Sarah McConnell: Some of the best known buildings of early America were designed by one of the best known early Americans, Thomas Jefferson. In his home of Monticello, the Virginia State House, and the historic grounds of the University of Virginia, we can trace his influences. There's a fascination with the natural world and with the architecture of Ancient Greece and Rome. But Jefferson's buildings also reveal the enslaved craftsmen who built them and our Founding Father's relationship with slavery. From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell. Today on the show, the conflicting ideals of Thomas Jefferson.

Sarah McConnell: There's a new exhibit open at the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Virginia.

Erik Neil: When you walk into the exhibition, among the first objects that you would see are a bust of Thomas Jefferson, and adjacent to it is a door.

Sarah McConnell: This is Erik Neil, the museum's Director. He says that door is a part of history.

Erik Neil: And this is one that we know now was actually built and designed by John Hemings. John Hemings was an enslaved craftsman who did a lot of work for Thomas Jefferson at Monticello and Poplar Forest.

Sarah McConnell: The stories of enslaved men like John Hemings aren't found in archived letters or official records. Instead, historians turn to architectural objects and tools to learn more.

Erik Neil: The scholars at Poplar Forest have tools that they know were his. They can inspect those tools, and then they could look at some of the carpentry, particularly the doors, and say, "That door was created by this craftsman." We feel, by showing some of these objects, and that includes bricks with the imprint of the person who made them, nails that we know were made at the nailery, that we can help tell that story of the makers.

Sarah McConnell: The journey to this exhibition started years ago in Italy when Neil saw an exhibit about Jefferson and one of his major influences, the Italian architect Palladio. Jefferson looked to Palladio, as well as other European architects, as he designed buildings to fit the ideals of a new democratic nation.

Erik Neil: He's the architect for a new nation. What is the appropriate architecture for a new nation? It's a very rare situation to plan a new city or to plan buildings for a new type of government. And then, we try to maybe think about how Classicism and the models that he looked to in the classical world, buildings like the Pantheon in Rome or maybe temples that he knew about in Ancient Greece, were the right models for him.

Erik Neil: Now, he is very conscious that it would be inappropriate in America to have something that is too big, too elaborate. The Baroque rococo taste is absolutely not his. He wants something more restrained. He wants something that is sober,

maybe even a little bit humble, that would be a reminder to the people who are governing the nation that they need to follow certain precepts in their own behavior. And their country would be better served if they were not too extravagant, and if they would be serious and go about their work as they should.

Sarah McConnell: But by examining the builders and not just the designer, this new exhibit shows how Jefferson fell short of his own serious democratic ideals.

Erik Neil: He also is inherently relying on the labor of enslaved people. So you have this high ideal, even the question of purity of form; but, paradoxically, that relies on the institution of slavery. We know that Jefferson has ideals. We know about the Declaration of Independence. We know that all men are created equal. Yet he operated within a system of slavery. He owned, we know, more than 600 individuals in the course of his life. He relied on them to build the buildings that he designed and to operate them. So that is the premise on which all of this architecture is created and how it functioned for, really, decades.

Sarah McConnell: Neil hopes people from all backgrounds and walks of life appreciate this balanced approach to Jefferson's art and architecture.

Erik Neil: I don't think that people should walk out of here and just say, "Oh, Thomas Jefferson was a hero." Maybe they'll say a little bit more, "Thomas Jefferson was a man of his times, and his times included slavery, Neoclassicism, revolutionary ideals, and great design." So all of those things might be part of the package of Thomas Jefferson that you get when you walk out the door.

Sarah McConnell: Erik Neil is an Art Historian and Director of the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Virginia. The new exhibit, Thomas Jefferson, Architect: Palladian Models, Democratic Principles, and the Conflict of Ideals, is on view now through January 19th.

Sarah McConnell: Among the many scholars who contributed to this exhibition are Mabel O. Wilson, from the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, and Architecture Professor Louis P. Nelson, Vice Provost at the University of Virginia. The two of them will speak at an event at 2 o'clock at the Chrysler Museum on Saturday, October 26th. Not long ago, I talked with them about Jefferson's architectural legacy.

Sarah McConnell: In a forthcoming book, the two of you and other scholars engage in reassessment of Thomas Jefferson's architecture. You see in his designs conflict between his ideals for the young democracy and his embrace of slavery. How do you see that conflict showing up in his architecture and buildings?

Mabel O. Wilson: I think what's important to consider in Jefferson's architecture is how much so many of these structures, the Virginia State House, the University of Virginia are two of his well known, including Monticello. He was also involved intimately

with the construction of Washington D.C., with the U.S. Capitol and the White House.

Mabel O. Wilson: So he had a vision of the role of architecture as both being symbolically conveying democracy, freedom, liberty, justice, American values, but also providing the spaces for the collective government in which that would essentially play itself out on a day-to-day basis. What I find ironic and somewhat almost a disavow of those values is the degree to which much of the maintenance of those buildings and even the construction of those buildings was done with enslaved labor. So monuments to liberty are actually being built with enslaved labor.

Sarah McConnell: Would anybody of that period have understood that or so taken it for granted that it was unremarked upon?

Louis P. Nelson: Well, I think it's important first to recognize Jefferson, in the late 18th and early 19th century, he describes the architecture across the State of Virginia and the American South as 'happily perishable'. So there's this blank slate upon which he can then inscribe the architecture of a new nation. That project of introducing a material vision for democracy is spectacular, it's noteworthy, and it draws a lot of people's attention. The writing of this period that is commenting on what Jefferson is doing does focus on the positive aspects of this because slavery is so normative, it's unremarkable. So I'm not aware of anybody in that moment that highlights the hypocrisy of this conflict between democracy and slavery.

Mabel O. Wilson: Yeah. I think what Louis says about this being a project of building the architecture of a new nation is exactly right. I think one of the things that Jefferson was interested in literally cultivating is culture. What would an American culture be? That architecture could be one vehicle for Americans to distinguish themselves from Europeans. Nonetheless, modeling, as he did, with The Rotunda at UVA on the Pantheon in Rome, or with the Virginia State House on the Maison Carrée in France, on these monuments of antiquity. Jefferson, nonetheless, was looking for something distinctly American in that project, I think, of architecture.

Mabel O. Wilson: He writes to Madison specifically talking about the cultivation of a taste in something that is good. I would agree with Louis. Their start's, I think, in that moment when the Declaration of Independence is being sort of worked through, that there was a sense that slavery would have to be contended with in some way or another. Jefferson early on recognizes that emancipation would some day have to occur, not because the slaves were deserving of citizenship, but because of the moral corruption of slavery to the American now citizen.

Louis P. Nelson: That's right, Mabel. One of the things that's really interesting is Jefferson's attentiveness to what he describes as the moral sense. When he is building up the University of Virginia, he specifically designs each of the pavilions to be

different from one another so that they can be examples of what he refers to as specimens for the architectural lecturer.

Louis P. Nelson: He has this wonderful quote where he argues that the architecture of the University of Virginia is, "Designed to improve the taste of my countrymen, to increase their reputation, and to reconcile them to the respect of the world." What he never incorporates into that conversation is the moral failure of the fact that this entire landscape is dependent on slavery. He's aware of it, absolutely. He's not unaware. He's an incredibly smart man, but he never brings those two moral convictions into conversation with one another.

Sarah McConnell: What was it about Maison Carrée that he thought would embody the ideals of liberty and democracy in the new nation? What was it about Roman architecture, about columns, and also, in other cases, about domes that he thought would be terrific exemplars of this new nation?

Mabel O. Wilson: I think the question of the interest in Greek and Roman Classicism is an important one because it ties to the ways in which the ruins that are still extant, particularly in Italy where many young men would go and do their grand tour and see these things, but also the rise of archeology and art history who are documenting these things. Jefferson doesn't actually see the Maison Carrée when he's in Paris. He only knows it through books.

Mabel O. Wilson: I mean, that's how Jefferson becomes an architect. He's not trained in the academy, but he learns his craft through reading books. He uses books to formulate an understanding in proportion, and scale, and detail. But also, I think the fact that so much of the notion of democracy is being borrowed, for example, from the Greeks, the idea of that space of the polis, of the public, is also being drawn on. Or the idea of the republic is drawn on from the Romans, so it becomes a political model as well.

Louis P. Nelson: One of the things that would happen in the drafting of the constitution, James Madison spends a great deal of time reading old histories. He's diving back into ancient histories to better understand the various ways that ancient cultures produced various modes of government. So there's this correlation between the use of antique models for the constructions of the Constitution and ultimately our federal government, and the use of antique models for a new more modern democracy. Those things are sort of parallel to one another. Just as one uses ancient models for governmental structure, one also uses ancient models for contemporary practice.

Sarah McConnell: And slave laborers did the work to build which early civic buildings in America?

Mabel O. Wilson: Which one didn't they build?

Louis P. Nelson: I was just going to say, let me run with that, Mabel. We all remember, a few years ago, the First Lady Michelle Obama made the comment that she now lives

in a building that was built by enslaved laborers, and that there was actually some pushback to that claim. That sent me back to some hard thinking about the failure of my particular subdiscipline, Early American Architecture, to have actually communicated the fact that one has to work really, really hard to find any building in the American South before 1861 that is in fact not built by enslaved laborers. The enslaved labor force was so pervasive, and Southern economy was so dependent on it, one has a really, really hard time actually identifying the building that's not.

Sarah McConnell: Even in the North?

Mabel O. Wilson: Yeah. The North is a little bit harder to pin down in terms of enslaved labor. But I would imagine, prior to the elimination of slavery in particular states, that you would find mechanics, people who would specialize in carpentry would be perhaps most common, brick making, brick laying, stonework. The enslaved were trained to do many kinds of labor, but it's interesting because it's very, very difficult to find records of how enslaved labor was being utilized. That's what makes it difficult, because it was so everyday.

Louis P. Nelson: It's just so normative, it's everywhere.

Sarah McConnell: Enslaved people built the White House. They built the U.S. Capitol, countless other buildings, including the Virginia Capitol Building, the University of Virginia. How important is it for Americans to understand and appreciate that people who were enslaved did this work?

Louis P. Nelson: Well, this is some of the work we've actually been doing at the University of Virginia in the last few years. I've been at the University of Virginia for 18 years. I'm a devotee of the institution. I deeply love the University of Virginia, so I'm just going to say that for the record. But it's also really important for us to recognize that we do a profound disservice to the writing of history when we let the sole figure and the shadow of Jefferson overcast the entirety of the Academical Village.

Louis P. Nelson: Because, as we have now the last five years been digging into the records, a much more careful analysis of the university's first half century, there's abundant evidence that helps us to see the narratives of men like Sam the Carpenter. Sam the Carpenter was an incredibly important person who was participant in the construction of the Academical Village for a decade or more. He's actually so valued and so trusted that he actually oversees other enslaved men.

Louis P. Nelson: He's an enslaved man overseeing other enslaved men for the completion of major projects. Halfway through the records in our analysis of records, we see showing up a second person called Young Sam. Young Sam who is a carpenter's apprentice always assigned to work with Carpenter Sam. Carpenter Sam is probably in the condition of overseeing teams of other enslaved men, training

them up, one of whom is probably his own son. There's many things we need to do, but there's at least two things: one, is to broaden the scope of significance beyond Jefferson.

Louis P. Nelson: I mean, he's an incredibly important person, absolutely; but he's also had his time in the sun. We've paid a lot of attention to Jefferson, I think, rightly because he's in so many ways an incredibly important figure. But one of the things that we have to do is now also to pan the spotlight, and look at the significant contributions of other people, and begin to imagine the stories of men like Sam the Carpenter.

Sarah McConnell: Mabel, when I ask that question, how important is it for us to understand and appreciate the enslaved people who did the work at all of these buildings, University of Virginia but also White House, U.S. Capitol, etc. That goes to the heart of what?

Mabel O. Wilson: I think it's critically important. This has to do with the rise of mass culture, popular culture in the U.S., which novels were certainly the first, vaudeville, you have cinema. Our collective ethos of slavery is shaped by Margaret Mitchell in Gone with the Wind. It's scarlet red. I mean, it's Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin. We have a very 19th century understanding of slavery. The large plantations of the Deep South that really come into being in the 19th century.

Mabel O. Wilson: That makes us think that, yeah, slavery was kind of maybe a 50-year problem after 1776. I don't think people understand that slavery has such a long arc that precedes the formation of the nation. It becomes a worldwide project, particularly with South America, with the African continent. I mean, it's got a incredibly long history in relationship to the making of the modern world, and so I think that these buildings can start to tell us things about that history, the nuances that we don't typically know or understand.

Mabel O. Wilson: I'm currently working on a book called Building Race in Nation that looks specifically at slavery and Native American dispossession in relationship to American civic architecture. That it's really important to think about how land dispossessed from Native Americans and labor dispossessed from African bodies built these monuments to freedom, and justice, and liberty. I think that gets at the heart of some of the things that we're still contending with as a nation.

Louis P. Nelson: African Americans played such an incredibly important role in the construction of these buildings, yet we have denied that historical reality. We've written that out of the narrative. We have whitewashed the making of democracy. Those kinds of arcs are playing out in our current political condition. It's so important for us to recognize that, if in fact we want a healthy and robust democracy, we have to have a healthy and robust democracy that speaks the truth about the whole of the early American experience, the whole of the revolutionary experience, the whole of the experience in the American South.

Louis P. Nelson: Because, when we only tell the story that centers a particular white family or white individual, we've in fact erased the contributions, the significance, and the dignity of the African Americans that then would have to fight after the Civil War for their own civil rights. So the mythology of American democracy is itself a destructive project, and we can only have a robust and healthy democracy when it's not grounded in mythology but actually grounded in history.

Sarah McConnell: In a new book you and others have just published about Jefferson's creation of UVA, it's called Educated in Tyranny: Slavery at Thomas Jefferson's University. I was reading it last night and struck by the notion that Jefferson envisioned UVA to be an institution with slavery at its core. Even archeologically we're discovering things about Jefferson's design that at Monticello he had a room below his where Sally Hemings lived that we used to think was a men's bathroom and now have realized she was there, to actually building into his plan for the University of Virginia hidden quarters where enslaved people would live.

Louis P. Nelson: That's right. That's why I've been increasingly using this phrase, that the University of Virginia is in fact the architecture of democracy in a landscape of slavery. That there is this implicit conflict between Jefferson's vision for a robust democracy, but it's absolutely embedded in a landscape of slavery. That conflict is something that Jefferson, he doesn't write about, but his buildings betray him in his writing.

Louis P. Nelson: When you look at these landscapes, and you actually look at who can see where, how people are moving around the landscape, who's contained, where are people contained, where are people free to move. Once you start really interpreting the landscape and the architecture through that lens, it's very clear that Jefferson is trying to make invisible this institution of slavery so that it does not have a corrupting influence on the students that he's hoping to graduate.

Mabel O. Wilson: Yeah. I mean, I think that Jefferson is much more deliberate in terms of the ways in which he places the workspaces, the living spaces of the enslaved both at UVA and at Monticello. Most of them are sort of below grade, and so you just do not see them, they're back behind. People are there, they're working, but they're invisible. At best, you might smell something or hear something. But even then, I mean, I think Jefferson was very clear that, once you bury something below ground, the earth basically starts to dampen sound and smells.

Mabel O. Wilson: So he was very strategic, but I think, as Louis has said, I mean, this was just part of people's everyday. People lived with the enslaved. I was just reading histories, evolutionist accounts of slavery in Washington D.C. I mean, the enslaved population, that's who worked in all the hotels. They were the servants in the houses, the boarding houses. It was just part of the economy. And then, there was a whole slave mart and trading that was going on in the nation's capital. So it was just part and parcel of the daily existence of the moment.

Louis P. Nelson: That's right. It's really interesting for us and very helpful for us that Jefferson is so particularly articulate in his designs. The fact that so much of the landscape of labor, the landscape of enslavement, is hidden from view both at Monticello and at the University of Virginia strategically. The fact that there's a anxiety or hypocrisy that's built into that is made apparent by the fact that the vast majority of plantations across the American South in the late 18th through early 19th centuries had slavery completely on display.

Louis P. Nelson: When you're going up that main road towards the big house, on either side of that road is the kitchen, the smokehouse, the dairy, the laundry, and other slave quarters. It's perfectly visible. There's no anxiety about displaying slavery. Jefferson chooses something different. Jefferson hides his landscape of slavery. He hides those buildings. He obscures them from view.

Sarah McConnell: Do you think that's because it was more comfortable for him and his family to live in this world, or because he was deeply conflicted about his prominence as a national founder of democracy who owns slaves? I know he was derided by Lafayette and others who said, "Why are you doing this?"

Louis P. Nelson: Yeah. That's right. I think it has everything to do with the fact that he recognized that slavery had a degrading power on even the white men that are enjoying the privilege from that. He understood, ultimately, slavery to be an evil that have the power to corrupt the human condition both black and white.

Mabel O. Wilson: Yeah. I'll throw this out, Louis, as a...

Louis P. Nelson: Go ahead.

Mabel O. Wilson: Because I'm thinking this through because I'm working on a chapter in my book on Washington D.C. trying to literally get the geography of Alexandria in Washington. I'm just shocked at, between the Capitol and the White House, how many taverns, and slave jails, and pens that are just kind of in plain sight but not really because they're behind walls. The business takes place in markets. So there's an interesting way in which there is an aspect of the trade in everyday slave holding and in urban context that is kind of behind the walls or behind the house.

Mabel O. Wilson: I'm wondering if Jefferson is perhaps more urban in his sensibility of how slavery unfolds versus in the Deep South where, that land in Mississippi of Louisiana Purchase, there's a different kind of white settler sense of the land. And Jefferson fundamentally, because he lives in Paris, is somewhat urban in his sensibility toward slavery.

Louis P. Nelson: I guess that's a possibility. I'd have to chew on that a bit more. But I tend to think that he is responding specifically to the landscape he finds himself in. He is so intentional about the perception of the white visitors viewers that he's really

trying to shape that space. But it's possible that his aesthetic sense in his urbanity does play a role.

Sarah McConnell: How new is this wave of architectural historians taking a deep look into how slavery and early American architecture went hand in hand?

Mabel O. Wilson: Very new, there are people who have looked at slavery particularly in relationship to vernacular architecture. I'm co-editing a book with Irene Cheng and Charles Davis called Race in Modern Architecture. We're looking at how the understanding of racial differences deeply embedded in the rising knowledge discourse of the Western practice of architecture... Because architecture has specifically Western roots.

Mabel O. Wilson: Building, people build everywhere, but architecture specifically is a Western form of practicing building. That rises parallel to an understanding of race, culture, and that is baked into the architecture. So I think we have, which is really exciting, a generation of scholars who are starting to go back to the 16th, and 17th, and 18th century, to the cannon, and start to unpack a lot of what's been buried within it around questions of racial difference in histories of slavery.

Sarah McConnell: Mabel O. Wilson and Louis Nelson, thank you for talking with me and sharing your insights on With Good Reason.

Louis P. Nelson: Thank you so much for having me.

Mabel O. Wilson: Thank you.

Sarah McConnell: Mabel O. Wilson is a Professor of Architectural Design at Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture Planning and Preservation. She's also a Senior Fellow at the Institute for Research in African American Studies and co-directs the Global Africa Lab. Louis Nelson is Vice Provost and Professor of Architectural History at the University of Virginia.

Sarah McConnell: Welcome back. From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. Jefferson's most famous buildings are marked with white columns, a style in plantation homes across the South. But Philip Herrington, a Historian at James Madison University, says it's not just historic homes that feature white columns. He studies the resurgence of plantation-style homes in the South, and what we can learn from a nostalgia for white columns. Philip is also a Virginia Humanities Fellow for the fall.

Sarah McConnell: Philip, how did you first start to notice plantation buildings had become interesting again?

Philip H.: Like many people, I saw Gone with the Wind, and that's what exposed me to what I thought, of course, at least initially, was a genuine, I suppose, look at the

plantation past. I grew up in Georgia, and I read the book when I was 12 as well. Actually, I read the book on vacation in Charleston with my parents. What could be more southern than that, reading Gone with the Wind in Charleston? I started to think about, where were these places? My parents were very indulgent in driving me around, looking for plantations. Actually, what I discovered was that I couldn't find really much of what looked like Tara in Twelve Oaks from the movie.

Sarah McConnell: What do you mean you couldn't find them? There were plantations, they just didn't look like the grand structures you were expecting?

Philip H.: Right. Sometimes you would find something, maybe a neighborhood called such and such plantation, which is very common in Georgia. Plantation play, I would call it, where there were names and buildings that seemed to evoke the plantation but actually weren't 19th century historical plantations.

Sarah McConnell: After you went around looking, and you were disappointed to see how few you found, where did you go from there?

Philip H.: Well, I went to the library for one thing. I got a lot of books. I was looking for answers, and what I learned was that the plantation landscape really was gone with the wind in that it was gone.

Sarah McConnell: You and your research partner have been looking into what you have dubbed plantation revival.

Philip H.: Right. People are attempting to create spaces that evoke in this instance a plantation past. Sometimes, actually, it's not just new construction. Sometimes it's historic buildings or historic sites that owners want to change in order to better convey a sense of what they imagine a plantation is supposed to look like. Those images are often based on stories or movies. One great example of this is Boone Hall Plantation.

Philip H.: Boone Hall's tagline, at least unofficially, is America's most photographed plantation. Boone Hall actually is a 1936 house built by some Canadians who bought the property, and they wanted a plantation that looked more like what they imagined a plantation should look like. We think of Westerns, but Southerns were very popular amongst movie-goes in the 19-teens and twenties. So already many moving images had been protected of plantations that had inspired people.

Philip H.: They tore down the existing 19th century house that was at the end of an oak avenue, and they used some of the pieces to build a new fancy house that now has been the setting for a number of TV series and movies, things like North and South. Also, more recently, The Notebook from 2004 was set at Boone Hall. So America's most photographed plantation is actually a plantation revival building.

Sarah McConnell: It's amazing how powerful cultural icons are, right?

Philip H.: Right. It is amazing, and these images get in people's heads, and they get really stuck. What are the consequences? If someone builds a house that looks like a plantation, what difference does it make? I think one thing, depending on the context, is that these plantation revival buildings do convey ideas about history that stick in people, and these ideas about history do shape the way that we understand our world.

Sarah McConnell: Help me understand why white columns in the first place? Why did plantations have white columns?

Philip H.: Well, not all plantations did have white columns. That's kind of, I guess, lesson number one about plantation architecture. One thing that made columns attractive to Southern planters is because they need shade, so big porches are shady. Columns have a lot of appeal, I think, throughout human history. They really, I think, pretty consistently indicate permanence and power. They get your attention. I think columns operated very well in that context on plantations where you want the big house to be a center of authority, a center of power.

Sarah McConnell: You and Lydia Mattice Brandt have been looking into this plantation revival and implications. Have you come to any insights about race and perpetuations of racial stereotypes?

Philip H.: Race is certainly at the center of this study. One thing that's really been interesting to me, thinking in terms of race and plantation revival, is the way that historic 19th century plantations were always black-majority spaces. The last thing that you need on a plantation to make a plantation run is a fancy white-columned house for white people to live in. What you need are workers, and you need places for those workers to live. Plantation houses included slave quarters, so plantations are black-majority spaces. Plantation revival are white-majority spaces, so they are plantations without their agricultural buildings, agricultural trappings. They're buildings without their slave quarters, but are still suggestive of being at the center of power.

Sarah McConnell: You also see these plantation revival spaces as being sort of whites only.

Philip H.: They certainly can be. One thing that Lydia has worked on a lot recently is Greek houses at the University of Alabama in the 1960s. Those fraternity houses really coincide with how that university was figuring out how to desegregate, at least on paper, but at the same time potentially maintain some segregated spaces. Fraternity and sorority houses are in some ways private institutions, but they also have a lot of ties to the public university and also to public money.

Philip H.: What was striking to us was that the houses that were built in the 1960s were all what we've considered to be plantation revival. They all have these white columns. Now, you might be thinking, "Well, does that just mean that they look

like plantations by style?" They do have the white columns, but certain student activities, things like 'Old South' days, parties in which people are dressed up as Confederate soldiers or Southern belles, they really remind people, or they create the associations of the Old South. And you really see how plantation revival buildings can be used as a backdrop.

Philip H.: I think column buildings aren't simply attractive to white audiences. In the 1990s, the TV show The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, people who were alive in the '90s watching TV, they might remember that that was a white-columned house. Now, I wouldn't necessarily call that house plantation revival, but I do think that the producers' choice of a white-columned building was deliberate. I think it signified that the family that occupied it had made it, that they had achieved the American Dream. White columns are a really critical part of the American Dream.

Sarah McConnell: Should we stop using white columns in architecture or are they still valid in any way?

Philip H.: I would definitely not want to be the person in world civilization who stops the use of white columns. White columns have been going on for a long time in many ways, and white columns are going to continue. White-columned architecture is not something that I want people who listen to this or to look at my later work, I don't want people to look at it and necessarily rush to good or bad. What I want people to do is really think about how did buildings create landscapes of power.

Philip H.: Buildings and spaces are about power, and buildings tell stories. We want to be mindful in creating those spaces, or changing those spaces, or curating them, what stories we're telling. I don't think people need to just avoid white columns because of a fear of seeming to want to revisit the plantation, but it really depends on the context. It might be that a certain neighborhood that's being developed, maybe you don't want to tack plantation on to that neighborhood, especially if there was actually a historical plantation there. We don't need new plantations.

Philip H.: It might be that a building that's supposed to serve as certain public purpose perhaps shouldn't resemble a plantation. It's not that white columns aren't there for everyone to enjoy; but, when someone looks at the building and says it looks like Tara, what I'd really like is for people to stop and think about, what does that mean? If it looks like Tara to you, and it looks like Tara to other people, is that okay?

Sarah McConnell: Philip Herrington is a Historian at James Madison University and a Virginia Humanities Fellow this fall.

Sarah McConnell: Walk into old post offices across the United States, and you might find New Deal era public murals. Like the walls of Thomas Jefferson's buildings, these murals

tells a story about the history of race in America. John Ott is a Professor of Art History at James Madison University. He's been taking a closer look at how conversations about racial integration played out in public art during the early 20th century.

Sarah McConnell: John, in your forthcoming book, you're looking at public art that shows racial integration during the years 1931 through '54. You've looked in particular at a lot of murals and sculptures during this period that depict racial integration or that are criticized for depicting racial integration or not. Describe some of these.

John Ott: Yeah. The federal government's paying hundreds of artists to paint thousands of murals across the country, and only a tiny fraction do show black and white Americans together. They're all over the country in places like Richmond, Virginia, but also Richmond, California, from Wisconsin down to Florida. They show integration in many different kinds of ways, and most of them would've been very hierarchical. Most appear, actually, in the South, and they show conventional racial hierarchies where whites are managers, they work with technology; and African Americans tend to be manual laborers, and they're depicted in often very stereotypical ways. So there's a really tremendous diversity of the ways that integration is imagined in these murals and in imagery more generally throughout the period.

Sarah McConnell: How many of the murals did you find to be sort of progressive, showing black and white figures integrated and joined together?

John Ott: There's just a handful, and it's the few artists that are involved with many of these leftist organizations. There's one artist, Philip Evergood, who's working in Jackson, Georgia. At one point, an exasperated administrator in Washington writes him, "I do not believe, however, that you were very conscious of the fact that you were painting for the people of Jackson, Georgia." So the mural undergoes, I think, six or seven different rounds of revision. Even when he's finished, the postmaster sort of writes in to say that, "Comments have been unfavorable and critical."

Sarah McConnell: What were the original drawings like? What was he depicting?

John Ott: That particular one shows black and white sharecroppers working side by side. There's no differentiation of the kinds of work that blacks and whites are doing, and that really challenges the prevailing ideas of white supremacy in the South and really throughout the country during the 1930s.

Sarah McConnell: Did the image of the two races working side by side survive?

John Ott: That particular one does survive now, but many were painted over, have gone missing, have been moved to museums or historical societies. Many of these murals, most of them would've appeared in post offices, but any other kind of federal building, court houses were quite common, schools in some cases.

Another example, in Vicksburg, Mississippi, is a mural made for a court house that has a very idealized image of a bustling Vicksburg both in the colonial era and then today. It's striking because it has about the same number of black and white members of the community.

John Ott: One of the local judges was not especially happy about the mural, and one of his friends writes in to say that she found that there were, "An excessive number of Negroes in the picture, especially in the foreground." And she is acknowledging that, yes, by population, most citizens of Vicksburg are African American, but she insisted that, "In our vicinity, the whites do rule." This imagery challenged her idea about her community and sort of who is running the show. The mural was not changed in the end, as sometimes happen, but that gives you just a little hint of how some of these murals would've been received and would've been objected to.

John Ott: Another case I like in Virginia is in Newport News, Virginia, which was a major shipping center, a big port. It became an important center of ship construction during World War II. This one artist, Mary [Fowler 00:42:02], did a couple panels of showing a white worker riveting a ship together, and an African American worker who's helping load coal. The official description describes the difference between the way these two workers are depicted this way, "For the panel representing Newport News's coal industry of today, Mrs. Fowler, the artist, has modeled the Negro artisan casting aside his obsolete coal-loading basket as he surveys with astonishment the miracle of cranes and pulley supplementing his hard labor."

John Ott: This really would've fed into period stereotypes about African Americans being associated with manual labor with out-of-date technologies, someone unable to comprehend machines. And, by contrast, the white worker, someone who's jumping into these new technologies, contributing to the war effort, busy working, and not just sort of gawking. Unfortunately, this is a common differentiation that you see in the way blacks and white are shown in these murals.

Sarah McConnell: There was also a mural painted at a high school in San Francisco that even right now is generating a lot of unusual controversy.

John Ott: Absolutely, this was one of the earlier murals done in San Francisco for George Washington High School. It's a series of different murals called the Life of Washington. The artist who made this was actually pretty much a progressive, and so he showed, as part of the saga of George Washington's life, not just heroic, idealized images but some of the darker aspects of his career. So the slave labor upon which his wealth and reputation depended. It shows subordinated laborers working at Mount Vernon. It also shows his involvement with the displacement of Native Americans, as a soldier in the British Army before the Revolution, and relating to some of the policies he passed once he was president.

Sarah McConnell: Why is it controversial today?

John Ott: These murals show images of people of color in subordination, or dead, in the case of the Native American figure. For that to be the only representation of minorities is troubling. It's important to call attention to these negative aspects of our country's history, but to show them merely as victims or as passive, I think is dissatisfying for a lot of community members both black, and white, and otherwise. The school board originally authorized that the mural would be destroyed because it's a mural, it's actually in the wall. You can't take it down without physically removing the wall, and so now the decision's been made to cover them up.

Sarah McConnell: How many of these artists were African American?

John Ott: Not very many, and most would've been assigned to make works in black communities and for black audiences. White artists are free to kind of paint murals for all kinds of multi-racial communities, but black artists are really ghettoized into places like the south side of Chicago, or Harlem, or Baltimore. And they were expected to paint African American subjects, so often very heroic images of figures like Frederick Douglass or Booker T. Washington. But they didn't have the same flexibility in terms of the kinds of subjects that many white artists portrayed.

Sarah McConnell: How much do you think the federal government was promoting racial integration themes?

John Ott: In the main, the government's trying to avoid any kind of political controversy, especially in the South.

Sarah McConnell: Even though you did find artists who were pushing the boundary this way, trying to show more egalitarian racial lifestyle, most of them were not pushing the boundary. Would you say the vast majority were just sort of depicting heroic local scenes?

John Ott: Yeah. They were expected to produce imagery that would inspire, that would show the community's best face. But there's a particularly interesting example of an artist who's from Richmond. He was assigned a post office in his hometown, and he chose as the subject the Burning of Richmond at the end of the Civil War.

Sarah McConnell: This is Richmond, Virginia?

John Ott: This is Richmond, Virginia, the capital of the Confederacy. It's a very unusual topic. It's unclear why it was ever authorized because it showed houses burning, people lying half naked in the street, houses being looted. A scene of chaos, a community not at its best. Nonetheless, he proceeds. A sketch gets published in

the local paper; and, instantly, there is this letter-writing campaign, people both supporting the mural and especially highly critical of it.

John Ott: For instance, this one fellow, A.B. [Upshur 00:46:16], who is a local insurance executive, writes in to a local paper, and this is in 1942, complaining about the imagery that was published in the sketch saying that, "My grandmother, several great-aunts, and my father were in Richmond when it burned. And from the accounts given to them of what transpired at the time, I feel certain that there were no half-naked women lying about the streets. I feel that it would be an insult to the better people of our city to foist this disgusting misrepresentation of this event upon us."

John Ott: That kind of backlash then provokes defenses by both the artist and people sympathetic to this mural. One James [Buchfield 00:46:54], and he's talking about groups like the Daughters of the American Confederacy, this guy writes, "These worthy organizations are prone to protest anything which does not contain a rather grayed and washed-out likeness of General R.E. Lee." So exactly the kinds of debates we're having now about the legacy of the Confederacy, its depiction in public arts, were actually happening in the '30s and '40s.

Sarah McConnell: It's so interesting that you found letters on the record someplace. Where did you find the letters complaining about these public artworks?

John Ott: They're all still in the National Archives, and while many might've complained about too prominent African Americans in murals, there are a handful of examples, they're very rare, where we see black community members complaining about what they see. The best known example, my favorite, is in Saint Joseph, Missouri, along the Missouri River. The artist Gustaf Dalstrom depicted a history of the region over 12 panels. While most show white workers industrious, building a community, raising families; blacks are shown by and large...

John Ott: There's one scene in which there's a group of African American men. They're sitting on a pier playing banjos and dancing. So there's this letter-writing campaign led by a local minister, the Reverend F.E. [Nunley 00:48:10], who's an American Methodist Episcopalian. He leads this letter-writing campaign. In his letters to Washington, he's complaining how these murals, "Depict the Negro as wanting nothing more than a place to dance and a banjo to pick."

Sarah McConnell: Even in the last year, as you've see some of these controversies played out in cities across the country. What to do with the statues? How has your delving in to this period cast light in your own mind on what we should be doing now with controversial public art?

John Ott: I think one of the many lessons that we get from these stories is just how little communities of color are consulted with the making of these works, and that's the source, I think, of almost all the problems that we have, that these were

expressly made to represent a white vision of history. When we're faced with challenges today about what to do with statues to General Lee, what to do with these murals depicting the life of Washington, I think we need to listen to those communities because they've been excluded from the conversation for so long.

John Ott: For me, as someone who actually lives in Charlottesville, Virginia, has seen recent events, I think my own attitude towards these murals and these statues have changed. I think in the past I would've advocated for more context to leave those things in place but to teach the controversy, not to censor history. But sort of listening to these communities, it's clear to me that there are other ways to teach these histories, and that it is as imperative, if not more so, to listen to these voices who've so long been silenced or ignored. If that means moving a mural or moving a statue to a museum, that seems to me more the right thing to do. Looking at the past, looking at these murals, I see similar trends.

Sarah McConnell: John, thank you for sharing your insights with me on With Good Reason.

John Ott: Thank you so much. It's been a real treat.

Sarah McConnell: John Ott is a Professor of Art History at James Madison University. His forthcoming book is tentatively titled Mixed Media: The Visual Cultures of Racial Integration, 1931-1954.

Sarah McConnell: The exhibit called Thomas Jefferson, Architect: Palladian Models, Democratic Principles, and the Conflict of Ideals is on view at the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Virginia, now through January 19th. The Chrysler Museum and the Palladio Museum in Vicenza, Italy, collaborated on the exhibition. It focuses on the ideas and key monuments of the Founding Father who shaped the architectural profile of America. It also confronts the conflict between Thomas Jefferson's ideals of liberty and his use of enslaved people to construct his monuments.

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