

JULY 2021

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AT OATLANDS*

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*EXPLORING OUR
NATIONAL PARKS*

THE
SUMMER
ISSUE



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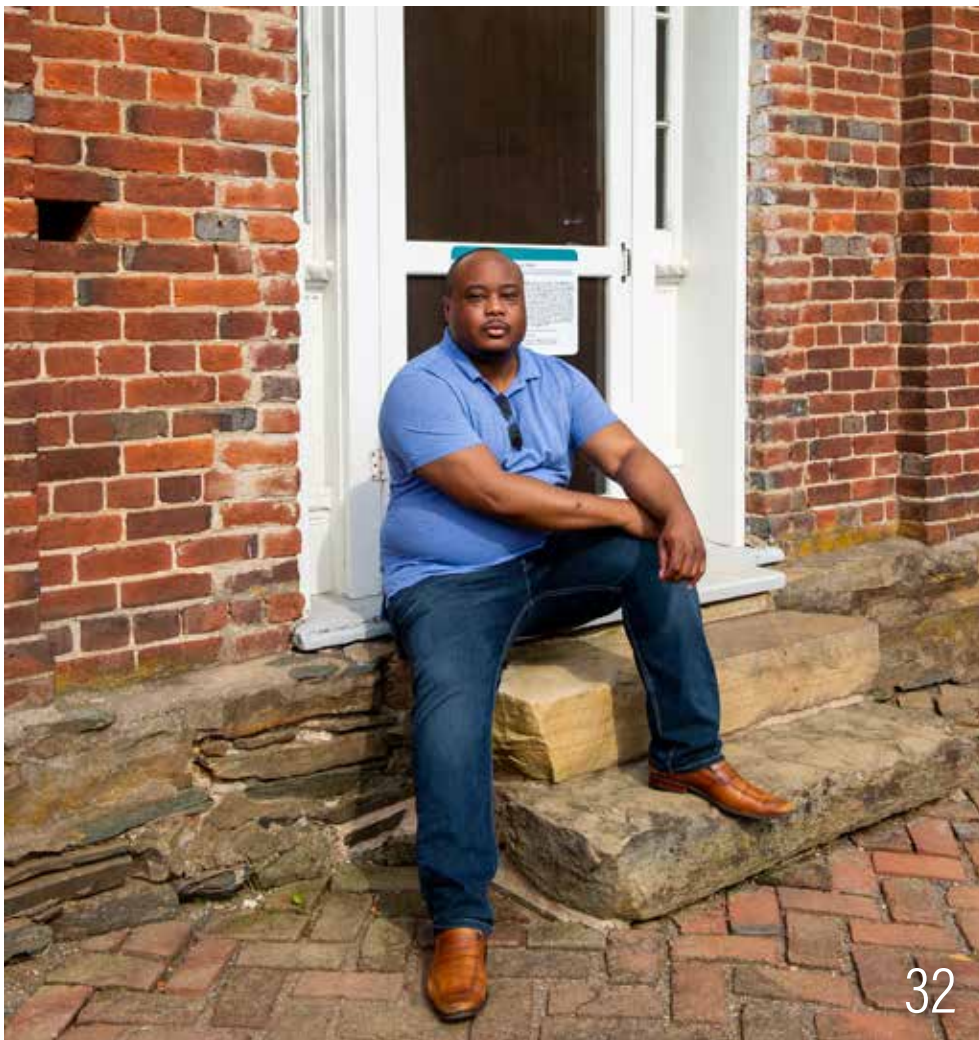
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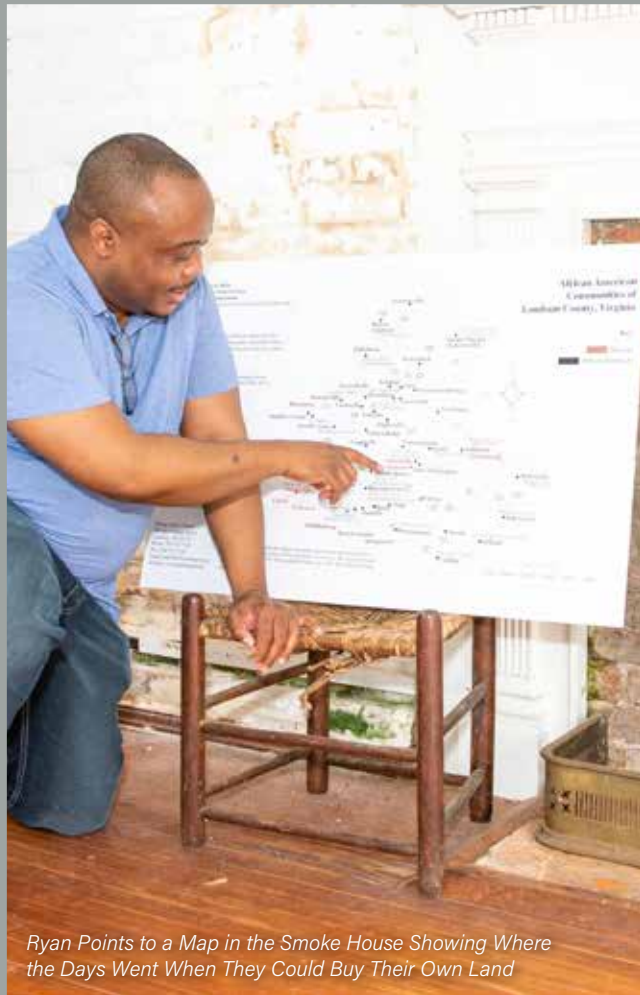
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ARTICLE MELINDA GIPSON
PHOTOGRAPHY CELESTE LINTHICUM
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ROOTED IN TRUTH



Ryan Points to a Map in the Smoke House Showing Where the Days Went When They Could Buy Their Own Land



HOW BUILDING A FACT-BASED HISTORY AT
OATLANDS FROM THE GROUND UP COULD
PAVE THE WAY FOR RECONCILIATION

RYAN WILLIAMS, A FORMER NBC NEWS EXECUTIVE, IS NOW A MEDIA AND DIVERSITY CONSULTANT, BRINGING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT BIAS AND EQUITY INTO SOME OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL BOARDROOMS IN AMERICA.

Yet even he didn't truly understand how deeply his own family was impacted by race until he traced his ancestry to Oatlands.

After following his grandfather's mother's family on **Ancestry.com** to the Day family in Loudoun County, Virginia, he Googled "Day family, plantation and Loudoun County," and a link from the 400-acre Oatlands Historic House and Gardens was the very first result. "More specifically, what I found was a PDF that had been loaded onto the Oatlands website from a transcription of Elizabeth Carter's diary," he recalls. ("*The Diary of Elizabeth O. Carter, Loudoun County Virginia, 1860-1872*," was just published in March and now can be bought from Amazon or purchased in the Oatlands bookstore for \$30.)

Like most African Americans, Ryan's historical quest for his family roots would otherwise have been lacking beyond the 1870 census, the first U.S. Census to both count and name African Americans who had been enslaved. In that census, Ryan found Robert Day, the last of his ancestors associated with Oatlands. Robert had walked away from the farm a free man as soon as he'd earned enough money to buy his own property in Gleadsville, named for another enslaved family.

With that name, and using records painstakingly compiled by Oatlands historians he also found Robert's parents Emanuel and Virginia Day and grandparents Julius and Jane Day. It was a history to which Robert's Ryan's own grandfather had only cagily alluded, saying there might be "something interesting" in his great-grandmother's ancestry. "It's safe to say that was a bit of an understatement," Robert Ryan says. "I went from Googling a plantation, to a phone call to Oatlands, to an invitation to visit, to 'hey, there's also a reunion scheduled for May' in one day. It was all very overwhelming."

Of course, he accepted the invitation, five years ago in May, driving in from Arlington with his mother Deborah, who lives in Pennsylvania. The then curator of education Lori Kimball, who digitized Elizabeth's diary, laid out large sheets of paper with names neither of them had ever heard before, and no one in the family knew anything about, laying out in detail the history of George Carter and his wife who had built Oatlands mansion and at one time owned as many as 133 slaves. A tour of the property led them to handle bricks both made and laid on the estate by the enslaved, and to touch divots in the floorboards outside the "master's bedroom" where the enslaved slept.

"I knew then this was going to be part of something special," Ryan said. When he and his mom returned to their car, they both just sat there for a while, too full of emotion to speak, until Deborah said, "They're watching us. When we say their names, there's something that enlivens them. It builds them up. They see us; they know us and they're glad we're here."

Says Ryan, "I go to her on all spiritual things, and she's saying, 'we needed to do this. This needed to happen.'" It took another four years of bringing relatives to descendant reunions before he joined the board of Oatlands where he now heads the Education Committee. He's now in awe of the enormity of the opportunity of using Oatlands, its research as well as the physicality of its land, buildings and library, "in the midst of an era where I can recall artist Kanye West saying in an interview that slavery was a choice."

His immediate response was to call his cousins and say, "Get your kids' behinds here to Oatlands because they need to understand the sacrifice that was made and see the remnants of that horrible period of history. These children need to be part of the generation that does better."

Having grown up in Philadelphia where every fourth grader has toured Independence Hall and stories of the underground railroad, he'd spent little time on the history of the other end of that conduit.

"They're watching us. When we say their names, there's something that enlivens them. It builds them up. They see us; they know us and they're glad we're here."

CONTINUED >



Katharine and Ryan stand in the "Dependency" where the enslaved serving the household worked and lived in sight of the mansion.

"Now I come here as a board member and know that, if my ancestors were buried here they would have ... never thought to see the day that their kin would be charged with the success and growth of this land. All I hear them saying is, 'tell our story. Tell our story.' So that's my role."

Katharine Stewart is likewise compelled to tell the story of Oatlands as both a fellow board member and member of the Education Committee, and as a descendant, though she prefers to trace her lineage to the father of Oatlands' plantation owner, Robert Carter III. One of history's little-known stories about Virginia's African American slave owners is that Robert, one of the richest contemporaries of America's founding fathers, and father to the George Carter who built Oatlands, was himself the single greatest emancipator of personal slave holdings in the nation's history.

According to Andrew Levy's book, *"The First Emancipator, Slavery, Religion and the Quiet Revolution of Robert Carter,"* when Robert Carter III turned 21 in February 1749, he inherited 100 slaves and 65,000 acres of land spreading across the Northern Neck, all the way to Winchester on the West and Alexandria to the East. By 1791, he had filed in Northumberland District Court a "Deed of Gift" document that would free more than 450 of his slaves – more than any other American slaveholder, ever. He'd even sent his son George to college in Rhode Island, a school later to become Brown University, to escape any commercial indoctrination into the notion that owning other human beings was either necessary or moral.

(For the record, we asked Ryan who the first college graduate was in his own family and he said, "You're looking at him.")

Katharine's search for her roots began in Virginia's Northern Neck where Robert III resided in Nomony Hall. Her journey to Oatlands led to Robert Carter III's daughter, George's sister Betty Landon Carter. Robert had 12 children, each of them deeded around 3,000 acres, largely in Virginia. A portion of Betty's land became what is now part of the Manassas Battlefield. Once she realized that Betty's brother had built Oatlands, her path also led her to a board seat in 2015.

Katharine distills her personal journey into three truths: "I'm very proud that I'm the great- times five, granddaughter of Robert Carter III who freed his slaves. I'm very, *very* proud of that. I'm horrified – as anybody would be whose ancestors owned slaves – that my great- four times uncle George was a slave owner. That's horrifying, really, *really* horrifying. But third, I'm heartened and so encouraged and proud of what Oatlands is doing because our work is part of a reconciliation that I think our country and all of its citizens need to take part in."

She repeated that Oatlands' historical work is "absolutely integral" to the greater reconciliation – primarily of black and white Americans – that needs to take place in this country adding, "Everybody is on a different path towards reconciliation, or may be at different points in that journey. We're not going at the same pace and certainly not everyone has arrived. My understanding and acceptance of the truth in my history and my willingness to learn is greater than what my parents are inclined to discuss. But my three sons represent the future. They will talk about this. They will come out here. They will talk to Ryan and his relatives, and they will be able to be reconciled."

Many like herself, whose heritage winds deeply through the southland, have ancestral exposure to either segregation or slavery, she acknowledges. Katharine herself attended elementary school in Chapel Hill and Charlotte where the schools had been segregated less than five years earlier. While she doesn't yet know whether Betty Landon Carter herself owned slaves, it's likely that a family with six or seven children and thousands of acres of land couldn't have managed the farm without help. What both she and Ryan are willing to do together is dig for the truth and share it, as well as all its repercussions, in open forums.

Ryan believes that, for he and other African Americans who visit Oatlands, slavery becomes real when one goes to the barn or the smokehouse and seeks their craftsmanship. "I've spent nearly 20 years telling other peoples' stories, but now I'm taking that time to tell our story. And, when we lift those names up, they become real." He cites research that says when children know their family tree they do better in history classes and school in general.

For himself, he can look out of his Arlington home towards the U.S. Capitol building and know that, "in the midst of so much that's happening in this country, I can say, 'I'm an American.' I can come [to Oatlands] and point to the name of a person who was born here four years after the Constitution was completed, ancestors who fought for this country and built this country. That's what it means to have a connection to a place in time."

*Ryan Williams and Katharine Lewis Fox Family Trees, set
against the oldest oak tree at Oatlands, likely dating to around
1798 when George Carter was given the 3,408-acre farm.*

Ryan Williams

(1977 -)



Deborah Williams - Donald R Reed

(1952 -)

(1938-1997)



Curtis N Williams - Eloise Dorsey Williams

(1914-2004)

(1913-1979)



Abraham Williams - Irene Day Williams

(1885-1962)

(1858-1926)



Robert Day - Catherine Jones Day

(1886-1970)

(1886-1970)

Emanuel Day - Virginia Day

(1819-1883)

(1835-)



Julius Day - Jane Day

(1790-1881)

(1794)

Katharine Lewis Fox - William Abbott Stewart

(1959-)

(1954 -)



Mary Landon Lewis - Joe Thomas Fox Jr.

(1934-)

(1935-)



Mary Johnson Best - William Figures Lewis

(1901-1995)

(1898-1972)



Watkins Harris Best - Mary Wyly Johnson

(1861-1924)

(1862-1939)



*John William Fletcher Best - Sarah Virginia
Hamilton Harris*

(1837-1901)

(18??-19??)



Adeline Ball - Hezekiah Best

(1799-1880)

(1801-1878/80)



George Carter - Elizabeth Osborne Grayson Lewis // [Sister] Elizabeth (Betty) Landon Carter - Spencer Ball

(1777-1846)

(1796-1885)

(1768-1804)

(1762-1832)



Robert Carter III ("The Great Emancipator") - Frances Ann Tasker

(1726-1804)

(1738-1787)

ROOTED IN TRUTH (CONTINUED)

Inside the Smokehouse is a Map Where the Newly Freed Settled



Katharine At the Mansion

We get to ask, why are there contradictions, why are there incongruities, and how do we get to the important place which is using all our insight to inform a better future?

Katharine responds, "I continue to be awed by what Ryan says. It feels like he's got such an unusual perspective on this, as an African American." Whereas Ryan speaks of feeling at peace or of completeness when he communicates his family's story, her reaction is often that she might not feel as forgiving of her own ancestors, were she in his shoes.

With a self-deprecating chuckle, Ryan says, "Well, let's say I don't fit the stereotype of a kid born in West Philly that got a degree in agricultural education who sits on the board of a former enslavement site" – as if there were many in his shoes. But from his first conversation with fellow board members, which touched on everything from Black Lives Matter to COVID restrictions, he said that his contributions to even tough conversations like that of "reparations" have been met with the response, "Bring it!"

"That means something and I think it's a story that, that not only helps us on the board of Oatlands but in our professional life and our family life and our personal conversations. The conversations that we as a board are having are the conversations that families need to be having – the conversations that you need to have with your co-workers in your regular everyday life when you hear certain remarks. These are conversations that make communities better and make the country grow."

"It could have been a very different conversation 10, 15 or 20 years ago," he adds, but now there exists a level of trust in each other and in their mission that allows them to "throw the smelly cat on the table" and *talk* about it. "It is a conversation that our nation should be engaging in, knowing the work that we're doing here."

Caleb Schutz, CEO of Oatlands Historic House and Gardens echoes the sentiment that reading, publishing and discussing all of the facts unearthed by Oatlands will contribute to the broader, national conversation about racial equity. When he was interviewing for his current job he found himself reading Jon Meacham's book, "The Soul of America," subtitled "The Battle for Our Better Angels."

To boil it down, Caleb believes that the history of Oatlands, like the history of Loudoun County, reveals families that were split apart over the Civil War and slavery, mirroring similar contradictions in U.S. law and practice. "You have presidents who touted both freedom and slavery, and those two ideas are incompatible – they can't co-exist." These contradictions are brought into stark relief at Oatlands,

whose story swings from a father who freed nearly 500 slaves to a son who purchased more than 100 in just one generation. The very fact that Robert Carter III was a contemporary of George Washington and every Virginia signer of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution puts this hard truth – "the smelly cat" question on the table: if he could free 500 slaves, why couldn't all our founding fathers?

It may be difficult to have honest conversations about diversity, equity and inclusion in corporate conference rooms, Caleb adds, but you can have them at Oatlands because the very buildings, like the "Dependency" housing the enslaved detailed to house duty, tell stories yearning to be heard – and because, he says, "heroes" like Ryan and Katharine are paving the way. "We get to ask, why are there contradictions, why are there incongruities, and how do we get to the important place which is using all our insight to inform a better future? ...Our road ahead is to find answers based on facts and not to make assumptions."

+ Oatlands' next major work is likely to be publication of George Carter's extensive ledgers, sure to name additional enslaved people and provide a "commercial" perspective of slave ownership.

+ If you're interested in digging deeper, check out The Enslaved Community Database online (see: <https://oatlands.org/reclaim-your-story/>). Oatlands has made a long-term commitment to the project and seeks diverse leaders and board members to work together to better understand the past. (Reach out to cschutz@oatlands.org if interested.)

+ Come visit (just \$10 per person), or consider becoming a member of Oatlands. Just \$50/year comes with invitations to VIP events, unlimited use of the hiking, equestrian and bike trails and access to the extensive gardens and grounds on the 400-acre estate.