

Building a bigger table: We all win when we come together

By Laura D. Hill
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This is the first article for my new column, “Building A Bigger Table.”

Now, you may be thinking, that’s an odd name for a column. What does it mean? Glad you asked.

When I think of building a bigger table, I reflect on Thanksgiving dinners during my childhood. In anticipation of being joined by extended family and friends, my dad would add a leaf to the dining room table to create more space. When our guests arrived, we sat down together to enjoy a mouthwatering Butterball turkey and Smithfield ham, along with southern soul food mixed with lively discussions.

In the 1970s, there were no cell phones or hand-held electronic gadgets competing for our attention. Everyone was present and engaged in mostly pleasant conversations. Yet, there were times when the conversations turned to politics, and adult voices grew louder and contentious.

One conversation that I fondly remember was a discussion about president Richard Nixon's Watergate scandal. I was baffled when I heard the term "watergate." My 8-year-old mind kept trying to picture a gate made out of water.

Regardless of the conversation topics, we left the table satisfied. Our bulging stomachs were full; we had spent quality time face-to-face with loved ones; we gained a better understanding of one another's views and we looked forward to the next opportunity to come together.

"Building a Bigger Table" is dedicated to creating space for more voices and issues impacting the Historic Triangle community. As the leader of Coming to the Table-Historic Triangle, I design community programs to bring diverse people together to have civil conversations about race. This column is my way of extending our table.

We can all agree that the past couple of years have been challenging times. Americans have navigated national, political and social unrest that threatened the unity and democracy of our nation, while, at the same time, endured a global pandemic that claimed the lives of nearly 1 million of our fellow Americans.

As the light at the end of the coronavirus tunnel comes into view, many are longing to get back to "normal." However, the pandemic uncovered racial disparities in health care, education, housing and employment that clearly demonstrated that normal was not working for millions of people. We now have an opportunity to redefine what "normal" becomes, not only for ourselves but for future generations.

Some people are driven by fear to build walls that further divide us. I challenge you to build a bigger table!

You see, each of us has the ability to make changes in our thinking and behavior that could propel the Historic Triangle to become a more racially just and equitable community. The starting point is making space for voices that have been intentionally left out. These are the marginalized voices that Dr. Martin Luther King was referring to when he said, "a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it America has failed to hear? ... It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met."

Through my column, I am inviting you to take your seat at the table. As you read, I hope that three things will occur. One, you will become motivated to step out of your comfort zone; two, you will be inspired to live in solidarity with community members who are suffering and three, you will become eager to learn more.

When we come together to create more inclusive and welcoming spaces, we all win!

Laura D. Hill is the founder and director of Coming to the Table-Historic Triangle, the local chapter of a national racial reconciliation organization. Learn more about her work at [Comingtothetable-historic triangle.org](http://Comingtothetable-historic-triangle.org).

Building a bigger table at William & Mary

By Laura D. Hill
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A rendering of William & Mary's Hearth: Memorial to the Enslaved. Courtesy of Baskervill (HANDOUT)

Today marks the dedication of the College of William & Mary's Hearth: Memorial to the Enslaved. This is an important milestone in the college's 329-year history, especially in today's climate. Lately, there has been an alarming increase in legislation to stop teaching about America's racial history.

Since 2009, William & Mary has been uncovering its nearly 170-year history of slavery. But it wasn't always this way.

I first toured the sprawling campus in fall 1985 while preparing to submit my admission application. I do not recall hearing anything about slavery, despite the fact that there was a provision for slavery in the college's 1693 royal charter and some of the Africans that William & Mary enslaved built parts of the campus.

I was perplexed. How could the oldest college in the south and second oldest college in the nation not have ties to slavery? Moreover, what did this obvious omission say about its commitment to excellence?



Fast forward to 2009.

I was living in Greater Williamsburg with my husband and two school-aged children, when I learned that William & Mary's Board of Visitors had acknowledged its slavery history, which spanned more than half the number of years of its existence.

My mouth dropped! This represented a 360-degree turn; one I am proud that William & Mary's leadership chose to make. It would take Harvard University, America's oldest college, another 13 years to follow their lead.

Last week Harvard's president, Lawrence Bacow, acknowledged Harvard's nearly 150-year history of slavery dating back to its founding in 1636. In an effort to make amends, Harvard is earmarking \$100 million to create a reparations fund. This decision comes one year after the Virginia General Assembly passed a law requiring five Virginia public colleges to provide reparations to descendants of people the colleges enslaved.

At both William & Mary and Harvard, African American women are leading their institutions along paths of truth-telling and reparative acts. Jody Lynn Allen is the director of the Lemon Project, William & Mary's reconciliation initiative, while historian Tomiko Brown-Nagin chaired the newly released report, "Harvard & the Legacy of Slavery."

When the community gathers to celebrate the dedication of William & Mary's memorial, I will be nearly 3,000 miles away. For the past three days I have been in Sacramento, California, attending a Coming to the Table leadership retreat. As I prepare to board the flight to go home, thoughts about missing this history-making event have already been tossing around in my mind.

Will the unveiling of *Hearth: Memorial to the Enslaved* be another "kumbaya moment?" Will people gather to reflect on racial injustices, shake their heads, walk away and do nothing? Or will they embrace the "journey of reconciliation" that embodies the mission of William & Mary's Lemon Project?

The transforming journey of reconciliation begins with the decision to build a bigger table. It involves offering people who don't look like you a seat at the table. Along the way, it calls for being open to re-educating yourself about America's history, which is marked by racial injustices. It ends with making and fulfilling tangible commitments to "do something" to help those who are still tasting the bitter fruit of disenfranchisement, based on the color of their skin.

Former South African president and civil rights icon Nelson Mandela rightly said, "It is in your hands to make a difference."

When I return home I will be refreshed and ready to create more opportunities for civil discussions and programs aimed at equipping people to experience racial healing and reconciliation. I hope to see you at the “Table!”

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