

HOSTS: John Barry, American Revolution naval hero/slave owner, and Octavius Catto, slain Black voting rights advocate

LISTENING CHALLENGE: Race in America

PLACE: Philadelphia, PA, Statue at Independence Hall



TUNING INTO RACE

No one knows who he is.

As tourists flow through the park behind Independence Hall in Philadelphia, site of the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, they pause in front of the life-size statue of a Colonial naval officer, who has his right hand extended, a finger pointing at something.

Younger kids mimic the stance and moon for the cellphone cameras.

All any of them know: someone at some point bothered to eulogize this man in one of the most sacred spaces for American Revolution history in America. The National Park Service put his name in all caps on the granite pedestal: BARRY.

There are no other military statues here; even George Washington, who stands on the other side of Independence Hall and whom everyone recognizes, is dressed in civilian garb with his hand on a book. Barry represents the muscle behind what the Founders pulled off on paper in the hall.

But a lot of people put a lot of muscle behind the fight for independence from Great Britain so why honor Commodore John Barry, an Irish Catholic immigrant? Why not, say, John Paul Jones, the man most learn about in grammar school as the father of the Navy, a title now

regularly granted to Barry as part of an edit that involved warring religions, admirals, various Irish American societies and millions of dollars.

Unlike the tourists, I know who this man is: my relative.

Hoping to find some answers, I wait for Russ Wylie, former president of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, which funded and dedicated the Barry statue at Independence Hall in 1907 and still maintains it today. I study Barry's face looking for signs of a family resemblance, but, of course, he's set in bronze and many generations removed so the best I can come up with is that he's tall and broad shouldered, like many of my siblings and me.

My brother, James Barry Collins, in particular, inherited the asthma that killed Barry, and the height. We both laugh about this since we know, other than the name and breathing problems, the connection is pretty thin. John and his wife Sarah had no children but raised his brother Thomas' children after Thomas died at sea. We allegedly descend from that family



line.

One of my many relatives created a family chart that clearly shows Thomas and his wife Anne Barry having a few kids in the 1700s and their son, name uncertain but we think it's Patrick, having many more kids, including Mary Anne Barry, who died in 1823; she was my nana's grandmother.

The day [Barry] was commissioned he stood sponsor and his wife a witness to the baptism of Anna, daughter of Thomas, his brother, born on that morning.

I reflect on this record of Barry at the baptism of one of Thomas' kids, how the Commodore and his wife never had any of their own children, how the baby probably wore a white christening dress as the Catholic priest lay holy water across her forehead, a ritual performed for each of us in my family and my massive extensive family of 46 first cousins on the O'Neil/Sullivan side.



What an intimate, loving act to bear witness before he set out to sea to face the British. Though all of the accounts I've seen describe how Barry "raised" Thomas' children, but, of course, John was gone so that chore fell to his wife Sarah.

Just saying.

As far as I know, there's no statues to any of my female relatives so I pause to honor her here.

After all what's the most important thing we hand down to our children besides DNA (which thins out pretty quick—you share less than 2 percent with a great-grandparent)?

Values.

On religion, education, politics, varying concepts of proper behavior and character.

We've bronzed John Barry but Sarah's value system may well be the part of the Barry heritage that still courses through me. What did her son's wife teach Mary Barry my great-great-great grandmother that passed down to my nana, Elizabeth Stanton O'Neil Sullivan?

Honor your country?

Well, Mary actually wed a Campbell from Nova Scotia, one of the Protestant Loyalist families given land there by King George when they fled the colonies. Today, teachers almost never bring up that crowd or

the fact that, initially, less than a third of the colonists wanted to fight the Brits. So clearly, after just a generation or so, the dividing lines between Revolutionary War hero and Loyalist began to fade, a shift we'd do well to emulate in our polarized Red/Blue land.

While researching the exploits of Commodore Barry during the American Revolution, I couldn't help but think of my resolute, smart, beautiful nana, who, with her husband, George Sullivan, raised nine kids during the Great Depression and founded a paper company in Springfield, Massachusetts, that still produces fancy paper for items like Godiva chocolate boxes and Estee Lauder perfumes. They showed tremendous resolve, built something with limited resources, and almost always put the needs of the greater group above their own.

I spy that value system everywhere in Barry's narrative. There he is transporting Washington's troops across the Delaware at the battle of Trenton, New Jersey, or commanding the navy when the British took Philadelphia, then the official seat of government for the Continental Congress. George Washington personally handed him a commission to head the navy, a document now held at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland.

My favorite tale: Barry ordered his men to pack small kegs with gunpower, floated them towards the British ships in the Delaware River in Philadelphia, then sharpshooters shot the kegs creating huge explosions and great destruction. They called it the Battle of the Kegs.



We begin to make some little figure here in a navy way.

That's John Adams remarking on Barry's effectiveness with so little against the mightiest navy the world had ever seen.

Before getting to the Barry statue, I had swung into the Museum of the American Revolution on South Third Street, which opened in 2017. They showed a short film about George Washington's tent, with special focus on how often he stayed in the field with his men, how he willingly gave up power after serving as president, how we as American citizens must constantly remind ourselves all they faced against insane odds. When they raised the curtain to reveal the actual tent, I became emotional, to the point of embarrassment.

What will happen if tribal loyalties and blind allegiance to self-serving political parties continue to dominate our culture today?



The author next to Commodore John Barry's statue outside of City Hall in Philadelphia, PA.

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”

General Washington, eerily prescient, feared the very things that tear at our democracy today. He warned of “Pretend Patriotism” and the “wiles of foreign influence” and urged his fellow citizens to watch out for “the first dawning of every attempt to alienate any portion of our country from the rest or to enfeeble the sacred ties which now link together various parts.”

All of these story threads converge in my mind in the 30 minutes I’m sitting on the bench at Independence Hall waiting for the representative from the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick.

Just after the clock tower bell sounds 10:00 a.m., a man strides towards me wearing a brilliant Kelly-green jacket: Russ Wylie has arrived.

Thin, with an angular face and warm brown eyes, Russ (below left) seems a bit suspect at first and wants to know why the word *Charlottesville* is on the permission form I want him to sign, which allows me to quote him for my project. His long index finger rolls over that word on the page; his shoulders tighten.

In my role as story-catcher I try to make it clear I am here to listen, to garner context for Barry and for Russ himself, a white man over 60 with a deep passion for history and his country.

He photographs me in front of the Barry statue. We walk to a restaurant for lunch, his green jacket bobbing in the crowd like an official at a St. Patrick’s Day parade. Over the hour, he opens up about how he came to be such an important caretaker of the Barry statue and legacy.

“At one point my son really got into the Civil War. He saw a Turner movie and afterwards there were men there asking people if they wanted to be part of re-enactments,” he tells me. “I thought that would be something good to do with my son so we did.”

As part of the PA 69th they did re-enactments of battles like Gettysburg. I laugh. I went to college there and worked as a tour guide. Pickett’s charge, I say, recalling the inclined field where General Robert E. Lee’s men charged as the PA 69th and other Union soldiers just picked them off one-by-one. Thousands died in that one field that day. As estimated 51,000 men were killed, wounded or captured at the Battle of Gettysburg.

Our shared need to know and value history eases the tension between us and Russ begins to tell me about Teddy Roosevelt celebrating American might by parading the US Navy around the world at the turn of



the 20th Century. The President promoted the colonial naval commander John Paul Jones, a Protestant Scot, as an ideal hero and “founder” of the Navy.

“Barry was minimized. He did not get his due.”

A Protestant Scot a better emblem of American power than an Irish Catholic. White men editing other white men.

More recently Russ and members of other Irish American societies pressed their case for years at the US Naval Academy that Barry deserved more recognition. It took almost a decade of wrangling with admirals, congressmen, raising money, and a massive letter writing campaign, but between 2014 and 2018, the navy pulled the Irishman out of the vault. The Barry arch now marks the academy’s entrance and there’s several other substantial memorials on the campus.

Initially the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick itself, founded in 1771, was made up of mostly Protestant Irish, but they actually appointed a Catholic as their first president.

“They could see the future. The need to be inclusive. That resonated with me because that’s the way it should be.”

That’s the way it should be.

Based on dangerous stereotypes that often dominate American discourse, no one would expect a white conservative man over 60 to share that sentiment with me but Russ’ theme of inclusivity makes it easy for me to swing my narrative over to a disturbing fact I came across while nosing around for other statues in Philly to investigate.

1900 statues in the city.

1900.

Not one to a person of color, even though Black people make up the majority of the population.

Well, at least not until 2017 when, under the direction of Mayor Jim Kenney, the city erected a statue to Octavius Catto, a Black man who was gunned down next to a trolley car in 1870 that he had helped integrate as he made his way home on the first day Black men had the right to vote in America, a cause he had helped spearhead in the city of brotherly love.

"What are you doing?" Catto asked his Irish American assailant, Frank Kelly, as Catto lay bleeding next to a trolley car, many white passengers looking on in broad daylight. Kelly had already killed another Black man that day in an effort to generate so much terror in the city that the recently passed 15th Amendment would be mute.

Another Irish American, Philly Mayor Jim Kenney, played a key role





in bringing that narrative into a public space near City Hall.

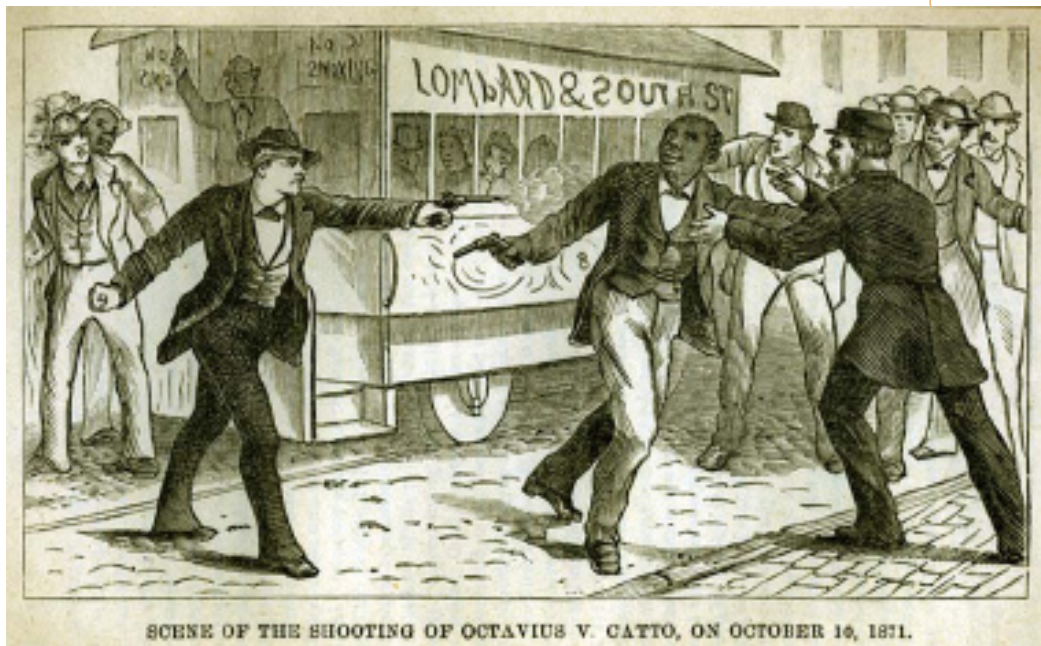
One white Irish hand taketh and another giveth.

When I pop out of the metro stop that I think is closest to the statue, I pause to ask a Black security guard where I can find the Catto statue. There's a hitch in his response as he scans me, a white, middle-aged woman, but he quickly recovers.

“The Civil Rights guy, right? He's just over there on that side of the building.”

He strides in that direction with me, fully engaged now. Statues pack the area around City Hall—several of Civil War figures, two of Benjamin Franklin, one of George Washington, even a couple of odd items like a huge iron and clothespin—so I'm stunned that the guard knows about Catto—and not just the statue's location but the *story*.

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As I swing around the corner, a multi-layered installation comes into view complete with a statue of a well-dressed Black man with a full mustache his body leaning forward, palms open towards the sky. Several granite pillars with bas reliefs of Catto as athlete, educator, advocate for interracial trolley cars and even Civil War soldier make some inroads into telling the complex story of a Black man who did so many things to lay the groundwork for future stages of the Civil Rights movement.

Before Jackie Robinson.

Before Rosa Parks.

Octavius Catto.

Never heard of him until this project.

Tuning in, not out.

What are you doing?

That line from a terrific biography on Catto, *Tasting Freedom: Octavius Catto and the Battle for Equality in Civil War America*, by Daniel Biddle and Murray Dubin, keeps coming back to me as I look at the statue from many angles. I see his leaning body and outstretched palms as the stance of a man sacrificed in the streets of Philadelphia the moment just before he was shot, the religious overtones of his crucifixion clear.



But when I track down the man I've come to see in City Hall, Jack Drummond, then Director of the Philadelphia Office of Black Male Engagement, he tells me he sees something very different when he looks at the first statue of a Black man in Philadelphia. We sit with each other at a gargantuan wooden table in one of the endless rooms in the cavernous City Hall.

“And the way the statue looks, its looks like he's flying, about to take flight, just how melanin-enriched men can begin to take flight,” he says.



Jack Drummond

Flying.

I see a man about to get shot and Jack Drummond, a Black native of Philadelphia, son of a single mother, who raised her three children in a part of the city known as the Down the Bottom, sees Catto taking flight.

"Seeing it [the statue] for the first time last year was electric. Looking at it, the statue itself, the color, looks so different; his face, his hair, his clothes. [When I was growing up] I certainly did not have statues to look up to or to know about or to have stories around."

I note the deep red prayer beads on his right wrist and twisted brass bracelet on his left. A kuffi hat rests on his head adding a touch of color to his dark dress jacket, black tie and white shirt. I register I'm looking at an Islamic man admiring a devout Christian Black man from the 19th Century. I sit back, a bit shocked, at the statue he sees versus the statue I see.

What are you doing? The statue captures Catto as a man sacrificed for civil rights.

No.

He's flying.

Both valid.

Earlier I had interviewed Jack's co-worker in city government, Ajeenah Amir (below left), Director of Public Engagement, who the day before had launched a citywide voter drive at a special event at the Catto statue. In the past, the city usually did it at scattered spots around the city during July 4th week, but now they have this rallying point, a Black man now bronzed in a major public square who was assassinated in the streets for helping Black men win the right to vote.

Ajeenah clearly finds all of this immensely exciting, even personally inspiring, especially in light of the caustic tone dominating our current political discourse.

Like Russ Wylie from the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, Ajeenah picks up on the word Charlottesville when I describe my project more fully. She was taking a road trip to North Carolina to visit family that August day in 2017 when white supremacists came to C'ville to rally around the Lee statue and



Ajeenah Amir

Heather Heyer got run down by a car.

“I have a three-year-old son and these things are still happening. Never in my life have I witnessed that old expression of hate from a group of people. Trolling through Twitter, I felt so disgusted, shocked and scared.”

I am very aware of being a white, middle-aged woman while talking with Ajeenah and spend too much time explaining that I have more in common with people like Heather Heyer than uber conservatives who wanted to hear about “both sides” in Charlottesville, but the defensiveness on my part also springs from the deeper knowledge I have that I am in Philadelphia on a trip to check out my bronzed relative, Barry, who was a slave owner.

I found out while digging through some old biographies about him.

On July 21st Captain Barry's wife, Sarah Austin Barry, became a Catholic and was baptized, conditionally, Anna Barry, wife of Thomas, being the only sponsor. At this time Captain Barry was cruising in the West Indies. Judith, the slave of Captain John Barry, an adult, was also baptized on August 19, 1779.

The slave of Captain John Barry.

I also know that, after leaving Ireland at age 15, he made his way to Philadelphia and by age 21 had become the captain of a merchant vessel that mainly went back and forth to the islands, especially Barbados.

That's sugar cane country and in 1766 there was no harder place to be on this earth than in those fields as a Black slave. Barry himself did not own slaves at that time but certainly earned his keep running products that relied on that economy.

Six million Africans were sent to the fields in the islands. Millions died of disease, abuse, and overwork.

Such complex tales muddy my quest to figure out how I feel about people from the past wanting to honor and bronze my relatives in such public ways. Who do I see now? Barry the wily man successfully undermining the British navy with something as small as some floating kegs of gunpowder or the slaveholder?

Context. Context. Context. That one word offers every American so much, which is why historic sites and societies are such a fantastic common ground through which we can meet and begin the healing. Again and again, I come across stories that fill out pictures I don't even know I need to fill. For example, I was surprised to learn that even Hamilton, now celebrated around the world thanks to the musical *Hamilton*, which highlights his background as a bastard son from the islands who rose from nothing to found the US Treasury, had his education paid for from a subscription fund

“replenished by sugar barrels from St. Croix,” the biographer Ron Chernow points out, which means “the education of this future abolitionist was partly underwritten by sugarcane harvested by slaves.”

No white that came in contact with the islands or from the islands was “entirely exempt” from the taint of slavery, Chernow concludes.

I look at Ajeenah, the product of Black families that fled the south in the 1950s, part of the Great Migration to Northern cities and jobs in industry, and see myself, a Barry relative, across from her and take solace in the fact I want to know about Catto; she and Jack Drummond actually graciously thank me for my interest.

My quest to round out the story of what should be bronzed on the streets of Philadelphia seems to ease tensions.

I don’t tell either of them about the slave-owning reference or, even about the bizarre history of how in the 1600s the British sent Irish Catholics as indentured servants to work the cane, who were abused, maimed and killed at rates comparable to the later Black slaves. As Biddle and Dubin point out in their Catto biography, Irish Catholics were essentially seen as the “blacks” of the British Isles—poor, starved and deprived of rights.

“Catholics could not educate their children, manufacture books, carry weapons or live in the city,” they write.

In the US, Black people were sometimes called “smoked Irish.”

Ajeenah laughs a bit when we talk about the irony that an Irish American mayor in 21st Century Philly helped lead the charge for the statue to a 19th Century Black voter rights advocate.

His family descends from the poor potato starved Irish, she says, while nodding. Oh, I have plenty of those types of Irish Catholics in my family tree as well, I say.

All of this rises in my mind, now a blender of correct and politically incorrect homage and narrative.



On my way out from my City Hall interviews, I see a large bronze plaque honoring Irish Americans who served in the American Revolution with special mention of John Barry, who gets his own line. I learned from Russ Wylie that this is called the Patriot's Plaque and each year before the St. Patrick's Day parade they host a ceremony there. Catto is just around the corner. The two narratives now cast in bronze just a few hundred yards from each other, co-existing.

He did not get his due.

By the time I left Philly, it didn't matter if an elderly white Irish American eulogizing Barry, or a Black City Hall employee eulogizing Catto and who grew up in a neighborhood called Down the Bottom, gave me that great line.

Who deserves his or her *due*?

Each generation constantly reassesses the answer, as the city of Philly itself made clear in June 2020 when it took down a bronzed statue of former mayor Frank Rizzo in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests after George Floyd was murdered by a white policeman. Rizzo's aggressive stance on policing in the 1960s and 70s of Black and gay people just wasn't something the majority wanted cast and memorialized in metal anymore.

Most trace the root definition for *due* to the Latin *sum cuique* used by Cicero, which infers *justice* and *fairness*. I walked away from Philadelphia feeling that both Barry and Catto deserve their places in public squares. But who and what shaped my own perception of what's fair and just?

