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Slavery's Legacy

Georgetown Faces Its Past

By Adam Rothman

College campuses, especially the venerable ones, typically present well-manicured landscapes of historical memory. The old buildings stand as monuments to the past even as their interiors are updated with WiFi and glass. The buildings are usually named after founders whose fame has faded, and in truth, few people on campus really know who they were – until they become infamous and the well-manicured landscape of historical memory starts to sprout weeds.

I teach history at Georgetown University, where I recently served as a member of a Working Group on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation. This group formed in September 2015 at the behest of the university's president, John J. DeGioia, to reflect on how Georgetown should "acknowledge and recognize Georgetown's historical relationship with the institution of slavery."

The immediate cause of the Working Group was the reopening of newly-renovated Mulledy Hall, named after Rev. Thomas F. Mulledy, S.J., a president of Georgetown in the early 19th century. Here is the scandal with Mulledy: he orchestrated the mass sale of more than 200 men, women, and children owned by Maryland's Jesuits in 1838, and used part of the proceeds to rescue the college from debt. President DeGioia rightly grasped that the moment was ripe for the Georgetown community to have a difficult conversation about our history.

Mulledy is really just the tip of the spear. Georgetown was founded and

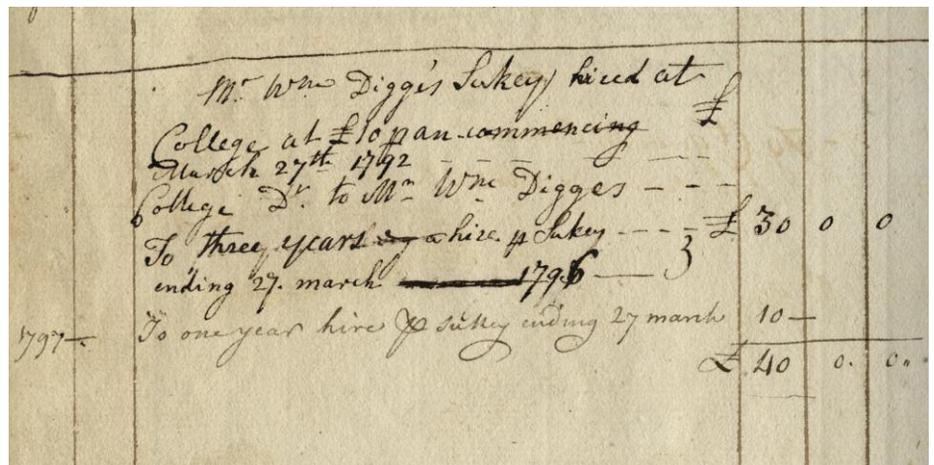
supported by a Catholic elite whose wealth was derived from slave labor. It was part of a Jesuit religious complex of churches, schools, and plantations scattered across Maryland. The plantations, worked by several generations of slaves, were supposed to subsidize the Jesuits' religious mission. Slaves worked at Georgetown College, too. One of them, a man named Isaac, ran away from the college in 1814, but was captured in Baltimore and sold off.

By the 1830s, the plantations had become unprofitable, slavery was under moral attack, and Georgetown had fallen on hard times, so under Mulledy's leadership, the Jesuits made a fateful decision to sell most of their slaves to two Catholic planters in Louisiana. They made sure to sell to Catholic owners so as not to betray their religious obligation to care for the

slaves' souls. That the Jesuits could baptize their slaves one day and sell them the next reveals much about the dynamics of American slavery.

A diverse group of faculty, students, staff, and alumni, the Working Group took its charge seriously. Not all the members of the group were familiar with this history, so we began by reading up on the 1838 sale and its context. Luckily, there is excellent scholarship on the subject. It has never been a secret. In fact, the college's American studies program taught about it for many years, and student journalists, including one member of the Working Group, had written about Georgetown's slaveholding past.

It was important for the Working Group to include the broader university community in our deliberations. We organized "conversation circles" in



This record from the Georgetown College accounts ledger indicates that the college hired an enslaved woman named Sukey from her owner, William Diggs, from 1792-1797 at £10 per year. Georgetown University Slavery Archive.

November 2015 to allow people to come together to share their diverse perspectives on the subject. A teach-in in early December highlighted other institutions' efforts to come to terms with past racial injustice in different settings at home and abroad, including South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. We created the Georgetown Slavery Archive to make relevant historical documents more readily accessible.

A series of public events in the spring 2016 semester culminated in a weeklong symposium on slavery and its consequences featuring distinguished scholars. Among the speakers was the historian Craig Steven Wilder, author of the acclaimed and influential *Ebony & Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities*, a pioneering history of U.S. colleges' early ties to slavery and their role in promulgating racist ideas. These events provided guidance to the Working Group by turning a difficult conversation into a substantive one.

Two major jolts intensified the urgency of our work. The first came in mid-November, when students staged demonstrations and a sit-in in President DeGioia's office to protest racial injustice and to express solidarity with other students around the country engaged in similar actions. The Georgetown protesters demanded, among other things, changing the name of Mulledy Hall and memorializing sites associated with the history of slavery on campus. They had grown impatient with the pace of our study.

Acting on the Working Group's recommendation, the university's leadership quickly responded by temporarily changing the name of Mulledy Hall to Freedom Hall. Another building named after a Jesuit priest who had also participated in the sale, McSherry Hall, was temporarily renamed Remembrance Hall. The protests subsided. Our task then shifted to coming up with permanent names that honor the past while living up to today's values. But this could not be all, as we and the protesters both knew. A sincere reflection upon history must go deeper than renaming buildings or toppling monuments.

A second jolt came from *The New York Times*. In mid-April, *The Times* ran a poignant front-page story about the search for descendants of the slaves whom Mulledy sold in 1838. Suddenly Georgetown's past was national

news. Not only did the revelations of living descendants pack an emotional punch, but it raised the controversial question of reparations. "272 Slaves Were Sold to Save Georgetown. What Does It Owe Their Descendants?" was the headline. Encountering descendants has added a whole new dimension to the Working Group's stated task of reconciliation.

As the academic year ended, the Working Group presented President DeGioia with a substantial report of its findings. The recommendations include a formal apology for our school's participation in slavery, new building names that call attention to the past, memorialization of slavery on campus, support for more research and teaching about slavery and its legacies, and – crucially – outreach to descendants of the Maryland Jesuit slave community, who must be a part of all of this for reconciliation to occur.

The university's relationship with descendants continues to grow. Over the summer, President DeGioia visited Maringouin, Louisiana, where many descendants still live. Since then, descendants have visited Georgetown, too. We welcome them. They have met with administration, faculty, and students, pressing to be included in the process of deliberation. Some have visited the archives and run their fingers over the names of their ancestors found in baptismal records and bills of sale. These are bittersweet moments, laced with tears.

Georgetown University has taken the first steps towards reckoning with its historical involvement with slavery. There is much more to be done. Critics may dismiss these efforts as politically correct on one hand or inadequate on the other. But one thing is certain: we are tending to a new landscape of historical memory.

Adam Rothman is professor of history at Georgetown University and the author of Beyond Freedom's Reach: A Kidnapping in the Twilight of Slavery and Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South. You can follow him at @arothmanhistory.

(For more on the Jesuits and slavery see Thomas J. Murphy, S.J., *Jesuit Slaveholding in Maryland, 1717-1838*, New York, Routledge, 2001. 258 pages.)