

University of Virginia's Memorial to Enslaved Laborers:  
A Step Towards Addressing a History of Slavery

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The University of Virginia (UVA) was founded in 1819 by Thomas Jefferson, a president known for his ownership of slaves. Located just miles from his plantation, the university had thousands of slaves on campus. UVA was not the only university to contribute to the slave trade; in fact, “most colleges founded before the civil war relied on money derived from slavery.”<sup>1</sup> Many colleges are attempting to make amends for their past, including UVA. In order to acknowledge the crucial role that slaves played in constructing UVA’s buildings, the university’s Board of Visitors, with much input from the students, decided to commission a monument that does so. The Memorial to Enslaved Laborers at the University of Virginia, which is still in the process of being constructed, will serve as an example for colleges that have yet to atone for their past.

From granite stones to flowing water, every component of the Freedom Ring was designed with a purpose. The project’s design team consisted of architects and engineers as well as cultural historians to ensure that this memorial would do all that it can to make amends for the troubled past of the university. The cultural historian Mabel O. Wilson brought up the idea of a ring shape (see fig. 1) because of a “ring shout” dance that was popular among slaves.<sup>2</sup> The locally sourced, Virginia Mist granite forms an open ring to imitate the broken shackles of former slaves. To contrast with the convex dome of the Rotunda, the centerpiece of UVA’s campus, the Freedom Ring’s “80-foot-diameter granite circle ... is concave, like a bowl”.<sup>3</sup> The grass lawn in the center of the circular structure acts as a gathering place for performances and reflection on the past, the flowing water symbolizes liberation and libation encouraging a spiritual connection. The inner

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Ellis and Stephen Smith, “History Shows Slavery Helped Build Many U.S. Colleges and Universities,” *Shackled Legacy* | APM Reports, September 4, 2017, Accessed July 31, 2019, <https://www.apmreports.org/story/2017/09/04/shackled-legacy>.

<sup>2</sup> James McCowan, “Höweler Yoon: The Boston-based Architecture Firm Casts off Traditional Disciplinary Blinders and Looks to the Totality of Design,” *Metropolis: Architecture Design* [Vol, May 2019 ] (May 2019): 97-101.

<sup>3</sup> McCowan, “Höweler Yoon: The Boston-based Architecture Firm Casts off Traditional Disciplinary Blinders and Looks to the Totality of Design,” 100.

granite wall honors over 5,000 enslaved laborers through the inscription of names for those that were known and place-markers for those that were not, while the outer wall features a rough texture that forms abstract portraits to symbolize the physical violence that enslaved laborers endured.<sup>4</sup> While the memorial was approved in June of 2017, the process of constructing it is still going on over two years later (see fig. 2-3). It is set to finish in the autumn of 2019 and be dedicated in Spring of 2020.

The history of American colleges' benefitting from and contributing to slavery is not one to be forgotten. Many highly esteemed colleges would not have reached their level of prestige had it not been for slave trade. Harvard College, for example, not only had slaves on campus serving prominent men, but also received its early donations from families that "made their fortune running slave ships...and milling cotton from plantations in the South"<sup>5</sup>. The school also played a pivotal role in promoting polygenism – the theory that human races descend from different species – and Harvard Law School featured a shield that honored the Royall family, who owned more slaves than any other family in Massachusetts and made their money from the labor of enslaved people.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Georgetown University was founded using profits from slave labor by some of the most notorious slave owners in Maryland. When the University fell into debt in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the priests decided to sell the entirety of their enslaved laborers, now referred to as the GU272, to plantation owners in Louisiana. While the University of Virginia did not sell any slaves itself, its legacy was not free of slavery and racism. Thomas Jefferson, the university's founder, owned over 600 slaves so it should not come as a surprise that UVA's campus was built from the labor of enslaved people. Even in the case of the aforementioned Rotunda, Kirt Von Daacke, co-chair of

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<sup>4</sup> Höweler Yoon. "UVA Memorial." Accessed July 31, 2019. <http://www.howeleryoon.com/work/36/uva-memorial>.

<sup>5</sup> Ellis and Smith, "History Shows Slavery Helped Build Many U.S. Colleges and Universities".

<sup>6</sup> "The Legacy of Isaac Royall, Jr." Exhibit Addenda. Accessed July 31, 2019. <https://exhibits.law.harvard.edu/legacy-isaac-royall-jr>.

the President's Commission on Slavery and the University, states "about a million bricks went into building the Rotunda. And every one of them was touched by an enslaved person"<sup>7</sup>. Having the centerpiece of the university's campus built by slaves reflected poorly on UVA's acknowledgement of its African American students.

A memorial is more than just a monument, it is meant to commemorate someone or something. As Mabel O. Wilson, an associate professor at Columbia GSAPP teaching architectural and history/theory classes states, "I think what the memorial's job to do is to stimulate a conversation...and link the past to present issues"<sup>8</sup>. However, this is not all that design teams of memorials are tasked with; they need to honor the wishes of the friends and families of those being remembered, which is not always the easiest task. In the case of the memorialization of the victims of 9/11,

some of the families of victims were adamant that the entire sixteen-acre site be...off-limits to any and all redevelopment ... other family representatives argued as insistently that their loved ones be commemorated by rebuilding the WTC even bigger than it was, right in the same place.<sup>9</sup>

When the desires of everyone contradict like this, it becomes extremely difficult to set up a standardized method of designing, especially when the subject matter is so delicate. Due to this, every detail in the Memorial Mission Statement was carefully deliberated and put forth principles to guide the design of the 9/11 memorial. The statement hoped that the memorial would allow all to remember the tragedies that occurred that day, recognize the survivors, provide a sacred space for friends and families, and resolve ignorance and hatred<sup>10</sup>. The resulting National September 11 Memorial & Museum was completed with the confidence that it embodies all these ideals.

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<sup>7</sup> Ellis and Smith, "History Shows Slavery Helped Build Many U.S. Colleges and Universities".

<sup>8</sup> Mabel O. Wilson, Interviewed by the author, Digital recording. New York City, NY, July 24, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Young, James Edward. 2018. *The Stages of Memory: Reflections on Memorial Art, Loss, and the Spaces Between*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 32.

<sup>10</sup> Young, *The Stages of Memory: Reflections on Memorial Art, Loss, and the Spaces Between*, 36.

Due to the mindful deliberation that must go into the design of memorials, cultural historians are often called upon to provide their input on the best course of action. In the case of the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers, Dr. Mabel O. Wilson, who attended UVA herself as an undergraduate student, used her expertise to assist the Höweler and Yoon design team. She explains that approaching architecture through the lens of a cultural historian, she is equipped with the knowledge to interrogate an object on a deeper level and is able to consider its broader context<sup>11</sup>. The object doesn't just exist on its own, it has a history that it carries with it. In the case of this memorial, this history cannot be forgotten, it must be commemorated despite the lamentable reality behind it.

University of Virginia's decision to commission the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers came at a time when it was essential to reunite the Charlottesville community. Just two months after the approval of the memorial, a white supremacist rally took place in Charlottesville, Virginia, resulting in multiple injuries and a fatality. Unfortunately, this was not the only white supremacist rally to occur in Charlottesville that same summer, as there were two more that occurred prior. Charlottesville's community had become a battle ground for hate, and it was essential for the University of Virginia, an integral part of Charlottesville to make a stand. By commissioning the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers, UVA does just that. It captures the conversations that were had with students and the greater Charlottesville community in order to honor its enslaved people. As the university's website states, "we're confronting our past, uncovering new knowledge, and using that knowledge to teach, heal, and shape the future"<sup>12</sup>. The design of the freedom ring successfully accomplishes what is desired in a memorial and should inspire other colleges.

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<sup>11</sup> Mabel O. Wilson, Interviewed by the author.

<sup>12</sup> "Memorial to Enslaved Laborers." 2018. President's Commission on Slavery and the University. March 19, 2018. <https://slavery.virginia.edu/memorial-for-enslaved-laborers/>.

The actions that the University of Virginia and other colleges have taken to address their pasts with slavery should serve as an example to those that have yet to do so. While it may seem impossible for universities to make up for such tragic pasts, their attempts to do so should not go unrecognized. Harvard University, for example, held conferences speaking against slavery and acknowledging its past association with it, retired the aforementioned Harvard Law School shield, and is actively researching the history of slaves on the campus. Furthermore, Georgetown University started the GU272 Descendants organization to track down all descendants of the slaves they sold and inform them of their family history, as well as give legacy status to descendants of those slaves<sup>13</sup>. It is important to realize that these actions are just steps in the right direction and are not being used to forget the past, but rather address it. Once it is open to the public in 2020, University of Virginia's Memorial to Enslaved Laborers will inspire conversations regarding its history to all that visit it.

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<sup>13</sup> Ellis and Smith, "History Shows Slavery Helped Build Many U.S. Colleges and Universities".



Fig. 1. Aerial rendering of the memorial showing its “ring” shape. Created by Höweler and Yoon. From Höweler and Yoon Architecture, LLP website. <http://www.howeleryoon.com/work/36/uva-memorial>



Fig. 2-3. Photos taken on site showing the current state of construction of the memorial.

Provided by Mabel O. Wilson.





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