

Hidden in Plain Sight Transcript

Introduction

[Ambient outdoors noise]

Host: Do you know anything about the name behind Cabell?

Student Interviewee: Considering, like, this is UVA, I can kind of, like, guess who Cabell, like - Cabell's character. But I also know that the buildings were originally not supposed to be there and then they were built so that you couldn't see, like, a community of free Black people that was, like, in viewsight of the Lawn.

[Series Introduction/Theme song: "The Duel" by Ketsa]

Host: Welcome to Memory Marks, a student-produced podcast about the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers and legacy of slavery at the University of Virginia. I'm your host, Ashley Thompson. In this episode, I'll take you on a tour of some of the buildings on grounds at UVA, investigate their namesakes, and explore what it means for the university today.

["The Duel" fades out]

[Silence]

Opening

Host: The year is 1817. Charlottesville, a sleepy town in the center of Virginia, is bustling with the beginning of construction of what will soon become the renowned University of Virginia. While Thomas Jefferson is credited with founding the University, you wouldn't find him physically building any of the structures. Instead, he surveys the construction of the University while freed and enslaved laborers work tirelessly to bring Jefferson's vision to life. The university opens in 1825 with the Lawn and the Rotunda at the center of campus life. While many new buildings have been constructed since then, the foundational structures have stood the test of time.

Now, UVA is renowned for the beauty of its campus and the Grecian architecture featured in many of its central buildings. But the people these structures are named after? They're slave owners, racists, and critics of social and political equality. They don't represent the values the university prides themselves on today. Regardless, these buildings are a major part of university life. They are the sites of many essential student activities like class discussions, club meetings, and study sessions. Even after spending a lot of time in these places, many students don't know the history of the buildings or the stories of the people behind them.

Today, I'm going to take you on a tour of the university and explore the real history of these spaces we interact with so often, starting in the heart of grounds - the Lawn.

[Ambient outdoors noise with construction faintly in the background]

[UVA Chapel bells ring the Westminster Melody, then toll once]
[Ambient outdoors noise with chatter in the background]

Host: It's just after 1, and I'm currently standing on the Lawn right in front of the Rotunda. The Rotunda is a massive structure at the peak of the Lawn that commands the attention of everyone that passes by. As I turn my back to the Rotunda I can see the entirety of the Lawn lined by the rooms and Pavilions that make up Jefferson's original Academical Village. There's quite a bit of activity here right now. There are many students studying, enjoying food, or just chatting with their friends on the Lawn.

[Walking sounds with ambient outdoors noise]

Cabell

Host: From the Rotunda, I walked down the Lawn, and I'm here now at Cabell Hall. The students here walk with purpose, as this building is a popular classroom location.

[Chatter and crunching leaves]
[Background noise, including chatter and leaves, plays on during the interviews ahead]

Host: "How much time do you spend in either Old Cabell or New Cabell?"

Student Interviewee 1: "None."

Host: "Have you ever spent time in there?"

Student Interviewee 1: "Yes, for classes."

Student Interviewee 2: "Well, I have a class twice a week in New Cabell, but I don't spend really any time in Old Cabell."

Student Interviewee 3: "New Cabell, maybe like an hour every other week. And then Old Cabell, this year like zero time, but second year maybe like a few hours a week, like in the old music library."

Host: "And what has brought you to those buildings?"

Interviewee 3: "Honestly, just one of my friends really likes the music library, and then in New Cabell, I have classes. Yeah."

Host: "Do you know anything about the name behind the building?"

Interviewee 1: "No."

Student Interviewee 2: “Considering this is UVA, I can kind of, like, guess.”

Student Interviewee 3: “I have no idea. I’m assuming it was a guy who went to UVA, maybe an old professor?”

Student Interviewee 2: “But I also know that the buildings were originally not supposed to be there and then they were built so that you couldn’t see, like, a community of free Black people that was, like, in viewsight of the Lawn.”

[Silence]

[Music plays: “Ronin” by EXETEXE]

Host: While Thomas Jefferson originally wanted the Rotunda to have an unobstructed view of the mountains, the open space had to be sacrificed to build more classrooms. In 1895, the university filled in this area with the building we now know as Cabell Hall. A not-so-accidental side effect of this construction was that the new building both visually and physically separated the University from a free Black community commonly referred to as “Canada.”¹ Why was the community given this name? Well, the name highlighted the alienation of freed Black people from having full rights as Americans.² Nearly half a century later, New Cabell was built right next to old Cabell, where it still stands today.

These buildings are named after Joseph Carrington Cabell, who played an important role in the legal founding of the university alongside Thomas Jefferson. He served around 30 years on the Board of Visitors and was a major influence during the university’s first few years.

During this time, UVA directly reflected the south’s ideals. The school owned enslaved laborers who lived on campus and maintained the university, but students were not allowed to bring their own servants to campus. Since most students came from a background of slave-owning families, they began to act like they were the masters of the university’s enslaved people. The laborers were regularly harassed and abused, but typically little to no punishment was given to the offending students. In 1829, a student was caught sexually harassing an enslaved worker late at night, but the only consequence received by that student was a scolding. The reason the board gave was the lack of evidence, quote, “but that of a slave.”

[“Ronin” fades out]

Host: The so-called “southern values” of the university at the time go hand-in-hand with Cabell’s personal attitude towards slavery. At UVA’s Special Collections Library, there are hundreds of handwritten letters ¹between Joseph Cabell and his family and friends.

¹ The land that Canada was built on was owned by free Black individuals who resided there. In order to block out these individuals, the university purchased more land adjacent to the Lawn. The community housed on the land eventually became composed of many diverse individuals, including free Black people, enslaved Black people, and white people as well. After the 1890s, the majority of the community

[Sounds of pages flipping and paper shifting]

Host: Looking through the withered and yellowing sheets, it is clear that Cabell lived according to these values.

[Sounds of pages flipping]

Host: February 12, 1811. Joseph Cabell's mother, Hannah, wrote to him about her search for enslaved laborers. While she had already purchased an 11-year-old child, she wrote:

Voice Actor 1: "I still want a lad about 16, one for a carriage driver. \$400 is as far as I can go with propriety."

Host: Like his mother, Joseph Cabell also wrote to others in search for more enslaved laborers for his plantation at Edgewood. In a letter to John Cocke on June 10, 1816, Cabell wrote:

Voice Actor 2: "Do not be hasty in the selection, but take time. The money will be ready on demand, the arrangements in that respect being made already."

Host: Cocke's name adorns the building just next to Cabell Hall.

Abraham, Quintilian, Will, Cato, Becky - these are just a few of the names mentioned in the letters. These are the names of enslaved laborers bought, sold, and used by Joseph Cabell and his associates. Cato's name can be found on the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers.

Alderman

[Construction noises / hammering with ambient outdoors noise]

Host: I'm here in front of Alderman library which has now been turned into a massive construction site. Even though it's out of commission, there's still a lot of commotion around this building. This used to be one of the most popular study spaces for students because of its quiet atmosphere and vintage feel.

[Leaves rustling and chatter with ambient outdoors noise]

Host: "Have you spent any time in Alderman Library when it was open?"

was Black. These diverse individuals were referred to as living in "Canada" and often worked for or were connected to the university in some fashion.

² Some argue that the community was named "Canada" after the country, since enslaved people who fled the US often sought refuge there. Others, including Kirt von Daacke, believe that the name was meant to alienate the community, which was a "pest hole" in the minds of university administrators. Kirt works on multiple projects studying the history of slavery and racism at UVA.

Student Interviewee 3: “Yeah, I would go there pretty often first year.”

Student Interviewee 4: “Yeah, I did. I would spend a lot of time studying there my first and second year.”

Host: “And do you know anything about Alderman himself?”

Student Interviewee 1: “I assume that he is an older white male from a while back. That’s about all I know.”

Student Interviewee 3: “I’m pretty sure he was a eugenicist?”

[Music plays: “Kite Fly High” by Adeline Yeo (HP)]

Host: The name “Alderman” is one that almost every UVA student recognizes. Alderman Dorms, Alderman Road, and Alderman Library all carry the name. But most people probably couldn’t tell you anything about the man himself. Edwin Alderman was the first president of the University, between 1905 and 1931. He is well-known for his contributions to education, but he was also an avid supporter of eugenics. This was the belief in the selective reproduction of humans based on certain traits. Eugenics has since been rejected as a false ideology that was often used to justify and validate racism. UVA was home to many prominent eugenicists in the 20th century, and Alderman was someone who enthusiastically encouraged these ideas.

Voice Actor 3: “Social equality and political control would mean deterioration of the advanced group”.

Host: This is a quote from Edwin Alderman during an address he gave in 1903. His values and beliefs are very much at odds with what the University claims to be today. At a time when the library is undergoing such major construction, it seems like now would be the perfect time to reconsider Alderman’s namesake at the university. We talked to the Dean of Libraries at UVA, Dr. John Unsworth, who informed us that a name change for Alderman is currently being considered by the university administration, but there are no definite plans at the moment.

[“Kite Fly High” fades out]

MEL

[Sounds of passing traffic and birds]

[Sounds fade out]

Host: From Alderman, I walked a few minutes to arrive at the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers. It’s a massive circular granite structure that peaks at eight feet tall. Hundreds of students pass by here every hour on their way to class or The Corner, which is a restaurant and nightlife district adjacent to the university. The dark grey walls of the structure are gauged by thousands

of “memory marks,” which are small incisions into the stone to represent laborers who built Thomas Jefferson’s vision in the early days of UVA. Only 973 marks are accompanied by names or designations. The rest are placeholders for enslaved laborers whose names are still unknown. In front of me I see “Billy,” “Charlotte,” “Friend,” “Brickmason,” and “Cousin.” The center of the memorial has a small stone circle with a grass center.

[Water flowing]

Host: Water flows around the edges of this area overtop of a timeline that details some significant dates in the history of slavery at UVA.

[Music plays: Night Drive by Szegvari]

[Anonymous voices read the following quotes, which overlap with each other. Water fades gradually]

1817. Ten enslaved people begin to clear the land that will become UVA.

1822. Fleming runs away. He is captured a mile from the University and returned.

1827. Prudence cleans bloody linens from the Anatomical Theatre...

1832. Three professors purchase Lewis Commodore. They are later reimbursed and he becomes UVA property.

1838. Two students savagely beat an enslaved man named Fielding.

...cleans up after cadaver dissections and is forced to rob graves.

1856. An enslaved 11-year-old girl is beaten unconscious by a UVA student.

1861. Virginia secedes from the Union.

...nearly 1,000 enslaved local African Americans are forced by confederate authorities to do work...

1865. UVA in September begins to pay wages to those formerly enslaved.

1866. Isabella Gibbons, formerly enslaved at UVA, teaches at a freedman’s school in Charlottesville. It will become the Jefferson School.

[Night Drive fades out]

Host: If you were an observer at the Memorial watching students pass by, you probably wouldn’t see any of them enter the structure. When they do, it’s often only for a short time. In contrast,

students will spend hours at Cabell Hall, Alderman Library, and the Lawn. And they have to - for classes, project meetings, study spots, all the things that comprise life as a student. But students don't have to go to the MEL; some students don't even know that it exists.

More often than not, we as students will acknowledge "Alderman" and "Cabell" rather than the MEL. We remember the names of the oppressors rather than the names of those they oppressed. Because of this, we are upholding the dark past of the university rather than paving the way for a better future.

Conclusion/Closing

[Music plays: "C maj soft pedal piano" by Jason Donnelly]

Host: I came to UVA from California, knowing almost nothing about the University's history or that of the surrounding community of Charlottesville. In my four years here, the type of information I've received about the school's troubled past has become known to me in bits and pieces, usually from fellow students. The way that information is passed around in hushed voices on campus makes it feel like somewhat of a secret, like something that could destroy someone's reputation. I've spent countless hours at each of these buildings without knowing anything about the person behind the name, and I feel guilty for that. And I know I'm not alone in that sentiment. So many Black lives suffered at the hands of these men, and yet their names are still acknowledged in conversation every single day among UVA students and faculty. The fact that these names still exist in the same space as the Memorial seems to distract from the recognition that the names on the Memorial deserve.

Eugenicists, plantation owners, white supremacists - these are the people who have defined UVA's past and continue to have a negative impact today. Only a handful of buildings have been named after the people who helped shape the university into a more equitable and diverse institution. Gibbons House, Ridley Hall, and Skipwith Hall are just some of these names that have only been established after 2015, even though UVA has been operating for over 200 years.

The Naming and Memorials Committee is a group at UVA who researches and discusses the relationship between university structures and the university's proclaimed values. They're aiming to bridge the gap between the two through the construction of memorials and the renaming of buildings. The committee is currently tackling a couple issues. For one, they are considering a name change for Alderman Library to prepare for its reopening after construction. They also made the decision to modify a memorial to a confederate soldier named Frank Hume that sits in the center of the campus. It will be replaced with blocks of contrasting color and officially renamed to the Whispering Wall, which is what it has been informally called for years.

While these issues are crucial to tackle, change is a slow process. Right now, the buildings named after problematic men leave a physical mark on our campus that prevents progress. Although some people might like to say that UVA has moved forward from its troubled past, the

reality is that we can't improve until we fully address what's already been done. It's time to redefine the spaces we inhabit so that they reflect our beliefs. For too long, the lives and histories of Alderman, Cabell, and many more have been all around us, living on in our conversations. We must see these names for what they are: oppressors, hidden in plain sight.

["C maj soft pedal piano" fades out]

Acknowledgements

[Theme song / "The Duel" by Ketsa fades in]

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["The Duel" fades out]

[End of episode]

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