

Unsung Founders Memorial Dedication
Bernadette Gray-Little
Saturday Nov. 5, 2005
10 am McCorkle Place (in front of Alumni Building)
Rain site: Person Hall

Born in Obscurity: Unsung founders of the University of North Carolina

BGL:

- Thank you Chancellor Moeser.
- And thank you to the Class of 2002
 - for this extraordinary gift to the University community,
 - and for your keen awareness and appreciation of the many contributions to our historic campus that have remained *unacknowledged* for too long.
- I was invited here to talk about the significance of this monument and its legacy, which I am happy to do.
 - I was also asked to share a personal story that would perhaps deepen your understanding of the importance of this monument – *a more difficult task*.
- (*I have long known* that I would not be here as a faculty member and dean today if not for the sacrifices of the civil rights workers and leaders who came before and influenced the eventual opening of this University's doors **to students and faculty of color, and to women.**)
- We were reminded of such heroism this week with the death of Rosa Parks.)

- As an African American who grew up in small town eastern North Carolina, I know that at least some of my ancestors were enslaved on one or more plantations near Georgetown, South Carolina.
 - **But that's about all I know of them.**
 - One of the troublesome legacies of slavery *is the cloud it casts* over the family histories of those who were bought and sold as property.
- Enslaved workers often had no surnames.
 - When they did have surnames, they were assigned by their owners,
 - and those names were subject to change if they were sold to new owners.
- Records of the births, deaths, purchase and sale of slaves were, for the most part, the private property of their owners.
- For these reasons it has been difficult **for my family** to trace our lineage with historical accuracy.

The institution of slavery has kept the true picture of **our** past *hidden in the shadows, just beyond our grasp.* ¹
- So it was for enslaved persons, who often were *born in anonymity and buried in unmarked graves*
 - and even for some of the free persons of color, who contributed greatly to the magnificent historic structures which surround us today,
 - including the oldest state university buildings in our nation.

¹ Black History: Lost stolen or strayed, 1968; Alex Haley, His search for roots, 1977

- Thanks to an excellent exhibit now at the Wilson Library, “Slavery and the Makings of the University,”² we can see records that document the work of at least some of these individuals,
 - including those who are **unnamed** in the record,
 - or who have no surnames.

- For example, we know from the bursar’s records in 1830, that university students paid a \$2 fee to hire servants, including some who were slaves.

- We also know that some of these servants saved the lives of University students.

- When students burned the belfry in 1856, a “negro” servant, *whose name is not recorded*, put out the fire.

- When another student caught fire lighting a lamp in 1859, he was rescued by a servant “*belonging to the building.*”

- We know also that some campus servants carried the surnames of our early university presidents.
 - There is one, who bore the name of **two** university presidents.
 - Wilson Swain, was born into slavery, the son of November Caldwell, a coachman for President Caldwell, and Rosa Burgess, a slave of President Swain.

² Exhibits.lib.unc.edu

- Wilson Swain, who was emancipated after the Civil War, worked as a college servant in 1875. Ten years later, he had been promoted to head college servant and his name had been changed to Wilson Caldwell.

- We **now** know that there were both enslaved and free persons who built the buildings and infrastructure of our historic campus.

- In 1793, the Board of Trustees contracted with James Patterson of Chatham County to build Old East. Patterson used *his own slaves to paint* the roof,
 - though we do not know the names of these workers.

- We also know that Colonel William Polk's slave carpenters worked on the construction of Old West –
 - again we do not know *their* names.

- We know that some of the slaves who built the campus were trained as skilled tinsmiths, carpenters and brick masons.

- There were also highly skilled free blacks who made significant contributions to the campus,
 - And some have been identified in the record.
 - Leroy Anderson and James Smith, free carpenters, helped finish Gerrard Hall and make repairs to other buildings in 1837.
 - Thomas Day, a highly respected black cabinetmaker, did the interior woodwork in the Dialectic and Philanthropic society libraries in Old East and Old West in 1848.

- **Consider for a moment** the *irony of this monument*, the Unsung Founders Memorial.
- It tells us that *long before persons of color* were allowed to study or teach at this University, they contributed their labor and service to the campus.
- Let us *pause to remember* that while some shared their *talents willingly* and for pay, many labored **anonymously** as *unwilling participants* in a shameful system of enslaved servitude.
- The physical beauty of this campus, and this monument, is a *reflection of the labor and talents* of persons both free and not free.

- But today, I too want to thank
 - the Class of 2002 President Ben Singer,
 - Vice President Byron Wilson and their fellow students,
 - and Do-Ho Suh , the artist,
 - for this **monument**, which finally **recognizes** the many **unnamed** whose toil and talent made the nation's first public university possible.
- This monument helps us realize their lasting contributions. It will help to make us and everyone who comes after us, aware and thankful to those who
 - did some of the heaviest lifting,
 - offered the bravest kind of service, and
 - contributed some of the finest physical details to our University.

- Let this monument **also stand to reflect the present as well as the past**, by reminding us of those who continue to contribute their toil and talent behind the scenes – providing the support and services that make the first public university one of the finest today.
- This monument's lasting legacy will be to help us remember our complex past, and to honor all of those whose labor makes Carolina great.
- Let this monument **stand to remind** us daily of all the **unnamed and unsung** heroes of our storied campus and to give them voice.