

**LAWN TOURS**  
**ON THE GROUNDS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA**  
**AUGUST 2018-PRESENT**

**Summary:** The University Guide Service, a student group at the University, provides roughly 2,000 walking tours yearly of the Lawn, Rotunda and Thomas Jefferson's Academical Village. Rather than use this unparalleled opportunity to promote the university to student applicants, prospective faculty members and other visitors, the Guides provide an indefensibly negative account of Jefferson, ignore the achievements of one of America's great public universities, and belabor leftist themes of grievance and victimhood toward Blacks, indigenous peoples, women and gays. The tours are a self-administered black eye to UVA's reputation.

**Introduction.** Guided tours create golden opportunities for prospective students to learn about the college or university they are applying to and for parents to feel good about investing six figures in their child's education. The University of Virginia has a uniquely impressive story to tell. Mr. Jefferson's University is the only higher-ed institution in the United States started by a Founding Father, while the Rotunda and Lawn, along with Monticello, comprise one of only 27 UNESCO World Heritage sites in the United States.

People from around the world come to visit. For years parents and prospective students have learned about Thomas Jefferson's incomparable contributions to America, his noble aspirations for UVA, and how the university has built upon his founding vision. One might think that the University would seize the opportunity to put its best foot forward. One might think that the students who volunteer to conduct the tours would express pride in the institution and sing its praises.

Many don't. Indeed, many go out of their way to denigrate Mr. Jefferson and the University for their association with slavery, racism, segregation, and injustice towards indigenous peoples.

That's not the work of a few lost guides. As this Jefferson Council paper amply documents, that's an outcome of their training and indoctrination.

**The University Guide Service.** The University Guide Service (UGS), a student-run organization, gives more than 2,000 tours a year. The UGS accepts new members at the beginning of each semester. Probationary members known as "probies" spend a semester being trained by their UGS Probational Chair and older guides, according to the UGS website. They get a "crash course in UVA history" for three hours each Thursday night during their Probie Semester.

"We encourage our Guides to share their personal UVA experiences with prospective students in a candid and constructive way," says the UGS website. "All Guides give historical tours of our University,

integrating the stories from across our schools' 200-year history into a unique and cohesive narrative that speaks to both the Guide and their tourists.”

What do they learn?

A sense can be gleaned from the Historical Information Sheet for a UGS Trial Tour, two version of which can be found online. States the introduction to both: “Students are not required to include every fact on the sheet– impractical for a 15-minute tour – but are encouraged to pick facts and stories that interest them to craft a “unique, cohesive tour that shows off your personality.”

The shorter version addresses the following topics:

The founding of the university (12 lines)

The Academical Village (27 lines, including four about slavery)

The Rotunda (14 lines)

Different faces of the Lawn (15 lines)

Student chronology (20 lines, mainly devoted to the admission of women and African-American students)

[The longer version](#) adds a lengthy section on slavery, with the following sub-topics:

Introduction (6 lines)

Working conditions (5 lines)

Living conditions (5 lines)

Violence against enslaved laborers (20 lines)

Resistance (13 lines)

Modern slavery initiatives (6 lines)

### **UVA Official Tour Guide Training Manual**

During their training, student tour guides are instructed to focus on the University’s history of sexism and white supremacy. [The 500+ page Lawn Tour training guide and historical commentary](#) provides a fairly balanced history of Thomas Jefferson and his greatest accomplishments as architect, president, and author of the Declaration of Independence, but devotes far more space to his views on slavery and his role as a slaveholder. The account does allude to differing interpretations regarding his slaveholding. For instance, the guide credits him with attempting to mitigate slave violence, but the official “position of the University Guide Service” is that Jefferson fathered children with Sally Hemings. The manual cites evidence in support of that interpretation and but of the abundant evidence against it.

The training manual gives almost no attention to the growth and development of UVa as an educational institution. The subject matter revolves almost entirely around modern preoccupations of political left – UVa’s role in slavery, the Civil War, segregation, eugenics, the women’s movement, the Civil Rights movement, and the LGBTQ movement. Profiles highlight the experiences of Blacks and Hispanics breaking the color barrier. Great space is dedicated to recent grievances, such as the arrest of a Black student, Martese Johnson, and the 2017 Unite the Right rally. No attention whatsoever is given to the university presidents and others who built the institution, or the many graduates who graduated from UVa and achieved prominence in politics, military, business or the arts.

In discussing the responsibilities of Student Guides, the manual lays out the ideological framework guides should adopt.

*Failing to discuss UVA’s history of white supremacy actively upholds the systems of oppression that have been the operating frameworks of this school and ignores the work that marginalized communities—particularly the Black community—have done to dismantle them. In the Summer of 2020, the Black Student Alliance at UVA released a document entitled *The Reiteration of Historic, Yet Unmet, Demands*. One of the demands in this document is “Rename all buildings and remove all monuments, plaques, and memorials in remembrance of white supremacists, eugenicists, and slave-holders on Grounds, while simultaneously rededicating and erecting memorials in honor of UVA and Charlottesville’s Black history.” In your historical tours, you have the power to honor these demands by memorializing UVA’s and Charlottesville’s Black History.*

Elsewhere, the manual casts the guides’ activity as part of a larger struggle against the oppressive elements of society:

"This battle between UVA’s original student population, those alumni, and legacy families against BIPOC and female students entering the university continues to exist at UVA and is the foundation of continued activism."

Tour guides are instructed to convey among other things that:

- Thomas Jefferson assisted in the colonization and genocide of thousands of Indigenous peoples.
- The University is situated on occupied Monacan territory and built by slave labor.
- Jefferson’s views on slavery were paradoxical and inconsistent.
- Jefferson was the father of scientific racism which laid the foundation for the eugenics movement.
- Jefferson conceived his architectural projects with slavery in mind.
- Jefferson fathered children by his slave, Sally Hemings.
- The University has a long history of racism and white supremacy which continues today.
- Jefferson merely collaborated with and drew on the writings of others in drafting the Declaration of Independence.

During their training, probies were enjoined to explore potential themes for tours. The suggested examples:

- Resistance and activism
- Education and resistance
- Combatting institutions of white supremacy
- Memory and memorialization
- Violence and community action
- Uncovering stories through architecture

The phrase “white supremacy” appears in the document 29 times. The phrase “Declaration of Independence” appears 11 times.

### **Direct Feedback from tours this past academic year**

How, then, does this instruction translate into Student Guides presentations?

The Jefferson Council has gathered feedback about the tours from numerous students, prospective students, parents and alumni/ae. Not surprisingly, the themes described in the training manuals appear in the tours. Here are examples.

Email from an alumna about a June 2022 Admissions tour: “My nephew just took his daughter to Virginia for tour. UVA was one of her top two choices. They had done homework before and loved the Grounds, especially the Lawn of course, so feeling great as they went into orientation - until the senior Assistant Dean literally opened her “welcome” by 4-5 minutes of how UVA was stolen from a local Indian tribe and The University is making amends, thinking of ways to give reparations for the wrongful [deed] etc., etc., etc. My nephew who was not exaggerating to rile his uncle- said he and his daughter were simpl[y] struck that this was the lengthy opening welcome meant to hook prospective students - and apparent that others in audience were similarly “startled”. He said the student guide gave an entertaining and informative tour until the end, then closed with a lengthy diatribe about how UVA was built on the backs of slaves by the oppressed, Charlottesville 2017 riots, etc., etc., etc. My nephew, a lawyer who acknowledges what colleges are like, said the usual themes are more softly woven into orientations but never so off the mark. He said it almost seemed like comments were a “qualifier” for prospective students. They left with UVA dropping off the list, based solely on their perception that *“If these are deemed the most important and critical opening and closing comments by these representatives, regardless of all the University’s ‘meat’ in between” she didn’t feel like it was a place for her.*”

4<sup>th</sup> year student who went on a Historical tour Fall 2021: The tour started with a declarative statement that the land was “stolen” from the Virginia Monacan Indian tribe, and the Rotunda and Lawn built by slave laborers. The hill tiers on the lawn were allegedly constructed by slaves for the University, and the three tiers on the East Range gardens were also constructed for the placement of enslaved laborers. The

guide then said that Sally Hemings was 14 years old when Jefferson chose her to go to Paris with him on his diplomatic mission. In Paris, Jefferson's slaves were considered free blacks due to the French laws. The guide stated with certainty that *"The only reason she would ever come to Virginia was if Thomas Jefferson promised to free her children. I'm almost 100% sure she would have stayed there [in France] had it not been for that promise."* She then went on to say that Sally Hemings was not formally emancipated, but Martha Jefferson did not continue to hold Hemings in bondage after Thomas Jefferson's death. The guide then addressed UVA's pre-Civil Rights Act of 1964 past. She said that before and after Plessy v Ferguson UVA attempted to remain segregated. For example, Alex Jefferson Stewart was rejected from the Law School in 1936 since she was black. She then sued the school; the General Assembly decided to pay for her schooling at Columbia Law to bypass UVA's refusal to enroll her. Another black student applied to the Law School in the 1950s but had to get the NAACP to help him bypass racial entrance laws. The guide then said that MLK was almost assassinated after being invited to speak at Old Cabell by Walter Ridley Jr. (NOTE: No idea where the "almost assassinated" descriptor came from. There is no historical validation of this assertion.). Lastly, the guide addressed the stone embedded in the Rotunda walkway — *"The University is laughing the face of the Black people by putting the stones where they will be stepped on."*

3<sup>rd</sup> year student with her brother who's applying to UVA: The Admissions guide mentioned that UVA has been historically cared for by the Monacan nation, and that enslaved laborers built the University. He did briefly give some nominal credit to Jefferson, affirming that he decided to found the University around a library instead of a religious institution. However, he then went on to affirm that UVA is all about *"telling the entire truth and not just the ones that make us look good."* He then went on to say that the Academical Village was built by enslaved laborers, and pointed folks in the direction of the enslaved laborers memorial if they wanted to go later. Next, he stated that Jefferson has a complicated legacy here at UVA, saying it's important for us to talk about the history not to *"dampen our excitement"* for UVA. Conspicuously absent from the Lawn guide's remarks, as is the case with almost every single one of these Lawn tours, were literally any comments on Jefferson's incredible accomplishments as a Founding Father."

UVA Alumna who took a June 1 Historical Lawn tour (this is the longest and most complete, since the alumna recorded this tour): The tour began with a talk conducted by an Admissions counselor. *"While we continue to honor Jefferson's legacy of educated citizen scholars to lead in a democracy," she said, "we also acknowledge our more complicated past. Jefferson was a slave owner, and the original University was built by enslaved laborers. He continued to own slaves until 50 years after its creation. The land on which the University and much of the Charlottesville area sits was taken from the Monacan people, who are the traditional custodians of this land. [Long pause...] If you are interested in learning more about our history, I highly recommend you spend some time in our monument to enslaved laborers, or explore the exhibits inside the Rotunda, at the bottom of the screen, maybe after your tour... [giant photo of modern memorial to slave laborers is projected above the Rotunda.]. Because this history actively informs who we are and how we move forward as a community today."*

After discussing test scores, course options and extra-curricular activities, a student guide took the group on a Lawn tour. *Here, he really decided to create a place that you could live together and still have that separation and still have that learning ....and you have the Academical Village...and that word,*

*'academical' is not really a word, but I guess when you are a Jefferson you can make up any word you want.....These smaller buildings have student housing, very prestigious, and they are the Lawn rooms, not the best housing... I will say more about that later. These larger buildings, faculty will live in them, and that is really cool. Typically, all the students would live in these Lawn rooms, and they would get taught in the Pavilions. You could get up, walk next door, and take your class, which was very cool for them. Three hundred students apply. About 54 lawn rooms, so 54 students get to live here. They are the worst housing. They have a little fireplace for your heating. But they do not have bathrooms attached. So, the "Lawnies"...there are 2 types of Lawnies...there is a joke going around, there are two kinds of "Lawnies": "those that pee in their sinks and those that don't".....*

*(Editorial aside: The Guide flubbed the quip. As memory serves older alumni, the joke went like this: There are two types of Lawnies -- those who pee in their sinks and admit it; and those who don't admit it.)*

*"So, for this last, complete stop, we will talk about the history of UVA and really what this Academical village is really all about. Thomas Jefferson founded this school in 1819. ... even before anything was here, this land was property of the Monacan Nation, this was and IS and always WILL BE property of the Monacan Nation, we really need to understand the full and true history of this university, not just snippets here and there...and no one is perfect, and everyone needs to understand it's been kept quiet, for multiple, multiple decades. Especially this university. Another aspect that you need to understand: Everything you see around you, was not built by Thomas Jefferson. Thousands and thousands of enslaved laborers built this university. You see every single one of these bricks was hand-crafted, they were hand put-in. This land you see right here, the Lawn, it was never terraced never like this originally. Thousands and thousands of pounds of dirt had to be moved by hand to make this the way it is. The gardens were behind the pavilions, are gardens, which are lovely places, where students can hang out and study. This is where the enslaved laborers were housed. And the walls, you'll see, now currently 5 feet tall, was 10 feet tall, and this is called Concealed Architecture, to hide the enslaved laborers, to capture the 'whiteness' of this architecture was to make the architecture look as perfect as possible. The layers of this university...With the pavilions you would only assume they would be two stories and the lawn rooms, one...underneath all of this, was a third story, where typically the enslaved laborers bathed, ate and slept, that shows that Jefferson was ashamed of the enslaved laborers, so everyone needs to go see the exhibit in the Rotunda, and that has not been talked about for 2 centuries. I have, and many students, have pushed for the full story, and that is something the universities have not done in their indoctrination, and that is something that should be done. Another thing we need to talk about was August 11, 12th, 2017, which put the university in the national spotlight. On August 11th-12th, The Unite the Right Domestic Terrorist group were coming here to Charlottesville to protest the taking down Confederate statues, currently not in the downtown area of Charlottesville. They were expected to show up on Aug. 12th, but they showed up a day early, they were led by two UVA alumni. What they did, they marched down the Lawn, and down the other, because they believed that **HE (NOTE: i.e., she's referring here to Thomas Jefferson)** would support their views, and they planned to encapsulate Thomas Jefferson themselves, but counter protesters came and surrounded them. August 12th, more protesters showed up. Fighting broke out and police had to be called and that day ended with more counter protesters and ending with the death of Heather Hyer, a counter protester. This is really a hard topic to talk about and how I would like to shift it now is to how the University responded to it...*

## Conclusion

These four accounts illustrate the themes that permeate the tour narratives. Conspicuously absent from the guides' presentation is any mention of Thomas Jefferson's monumental achievements: author of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, author of the Declaration of Independence, Governor of Virginia, ambassador to France, President of the United States and architect of the Louisiana Purchase, and founder of the University of Virginia, among many others – much less of his tireless efforts to live up to his immortal words that “all men are created equal” by abolishing the legal remnants of feudal hierarchy, ending the trans-Atlantic slave trade and curtailing the geographic expansion of slavery.

The Lawn tours has evolved from extolling the greatness of Thomas Jefferson and the uniqueness of UVa into a 21<sup>st</sup> century morality play denigrating one of America's preeminent Founding Fathers and one of its most prestigious public universities.

The Jefferson Council acknowledges that the University Guides should be able to tell “the whole story,” which means incorporating the story of slavery, segregation, and Civil Rights into the narrative, but we object to making those topics the dominant preoccupations. Not only does it do a dis-service to history to downplay the enormous contributions that Jefferson and UVa have made to Virginia, the United States and the world, but the Guides are driving away prospective students and damaging the university's reputation. Somehow, within the constraints of student self-government, the stories of Jefferson and UVa must be brought into balance.

*The Jefferson Council*  
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