**Episode 2: The Academical Village**

[narrated by EricaJoy Oliverio]

[theme music: repetitive, dramatic keyboard music]

Tradition. Noun. The handing down of statements, beliefs, legends, customs, information, etc., from generation to generation, especially by word of mouth or by practice.

Some say that tradition is everything. That it’s something that has to be continued no matter how much time has passed.

But how long should traditions be upheld? What has to happen for something that’s long standing to change? And what if it can’t be changed?

Welcome to Monumentality. I’m your host, EricaJoy Oliverio, and, today, I’m going to tell you a story about the University of Virginia - its history and its present.

[theme music fades, light piano music begins]

The University of Virginia is one of the oldest higher education institutions in America. Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States and the author of the Declaration of Independence, designed the University to contrast his own college experience at another Virginia school, The College of William and Mary.

Jefferson had two radical ideas. The first was to have eight individual schools that each had its own educational focus. This was unlike other colleges at the time that only had one discipline, like medicine or law. The second radical idea for UVA was for it to be unaffiliated with religion. Instead of the campus being physically centered around a church like most colleges at the time, he wanted the library--the symbol of academic life--to sit at the University’s center.

Jefferson’s vision was for an Academical Village where students and professors would learn and live with each other. But what does this Village entail?

We got a tour of the lawn from Tom Pilnik, a University Guide. He helped us to better understand this history. Here’s what we learned. It’s a little long, but so if UVA’s history.

Tom Pilnik: “So we are sitting right now on the lawn in the Academical Village. The Academical Village is made up of a lot of parts that are surrounding us right now. But really, the centerpiece of this space is the Rotunda. And this was a building that was modeled after the Pantheon in Rome. So if you can imagine that building, but made out of this classical red and white brick. So you’ve got these white columns and this beautiful domed building right in the center of this Academical Village. And so this Rotunda looks in a southern direction down the lawn where we’re sitting now and you know there are hundreds of students out right now playing Frisbee and sitting and having their last classes but flanked on either side of the lawn are these lawn rooms and these pavilions. And so you have 54-ish of these rooms on each side where students still live. Between each section of lawn rooms you have these huge pavilions and most of these, again, are in this neoclassical Jeffersonian red and white brick but they’re styled after individual Roman and Greek temples, um, and as you go down the lawn essentially what Jefferson did was begin to design his own temples.”

Tom does a great job of describing the lawn and its structures. If the weather is nice, you can see students enjoying their time all around the Grounds of the University. The Rotunda and the surrounding lawn are seen as the space that best symbolizes UVA’s mission as an academic and social sphere.

It’s where most University-wide events are held, from graduation to more niche events like the annual light show, Lighting of the Lawn. Tom believes that large events on the lawn are what demonstrate its inclusivity.

Tom: “It’s just spectacular to see how much an event like this brings students together and how much a space like this has the capability to bring students together. So, um, it’s events like those that then promote the message of inclusivity and inclusion on the lawn and that promote, um, the ideal that you are allowed to be here and that this is everyone’s space. That this space is meant to build the community together.”

[piano music fades out]

But who is allowed to regularly occupy that space? Do these Jeffersonian traditions bring us together or tear us apart?

We interviewed Dean Gates, the current Dean of Diversity and Inclusion in the Engineering school at UVA, and asked him about his thoughts on the lawn and its traditions.

Dean Gates: “It is almost now in some ways as it was then, I believe. The color of the students who are there is different. There is more diversity in the color. But it is still a highly elite and privileged space, even in 2017. Only a few dozen students get to live there. And they’re chosen through a format historically that has maintained a high sense of privilege...So the lawn is in a sense telling the story of its heritage but not necessarily the story of its promise.”

Can’t argue against that. Living on the lawn is seen as the epitome of the UVA experience. It is a space revered by everyone at the school, faculty and students alike. This makes its already extremely selective application even more stress-inducing to students applying for this prestigious experience. But we can’t forget how the lawn came to be. When Jefferson first started his great University, he used slaves rather than hired laborers to build it. As a black man, Dean Gates has thoughts on this as well.

Dean Gates: “When it comes to engineers, I remind black engineers that the first great engineers at UVA looked exactly like them, they were simply enslaved. So when you look at the lawn houses, who built those? When you look at the Rotunda and its magnificence, who built that? These structures are symbols of our heritage and our being in this space. You think about who lived in the basements of those buildings. They were slaves.”

So when you walk across the UVA lawn, you are walking on a space that only exists because of slavery. That can be hard to swallow as a current student. The plethora of white columns surrounding a 62% white population of students doesn’t help with this image. Although the University has made efforts to acknowledge this history, the progress is slow. Most students of color continue to feel trapped by a history of white supremacy when they walk across Jefferson’s lawn. Dean Gates had his own reaction to the University's attempts to honor its less than honorable history.

Dean Gates: “I think it’s great that UVA is acknowledging our history. I think it would be tragic if that acknowledgment turned into a white washing of the realities. There was something in the Cavalier Daily a few months ago, some initial renderings of buildings or edifices for the memorial for slaves and slavery, slave laborers. And it looked very much at that point like the rest of the buildings on grounds, it was full of white columns, and I gasped and sent an email to central saying this isn’t going to cut it.”

So it doesn’t seem like the administration has plans to change the lawn much, if at all. Why is that? Well, in 1987 the lawn was classified as a UNESCO World Heritage site. This means that no significant changes can be made to it, structurally or architecturally. Unfortunately, this also means that a memorial for those enslaved here will be difficult to make. And that nothing currently in the area can be removed. So the white columns are here to stay.

We talked to a Bryanna Miller. Bryanna is a black student at the University. She is the outgoing president of the Black Student Alliance, the incoming Student member of the Board of Visitors, and she will be a Lawn resident--or Lawnie--for the upcoming school year.

Here’s how she thought about the lawn when she first came into UVA.

Bryanna Miller: “It’s always been a challenge for me because I think that black students in particular have an earlier orientation to what the lawn has represented in the past. If you’re a black student at the university you’re made to be more aware of the history of the university earlier on in your time. So, my first year especially I felt really uncomfortable because I was thinking about how some of the lawn room basements were quarters for slaves. I didn’t understand in my first year why black students would want to live on the lawn. I just like didn’t understand it, right? Like how can you voluntarily live in a space and interact there knowing, like, the history of it.”

Obviously, Bryanna is only one student. But among students not originally allowed to attend the school, like Bryanna, there seems to be a feeling of discontent. They feel as if the lawn is not properly representing what it is like to be at UVA. It’s too old. It’s too green. It’s too *white*. Even Bryanna’s relatives had something to say about the Lawn and its history of racism.

Bryanna: “I hesitated for a really long time about applying to live on the lawn, and most of my hesitation had to do with the history. It was something that I talked to my uncle a lot about, and I texted him and I was like “hey, I think I’m going to apply to live on the lawn. I know we’ve had a lot of conversations about it.” And he literally texted me back and was like “Well, you know, go for it but I still don’t understand why you wanna live in Uncle Tom’s Cabin.”

Like Dean Gates said, the lawn is an elite space. And because of its UNESCO protection, its history and white columns aren’t going anywhere. But that doesn’t mean that the elitist attitudes of the lawn have to stay.

So how can we accept this and still love our University? Here’s Dean Gates again, with his own solution.

[musical interlude: uplifting light guitar music]

Dean Gates: “We occupy the space. In other words, rather than fleeing from it, we draw to it. We make it a space in which we embrace. It requires that we become comfortable with our discomfort with the Grounds and the lawn. And that we become comfortable with the uncertainty with our positioning here as people at UVA to say, ‘This is my space. This is my lawn. This is not the lawn of UVA, this is my front lawn, my back lawn, my side lawn, this is where I live.’”

What Dean Gates is calling for is not an architectural change. That would be impossible anyway. Instead, Dean Gates is calling for *social* change, and putting it on the students to carry it out. In a space so rooted in tradition, significant changes have to come from the people in that space.

Bryanna also believes that making the lawn your own is the only way to move forward.

Bryanna: “I think in some ways if you’re a student who rejects and refuses to participate fully in the space, you are cutting yourself off from the full university experience. And so my goal was to participate as fully as possible in my UVA experience because I recognize the love that legacy students have for this place. I wanted to have that same joy and excitement about the place. And I think the lawn can do that, you know. Participating in the traditions, that can do that. Or at least it did it for me. Yes it does have this history, but at the same time it has a future that can be inclusive. But only if we choose to participate in it.”

Bryanna proves that this kind of attitude change can happen. It starts with students like Bryanna, with guides like Tom telling visitors our history, and with us - shedding light on these issues.

[theme music returns]

Next week on Monumentality, we’ll focus on a place that doesn’t even exist anymore, and how to create history for a space that has been forgotten: the neighborhood, Vinegar Hill.

Thank you to Dean Gates and Bryanna Miller for taking the time to be interviewed by us. Also, thank you to Tom Pilnik for giving us an extensive tour of the Lawn.

[theme music fades out]