

**African-Americans
and the Construction
of the University of Virginia**

by

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The origins of the University of Virginia have often been studied by looking at the first professors and students. However, there was a group of people at the University long before the professors and students ever arrived and classes started on March 7, 1825. This first community consisted of the people who built the University of Virginia.

This community of builders has attracted the interest of a few historians. Much has been learned about the major and minor contractors, the different craftsmen, and the workmen, but very little is known about the roles played by African-American slaves and free African-Americans. Despite the scarce documentation, it is essential to look at the presence of slavery in the building of the University of Virginia for two reasons. First, any new information about black workers sheds light on the entire group of people who built Thomas Jefferson's "Academical Village"; second, historians have a responsibility to find out more about the history of people, such as slaves, who have traditionally been ignored in historical narrative accounts.

Although historians may never be able to document completely the precise capacity in which African-Americans were involved in the development of the University, it is clear that they were part of both the operation and the construction of the University. The Proctor's Papers reveal the names of specific African-Americans present during the University's construction. These papers also suggest that the University used slave labor in its manufacture of bricks, and that the University allowed African-Americans to assist John Gorman, a stonecutter, during his work on the Grounds. Another craftsman, James Oldham, brought two of his own slaves in order to work for him as carpenters. These documents support the claim that African-Americans had an active role in the construction of the University.

In 1762 "Charlottesville was established one mile west of the Rivanna River water gap on a gently sloping knoll." The land got its name from "Queen Charlotte Sophia of Mecklenberg, the wife of England's King George III."¹ In 1779, the town only consisted of "a courthouse, one tavern, and a dozen little houses."² Very little changed in Charlottesville until 1817 when Thomas Jefferson began building Central College, which would later become the University of Virginia.

Jefferson exerted a great deal of effort and care in assembling a working community to build his University. They had an enormous task at hand. In order to build just one pavilion, a foundation had to be dug; a frame had to be raised; bricks, lumber, and stones all had to be made, prepared, stacked, moved, and restacked. These builders had to lay the bricks, shape the columns, build balconies and connect them to the pavilions. The doors for the pavilions were not made from mahogany, but rather were made out of pine and painted with a feather or grained to make them look like mahogany. Glass had to be cut for window panes and the walls had to be painted. There was also a great deal of art work done in the form of carvings and mouldings. All of this labor was for the exterior of the building alone. It had to be repeated for ten pavilions, six hotels, over one hundred dormitories, and the Rotunda.

James Dinsmore and John Neilson “became Jefferson’s most prominent master builders at the University and overseers of his work.”³ A number of principal carpenters and brickmasons worked under Dinsmore and Neilson and erected Jefferson’s Academical Village (figs. 1,2) These principal carpenters and brickmasons were also supported by many other workmen, who helped with the overall construction of the University.

There is evidence that slaves were part of this community of builders. However, it is difficult to assess the extent of their activities. Once the students and professors began to arrive, the roles of slaves were more clearly defined. According to The Faculty Minutes for October 1, 1842, slaves or servants, as they were often called, performed the following duties:

Attendance of Servants on Dormitories

No servant shall attend on more than twenty students, and he shall perform the following menial offices...

- Bring water and clean towels
- Make fires in Winter
- Clean up the rooms
- Make up the beds
- Clean Candle Sticks &c.
- Wash fire places with Potter’s clay once a week
- Black Andirons &c once a week
- Wash the windows &c once in four weeks

White wash the fire places in summer twice
Black students shoes, afternoon, daily.
Bring ice purchased by students from University Ice House
Put up wood supplied by the Proctor
Carry water to each Dormitory twice during the day...⁴

The University of Virginia provided such services because in 1824 the Board of Visitors stated that “No Student shall, within the precincts of the University,... keep a servant, horse or dog,... on pain of any of the minor punishments, at the discretion of the Faculty.”⁵ Servants were provided for the professors as well as students. In 1827 John Tayloe Lomax wrote Arthur Spicer Brockenbrough that “The professor expects that the servant heretofore assigned for sweeping out the Lecture Rooms and for menial services about these rooms should be continued in that employment.”⁶

It is possible that these servants were not slaves and could have been free blacks. However, the term servant was often used interchangeably with slave, “my man” or “my woman.” It is clear that these servants did act as menial laborers for the students and faculty. Whether slaves contributed to the actual building of the University remains unclear. In the first volume of History of the University of Virginia, Philip Alexander Bruce states that:

In the course of the building, the University had use for the labor of many hired slaves. In 1821, the number employed there in different ways was thirty-two, some of whom were still under age. The terms for which they served did not run over one year, although, doubtless, the contracts with their owners were most often renewed at expirations. The overseer in charge was James Herron, who was responsible for the safe keeping of the necessary supplies for the men and horses, and also for all the carts and tools. There seems to have been a large garden full of vegetables under cultivation for the benefit of the laborers; and the overseer was required to have it properly sowed, planted, and tended in season.⁷

The statement “In the course of the building” suggests that slaves were present during the building of the University, but Bruce does not elaborate on their specific roles. He mentions slavery several times, but does not offer specific evidence so that his assertions can be verified. One of the objectives of this study has been to identify the documents that Bruce alluded to in his history. Bruce’s claim that the University had thirty-two slaves raises the question of how he came up with that number.

Bruce also notes that slavery was a great expense for the University:

One of the continuous expenses which had to be met was the hire of slaves and the purchase of provisions for their support. In 1820, the outlay on this score amounted to \$1,099.08; in 1821, to \$1,133.73; in 1822 to 868.64; and in 1825 to \$681.00, a steadily falling scale from year to year. The charge for each negro was gauged by his age and physical condition. Sixty dollars was the average amount. When the slave was returned at the end of his time, he had to be fitted with outer and underclothing, and double-soled shoes. The monthly wages of a white or free colored laborer ranged from ten to sixteen dollars. These men were either boarded by the University at a weekly rate, or they were supplied with meal and bacon... John Herron, the overseer, received one hundred and twenty dollars annually for his services.⁸

Bruce refers to one of the University's overseers, John Herron. The consistent presence of such an overseer is apparent in the Thomas Jefferson's Papers and the University's Proctor's Papers. This overseer was in charge of the University workforce, including the white laborers, slaves and free blacks.

There are records and estimates of the University's expenditures both for operations and construction throughout the Proctor's Papers called Balance Sheets. On the University of Virginia's Balance Sheet for 1818 and 1819 the Proctor notes the amounts paid for land purchased from John Perry, the Doric Pavilion, the Corinthian Pavilion, the South wing dormitories, Doctor Cooper's services, and an oxcart and team. There is also an indication that in 1818 an overseer received one hundred fifty dollars and that in 1819 he received one hundred dollars. In 1818 eight laborers were hired for eight hundred dollars, and in 1819 sixteen laborers were hired for fourteen hundred dollars.⁹ These figures are not far from the estimate that Bruce gave in his history for the average cost of African-American labor.

Further proof that the term overseer often indicated the use of slave labor is found in the Proctor's Papers. Brockenbrough, the proctor of the University, signed a contract with James Harrison stating that the University would "employ the Said Harrison as an overlooker of the laborers at the University of Virginia for the next year... He is not to absent himself unnecessarily from the negroes."¹⁰

An overseer would not have supervised only African-Americans. Bruce notes "the monthly wages of white or free colored labor ranged from ten to sixteen dollars."¹¹ Unfortunately, Bruce does not

elaborate on the roles of free blacks. In 1820 there were 36,889 free African Americans in the state of Virginia, and it seems that some of them were present at the University.¹²

Bruce writes that in 1825, William Spinner, a free negro, was hired by the University as a janitor. He was replaced by William Brockman in 1828. Unfortunately, there is no reference to these men in the Board of Visitors minutes to confirm Bruce's assertion.¹³ However, in 1828 faculty member William Wertenbaker wrote Brockenbrough to inform the proctor "that the faculty disapprove of free negroes being located within the University."¹⁴ This statement suggests that free blacks had been a part of the community.

Later in 1828 Wertenbaker again wrote Brockenbrough on behalf of the faculty: "Resolved that the proctor be directed to inquire and ascertain whether the house occupied by Phil, a man of colour, at the foot of the hill below the University is not reputed to be a house of Evil Fame, and if he shall ascertain upon information to be relied upon that, that it is a house of bad fame... that the proctor consult any legal means which ought to be pursued to get rid of such disorderly neighbors."¹⁵ This last statement regarding the University's legal recourse suggests that Phil was also a free man of color, who the University would have to deal with in court.

Few African-Americans in the antebellum period, whether slaves or free blacks, are referred to by name in traditional historical accounts. This is linked both to the loss of their names once they were brought to America, and to the fact that their new surnames were often taken from their masters. A more complete history can be gained by revealing some of the slaves names who were here at the University of Virginia.

Slaves were sometimes referred to by name in the Proctor's Papers. In 1818 P. Digges asked Nelson Barksdale (Proctor before Brockenbrough) "for his slave Cesars back and \$12 for the amount due for his hire."¹⁶ Many times the proctor acted on behalf of the institution in the purchasing of slaves. In 1819 John Nunn received a receipt from Barksdale for "three negroes by name Sam, Nelson, and

Squire.”¹⁷ Later that year, Richard Ware asked Brockenbrough “to pay W.D Meriwether's black man Charles \$14 for three days hauling.”¹⁸ The next year a man named Yancey received a \$21 draft on the bursar “for the hire of Anthony forty five and a half days as a labourer at the University.”¹⁹ Edmund Bacon, Jefferson's overseer at Monticello, wrote to Arthur Spicer Brockenbrough regarding the hire of Lewis, John, Wilson, and Isham.²⁰

In 1824, Thomas Brockenbrough told his brother Arthur, “I wish you to keep my man John another year at the usual hire for men of his description.”²¹ On May 17, 1825, Robley Dungleison wrote Brockenbrough “that a late negro, named Benn, is selling fermented liquours in the cellar of pavilion No. 1”²² The Proctor's Papers from 1818 until 1828 provide historians with the following names: Cesars, Sam, Nelson, Squire, Charles, Anthony, Lewis, John, Wilson, Isham, John, and Benn. These twelve names represent a group of people who were a part of the University of Virginia's original community.

The reference to Benn's selling of liquor suggests that slaves may have lived below the pavilions and dormitories. In the Board of Visitor's minutes for July 7, 1840 it is “resolved, that the proctor be authorized to cause the cellar under the dormitory (either 34 or 36, East Lawn) be occupied as a study by Professor Bonnycastle to be fitted up for the accommodation of his Domestic.” Historian James Thomas concludes that “his ‘Domestics’ were slaves—no one else would have stayed in the windowless basement.”²³ A letter from Jefferson to Richard Ware refers to the possibility of “underworkmen living in the cellars.”²⁴ One wonders if “underworkmen” could have been slaves.

While the research thus far has helped to increase an overall understanding of the presence of African-Americans during the University's early years, there is still little evidence that these people played an important role in its construction. A few documents in the Proctor's Papers do, however, suggest that slaves were involved in the building of the University. In 1821 John Gorman made an agreement with the University for stonecutting with the stipulation that “all such blacks as will require help, the proctor will lend or cause to be lent such assistance.”²⁵ The Proctor evidently agreed to provide Gorman with University slaves to help with the stonecutting.

In a letter to Brockenbrough in 1823, Jefferson wrote, “I think we should hire as many hands for the next as we did for the current year. There is a great deal of work to be done yet on the grounds.”²⁶ Again one is left wondering what exactly Jefferson meant. Could this “work” possibly be work on the buildings, or is it instead actually on the “grounds”—the land itself? In another balance sheet for the University in 1825 Brockenbrough tells Jefferson “I do not think it necessary to keep up so large a force as this estimate embraces unless we go into the brick making business again the next year.”²⁷ On this same balance sheet Brockenbrough estimates that the University can get laborers for sixty-five dollars a year, hire an overseer for one hundred fifty dollars, and pay a total of fifteen dollars for taxes on “land and Negros.”

These estimates along with Brockenbrough's belief that the University did not need such a large labor force, suggest that this labor force consisted of blacks who were property that the University had to pay taxes on and who helped with brickmaking—an important part of the construction of the University. In an earlier letter to Jefferson, Brockenbrough wrote, “On Saturday I propose going to Richmond, to purchase a tinman for the use of this institution.” William B. O'Neal believes that “this tinman was probably Carpenter Sam who appears in the account books as having covered most of the cornices with tin.”²⁸ These letters suggest that slaves were involved both with the brick and tin making, and therefore helped with the actual construction of the University.

While documented evidence provides the most accurate picture of history, educated guesses can be made that may one day lead to further discoveries. Both slaves and free blacks probably helped with the terracing of the Lawn, the preparation of lumber and bricks, and the digging of foundations. The different contractors, bricklayers, carpenters, and craftsman may have also brought their slaves with them to the University.

The Lawn at the University of Virginia is terraced in four places so that the Rotunda sits on the highest place in the Academical Village and serves as a focal point. This terracing required a great deal of

labor to dig, move and reshape the Virginia clay. Slaves and free blacks may have helped with this terracing as well as with the digging of foundations for all of the buildings.

The supplies for construction had to be prepared, hauled, and stacked. These bricks, lumber, and stones would not have been readily available and therefore had to be hauled great distances. Black labor may have helped both with the making of bricks and the preparing of trees for lumber as well as with the transportation of all of these supplies.

One of Thomas Jefferson's carpenters, James Oldham, had “slaves, two of whom were carpenters, (and) were valued at \$5,500.”²⁹ There is a good chance that many of the University's contractors would have employed and used slaves as well. The Albemarle County Courthouse has wills, deeds and tax records that would reveal more about these men and their slaves.

Thomas Jefferson's University required an extensive work force. It is clear that blacks, either as slaves or free people, were involved with the building of the University, supported its upkeep, and served many people in the University community. Establishing the fact that African-Americans were a part of the first community at the University of Virginia both paints a more accurate picture of the community and also reveals more about a group of people who have often been neglected in traditional historical accounts.

Endnotes

¹K. Edward Lay, "Charlottesville's Architectural Legacy," The Magazine of Albemarle County History, 46 (1988), 30.

²W.J. Bell, "Thomas Anbury's Travels in America," Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America, 37 (1942), 23-26

³K. Edward Lay, "Charlottesville's Architectural Legacy."

⁴Minutes of the Faculty of the University of Virginia, 1 Oct. 1842 (p 34 of the Ms Vol. VI); James Thomas, "Slaves at the University of Virginia," (Unpublished Papers, 1965, 2), Special Collection Department, Alderman Library, Accession Number 8103

⁵Minutes of the Board of Visitors of the University of Virginia, 4 Oct. 1824, 1:72; Thomas, "Slaves at the University of Virginia," p.1 1965, Special Collection Department Alderman Library, Accession Number 8103; Ervin L. Jordan, "Blacks and the University Of Virginia: An Overview 1819-1987," (unpublished paper, 1987). Special Collections Department, Alderman Library, Manuscript Division.

⁶John Tayloe Lomax to Arthur Spicer Brockenbrough, Oct. 1827, (ViU: Proctor's Papers).*

⁷Phillip Alexander Bruce. History of the University of Virginia, 5 vols. (New York, 1920), I: 259-260.

⁸Ibid., 284-285.

⁹Brockenbrough, University of Virginia Balance Sheet, 1818 & 1819, (ViU:Thomas Jefferson Papers) Edward Lay, "Charlottesville's Architectural Legacy,"

¹⁰Brockenbrough with James Harrison Contract, 1820, (ViU: PP).

¹¹Bruce. History of University of Virginia, 1819-1919, 1:284-285.

¹²Ira Berlin. Slaves Without Masters, (New York, 1974), 136, Table 6, Free Negro Population, 1820-1860.

¹³Bruce. History of the University of Virginia, 2: 56-57. Ervin L. Jordan, "Blacks and the University of Virginia," 1.

¹⁴William Wertenbaker to Brockenbrough, 23 April 1828, (ViU: PP).

¹⁵William Wertenbaker to Brockenbrough, 20 May 1828, (ViU: PP).

¹⁶Nelson Barksdale to P. Digges, 1818, (ViU: PP).

¹⁷Nelson Barksdale to Jas H. Terril & Smith, 1 Jan. 1819, (ViU: PP).

¹⁸Richard Ware to Brockenbrough, 29 Dec. 1819, (ViU: PP).

¹⁹Yancey to Brockenbrough, 8 July 1820, (ViU: PP).

²⁰Edmund Bacon to Brockenbrough, 27 Dec. 1821, (ViU: PP).

²¹Thomas Brockenbrough to Arthur Spice Brockenbrough, 4 Nov 1824, (ViU:PP).

²²Robley Dunglison to Brockenbrough, 17 May 1825, (ViU:PP).

²³Minutes of the Board of Visitors of the University of Virginia, 7 July 1840.5 vol., 3:429-430. James Thomas, "Slaves at the University of Virginia" 3; Ervin L. Jordan, "Blacks and the University of Virginia," 1.

²⁴Thomas Jefferson to Richard Ware, 9 April 1819, (ViU: Thomas Jefferson Paper).

²⁵John Gorman contract for Stonecutting, 1821, (ViU: PP).

²⁶Thomas Jefferson to Arthur Spicer Brockenbrough, 28 Dec. 1823, (ViU: PP).

²⁷UVA Balance Sheet. Brockenbrough to Thomas Jefferson, 1825, (VitJ: PP).

²⁸Arthur S. Brockenbrough to Thomas Jefferson, Oct. 19, 1820; ViU. William B. O'Neal, "The Workmen at University of Virginia 1817-1826 With Notes and Documents," The Magazine of Albemarle County History, 17 (1958-1959), 10.

²⁹Albemarle Co. Inventory, Bk. 14, p. 461. K. Edward Lay, "Charlottesville's Architectural Legacy."

*Proctors Papers are taken from the uncorrected transcriptions provided by Frank Grizznrd, The Washington Papers, Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

Appendix

Fig.2: Principal Carpenters and Brickmasons at the University of Virginia – A List

as found in Edward Lay's, "Charlottesville's Architectural Legacy," The Magazine of Albemarle County History, 1988, Vol. 46.

Matthew Brown - associate brickmason to Perry, Pavilion III, sixteen dormitories

Curtis Carter - principal brickmason Pavilion VI, Hotel A, Pavilions I and IX, as well as some dormitories

Nathaniel Chamberlain - brickmason, Rotunda

Hugh Chisholm - brickmason for Pavilion VII

Dabney Cosby - principal brickmason for Hotels D and E and for eight dormitories

Malcom F. Crawford - University carpenter, dormitories

James Dinsmore - master builder and co-overseer, Pavilions III, V, VIII, fourteen dormitories, Rotunda, Anatomical Theatre

John Neilson - master builder and co-overseer, Rotunda and Anatomical Theatre, Pavilions IX and X, and seven dormitories

James Oldham - a carpenter skilled in the orders of an architecture like Palladio's. Pavilion I, Hotels A and D, and dormitories

Lyman Peck - principal carpenter with Crawford for twenty-seven dormitories

Captain John M. Perry - master brickmason, worked on the Rotunda, Pavilions III, V, VII, VIII, Hotels B and F, most of the dormitories, the serpentine brick garden walls, and the privies. Principal carpenter for Pavilion VII, the first pavilion

William B. Phillips - principal brickmason for the Rotunda, the Anatomical Theatre, pavilions I, IX, and X, Hotel C, dormitories, the serpentine garden walls and the cisterns

George Wilson Spooner, Jr. - principal carpenter for Hotels C and E and for several dormitories. He also worked for Dinsmore on the Rotunda and for Neilson on pavilion IX

Abiah B. Thorn - brickmason in partnership with Perry, Rotunda, Pavilion VIII, dormitories,

Richard Ware - principal carpenter, brickmason for thirteen dormitories and for Pavilions II, IV, and VI, as well as being master carpenter for Hotel F

Inclusion 3: Suggestions for further research

The University's Proctor's Papers are a wonderful source for further research on this subject. They are available in the Special Collections Department in Alderman Library. These papers are often overlooked by researchers due to the fact that they are very old, dirty, and difficult to read. However, I believe that these papers probably have a lot more evidence to support the assertion that African-Americans played a vital role in the construction of the University.

The Albemarle County Courthouse has many of the wills and deeds of the principal builders at the University. It has been proven that James Oldham had two slaves who worked as carpenters during the construction. It is probable that many of the other builders brought their own slaves or hired free blacks as well. Their deeds and wills may account for these slaves or free blacks.