

*The*  
BRONZED  
PROJECT



*Should My Uncle John be  
in Your Public Square?*

by Mary Collins

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# HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE



If you can trust the space created for you, if you come armed to listen rather than confront or persuade, we can begin.

On paper, you will be introduced to some of the people I met in many states while pulling together sample stories and a framework for better public discourse. I visited several different regions—Wisconsin, New England, Philadelphia and elsewhere—and along the way reflected with others that I met on race, class, politics and the steep decline in our national conversation. On the [www.TheBronzedProject.com](http://www.TheBronzedProject.com) website, I break down this project into several smaller, more manageable parts that programmers and, actually, any visitor to the site, can mix and match as they see fit. It all depends on what your goals are as an individual or for any group you form or join. All of the material is available for free.

Some of the characters wear MAGA red baseball caps while others talk of their enslaved relatives; one grandmother speaks about keeping politics out of her daughter's baby shower; a paper company owner mourns the decline in American manufacturing. Some of them you might recognize as part of the social circle you already rotate in, but others will feel alien, even dangerous, to you, a divide that this project seeks to bridge through story-sharing and skill building.

They are us in a fractured America, still trusting enough to talk to a writer they don't know who offered only to listen.

That one simple act of my silence while they spoke generated a lot of trust in a short window of time. Of course, I come from a position of strength as an educated white middle-aged woman, a category of person in the US

that generally does not instill fear. Most stereotypes about people like me are about assumed privilege, selfishness, and self-absorption, not violence, poverty, or crime.

Still, when I asked around on the streets of Philly near the town hall about a new statue to a Black man murdered in the late 19th Century over voting rights, people looked puzzled. Why would a woman who looks like me be searching for a statue to a Black male?

As though I would only be interested in visiting memorials to people and values that match my own.

To be honest, that was precisely what I was doing when I started my road trip, though with the intent to challenge many things about those memorials and values. Several of my descendants are honored by bronzed statues in town squares across America, all part of my maternal line that stretches back to the 1600s (my father's side was more typical starving Irish that arrived in the late 19th Century and early 20th Century).

Their narratives were just part of family lore, something I hadn't given much thought to until a woman died in 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia, because of violence instigated over the town's plan to remove a statue to the Confederate General Robert E. Lee.

In an instant, *bronzed* became a fraught word for me.

Suddenly, I cared for the first time if my bronzed relatives—an American Revolution navy commander, a logger in Maine, an early leader of Sein Fein (later the Irish Republican Army), to name just a few--deserved their exalted status. Should their narratives be displaced or at least edited by others? Perhaps bronze is simply too lasting a metal, too immoveable as a historical space holder for public spaces.

I set off in 2017 to visit my various bronze relatives and to talk with Americans about class, race and politics along the way. My travels brought me to Philadelphia, Maine, Nebraska and beyond. I finished in 2020 in the time of Covid-19 as armed white men staged sit-ins at the Michigan state capitol to protest shelter-in-place restrictions. I finished as hundreds of thousands of Americans took to the streets to protest the murder of George Floyd, a Black man who suffocated to death as white police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on his neck for nearly nine minutes.

Bookends of violence “with the same DNA as the Tea Party,” as Adam

Brandon, president of the conservative FreedomWorks, acknowledged in an interview with *Vox Magazine*. At the time, he was only referring to Charlottesville and the Michigan protests, but the list keeps expanding.


In each instance white people with extremist views took centerstage, a portion of the American genome that does not represent the majority, but consistently controls the airwaves and narrative. They thrive when we all move to the edges of our own world views.

The nationwide Black Lives Matter rallies after the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis showed we can meet on the streets away from those edges, all races and classes in a stream of humanity that we hope can bring us to a better, more just place.


But our inconsistent and unpredictable response to the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic provide a more accurate snapshot of where Americans stand on race, class and politics. Few will dispute that allowing a police officer to suffocate a man—knee to his neck--because he used a fake \$20 bill is murder. Simple as that.

Yet, ask people if they feel the laws governing the pandemic are capricious, or whether they believe anyone that flaunts them is selfish and unsafe, and their answer says volumes about their party affiliation, religious views, education, class, race, gender and general kin.

Covid-19 has no party affiliation and a global reach. It should and could unite us, if we can tune out the outliers and tune into the murky middle where most American's value systems reside. Chances are you are part of that middle, ready to listen for a better way forward in the national conversation.



I know that's true because I met you, or someone like you, while touring the country.



In the same way that some bronzed statues can encourage entrenched thinking and tribal-like affiliations, so too do many social media sites, blogs and television networks. They encourage like-minded people to cluster and they often get stuck in a damaging feedback loop; just hit **REPLAY** and receive the same narrative again and again and never challenge any of it.

A few years ago, I had one of my college classes interview Gold Star mothers who had lost sons in the Vietnam War. One of the students lived in a town that had a sculpture of a life-sized helicopter on the green that she'd seen all of her life but had no idea what it was for. Then she interviewed the Gold Star mother of the son which that installation honored. On her way back from the interview, my student stopped at the memorial, knelt and cried.

She now had historical and personal context for what she was seeing and understood something she had never been equipped to see before.

We need to equip ourselves to see anew.

We need to listen to each other the way she listened to that Gold Star mother.

We should realize that the majority of us live in the political middle, some more Red or Blue than others, but most, remarkably, in an overlapping area I'll call the purple zone.

Polls show that the pandemic has made Americans care more about their country. We can tap into that common good feeling to improve our public discourse.

First, we must find a place to gather that most of us trust, a daunting task in a society that has seen a steep decline in its faith in fundamental public institutions—the government, media and academia. President Donald Trump may have played into that distrust but he did not create it.

Huge disruptions set into motion in the 1960s and 1970s, including the Vietnam War, the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and President John F. Kennedy, and President Richard Nixon's impeachment are some of the key forces that undermined public confidence.

A quick look at some numbers from a Pew Research Center poll examining data 1958-2019, pre-pandemic, provides a devastating snapshot:

- Less than 3 in 10 Americans trust in the federal government compared to 73 percent in 1958 when the survey was first started
- Just 11 percent of Americans have faith in Congress
- Less than a quarter trust the news media

A range of surveys and studies essentially show that other than the military (74 percent), Americans have little trust in the most important institutions in our society. Of course, all of these numbers are trending downward as we weather Corona.

The silver lining: Public Broadcasting Service (76 percent trust “a great deal” or “somewhat”) and museums and historic sites (81 percent).



Eight out of 10 Americans trust historic sites/societies and museums. I think we’ve found our neutral spaces!

So step into the project with me. Visit on the page with people who think like you and those that do not think like you. Next, working with the museum or historic society/site sponsor, come ready to participate in your own story-sharing and conflict resolution skill building workshop, which can be done virtually during the pandemic or, even better, in person when health restrictions allow.

When I reflect on my own bronzed relatives’ stories now, I am shocked at my ability to hold conflicting values in my head. I can feel proud of Commodore John Barry, credited with founding the Navy during the American Revolution, and dismayed by the fact that he owned at least one slave. As one Black woman I interviewed said, when reflecting on both her pride in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and her dismay at his treatment of women, we all have feet of clay, a Biblical reference that we can all grasp no matter our religion or spiritual leanings.

Most humans spend a lot of time in these gray areas. Let’s start there and move outward one small circle at a time.





# NEXT STEPS

- Meet your Bronzed Hosts by reading some or all of the narratives and use them as a free shared text for your group.
- *The Bronzed Project* website, [www.TheBronzedProject.com](http://www.TheBronzedProject.com), offers many options for how to use these common texts to initiate a story exchange that centers on racial, political or class related issues. Ideally, you will partner with a nonpartisan organization, perhaps the historical society in your state, to help you recruit a group of people from a range of racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds. Based on your overall goals as a group, you can use the materials to:
  - Ask the group leader to read the Programmer's Guide, which includes essay samples, guidelines for moderating constructive discussions and advice from a conflict resolution expert.
  - Host an essay writing workshop that encourages participants to share some personal story centered on any of the three primary themes or other prompts offered on the website. For those that feel insecure about writing, simply speak your story into a recorder and share the audio with the group.
  - Ask participants to investigate the historical backstory of a relative, with the theme of race, class or politics as a backdrop, and share that story with the group.
  - Use the special extras, such as the story about my visit to a Foundry, as the framework for an art-driven activity where participants draw or otherwise craft a "statue" to someone or something that they value.

## THE GOAL:

To identify characters, tackle a complex social issue, dig into the historical context of your characters, and then process any conflicted feelings you have about what you discover. This process can lead to better public discourse on complex topics. Focus as much as possible on the story-sharing aspect of the program, not your opinions or how you feel about other people's opinions. Focus on your shared humanity.