

Descendants of Enslaved Black People Who Built St. Louis University Call for Reparations



Saint Louis University in St. Louis, Missouri was founded in 1818 as a private Jesuit research university and was built by 70 Black people enslaved by Jesuits. Its construction relied directly on enslaved labor. The enslaved that were identified as enslaved by the university were never compensated for their work and have yet to be properly honored on campus.

In response to this historical wrong, on February 8, 2024, descendants of the enslaved, Democratic State Senator Karla May, and economist Julianne Malveaux announced that the wealth acquired amassed from stolen labor, and the construction of the university, “totaled between \$361 million and \$70-plus billion.” Economist Malveaux stated that this estimate was based on what the university’s 70 enslaved people would have earned with a low wage - five cents an hour - for 24 hours a day, from 1823 until the abolition of slavery in 1865.

Since its founding in 1540, The Society of Jesuits had benefited from enslaved labor and was an active participant in slavery in the U.S. until it was abolished in 1865. The Catholic Order forced enslaved Black people to construct churches and schools for white people throughout the United States, including Missouri, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Louisiana, Alabama, Illinois, and Kansas. Along with St. Louis University, Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. and Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama were directly involved in the forced labor of enslaved Black people for the construction of the schools.

Robin Proudie, the executive director and founder of Descendants of the St. Louis University Enslaved, is descended from Henrietta Mills, who was enslaved by the Jesuits in St. Louis. Proudie has spent many years piecing together her family’s history and telling Mills’ story across the country. Documents show Mills was 16 years old when she married 20-year-old Charles Chauvin on June 18, 1860. On the same sheet of paper as her and her husband’s names are listed another four words: “slave of St. Louis University.” Proudie said her family has waited patiently for the university to reconcile with its past, but progress has been slow.

Sources:

PBS. “Descendants of those enslaved by St. Louis University calculated their ancestors’ unpaid labor. Here’s how.”
<<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/st-louis-university-was-built-using-enslaved-labor-descendants-are-making-a-new-call-for-compensation>>

