

Ways and Means S6E1- Not So Long Ago

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:00:00] Wealth. Wealth is a word that has a very technical definition. Assets minus how much debt one owes, but that's not what we think of when we think of wealth. That's because in our society, wealth translates to power. And when you have access to a lot of wealth, it's like having a superpower. When you look at wealth in America and who has that access, imagine this. Imagine you're looking at a deep canyon from above. On one side of the canyon, there are white people with financial resources in abundance, unbothered by debt, security net firmly in place. Across that enormous gap are Black people, my people, ever curious about how to cross a seemingly impossible distance, how to get from here, to equality. From the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, this is Ways & Means. I'm Lindsay Foster Thomas.

I want to share a statistic with you. Even if you've heard this one before, it never fails to shock. In the city of Boston, white households have a median net worth of about \$247,000 dollars. The median net worth of a Black household in Boston? A mere \$8. Eight, and while the wealth gap or gulf between Black people and white ones in Boston is great, this kind of inequality is a national issue. Eight dollars. How could that be? This season of the podcast is devoted to answering that question and to illustrate what could have been done and what can still be done to start to close the gap between white and Black Americans. It's a special series called "The Arc of Justice: From Here to Equality", inspired by the research of the economist who first identified the huge divide in Boston, William Darity Jr.

Sandy Darity [00:02:34] Known better as Sandy Darity.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:02:36] Sandy is a faculty member at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, and he's an expert on the racial wealth gap. Sandy has written about that topic for years, but recently he collaborated with folklorist and arts consultant Kirsten Mullin. They're married, just so you know, and they co-wrote a book called *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the 21st Century*.

Female voice: [00:03:05] You've arrived.

Sandy Darity [00:03:06] Yep, we did. The rain held up, even though it's a gray day.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:03:11] Their story, our story begins where the story of many Black American families started. On a plantation. Sandy and Kirsten are about an hour outside of Raleigh, North Carolina, at a place called Rose Hill Estates. It's a cold winter afternoon and face masks are helping to keep them warm ... a little.

Sandy Darity [00:03:33] My own family has a history that's associated with this plantation because our ancestors were enslaved here. So, we don't have the same sense of romance about the location that many other people have who come to visit. But we also have a sense that it's important to know that this is where our family was located during the period of slavery in the United States.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:04:02] If you take a moment and try to imagine a southern plantation, you might conjure up something a lot like Rose Hill in your mind. A grand antebellum home set far back from the road. Kirsten is taking it in - the place where her husband's ancestors were enslaved.

Kirsten Mullin [00:04:22] And I was just thinking, gosh, how far, how deep, you know, across the property would one have to go in order to escape? That was my whole my whole mindset. We were remembering driving in today, the first time that we came here and just how emotional it was. And in my own family, on my father's side had been enslaved in Alabama and my mother mother's side in Virginia. But I've not been to those places and we came here with our children.

Sandy Darity [00:05:00] Yeah.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:05:01] That first visit was a family reunion for descendants of those who lived and labored here in the late 1980s.

Kirsten Mullin [00:05:09] You know, I can remember just kind of standing around and thinking how bizarre it was to be, you know, swimming in the pool, you know, where family members had been enslaved. It was just an out of body experience. But I do remember saying to our son and to other family members, you know, put your feet up on the furniture, jump on the beds. You know, your ancestors built this place and, you know, explore every inch of it because this is yours.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:05:57] Today on The Arc of Justice: slavery, the very foundation for the extreme racial wealth gap that exists in the U.S. today. We'll explore how that history is clouded by lies about slavery's role in this nation's founding and how those lies led to something called "dismemory", dismemory that's helped blind us to solving our stark economic divide. Slavery.

(Ringing Phone)

Vivian Hortense King McClinton [00:06:28] Hello?

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:06:28] It was just so long ago, right?

Vivian Hortense King McClinton [00:06:31] Well, my name is Vivian Hortense King McClinton. I'll be 102 tomorrow.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:06:39] Hortense McClinton's father, FATHER, was born into bondage in Texas. She's just a single generation away from slavery and yeah, this is a recent interview.

Vivian Hortense King McClinton [00:06:53] My grandparents were brought as slaves, my grandfather from Screven County, Georgia. And my grandmother, the story goes is she was told when she got there that they pointed to my grandfather and said, that's going to be your husband. She had two children that had been born and we never saw them, and neither did she after they were sold from her.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:07:22] Kirsten and Sandy have gotten to know Hortense pretty well over a number of years. They talk about her in a truly loving way, and they say she has unearthed an amazing amount of her family history, but because of the nature of slavery and the way families were broken apart, there's still huge knowledge gaps.

Vivian Hortense King McClinton [00:07:42] You know, people used to not talk about slavery to their kids, I guess, because it was so horrendous they didn't want them to know about it, you know?

Walter Herbert Morris [00:07:54] My name is Walter Herbert Morris, my age is 99. Date of birth, 7/12/21, place of birth Plateau, Alabama.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:08:10] Walter Morris says slavery wasn't discussed in his family either. Grandparents on both sides were enslaved. And one time he asked his dad why. Why couldn't they talk about slavery times? Walter has never forgotten his father's response.

Walter Herbert Morris [00:08:28] Son, there were so many things of heartbreak. And things of anguish. And our lives and then the lives of your people that we simply locked up and they were too hard to talk about. I've never forgotten that.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:08:52] Some of that heartbreak almost certainly had to do with the fact that violence was used as a tactic for securing and sustaining a labor force. Children were stolen, women were raped, flesh was ripped open as a consequence of defiance, fatigue or just existing while Black. Sure, most everyone knows something about this history of violence, but there's been a concerted effort to whitewash the memory of slavery. Take the plantation household. There are books and movies that portray white women and Black women as forming a kind of sisterhood on the plantation. Some top researchers who study first person slave narratives like Duke University's Thavolia Glymph and Stephanie Jones-Rogers of Berkeley say they found nothing in the archives to support that notion. But here's something troubling. There's been a concerted effort to whitewash the memory of slavery. It's something Kirsten Mullen calls dismemory. She actually coined the term.

Kirsten Mullen [00:10:01] This is, in effect, the systematic organized effort that individuals, and especially some groups, went about to alter, you know, future generations understanding of not just slavery, but, you know, why the civil war was fought and especially reconstruction.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:10:22] Here's one example of dismemory: Charleston, South Carolina. The city holds a central role when it comes to the history of human bondage in the U.S. Roughly half of all enslaved people entering the 13 colonies passed through the Port of Charleston. By the middle of the 19th century, most white Charleston residents were slave owners.

Franklin Williams [00:10:46] My name is Franklin Williams, I live in Charleston, South Carolina, and I'm a Charleston city African American tour guide.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:10:55] Charleston is a tourist destination. I've never been. But everyone I know who has says it's gorgeous. You can feel like you've traveled back in time walking down some streets. Franklin knows those streets well. Before he gave tours himself, he was a bus driver in Charleston, escorting mostly white tour guides on trips for mostly white tour groups.

Franklin Williams [00:11:19] And I would hear things like slaves were happy. And you go on like, "Really," to yourself, you know, "are you kidding me?" And the people sitting there listening to the tour guide so intently as if they are hearing facts.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:11:40] Soon, Franklin quit his job and launched his own tour company, focused on the African American experience in Charleston and some of the realities left out of historical narratives he'd been exposed to. One of the books in Franklin Williams' personal library about Charleston history is written by Ethan Kytle and Blain Roberts. They're historians who moved to Charleston in the early 2000s, and they're white. When they first came to town house hunting, they visited a beautiful antebellum home in hopes of renting a basement apartment.

Blain Roberts [00:12:13] And at one point I said, "Well, you know, how would this space have been used by the original owners?" And she said, "Well, this space would have been the workspace of the servants." And I kind of just instinctively said, "Oh, you mean the workspace of the slaves?" And she said, "No, the servants. There's no evidence in the historical record that they weren't paid." And so that was a very interesting way to really frame her understanding of the role of slavery in this particular antebellum household.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:13:04] Perhaps because of their background in the subject, they kept noticing this kind of misinformation surfacing, like when they went on a carriage tour. The tour guide said in the 18th century, about 85% of Charleston's population was English and 15% was French Huguenot. I'm not known for my math skills, but I do know Black people weren't zero percent of the population.

Blain Roberts [00:13:33] And that's an amazing thing to say. To completely leave out the fact that slave labor was so important to the early city was really breathtaking. I mean, those two numbers just erased their presence from the city altogether.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:13:49] And so Blaine and Ethan decided to see if they could trace the history of whitewashing. When did it begin and how? For example, they looked into the history of a building in town called the Old Slave Mart. Here's Ethan.

Ethan Kytle [00:14:04] During slavery times, the Old Slave Mart, initially, it was a - it's a large complex, a series of buildings, some of which were open air, some of which were enclosed. It was a place where men, women and children were bought and sold every day.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:14:20] Here's what they found. Even though slavery ended in 1865, just a few decades later, many white Charlestonians had begun saying that people had never been bought and sold there. At a place called The Old Slave Mart. And they weren't just saying so among themselves, the inaccuracy even made it into local tourist guidebooks.

Blain Roberts [00:14:45] One of the earliest ones from 1911, which was published by a Confederate veteran, talked about the Slave Mart, but listed it as the so called "mythical slave mart." And this was a very common way to talk about this site early on, because most white Charlestonians did not want to acknowledge that there had been a slave, a market for slaves, an actual physical location where slaves had been sold. Of course, there were multiple, but this was one that still existed in the early 20th century. And so, this was really the kind of common way to talk about it slash not talk about it, to not acknowledge what it was.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:15:30] Guidebooks, history books, textbooks are peppered with misinformation just like this. Misinformation that amounts to the public record. So this kind of whitewashing from small details to large has framed how we think about slavery in this country and about how difficult life was during slave times and afterward and because many Americans accept this doctored view of reality, it affects how we perceive the damage done to

African-Americans by slavery and how that damage lasted for generations. Kirsten, you know, dismemory, of course, wasn't just happening in Charleston, South Carolina. Right. How widespread was it?

Kirsten Mullen [00:16:17] It was indeed widespread. When you think about textbook committees, you know, these school districts, especially when you think about states like Texas and California were incredibly influential. And so, you know, one textbook might be used across an entire state or region. That was very common and still is. Actually, the textbook business is very political. And, you know, once one one's book is in the pipeline, it's really difficult to dislodge it.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:16:47] Sandy Darity points out that dismemory and misinformation have allowed for hero worship of people who upheld and fought for the institution of slavery because --- it wasn't so bad, right? White slaveholders and enslaved people could be buddies, maybe even some Black folks were paid for their hard work. Wait, were there even Black people ever here?? As much as that history has been altered and omitted, other historical elements have been adopted and amplified. There are plaques and monuments and high schools and military bases named after Confederate generals.

Sandy Darity [00:17:27] What the United States has never done is something that Kirsten that I refer to as deconfederatize. A process of deconfederatization was essential in the aftermath of the Civil War, but it never happened. And so, as a consequence, we have a situation in which the losers actually wrote the story of what happened to cause the war, how the war proceeded and the aftermath of the war itself. It's really unusual for the losers to tell the tale, but that's exactly what has happened in the United States.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:18:09] Disemory is not just about how we remember slavery, it helps us paper over what was going on economically, too, and not just in the South. Slavery also helped build the wealth of the north. It powered the textile mills that dominated the northern economy. Profits from slavery fueled the growth of New York City and many of New England's founding families. The Cabots and the Fanueil's owed their wealth to slavery and slavery helped launch some of today's wealthiest brands. Let's take one we all know, Brooks Brothers.

Voices: One of the bedrocks of this country... We're a New York institution... We're an American company.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:18:50] Brooks Brothers is the country's oldest clothing retailer. They dressed President Lincoln and JFK, 40 U.S. presidents in all, plus the Vanderbilts and the Astors.

Old-fashioned newsreel: [00:19:02] Now ladies, this is for you, John Jacob Astor marriages Virginia Middleton French, a cousin of the Vanderbilts. Today the heir to millions...

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:19:10] But here's a part of company history that you don't always hear. In the early days, Brooks Brothers also made plantation clothing. Fine suits for slave owners and slave traders and livery uniforms for enslaved domestic workers. Corse calico for slaves. Here are some other big names in American business that you might recognize. Tiffany's, the iconic New York City jeweler. The company's founder got his money from the slave trade. Aetna, New York Life. Those companies ensured slave ships on the Middle Passage, and they also insured individual people who were enslaved. So, Sandy, from an economic perspective, where does slavery fit in terms of building the wealth of America?

Sandy Darity [00:20:03] Slavery is decisive in building the wealth of America. It's central to the way in which the entire economy was organized, and it becomes the fount from which all other wealth tends to flow in the country. When we arrive at the point of the civil war in 1860, the total value of enslaved people in the United States, the total value to their owners was estimated to be about \$4 billion dollars. And that was the largest amount of asset wealth associated with any particular form of property in the United States at that time.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:20:53] After slavery ended, owners and businesses that profited from slave labor, northern and southern, well, they just kept profiting. The money they made was left to their kids and their grandkids. And those profits from slavery flowed down to descendants, creating something called generational wealth. The first ship carrying enslaved Africans arrived in the colonies in 1619. The institution of slavery lasted for more than two centuries after that. Generation after generation after generation of white families grew their wealth during this period.

Caprinia Wallace [00:21:33] I definitely think that the way we are today was is definitely because of what happened two hundred years ago or one hundred years ago to our families and generational wealth is definitely a thing.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:21:48] Caprinxia Wallace is a college student. Her family doesn't have a lot of money to help her while she's in school. And when she looks out her window at the streets of her Black neighborhood, she sees the result of families like hers being kept from opportunities to obtain, grow and pass down wealth. It looks nothing like a nearby neighborhood with mostly white residents.

Caprinxia Wallace [00:22:15] There's sidewalks, just these incredible houses, the difference is obvious.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:22:24] Caprinxia is descended from an enslaved man named Cudjo Lewis. He died in 1935 and perhaps his name is familiar to you. Writer Zora Neale Hurston interviewed Cudjo and his story was famously documented in the book [Barracoon](#). Cudjo was kidnapped and brought to the U.S. on a ship that arrived shortly before the start of the Civil War. He could be a whole podcast episode on his own. Caprinxia's mom, Cassandra, says that while their family is still struggling, white people are still benefiting financially generations later from wealth that slavery built.

Cassandra Wallace [00:23:01] They were built on the back of our ancestors and they have that white privilege from it. They still getting things off of it, it just like keep adding to it, adding to it, every year it would, and it would add to it, but it was us who made it for them and they just they sitting there and they just having land and go on and they could send their kids to big colleges and they can really invest in what they want to invest in while we starting over.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:23:37] Sandy Darity's research shows that Caprinxia and Cassandra are exactly right.

Sandy Darity [00:23:43] I think that the most important factor that dictates what your wealth level is, is what types of resources you've received from your parents and your grandparents, that that shapes the foundation for your capacity to be successful at accumulating - accumulating wealth of your own.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:24:02] Next time on the show, we'll look at one of the biggest assets for accumulating wealth in America: land. How the federal government made two promises to Americans but only made good on one, one that gave land, a lot of land, to mostly white people.

Kirsten Mullen [00:24:21] So many people who have wealth are connected to this myth that it exists because of their own making. It's quite possible that many of them don't themselves know that the origin of their family's wealth is a federal policy called the Homestead Act.

Sandy Darity [00:24:37] Federal policy lies at the heart of the racial wealth disparity that we observe today.

Lindsay Foster Thomas [00:24:51] The Arc of Justice: Moving From Here to Equality is a series from the Ways & Means podcast from the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. It's inspired by the book *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the 21st Century* by Duke Professor William "Sandy" Darity Jr. and folklorist and arts consultant Kirsten Mullin. This show is produced in partnership with North Carolina Public Radio WUNC. We have notes, an episode discussion guide and full credits for the series at our website [WaysandMeansShow-dot-org](#). This episode was produced by Carol Jackson, Alison Jones and Malu Frasson-Nori with Candace Manriquez Wrenn, Stacia Brown, Matt Majsak, Erin Blanding and Johnny Vince Evans. Original music for this episode was produced by youth in Durham, North Carolina, in collaboration with Black Space and Only Us, featuring the work of Lil' Monsta, Zone, and Pierce Freelon. Season 6 of Ways & Means is made possible through support from the Duke Office for Faculty Advancement thanks to funding from The Duke Endowment. Thank you for listening. I know we're just getting to know each other, but a quick favor? If you liked this episode and learned something from it, please share it with a loved one. Until next time, I'm Lindsay Foster Thomas.