

Building a Bigger Table to Move Forward Together

By [Laura D. Hill](#)



Johnette Weaver, vice president of Williamsburg History, moderated a panel on how Black people and their communities can be fortified through cultural practices at the recent Lemon Project Spring Symposium. (Johnette Weaver)

“If you can’t fly, then run. If you can’t run, then walk. If you can’t walk, then crawl, but whatever you do, you have to keep moving forward.” — The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Last week, more than 300 people gathered in person and hundreds virtually for William & Mary’s 16th annual Lemon Project Spring Symposium. The keynote speaker, Daniel Black, an award-winning author, professor and activist, was back by popular demand to share a powerful opening address titled “We are the Way: Move Forward Together” for the two-day event.

“Unity is our only salvation. We will stand together or we will all be destroyed,” he said. “Nobody is coming to free us, but us. Don’t depend on Democrats. Don’t depend on Republicans. Depend on each other!”

Before I continue, let's start with a simple question that I was asked recently when I shared plans to attend the symposium: "What is The Lemon Project?"



Colette Roots, from left, Daniel Black, Johnette Weaver and Yvonne Johnson at The Lemon Project's annual symposium last weekend. (Courtesy/Johnette Weaver)

In case you are asking yourself the same question, The Lemon Project: A Journey of Reconciliation is an initiative established by William & Mary in 2009 after the board of visitors acknowledged the university had "owned and exploited slave labor from its founding to the Civil War; and that it had failed to take a stand against segregation during the Jim Crow Era."

Since 2009, William & Mary has committed to uncovering its nearly 170-year history of slavery beginning with the provision for slavery in the school's 1693 royal charter. In 2022, Hearth: Memorial to the Enslaved, a \$2.9 million brick hearth, was built on the campus to recognize the forgotten people who had helped to "build, maintain and move the university forward." Its name derives from a man named Lemon who was enslaved by William & Mary, and represents all the people who were enslaved there.

The Lemon Project aims to make amends for wrongs perpetrated against African Americans by William & Mary in two major ways. First, building bridges between William & Mary and African

American communities through research and programming. Second, by creating a more welcoming community that supports diverse students, faculty and staff.

The first Lemon Project Spring Symposium was held 15 years ago as a means of community outreach to establish dialogue with the local Black community. Over the years the scope has widened to include statewide and national participation. This year, groups from Virginia, Maryland, New Jersey and Massachusetts gave presentations that covered elevating voices of descendant communities, Black birthing experiences, displacement, community resilience, genealogy, storytelling, perspectives of Black men and women, reclaiming history, and creating living monuments.

Local participants included Johnette Weaver, vice president of Williamsburg History, who moderated a panel about how Black people and their communities can be fortified through cultural practices, history and collective action; Jacqueline Bridgeforth Williams, founder and executive director of Village Initiative for Equity in Education, who participated in the Descendant Communities Speak plenary panel, which explored how ancestral knowledge, joy and dignity sustain Black communities; and DeVeria Gore, board member of the Virginia Racial Healing Institute, who moderated a panel on “Reclaiming the 19th Century History of the Amblers House” in James City County.

The closing event was a unity gathering at Hearth: Memorial to the Enslaved. More than 50 people were on hand for Black’s closing remarks and to enjoy the glow of a warm fire at sunset, along with soulful voices of the Ebony Expressions choir and open mic spoken word poetry featuring Lacroy Nixon, Williamsburg’s first poet laureate, and other poets.

Crystal Haskins Lassiter’s thoughts best summed up the symposium: “I had the best time. Dr. Daniel Black’s keynote was everything I dreamt it would be. He gave us food for thought, hope, and strategy to reclaim our oneness.”

When we come together to create a more welcoming and educated community, we all win!

Laura D. Hill is the executive director of the Virginia Racial Healing Institute, which manages Coming to the Table-Historic Triangle. Learn more about her work at varacialhealinginstitute.org.



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