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Journeys of Reconciliation: Institutions Studying Their Relationships to Slavery

Amy Schindler

University of Nebraska at Omaha, acschindler@unomaha.edu

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Amy C. Schindler

SFrom the Archives to the Community: William & Mary's Lemon Project

History of the Lemon Project

In 2009, after student and faculty resolutions calling for a full investigation of the university's past for the previous 2 plus years, the Board of Visitors acknowledged that William & Mary had "owned and exploited slave labor from its founding to the Civil War; and that it had failed to take a stand against segregation during the Jim Crow Era." As a result, the Board offered its support for the establishment of The Lemon Project: A Journey of Reconciliation.

[SLIDE 1] Initial research for the project before the Board resolution was led by the late Prof. Bob Engs, visiting professor from the University of Pennsylvania, assisted by then-Ph.D. candidate, now Prof. Jennifer Oast. They researched and wrote a report on what was known about the history of African Americans at the College and the steps that needed to be taken to complete that history. This work led to the Lemon Project.

[Slide 2] The Project is named for Lemon, a man who was enslaved by the College of William & Mary. We cannot know the full dimensions of Lemon's life or his relationship with William & Mary, but we have details in the archives about the work he did as an enslaved man as well as his death and burial. In many ways, Lemon stands in the place of the known and unknown African Americans who helped to build, maintain, and move the College forward. This list of slaves at William and Mary in the late 18th century from the archives includes Lemon's name and has become an image commonly associated with the Lemon Project.

When I arrived at W&M in 2007, I knew that the university had owned slaves and had some sense of the role they played in the construction and operation of the university. What I knew much less about were the university's actions during

the era of Jim Crow and desegregation in the 20th century.

The memory of these chapters in the university's history was not part of the history that the university shared about itself nor is commonly known. Like Donnelly, I hate to use the expression "buried in the archives." These chapters were minimally discussed in the university's official 2-volume history. However, the fact that the university had a plantation that helped to fund the university's operations and student scholarships was mentioned in historical articles in the alumni gazette going back to at least the 1930s.

In the 20th century, W&M upheld the segregation of its student body and workforce. Before the Brown decision, students were required to include a photo with their application and African American students were commonly referred to other institutions of higher education. The first black undergrad, Oscar Blayton, was admitted to W&M in 1963 and in 1967 the first residential undergraduate students - 3 women - were admitted. These women roomed together their entire 4 years at the university.

The Lemon Project was established to study and share these aspects of the university's history as well as the university's complicated, to say the least, relationship with Williamsburg's African American community. The project borrowed much from our friends at Brown when establishing its mission and scope.

The work of the Lemon Project was meant to be carried out by subcommittees as well as courses for W&M students and programs involving the local community.

Courses in Special Collections

Adjunct professor Jody Allen was appointed to manage the project and offer the main LP courses. Her first course visited Swem's Special Collections so that we

could share the material available with her students, as well as with Jody. That first course focused on the education in the 20th century and the students' main project was the collection of oral history interviews from alumni & members of the local community - for the archives, of course.

That first class did not make heavy use of archival material, but it did introduce a core group of students - who became regular users for several semesters - as well as their instructor to the material available in special collections. We had opened a dialog and this is a very good thing, no?

[Slide 3] The following semester Prof. Allen was interested in putting her Lemon Project course students to work curating an exhibit with Special Collections staff about the Jim Crow era in Williamsburg through the lens of Henry Billups, a much-beloved W&M employee from the late 19th to mid-20th century.

[Slide 4] Hers was not the first course our staff worked with to curate an exhibit, but the opening reception and presentation by students was very successful in bringing in not only library staff, but also the campus community and community members.

Each semester Prof. Allen's Lemon Project class visits Special Collections and make use of the collection.

Independent Studies

Over the last two years we have also had several students working on independent study projects using archival material in conjunction with the Lemon Project.

Miriam Johnson Carter was a teacher, wife, & mother. She applied to W&M's School of Ed & was turned away because she was Black, it was 1955, and the

course of study she wanted to pursue was offered at Virginia State, a historically black college also in Virginia, so they could do that. She didn't accept that rejection. She sent another letter, and another, and another, and more over the course of the summer. She finally applied to and was accepted to study law at William & Mary. She was only able to stay in the program for one year. Her family told me that in classes, no other students would sit next to her. Her car was tampered with. This is an amazing story.

Last summer a student conducted research about desegregation at W&M and she asked the question, why hasn't Mrs. Carter been talked about & why isn't she mentioned more when people talk about desegregation at the university? A few of us speculated why a bit together, but all too quickly her summer research period was over. We used some of her research to curate an exhibit about desegregation at W&M and when it was done, I sent a letter to the man who I believed was the same man listed in her obituary as one of Mrs. Carter's sons. He had his son call me the day after he received my letter and they came to visit that week. It turns out two of Mrs. Carter's grandchildren attended the university in the 1980s and 1990s, but hadn't maintained contact with the university.

We've connected with this family and these alumni and brought them into the archives. This connection led to a women's history month article about Mrs. Carter in the local paper & that's something we are so, so proud of. Their family's story has not been a part of the narrative, of the history, of the stories we share about W&M, but we must make it so. We're witnesses to the history of an institution, a family, and a country.

Community Outreach

[Slide] One of the core components of the Lemon Project's community outreach is the Annual Lemon Project Spring Symposium. And since we're located in Williamsburg, Virginia, yes, there have been costumed interpreters from Colonial

Williamsburg.

[Slide]Intended to bring together the community, students, faculty, staff, and alumni, the Lemon Project Symposium has been most popular with the community and as a venue for students and others to share their research. We've struggled to attract students to this weekend event. Next year's symposium will include a choreographer, which ties into our new W&M Hip Hop Collection.

[Slide]Swem's Special Collections has been invited to participate in sessions from the first offering. And throughout all of the symposiums, we have students and other researchers sharing the product of their research in special collections with symposium participants.

One example is a filmmaker whose family was displaced during WWII for the construction of a local military base, which then became a CIA training facility. He is seeking primary sources from the archives to use in a documentary about the many African American communities in Hampton Roads Virginia that were displaced for several military installations. We're of course helping him as we would any other researcher, but also from that first meeting we're talking with him about how much his recordings, leads, etc. will mean for the archives.

New Material for the Archives

When we look at new material for the archives, there are of course the administrative records of the Lemon Project including publications, photos, media coverage, and research.

The research records include ongoing effort to gather suitable material from students. This has been easier to receive from faculty who are publishing on related topics.

[Slide - Oscar Blayton]

We do a good bit of outreach to community members & alumni including of course explaining what an archive is and what the archive would benefit from receiving from them. We also rely on growing this network to find other leads and collections as well as publicize the work happening in the library.

Another area of collection growth and community outreach is the Lemon Project's oral history project. It includes interviews with alumni, faculty, staff, and members of the community. The interviews are conducted by Prof. Jody Allen and her graduate students, filmed by the library's media center, and interviews themselves are for the archives. Without a staff member to coordinate and lead an oral history initiative, we were very pleased to have the Lemon Project take on our suggestion to conduct these interviews.

[SLIDE - Jody]

Our experience in Swem's Special Collections is one of collaboration, building on current relationships, and creating new opportunities.

I just want to close with my thanks to Prof. Jody Allen, director of the Lemon Project, who couldn't be with us this morning. Her tireless efforts as the manager and a guiding force for the project are remarkable. The archives is very fortunate to have her as a colleague, supporter, collaborator, and friend.

To Prof. Brophy: Yes, William & Mary had much work to do, and while there is always work yet to do, we can say that much has been done.

Thank you.