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 Academical 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.

Key
- Site open to the public
- Exterior viewing only, building not open to the public
- Historic location only
- Historic marker
- Parking

The Rotunda and Bricks on the Lawn

One of the most overlooked legacies of enslaved labor are the bricks that cover the Academical Village. Enslaved laborers dug the clay, helped fire the bricks, hauled them to Grounds, and laid them to build the university. The brick-making began in the summer of 1817, and the enslaved laborers working on this task were a diverse group of mostly men, but included at least one woman and several children. An enslaved man named Charles was responsible for digging the clay and marketing the kiln with the help of six enslaved boys rented out from John H. Cohee in 1823. Enslaved laborers named Dick, Lewis, Nelson, and Sandy were also assigned to the brickyard, and worked long hours by the kiln. Enslaved laborers also carved out the terraces on the Lawn, creating the unique landscape that you see today. Many of the enslaved laborers were highly skilled at construction, carpentry, stone cutting, and blacksmithing, who were forced to work alongside free black and white laborers, contributed to some of the more intricate design work seen in the details of the architecture on grounds. In 1823 as part of Rotunda construction, free man of color Robert Battle hauled over 176,000 bricks and a few tons of sand to the University during a five-month stretch. For his hard work, he was paid $170.

Enslaved Labor Plaque

In February of 2007, the University’s Board of Visitors added a plaque to the statue of Thomas Jefferson standing on the Lawn to honor the University’s “original labor force,” which included enslaved workers.

Hotel A

Hotels intersperse the East and West Ranges. These buildings were rented to hotelkeepers, each of whom owned many people who were expected to prepare meals and provide cleaning for the students. On a daily basis, the enslaved laborers brought fresh water to the students and tended their fires. They regularly cleaned the rooms and public spaces of the University. In addition, in the basements and gardens, they prepared the meals that were served to students in the hotels. This work required extensive labor force. In 1830, the Consistory operated Hotel A owned twelve people who may have lived in the basement and in outbuildings in the gardens. At any time, the University was competing for cadavers with two other medical schools in the state. Professional grave robbers known as “Resurrectionists” were hired in Richmond, Alexandria, and Falmouth. These men primarily targeted African-American burial sites to meet the University’s demand for 25 to 30 cadavers per season. An enslaved man named Lewis was hired by the University from carpenter George Sprouse specifically to clean up after the cadaver experiments. Because of these duties, the University community called them “Academical Locusts.” During his time at UVA, Lewis lived in several locations including behind Pavillon 9. It is unknown whether Lewis died by sale, but by 1880, Lewis no longer appears in University records.

The University Gardens

Over the decades, dozens of buildings were added to these spaces including: smokehouses, brick kilns, saltpeter sheds, and quarters. Enclosed by walls and largely hidden from the university community, these spaces provided cooking and cleaning services to students, faculty, and Isabella Gibbons, who were both enslaved at UVA, lived and labored. Owned by different professors, they were able to maintain family connections and become literate despite the constraints of slavery. Mr. Gibbons was owned by Professor Henry Howard and later worked for Professor William H. McCullough in Pavillion 9. Mrs. Gibbons was a domestic servant in the household of Professor Francis Smith in Pavillion 9 and 10. Although their marriage had no legal standing, William and Isabella Gibbons preserved their union and raised their children while living in slavery. Legal restrictions and the strong opposition of white society severely limited access to education for Virginia 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 learn to read and write, “unless my mother taught me secretly.”

Pavilion VI and Garden

Pavilion X and VI were once places where William and Isabella Gibbons, who were both enslaved at UVA, lived and labored. Owned by different faculty, they were able to maintain family connections and become literate despite the constraints of slavery. Mr. Gibbons was owned by Professor Henry Howard and later worked for Professor William H. McCullough in Pavilion 9. Mrs. Gibbons was a domestic servant in the household of Professor Francis Smith in Pavillion 9 and 10. Although their marriage had no legal standing, William and Isabella Gibbons preserved their union and raised their children while living in slavery. Legal restrictions and the strong opposition of white society severely limited access to education for Virginia 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 learn to read and write, “unless my mother taught me secretly.”

The Mews

The building now known as the Mews was built around 1830. It is one of the few surviving original outbuildings. Built as a detached kitchen, it also provided accommodations for some of the professor’s enslaved labors. These kitchen quarters were modeled after plantation kitchens, which were usually detached and situated near the main house. These buildings and the enslaved cooks and domestics were integral to the formal functions of the University’s community, providing meals and domestic service to the professors and their families.

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UVA Walking Tour Enslaved African Americans at the University

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 Academical 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.
In 1829, the Board of Visitors approved the construction of a one-story dormitory building south of the Library on land purchased from Lewis Mountain. The building was constructed at a cost of $6,500 and was to be occupied by 1831. The dormitory was originally named after George Tucker, a professor of Moral Philosophy, and was later renamed in honor of Miss Mary Gibbons, a prominent UVA alumnus and benefactor.

University staff discovered several grave shafts during the expansion of a parking lot in 1992. The site was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1993. In 2014, the Board of Visitors established an educational exhibit in an alcove on the first floor of the Gibbons House dormitory to teach first-year students about the namesake of the building and the longer history of slavery at UVA. The building was formally dedicated in summer 2015.

Enslaved African Americans were employed at the University during the antebellum period, serving as domestics, laundresses, and seamstresses. In particular, enslaved individuals working for hotelkeepers in the area surrounding the Foster residence became known as the Foster family. The 2-acre historic property in the Foster family's neighborhood was once a significant asset to the University and was later used as a parking lot.

In the decades between 1820 and 1860, Maury owned between 18 and 50 enslaved people, depending on the value of its acquisition by the University in 1947. As Maury's plantation holdings grew, so did its acquisition by the University in 1947. Passed down through the Maury family until Reuben Maury in 1809. Piedmont, a 290-acre plantation acquired by Maury, was the first resident of Pavilion IX, occupying the dormitory to teach first-year students about the namesake of the University.

In 2014, the PCSU organized a formal service at the First Baptist Church, followed by an evening vigil led by a choir and a choir to honor Ingmar Miller and a choir singing the gospel song. Walking Tour

In 2014, the PCSU organized a formal service at the First Baptist Church, followed by an evening vigil led by a choir and a choir singing the gospel song.

Walking Tour

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 undeniable 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

Mrs. Gray’s Kitchen

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