

By Anemona Hartocollis

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NORWICH, Conn. — The two slaves, a father and daughter, were stripped to the waist and positioned for frontal and side views. Then, like subjects in contemporary mug shots, their pictures were taken, as part of a racist study arguing that black people were an inferior race.

Almost 170 years later, they are at the center of a dispute over who should own the fruits of American slavery.

The images of the father and daughter, identified by their first names, Renty and Delia, were commissioned by a professor at Harvard and are now stored in a museum on campus as precious cultural artifacts.

But to the Lanier family, they are records of a personal family history. “These were our bedtime stories,” Shonrael Lanier said.

A program for a 2017 conference at Harvard on the links between academia and slavery. The program bears the image of Renty, a slave from whom Ms. Lanier says she descended. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

The lawsuit says the images are the “spoils of theft,” because as slaves Renty and Delia were unable to give consent. It says that the university is illegally profiting from the images by using them for “advertising and commercial purposes,” such as by using Renty’s image on the cover of a \$40 anthropology book. And it argues that by holding on to the images, Harvard has perpetuated the hallmarks of slavery that prevented African-Americans from holding, conveying or inheriting personal property.

“I keep thinking, tongue in cheek a little bit, this has been 169 years a slave, and Harvard still won’t free Papa Renty,” said Mr. Crump, who in 2012 represented the family of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager killed by a community watch member in Florida. Ms. Lanier is also represented by Josh Koskoff, a lawyer who represents families of the Sandy Hook elementary school massacre victims.

Renty and Delia were among seven slaves who appeared in 15 images made using the daguerreotype process, an early form of photography imprinted on silvered copper plates.

The pictures are haunting and voyeuristic, with the subjects staring at the camera with detached expressions.

The daguerreotypes were commissioned by Louis Agassiz, a Swiss-born zoologist and Harvard professor who is sometimes called the father of American natural science. They were taken in 1850 by J.T. Zealy, in a studio in Columbia, S.C.

Agassiz, a rival of Charles Darwin, subscribed to polygenesis, the theory that black and white people descended from different origins. The theory, later discredited, was used to promote the racist idea that black people were inferior to whites. Agassiz viewed the slaves as anatomical specimens to document his beliefs, according to historical sources.

An inventory from 1834 listing the slaves on the plantation of Col. Thomas Taylor in Columbia, S.C. The names Big Renty and Renty appear on the list.
Karsten Moran for The New York Times

Interviewed at her home in Norwich, Ms. Lanier, a retired chief probation officer for the State of Connecticut, said she had not heard of the photos until about 2010, when she began tracing her genealogy for a family project.

Her mother, Mattye Pearl Thompson-Lanier, who died that year, had passed down a strong oral tradition of their family's lineage from an African ancestor called "Papa Renty." Shonrael, Ms. Lanier's daughter, wrote a fifth-grade project about her ancestor in 1996.

The lawsuit could hinge on evidence of that chain of ancestry. Ms. Lanier's amateur sleuthing led to death records, census records and a handwritten inventory from 1834 of the slaves on the plantation of Col. Thomas Taylor in Columbia and their dollar values.

The slave inventory lists a Big Renty and a Renty, and listed under the latter is Delia. Ms. Lanier believes that Big Renty is her “Papa Renty” and the father of Renty and Delia, and has traced them to her mother, who was born to sharecroppers in Montgomery, Ala.

Her genealogical research has its skeptics. Gregg Hecimovich, who is contributing to a book about the slave daguerreotypes, to be published by the Peabody next year, said it was important to note that the slave inventory has the heading “To Wit, in Families.” Big Renty and Renty are at the top of separate groupings, he said, implying that they are the heads of separate families.

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“I’d be very excited to work with Tamara,” said Dr. Hecimovich, who is chairman of the English department at Furman University. “But the bigger issue is it would be very hard to make a slam-dunk case that she believes she has.”

Doris Burke contributed research.

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