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HISTORY

"White work." Local Episcopal churches use film and dialogue to discuss racism

By DENISE M. WATSON
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT | AUG 02, 2020



TODAY'S TOP NEWS VIDEOS

Bob Randall thinks about Rachal often, although he knows little about the young woman.

He knows that she lived in the late 1700s on the grounds surrounding his church, Old Donation Episcopal in Virginia Beach.

He knows that she was one of several slaves the church bought, used and sold in the interest of the parish.

Church leaders then had names such as "Walke," "Nimmo" and "Keeling," names that still live on in the Beach. Randall wonders if those men ever considered the morality, the lasting cost of buying and selling humans. Couldn't they have imagined how future generations would continue to pay?

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Old Donation in July started a monthslong, film-based dialogue series called "Sacred Ground." It looks at America's and the church's own complicated racial history and how to reckon with it.

A paragraph in the Colonial Vestry Book of Lynnhaven Parish (now Old Donation Episcopal Church) Princess Anne County Virginia 1723-1786 shows an entry of a slave who was sold. The book is a copy of the original that was photographed on Monday, June 29, 2020 in Virginia Beach, Va. (The N. Pham / The Virginian-Pilot)

The program, which was created by the Episcopal Church, is open to all but is designed for white people to have probing conversations among themselves.

Katrina Browne, one of its architects, is white and said that too often Black people are asked to do all the talking when it comes to race. It is time for "white work," to examine what racism is, how it has hurt people of color and whites, and how race plays out with family history, class and even regional identity.

Randall said some of that reckoning is playing out now in ongoing, national protests that erupted after the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police in late May.

Randall said the contemplation, particularly among Christians, needs to be internal as well as include action.

"We've survived fires, hurricanes, storms, wars, you name it — those are the kinds of stories that churches like to tell," Randall said. "We've done and continue to do lots of good Godly work. But any church around since 1637 likely has a complicated history including both saints and sinners, with sin and evil that were part of the time. ... Knowing the truth, the good, the bad, and the ugly, helps us start to repair the breach in our world and chart a Godly path of action for our parish."

The Rev. Bob Randall, pastor at Old Donation Episcopal, poses in front of the church on Monday, June 29, 2020 in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Randall holds a book that contains documents of that the church actually bought and sold slaves that goes back to 1637. (The N. Pham / The Virginian-Pilot)

Other faith groups are looking within, too.

Rabbi Rosalin Mandelberg of Ohef Sholom Temple in Norfolk started a yearlong anti-racism course in late June. The program had 120 slots. They filled quickly.

“The murder of Floyd and the nation’s reckoning with race hit me very hard,” Mandelberg said. “I saw the need for myself and my community to begin to look at issues of privilege and bias, even if unintentional, and to look toward how to be better human beings, allies and anti-racists.”

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The Episcopal Church’s “Sacred Ground” launched last year and has a particular relevance in eastern Virginia. Here, church histories stretch long and deep, intertwining with the founding of the English colonies and slavery.

Lay church leaders were often slave owners and frequently donated their human chattel to their congregations. They instructed churches to buy “breeding negroes” to have children and build the congregations’ endowments. They bought slaves to construct poorhouses and provide maintenance, rented them out to raise money for the church and included them in incentive packages to attract ministers from England.

Old Donation church’s name was derived from a minister who donated land and slaves to the congregation to support a boys’ orphanage. (See [“Slavery and Salvation”](#) in Sunday Break.)

“Sacred Ground” is a 10-part program and falls under the Episcopal Church’s “Becoming Beloved Community” initiative that it started a few years ago.

With “Sacred Ground,” people are asked to meet on a regular basis to share what moved them after reading selected book chapters, essays and watching documentaries and film clips. At Old Donation, two sets of meetings are taking place every two weeks — one virtual and one in-person. Several other local churches have completed the program including St. Andrew’s Episcopal and Episcopal Church of the Ascension in Norfolk, and St. John’s Episcopal in Hampton.

More than 400 groups in the Episcopal Church or seminaries have taken or are using the program.

Readings include parts of “Waking Up White And Finding Myself in the Story of Race,” by Debby Irving and “Jesus and the Disinherited” by Howard Thurman. The groups, called circles, also watch films that examine Indigenous, Black, Latino and Asian American histories and how they interact with European American histories.

The circles examine “whiteness” and how many European immigrants shed their ethnic names, language and culture to blend into America’s “melting pot.”

Browne, a national consultant with the Becoming Beloved Community plan, helped design “Sacred Ground” after moving through her own personal awakening.

Browne’s roots go back to 18th century Rhode Island and James DeWolf, a wealthy merchant who headed the largest slave-trading family in American history. Over three generations, the family brought approximately 12,000 enslaved Africans to the Caribbean and colonies. The descendants of those enslaved might now top more than 500,000.

Katrina Browne a consultant with the Episcopal Church, helped create the "Sacred Ground" film-based dialogue series to get congregants to discuss race. The series is part of the Becoming Beloved Community initiative of The Episcopal

In her late 20s, Browne started to read more about the North's often-ignored ties to slavery. Slavery was legal in Northern states for more than 200 years. Even as the Northern states slowly phased out the practice, the North's cotton mills and distilleries thrived on products grown and harvested by enslaved people in the South.

In 2008, Browne produced the Emmy-nominated PBS film "Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North" that followed her and several relatives as they traveled the family's slave trade route — Ghana, Cuba and Rhode Island — and talked through what it meant to be a part of that legacy.

"If our family was willing to make mistakes on camera, and still kind of hang in there with the process, I thought that would do some good," Browne said in a phone interview. "If we had this worst-of-all-possible family histories that it might inspire other white people with less dramatic, extreme cases to maybe take some initiative as well."

Browne pulled the name of the program from a snippet of a 1998 column by Pulitzer-winner Leonard Pitts Jr.

"Understand that this is sacred ground and it hurts to walk here ... What do I want from you? I want you to be my sister and to walk here with me. I know it's a hard walk. I know it causes you pain. But this much I also know: If ever we learn to tread this ground together, there's no place we can't go."

Browne has heard various kinds of white anxiety over the years, she said. Most often is that many whites assume Blacks are angry and blaming them for slavery.

She recalled being nervous about telling one of her African American friends about her slave-trading history. When she did, her friend laughed and told her that "I can tell the difference between you and your ancestors."

Browne said another important part of the "white work" is recognizing that while whites can have a hard time, too, few have been denied access to college or jobs or

She never wants to deny anyone's struggles, she said, but, "a lot of times people treat it as like, if I acknowledge your pain that means that you're denying mine, like there's a competition over who's suffered more," Browne said. "I invite people to think about how you can empathize with what Black Americans have had to contend with without denying your own sense of suffering that took place in your family."

In June 2019, Browne spoke before a subcommittee in the U.S. House of Representatives in support of H.R. 40 that asked for a commission to, among other things, consider a national apology for slavery and the discriminatory laws and practices that followed. The bill stalled after the hearings.

Samantha Vincent-Alexander, rector of St. John's Episcopal Church in Hampton, stands inside the church Wednesday morning July 15, 2020. (Jonathon Gruenke/Daily Press)

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St. John's Episcopal in Hampton dates to 1610. It is the oldest Anglican parish that has continually existed in America. It completed its six-month "Sacred Ground"

The Rev. Samantha Vincent-Alexander averages about 130 in Sunday attendance — pre-pandemic — and said she expected fewer than 10 people to sign up for the program. She had 24 and 19 completed it.

It was intense work, she said. Each session could require two to three hours of reading. The heavy discussions made people feel uncomfortable.

But it was a necessary discomfort, she said.

Her church is predominantly white and several circle members are children of World War II veterans. Their parents benefited from the college breaks and low-interest mortgages provided by the G.I. Bill after the war. They did not know until going through the coursework that Black veterans were routinely excluded from those perks.

Several in the group talked about how they lived through segregation but felt guilty for not knowing how to speak up against it.

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The church also has tie-ins with the history they studied.

In 1878, Native American students started being shipped to nearby Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, now Hampton University, as the federal government started to break up Indigenous settlements and planned to "civilize" their people. Those students attended St. John's and in 1887 donated a stained glass window featuring Pocahontas to the church. The window is still there.

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Vincent-Alexander said circle members are now discussing how to expand on what they have learned. For example: how they can more fully tell the history of the church on its website and literature, including how the current 1728 building was

likely built by enslaved labor.

"This is the part where our faith comes in because our faith teaches us that hope is never lost; there is always light in the darkness, you just need that flicker of light," she said. "All you need is a little hole. You can put your hand in and open it up, but it still requires work."

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Topics: [Sacred Ground](#), [Katrina Browne](#), [Episcopal Church](#), [St. John's Episcopal Church Hampton](#), [Old Donation Episcopal Church in Virginia Beach](#), [Rector Bob Randall](#), [Rector Samantha Vincent-Alexander](#), [Becoming Beloved Community](#), [local history](#), [slavery](#), [race and reconciliation](#)

Denise M. Watson



Denise Watson is a features writer. She covers the visual arts and people, places and things – anything interesting and oddball (like me). I'm a Norfolk native and have written for my hometown paper for 27 years now.

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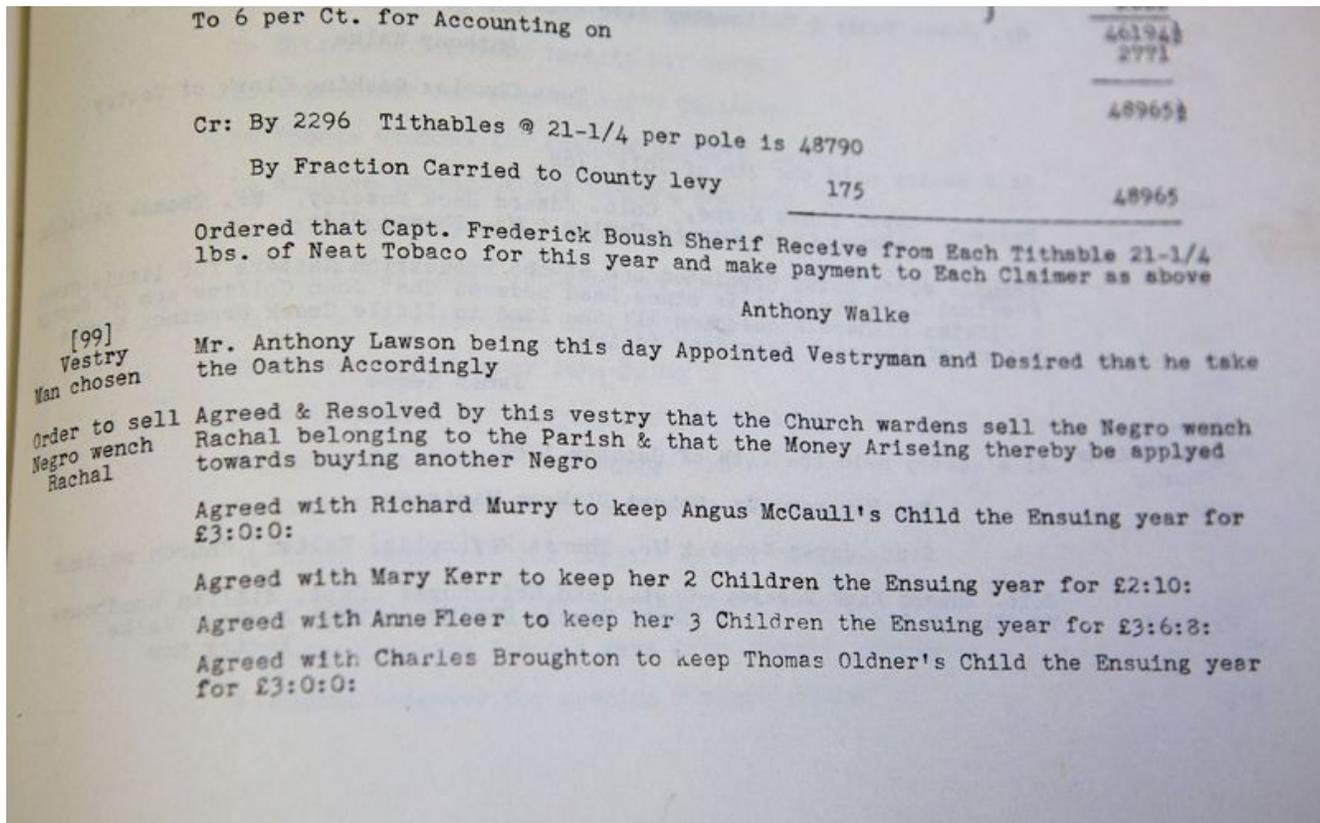
HISTORY

Slavery and salvation: Modern churches reckon with history in the trade

By DENISE M. WATSON
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT | AUG 02, 2020



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A paragraph in the Colonial Vestry Book of Lynnhaven Parish (now Old Donation Episcopal Church) Princess Anne County Virginia 1723-1786 shows an entry of a slave who was sold. The book is a copy of the original that was photographed on Monday, June 29, 2020 in Virginia Beach, Va. (The N. Pham / The Virginian-Pilot)

Parishioners at Old Donation Episcopal Church in Virginia Beach were shocked — and dismayed — when their congregation’s records showed that their 383-year-old church once owned slaves.

FEEDBACK

It recently launched a film-based dialogue series called “Sacred Ground” to help them examine the country’s and its own past of race and racism. The program was started last year by the Episcopal Church. (See [A1 story](#) on the Sacred Ground series.)

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But when it comes to churches as slaveholders, Jennifer Oast, associate professor and chair of the history department at Bloomsburg University in Pennsylvania, said the old church's practice was not uncommon.

“Almost every institution in early Virginia owned slaves or made money from enslaved people,” she said.

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Jennifer Oast wrote the 2016 book "Institutional Slavery: Slaveholding Churches, Schools, Colleges, and Businesses in Virginia, 1680-1860." (Courtesy of Jennifer O)

Churches were some of the first institutions in the colonies to own, use, sell — and abuse — the enslaved. It started with the Anglican Church, or Church of England, the first established church of the Virginia colony. But other denominations, including Catholics, Presbyterians and Lutherans, would later find ways to advocate benevolence and love while owning men, women and children.

Parishes from Norfolk (Elizabeth River Parish, now St. Paul's Episcopal — to Hampton (Elizabeth City Parish, now St. John's Episcopal) — to Mathews County

Bruton Parish Episcopal) mentioned owning slaves in their vestry records.

FEEDBACK

Bruton Parish Church, Williamsburg.

Clergy were also slave owners until the eve of the Civil War. A 2006 report by the Virginia Theological Seminary noted that 82% of the Episcopal clergy tied to the Diocese of Virginia in the 1860 census “had at least one slave, while some owned dozens.”

Oast, the history professor, began her research in 2000 while working on her doctorate at William & Mary. Colleges, including William & Mary, had enslaved workers, and the colleges were closely linked with churches. Her work culminated in the 2016 book “Institutional Slavery: Slaveholding Churches, Schools, Colleges, and Businesses in Virginia, 1680-1860.”

“I wanted to look at how these ‘philanthropic organizations’ that were supposed to be for the common good, look at how they use slavery to promote their mission,” she said. “And how was their experience of slavery different than those who worked on a traditional plantation.”

Oast said James Blair, an Anglican minister and co-founder of William & Mary, introduced the idea of slave-owning to colleges and churches. Blair arrived in Virginia in 1685 and by 1689 became the highest-ranking cleric in the colony.

Blair, for whom several buildings in Hampton Roads are named, suggested that parishes buy slaves to entice experienced ministers from England to settle in Virginia. The enslaved were included with the glebe, the land and home used by the minister. The enslaved worked the land and made money for the minister. Churches also used enslaved people in poorhouses to take care of orphans, the disabled or elderly, and hired them out to any business or enterprise that wanted their labor.

FEEDBACK

A statue of James Blair at the College of William & Mary, which he co-founded. (Jonathon Gruenke/Daily Press)

The legislature also sent the enslaved to churches. A 1691 law penalized white women who had children with African American or mixed-race men. The offspring, though born free, were required to work for the parish until the age of 30.

At first, benefactors donated cattle to churches because the cattle could reproduce and increase the parish's wealth. Oast noticed that after 1680, as slavery became

Thomas Walke III of Lynnhaven Parish, which later became Old Donation, in his 1760 will left the church 25 acres of “land and swamp” for the use of the disabled and orphans in the parish. If the vestry, the board of directors, thought it best, they could sell the property as soon as possible and buy “breeding negroes.”

“Breeding, he’s talking about women, not a man who will die in 20 years,” Oast said, “but a woman or multiple women who will have children and they’re thinking about it as long-term, growing endowment.”

Oast said she saw it repeatedly in church and school records.

“You can see over time how there might be six people in the initial donation and then there are 60, a large extended family, that all belong to the same institution.”

FEEDBACK

A paragraph in the Colonial Vestry Book of Lynnhaven Parish (now Old Donation Episcopal Church) — from Princess Anne County, Virginia, 1723-1786 — shows an entry of a slave who was sold. The book is a copy of the original. (The N. Pham / The Virginian-Pilot)

Church records were often incomplete — they might exist only for particular years — or they no longer exist at all. Oast said her research showed that the enslaved owned by churches appeared to live a harsher existence. Likely, she said, this was because they did not have an individual owner who had a personal and financial interest in their survival.

Churches auctioned the enslaved once a year on hiring day, which was usually Christmas Day or New Year's, for one-year contracts.

While individual slave owners tended to rent out adult slaves or slaves who were unattached, churches typically didn't provide long-term housing for slaves and made sure they were all hired out or sent elsewhere each year. Even infants.

Oast found records of what were called "expensive slaves." These were mothers and their children; the church paid someone to take them for the year.

If someone wouldn't want a worker because she had children, the church looked for an entity and paid it to take the child. That might be a farm or plantation that had small children being looked after by an older slave. Once children were old enough to make some money, they joined the working pool, usually by the time they were 8.

"So that means they were constantly separated from each other; you couldn't form long-term relationships with spouses and you never knew where they were going to be one year to the next," Oast said. "Children were separated from their mothers just as soon as they could earn even one dollar."

FEEDBACK

Upper Wolfsnare was built in 1759 by Thomas Walke III, a wealthy member of the gentry in Princess Anne County, which later became Virginia Beach. In his 1760 will, Walke bequeathed land to his church, Lynnhaven Parish, and instructed that the vestry board could sell it and buy "breeding" slaves who could bear children and increase the church's endowment. The house at 2040 Potters Road is closed for the summer because of the pandemic but is opened to the public periodically. (Eric Hodies/Freelance / The Virginian-Pilot)

Oast said Briery Presbyterian Church in Keysville, which dates to 1755, had the most complete records and reported the enslaved it rented out each year. The records also detailed the physical condition of the enslaved.

Children owned by Briery were twice as likely to die before the age of 10 than enslaved children on a plantation, according to Oast's research.

for more than two or three years. About half went someplace different every year.

One reason: Plantations wanted young, strong male workers. As those men aged, they couldn't fetch the same price and would be hired to another farm with a smaller budget.

“What’s really obvious from all these records, in my opinion, is that it was all based on finances,” Oast said. “It was all very capitalistic.”

After the end of the Revolutionary War in 1783, the Anglican Church was “disestablished” and churches rebranded themselves under the Episcopal name.

In 2008, the Episcopal Church issued a formal apology for its role in slavery.

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Daniel Ries, a member of Old Donation, went through the Sacred Ground program on his own and suggested to the rector that the church use the series. Ries, a retired engineer, said he lived decades and didn’t fully understand the ways in which racism socially and systematically hurt African Americans and other people of color until a few years ago as he traveled and read more books by Black authors and about American history. It was then, he said, that he realized “that the history that I had been taught wasn’t the full story and it wasn’t that uncommon.”

volunteers to decipher
'colonial chicken scratch' in
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Once he learned about the enslaved
owned by the church during the
Colonial era, he wanted to know
more about them. He wants to know

what happened to them, if they had descendants — questions he realizes he
probably won't find the answers to.

But the church, and society, can think about that loss and how it has created the
issues America deals with today.

“I think that an important part of what white people have to do, OK, is to listen to
what people of color have been telling us for 400 years,” he said. “And so I’m
listening to their voice.”

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Topics: Churches owning slaves, Old Donation Episcopal Virginia Beach, St. Paul's Episcopal in Norfolk, St. John's Episcopal in Hampton, Kingston Episcopal Parish Mathews County, Bruton Parish Williamsburg, slavery, colonial Virginia, Jennifer Oast, Institutional Slavery book, local history

Denise M. Watson



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Denise Watson is a features writer. She covers the visual arts and people, places and things – anything interesting and oddball (like me). I'm a Norfolk native and have written for my hometown paper for 27 years now.

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