

Researchers discuss the MIT and Legacy of Slavery project

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The first class of the "MIT and Slavery" undergraduate research project ran in the fall of 2017. Set in motion by MIT President L. Rafael Reif with Melissa Nobles, the Kenan Sahin Dean of the School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, the course was developed and taught by Craig Steven Wilder—the Barton L. Weller Professor of History and the nation's leading expert on the links between universities and slavery—in collaboration with Nora Murphy, the MIT archivist for Researcher Services.

The findings from the initial class include insights about MIT's role in the post-Civil War era of Reconstruction; examples of racism in the culture of the early campus; and the fact that MIT's founder, William Barton Rogers, had six enslaved people in his Virginia household, before he moved to Massachusetts in 1853. The findings also suggest new lines of research that will enable MIT to contribute to a larger national conversation about still hidden legacies of [slavery](#), especially the relationship between the Atlantic slave economies, the fields of science and engineering, and U.S. technical institutions.

As the "MIT and Slavery" research continues over the coming semesters, MIT is also conducting a community dialogue series, MIT and the Legacy of Slavery, led by Dean Melissa Nobles. The dialogues are an opening chapter in MIT's commitment to researching this history and making it public. A series of events will create campus-wide and community-wide opportunities for shared discussions of the findings and our responses. The first event in this series was held in February, and the

second, The Task of History, takes place Thursday, May 3, 5-7 p.m.

SHASS Communications spoke with Nobles and Wilder to hear their thoughts about the ongoing [research project](#) and the community dialogue series.

Q: MIT's approach to exploring the Institute's historical relationship to slavery is unfolding somewhat differently than the process at other universities. Can you describe MIT's approach, and what it means for the community and the Institute's responses to the research findings?

Wilder: Our undergraduate students are engaged in an ongoing research project examining MIT's ties to slavery. As I like to note, MIT students are rewriting the history of MIT for MIT. Their focus on the early history of the Institute allows us to explore the connections between engineering, science, and slavery in antebellum America, which will make a significant and new contribution to the work being done by the dozens of universities that are now researching their historical ties to slavery. MIT is uniquely positioned to lead the research on this subject.

Nobles: It has been 15 years since Brown University launched its three year study of the university's historical connections to slavery. Since then, several other colleges and universities, including Georgetown, Harvard, and Yale, have taken up similar multi-year studies. Three key features distinguish our project from these earlier efforts—to which we are indebted for the precedents they provide.

The first is that rather than the research project starting unofficially and at the faculty level, in this case President Reif and I initiated the process,

consulting with MIT historian Craig Steven Wilder about the best way to respond to inquiries about MIT's connections to slavery. Neither the president nor I knew the answers to those questions. But we did appreciate our great good fortune in being able to turn to Craig, the nationally recognized expert on the relationship of slavery and American higher education and the author of "Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities." Craig recommended an innovative approach, which he then developed with Archivist Nora Murphy: a new, ongoing MIT undergraduate research class to explore this aspect of MIT's story. President Reif and I provide resources and support.

The second distinctive quality, which flows from the first, has to do with timing. The norm at other universities is that some years of research predate the public release of the findings. By contrast, MIT announced the initial findings only a few months into the project and will continue releasing new findings each term. This means that the MIT community as a whole has the opportunity to be involved in this endeavor in real-time, as the research matures, learning from the emerging findings—and making informed suggestions for potential official Institute responses. We do not know what the research will find in full, nor what it will ask of us, and I envision a fluid process, one that can respond to new findings, as our community and leadership take the measure of this new dimension of MIT history.

The third distinctive aspect is our project's intellectual scope, which—by virtue of MIT's expertise in science and technology—also allows us to explore a more far-reaching question: the connections between the development of scientific and technological knowledge and the institution of slavery and its legacies. The Institute's founding at the start of the Civil War in 1861 involves MIT in one of the earliest such legacies: the reconstruction of America's southern states, and new social, legal, and economic realities that arose in the transition from slave to

free labor, some of which we continue to grapple with today.

Q: At President Reif's request, Dean Nobles is leading a series of community dialogues about the early findings from the "MIT and Slavery" class. What plans are there for this phase, and what do you hope the dialogues will produce?

Wilder: The community dialogues are an effort to bring the early and ongoing research from the "MIT and Slavery" course to the various constituencies on campus, to our alumni, and to people and institutions in the Cambridge-Boston area. Our history can help us make new and lasting connections to communities that neighbor MIT but remain separate from it. Dean Nobles is planning an exceptionally rich and inviting range of events and activities to anchor these community exchanges. The forums will provide opportunities for us to receive feedback on the project and to solicit opinions on how MIT can respond to this history as the research continues to unfold.

Nobles: I envision the community dialogues as fulfilling two purposes. The first, and most important, is to engage and deepen our collective understanding of the history and issues surrounding MIT, slavery, and Reconstruction, which was itself the immediate legacy of slavery. The second is to provide various ways by which the MIT community can engage with the ideas and questions raised by the research.

We will shape the dialogues to reflect and advance these two purposes. We will also organize activities, such as small group gatherings, film screenings, panel discussions, and other creative projects designed to encourage and catalyze conversation and reflection. We envision a number of activities each semester. One hope is that the dialogues will inspire MIT community members to incorporate the research findings,

and the questions they raise, into their own thinking, teaching, and endeavors.

For example, during our February event, at which the first group of student-researchers announced their early findings, Alaisha Alexander '18 summoned the audience to a creative investigation. She asked that we all go back to our labs, libraries, and classrooms, and be newly alert for ways in which larger social issues, and specifically, racial issues, may be embedded or reflected in our fields. This strikes me as an extremely important question, one worth asking precisely because now, as in the past, larger social, political, and economic processes are inextricably connected to technological and scientific advances. Examining MIT's history and its connection to slavery allows us to think in new ways—about our past but also about the present and future.

And, of course, as the research and the dialogue series progress, we will always be interested in hearing from the MIT community. In addition to responses via emails and participation in scheduled events, we will set up a mechanism so that community members can contribute comments, ideas, suggestions, and insights.

Q: Alongside the MIT and Slavery project, Professor Wilder and others are engaged in creating a consortium of technical universities that will research broader questions of the relationship of the sci/tech fields to the institution of slavery and the U.S. slave economy. Do you envision ways that MIT faculty, students, and staff can participate in this broader research effort?

Wilder: The goal of the consortium is to bring several antebellum and

Civil War-era engineering and science schools together to produce a more complete history of the rise of these fields in the Atlantic slave economy. The current plan is to have each school establish a research project that draws on its strengths and reflects its institutional needs. The consortium will help coordinate efforts and move resources between universities, and it will host regular conferences where participating faculty, archivists, librarians, and students can share their research.

Nobles: I am really looking forward to this multi-university research project because it will shine a bright light on long understudied dimensions of the historiography of slavery and of science and technology. For example, in most American history classes, we learn that the introduction of the mechanical cotton gin in the early 1800s exponentially transformed the productivity and hence profitability of cotton cultivation. This technological "advance" for productivity also meant, of course, an intensified need for slave labor, to grow and harvest ever-increasing amounts of cotton. Undoubtedly, the connections between science and technology with slavery go far deeper and wider than the cotton gin. The entanglement of the slave economy, science, and technology is a very rich topic area, and one that MIT is uniquely qualified to examine.

More information: MIT and the Legacy of Slavery:
[shass.mit.edu/news/news-2018-m ... s-community-dialogue](https://shass.mit.edu/news/news-2018-m...s-community-dialogue)

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