

2023 Strong Men & Women in Virginia History Student Creative Expressions Contest Northern Regional Winning Submission

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Never once have I been taught about the history of the soil I live on; the role my land played in using enslaved labor, the knotty history of our area's connection to the confederacy, and our immense usage of enslaved people to build our success. Our capital nation, was founded and created on plantation land using enslaved labor. You would think I would have been taught about the foundation of my home at my high school, but I indeed was not. The old name of my school was Washington and Lee, Lee referring to Robert E. Lee, a Confederate general who led the South's attempt at secession during the Civil War. There are a lot of names and places that connect us to the confederacy in a very casual way. For example, the names of our streets and highways that we drive on every day. I think that the stories of how we interpret and rename our public places in order to remember the past more thoroughly needs to be better documented. This is when I got a spark to get onto the internet and start my own research.

As I was conducting my own research, I stumbled upon a woman who needs to be talked about and importantly honored. Gladys Quander Tancil was the first Black person to be a historical interpreter at Mount Vernon. She had a strong character and a good moral compass. She was a role model and she had a talent for informational storytelling that drew crowds into Mount Vernon. Tancil shed light on slavery and the role it played in the success of George Washington. Tancil's connection to Mount Vernon was particularly strong because her ancestors were enslaved on the plantation. The Quander family is one of the oldest documented families in the United States, first recorded in Maryland in 1684 and they can trace their roots all the way back to the Fanti tribe in Ghana. Tancil was descended from several people enslaved by the Washingtons, and Nancy Quander, the founder of the Quander Virginia branch of the family, was emancipated by Martha Washington at the age of 13.

Gladys Quander Tancil took her ancestor's stories and shared them with the general public to inform them about the not-so-good parts but necessary parts of American history and Washington's legacy. This was not a popular decision at the time because Mount Vernon was (and still is) run by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, a group of southern, elite white women who were not interested in anything tarnishing the story of the Washington family. In fact, when she started as a historical interpreter in 1975, Tancil was the only Black employee who was not a maid or a gardener on the property. The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association wanted to



keep Mount Vernon's image as close as possible to the historical racial imbalance—they only hired Black people as laborers, cleaners and cooks in order to replicate the place of enslaved people on the plantation. Tancil's mother worked as a cook and mistress at the house serving the Ladies' Association, and Tancil took two weeks off every year to do the same thing before being hired as an interpreter. Not only did Tancil's mother work at Mount Vernon, but many of Tancil's family and ancestors were connected to the property. In addition to her enslaved ancestors, she was raised on her father's family farm, which sold items to Mount Vernon and her grandfather, Charles Henry Quander, was enslaved on nearby Hayfield Plantation, where Hayfield High School now stands. After emancipation, he bought land nearby, upon which Potomac High School was later built after the state took the land from Tancil's uncle.

Instead of having our high schools named after slaveholders and the plantations where they built their wealth on forced labor, we should remember and honor people like Gladys Quander Tancil. She can teach us to look at our history with grace and love, but also with an unwavering commitment to telling the truth and lifting up the stories of people whose lives it is painful to talk about because it exposes the complexity of our American legacy.



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