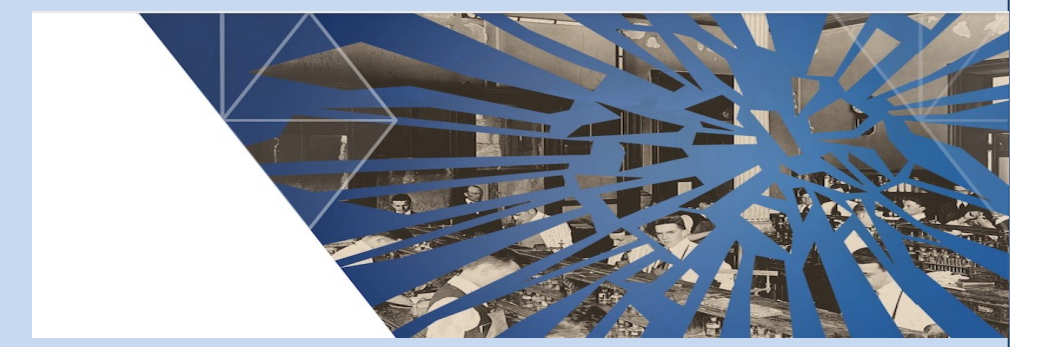


The Wyman Family and Slavery Project: The Gross Family at the Homewood Villa in the 20th Century

Hard Histories at Hopkins
Fall 2021

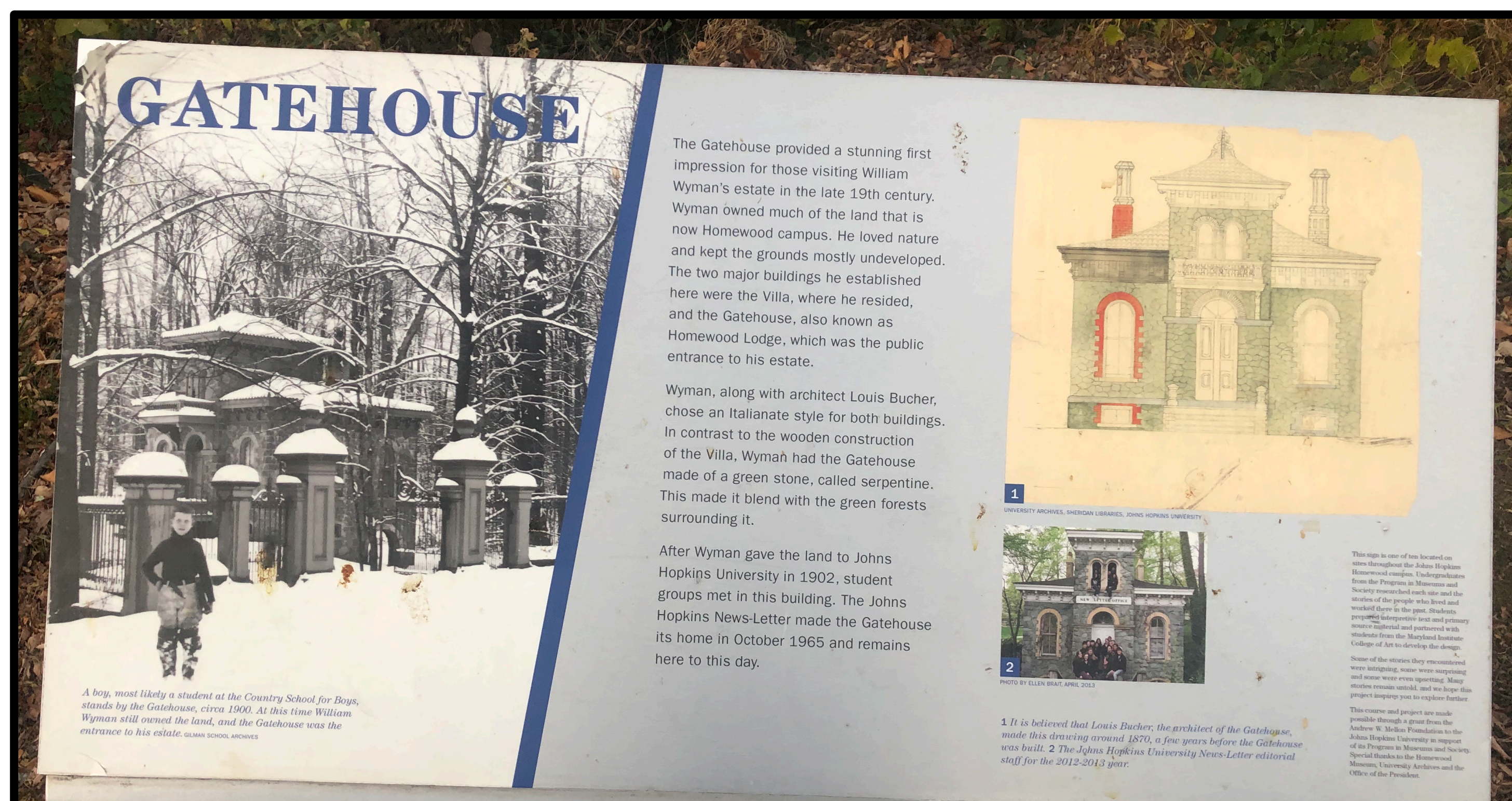
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Abstract

This research, as part of the Wyman Family and Slavery Project, explores how the Wyman Family reinscribed a narrative of Black labor on their property into the 20th century. Specifically, this project investigates the Homewood Villa—a residence owned by the Wyman Family that stood on the Johns Hopkins University grounds until its destruction in 1955—and the people who labored there. This project has two key findings: first, the Homewood Villa, through its affluent architecture in the Italian Villa style, displayed the power and wealth of the Wyman Family on the Johns Hopkins University campus. Second, inside the Villa, from 1930 to 1949, labored two Black caretakers, Julia and Benjamin Gross. This project also, in the timeline format, produces a history of the Homewood Villa, while concurrently constructing a life narrative of Julia and Benjamin Gross, to ultimately grant the Gross Family agency in the Homewood Villa's history.

Questions



Gatehouse plaque on Johns Hopkins University Campus

The only surviving trace of the Homewood Villa on the Johns Hopkins campus is the Gatehouse. This building “provided a stunning first impression” to the Wyman Family property, which included the Villa. On this signage, although there is hinting at the wealth of the Estate in its architecture, there is no mentioning of the Black people who labored on this property. This project, ultimately, seeks to change how JHU memorializes or commemorates the Wyman Family through their limited discussion on the Homewood Villa.



Gatehouse at Johns Hopkins University

The Archive

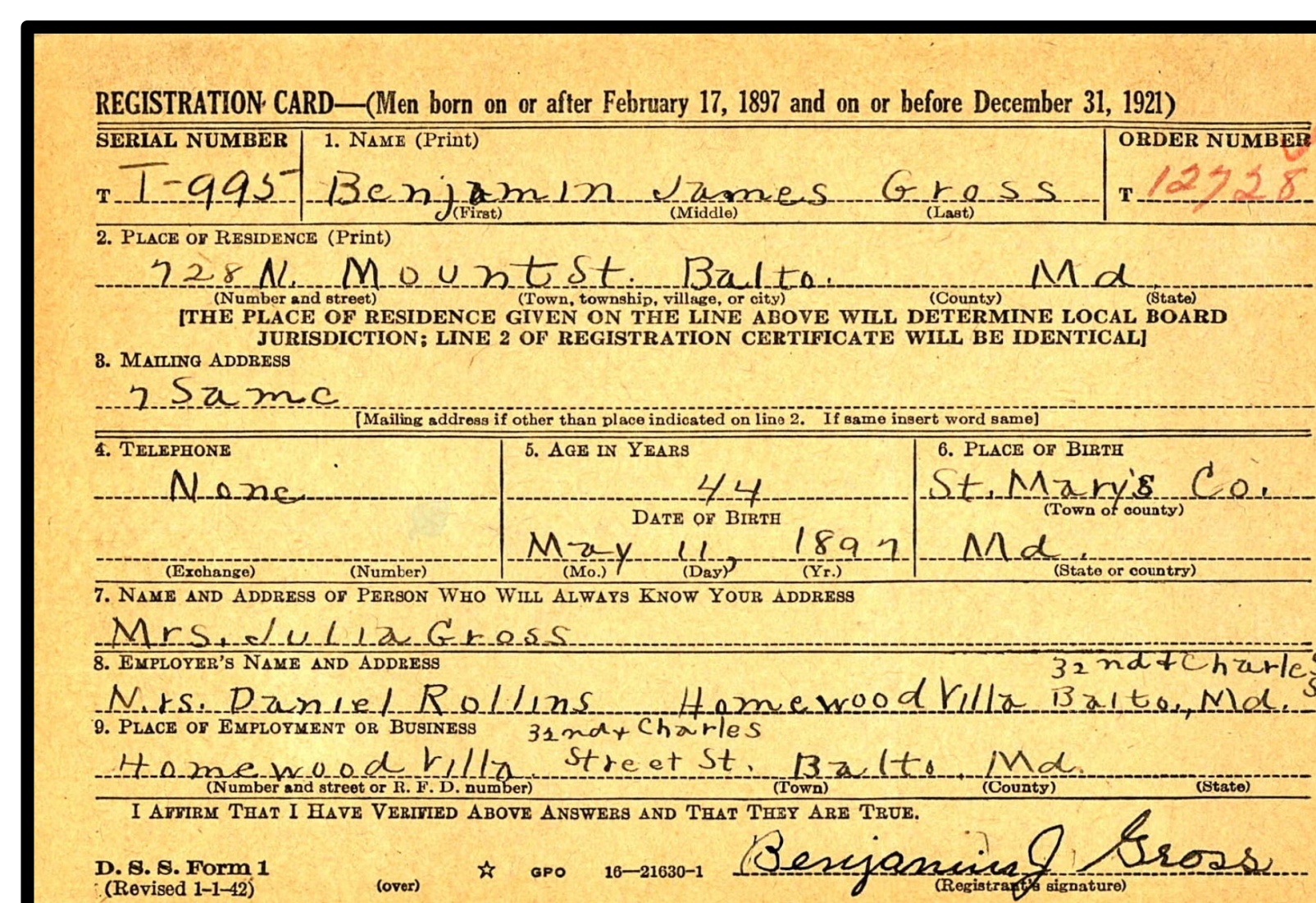
This study employed extensive archival research. Findings related to the Homewood Villa (newspaper articles, architectural plans, photos) hailed primarily from the JHU Special Collections. Additionally, a class visit to the Clifton Mansion in Baltimore—an Italian-style villa that was Johns Hopkins' summer home—supplemented information about the Italian villa architecture as a display of power. While I initially learned about both Julia and Benjamin Gross in a 1949 *Sun Magazine* article, from the JHU Special Collections, introducing the pair as “caretakers” in the Villa, I also conducted biographical research on the Gross Family through Ancestry Libraries, the Baltimore City Directories, and the *Baltimore Afro-American* newspaper. Through these sources, I pieced together address information, military records, and Census records to construct a broader narrative of the lives of Julia and Benjamin Gross.



Architectural plan for the Homewood Villa



Sun Magazine article introducing Julia and Benjamin Gross



Benjamin Gross WWII Registration Card, 1942



Clifton Mansion exterior

Results

Through archival research, I confirmed that Julia and Benjamin Gross were, indeed, caretakers at the Homewood Villa. Although the 1949 *Sun Magazine* article contends that Julia and Benjamin lived at the Villa, biographical records suggest the Grosses lived offsite. In any event, the couple devoted much of their working lives at the Villa, while still living dynamic lives apart from the Villa. Furthermore, as the detailed architectural plans of the Villa and the Clifton Mansion architecture display, the Italian Villa was a physical demonstration of the Wyman Family's wealth and power on the Johns Hopkins University campus.

Timeline

To create a comprehensive narrative documenting the lives of Julia and Benjamin Gross, in relation to a history of the Homewood Villa, I created a timeline, linked here:

[Timeline](#)

Conclusions

As the timeline indicates, the Villa was a representation of power and wealth for the Wyman Family, which the architectural plans and visit to the Clifton Mansion reinforce. Against this backdrop of power, the Wyman Family employed Black laborers in the Villa. Julia and Benjamin Gross, indeed, lived dynamic lives, having been players in the Great Migration and two World Wars, a compelling narrative we, as members of the University, overlook when simply memorializing the Wyman Family and their land. Looking back upon the Wyman Family's slaveholding in the nineteenth century (hyperlink to Marvis), continuities between the past and more recent past emerge. Indeed, as the labor of Julia and Benjamin Gross highlights, the narrative of the Wyman Family and Black labor did not end with emancipation.

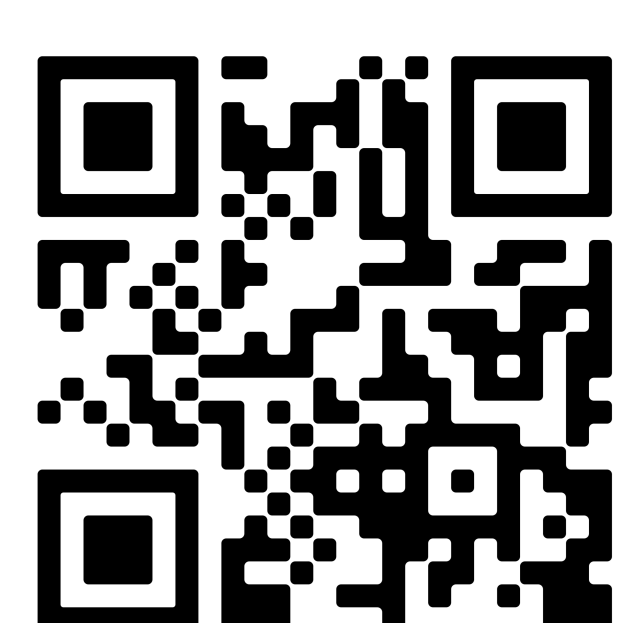
Regarding next steps, I implore Hopkins to include in their signage outside the Gatehouse information about the people who lived and labored at the Villa, and how the Italian Villa architectural style served as a display of power for the Wyman Family. Even further, I believe that the University ought to rethink the naming of locations on campus; indeed, terming this building the “Homewood Villa,” or, alternatively, the “Wyman Villa,” erases the narratives of the Black people who labored there. Just as the University memorializes the Wyman Family, Hopkins ought to commemorate the Black people, such as Julia and Benjamin Gross, who worked on the property into the 20th century. I therefore urge Hopkins to rename the land where the Homewood Villa once stood to honor the Gross Family and their contributions as people who labored on the Johns Hopkins campus.

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Here is the QR code for the Hard Histories website.



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