

# Building a Bigger Table: We all win when we come together

By Laura D. Hill  
Virginia Gazette

April 23, 2022



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: William & Mary

By Laura D. Hill  
Virginia Gazette

May 07, 2022



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!”

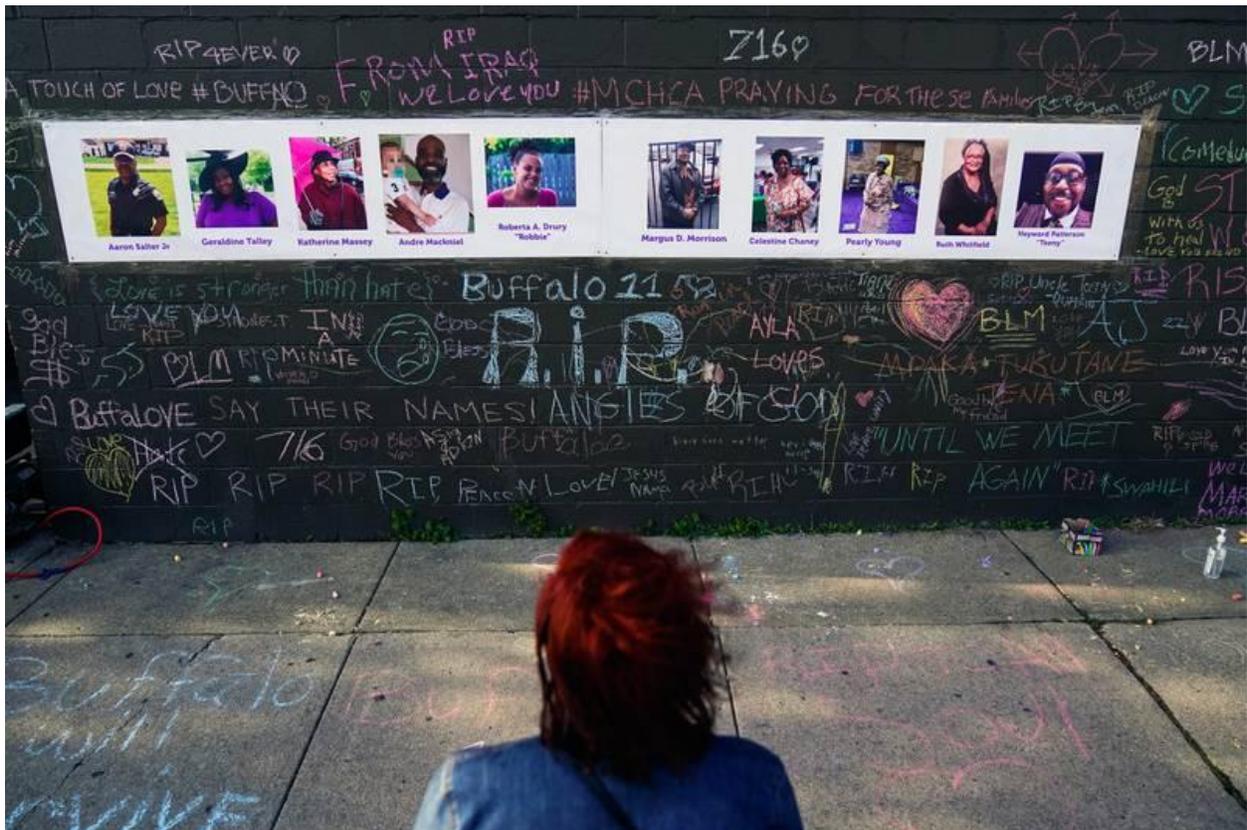
When we come together to create a more just and welcoming community, we all win!

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# Building a Bigger Table: Becoming catalysts for change

By Laura D. Hill  
Virginia Gazette

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A person visits a makeshift memorial near the scene of Saturday's shooting at a supermarket, in Buffalo. A series of killings of Black Americans wrought a heavy emotional and mental toll on Black communities that have already been burdened and traumatized by centuries of oppressive systems and racist practices. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke, File) (Matt Rourke/AP)

Last Saturday I attended a memorial service held on the steps of historic First Baptist Church in Williamsburg. Holding back tears, I listened as community leaders paid tribute to 10 victims who were killed while shopping at a grocery store in Buffalo, New York.

They were ordinary people, leading ordinary lives — a grandmother, a sister, a son, a father, a cousin, a daughter and a mom. The common denominator was they went shopping on May 14th at their neighborhood grocery store and they had brown skin.

As the church bell rang out 10 times in honor of each person, I looked around and noticed downcast faces in the diverse crowd of about 40 people who were on hand.

I had mixed feelings. On one hand I was proud that the community stood in solidarity with a nation mourning after another hate-fueled tragedy. On the other hand, I found myself wondering, “How can Americans respond to racial violence with mourning, yet not take concrete steps to help prevent it?”

After all, this was not an isolated incident. Nearly seven years ago, 21-year-old Dylan Roof, an admitted white supremacist, walked into a historic Black church in South Carolina and murdered nine members who were attending a Bible study. The nation mourned. President Obama visited Charleston to offer condolences, as family members buried their loved ones and sought to rebuild lives torn apart by racial trauma.

Yet, racial violence reared its head again. In October 2018, there was a mass shooting at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh where 11 Jewish people were killed. A year later, 29 Hispanic and Black lives were cut short after shooting sprees in Dayton, Ohio and El Paso, Texas. Then last year, six Asian women in greater Atlanta were hate crime victims.

That's 55 people gunned down while shopping for groceries, attending religious services, walking down the street and visiting a spa. Add in the hundreds of survivors, recovering from gunshot and/or emotional wounds, and a fuller picture emerges of a national crisis. According to FBI 2020 statistics, 61.9% of hate crime victims were targeted because of their race, ethnicity or ancestry.

How do we become catalysts for change, as our nation groans under the heavy weight of racial violence?

First, resist the urge to remain silent or neutral. This is the wide path that many people find themselves on due to fear, indifference or the misguided notion of keeping peace. Living in denial won't make this go away.

Human rights activist Bishop Desmond Tutu warned, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."

Next, support legislation to restrict the purchase of assault weapons. Surely, enabling people to walk around with loaded assault rifles to murder innocent adults and children was not what the framers of the Second Amendment had in mind.

Next, adopt the HGTV mantra — start at home. Educate yourself and family about racism and the many forms of racial hatred that it has spawned. Then build a bigger table by intentionally looking for opportunities to enjoy authentic relationships with people who don't look like you.

Next, build a bigger table in your workplace and community by hosting discussions about racial issues. Make space at the table for those who have experienced harm and listen to their truths. Just in case you're feeling a little apprehensive, Coming to the Table-Historic Triangle can

provide experienced facilitators to tactfully guide you through this process.

Finally, support local organizations that are advocating for racial justice and equity, such as the Village Initiative for Equity in Education, NAACP, Williamsburg Action and the WJCC Coalition for Social Justice.

When we come together to create a more responsible community, 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-historictriangle.org](http://Comingtothetable-historictriangle.org).*

# Building a Bigger Table at Juneteenth

By Laura D. Hill  
Virginia Gazette

June 17, 2022



The Juneteenth flag commemorates the day that slavery ended in the U.S. (AP Photo/Nati Harnik) (Nati Harnik/AP)

Last June, the signing of the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act made June 19th a national federal holiday. While Juneteenth has been celebrated by African Americans for more than 150 years, it was once one of America's best-kept secrets.

The story of Juneteenth began 2½ years after President Lincoln signed the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, liberating about 4 million enslaved Americans. Some Texas enslavers resisted complying with the executive order. On June 19, 1865, 2,000 Union troops arrived in Galveston Bay, Texas, to enforce compliance. A handful of Texas communities continued to observe June 19th as America's true "Independence Day," dubbing it "Juneteenth." Gradually the celebration began to pick up steam.

Fast forward to 2016.

Opal Lee, a 90 year-old retired Texas teacher, brought attention to the need for a national Juneteenth celebration by walking 1,400 miles from Fort Worth to Washington, D.C., and momentum grew! But it was the outcry in response to former president Donald Trump's plans to hold a campaign rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on June 19, 2020, that brought Juneteenth into the national spotlight. When Trump agreed to reschedule the rally, millions of people started asking, "What's Juneteenth?"

Juneteenth is a time to celebrate both freedom from America's oppressive 200-year-old slave laws and the hope that America will live up to its pledge of liberty and justice for all.

While the struggle to ensure that Americans are free to enjoy their constitutional rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness still lives on, I am encouraged by the future implications of a local initiative, the Juneteenth Community Consortium.

Formed in early 2022, this group of leaders of Greater Williamsburg area organizations (<https://www.juneteenthcc.org/>) is transforming our Juneteenth celebrations. The primary goals are to educate, commemorate and celebrate Juneteenth, as well as coordinate

celebrations and create a website to make people aware of scheduled events.

Upon joining the consortium, I was struck by how our diverse group exemplified key principles of Building a Bigger Table — welcoming, inclusive and working together for the good of the community. I found myself thinking, “What would happen if this spirit of collaboration spilled over into the community and helped to transform our health care, legal, educational, housing and policing systems?”

Imagine what living in the Historic Triangle would look like if we took to heart the words of business magnate Henry Ford who said, “Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success.”

Today we can gather to partake of the fruit of the consortium and its members’ labor — a wide variety of Juneteenth events, including an eye-catching art exhibit at the Stryker Building, a Saturday morning motor parade and free admission to programming at Colonial Williamsburg.

On Sunday, there will be an Interfaith religious service, a celebration at the Triangle, once the business hub of the Black community, and screenings of the educational documentaries “History Half Told is Untold” and “Only Us” at historic First Baptist Church.

Monday, June 20th — the “official” holiday observance — will be relatively low key. Federal and state offices will be closed, giving people a chance to rest from a weekend chock full of stimulating events.

On Tuesday, June 21st, community members are invited to attend a virtual Juneteenth “After Party” sponsored by Coming to the Table-Historic Triangle. This is an opportunity to come together for civil

discussions about what Juneteenth 2022 meant and to discover new ways to improve the 2023 celebration and our community.

I hope to see you at the “Table”!

When we come together to build a more inclusive and welcoming community, we all win!

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# Building a Bigger Table: Working toward equality for all

By Laura D. Hill  
Virginia Gazette

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(Charles Haire // Shutterstock)

Millions of Americans are looking forward to a three-day weekend to celebrate the 4th of July. Two weeks ago we celebrated Juneteenth, a national holiday recognizing enslaved Americans’ freedom from oppressive slave laws. Now, we recognize the brave signers of the Declaration of Independence and the pursuit of freedom.

Americans have several types of freedoms. The Bill of Rights outlines our freedoms of speech, religion, keeping and bearing arms, press, assembly, and the right to petition the government. But, with freedom comes responsibility.

For example, the Second Amendment gives Americans the right to bear arms. Yet, we understand that the recent mass shooting of 19 school children and two teachers in Uvalde, Texas, was not what the framers of the Bill of Rights had in mind.

The First Amendment grants freedom of assembly, which allows for peaceful gatherings and protests. The January 6th violent attack on the U.S. Capitol that resulted in multiple deaths and injuries and the arrest of more than 700 people was not what the framers of the Bill of Rights had in mind.

Exercising freedom responsibly means that we use our freedoms as an opportunity to reach out to help ourselves and to help others. Actress Audrey Hepburn once said, “you have two hands, one for helping yourself, the other for helping others.”

Opportunities to help others abound! In fact, this is the purpose of building bigger tables. By making space for those who have been historically disenfranchised, you are using your freedoms to benefit others. Furthermore, you are ensuring that all people have opportunities to live and work in communities where they are seen and their voices are heard.

Inherent in freedom is power, which must be exercised responsibly too. The signers of the Declaration of Independence understood the power that came with being free of Great Britain and King George III’s tyranny. By becoming “free and independent states” they could self-govern, thereby controlling their own lives and destinies.

The problem was they failed to use their power to benefit enslaved Americans, who were in bondage due to legalized slavery, which existed in all 13 colonies.

When asked to speak at a 1852 Independence Day celebration in Rochester, New York, abolitionist Frederick Douglass highlighted this dilemma by asking,

“What to the American slave is the 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.”

Our freedoms are interconnected. In his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, civil rights icon Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. reminded us to live in solidarity with one another. King said, "No one is free until we are all free." Notably, the first freedom fighter and casualty of the American Revolution was Crispus Attucks, a man of African and Native American (Wampanoag) ancestry, who was killed in 1770 during the Boston Massacre.

Today, millions of Americans believe their freedoms are on the chopping block and our democracy is under attack. Voting rights are the cornerstone of a representative democracy. Efforts to strengthen and restore provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act stalled in Congress in 2021 and the Freedom to Vote Act failed to get the required votes needed in January 2022. Meanwhile, state legislatures across the nation enacted laws to make access to voting more restrictive.

What better time to "come to the table" to work towards realizing the self-evident truth that all are created equal and endowed with unalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

When we come together to create more just and equitable communities, we all win!

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# Building a Bigger Table with Liberia

By Laura D. Hill  
Virginia Gazette

July 23, 2022



*Colonial Williamsburg's historical interpreters collaborated with Liberia's B4 Youth Theatre group for a dramatic performance about the story of the United States' first and only attempt at starting a colony. (Courtesy of Tilford Bartman)*

History came to life recently at Colonial Williamsburg's Hennage Auditorium when CW's historical interpreters collaborated with Liberia's [B4 Youth Theatre](#) group for a compelling dramatic performance about the story of the United States' first and only attempt at starting a colony.

This year marks the bicentennial of Liberia, established in 1822 to send free Black Americans “back to where they came from.” While former president Donald Trump reintroduced this phrase in 2019 when he tweeted that four congresswomen of color should “Go back where they came from,” there was a colonization movement in the 1800s with this aim.

It was fueled by angst from southern slaveholders who feared that free Blacks were a threat to their hand-over-fist profits from institutionalized slavery. Most southern states had laws requiring newly freed Blacks to leave within 60 days. However, the abolition of slavery in England in 1807 and the increase in the number of free Blacks after the Revolutionary War stoked fears. Would living around free Blacks motivate those enslaved to resist the chokehold of slavery?

In 1816 the American Colonization Society (ACS) was formed. Similar to the Virginia Company of London, which financed the English colonists 1607 voyage to Virginia, the ACS recruited free Blacks, leased ships and purchased supplies. On February 6, 1820 the maiden voyage began at the New York Harbor when a ship named “Elizabeth” embarked on the “Return” journey to West Africa, arriving on March 9, 1820.

White ACS representatives were sent and charged with identifying suitable land and negotiating with African tribal leaders to purchase it. Like the 17th century English colonists, they met with resistance from indigenous people.

After more than a year of failed negotiation attempts along the West African coast and the loss of lives due to malaria, dysentery and diseases, a tract of land bordering Sierra Leone and Guinea was negotiated for at gunpoint. In exchange for his land, the African ruler received about \$300 dollars in goods, including tobacco, guns and gunpowder.

Twenty-five years later, on July 26, 1847, Liberia's freed Black Americans declared independence from the U.S. and drafted a constitution. Liberia became the first African republic and successfully fought to maintain its sovereignty as European nations divided and colonized Africa.

Yet despite their accomplishments, there was a colossal failure. They replicated the oppressive social systems and status hierarchy they had escaped in the U.S. Descendants of Liberia's Black Americans comprised the ruling class, who had voting rights and enjoyed "privileged" status, while descendants of the natives were denied voting rights and treated as second class citizens.

This mirrored the colonists who, after suffering unrelenting persecution in Europe, settled in America and codified laws to oppress indigenous and African people. In Liberia the oppressed became oppressors for about 150 years, until a violent coup in 1980 led to civil war that wreaked havoc on the economy, destroyed millions of lives and decimated the young nation for more than 35 years.

The play "200 Years of Returns" was the brainchild of Dr. Jasmine Banks Jones, executive director of the B4 (Burning Barriers, Building Bridges) Youth Theatre group, one of four remaining theater arts groups in Liberia. However, writing the play was a collaborative effort that included Katrinah Lewis, CW's artistic director of museum theatre, and members of the interpreter department. Their next performance will be on July 26th, Liberia's Independence Day, at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. Then, in December, CW interpreters will travel to Liberia.

Making connections and working together to tell the often overlooked story of America's historical ties to Liberia exemplifies the heart of building bigger tables.

When we come together to build a more inclusive and welcoming global community, 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-historictriangle.org](http://Comingtothetable-historictriangle.org).*

# Building a Bigger Table for Black-owned businesses

By Laura D. Hill  
Virginia Gazette  
Aug 12, 2022



Chris Knight cuts the ribbon celebrating the grand opening of his cookie business, Cookie Chris, with the help of Williamsburg Mayor Doug Pons, (Laura D. Hill)

Recently I attended the grand opening of Cookie Chris, a homemade cookie shop in Williamsburg. My heart filled with hope as I watched Mayor Doug Pons and 17-year-old entrepreneur Chris Knight joining together to cut the ceremonial ribbon, as a cheering crowd looked on and cameras flashed.

The wide toothy smile on Knight's face spoke volumes. It mirrored the smile on Andre McLaughlin's face, who a week earlier celebrated the grand opening of Andre Julius — Custom Suits & Accessories, a men's apparel store on New Town Avenue.

The dream of business ownership that Knight and McLaughlin have realized has been stirring in the hearts of Black business owners for more than a century.



Andre McLaughlin recently celebrated the grand opening of Andre Julius — Custom Suits & Accessories, a men’s apparel store on New Town Avenue. Courtesy of Andre McLaughlin

**August is National Black Business Month, a time to reflect upon and celebrate the achievements of Black businesses.**

Fifty years after the abolishment of slavery, Black businesses thrived in American cities, notably in Tulsa, Oklahoma, once known as “Black Wall Street.” In Williamsburg, Blacks owned homes and businesses along Duke of Gloucester Street.

The 1920s restoration of Colonial Williamsburg, led by Dr. W.A.R. Goodwin, the reverend of Bruton Parish Church, and financed by the deep pockets of John D. Rockefeller resulted in the displacement of Black families and businesses.

Undeterred, in the 1930s Black-owned businesses set up shops near the intersection of Scotland Street and Richmond Road. Known as “The Triangle Business Block,” it became the Black business hub until the early 1980s when the area was rezoned.

Today Black-owned businesses still face obstacles. According to research by Citigroup Bank, racism’s price tag over a 20-year period was a whopping \$16 trillion! A breakdown of the costs revealed that more than 75%, \$13 trillion, was attributed to the loss of revenue for Black-owned businesses due to discriminatory lending practices.

Fortunately, new local business initiatives are designed to help Black-owned businesses stay ahead of the curve.

In November 2021, the non-profit Black Business Concierge was started to help connect potential customers to Black-owned businesses. The brainchild of Antonia Saunders, president of Williamsburg Action, a racial justice advocacy group, Black Business Concierge aims to help business owners to create generational wealth.

Lawrence and T’juana Gholson of Maximized Life Coaching and Mentoring are local Black business owners who provide a host of business-friendly services.

Last August, I attended one of their free monthly Business Bootcamps. Leaders of the Greater Williamsburg Chamber of Commerce, Hampton University's Virginia Workforce Innovation and Entrepreneur Center, and SCORE were on hand leading workshops to help put new business owners on the path to success.

Additionally, the Gholsons own the Maximum Building and Working Nimbly, which offers new businesses an affordable shared office environment. Their newest venture is "Make 'Ur Merch," a merchandising collaborative space designed to help small business owners test the market for their products before venturing out on their own.

Building a bigger table that embraces Black-owned businesses is easy as 1, 2, 3. The first step is to seek out and patronize Black-owned businesses. Next, contact the Greater Williamsburg Chamber of Commerce to inquire about opportunities to mentor Black entrepreneurs or to serve as a fiscal sponsor for a Black-owned business. Third, look for opportunities to collaborate on projects with Black-owned businesses.

Danny Thomas, the founder of St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital, once said "Success has nothing to do with what you gain in life or accomplish for yourself. It's what you do for others."

As Chris Knight and Andre McLaughlin continue on the lucrative path of business ownership, they stand on the broad shoulders of Black business owners who came before them, while carrying the hopes and dreams of members of the Williamsburg Black community today.

*Laura D. Hill is the founder and director of Coming to the Table-Historic Triangle, a program of the Virginia Racial Healing Institute. Learn more about her work at [Comingtothetable-historictriangle.org](http://Comingtothetable-historictriangle.org).*

# Building a Bigger Table to Commemorate the first Africans in Virginia

By Laura D. Hill  
Virginia Gazette

Aug 19, 2022



*Engraving shows the arrival of a Dutch slave ship with a group of African slaves for sale, Jamestown, Virginia, 1619. (Hulton Archive/Getty Images) (Hulton Archive/Getty Images)*

On August 20, 1619, a large ship arrived off the coast of present-day Hampton, Virginia, carrying what English colonist John Rolfe described as

“nothing but 20 and odd negroes.” Little did Rolfe know that these Africans and their descendants would transform the Virginia colony, which had been struggling to build and sustain an economy.

About nine years earlier Rolfe began experimenting with growing tobacco commercially using Spanish tobacco seeds, which produced a more pleasing taste than the tobacco indigenous people grew and smoked.

The labor force consisted of English indentured servants who were growing and harvesting tobacco in Virginia several years before the first Africans, who are believed to have been from Angola, were brought here on the Treasurer and White Lion.

English privateer had taken the Angolans as “booty” after attacking the San Juan Bautista, the slave ship that was transporting them to Vera Cruz, Mexico, a Spanish colony known for its sugar plantations.

While the Angolans were empty-handed, they retained the knowledge and skills they had learned in their homeland. They knew how to lead empires, build homes and boats, make metal tools and weapons, weave cloth to make clothing, design and make musical instruments and jewelry, and to grow and harvest crops, notably tobacco.

Angolans had been growing and smoking tobacco since the 1500s after being introduced to tobacco by the Portuguese. This would prove to be an invaluable skill to the colonists. Within 50 years laws would be codified in Jamestown to exploit the knowledge, skills and labor of Africans by enslaving them.

African labor, skills and knowledge would build and keep afloat southern colleges and universities, including William & Mary, the University of Virginia and Georgetown University. The homes of several U.S. presidents including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison were built by the people they enslaved.

Virginia would continue to pass laws to disenfranchise people of African ancestry, resulting in the 1705 Slave Codes — thereby, building a colony and state that stifled African American voices and well-being to generate more wealth.

By 1860, Virginia would boast the highest population and highest enslaved population in the southern states. Moreover, the antebellum south exceeded the wealth of northern states with the per capita income in Virginia being in the top percentile.

Today, 403 years later, Virginians have the responsibility to address the legacies of slavery, which have resulted in the racial unrest, injustices and disparities that we still witness today.

We begin with a commitment to build bigger tables that include and value African American voices.

Next, we help to organize and participate in honest discussions about racial issues in our community. We also correct false historical narratives that have ignored, glossed over and romanticized the human suffering that African Americans have endured due to generational trauma caused by dehumanizing systems of slavery, Jim Crow and racial discrimination.

Finally, by acknowledging the racial history of our community and taking tangible actions to repair the harms, we are choosing the clear path to racial healing, reconciliation and justice.

When we come together to create a more inclusive and just community, we all win!

*Laura D. Hill is the founder and director of Coming to the Table-Historic Triangle, a program of the Virginia Racial Healing Institute that is affiliated with a national racial reconciliation organization. Learn more at [www.comingtothetable-historictriangle.org/](http://www.comingtothetable-historictriangle.org/).*

# Building a Bigger Table to recover Forgotten History

By Laura D. Hill  
Virginia Gazette

Sep 16, 2022



*Hundley family descendants and friends gathered for the unveiling of a historical marker for The Reservation on Sept. 10, 2022. Courtesy of Laura D. Hill (The Virginian-Pilot)*

Years ago I learned an African term called “Sankofa” that illustrates the importance of learning from the past. Sankofa means “it’s not wrong to go back for what has been left behind or forgotten.”

Last Saturday morning, I witnessed “Sankofa” in action when I attended the unveiling of a new historical marker at the entrance of Yorktown Naval Weapons Station. The marker was researched, petitioned for and

paid for by descendants of The Reservation, a free African American community that owned homes and businesses there from 1862 to 1922. When the government seized the land to build a military depot, more than 75 families were displaced.

The recognition of The Reservation highlights a national movement to reclaim African American history. The Virginia Department of Historic Resources has the oldest historic marker program in the United States. According to their records, of the 2,500 new historical markers erected, most recognize newly revealed African American history.



While people nationwide are working to uncover and acknowledge America's history, others are working to conceal and restrict teaching about slavery, Jim Crow and/or the Civil Rights movement. Recent news

reports illustrate this point. Earlier this month VPM, a Richmond-based news service, reported that tours have resumed at the Virginia governor's mansion. However, tour guides did not mention enslaved people who built and lived at the executive mansion for approximately 50 years.

Last month, CNN reported that 60 years ago, Colonial Williamsburg paved over an area that once was home to historic First Baptist Church, one of the oldest African American congregations in the country. Today, CW is footing the bill to excavate the area, which has unearthed human remains and artifacts that have gained national attention. No longer content with history being "half told," CW is collaborating with Let Freedom Ring Foundation and others to tell the "whole story."

The choice is clear. We either move beyond our personal discomfort to learn from the past or we bury our heads in the sand to try to avoid an inevitable day of reckoning with our forgotten history.

Let's embrace this "Sankofa" moment by building bigger tables for honest dialogue and reconciliation. The first step is to acknowledge our family history, even the painful truths that we would rather erase. Admittedly, it's easier said than done, but recently a brave woman visited Williamsburg to shine light on the way.

When Georgia-native Donna Melcher learned of her family's ties to slavery in Virginia, she began a journey of racial healing that brought her here. Determined to look her family history squarely in the face without whitewashing the uncomfortable parts, she stood before a crowd of more than 50 people, apologized for the harm her ancestors had caused and took tangible, reparative steps to make amends. "One day I will be somebody's ancestor and I want to be the ancestor that got it right," Melcher said.

Secondly, re-educate yourself. Free webinars, classes and educational materials abound! A visit to the Williamsburg Regional Library or a local

bookstore to obtain The New York Times bestseller “Caste: The Origins of our Discontent” by Isabel Wilkerson is a good place to start. In “Caste,” Wilkerson examines the roots of racial hierarchy systems and how they still influence our lives today.

Third, take advantage of opportunities to connect with people who do not look like you. Coming to the Table-Historic Triangle and our community partners plan monthly programs to bring diverse people together to enjoy thought-provoking books, meals, discussions and educational events. There is a seat at our table for you!

When we come together to build more inclusive and welcoming communities, we all win!

*Laura D. Hill is the founder and director of Coming to the Table-Historic Triangle, a program of the Virginia Racial Healing Institute. Learn more about her work at [Comingtothetable-historictriangle.org](http://Comingtothetable-historictriangle.org).*

# Building a bigger table to repair systems that perpetuate injustices

By Laura D. Hill  
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Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Isabel Wilkerson gave the keynote address at William & Mary's Women's Weekend, which was held Sept. 16-18. (Skip Rowland/William & Mary) (Skip Rowland/Skip Rowland)

Recently I attended William & Mary's Women's Weekend, where more than 300 alumni and friends gathered to celebrate, support and empower women.

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Isabel Wilkerson gave a powerful keynote address that focused on our responsibility to repair broken social systems that are based upon centuries-old racial hierarchies, which determined who had access to community resources and whether people were valued or devalued.

In her New York Times-bestselling book, “Caste: The Origins of our Discontent,” Wilkerson chronicled hierarchy systems based on race, ethnicity or religion that were designed to create stratified societies where everyone was assigned a “place” and people were restricted from moving beyond a predetermined station in life.



In 17th-century Virginia, this ideology was used to position Europeans and their descendants as superior, while indigenous and people of African ancestry were viewed as subordinate. Four hundred years later, this flawed way of thinking is still impacting our lives.

Wilkerson illustrated this point by sharing a story about her father, who graduated from Hampton Institute (now Hampton University) and served as a distinguished Tuskegee Airman during World War II. After the war, he and his fellow airmen were denied opportunities to work as pilots. According to America's racial hierarchy system, Black men could not be pilots because they lacked the necessary intelligence, leadership or coordination.

Another glaring example of a racial hierarchy system existed in the National Football League. Growing up in the 1970s, my Sunday afternoon ritual was watching football games with my older brothers. I often found myself wondering why there were no Black NFL quarterbacks. I would later learn that it was due to the misguided belief that Black athletes lacked intellectual and leadership qualities to succeed as quarterbacks. Sound familiar?

The first time I saw a Black NFL quarterback was in 1984 when the Houston Oilers signed Warren Moon. He went on to become a nine-time Pro Bowler and was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2006. By 2017 all 32 NFL teams had started a Black quarterback. In 2020, NFL history was made when 10 of the 32 NFL starting quarterbacks were Black. Today, the highest paid player in the NFL is Patrick Mahomes, a Black quarterback who has led his team to four AFC championships and a Super Bowl victory in 2020.

Hierarchies to keep people in their "place" can also be based upon gender. The story of women at William & Mary is a fitting example. For its first 225 years William & Mary was an all-male school. For centuries American women were viewed as second class citizens and denied the right to vote. But in 1918, amidst financial struggles, the women's suffrage movement and the global Spanish flu pandemic, William & Mary opened its doors to women. Today William & Mary has its first woman president, Katherine Rowe, and 58% of the undergraduate student population are women.

While we can not change what has happened in the past, we can analyze and repair the systems that continue to perpetuate injustices. Wilkerson

compared this to taking responsibility for repairing an old house. “We may not have built the house, but when the basement is flooded with water, we have to fix what’s broken.”

For communities nationwide, “fixing what’s broken” has led to establishing truth and reconciliation committees to uncover and address their racial histories and to make amends. In 2021, Williamsburg established its first-ever Truth and Reconciliation Committee, which I am honored to serve on.

When we come together to create more truthful and just communities, we all win!

Laura D. Hill is the founder and director of Coming to the Table-Historic Triangle, a program of the Virginia Racial Healing Institute. Learn more about her work at [Comingtothetable-historictriangle.org](https://comingtothetable-historictriangle.org).