

Opinion

Confronting the dark history of medical experimentation on Black Americans

There's an ongoing attempt to erase knowledge of these atrocities and pretend as if they were just figments of Black folks' imagination.



— The remains of 19 African Americans whose remains were wrongfully taken from New Orleans in the late 1800s and sent to the University of Leipzig in Germany for racially biased scientific research.

Jacob Cochran / Dillard University

June 2, 2025, 6:51 PM CDT

By Donney Rose, poet, advocacy journalist and teaching artist

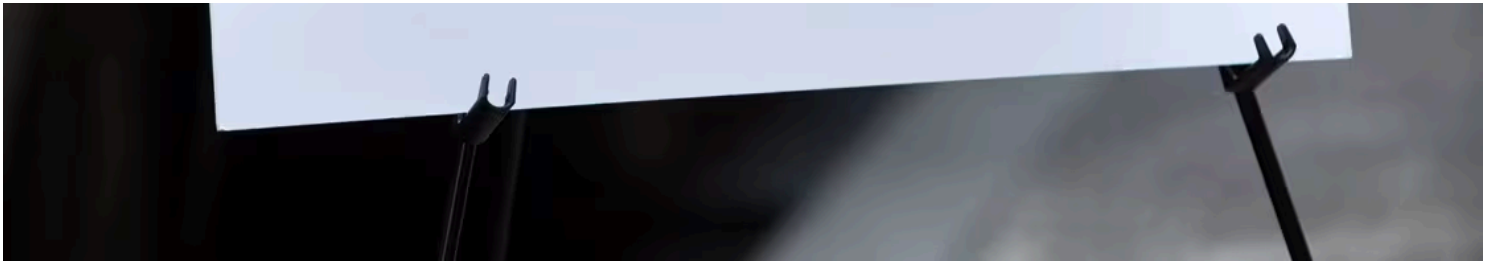
In 1871, Henry D. Schmidt, a New Orleans doctor, “gifted” [the crania of 19 formerly enslaved African American and mixed-race individuals](#) to Dr. Emil Ludwig Schmidt at the University of Leipzig to study the racist hypothesis that a person’s morality or intelligence could be determined by crevices and bumps of their skull. A century and a half later, in a presumed act of higher consciousness, the German university no longer felt the need to house the ill-gotten skulls and, on Saturday, the remains of those 19 disregarded souls were given a proper burial in New Orleans.

The 1850 images were commissioned by Harvard biologist Louis Agassiz to support the idea that human races evolved separately.

Saturday’s event at Dillard University took place on the same week that Harvard University announced that it is [relinquishing what are believed to be](#) among the earliest photos of enslaved people in the United States. The 1850 images of a father and daughter known as Renty and Delia, who were photographed naked to the waist, were commissioned by Harvard biologist Louis Agassiz to support the theory of polygenism, the idea that human races evolved separately.

Harvard would probably still be clutching those photos if [Tamara Lanier](#), an author who says she’s a descendant of the father and daughter pictured, hadn’t fought a 15-year legal battle with the university. But the photos won’t come to her. Renty and Delia’s images will now be placed at the International African American Museum in South Carolina, the state where they were enslaved.





— A sample image of "Papa" Renty and his daughter Delia, taken in 1850, during a press conference announcing a lawsuit against Harvard University, in New York City, on March 20, 2019.

Kevin Hagen / Getty Images file

As I sat through the three-hour service, which included a city acknowledgement by New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell, musical tributes and a riveting performance from Dillard University's Theatre Ensemble personifying the 19 human beings we were paying homage to, I couldn't help but think about the history of Black Americans being the guinea pigs for experimentation or examination or the subject of incomplete theories, under the guise of scientific advancement. Or the irony of racist individuals using "inferior" Black specimens to interrogate complex ideas about human physiology, and still arriving at racist conclusions even with evidence in their possession that contradicts their hypotheses.

We live in a moment where there is a persistent effort to erase all knowledge of these atrocities and pretend as if they were just figments of Black folks' imagination. But Eva Baham, who chaired the Cultural Repatriation Committee that brought the remains of the 19 New Orleanians home, said during Saturday's service that the purpose of studying history is "to move forward. And when we keep our past hidden, we are starting over every day."

We could not verify any descendants. And so we have to step in and be their family.

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The memorial service for Adam Grant, Isaak Bell, Hiram Smith, William Pierson, Henry Williams, John Brown, Hiram Malone, William Roberts, Alice Brown, Prescilla Hatchet, Marie Louise, Mahala, Samuel Prince, John Tolman, Henry Allen, Moses Willis, Henry Anderson and two other unidentified souls was unlike any other I have witnessed. The decedents had transitioned over a century and a half ago; however, their departure from this realm could not have been considered peaceful before this weekend's ceremony. Roughly 200 community members filled the sanctuary of Dillard's Lawless Memorial Chapel to pay their respects to these ancestors who were so horribly disrespected after they died.

"It was emotionally draining because you're trying your best to make some connections and to search and find [that] there's hope," Freddi Williams Evans, a member of the Cultural Repatriation Committee, told me. "We could not verify any descendants. And so we have to step in and be their family."

Harvard is letting go not just of the photos of Renty and Delia, but also images of enslaved people known as Alfred, Delia, Drana, Fassena, Jack and Jem. Lanier, who says she's the great-great-great-granddaughter of "Papa Renty," said of the settlement with Harvard, "This pilfered property, images taken without dignity or consent and used to promote a racist psychoscience will now be repatriated to a home where their stories can be told and their humanity can be restored."

As she spoke Wednesday she locked arms with Susanna Moore, the great-great-great-granddaughter of Agassiz, the Harvard biologist. Moore rightly called the work her forefather was doing with the photos "a deeply racist project."

We are still unpacking just how much dehumanization defined slavery and its aftermath in the United States.

The combination of Harvard relinquishing its photos and Dillard receiving the remains of those wrongly shipped to a lab overseas means that even in 2025, we are still unpacking just how much dehumanization defined slavery and its aftermath in the United States. Dillard University

President Monique Guillory told me it was important to honor the 19 in New Orleans because “They walked the streets of New Orleans like we do.”

Saturday’s ceremony ended with African drumming and dancing, and then attendees were led out of the chapel by a jazz band and a traditional New Orleans second line en route to bury the remains of a tormented people, the right way.

Donney Rose

Baton Rouge, Louisiana, native Donney Rose is a New Orleans-based poet, advocacy journalist and teaching artist. He is a past [Kennedy Center Citizen Artist Fellow](#) and a recipient of the 2022 Maryland State Arts Council Independent Artist Award for Literary Arts, among countless other noteworthy accomplishments in arts and community organizing.
