

Dan Gediman: Until recently, when most people thought of Louisville, it was the place where the Kentucky Derby was run¹, or maybe the birthplace of Muhammad Ali². But now, people know Louisville for different reasons.

The city has become a flashpoint -- the place where Breonna Taylor was shot and killed, in her own home, in the middle of the night, as police broke down her door under a no-knock warrant, looking for drugs that weren't there.

It's also the place where David McAtee was shot and killed by a member of the National Guard, as they confronted a group of Black citizens, out after curfew.

But the problems that have fueled the protests on the streets of Louisville didn't start with the death of Breonna Taylor, or David McAtee, or George Floyd in Minneapolis, or the many other African Americans unjustifiably killed in recent years.

The issues that led to these protests -- police brutality, health and wealth inequities, mass incarceration, started much, much further back. Some say to the 1600s when the first enslaved Africans were brought to this country. Slavery shaped America, and most definitely the state of Kentucky. But that history, and its legacy, have rarely been explored, or even acknowledged, here in Kentucky.

Patrick Lewis: I would say it is pretty common across the state for for white Kentuckians not to consider their connections to slavery.

Vanessa Holden: Whole generations of enslaved people just disappeared from Kentucky into the cotton fields of the deep south.

Chanelle Helm: One of the strongest connections people need to understand is time, it's only been 152 years since the emancipation proclamation was even put into effect. And since that time, we still have seen like grotesque, inhumane ways that black people in this country, particularly in Kentucky, have been treated.

¹ <http://bit.ly/3b08ReY>

² <http://bit.ly/2OiE8A1>

Ricky Jones: It's been very, very difficult generation after generation for the children of slave owners to accept the children of slaves as their equals, you know, as their colleagues in this business of moving the world forward.

Sadiqa Reynolds: There is no way to get around the damage that the system has done the black community, whether from slavery, Jim Crow, redlining, discriminate, all of these things have had such a horrible impact.

Dan Gediman: Scholars and thinkers like those you just heard have spent years exposing the long, deep roots of racial injustice that grew from slavery, to Jim Crow, to now. Perhaps the best way to look at our national history is to see it as an intertwined system of many smaller histories — of this state, of cities like Louisville, even the history of families. This is the Reckoning. I'm Dan Gediman.

Russ Bowlds: All of this, the Mall and everything, used to be part of Oxmoor.

Dan Gediman: On a sunny June day in 2019, cousins Brigitt Johnson, Russ Bowlds, and his sister Lisa Bowlds-Williams, drive together to visit Oxmoor, a former plantation, in Louisville, Kentucky.

Russ Bowlds: I'm really looking forward to seeing the space that our ancestors occupied.

Brigitt Johnson: See how they preserved it.

Dan Gediman: Oxmoor sits right behind one of the big shopping malls along Shelbyville Road, a busy commercial corridor dotted with strip malls, restaurants, and car dealerships. It was built by Alexander Bullitt in 1787³ and is still owned by the Bullitt family today. But few people shopping at Oxmoor Mall know much, if anything, about the plantation it was named after, a place where generations of black people were enslaved.

³ <https://oxmoorfarm.org>

Russ Bowlds: Seems like I heard somewhere down the line that there was one of the slave quarters that was still standing, or is that incorrect?

Loretta Williams: No, that's true.

Russ Bowlds: Okay.

Dan Gediman: The ancestors of these cousins lived in one of these slave cabins. At one time, there were nine wooden cabins lining the long driveway leading up to the mansion at Oxmoor⁴.

Brigitt Johnson: Wow. So they had a slave quarters..

Lisa Bowlds-Williams: All down here.

Brigitt Johnson: Isn't that weird? I wonder if this was gated off back then. Like, what stopped them from running? [laughs] you know?

Dan Gediman: The cousins had never met until this weekend. For a long time they had lived in different parts of the country — Russ in California, Brigitt in Maryland and Lisa in Indiana. Now they all live about an hour away from each other in central Indiana, where their families had slowly migrated after emancipation. Brigitt and Russ found each other when they started exploring their family roots on a genealogy website. But until a few weeks ago, neither of them knew that any part of their family history was tied to Oxmoor.

Brigitt Johnson: This is the entire — not all of it of course, this is the main.

Lisa Bowlds-Williams: Main house.

Russ Bowlds: Dad would have loved to have seen this.

Brigitt Johnson: I wonder what Momma's reaction would have been.

⁴ Per Email from Shirley Harmon 1-15-20 and 1860 William Bullitt slave schedule

Dan Gediman: Russ had been deeply engaged in genealogical research for many years and had amassed many documents and photos pertaining to his ancestors. Brigitt was a relative newcomer to genealogy, but equally passionate to learn as much as she could about her family's past. But one of the many challenges for African Americans like Brigitt and Russ is not being able to get back before 1870 in their family trees. That's the year the U.S. Census first noted formerly enslaved people by first and last names. For centuries before that, the only way the enslaved were identified was by their first name, making it exceedingly difficult to trace families from enslavement to now.

Brigitt and Russ would still be in the dark about several of their enslaved ancestors if it weren't for a single document that sits in a vast collection of Bullitt family papers at a Louisville archive known as the Filson Historical Society.

Henry Bullitt — Alexander's grandson, left behind an unpublished memoir about growing up at Oxmoor in the years before the Civil War. In this memoir, Bullitt mentioned several people who were enslaved at Oxmoor, including one particular woman, Eliza Sanders. Actors will be interpreting this and other archival documents throughout the series.

Henry Bullitt: Mother gave Eliza to her daughter, Mrs. Archibald Dixon of Henderson, Ky. Eliza's husband, Jim Sanders, belonged to Mr. John Burks, and, in order to keep them together, Mr. Dixon paid for Jim, Mr. Burks' price, \$1500.⁵

By knowing the last name of Eliza and Jim Sanders, it became possible to search for them online in the 1870 census⁶. And there they were, living with their four children in Henderson County, Kentucky, where another Bullitt family plantation was located. Following their descendants down through the generations led to Brigitt and Russ. We set up a video chat so I could show them what I'd found.

Dan Gediman: I want to encourage you to stop me at any point and ask questions
Brigitt Johnson: Okay, okay.

⁵ Recollections of Henry M. Bullitt 9-14-1906 (part one), Pg 2, courtesy Filson Historical Society

⁶ ancestry.me/1870-Federal-Census-James-Saunders

Dan Gediman: All right, let me jump in...

Dan Gediman: The Bullitt family papers at the Filson archive includes thousands of letters, legal documents, and family photographs⁷. In one faded sepia-toned photo, an older brown-skinned woman sits holding a small white child, her cheek up against the baby's head. Her white hair is pulled back and parted in the middle, a plaid scarf draped around her neck. Her name is Louisa Taylor:

Dan Gediman: I'm almost positive that's Louisa, your fourth. I believe it's your fourth great grandmother.

Russ Bowlds: Wow.

Dan Gediman: Louisa Taylor was born in July of 1805⁸. At the age of five days old, she was given as a birthday present to seven-year-old Mildred Fry, who was to be her mistress for most of her life, even after slavery ended. When Mildred was 21, she married Alexander Bullitt's son William and moved into Oxmoor, which William had inherited. As Mildred began having children, Louisa became their nursemaid.⁹

Louisa had six children of her own¹⁰, one of whom was Eliza, who eventually married Jim Sanders. Brigitt and Russ are directly descended from Eliza and Jim. I asked them what they thought of this new information about their ancestors.

Brigitt Johnson: Um, I'm just I'm very emotional right now. So just just go ahead, please.

Russ Bowlds: I'm just, I'm just in awe, I'm looking at this woman and seeing so many different features of her in some of my other cousins and yeah, it's weird.

Dan Gediman: So she does look familiar to you.

Russ Bowlds: Yeah.

⁷ Per 1-16-20 email from Jennie Cole of Filson Historical Society.

⁸ ancestry.me/1880UnitedStatesFederalCensus_Louisa_Taylor

⁹ Letter from Mildred Stites to Marshall Bullitt 1912, pg 1, courtesy Filson

¹⁰ Letter from Mildred Stites to Marshall Bullitt 1912, pg 1, courtesy Filson

Dan Gediman: Learning about the connection to Oxmoor helped fill in a missing link in Brigitt and Russ' ancestry. But Brigitt says she's frustrated that the search for these links is so hard for African Americans — never mind the difficulty of tracing her roots back to her African homeland.

Brigitt Johnson: We're pretty much the only race of people that don't know where they came from. Because I don't know who my original people were. I don't know my language. I don't know, my culture. I know, none of these things, because it was all erased.

Dan Gediman: That erasure happened on many levels. And it starts with the stories passed down by white enslavers. There's an entire literature of memoirs written in the late 19th and early 20th century by elderly southerners reminiscing about the good old days before the Civil War. An example of this is *My Life at Oxmoor*, written by Henry Bullitt's brother Thomas, which takes a nostalgic look back at life on the plantation under his parents William and Mildred.

Thomas Bullitt: The Negroes were well-cared for...they knew and recognized it. They respected my father, and they were much attached to my mother... [They] were cheerful and contented. It was shown in their daily work and in their fun-loving exercises at night. They loved to dance, and often danced without music, except patting with the hands on the knees; and this they learned to do to perfection.¹¹

Dan Gediman: Memoirs such as these helped shape the story Kentuckians would hear about slavery for many decades. A story which would then be repeated well into the 20th century.

J. Winston Coleman: In these homes were many contented servants, born and reared for several generations in the families of their present masters, who served them with unswerving loyalty and devotion, and who, in turn, were held in genuine affection. Many of these family servants of the "big house" were privileged characters, and under no circumstances would they have accepted their freedom from their beloved 'white folks'.¹²

¹¹Thomas Bullitt. *My Life at Oxmoor*, 1911. pp. 61 & 72: <http://bit.ly/3aZBn0a>

¹²J. Winston Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky*, 1940. P 26

Dan Gediman: That's from a 1940 book called *Slavery Times in Kentucky*, by J. Winston Coleman, that's constantly referenced in other books as an authoritative text. The book was in print until 1970, and can still be found in libraries across Kentucky.¹³ History books like this helped shape a myth that slavery in the state was mellow, well-ordered, maybe even pleasant.

Patrick Lewis: Kentuckians have now and did have during the era of enslavement a myth of mild slavery.

Dan Gediman: Patrick Lewis is a Scholar in Residence at the Filson Historical Society in Louisville.

Patrick Lewis: White Kentuckians have always argued that they did slavery better, nicer, kinder, gentler. And quite literally, you can read this at almost any point during slavery and afterwards, 'at least we're not Mississippi', you know, 'no, we're not Alabama'. And and you know, it is a way of minimizing white complicity in the violence of slavery in the exploitation of slavery in Kentucky by saying, well, at least we're not, you know, grinding people to death in Louisiana sugarcane fields. Of course they, they, white people, Kentucky will hold the threat of selling enslaved people into those same conditions. But, there is always this belief that somehow black people are better off in Kentucky than they are in other places in the US.

Dan Gediman: One of the ways that Kentucky did differ from states like Mississippi and Alabama was in the numbers of people who were enslaved. In 1850 Kentucky came 8th on the list of all 15 states where slavery was in force¹⁴. There were about 200 thousand people enslaved in the state — roughly 20% of the population. By comparison Alabama had nearly 350 thousand enslaved people.¹⁵ But here's where it gets interesting. Even though Kentucky was right in the middle of the pack in the total number of enslaved, it was third in the nation in terms of the number of households that enslaved at least one person¹⁶.

¹³<https://bit.ly/3f4Kn4O>

¹⁴Klotter, James C., Friend, Craig Thompson. *A New History of Kentucky* (p. 67). The University Press of Kentucky. Kindle Edition.

¹⁵ <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1850/1850c/1850c-03.pdf?#>

¹⁶ <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1850/1850c/1850c-04.pdf#>

What that means is that slavery was spread across many facets of Kentucky life. So in addition to household servants, the enslaved worked in mines and factories, and on railroads, and riverboats. The state didn't have huge cotton plantations like Mississippi and Alabama, and only five slaveholders in the state enslaved more than 100 people.¹⁷ But it did have many smaller plantations, like Oxmoor, where 53 people were enslaved in 1850¹⁸.

And it appears from reading the Bullitt family papers, that enslaved labor was a critical part of generating the family's income. In the early 19th century Oxmoor primarily grew hemp — then the most lucrative cash crop in Kentucky. William Bullitt kept careful records in a ledger book of how many pounds of hemp each enslaved field hand was able to process, breaking open the stalks to remove the fibers inside. And harvest time was news worth writing about for the entire Bullitt family. Here is Mildred Bullitt writing to her son John in 1849¹⁹.

Mildred Bullitt: My Dear John, The hemp is this night all finished being broken. A most delightful spell of weather we have had for the business. Lewis set the example of going over three hundred pounds, and it has been followed by all the young men. I believe Daniel broke in one day 364 lbs!

Dan Gediman: Nowadays, you probably know hemp as the plant that produces CBD oil. But back then, the hemp that was grown in Kentucky helped support the cotton plantations of the Deep South. Vanessa Holden is a professor of history at the University of Kentucky.

Vanessa Holden: Kentucky contributes to this larger economic system by providing the supplies needed to harvest cotton. That hemp is used for the cotton sacks, hemp is used to bail up cotton, one of the nation's most important exports in the antebellum period. So following the money allows you to link all sorts of economic ventures, ultimately to slavery.

¹⁷Klotter and Klotter, *Concise History of Kentucky* (citing US Census data); McDougal, *Ivan Slavery in Kentucky* <https://bit.ly/2GqAxvt> p 221

¹⁸1860 Wm. Bullitt's slave schedule, in folder, plus Young & Hudson "Slave Life at Oxmoor" p196

¹⁹<http://bit.ly/312l66a>

Dan Gediman: In addition to using enslaved labor to grow hemp, the Bullitt family papers reveal another way they made money from slavery — by leasing slaves. In Kentucky, enslaved people were hired out to work in just about every area of commerce and industry. It was also popular in cities like Louisville, for people to hire an enslaved maid, or maybe a chauffeur, without the capital investment of buying one. And for someone like William Bullitt, it was like printing money, because all the living expenses of the enslaved people were paid for by others.

William Bullitt: April 14th 1860, W.C. Bullitt hereby hires to A.J. Anderson 2 negro men, George and Dick, for the sum of Three Hundred and Nine dollars and sixty cents payable the end of the year and secured by note. Anderson is bound to work them on his farm on which he now lives and nowhere else, to clothe and feed them well, furnishing them each a good suit of winter clothing in the fall, a pair of boots and hat included, and to pay all Doctors Bills and to return said negroes to said Bullitt on the 25th day of December next unless providentially hindered.

Dan Gediman: Not only were enslaved people hired out for long term periods, but also as temporary workers for a few days or weeks. Again, historian Patrick Lewis.

Patrick Lewis: There's this sort of this almost this communal labor source that anyone in the white community, non-slave owning, or whatever can pull on at harvest time or when you're building a new barn. We see this a lot in counties that produce hemp. You know, there are skilled hemp breakers, there are skilled rope walkers and they can sort of move around through an agricultural cycle and the entire community, white community can sort of pick up and put down that labor as they need.

Dan Gediman: Banks and other financial institutions were a critical part of making slavery profitable. For example hiring out an enslaved man or woman could have a downside if the work was at all dangerous, so enslavers often wanted to protect their property. Sharon Murphy, a professor of history at Providence College, has written extensively about the banking and insurance industries in antebellum America.

Sharon Murphy: It's a big investment to own a slave. If you've just hired the slave, you don't have the same financial investment. You don't have the same incentive, perhaps to be more careful with these slaves. So the slave owner in hiring out, would sometimes take out an insurance policy to make sure that if something happened to that slave while they were working on the railroad, while they were working in the mines, while they were working in a tobacco factory, that they would be compensated for that.

Dan Gediman: And there were other financial tools that families like the Bullitts could use to build their wealth.

Sharon Murphy: Just like mortgages, where you have a home and you use the home as a collateral, or a car loan today you have the car as collateral. In the south, one of the main forms of wealth in the 19th century were the slaves. So it's actually kind of natural for slaves to be used as collateral on loans.

Dan Gediman: If you were white and had a decent reputation, you could often purchase a new field hand or cook on credit, just like a car or living room furniture, and pay the loan back with interest months later²⁰. Newspaper ads for slave auctions from this period often advertised the terms.

The undersigned will, on Monday, the 23rd of February 1852, at the court house door in the city of Louisville, sell to the highest bidder, at public auction, on a credit of 6, 12, and 18 months, five negro slaves, two women and their children. The purchaser to give bond with approved security, bearing interest from the day of sale until paid²¹.

Dan Gediman: All the financial tools that helped enslavers purchase a work force were also in play if a farm or other business failed. Loans were called in and banks foreclosed on property, including taking possession of enslaved people. Professor Sharon Murphy says satisfying creditors was one of the biggest reasons enslaved people were sold²².

²⁰<https://library.uncg.edu/slavery/petitions/index.aspx> (choose KY, then "loan" for keyword; add date)

²¹<http://bit.ly/36OOEVO>

²² Banking on Slavery in the Antebellum South https://economics.yale.edu/sites/default/files/banks_and_slavery_yale.pdf

Sharon Murphy: When someone defaults on a loan, if the slaves were part of the collateral the bank or the creditor could do any number of things with those slaves. They might put them on the auction block and sell them and get the proceeds from it to liquidate that debt. They might decide to own the slaves for a while so the creditor can just take possession of the slaves themselves. And not only creditors could do this, banks did this. So those slaves, they might be sold, they may get a new owner but they're still living together on the same plantation. They may be split up and sold to areas where there's more demand for slaves. They may be just sold down the road to another plantation nearby. There's any number of things that could happen to them, but at all times, their existence is kind of in limbo, especially when you have these foreclosures going on.

Dan Gediman: Not only did enslaved people show up as assets in loan foreclosures, they also figure prominently in wills and estate settlements. Again, Professor Vanessa Holden.

Vanessa Holden: There's a whole other world of moving enslaved people as chattels in between individuals.

Dan Gediman: For many white Kentuckians, enslaved people represented the single largest asset in their estate — worth more than their home, land or livestock. So great care was taken to make sure those assets remained in a family.

Vanessa Holden: Enslavers see slave holding, and being able to move slaves into the next generation as a way of shoring up their families prospects beyond their own lifetime.

Alexander Bullitt: I give and devise to my son William C. Bullitt and his heirs forever the following slaves to wit, Abraham, Big Bill, Hope, Little Bill, Celia and four children Betsy, Titus, Absolam and Dolly, Rachel and her two children Sally and Alek, Dinah and her child, Louisa, Ake and Annie, and Frank, his children, and Big Jack²³.

²³<http://bit.ly/36OOEVO>

Dan Gediman: When Alexander Bullitt died in 1816, he left a large estate to his six children. To his son William, he left the land and buildings that made up his plantation Oxmoor. To his other children, he left some combination of land, stock, and other valuables.²⁴ But he also bequeathed to each of his children other human beings, which were theirs to keep, to sell, to borrow against, and then pass along, with any additional offspring, to their children and their children's children²⁵ That's how chattel slavery worked in this country. In other parts of the world, enslavement was usually something that only affected that one individual — perhaps someone on the losing side of a war, or paying off a debt of some sort. But from the earliest colonial times in this country, white Americans defined enslavement as an inherited state. Once a woman was enslaved, her children were also enslaved, and their children's children. Slavery became something Black people were born into — an inheritance that African Americans, and our country as a whole, are still reckoning with centuries later.

Cousins Brigitt Johnson, Russ Bowlds, and Lisa Bowlds-Williams drove several hours from Indiana to visit the plantation at Oxmoor where two generations of their ancestors had been enslaved. Almost immediately after arriving, Brigitt had tears in her eyes.

Brigitt Johnson: This is where people were owned. No different than owning that statue right there. They were a piece of property. For a group of people to look at another group of people as cattle. It's just really sad. Just very, very sad. I would love to...my mom, my grandma. I would love for any of them, you know, that's already gone, to witness this. Like, did you know that we were this close? ... I want to bring my kids here. Now. I want them to see this.

Dan Gediman: We walked through the former plantation, taking in the various buildings where their ancestors had worked, the mansion house where Louisa Taylor nursed all the Bullitt children and her daughter Eliza served as Susan Bullitt's maid²⁶. The laundry, where Louisa's other daughter Tinah had washed the Bullitt family's clothes, and then, eventually to four white brick buildings. They are the last remaining slave dwellings at Oxmoor. Russ, Brigitt and Lisa approach the smallest of the four buildings.

²⁴shorturl.at/uzDH9

²⁵See Alexander Scott Bullitt's will in fact-checking folder

²⁶Letter from Mildred Stites to Marshall Bullitt 1912, pg 1, courtesy Filson

Russ Bowlds: The door is open so we can go in. Why is that, no windows?

Dan Gediman: Expense? Extravagance.

Dan Gediman: Brigitt touches the door to the cabin.

Russ Bowlds: You can go in.

Dan Gediman: After pushing the door open Brigitt pauses, then turns away. Russ and Lisa go ahead, and walk inside the small cabin.

Russ Bowlds: Wow. Not a lot of space, is there? Can you imagine a whole family living in a... right in this place.

Lisa Bowlds-Williams: And one window.

Russ Bowlds: Wow. Would have been tough times, huh?

Dan Gediman: As Russ and Lisa continued exploring Oxmoor, we found Brigitt outside the cabin, looking out over the estate.

Brigitt Johnson: I was OK until I touched the door. It's very small. It's even small for one person, let alone a family. I was fine until I touched that door. But I felt like... I was going in my home.

Dan Gediman: There are other places like Oxmoor across Kentucky, and other African Americans like Brigitt, Russ, and Lisa, who don't know their history regarding slavery. But understanding that history is more than filling a gap in a family tree. Slavery in Kentucky had a social and economic impact that echoed down the generations to today. And that's true of white families as well. Coming up, a family learns of its connection to a slave trader. This is the Reckoning. We'll be back in a minute.