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U-Va. memorial will honor the enslaved people who toiled there

BY SUSAN SVRLUGA

Two hundred years ago, Thomas Jefferson came to an abandoned farm to begin marking out the landscape for the university he planned to create, accompanied by his overseer and 10 slaves.

"From the very first moment, this is a story where there are often more enslaved people than designers, or professors, or students" at the University of Virginia, said Kirt von Daacke, a professor and assistant dean.

The bricks that built Jefferson's vision of a place where students and professors lived and worked and learned together were dug out of clay by enslaved people, shaped by enslaved people, baked in kilns by enslaved people. The stone for the stately steps and architectural details was quarried and carved by enslaved people. And much of the building was done by enslaved people, usually "rented" from slave owners in the surrounding area.

Now the university is planning to build a large and visible memorial to commemorate the contributions of an estimated 5,000 enslaved people who helped build and maintain the school founded by the third U.S. president.

It's part of a larger, ongoing effort by the university — and about 30 others — to grapple with painful truths and to tell a more complete and accurate story of its past.

It's also an effort that was first pushed by students nearly a decade ago. Now it has approval at the highest levels: On Friday, U-Va.'s governing Board of Visitors unanimously endorsed not only the concept of a memorial but also the design presented to them. Private fundraising for the estimated \$6 million project will begin immediately, and officials hope that the memorial will be complete in 2019, when the school celebrates its bi-

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centennial.

The move comes at a time when Charlottesville is at the epicenter of fiery debates over history and racism. In May, torch-wielding demonstrators gathered to protest efforts to remove a statue honoring Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee, a Virginia native. And a Ku Klux Klan group from North Carolina, just south of the Virginia line, plans to hold a rally in Charlottesville in July.

The U-Va. memorial, von Daacke said, would be a way to intellectually reject white supremacy by adding to the landscape rather than removing historical monuments.

"It's a really powerful memorial that, I think, fits with Jefferson's vision for the university while changing the story," he said.

The landscape and buildings of the university were always intended to be an integral part of the learning experience. "This will do that."

It will be built within the UNESCO world heritage site, near the anthropology building and the Corner and easily visible to people driving by the state flagship university as well as to those on campus.

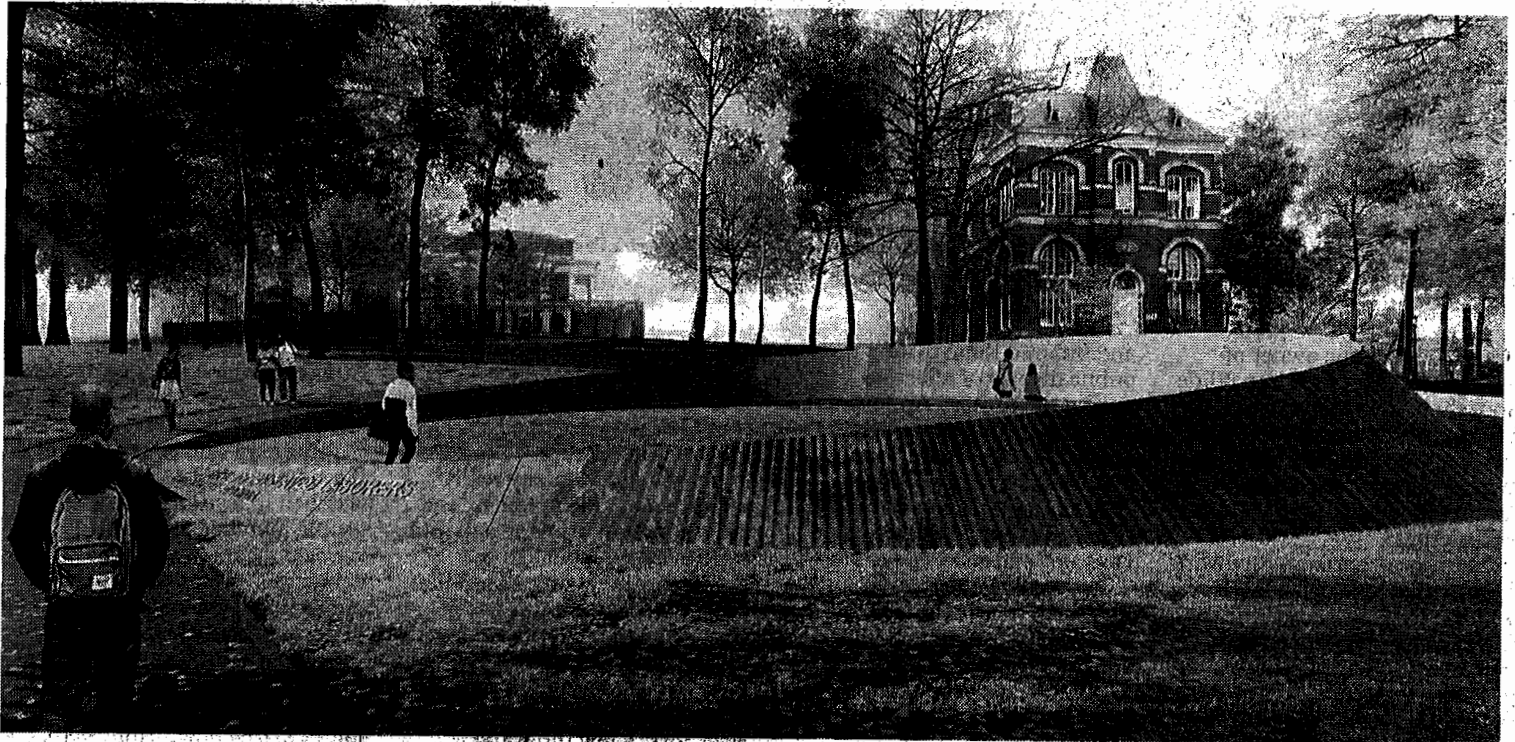
A Boston design firm, Höweler+Yoon, in consultation with members of the Charlottesville, and U-Va. communities, designed a circular memorial about 80 feet in diameter, echoing the dimensions of Jefferson's iconic Rotunda.

The outer wall will be local granite, the same stone used on the terraces of the Rotunda, and at its highest point will rise to about eight feet. Names of the people who worked there as slaves — about 1,000, mostly first names, are known — will be inscribed, with space to add more.

As research continues, more about those people and their stories is being learned.

Another ring inside the memorial will serve as a shelf. A ring of water will spill over a stone shelf, said Marcus Martin, who co-chairs the President's Commission on Slavery and the University with von Daacke and is U-Va.'s vice president and chief officer for diversity and equity. That shelf will have a timeline of the history of

Memorial part of effort to tell broader story of U-Va.'s past



HÖWELER+YOON

slavery at the university inscribed upon it. The water "will symbolize liberation, and the transatlantic voyage of the enslaved people," he said.

A large inner circle, a grassy area, will be used as a gathering space. "I envision students, staff and faculty will pass by it every day," Martin said. "They will probably sit there and reflect upon the memorial. There will be programs and classes there; I can see gospel choirs singing there. I can see people giving speeches there."

They hope to create annual traditions that link the university and surrounding community, von

Daacke said. Every year on March 3, the city marks the anniversary of the day in 1865 when Union troops arrived and ended slavery in Charlottesville, with a walk beginning at the historical slave auction block in town.

When the memorial is complete, he hopes, that walk will end on campus.

As with other historical sites, such as Monticello, von Daacke said, they are working to confront the reality that "Jefferson is both the man who wrote the Declaration of Independence, the man who founded a radical experiment in higher education in the United States, and a lifelong slaveholder with rather unpleasant views of

people with dark skin. "I don't think the university, until the last decade, had really begun to grapple with that reality," he said. "I'm really excited that we are adding to that landscape."

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COURTESY OF UVA

ABOVE: Isabella Gibbons, who was a slave held at the university, is shown after emancipation.

LEFT: A rendering of the memorial by design firm Höweler+Yoon of Boston.