

"More than Words, More than Symbols"

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[Intro with theme song music]

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, Tristan Guarnieri, and on this episode we will be discussing the individuals who built the university, the process of finding and adding names to the memorial, and how the memorial impacts the Charlottesville Community. I hope you enjoy.

[Intro music fades]

[Starting audio - Dark audio and sound effects, sound of stirring water]

In a dark charnel, filled with the stench of burning flesh, Lewis boils bodies.

[Pause in speaking]

A charnel has two meanings. It is a place to store bones of the dead, which is why Thomas Jefferson designed it when constructing his Anatomical Theater at the University of Virginia. It was meant to give students surgical practice they couldn't get elsewhere, primarily through the dissection of corpses. However, a charnel is also a place of violent death.

[Sound of digging to represent grave robbery]

The corpses used were almost entirely black. Many belonged to enslaved laborers, and many were stolen from their graves by the same white people who oppressed them.

[Pause in speaking, continuation of sombre music]

For 18 years, Lewis's job as an enslaved laborer at UVA meant dealing with this reality on a daily basis.

[Sounds effects in the background of actions at the same time these actions are said. Running water for washing, sound of scrubbing, etc]

He washed...embalmed...dissected...cleaned...and boiled black bodies. His morbid work made him an outcast even in his own community. UVA students mocked him by giving him the name "Anatomical Lewis", forever associating him with the grizzly work that was forced upon him. By 1860 Lewis no longer appears in university historical records, and his written history comes to a sudden end.

[Transition audio - light, reflective music]-----

Lewis is just one of 577 names on the UVA memorial for enslaved laborers. Most of these individuals remain unknown, but they have not been forgotten. There are members of the Charlottesville community, including genealogists and direct descendants, who are trying to honor and call attention to enslaved laborers' contributions to UVA. However, this work is no small task. The memorial is built in a space visited by many different people everyday, each bringing unique perspectives and interpretations. As UVA carefully works to acknowledge its problematic past, dealing with such sensitive information can be slow and difficult. It is even more frustrating when there is still so much left to do.

Yet, progress is still being made. Recently, 5 new names have been added to the memorial thanks to the work of Myra Anderson, a descendant of enslaved laborers. We got the chance to talk with Myra about her family's connection to Jefferson and UVA.

[Begin Myra Anderson's Interview]-----

[Interview clip - Myra Anderson]

"My family goes back seven generations to this community...I didn't realize that my family had any connection to the University of Virginia at all. My grandmother had told me a few times growing up that our ancestors were enslaved at Monticello but I didn't actually believe that because we had visited Monticello in school and they never mentioned that there were slaves there."

[Transition audio - light, reflective music]

Myra is a direct descendant of the Hern family, who were not only enslaved laborers at Monticello but also helped build the grounds at

UVA. Her ancestors' names were left off the memorial when it was first constructed, even though there was substantial record of their time at Monticello and UVA.

[Interview clip - Myra Anderson]

"There were five others whose names were all over Monticello's records as having gone to the university but when the memorial first became available for the public to visit I noticed those names were not up there"

According to the records at Monticello, David and Isabel Hern worked in the house, the fields, and in the shops. Their family has been described as a complex network of people who crossed all social and occupational borders within the plantation. David and Isabella had three children who were purchased by men connected with the University, David or "Davy" Hern, Lily Hern and Thrimston Hern.

[Interview clip - Myra Anderson]

"Davy was actually my uncle by blood line. My aunt Edith Hern trained in the white house when Thomas Jefferson was there for 7 years under a french cook and for the last 15 years of Thomas Jefferson's life, Edith ran the kitchen, and alongside her, her sister in law Fanny, they prepared meals every single day."

[Sound effects of building, fade out music]

Trained in stone cutting, Thrimston Hern helped construct the steps that led from the lawn to the second floor of the rotunda. He is even mentioned on the memorial timeline because of his contributions at UVA. This description, however, raised some concerns for Myra.

[Interview clip - Myra Anderson]

"I will tell you, I don't like what they wrote etched in stone on the timeline at the memorial as it relates to him. It says "a very tolerable, tolerable stone cutter". And the reason I don't like that is because first of all that's not a compliment. And second, I don't like the fact that they didn't stick to the facts of what he did but they put an opinion in there of a slave master because the whole idea of this memorial is to memorialize the people who were enslaved. You are still taking away from his dignity by characterizing him with something, the opinion of a slave master."

[Silence]

For the average person walking through the memorial, Thrimston Hern's description might go unnoticed. It's hard to predict the impact five words can have on a passerby. But when there is a direct connection, these words are personal. Myra's response highlights the fact that, even though the MEL attempts to honor individuals, there is still a lot of work to be done. Myra expressed that she thinks there should be a bigger focus on descendants. Luckily, it seems in this respect the university and Myra were on the same page. A memorial can only do so much, so UVA has taken steps in looking towards the future.

[Begin Dr. Shelley Murphy's
Interview]-----

[Audio transition - reflective and investigative music]

[Interview clip - Dr. Shelley Murphy]

"My name is Dr. Shelley Viola Murphy. I am hired by UVA as the descendant project researcher to find the descendants of the enslaved laborers who basically built the university for Thomas Jefferson."

Dr. Murphy is a genealogist. Genealogy is the study of families, family history, and the tracing of their lineage. But Dr. Murphy puts it in much simpler terms.

[Interview clip - Dr. Shelley Murphy]

"Genealogy is about time, place, and asking questions. Having the basic knowledge of genealogy is a plus. I've got 30+ years as a genealogist and I research several different states on a personal level."

Her research starts with a date and the name of a person who owned enslaved people. Dr. Murphy then searches online databases for any sign of these individuals in various plantations and communities across Virginia. Despite what many might think, a lot of her work requires researching white people who owned enslaved people, in addition to the enslaved people themselves.

[Interview clip - Dr. Shelley Murphy]

"They go hand in hand. You cannot do one or the other research without looking at the other, it just doesn't work that way regardless of what people think."

Her typical day involves making charts, asking questions and using social media to reach people in the community. Dr. Murphy even

created a facebook group called *Descendants of Enslaved Communities at the University of Virginia*.

[Interview clip - Dr. Shelley Murphy]

"I centered my research just on Central Virginia, and I thought that was more than enough. Because there's just me researching, there's no team or anything, and what I needed to do was control my environment. How will people find me? How will I find people?"

Dr. Murphy works alone. There is no descendant research team, just her working 7 days a week doing as much as possible to track those the university tried to forget. The process is slow and painful, and success is never a guarantee.

[Fade out music]

But even when names are found, getting them on the memorial can be just difficult. Myra went through this arduous process, and she ended up changing the way UVA handled the addition of new names on the memorial going forward. Myra gave us insight into this process.

[Transition audio - sombre music]

[Interview clip - Myra Anderson]

"18 months of going back and forth with the university, which was at times very frustrating and also incredibly confusing ... When I finally got connected with the right person, while they had figured out a system to get these initial names up there, they hadn't figured out a second system for vetting additional names so they actually had to form a committee of descendants and I think faculty, a conglomeration of a lot of people and come up with a way to vet new names.

At times I wanted to give up like I wanted to say, you know what, this is just too long and too ridiculous and all of these things, I really wanted to give up on the whole thing but you know what my DNA would not let me. I felt the strength of my ancestors to keep pushing.

In December I got a letter from the university and it basically outlined, they acknowledged that it had been a frustrating process for me and they apologized for that and said that the names would be added.

Moving into that space and seeing those names, in one way it was very powerful for me because it's like my ancestors made their mark on

history by helping to build that university and here I am seven generations later and I am making that same mark on history by making sure their names are on this wall."

Dr. Murphy is also making her mark on history, and for her it is an emotional journey.

[Interview clip - Dr. Shelley Murphy]

"My biggest challenge, which is a lot of emotion when you do this type of research, it's an up and down. I love the success when I find somebody and then link them down to a descendant today, but some of the challenges that I experience and is really kind of depressing too, is the first name only folks. Because I feel I'm leaving somebody behind."

[Music fades to silence, transition audio - delicate, insidious
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I'm a student at the University of Virginia. I graduate this year, and this research project was one of the first times I heard the stories of these enslaved laborers. I remember seeing the original plaque that was meant to honor enslaved individuals at the university. It felt like the enslaved laborers deserved so much more. UVA has been trying to make their history more apparent, something that's not diminished by a small plaque in a dark hallway beneath the rotunda. Dr. Murphy has a similar story to mine.

[Interview clip - Dr. Shelley Murphy]

"I'm 69 years old, they didn't teach me any of this. None of this. And it's still not being taught. And African Americans that have this legacy behind them, we keep forgetting that white America also has that legacy. You can hide all you want, you can have fear, you can be ashamed. It happened. You need to help keep it from continuing to happen."

[Slight pause, fade out music, transition to sound of water like memorial]

As a student, it's hard to say what the memorial means to me. Walking through it is an experience that's difficult to describe. In one sense it's unsettling. With the number of names missing on the memorial, it can feel that we've barely put a dent in discovering these peoples stories. Yet it's also calm. Dr. Murphy described her experience.

[Interview clip - Dr. Shelley Murphy]

"Walk through that memorial and put your hands across those names and walk through there. They were real people, and they need to be acknowledged and honored for what they have done. And it's not just at UVA. It's an honor to be able to connect with them cause right now, all those who are on that list that's my family, and my job is to find MY ancestry that's on that wall, and whose name is going to be put on that wall. So we're looking for more. Constantly."

[Slight pause, transition to sounds of a people talking and then reflective music]

I find when I walk through the memorial the sounds of a normally busy campus fade away. I'm left thankful that I got to know these stories better, but also uncertain about where to go from here. Uncertainty feels like something the university struggles with as well. The memorial's creation was largely a student-led effort, and although a huge step for UVA, it's hard to decide where to go from here. Do we memorialize enslaved laborers in other ways? Do we shift our focus to descendants? Where do we find these answers? The answer may lie with community figures like Myra and Dr. Murphy, who have strong opinions about what steps the university should take.

[Interview clip - Dr. Shelley Murphy]

"There's an opportunity that we have to look towards another generation. My feelings would be that we need to make sure the younger generation understands and would be prepared, by being educated, could be scholarships, whatever you want to do reparations, towards stuff like that. They are prepared to understand what was there, how they might connect, and even if you don't connect by ancestry you connect by race. Now let's see the faces and see that the next generation are the ones giving the tours and educating their own age group or adults on what they've learned, what they've experienced, and where does it go from there."

[Interview clip - Myra Anderson]

"I am beyond thinking of ways to honor or memorialize, and more about you know what these descendants are still here whose ancestors were enslaved there, how can we work now to try to readdress some of that. Because while this university has flourished off the blood sweat and tears of my ancestors, there are people, families, individuals, descendants who have continued to struggle. I would like to see the university put some energy into that as a way to truly memorialize more than words and more than symbols."

More seems to be a word that keeps coming up in discussions about the memorial. We want more names, more descendants, more ways to honor and acknowledge this university's past. In our interview with Myra, she left us with a final thought to consider.

[Interview clip - Myra Anderson]

"Historical events have modern day legacies and I think that is what I am still living under the legacy of my ancestors and under the legacy of how the university was founded."

[Fade to silence, transition into outro after pausing on silence for a while]

Outro:

This podcast was produced by Jesse Lynch, Abigail Grable, Alejandro Waquin, and Tristan Guarnieri as part of a collaborative project for Professor Steph Ceraso's "Writing with Sound" class at UVA.

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Thanks for listening.

[Fade theme song]

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