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Telling the Untold Stories

George Mason University Frames the Conversation Around Its Institutional Namesake and His Legacy

by Cathy Pinsky and Stephanie Wolfgang

Through historical study, outreach, and education, undergraduate students at George Mason University began research that developed into the Enslaved Children of George Mason Project. The goal was to broaden the university narrative, encourage discussion about American ideals of equality and freedom, and transform a complex historical legacy and memorial into an inclusive campus place for reflection and dialogue.

Introduction

George Mason University (GMU) was established as an independent university in 1972, bearing the name of one of our nation's founding patriots, George Mason IV (Mason). He was the author of the Virginia Declaration of Rights, the precursor to the United States Declaration of Independence, and later the United States Bill of Rights.

4 TAKEAWAYS . . .

. . . To Effectively Address Campus Legacy Topics

1. **Undergraduate student research can lead to transformational projects** on university campuses.
2. Project outcomes are enriched when you **integrate input and knowledge from varied stakeholders.**
3. **Communication is key** to project momentum and success.
4. **Strong executive leadership is required to move through decision-making** effectively and efficiently on potentially controversial projects.



The statue of Mason, a focal point of GMU's identity and campus pride, is located at the heart of the Fairfax Campus, representing the ideals of liberty that the patriot championed. The existing statue, heroic in appearance, conveys a stirring story, a supposed shining chapter in American history. But another part of Mason's story—a darker chapter—remains mostly untold.

Undergraduate Student Research

Like other wealthy Virginia landowners of his time, Mason was a slaveowner. More than 100 people were enslaved for decades at Gunston Hall, the Mason family's home and plantation, which is now a

historic site located about 20 miles southeast of the university's Fairfax Campus. What are their stories, and do they inform the complex legacy of Mason, the man and founding patriot?

In 2016, inspired by questions from GMU's Honors College students about the enslaved people of Gunston Hall, Wendi Manuel-Scott, a history professor in GMU's School of Integrative Studies, and Benedict Carton, a Robert T. Hawkes Professor of History, applied for a grant from GMU's Office of Scholarship, Creative Activities, and Research (OSCAR), the university's award-winning undergraduate research program, to dig into the past. The project's goal was to tell the previously untold stories of those who were enslaved by the university's namesake.

Figure 1 **Some Members of the Original OSCAR Grant Research Team in Gunston Hall**



Photo by Evan Cantwell, George Mason University, 2018

The existing statue, heroic in appearance, conveys a stirring story, a supposed shining chapter in American history.

Five students with diverse interests and backgrounds began the research project in the summer of 2017. Ayman Fatima, a student double majoring in systems engineering and government and international politics, built a narrative around James, Mason's manservant, using small puzzle pieces such as wills, letters, and bills of sale. Global affairs major Alexis Bracey researched the enslaved children of Gunston Hall, the Mason family's relationship with the slave trade, and the culture of the enslaved community. History major Kye Farrow investigated how laws governing individual liberty affected enslaved individuals. Criminology, law, and society major Elizabeth Perez-Garcia studied the women in Mason's life, including his wife and mother, finding very little documentation about their lives. Finally, applied statistics major Farhaj Murshed researched the diet and medical treatment of the enslaved people at Gunston Hall.

The project did not end in the summer of 2017: The Enslaved Children of George Mason Project was the start of a wider exploration of the lives of Mason and those around him. Fenwick Library history librarian George Oberle, who helped the students with their archival searches, continues to teach an honors course and history classes that integrate the project's findings.

GMU Student Convocation 2017: Diversity and Inclusion

At the convocation for incoming students in the fall of 2017, there was no shying away from the awareness of the August 2017 violence in Charlottesville, with GMU president Ángel Cabrera and keynote speaker Wendi Manuel-Scott using it to contrast with the university's ethos. "You are in one of the richest learning environments you could have immersed yourself in," Cabrera said, referring to the university, as he urged students to engage their fellows of differing viewpoints. "Diversity is our strength. Diversity is our strength if we create an environment of freedom and mutual respect."

"Your voice, your talent, your intellect are welcome here," said Manuel-Scott, an associate professor of integrated studies. "If you are an international student, you are welcome here. We see you. If you are Sikh, Jewish, Muslim, black, white, autistic, straight, trans, a single parent, you are welcome here. Veterans, you are welcome here."

Her efforts didn't end there. Manuel-Scott pressed university administration to consider the addition of a campus memorial to the Enslaved People of George Mason IV.

Unlike other campus efforts to come to terms with slavery in America, that memorial project represented an opportunity to encourage commemoration through the discoveries of our GMU student scholars. Project leadership was most interested in creating a place at the heart of campus where the university



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community could gather to reflect and learn—a place where it was appropriate to encourage deep reflection and searching inquiry. Through history, outreach, and education, the project sought to broaden the narrative of our university and encourage discussion about American ideals of equality and freedom.

“One of the things that the project does is confront the full legacy of our namesake in a way that speaks to who we are [as GMU], in a way that’s courageous, in a way that exemplifies what we do as a university,” said Julian Williams, vice president of GMU’s Office of Compliance, Diversity, and Ethics. “And to turn student questions into action, into work with faculty members, and to make that into something that is long-lasting.”

Infrastructure Replacement Capital Project

In 2014 the Commonwealth of Virginia approved a \$51.5 million project in GMU’s 2014–2020 capital plan to replace an expansive network of aging underground utilities at the heart of the Fairfax Campus. In addition to almost four miles of underground utility replacement, the project included the reimaging and extension of what was known at the time as North Plaza, home of the George Mason IV statue since it was originally installed in 1996.

GMU brought on landscape architects from Perkins and Will in 2015 to work with the university to design the infrastructure improvements project and reimagine its central campus outdoor spaces including the North Plaza and George Mason IV statue.

In 2017 GMU’s North Plaza was renamed in honor of the late civil rights legend Roger Wilkins, who taught at the university from 1986 through his retirement in 2007, and wrote powerfully about politics, race, and American democracy.

Then in 2018 university leadership unanimously agreed that a memorial to the Enslaved People of George Mason would be added as a part of the expanded and refurbished Wilkins Plaza. Late that year the university began its most important construction effort in a generation, the Core Campus Project, which over a three-year period would transform Wilkins Plaza—the visual, physical, and symbolic center of the Fairfax Campus—into a crossroads for learning and community gathering.

Driving Memorial Content

The initial task brought to the Wilkins Plaza design team was simple: incorporate elements found by the undergraduate research team into the design of the new fountain that was slated to be installed at the plaza as part of the Core Campus Project. Those elements were a list of names of the individuals enslaved by Mason; a representation of a brick that had been found at Mason’s plantation, with fingerprints of the enslaved laborer who made the



brick; and a nod to the spiral stone and shell deposits that had been found beneath the cabins of enslaved people at Gunston Hall.

The design team determined that rather than adding those components to a previously designed element in the plaza, perhaps the memorial could stand on its own as a recognition of the enslaved individuals and as a way to be in dialogue with the Mason IV statue, already installed on the plaza.

Additionally, the design team's goal was to tie that memorial into the story of the redesigned plaza as a whole. The Wilkins Plaza and surrounding landscape was designed to address a spectrum of well-being, with the end of the plaza closest to the Mason IV statue focused on emotional well-being and reflective spaces.

The opposite end of the plaza was to focus on more active social well-being.

In incorporating the memorial into the plaza, the design team began to think of how the untold stories of enslaved individuals could communicate with the previously designed elements of the plaza through the concept of voice. The social end of the plaza includes a number of blank walls available for student groups and individual students to chalk and paint messages—a showcase of the “student voice.” At the opposite end of the plaza stands the bronze statue of George Mason IV, representing a more “traditional voice.” With the addition of the memorial, we added the concept of the “hidden voice”—the untold story of the people enslaved by Mason—that is also part of our collective history.

Figure 2 **The Redesigned Base of the George Mason IV Statue**



Rendering courtesy of Perkins and Will, 2019



The memorial was reframed to relate to both of those voice elements: to the student voice walls in size and form and to the George Mason IV statue through materiality and alignments. The final design for the memorial depicts two individuals: Penny, an enslaved girl who was “gifted” to one of Mason’s daughters as a companion, and James, Mason’s personal body servant. Each figure is positioned to face a cutout that aligns with the statue in perspective. Plaques at each

viewpoint of alignment prompt the viewer to consider how slavery and freedom coexisted in America during Mason’s time, and how power balances have changed in the present day. Rather than framing that story as a judgment or glorification of Mason, the university wanted to utilize the installation as a vehicle to create a dialogue around our collective history and the role we each play in shaping the future.

Figure 3 The Penny Panel of the Memorial to the Enslaved People of George Mason



Rendering courtesy of Perkins and Will, 2019

Figure 4 The James Panel of the Memorial to the Enslaved People of George Mason



Rendering courtesy of Perkins and Will, 2019

Stakeholder Involvement and Dialogue

The deep and varied bench of knowledge at GMU enriched the memorial design. Through regular meetings with stakeholders as part of the Memorial Steering Committee, the design of the memorial underwent numerous and nuanced revisions. University historians brought research regarding the appearance of clothing and objects from Mason's time. In the absence of any written records from the enslaved people themselves, scholars from the African American studies program helped determine what attitude Penny and James should portray in

their stances toward the Mason statue—stances that would speak to their enslaved positions and to their likely frustration with those positions, represented through small acts of resistance. Theater representatives added nuanced comments relating to body positioning, and art curators brought knowledge about materiality and expression.

Figure 5 Professor Wendi Manuel-Scott explains the memorial through illustrative boards.



Photo courtesy of GMU-TV, 2019

Additionally, students from the original research group and representatives from Mason's Office of Compliance, Ethics, and Diversity helped steer the narrative told by the memorial, ensuring that the story being portrayed was in line with the story of inclusion that is so important to the university, which is the most diverse in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Once the initial design was completed with the input of the stakeholders, it was then taken to a number

of broader university groups and institutions to ensure buy-in from all constituents. The design was presented to the Faculty Senate, the President's Executive Council, the Board of Trustees, the Virginia Art and Architecture Review Board, the President's Student Council, and the Student Senate. Representatives from each of those organizations expressed their support for the project, and in February 2019 the Student Senate wrote a resolution in support of the memorial, noting that it "will be a

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catalyst for necessary, thoughtful reflection, and . . . give a voice to those silenced by history” in a campus that “should reflect the diversity of our student body as well as the complexity of our nation’s history.”

With the support of those groups, the design was taken to GMU’s Board of Visitors for final approval. The memorial design passed that final authorization aided by the fact that so many groups had given their nod of approval. The planning process, like the memorial itself, was structured to invite dialogue and come to a design that was representative of the values of all stakeholders.

Communication and Momentum

While the design for the memorial was finalized in 2019, due to the timing of other Core Campus Project components, the actual memorial will not be constructed until late 2021. With that timeline in mind, GMU wanted to develop a strategy to keep the momentum around the installation going from the time of design completion to construction.

Members of the Memorial Steering Committee have been conducting interviews with news outlets and writing articles in conjunction with

GMU communications efforts. GMU-TV has been developing content to exhibit at events and online that tells the story of GMU research and the memorial. Additionally, informational signage boards sit near the existing Mason IV statue, including design renderings letting passers-by who walk through know what is coming to the space. In summer 2020 the Mason statue will be temporarily moved to make way for construction to begin in the area. At that location there will be additional information regarding the new composition to which the statue will return. A podcast has also been produced that has Wendi Manuel-Scott and George Oberle discussing the memorial and what it means to the GMU community.

Figure 6 **The Welcome2Mason Mock-Up of the Penny Panel**



Photo by Cathy Pinskey, George Mason University, 2019

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The 2019 Welcome2Mason, which occurred for two weeks when students returned to campus in the fall, was the perfect opportunity to raise awareness of the memorial with existing and new students. For the event the memorial panels were printed on banner material and temporarily erected in their future locations as mock-ups. That installation was paired with a tent where visitors could obtain further information about the project. One student was so moved by the design that she left a piece of paper torn from a notebook at the statue. It read: *Dear George, I will take the degree/education you did not want Penny to have.*

Figure 7 A Student Note Left at the George Mason IV Statue During the Memorial Mock-Up

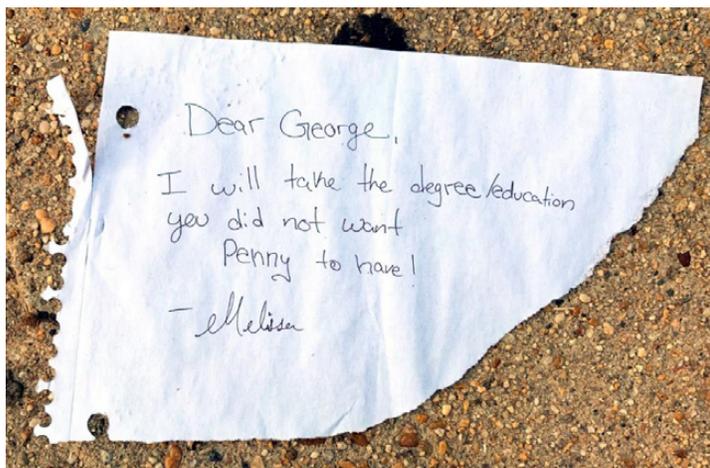


Photo by Cathy Pinskey, George Mason University, 2019

With that as an encouraging sign that the memorial was spurring dialogue as intended, GMU plans to continue events through the unveiling in 2021. Additionally, even following the memorial installation, the intention is for the project momentum not to stop. The university is now looking toward fundraising (https://giving.gmu.edu/enslaved_people_memorial_fund/) to establish an endowed program to continue research into the people George Mason IV enslaved, and to catalog the community dialogue around the memorial and his historical legacy.

WHAT WORKED

- **Sharing the project with as many campus and community stakeholders as possible** before getting final board-level approvals.
- **Using memorial elements to provoke thought and generate dialogue** that can relate to current and future students.
- **Including student researchers and faculty mentors** as a significant part of the planning team.

WHAT DIDN'T

- **Utilizing static memorial elements** that only addressed the past and not the current/future conditions of society.
- Envisioning elements in the built environment and **not using physical mock-ups to scale.**

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Author Biographies



CATHY PINSKEY, MARCH, has been capital program director in facilities at George Mason University (GMU) since 2016, responsible for the university's largest-ever capital improvement program. During Pinskey's time at GMU, space has more than doubled from just over 3 million square feet to approximately 9.2 million square feet today. Pinskey has an MArch from the State University of New York at Buffalo and an MA in education from Drexel University. She is a registered architect in Virginia and Pennsylvania.



STEPHANIE WOLFGANG, MLA, is senior associate and senior landscape architect at the interdisciplinary design firm Perkins and Will. Her current primary area of focus is landscapes at institutions of higher education, designing to enrich the public's experiences of their communities and environments. She holds a BS in architecture from the University of Virginia and an MLA from the University of Georgia. She is a registered landscape architect in Virginia, Maryland, and Georgia.

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