

FAST COMPANY

UVA's new memorial to enslaved laborers is exactly the public art we need right now

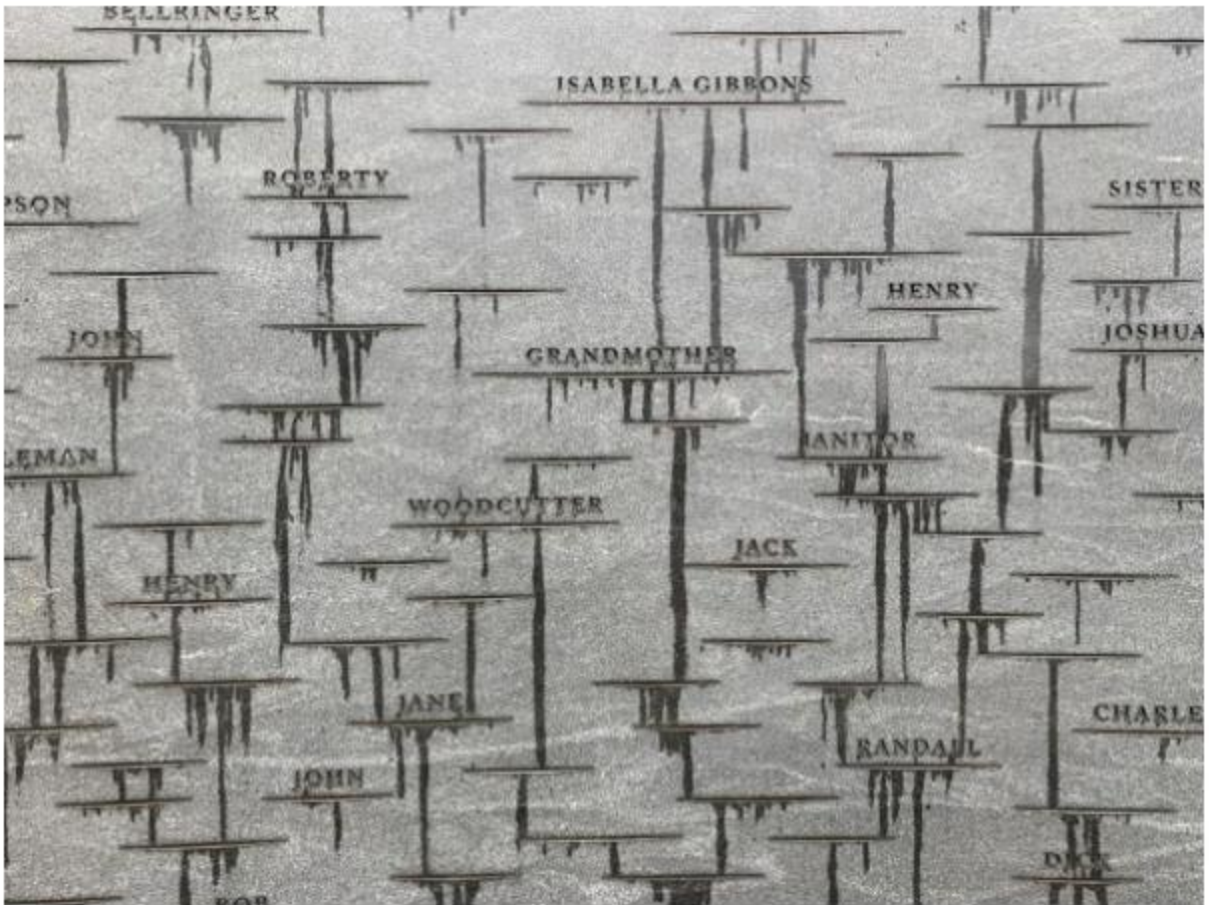
This new memorial to enslaved laborers is unfinished. That's on purpose.
Lilly Smith



1/10 [Photo: Alan Karchmer/courtesy Höweler + Yoon Architecture]

Many public monuments installed over the past century have racist origins. A new memorial at the University of Virginia instead explores racism itself—how the university has benefited from the labor of enslaved people, and how much further there is to go.

The newly opened Memorial to Enslaved Laborers is a place of remembrance for the estimated 4,000 enslaved people who built and maintained the UVA grounds between 1817 and 1865. The memorial is also meant to be a place for contemplation about the current state of racial justice.



[Photo: Höweler + Yoon Architecture]

Colleges and universities have been grappling with how to make reparations for their participation in racist systems and for the use of slave labor in building their campuses. Schools like UNC Chapel Hill, Bowling Green State University, the University of Oregon, and Yale have renamed buildings that were dedicated to racist figures. University of Georgia created an advisory group to rename buildings, while Georgetown University announced it would raise \$400,000 annually to benefit descendants of enslaved people the college sold in the 1800s.

For its part, in 2018, UVA released a report on the university's relationship to slavery and enslaved people. It noted that the restorative justice work was ongoing, citing the 2017 white supremacist violence in Charlottesville, where the school is based, which "brought into sharp relief just how important this work is." As part of that work, the university opened an Equity Center to engage with the Charlottesville community on issues like affordable housing, education, and healthcare. The Memorial to Enslaved Laborers was designed by architecture firm Höweler + Yoon, in collaboration with historian and designer Dr. Mabel O. Wilson of Studio& and others. The massive concentric circles are designed to be a tribute in both concrete and abstract ways.



[Photo: Höweler + Yoon Architecture]

Step inside and you'll see a series of names inscribed along a long, concave wall. The design team worked with researchers to inscribe the names of 578 enslaved laborers who could be identified with historical records, and 311 people who couldn't be identified by name (only, say, through their occupations). While it includes room for later inscriptions if more people are identified, it's intended to be an unfinished archive that recognizes the gaps in history and the antiracist work that still needs to be done.

By the researchers' estimate, there were 4,000 people who were enslaved at UVA—and 4,000 “memory marks” on the memorial serve as “a reminder of each of their lives and of the violence incurred in the dehumanization of men, women, and children whose names remain unknown,” according to the statement. (In 2019, the university started a “Descendent Research and Outreach Project” to identify more names of enslaved people who labored at UVA.)

The ring at the very center has multiple meanings, too. On its surface, it's a timeline, starting in 1619, with the first written account of enslaved Africans arriving in Virginia, and ending in 1889, when Isabella Gibbons died. Gibbons was an enslaved domestic worker at UVA who became a teacher when she was emancipated. Water flowing over the timeline evokes African libation rituals, the Middle Passage, baptismal ceremonies, and rivers as routes to liberation. In collaboration with the artist Eto Otitigbe, Gibbons's eyes are inscribed in the side of the monument at a huge scale.

"The Memorial is not just about memory. It is about the present, and the work that we all need to be engaged in today," Höweler + Yoon cofounder Meejin Yoon said. "These are the necessary steps in the contemporary conversations about race and repair." There are enough monuments to the past. This one recognizes its faultlines and challenges visitors to confront the future, too.



3/10 [Photo: Alan Karchmer/courtesy Höweler + Yoon Architecture]



2/10 [Photo: Sanjay Suchak/courtesy UVA Communications]



7/10 [Photo: Höweler + Yoon Architecture]



5/10 [Photo: Alan Karchmer/courtesy Höweler + Yoon Architecture]



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