

Foundation for the Present, Paid in the Past



Artist Statement by [Carl Joe Williams](#)

Black history surrounds us, though it's often hidden or ignored because it reveals uncomfortable truths about how this country built its wealth and how Black bodies were treated as tools in that process.

For me, the act of creating this artwork is much more than just an artistic expression; it's a way of honoring, and also bearing witness to, a brutal historical reality. It's impossible to tell the full story of wealth and prosperity in this context without acknowledging that so much of it was built on the foundation of slavery, and on the dehumanization of countless people. To truly understand where we are now, we have to remember and confront that painful truth. This piece exists to keep that memory alive.

This project was collaborative, not so much in style, but in how we represented the people involved. There's only one single known image of the 27 individuals enslaved at the Arcade and City Hotels. That limitation meant I had to represent these lives thoughtfully, relying on imagination and intention, rather than strict visual accuracy.

The piece drew inspiration from period imagery, especially the 1868 "Reconstructed Constitution of the State of Louisiana," which features portraits of the era's key figures, including David Wilson, the only known image of a formerly enslaved man owned by Ruggles Sylvester Morse.

This work is deeply connected to my ongoing reverence for ancestors. My lineage is rooted in Louisiana, with particularly strong ties to New Orleans, and the opportunity to pay tribute to those who came before me carries real weight. It's hard not to feel that there's something almost symbolic about being the artist who gets to honor these souls in this way.

This work also serves as a recognition of the countless untold stories woven into the very foundation of this country.