On February 24, 1838, two students severely beat Professor Bonnycastle’s ten-year-old slave Fielding. Bonnycastle unsuccessfully attempted to stop the assault. Following this incident, Bonnycastle sought punishment of the students from the Faculty Committee. Multiple pages of testimony were taken from the students involved, witnesses, and Bonnycastle himself. Fielding was not questioned. The University referred action to the local authorities but the students were never punished.

The Gibbonses
William and Isabella Gibbons were able to maintain family connections and become literate despite the constraints of slavery. Mr. Gibbons, owned by Professor H. Howard and later worked for Professor William H. McGuflly, the husband of the famous McGuflly readers. Mrs. Gibbons, a domestic servant in the household of Professor Francis Smith in Pavilions V and VI. Although their marriage had no legal standing, William and Isabella Gibbons preserved their union and raised their children while living in slavery at the University of Virginia.

Legal restrictions and the strong opposition of white society severely limited access to education for Virginia’s slaves. William Gibbons learned to read by carefully observing and listening to the white students around him. His daughter Bella recalled that she could not have learned to read and write, “unless my mother taught me secretly.” After the Civil War, Isabella Gibbons became the first person of color to teach at the Jefferson School, a freedmen’s school in Charlottesville and, after 1871, part of the public school system. She taught there for more than twenty years. In freedom, William Gibbons became a prominent religious leader as minister at the First Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.

Henry Martin
Oral history tells us that Henry Martin was born on July 4, 1826, the same day Thomas Jefferson died. He grew up in slavery on a farm belonging to the Carr family. At age nineteen, he was leased out to work at the University, first as a waiter at the Carr’s Hill dining hall and later as bell ringer and janitor. In the latter job, he was responsible for cleaning the lecture rooms, library, and chapel. In freedom after the Civil War, he rang the Rotunda bell every hour from 4 a.m. to 10 p.m. for thirty more years. Martin made a strong impression on generations of students and was remembered as a man of “intelligence, firmness and diligence.” In 2012, a plaque honoring Martin’s legacy was laid near the Chapel.

During the Civil War, the lives and duties of slaves changed. Some worked in the hospital assisting doctors with patients. Others continued their domestic duties to the families they lived with. A few were leased to work for the Confederate Army. With the help of their slaves, the Minor family was able to hide their silver and other valuables from the approaching Union troops. Still other faculty members were concerned that their slave property would be seized. Across Union lines, Mary Stuart Smith, owner of Isabella Gibbons, and many others were advised to sell their slaves while they could.

The University surrendered to General Caesar, representing General Phillip Sheridan, on March 2, 1865. University Professor Socrates Maupin and Rector T.L. Preston convinced the Gibbons to destroy UVa. With the Civil War ending soon after, slavery was abolished throughout the United States. Freed blacks left their quarters on Grounds, but many stayed in Charlottesville to work on construction projects at the University or as paid servants for their former owners. Though it would be another century before African Americans would gain full access to attend the University of Virginia, they remained present as ever.

Conclusion
This brochure is the result of a student-led initiative to explore the existing scholarship concerning the role of enslaved laborers at the University and to make the information available to the public. Efforts are underway to continue the research and discovery of UVa’s past and to recognize the contributions of enslaved laborers. It is our hope that in the future, we know more about our past.

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Cover Images: Henry Martin, Sally Cottrell Cole, Monticello Dispersal Sale showing purchase of “Patsy” by Professor Bonnycastle.

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Introduction

The University of Virginia was officially founded in 1819 when the Virginia General Assembly approved its charter. Thomas Jefferson, the "father of the University," viewed it as his "last act of usefulness." Reflective of the United States in the early 19th Century, slavery was an integral component of the University starting with its construction and continuing into the Civil War. This brochure provides a sampling of the stories and experiences of enslaved men and women who lived and worked at U.Va. By no means a complete picture, the stories and experiences included is meant as an introduction to the history of slavery at the University. Undoubtedly more will be learned as researchers seek to understand the role of slavery and the lives of enslaved people.

Construction, 1817-1826

Construction of the University began with the laying of the cornerstone on October 6, 1817. For the next decade, hundreds of laborers – free and enslaved, white and black – worked to build the Academical Village. Slaves were assigned various tasks, ranging from hard manual labor to highly skilled positions like blacksmiths, carpenters, and artisans. One of the more strenuous tasks was terracing the lawn. In March 1819, a Board of Visitors member recorded the progress blacks had made in this endeavor. One of the skilled laborers, known only as "Carpenter Sam," was tasked with trowel and carpentry for the construction of Pavilions V and VII.

During the building period, local slaveholders leased slaves to the University to fulfill its need for labor. Construction supervisor Arthur Brockenbrough agreed to pay $57.90 to Rezin Wertz for a "boy named negro" in April 1821. That year, the University paid a total of $1,215.73 to slaveowners in exchange for the labor of at least thirty-two slaves. The leasing of enslaved laborers was critical in the University's construction. Without it, the University would have been unable to hire slave laborers to construct Pavilions V and VII.

The Early Days, 1826-1832

After enslaved labor did not. In order to fulfill institutional duties, UiUAS continued to hire slaves from area slaveowners. In addition to building maintenance, slaves were now tasked with serving the students and faculty.

Before classes commenced, the Board of Visitors banned students from bringing their slaves to Grounds. Some students, unhappy with this policy, defied the Board of Visitors and housed their personal slaves off Grounds. There was no prohibition against faculty owning or leasing slaves. In fact, faculty and administrators depended on the work of enslaved laborers. However, not all professors came to the University as slaveholders. Professor John Patten Emmet, a New York born in Ireland, arrived in Charlottesville in 1826.

For enslaved laborers to fulfill the University's responsibilities, the University was responsible for the upkeep of these slaves. Because of these duties, slavery was a component of the University community. By 1829, the University's labor force was 182 slaves, and most were over the age of 20. By 1860, the University no longer appears in University records.

Lewis and the Anatomical Theater

The Anatomical Theater, a dissecting lab, was once located in an area in front of Alderman Library. A slave named Lewis was assigned the responsibility of cleaning up after the students' cadaver dissections and experiments in this lab. During his time at U.Va., Lewis was kept in several locations including behind Hotel F. Whether he left by death or sale is unknown. By 1860, Lewis no longer appears in University records.

Violence Against Slaves at U.Va. Grounds

Today when we read about violence against slaves, we view it as an instance of person-on-person violence. However, in the 19th Century, these incidents were viewed as person-on-property violence. According to Dumas Malone, "the owner of the slave but no thought given to the human victim. Two examples of violence against slaves at U.Va. follow.

On June 24, 1822, several students hanged on the door of Dr. William H. Ferrand. The students, referring to the slave as "indoor proprietors" to his female slave. The Faculty Committee expelled one of the students, William Carr. However, Carr was readmitted a year later only to again face disciplinary action and imprisonment. He was re-admitted for a third time in 1831, finishing his education in 1832. Sexual harassment of and assaults on female slaves and free women were not uncommon during this time.

Gardens, Hotels, and Slave Quarters

Behind every Pavilion is a garden, which was a central workplace for slaves and laborers. During the first decades of U.Va.'s history, the hotelkeepers interpreted the East and West Ranges of Pavilions for the students' living quarters and originally held few personal houses for students. Hotelkeepers provided meals, laundry, and cleaning services. Slaves were banned from much of the work left by death or sale. Slaves made up slightly less than half of the slave population at the University from 1830-1860. The number of enslaved people on Grounds is estimated to have fluctuated between 108 and 182.

In U.Va.'s early years, as many as twenty-five outbuildings (including Pavilion and Hotel kitchens, privies, and smokehouses) occupied the gardens and near Hotel yards. Additionally, the increased presence of slaves on Grounds, new buildings were constructed as work and living spaces. For example, in 1828, Professor Releby purchased the equal to the 1829 structure behind Hotel E. In 1849, Professor Charles Bonnycastle was granted permission to build the brick house known as Hotel G.

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