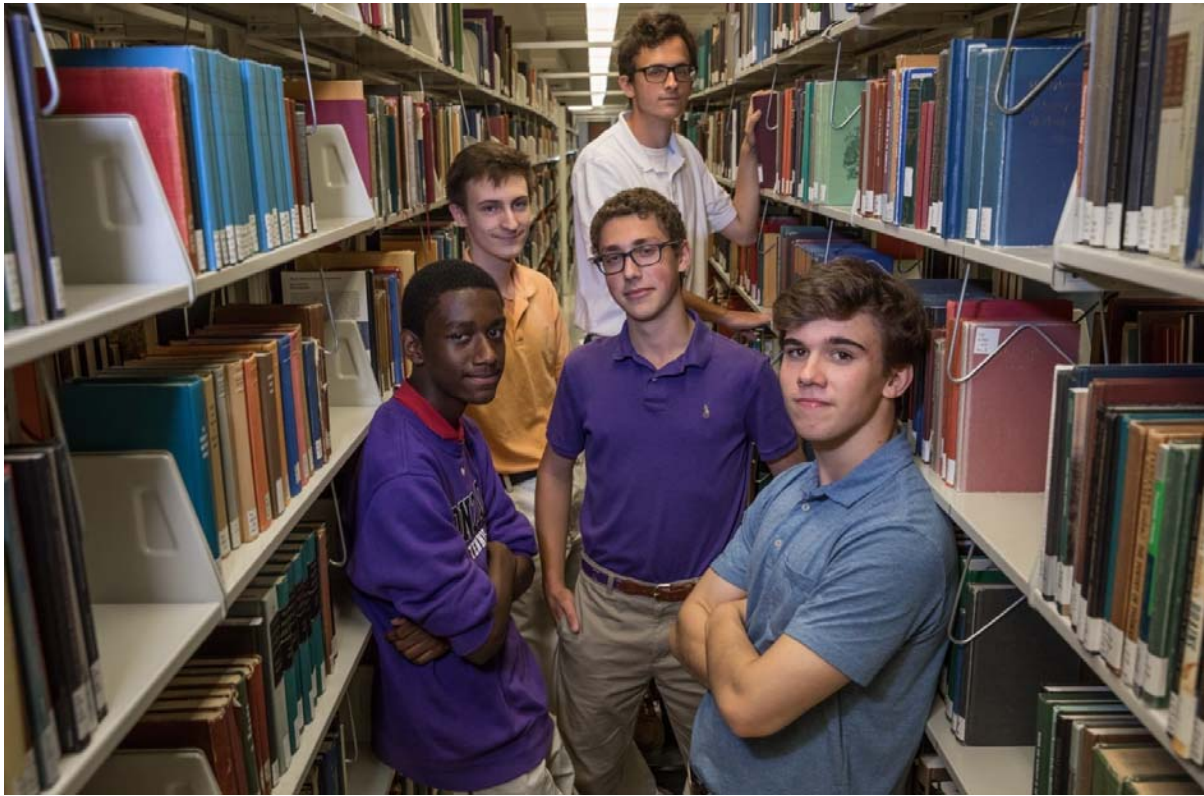


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Students, clockwise from top center, Jack Boland, Daniel Podratsky, Jack Brown, Hameed Nelson and Joe Boland mined archives at Georgetown University Library for two weeks over the summer. They were joined by student Matthew Johnson, not shown. (Evelyn Hockstein/For The Washington Post)

Education

Did their school have ties to slavery? Now students try to make sense of the answer

By [Rachel Siegel](#) September 25 at 7:14 PM

The boy's name was Gabriel, and he was a slave. Once, he was tipped less than seven cents for weeding the garden at the Washington Seminary in Northwest Washington. Another time, he was given 12 cents for reasons unknown.

Any knowledge of Gabriel was lost until six students from Gonzaga College High School — the later incarnation of Washington Seminary — decided to research their school's history and its potential ties to slavery. They spent two weeks this past summer mining archival material, their quest mirroring research conducted previously at Georgetown University and other schools that had discovered their institutions bore the stain of slavery.

That earlier research showed how Georgetown had profited from Jesuit-owned plantations that thrived across the region. What about our school, the Gonzaga students wondered. Did it, too, benefit from, and help sustain, the global slave trade of the 19th century?

They found their answers: Profit from those plantations was funneled to Washington Seminary, which at the time was part of Georgetown. And two slaves — Gabriel and another named Isaih — worked at the school for an unknown period of time.

Now, the 16- and 17-year-old students are left to grapple with this complicated and troubling history.



Accounting ledgers reviewed at the Georgetown University Library from the 1820s show financial transactions dealing with slaves. (Evelyn Hockstein/For The Washington Post)

“The research in some ways was the easy part,” said Ed Donnellan, a Gonzaga history teacher who supervised the project. “How to respond is the true challenge to us.”

In November 2016, Adam Rothman, a Georgetown history professor and the principal curator of the Georgetown Slavery Archive, spoke at Gonzaga about Georgetown’s ties to slavery.

Last year, the university apologized for its role in the slave trade and offered

admissions preference to the descendants of slaves sold by the school. In 1838, 272 slaves owned by Jesuits were sold to help pay off debt at Georgetown.

Rothman said the students were curious about Gonzaga’s history and asked what they could do to find out. “Just go to the archives and start digging and see what you find,” Rothman recalled telling the students. “And they did.”

Shortly after Rothman’s talk, Donnellan put out an invitation to any Gonzaga students who wanted to participate in the research. Six volunteered, spending two weeks of the summer at the Booth Family Center for Special Collections at Georgetown. There, they culled through Washington Seminary accounting books and records kept by the broader Jesuit order.

It was clear Washington Seminary benefited from profit generated at the Jesuit plantations, said Joe Boland, 16, who participated in the research. But what stood out most for the

students, they said, were references to the slaves who worked on the school's grounds, Isaih and Gabriel. A brief note in the Washington Seminary accounting book listed \$82 "to Jerome Mudd [for] Isaih black boy for expenses to St. Thomas." St. Thomas was one of the Jesuit plantations in Maryland, and Mudd, the students discovered, was a teacher at the Washington Seminary and a priest-in-training.

Yet it is Gabriel's story — incomplete as it is — that the students say weighs most heavily on them. Multiple mentions of Gabriel being tipped small amounts appear in records kept by the seminary. And there's a reference in a Georgetown accounts ledger that describes him as "a black boy from the Seminary of Washington."

How Gabriel got to Georgetown isn't entirely clear, though the students suspect he was brought by a family and used as counterbalance to get \$1 off tuition per month. One document suggests he took the place of another slave in 1827.

Another document from a Georgetown accounts ledger notes "Gabe" was sold for \$450 to an unknown buyer, with a 5 percent commission going to an Edward Millard, who once attended the Washington Seminary.

"We want to finish the story of Gabriel," Boland said. In continuing their research, the students hope to find Gabriel's bill of sale.

When Washington Seminary was founded in 1821, it was part of Georgetown College and located on F Street in Northwest Washington. The school was founded for the training of seminarians but mostly educated lay students. At the time, the Jesuits forbid charging tuition, which led to financial struggle and the departure of the Jesuits in 1828.

The seminary operated independently until the Jesuits returned in 1848. Ten years later, the school received a congressional charter that enabled it to become a separate entity from Georgetown, at which point it was renamed Gonzaga College. The school moved to its current location on I Street in 1871.

The students presented their research on the link to slavery to Gonzaga faculty and students, and the school has planned a series of open discussions for students to talk about this complicated history.

Jack Brown, 17, said the emergence of this history has left him with a "weird feeling." He said he and his peers "weren't putting any spin on this, no bias, just telling [students] what happened."

"Now that we have the information, what can we do?" said Hameed Nelson, 16, who also took part in the research.

Perhaps, Donnellan said, they can build a memorial garden for Gabriel.