

20.08.01 The Chiefest Town Hour.mp3

Sarah McConnell [00:00:04] English speaking people have known about the Monacan Indian capital, raw awake for more than 400 years.

Jeffery Hantman [00:00:11] How do we know? Well, in 1608, the legendary captain John Smith the Jamestown colonist. Captured a Monacan from Rassawek. John Smith said. Tell me about the towns that your people live in. And Amerolic named 12 towns, and one of them, he said, was the chiefest of all. To whom other people pay tribute.

Sarah McConnell [00:00:38] From Virginia Humanities, This is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell. Today, we take a closer look at that chief list of all towns, an historic site that might now be threatened by a water project. Scholars believe for thousands of years, Monacan Indians lived and were buried at the fork of land between two rivers. The James and the Rivanna. This is the site believed to have been the Monacan Indian capital Rassawek. It's also where a new development wants to put a pumping station to draw water out of the James River. Monacan chief Kenneth Branham suspects every living Monacan today has ancestors buried at Rassawek. And those remains could be disturbed by the water line. With Good Reason producer Lauren Francis met with the chief at the Monacan headquarters in Amherst, Virginia.

Lauren Francis [00:01:37] Chief Branham was raised right here in Amherst County.

Monacan Chief Kenneth Branham [00:01:40] The racism here on Amherst County was extremely harsh on our people.

Lauren Francis [00:01:45] He says that people couldn't recognize him as Monacan just by looking at him.

Monacan Chief Kenneth Branham [00:01:49] You couldn't look at us and say that's demonic in India. But the last name's Branham, Johns, Hamilton, Clarks, you know, once their last name came out. Oh, you're one of them. So, you know, our people didn't advertise that.

Lauren Francis [00:02:07] One time as a kid Chief Branom asked his grandmother why she didn't share more about their heritage.

Monacan Chief Kenneth Branham [00:02:13] Why did she teach us more about who we were? Ancestors? Her grandmother. And, you know, and she said, well, if the wrong people hear us talking about it, we might not have a place to stay.

Lauren Francis [00:02:27] Today, the chief doesn't hesitate to share Monacan heritage, and he wants to preserve it for future generations.

Monacan Chief Kenneth Branham [00:02:34] You asked me about Rassawek. We had a creek comes together. That's the way Rassawek looks from the road. It looked like a like I said, a slice of pie.

Lauren Francis [00:02:45] The James and Rivanna rivers intersect right at the Monacan site.

Monacan Chief Kenneth Branham [00:02:48] That's the ideal place you would want a village protected on two sides by water and trade canoes. Stuff like that coming to that point.

Lauren Francis [00:03:00] The chief describes it as a paradise with thriving native communities and the three sister crops: squash, corn and beans in abundance.

Monacan Chief Kenneth Branham [00:03:09] Other tribes came and traded, you know, not only with Monaco, but the Indians to get there. So we was all a very busy place and it rivaled some of the cities you would have seen over in England and France in size and population. At one time.

Lauren Francis [00:03:28] Now, the site is completely overgrown. But if the Army Corps of Engineers approved the multi-million dollar plan, a water pumping station will be built there.

Justin Curtis [00:03:38] You know, public water is incredibly important.

Lauren Francis [00:03:41] That's Justin Curtis, lawyer for the James River Water Authority.

Justin Curtis [00:03:45] So we're trying the best to meet the needs of the citizens that we serve by the water while also being sensitive to the Monacan Indian nations and others that have expressed objections.

Lauren Francis [00:03:57] Curtis argues that it's not clear that this specific spot is Rassawek.

Justin Curtis [00:04:01] Just want to be clear. It's not to say that there wasn't significant. It's not a significant site. It absolutely is. There was significant occupation there. So we're not denying any of that. So just to be very clear. But if you're asking the question about was that specific location Rassawek. I think there's still fair questions to be asked and that could be answered through further archeological study that could potentially definitively answer that question.

Lauren Francis [00:04:27] However, top scholars are convinced that this site is Rassawek. The density of artifacts and burials tell them that this was the chiefest town.

Monacan Chief Kenneth Branham [00:04:38] That site is not only our history, but is Virginia history. And it's this country's history.

Lauren Francis [00:04:44] This is Monacan Chief Branham again.

Monacan Chief Kenneth Branham [00:04:46] Why would you want to destroy that? And there are ancestral remains we know in there.

Lauren Francis [00:04:52] The Monocans have proposed more than a dozen alternative routes for the park.

Monacan Chief Kenneth Branham [00:04:57] The respectful thing is to go around. If there was no other way, you know, we're still fighting. But there is many ways and we have shown them another way. And there is progress in the talks.

Lauren Francis [00:05:11] Attorney Justin Curtis says the water authority is still considering other locations.

Justin Curtis [00:05:17] We've continued, even though we have a permit application pending for that particular site and project location. It doesn't mean we've put our pencils down and stop evaluating other alternatives and we haven't stopped talking with the tribe.

Lauren Francis [00:05:31] The chief is determined to fight for a different publication. And for him, the fight is bigger than just Rassawek

Monacan Chief Kenneth Branham [00:05:38] If we cannot stop this water from being put on our sacred site at Rassawek, I don't think it's a site in Virginia that we can save.

Lauren Francis [00:05:50] Over 12000 individuals and organizations have expressed opposition to the project, including a majority of the 574 federally recognized tribes. The project is currently being reviewed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Chief Kenneth Branham says the tribe is willing to take the issue to the Supreme Court. For With Good Reason, I'm Lauren Francis.

Sarah McConnell [00:06:23] Chief Branom credits an anthropologist named Jeffrey Hantman for introducing him to Rassawek back in the 1990s. In the gift shop at the Monacan Ancestral Museum, he put it out copies of Hantman newest book, The Monacan Millennium.

Monacan Chief Kenneth Branham [00:06:39] Jeffrey Hartman wrote to us from just recently, came back several years ago. And, you know, he he did a lot of study on Monacan Indians.

Sarah McConnell [00:06:47] Jeffrey Hantman is a professor emeritus of anthropology at the University of Virginia. He's also one of the thousands of people who has expressed opposition to the water project to the Army Corps of Engineers. He has no doubt the site in question is Rassawek. Jeff, how do you know Rassawek existed as the primary town of Monacan chief 400 years ago?

Jeffery Hantman [00:07:13] English speaking people have known about Rassawek for 400 years. Native Americans in Virginia have known about Rassawek for a thousand years, if not more. How do we know? Well, in 1608, the legendary captain John Smith, the Jamestown colonists captured a Monacan from Rassawek. John Smith said, Tell me about the towns that your people live in. And Amerolic named 12 towns. And one of them, he said, was the chiefest of all, to whom other people pay tribute. And so from 1608 on, we've had a map with the name Rassawek on it at the confluence of two major rivers. And that's the place that is threatened with disturbance right now.

Sarah McConnell [00:08:04] When did you first visit Rassawek?

Jeffery Hantman [00:08:07] I first visited Rassawek back in the 1990s. I had been working on some of the other chiefs villages in the interior of Virginia and I wanted to see what was on the surface at Rassawek without disturbing it. So I visited that place and could see clearly on the surface objects that were made by Native Americans five hundred years ago, a thousand years ago, and older. Stone tools, pottery bowls made of soapstone of all the things that were elements of a town. There was more there. There's just the quantity,

the number of stone tools, the variety of stone tools, the amount of pottery that all said here is a major town. And we're told by a reliable source that it was the chiefest. That was Amerolic's term, the chiefest town to whom others pay tribute. I know from my own research in the region that burials cemeteries are associated with chiefs, towns and some human remains have been identified at this place. And I'm reasonably certain, as certain as one can be without disturbing the site, that there are more burials that would be disturbed if the project goes forward.

Sarah McConnell [00:09:37] What's your best guess about how long Rassawek had been a thriving town back when John Smith's people first learned of it?

Jeffery Hantman [00:09:47] My best guess is that it had been occupied for about a thousand years. That's a long period of time. Its location is where the two major rivers in the Virginia interior then flow down to the area that the Powhatan Indians lived in. Chief Powhatan, his daughter, Pocahontas. And also, we're Jamestown was. So this place had been lived in for a long time and in 1608, its location made it even more important as the Indians of the coast, the English and the Indians of the interior. Who are the Monacan Indians came together to negotiate who would control this land.

Sarah McConnell [00:10:31] And yet, compared to the thousand years that had been there, it was abandoned in relatively few years, in all likelihood after the encounter with the Europeans. Right?

Jeffery Hantman [00:10:42] That's true. And that's long been called a mystery based on oral history. Things I've learned from native people in Virginia. It's not that great a mystery. The Indian people in the James River, such as those at Rassawek, knew who the English were. They knew what their motive was here. And although they initially tried to trade with the English and establish a trading relationship that didn't last. They were also concerned that the Spanish would be coming into the Chesapeake Bay and up the James. The Monacan people withdrew into the mountains and away from the James in the late 1600s early 1700s.

Sarah McConnell [00:11:29] That early after contact? Right?

Jeffery Hantman [00:11:31] Well, about a century. A wonderful quote, Amerolic, like the man I mentioned before, told John Smith why they were leaving the region. And the answer in his own words was we heard that the English were people who came to take our world from us.

Sarah McConnell [00:11:50] You said that people have been digging up Indian sites since Thomas Jefferson's time. Did Thomas Jefferson know the Monocans?

Jeffery Hantman [00:11:58] Thomas Jefferson did know the Monocans. And he witnessed their visit from point south to a burial mound near modern day Charlottesville, Virginia.

Sarah McConnell [00:12:12] So his homes were built on Monacan lands.

Jeffery Hantman [00:12:15] Yes, the University of Virginia is built on ancestral Monocan land. Monticello is built on ancestral Monocan land.

Sarah McConnell [00:12:24] Philosophically, what's your point about? Americans have been digging up Indian sites since his time. Literally, of course. Yes.

Jeffery Hantman [00:12:32] Unfortunately, for the most part that we're talking about Jefferson's dig in 1784 and his dig actually seems to have prompted a lot of what we would today call amateur archeologists or looters. In the worst case prompted a lot of illicit disrespectful digging of sacred cemeteries. No one would have done that to a European and an Anglo cemetery. They did their excavations well into the 20th century and concluded that the people who they dug up had no relation to the Indians who lived around them. And it feeds the notion that Indian people had disappeared. They once lived here. They built these mounds. They built these large towns. But they have disappeared. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Sarah McConnell [00:13:24] If we took a poll with most Virginians have even heard of the Monacans?

Jeffery Hantman [00:13:30] I would have to say most Virginians have not. I mean, and that's just a failing of the way we teach Indian history in the East. Our students in elementary school, in middle school and high school, when they learn about Native Americans, they'll study the Plains Indians, they'll study the Pueblo Indians. And it's shocking to me and I've worked on curriculum development quite a bit. It's shocking to me that there is nothing about Indians in the eastern United States. So no wonder they haven't heard of the Monocans or the ten other recognized tribes in Virginia. There's still a sense that, you know, Andrew Jackson forced Indians out of the east. And there's this sense here that he was successful of that. And there are just thousands and thousands and thousands of people, hundreds of communities that tell us that isn't true. The people, native people persisted against all odds, even when the government declared that there was no such thing as Indian as the race on the census form.

Sarah McConnell [00:14:40] The Virginia government?

Jeffery Hantman [00:14:42] The Virginia government did, and most state governments in the eastern U.S. did. That's the story of eugenics.

Sarah McConnell [00:14:50] It required the Indians to check a box. White or black.

Jeffery Hantman [00:14:53] Correct. And Indian was not allowable. That caused a lot of pain for a lot of people who were identified as Indian or Indian and black. But it was all done by the state dictating to an individual who they were. And it took until the late 1990s and the first part of the 2000s for the state of Virginia to apologize for its eugenics policies and to allow Monacan Indians, Indians across the state of Virginia to change how they were listed in the census. The practical implication of that was enormous because the tribes in Virginia, all recognized by our congressional delegation, by our governors, were not granted federal recognition. And the reason for that was that looking back through census records, there was inconsistency. But that inconsistency was imposed by the state. The balance of power has changed. And I think we see that at Rassawek. 50 years ago, the destruction we may have already taken place. And now tribes are fighting against the local authorities and the Army Corps of Engineers. And I believe they will win.

Sarah McConnell [00:16:12] What went through your mind when you first heard of the plan to build a water plant, to run a pipe across this particular site?

Jeffery Hantman [00:16:19] There was a terrible idea and that would never happen. And I've seen these kinds of projects larger than this one not happen much to the shock of the

local planners. You know what? Proponents say this is really just mostly digging a trench for a small pipe to extract badly needed water from the river. Is that such a disturbance of the land? Yes. I don't have to hesitate. First of all, the trench is wide that's been discussed, the likelihood of disturbing human remains is tremendous, which will shut the whole project down according to federal and state law. And last but not least, this project is not essential. Who is this project essential for as compared to the will, the religion, the history, the rights of the Monocan people? I sympathize, but they have to find another way in.

Sarah McConnell [00:17:16] The extreme, though, aren't all new developments on Monocan land in that area? Even if they found another site, it would still be land once used by Monocans.

Jeffery Hantman [00:17:26] Sure. And the answer to that is Monocan people, to their great credit, have offered alternative paths that will go through Monocan site, but not the heart of Rassawek. There are ways of balancing the needs of developers, the needs of the Indian communities. The archeology I've been involved in. Dozens of projects like that. There are compromises. So I hear your question. Sure. Isn't art artifacts going to be art objects from the past? Going to be everywhere, yes. But is the amount of disturbance? Is the significance of this disturbance equal in the center of rassel with versus someplace a few miles away? No. American preservation law is written that way. Let's find the balance. But sometimes there's no there can't be a balance. And the weight of that tips to where sacred sites, sacred historic sites are concerned.

Sarah McConnell [00:18:54] Jeffrey Hantman is a professor emeritus of anthropology at the University of Virginia and the author of The Monocan Millennium.

SFX [00:19:01] Music: "Lupi"

Sarah McConnell [00:19:09] The National Park Service recently acquired another important Native American site in Virginia. It's the Powhatan capital Werewecomoco, where Pocahontas lived with her father, the great chief Powhatan. William and Mary professor Martin Gallivan was a principal anthropologist at the excavation at Werewecomoco. He says if he could wave a magic wand, he'd have developers at Rassawak follow the Werewecomoco model and include Virginia Indians from the beginning. Martin, you have studied the native people who were in Virginia before the Europeans arrived in the early 1600s. Especially the people who lived along the rivers and the James River. When did you first learn about the Monocan tribe?

Martin Gallivan [00:19:58] I grew up in Virginia and knew a lot about Pocahontas and the Powhatan Indians and Pocahontas' father, Powhatan. But I'd never heard the Monocans until I started graduate school at the University of Virginia in the 1990s.

Sarah McConnell [00:20:11] How many Monocans were there at the time of the first arrival by the Europeans and Captain John Smith exploring with other men into the central part of the state?

Martin Gallivan [00:20:21] We would guess that there's about there were about 15000 Monocan Indians living in the central part of the state in 1607 when Jamestown was established.

Sarah McConnell [00:20:30] Did Thomas Jefferson see Monocan Indians and Monocan villages as he would canoe near his home Monticello along the Rivanna river?

Martin Gallivan [00:20:40] He did. So Jefferson remarked upon a group of Monacan Indians who came to his father's land on the right and a river and proceeded through the woods directly to a burial mound that was located on the river on his father's property. And the story was that the Monacan stayed for some time, conducted the ceremony, and then left Rassawek, which was about 50 miles downstream from where Thomas Jefferson lived in and from where that story about the Monacan mound took place.

Sarah McConnell [00:21:13] Did he or any of the Europeans of John Smith's time make reference to last week or see it themselves?

Martin Gallivan [00:21:22] There are references to Rassawek in the early colonial record. There's an event in 1608 when English colonists ran into and had a small skirmish with a group of Indians capturing a Monacan named Amerolic. Amerolic's account in 1608 describe the Monacan world. He described Monocans living on the James River drainage and a related group of men a lacks living on the Rappahannock Cranage. Those two groups of Indians were part of the same political and cultural world. So we know a lot about the locations of Monacan and men who act villages from Amerolic's account. The account led to the design of the John Smith map, which shows the locations of these villages on on the two rivers.

Sarah McConnell [00:22:10] If you and I were to walk through the property now, what would we see now? What might we have seen then?

Martin Gallivan [00:22:16] So in 1608, when Amerolic describes Rassawek as the chiefest town of the Monocans, it would have been a big sprawling village with one hundred, maybe 200 residents. There is likely a core of the village where the elites lived, where there would be houses concentrated near the rivers and then other farmsteads or home households in the area surrounding that central core. The folks would be growing corn, beans and squash. They would live in wooden houses, called yahakins. And that scene is very different than what we'd see there today. Today at point of fork, it's basically woods. It's overgrown area. It's not currently being farmed, but it's an area that's rich in the archeological record. And we know for certain that around A.D. 1200. So that's 400 years before Jamestown was established. Indian groups up and down the James began to settle large villages. They began to grow lots of corn, beans and squash. But these large towns were established up and down the floodplains of big rivers like the James from A.D.. 1200 on up through the early 1600s when the Jamestown colonists arrived.

Sarah McConnell [00:23:26] Has it been hard to preserve Native American sites in Virginia and elsewhere?

Martin Gallivan [00:23:31] It has been hard until recently to preserve Native American sites. The overwhelming focus among preservationists has been on preserving colonial history. The civil war history. The Revolutionary War history. Those stories are seen to be central to the American story, and oftentimes American Indian sites were not seen as really part of those narratives. More recently, though, people have begun to recognize the importance of native history. That is part of American history. And then it's just damn interesting. So there has been greater success, thankfully, toward protecting them, as we've been able to do at where, Werewecomco?

Sarah McConnell [00:24:10] Tell me about where Werewecomoco. What's that site?

Martin Gallivan [00:24:12] So Werewecomoco is the Powhatan equivalent of Rassawek. It was the capital of the Powhatan world in 1608. When the colonists arrived, when John Smith met Pocahontas there at the site, that was her father's home, Werewecomoco is located on the York River. And we conducted excavations there between 2003 and 2010 and really found a remarkable array of features and artifacts reflect. Thing many, many periods of Werewecomoco's past.

Sarah McConnell [00:24:43] And has it been preserved? Has it been protected from development?

Martin Gallivan [00:24:47] It has. Werewecomoco has been protected from development, thankfully. Currently, the National Park Service, which owns the land, is developing this site as a heritage location where in the past, if he traveled to the Williamsburg area, you might learn about colonial history and Colonial Williamsburg or civil war history at the civil war sites in the area, or even Revolutionary War history at sites like Yorktown. In the coming years, we'll be able to learn about the native past at this national park called Werewecomoco.

Sarah McConnell [00:25:16] How helpless do you think Virginia tribes people have felt when they've wanted to call attention to and preserve historically important sites but didn't have the means to do it themselves?

Martin Gallivan [00:25:29] That has been an uphill battle for the Monocans and other groups to get public officials to recognize the importance of their past and of the sites that are connected to that past. The Monocans have fought really hard to see Rassawek preserved and I'm on the same page. I want to try to help them succeed in that. But what we did at Werewecomoco before we even began excavating anything is that we reached out to the distending communities of American Indians and asked them, what would you like to see happen here? Would you like to see us investigate this site? And if so, what sort of questions do you have and what sort of approaches do you think would make sense? And we did our best. Working with an advisory board, all native advisory board at Werewecomoco to put those wishes into action. And the result was really fabulous. We were able to do good research, good archeology, and also collaborate closely with these American Indian groups.

Sarah McConnell [00:26:25] Do you think this moment of pushing for social justice that we're in across America may yield good things for the efforts by Virginia tribes and other native people to reclaim their heritage?

Martin Gallivan [00:26:41] It's a really remarkable time, Sarah, to be having this conversation. People are waking up to different kinds of history, histories of injustice, histories of displacement when it comes to American Indians. And they're recognizing that those aren't the stories that get told. It's really exciting to see people bring other stories to the fore. One of the stories that needs to be told more fully is the story of the early colonial period and the native role in that. A site like Rassawek would allow us to bring those stories out a bit more prominently so people would understand their history alongside the history of the English colonial venture at Jamestown.

Sarah McConnell [00:27:29] Martin Gallivan is a professor of anthropology at William and Mary and the author of James River Chiefdoms: The Rise of Social Inequality in the Chesapeake. Gallivan is also currently writing the Field Guide for Werewecomoco National Park.

Sarah McConnell [00:27:48] This is With Good Reason. We'll be right back.

SFX [00:27:50] Music: Blue Dot Sessions

Sarah McConnell [00:28:06] Welcome back to With Good Reason. Amy Clark grew up hearing about the cemetery of enslaved people on her family's property in Appalachia. Years later, she decided it was time to truly honor that side and the people buried there by uncovering their history.

Amy Clark [00:28:24] It went beyond my role as a researcher to my role in this family. My role as a mother. My place in history.

Sarah McConnell [00:28:33] We'll hear more from her later. But first, Clark has been working with William Isom from the Black in Appalachia Project to learn more about the cemetery. Isom as the director of community outreach at East Tennessee PBS and the research coordinator for Black in Appalachia. He says researching black family histories in Appalachia is like piecing together an intricate quilt.

William Isom [00:28:59] One little piece here or one little piece there in and you may have to wait a couple of years and keep looking and then you'll find another little piece of my mentor, Darlene Wilson. I heard her say one time that there, you know, there's these two mountains and one mountain is the official narrative. It's the things that you find in the newspapers. It's the it's the court documents, the court records. And then there's there's this other mountain, which is the vernacular history. So stories that people tell each other when they're sitting on their front porch. It's often times the real story that isn't shared with the broader society. And where these two mountains meet, it's called the holler, right. Or the Valley.

Sarah McConnell [00:29:45] Yeah.

William Isom [00:29:46] And and oftentimes in the hollers where the water comes from, it's where you find the most biodiversity. And I think in this case, by holding up these these vernacular histories and these official histories up together at the same time as equally valuable, then we can begin to like dig in and appreciate the biodiversity that these stories and live and operate within the contradictions of these stories. That's the closest thing that we can. I think that we can get to something that you may consider the truth.

Sarah McConnell [00:30:23] When did you first start looking into your family's history and wanting to know more about the actual history?

William Isom [00:30:29] In elementary school they they they have you do the family tree. I once I started trying to do what the other kids in the class were doing. That information was not available for my family. And I wondered why.

Sarah McConnell [00:30:45] So had there been many black people, black families in your neck of the woods growing up?

William Isom [00:30:51] Yeah, there there were and are lots of black families in the region. And they had been there since the kind of the English kind of stumbled their way across the mountains. Black folks came with them. And in some cases came a little bit

before them. And so slave labor built that economy and allowed those settlers to develop the towns and the counties and the coal economy.

Sarah McConnell [00:31:17] What are some of the family stories you grew up on about your ancestors from that area?

William Isom [00:31:25] There's one story in particular about my great, great granddad. His name was Kelson Harrison Isom. And the story that, as it was told to me, was that he was the son of a slave and a slave owner, one of 13 children from this relationship. And as the story goes, as these 13 boys came of age, they were emancipated and kind of set on their way out into the world. The slave holder father never sold any of his his children out of the family, never sold them down the river, so to speak. That's it's a nice story. I mean, it's as nice as it can be. But in reality, I've found a will. The will of the slave holder. Gideon Eyssen, which listed Kelson and some of his brothers as property. And through the administration of that estate, they continued to rent these enslaved guys out to other family members and other farms in the area for profit, even after national emancipation. And I had also found that my great great grandfather's brother, whose name was Gordon, was sold down the river to a slave holder in Knoxville. And so that the bones of the story were there. But the things that make that story palatable were not true.

Sarah McConnell [00:33:02] Were there other stories about this great great grandfather that you'd heard from family?

William Isom [00:33:07] Nobody knew where his grave was at. And so I was told that he was buried on a bluff in Hawkins County up on a mountain. And so I scoured every every mountain along the Holston River trying to find his grave. And then one day I ended up finding him and his wife and his brother's grave in the woods near Knoxville. And I had uncovered literally uncovered his grave with my hands. I was like, oh, what's this? And like, swept the leaves away. And there there they were.

Sarah McConnell [00:33:44] That must've been so moving for you to find that.

William Isom [00:33:47] Yeah, it was it was very moving and very, very magical because it was located adjacent to a cemetery. But it was not in the main body of the cemetery. And I remember saying, this is a black cemetery. I guarantee that there's people buried in the woods. And lo and behold, there were. And they were, they were my ancestors.

Sarah McConnell [00:34:16] William Isom is director of community outreach at East Tennessee PBS and the research coordinator for Black in Appalachia. One of isobars collaborators is Amy Clark. She's department chair and a professor of communication and Appalachian Studies at the University of Virginia College at Wise. Amy grew up in Appalachia on land that had been in her family for generations. Amy, you were very young when you would go on these walks with your grandparents, your grandmother? Who was it who first told you about the graves of enslaved people being on the family's property?

Amy Clark [00:34:55] My great grandmother first told me the story. She was married to the man whose ancestors owned that land. And because I was born a very young parents, I had my great grandparents and my grandparents and my parents for a very long time. And so I had this rich tradition of storytelling and we would go on walks. And every so often, you know, they would retail the same stories that I had heard over and over. And this cemetery would come up, particularly in the ghost stories.

Sarah McConnell [00:35:28] What would they say about the cemetery in ghost stories?

Amy Clark [00:35:32] The ghost stories that they would tell would always take place in and around this patch of woods where the cemetery was located. But they would also use it as a marker, you know, out there close to the slave cemetery or a few yards, right to the slave cemetery. Something happened. And so there were stories about the devil appearing to an ancestor in the corn patch or ghostly riders on horseback chasing one of my grandmothers as she was trying to get home one night from being in the field. And so they always took place close by.

Sarah McConnell [00:36:08] And help me understand where this farm was that your family owned?

Amy Clark [00:36:13] Well, in central Appalachia and in far southwestern Virginia, Lee County is the county that points west. We're in very wooded farmland and very hilly, very rough terrain in some places. So we live, my family lived, along a holler. So we call it a holler. And it's it's along road that is flanked by mountains and a river runs, runs nearby. And our families had you know, this is an old word, but our families had homesteads all up and down that holler. And so I grew up within a box ride of great grandparents and grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins. And so just imagine, you know, woods on one side divided by a dirt road and then a drop off. And the old home place is what my great grandparents would call this home where my white ancestors lived and owned all of this farm land. And so they still use the land for gardening. When I was growing up, it was used for tobacco. It's a beautiful place. And you can see for miles and miles. Beautiful place to sit on the front porch and tell stories, which was the experience I had growing up.

Sarah McConnell [00:37:35] When did you decide to start looking into who was buried in the cemetery of enslaved people on your family's land?

Amy Clark [00:37:44] I started writing about my family in my 20s and publishing essays because my family's stories were such a rich, I just, there were so many rich layers to the storytelling. And I remember I was sitting down and thinking about what I wanted to write in a writing workshop. And those graves came to my mind and I thought, it's time, it's time for me to write about the graves. And so I just started by writing down everything that I knew just based on the stories that I had been told. And I began to realize that I wanted to know who was buried there. And I wanted to tell their story. And so that sort of set me on a path in 2013 that is still ongoing.

Sarah McConnell [00:38:31] How many graves are there, do you think?

Amy Clark [00:38:35] Well, when I went back to the site after so many years and I remember this when we were walking through the woods when I was little, we had no idea how many graves there were. But I remember we counted something like seven to ten stones and that's all there were. So when I went back, my husband and I went back and began to clear the ground and we began to uncover more and more stones. We found about 30, but we suspect there are more because we didn't have the equipment to move trees and we didn't really want to do that. But we didn't have the equipment to move as much foliage and brush and trees as we would need to to really uncover and clear the land.

Sarah McConnell [00:39:18] What kind of stones did you find?

Amy Clark [00:39:20] So we found field stones and there chiseled into shapes. So we know we knew that they were probably graves. They're chiseled into mound shapes and pyramid shapes. Rough, rough chiseling. There's there's nothing engraved on them. They're simple field stones that were carried and placed.

Sarah McConnell [00:39:43] Are they big?

Amy Clark [00:39:45] The tallest one is about 15 inches tall and the smallest one is about four inches tall. So they're not very large, not like traditional gravestones that you would find in cemeteries.

Sarah McConnell [00:39:58] Do you think whole families are there?

Amy Clark [00:40:01] We know that probably whole families are there because I was able to get ground penetrating radar. Physicist Rhett Hermann came from Radford and worked with me. I was able to get a grant to fund this reading of the ground. And this is something that is typically done in cemeteries where there are no gravestones or they've been moved in because there are so many trees in this patch of woods. And some of them had fallen. They had uprooted some of the graves. And so I wanted to know first, I wanted to confirm that what I was looking at was a graveyard. And the second thing I wanted to do was see if the order of the burials matched the placement of the stones. After so many years and so Dr. Herman brought ground penetrating radar equipment that sends the sound waves into the ground and it bounces back from organic material that doesn't match the soil. So wooden coffins or blankets or bones, it would bounce back from that. And I can't explain it as well as he would, but it translates into a reading on the computer and we can see where the burials are. He was concerned we wouldn't be able to do it very well because the ground is very rooty, and and, you know, it's very hard to roll the machine over. But almost instantly he got a reading when he started to do the work. And so what we found was it is a graveyard. And we found clusters of burials together. And Dr. Herman's experience from mapping African-American cemeteries is that when clustering occurs and burials, it's usually family members.

Sarah McConnell [00:41:44] That's very moving, isn't it?

Amy Clark [00:41:46] It is. And it was moving for me. To see them on the computer when they emerged, they emerge as bird cocoon shaped images. And to actually see them for the first time was an experience that it's hard to describe. It was a fulfilling experience for me because I felt as though, I felt like I was making progress. But I also wanted to be able to say, you know, I can see you. You exist. I'm going to tell your story. When I realized that my own family was connected to this space and then I started to research the county's history and some of the stories that I found. I realized that I didn't have the true history of my county and I didn't have the true history of my family. And so it became really important not only for the people buried there in 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, in the context of that time period and all of the things that were happening socially and culturally. It became more important for me to be able to tell that story and for my children, you know, when I tell my children about their family history, I want to get it right. And I and I want, as I'm teaching them about the time period that they're growing up in. This seems like the perfect opportunity because they've joined me on this journey as they've gotten older. You know, they've gone into the woods with me and we've talked about who's there, who's probably there, and we've talked about the history behind that. And so it's hard to explain, but and it's more complicated than that. But it went beyond my role as a researcher to my role in this family, my role as a mother, my place in history.

Sarah McConnell [00:43:49] How old are your children?

Amy Clark [00:43:52] They're 10 and 12 now. My daughter is the same age that I was when I first became aware of the stones.

Sarah McConnell [00:44:00] What did you learn about how these enslaved people came to be part of your family's history?

Amy Clark [00:44:08] When I was beginning the research, a family member pointed to a death portrait that hung on my great grandmother's wall. And this wasn't uncommon. This isn't uncommon, particularly among Appalachian families, to have portraits of the dead. It was the only portrait that she had of her husband's little sister who had died of meningitis in the 1920s.

Sarah McConnell [00:44:32] Mary?

Amy Clark [00:44:32] Mary. And so I started researching her and her husband and her father and all of the stories that are told about them were that her father was a slave owner. One of the richest men in Lee County, and that he had given her and her husband, who was a Confederate veteran, slaves when they were married.

Sarah McConnell [00:44:54] Around what era?

Amy Clark [00:44:58] This would have been pre or during the civil war.

Sarah McConnell [00:45:02] Right. About how many enslaved people had he had?

Amy Clark [00:45:07] The family's stories suggest that he had up to 40, the father, and that a few of them came to live with her and her family. And in 1870 census records, we do find African-Americans continuing to live in the immediate area after the civil war.

Sarah McConnell [00:45:28] What became of the African-Americans in that area in your county and the surrounding counties after the war?

Amy Clark [00:45:36] You know, the reconstruction period was a very difficult time. And from what I have gathered from news accounts and articles and things that I've gathered, a large number of the African-American population were basically driven away from the county. They were competing after the civil war for jobs, you know, was a terrible time, a terrible time in terms of of racism and very little opportunity. This was a time when the Ku Klux Klan organized and there was Klan activity in Lee County at that time. And so from from what I've gathered, that was a large reason why so many people left is they were driven away.

Sarah McConnell [00:46:26] Had you learned any of that kind of history in your school years?

Amy Clark [00:46:30] None of it. None of that, that I can remember. None of that was in my in my classroom or in my history books. I just knew that, you know, in Lee County, there were landmarks. There was evidence of racism all around us. And we in Appalachia have such a strong sense of place anyway. Place is so important to our roots, I think, because it's how we made our living for so long. It you know, between farm land and coal

and timber, these extraction industries were just so connected to place and burial rituals are connected to place. And so this story, I think, is, you know, when I think about place and I think about my family's place and my place in history. It's not something I can look away from. It's not something that I can deny. And I think as hard as it's been going forward to keep doing this, even when it's frustrating and you and you run into so many dead ends. Anyone who does genealogical work knows this. There's something that just keeps you pressing forward. And I think one of the things that has helped a great deal is that I've had a co researcher, William Isom, who works for East Tennessee PBS and is a documentary filmmaker. I'm aware of the fact that I'm processing all of this information and I'm telling this story as a white woman in the 21st century. And so I don't. I don't want to presume to be telling the story of African-American people, you know, from a position of white privilege. It's. And yet I am trying to do that very thing. But having, you know, a co researcher who's telling the story alongside me and finding his own family roots has been enlightening for me. It's been it's kept me, you know, reflexive and reflective and thinking about how I may be getting it right or getting it wrong. And so that's that's something that I constantly try to keep in mind.

Sarah McConnell [00:48:57] In your own research, have you been able to identify the the people who were in any of these graves?

Amy Clark [00:49:06] I have not conclusively. We have found the names of people that we know were living close by in 1870. But so far, no names that I can link specifically to those graves.

Sarah McConnell [00:49:23] What do you want to achieve with all the research into these long forgotten graves on beloved family land?

Amy Clark [00:49:31] I think, again, is is not only to tell my story, our story to my own children, but maybe. I don't know if it's right to say revise history, but maybe it is right to say revise history, maybe a rewriting of history to include African-Americans who helped build this county, who helped shape this county. There may be few in number now, but they weren't then. And I think to deny their place in our county's history is so wrong. And it does such a disservice to our younger generations. And so. I just you know, I believe in the power of story and I know the power of story. And if I can get as close as possible to building this narrative of this community that lived here or worked here and rests here now, I think that's my end goal.

Sarah McConnell [00:50:38] Amy Clark, this is a wonderful project. Thank you for talking with me and with good reason.

Amy Clark [00:50:43] Thank you, Sarah.

Sarah McConnell [00:50:50] Amy Clark is department chair and a professor of communication and Appalachian studies at the University of Virginia College at UVA Wise. She's also co-director of the Center for Appalachian Studies and was named an outstanding faculty member by the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia. Major support for with good reason is provided by the University of Virginia health system using advanced cardiac imaging to better diagnose conditions before they become serious health issues. UVAHealth.com. With Good Reason is produced in Charlottesville by Virginia Humanities, which acknowledges the Monacan Nation. The original people of the land and waters of our home in Charlottesville, Virginia. Our production team as Allison Quantz, Matt Darroch, Lauren Francis and Jamal Milner. Our intern is Aiden Carroll. Some

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I'm Sarah McConnell. Thanks for listening.