

# Influence of Slavery on American University

## Initial Findings and Recommendations

*A Report to Members of the Community from the  
American University Working Group on the Influence of Slavery*

# Origins of the Working Group

## February, 2018

- Concerns about links between slavery and AU were raised in an *Eagle* editorial that critiqued the Founder's Day Ball, an undergraduate dance that honors the life and work of AU's founder, the Rev. Bishop John Fletcher Hurst, in light of Hurst's history as a slaveholder.
- It urged AU to “fund further research on the University's involvement in slavery and slave-based wealth and publicly acknowledge its connection with slavery in the United States.”

## April, 2018

Dr. Fanta Aw, Vice President of Campus Life and Inclusive Excellence, established the Working Group on the Influence of Slavery and charged it with addressing three goals:

- 1) Review preliminary research conducted by the University Archivist and identify any gaps to ensure completeness.
- 2) Suggest recommendations to Dr. Aw on how best to address the history and communicate findings.
- 3) Engage campus community in constructive engagement around the issues.



# Initial Questions for the Working Group

- Does AU have ties to slavery?
- If so, what are the nature of those ties?
- Were the financial resources of AU founder Bishop John Fletcher Hurst derived from a slave economy, and if so, did it benefit AU?
- Did slaves fund the creation of AU?

## MEMBERS OF THE WORKING GROUP

**Rev. Mark Schaefer**, *University Chaplain*

**Bette J. Dickerson**, *Interim Assistant Vice President, Campus Life, Associate Professor Emerita, Department of Sociology*

**Christine Platt**, *Managing Director, Antiracist Policy and Research Center*

**Sybil Roberts**, *Incoming Director, African-American and African Diaspora Studies Program*

**Leslie Nellis**, *Associate Archivist*

**Malgorzata J. Rymsza-Pawlowska**, *Director, Graduate Program in Public History, Assistant Professor, Department of History*

**David Aldridge**, *alumnus (Class of 1987), American University*

**Nickolaus Mack**, *undergraduate student, American University*



# Historical Context

- **AU was founded in 1893, after abolition but in a former slaveholding region and by people with potential personal ties to slavery**
  - Two of DC's major universities (Georgetown and George Washington) were established before slavery's 1862 abolition in the District.
  - Benefits from slavery for universities founded later would be indirect, through wealth gained from slavery or other channels.
  - Historical research can uncover the nature of those benefits, reveal AU's relationship to slavery, and inform decisions about ways to acknowledge that history.
- **Three focal points to the investigation:**
  - ***AU's founder, John Fletcher Hurst.*** Did he have ties to slavery, and if so, what were they?
  - ***AU's property.*** What are its historic ties to slavery?
  - ***The Methodist Church.*** AU was founded as a Methodist institution, with money raised nationwide. What was the Methodist relationship to slavery?

- In the 1700s and 1800s, enslaved people were economically crucial to the area and comprised a large part of the population.
- By 1820, the census shows that 31.2% of the District's population was black. Most were enslaved.
- By 1820, 26.4% of Maryland's population was enslaved and another 9.8% was free non-white.
- The black population in DC throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century consistently ranged from 26% to 33% and formed a mainstay of the economy.



# John Fletcher Hurst's Relation to Slavery



*Hurst and wife Catherine Lamont  
Hurst; photo c. 1859*

- In 1834, born in Maryland's Eastern Shore to a family that historically owned slaves to run their farms.
- In 1849, inherited one or two slaves. He was 15; his known slave, Tom King, would have been around eight.
- In 1850, as a Dickinson College freshman, argued in favor of abolition in a debate.
- In 1858, as a young Methodist minister, authorized Tom King's manumission in 1862, when King would turn 21.
- In 1859, records mixed feelings in diary about radical abolitionism – admiring Henry Ward Beecher, but unwilling to support “ultraism.”
- In 1863, wrote in diary: “On my knees I declare that in future I will be the black man's friend, and if my previous course has seemed dubious may God forgive me. The riots in New York have disgusted me with conservatism.”
- In 1863, sold family farm.

# The Methodist Church's Relation to Slavery

*"We do hold in the deepest abhorrence the practice of Slavery, and shall not cease to seek its destruction, by all wise and prudent means."*

- 1785, Methodist Church, in a caveat to the decision to allow slaveholders to keep their slaves

- In 1784, the Methodist church gave two options to slaveholding members: free slaves or leave the church.
- In 1785, that rule was suspended.
- In 1800, a rule stated that preachers with slaves must free them "if practicable" or leave the ministry.
- In 1835, the Baltimore Conference of Methodist Episcopal Church adopted a statement in favor of "peaceable, gradual emancipation," rejecting radical abolition.
- In 1836, bishops instructed clergy not to engage in abolition work, a move resisted by many.
- In 1844, the church split over slavery after a plan to censure a slaveholding bishop. Southerners broke away and formed the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.
- In 1857, Hurst became a preacher in the East Baltimore Conference; was appointed to a New Jersey church in early 1858, at age 23; and a month later promised to free his slave Tom King, then around 17, when King turned 21.



# The AU Property's Relation to Slavery



- In 1713, a plot of land was granted to Thomas Addison and James Stoddert. It became the Friendship tobacco farm; AU's property was its southern portion.
- In 1760, Murdock House (or "Friendship House") was built where the AU President's House now stands. It was the area's first substantive "country manor." The farm had been inherited by the Murdocks from Anthony Addison, who owned 20 slaves at his death.
- Nine people enslaved by the Murdocks were freed by the DC Emancipation Act in 1862, when they are recorded as living in Georgetown. It's unclear if they worked the land that is now AU, or how many slaves lived on and worked the land from the mid-1700s to 1862.
- In the 1870s or 1880s, the Davis family bought the property. Members of the Davis family had also owned slaves, including four people freed by the 1862 emancipation.
- In 1890, Hurst paid Achsah Davis \$100,000 for the land for the proposed Methodist university.



# How Did AU Benefit from Slavery?

- Enslaved people were present over the course of around 150 years on the land that became American University.
- They also worked for families that owned and lived on the land and for the founder.
- AU relied on country-wide fundraising to help purchase land, build and develop the campus, and open the University. These funds no doubt included wealth accumulated from and during the slavery era in the United States.





## Considerations:

# Grappling with the Implications of Erasure and Complicity

What the Working Group could find is deeply impacted (and impoverished) by the vast gulf in voice between those in the white power structure and those who were enslaved.

When Hurst and the Methodist Church wrestled with their own responses to an institution they opposed in theory yet benefited from in practice, their ideas and experiences were recorded for the future. They wrote and could preserve diaries, letters, records and more. That privilege wasn't shared with enslaved people.

Only one name of a Hurst slave is known so far: Tom King. But his story is not. Did he see freedom? What did he, and others like him, experience afterwards? Other names of Hurst slaves may have vanished in a fire that destroyed many Hurst family records, or may never have even been fully recorded. Nor is there much information on people owned by other families in the AU story.

Were there slaves living and working on what is now AU land? Probably. But we don't know who or when. What was their story, during slavery and afterwards? We don't know. That's the nature of erasure.

Research will continue, but the overarching point is clear. While AU, founded in 1893 and nationally funded, appears not to have benefitted directly from the sale of specific slaves, its founders benefited financially from slavery and from complicity in the system, and the university's history is entwined with systemic injustice. Any way of acknowledging the enslaved people linked to the AU story will need to grapple with the implications of erasure - both of people's stories and of their rights.



# Recommendations in Brief

## Memorial

**Markers and Spaces.** Establish these, reflecting the recommendations.

## Educational

**Online Resource.** Create a page on the University website dedicated to sharing this information.

**Knowledge Creation.** Support scholarly efforts such as the **Antiracist Research and Policy Center** and **African-American and Diaspora Studies** major.

## Action

**Anti-Racism Work.** Knowledge of one's past is essential to identifying a course for the future. Find opportunities to intensify commitment to antiracism work and advancing opportunities for DC residents.



# Recommendation: Acknowledgment through Memorialization

Several college campuses have created or are in the process of establishing memorials that address their relationships to slavery.

Other ways that universities have acknowledged their own institutional relationships with slavery via interventions in the physical landscape (e.g. not including centers, hires, and other initiatives) include:

- creating walking tours
- renaming buildings on campus
- holding memorial events.

## Key Characteristics of Memorials:

- Encourage reflection
- Often reference archival material such as names (if known), dates, numbers
- In dialogue with physical surroundings
- Are a beginning, not an end



# Considerations for Physical Acknowledgement / Memorialization

**The American University  
Influence of Slavery  
Working Group  
has identified  
a set of themes  
to be kept in mind  
as plans for  
memorials and markers  
move forward.**



## **Absence and erasure**

It is difficult to know fully the history and experiences of slavery and enslaved people; these records are absent.

## **Multiplicity or decentralization**

Slavery as institution and enslaved people as individuals were present on the land where AU is now located, at multiple spaces and points of time.

## **Contemplation**

Continue to reflect upon remaining questions, and to make connections between past and present.

## **Conversation**

Pair with projects and programming from across AU and partner institutions to call attention to AU's own story/ies, as well as the larger histories of slavery in Washington and Maryland.

# Recommendation: Acknowledgment through Scholarship and Community Action

**Knowledge Creation.** Support scholarly efforts that address the African-American experience, grapple with the implications of erasure, and seek to understand systemic injustices related to the history and impact of slavery and racism. This could include support for:

- **Antiracist Research and Policy Center**
- **African-American and Diaspora Studies** major.

**Knowledge Dissemination.** Create a page on the University website dedicated to acknowledging and sharing information on this aspect of the AU story.

## Community Action:

- Acknowledge that a legacy of benefiting from systemic injustices includes a responsibility to give back to the impacted community
- Deepen and redouble AU's commitment to work that responds to this legacy, particularly by advancing opportunities for DC residents.



## Next Steps: 2019

### Implement Recommendations

AU Leadership, in partnership with Influence of Slavery Working Group, will determine recommendations to implement in 2019

### AU's New Strategic Plan

Identify strategic goals in the new AU Strategic Plan, such as "Partnership with DC," as ways to rededicate our commitment to Washington DC and advance educational opportunities for DC Residents

Advance institutional work related to AU's Plan for Inclusive Excellence

