

Ava Branch

Dr Hilary Green

AFR 224-A

25 February 2025

Erasing the Past: The Legacies of Slavery in Higher Education

With the dawn of the new millenia, many colleges and universities have attempted to redress their own institutional legacies with enslavement.¹ Calls for institutional acknowledgement are, more often than not, driven by student coalitions or faculty members, as administrations tend to shy away from recognizing the slave labor that sustained the infrastructure on campuses. When taking a deeper look into these histories, there are many parallels amongst Southern institutions of higher education in terms of how they both institutionally and ideologically strengthened slavery on their campuses. Similar to Davidson, Southern institutions embedded pro-slavery ideology into their curricula, as well as manipulated historical records and memorialization to obscure enslaved labor. When examining how these universities approach this historical rectification, there are clear similarities with Davidson College and other institutions, specifically in their ability to maintain the systemic erasure of the contributions of enslaved individuals on their campuses. Ultimately, because of the inaction taken by administrations, the burden of historical accountability is unjustly shifted onto individuals, rather than the institutions themselves.

One major parallel between Davidson and other institutions' legacies with enslavement is their extensive integration of pro-slavery ideologies in Southern curricula. Due to an original lack of access to education in the new colonies, British settlers established institutions of higher

¹ Leslie M. Harris, "Higher Education's Reckoning with Slavery."
<https://www.aaup.org/article/higher-education%E2%80%99s-reckoning-slavery>.

education throughout the Thirteen Colonies as a way to facilitate the spread of knowledge from one hemisphere onto the other. For example, Yale was established in 1701.² These institutions evolved concurrently with the US, growing and expanding with the country to aid in crafting a singular national identity. Ultimately, curricula in the United States diverged between the North and the South, and Southern institutions intentionally structured their universities to legitimize and reproduce pro-slavery ideology.³ A widely-held belief amongst faculty at these institutions was the importance of slavery in upholding “stability” of the South. Universities were able to propel the narrative that being pro-Southern inherently meant being pro-slavery—the link between both intertwining more and more intricately with the assistance of their faculty members. In this way, it is no surprise to learn about some of the speakers institutions would invite to their campuses, such as Washington College’s speaker at their 1850 class graduation: John Reuben Thompson, a pro-slavery literary nationalist.⁴

The values these institutions promoted positioned faculty as key agents in reinforcing and legitimizing slavery’s importance in the South, a dynamic reflected in the career of Albert Taylor Bledsoe. Albert Taylor Bledsoe, the author of the 1856 philosophical treatment *Liberty and Slavery*, taught at the University of Virginia (UVA) from 1854 to 1879.⁵ At Davidson College, professors that served in the Confederate Army, such as William Joseph Martin and D.H. Hill, were deeply honored and cherished members of their academic communities.⁶ During this period, university professors had to promote and sustain pro-slavery messages to remain employed. It is clear that faculty members were the conduits in which these ideologies were

² David W. Blight. “Founders.” In *Yale and Slavery: A History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press.) 37.

³ Alfred L. Brophy. *University, Court, and Slave: Pro-slavery Thought in Southern Colleges and Courts, and the Coming of Civil War*, 50.

⁴ Brophy, *Pro-Slavery Thought*, 101.

⁵ Brophy, *Pro-Slavery Thought*, 62.

⁶ Beaty, Mary. 1988. “The Civil War and its Aftermath.” In *A History of Davidson College*, 106-123. Davidson: Briarpatch Press. 114.

transmitted through to the rest of the student body, signifying that the purpose of higher education—at one point in time—was to sustain *Southern* values of oppression.

Southern institutions, like Davidson, share a common tactic in obscuring the contributions of enslaved labor in building their campuses. Enslaved labor at Southern colleges maintained the entirety of these campus infrastructures: they cleaned facilities, loaded goods on and off ships, and made each individual brick of the buildings they ultimately built.⁷ One of the main ways in which colleges have tried to reckon with their past is through the addition of monuments dedicated to enslaved individuals. In 2005, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill erected their own slave monument, titled *Unsung Founders, Bond and Free*, that honors the work of the enslaved that built the campus.⁸ However, a major issue the university has run into concerning the monument is its ambiguous nature: it lacks any sort of definitive acknowledgement of the contributions by specific enslaved individuals that were forced to work on UNC's campus. Unlike Davidson College, who only ever referred to the enslaved as “hands” or “servants,” UNC has an incredibly extensive archives that documented each enslaved person that worked at their school.⁹ UNC could very easily honor each enslaved person that worked on campus, granting them a sense of personhood and honoring their descendants. However, the veil of separation that still somewhat excuses their role in the institution of slavery is still maintained with the lack of true recognition.

Similarly in the fall of 2025, Davidson College unveiled its own memorial honoring the enslaved labor that built much of the institution's early physical landscape.¹⁰ *With These Hands* is

⁷ Blight, *Yale and Slavery*, 33-34

⁸ Lecture, February 6, 2025.

⁹ Davidson College Board of Trustees, Board of Trustees Minutes 1836-1875, 13.

https://davidson.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/delivery/01DCOLL_INST:01DCOLL/12263429750005716

¹⁰ Mary DeAngelis. “Davidson College Unveils Plans for Memorial to Honor the Enslaved and Exploited | Davidson.” Davidson College.
<https://www.davidson.edu/news/2023/03/29/davidson-college-unveils-plans-memorial-honor-enslaved-exploited>.

a monument serving as a way to acknowledge the enslaved people whose contributions have, up until this point, gone unnoticed. The institution's president, Douglas A. Hicks, stated that although Davidson can “never fully atone” for its past, actions such as these “help take another step toward reconciling with it.”¹¹ Placed on the lawn at the heart of the original Elm and Oak buildings, the monument occupies a space where the impact of enslaved labor is both historically significant and visibly embedded within the campus infrastructure.¹² Moreover, in 2020, the Davidson administration established a committee tasked with developing policies for renaming campus buildings: the Special Committee in the Acknowledgement and Naming.¹³ The Chambers academic building, named after slave-owner Maxwell Chambers, was a central issue for this committee. While Maxwell Chambers dedicated much of his wealth to the college, his wealth is accredited greatly to the enslaved labor he depended on.¹⁴ The creation of the committee propelled hope throughout campus, as student coalitions felt that Davidson was taking steps towards the right direction—to atone for their profitization of enslaved labor. Despite the creation of the committee, motions to rename the building were voted on and struck down in the fall of 2023. Once again, enacting genuine change at the institutional level remains a constant battle.

The most significant similarity amongst Davidson and other institutions of higher education is in their ability to control how history is taught—or more so omitted. Selectivity in campus administration's activism continues to serve as a means of distancing these institutions from their direct ties to slavery. Sustained through historical erasure, this phenomena of institutional amnesia ultimately shifts accountability away from college administrations. These

¹¹ DeAngelis, *With These Hands*.

¹² Lecture, February 6, 2025.

¹³ Green, Hilary N. Maxwell Chambers and His Complicated Connections to Davidson College (2023), 3.

¹⁴ Lecture, February 6, 2025.

deliberate oversights by universities to purposefully disregard their campus' legacy of slavery ensures that the burden of uncovering the past remains on individuals. When efforts to sustain dialogues surrounding the legacy of slavery amongst higher education, the deliberate lack of any sustained efforts to acknowledge the past facilitates the reemergence of a collective forgetting.¹⁵ This detachment, veiled in a university's ambiguous slave monuments and a lack of clear archival records, prohibits any sort of meaningful responsibility to be taken by these administrations. Campus community members almost always have to work twice as hard to expose these histories, with specific faculty members often piling this research on top of their work obligations.¹⁶ Ultimately, the most striking similarity amongst institutions of higher education and their legacies of campus enslavement lies in their persistence to erase that legacy—ensuring that the responsibility of remembrance falls on individuals rather than the institutions themselves.

¹⁵ Hilary N. Green, "The Burden of the University of Alabama's Hallowed Grounds," *The Public Historian* 42, no. 4 (November 2020): 29.

¹⁶ Green, Alabama's Hallowed Grounds, 31.

Bibliography

- Beaty, Mary. 1988. "The Civil War and its Aftermath." In *A History of Davidson College*, 106-123. Davidson: Briarpatch Press.
- Blight, David W. 2024. "Founders." In *Yale and Slavery: A History*, 33-52. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Brophy, Alfred L. 2016. "Chapter 2: Pro-slavery Academic Thought in the 1840s and 1850s." In *University, Court, and Slave: Pro-slavery Thought in Southern Colleges and Courts, and the Coming of Civil War*, 48-130. N.p.: Oxford University Press.
- Davidson College Board of Trustees, Board of Trustees Minutes 1836-1875, 1-627.
- DeAngelis, Mary. 2023. "Davidson College Unveils Plans for Memorial to Honor the Enslaved and Exploited | Davidson." Davidson College.
<https://www.davidson.edu/news/2023/03/29/davidson-college-unveils-plans-memorial-honor-enslaved-exploited>.
- Green, Hilary N. Maxwell Chambers and His Complicated Connections to Davidson College (2023).
- Green, Hilary N. "The Burden of the University of Alabama's Hallowed Grounds," *The Public Historian* 42, no. 4 (November 2020): 28-40.
- Harris, Leslie M. n.d. "Higher Education's Reckoning with Slavery." AAUP.
<https://www.aaup.org/article/higher-education%E2%80%99s-reckoning-slavery>.