, Irish, Jews, Italians, Hispanics - have been subjected to discrimination in a variety of ways upon arriving in America, but mostly they have assimilated, have accepted the country's language and cultural norms, and now get along fine, right?

Well, let's not even go into that debate. But even if the road remains rough for some minority groups, the experiences endured by black Americans raises discrimination to an incomparable level. Sure, the trite phrase that "all lives matter" is true - but black Americans are the minority that has needed most to stress it.

Name a characteristic of well-being and the chances are it is mostly [lacking for black Americans](#). Unemployment rates are *normally* twice as high for black men as for white men. Earnings are less for black workers across all levels of educational attainment. Wealth accumulation just does not happen for most black families.

It starts at the beginning of life, as documented in a report released in December [by the Annie E. Casey Foundation](#). Black children ages 3-5 are enrolled in school at above-average percentages, but in every other one of a dozen "indicators," they trail white, Latino and Asian-Pacific Islander children. Their circumstances - birthweight, socioeconomic status, education performance, family stability - compares consistently only with those of American Indian children.

I'll defer other bleak information for another day in this Black History Month after I describe the tax laws mentioned above, laws that look almost as if - *as if* - they were designed to siphon funds from African Americans for the benefit of the rest of us. I refer to the state's receipts of Lottery revenue and cigarette taxes.

Since the cigarette tax was more than doubled in 2012, the state has been raking in more than \$800 million per year from it ([see page 14](#)). Lottery proceeds have soared as well, hovering below - but within hailing distance - of \$3 billion per year ([starts on page 70](#)). Research says black males disproportionately pay these taxes.

Tobacco taxes first: The [Centers for Disease Control reported in 2015](#) that smoking rates were almost twice as high for persons living below the poverty level and for those at or above the poverty level. Although it is not a perfect match, the socioeconomic data clusters black people in the "below" poverty level cohort.

As for Lottery game participation, research cited by the [Shorenstein Center at Harvard](#) revealed that the lowest quintile by socioeconomic status had the "highest rate of lottery gambling (61%) and the highest mean level of days gambled in the past year (26.1 days)." Again, low income status equates significantly to being black.

Taxing the voiceless most is a pattern in Springfield. I've seen many tax and fee adjustments since I arrived at the state Capitol in 1981. The policymakers' tendency has been to put the heaviest burdens on those who have the least political influence and/or on those who evoke little or no sympathy. Thus, they favor "sin taxes."

I'm not alone in noticing this, of course. The creative and persistent state [Rep. La Shawn Ford](#) (D-Chicago) regularly has sponsored legislation that would cause the state's Lottery proceeds to be used to benefit residents of the zip codes where the players lost the money. His high-poverty district would benefit from that.

But he has not filed such a bill during this General Assembly. He must be getting frustrated by the rejection.

The fact of the matter is that plenty of research has been done to determine the demographics of cigarette smokers and lottery players. None of the revenue received by the state from those sources is used for programs that would dissuade citizens from such bad habits. No, it goes to the GRF or the Common School Fund.

In both of these cases, the socioeconomically disadvantaged, largely black, neighborhoods of Illinois are producing a tax revenue "profit" of sorts that is used by the state for the general public benefit - for all of our benefit.

Will there be any more commentary/analysis for Black History Month? Yes, there will. Again, I cannot speak with a black person's voice and conviction, but I have observed at times throughout my life how black people are subjected, as my friend Wyvetter Younge was, to experience of deep humiliation.

Although I cannot imagine the reality of it, I can say what my attitudes would be like if I were directly affected. Next time, I'll take on the sensitive task of saying why, if I had been so directly affected by their actions, my historical hero would be W. E. B. Du Bois - far and away instead of Booker T. Washington.

I'll also follow through on my promise to share the substance of education resolutions adopted last year by the NAACP.

Links to all newsletters posted last year can be found in the [web page at this link](#).

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