

Clint Smith III is an American writer, poet & scholar. He received his BA in English from Davidson College & his PhD in Education from Harvard University. He was born and raised in New Orleans LA and is currently 34 yrs old.

In his book “How the Word Is Passed”, he takes us along on his journey to visit: National Landmarks, museums, classrooms, plantations, celebrated events, cemeteries and a prison, all for the purpose of examining how the history of slavery has been remembered and reckoned with in this country and Africa. All these visits took place between Oct. 2017 and Feb. 2020. All quotations from people he interviewed were captured with a digital recorder.

It seemed to Smith that the more purposefully some places attempted to tell the truth about their connection to slavery and its aftermath, the more staunchly other places have refused. I’ll be focusing on his visit to the Jefferson Monticello Plantation to get a better understanding of their reckoning with the history of slavery.

At Monticello, Smith spoke with Niya Bates, their Director of African American history & the Oral History Project. She explained that Monticello has been open to the public since 1923. In the first 30 yrs they only offered house tours, and most of the guides were Black men dressed in livery (which were special uniforms worn by the slaves of wealthy households)!! It wasn’t until 1951 that the Jefferson Monticello Foundation had its first reckoning with slavery and transitioned from colored guides to white guides. According to Niya, this wasn’t well received by the general public. “The visitors resented our becoming more factual & less entertaining.”

Their second public reckoning with slavery began in 1993 as part of their oral history project. That project was called “Getting Word” and involved interviewing the descendants of enslaved people from Monticello in an effort to preserve those histories. “This is how the word is passed down,” remarked one of the descendants in an interview for the project, happy to finally be able to share his family’s story with the world.

Using the stories collected from these oral histories, along with DNA findings revealing Jefferson fathered at least 6 children with an enslaved woman named Sally Hemings, and information in Jefferson's Farm Book documenting the humans he owned, the Jefferson Monticello Foundation finally took a big step in acknowledging Jefferson's relationship with slavery and began providing tours addressing these truths.

What they had realized was: The history of slavery is the history of the United States. Slavery was a system that created the economic prosperity that enabled our country to exist. It was not peripheral to our founding, it was central to it. It is not irrelevant to our contemporary society, it created it. Therefore, they had a responsibility to educate the public to the truth about Jefferson's relationship with slavery.

Smith wanted to see what effects these tours might have on visitors, so he joined a group tour. During the tour he noticed two older women who appeared to be visibly shaken with each piece of historical evidence about Jefferson as a slave owner. After the tour he introduced himself and asked if they were open to sharing their reactions to what they had just heard. Both were warm & welcoming, and spoke freely.

Quote:

"This really took the shine off the guy. You learn he's a great man, but the slavery part was not part of it. Well, it wasn't detailed. It didn't put any heart & thought into it. In high school & college, you didn't think, These are families. These are moms & dads being separated from each other. That wasn't part of the education. Oh my God, how can you split a family?"

"It's happening now," the other woman added, and these self-proclaimed, white Southern Republicans from Texas found themselves identifying the parallels between families separated during slavery and those separated while seeking asylum in the US from violence in Central America.

Learning the truth about slavery and other ugly chapters in American history has often been met with resistance. In fact, our historical reckonings are one of the biggest battle lines of our current time. However, these historical truths need to be heard if we are to understand & address the issue of racism in this country.

This ends our presentation. We want to thank you for letting us share our journey exploring racism with you. This is how the word is passed!!