

"The Tale of Two MELs" Transcript

[*Music*: "The Duel" by Ketsa plays]

Byron Bleuze: Welcome to Memory Marks, a student-produced podcast about the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers and the legacy of slavery at UVA. I'm your host, Byron Bleuze, and today we will explore the story of two MELs and how each came to be. We will focus on the decisions leading up to the memorial, the crucial role that students played in its creation, and the relationship between students and the university over the course of its completion.

[*Music*: music fades]

Byron Bleuze: Seventeen years ago the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers didn't exist; the space between Grounds and The Corner was void of any reminders of the university's history. Seventeen years ago almost no research had been done on the role slavery played within the university.

So what changed? What happened within the last two decades to get us to where we are today?

Catherine Neal Bean: It just seemed to me there's this hole of research, of academic study on the life of slaves at the university. And so I was almost in this disbelief of 'What do you mean nobody's ever written about this? What do you mean nobody's ever done anything?'

[*Music*: "Mallet Play With Violin and Piano" by Maarten Schellekens plays]

Byron Bleuze: That's Catherine Neale Bean, a history and American studies major and winner of the 2004 Walter R. Kenan research grant. She graduated in 2006 and was the first person to comb through thousands of records in the university's archives. Her award-winning thesis, "Slaves, Freedpeople, and the University of Virginia," examined the relationships between enslaved people and the university's hotelkeepers, professors, and their very own students.

Before her thesis, however, much of UVA's history remained untouched. There was a hesitancy among the university as a whole that lasted decades longer than it should have.

[*Music*: Music continues]

Byron Bleuze: It wasn't until the late 2000s that the University attempted to recognize some of its history with slavery for the first time.

Byron Bleuze: On February 9, 2007, the Board of Visitors directed the placement of a stone tablet under the Rotunda. It reads:

[*Music:* Music fades]

"In honor of the several hundred men and women, both free and enslaved, whose labor between 1817 and 1826 helped to realize Thomas Jefferson's design for the University of Virginia."

Kurt von Daacke: You have to stop, pivot, look down and read broadly small print on the floor while blocking the hallway.

Byron Bleuze: That was Professor Kurt Von Daacke, an assistant dean and professor in the College of Arts and Sciences and former co-chair of the President's Commission on Slavery. He is one of many who have criticized the plaque extensively, not only for its placement and design, but also its inscription.

Kurt von Daacke: It's acknowledging slavery, but it makes some real crucial mistakes, right. It only considers enslaved people as here during construction. It co-mingles them with free laborers in a way that's really awkward. The bulk of the labor, the vast majority of the labor force building the university were enslaved people, and then it ignores the years from 1826 to the general emancipation in 1865. So that's what led to some ad hoc student ferment.

[*Music:* "Webbed" by REW<< plays]

Byron Bleuze: Simply put, as Catherine Neale Bean says...

Catherine Neal Bean: That little plaque wasn't cutting it.

[*Music:* Music continues]

Byron Bleuze: As dissatisfaction grew among people at the university, so did conversations about what needed to change. One of the leaders of those conversations was Frank Dukes, a Distinguished Institute Fellow at the Institute for Engagement and Negotiation at the University of Virginia and also founder of UCARE, The University and Community Action for Racial Equity.

Frank Dukes: We were looking at our legacy of slavery, segregation, discrimination, eugenics, it's impact on student life, on staff, on faculty, today and then also particularly the impact on the community at large. We were trying to say, can this be a window instead of a door?

[*Music:* Music continues]

Byron Bleuze: Ishraga Eltahir, an alumna who graduated in 2011 and who was a member of UCARE, was influential in pushing those conversations forward.

[*Music*: Music fades]

Byron Bleuze: She wanted more. More change. More action. And she knew she needed to be more involved for that to happen. Ishraga formed a student group called Memorial to Enslaved Laborers, MEL for short, that advocated for a bigger, grander memorial. The students that were a part of this group knew that change needed to happen and that they were the ones that were going to have to push for that change. They got an independent organization status from the student council. They went into the community and held focus groups, which discussed whether or not there should be a Memorial. What it should mean. How it should engage the community.

[*Music*: “Boana” by REW<< plays]

Kurt von Daacke: We had our very first community engagement meeting and...

Byron Bleuze: Again, Professor Von Dak.

Kurt von Daacke: It was a workshop with a list of very broad based questions. Basically, what should we be doing? And the first person who stood up, told us, ‘You better damn well build a Memorial. It better be big. It better be visible and we'd better be able to get to it.’

[*Music*: Music continues]

Byron Bleuze: As time went on and these conversations increased and became more impassioned, students soon became leaders in the fight for the MEL. There was still some hesitancy among staff and faculty, but students did not waver in their determination. And because of that, without them, the MEL never would have happened.

[*Music*: Music fades]

Kurt von Daacke: When we did something, the student's response was always, Hey, that's great. You named that building after William and Isabella Gibbons. But what about X, Y, and Z? We benefited largely from a tailwind pushing us to go farther and do more and pushing the university to do more.

Byron Bleuze: But things didn't always go smoothly for the students.

[*Music*: “Boana” by REW<< plays]

Byron Bleuze: According to Diana Wilson, an alumna who graduated in 2018 and who served as chair of MEL between 2016 and 2018 and on the President's Commission for Slavery, it wasn't an easy battle.

[*Music: Music fades*]

Byron Bleuze: Students were often excluded from the details and specifics of the memorial and the decisions that went into it. Nevertheless, students continued to fight relentlessly.

Diana Wilson: The burden of this Memorial was really on the shoulders of a lot of students, because we knew that if we stopped or if we didn't put in the work, there was an opportunity to give even more credibility to the people who told us 'wait.'

Byron Bleuze: To make matters worse, not all of the University's administration were enthusiastic about the idea of a new memorial.

Byron Bleuze: Frank Dukes, founder of UCARE, spoke to the dissonance between the two groups....

Frank Dukes: Some were skeptical about the value of doing this. Let's not fool around with memorialization or symbolic elements when we have so many concrete needs for student aid, faculty recruitment, and so forth. There were other needs and they knew that this would take attention and funding to be able to do. Not an opposition in the sense of we should not recognize these enslaved people, but more like we should recognize them by making this a better place and making our resources diverted towards doing that as opposed to the symbolic element.

Byron Bleuze: Despite this adversity and pushback, the students were ultimately triumphant. In 2016, after much discussion and planning, the Board of Visitors added the MEL to the official list of Capital Building Projects. A design team was selected, and although COVID delayed the official dedication in 2020, it was held virtually in 2021.

Byron Bleuze: But the students received very little credit for all their work.

Byron Bleuze: Class of 2018 alumna Diana Wilson is one student who felt this way.

Diana Wilson: I think names are in the website that professor Kirt started up. But outside of that there has been very little recognition.

Byron Bleuze: Another class of 2018 alumna, Zakia Alomari, also felt under-recognized.

Zakia Alomari: I don't know that they contextualized that students were involved in this ever.

Byron Bleuze: Zakia Alomari was the Director of Programming for MEL in 2016. MEL as in the student-created organization. Confusing. I know. When the university adopted the name,

Memorial to Enslaved Laborers, it made it harder to differentiate between the two, not only making things confusing but also erasing the student group's visibility.

Diana Wilson: A lot of people didn't really understand what the MEL was doing.

Byron Bleuze: Again Diana Wilson.

Diana Wilson: And at the same time, the administration also took on the name, MEL, which was at first, just the student organization, but then they took the name on for the entire project. So then people were confused. They were like, oh, so MEL is what the administration is doing. We're like 'yeah, but no, at the same time.' So it became harder to get students engaged because it felt like it was above us.

[*Music:* "Webbed" by REW<< plays]

Byron Bleuze: By claiming the name Memorial to Enslaved Laborers, the administration blurred the lines of the work they were doing versus the work the students had already done. But at the end of the day, the students involved were not fighting for recognition. They fought for change.

Diana Wilson: You fight for something, but you don't usually get the credit and/or acknowledgement. That's why you can't do it because you want acknowledgement or credit because it's likely not going to happen.

[*Music:* Music continues]

Byron Bleuze: Seventeen years ago, the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers didn't exist.

[*Music:* Music fades]

Byron Bleuze: But today it does. Seventeen years may seem like a long time for change to come about, but compared to an institution that has existed for two centuries, it's not that long. Change doesn't happen overnight. It takes time and it takes effort.

Byron Bleuze: Catherine Neale Bean highlighted the struggle students face when pushing for sustained change over time.

Catherine Neal Bean: The time from when I started researching it, in whatever that was, 2003, 2004, to them actually creating a Memorial was actually only 15 years. And when the university's 200 years old, 15 years is not that long, but what's long about it is that you're a student there for only four years. And so compared to four years, that seems like an eternity,

but that also speaks to why it's important to create that coalition of students around it. You know, if it's really important, it doesn't die when one student leaves or graduates.

Byron Bleuze: In order to keep the momentum alive, students served multiple roles. They had to be organizers — fighting for acknowledgement and pouring in effort toward completion of the memorial. But they also had to become recruiters and historians in order to create a movement that could be sustained over a decade and a half. They had to learn from the students who came before them, and then pass down that knowledge to those that came after.

Byron Bleuze: Diana Wilson, MEL chair from 2016 to 2018, experienced this first hand.

Diana Wilson: I remember coming in as a first year, everything we knew about UVA, especially as black students, we got from the black fourth years. Everything new, everything that we really learned, everything that we got, it was passed down.

Byron Bleuze: 2016 MEL Director of Programming, Zakia Alomari, also emphasized the importance of passing down knowledge.

Zakia Alomari: It is important that students know what students have done in the past, because it lays out possibilities for everyone. I think a lot of times it's easy to feel jaded or like you can't change anything, but when you know that changes all around the university have only happened because other students spoke up, it makes you know what possibilities lay out there for you.

Byron Bleuze: No one person can create change alone. It takes the efforts of many people working together. As Catherine Neale Bean says...

[*Music: "The Silent Grove" by Axletree plays*]

Catherine Neal Bean: The university is bigger than you. The university is bigger than me. The university is bigger than any one student, and that's one of the things that makes it so incredible. And I think when there's something that really does move the place it'll happen and students will grasp onto it. And you just have to be okay with saying, you know what, I trust the students who are coming after me to make sure that this thing gets over the finish line.

[*Music: Music continues*]

Byron Bleuze: Within this last decade, UVA has started to grapple with its history, but this is just the beginning.

[*Music: Music fades*]

Byron Bleuze: Students, faculty, and community members all want more. They know the university can and should do better.

Byron Bleuze: Professor Kirt Von Daacke is one of those that wants more.

Kurt von Daacke: I hope to make this history much more visible and known around grounds.

Byron Bleuze: Catherine Neale Bean believes these conversations need to continue.

Catherine Neal Bean: We need to keep talking about race and slavery and imbalances of power and inequality. And that conversation needs to keep going and the university—I think the University of Virginia should be a leader in that conversation. There's a ton of work to do. And I think there's a ton of work the university can do as a leader.

Zakia Alomari: I think a Memorial is just one piece because symbols are important, but it's only one piece.

Byron Bleuze: Once more Zakia Alomari

Zakia Alomari: With the Memorial, there should be the action piece empowering people, black students and making sure certain things are never able to happen again. I think that a lot of times institutional changes — they are sort of window dressing until reality is changed for black students, and I think the university has a lot more to do.

Byron Bleuze: For some, the memorial serves as a place of healing. For others, it's a place of learning. But to all, it's a place of remembrance and acknowledgement of a stained history. However, it also represents the power of student gathering and how students can come together for a common cause and create change. But that change is not yet done. And it is the hope of many that the memorial will act as a catalyst for future change.

Byron Bleuze: Diana Wilson also hopes to see more change in the future.

Diana Wilson: And hopefully this is a symbol that we are moving forward and progress will continue to roll in and we will continue to move forward as a university and as a people and towards equity and justice.

Byron Bleuze: The MEL is a symbol for future change, but it is one that wouldn't exist without MEL, the student-led organization, a fact often ignored. Even though these students didn't seek recognition or glory, their story deserves to be told. It is important to know that there are two MELs, the one you see now between the Rotunda and the Corner and that of the student group that has been overshadowed and underrecognized despite its crucial role in the creation of the memorial.

[Silence]

[Music: "The Duel" by Ketsa plays]

Byron Bleuze: This podcast was produced by Byron Bleuze, Yumna Rahman, Jeffrey Richbart, and Jesse Brouillette as part of a collaborative project for Professor Steph Ceraso's "Writing with Sound" class at UVA. Special thanks go out to Kirt von Daacke, Frank Dukes, Diana Wilson, Zakia Alomari, Piers Gelly, Krystal Appiah, Tierny Fairchild, Meghan Faulkner, and Catherine Neale Bean. A full list of audio and textual sources used in the production of this podcast can be found in the transcript associated with this episode. Thanks for listening.

[Music: Music fades]

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