

OFFICE OF THE PROVOST



February 1, 2021

To the Washington College Community,

We hope that you and your families are healthy and safe, and looking forward as we are to the start of the new semester and fresh possibilities. Just as we see our nation's leaders grappling with how to protect the integrity of the American Constitution and build the kind of democratic society that our founding fathers first envisioned, Washington College too is at a pivotal moment in its history as we endeavor to become the institution we have long aspired to be. Our nation, and our institution, can only move forward if we embrace our founding principles, recognize when we fall short, and do all we can to set things right.

National Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman, in “The Hill We Climb,” the poem she read at the presidential inauguration on January 20, envisions an unfinished America, and the common work remaining to us, a task of looking back to the past to build a better future:

*Being American is more than a pride we inherit,
It's the past we step into
and how we repair it.*

At Washington College, our work to connect our true past with our present realities and future possibilities is already underway. Almost as old as the nation itself, Washington College has troubling legacies that we must address. If we are to reach our goal of a diverse and inclusive culture, it is imperative that we understand the lasting repercussions of our historical legacies and how they impact our culture today. The time has come for us as an institution to acknowledge our complicity in past transgressions, to honor those courageous individuals who have stood up over long decades and centuries for racial justice, and to find a way forward so that people of all backgrounds can build a community that welcomes all.

The [Washington College History Project](#)—a group of faculty, staff, students, Board members, alumni, and community members—is developing new ways to engage contemporary audiences in conversations about our past as a way to effect positive change on campus today. In our campus and our wide community, honoring and dignifying Black people is long overdue. As an institution, we aim to celebrate both the strength and the struggle, to acknowledge both the trauma and the endurance, past and present, of the people who have worked to make our community richer in its plurality and complexity.

Today we are pleased to announce the **Asterisk Initiative**, part of that larger Washington College History Project that last summer began to reckon honestly with the unacknowledged history of African Americans at Washington College. In academic writing, the asterisk symbol is one that tells us to pause and look further, revealing essential context and subtext. The **Asterisk Initiative** literally makes history visible by placing asterisk-shaped markers on campus landmarks with deeper stories to tell, including the George Washington statue, William Smith Hall, Hynson-Ringgold

House, and Thomas E. Morris Hall (formerly Harford Hall). And in the middle of a pandemic, all physical signs point to a [website](#), where you can find stories, pictures, videos, and a virtual tour that will also be shared on social media throughout the spring semester. This project is sponsored this year by the Richard E. Holstein ‘68 Program in Ethics, which promotes ethics education in the classroom, across campus, and in the community.

We encourage you to view the [introductory video here](#). Interim President Wayne Powell shares the story of William Smith in [this video](#), and Adam Goodheart shares the history of the Custom House in [the video here](#). This initiative is a work in progress, with more landmarks to be identified, more stories to be told, and more videos to be dropped on social media throughout the spring semester. Through these texts and videos, the process of exploration, discussion, and reconciliation begins. A special Q&A session for students is scheduled for Feb. 15, at 5 p.m. Details to follow.

Perhaps no institution is better suited to this work. Washington College’s history tracks closely with that of the nation—both for better and for worse. Our College’s founder, William Smith, was a slaveholder, as was our namesake, George Washington. The institution reaped direct financial benefits, in a variety of ways, from the inhumane enslavement of human beings. Washington College enforced a policy of racial segregation until the 1950s, and even after Black students did start to enroll, they were often marginalized. It was not until 1989—just 32 years ago—that Washington College hired its first Black faculty member. This is our shameful history.

But this is our history, too:

Generations of Black students, faculty, and staff have contributed to our institution in every possible way—often without sufficient recognition or compensation—and made the College what it is today. Generations of Black leaders, artists, and intellectuals, figures of national and global stature, have come to Washington College as honored guests: Julian Bond, John Hope Franklin, Toni Morrison, Colin Powell, Johnnetta B. Cole, Gloria Richardson, Claudia Rankine— who graciously shared powerful perspectives with our campus community. Generations of Washington College activists have fought to make our nation and our institution a more just and equitable place. When the Freedom Riders arrived in Chestertown on Feb. 3, 1961, students and faculty, Black and white, stood shoulder to shoulder with local African American protesters. And for the past 60 years, generations of Black students have found countless ways to build community and be heard. We walk in their historic footsteps on our campus too, not just George Washington’s or William Smith’s.

As for George Washington himself, our association with him is indelible; he’s part of our institutional DNA. But we must strive for a more full and honest understanding of this complicated, exceptional, and flawed person: a slaveholder who personally grappled with the issue of slavery but did not compel our newly-formed nation to do so. While he and the nation’s other founders denied millions of people the “unalienable rights” of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness set forth in the Declaration of Independence, they also penned the original blueprint for freedom and equality that would provide African Americans the framework to eventually hold their government accountable. It would be a mistake to revoke the legacies of Washington, Smith, and others who built this great college, as if both the good and the bad that they did had never happened. Only by facing our history head-on and learning from it can we move forward. The Asterisk Initiative opens our eyes and our hearts to these stories.

In closing, as we each consider the ongoing conversations about issues of race and racial justice, particularly in the context of the contemporary political arena, I'd venture to say that history has never been more important, nor more relevant. If you wonder just how America came to this moment when people of color and their allies are calling for change, let us look carefully at our past. And then, as that brilliant young poet suggests, "lift our gazes not to what stands between us, but what stands before us." Dare to write a new chapter of American history, raising up "a nation that isn't broken but simply unfinished." Amanda Gorman has called on all Americans to step into our past and begin to repair it. I hope you will join this initiative that seeks to do just that. History has its eyes on us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Harvey". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Michael Harvey
Interim Provost and Dean of the College

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lorna J. Hunter". The signature is cursive and elegant, with a distinct flourish at the end.

Lorna Hunter
Vice President for Enrollment Management and Marketing