



WILLIAM & MARY

CHARTERED 1693

THE LEMON PROJECT *A Journey of Reconciliation*

The Lemon Project: A Journey of Reconciliation was established in 2009 at the urging of the Student Assembly, the William & Mary (W&M) student chapter of the NAACP, and faculty. After 316 years, these groups called on the university to disclose its full story, not the story that inspired the appellation, “the Alma Mater of a Nation,” but the story that included slaveholding and adherence to Jim Crow laws—in short, its seedier side. For just over a decade, The Lemon Project has worked to uncover this history and make it public. Not simply for the sake of airing dirty laundry, but to finally acknowledge the Black men, women, and children who built and maintained the institution—the people who made life comfortable for the White males who studied here. They were the enslaved people who toted the water, chopped the wood, laid the fires, washed the clothes, cooked the meals, and labored on the W&M owned plantation that provided financial stability for the institution and scholarships for less wealthy students. Without the enslaved people, there would be no William & Mary.

Today in the throes of a pandemic and the reaction to the continuing murder of unarmed African American men, women, and children, The Lemon Project operates with the understanding that history helps us both see the present more clearly and plan for the future. It helps us to see ourselves, and it helps others to see us. For example, if you know the full story, you won’t have to wonder why Black people are angry. You’ll know. If you know the history, you’ll know why the saying “when the looting starts, the shooting starts” is incendiary. If you know the history, you’ll know why one of the battle flags flown during the U.S. Civil War is now a symbol of hate and white supremacy and inspires fear and contempt. Sadly, you’ll know that the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, and the countless others, known and unknown, are part of a long and deadly history that Africans and African Americans have lived with on this continent since 1619.

In 1865, newly free Black people lost their monetary value in the eyes of White people and thus the “protection” of the former owner. They became expendable. Their deaths were a cautionary tale, a way to keep Black people in their place. The stories of these times, the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras, are only partially told in school or completely left out of the curriculum and are therefore largely unknown by the general public. Ignoring the story has allowed the infection of ignorance to fester in this society. While from time to time treatment has been administered in the form of race relations initiatives and African American Studies classes, it has been limited to mostly the people who choose to participate. These attempts at treating the infection lack systemic impact, allowing the infection to permeate society and periodically festering into an

ugly sore. Indeed, anyone who has stopped taking an antibiotic before its work is done knows that the infection will always come back, and it will come back with a vengeance until all the medicine is taken. What we are living through right now is evidence of the insidious nature of this infection. The role of The Lemon Project: A Journey of Reconciliation is to tell the full story, to administer the medicine, and to make it plain for all to see and learn from. Of course, some people will find the medicine difficult to take and it will make them uncomfortable, but that is the price we all must pay if real and lasting change has a hope of surviving.

–The Lemon Project Team