

Higher Education's Reckoning with Slavery

Two decades of activism and scholarship have led to critical self-examination.

By Leslie M. Harris



Since 2001, faculty, students, and staff at more than seventy US colleges and universities have researched their institutions' histories of involvement with the enslavement of people of African descent. Although that number may appear small, this work has had substantial influence. Elite private and state flagship universities are disproportionately represented among these institutions, and more than half are in Southern states. The examination of the history of higher education's support of slavery and accompanying racist ideologies has developed into a flourishing field of academic research and inquiry. Whether the recovery of this history will be an effective tool for institutional change remains to be seen.

At the outset of this movement, most institutions feared the impact of such projects on their reputations and particularly on alumni donations. Would recovering these institutional histories discourage donors, or make colleges and universities targets for right-wing or left-wing provocateurs? But in most cases, such fears have been overcome by rigorous research and a refusal to pander to politics from any part of the ideological spectrum. Indeed, this new field of inquiry has also engaged students, particularly undergraduates, in historical research that has real-world applicability. For many participants in these projects, investigating histories of slavery and race helps them connect the dots to today's racial issues, just as study of the US Constitution and the Declaration of Independence helps us to understand the foundational ideologies of our nation. These histories are not a complete answer to the sometimes confounding racial situations in which colleges and universities find themselves, but uncovering them goes a long way toward making clear how embedded issues of race and racism are in our institutions—and how covering them up has done no one any favors.

Inception of a Movement

Although Brown University garnered the most headlines in the early years of this movement, Brown was just one of several institutions where faculty, students, and administrators pioneered processes for investigating, publicizing, and redressing histories of slavery and race. In 2002, the year before Brown's efforts began, groups at two other institutions were already critically examining higher education and slavery.

At Emory University, Mark Auslander, a professor of anthropology at Oxford College—the site of the university's original campus—presented research about the history of slavery and Jim Crow labor practices at Emory as part of a "Year of Reconciliation" convened for the 2001–02 academic year. Auslander had researched this history with several classes of undergraduate students beginning in the late 1990s; that work provided the material for *A Dream Deferred: African Americans at Emory and Oxford Colleges, 1836–1968*, an exhibition

launched in early 2002. Eighteen months later, when the Emory campus was rocked by an academic year full of controversies around the meaning of racial diversity, Auslander's work provided the foundation for the Transforming Community Project, a multiyear initiative that would help faculty, staff, students, and alumni grapple with the vexed history and current experiences of race at Emory. Through history-based community dialogues, seminars on historical research, mini-grants to fund new projects, and events exploring the history of racial diversity at Emory, the Transforming Community Project provided a space for all members of the university community to work toward fostering racial inclusivity and equity.

Meanwhile, graduate students at Yale University sought to complicate that institution's self-presentation as a site of antislavery activism. Antony Dugdale, J. J. Fueser, and J. Celso de Castro Alves, then doctoral candidates, authored *Yale, Slavery, and Abolition*, a pamphlet published by New Haven's Amistad Committee and made available at <http://www.yaleslavery.org> in 2002. Responding to Yale's 2001 establishment of the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition and to a tercentennial brochure—both of which had focused exclusively on Yale's connection to the antislavery movement—these students uncovered evidence of Yale's deep implication in proslavery practices and ideologies and Northern racism. Noting that in 1831, Yale leaders had prevented the establishment of a "Negro college" in New Haven and that "in the 1930s and 1960s, Yale chose to name most of its colleges after slave owners and proslavery leaders," they sought to create a more truthful history of Yale. They were supported in this endeavor by the Federation of Hospital and University Employees, HERE Local 34 (the union of clerical and technical workers at Yale), and Yale's Graduate Employees and Students Organization.

The launch of Brown's Steering Committee on Slavery and Racial Justice in 2003 garnered more attention and set the model for institutional investigations of such histories. Ruth Simmons, the first African American woman to hold the presidency at an Ivy League institution, convened the steering committee to conduct research into Brown's involvement in New World slavery and to propose means of redressing that history. The committee issued its report in 2006, and Brown's board of trustees endorsed twelve recommendations, including rewriting the university's official history; working more closely with the city of Providence to redress racial disparities in its educational system, in part by raising \$10 million for a Fund for the Education of the Children of Providence; strengthening relationships with the nation's historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs); and strengthening Brown's Department of Africana Studies. In 2012, the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice opened under the leadership of historian Anthony Bogues, who has continued the intellectual work of exploring the history and legacies of slavery at Brown and beyond.

Groups at two other institutions, the University of Alabama and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, also initiated early recognition efforts. In 2004, the University of Alabama's faculty senate passed a resolution acknowledging and apologizing for the involvement of antebellum Alabama faculty members in punishing enslaved people on campus and promulgating proslavery ideologies. This action, led by law professor Alfred Brophy, is believed to be the first instance of an institution of higher education apologizing for its involvement in slavery. At Chapel Hill, the Class of 2002 raised money for the *Unsung Founders Memorial*. Unveiled in 2005, the memorial honors "people of color, bound and free, who helped build the Carolina that we cherish today." The low-to-the-ground monument features a flat granite table upheld by three hundred small figures with five stone seats around it. Erected in the shadow of Silent Sam, an eight-foot-tall, early-twentieth-century statue celebrating the Confederacy, the memorial has been praised for its symbolic accuracy and vilified by those who think it reinforces rather than challenges white supremacy. The memorial's unveiling coincided with the opening of an exhibition on the history of slavery at UNC, *Slavery and the Making of the University*.

These actions—research, memorialization, and apologies—remain the primary ways institutions have addressed their histories of slavery. Almost without fail, such efforts have been initiated at the student or faculty level, a reflection of the progress institutions have made in diversifying their populations: more diverse student bodies and faculties ask new questions about the histories of these institutions and link these histories to continuing efforts to achieve equity within and beyond campus. These efforts also reflect a resurgence of interest in reparations in the late twentieth century. Brown's commission, for example, was in part a response to a reparations movement that identified that university, along with Yale and Harvard, as potential targets for a lawsuit.

But a diverse student body and faculty or even potential lawsuits do not guarantee support for such projects. After Brown's pathbreaking initiative, and despite Ruth Simmons's exemplary leadership, the administrations of other Ivy League institutions largely sidestepped the questions raised by research by their own faculty and students during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Many denied the significance of slavery at their Northern institutions.

At Harvard, Janet Halley raised the question of ethical engagement with history when she became the Royall Chair of Law in 2007. The position, Halley observed in a speech she delivered upon assuming the chair, is named for Isaac Royall, who inherited land and slaves in Antigua and in Medford, proceeds from the sale of which were used to fund Harvard Law School, the first law school in the United States. In the same year, Sven Beckert, Laird Bell Professor of History, established the Harvard and Slavery research project. With undergraduate and graduate students and staff members, he produced a pamphlet outlining Harvard's history of slavery and created a website, HarvardandSlavery.com, in 2011. But not until 2016 did Harvard president Drew Gilpin Faust (a scholar of the antebellum South) publicly acknowledge Harvard's involvement with slavery. And it was not until November 2019, following a September speech in which he

compared Harvard donors to African Americans freed by the Thirteenth Amendment, that Harvard's new president, Lawrence Bacow, announced the establishment of a \$5 million university-wide initiative to study the history of slavery at Harvard.

Similarly, at Princeton University, history professor Martha A. Sandweiss founded and directed the Princeton and Slavery Project with funding from a number of departments and programs within the university but with little direct financial or administrative support from the central administration. Between 2013 and 2017, postdoctoral fellows, undergraduates, and other scholars worked to excavate the histories of slavery and race at Princeton. In 2017, the project unveiled its work on campus with a presentation on its website— one of the largest of its kind—of newly revealed histories and a weekend of commissioned artworks, short films, and plays that explored these histories.

The University of Pennsylvania for years denied having had links to slavery, citing Pennsylvania's Quaker heritage without acknowledging that many Quakers had been slave owners. But student research begun in 2017 under the mentorship of historian Kathleen Brown has uncovered evidence of at least seventy-five trustees who owned enslaved people, as well as a host of connections between the recruitment of Southern men to the medical school—the first in the nation—and the development of racial science and racist ideologies. Following a 2017 conference revealing the results of this research, Penn's president and provost retracted the university's earlier denials and established its own "working group to examine the role of slavery in Penn's early years."

Beginning in 2009, students, faculty, and staff at the University of Virginia also campaigned for a more adequate acknowledgment of the history of slavery at the university. Central to these efforts was Kirt von Daacke, professor of history and assistant dean in the College of Arts and Sciences, who was the lead researcher on the history of slavery at the institution and created an expansive website with interpretive essays, maps, and thousands of primary documents. In 2013, UVA president Teresa Sullivan established the President's Commission on Slavery and the University with von Daacke as cochair. Between 2013 and 2018, the university community undertook what may be the most ambitious of the university-based projects to reckon with slavery and its legacy. Members of the central administration, including Sullivan, were active participants in the commission's first major event in 2014, the symposium *Universities Confronting Slavery*, which included an evening memorial service at Charlottesville's First Baptist Church and a commemoration ceremony at the African American cemetery, which was located outside the walls of the main university cemetery and is believed to contain the bodies of at least sixty-seven enslaved laborers who died while working at the university. The project has also led to the publication of a collection of essays, *Educated in Tyranny*, and inspired renewed efforts to build equitable relationships with the surrounding African American community in Charlottesville. In 2011, UVA established a small park and memorial to Catherine "Kitty" Foster and other members of the free black community who in the antebellum era lived on what is now the South Lawn of the university, and this year UVA will unveil a monument to the enslaved laborers who are part of the university's history. In accordance with the Charlottesville black community's wishes, the monument is situated on a highly visible and easily accessible part of the campus, bridging town and gown. UVA also hosts the *Universities Studying Slavery* organization, which boasts fifty-seven members (including eight international institutions) and holds semiannual meetings to collaborate on strategies and share research.

Demands for Redress

Scholars and campus activists continue to document the extent to which higher education institutions benefited from the enslavement of people of African descent and supported slavery. But beyond academic research, the possibilities for redress remain unclear. Most successful, even if fraught, have been efforts to change physical landscapes by adding monuments to enslaved laborers, replacing the names of enslavers and white supremacists on campus buildings with the names of those dedicated to racial equality, or adding interpretive materials to contextualize monuments and building names.

Such efforts gained greater traction nationally in 2015. The murder of nine black AME Church members in Charleston, South Carolina, by a white supremacist, which led to a national reconsideration of the place of Confederate monuments, and the ongoing Black Lives Matter movement and concomitant concerns about racial inequality, including overpolicing on college campuses, prompted student uprisings across the country. Many student groups called on their colleges and universities to remove monuments and rename buildings that commemorated the Confederacy or people they considered to be white supremacists. A series of coordinated student protests during the 2015–16 academic year highlighted how a new generation was linking antebellum slavery to continuing racial inequalities. Institutions that had earlier recovered histories of slavery were pushed to do more.

At Harvard, students inaugurated "Royall Must Fall," a campaign to encourage retirement of the Royall family crest as a symbol of the law school. This campaign echoed "Rhodes Must Fall," an international campaign demanding the removal of a statue of British imperialist Cecil Rhodes from the University of Cape Town in South Africa, and spread to wider demands to "decolonize" universities. Demands of a broadened campaign to "Reclaim Harvard Law" included greater diversity among staff, additional resources to support racial equity, changes to the curriculum that would deepen the exploration of race, and appointments of faculty members with expertise in critical race theory. In early 2016, a committee appointed by the administration recommended the removal of the Royall family crest, and within a few months, most representations of the crest were gone.

In spring 2016, Yale president Peter Salovey initially refused to accede to demands to rename Calhoun College, named for John C.

Calhoun, the proslavery architect of states' rights politics in the antebellum South and a Yale alumnus. Disappointment from within and without the Yale community led Salovey to appoint a Committee to Establish Principles on Renaming composed of Yale faculty, administrators, alumni (who were in the majority), and current students. The committee studied similar monuments at a range of higher education institutions as well as practices of memorialization globally. Its suggested procedure for adjudicating such decisions led to the establishment of a second committee, which voted to remove the Calhoun name. The college is now known as Grace Hopper College, named after a pioneer in the field of computer science who received her master's and doctoral degrees in mathematics from Yale.

At Chapel Hill, students and other antiracist activists rejected the strategy of simply adding the Unsung Founders Memorial to the same square where Silent Sam stood. Despite a North Carolina law forbidding the removal of monuments, they called for the university to remove the statue and then, in fall 2018, toppled it to the ground themselves. A year of debates about what to do with the statue followed, and in December 2019 the university system voted to give it to the Sons of Confederate Veterans, who had filed a lawsuit seeking possession of the statue, along with a \$2.5 million trust fund for its preservation. Heated debates continue about this course of action. A similar case occurred in 2016, when Vanderbilt University paid the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) \$1.2 million to remove *Confederate* from the Confederate Memorial Hall dormitory, which the UDC had funded in 1935. Following the recommendations of a presidential task force in 2015 and then again after the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville in 2017, the University of Texas at Austin removed a total of six statues from its Main Mall. Several of the statues are on display at the Briscoe Center for American History, including a statue of Robert E. Lee, which is accompanied by an explanation of the historical context of its creation.

Most controversial and least successful have been efforts to provide direct financial redress to communities negatively affected by slavery and racism. As in the larger reparations movement, the idea of redistribution of wealth has run up against dominant capitalist notions of wealth creation and ownership, in which workers, whether enslaved or free, have the smallest claim to the wealth they helped produce. Georgetown University's identification of 272 enslaved individuals sold south to Louisiana to save the university from bankruptcy provided a stark example of how the sale of human bodies and the wealth held in enslaved laborers was directly tied to the economic success of many higher education institutions. Georgetown's initial apology was followed by an offer to treat the descendants of those sold as it treats the descendants of university alumni who choose to apply to the university. But as recent affirmative action lawsuits highlighted, the advantages that alumni descendants gain in a range of elite institutions are themselves unjust, and Georgetown's offer is particularly galling given that the descendants of enslaved people did not in fact receive the benefits of a Georgetown education during their enslavement. In fall 2018, Georgetown's Student Government Association passed a resolution to add \$27.20 to student fees for a reparations fund earmarked for the descendants of the 272. Although some students have protested this fee, most appear to support it—another example of how students are often ahead of administrators on these issues. Such a change would have to be approved by the trustees, and as of this writing—more than a year later—the proposal still sits with the board.

A handful of institutions, however, have taken more concrete steps toward making financial reparations. Virginia Theological Seminary set aside \$1.7 million to pay reparations to the descendants of those enslaved at the institution, following further research to identify the enslaved and their descendants. Princeton Theological Seminary (unrelated to Princeton University) agreed to set aside \$27.6 million to fund scholarships and doctoral fellowships for the descendants of enslaved people and people from other underrepresented groups, to hire faculty to study slavery, and to rename buildings and other campus spaces to honor these histories. To date, these are the most substantial sums of money directed to reparations in higher education.

Brown University pledged in 2006 to raise \$10 million for investment in the Providence school system, but by 2019, only \$1.9 million had been raised. Meanwhile, the university's endowment stands at \$3.8 billion. In 2014 and again in 2019, Harvard received letters from the prime minister of Antigua and Barbuda, where the Royall family made its wealth in slaves and plantations, requesting a meeting to discuss how Harvard might redress the lack of investment in the people and places that were central to producing the Royalls' wealth. To date, no meeting has been scheduled.

Although a full accounting of slavery would put financial redress beyond the capacity of any individual institution, if groups of institutions unite, they could wield significant power together to address the long-standing underinvestment in the descendants of enslaved people. Participants in the Universities Studying Slavery project are discussing how this could happen. Sharing financial resources with HBCUs, which have not recovered from the devastating 2008 economic downturn as strongly as have wealthier historically white institutions, could be one starting point. HBCUs not only educate the majority of African Americans; they also are feeder institutions to graduate programs at some of the most elite universities in the nation. Indeed, the methods of teaching and mentoring at HBCUs have been historically, and continue to be, a model for redressing the inequities in our public school systems and in our nation. Universities Studying Slavery is currently piloting a collaboration with Tougaloo College, the Tougaloo College Research Development Fund, in which institutions would provide infrastructural support that would help the college apply for and track federal funds.

Continuing Impact

Colleges and universities continue to investigate histories of slavery, and some have moved beyond slavery to other issues of race and racism. The University of Virginia has turned to an examination of its role in Jim Crow segregation in Charlottesville and the South.

Rhondda Robinson Thomas, Calhoun Lemon Professor of Literature at Clemson University in South Carolina, has uncovered an extensive history of using African American convict labor to build the land-grant institution in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And Northwestern University and the University of Denver have investigated their ties to the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre, in which two hundred Cheyenne and Arapahoe Native Americans, mostly women and children, who were waving US and surrender flags, were gunned down by a US Army regiment in Colorado. John Evans, one of the founders of Northwestern University and the man for whom Evanston, Illinois, is named, was territorial governor of Colorado at the time and had called on US citizens to “kill and destroy” hostile natives, despite the fact that the group at Sand Creek was known to be peaceful. Northwestern and UD have both launched initiatives to begin the process of redress by engaging with Native communities and investing in Native studies.

Even as the self-examination of higher education institutions continues, some positive outcomes are identifiable. Although many feared that an honest accounting of this history would alienate people, for many the opposite has been true: good-faith efforts in investigating and openly sharing these histories has brought a diverse group of people back to institutions from which they previously felt alienated. At Emory University, one of the first public events of the Transforming Community Project was welcoming back black alumni who had struggled for greater equity at the institution in the late 1960s; many had not returned to the campus since graduating. At the University of Virginia and Georgetown University, members of descendant communities are also renewing a connection with these institutions on vastly different terms from their enslaved ancestors. For the diverse range of participants in these projects—students, faculty, and staff—the complicated ways in which history is recovered, researched, and memorialized is made real through these projects. And although many institutions are still unclear about the relationship between financial reparations and institutional transformation, the possibility for creative responses to this question has rarely been more alive than it is today.

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