

A decorative background featuring a complex, repeating mandala pattern in shades of blue, orange, and white. The pattern consists of interlocking floral and geometric shapes, creating a rich, textured effect.

## CHAPTER 4

# Archivists Leading the Reckoning:

## Confronting Slavery and its Legacies at the University of Maryland

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For many colleges and universities in the United States, the last two decades have been a time for redressing their institutions' historical ties to slavery and its complicity with a continuing narrative of racism in higher education.<sup>1</sup> The work of research and acknowledgment, along with increased DEI and anti-racism training, has led to notable examples of public recognition of past wrongs and reparative actions designed to right those wrongs. The restorative justice campaigns at Georgetown University and the University of Virginia, for example, have made the news with large-scale activities, such as examining admission practices, renaming buildings, and erecting memorials.<sup>2</sup> What is not always clear from the headlines is how the staff in special collections departments within academic libraries are engaged in this work.

This case study of The 1856 Project at the University of Maryland (UMD) shines a light on the leadership of staff in the Special Collections and University Archives department. It describes the project's emergence in a climate of controversy concerning the university's racial history, outlines the project's infrastructure, and spotlights the work of two committees and their scalable activities. The study concludes with some lessons learned for archival professionals and other cultural memory workers embarking on their own social justice work.

# Origins

Founded in 1856 as the Maryland Agricultural College, UMD is the state's flagship public research institution. Located in College Park, just outside of Washington DC, its 1,347-acre campus is home to more than 40,000 students and 14,000 faculty and staff. Approximately 40 percent of the student body represents minority populations. UMD is part of the University System of Maryland (USM) which encompasses eleven other colleges and universities and four regional higher education centers. In 2018, UMD adopted a Values Statement that emphasized inclusivity and accountability. In recognition of its strides toward inclusivity, UMD recently was ranked "No. 1 college in the nation for LGBTQ+ students" by Campus Pride and [BestColleges.com](https://www.bestcolleges.com).<sup>3</sup>

The eight libraries making up the University of Maryland Libraries unit serve the education and research needs of the campus, the state, and the greater community with collections and programs that align with the university's commitment to modeling a more perfect union. Working toward this mission are sixty-five members of the library faculty, ninety-seven staff, seventeen graduate assistants, and 233 student workers. The most recent statement of values in the Libraries centers on democratization, stewardship, empathy, bravery, and transformation.

These public pronouncements of values and the commitments to equity and inclusion come at a time when the university continues to grapple with a series of events linked in the campus consciousness. In 2015, UMD celebrated the unveiling of Frederick Douglass Square in Hornbake Plaza in recognition of the state's most famous native son and social justice activist.<sup>4</sup>

The progressive momentum continued in 2016 when the USM Board of Regents and the UMD Student Government Association approved removing the name of former UMD president Harry Clifton "Curley" Byrd from the football stadium. Byrd Stadium was named in 1950 to honor the president's achievements in advancing the university's size, scope, and national prominence; however, the stadium was renamed because Curley Byrd was a staunch segregationist. As one analyst put it, "Byrd perhaps best personifies the duality that entangles the state—and the nation—as it relates to its legacy on race in higher education."<sup>5</sup>

The pendulum took a tragic swing the very next year. In 2017, US Army 2nd Lieutenant Richard Collins III, a young, African American senior at Bowie State University, was murdered on UMD's campus by a white UMD student with alleged white nationalist affiliations. While the ongoing trial delays and the ultimate dismissal of the hate-crime charge were troubling on their own, a second incident occurred in mid-2018 when African American UMD student and athlete Jordan McNair collapsed and later died under what ESPN commentators described as a "toxic coaching culture."<sup>6</sup> The sentiment on campus was that McNair's death, like Collins, bore witness to a climate of white supremacy and practices bred from racist views of the Black male body. Amid these traumatic events, UMD welcomed Dr. Georgina Dodge, the inaugural Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion, in 2019, and in 2020, Dr. Darryll J. Pines, only the second African American president in the USM. Among its first steps, the Pines administration outlined a

comprehensive restorative justice plan for the entire university. It became clear to many that an equally comprehensive investigation of the university's history was crucial to reinstitute this work.

An opportunity to consider a reparative history project occurred on February 24, 2020, when two alumni, historians Dr. Herbert Brewer and Burton Kummerow, returned to their alma mater to deliver companion talks sponsored by the UMD History Department under the title, "What Made College Park Possible?: A Program on the Founding of the University of Maryland." In his talk, Brewer introduced to some and recalled for others the life and career of Charles Benedict Calvert of Riversdale, a descendant of the founding family of Maryland. Calvert was a leading member of Maryland's gentleman-planter elite, whose passion for science-based farming methods led to the establishment in 1856 of the Maryland Agricultural College, the precursor to the University of Maryland. Alongside Calvert's progressive methods for agriculture, Brewer noted Calvert's nonprogressive reality as an enslaver. In fact, Calvert either enslaved or was the trustee for over 300 men, women, and children of African descent, as outlined in an account book, stewarded by UMD's Special Collections and University Archives (SCUA), and in plantation records at the Riversdale historic house museum, a National Historic Landmark.<sup>7</sup>

Professor Brewer took his audience back to his work as a graduate student in the early 2000s with the Distinguished UMD Professor of History, Ira Berlin. At this time, UMD's 150th-anniversary celebration in 2006 was criticized for only a perfunctory mention of the slave economy that was central to its origins as an agricultural college. At the urging of university administration, Berlin and Brewer taught a two-semester history course to address the omission. Working under the constraints of a course timeline, their students' 2009 report, *Knowing Our History*, could only begin to uncover the hidden history of slavery and UMD.<sup>8</sup> Brewer explained to his audience that other universities exploring these issues had formed a consortium called Universities Studying Slavery (USS). He concluded his talk by challenging UMD to join the USS and to continue the investigation.

Attending the presentation was Dr. Dodge and three staff members from the University Libraries: Douglas McElrath, director of SCUA, Lae'l Hughes-Watkins, university archivist, and Joni Floyd, curator for (state of) Maryland and Historical Collections. Inspired by Herbert Brewer's challenge, the four discussed how joining the USS would address the campus climate and would also align with the values and initiatives expressed by President Pines and his administration. In a matter of months, the UMD had joined the USS, held its first planning meeting, created an advisory board, and elected co-chairs. Two members of the UMD Libraries faculty, Hughes-Watkins and Floyd, were elected as co-chairs. On April 10, 2020, the Senior Vice President & Provost Mary Ann Rankin accepted a formal invitation to join the USS from the President's Commission on Slavery and the University at the University of Virginia.

The UMD Libraries, and in particular SCUA, were ready to answer the call. In many ways, the staff in SCUA were the best equipped to lead the project. Records in the University Archives would serve a primary role in the investigation, and SCUA had supported many local public history projects in the past and was currently running a community archives program. Furthermore, in the absence of a historian specializing in Maryland

local history, the SCUA director served as the subject matter expert. SCUA was committed to Brewer's emphasis on student-conducted research. As information professionals, staff had experience and were comfortable with supporting others conducting primary source research. Moreover, SCUA had already been placed at the center of these events. To appease the critics of the stadium name change, President Wallace Loh made a bargain: "Change the football stadium's name to Maryland Stadium and to instead memorialize the accomplishments of Harry Clifton 'Curley' Byrd in one of the university's libraries."<sup>9</sup> The Maryland Room, SCUA's public reading room in Hornbake Library, became the designated location for a permanent exhibit on the life and times of Byrd. The University Archives staff created this display, making certain to emphasize Byrd's mixed and often hurtful legacy. Having navigated this charged terrain, SCUA was ready to lead the reckoning for the entire university.

### *Universities Studying Slavery*

USS is a consortium of over ninety institutions of higher learning in the United States, Canada, Colombia, Scotland, Ireland, and England. These schools are focused on sharing best practices and guiding principles as they engage in truth-telling educational projects focused on human bondage and the legacies of racism in their histories."<sup>10</sup> USS began at the University of Virginia in 2014 and as of 2022 had nearly 100 members, which indicates the growth of importance that many institutions are placing on this research. Joining USS was an opportunity for the UMD Libraries to become campus leaders in social justice and reconciliation. SCUA brought some unique perspectives and experiences to the table. It could leverage its position as a hub for public engagement, as a research center at a major research institution, and as a public institution that welcomed involvement from multiple stakeholder communities. In particular, our public trust status as a library meant that we could create space for various voices ranging from students and trained academics to community scholars, while also welcoming input from alumni whose opinions and memories of their time at UMD might not align with the findings of the project. As inspiration, we walked past the statue of Frederick Douglass right outside of our library's main entrance on a daily basis.

## **Mission, Goals, and Scalable Objectives**

Central to the successful launch of the project was campus-wide participation. The founding group reached out to important stakeholders and, as a result, the 1856 Project Advisory Board began with members from African American Studies, Anthropology, College of Behavioral & Social Sciences, Education, History, and the Honors College. Thanks to the university archivist's previous work, we had student participation as well as interest from members of the Lakeland Community Heritage Project, whose mission was to document the history of an African American community in College Park with complicated and hurtful ties to the university.

By the summer of 2020, what had been the “Universities Studying Slavery at the University of Maryland working group” had officially become “The 1856 Project: Universities Studying Slavery at the University of Maryland.” The initiative is led by the University of Maryland Libraries in consultation with the university’s Office of Diversity and Inclusion. We chose The 1856 Project as the name of our local chapter to mark the year of the founding of the Maryland Agricultural College, our precursor. Also, in the African American tradition of call and response, we chose the name beginning with a capitalized “T” in response to the call of The 1619 Project, an endeavor with which we align ourselves. Like that social justice initiative, we reframe the university’s history by placing the consequences of slavery and its legacies and the contributions of Black peoples on campus. We will add to the acknowledgment of the role the University of Maryland has played throughout its history in denying access and full participation.

Our next step was to consult with longstanding members of USS. The top lessons we learned from our meetings with representatives from the University of Virginia and Georgetown University were:

1. Identify stakeholders and involve them from the very beginning of our work, while avoiding a “build it first” process and then expecting buy-in.
2. Stakeholders must include a wide range of groups: students, faculty, staff, alumni, and surrounding communities.
3. Ensure that those involved are compensated for time and intellectual offerings, whether through academic credits or honoraria.
4. Position the project as a campus-wide endeavor.
5. Student involvement in the research is crucial.
6. Communities surrounding the campus, which have been impacted by the institution’s exclusionary practices, should be consulted early on in the process to work in partnership with the university.
7. Learn from the best practices and support other universities can provide.

We next organized committees beyond the advisory board. The goal was to balance a structured organizational plan with open space for stakeholder input. Our committees were: Advisory Board, Research Investigation, Outreach and Engagement, Communications (website), Scholarly Cross Discipline, Grants, and Memorialization.

For each committee, we discussed some possible goals:

<p><b>Advisory</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Membership from across campus</li> <li>• Membership from majority African American neighborhoods near campus</li> </ul>	<p><b>Programming and Public Outreach</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inaugural event</li> <li>• Speaker series</li> <li>• Community listening events</li> <li>• Community research fellowships</li> <li>• Sponsor two Maryland History Day Awards [4th grade, 11th/12 grades]</li> </ul>	<p><b>Research Investigation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Archival research (UA and MDHC)</li> <li>• Archaeological survey</li> <li>• Post-doctoral fellows</li> <li>• Publication subvention</li> </ul>
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<p><b>Curriculum Development and Student Engagement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curriculum development</li> <li>• Summer research institute</li> </ul>	<p><b>Digital Infrastructure</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Website—annual updates of our findings</li> <li>• Digital collections and exhibits</li> </ul>	<p><b>Memorial and Restorative Justice/Reparations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Memorial space</li> <li>• Descendent scholarships</li> </ul>
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The first committees called to action were the Advisory Board, Research Investigation, and Outreach and Engagement (OE). The Advisory Board members focused on overall direction for the project with an immediate priority being a funding proposal to the president's office. The Research Investigation Committee began its work with the following projects:

- Research university payroll records for African American employees.
- Examine digitized historic maps to identify the names of local enslavers.
- Search historic newspapers for ads by enslavers announcing rewards for the return of local freedom-seekers.
- Identify board of trustee members who were enslavers.

The first task for OE was information gathering. We began to research the activities of other USS members by researching their online offerings. Our goal was to answer questions about their motivations for joining USS, the scope of their projects and any deliverables, whether their activities were scalable, and how archives were positioned in their projects. Equipped with this information, OE generated three objectives:

1. Conduct targeted listening sessions.
2. Plan the inaugural event.
3. Create small-scale promotional events or merchandise, starting with a sticker campaign.

## *Targeted Listening Sessions*

OE began with four listening sessions: two for campus communities and two for our neighbors. We targeted them separately in order to identify potential differences in goals and expectations for project outcomes. For example, those on campus may prioritize curriculum development over offsite community-based programming, while our off-campus stakeholders may feel the reverse. The conversations were only lightly moderated in order to facilitate the exchange of ideas and to avoid imprinting our own expectations regarding outcomes on the attendees. In addition, we decided not to record the sessions in order to encourage comfort and candor. During the listening sessions, we supplied two poll questions based on our research findings.

Poll 1: Rank these priorities

- Archeological dig—student and public participation possible
- Archival research conducted by faculty and staff
- Archival research opportunities for students and off-campus stakeholders
- Regular report of our findings on the 1856 Project website

- Curriculum development—course packets for current UM classes
- Curriculum development—entire course on UM history

Poll 2: Rank these priorities

- Community research fellowships
- Speaker series—campus and beyond campus experts
- Apprentice opportunities (undergraduates, graduates, alumni)
- Scholarships for descendants
- Memorial space and permanent exhibit
- Hire a university historian

## ***Planning the Inaugural Event***

The Outreach and Engagement Committee designed the inaugural symposium to bring together students, faculty, public historians, and community scholars to discuss ongoing research into how slavery in Maryland defines our shared past and continues to shape our present. President Pines provided opening remarks, the senior vice president and provost gave closing remarks, and two of the session moderators were UM Libraries Dean Adriene Lim and Dr. Dodge. Mary Elliott, museum specialist, Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of African American History and Culture, gave the keynote address, “The 1856 Project in Context: Slavery and its Legacies in Maryland.” The remaining sessions were: Session 2: “Researching Slavery in the University: Summer Research Initiative and Community Scholars”; “Session 3: Slavery, Its Legacies, and Public History: The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission”; and “Session 4: Universities Studying Slavery at Maryland Colleges and Universities.” Approximately 400 guests attended the symposium, including undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, staff, senior administrators, alumni, and local community partners and scholars.

This high-profile event was the kick-off for planned future smaller-scale programs: an annual research update, which will be a ninety-minute to three-hour program that showcases: the historical information uncovered by T1856P members, interns, community scholars, Summer Research Initiatives participants, and other affiliates; a community conference, which will showcase the work of local history researchers, genealogists, and community members from Prince George’s and Montgomery counties, K-12 educators, local artists, African American storytellers, and African and African American cultural heritage workers; and listening sessions and smaller group sessions that facilitate that feedback would continue on an annual basis as part of our commitment to sustained engagement.

## ***Sticker Campaign***

As we worked with the results from the listening session polls, we also began a sticker marketing activity to help introduce The 1856 Project beyond the sessions. We grounded our campaign in a recognizable social justice figure, one with immediate recognition and links to the campus community, nearby neighborhoods, and the global community: Frederick Douglass. His quotations felt particularly appropriate, as the Research Initiatives

Committee uncovered evidence that linked Douglass to our campus. We then started to mine the oral histories from the Project STAND (Student Activism Now Documented) collection, the reparative archives initiative founded by Co-Chair Hughes-Watkins.<sup>11</sup> By creating stickers of both Douglass and Elaine J. Coates, the first African American student to graduate from UMD, we foregrounded the intellectual lineage we wanted to demonstrate. The next pair of stickers will include Parren Mitchell, Maryland native, civil rights activist, and US Congressperson, who successfully sued a segregated UMD for admission to graduate school. To celebrate our inclusive history, we will pair the Mitchell sticker with one selected by our community partners in deference to their greater community knowledge about the African American employees at the university.<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 4.1.** Stickers created to establish a trajectory of social justice activism from Douglass to Coates to Mitchell.

## Archivists and Social Justice Research—Framing an Inclusive Research Practice

One of the unique characteristics of The 1856 Project was the leadership of the SCUA staff in the research phase of the project. As the research plans developed, it became clear that we in SCUA were well-positioned due to our standing as subject experts and our perspectives as archivists and curators. Building on a deep knowledge of the sources, we sought to craft our research goals around a commitment to diversity and inclusion. Most critically, we decided that the goals of The 1856 Project demanded an inclusive research process. The project's inaugural Summer Research Initiative (SRI) for undergraduates in 2022 was the occasion for testing and refining these principles.

The SCUA staff had many years of experience engaging with state and local history and with the history of the University. We had previously conducted research for special collections exhibits that explored the founding of the Maryland Agricultural College (MAC) and into local events connected to the War of 1812, which provided staff members with

a grounding in the relevant primary sources.<sup>13</sup> The staff also had served in a consultant role for the previous “Knowing Our History” project, which was led by UMD’s History department.<sup>14</sup> These experiences convinced us that a rich local history regarding African Americans has been hidden by traditional chronologies, most of which emphasize the lives of major landowners who were enslavers. Similarly, more recent scholarly research that touched on the vicinity of campus largely focused on broader historical and institutional trends, while only providing a glimpse into personal narratives. Knowing Our History laid the foundation, but we knew there was much more to be explored.

The decision to design the research process as an act of reparative history was a natural consequence of SCUA’s circumstances. Our colleague Lae’l Hughes-Watkins’ advocacy for reparative archiving was an important element in framing our identity and mission as archivists. But we also were mindful of the late UMD professor Ira Berlin’s call for historians to engage in the contradictions inherent in the competing demands of history and memory in seeking social justice.<sup>15</sup> Thus, we asked ourselves whether the process of discovery should be framed as an act of reparative justice. In other words, who conducted the research was just as important as the actual outcomes of the research.

Similarly, we were committed to collecting the research data into a transparent and accessible resource that could be explored by anyone seeking deeper engagement in The 1856 Project. The goal was a repository that would bring together primary source evidence that could illuminate the lives of individual African Americans impacted by slavery and the racist assumptions that persisted long after Emancipation. Even if we were unable to craft a large number of biographies that told complete life stories, we wanted to be able to create a resource that emphasized the humanity of individuals who were not just statistics for analysis. Projects such as [Enslaved.org](https://www.enlaved.org) provided useful models, but as we collected data for The 1856 Project, we recognized that qualitative as well as quantitative information was the desired outcome.<sup>16</sup>

There were two additional factors that prepared the SCUA staff to lead an inclusive research process for the 1856 Project. We already had been engaged in community archiving projects that forced us to reexamine our traditional roles as archivists. A commitment to ceding control of the narrative to members of the community made us more open to inclusive archiving and interpretation. This respect for including those who often had been excluded from the archive helped SCUA staff gain credibility with potential collaborators in the local community.<sup>17</sup> Finally, members of the SCUA staff had well-established ties with local heritage groups: people and organizations at the grassroots who were engaged in preserving and interpreting local history.

### ***Designing an Inclusive Research Process***

Archivists have a longstanding professional commitment to equal access to primary source information. Grounded in this belief, the leaders of the research for The 1856 Project decided that redressing the harms of the past required an inclusive approach. We wanted those impacted by that history to engage in the actual process of finding and collecting the information. Two undergraduate students with BIPOC identities and two community scholars from an African American neighborhood with deep and, at times, hurtful ties

to the university were selected by the research team leaders as participants in the inaugural 1856 Project Summer Research Initiative (SRI) in 2022. Due to our partnership with UMD's College of Behavioral and Social Science (BSOS), we were able to include our inaugural undergraduate fellows in an existing program in BSOS designed to expose undergraduate students with BIPOC identities to advanced research experiences. The goal of this program is to encourage these students to consider attending graduate school. Students from across the country applied to the BSOS program and were screened by the assistant dean for Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion in BSOS, who also was a member of the Advisory Board for The 1856 Project. Our first two students came from UMD and Roosevelt University, an HBCU located in Chicago. Our community scholars were self-selected from the Lakeland Community Heritage Project. For both sets of researchers, the goal was to engage them as part of the process of locating and curating a collection of research findings.<sup>18</sup>

Guest lectures on different aspects of historical sources and their interpretation were drawn from our colleagues in the University Libraries on campus and from community partners. Centering the investigation on novice researchers created challenges, which required us to develop a comprehensive eight-week primary research boot camp so the students and community scholars could become familiar with the sources they would be exploring. The SRI leaders also arranged for field trips for the research fellows. At Riverdale, the preserved mansion that was the headquarters for the large plantation whose land encompassed the eventual campus of the Maryland Agricultural College, the fellows directly confronted the reality of a slave economy. The ubiquity of this economic model was reinforced with a subsequent field trip to Monticello and Montpelier in Virginia. A research trip to the Maryland State Archives in Annapolis provided additional opportunities to engage with the written documents that preserve the record of slavery as a series of transactions where humans were treated as property. Through these activities, we also recognized and discussed the potential for emotional trauma when collecting information that documented the systemic horrors of a slave economy. We encouraged the students to express the pain they felt as witnesses, which made them all the more intent on humanizing the subjects of their research. The collaboration between undergraduates and mature community scholars also had the benefit of exposing the students to individuals who directly experienced racism in their community's relationship with the university.

### ***Reconceptualizing the Interpretation of Difficult Histories***

Research into slavery inevitably involves an exploration of records focused on the ownership of property—e.g., deeds, wills and probate inventories, tax assessments, court cases involving property disputes, newspaper ads, personal letters and diaries, census schedules, and other records documenting enslaved people as property. The goal for the SRI was to frame the narrative not just in the context of impersonal property transactions by enslavers but also to use property records as a gateway into understanding individual lives. The researchers were encouraged to find evidence for personal narratives of family ties, resistance to enslavement, and post-Emancipation transitions where freedmen and women created institutions and communities. While it was important to understand the

broad historical contexts for slavery and its aftermath, the SRI participants focused on individuals to recover their stories. We were not as fixated on answering the question of whether enslaved people built the original buildings of the MAC as we were on understanding the experience of the enslaved people who lived in the vicinity of the campus and were part of a slave economy that supported the founders of the institution. The 2022 SRI cohort made significant discoveries, which provided The 1856 Project with the names of approximately forty enslaved people who lived on or near the land that became the Maryland Agricultural College. This information provided the basis for telling the stories of two individuals whose transitions from slavery to freedom were the basis for the final poster presentation by the students. Future SRI researchers will continue this work of fleshing out the details of life for these forty individuals.

Research into the legacies of slavery and racism often uncovers rich individual narratives that enhance our understanding of the injustices of the past. However, it also is common to find only incomplete bits of information that create more questions than answers. Enslaved individuals often were identified only in aggregate as numbers or by first names and thus are very hard to trace in the historical record. While our goal may be to recover as many complete stories as possible, the reality is that many more people have been lost to the systematic dehumanization inherent in the institution of slavery. This is a difficult conclusion for idealistic novice researchers. Thus, it becomes all the more important to establish the facts about those for whom we are able to reconstruct a more complete life. One of the SRI students was able to build such a narrative from a runaway slave ad from 1853 for Gasaway Greenlief, a man enslaved on land that later became part of the UMD campus. Because of his distinctive name, we were able to connect him to other documents and establish a multi-generational family history for the Greenliefs that spanned the eras of slavery and freedom. The Greenliefs were just one of many families enslaved in the vicinity of our campus, but their recovered story can be representative of experiences of a much larger mass of enslaved people. This type of representational history is an important aspect of the reparative goals of The 1856 Project.

### ***Accessible Research Data***

A major challenge for the research project, up to this point, has been to develop an inclusive and accessible repository for the research data. As archivists, this flipped the traditional relationships between records creators and the custodians of the records. We had to move beyond the passive role of curating collections created by others to a more active participation in the process of molding a new collection. We turned to the lessons learned from community archiving projects and from the digital humanities community to seek models and protocols. In particular, we modeled our approach on that of our UMD colleagues in the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities who had experience combining the techniques of digital humanities in a community archiving context through their work on the Lakeland Community Heritage Project.<sup>19</sup> For The 1856 Project, the goal has been to develop a repository that continues to expand as more research data is discovered, while also being available to anyone who wishes to explore the data. The data repository will be part of a comprehensive website that includes interpretative products

derived from the data, such as biographies of individuals and profiles of families like the Greenliefs. We anticipate inviting students, faculty, and community members to interpret the data in any number of ways:

- traditional historical scholarship expressed in articles, books, dissertations, etc.
- classroom teaching and learning
- memorialization in a variety of forms
- placefinding: identifying places of significance, renaming buildings
- artistic expressions that give voice to the voiceless
- public history projects that interpret the data: exhibits, tours, blogs, websites, etc.
- identifying connections between injustices, past and present
- promoting reflection, acknowledgment, conversation, and reparation
- defending the truth: denying myths and nostalgia about the past

To meet the needs of these many potential audiences and projects, the repository of research data remains a work in progress. The goals for the second and third years of the project include building a flexible data infrastructure that promotes broad access and inclusive investigation.

## Conclusions

### *Takeaways for Institutions Embarking on Social Justice Initiatives*

Centering social justice in our archival practice draws the profession closer to what Ghaddar and Caswell described as a “decolonial archival praxis.”<sup>20</sup> As Bergis Jules states, “Our traditional practices in the archives are dangerously close to this legacy of institutionalized dehumanization. The silences, erasures, and distortions, and the lack of care, around the histories of the most marginalized people in our society are essential characteristics of it.”<sup>21</sup> Part of confronting this legacy of silence and erasure in the archival records is to bring to light the human beings and their actions revealed in the work of reparative and inclusive research. In the Reciprocity in Researching Records Collaborative (RRRC) protocols, Jules advises that “every research project should begin with a power analysis of the relationship between community archives, academic researchers, and the institutions to which they belong...”<sup>22</sup> Using the RRRC framework, the three overlapping issues to consider when analyzing power dynamics when building relationships are 1) transparency is key to building trust, 2) question your community expectations, and 3) embrace situational leadership.

#### ***1. Transparency is Key to Building Trust***

At the inception of The 1856 Project, we were confronted with questions regarding our motivations for this line of inquiry. From campus reporters and student workers to virtual listening session participants and potential collaborators from on and off campus, the subtext to these questions was whether we could be trusted to tell the truth about the findings.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, we found it important to explore openly our own motivations for

engaging in the project and to ask ourselves how our worldview and positionality inform the process of research, interpretation, and archival practice. This type of self-analysis also brings to light one's biases and blind spots.

To answer these questions, it is important to acknowledge the value of a team that embodies different backgrounds, professional perspectives, and areas of expertise. The co-leaders of this project are two cis Black women—in fact, the only two full-time African Americans working in SCUA. Lae'l Hughes-Watkins is an internationally recognized expert in the field of reparative archival studies and is the founder of Project STAND, which seeks to empower student activists from underdocumented communities to become memory keepers and archivists of their experiences.<sup>24</sup> Ms. Hughes-Watkins was the university archivist when this work began and is now the associate director, Engagement, Inclusion and Reparative Archives in SCUA. The 1856 Project benefited from her co-leadership due to her personal and professional perspectives and the credibility her past experience brought to the enterprise. Douglas McElrath, a cis white male and the long-tenured director of SCUA, is our historian. He also supervises Ms. Hughes-Watkins and Dr. Floyd. Mr. McElrath could easily have assumed a more front-facing leadership role yet consciously chose to support Hughes-Watkins and Floyd and co-chair the research committee. His decision is a sign of his trust in our leadership. In addition, through his participation in the project, he has learned about the burdens and obstacles faced by Black female memory workers who serve in positions of leadership. He has attempted to reorient resources and adjust workloads in acknowledging the extra work and stress (intellectual, physical, and emotional) this type of project can produce. Those who supervise people of color involved in social justice projects should consider the impacts of this type of work in evaluating performance and allocating resources.

As a former cultural heritage administrator who shifted back to academia in 2016 and to UMD in 2019, Dr. Floyd brings her experience with public history and community outreach to the table. She is a native Marylander and a descendant of the Queen family, whose narrative of resistance was explored in a major new study that described their successful suit for emancipation at a time when other branches of the family were sold to Louisiana by the Jesuits of Georgetown University.<sup>25</sup> For Dr. Floyd, the challenge is balancing between a genealogy directly relevant to the narratives of The 1856 Project and representing the university in interactions with potential stakeholders. Both Ms. Hughes-Watkins and Dr. Floyd must confront perceptions of being racial sell-outs as we work to balance university and community interests. As Powell, Smith, Murrain, and Hearn so eloquently explain:

Black women archivists stand at an intersection between the institutions and communities that we represent. We inhabit intersectional identities and bring diverse experiences to our careers. We advocate for historically marginalized communities, and we support one another dealing with professional macroaggression, institutional roadblocks, and recognizing the emotional labor we expend as Black women in memory work.<sup>26</sup>

As leaders of The 1856 Project, each of us has tried to be both self-aware and hold each other responsible for biases, blind spots, or omissions. History and how we interpret it often involves differences of opinion; however, we will establish credibility for our project through trust-building and by establishing dialogues with those who represent stories and histories that are still silenced or erased. While we have important areas of expertise we can bring to the project, our success will be gauged by embracing humility and listening closely to how stakeholders respond to the research findings and how the project decides to act on their views.

## ***2. Question Your Community Expectations***

The RRRC protocols point out that it is important to question your assumptions about the community with which you engage.<sup>27</sup> Sometimes terms like “marginalized” and “underserved” skew our expectations. Some may unconsciously assume that community members are willing to convey very little beyond their tales of tragedy and defeat. On the contrary, stories of struggle coexist with stories of triumphs and stories of everyday life. Collaboration involves recognizing the wealth of abilities and skills your collaborators possess. For example, active church members usually have great strategic planning and coordination skills. And those with any experience in service societies have led fundraising campaigns. In fact, they might not use the same terminology, but communities often have a self-taught family or community historian who has led projects to document their community’s histories and has created programs and events held at their churches, community centers, and family reunions. Black family reunions are an example of highly organized and very sophisticated enterprises.

Moreover, social justice projects should not assume local communities lack sophistication in the economics of fundraising and network-building. Many community projects have been sponsored by their churches, denominational church conferences, local chambers of commerce, sororities and fraternities, and benevolent societies. Some communities have strong ties to local governmental agencies and have experience in leveraging funding in support of projects from local government and heritage commissions, public schools, or collaborating with programming in connection with the public library. With this level of experience, community stakeholders do not expect to take a back seat. This is why it is vital to invite the community to a leadership role at the inception of a project.

## ***3. Embrace Situational Leadership***

While The 1856 Project employs the co-leadership model for its administrative infrastructure, we have adopted situational leadership theory when working with individuals and groups. More versatile than traditional collaboration models, situational leadership calls for leaders to “adapt their style to the situation and look at cues such as the type of task, the nature of the group, and other factors that might contribute to getting the job done.”<sup>28</sup> These two examples will illustrate this point.

In the summer of 2022, The 1856 Project agreed to a course integration venture with Dr. Quint Gregory, founder and director of UMD’s Michelle Smith Collaboratory

for Visual Culture, which involved co-conceptualizing the course, sharing our original research, and recommending additional partners. As part of the eventual fall 2022 course, “HIST 688A: Collaborative Curation: The 1856 Project,” the research committee co-chairs presented subject-specific guest lectures and then stepped out of the way. Gregory’s other partners, Maxine Gross and Violetta Sharps-Jones, the officers of the Lakeland Community Heritage Project, became the public-facing partners with the course and its students. They led the community’s support of the exhibition while SCUA employed two students from the course, thereby compensating them for their labor while they earned course credit. In spring 2023, the Collaborative Curation students unveiled a semester-long exhibition titled “The Heart of the Table,” which features just one of many microhistories illuminating the relationship between the university and African Americans associated with the institution.<sup>29</sup>

The second example involves the second most pressing issue that our listening access moderators are asked: How and when will The 1856 Project address the university’s complicity with the genocide of Indigenous peoples during the colonial occupation? In response The 1856 Project is relying on the leadership of our frequent partner, the Maryland State Archives, to lead the communication with the elders of the tribes and bands of First Nation and Indigenous people. Through a sustained relationship with the Maryland Commission on Indian Affairs and its network, this coalition has produced *Mayis*, an Indigenous Records Guide. The 1856 Project’s role is to help promote this database and show our support for continuing projects by attending commission meetings and programs, with the goal of finding an organic opportunity to work together.

The lessons of past mistakes in collaborations with native peoples that often were based on exploitative relationships that smacked of tokenism or fetishization have reminded us that moving too fast is not without its risks. Our project recognizes that building a relationship of trust is time-consuming. Whether a project separate from The 1856 Project is a better means of responding to the question is an option we will consider in developing plans. This may not satisfy everyone, but it behooves us to, at minimum, sustain the level of situational leadership we engage in until more can be done.

### ***Centering Social Justice as Professional Practice***

A commitment to social justice forces archivists and curators to reexamine their roles in preserving the record of the past. We as archivists now recognize that narratives about marginalized people often have been excluded from the archives and that the tools we use to facilitate discovery often ignore surviving evidence of difficult histories embedded in the records that do survive. We learned important lessons from designing research projects for The 1856 Project’s first summer research initiative: most importantly, those most impacted by the legacies of racism should be the principal investigators of that history. The staff in SCUA may have known more about the sources and research techniques needed to uncover and understand those sources, but it was important to step aside and serve as guides to the process of exploration. As historians, we may have been wary of placing too much emphasis on the individual, but as a project committed to recovering memories and the dignity of personhood, we knew that personal histories were an important

interpretative goal for the research. Finally, we sought to overcome the problem of exclusivity in archives. The research data will be broadly accessible to all types of potential users, and our responsibility as archivists will be to maintain the integrity of the data and assess new ways for the data repository to reach its full potential.

Archivists should build on the skills they have developed as experts in describing the contents of collections and in helping others do research. We should expand on the lessons of community and reparative archiving and not be afraid of assuming leadership in the research enterprise. We should expand the scope and impact of digital humanities to create resources that have broad applicability, not just in support of individual scholarship. We should demonstrate our critical importance to the cause of social justice by not standing on the sidelines but by stepping up to assert our ability to lead.

## Notes

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13. Research into the founder of the Maryland Agricultural College, including exhibits on this topic, is reflected in a resource guide produced by the University Archives: Charles Benedict Calvert Resource Guide, <https://www.lib.umd.edu/charles-benedict-calvert-resource-guide>; Douglas McElrath, *Beyond*

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