

# OnlineAthens

## ATHENS BANNER-HERALD

---

### Opinion

## UGA: Article misrepresents university's actions concerning reinterment of remains

Posted Mar 22, 2018 at 12:24 PM

Updated Mar 22, 2018 at 12:25 PM

Profoundly disappointed. That is our reaction to a March 21 *Athens Banner-Herald* article that misrepresents the facts about the reinterment of remains discovered during the expansion of Baldwin Hall and the University of Georgia's efforts to treat these individuals with respect and dignity more than one year ago.

The article reports on an effort by some in the Franklin College of Arts and Sciences Faculty Senate to label the University's decisions in this process as unilateral, irresponsible and unethical. Nothing could be further from the truth.

I will not rehash all of the events of a year ago, but I will hit the most important points in this summary — much of which was omitted in the story.

- Upon discovery of the remains in November 2015, the University immediately halted construction and contacted law enforcement authorities. When it was determined no crime had been committed, the project then fell under the jurisdiction of the State Archaeologist's Office for oversight.
- The University of Georgia followed the guidance of the State Archaeologist's Office every step of the way, from discovery to reinterment. The head of the office even wrote a letter to the University affirming that the University had acted properly and fully complied with all requirements — a letter that was provided to the *Athens Banner-Herald* one year ago.
- The State Archaeologist's Office provided three key instructions as guidance for reinterment:
  - That the cemetery be close to the original burial site. Oconee Hill is the closest cemetery to Old Athens Cemetery and was its successor in the 1800s.
  - That the remains be reburied individually. Each of the remains was carefully catalogued and placed in an individual funeral box.
  - And that the remains be arranged as closely as possible to the original burial configuration so as not to inadvertently separate family members. This was done.
  - The University consulted with several elected leaders of the local African-American community about this process. The *Athens Banner-Herald* included letters and quotes by some of these individuals, expressing appreciation for the University's handling of this matter, in its ongoing coverage of the story last year.
  - On March 20, 2017, we facilitated a service of reinterment. Two prominent members of the local Athens community, U.S. District Court Judge Steve Jones and Reverend Winfred Hope, joined President Morehead and spoke at this solemn and respectful service. More than 200 individuals joined us for this remembrance.

— The site is marked with a granite marker that describes what happened and acknowledges that, due to the time period, the remains of those for whom we were able to identify ancestry were most likely slaves. A stanza of a poem by an African-American poet of the time period graces the other side of the stone. Oconee Hill provides perpetual care of the gravesite.

— During the course of discovery and exhumation of those remains which were discovered, the University funded the work of one of our faculty members in the Department of Anthropology, Dr. Laurie Reitsema, to conduct basic research on the remains to learn more about how the men, women and children lived — clues about their ancestry, age, sex and general health.

We pledged last spring to conduct further research to learn more about the lives of these individuals. That work is ongoing, under the coordination of our vice president for research, Dr. David Lee. He reported on the progress of this multidisciplinary research in a letter to the head of the Franklin Senate, and an update ran in our campus newspaper, *Columns*, on March 19, 2018.

The ongoing research has two facets:

- The first, being led by Dr. Marguerite Madden, director of UGA's Center for Geospatial Research, is constructing a GIS database of the evolving UGA campus from the 1800s to present. Dr. Madden tells Dr. Lee that she has made significant progress and will soon finish her work. This research will create a series of digital time-series maps with interactive capabilities, including historic photos, stories and other media to reveal insights into the lives of the individuals. Dr. Madden has engaged with the community by including local high school students on her research team.
- In the second component, an expert at the University of Texas — who was specifically recommended by Dr. Reitsema — is endeavoring to prepare, if possible, nuclear DNA libraries from samples of the remains of individuals buried at the Baldwin Hall site. As Dr. Lee reported, these libraries will be analyzed by a researcher at Harvard University with unique expertise in working with ancient DNA. The Texas collaborator has informed Dr. Lee that she hopes to have these analyses completed by the fall.

Ironically, Dr. Reitsema is now one of the faculty members apparently criticizing the efforts of the institution — efforts to which she was a major contributor. To the contrary, the extent of the University's efforts demonstrate that its actions are in no way unilateral, irresponsible or unethical. It is a shame that some would now endeavor to mislead the campus and local community to believe otherwise.

As we have stated from the outset, the University's driving principle throughout this process was to ensure that the remains of the men, women and children were treated with dignity and respect. This was our primary concern and commitment from the very first discovery at the construction site, and we have never wavered in our resolve.

The University carefully considered multiple perspectives on this issue over one year ago. The facts clearly demonstrate that the University has taken appropriate and thoughtful actions in this matter.

*Greg Trevor*

*Executive Director of Media Communications*

*University of Georgia*

---

**SIGN UP FOR DAILY E-MAIL**

... . . . . .

Wake up to the day's top news, delivered to your inbox

