

*Returning to View: Using Archaeology and History to Restore
Forgotten Stories about the Founders, Enslaved People, and Builders
Of the Academies that Became Washington and Lee University*



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***The Back Campus:
Liberty Hall Academy for One Decade, Landscape of Enslavement for Six***

Key Points

Washington and Lee University's back campus is dominated by "The Ruins," the stone walls of Liberty Hall Academy's academic and dormitory building. This iconic structure, however, was just one of many in the vicinity. The campus also included a rector's house, steward's house, stable, and other features that W&L Archaeology has excavated. Not only was the main academy building integral to a web of structures, but it was also short lived. It stood just for a decade (1793-1803) before it burned and the school moved to its current location. From 1803 until the Civil War, the former Liberty Hall campus was a plantation belonging to Andrew Alexander. Thus for some six decades, it was a landscape inhabited and worked by members of an enslaved labor force. Thousands of artifacts recovered around the "steward's house" and other structures post-date the academy period and therefore were used, not by Liberty Hall students, but by enslaved people in the Alexander estate. Archaeology, archival sources and memoirs have begun to illuminate their experiences, among the most poignant being indications that enslaved people living in former Academy buildings taught each other to read.

Narratives

The Ruins –the remains of Liberty Hall Academy – are so imposing, elegiac, and ancient that they dominate most current perceptions of W&L's back campus landscape. They are, however, only the visible tip of a larger and more complex historic palimpsest.



Present day back-campus landscape with 19th-century buildings shown in purple.

Two wooden school houses preceded the stone building. Largely because both burned, trustees determined to construct a more durable edifice to house classrooms, the library, and dormitory spaces. The three-story stone Liberty Hall Academy opened for operation in 1793, but only a decade later it too succumbed to fire.

In 1803 the school moved to its current location, closer to town and to a robust water source (a spring at the corner of Washington and Jefferson Streets). The migration hinged on the participation of Andrew Alexander (1768-1844). Alexander was a graduate of Liberty Hall Academy. [His ancestor, Robert Alexander, in 1749 had begun tutoring young men. His work constitutes the kernel to which Washington and Lee University points as its origins and its claim to being the ninth oldest institution of higher education in the nation.¹]

Before 1803, Andrew Alexander owned and, through an enslaved labor force, farmed the land on which W&L's front campus now stands. Archaeological and archival evidence indicates that his home was on or very close to the site of Lee House.² In 1803 Alexander swapped this property for the Liberty Hall campus. Andrew and his wife Ann Alexander took up residence in the former rector's house on the back campus; they substantially expanded it in 1821. This building stood throughout the 19th century until it was dismantled to build the "Liberty Hall Farm House," now home to W&L's Laboratory of Anthropology.³

Andrew Alexander was a prominent slave holder. The number of enslaved people on his Liberty Hall plantation varied over the years (1803-1844). The size fluctuated in part due to his practice of hiring out slaves: he accrued profits from the labor that his enslaved workers expended at others' plantations or industrial ventures. Enslaved people also worked at his plantation on the former Liberty Hall Academy grounds. Some were domestic "servants." Others produced whiskey, grew wheat, and cared for horses, cattle, sheep, and hogs.⁴

After Alexander's death in 1844, executors sold "Liberty Hall Farm" (as it was then known) to Samuel McDowell Reid, Clerk of the County Court, Washington College trustee, alumnus, and a wealthy slaveholder. From then until the Civil War, Reid's enslaved laborers lived and worked on this land.



Green shell-edged (left-ca. 1800-1830) and Transfer-Printed (right-ca. 1812-1830) pearlware dinner plate sherds. These and thousands of other artifacts – including education-related materials like a protractor – were excavated at the "Steward's House." Many post-date the steward's occupancy, however, and were

instead used when the building was part of the Alexander plantation and very likely occupied by enslaved people.

In sum, the back campus landscape we often think of as a space of education was more significantly a realm of enslaved life and labor. The academy building operated for less than ten years. The “Steward’s House” – built 1793 – only served students until 1803, when the Academy moved to its current location. For over half a century – 1803 into the 1860s – buildings formerly part of the Academy became homes for Alexander’s enslaved labor force. Many archaeological features – the steward’s house, stable, smoke houses, blacksmith shops, and likely detached kitchens – were loci of enslaved people’s domestic lives and labor.



Ca. 1911 photo of Liberty Hall Ruins (foreground) and the 1799 Stable (center, mid). This photo of the stable, which doubled as a slave quarter, is the only known photo of building occupied by enslaved African Americans on Liberty Hall Farm.

During the 1970s, W&L Professor of Anthropology John McDaniel directed excavations of key Liberty Hall area structures. Their methods were state of the art for the time and insightful given available historical information. Archaeological and archival insights generated in the interim, however, have raised the distinct possibility – indeed probability – that many of the artifacts McDaniel’s students excavated around the Academy buildings were not associated with student life but rather with enslaved people on the Alexander plantation.

W&L archaeologists Don Gaylord and Alison Bell conducted testing on the Liberty Hall landscape 2013-2018. They hope to secure adequate laboratory space to work with students in analyzing artifacts recently recovered and re-analyzing those from the 1970s excavations. This research holds significant possibility for generating insight into daily lives of the enslaved.



The “Steward’s House” after excavation in 1978 (left) and today

In addition to archaeological evidence linking thousands of artifacts to enslaved lives and labor, archival information illuminates it as a space of African American aspiration. Andrew Alexander’s granddaughter, Sally Mae Alexander Moore, in 1920 issued a book, “Memories of a Long Life in Virginia.” She recalled that her

grandfather owned many slaves. He would never sell one, though it wrong. He had a school for his slaves, said he wanted everyone on his plantation to be able to read the Bible, and my mother told me of her teaching the maids in the house to read and write. The blacksmith on the place had a school; he was one of the slaves.

Thus archaeology – artifacts related to daily life, as well as to reading, writing, and education – in and around the so-called “Steward’s House” may in actuality reveal traces of the determination of enslaved people teaching each other to read.

Research on the Liberty Hall campus also underscores the reality that Washington and Lee University and its predecessors benefitted from the labor of enslaved people. Their legacy includes direct forms: they fired the bricks, forged the nails, and understood the physics required to raise the walls of Washington Hall. They also, however, labored in diverse ways – being hired out, shearing sheep, reaping wheat – that enriched their legal owners. Those “owners” shared the fruits of their enslaved laborers’ efforts with the academy that became Washington and Lee University. The wealth of trustees – Alexander, Reid, and also John “Jockey” Robinson – and their donations to the school grew out of slavery. Washington and Lee University was, in its DNA, physically and financially constituted by profits of enslaved labor.

Questions

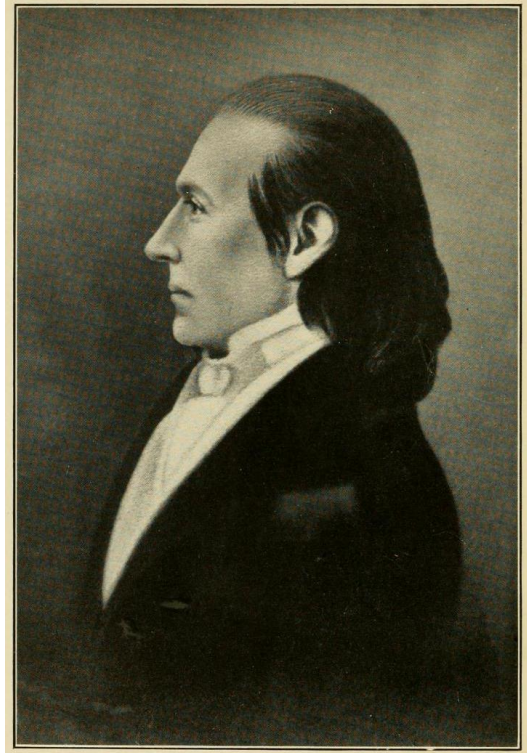
- Why have local landscapes of enslavement been so completely disappeared from community memory?

- Why was the “steward’s house” not maintained after its excavation in the 1970s? Why has the building been allowed to crumble?
- How might the “steward’s house” be conserved and interpreted as a site of African American life, labor, determination, and aspiration?



Buttons and part of a porcelain doll's face excavated on the site of the former steward's house.

Reverend William Graham: Forgotten Founder?



“The end of education is to furnish the mind with the knowledge of truth” so that students
“may be capable to pursue any business in life [they] shall afterwards think proper.”
– Reverend William Graham⁶

Key Points

The Reverend William Graham was the first rector of Liberty Hall Academy. He was responsible for buying its original library and scientific equipment. Because he personally housed and taught students during the American Revolution, the institution survived, and Washington and Lee University can claim an uninterrupted line to origins in 1749. Reverend Graham oversaw the establishment of Liberty Hall at its current location, including the erection of the stone classroom/dormitory structure we now know as “The Ruins.” Trustees persuaded him to remain at Liberty Hall (rather than going to Hampden Sydney) because his leadership was critical to the academy’s viability. Graham “made the ask” to George Washington, and his appeal resulted in the donation of canal stock that secured the academy’s future.

Timeline

- 1746 William Graham was born in Pennsylvania
- 1773 graduated from the College of New Jersey (later Princeton)
- 1774 appointed by the Presbytery of Hanover to manage Augusta Academy, the Reverend John Brown's school at Mount Pleasant, near Fairfield in Rockbridge County
- 1776 the school's name changed to Liberty Hall Academy and location moved to Timber Ridge; Graham was named rector, and he purchased "sundry books and apparatus for the use of the academy."
- 1778 Graham purchased a farm near Lexington because inflation during the Revolution made his salary almost worthless; he needed more land to support his family.
- 1779-1782 Graham took in students and taught them in or near his house. Raised money for Liberty Hall
- 1782 Graham and two neighbors sold contiguous tracts, a total of 19 and a half acres, to Liberty Hall Academy (the current "back campus"). The General Assembly incorporated (chartered) Liberty Hall Academy. The charter petition noted that the school had a "valuable Library of well chosen Books, and a considerable Mathematical & Philosophical apparatus." Wood-frame school house was in use.
- 1783 wooden school house burned and arson suspected; new wooden structure erected
- 1790 second wooden school house burned
- 1791 Hampden-Sydney offered Graham its presidency. Liberty Hall trustees proclaimed that the academy owed its very existence to Graham, and to separate the rector from the school would mean the demise of the latter. Graham opted to stay.
- 1793 Graham sold to the academy 1.5 acres of land where the three-story stone academy building was constructed. Ground-floor likely classrooms and library; upper stories dormitory spaces.⁷
- 1796 "Graham learned that President George Washington planned to give the 100 shares of stock in the James River Company which he had received from the Virginia legislature to an educational institution in the state. ... Writing Washington on behalf of the Trustees of Liberty Hall Academy, Graham described the history of the school, its standards of education and the financial problems that it had endured during the Revolution. After stating that its students had gone on to serve the country well in many different fields, he said, 'As the public good is the only object which can influence your determination, it is unnecessary to add anything further, but fully confiding in your wisdom, we shall entirely acquiesce in your decision.' On the basis of this letter, President Washington decided to give the 100 shares of James River Company stock to Liberty Hall Academy."⁸
- 1796 Graham resigned as rector after 22 years' service. His reasons were financial ("The impracticality of acquiring the conveniences or even necessities of life for myself and my family") and religious. He and his family moved to West Virginia both to farm and to promote the Presbyterian faith.
- 1799 Graham visited Richmond to settle some personal business. Developed and died of pleurisy (inflammation of the lungs). Buried in St. John's Churchyard.
- 1911 Graham's body and gravestone moved to Washington and Lee University, next to Lee Chapel.⁹



Questions

- Why is the Reverend William Graham both literally and metaphorically in the shadow of Lee Chapel?
- Why do many members of the W&L community seem to know a lot about other historical figures (including Traveler) but little if anything about Graham?
- Why was the W&L community moved in 1911 to repatriate Graham to Lexington, and why do we seem to have lost this aspect institutional history?
- How do we come to terms with Graham's enormous contributions to Liberty Hall Academy and the fact that he held some six people in bondage?

Monticello, Lexington, Liberia: An African-American Family's Experience

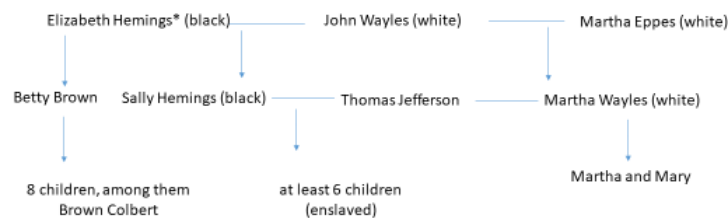
Key Points

The history of Washington and Lee University is integral to histories of the commonwealth, the nation, and the globe. Skills that craftspeople – black and white, free and enslaved – honed at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello were critical to the creation of Washington Hall, the center-point of W&L's iconic colonnade. Monticello blacksmith and house servant Brown Colbert, a man held in bondage by Jefferson, sacrificed the daily support of his natal family at Monticello to be in Lexington with his wife, Mary. For nearly three decades, they lived and labored for John Jordan at his property on the North River called "The Point." In 1833 Mary and Brown Colbert gambled on freedom for themselves and their younger children by accepting a proposal from the Rockbridge Colonization Society – in which Washington College President Henry Ruffner played a central role – to immigrate to Liberia. Soon after their arrival, they died in their quest for liberation, but their adult children who remained in Virginia continued to forge bonds of family and community in Lexington with descendants who still remain here.

Narrative

During his presidency in the first decade of the 19th century, Thomas Jefferson spent much of his time in Washington, DC. Meanwhile, at his home in Albemarle County, Virginia, free and enslaved laborers were following his specifications to dramatically expand his Monticello mansion. John Jordan, a free white mason and brick maker hired by Jefferson for this work, employed his own slaves on the task, one of whom was young woman named Mary (b. 1788).

Brown Colbert (b. 1785) was one of Jefferson's scores of enslaved people at Monticello, and a member of the large and important Hemings family there. Colbert was a nail maker and a "domestic servant" – occasionally serving beside his brother Burwell in the manor house rather than the fields. His aunt was Sally Hemings, the woman with whom Jefferson had some six children.



- Elizabeth Hemings had 12 known children, 6 of them fathered by Wayles – including Sally. Betty apparently had a different father.
- Brown Colbert – who came to Lexington with Jefferson's craftsman John Jordan, was Sally Heming's nephew

Between 1802 and 1804 while Mary was with Jordan at Monticello, she and Brown Colbert fell in love and – to the extent possible under law for enslaved people – married.

In 1805 Jordan moved to Lexington, bringing Mary with him. Because Brown Colbert wanted to be with his wife, he asked Jefferson to sell him to Jordan. Jefferson did so reluctantly. For Colbert, being with his wife meant being separated from his mother, siblings, cousins, and other relations at Monticello. Family memory recalls that Colbert “was able to remain in contact with his mother and siblings at Monticello and in Washington. ... [T]his family made extraordinary efforts to maintain family bonds despite separation.”¹⁰

Jordan had diverse business interests in and around Lexington. He bought land now called “Jordan’s Point” – just east of Lexington along the river – and established a variety of industrial operations c. 1805. Among them was a forge; Brown Colbert – a trained nail maker and blacksmith – almost certainly worked there, and it’s quite possible that he, Mary, and their children lived on site. Historic photographs show both domestic and industrial buildings at the Point.



W&L’s archaeological excavations at Jordan’s Point in 2013-2014 revealed brick and limestone rubble associated with at least one nineteenth-century structure. A small brass buckle, buttons, and pieces of ceramic cups, plates, and bowls that were found point to household activity during the 1800s.



Dean Suzanne Keen visiting W&L archaeological field school at Jordan's Point (2014)

In 1822, trustees of Washington College hired Jordan and his business partner Samuel Darst to erect a “Center Building,” now called “Washington Hall.” It’s likely that Colbert forged many of the nails used in the structure. Certainly Jordan enlisted his enslaved labor force and hired others to erect the building; their brick-making lot was in the location of the current W&L visitors’ parking lot at the intersection of Jefferson and Henry Streets.

President of Washington College Henry Ruffner was corresponding secretary of the Rockbridge Colonization Society, local branch of the American Colonization Society (ACS). The ACS had been “formed in 1817 to send free African-Americans to Africa as an alternative to emancipation in the United States. In 1822, the society established on the west coast of Africa a colony” that eventually became the nation of Liberia. Motives for colonization were mixed:

Some blacks supported emigration because they thought that black Americans would never receive justice in the United States. Others believed African-Americans should remain in the United States to fight against slavery and for full legal rights as American citizens. Some whites saw colonization as a way of ridding the nation of blacks, while others believed black Americans would be happier in Africa, where they could live free of racial discrimination. Still others believed black American colonists could play a central role in Christianizing and civilizing Africa.¹¹

In exchange for their freedom, Mary and Brown Colbert and their two youngest sons “agreed to leave Virginia for a new colony in Africa”; they “boarded a ship for Liberia, leaving behind three grown children.”¹² The couple and one son died from disease soon after arriving in 1833.

Several of Mary and Brown Colbert’s older children remained Virginia. Among their descendants were “a Union Army soldier, teachers and university professors, and a well-known lecturer and suffragist.”¹³ Some descendants still lived and worked in Lexington into the twentieth century. Brown Colbert Borgus (1897-1963), for example, was a veteran of the First

World War. From 1919-1955 Borgus worked in the dining hall at Virginia Military Institute. His daughter Emily Borgus Adamson recalled:

My father was something like the maître d', headwaiter, down at VMI. He hired and fired and had his own office. That was the time the waiters were all black and they wore black-like tuxedo pants with that stripe down the leg and waiter jackets and black bow ties and white shirts. They waited on the Keydets [VMI cadets/students]. ... There is a plaque there in Crozet Hall on the wall with his picture in it.¹⁴



The plaque says, “In honor of Mr. Brown Colbert Borgus, ‘Bogus,’ VMI Head Waiter 1919-1955. A sympathetic ear for cadets. Always a diplomat. Always a gentleman.”¹⁵ Borgus and other descendants of Mary and Brown Colbert are buried in Evergreen Cemetery, Lexington’s historically African American burial ground.

Questions

- We often look to the past for heroes: for models of action in the present. How do Mary and Brown Colbert offer examples of forging bonds of family and community in the midst of oppression?
- How might Brown and Mary Colbert help provide a sense of historical depth and precedent to members of the Lexington community today?
- In what ways were Brown Colbert’s experiences, and that of other enslaved and free African Americans, very publically visible in the antebellum period but generally obscured now? Why?

¹ All above information from *Liberty Hall Academy: The Early History of the Institutions which Evolved into Washington and Lee University*. John M. McDaniel with Charles N. Watson and David T. Moore

² Rivanna Archaeological Services (2012) Phase I Archaeological Investigations Associated with the Lee House Events Space Project. Prepared for Washington and Lee University.

³ Rivanna Archaeological Services (2012) *Archaeological Resources Management Plan*, Washington and Lee University. Prepared for W&L's Historic Preservation and Archaeological Conservation Advisory Board

⁴ Andrew Alexander's estate settlement and probate inventory.

⁵ <https://leefamilyarchive.org/washington/reference/wg/index-3.html>

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<https://scholarship.richmond.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1306&context=masters-theses>

⁷ All above information from *Liberty Hall Academy: The Early History of the Institutions which Evolved into Washington and Lee University*. John M. McDaniel with Charles N. Watson and David T. Moore

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<https://scholarship.richmond.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1306&context=masters-theses>

⁹ <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/111051532/william-graham>

¹⁰ <https://www.monticello.org/getting-word/families/colbert-hemings-family>

¹¹ <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/afam002.html>

¹² <https://www.monticello.org/getting-word/people/brown-colbert>

¹³ <https://www.monticello.org/getting-word/people/brown-colbert>

¹⁴ http://www.historiclexington.org/assets/adamson_emily_final.pdf

¹⁵ http://www.historiclexington.org/assets/adamson_emily_final.pdf