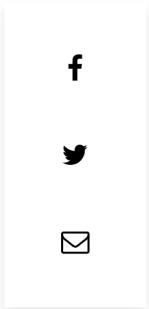




ARTS, CULTURE, & POLITICS



# Understanding Hard History at James Madison's Montpelier: An Informative and Eye-Opening Fall Break Experience



Asa Herron 📅 Nov 17, 2019



Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries is the most exciting professor at Ohio State right now. As an associate professor in the History Department, he teaches courses on African-American history, specifically focusing on the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. He puts his specialty knowledge of history to work in the present day as the President of the Board of Directors for the American Civil Liberties Union's (ACLU) Ohio branch and host of his "Teaching Hard History" podcast. In the past, he has been instrumental in the redevelopment of several history museums such as The National Civil Rights Museum in Nashville and James Madison's Montpelier.



I have been fortunate enough to take two of Dr. Jeffries' courses in my time as a student so far. I first met him in a freshman seminar on mass incarceration and the Black Lives Matter movement where we hit it off right away. I really appreciated how he could make history come alive and explain how it manifests itself in the present. The next year I took his African-American History Through Film class, which is the best class I have taken at Ohio State. As our friendship progressed, Dr. Jeffries invited me on his second-ever student trip to James Madison's plantation in Virginia, Montpelier. The purpose was to connect the

The plantation has been made into a museum which commemorates the life of the “Father of our Constitution” similarly to George Washington’s Mount Vernon and Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello. However, it was not only these men who lived at their respective plantations. They were home to a community of enslaved laborers who took care of the property and provided the labor which created the wealth our founding fathers enjoyed.

For the most part, the history of these enslaved people has been largely ignored. Montpelier decided in 2017 to deviate from the norm and open the exhibition, “The Mere Distinction of Colour.” Its purpose is to highlight the humanity and perseverance of the enslaved community on the plantation, and to dissect Madison’s inherent hypocrisy in promoting American ideals of freedom and equality, while depriving liberty from the people he “owns.”

Madison even struggled with this contradiction in his own time, as the exhibit is named after a quote of his: “We have seen **the mere distinction of colour** made in the most enlightened period of time, a ground of the most oppressive dominion ever exercised by man over man.”

Those in charge of creating this new exhibit hosted several historians from around the country for help. Dr. Jeffries was one of those historians. He advised curators on how to address the horrors of what happened on the plantation while also highlighting the triumph of the human spirit and tracing the development of African-American culture. Since his impact was so appreciated by the museum, he was extended an open invitation to bring ten of his students to the project. Thus, this Fall Break field trip began.

On our first day at Montpelier, we started touring the new exhibits installed after the

They told the story of how their enslaved ancestors maintained their culture and dignity within an economic system designed to dehumanize them.

One example on display was a piece of quartz found by Montpelier's archaeological team in the corner of the home's foundation. It is a West African tradition to place a piece of quartz in the northwest corner of the house for protection. Additionally, there was a brick with a fingerprint embedded in it which was left by an enslaved individual who wanted to leave their mark on the brick they made. It was extraordinarily powerful to see and touch these objects, like these people were standing right in front of us just yesterday.



As we made our way to the mansion's basement, where the Mere Distinction of Colour exhibit is housed, we could see similar, smaller fingerprints made by child laborers on the bricks of the foundation. This foundation held the walls where James Madison thought and wrote about our current government's framework, and it was built by enslaved children. This really resonated with me; a visual example of how the country as a whole was literally built up by enslaved labor.



The exhibit facilitated this thought process by pointing out the importance of the Atlantic Slave Trade in America's rise to economic power. When showcasing slavery's political significance, the exhibit identified that Madison was very deliberately not using the word

Congress could amend anything through the proper process, except for this “Importation” Clause in Article I Section IX. The end of the Mere Distinction exhibit shows a video (featuring Dr. Jeffries) connecting the dots between the institutional racism at the onset of our government and how it reveals itself today.





were recounted to us. After emancipation, newly freed African-Americans attempted to create political and economic power, but white violence and lack of arable farmland dismantled these efforts. Additionally, Montpelier was home to a segregated train station, so we were able to experience the falsehood of “separate but equal” in Jim Crow America. The “colored” waiting room was noticeably more cramped and uncomfortable than the “white” waiting room. It was crazy to think that my parents were alive at a time when this was completely normal. It made me question what I may see as normal today but that is actually morally disgusting.

With a solid historical background in our minds, we made our way to Charlottesville where we met with several activists in the community. Charlene Green is a member of the Charlottesville Office of Human Rights who told us of the Urban Renewal of Charlottesville in the early 20th century which resulted in the destruction of the city's black communities. This ensured that black voices would not become politically or economically powerful. As a result, Confederate monuments litter the parks of Charlottesville, serving as a rallying point for white supremacy pride which Dr. Jalane Schmidt, a religion professor at the University of Virginia and Black Lives Matter activist, explained to us. Dr. Schmidt was there when the Neo-Nazis came to town, bore their tiki torches, and eventually drove a car through a crowd of counter-protestors. She detailed the history of white fragility in Charlottesville when talking about dismantling the legacy of the Confederacy, and how allowing the Confederate sympathizers to have space always ends with innocent deaths. The fight to keep Neo-Nazis without a platform in Charlottesville and around the country continues today.



On our last day, we were joined by teachers from local school districts to hear a lecture from Dr. Jeffries on the importance of teaching and learning factual history, even in the face of adversity. As he often says in his classes, Americans love nostalgia but hate history.

get a glimpse of what I experienced and the possibility to experience it yourself.

*Look out for Dr. Jeffries' courses when scheduling classes for next semester. He teaches HISTORY 3083: Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, ARTSSCI 1137.10: First-Year Seminar on Mass Incarceration, and HISTORY 3085: African American History Through Contemporary Film.*



**Asa Herron**

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