They thought Georgetown University’s missing slaves were ‘lost.’ The truth was closer to home than anyone knew.

By Terrence McCoy  April 28 at 4:53 PM

The search for the lost slaves began with a simple question.

Every month for two years, Richard Cellini, founder of an organization looking for descendants of the slaves sold to save Georgetown University, had updated a spreadsheet. It showed consistent progress: More and more descendants were learning the truth — that the Jesuit priests running Georgetown had sold their ancestors in 1838 to two Louisiana plantation owners to pay university debts.

But Cellini couldn’t get past a problem. Roughly a full third of the sold slaves — 91 in all — were nowhere to be found in any historical record in Louisiana. Where were they? The question led to a startling answer: The “lost Jesuit
slaves,” as Cellini had taken to calling them, weren’t lost at all. In fact, they’d never left Maryland. For some reason, they had been left behind.

The revelation has ushered in the next chapter of an ongoing historical reckoning playing out at Georgetown University, which in 2016 offered preferential status to the descendants to atone for its role in the slave trade. Researchers estimate there are as many as 3,000 living offspring of the 91 slaves, many of whom are sprinkled throughout Maryland, the District and Virginia. The vast majority have no idea of their relation to one of the nation’s leading universities.

So the Georgetown Memory Project has set out to find them, bringing a search that had gone global back to its local origins: the counties in southern Maryland where the slaves had once worked on Jesuit plantations.

Researchers are calling unknowing descendants. They are knocking on doors, combing through historical records and fielding emails from curious locals whose DNA tests showed a possible relation to other descendants of Georgetown’s slaves.

The truth is asymmetrical, Cellini likes to say. Georgetown and the Jesuits have the answers. And it’s up to them to find the progeny. It won’t happen the other way around.

“All of us have been complicit in not sharing this information, and every year we don’t share it, we continue to be complicit,” Cellini said. “We have an affirmative obligation to share it.”

**Slave swapping**

Some had fled, having heard word of their sale, and hid in the woods while others were placed on ships bound for Louisiana. Some ran away. One man, age 65, was left behind because he was too old. Others died between their sale and their shipment. And for others, they never journeyed south with the rest because of the unusual conditions of the sale agreement.
For the transaction to go through, the Georgetown priests had needed the approval of the Jesuit Superior General in Rome. He allowed it on the condition that husbands and wives were not separated, presumably to honor the sacrament of marriage. The problem was that some slaves were married to slaves belonging to other plantation owners, or were married to freed men and women. So the Jesuits started swapping slaves with local plantation owners. Some of those who had originally been sold were left behind, while these other slaves, never actually listed in the original bill of sale and never owned by the Jesuits, were sent down to Louisiana as replacements. The confusion over which slaves would go to Louisiana led to long delays in some cases and some slaves just remained in Maryland.

Nearly 200 years later, the only artifact that some of the families retain of this history are names plucked from another time — Cutchember, Sweeton, Yorkshire — names that at one time belonged to the prominent, white slave-owning Marylanders who had sold or donated slaves to the Jesuits.

The rarity of the names has turned out to be almost the only break that has gone the way of the genealogists searching for descendants. The quality and quantity of historical records are highly varied across states. Some, like Louisiana, with its French and Catholic legacy, have a robust trail of records. But in others, like Maryland, incomplete record keeping has obfuscated the stories of innumerable slaves.

One of those genealogists, Malissa Ruffner, an exact researcher, contacted an African American heritage committee in St. Mary’s County, Md., looking for clues. She asked if they knew any Yorkshires in the area. The committee told her about one man who wasn’t just a Yorkshire, but lived on Yorkshire Lane — where Ruffner decided to go, taking her car from a paved road to a dirt path slicing into the woods.

“And here’s Yorkshire Lane,” she said, passing several trailers, junk cars, signs warning of dangerous dogs and a statue of the Virgin Mary.
The road forked and there came another dirt path that led toward a trailer whose chimney was chugging smoke into the overcast sky. A tall man with big hands and a kind face opened the trailer’s front door and stepped outside.

He smiled.

“Welcome to yesterday,” he said.

A lost identity

For several decades — he doesn’t know how many — James Timothy Yorkshire, 83, has lived inside this trailer in the forest, which he heats by burning wood he chops in a cast-iron oven. He is isolated from any technology save a television, along a road where he was born in 1935, when there were many more Yorkshires populating Yorkshire Lane.

By the time he was a year old, both of his parents were gone. He thinks tuberculosis killed his mother at age 22. His father disappeared to who knows where. Their absences created a blank spot in his identity. He doesn’t know what his mother looked like — he doesn’t have any photographs of her — and never learned his father’s name. He grew up thinking his grandparents were his parents. When he found out they weren’t, he felt a hollowness that has been with him ever since.

There were other things he didn’t know about himself. He didn’t know why he looked the way he did, or why he’d been raised Catholic, or why his name was Yorkshire, a name few in England could believe he possessed when he passed through as a soldier around the time of the Korean War.

Decades passed, and then one day — now at the end of a life in which he’d grown accustomed to not knowing — he heard the phone ring. He put down the chain-saw blade he had been sharpening to cut some wood, went inside and answered it. A woman named Malissa Ruffner was on the other end,
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He didn’t know what to make of it. But he answered the best he could. She began listing things in his family’s past — that they were connected to the area of St. Inigoes, where one Jesuit plantation had been — and named members of the Yorkshire family tree. She then told him she believed he was likely descended from Alexius Yorkshire, who was sold by the Jesuits. Alexius never appeared in any Louisiana record after the sale and was identified as someone whose marriage kept him from heading South.

Now, speaking with him about his family for the third time, Ruffner spread across his kitchen table genealogical records and a family tree linking him to the Jesuit slaves. “All of this is incredible,” he said. For the first time he knew his father’s surname, Hardy.

Next she opened an AncestryDNA box and handed him a plastic vial. She told him she wanted to be sure.

“One of the things I came down here to ask was about this DNA test,” Ruffner said, handing him the vial to provide saliva.

“I have no problem with it,” he said, taking it from her. “I have to sneeze anyway.”

**Legacy status could help**

The descendants of the Georgetown slaves are being identified in two ways. The first is a genealogist pieces together a family tree through birth certificates, death records and other documents, then reaches out to the living descendant. The second method illustrates the democratization of DNA testing in America. Potential descendants do a DNA test and discover they may be genetically related to other descendants of the Georgetown slaves who have also taken the test. Then they get to wondering about their
past and eventually contact the Georgetown Memory Project.

That’s what happened earlier this month to Lynn Locklear Nehemiah, a dentist in the District. Her DNA results showed that she’s related to other descendants, a discovery that recalibrated everything she thought she knew about her family. She had long known her ancestors had worked for Georgetown as cooks, but it had been framed as an accomplishment — they were well respected and excellent chefs. But now she was learning a secret belied the stories. She had an ancestor, Louisa Mahoney Mason, who as a young girl, hid in the woods as others were sent to Louisiana, according to historical accounts.

“I can only imagine the terror,” Locklear Nehemiah said of her ancestor. She began to think about her own family members, some of whom she thought would have had different lives if they hadn’t been saddled with so much historical trauma. But then she realized all of this could also be a launching point, the start of something new.

Her son is 17 and looking at colleges. “Georgetown is pretty competitive,” she said. But maybe legacy status could give him an edge.

That’s a possibility Yorkshire, himself now considering what could come of this, bats away as nonsense.

Ruffner asked him about his children, whom he rarely sees, and his grandchildren, some of whom may soon be looking at colleges. Wouldn’t he like to alert them? Couldn’t one of them potentially use the preferential status and try to get into Georgetown?

He said he wouldn’t reach out to them. The truth — and the burden of knowing it — was his alone to bear. No one else had to know.

If the Jesuits had wanted to make amends, he said, they should have done it decades ago. They should have helped his grandmother, or her mother. Now he’s 83, everyone before him is long dead, and it’s too late.
“I have no anger toward the Jesuits,” he said. “But they’re so phony. Where are the black priests down here? There are none. So how do I feel? How do I say that. . . . I feel relieved.” The blank spot left by his parents’ absences was finally filling in.

He had his answer, but it was his answer, and no one else’s. So he stayed in his trailer, on Yorkshire Lane, in the county of the Jesuits and his ancestors, and asked for a favor.

“When they put my picture in the paper,” he said, “don’t have them put it anywhere prominent.”

Terrence McCoy covers poverty, inequality and social justice in urban and rural America. He is the recipient of numerous awards, including the 2016 George Polk Award for stories that showed how companies in an obscure industry made millions of dollars from exploitative deals with the poor and disabled. He has served in the Peace Corps in Cambodia.

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