

## Letter about current events from the Roberson Project

*African American history is not a lesser part or sidelight of American history. African American history is American history.*

- **Houston Bryan Roberson**, late professor of African American History at the University of the South

*In this soil, there is the sweat of the enslaved. In the soil there is the blood of victims of racial violence and lynching. There are tears in the soil from all those who labored under the indignation and humiliation of segregation. But in the soil there is also the opportunity for new life, a chance to grow something hopeful and healing for the future.*

- **Bryan Stevenson**, executive director, Equal Justice Initiative

Dear University community,

The Roberson Project on Slavery, Race, and Reconciliation condemns the racist violence that killed George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. We feel what so many others, from Sewanee and elsewhere, are feeling now: sorrow, grief, and outrage over these needless deaths; an urgent wish that our country's racial divisions can be healed, and a demoralizing recognition of how far we are from that goal. We stand in solidarity with Black students, alumni, faculty and staff at the University, and we fully support the Sewanee community's determination to bear witness against racial division and injustice in this nation.

We know that the demonstrations around the world are not just about the last several weeks. These actions respond to many generations of systemic and unpunished violence against Black people in the United States and elsewhere. We further believe that raising awareness of that history is not merely an academic exercise. Such work connects us with our past and creates, in Bryan Stevenson's words, "the opportunity for new life, a chance to grow something hopeful and healing for the future."

That work for us in the University community begins at home.

The serene beauty of our mountaintop home could mislead us into thinking that Sewanee is or ever has been an oasis of racial tolerance and inclusion. The history of violence against Black people and that history's enduring legacies of racist injustice and oppression are also Sewanee's history.

We remember—and must not forget—that the white men and women and their priests and bishops who gathered on this edge of the Cumberland Plateau in the autumn of 1860 to lay the University's cornerstone did so as an expression of their "love" for—in their words—"the land of the sun and the slave." They believed the University they were building would protect and perpetuate the South's civilization of bondage, and that slavery was the only true and lasting foundation of a Christian civilization.

But we also must not forget those at Sewanee who fought against the legacies of this history. We must lift up the names and actions of the brave African American men and women who enrolled in the University and, commencing in 1953, gradually bent and finally broke the color line at

Sewanee. They met determined and often ugly resistance from all levels of Sewanee, but many—like Nathaniel Owens, the first Black graduate of the College in 1970—did not relent. They also had students and teachers as friends and allies: the faculty members at the School of Theology who resigned en masse to protest the University’s resistance to desegregation in 1952; the faculty members and students who supported the Highlander Folk School in the face of violent threats; or the University families who joined with African American families to bring an end to Franklin County’s segregated public schools. These and many other examples in the past and continuing in the present can remind us—in moments when we really need it, like now—that we are not as helpless as we feel and that our actions have made a difference. It has been the determined actions of African American and white students, faculty, and staff that have changed Sewanee and the University for the better.

The name of our project honors the life and career of the late professor of African American history, Houston Bryan Roberson, who died in 2016. In 1997, 130 years after the University officially opened its doors, Dr. Roberson became the first African American hired in a tenure-track position in Sewanee’s undergraduate college. The lasting message of his nearly twenty years of teaching was this: “African American history is not a lesser part or sidelight of American history. African American history is American history.” Today he would undoubtedly be telling us—in his gentle but firm voice—that the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery were not aberrant events but extensions of a major current of American life. Yet the message of Houston’s teaching was never a hopeless one. In part this was because he consistently emphasized the resourcefulness and resilience of African Americans who resisted a system that tried to dehumanize them.

The Roberson Project is dedicated to carrying forward Dr. Roberson’s legacy of truth-telling and hope in our work to understand and tell Sewanee’s and America’s history. We also are committed to work with present and former Black residents of Sewanee and their descendants to recover and preserve their histories and contributions to the University and the larger community.

This is a time when many of us in Sewanee and beyond may be struggling to find a way to do something that makes a difference. We at the Roberson Project are no different. But, with your help and support, we will continue to do what we can to “grow something hopeful” in our community—through the roundtables and dialogues organized by our group of student advocates; through the research our teams of College and Theology students are amassing and publishing; through our partnerships with members of local African American communities to Save Sewanee Black History; and through the courses, lectures, performances, and exhibits that we sponsor. We welcome your support as we pursue the difficult but necessary work of telling a more inclusive and just story of Sewanee.

Thank you —  
The Roberson Project Working Group

*For additional information about the Roberson Project on Slavery, Race, and Reconciliation, or to learn how you can support or participate in our initiatives, please contact us by email at [robersonproject@sewanee.edu](mailto:robersonproject@sewanee.edu).*

The Roberson Project on Slavery, Race, and Reconciliation  
*Confronting Our Past; Seeking a More Just Sewanee*