

Slavery's descendants gather in Va. for 'brotherhood and healing'

By Calvin R. Trice
RICHMOND TIMES-DISPATCH

HARRISONBURG, Va. — Joe Hairston spent his weekend mingling with descendants of the family that enslaved his ancestors. He came away feeling more hopeful about race relations.

"The fact that the white descendants of white slave masters accept us, and they recognize that we have a common ancestry - that's an opening," said Hairston, a retired Army officer who lives in Washington. One of his maternal ancestors was a slave of Hairston planters in North Carolina.

From Thursday through Saturday, 20 descendants of slaves, slave owners and slave traders gathered at Eastern Mennonite University for "Coming to the Table," a conference that featured storytelling, interviews, presentations and reflections on the institution whose legacy continues to shadow race relations.

Hairston, 83, said sitting down as equals with the families who generations ago held his in bondage shows how far the nation has come. He recalled that when he first

joined the Army, he couldn't be promoted from second lieutenant because a higher rank would have elevated him above whites. Blacks have since have occupied some of the highest positions of the military and the government, he noted.

"While some people look back and see how bad it was, and forget how good it's getting to be, I want to forget the past and focus on the future," Hairston said. "And the future is, we are becoming one people."

Several plantations in the South now attract descendants of slaves and their masters in reunion. Organizers of last weekend's conference want to inspire more gatherings of several families.

"I see it as a movement that's going on and that we're trying to provide leadership and encouragement for," said William Hairston of Harrisonburg, whose ancestors were a prominent slave-owning clan. He has both white and black relatives, including Joe Hairston.

His family's black and white tree branches and their origins are detailed in Henry Wienczek's 2000 book, "The

Hairstons: An American Family in Black and White."

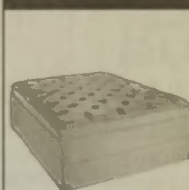
Members of the two sides of Hairstons have been in regular contact since the 1970s. For a decade, William Hairston considered the idea of bringing together both sides of descendants from several plantations.

The idea received a boost from an unlikely place: Monticello, scene of bitter

relations between some white descendants of Thomas Jefferson and those of his slave Sally Hemings.

DNA linked at least one of Hemings' children to the Jefferson clan, and some historians have concluded that the Founding Father likely fathered at least one and possibly all six of Hemings' children listed in Monticello records.

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