

Film project sheds light on New England's legacy of slavery

by [Tracy J. Sukraw](#)

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The multimedia installation at Christ Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts is putting a spotlight on the parish's entanglement in slavery. (Photo by Tracy J. Sukraw)

As evening darkness fell over Harvard Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts on October 12, a big screen erected on the front lawn of [Christ Church](#) lit up with a message for all to see:

“Here Lies Darby Vassall.”

As an 11-minute film of the same name had its outdoor debut, Vassall’s descendants watched from front-row folding chairs. Researcher and artist Nicole Piepenbrink created the film as part of a multimedia installation to a public spotlight on some historical facts that many at the iconic 1759 church became aware of only recently.

Darby Vassall, son of Tony and Cuba, was born in 1769 into enslavement by the Vassall family, early benefactors of Christ Church. After slavery was made unlawful in Massachusetts in 1783, he went on to become a leader in Boston’s Black community, helping to found a mutual aid society for Black Bostonians, petitioning for state funding for Black children’s schooling, and advocating all his life for equal rights and abolition of slavery.

No one knows why, but it was Darby Vassall’s choice to be buried in the Vassall family tomb under Christ Church’s sanctuary.

None of the four published histories about Christ Church mention the origins of the money used to fund the church’s construction, maintenance, and growth, even as the slave trade and its related enterprises continued to enrich church benefactors into the 19th century.

Piepenbrink started her *Here Lies Darby Vassall* thesis project two years ago at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design with “an interest in looking at how spatial conditions of church buildings with historic designations tell selective stories about the past. Stories that continue to shape our psyches, influence our actions, and perpetuate injustices in the present,” she said during a ceremony at the film installation’s launch.

“Analyzing the spatial conditions of Christ Church revealed that the only physical marker on this site that nods to the history of slavery can be found on a framed sheet of paper positioned at the back of the Vassall tomb in the basement. One and

a half lines state that Darby Vassall, son of Tony Vassall, is buried in the tomb.”

Christ Church’s rector, Kate Ekrem, said the film project is a first step in the parish’s efforts to acknowledge and reckon with its “entanglement in the legacy of slavery.”

“We have learned that history is not just a set of facts but the way you tell the story, and that we’ve been telling the story wrong,” Ekrem told the gathering. “We’ve been accepting stories that we should have been questioning, and we’ve been forgetting stories we should have remembered.”

One of Darby Vassall’s living descendants, Dennis Lloyd, is a retired Roxbury native who now lives in Atlanta and serves on the vestry at St. Paul’s Church there. During a group interview in August that included Nicole Piepenbrink and leaders of Christ Church’s Racial Justice Group, Lloyd recalled first visiting Christ Church in the 1960s for the wedding of Neal Hastie, whom he knew through Hastie’s youth organizing efforts in Roxbury.

“I remember sitting in the back,” Lloyd recalled. “I would never have realized that years later there would be a connection made to my family being at Christ Church—that my great-great-grandfather, a slave descendant, was buried there. So that was a revelation.”

Ted Hammett, one of the co-facilitators of the Christ Church Racial Justice Group, described what a revelation it was for the parish, too, when Alden Fosset, Kellogg Fellow at the Episcopal Chaplaincy at Harvard, preached a sermon late last year about Darby Vassall.

“I’ve been a member of Christ Church since 1986 and that was the first I knew that there was a formerly enslaved person buried under our church. I think that was true for many of our parishioners. That was for many of us a really amazing and jarring discovery,” Hammett said.

David Brancazio, who also co-facilitates the Racial Justice Group, added that, for him, awareness of slavery’s local legacy has been a slow dawning.

“I’m embarrassed to say this, but I had no idea that slavery was even being enforced in New England, and through this project I’ve learned that not only was slavery alive and well, but the slave trade and money from it was a primary source of wealth in New England. That was just sort of stunning to me. I hope that this project helps

educate the Boston public about our true history.”

Last year, Lloyd and his family founded the [Slave Legacy History Coalition](#) to help people connect with repositories of slave legacy history in Boston and Cambridge.

It, along with projects like *Here Lies Darby Vassall*, he said, “bring into present form the commitment that people have to elevate and not lose that history because it’s so important.”

Piepenbrink said that the *Here Lies Darby Vassall* project has been personally transformational.

When she began looking through archives related to Christ Church, she was trying to find out who was enslaving or participating in the slave trade.

“As I continued moving through the archives, at first my jaw was just constantly dropping with how many names there were,” she said. “My question totally changed from who was to who wasn’t. The exceptions were not the folks profiting from participating; the exceptions were the ones who weren’t.”

During an interview at the church in July, Ekrem acknowledged that reckoning with racial injustice is hard work, and that a discussion forum after church on a recent Sunday had been helpful and important for her congregation. “It’s going to stir up uncomfortable feelings and we have to be able to face that,” she said.

Her advice to other congregations wanting to begin a similar journey is to find a place to start, and then just start.

“There’s no perfect way to do it. I just feel like we can’t get paralyzed by our fear that we’re not going to do it the correct way or that we’re going to get criticized,” Ekrem said. She also encouraged churches to connect with neighbor churches that are also involved in racial reconciliation.

Christ Church is partnering with nearby First Church, Congregational and First Parish, Unitarian Universalist, as well as the Episcopal Chaplaincy at Harvard, for neighborhood walking tours and a [November 5 retreat day](#) focused on learning and reflecting together about the legacy of slavery.

“The truth will set you free,” Lloyd said in response, “and the truth is, we’re talking about it now, we’re all here. We can’t right every wrong, but what we can do is move

forward together collectively.”

Here Lies Darby Vassall will play for the public on Christ Church’s outdoor screen on a loop, daily from 6 to 8 p.m. through All Saints Sunday on November 6. It is also available for viewing on the project website, hereliesdarbyvassall.art.—Episcopal News Service