OPINION

Beth Thames: From slavery to Jim Crow, Legacy Museum teaches lessons

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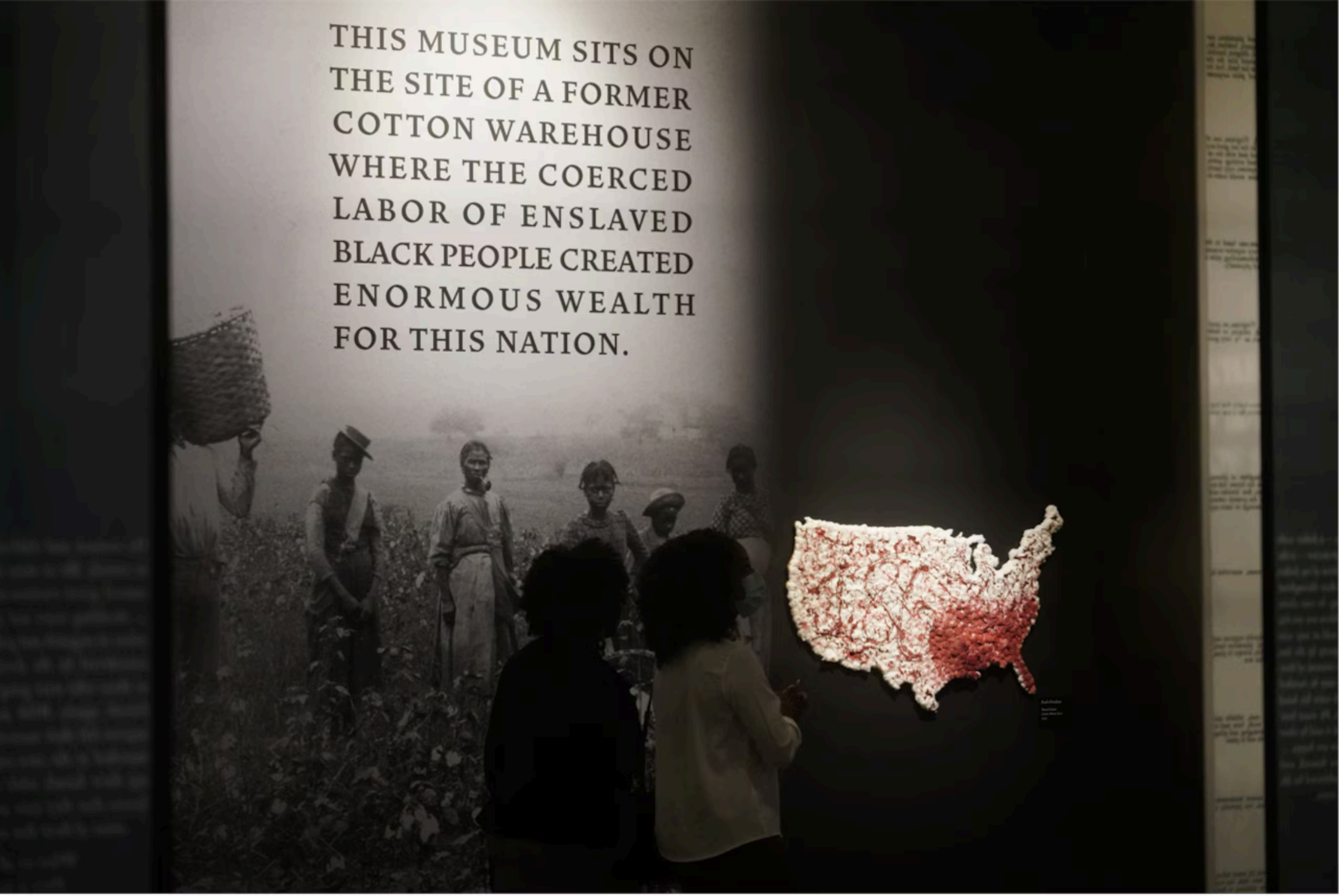

The Legacy Museum in Montgomery is built on the site of the Lehman, Durr and Co. cotton warehouse along the Alabama River that was an epicenter of the slave trade by the 1850s.

By Beth Thames

This is an opinion column

You'll want to look away, but don't. If you visit Montgomery's Legacy Museum, conceived and created by the Equal Justice Initiative and its founder, lawyer Bryan Stevenson, you'll come face to face with young slave children looking for their mother who was sold away down river.

"Mama?" they call out. But there's no answer. The boy and his little sister are holograms, three dimensional computer images that look as real as children standing in a field. The Legacy Museum focuses in part on families and how slavery separated them. It's historical and factual.

And it will move you to tears, as it did to two elderly white women standing next to me on my recent visit there. At a time when our country's schools are trying to decide what goes into history books and what is left out, this collection of films, documents, art, maps, and newspaper accounts of the slave trade make it clear.

We can't ignore a large swath of history and we can find ways to teach it that demonstrate that it was horrific, immoral and a slap in the face to the people who helped build this country even when they were not included in the "all men are created equal" part of the Declaration of Independence. This really happened but we can't let it happen again to anyone, anywhere.

This really happened and it happened right on the space occupied by the museum at 400 North Court Street in Montgomery. "You are standing where" signs are posted around the museum and lend an immediacy to a visitor's presence there.

"You are standing in front of a brick wall built by slaves." "You are standing where slaves were auctioned off." The decades roll on by and toward the end of the exhibits is a section on voting rights. "You are standing where Black people tried to register to vote." Could you pass the registration test? Probably not. Who could?

The questions are meant to fail anyone who attempted to register. They read: How many seeds are in a watermelon? How many bubbles are in a bar of soap? How many jelly beans are in the jar in front of you? (I looked, but I couldn't tell.)

And two more: In what year did Congress gain the right to prohibit the migration of persons to the states? How may the county seat be changed under the constitution of your state? I had no clue. I would have failed the test, which was the whole point. Most people did.

As visitors move through the museum, they read walls of signs and posters saying "whites only" in restaurants, restrooms, and the front seats of buses. They see photographs of convict leasing. They see pictures of lynching. They hear vitriolic speeches by southern politicians, harsh and loud.

But the museum is quiet. Reverential. No photographs are allowed and loud talking is discouraged. The visit to the museum is meant to be serious and solemn. Visitors come from all over the country and even the world to walk through the rooms, listen, and learn.

One of the things Bryan Stevenson hopes visitors come away with is the story of survival, hope, and determination. The last room in the museum is full of art—quilts, paintings, and sculptures created by African Americans. It demonstrates the kind of creative joy that can't be squelched, even by decades of repression. My group walked out into the sunlight, still quiet from what we'd taken in. Well done, Mr. Stevenson.

(Ticket information is available at 334-386-9100)

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