

Harvard Lays Bare Its Historical Ties To Slavery

Author and The Atlantic writer Ta-Nehisi Coates suggested institutions pay financial reparations for “their role in slavery.”

Harvard University publicly recognized its deep historical ties to slavery Friday during an eye-opening conference, reports **ABC News**.

At a conference that Harvard organized to explore the relationship between colleges and slavery, university President Drew Faust said the school must confront the grimmer parts of its past before it can move forward. “Harvard was directly complicit in slavery from the college’s earliest days in the 17th century until the system of bondage ended in Massachusetts in 1783,” Faust, a historian, said in her opening speech. “We look at both past and present today in the firm belief that only by coming to terms with history can we free ourselves to create a more just world.”

...At least two of Harvard’s early presidents brought slaves to live and work on campus, historians said. Some of the school’s major donors made their fortunes through slave labor or the slave trade. The university invested in merchant voyages trading crops produced by slaves. The 19th century Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz promoted theories about race that were used to justify slavery. “Some of our most esteemed educational institutions are also the product of some of the most horrific violence that has ever descended on any group of people,” said Sven Beckert, a Harvard history professor who has studied the school’s slavery ties.

Harvard is the latest in a string of universities that have sought to confront their connections to slavery recently, often only after students demanded it...But there’s still debate at Harvard about how to reconcile for past wrongdoings. At the conference, writer and keynote speaker Ta-Nehisi Coates drew applause when he suggested colleges make some sort of financial reparations for their role in slavery. “I don’t know how you conduct research that shows that your very existence is rooted in a great crime, and you just, well, shrug, and maybe at best say I’m sorry,” said Coates, who writes for The Atlantic magazine. “You have to do the right thing and try to make some amends.”

The “Universities and Slavery: Bound by History” conference exposed how “higher education in the United States and beyond was partly built “upon the violence of the slave trade, the Middle Passage, the auction block, and the whip,” with officials pushing for further engagement and addressing of the school’s past with slavery, reports **The Boston Globe**.