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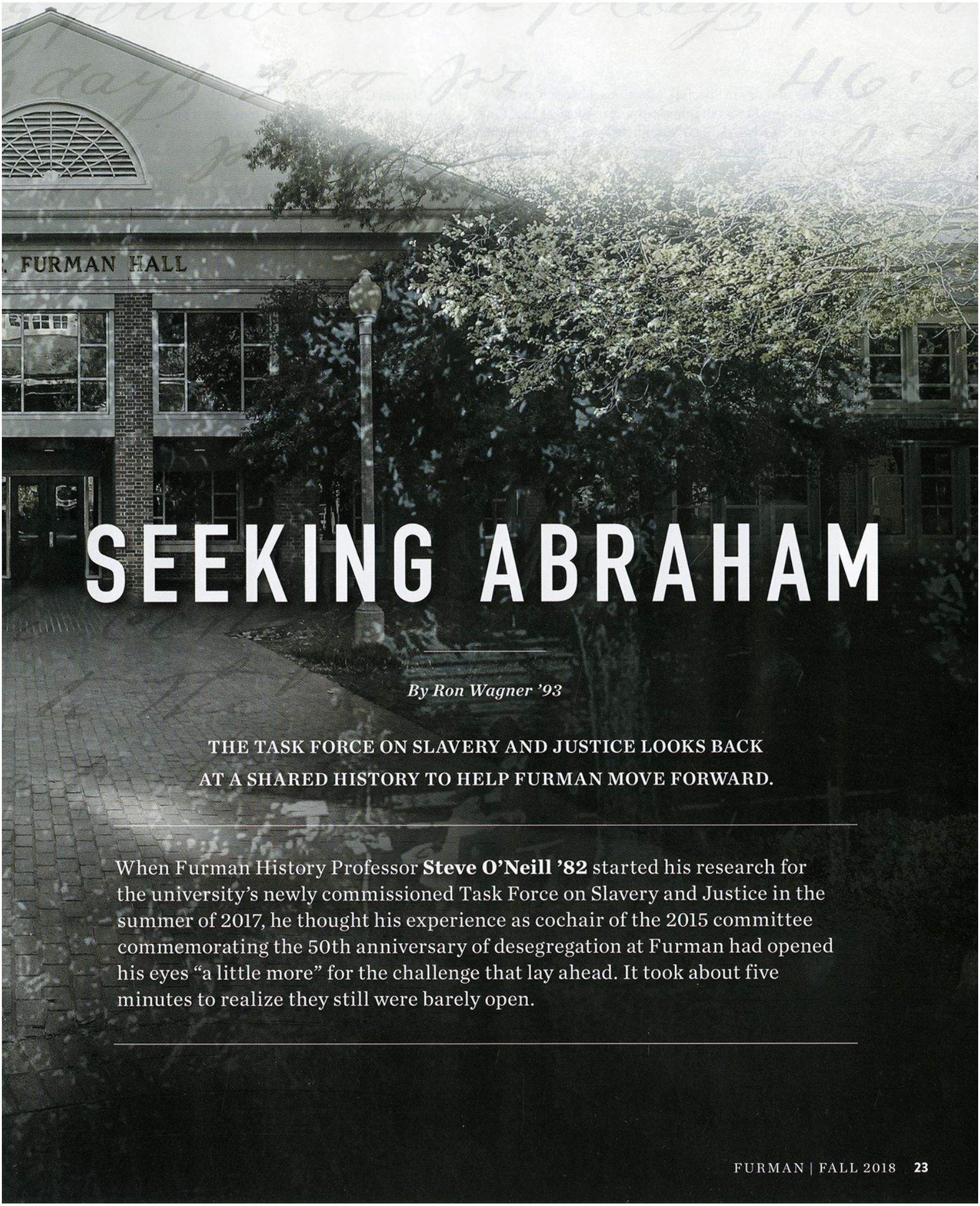
JAMES



SEEKING ABRAHAM

By Ron Wagner '93

THE TASK FORCE ON SLAVERY AND JUSTICE LOOKS BACK AT A SHARED HISTORY TO HELP FURMAN MOVE FORWARD.

When Furman History Professor **Steve O'Neill '82** started his research for the university's newly commissioned Task Force on Slavery and Justice in the summer of 2017, he thought his experience as cochair of the 2015 committee commemorating the 50th anniversary of desegregation at Furman had opened his eyes "a little more" for the challenge that lay ahead. It took about five minutes to realize they still were barely open.

"My first day in Special Collections, I opened up the folders ... and I was shaking to the core because I couldn't read it," he says. "I didn't know how I was going to do this."

The written word has changed quite a bit since the 1800s, O'Neill discovered, making the primary sources of information about Furman in its early decades – extensive letters and diaries written by university founder Richard Furman and son James C. Furman, now housed in Special Collections and Archives above the James B. Duke Library – nearly unintelligible. Fortunately for O'Neill, who specializes in 20th century South and the Civil Rights movement, he wasn't alone on his journey to examine Furman's early years.

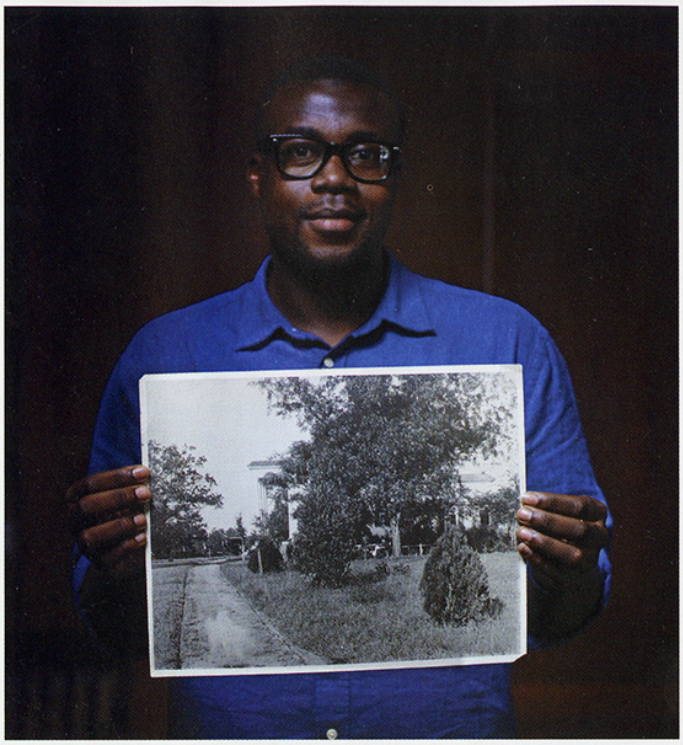
"James C. Furman brings with him a militant pro-slavery attitude that by 1860 has whipped up into a fervor for secession," says task force chair and Communication Studies Associate Professor **Brandon Inabinet '04**. "And with that comes a lot of the over-the-top racist arguments you suspect might be the worst of his time, because he's trying to convince – by means of rhetoric – people who previously had been pro-Union. His words shock the modern conscience."

Insights into the two men who founded and built Furman were part of the task force's mission to make "a firm, scholarly understanding of the past" part of the university's foundation. That's a priority for current students like **Chelsea McKelvey '19**.

One of the members of his team of student researchers, **Laura Bloodworth '18**, had experience reading 19th-century handwriting, and she was able to translate the texts under the supervision of history professors Carolyn Day and **Courtney Tollison Hartness '99**. They revealed how dedicated Richard Furman was to saving souls and healing rifts among the Baptists while providing theological justification for slavery. They also showed how much more aggressively James Furman championed the institution of slavery and the major role he played in pushing South Carolina into the Civil War after moving the campus to what is now downtown Greenville in 1851.

"I'm very passionate about diversity, equity and inclusion, and reconciling with the past. Being an African-American female on a predominantly white campus, I recognize that there is a need for our campus to be more aware of the past of our university as well as current issues," says McKelvey, who is one of three student representatives on the task force. "I think we do live in somewhat of a bubble at Furman, so I really wanted to be a part of something that would enlighten our community in that way."

JEREMY FLEMING



***Andy Teye '18**, one of the student researchers on the Seeking Abraham Project, holds a photo of Abraham Sims standing in front of James Furman's Cherrydale house in Greenville.*

JEREMY FLEMING

Another, perhaps bigger, part of the task force's mission was to help restore dignity to people who'd had theirs taken by slavery. That turned out to be difficult, because, like many other slaveholders, Richard and James Furman did not write a lot about their slaves. O'Neill's team could find almost no information about them outside of an occasional first name and census figures that tracked them as property.

"The idea was that we were going to recover the humanity of the former slaves of the Furman family by delving into this research and bringing out their lives and bringing out their voices," O'Neill says. "But that really hasn't been the case, because we're having to work through sources that were recorded by James and Richard Furman. And they simply didn't pay that much attention to their slaves."

A glimmer of hope appeared in the form of a post-slavery picture of a man standing outside James Furman's Cherrydale house in Greenville, taken in 1890. The image shows a figure partially obscured by bushes, a shadow across his face. On the back, he's identified as "Abraham, an ex-slave, for many years a family servant."

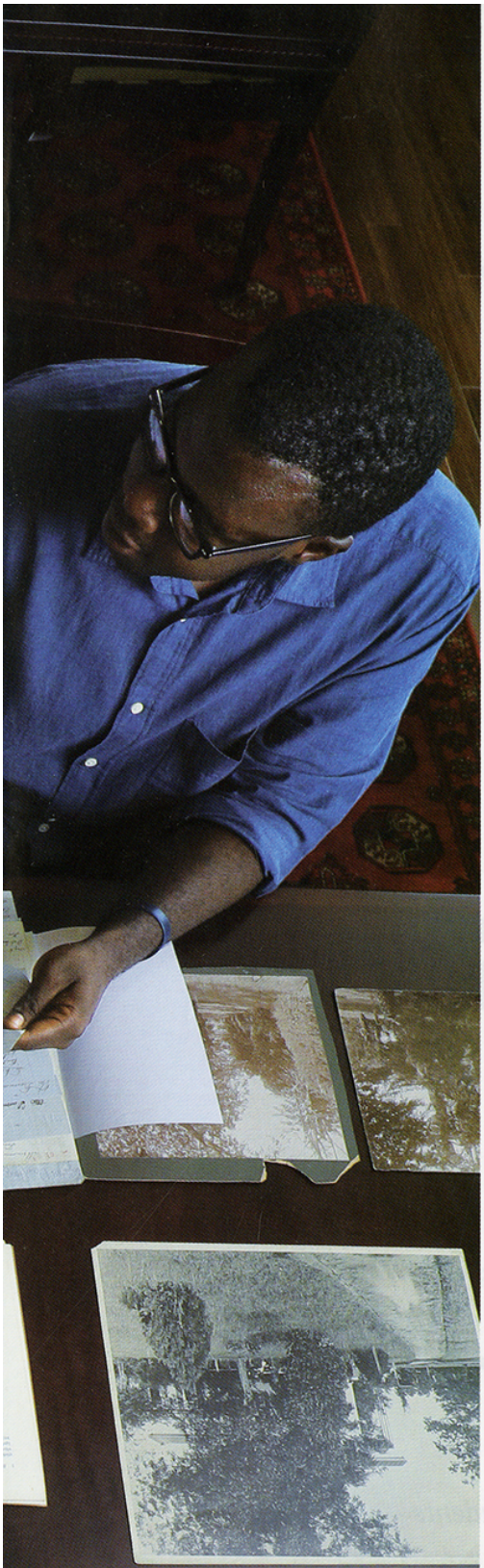
Though this may not seem like much to go on, O'Neill and his team, which also included students **Andy Teye '18**, **Yilan Luo '18** and **Marian Baker '17**, as well as Tollison and Associate Professor of Political Science Teresa Cosby, had enough to start reconstructing some of Abraham's life. He appeared in Census Bureau records by 1900 as Abraham Syms, and land records indicated he was born in August of 1839. He married a woman named Madora, had six children and eventually learned to read and write.

Abraham Sims, as he was properly identified, was a cook who owned a home on Paris Mountain Road in Brutontown, and the task force was able to trace his walk up Poinsett Highway to work at "the Big House" of Cherrydale. He's buried in the cemetery at Brutontown, with "Sims" engraved on a gravestone nearly invisible underneath vines and trees.

The quest to turn Abraham from nothing more than a grainy black-and-white photograph to a person evolved into the "Seeking Abraham Project." Sims now exists in Furman's historical record, as do the 56 enslaved people James Furman owned in 1850 who undoubtedly helped build the school's first campus in Greenville along with the many others who were "hired out" to help with the construction. They're no longer invisible, their contributions no longer ignored.

That's a powerful answer to one question task force members heard more than any other: Why is it necessary to talk about such an unpleasant past?

"Those people were part of Furman's story, too, and they should be included in that grand story of how we became a great institution," Inabinet says. "To say, 'Oh, slavery was bad, and we shouldn't talk about it because



*Furman history professor **Steve O'Neill '82**, center, spent hours in Special Collections and Archives above the James B. Duke Library with student researchers **Andy Teye '18**, right, and **Laura Bloodworth '18** poring over letters, diaries and other records from the 1800s.*

JEREMY FLEMING

it's really negative,' is to say all of those people who were slaves aren't worth talking about."

The task force came about partially in response to a 2016 editorial that Baker, a history and biology double major, wrote for The Paladin student newspaper expressing the surprise and disappointment she felt when she learned through her own research that Richard and James Furman were not only slave owners but two of South Carolina's most influential pro-slavery figures. She also wondered whether these pasts were being downplayed and made a strong case for how she felt that history influences the university's present culture.

"The early trustees and the early professors and the early donors (in Greenville) were also, almost to a person, slaveholders," O'Neill says.

A Spanish and history double major from Charleston, South Carolina, McKelvey says Furman becoming more diverse and inclusive depends on a robust accounting of where it came from.

"I think it's really hard for people to identify with something that didn't necessarily affect their family or didn't necessarily affect people who look like them, but that doesn't mean it's any less important," she says. "I associate Furman with good things, but then when I look at Furman in terms of the history ... it is a little disheartening. Once we are able to really confront that and make the campus community ever more aware of what happened and where we plan to go, then we'll be able to better move forward and maybe see some of that diversity that we should have on campus grow."

> "HERE'S THE HISTORY ... ONE OF SLOWLY INTEGRATING, WORKING TOGETHER, FINDING NEW WAYS FORWARD."

Resulting conversations from the piece reached the office of Furman Provost George Shields, who commissioned the task force with the support of President Elizabeth Davis and the Furman Board of Trustees.

Slavery ended with the South's defeat in the Civil War, and the current Furman campus broke ground in 1953, long after both Richard and James Furman were dead. But to ignore slavery in recounting Furman's history, O'Neill says, is to ignore the high probability there would be no Furman without it.

If he'd rejected slavery, Richard Furman certainly wouldn't have become the first president of the South Carolina Baptist Convention, which gave him the social status and platform to become the university's namesake. And James Furman relied heavily on the monetary advantage enslaved people provided to move the school to Greenville.

And as The Furman Advantage articulates, diversity and inclusion are essential to preparing students for meaningful lives and for moving Furman forward as an institution of higher learning, which leads into the task force's ultimate objective: helping Furman create a future with this new history.

"This is an opportunity to try to say, 'Here's the history, a shared history (that's) often racial because it's in the South, but one of slowly integrating, working together, finding new ways forward,'" Inabinet says. "That's a good one to tell." ●

What's next? *The campus community, alumni and Board of Trustees are discussing the Task Force on Slavery and Justice's "Seeking Abraham" report in several forums this fall. The board will consider the report's recommendations through the spring and work with the university to develop a plan and timeline for implementing approved steps. For more information, visit furman.edu/tfsj.*