



Memorial to Enslaved Laborers

Charlottesville, VA

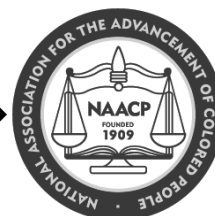
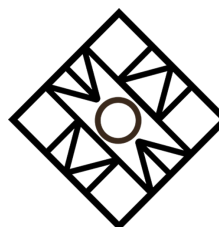
Public Space

Completed December 1, 2020

<https://www2.virginia.edu/slaverymemorial/>

Project Contact

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NOMA-NAACP-SEED Awards

Based on common foundations and a shared vision, NOMA, NAACP, and the SEED Network announced the [2020 Awards for Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion](#) (JEDI) in design, architecture, and land development. Seven projects were selected through a competitive process and by a distinguished jury. This case study profiles one of the winning projects.

About the National Organization of Minority Architects

The National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA) mission is to champion diversity within the design professions by promoting the excellence, community engagement, and professional development of its members. NOMA is committed to creating a pipeline to the architecture profession to a more diverse spectrum of students and cultivate a more inclusive profession that reflects the communities served by design: all communities. As architects, we acknowledge that our professional duty is to protect the health, safety and welfare of the public and as NOMA members, we seek to fulfill this duty by ensuring that we help to facilitate diverse teams that can optimally address the needs of increasingly more diverse communities. Our signature annual event is our national conference that attracts students and professionals from nearly every corner of the building industry to converge, exchange ideas, network and support one another professionally to create a better build environment for everyone.

About the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

The mission of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is to secure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights in order to eliminate race-based discrimination and ensure the health and well-being of all persons. Environmental injustice, including the proliferation of climate change, has a disproportionate impact on communities of color and low-income communities. The NAACP Environmental and Climate Justice Program supports community leadership in addressing this human and civil rights issue. With the launch of the Centering Equity in the Sustainable Building Sector (CESBS) Initiative, the NAACP seeks to universalize access to safe, affordable, healthy, energy-efficient, regenerative, and resilient buildings for all people.

About the SEED Network

Established in 2005, the Social Economic Environmental Design (SEED) Network provides a common standard to guide, evaluate and measure the social, economic, and environmental impact of design. SEED is premised on the belief that design can play a vital role in the most critical issues that face communities and individuals, in crisis and in everyday challenges. To accomplish this, the SEED process guides professionals to work alongside locals who know their community and its needs. This practice of “trusting the local” is increasingly recognized as a

highly effective way to sustain the health and longevity of a place or a community as it develops.

Award Jury

Carl Anthony, Architect, author and urban / suburban / regional design strategist

Kim Dowdell AIA, NOMA, NCARB, LEED AP BD+C, 2019-2020 National President of NOMA

Maya Henderson, Sustainability Professional

Christopher Lee, AIA, Architect, Mark Cavagneo Associates

Tiffany Mayhew, NOMA

Marquis Miller, Chief Diversity Officer, City of Chicago, Office of the Mayor

Jacqui Patterson, Senior Director of Environmental and Climate Justice at the NAACP

Paloma Pavel, President of Earth House Center

Laura Shipman, Director of Community Development and Planning, One Treasure Island

Jimmie Tucker FAIA NOMA LEED AP, Managing Principal, Self + Tucker Architects

Barbara Brown Wilson, Associate Professor, Author, University of Virginia

How would you know if a project supports JEDI?

Justice: “It creates opportunities for reparation and reconciliation.”

Equity: “The project would take great care and be intentional about serving all populations in the ways that meet their needs and desires.”

Diversity: “A project needs to be able to show that it supports diversity from the project team to the users of the space... It must demonstrate that the architect/designer understands the culture behind groups of people, and not just tailor to perceived stereotypes of that culture.”

Inclusion: “Design process was collaborative, creative and vigorous which listened to and included voices from the community, other disciplines and the client.”

To view even more reflections on the definitions of JEDI, visit [the summary](#) of survey responses from NOMA, NAACP, and SEED Network members.

Executive Summary

The Memorial to Enslaved Laborers (MEL) at the University of Virginia (UVA) honors the lives, labor, and perseverance of an estimated 4,000 enslaved African Americans who built and sustained daily life at UVA between its 1817 founding by Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States and a slave holder, and the emancipation of the enslaved in 1865.

In 2010, UVA student interns with UCARE (University & Community Action for Racial Equity) initiated an effort to critically examine the institution's history and recognize the lives of the enslaved laborers. This activism, in conjunction with several subsequent actions by students, faculty and alumni, prompted the University of Virginia to commission the memorial in 2016. The design emerged as a result of an intensive community engagement process with members of the UVA community, the Charlottesville community, and descendants of the enslaved.

The Memorial's commemorative forms and historical inscriptions acknowledge the dualities of enslavement—the pain of bondage and hope for the future. MEL celebrates the community that nurtured resistance and resilience to the dehumanizing violence that shaped the everyday experience of enslaved life at UVA. In doing so, the Memorial creates a vital public place to understand, learn, and remember their contribution to the University.

The Memorial to Enslaved Laborers was designed by the design team led by Höweler + Yoon Architecture that included historian and designer Dr. Mabel O. Wilson (Studio &), Gregg Bleam Landscape Architect, community facilitator Dr. Frank Dukes, and artist Eto Otitigbe.

Who are the communities involved in and impacted by the project?

The Memorial to Enslaved Laborers is located on the historic campus of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, VA. For the MEL project, the Design Team led an inclusive design process to engage the local African American community, including some known descendants of the enslaved laborers, alongside members of the UVA and local Charlottesville communities. While these communities are intrinsically linked, enduring legacies of injustice and exclusion have often complicated interactions between them.

Located in central Virginia, Charlottesville is home to approximately 50,000 people. Approximately 70% of the population identifies as white and 19% as Black or African

American; other racial groups comprise less than 10% of the population. While education attainment is extremely high — 90% of >25 year-olds have a high school diploma and 53% have a Bachelor's degree or higher — roughly 23% of the population is living in poverty.

The University of Virginia, founded in 1817, is attended by over 20,000 students and is a major driver of economic and social life in Charlottesville. The University and its Hospital are highly ranked in their respective categories and together employ over 30,000 people. As a public university, roughly 2/3 of the students are native Virginians. Prior to the 1970s, enrollment of both Black and female students was extremely limited. As of 2019, roughly 9% of the student body identifies as Black and 55% identifies as female.

The Memorial to Enslaved Laborers rises on the east side of the Grounds, directly past the University's iconic Rotunda dome. It is sited in an area referred to as the Triangle of Grass, part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site and along University Avenue that connects to downtown Charlottesville. Thomas Jefferson— the third president of the United States and a slave holder — made his home at nearby Monticello and was the architect and founder of the University in 1817. The original swales—the low areas that frame the entrance into the Academical Village—were part of a larger landscape strategy, including the University's iconic serpentine walls, which hid enslaved labor from view.

Racial inequities have persisted at the University and in the City of Charlottesville. The University admitted its first Black student in 1955 but continued to exclude Black students on the basis of their race until well into the 1960s. Charlottesville has been the site of brutal incidents of racial violence, from the Jim Crow era to 2017 when white nationalists rioted over the proposed removal of a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee.



Portrait of Isabella Gibbons by artist Eto Ottigbe on the exterior surface of the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers derived from original photograph above.



Project Stakeholders

University of Virginia:

UVA President's Commission
on Slavery and the University
(PCSU)

UVA Offices of the Architect
and Facilities Management

UVA Division for Diversity,
Equity, and Inclusion

Alice Raucher - University
Architect

Mary Hughes - University
Landscape Architect

Sarita Herman - Project
Manager

Ted Nelson - Construction
Administration Manager

Design Team:

Höweler + Yoon Architecture
LLP, Designers and Architects:

Meejin Yoon, Eric Höweler,

Namjoo Kim, Caroline

Shannon, Anna Kaertner,

Alex Yueyan Li, Caleb

Hawkins, Boris Angelov, Julia

Roberts

Dr. Mabel O. Wilson and

Marlisa Wise, Studio & -

Cultural Historians and

Designers

Dr. Frank Dukes- Community

Engagement Facilitator

Gregg Bleam and Aaron

Bridgers - Landscape

Architects

Common Name - Typography

Eto Otitigbe - Artist

Consultants:

Silman - Structural

Engineering

Nitsch - Civil Engineering

WSP- MEP

George Sexton Associates -

Lighting Designer

DEW - Water Feature

Consultant

Construction:

Team Henry Enterprises -

General Contractor

Quarra Stone - Stone

Fabrication and Installation

How were each of these communities involved in the process and project?

The Memorial to Enslaved Laborers represents the culmination of years of advocacy by UCARE (University & Community Action for Racial Equity), community engagement by the President's Commission on Slavery and the University, and by the Memorial design team. Many valued partners were critical to the Commission's work and deeply informed the memorial's design.

The first official acknowledgement of slavery at the university, founded by Thomas Jefferson in 1819, was not made until the spring of 2007 when the Board of Visitors made an "expression of

regret” accompanied by a small stone plaque that was installed in a brick walk near the Rotunda. The insufficiency of the scale, siting, and language of this marker catalyzed further action by students, faculty, and members of the Descendents and Charlottesville communities.

In the fall of 2007, a small group of faculty and students began developing what became the University & Community Action for Racial Equity (UCARE) with the mission to “[help] the University of Virginia and the Charlottesville communities work together to understand the University’s role in slavery, racial segregation, and discrimination and to find ways to address and repair the legacy of those harms, particularly as they relate to present day disparities.” In 2009, student leaders from UCARE, including Ishraga Eltahir, formed an organization that was recognized by the student council as the Memorial for Enslaved Laborers, known colloquially as MEL, which hosted a student design ideas competition for a permanent memorial in 2011.

In 2013, then UVA-President Theresa Sullivan created the President's Commission on Slavery and the University. The Commission’s 26 members, including including students, faculty, staff, administrators, alumni and members of the Charlottesville and Descendants communities, articulated recommendations regarding the recognition and acknowledgment of the history of slavery at the University of Virginia, including a permanent memorial on the Grounds.

With the demonstrated importance of a permanent memorial, the university opened a request for proposals (RFP) for a memorial in 2016 and selected the design team of Howeler + Yoon Architecture with cultural historian and designer Mabel O. Wilson, landscape architect Gregg Bleam, community engagement facilitator Professor Frank Dukes, and later artist Eto Otitigbe.

From November 2016 through June 2017 the design team engaged in a participatory design process. Through numerous community forums, listening sessions and an on-line survey, the designers collected input on the aspirations for the memorial; comments including: ““The memorial must evoke the human spirit, show pain, love, life, death...” and “The memorial should be visible. The enslaved laborers were marginalized. Therefore, the memorial should be prominently accessible, visible and memorable.”

The engagement included meetings held at historic local African American churches, the African American Heritage Center, nearby plantations that have active descendant groups, and local restaurants, Black alumni meetings, and more. The engagement process shaped decisions about where the memorial would be located on the Grounds, what it would be made of, how it would memorialize the labors and the lives of those who had been enslaved, and how it would serve as a space for reflection, remembrance, action, learning and celebration far into the future.

Several formal groups supported the ongoing development of the project through construction, including the IDEA Fund, the Community Engagement Committee, with representation from the university and descendants communities, and the Timeline Committee, tasked with composing a timeline of slavery at UVA that is engraved in the memorial's water feature as a central element of the design.



"MEL is one and the same as its inclusive design process. Only the descendants' community, historians, and university affiliates working together could bestow life and legitimacy on this project and make it 'work.'"

Höweler + Yoon Architecture

"Power is not its language. Closure is not its goal. Active, additive remembrance is. Is this what distinguishes a memorial from a monument? A monument says: I am truth. I am history. Full stop. A memorial says, or can say: I turn grief for the past into change for the present, and I always will."

Holland Cotter, New York Times



How does the project support...?

Justice

The Memorial to Enslaved Laborers supports justice by permanently acknowledging the estimated 4,000 enslaved persons who worked on the Grounds of UVA between 1817 and 1865. The design team worked closely for several months with a commission of UVA faculty and staff to gather information from a range of historical records. While over 500 names have been discovered, the identities of many of the men, women, and children who labored on the UVA campus were not recorded. For each one, a “memory mark” on the inner wall of the Memorial recalls their presence. The wall of marks and names functions as an unfinished archive, with more names of the enslaved to be added as they are discovered through on-going research. Already, one additional name has been revealed.

Additionally, the Memorial has already demonstrated its relevance for contemporary issues of racial justice. Originally scheduled to be dedicated in April 2020 by the University and descendants of the enslaved community, the formal dedication was postponed due to the ongoing COVID-19 health crisis. In the interim, the Memorial was spontaneously inaugurated as the site of a “White Coats for Black Lives” gathering led by UVA Medical School students in June 2020 during the national protests prompted by the murder of George Floyd.



Equity

Given the inequities imbued in the University's history, the Memorial represents the University's ongoing commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion. UVA students catalyzed a memorial to honor the lives of the enslaved community in 2010 with initiatives to raise awareness about the history of slavery, segregation, discrimination, and eugenics, as well as efforts to resist oppression at the University. The following year, they formed a student-run competition for a memorial to enslaved laborers. The President's Commission on Slavery and the University (PCSU) was then formed in 2013 to explore and report on the history of slavery on UVA Grounds and consider ways to commemorate their contribution to the institution founded by Thomas Jefferson—the third president of the United States, the architect of the University of Virginia, and a slave holder. As a result of this important work, UVA formally commissioned the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers in 2016.

The design process began that October with a series of dialogues and community engagements. In multiple public forums and surveys, students, staff, faculty, alumni, and community members, including descendants of the enslaved, shared their vision, aspirations, and ideas for making the memorial an active catalyst for racial equity. Their generous responses informed each element of the Memorial's design - its location,

materiality, qualities, and landscape. The Memorial now serves as a community forum and a space for gathering, celebration, performance, education, and stage for civic engagement. It creates a living connection between the ancestors who built UVA and those that benefit from their work today, the descendant community, and future generations.

Diversity

The Memorial supports diversity by creating a new threshold to the University that encourages multiple visitor experiences, inviting collective commemoration and individual contemplation. Imagery, forms, and rituals from across the African diaspora and African continent are layered in the Memorial. The memorial's shape evokes the "Ring Shout," an African American spiritual dance performed in a circle that celebrates liberation, while the walls and surfaces recall the material culture and craftsmanship of enslaved workers by using marks, carvings, textures, and imagery in locally sourced "Virginia Mist" granite. A ring of water evokes the enslaved ceremonies of libation.

The exterior surface incorporates artist Eto Otitigbe's monumental portrait of Isabella Gibbons, an enslaved domestic worker at UVA and later a teacher in Charlottesville. The likeness of Gibbon's eyes was inscribed into stone as a witness to her community's history and becomes visible from specific vantage points throughout the day.

MEL's design was led by a diverse team. The project was constructed by Team Henry Enterprises, a Black-owned business.

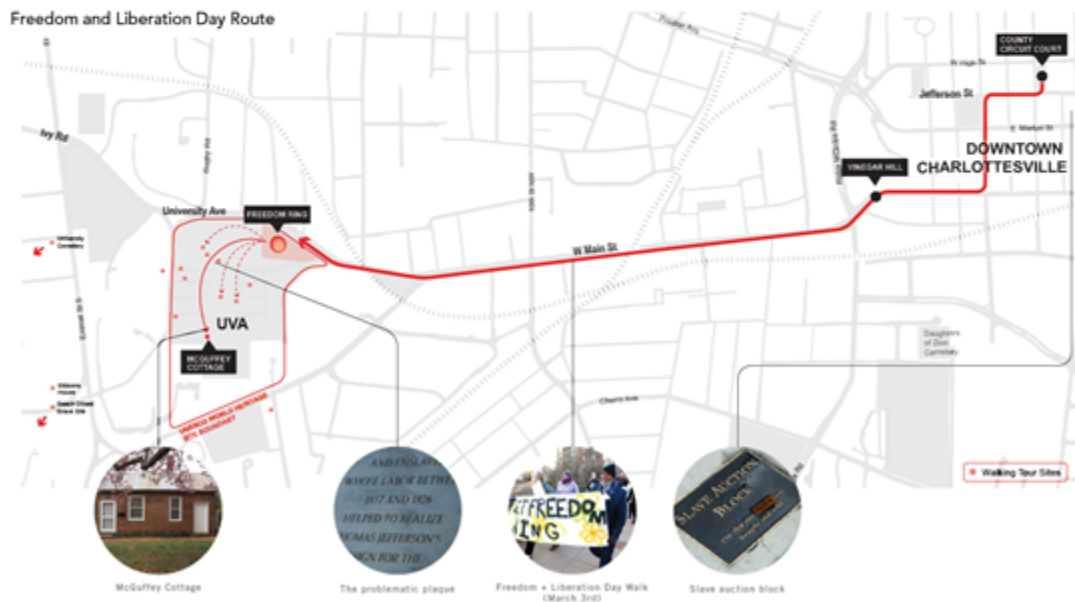
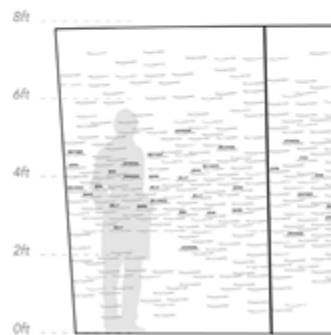
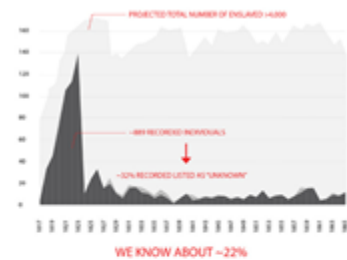
Inclusion

The Memorial to Enslaved Laborers supports inclusion through both its process and its creation of an inclusive public space. Designing the community engagement process itself was essential to the success of the project. With generations of mistrust between the University and the descendants community, an inclusive process was paramount. The design team held community meetings in local churches and schools to create conditions for open and productive dialogue. The importance of these conversations is evidenced by expressions of ownership and belonging of the space imagined to host outdoor gatherings, classes, and performances including the "White Coasts for Black Lives" vigil organized by UVA Medical students and the dedication ceremony planned by descendants.

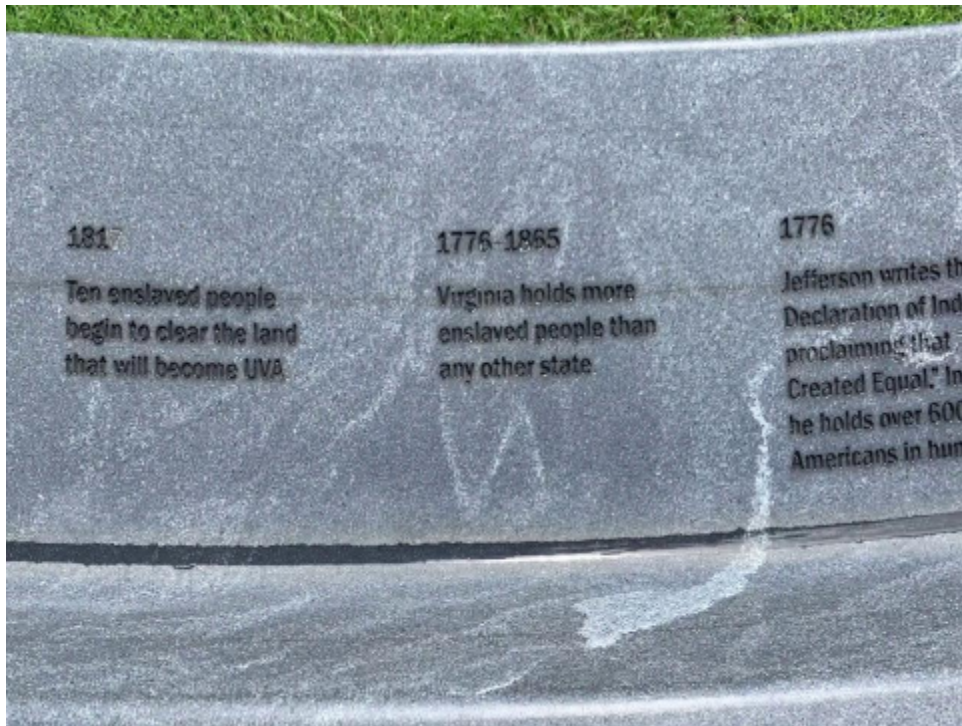
As a result of community input, the design team sited the Memorial at the edge of campus on the east side of the historic Lawn. This offers a space of belonging to members of the local and descendants communities who had expressed their discomfort and unease on

the Grounds prior to the construction of the Memorial. As such, MEL transforms the historical usage of the landscape as a tool of domination into an open and welcoming place for those seeking truth and justice.

Freedom and Liberation Day, commemorating the ending of slavery in Charlottesville and Albemarle County, is celebrated annually on March 3rd with a procession across the city to the UVA Campus. The Memorial will serve a critical role in this important community ritual as a public space designed for justice, for equity, and for inclusion.



Double-click & watch their story!



Project Journey

How did the project evolve in response to intentional JEDI strategies?

The project's siting and form were a direct product of community input. It was important not to over-determine at the beginning of the project-- and it's a credit to the university that they welcomed such an open-ended process. The community ultimately felt ownership of the process because a lot of room was left for them to guide the conversation.

What are the critical measurements of the success or failure of the project?

The relationship between the descendants' community and the university had been tense for many years. The process of talking openly about the institution's history helped to build trust between them and let them collaborate productively. The fact that both groups feel ownership over the memorial is a tremendous

accomplishment. That the project facilitated the first steps toward healing that strained relationship is a measure of its success.

"This is a beautiful built work that aims to recognize and begin healing for historic injustices. From project inception to execution, the participatory process seemed to create a figurative and literal healing circle for this place and community. The project embodies trauma-informed design."

NOMA-NAACP-SEED Jury Member