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Harvard Law to Abandon Crest Linked to Slavery

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The Harvard Law School Library in Cambridge, Mass. Credit Charlie Mahoney for The New York Times

Harvard Law School is poised to abandon an 80-year-old shield based on the crest of a slaveholding family that helped endow the institution, as campuses across the country debate the use of historic names and symbols that some consider offensive.

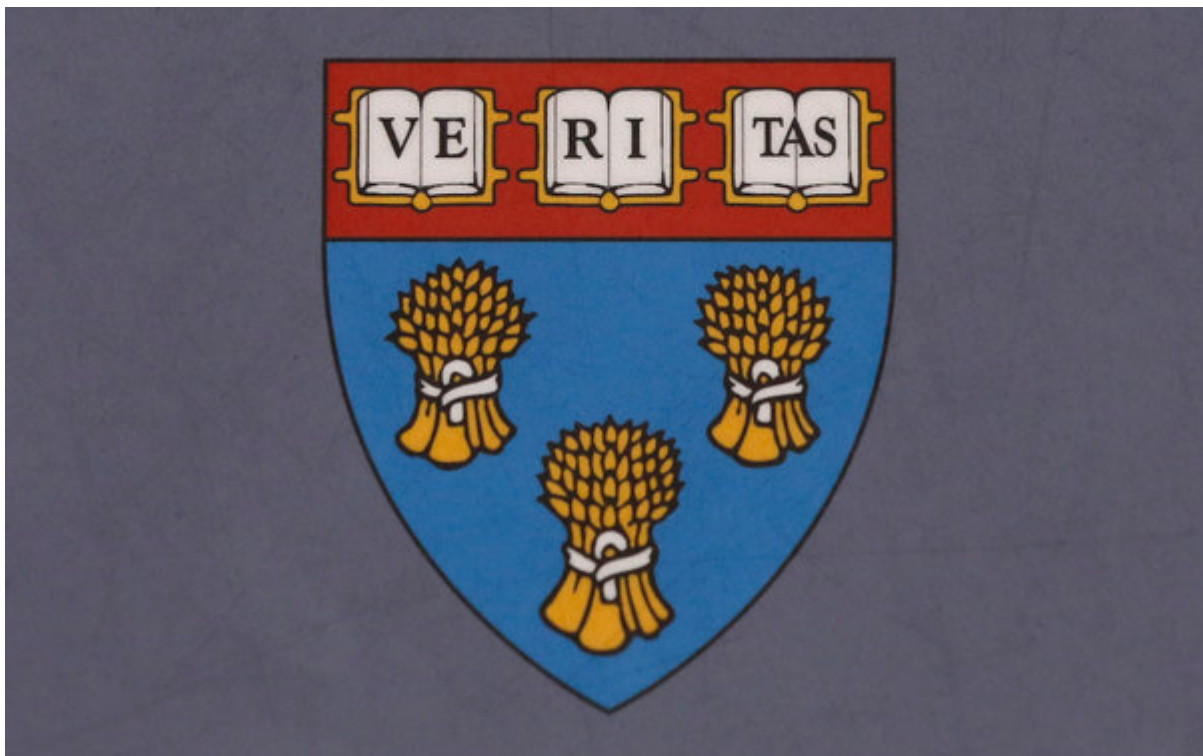
On Friday, a law school committee said the shield did not represent Harvard values. It shows three sheaves of wheat, a symbol that is derived from the family crest of an 18th-century slave owner, Isaac Royall Jr., who endowed the first law professorship at Harvard, though the gift did not by itself create the law school. The image of the wheat appears under the word “Veritas,” or “Truth” in Latin, the Harvard motto.

“We believe that if the law school is to have an official symbol, it must more closely represent the values of the law school, which the current shield does not,” the committee wrote. Its recommendation was endorsed by the law school dean, Martha Minow, and is considered likely to be approved by Harvard’s corporation.

But it came with a passionate dissent from Annette Gordon-Reed, a professor of legal history who is known for her scholarship on Thomas Jefferson and his relationship

with Sally Hemings, his slave. The work of Ms. Gordon-Reed, who had argued that historians had too readily discounted the oral testimony of Hemings's descendants, was vindicated in 1998 by DNA evidence showing that a Jefferson fathered a child by Hemings.

In her dissent, Ms. Gordon-Reed wrote that erasing the Royalls would also extinguish the memory of the slaves whose labor contributed to the founding of the law school. "People *should* have to think about slavery when they think of the Harvard shield; but from now on, with a narrative that emphasizes the enslaved, not the Royall family," Ms. Gordon-Reed wrote. She was joined by one other member of the 12-member committee, Annie Rittgers, a law student.



The Harvard Law School shield is based on the crest of a slave-holding family that helped endow the institution. Credit Harvard Law School, via Associated Press

Ms. Gordon-Reed said sheaves of wheat had also appeared on American pennies and did not have the visceral associations of a Confederate or Nazi flag. Besides, she said, since it was designed in 1936, the shield had taken on its own meaning, separate from the Royall family, honoring the law school graduates. Her opinion acknowledged the complexities that universities confront in dealing with these issues and was a rare departure from the cautious approach of many campuses.

Several universities, including Harvard, Yale, Princeton and M.I.T., have decided to abolish or to consider abolishing the title of "master" for those who oversee student residences, because of potential associations with slavery. Amherst College has decided to purge official references to its unofficial mascot, Lord Jeffery Amherst, a military commander in the French and Indian War who was accused of brutality toward Native Americans.

On the other hand, some administrators have found themselves criticized for trying to show racial sensitivity. In December, two Harvard College deans apologized for distributing place mats labeled “Holiday Placemat for Social Justice,” which offered advice to students about how to discuss controversies such as the house “master” title, “black murders in the street” and “Islamophobia/refugees” with their families. The place mats advised students to, for example, “listen mindfully,” “breathe” and “ask questions.”

In the letter of apology, the deans, Stephen Lasonde and Thomas Dingman, said the place mat “failed to account for the many viewpoints that exist on our campus.”

Others have been criticized for supporting free speech, such as Erika Christakis, a Yale lecturer who argued for “transgressive” Halloween costumes that students said could perpetuate racial stereotypes.

Bruce H. Mann, a Harvard law professor and the chairman of the committee, said Friday that the rest of the committee had agreed that the history of slavery had to be remembered, but disagreed about how to do it.

In an email Friday, Ms. Gordon-Reed said she had been influenced by her scholarship on Hemings. “This is my life’s work,” she said. “I sincerely believe that we owe it to the enslaved to work through those feelings and think of ways to carry their stories forward. And we should do that in a way that shows the inherently entwined nature of the good and bad of our past, using written text and symbols like the sheaves and, even, buildings like Monticello.”