

New Website Documents Family Histories of Enslaved People Alongside the Voices of Their Living Descendants

American Ancestors Launches Database of Men, Women, and Children
Sold by the Jesuits of Georgetown College in 1838

GU272 Memory Project: gu272.americanancestors.org

June 19, 2019 – *Boston, Massachusetts* – American Ancestors is commemorating Juneteenth, a national day observing the 1865 announcement of the abolition of slavery in America, with the launch of a new website that traces the family histories of more than 300 men, women, and children sold by the Jesuit priests of Georgetown University (then known as Georgetown College) in 1838 to Louisiana sugar plantations. Today also marks the 181st anniversary of the actual date on which the enslaved people of Georgetown College were sold.

Named for Georgetown University and the 272 people listed on the 1838 bill of sale, the GU272 Memory Project website (gu272.americanancestors.org) features fully documented genealogies of the families who were sold, along with audio interviews of their modern descendants speaking about a wide range of topics, from personal memories of family members to racism in America.

Mélanie Short-Colomb, a 65-year-old GU272 descendant who is now pursuing her BA in history at Georgetown University, said, “As Black Americans--as descendants of enslaved people--we have always been told ‘you’ll never know who you are. You’ll never know where you came from.’ Now that we have this data, my hope is that we can use it to open doors and make connections. We have been here since the founding of this country, and we are a significant part of the American experience.”

The Georgetown sale is one of the largest recorded sales of enslaved people in U.S. history. In total, 314 individuals comprising 49 families were sold in 1838. Until the early 2000s, Georgetown lore held that none of the slaves survived the journey from Maryland to Louisiana; in fact, virtually all of them survived. Denied the right to practice their religion, and forced to work on plantations in brutal conditions, the survivors nevertheless married and had children and grandchildren: to date, 8,425 descendants of the GU272 have been identified, more than 4,000 of whom are still living today, and some of whom are interviewed on the GU272 Memory Project website.

“Having descendant voices present alongside historical documents is an essential part of the GU272 narrative,” said Claire Vail, the project’s director for American Ancestors. “Documents provide the factual framework, but people supply the human story.”

The project – and the resulting website – is the culmination of years of collaboration between American Ancestors, the country’s oldest and largest genealogical society, and the Georgetown Memory Project, a non-profit research organization founded in 2015 by Georgetown alumnus Richard Cellini to identify the original members of the GU272, and to trace their direct descendants (living and deceased).

Said Cellini, “When it comes to finding the descendants of people once enslaved in America, the hard part isn’t the finding. It’s the looking. It’s hard to look. But when we look, we find.”

About the GU272 Memory Project website

The GU272 Memory Project – located at gu272.americanancestors.org – includes a historical narrative, a guide with clues for determining whether one is a descendant, interviews with more than 40 GU272 descendants (presented as one-to-four-minute audio segments covering a range of topics, from segregation in the South to personal relationships within families), research tools for GU272 descendants and African American family historians, and short biographies of the heads of 32 of the families.

The cornerstone of the website is a searchable database that provides the indexed genealogies of thousands of non-living descendants of the 314 people sold (for privacy reasons, genealogical records of living descendants have been withheld). The database comprises 50 volumes (49 family volumes and one source documentation volume) with nearly 1,000 images and more than 10,000 records and 32,000 searchable names. It is indexed with name, date, location, record type, and names of family members. Access to the site is FREE to all members of American Ancestors / New England Historic Genealogical Society (NEHGS), including those who sign up for a free guest account. See americanancestors.org/membership/guest-users to register for a free guest account.

The Georgetown Memory Project was founded by Cambridge, Mass. resident and Georgetown University alumnus Richard Cellini. He brought together professionals in the world of genealogy who to date have located 8,425 descendants of the 314 enslaved people sold in the 1838 sale – more than 4,000 of whom are alive today. Living descendants of the slaves could have educational benefits offered to them by Georgetown University. In April of 2019, Cellini was named a Councilor of American Ancestors / New England Historic Genealogical Society.

The creation of the website was generously funded through American Ancestors and NEHGS by Helen E. R. Sayles, CBE, and DuWayne R. Sayles of Concord, Mass. The genealogical research presented on the website was funded and produced by the Georgetown Memory Project, working in close collaboration with members of the GU272 descendant community.

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About American Ancestors and New England Historic Genealogical Society

American Ancestors / New England Historic Genealogical Society (NEHGS), with its national headquarters located in Boston's Back Bay, is the oldest and largest genealogical society in America. The American Ancestors brand serves more than 260,000 members and millions of online users engaged in family history nationally and around the world. It is home to a world-class research library and archive, and an expert staff. NEHGS offers an award-winning genealogical research website at [AmericanAncestors.org](https://www.americanancestors.org) with more than 1.4 billion records and maintains a publishing division which produces original genealogical research, scholarship, and educational materials, including the *Mayflower Descendant*, a quarterly journal of Pilgrim genealogy and history.

Note: Many high-res images with captions are available to media for use in coverage of the GU272 Memory Project. Visit <https://photogallery.americanancestors.org/GU272/> to access the photo gallery.

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