The University of Virginia utilized the labor of enslaved African Americans from the earliest days of its construction in 1817 until the end of the American Civil War. Most of the University’s first enslaved laborers were rented from local slave-owners and worked alongside whites and free blacks in all the tasks associated with constructing the Academic Village. When the first students arrived in March 1825, enslaved African Americans worked in the pavilions, hotels, and the Rotunda; maintained classrooms, laboratories, and the library; and served the daily needs of the students and faculty, especially in providing cooking and cleaning services. This self-guided tour is an introduction to some of the significant people, places, and events that shaped the early history of African Americans at the University of Virginia. For further information see slavery.virginia.edu.

UVA Walking Tour
Enslaved African Americans at the University

The University Gardens
The University Gardens include two large greenhouses and a variety of garden structures in use from 1817 until the end of the American Civil War. As the name suggests, the University Gardens were the first gardens to be planted on the University grounds. The University of Virginia was founded in 1819, and the first gardens were planted in 1820. The University Gardens were designed by Thomas Jefferson and were used for educational purposes. The gardens were designed to teach students about the cultivation of crops and the importance of agriculture. The gardens were also used to demonstrate the latest agricultural techniques and to provide food for the University's community. The University Gardens were expanded and improved over time, and by the mid-19th century, they were one of the largest and most well-known gardens in the United States.

Walkers should proceed to the University Gardens for the next stop in the walk. Turn right onto Venable Lane and walk forward.

1. Rotunda in the Academic Village

One of the most overlooked legacies of enslaved labor are the bricks that cover the Academic Village. Enslaved workers dug the clay, fired the bricks, hauled them to Grounds, and laid them to build the University. The brick-making began in 1817 with a team comprised largely of enslaved men, but also of one woman and several children, who also worked in the brickyard. In 1823, an enslaved man named Charles was responsible for digging the clay and making one of the kilns with the help of six enslaved boys rented out from J. H. Cocke. Enslaved men Dick, Lewis, Nelson, and Sandy were also rented to the brickyard, and worked long hours by the kiln. That same year, as part of Rotunda construction, free men of color Robert Battleshad owned over 170,000 bricks and a few tons of sand to the University during a five-month stretch. Free man of color Robert Battles hauled over 176,000 bricks and a few tons of sand to the University during a five-month stretch.

2. Hotel A

Hotels are interspersed among the student rooms on the East and West Ranges. They were rented to Hotelepans, each of whom owned or rented many enslaved people. The enslaved daily fresh water to the students, tended fires, cleaned rooms and public spaces, and prepared the meals that were served to students in the hotel. In 1830, the Hotelepans have enslaved twelve people who may have lived in the basement and in garden outbuildings. The population of enslaved people in the Academic Village fluctuated between 90 and 150 people annually in the decades before emancipation. University records document that students resulted to physical violence against enslaved people regularly.

3. Hotel E

One was William, a young boy who worked as a dormitory and dining hall servant. In 1843, several students boarding with Mrs. Gray complained that William was “impertinent” and that he did “not attend well” at the meals. Under pressure from the faculty, William was “withdrawn” from serving the student dormitories. In 1835, Mrs. Gray complained to the faculty that a student boarder had struck her servant William in his presence and that the student was rude. The student defended his behavior, stating that “he would do so [strike his servant] whenever it pleased him.” Faculty sided with the student in concluding that William was “highly offensive in manner, & impertinent in language to Mr. Harris & is haughty in his conduct to others.” William was subsequently removed from any attendance on the students.

4. The Mews

The Mews, one of the few surviving original outbuildings, was erected in 1829 as a 10-story kitchen with an attic that was used as a servants’ quarters. After it was abandoned, students objected to its acknowledgement of the contributions of enslaved people to the University. Their awareness-raising efforts after 2007 paved the way for the birth of the President’s Commission on Slavery and the University in 2013.

5. Mrs. Gray’s Kitchen

Completed in 1830, this 11-stor hotel E “office” with two rooms was known as Mrs. Gray’s Kitchen. It served as both a domestic and residential spaces, including one built as an additional living space as well as a dormitory hall attendant, died in 1857.

6. The University Chapel

In the course of carrying out their responsibilities, enslaved people interacted with white students in spaces throughout the Academic Village on a regular basis. Unsurprisingly, those daily interactions with students could be difficult and violent. Students resorted to reflecting physical violence upon the bodies of free and enslaved laborers for a variety of often imagined “offenses,” including ineptitude, impertinence, or a perceived lack of attention to duties. Failure to change a place at the dinner table or presumed negligence in preparing a dormitory room or changing bed linens could result in a violent interaction. Enslaved individuals who did not speak to white students with respect and deference were also pointedly put to task. The slave system was upheld by both violence and the routine threat of violence. At UVA, the enslaved enslaved beatings, whipings, and even sexual abuse. As one student explained in response to his attack on an enslaved Nubian, “whenever a servant is insolent — he will take upon himself the right of punishment without the consent of the master” because “correction of a servant for impertinence may be defied on the ground of necessity for maintaining due subordination.” A complaint against an enslaved person for an offense could lead to their removal from duties, or even from the University. Furthermore, even when students were judged by faculty to be at fault, their actions were only reprimanded and very rarely led to any meaningful punishment.
ENSLAVED AFRICAN AMERICANS at the University of Virginia

This self-guided tour introduces some of the people, places, and stories related to early African American life at the University of Virginia. Between 1817 and 1865 the University relied on the labor of enslaved African Americans, whose presence was undeniably central to the building and functioning of the University of Virginia. This walking tour is an initiative of the President's Commission on Slavery and the University, a group committed to acknowledging and memorializing the lives and legacies of enslaved laborers at UVA.

To learn more visit slavery.virginia.edu

The Crackerbox

One of the few surviving outbuildings, the “Cracker Box” is a two-story structure erected in 1826 behind Hotel F. (see the Mews, the Coacher Box was originally constructed as a detached kitchen with second story-dwelling space. Hotelkeeper John Rouse brought his household, including 13 enslaved people and 3 free black women, to Rouse in 1829.

A one-room addition was added to the north and, perhaps-as additional living space for the enslaved.

Enslaved men James Munroe and Edmund, along with the other people owned by Rouse, likely served one of two capacities: as hotel servants preparing, serving, and cleaning-up student meals, or as dormitory servants providing services to students and cleaning their rooms. The Rouses left the University in 1854 and opened a boarding house for students on Main-Street. It is likely that the people they held in bondage continued to serve students and the Rouses at their boarding house establishment.

Pavilion VI and Garden

Pavilion VII was one place where William and Isabella Gibbons, both enslaved by different professors, persevered to maintain family connections and educate themselves. William was owned by Professor Howard in Pavilion R and later worked as a butler for Professor McGuire in Pavilion IX. Isabella was owned by Professor Smith in Pavilions V and VI, where she worked as a domestic servant. Although their marriage had no legal standing, William and Isabella preserved their union and raised their children while held in bondage. The strong opposition of white Virginians also severely limited access to education for the enslaved. William learned to read by carefully observing and listening to the white students around him. Their daughter Belia recollected that she could not have learned to read and write, “unless my mother taught me wisely.”

Memorial to Enslaved Laborers

The Memorial to Enslaved Laborers honors the lives, labor, resilience, and resistance of 4,000 enslaved people who lived and worked at UVA between 1817 and 1865. First proposed by students in 2010, the idea for a memorial garnered widespread support from students, faculty, staff, alumni, and the local community. The President’s Commission on Slavery and the University brought that initial vision to reality.

Situated within the UNESCO World Heritage Site space northeast of the Rotunda, the memorial sits in the midst of what were originally fields cultivated by enslaved people. The memorial’s design and location were deeply informed by a process of engagement with students, faculty staff, and the local community. Hoskie + Voss Architects, the team who designed the memorial, was completed in 2020.

As people walk along the memorial’s path, the interior granite wall rises to a height of eight feet. This wall bears memory marks—the inscriptions of the known and unknown names of the estimated 4,000 persons who worked on grounds. Current research has uncovered the names of nearly 600 enslaved persons. Curving parallel to the wall of names, a smaller ring of granite incorporates a bench for individuals to rest and reflect. The smaller ring also hosts a stone tablet with a timeline of the history of slavery at UVA etched into the stone.

University Cemetery

In 2012, Archaeologists discovered 67 mostly unmarked grave shafts, which likely contain the remains of enslaved African Americans. In 2014, the cemetery underwent renovation and interpretive panels were installed, all without disturbing the graves. Although we do not know who was buried here, we do know they were people with families, faith, community, and cultural traditions. Thus, in 2014 and 2015, the PCUs organized memorial services that included evening services and block looks led by renewed financial assistance from the University.

Gibbons House

In 2015, “Gibbons House” dormitory was dedicated and named after Williams and Isabella Gibbons, who were both enslaved at UVA. Later that same year, Gibbons family descendants were honored with a reception at the dormitory. Isabella and Williams Gibbons became esteemed leaders in the African American community locally after the general emancipation in 1865. Isabella served as a minister and Isabella taught in the Freedman’s School. The President’s Commission on Slavery and the University (PCUS) installed exhibits honoring their accomplishments in an allow on the first floor of the dorm and outside along the main walkway to Central Grounds.

Gooch Dillard Grave Site

The Gooch Dillard dormitory is located on what was originally part of Reuben Macoy’s 250-acre Piedmont plantation. With the exception of 1851, when UVA briefly took ownership of the property, Piedmont remained with the Macoy family until UVA purchased it in 1947. As Macoy’s plantation holdings grew, so did the number of enslaved people he owned. In the decades between 1825 and 1860, Macoy owned between 25 and 62 enslaved individuals. Prior to construction of this dormitory complex in 1882, Macoy descendant Alice E. Clark recalled the location of a cemetery containing the remains of enslaved people who lived and worked there. Archaeologists then conducted limited testing in the area. Although only nine graves were identified, it is believed that the cemetery could be larger. In 2019, Student Council, working with the President’s Commission, installed interpretive panels documenting this history.

Photography

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