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UGA should talk about slavery's role here, researcher says

By LEE SHEARER updated Thursday, October 20, 2016 - 7:52am 0 comments

Black slaves were an everyday, essential part of the University of Georgia for nearly its first century, but there's no marker, no public monument, to acknowledge the role they played in UGA history.

Athens Banner-Herald

A UGA historical marker noting "The War for Southern Independence." In the background are the UGA Arch, which may have been fabricated by slaves, and a memorial to the Confederate War dead from Athens. (Lee Shearer/Staff)

The UGA community should think about changing that, says UGA professor Scott Nesbit.

Slaves did much of the work of the university up until the Civil War; it's possible, though not confirmed, that slave labor produced the iron fence enclosing North Campus and the iconic Arch, Nesbit said as he gave an invited lecture on UGA and slavery to the Athens Historical Society last week with his teaching assistant, Audrey Thomas.

In fall semester Public History and Technology classes in 2015 and again this year, Nesbit has had his students teaming up on a continuing project to find out how slavery played out at UGA. The course is part of the Master of Historic Preservation Program in UGA's College of Environment and Design.

"This is very much research that is in progress," Nesbit told Historical Society members and others who came to hear about the research he and his students have been doing.

Nesbit is an assistant professor of digital humanities at UGA, so his classes have also been building a not-yet-public website on the history of slavery at UGA, with digital images of historical documents and objects displayed as well as narrative and facts.

Thomas has been investigating the academic, intellectual aspect of slavery at UGA — what the learned men of the UGA faculty had to say about it. The founder of UGA's law school, T.R.R. Cobb, was a prominent intellectual defender of slavery, she found.

Cobb wrote that slavery was an essential part of the national economy, and that the enslaved could benefit from their enslavement.

Nesbit and his students haven't found any evidence of contrary opinions.

"There were no antislavery ideas circulating at the University of Georgia immediately before or during the Civil War," he said. "UGA did good work for the slavery regime."

Some people here might possibly have opposed slavery in action even though they couldn't do it publicly.

There seemed to be an "undercurrent of suspicion" in the local newspapers that some citizens might be aiding runaway slaves, he said. Black slaves were a normal, essential aspect of the university's operations, Nesbit said,

"Much of the work of the university was done by enslaved people," he said.

The revered iron fence on UGA's North Campus, the oldest part of the university, may have been fabricated by slaves, and possibly the Arch, Nesbit said. They've found no document that would confirm that, but the man who owned the company that built the fence and Arch also owned many slaves, Nesbit said. Nesbit and his students haven't found any evidence the university actually owned slaves, as many universities did before slavery was abolished, Nesbit said. Instead, the university rented its slave labor.

Some faculty members were slave owners, but Nesbit and his students haven't yet confirmed that UGA students owned slaves, he said.

Several universities in recent years have taken steps to acknowledge slavery in their histories and offer some kind of atonement, many well before the Craig Steven Wilder's book "Ebony and Ivy" detailed how slaves and slavery benefitted Ivy League as well as Southern universities.

Georgetown University last month announced it would build a memorial, name two buildings in honor of the slaves, and give preferential admissions status, as with the children of alumni, to the descendants of 272 black slaves the university sold to raise money in 1838.

Eight days later, a group of those descendants suggested that Georgetown could help build a $1 billion foundation, the Washington Post reported.

The University of North Carolina's Class of 2002 launched a successful fundraising drive to for a memorial that is a black granite table supported by 300 figurines of bronze, with five granite seats clustered around it, and inscribed around with the words "The Class Of 2002 Honors The University's Unsung Founders — The People Of Color Bound And Free — Who Helped Build The Carolina That We Cherish Today."

Nesbit and Valerie Babb, director of UGA's Institute for African American studies, hope to broaden the effort to talk about how UGA might understand and acknowledgeits history of slavery, he said. The descendants of slaves who worked at UGA should be part of that conversation, he said.

Nesbit is also participating in a regional coalition of researchers investigating the role of slavery in the South's institutes of higher education.

Nesbit showed a photograph of the Arch as he began his talk to about 100 people in UGA's Russell Research Libraries building Sunday.

In the foreground was a state historical marker erected in 1991 about the university. Nesbit pointed to the second paragraph of gold letters:

"During the War for Southern Independence, most of the students entered the Confederate Army. The University closed its doors in 1864, and did not open again until January 1866. After the war, many Confederate veterans became students."

Beyond the Arch another public monument was visible — an 1871 memorial to the Confederate dead commissioned by Athens' Ladies Memorial Society.

Even though most people don't even notice the UGA historical marker noting "the War for Southern Independence" and the memorial to the Confederate dead as they bustle through the Arch and across Broad Street, they are important public monuments, according to Nesbit.

"This is what the landscape says about who we are," Nesbit said. "I wonder what other stories the landscape of the campus ought to tell in the future."

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