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Faculty group presses UGA on its slavery history

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When faculty and administrators drive in to their jobs at the University of Georgia's Baldwin Hall, they're driving over the graves of slaves or former slaves.

But that's just one part of a bigger issue a UGA faculty group is wrestling with as it considers how the university should confront and acknowledge slavery in its history, and whether UGA has followed through on promises made earlier, when remains from 105 graves were removed from the Baldwin site and reburied off campus. Other graves remain beneath the pavement beside the building, UGA anthropologists have found.

The group, the Faculty Senate of UGA's Franklin College of Arts and Sciences, hasn't taken any official steps on such concerns, but UGA's response — or lack of it — was the main item on the agenda as the group met Tuesday.

Representatives of the UGA anthropology department — ironically located in Baldwin — say the university did not act responsibly or ethically in its handling of the expansion, and brought their concerns to the Faculty Senate in February.

Workers preparing for an expansion and renovation of 1930s-era Baldwin discovered the first remains as they began to dig near the building in November 2015. UGA called in an archaeological firm, Southeastern Archaeological Services, as it became evident there were more remains, and soon issued a news release saying the remains of up to 27 people had been unearthed and removed.

At first officials said the remains were of people of European descent. Immediately adjacent to Baldwin is the old Athens Cemetery, once a burial ground for the city of Athens, including for a number of prominent white citizens.

But the cemetery was once larger, covering land beneath and beside the old cemetery as well as the new portion of Baldwin Hall.

Eventually, the graves amounted to over 100, and in January 2017, DNA analysis of the 30 which contained sufficient material for analysis revealed that all but two were of African American ancestry — likely slaves or people born into slavery. The old cemetery was officially closed after Oconee Hill Cemetery opened in 1856, but burials continued in the area of the old cemetery at least until about 1898.

In March 2016, UGA had the remains removed and reburied at Oconee Hill Cemetery, off the UGA campus next to Sanford Stadium, angering many in Athens' African American community who were taken by surprise at the university's unilateral decision.

The UGA administration "failed to act on the professional norms of ethical practice for reburial with community consent, as recommended by the UGA contractor (Southeastern Archaeological Services) and faculty members," according to a document titled "Issues of Concern Related to the Baldwin Hall Expansion" that two anthropology faculty members brought to Tuesday's meeting.

And though UGA administrators did get input from select African American community members, they made decisions unilaterally, such as deciding to relocate the cemetery and failing "to communicate, much less agree on the date and method of reburial," according to the anthropologists' document.

The document, presented by anthropology faculty members Laurie Reitsema and Laura German, also questioned whether UGA had fulfilled promises made in the aftermath, including allowing local citizens the chance to see if they might be related to the people whose remains were removed.

They also asked the Senate to consider steps UGA should now take, including asking the university's administration to hold a public forum with African American community members to agree on a process for testing those possible family genetic links and to establish a process of collaboration and decision-making with African American community members concerning the old cemetery.

Senators also saw another document at Tuesday's meeting: a letter from UGA Vice President for Research David Lee to the Senate president, genetics professor Mary Bedell. A second stage of DNA analysis has been delayed, but could be completed by fall, Lee wrote.

A report from Southeast Archaeological Services is still months away, but will be a public record, according to Lee.

Lee also noted a university professor has made "very significant progress" in creating a Geographic Information System database of changing land use on the campus. Marguerite Madden and her team at the Center for Geospatial Research are making progress toward creating a series of "story maps" that should "reveal insights into the likely lives of individuals buried at the Baldwin Hall site" and could receive external funding for a second phase of work, he said.

The Senate invited two Athens African American leaders to Tuesday's meeting — Fred Smith, co-chair of the Athens Area Black History Bowl, and Linda Davis, a member of the Clarke County Board of Education and a leader of an ongoing restoration effort at the historic African American Brooklyn Cemetery. Both are among the critics of the university's decisions concerning the Baldwin Hall cemetery.

Notwithstanding a "systemic disregard and disrespect," some UGA departments and individuals have reached out to Davis and others in Athens, even involving them in teaching courses that touch on the history reflected in those Baldwin Hall graves, Davis said.

"Lots of folks connected with UGA are really concerned with this matter," Smith told the Senate. "It's kind of up to you to make sure this matter does not go away."

But Tuesday's meeting gave Davis hope for change.

"It was a noble gesture to allow us to come," Davis said. "I feel like this is a turning point."

Reitsema, among others, hopes Davis is right.

"It's a great opportunity," she said.

The Senate took no action at Tuesday's meeting, which was the second in which the senators talked about the Baldwin Hall African American cemetery. But a committee headed by English professor Chris Pizzino is charged with formulating a response for the Senate's next meeting, the last scheduled meeting of the academic year, in April.



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