**Episode 3—Vinegar Hill**

[narrated by EricaJoy Oliverio]

[theme music: repetitive, dramatic keyboard music]

Memory. Noun. Something remembered from the past; a recollection.

But what happens when something isn’t remembered? What happens when the past is forgotten?

Welcome to Monumentality. I’m your host, EricaJoy Oliverio, and today I’m going to tell you a story about Vinegar Hill--a neighborhood that now exists only in memory but refuses to be forgotten.

[music fades out; ambient sound from inside Random Row Brewery fades in]

These are the sounds from a Thursday night at Random Row Brewery. The producer of this episode, Tricia O’Donnell, and I ordered a few flights of local beer and chatted with the bartenders about school, beer and life. There were kids running around, couples and friends hanging out, and a guitarist playing some acoustic music in the background. It was a pretty typical Thursday night in Charlottesville.

[ambient sound fades out]

The name Random Row didn’t used to refer to a brewery, though. About a block away from where we were enjoying a flight of locally-brewed beer is a place that used to be a thriving neighborhood—the center of the African-American community in Charlottesville. It was called Vinegar Hill, but it was also known by the name Random Row, because the houses deviated from the grid of the original town plan.

Located near downtown Charlottesville, Vinegar Hill was originally settled by Irish families in the early 1800s. It was named by a man named George Toole in honor of his home in Ireland which was known by the same name. African American families began moving into the neighborhood after the civil war. In addition to being a residential space, Vinegar Hill also developed into an important center of commerce for the black community since there were many family-owned businesses in the area that thrived.

Vinegar Hill, or Random Row, became the center of African American life in the city.

[theme music fades in]

But in 2017, drinking beer at a brewery by the same name, there is no sign that this neighborhood ever existed.

[theme music fades out]

In 1965, federal tax dollars funded the destruction of Vinegar Hill in the name of “urban renewal.” The entire community was erased—all of the buildings were destroyed. The sole building left standing was the Jefferson School, which had been the school for African Americans when Charlottesville was still a segregated city. African American families were forced to abandon the homes and businesses that they had built from scratch and to leave the city they had established their roots in.

In a documentary called *That World is Gone*, produced in 2009 and 2010 by Hannah Brown Ayers and Lance Warren, Ayers and Warren talked to some of the people who were displaced by this urban renewal project. Here are Ann Wicks Carter and Kathy Johnson Harris, who grew up in Vinegar Hill before being forced to relocate:

Ann Wicks Carter: “I came home, I can’t remember if I was a sophomore or a junior, and I told my mom I was going to 4th street to see what it’s like. And she said nobody’s there. It was a ghost town. It was the eeriest.”

Kathy Johnson Harris: “It was a Saturday morning and a moving van came, and I can remember my baby sister who was 3 sitting at this yellow kitchenette set in the kitchen. And I can remember my mother going out, telling them to back in and take our belongings because we were leaving. I remember my dad going to meet with some people to see if he could stop it. And people were, “Oh, don’t worry about it.” I think some knew and some didn’t have fight in them. Some knew, and didn’t know how to fight.”

Residents were forced out, and their homes were destroyed. The homes weren’t beautiful, but they were still meaningful. Here’s Scot French, who was interviewed for the same documentary, speaking about the significance of property ownership and the impact of urban renewal on the African American community:

Scot French: “African Americans may not have owned the most expensive property. In fact, they may have been quite modest properties. But that was very important as a marker of sort of, both personal advancement and racial advancement. That they had been able to at least get a piece of the American dream. Urban renewal in effect crushes that. You know, it’s saying, it doesn’t matter. This is a market decision. Your investment in this property—your financial investment, your emotional investment—means nothing here. The history of your struggle means nothing. This is about the greater good, and you need to get out of the way.”

[theme music fades in]

This didn’t happen that long ago. This is still a living memory for many people, like Ann and Kathy. How did an entire neighborhood get destroyed? And why, in 2017, is the memory still largely erased from Charlottesville’s history?

Throughout the course of Monumentality, we have talked about monuments and the singular stories that they tell. But in the case of Vinegar Hill, there is no monument. There is no story to honor the loss of the Vinegar Hill community. It’s a space that, without memorialization, could very well be forgotten.

[music fades out]

We talked to Frank Dukes, who is a distinguished institute fellow at the institute for environmental negotiation at UVA, and one of the founders of UCARE, university and community action for racial equity. He told us the story behind the neighborhood’s destruction.

Frank Dukes: “Vinegar hill was the community, the heart of the African American community, that was largely destroyed under the name of urban renewal, but really one of the consequences of white supremacy. This idea that some people are less valuable than other people and their voices are less valuable than other people and that they have less authority over the direction of their own lives. And so I’ve been aware of the history and actually been teaching my students that history because it’s emblematic of the rest of the history of Charlottesville, and also that people have long memories and there are many, many people alive who witnessed the destruction of Vinegar Hill, and then witnessed the long time before anything was done that was promised to be done for the re-development of Vinegar Hill, and then saw most of that benefit not happening back into the black community too.”

Dr. Dukes was also a part of the Blue Ribbon Commission for Race, Memorials, and Public Spaces. He served on the commission for 6 months until it was dismissed in early January 2017. The commission, which was formed in June 2016, was tasked with addressing questions of race, memorials, and public spaces in the city and with providing options to the City Council for addressing these issues moving forward. The commission was involved with the issue of the Lee statue that we discussed in the first episode of Monumentality, and also with Vinegar Hill. Dr. Dukes told us about how the commission approached Vinegar Hill:

Frank Dukes: “As far as our commission goes, our commission was charged with looking at telling a more complete racial history and changing the narrative and so highlighting that history of Vinegar Hill, not to wallow in sort of the misery of that, although there is misery and pain involved with that, but more as a lesson for us to understand there are reasons why we have certain types of public housing. There are reasons why we’ve had certain types of development in Charlottesville. There are reasons why there are people that absolutely distrust government at any level, because of what happened, and local government in particular, because of the way their voices were left out of that. And with our commission, we wanted to support—we didn’t feel that we needed to do anything new, because there already were efforts—but the two efforts that we supported were that there is a memorial planned for vinegar hill that already, the artist have been selected and they’ve already done a model with that, and so we endorsed that and then maybe even more importantly that there are plans for a new Vinegar Hill park near the courthouse and near the downtown mall and really just by the downtown mall, too, where there’s currently a plaque that is mostly invisible, and so we endorsed that. The city historic resources commission made a presentation and came up with a plan. Also there’s going to be redevelopment of that end of the mall with what’s currently the park/the skate rink is going to be torn down and office buildings placed there too, so the hope is that that will be an opportunity as that is being developed to bring forth more of the history of Vinegar Hill.”

As Dr. Dukes mentioned, there *are* some existing efforts to memorialize Vinegar Hill. There’s currently an informative plaque downtown, but it is hard to see. In fact, it actually used to be behind a large planter and a trash can that was bolted to the ground, making it practically invisible. Those barriers were removed, but the plaque still goes unnoticed. So, in December 2016, the City Council approved a funding request from the Charlottesville Historic Resources Committee to bring better signage to the area. They are working on creating a larger park to memorialize Vinegar Hill as well. Dr. Dukes also talked about an effort to rename the federal building and courthouse in honor of the neighborhood.

Frank Dukes: “Our new congressman, the first piece of legislation Congressman Garrett introduced was to name the federal building and courthouse after justice Antonin Scalia. I’m sure he was not aware of the history of Vinegar Hill and that that courthouse is actually in Vinegar Hill, and so after consulting with some of the people that are very active in commemorating Vinegar Hill and trying to create more prominence for the memory of it, we began a petition and we ended up having 1200 signatures, 400 comments, sent the updates to Congressman Garrett periodically, sent him the petition, sent him the names of everybody, sent him the arguments for naming it after something that would commemorate Vinegar Hill, not necessarily someone who really didn’t have anything to do with that particular area. There are plenty of other buildings that can be named for Justice Scalia, but there is only one Vinegar Hill location and one opportunity for that. So we’ve not, he did say he would get back but we’ve not heard from him about any sort of decision he has made for that.”

It isn’t clear what’s going to happen with that proposal yet, but one thing is obvious. There are many efforts to memorialize this neighborhood and re-write it into the history of Charlottesville.

[upbeat musical interlude]

This emphasis on physical markers of memorialization is not just a given, though. Why do we put so much stock in these monuments and memorials? This question spans the course of Monumentality, and it’s really at the center of the questions we have been exploring throughout this podcast. We asked Dr. Dukes how he understands the role of monuments and memorials in telling history, and his answer speaks to what we have talked about throughout Monumentality:

Frank Dukes: “Monuments and memorials are important because they are so prominent and if used for educational purposes they could be really transformed. I think people could realize they at least have to confront that there is a different version of history and why is it that they believe a certain type of history. It may take generations. When a part of history is part of your identity, it’s hard to give that up. I think there will be people that once they learn more…people aren’t generally persuaded by facts but there are some facts that are just sort of hard to deny. But I do think we have to start doing it. We have to start doing it with our teaching, we have to start doing it with the research that we do and we have to start doing it with the monuments and memorials. And I think the monuments and memorials are so public and so visible, so much attention being paid to them, that they’re a great way to be able to make that happen.”

[music fades]

It’s encouraging to see the way that people are thinking critically about the role of these physical structures that surround us, and the stories they tell.

[theme music fades in]

At Monumentality, our goal has been to bring light to some of the stories that are hidden by these monuments. Or, in the case of Vinegar Hill, the stories that can be brought to light by creating better ones. History is not one-sided, but often the way that we are taught it *is*. There are so many layers to every story, and we have the responsibility as citizens to dig deeper into those stories and to attempt to find the truth within them. Monuments, in all of their shapes and sizes, can either be a barrier to this or a pathway to greater understanding and truth.

On behalf of the creators of Monumentality, thank you for joining us on our exploration. Whether you are a citizen or a stranger to Charlottesville, we hope that these stories will challenge you to think critically about the spaces that *you* inhabit, to ask questions about the monuments that you encounter, and to learn the whole story behind the place that you call home.

[music fades out]