

## **STATEMENT ON UVa GOVERNING BOARD CRITICISM OF PROF. LOUIS NELSON**

Vernacular Architecture Forum

Society of Architectural Historians

Society for American City and Regional Planning History

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As organizations representing historians of the built environment, we protest the comments of members of the University of Virginia governing board as [reported by the Washington Post](#) on February 23, 2023. The Post quotes text messages from board member U. Bertram Ellis Jr. that are critical of the university's recognition of its past role in slavery and Jim Crow practices and that call for the governing board to prevent administrators and faculty from acknowledging this difficult past. Mr. Ellis specifically targets Professor Louis P. Nelson, an architectural historian and Vice Provost for Academic Outreach, for his highly successful efforts to bring attention to the university's racist past.

In the first place, Mr. Ellis' comments endanger academic freedom at UVa and, if imitated, to the ability of university faculty everywhere to pursue their research agendas they deem important. Such threats to interfere in faculty members' teaching and research violate their fundamental right, as experts in their various fields, to carry out their work as they see fit. The tenure system serves as a guarantee that faculty members cannot be removed for social and political views, whether liberal or conservative.

As part of Mr. Ellis's disparagement of UVa's effort to acknowledge past discrimination, he singles out the work of Professor Nelson, a leader in the field of architectural history. Professor Nelson is the author of numerous acclaimed books and peer-reviewed articles documenting the architecture and cultural landscapes of Black communities on both sides of the Atlantic. He has earned multiple awards for his work, including the Abbot Lowell Cummings Prize from the Vernacular Architecture Forum and the John Brinckerhoff Jackson Prize from the Foundation for

Landscape Studies. Professor Nelson is a former President of the Vernacular Architecture Forum and served as the editor of its academic journal *Buildings & Landscapes*. Among his many contributions to the field of architectural history in general and the University of Virginia in particular are the launching of a summer research program that brought students to explore the vernacular architecture of a Black community in Jamaica; successful grant applications to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for a \$750,000 grant to establish summer field schools in African American communities; and a grant of \$5 million to expand the University of Virginia's academic strengths in teaching about racial equity and democracy. Additionally, he has established several projects that engage students, faculty, and community members in understanding the role of race in the development of the university and its home in Charlottesville.

As historians of architecture and urban design, we believe that the built environment provides important evidence about social relations and political issues beyond what is expressed in written documents, and we investigate the ways in which prejudice based on race, ethnicity, and gender is inscribed in buildings and landscapes. Board member Ellis expresses concern that examination by Professor Nelson and others of the history of racially-based mistreatment at the University of Virginia is simply part of an effort to undermine the importance of Thomas Jefferson and other founders of the university and to expunge the record of their contributions. We disagree and insist that examination of the full history of slave-holding historical figures provides an appropriate perspective on American history that is indispensable for understanding social relations today. Architectural historians continue to recognize Jefferson's innovative designs for the University of Virginia and Monticello while also insisting on filling in the blanks about the many other types of people who occupied these buildings. UVA's history is embedded in its architecture and landscapes; we cannot discuss the stylish designs of Jefferson as an architect without acknowledging the human beings he held as slaves and the cabins, basements, and other hidden spaces of enslavement and discrimination that are an important part of the buildings and landscapes he designed.

The role of a university is to foster civil discourse. While Mr. Ellis [has apologized](#) for his statements becoming public, he has not addressed the need to offer honest interpretations of African American history (and, more specifically, to examine the full history of racial discrimination at the University of Virginia), nor has he acknowledged the importance of academic freedom that allows faculty and students to explore this history. Ellis owes an apology to Professor Nelson and to the UVA community for threatening the university's distinguished academic reputation.