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Nonprofits' Research Knits Bonds Among Descendants of Georgetown Slaves

By Rebecca Koenig



WILLIAM WIDMER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

KEEPING THE FAITH: Charles Hill, whose ancestors were among the people Georgetown University sold to slaveholders in Louisiana in 1838, visits Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in Maringouin, La.

Who are your people?

Black Southerners know the question well, and the answer has often proved elusive. Due to poor record-keeping and family disruption over centuries of slavery, even the most dedicated black researchers find it nearly impossible to trace their lineages back beyond the Civil War.

So when African-Americans started getting phone calls explaining that a new nonprofit had identified them as descendants of 272 enslaved people Georgetown University sold in 1838 to Louisiana plantations, the news was life-changing. Alumnus Richard Cellini started the Georgetown Memory Project, which is independent from the college, to find out what became of the people the Jesuit institution sold to pay its bills.

"Our predecessors at Georgetown had done an ugly thing. It seemed to me that our opportunity in the 21st century was to do a beautiful thing," Mr. Cellini says. "These are the people who built our university, and it seemed improper not to find [their descendants], contact them, and acknowledge our debt."

With the help of genealogists, more than 4,800 descendants have been identified so far. They've created their own nonprofit, the GU272 Descendants Association, to unite and organize themselves through events that often serve as surprise family reunions.

"Every time we have one of these, people figure out they're sitting next to a family member, oftentimes someone they've known for many years," says Karran Harper Royal, the association's executive director.

The group is trying to create a foundation to provide financial support to descendants and run programs that help Americans grapple with slavery's legacy.

The nonprofits' work could have big implications. The Memory Project's database serves as a "giant longitudinal survey of the effects of enslavement" that will tantalize researchers, Mr. Cellini says. Descendants hope the foundation will lead the country toward racial reconciliation.

It's equally momentous to African-Americans who have finally found their people.

"I've always felt our families were not seen as a part of the building of this country," Ms. Harper Royal says. "Now we know we are just as much a part of fabric of this country as anybody else."

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