

By A Thread: An Examination of Chattel Slavery at the
Capstone

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By A Thread: An Examination of Chattel Slavery at The Capstone

The institution of slavery played an integral role in the establishment and development of The University of Alabama. Although there are some records that remain, currently housed in Hoole Special Collections, it is difficult to determine the specific number of enslaved persons on campus, and what happened to them after emancipation. Instead of focusing on the life of an individual, this essay will focus on three receipts detailing clothing purchases made on behalf of enslaved persons throughout the antebellum period of the University's history.

Material history is a way to examine the cultural as well as economic history of slavery at Alabama. Katie Knowles examined material history of slave clothing in her thesis *Fashioning Slavery: Slaves and Clothing in the U.S. South, 1830-1865*, including the lack of investment in high quality cloth for enslaved persons clothing. Enslaved were able to acquire fancy clothing through bartering or purchase, supplementing their wardrobe for Sundays and special occasions.¹ The University of Alabama purchased expensive pre-made clothing. This is especially remarkable considering that the University did not own the majority of enslaved persons, instead leasing them from faculty and the community for extended periods of time.² The University of Alabama on one level made a business decision to invest in their property, marketing themselves from top to bottom as the premier higher education institution for the sons of Southern planters. However, investing in nice clothing has a psychological and emotional impact on both the enslaved and white people involved. Is it really possible to look at another young man as inferior, when his dress is better than your own? How does one reconcile the concept of "property" with

¹ Katie Knowles, "Fashioning Slavery: Slaves and Clothing in the U.S. South, 1830-1865." Rice University, 2014. 142.

² Hilary N. Green, *Hallowed Ground: Race, Slavery and the University of Alabama*. Walking tour, 2016. Accessed December 11, 2016. <https://spark.adobe.com/page/3pmJR6un1szMN/>.

an individual who is more highly trained than yourself? Without active investment in white supremacist ideology, the enslavers would have to face the horror of chattel slavery.

Without primary sources that explicitly answer these questions, it is impossible to know how all parties involved felt during this time. However, economic histories alone cannot answer these questions either. Instead, this piece examines the human impact of economic decisions made during the early years of the University of Alabama's history. Due to the lack of more traditional slave records, such as slave schedules and property inventories, an accurate account of the exact number of enslaved persons compelled into forced labor is not known. Clothing purchases provide the opportunity to look at decisions impacting certain enslaved persons while conjecturing about the impact on others. Examining these purchases reveals the complex and intimate nature of chattel slavery and white supremacy on this campus, and to the larger Tuscaloosa community. What cannot be documented is the *soul value*³, and whether enslaved people at the university separated this internal valuation while being fully aware of their monetized value in the Peculiar Institution.

This essay will examine four receipt purchases: two from 1839, 1846, and 1860. The early receipts recorded purchases of luxurious materials and payment to a local seamstress. This section will focus on the intimacy of producing clothing in addition to material choices so early into the school's existence. The second receipt in 1846 is for Moses, an enslaved man at the University with enough value for the University to provide a full wardrobe. The final receipt from 1860 is a purchase for clothing and insurance for enslaved persons. What does this purchase reveal about the mindset of the University, especially in the infancy of the Civil War?

³ Dania Ramey Berry defines spirit or soul value as "...an intangible marker that often defied monetization yet spoke to the spirit and soul of who they were as human beings. It represented the self-worth of enslaved people" Dania Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation*. Beacon Press, Boston 2017 (Kindle Edition). 6.

All costs have been adjusted to 2016 inflation to give the reader an accurate idea of the amount of money the University paid for clothing and materials. The primacy document is included at the end of each section. 2016 is the latest fiscal year on record, so to determine 2016 price translations I used the free website www.in2013dollars.com. It calculates inflation using cumulative price change, average inflation rate, and Consumer Price Index (CPI).

Part I – 1839, New Threads - The Early Years (2016 inflation cost)

<i>May 18</i>	<i>To Mrs. J.C. Buchanan, received payment in full from B. Manly, for the University</i>		
	<i>To making 5 shirts for college servant</i>	<i>50 cents each</i>	<i>\$1.50 (\$37.37)</i>
	<i>To making 2 do (shirts) for college servant</i>	<i>50 cents each</i>	<i>\$1.50 (\$37.37)</i>
	<i>Finding thread & buttons, also lining for 2 shirts</i>		<i>\$0.37 (\$9.22)</i>
	<i>Making 2 Round Jackets at 1.00 each</i>		<i>\$2.00 (\$49.83)</i>
	<i>Making 3 pairs of Pantaloons at 75 cts each</i>		<i>\$2.25 (\$56.05)</i>
			<i>\$7.62 (\$189.84)</i>
<i>November 28</i>	<i>To Cook & Korengay</i>		
	<i>To 2 pairs satinnet (satin) pants</i>		
	<i>For servant boy Sam</i>		<i>\$8.00 (\$199.30)</i>
	<i>1 satinnet vest “</i>		<i>\$2.25 (\$56.05)</i>
			<i>\$10.25 (\$255.36)</i>

Cotton revolutionized and restructured how social classes presented their status through clothing. It was also the material that produced ready-made clothes as a part of the British Industrial Revolution.⁴ By the time the United States forged its independence from Great Britain and invented the Cotton Gin in 1799, the country was well prepared to imitate European fashions in addition to manufacturing cheap cloth for clothing enslaved persons.⁵ In the early years of the

⁴ Beverly Lemire, *Cotton*. 2011, Berg. New York. 33.

⁵ Knowles, 62.

University, the decision (most likely by the faculty senate and President Manly) was made to clothe some enslaved persons not with inexpensive Negro cloth, but to provide a wardrobe fashioned in the image of a new, yet prestigious university.

This is a sharp turn from the initial anti-slavery organizing, led by new faculty member Henry Tutwiler and the Alabama Colonization Society from 1831 to 1837, the year Basil Manly arrived at the Capstone.⁶ Tutwiler left shortly after, allowing Manly to advance the pro-slavery cause on campus, and in Tuscaloosa.⁷ By 1839, he is authorizing payment on two receipts for enslaved person's clothing (referred to as "servants") outfitting them in high quality fabrics while also purchasing multiples of the same garments. If an enslaved person was property that had no rights,⁸ how do these purchases fit into the historical record, and what insight can they provide into the early years of the institution?

The first receipt is for payment to seamstress Mrs. J.C. Buchanan for the completion of five shirts, three pairs of pantaloons, two round jackets, buttons, thread, and lining for two shirts.⁹ While the receipt does not specify if the purchase is for one or multiple people, however this is a large order totaling \$7.62, translating to \$189.84 in 2016 dollars. While the material of the round jacket¹⁰ is not specified, paired with the pantaloons implies a specific uniform with the ability to change clothes more frequently than the average nineteenth century person.

Additionally, the purchase of buttons, thread and lining showed that there was expected and required maintenance for purchased clothing. Most clothing, but specifically clothing for

⁶ Albert Brophy, *University, Court and Slave: Pro-Slavery Thought in Southern Colleges and Courts and the Coming of Civil War*. Oxford University Press, New York. 2016. 97-98

⁷ Ibid, 98.

⁸ Ibid, 98.

⁹ James B. Sellers, *History of the University of Alabama Volume I – 1818-1902*. University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa. 1953. 39.

¹⁰ Round jackets most likely refers to Roundabout jackets, designed to allow free movement by men in high activity positions. Pantaloons were a tight-fitting bottom, ending at the ankle or calf. Knowles, 81.

enslaved persons, was made of low quality yet durable material, designed to last a long time. Before the university reached its ten-year anniversary, Manly's purchase on behalf of the school demonstrates a dedication to curating an institution of learning that would attract the sons of planter elites in the state. This image must be reflected from himself to the enslaved who had daily contact with faculty and students.

President Manly could easily have viewed these purchases as an investment in school property, however that does not explain the selection of a seamstress to provide the clothing. Seamstresses typically measure, fit, then complete assigned clothing, and their creation is an intimate process. So how does a white woman complete this type of work without violating her honor? Most likely, an enslaved woman or man provided the measurements on her behalf mitigating the need for personal interaction. White supremacy would ensure Mrs. Buchanan was protected, but her selection is questionable because the University would need to protect its reputation from potential attack. Yet it is a compelling thought exercise to imagine the dynamics of a white seamstress in close quarters with enslaved persons, most likely men, of African descent. Did she feel excitement at the prospect of working with nice fabrics, or at being so close to people deemed both exotic and inferior? Again, many questions that cannot be answered without primary sources. Manly and the University did not choose to employ Mrs. Buchanan again, at least in any records that survived. Instead the school chose to purchase ready-made items for enslaved persons in visibly prominent positions.

In November of 1839, Manly authorized payment for two satinet pants and a vest for "servant boy Sam", totaling \$10.25, or \$255.36 in 2016 dollars. This is an exorbitant amount of money to spend on a child, especially one who was viewed as property. Satinet is a material mix

of woven cotton and wool, worn by those who performed heavy labor in hot climates.¹¹ Again, the argument can be made that Manly was simply investing in property, but the choice in material and quantity tells a different story. One major clue from the receipt is “servant boy Sam”, boy referring to Sam’s age and the high probability that clothing would need to be replaced as he grew older.¹² Vests were common in everyday dress, to the point that one was not considered fully dressed without a shirt and vest.¹³ Sam was in a position of visible prominence, one that would require a specialized skill set reflected in his level of dress. Sam almost certainly knew that he was a valuable person, not property, to the university.

Most, if not all, enslaved persons were well aware of their value, whether they learned through paying attention during auctions to eavesdropping on conversations between white slave owners.¹⁴ Sam, and other enslaved persons were also aware of their value as human beings. They knew that chattel slavery was wrong and they were being exploited and abused by those who claimed to “own” them.¹⁵ Further, they possessed specific skills that enhanced the productivity and image of the university. Manly’s decision to clothe these men in high quality fabric betrays his belief in the inferiority of the enslaved. If they were truly intellectually inferior, they would not hold positions of visible prominence. Instead, those positions would gainfully employ local white people, clothing them in high quality uniforms and raising the overall image of the university. By clothing enslaved men in nice materials, and hiring a seamstress to create their wardrobe, Manly’s actions displayed a confidence and value in enslaved labor. White

¹¹, Knowles, 52

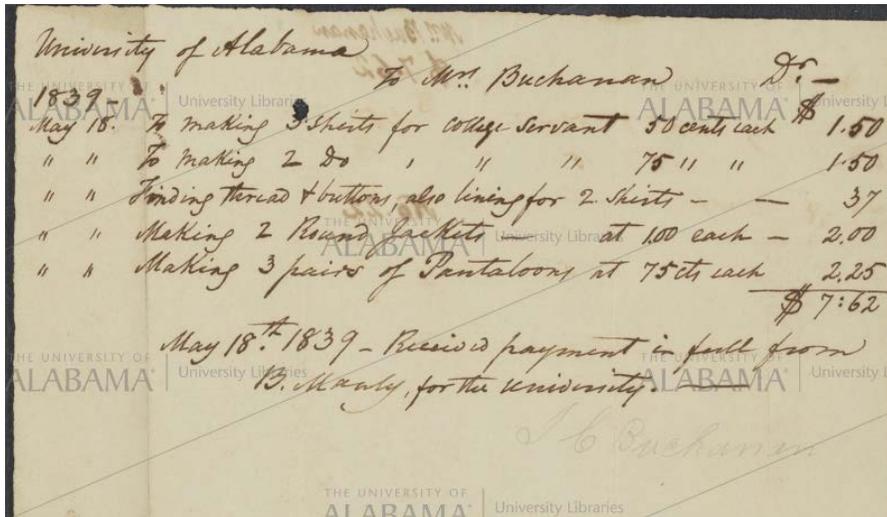
¹² University of Alabama Libraries

¹³ Jill Condra and Anita Stamper, *Clothing through American History: The Civil War through the Gilded Age, 1861-1899*. Greenwood, Denver. 2011.162-163

¹⁴ Berry, 40, 91

¹⁵ Heather Andrea Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery*. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill. 2012. 95-97.

supremacist ideology allowed Manly and the University to avoid confronting their complicity perpetuating slavery.



University of
Alabama Libraries
Early
Administrative
Records Digital
Collection.

Part II – October 17, 1846, Taunt Thread - The Middle Years (2016 Inflation costs)

To 1 coat, 1 vest, and two pairs of pants

For servant Moses \$9.00 (\$272.26)

Received payment of B. Manly

Edmund Rourke & Co.

A little after the fifteen-year anniversary of the founding of The University of Alabama, President Manly paid \$9.00 for one coat, vest and two pairs of pants for Moses. \$9.00 in 1846 translates to \$272.26 in 2016 dollars. Imagine spending that amount of money to clothe a valet or concierge at a five-star hotel. While they may look nice, people working in these positions are rarely wearing nice materials purchased by their employer. Manly continued the trend of purchasing nice clothing for enslaved men who worked on campus, but this receipt recorded a shift in purchasing strategy from the head of the university.

First, Manly ordered pre-made clothing for Moses from local goods merchant Edmund Rourke & Company. Unfortunately, there is no further information about the merchant, the other

goods they sold and other customers. But it can be confidently assumed that at this point, the university had helped to cultivate a growing business community in Tuscaloosa, serving faculty, students, and the expanding community. Manufactured clothing mitigated the potential for interracial relations between Mrs. Buchanan and enslaved men (at least, at the University). These purchases also supported Northern factories and merchants who manufactured clothing using cotton harvested in the South.¹⁶

Then, Manly purchased two pairs of pants to allow Moses the opportunity to have a change of clothing. Generally, expansive wardrobes were limited to wealthy white Americans. Combined with the coat and vest purchase, this receipt is for the replenishment or upgrade of Moses' uniform. The consistent purchases of clothing for enslaved persons throughout the pre-Civil War years show a continued acknowledgement of the value Moses provided to the school through his skillset. However, Southern philosophy especially at the University provided the required exposure and investment in white supremacy that allowed divestment from the atrocities of slavery.

Southern schools were created to create Southern scholars who would defend Southern institutions¹⁷, and the University of Alabama was no exception. Young men learned to defend slavery in literary societies, while listening to oratory in the 1840s focused on political and pro-slavery messages¹⁸. Looking to the 1847 address of James Wright Taylor can provide insight into the philosophical and ideological mindset at the University of Alabama, supported by President Manly. Taylor represented a shift in the role of higher education, advancing that the University prepares special men – separate from Alabama society – to “protect the peculiar rights

¹⁶ Knowles, 58-60.

¹⁷ Brophy, 101.

¹⁸ Brophy, 101-102, 107.

and institutions which belong to it, as one of the Plantation States of the South.”¹⁹ He illustrated this using the metaphor of the University as a magnetic force, attracting the best to the surface. As the particles would be replaced by new ones, the old ones would fall away. These young men would return home to their communities as teachers carrying the University’s morals and philosophical teachings, thus influencing the entire state.²⁰

How would Moses have reconciled working, and living, in close proximity with white Alabamians who viewed him as inferior while wearing an expensive uniform? One cannot imagine the psychological stress of navigating the mental minefield of enslavers who had to constantly work to deny the humanity of those in bondage. One strategy Moses could have utilized was to buy into the economic value placed on him, through his wardrobe and price paid by the university, as his soul value. Internalizing racial oppression would have allowed Moses to forgive all transgressions perpetuated by students and staff, because surely, they were aware of his value based off his clothing. It is more likely that Moses divorced his soul value from his wardrobe. Nice clothing is not a salve for forced labor, psychological and emotional abuse suffered during slavery. It is not a reprieve from being constantly on call for the students and faculty. Moses’ soul value sustained him in the face of constant abuse, protecting him in a way his wardrobe never could.

Manly may have believed that his purchases were ones of required property maintenance, but he was again acknowledging the value enslaved workers brought to the University. Competing for the best and brightest of Alabama’s planter elite involved creating and maintaining an image of intellectual superiority, serving as a beacon against the anti-slavery movement of the North. In order to portray this image, Manly had no choice but to clothe Moses, Sam, and other enslaved

¹⁹ Brophy, 109.

²⁰ Ibid.

men in quality clothing. Inadvertently, this again acknowledged the skillset these men brought to the University provided enough value to be clothed at the level of the planter elites who viewed them as inferior.

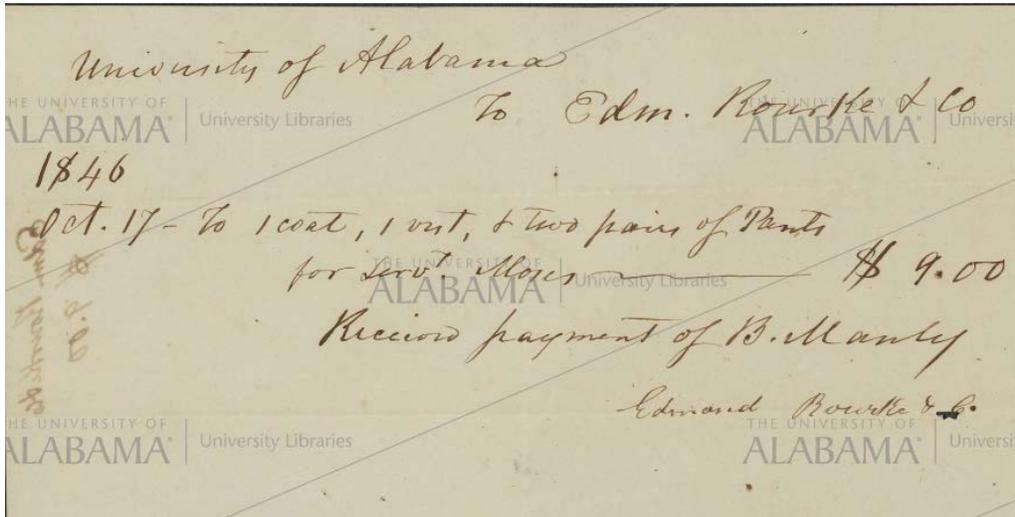


Fig 2: Receipt, University of Alabama Libraries Early Administrative Records Digital Collection.

Part III – September 21, 1860 Worn fabric and the end of an era (2016 Inflation costs)

Pay Geo. Beneagh

Two hundred and one 22/100 dollars (\$201.²²) (\$5,557.83) for clothing and insurance of slaves

With tension between Southern and Northern states rapidly approaching their secessionist peak, President L.C. Garland authorized \$201.22 towards clothing and insurance for enslaved individuals. A similar investment in 2016 would cost \$5,557.83. Following the purchasing pattern established by Manly, Garland purchased pre-made clothing for enslaved persons at the University. Without any additional details on the specific items purchased, limited information can be inferred from Garland's decision. Yet so close to the dawn of the Civil War, purchasing insurance on those enslaved was an economic leap of faith that the Peculiar Institution would

endure, maintaining an established lifestyle built on the labor of many to benefit the few. This purchase is one worth probing

White slave owners who purchased life insurance on the enslaved sought to protect their investment. From this receipt George Beneagh was most likely the insurance agent but there is no written record of the company he represented. “Slaves” in its plural form implies more than one enslaved person would be covered by the policy. Beyond this, the receipt also does not have any additional details about the policy that would provide valuable insight, such as number of enslaved insured, their ages, gender, current health, or length of policy. Dania Ramey Berry in *The Price for their Pound of Flesh* examined a sample of insurance policies from Southern Mutual Life Insurance Company for trends and standards used to determine policy value of enslaved persons. Her case study of Diamond and the two enslavers who purchased insurance policies²¹ can help theorize about the University’s policy purchase.

Life insurance was the only way enslavers could protect their financial investment, whether from death at the hands of another white person or American Indian or to recoup losses from enslaved who self-liberated seeking freedom in this life.²² With the prospect of war rapidly approaching, more enslavers sought to protect themselves from financial loss of their human property.²³ Assuming Garland spent \$10 (\$276.21) on clothing, which is what the University typically spent, that leaves the cost of insurance at \$191.22 (\$5,281.62). The policy covered at minimum two enslaved persons, presumably in good health and young to middle aged. While the gender is unlisted, it is a high possibility that the enslaved persons were men since all receipt documentation refers to enslaved men or gender neutral “servants.”

²¹ Berry, 116.

²² Berry, 110, 112, 116.

²³ Ibid.

Purchasing insurance shows both a confidence and fear at the changing Southern landscape. Southern institutions were successful at sowing pro-slavery rhetoric and philosophical beliefs throughout the region, instilling confidence in those agitating for secession.²⁴ With the law and God on their side, surely victory was inevitable. However, the act of purchasing insurance also acknowledged that financial loss could occur, whether from war or other more familiar means. In this case, the risk was not worth the reward, therefore the University chose to protect its investment in human property.

It would be remiss to focus on the economic valuation of insurance policies in isolation from human impact. Enslaved persons, in the same way they knew their economic value and valuation of clothing, were most likely aware of insurance policy values as well. This is critical to emphasize because many economic studies do not take into account the human toll of what would today be referred to as management decisions. From purchase (or rental) price, to wardrobe, and now insurance, enslaved person had to contend with multiple reminders of their supposed inferiority. Life insurance policies of the antebellum era are the final layer of price labeling and control enslavers placed upon the enslaved that the latter had to contend with. Maintaining a soul value divorced from these factors would have been critical for psychological and emotional health. Close proximity to enslavers would only heighten anxiety brought on by knowledge of on-paper value. Soul value was the only sustainer, especially since there is no written record of a community of enslaved on campus who would be able to sustain each other. Working on campus was an isolated experience, and a strong self-worth independent of

²⁴ For additional information “Slavery, Property, and Constitutionalism” goes into further detail. Brophy, 275-294

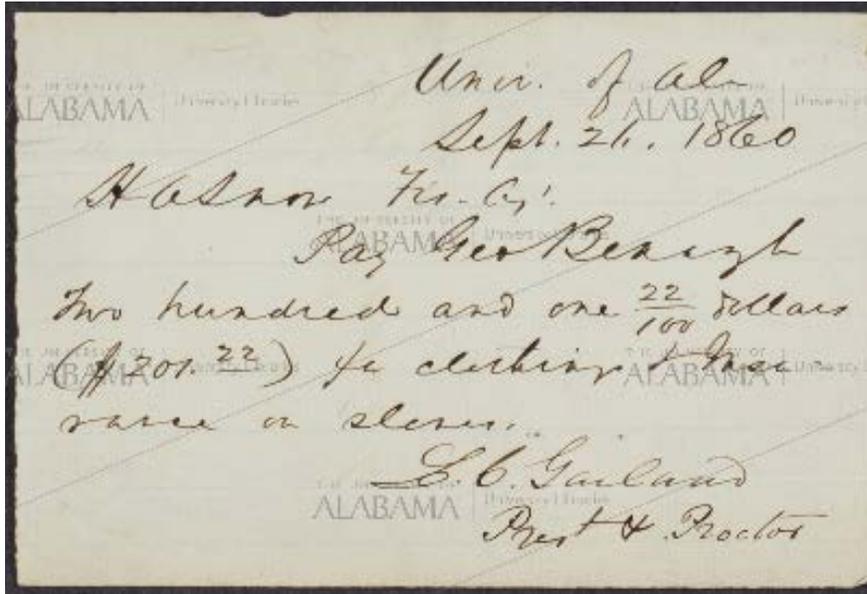


Fig 3: University of Alabama Libraries Early Administrative Records Digital Collection.

The Fabric Unravels – 1865 and beyond

After the end of the Civil War, no records exist of the formerly enslaved at the University. A large portion of campus was burned by Union soldiers²⁵, leaving students and faculty to rebuild alongside the community. The state did not see the same post-Emancipation political uprising of their Southern neighbors, such as South Carolina and Louisiana, however they did have some political representation in the House and Senate in 1868.²⁶ Black Alabamians were not the only demographic planter elites had to contend with as poor whites saw Reconstruction as an opportunity to gain political leverage. The state functioned without a statewide government from 1865-1868. Funding for Freedman's Bureau's was hindered by the cotton tax, war confiscations, in addition to the economic loss of slave value and destruction of property. Investments in railroads bloated the state's debt were blamed on carpetbaggers,

²⁵ Hilary N. Green. *Hallowed Grounds: Race, Slavery, and the University*. Walking tour, accessed December 11, 2017. <https://spark.adobe.com/page/3pmJR6un1szMN/>.

²⁶ Du Bois, William E B. *Black Reconstruction in America*. Russell & Russell, 1962. New York. 487, 493.

resulting in legislation cutting back funding for hard fought schools. With the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, racial terror rose to fill the role of oppressor that chattel slavery vacated. The state turned to convict labor to mine coal and iron, marking the end of Reconstruction in Alabama.²⁷

The lack of consistent record keeping makes it extremely difficult to trace the lives of enslaved persons after Emancipation. What happened to the men documented in these receipts? Did they stay in Tuscaloosa, helping the campus rebuild this time as paid labor? Did they leave, choosing to start a new life free of the reminders of slavery? The University understandably did not keep records of the enslaved after 1865 because they were no longer property. Men such as Sam and Moses disappear from written record, and researchers are left to speculate about the rest of their lives. This does not diminish their soul value, because research such as this seek to restore enslaved labor at the University back into the main conversation of its history. The receipts of clothing purchases made by Presidents Manly and Garland were a marketing choice of the University, but it does not exclude the intimacy of chattel slavery. Enslaved men on campus had economic value, but more importantly a soul value to survive chattel slavery and white supremacy.

Why does this type of research matter? At the University of Alabama, it is important to preserve and research all aspects of its history, including the parts that make people feel uncomfortable. Slavery is not a happy topic, it does not always uplift a reader. It is impossible to fully understand how truly atrocious chattel slavery was for black Americans, the depths of depravity and denial that white Americans engaged to continue this practice for the first half of America's history. White supremacy functioned as a two-way mirror. Most days the enslavers only saw their reflections, but some days they saw through to the depravity of chattel slavery

²⁷ Du Bois, 492-495.

Clothing purchases made by the University provide unique insight into life of enslaved persons on campus. With very few traditional records that are associated with private ownership, clothing provides the opportunity to add an additional layer of understanding to the operation of the University. More importantly, it provides an opportunity for the enslaved to be restored their place in the historical record of the Capstone.

This is not a genealogy project; however black Americans have suffered from the multitude of familial fractures that occurred during slavery. Black historians conducting this research do not need to have a direct connection to the individuals to feel a calling to restore voices that have been silenced long after their deaths. Clothing the bodies of the enslaved was a complex choice, despite socialized norms developed during the day. It is important to examine the economic and social impact of these decisions for a more accurate, albeit difficult and painful, history of the campus to be brought to the surface. Historical accuracy has become a privilege in America. Black historians and researchers are performing a sacred duty in documenting these lives...by any means necessary.

Author's Note and Acknowledgements

This research project was conducted under the direction of Dr. Hillary N. Green at the University of Alabama as an independent study seminar course entitled “Slavery and Emancipation in the Atlantic World.” Over the course of the Fall 2017 semester, I followed a rigorous reading schedule for several weeks before looking at primary sources in Hoole Special Collections Library. The initial project was to attempt to follow the life of one enslaved individual, and I was thinking about William – a carpenter who’s forced labor was documented throughout the pre-Civil War years of the University. But the clothing purchases stood out, mainly because of the amount of money being spent in addition to the quality of materials. In the 2015 exhibit *Purchased Lives*, The Williams Research Center in New Orleans displayed two Brooks Brothers suits worn by an enslaved carriage driver and coachman. Yes, that Brooks Brothers²⁸, a jarring reminder that so many of today’s institutions built their fortune on the backs of the enslaved.

Remembering the exhibit is what pushed me to study the receipts, and by extension material culture and history. Historians of slavery continues to follow these creative routes to accurately remember this country’s past. Heather Andrea Williams’ *Help Me to Find My People* in addition to Dania Ramey Berry’s *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh* served as the inspiration for how this research is modeled. Most importantly, this work serves to restore voice and place to the enslaved at the University who have yet to be named, and may never be named. A sincere thank you to Dr. Green for your guidance, patience, and continued dedication to documenting the lives of the enslaved at the University of Alabama.

²⁸ Edward Ball, "Slavery's trail of tears: retracing America's forgotten migration--the journey of a million African-Americans from the tobacco South to the cotton South."2015. Accessed December 15, 2017. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/slavery-trail-of-tears-180956968/>.

To those who walked the grounds, built the quad, carried water from Marrs Spring to the dining hall (now Gorgas House), Moses, Sam, Ben, and the nameless: The work continues, and you will not be forgotten.

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