RENEWING CIVIL SOCIETY

Restoring humanity at Montpelier

Descendants of Madison-era slaves contribute to exhibit

BY ABBY CHURCH

Creaking open the rounded, off-white door to the cellar at Montpelier, guests are met with a cool rush of air. Inside, past the pamphlets and listening stations, gray etchings on the walls reveal the names of those who were once enslaved at James and Dolley Madison's estate in Orange County, Virginia.

As visitors trace the names and learn their stories, these individuals start to come alive.

From 1723 until Dolley Madison sold the property in 1844, 320 people lived at Montpelier. Of those, 300 were African-American slaves, encompassing six generations. These were the people who heard the ideals of freedom exalted within the walls of the mansion, yet didn't have it themselves; and the people whose owner, a Founding Father and the nation's fourth president, crafted the document in which freedom was supposedly defined for all Americans.

Through its new exhibit, "The Mere Distinction of Colour," the Montpelier Foundation is restoring the humanity of a forgotten community. What makes the project stand out, however, is that the people who helped with the excavation and creation are themselves descendants of slaves.

It's important to understand how Montpelier defines the term "descendant." Starting in the early 2000s, the foundation invited all African-Americans who felt a connection with the history and story it was telling to be part of the descendant community. More often than not, slave families weren't confined to one plantation because of buying and trading. This left families torn apart and documentation of slave family records practically nonexistent. In fact, oral histories from descendants have proven to be more ripe than official records.

"Because of the boundary consideration and also the fact that there's just not that many documentary records, it came upon us to not be exclusive in that sense and allow folks who are connected to this history to connect to the story and be involved in what we're doing," says Price Thomas, former director of marketing and com-

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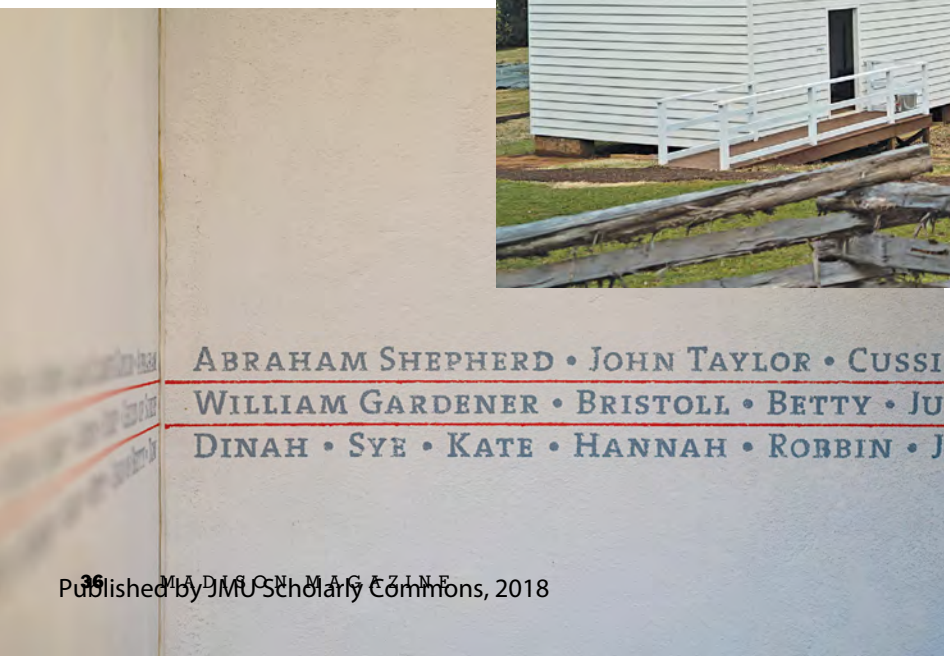


(Above): Montpelier grounds with slave quarters in the foreground; (Left): Names of slaves are etched on gray walls in the exhibition; (Right): Virginia-born Laura Price Clay, grandmother of author and teacher Leontyne Clay Peck.

LAURA PRICE CLAY PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY LEONTYNE CLAY PECK

(Above and left): Panels from "The Mere Distinction of Colour" exhibition tell the story of a forgotten community at Montpelier; (Bottom): The interior of slave quarters at the Orange County, Virginia, estate.

munications at Montpelier.

One of the many descendants who came to help with the exhibition was Leontyne Clay Peck, an author and teacher of African-American history and culture. Having spent most of her adult life in Washington, D.C., Peck and her family relocated to Charlottesville, Virginia, 15 years ago. Not long after she arrived, her grandmother, Laura Price Clay, died and Peck was asked to write her obituary. Assuming that her grandmother was born and raised in West Virginia, Peck asked if that fact was correct. To her surprise, she was told that her grandparents were actually born in Madison County, Virginia.

Leontyne Clay Peck, who participated in the excavation of the Montpelier slave quarters, examines artifacts found on the site.

Soon, Peck found herself driving to Madison County to uncover more of her family's history. There, the courthouse clerk pulled a document revealing that Peck's great-grandparents, Amanda and Washington Clay, were freed slaves. "Once she gave me that document, I found the names of my great-great-grandparents—and my great-great-grandfather's name was Henry Clay," Peck says.

Peck went on to become involved with the University and Community Action for Racial Equity at the University of Virginia, where she met Matthew Reeves, director of archaeology and landscape restoration at Montpelier.

After turning down Reeves' initial offer to participate in the excavation of the slave quarters, Peck reconsidered. She arrived with an open mind and was assigned to a digging team.

Michelle Proulx and Shane McGary with the ground-penetrating radar sweeper used in the research at Montpelier.

SWEEPING FOR CLUES

Geology professor, student search for evidence of slave cemeteries at Montpelier **BY JIM HEFFERNAN ('96, '17M)**

While collecting oral histories for a new exhibit honoring the contributions of African-Americans enslaved at Montpelier, officials heard stories of human bones and other remains turning up in a field near a path a few hundred yards from the main house.

Resident archaeologist Matthew Reeves began to wonder if the site, located across the road from a wooded area with a few modest headstones, was in fact a second slave cemetery on the property. After digging into the matter on his own, he turned to Shane McGary, a noted geophysicist and professor of geology and environmental science at JMU.

"Our work is trying to get a sense of whether there are burials there, where exactly they might be, and helping [Montpelier] better understand the history of the place," McGary says.

For this important undertaking, McGary enlisted the help of Michelle Proulx, a senior geology major with whom he had worked at other area historical sites with oral histories of slave burial grounds. One of those sites was Belle Grove Plantation near Middletown, Virginia, the ancestral home of the Hite family, including Nelly Madison Hite, sister of James Madison.

"I have always had a great respect for African-American cemeteries," says Proulx, who discovered the one at Montpelier during a tour her freshman year. "Coming back and figuring out that we could actually do some really great work there and the work would go toward a really good cause has been amazing. I jumped on the opportunity right away."

McGary and Proulx are using ground-penetrating radar technology to sweep for clues. Their cart has a transmitter that sends 400-megahertz electromagnetic pulses deep

ARTIFACTS PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY LEONTYNE CLAY PECK; PROULX AND McGARY BY MIKE MIRIELLO ('09M)

Digging at the grounds where her ancestors may have lived proved to be a surreal and emotional experience for Peck. "It made it a spiritual journey. I felt that with every object that I found [in the South Yard] … I was touching and connecting to that last person who was there. It didn't have to be my relative—it probably wasn't my relative, we don't know—but what I do know is that I felt like they were saying, 'Thank you for coming and sharing our story.'"

Christian Cotz ('97), director of education and visitor engagement at Montpelier, explains that instead of focusing on stories of forced labor and poor living conditions, the exhibit presents the slaves as people.

"You're never going to know what it would feel like to plow five acres in a day with a mule," Cotz says. "But you can imagine what it might feel like to have your mother taken away from you. You can imagine what that feeling of loss and the inability to do anything about it, the futility of trying to do something about it."

'We're still dealing with these issues … with people's humanity. What happened in [the past] has a direct impact on how we think, how we look at things today.'

— LEONTYNE CLAY PECK

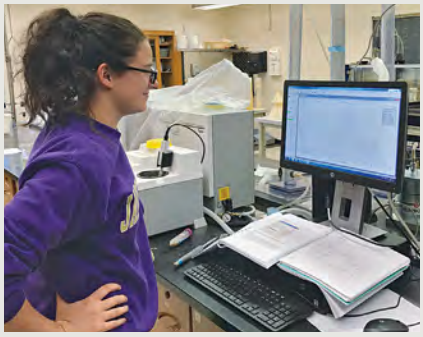
"The Mere Distinction of Colour" is important in addressing the implications of slavery and encouraging a broader discussion of race in society. Peck says these are discussions that we, as a nation, need to be having.

"We're still dealing with these issues … with people's humanity," she says. "What happened in [the past] has a direct impact on how we think, how we look at things today."

In the "Lives of the Enslaved" section of the exhibit, a board sits in the middle of one of the rooms with "Leave Your Voice" written across the top and pencils and note cards arranged at the bottom. Among the many submissions from visitors is a card from an 11-year-old named Ava.

"We should always remember that not everything about us is different," Ava wrote. "There is one thing about us that is the same. We are all people."

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is a condensed version of a feature that originally appeared in *The Breeze*, JMU's student-produced newspaper, on July 12, 2017.



Proulx examines data collected from the Montpelier site and operates the ground-penetrating radar sweeper on a possible burial site on the mansion grounds.

into the earth. "When it encounters something that has a different set of electrical properties, some of that energy gets reflected back up and picked up by the receiver," McGary explains. "We're able to measure the travel times, which tells us something about the depth and distance. And we can also see the intensity, the contrast and electromagnetic properties."

For different reasons, McGary says, bodies during that time were often buried east to west—one of the stories that has been told is that slaves were buried with their feet facing east so that they could rise up and walk back to Africa—so he and Proulx look for three consecutive lines running in that direction as evidence of a possible burial plot.

If they were fortunate, slaves families at Montpelier wanting to bury one of their own may have been given some wood by the Madison family for a casket, Proulx says. If not, they would be forced to use whatever materials were available to them.

The irony of James Madison, Father of the Constitution and our nation's fourth president, holed up in his library at Montpelier conceiving of a representative democracy that protects individual freedoms while his slaves kept the home fires burning is not lost on the Montpelier Foundation, which in recent years has begun telling a more complete story of the estate.

"A lot of these historical sites are starting to realize that they haven't handled the slave narrative very well," McGary says. "Montpelier has been one of the places at the forefront of changing that."

In the fall, while working on site, McGary and Proulx met some of the slave descendants whom Montpelier had invited to help with its new "The Mere Distinction of Colour" exhibit.

"We got to show them what we're doing and how we're doing it," Proulx says. "I think they genuinely appreciated our work and really took it to heart."

For McGary, the project offers a rare opportunity for a geophysicist to be involved in restoring the humanity of a forgotten community. "It's been really gratifying to realize that something I felt was important is important to a lot of other people too."

LAB AND RADAR SWEEPER PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY MICHELLE PROULX