



THEIR WEALTH WAS BUILT ON SLAVERY. NOW A NEW FORTUNE LIES UNDERGROUND.

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Their wealth was built on slavery.

Now a new fortune lies underground.

In Virginia, the land still owned by the Coles family could yield billions from uranium. Does any of that wealth belong to the descendants of the enslaved?

By Julie Zauzmer Weil

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Clockwise from top left: Isaac Coles, Carole Coles Henry, Edward Coles, Walter Coles
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Julius Lutz/The Washington Post, Washington Post, Washington Post

CHATHAM, Va. — The land came first, 5,557 acres of forest purchased two years after the Revolutionary War by a Virginia slaveholder and future congressman. The mansion came next — a symbol of fortune and power built by enslaved workers, who spent seven years assembling the stately home brick by brick until it was finally finished in 1825.

“It’s been occupied by a Walter Coles and his wife ever since then,” says the latest Walter Coles — the fifth of that name — as he sits in the same parlor his father, grandfather, great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather all sat in before him, recounting the history of Coles Hill as his predecessors look down from portraits on all four walls.

Coles, 84, is one of countless Americans who still benefit from the wealth accumulated by America’s 18th- and 19th-century slaveholders. And his great-great-grandfather, Walter Coles I, and great-great-great-grandfather, Isaac Coles, helped shape the country’s brutal and lucrative system of slavery: They were among the more than 1,800 slaveholders who served in Congress, writing and passing the laws that allowed them to amass their own fortunes on the backs of others.

More than two centuries later, the descendants of those enslaved at Coles Hill take deep pride in what they’ve achieved in the face of subjugation, segregation and relentless racism. One of them, Carole Coles Henry, a 67-year-old retired administrator for the city of Phoenix, has spent years thinking about the stark differences between the White family with the name Coles and her own Black family with the same name.



Walter Coles, 84 — the fifth of that name — sits in the same parlor where his father, grandfather, great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather all sat at Coles Hill in Chatham, Va. His wife, Alice, and dog, Leody, are with him. (Justin Ide for The Washington Post)

“It took 225 years for us to get to the point where we’ve got college graduates who now are owning our own homes, who are successfully giving back to society — I’m talking about being able to amass any kind of equitable resources to begin to move into society in a way where we can have a piece of the pie too,” Henry said. “It’s just now, my generation, where all of us are owning homes and being able to send our kids to college and being able to look back on this history and say: What in the world happened here?”

The story of those disparities isn’t over. Buried beneath the ground of Coles Hill lies one of North America’s largest untapped uranium deposits — worth billions of dollars if it could ever be mined.

The uranium at Coles Hill, which holds the potential to fuel nuclear power plants and rewrite the next chapter of the plantation’s history, remains untouched for now, blocked by Virginia’s state legislature from being extracted because of possible hazards, in a fight that went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

But this most modern of minerals ties back to the story of how America’s early lawmakers created a system of entrenched racial and economic hierarchies as durable as the red brick mansion where a Walter Coles has always lived.



Circle Coles Henry holds a photo of her grandmother Nedie Coles and grandfather Jesse Coles. Henry's great-grandfather David Coles worked at Coles Hill and also served tobacco on a family plot adjacent to the plantation. (Justin Ide for The Washington Post)

Enslavers defending slavery

The Coles family was one of Virginia's wealthiest, dating back to pre-revolutionary years when John Coles immigrated from Ireland and bought up more land than almost any other man in the Virginia colony. When he died in 1747, he left his family, including his son Isaac, property in several parts of the colony and about 48 enslaved people whose unpaid labor would turn those lands into profitable enterprises.

Isaac was a patriot who fought in the Revolution, befriended Thomas Jefferson and was so close with George Washington that the first president wrote in his diary of inviting Coles to a day-after Christmas dinner in 1789.

Isaac bought the land in southern Virginia, 30 miles north of the North Carolina border, that came to be called Coles Hill.

When Walter Coles welcomes guests through the front door today, the first framed keepsake on the wall is the document that started it all: a hand-drawn map from 1785, surveying the 5,557 acres purchased by Isaac Coles that year.

When the very first Congress met in 1789, Isaac was a member, joining a body in which 3 out of 5 of his fellow lawmakers were slaveholders like him. In his three terms in the House of Representatives, Isaac sometimes voted on bills that affected his personal wealth, especially when it came to slavery. In 1795, for instance, a bill was proposed that would have required foreign-born slaveholders — like Isaac's own father had been — to give up their claim to enslaved people in order to become U.S. citizens. Isaac voted against it, and it failed.



Isaac Coles, the grandfather of the Coles family who originally bought the property at Coles Hill in 1785, served three terms in the U.S. House of Representatives. Photo: Mark Pendergast

Isaac bequeathed about 74 enslaved people to his family at the time of his death in 1813. His son Walter — who inherited about 1,000 acres of the original estate and oversaw construction of the mansion at Coles Hill — served a decade in the House and voted on the issue of slavery far more often than his father. He voted in favor of an 1837 resolution declaring that enslaved people did not enjoy the right to petition enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, and another resolution that claimed abolishing slavery would be unconstitutional. In 1838, he voted in favor of an unsuccessful bill to make aiding a fugitive from slavery a federal crime. A consistent advocate of the highly contentious “gag rule” that stifled debate on slavery, Walter Coles voted in 1840 to prevent the House from even considering any bill that would abolish slavery or the slave trade in any state.

Meanwhile, more than 200 miles south of Washington at his stately new home at Coles Hill, the people Walter personally enslaved were making him a wealthy man.



Walter Coles V and Alice Coles, 4th generation grandsons of the property of Wiley P. Ruffin, standing in the cemetery.
Photo credit: David Ruffin/Smithsonian.com

‘Which side I’d be on’

Walter Coles V knows that his life has been shaped, in part, by his slaveholding ancestors. A story like his — a man living on the same property his family has occupied for six generations — is rare. But the long echo of family money that was generated by enslaved people is not rare. Research has shown that slaveholders dominated the economic hierarchy in the South into the late 19th and 20th centuries, remaining wealthier than their neighbors long after the people they enslaved were emancipated, because of the economic and social advantages they built up during the time of slavery.

The other side of that equation is that African Americans to this day lack the intergenerational wealth of White Americans. The typical Black household’s wealth is less than a tenth that of the typical White household.

The estate Walter Coles inherited — the mansion and most of the 1,000-acre property owned by a Walter Coles for five generations — has been assessed at \$1.9 million, though he believes it to be worth more. He has given a lot of thought to the systematic exploitation that made Coles Hill possible and the conflicted views on slavery held by Jefferson and James Madison, whose signatures hang on his walls and are among his most prized possessions. He imagines a world where they had acted on what they sometimes acknowledged in their writing: that slavery was immoral and ought to be gradually abolished. He wishes early lawmakers, including Isaac Coles, had gone ahead with such a plan, wiping out American slavery in the country’s founding generation.

His wife, Alice Coles, thinks “of course” the United States would be better off today if slavery had ended in the early days of independence. Black Americans “could have gone out and bought their own land,” she said, and built wealth just as White Americans did. But the couple sees no need for reparations in the present day.

After emancipation, those who had been enslaved at Coles Hill found a way to prosper, buying land nearby and launching businesses, Walter argues. “Those slaves went up here and started a blacksmith shop, and started a farm, and were growing tobacco,” Walter said. “People given a chance can be successful. ... They emerged from the Confederacy struggling to be entrepreneurs. They came out of it pretty well.”

He acknowledges that his ancestors enslaved Black people to enrich themselves. And he is frank about what he probably would have done in their shoes.

“I know which side I’d be on” if he’d lived back then, he said. “I’d probably be for slavery.” Looking out at the rolling green fields of Coles Hill, he can imagine reckoning with the issue just as Isaac and Walter I must have done. “I’d probably be thinking about how you can fix it, because they all were. They were all troubled by it. ... They were troubled about it, yet they had so much tied into it.”

He paused. “That’s true of our family,” he said. “We had Edward Coles.”

Renouncing slavery

Edward Coles stood to inherit the same status and privilege as Walter I, his first cousin. But while Walter I spent his decade in Congress defending slavery, Edward became firmly convinced of its repugnance.

He kept his views hidden from his family. He wanted to make sure he would inherit enslaved people upon the death of his father, who was Isaac’s brother.

As soon as his father died in 1808, Edward told his family and friends that he intended to give the 12 human beings he now owned their freedom. Most people he knew angrily objected. His family made him promise not to tell the enslaved people about his plan to free them while they were still in Virginia — they worried that other people enslaved by the Coles family would demand their freedom too. Jefferson wrote Edward a letter on Aug. 25, 1814, trying to talk him out of it.

“[M]y opinion has ever been that, until more can be done for them, we should endeavor, with those whom fortune has thrown on our hands, to feed & clothe them well, protect them from ill usage, require such reasonable labor only as is performed voluntarily by freemen, and be led by no repugnancies to abdicate them, and our duties to them,” Jefferson wrote to Coles.

Jefferson had at times called slavery a “moral depravity” and a “hideous blot.” But he enslaved the mixed-race children he fathered with Sally Hemings, along with 600 others over the course of his life. Of Black people, the former president wrote in his letter to Coles: “They are pests in society by their idleness, and the depredations to which this leads them. Their amalgamation with the other colour produces a degradation to which no lover of his country, no lover of excellence in the human character can innocently consent.”

Edward stuck to his plan, and eventually took 17 enslaved people to Illinois in 1817 to emancipate them. When he told them, after crossing into Pennsylvania, that he intended to grant them their freedom and buy them land of their own, “They stared at me and at each other, as if doubting the accuracy or reality of what they heard,” Edward wrote.

Edward recalled “electrical” reactions — tears mixed with “hysterical, giggling laughter.” He stayed in Illinois, where he supported the people he’d freed, became the state’s governor and devoted much of his career to condemning slavery. His abolitionism provoked fierce backlash in Illinois, scuttling his run for U.S. Senate, and he resettled in Philadelphia.

Edward’s own son, born in Philadelphia, did not share his convictions. Roberts Coles moved to Virginia shortly before the Civil War, bought a plantation and became an enslaver.

When Edward learned his son planned to join the Confederate Army, he confided to a relative, “There is little or no prospect of my ever being again happy.” Roberts Coles died in battle, fighting for a cause his father abhorred.

Roberts’s cousin Walter Coles II was also a Confederate leader. He came home after the war to a world at Coles Hill that was different in some respects, but still familiar to him. Many of the Black families who had been enslaved at Coles Hill stayed on as sharecroppers, as they did at plantations across the South. Over the course of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, his sons Walter Coles III and Russell Coles — a friend of Theodore Roosevelt — modernized the plantation’s cultivation of tobacco. The cash crop funded a luxurious lifestyle at Coles Hill for the

next century. Black sharecroppers not only worked the fields but waited on the Coles family much as they had before emancipation.



Carole Coles Henry, 67, in the backyard of her home in Phoenix. (Joshua Lott/The Washington Post)

Carole Coles Henry recorded a video interview in the 1970s in which her grandfather Jesse Coles recalled the demeaning work he was expected to do decades after slavery.

“He was the houseboy. My aunt told me he slept at the foot of the bed of old man Coles and was there to wait on him hand and foot,” Henry said. “My grandfather was born in 1900. What was he doing sleeping at the foot of old man Coles?”

In 1911, Walter Coles II, white-bearded and stern, was photographed looking out on the family’s lands with his son Walter III standing behind him and his grandson Walter IV an infant in his lap, with expectations that the baby would grow up to master the same domain.

That was the world Walter V was born into in 1938: Sunday fried chicken suppers made by a live-in cook. Horseback riding, quail hunting, private school and rides on his father’s plane in the 1950s. He ate every meal at a dining room table crafted in the 1830s.



Carole Coles Henry holds a photo of her great-grandfather Clem Coles, who worked at Coles Hill in the period after emancipation. (Joshua Lott/The Washington Post)

As cigarette smoking became less popular, the tobacco that Coles Hill relied on became less lucrative. But the Coles family already knew of a far more valuable source of wealth on their land. In the 1970s, a Canadian mining company searching for signs of radioactivity from a helicopter homed in on Coles Hill as a possible site of uranium deposits. Further testing eventually revealed a remarkable lode, one of the largest and most concentrated deposits of the nuclear fuel material ever found in North America.

Walter V spent his career away from Coles Hill, including 30 years in the U.S. Foreign Service. Only after retirement, in 2006, did he return to live at his childhood home. By that time, he and his son, the sixth Walter, had started looking into how to sell the uranium under their feet. In the mid 2000s, the deposit was valued at more than \$7 billion — if anyone could mine it.

Walter and his son formed a company, recruited investors, and spent hundreds of thousands of dollars hiring four top firms to lobby Virginia legislators to lift their decades-old ban on potentially toxic uranium mining. They even flew state representatives to France to show them that the mining could be done safely and could fuel highly efficient, climate-friendly nuclear power.

Three years ago, the family lost its bid to overturn the state mining ban at the Supreme Court.

Still, Walter believes Virginia lawmakers will relent someday — in a world wracked by climate change, nuclear energy is the best solution he sees.

“It’s the cheapest, safest energy that you can have,” he said, and Alice cut in, “In Europe they’re so concerned about the coming winter.” Walter nodded. “I think it will work itself out,” he said.

There have been some encouraging signs. In October, Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin (R) called for a push on nuclear energy.

In November, a Toronto-based mining company struck a deal to take over shares of the Coles uranium venture, in a deal that would be valued at \$32 million. The company said Youngkin’s support for nuclear energy fueled confidence that its investment will eventually be rewarded.

In the meantime, Walter and Alice live a life at Coles Hill that resembles in many ways that of generations before them. Walter raises 180 head of cattle to keep the land productive, now that the tobacco is gone. Alice compiles thick binders of carefully organized notes on the family’s history, documenting its legacy for groups such as the Colonial Dames of America chapter she runs in southern Virginia.

The couple can easily spend hours in the parlor telling visitors about their predecessors. The room has barely changed, down to the 200-year-old remedies still in the medicine cabinet. Only when Walter’s iPhone rings does the 21st century seem to intrude.

Sometimes those visitors are historical treasure-hunters; he’s turned down offers for the signatures of Madison and Jefferson that hang on the walls. Sometimes, the seekers come in search of more personal history.

“Many, many Blacks have been here to come see us,” Alice said. “They say, ‘My grandfather or grandmother grew up here.’”

During his battle to mine the uranium, Walter has been asked by journalists and others whether some of the revenue should be shared with Black families whose ancestors worked at Coles Hill. He made plans for 3 percent of uranium profits to go to a fund supporting Pittsylvania County education and other causes such as science research, rather than the descendants of those enslaved here.

“Maybe that was not the best way,” he said. But he wasn’t sure a more personal approach was practical. Taking Gilly Coles, a cook at Coles Hill in the late 19th century, as an example, he asked: “How would you do that? [Gilly’s] family, she must have 20 descendants. How would you decide what you would give each one, and how much?”

When a Post reporter pointed out that a larger number of descendants of the first Walter Coles have materially benefited from the enslaved laborers, he responded, “Well, they paid for those slaves, back then.”

Walter hasn’t sought suggestions from the descendants of the Black people who worked the land. But Carole Coles Henry said she doesn’t expect reparations, at least not in a financial sense.

“When their agricultural pursuits are one of the ways that they built their wealth, and our family — we were there as a part of that activity — do they have a moral and ethical responsibility? They must answer that, and they’ll be held accountable for that eventually. Our family, we’re not looking for anything. If you ask about reparations, what we’re looking for is information,” Henry said. “I want to know about my family legacy. And do we have ancestors [buried] on that property? And if they’re there, who’s there? And do we have access to their place of burial to see it, to reflect on it, to pay homage to it?”

Some in her family believe they may be related to the White Coles family, though they have not looked for DNA evidence. The Black Coles family are multigenerational landowners in the area, too. Gilly, the cook, saved up to buy 12 acres of land adjacent to the plantation, where her son, Clem, farmed tobacco alongside his work at Coles Hill. Clem’s son was Henry’s grandfather, Jesse Coles. He and his children and grandchildren held onto the small farm, which now sits unused beside Walter’s property. Henry said it was assessed at \$36,800 earlier this year.

Jesse left Virginia in the Great Migration of the mid-20th century and found work in the steel factories of Pittsburgh. To Henry’s knowledge, she is the only one of his descendants who has ever been back inside the red brick mansion.

About a decade ago, she was in the area for a family reunion when she drove past to see Coles Hill. Walter Coles spotted her. When she said she was a descendant of Clem, whom he’d known as child, he invited her inside.

“When I walked in the parlor, I almost lost my breath when I saw how it’s frozen in time,” Henry said. “I cried the whole time I was there, because I felt it: the connection. The deep connection.”

This place belonged to her family, too.

About this story: Editing by Lynda Robinson, photo editing by Mark Gail and Mark Miller, copy editing by Vanessa Larson, design by Michael Domine.