Crystal S. Rosson had spent years tracing her family roots — poring over courthouse documents, asking relatives to show her the unmarked graves of their ancestors, even quitting her job at a Virginia high school to devote more energy to her research. With every new picture and article she uncovered, one thought lingered in her mind: Where had her great-grandfather Sterling Jones lived?

One day she found her answer. It was a well-kept cabin, once a farm-tool museum, now mostly vacant. And it sat only a stone’s throw from the back door of the mansion of the president of Sweet Briar College.
Ms. Rosson had chills. She lives just three miles down the road from Sweet Briar, and she says her family always felt a connection to the women’s college, but she never fully understood why. Since the first day she stood outside that cabin, she has learned more about that connection.

Her great-grandfather was a bricklayer; in fact, he was employed by the college to construct some of its first buildings after the former plantation became an institution of higher education. The cabin, she discovered, was also where Jones’s father probably lived as a slave.

In Context: Race on Campus

A collection of news and commentary from The Chronicle can provide a starting point for discussion of what might be done to improve the climate and conditions on your own campus.

Ms. Rosson called administrators at the college to see if anyone knew anything about Jones. That’s when she met Lynn Rainville, a research professor in the humanities. Ms. Rainville is director of the Tusculum Institute, which she helped create in 2008 to research and preserve local history. For the previous 15 years, she had been doing just the opposite of Ms. Rosson — tracing Jones’s descendants to find out where they ended up.

"It was a fluke," Ms. Rosson says of meeting Ms. Rainville. "We had long, crazy, amazing conversations that started us on this path together to piece my great-grandfather’s connection together to the college." In 2014 the two researchers
reopened the cabin with an exhibit to teach students and the public about the college’s historical ties to slavery.

The collaboration between Ms. Rosson and Ms. Rainville was accidental, sparked simply by their own curiosity. But the professor and the genealogist are by no means alone. As more institutions grapple with their own thorny histories, a growing number of scholars are digging into public history and raising questions about colleges and universities’ responsibility to acknowledge and explain those links to slavery and racism.

That represents a shift in scholarly thinking, says Kirt von Daacke, an assistant dean and associate professor of history at the University of Virginia. "Scholars haven’t been deeply involved in micro-institutional history," he says. "They see it generally as a bit of navel-gazing, but they think it’s great for students to do."

**A ‘Living Laboratory’**

Since Brown University took major steps in the early 2000s to explain its connection to the Atlantic slave trade, more scholars have felt an urge to investigate institutional histories. Now, with the escalation of student activism on race and the national influence of the Black Lives Matter protest movement, scholarly interest has reached a "critical mass," Mr. von Daacke says.

At UVa, efforts to dig into the university’s complicated racial past sprang from a desire among professors to see the campus as a "living laboratory." Professors across humanities disciplines sent their students to the archives to learn to conduct research. In some cases they discovered a deeper history that they felt the college should address.
Slavery and Academe

You may also want to read these Chronicle articles:

- Many Colleges Profited From Slavery. What Can They Do About It Now?
- A Story That Was Too Ugly to Tell
- After Brown U.’s Report on Slavery, Silence (So Far)
- Slavery and Capitalism
- Making History Accessible: SlaveryStories.org

Elsewhere, high-profile cases of colleges’ reckoning with their racially fraught pasts have drawn considerable news-media attention. Yale and Princeton made controversial decisions this year to keep names tied to slavery and racism on their buildings. Many universities and colleges across the South, such as the University of Mississippi, have debated — or are still debating — whether to remove Confederate statues on their campuses or to add context with plaques.
Those cases have given many administrators a new interest in their institutions’ pasts — partly out of sympathy for students’ demands for greater transparency, and partly to forestall potential protests.

"Faculty and students push for change and suddenly have gotten more traction," Mr. von Daacke says. "Everyone is saying, If we do this now, we may avoid protests."

In some cases, administrators’ heightened attention has given new validation and influence to scholars who study their institution’s histories. But that recognition doesn’t always come right away.

Several years ago Sven Beckert, a professor of history at Harvard, worked with students to publish a booklet about notable locations on the university’s campus, such as the president’s house, where slaveholding presidents once resided. After discovering some of that history, Mr. Beckert expected administrators to take some sort of action to address that piece of the institution’s past.

But few responded to his findings — until the issue collided with the growing national conversation. Last summer the university’s president asked Mr. Beckert to suggest how Harvard could add to the dialogue. With the help of a colleague, he began organizing what will be one of the first conferences devoted to the subject of colleges and universities studying slavery. Harvard will host the conference in March 2017.

"It’s only a question of time," he says, "until all Northern institutions, or all throughout the country, will in some ways have to look into this history."

‘Reworking Its History’
When Rhondda R. Thomas arrived at Clemson University, she heard rumors that convict laborers had built the institution on top of the plantation of John C. Calhoun, the 19th-century U.S. senator and vice president who was one of slavery’s most zealous advocates. But no one seemed to know who the laborers were or how many of them lived on the South Carolina campus.

Ms. Thomas, an associate professor of English, thought there may have been 50 workers, mostly African-American. But as she dove into the archives this past spring with a small team of undergraduates, they uncovered more than 750 names. One student working on the project even found her own name, and discovered it was an ancestor.

Ms. Thomas is continuing to comb the data to learn about the lives of those laborers. She also now sits on a committee that aims to acknowledge and explain the institution’s past connection to racism and slavery.

"It’s reworking its history," she says. "Around the country all universities who have this history have to ask the question, What are we going to do about it?"

Ms. Thomas says some members of the committee hesitated to "go down that road," but Clemson has since taken many steps to teach about its past. Several months ago the university put up historical markers to show where imprisoned black laborers and Native Americans once lived.

In many cases institutions’ links to slavery aren’t as well known. And smaller institutions have fewer resources with which to revise outdated books of campus history. It has not always been a priority for those universities and colleges to look into the meaning of historical locations on their campuses, says Mr. von Daacke.

But as the national conversation builds, he says, many institutions are taking small, symbolic steps to address campus history before protests arise. Some are joining new consortiums such as Universities Studying Slavery, which UVa
created in 2015. The consortium, made up of more than 20 universities and colleges in Virginia and other states, has convened several times, allowing professors to share information about research projects, about course syllabi, and about committees dedicated to institutional history.

Ms. Thomas and Ms. Rainville are also seeking to help other institutions research and acknowledge their tangled pasts. They are part of a working group, convened by the National Council on Public History, of 19 professors across the country who are investigating their institutions’ historical ties to slavery, racism, sexism, and other social ills. Among the group’s goals is to create a database of syllabi that teach students to research their institutions’ histories.

The network has been particularly helpful for smaller institutions like Pennsylvania’s Bryn Mawr College, which doesn’t have the resources to form a full committee of institutional historians devoted to the work.

**Different Models**

The model that worked for Brown University doesn’t work for everyone, says Monica L. Mercado, a postdoctoral fellow at Bryn Mawr.

At Bryn Mawr, after what Ms. Mercado calls "troubling incidents on campus" — including a Confederate flag tacked to a dormitory wall — two undergraduates tackled an independent-study project with her. They designed "Black at Bryn Mawr," a 90-minute walking tour of notable locations of African-American history on the campus, modeled after the "Black and Blue" tour at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The students who developed the tour have now graduated, and Ms. Mercado will leave her post within the month to accept a full-time position at Colgate University.
Abigail L. Perkiss, an associate professor of history at Kean University, recently began teaching an upper-level seminar about African-American history on the New Jersey campus. In the spring she had the students Skype with Ms. Mercado to learn about projects at other colleges, and then she sent those students around the campus to do their own research.

For the commuter school, which is made up largely of nontraditional and minority students, the research was emotionally difficult: Students discovered a history in stark contrast to the university’s current diversity-driven mission. Even its name imparted a lesson. The Kean family, who lived on the land in the 1800s, owned slaves.

The class also created a walking tour from its findings, and administrators supported the project. But as Ms. Perkiss prepares to go on sabbatical next year, she worries whether there will be momentum when she returns to develop the tour into a permanent feature.

In the meantime, scholars like Ms. Rainville, at Sweet Briar, are uncovering significant new information about their colleges. Ms. Rainville, who studies the history of African-Americans on the plantation and in Virginia, estimates that about 25 to 30 percent of black workers at the college can trace back their ancestry to those enslaved on the plantation.

When Ms. Rainville began teaching anthropology at Sweet Briar as an adjunct professor, in 2001, she didn’t plan to stay for more than a semester or two. But as she began to understand the vibrant antebellum landscape, she was bothered by her own lack of knowledge about what had happened there.

She knew the romanticized explanation of the college’s founding — how a grieving mother created it in her daughter’s memory — but she wanted the full story. So she started using her courses to push past what she calls a sort of "Gone..."
"With the Wind" mentality of campus history. She began to look at the campus as a "built-in laboratory."

"If you are someone who studies history or material culture, this is history that is still alive," she says. "How could you ignore it?"

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