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Buried History

How far should a university go to face its slave past?

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DUSTIN CHAMBERS FOR THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

A granite marker indicates where the U. of Georgia reinterred remains, presumably of slaves, that were discovered during a campus construction project. The university's handling of the remains has upset some faculty and community members.

American universities have publicly wrestled with their historical ties to slavery for the better part of two decades. In all those years, there may never have been a moment quite like what took place at a cemetery near the University of Georgia's Athens campus on March 7. That afternoon, Fred O. Smith Sr. — Georgia alumnus, slave descendant, leader in Athens's black community — found his alma mater secretly reburying the remains of people who could have been his ancestors.

The remains had obsessed the 63-year-old retiree since they surfaced in late 2015 during a campus construction project. At the time, the university explained that it had found several graves from a 19th-century burial ground, Old Athens Cemetery, while expanding Baldwin Hall, an academic building next to the cemetery. It [described](#) the bones as belonging to people of European heritage. But the story had changed by March 1 of this year, when Georgia issued another [statement](#), confirming what Smith and others had long suspected. Most of the remains whose DNA was successfully analyzed — fewer than one-third of the people from what by then amounted to 105 rediscovered grave sites — were of African descent. That meant, in all likelihood, they had been slaves.

Immediately, local black leaders began to [complain](#) publicly. They held a [press conference](#). They attacked the university's lack of transparency. They noted that some current residents of Athens probably were descended from the individuals whose remains were found. They criticized the site where the university intended to rebury those remains — the plan was to move them to a cemetery called Oconee Hill, with a memorial ceremony slated for March 20 — and recommended a historically black burial ground instead. They implored the university to slow down.

Reckoning With Slavery

In recent years, scholarship on the history of slavery has leapt beyond academe to force a societal reckoning. This occasional series explores fresh questions scholars are asking as America confronts its history of human bondage.

A New Path to Atonement

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How Should We Memorialize Slavery?

Stained by Slavery

Then Smith got a call. *They have dug the hole, and they may be burying them at any moment*, said his tipster, whom Smith declines to identify. Which is how, around noon on March 7, he found himself outside the gate of Oconee Hill, a sprawling cemetery located across the railroad tracks from Georgia’s football stadium.

The gate was locked. The reburial would not take place during the March 20 ceremony, as some had assumed from the university’s press release. It was happening now — unannounced — during Spring Break.

Smith drove to another gate. It was also locked, but there he had a clear view of the reburial. No minister anywhere. No hearses, just U-Haul-like moving trucks. Workers lowering boxes, not coffins, into what seemed like a mass grave. When one person saw Smith taking pictures, he says, the man pulled a large truck in front of the gate to block his view.

Smith emailed a description of the scene to hundreds of contacts. The same day, he met with Valerie Babb, an English professor who directs the University of Georgia’s

Institute for African American Studies, and told her what had happened at the cemetery. “My reaction,” Babb says, “was horror that remains were treated that disrespectfully.”

What happened next would only deepen professors’ concerns. To some faculty members and students, the emergence of these remains presented an opportunity for Georgia to do what many other universities have done lately: fully investigate and deal with its history of slavery. But the coming weeks would show how much of a struggle it still can be for a major institution to face its complicity in America’s original sin, particularly a public university in the Deep South. Georgia, some professors feared, was literally and figuratively trying to bury its slave history.

The past is unavoidable the moment you arrive at the University of Georgia, which was chartered in 1785 and promotes itself as the “birthplace of public higher education.” If the Georgia story has a symbolic center, it’s a black iron arch, thought to have been built around 1857, that stands close to some of the campus’s most historic buildings. A commemorative marker nearby explains how the university shut down during the Civil War — “the War for Southern Independence,” as the sign calls it — when most of its students entered the Confederate Army.

That same arch stood during the struggles of desegregation a century later. It was there, in 1961, that demonstrators hanged a blackface effigy and chanted “Two, four, six, eight, we don’t want to integrate.” Today a marker celebrates the courage of the first two African-American students to enroll at the university, Hamilton Holmes and Charlayne Hunter (now Hunter-Gault). The white-columned building where those pioneers registered for classes is now named after them.

The story of slavery at the university, however, is nearly invisible. In recent years, some faculty members and students have been trying to change that. They’ve combed archives to uncover the facts about the university’s history of bondage, presenting that story in a [website](#) and a library exhibit. They’ve studied and helped preserve the

history of various cemeteries where enslaved and later free African-Americans were buried. “Slavery was a vital part of the history of the University of Georgia,” says Scott Nesbit, a 19th-century historian specializing in digital humanities who has studied and taught the university’s slave heritage. “What we find also is that University of Georgia was vital to the history of slavery.”

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In 1860, the 11,000 or so residents of Clarke County, which included the university, were about equally split between white people and enslaved African-Americans. Slaves did much of the labor on the campus: chopping wood, carrying water, maintaining buildings. (That famous arch? Slaves may have built it.) Some Athenian slaves led notable lives. Lucius Henry Holsey, who was owned by a literature professor, went on to found Paine College, a liberal-arts institution in Augusta, Ga. At the same time, thinkers associated with the university were publishing significant treatises defending slavery on moral, economic, and political grounds.

Some on the campus now call for the university to acknowledge and showcase that slave history. Doing so would create a more inclusive environment for African-American students, says Mansur A. Buffins, a rising senior who is president of the campus chapter of the NAACP. It would link them to African-Americans who contributed to the university long before Holmes and Hunter-Gault integrated it, in 1961. “If you’re acknowledging the total black experience on this campus, I feel more of a connection to the campus,” Buffins says. “Right now, as a black student walking throughout the spaces on this campus, the only time I feel connected to this campus as a physical thing is when I’m passing by the Hunter-Holmes Academic Building.”

The University of Georgia's slave history is hardly unique, and neither are the recent calls to reckon with it. After the Revolutionary War, Americans secured the future of their democracy in part by building colleges. They established 17 from 1783 to 1800, among them the first truly public institutions, such as Georgia and the University of North Carolina. Slavery undergirded the entire enterprise, says Craig Steven Wilder, a historian at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and author of *Ebony & Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (Bloomsbury, 2013).

These days, academe's early dependence on slavery has risen to the surface. Investigating and publicizing that past, once uncommon, has become a badge of seriousness. Brown University paved the way with a landmark report in 2006. The movement gained momentum with Wilder's book in 2013 and has spread to so many institutions that a [consortium](#) exists to facilitate their efforts.

The new self-studies can be as vast as the story of slavery itself. For example, researchers at the University of Virginia have found that 5,000 or more enslaved laborers worked there during the 45 years between its founding and emancipation. Slaves created the 900,000 bricks that made up the Rotunda of what is now a Unesco World Heritage site, according to Elizabeth R. Varon, a historian at UVa. The university has addressed that history through measures like a formal expression of regret from its governing board, extensive community meetings, naming a new dorm after a former slave couple, a memorial project, and a lecture course meant as a new way of initiating undergraduates into campus culture.

Probably no reckoning with academic slavery has captured the public imagination like the one at Georgetown University, where a penitent president has offered preferential admissions treatment to descendants of 272 slaves whose 1838 sale shored up the Jesuit institution's finances.

Georgia is a laggard by comparison. What's distinctive about its situation is the intimate presence of this history. Its South Campus is built on land that used to be a

slave plantation. Many state residents trace their roots to slaves and slaveholders.

“Other places, where the student body is from all over the world, to talk about slavery is not necessarily to implicate you directly,” says Scott Reynolds Nelson, a historian at Georgia. “But here, particularly for the student body, and then for many of the higher administrators, there’s a more direct family connection. You don’t have to press too hard to get 150 years back.”

“**T**his is the cemetery,” says Fred Smith. “We’re riding on it.”

It’s a Saturday morning in late March, and Smith parks his SUV behind Baldwin Hall. What he sees as a cemetery looks like a standard red-brick academic building. The more visible burial ground is the sloping, magnolia-shaded area behind a fence next door. That place, called Old Athens Cemetery, contains monuments to the kinds of people whose lives tend to leave records for historians: a railroad magnate, a veteran of the Revolution, a professor of belles lettres and moral philosophy.

But the cemetery’s modern borders mask a hidden back story. The burial ground, presumably segregated, once encompassed more land, according to Scott Nesbit, the historian. It fell out of use after Oconee Hill Cemetery opened in 1856, he says, and it was closed to black burials in 1858. By the 1930s, when the university used money from the New Deal to build three new academic buildings in the area, Old Athens Cemetery had lapsed into disrepair. According to Nesbit, one of those new facilities, Baldwin Hall, was built on its slave section.



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University officials “had no emotional inclination about this,” says Fred Smith Sr., a Georgia alumnus, descendant of slaves, and leader in the local black community. “I guess they thought that we would take that as some prehistoric bones that they found, and that we wouldn’t identify that those might have been our relatives, our ancestors.”

The evidence: a 1938 letter, sent by a public-relations firm to the university librarian, explaining the methods used to exhume skeletons of slaves for the Baldwin Hall construction. It reads, “The white inmates at the northern end of the cemetery turned over in their graves when they heard picks and shovels digging foundations for a large brick University building in 1938. They rested more easily when it was revealed that the digging was being confined to the southern end where the colored folks of Athens used to be interred; numerous tibias, vertebrae and grinning skulls of colored brothers were unearthed and thrown ‘over the dump,’ while surviving relatives and friends of silent sleepers in this city of the dead shuddered to think of what an extension of building construction would mean.”

What happened to the remains exhumed during that construction? Nesbit doesn't know. "I believe that they were thrown — that they were thrown away," he says. "The remains were simply thrown away."

Fast-forward to 2015. The shudder-inducing prospect foreshadowed in that 1938 letter came to pass. This time workers found remains amid a project that involved replacing a parking lot outside Baldwin with a building extension. The university halted construction and brought in a consultant, Southeastern Archaeological Services, to exhume and rebury the remains. Based on Southeastern's visual inspection, Georgia announced, those remains appeared to be European.

That puzzled some faculty members. It shocked Smith, who is known around Athens for founding an academic "quiz bowl" competition focused on local and national African-American history. Like Nesbit, Smith had seen documentation about the removal of slaves' graves when Baldwin was built. He immediately emailed university officials to share that history and pose a question: "Could the remains be slave remains?"

It would take more than a year for an answer to emerge. In January 2016, one month after Smith sent his email, Georgia [announced](#) a research project to learn more about the individuals' ancestry and living conditions. Carrying out the study: Laurie Reitsema, a biological anthropologist at the university who specializes in researching past human lives by studying skeletons. The subjects she had to work with in this case were fragmented. Only 63 of the 105 grave sites possessed any visible human remains. Also, because the campus lacked a lab suitable for the challenging task of analyzing archaeological DNA, a facility in Texas had to process the samples.

Ultimately, 42 of the individuals appeared to have enough organic material to enable ancient-DNA analysis, Reitsema says. The analysis succeeded in most, though not all, of those cases, and most of the people who could be studied were found to have

African ancestry. “Given the period of use of the cemetery, and the geographic region, it’s highly likely that they were enslaved,” Reitsema says.

What Reitsema and Nesbit discuss with the precision of scholarship hits Smith with the force of kinship. When he learned of the remains’ African ancestry, he grieved. He wanted time to process the news. He hoped to see the remains lowered into the ground. Instead, the university reburied them within a week of announcing their ancestry. And Smith was locked out. University administrators “had no emotional inclination about this,” he says. “I guess they thought that we would take that as some prehistoric bones that they found, and that we wouldn’t identify that those might have been our relatives, our ancestors.”

At least one administrator, though, does see the bones that way. Michelle Cook is Georgia’s chief diversity officer and associate provost for institutional diversity. She is also an African-American with Athens-area roots going back to the 19th century. The Baldwin remains, she says, “could be my own relatives.” She advised the administration on how to memorialize them, and, since that process came under attack, she has served as a public face of the university’s response.

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Cook says university planners never expected to find bones on the site, because oral histories and local historians indicated that all remains had been removed decades ago. Once remains did turn up, she says, Georgia reburied them based on guidance from the Office of the State Archaeologist. That meant finding a new grave site close to the original one (Ocone Hill is minutes from Baldwin). It meant reinterring remains

individually in wooden funeral boxes whose size was appropriate to their contents. It meant burying them as closely as possible to their original configuration, so as not to separate family members or other pairings.

The university decided to honor those people with a service of remembrance on March 20, Cook says. It anticipated that many community members would attend. It was necessary to reinter the remains at an earlier time, she says, with good weather. Locking the gate — normal at Oconee, she says, for burials that take place separately from funeral services — was appropriate to prevent a media or public spectacle. And, contrary to Smith's claim about the large truck, the consultants who handled the reburial say they did not deliberately block anyone's view, according to Greg Trevor, the university's chief spokesman.

Georgia consulted members of the black community about the memorialization process, Cook says, naming a judge, Steve C. Jones; a music professor, Gregory S. Broughton; and a pastor, Winfred M. Hope, all of whom participated in the March 20 ceremony. The university's handling of the reburial has earned the praise of another local black pastor, Charlie Maddox, who wrote an [op-ed](#) in the *Athens Banner-Herald* attacking critics' "inflamed and hyperbolic rhetoric."

"The institution was trying to do this in the most dignified way," Cook says. "Not in the sense that there was a rush, but out of a true genuine concern" to respectfully rebury the bones as soon as possible.

But the university's response doesn't much impress Craig Steven Wilder, the MIT historian. The idea, he says, "that state institutions can unilaterally make decisions about the reburial and the remains of enslaved people, without in fact a significant and extended period of public discussion, to me is outrageous."

And the reburial itself is only the most high-profile controversy in a series of related moves that have troubled professors and students.

Start with the word “slavery.” The university has been inconsistent about referring to the Baldwin individuals’ probable enslaved status. When it announced their African descent, its news release made no mention of slavery. Speakers at the March 20 ceremony, including the university’s president, Jere W. Morehead, also skirted the subject. They stressed how much was unknown about the individuals.

This was striking given the vast amount that *is* known about 19th-century U.S. slavery, including archival research by Georgia’s own faculty that has deemed the practice essential to the university’s early history. It was only on the granite marker by their Oconee Hill graves, where the reinterred individuals were described as “presumably slaves or former slaves,” that the word was found.

Georgia also effaced enslaved people from the 1845 landscape painting that stretches across the [website](#) showcasing the university’s history. The bottom section of the [original painting](#), “View of Athens from Carr’s Hill,” by George Cooke, depicts multiple figures that are almost certainly slaves, one of them running to a carriage and another working with cotton bales. Yet, as the campus newspaper [reported](#) in early 2016, those slaves are cropped out in the version that appears on the history site.



HARGRETT LIBRARY, U. OF GEORGIA

Slaves depicted in the lower section of "View of Athens from Carr's Hill," an 1845 painting, did not appear in a cropped version of the landscape reproduced on a history website of the U. of Georgia.

After the Baldwin Hall discovery, university officials pulled an article scheduled to run in the alumni magazine about efforts of Georgia historians, students, and community members to study and preserve Oconee Hill, successor to the Old Athens Cemetery next to Baldwin Hall. Officials shelved the story because "anything to do with the old cemetery and its association with the Oconee Hill Cemetery is a very sensitive topic right now as far as the public is concerned," says internal correspondence obtained by *The Chronicle Review*. Of particular concern: that the article "would not be well received by local and state officials who have close ties to the university."

As for the Baldwin remains, it's not just members of the Athens community who have felt excluded from decisions about what to do with them and how the University of Georgia should address its history. The same goes for faculty members from areas like history and African-American studies. Professors in these fields have studied and taught black history. They've built up community contacts. But many faculty members have learned about the university's moves from press releases and newspaper articles.

"The history department, formally, was never contacted," says Claudio Saunt, who heads it. "No one ever called the department chair and said, 'We have this story. We've discovered these remains. We want to know more about the history at UGA. Can you help us?' "

A climate of paranoia envelops the subject. People interviewed for this article considered parts of the story too sensitive to discuss on the record. Employees whose jobs lack the protection of tenure have felt pressure not to pursue public-oriented work related to slavery and the university. "I feel very badly for people in the community who have been very hurt by this experience," says Cindy Hahamovitch, a historian. "But at the same time, I'm also concerned for the university's reputation. We run graduate programs. We try to attract faculty to come here. The last thing UGA needs is a reputation as a place that doesn't handle this well — is trying to bury the past."

"The past never cooperates by staying in the past. Eventually it always reaches out to us and asks, What have you learned?"

Georgia is doing nothing of the sort, officials respond. Cropping out slaves from that painting: A web designer resized both the top and bottom sections of the image to make it fit the page, Trevor says. Pulling the magazine article: To run it would have been insensitive, he says, at a time when the Baldwin remains were still being

exhumed. Sidelining faculty members: Cook names more than a dozen mostly black professors and administrators whom she personally contacted before March 1 to discuss what the university had learned about the remains' ancestry and how it was planning to rebury them.

Nevertheless, some professors are taking matters into their own hands. A few hours after Smith drives his SUV to the Baldwin site, he joins hundreds of people in the Richard B. Russell library building for a faculty-organized event billed as "A Conversation about Slavery at UGA and the Baldwin Site Burials." The meeting has a guerrilla feel. Its organizers tried but failed to get institutional sponsors. They almost failed to get the venue. Now, lined up behind a long beige table, a panel of professors and community members faces a packed auditorium. Several administrators are here, too, but they sit in the audience.

"Some have been afraid to engage in the type of conversation we are about to have today because the many issues surrounding it are difficult, and because some constituents might be offended," says Valerie Babb, the English professor. "But the past never cooperates by staying in the past. Eventually it always reaches out to us and asks, What have you learned?"

What follows begins like an academic symposium — an opportunity for scholars like Nesbit and Reitsema to share the findings of their research — but soon becomes a drubbing. In front of local and national reporters, Smith seems to verge on tears as he recounts the university's treatment of the Baldwin remains. A prominent local politician and historian, Michael L. Thurmond, scolds the university for failing to document the contributions of slaves, whom he compares to the black female NASA scientists celebrated in the movie *Hidden Figures*.

John H. Morrow Jr., a black historian who has served the university for nearly 30 years and held a number of leadership posts, indicts Georgia for consistently acting as if the surrounding black community does not exist. Morrow, who was one of the employees

contacted by Michelle Cook, the chief diversity officer, scorns President Morehead's response to the Baldwin Hall controversy. According to a news release that had gone out a few days before, this would involve meetings with university members, city officials, and other local leaders to discuss collaborating on issues like education and economic development.

"He's going to talk to the community," Morrow says. "I'm not interested in hearing what the white community has to say about this. We know damn well what the white community thinks, because we're connected to it — coaches and everyone else. But there is still no communication with the African-American community about these issues."

If your notion of how a university reckons with slavery comes from the positive coverage of recent developments at Georgetown, then Georgia's case demonstrates a messier reality. Institutional fear of dealing with slavery is common. Even Georgetown was not immune. As Wilder points out, Jesuit historians had written for decades about their order's slave plantations. Only in recent years has Georgetown taken what he calls "institutional accountability" for that history.

Whether Georgia will follow that example is an open question. Faculty members are pushing for a slavery initiative that aspires to match the ambition of projects like the ones at Georgetown and Virginia. So far, Georgia's response has been lukewarm. Administrators are backing a more narrowly tailored research project to learn more about the lives of the 105 people whose graves were discovered at Baldwin Hall, including, as a [news release](#) puts it, "any ties to slavery."

For Smith, even that is a positive step. On the day of the contentious "Conversation" set up by the faculty, he drives to Oconee Hill Cemetery to visit the freshly sodded graves of those 105 people. He examines the white lilies beside their granite marker. He stoops to read the Paul Laurence Dunbar poem [excerpted](#) on it. He seems, for a moment, satisfied. He has turned these slaves into front-page news. "Before that, they