

Shard Mending

By David Terrett Beumee

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As part of decades of genealogical research of our enslaving ancestors at Oakland Plantation in Alexandria, Virginia, Mom had left typed notes in or on the backs of hundreds of photographs and artifacts left to my brother and me. A Spode demitasse cup had meant to accompany a highly stylized ivory portrait of Jane Day, 2nd wife of my ancestor George Richards, but the antiques had been split between my brother and me at Mom's demise. I wanted the portrait to show to the archeologists at Alexandria Archeology, along with the tiny cup, as I had been shown shards of white earthenware, among hundreds of artifacts collected from the site of slave quarters near the old mansion house in Alexandria. I wanted to contrast for the archeologists what my ancestors used for dinnerware with that which enslaved Africans may have used at Oakland Plantation, and also give an example of a portrait of an elegantly coiffed white woman ancestor of the 1870's to contrast what I imagine Terrett slaves might have worn. This meant acquiring the portrait from my brother and sister-in-law at their ranch home in southeastern Wyoming.

I arrived with my wife in great fear, recognizing this was my chance to present evidence of our ancestors' enslaving past. I had received advice that confrontation of the facts would end the conversation with my brother, so I listened and kept my mouth shut. Sure enough, an opportunity eventually presented itself as to how our enslaving ancestors gained and maintained wealth over four generations on the backs of slave labor, and I presented the will document of our third great grandfather, George Hunter Terrett, showing dollar values for human lives in the

same column as dollar values placed on horses, cattle and furniture. I explained how this document gave evidence that our ancestors thought of black people as animals to be bought and sold like cattle, attitudes that have resulted in murder of unarmed black people on the streets of our country today

It was obvious that the issue of justice for black people had never crossed his mind, an admission my brother expressed in a call to me several weeks later, thanking me for having done the research into our family's past and expressing genuine surprise that our ancestors were enslavers of embezzled Africans. Then, after expressing the need for cooler heads to prevail throughout political discourse in America, my brother launched into a tirade on the wisdom of "zero tolerance" Trump administration immigration policy, aimed at people of color trying to escape political violence in their own countries to find a better life in America. I kept my mouth shut and survived the diatribe about the predominance of "liberal media" and "fake news."

Perhaps, through the empathetic conversation approach championed by the work of [David Camp](#), there may be an opening for me to speak to my brother, but for now, I understand that for many people, the sovereignty of our nation is at stake. "Either we have a sovereign nation with laws that protect our borders, or we don't," he said. What could I have said in that moment that could have made a difference? We don't see eye to eye politically, but willingness to listen to each other may offer a doorway toward healing and racial justice in our country.