

THE PEOPLE'S RECORDER

EPISODE 3: VIRGINIA PART 2

NEWS REPORT (WUSA9): *New tonight. For the past 60 years, thousands of African American graves in one cemetery have sat unnamed and unmarked. Their headstones were sold for scrap or thrown into the Potomac River.*

HOST: On the banks of the Potomac River, a stone's throw from the nation's capital, the governors of Maryland and Virginia, along with Mayor Muriel Bowser of Washington DC, meet for an act of reparation and restoration. Rededicating headstones from long lost African American cemeteries.

MODERATOR (FROM WUSA9 REPORT): *I'm very proud to introduce to you the Mayor of Washington DC, Mayor Muriel Bowser.*

MURIEL BOWSER (FROM WUSA9 REPORT): *We talk today about recovering these headstones and memorializing them properly. But what we're really talking about is how we tell the stories of not just this action. But this time and the times before that.*

HOST: This act of restoring and preserving Black history can trace its roots back to the Great Depression, when Black writers hired by the Federal Writers' Project worked to reclaim the African American story in Virginia.

What they found was a history different from what had been set in stone, a history that was (and in many ways still is) at risk of being buried and lost forever.

[Theme music starts]

HOST: This is the People's Recorder and I'm your Host Chris Haley. This podcast explores the work of the Federal Writers' Project, the 1930s agency that set out to document the United States. It ended up raising as many questions as it answered in its quest to hold up a mirror to America - questions that we still ask ourselves today.

In the previous episode, we heard about a small team of African American writers in Virginia known as "The Negro Studies Project." Led by a chemistry professor named Roscoe Lewis, they amassed an encyclopedia of Black history in Virginia. They uncovered a history never before told.

Led nationally by Black Studies scholar Sterling Brown, that group knew that the documentary recording of Black history was scarce, a legacy of slavery's power structure in the South, which saw African Americans as nothing more than property, not human beings with their own stories.

The Negro Studies Project conducted life history interviews—what we often call today oral histories. They talked with people in the Black community, including elders who had survived slavery. Their work also underscored how history remains in actual physical spaces. Places like cemeteries. For me, as an archivist, studying African American cemeteries is so important to my work. Burial grounds are sacred places where we remember those we've lost. But they are also critical places in our culture and history. In that recovery process, communities are gaining control of their stories.

That brings us to Kiki Petrosino, poet, author and professor at the University of Virginia. When she was researching her book, *White Blood*, she began with her own family's roots, and found that parts of Virginia's African American history are still covered over – literally. Part of her research led her on a hunt for a long-lost cemetery where her ancestors were buried.

KIKI PETROSINO: *I felt that there were aspects of my family's history that were in the process of being erased by time. My mother and I took a trip to the Louisa County Historical Society, and we found a binder that had photographs of many burial sites. Volunteers were going into the woods to document the locations of small family burial grounds in the county. We decided to go drive out there and see if we could find any burial sites.*

The problem is that it was quite overgrown, there was a lot of leaf litter, I didn't grow up in a rural environment. At one point I think we were only a few feet away from it...but everything was so overgrown; it was just inaccessible. My mother and I had no idea how to approach the idea of finding these graves. And so, we went as far into the woods as we dared, but then quickly became pretty disoriented and we had to find our way out.

It's frustrating. It's saddening. So many elements of the landscape here in Virginia have been preserved. You can drive along a road that you know was an old wagon road. There are Civil War battlefields that are preserved, for example, and you can see what the battlefield would have looked like back then. There are plantation houses, there are churches, chapels. There are Confederate burial sites that have gotten public money for their maintenance over the years. But these African American burial sites are not required to be maintained, you know?

HOST: Unfortunately, this was not an isolated incident. Julian Hayter is a historian at the University of Richmond, who has written about African American history in Virginia.

JULIAN HAYTER: *It exists in a kind of bigger picture, if you will. After emancipation black people are tax-paying citizens, but that money's not being remunerated into their communities, right? So, the infrastructure. Their tax dollars are essentially being diverted to other communities to prop them up, while many of these cemeteries are public property.*

HOST: For decades, many African American cemeteries were neglected or forgotten, or overrun by land developers. To me, the movement to recover Black cemeteries follows in a straight line back to the Federal Writers' Project and their efforts to gather the accounts of formerly enslaved people. In each case, something that was under-valued and almost erased by institutional neglect, was retrieved and prized, led by communities of color.

In the Tidewater town of Courtland, Virginia, these stories stretch back over a century. Alton Darden and his brother Maurice, along with Dolores Peterson, are trustees of the Helping Hand Cemetery. The neatly trimmed cemetery was started by their ancestors, formerly enslaved citizens of Courtland, in 1897.

We caught up with them on Zoom.

DOLORES PETERSON: *He's on mute.*

ALTON DARDEN: *Oh, there he is. Finally. Now, my mother who's buried there would always say, "you know, I need some money to help get the cemetery grass cut." She was the one who always made sure that we stayed connected with Courtland. The cemetery has really awakened me to a whole lot of things.*

DOLORES PETERSON: *My family took us into the cemetery to clean off the graves of our ancestors. And when I was young, my great-grandmother would take us in there and give the kids shovels and tell us to make mounds at these special places. And she would say, "This is where grandpa and grandma are buried."*

At first, it was the history of the cemetery, but as we got to know other names of the different families, we said, "Wait a minute. The history of the African American community of the late 1800s is told right here in this cemetery." We got a picture of what that community looked like...

HOST: The depth of the cemetery's history gave the Helping Hand Cemetery Club renewed purpose. The Courtland group recognized the cemetery's role in continuing the story of their community. Just like Roscoe Lewis's team of Federal Writers in the 1930s.

Of course, the tools of the trade since then have improved. ...

MAURICE DARDEN: *They say there are 700 people interred in that cemetery. The problem is there's not enough land to put that many people in that cemetery. Virginia Humanities brought a machine out. And it was a GPR, a ground penetrating radar. As we went through the grounds, we found there were 172 unmarked graves. The indications are there are people buried on top of each other.*

HOST: With each new discovery, the Club is working to water the roots of the community by sharing its history and conducting remembrance interviews.

DOLORES PETERSON: *We've just been working collectively to improve all aspects of the cemetery and to transform it into an actual educational place so that when visitors come and our family members come, they can learn not only about who's buried in the cemetery, but let's look at the community from which these people who are buried here came.*

HOST: Dolores is on to something. These initiatives connect us to our families, to our communities, to our past.

DOLORES PETERSON: *I can foresee my grandchildren telling their grandchildren. You know what, our ancestors started this community, whether they were slaves, Native Americans, free men, they started a thriving black community. We're just links on this earth, and if we don't take advantage of being a link, a lot of information is lost.*

HOST: Across Virginia, rehabilitating Black cemeteries is closely tied to recovering a lost history. Courtland has a deep tradition of valuing the cemetery. Other places lack that continuity.

In Richmond, volunteers at the East End cemetery have reclaimed graves after decades of neglect. Their work inspired me to trace that process, as it paralleled my own family's search for our ancestral roots. A few years ago, I co-directed a short film called *Unmarked* about the urgency of preserving these burial sites. In the film, Richmond photographer Brian Palmer, a longtime volunteer at East End, speaks of the physically demanding work.

BRIAN PALMER (FROM UNMARKED): *I like it when people get down to the roots. Peel back the vines, tear up the roots. If you find a buried headstone, try and dig it out without damaging the headstone. These are one-of-a-kind historical artifacts. They're irreplaceable. We're kind of rebuilding a community's history.*

HOST: With Palmer, Kiki Petrosino wrote a photo essay about East End.

KIKI PETROSINO: *East End Cemetery is full of life. Thousands of epitaphs offer portraits of the people buried there: A true friend. She lived for others. He is not dead. He is just away. You learn too about the black-led organizations that help pay for these gravestones: Booker T. Washington School. Rosalyn's Beauty Salon, Purple Aster, House of Ruth. The unmistakable curves of U.S. military issued headstones are here, too. Black veterans with service dating back more than a century rest alongside teachers, pastors, homemakers, and friends.*

HOST: In her words, you hear the echoes of the work done by Roscoe Lewis' and his group on the Negro Studies Project. As we heard last episode, his team had to pore over public records, but they also had to seek out the primary sources left out of those documents—from tombstones, landmarks, and interviews with people who many wanted to leave out of the story. They needed all of it. Such as this account from William Johnson. Johnson had been enslaved in Virginia and put to work by the Confederate army during the Civil War. He barely escaped from the grips of the rebel army. Over 70 years later, he shared his story with the Negro Studies Project, read here by an actor.

WILLIAM JOHNSON (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *In July 1864, my master's regiment captured a gang of Yankee soldiers and brought them into camp...I didn't know what the war was all about nor why they were fighting, but when the rebels were out on the battlefield we got a chance to talk to the Yankee prisoners. They explained to us about slavery and freedom. They told us if we got a chance to steal away from camp and got over to the Yankees' side, we would be free. They said if the Rebels win, you will always be slaves. Those words got into our heads. We got together, five of us, and decided to take a chance one night, and we made it.*

JULIAN HAYTER: *It's nothing short of remarkable that someone recognized the urgency in getting these voices down on record before they were gone, because you know damn well, someone down the line will try to say, this stuff never happened. And that's precisely the history that they're writing against.*

[Archival montage from Charlottesville, 2017]

SOT (ARCHIVAL): *"Blood and soil, blood and soil..."*

HOST: Charlottesville 2017. A confederation of white nationalist groups, the KKK, and neo-Nazis descended upon the small Virginia city for the Unite the Right rally. Many still remember the images of Tiki torch wielding protestors and their hateful chants.

SOT (ARCHIVAL): *"One people, one nation. End immigration."*

SOT (ARCHIVAL): *"We're honoring the founding fathers who were white. We're honoring all of the great white men who are being smeared and defamed and torn down."*

NEWSCASTER (ARCHIVAL): *On the streets of Charlottesville today the hate boiling over. White supremacists and counter-protestors fighting with fists and clubs.*

HOST: The rally tragically turned violent, and then deadly. What was it that fueled such violence? And why there? Organizers of the protest chose Charlottesville because of the city's decision to take down the statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee, claiming that removing the statue would be erasing a piece of American history.

But how true was this history that they were trying to save? Are these statues simply memorials to an enduring American myth, the idea of the Lost Cause?

The Lost Cause is the persistent idea that romanticized the antebellum South. The myth turned the cause of the Civil War from a fight over slavery into a contest over States' Rights and an overreaching federal government.

In the 1930s, white southerners on the Federal Writers' Project, whether they realized it or not, were steeped in Lost Cause culture and stories.

[Archival Alexandria tourist video from Library of Congress]

NARRATOR (ARCHIVAL): *Georgian brick buildings and quiet tree shaded streets give to Alexandria the imprint of history. In historic Christ Church, the President worshiped. In here many Presidents since have attended services. Here too, worshiped another soldier son in whom Alexandria takes pride. The immortal Robert E. Lee.*

GREGG KIMBALL: *The things that got preserved tend to be things that kind of reek of the antebellum South, kind of a mythical idea of Moonlight and Magnolia.*

HOST: Gregg Kimball from the Library of Virginia says that white writers working on the WPA Guide to Virginia fell into a familiar pattern.

GREGG KIMBALL: *So, you know even in the WPA era, there were kind of cultural wars about what is going to be depicted. You know, if you read the Guide and some other things, there's no doubt, it certainly includes many Lost Cause sites.*

HOST: That includes this bit on Richmond from the WPA Guide to Virginia:

WPA GUIDE EXCERPT (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *The Lee Monument, a bronze figure of the general upon his horse Traveler, stands on an ornate stone pedestal. The monument was unveiled by Lee's West Point classmate and friend, General Joseph E. Johnston, in 1890. Because the sculptor, Jean Antoine Mercié, thought "the brow of Lee too noble to be hidden under a hat," this was the first equestrian statue with a bared head erected in the United States.*

HOST: Our collective struggle with understanding our past is something Kiki Petrosino thinks about a lot, especially as she continues to seek out the stories of her ancestors in Virginia.

KIKI PETROSINO: *I grew up in a family that loved to vacation educationally. And so a family outing might be to go to the Gettysburg battlefield or places like Monticello, Montpelier, Mount Vernon, Arlington House—these big estates that because they were associated with a president or somebody like Robert E. Lee, George Washington, they've been preserved.*

HOST: The WPA Guide to Virginia documented these landmarks, but state editor Eudora Richardson did not push to challenge 1930s readers. One entry reads:

WPA GUIDE EXCERPT (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *Montpelier was once the home of James Madison, 'Father of the Constitution' and fourth President of the United States. From among ancient trees the long, two-story house faces the Blue Ridge Mountains. The numerous and very spacious reception rooms have simple white woodwork. The house was suited to the entertainment that President and Dolly Madison dispensed here on a large and generous scale.*

HOST: The WPA Guide to Virginia does not mention the enslavement of human beings at Montpelier. That silence is deafening.

KIKI PETROSINO: *There's always something to say about the way that Virginia has dealt with its unsavory or uncomfortable aspects of its past. We also can see that certain things have been preserved here in Virginia while other things have been allowed to recede into the past.*

We always want the public to know more and to learn more and to understand more. With that said, I have yet to identify with 100 percent certainty the particular estates where my ancestors were held and trafficked.

HOST: But Petrosino still finds herself drawn to places like Montpelier or Jefferson's Monticello. She is making these trips to experience their contradictions.

KIKI PETROSINO: *I go there to think not only about the president or the famous general who may have lived there, but I want to know more history. I go in search of some experience of the past and the present colliding. And I really do experience it as a collision of energies.*

Other people might find them uncomfortable places to be in, they might not want to go to a place like Monticello because of its history of hundreds of people being enslaved there.

It is uncomfortable. But there's something that I seek in that discomfort, and I find those places exhilarating to be in because of that collision.

HOST: Being open to that collision, to the discomfort of different views of history can be hard. Such collisions can also challenge deeply held world views.

The stories that Roscoe Lewis and his team of Federal Writers collected for the book, *The Negro in Virginia*, provided a powerful antidote to the Lost Cause culture. Though they were up against a deeply entrenched narrative, they dug into stories of real people and what they suffered during slavery and its aftermath. Much of the history they uncovered is maintained at the Library of Virginia and available on its website.

GREGG KIMBALL: *We would not be having this crazy conversation about quote unquote critical race theory if someone could spend a week with me looking at materials at the Library of Virginia. Because you can't deny the documentation, it's overwhelming... when you go through antebellum records on Virginia and you start to understand very quickly the enormity of the domestic slave trade, and what that actually meant for Black people, believe me, you will have a different understanding.*

HOST: The work that Roscoe Lewis and his WPA crew did is a key part of those records. Their interviews open a new window to history, through the words of those who lived it. They include women like Mary Jane Wilson, here read by an actor.

MARY JANE WILSON (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *My mother and Father was slaves, and when I was born, that made me a slave. I was the only child. My mother was owned by one family, and my father was owned by another family. One day, my father's master took my father to Norfolk and put him in a jail to stay until he could sell him. My missus bought my father so he could stay with us.*

GREGG KIMBALL: *Those interviews are used quite heavily. Now, think of how few sources exist that are actually from the mouths of the formerly enslaved themselves. I meant, there just aren't many. They're just invaluable and continue to be so. Then we have Jim Crow segregation. We have discrimination in housing. We have discrimination in employment. These are not things that should be argued about because, they happened. This is a continuum that comes right up till today. And we need to understand the full scope of that if we're going to grapple with the issues of race that we face now.*

HOST: Writers and historians alike still hold up the work of Roscoe Lewis and his small team as a crowning achievement. Lewis himself understood the value of the work, and the importance of history as a revealing force, one that can put steady, subversive pressure on the status quo.

In 1943, three years after leaving the Federal Writers' Project, Lewis wrote, read here by an actor:

ROSCOE LEWIS (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *Pressure serves the vital function of maintaining in the Negro a realization that the American way of life is being pushed steadily, even if slowly, along a path that someday may lead to democracy.*

[Archival – Civil Rights March]

JULIAN HAYTER: *The Civil Rights Movement in some ways is African Americans demanding their own New Deal and I think many of those demands are informed by works like such as this. I would almost guarantee you that they helped generate the urgency that inspired Civil Rights activism.*

HOST: Today, there are signs of change. Historic sites like Montpelier and Monticello include lessons on slavery as essential parts of their tours. Monuments to the Lost Cause are coming down, and some are being re-purposed. For example, the statue of Robert E. Lee, at the center of the violence in Charlottesville, has been melted down and will be recast as a new work of art.

[Archival from NPR Report]

NPR REPORTER (ARCHIVAL): *A massive bronze sculpture of Confederate general Robert E. Lee stood in a downtown Charlottesville park for nearly a century. Charlottesville prevailed in a prolonged legal battle with the Sons of Confederate Veterans and other groups and donated the Lee statue to a coalition that proposed to melt it down and create a more inclusive public art installation.*

For Methodist minister Isaac Collins, the deadly white nationalist violence in Charlottesville was a turning point for the nation and says it's surreal to see the focal point of that episode disassembled.

MINISTER ISAAC COLLINS (ARCHIVAL): *This statue that has cost us so much. So much violence, so much hurt, so much bloodshed. It's gone and it's never going to be put back together the way it was.*

HOST: All this is spurring new conversations and fresh examinations of the past. I'm not sure I'd be doing what I do had it not been for the work of people like Roscoe Lewis and his colleagues on the Writers' Project. The history they gathered inspired generations of activists and storytellers. As Audrey Davis, the Director of the Alexandria Black History Museum, shares, all of us owe a debt to the work that they did.

AUDREY DAVIS: *They instilled that love of history. And I think that generation really was grounded in that because they didn't have it. There weren't sites where you were honoring African Americans.*

And so, I think my grandfather would be amazed that there's a National Museum of African American History and Culture. I know my grandfather would have spent hours in that museum. And so would Sterling Brown and I'm sure Roscoe E. Lewis. But they helped us memorialize places by recognizing the people and what they did. So, without them we probably wouldn't know about different sites that are of importance in the African American canon.

[Archival interview with Harden W. Stuckey from Library of Congress]

INTERVIEWER: *You're going to help us out with these, however?*

HARDEN W. STUCKEY: *Yes, sir, in order to preserve the songs of my childhood days. This is a farm song, made up between the boys plowing on two or more plantations where one would holler hallo and the other would answer with the second hallo. And that would be signal for knocking off time.*

[Begins to sing]

GREGG KIMBALL: *There's a lot of material online now. But for everything that's online, there are many thousands of pages that aren't. Believe me, we're just scratching the surface.*

HOST: Roscoe Lewis and his team on the Negro Studies Project were reshaping the American narrative. For years after, they faced resistance from state officials. Even the national powers-that-be eyed them with suspicion. Sterling Brown, who led the national effort to document African American history for the Writers' Project, later said that he was followed by FBI agents for years.

As we will hear in future episodes, Project workers in other states would also face pushback. Some of that pushback came in Florida, which is where we'll be headed next.

Coming up on The People's Recorder: Zora Neale Hurston puts her stamp on the WPA Guide to Florida and records Black life on the Gulf Coast.

This episode of The People's Recorder was brought to you with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities and Virginia Humanities. The photo essay about East End Cemetery by Brian Palmer and Kiki Petrosino appeared in the Virginia Quarterly Review. You can learn more about Unmarked at Ummarkedmovie.com. The episode uses original audio from the Library of Congress.

The People's Recorder is produced by Spark Media. Be sure to follow us on social media at [@peoplesrecorder](https://twitter.com/peoplesrecorder). I'm Chris Haley. Thanks for listening.