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A powerful new memorial to U-Va.'s enslaved workers
reclaims lost lives and forgotten narratives

Philip Kennicott



Visitors at the University of Virginia's Memorial to Enslaved Laborers in Charlottesville this month. The memorial acknowledges the estimated 4,000 enslaved people who lived and worked at the university from 1817 to 1865. (Evelyn Hockstein/for The Washington Post)

If you stand outside the concentric rings of the University of Virginia's new Memorial to Enslaved Laborers, there is a curious acoustic phenomenon: The conversations of people inside the gray, granite walls are clearly audible, even from a distance.

Architects Eric Howeler and Meejin Yoon say that's no surprise, given the way curved surfaces reflect sound. "We knew the geometry had [acoustic] qualities, but it wasn't until it was built that it became so evident," says Yoon.

So, this evocative and moving new memorial to the thousands of enslaved people who helped build and then served the university that Thomas Jefferson designed can make private conversations public. And that echoes the larger challenge of this memorial, part of the university's ongoing effort to confront the legacy of slavery and white supremacy: how to memorialize people whose names and stories are mostly lost to history.

Of the roughly 4,000 enslaved people whose lives intersected with the university — as construction workers, craftsmen, domestic servants, gardeners, cooks — the names of only 578 (to date) are known. Another 311 were known by their roles within the campus or their relation to others who lived or worked there: bricklayer, mother, son, niece.

That left more than 3,000 blank places on a wall meant to honor a whole community of people who were an essential part of university life but also subject to explosive violence and sexual abuse from students raised to be masters in a system of racial domination. The design solution is something the architects call “memory marks,” small gashes in the stone that stand in for the anonymous laborers, gashes that look a bit like wounds. After a rainstorm, a visitor to the memorial noticed that water was slowly dripping from the memory marks. That visitor, a descendant of the community of enslaved laborers, told the architects this reminded her of “the tears of our ancestors.”



“Memory marks” in the University of Virginia’s Memorial to Enslaved Laborers. (Evelyn Hockstein/for The Washington Post)

For better and worse, Charlottesville is at the center of this country’s conversation about race, the legacy of slavery and the persistence of white supremacy. The infamous 2017 Unite the Right march brought neo-Nazis, Klansmen and other extremist groups to Charlottesville for two days of violent protests, including a torchlight march on the university campus in which White men chanted, “Jews will not replace us,” and the murder the following day of Heather Heyer, an anti-racist counterprotester.

On Richmond’s Monument Avenue, an evolving legacy of ugly ideas

Charlottesville was also the epicenter of the Jeffersonian dream — agrarian, egalitarian, intellectual and racist — one of the most fraught and frustrating chapters of American history. Jefferson founded the university in 1819, designed the campus (now a UNESCO World Heritage Site) and laid out an ambitious academic agenda for an institution that was meant to train the future leaders of a democracy that paradoxically embraced slavery. Idealism and cynicism were baked into the brick of this neoclassical Piedmont masterpiece, an oblong campus of pavilions connected by a colonnaded loggia around a slowly descending greensward.

The new memorial, which was scheduled to open in April before the coronavirus pandemic shut down much of the university, is an effort not just to think about Jefferson but to think beyond him. Its circular form recalls the slave tradition of a ring shout (an African-derived spiritual-dance ritual). But it also serves as an outdoor classroom, small amphitheater or gathering spot. During the design process, the architects had to determine the exact dimensions of the circle. Again by fortuitous discovery, they realized that the diameter of Jefferson's dome for the central Rotunda building was also the right size for a memorial that needed to be both big enough to make a statement and small enough to be intimate.



Kelli Lemon, U-Va. Class of 1998; her father, Karl Lemon; and her son Lance Lemon, U-Va. Class of 2011, visit the memorial. (Evelyn Hockstein/for The Washington Post)

But they also used a locally quarried granite that stands apart, with funereal reticence, from the mainly classical, red-brick and white-trimmed campus. And while the memorial sits within the UNESCO World Heritage Site, it is set to the side of Jefferson's Academical Village, along a prominent pathway that connects students to the cafes, shops and restaurants along University Avenue. And so it echoes humanist discourse at its best: distinct, independent, always qualified to be precise and general only in its open acknowledgment that little is finished or certain.

The two circular forms include a timeline of slavery at U-Va. along the inner ring and the wall of names and memory marks along the outer one. The exterior of the outer wall also includes a subtle (and sometimes difficult to discern) set of eyes, derived from an image of Isabella Gibbons, an enslaved woman who was owned by professors at the university before emancipation and who went on to become an educator of freed African Americans.

The eyes, visible from certain angles depending on the light, reinforce what the echo suggests: the sense that something hidden or obscure is being made available and present. Images of enslaved

people, especially during the early years of the university, are extraordinarily rare. A [2018 report](#) delivered to U-Va.'s President's Commission on Slavery and the University included just one known image of an enslaved person at the school during the antebellum period: a Black woman holding a White baby, standing on the balcony of one of Jefferson's pavilions. Gibbons, who survived slavery and lived during the age of photography, offers a rare, direct encounter with one of the thousands of otherwise anonymous laborers.

The lack of early images of slavery doesn't make slavery invisible, says [Louis Nelson](#), professor of architectural history at U-Va. The campus design, which pushed the domestic life of enslaved labor into ground-level spaces not visible from the center of the lawn, and into gardens obscured by eight-foot-high serpentine walls, continued architectural gestures built into [Jefferson's mansion at Monticello](#). These were "strategies to remove the presence of the Black body and obscure the institution of slavery," says Nelson, who describes Jefferson's campus and Monticello as "White landscapes" in which slavery is tucked into the sides or underneath.



The University of Virginia's Memorial to Enslaved Laborers. (Evelyn Hockstein/for The Washington Post)

Unlike elite universities in the North, which were mainly urban and had a ready supply of labor and resources for their daily operation, Jefferson created an ideal village, essentially *ex nihilo*, into which he incorporated all the necessities of the university's agenda, including its dependence on slavery. Rather like the Enlightenment conception of the cosmos, in which God is often likened to an invisible architect or clock maker, slavery was part of the hidden works of the larger mechanism.

That gives the round form of the memorial, which some have compared to broken shackles, yet more resonance. So, too, the presence, just up the hill, of the 1876 [Brooks Hall](#), originally devoted to natural history, with the names of prominent scientists carved on its exterior, including Carl Linnaeus, a Swedish botanist who helped create the modern taxonomic system. The name of Linnaeus, who played a key role in the origins of scientific racism (the pseudoscience of categorizing humans by racial types and hierarchies), is clearly visible from the memorial.



The memorial at night. (Evelyn Hockstein/for The Washington Post)

College campuses are, by their nature, thick with meaning, intentional, accidental, associative and uncanny. In 2007, the university installed a small memorial marker near the central Rotunda, which read: “In honor of the several hundred men and women, both free and enslaved, whose labor between 1817 and 1826 helped realize Thomas Jefferson’s design for the University of Virginia.” It was inadequate in multiple ways: its seeming equivalence between free and enslaved labor, its limit to the “several hundred” who worked on campus construction rather than the decades-long history of enslaved labor up to the Civil War, and its reflexive inclusion of Jefferson’s name, as if it were an honor to be unrightfully bound to fulfilling his vision.

It was also small, and easy to miss, rather like it is easy to overlook Linnaeus’s name on Brooks Hall. Both should probably be left where they are, reminders that history, science and the self-image of institutions always involve an admixture of motives, benign and malign and sometimes inscrutable even to the most conscientious observers. The designers of the new memorial, which can’t be missed and is already attracting a steady stream of visitors, say they wanted to fulfill the need for a memorial that made an invisible, often whitewashed history visible. They also wanted something open-ended, subject to interpretation, a place of happy accidents like that strange echo. They succeeded. Here is a space you might sit in for a long time, and wonder: How did we get here? And where are we going?

Is a new Eisenhower memorial the last of the “great man” monuments?

We need libraries, and this one can’t open soon enough

Thomas Jefferson, a great scientist, and a mastodon skeleton