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In 1850, a racist Harvard scientist took photos of enslaved people. A purported descendant is suing

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Tamara Lanier stands in front of a display using images of enslaved people that she believes are her ancestors. Her lawsuit against Harvard University alleging the “wrongful seizure, possession and expropriation” of the images was... (Frank Franklin II / AP) [More](#) ✓

By [Gillian Brockell](#)

The Washington Post

Tamara Lanier has been hearing about “Papa Renty” since she was a kid,

long before Harvard University rediscovered him.

He was her great-great-great-grandfather, the family patriarch, her mother told her. He was born in the Congo River basin, abducted from his home as a young man and enslaved on a cotton plantation in South Carolina in the early 1800s, where other enslaved people called him the “Black African.”

He was brave, teaching himself and others to read and write — illegal for a Black man at the time — and “stubbornly insisted on two things: education and faith in God,” Lanier said in an email interview.

After her mother’s death in 2010, Lanier took a renewed interest in her family’s history, and with the help of a friend, she made an incredible discovery: Renty and his daughter, Delia, had been photographed. In fact, the 1850 daguerreotypes of them are believed to be the first images ever made of enslaved people. Lost for decades, they were found in an attic at Harvard’s Peabody Museum in 1976.

“In addition to the family resemblance, we saw pride and determination” in their faces, Lanier told The Washington Post.

Even so, the circumstances in which they were photographed — as specimens for a racist scientist — made her sick, eventually leading her to sue Harvard in 2019. This week, Massachusetts’s highest court heard arguments in the case.

Harvard continues to profit from an “atrocious” committed against her ancestors, Lanier’s lawsuit contends, and Lanier is seeking ownership of the photos and unspecified damages.

Louis Agassiz was a Swiss-born biologist who immigrated to the United States in 1847. He soon took a position at Harvard, where he established the Museum of Comparative Zoology and spent the rest of his career. He died in 1873, leaving his papers to Harvard. He has been called “the creator of American science” and, until last summer, a neighborhood near the Harvard campus was named after him. As recently as 2019, Harvard described Agassiz as “charismatic [and] a great systematist, paleontologist and renowned teacher of natural history,” according to the lawsuit.

Agassiz was also deeply racist. A proponent of “polygenism,” he sought to prove that Black people had no common origins with other races and were thus inherently inferior. To prove this, he sought out “pure” African subjects — not an easy thing in 1850 Cambridge, given that legal slavery had ended in Massachusetts in 1783 and the trans-Atlantic slave trade had been banned federally since 1808.

Traveling to South Carolina, he found Renty, the so-called Black African. He and other enslaved men and women were taken to a studio, stripped naked and forced to pose, every inch of their bodies captured in daguerreotype. They were also subjected to measurements of every body part, including their buttocks and genitals.

In July 1850, Agassiz published an article on this “empirical data,” concluding that “Social equality, I deem at all times impracticable. It is a natural impossibility, flowing from the very character of the negro race.”

Harvard has not pushed this false idea since the images' rediscovery in 1976, but it is still using the images and charging a fee to others who want authorization to use them, according to Joshua Koskoff, one of Lanier's attorneys. The images were used in 2017 on the cover of a book and for promotional materials for a conference Harvard hosted on universities reckoning with their past relationships with slavery, according to The Boston Globe.

"Harvard has kept Renty and Delia enslaved for 170 years," said Ben Crump, another Lanier attorney, during oral arguments before the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court on Monday. "We are beseeching this court not to condemn them in death as property of Harvard for all eternity."

Harvard did not respond to a request for comment, but in court the university has made a First Amendment argument, saying property interests generally belong only to a photographer and not its subjects. The Massachusetts Newspaper Publishers Association filed a brief supporting Harvard, saying photojournalists and videographers rely on this principle daily in their coverage of the news.

But Koskoff argued that in the commissioning of the photos, neither Agassiz nor Harvard was acting as journalists, but as perpetrators of an assault. The "closest modern analogue" would be the possession of revenge or child pornography, Koskoff told The Post in an email.

"In fact, one of the deeply troubling questions of this case is whether Delia was actually a minor at the time she was forcibly stripped for the study," he wrote. "We don't really know, but more importantly Harvard doesn't know. Yet Harvard routinely publishes her bare-chested image to suit its own purposes."

Attorneys for Harvard have also questioned Lanier's claim of being related to Renty and Delia, although she has shared her genealogical research with Harvard officials for years and asked repeatedly for verification. Koskoff declined to allow Lanier to provide her evidence to The Post, citing the ongoing litigation. Lanier previously told the Harvard Crimson that in addition to census and other written records, four subsequent generations of her family had male relatives named Renty.

So what would she do with the images if her lawsuit is successful?

"We are going to sit down as a family and talk about what is best for Renty and Delia. We want the world to get to know the real Renty and Delia," she said. "We want the world to know that we are proud of them and honored to be their descendants."

For other descendants — those of Agassiz — it is not a question of honor so much as redress. More than three dozen have signed a letter in support of Lanier, telling Harvard, "For too many years, we have ignored Agassiz's role in promoting a pseudoscientific justification for white supremacy. ... Now is the time to name, acknowledge and redress the harm done by Louis Agassiz."

This story was originally published at [washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com). [Read it here.](#)

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