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XI. Elephant in the Room

Over the last few months, I have been telling you a lot about the story of accomplishment that is the Lewis and Clark Expedition. It is the beginning of the White Man's explosive westward expansion in America, for better and for worse. Worse for Native Americans. In part, this was my way of putting a focus on some wonderful books in the Westmoreland Library Network's county-wide collection; in part it was to further make Thomas Jefferson's (and America's) own case in a Library (learning) context: "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."

It was the time of Jefferson and his incredible mind, exemplified by probably the most inclusive Library in the country at the time, his personal Library: his particular impact on American history, education and governance. George Will, in the Washington Post on December 16, 1990, explained why "Jefferson is the Person of the Millennium."

But for Thomas Jefferson and his Library there could be no Lewis and Clark Expedition. But, also, Thomas Jefferson owned hundreds of slaves on the same Monticello plantation that housed his books. Except for that personal Library, this could have been essentially just another plantation of the South. It was where Thomas Jefferson ran his business with slave labor, just as other plantations did. Who can say if his slaves were treated better than most or not? Maybe they were, but the Civil War had yet to be fought. Reconstruction had yet to have its short time of redemption.

Colson Whitehead describes the human hell that plantation life could be in the extreme in his masterpiece and Pulitzer Prize-winning "The Underground Railroad." He captures the pain and horror of what that slavery, any slavery, can be. The physical supremacy by brute force of Whites over Blacks.

Jefferson, as I wrote previously, understood the enigma in the most human terms: "What a stupendous, what an incomprehensible machine is man! Who can endure toil, famine, stripes, imprisonment or death itself in vindication of his own liberty, and the next moment...inflict on his fellow men a bondage, one hour of which is fraught with more misery than ages of that which he rose in rebellion to oppose."

Reconstruction. What was that? It was a moment in historical time after the Civil War, up to about 1877, when the North tried to have its way with ending slavery and freeing the enslaved, including passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution. The chance slipped away to enforce a true equality of opportunity for the generations to come. That story is too complex for a newspaper article, but it is told well in two substantial and bibliographically documented books.

The first is W.E.B. DuBois "Black Reconstruction in America: 1860-1880," first published in 1935. It documents venality, some progress despite that, and slavery manifested in

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more covert respects than outright slavery. DuBois' many learned accomplishments include being one of the founders of the NAACP.

Eric Foner's "Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877," updated edition of 2014, makes clear that Reconstruction is unfinished business. But we all know that, and the three books mentioned here are essential complement, and 'elephant in the room,' to others previously mentioned about Jefferson and his Lewis and Clark Expedition (archived at <https://www.murrysvillelibrary.org/about-us/the-magic-library-card-series/>).

Charles B. Greenberg
Board Director, Murrysville Community Library Foundation