



15 MINUTES, DURHAM COUNTY

15 Minutes: William A. Darity Jr., Duke University Professor of Public Policy on Reparations for Black Americans

Darity is the author of *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century*

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February is Black History Month, and the fight for reparations—the idea of repaying Black Americans for the losses they experienced during slavery, both financial and personal—is seeing a resurgence in the present day.

Over the past few years, cities and states across the nation, including Asheville and Durham, have taken steps to create reparations committees or task forces to study how best to repay their residents who are the descendants of enslaved Americans.

Two weeks ago, during a Raleigh city council meeting, local activist Octavia Rainey called on Raleigh leaders to create a “reparations task force on slavery and systematic discrimination.”

“When you look at this city council, it’s like you don’t care about the past,” Rainey said before the council members. “We need this reparations task force because the city hasn’t said ‘I’m sorry.’ It’s about time that you step up to the plate and you do that.”

Racial injustice, Rainey said, has lived in the United States for the last 160 years, with post-Civil War reconstruction, Jim Crow laws, and in Raleigh, with the creation of the all-white Raleigh Redevelopment Commission in 1953.

“Without accountability, there is no justice,” Rainey said.

For some activists, reparations are about recognizing the wrongs of the past and forcing those accountable to apologize. For others, it’s about redressing those wrongs. Asheville’s reparations effort—which its city council approved in 2020—has been lauded by some and criticized by others, with many condemning the city’s decision to take a pass on making direct cash payments in favor of allocating funding to promote homeownership and business opportunities.

As the conversation around local reparations continues, we talked to expert and Duke University professor William A. Darity Jr. Darity. He, along with writer Kirsten Mullen, co-authored *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century*.

An extended version of the conversation is below, edited for length and clarity.

Where does the concept of reparations come from?

The concept of restitution for black Americans dates to slavery times. There was an expectation that if and when slavery came to an end, there would be some form of redress that would be given to the formerly enslaved.

In January 1865, shortly before the war actually came to an end, General [William] Sherman ... met with a group of representatives of the Black community in the Savannah, Georgia, area. The Rev. Garrison Fraser ... told Stanton and Sherman that what freedmen needed was land and to be left alone.

Four days later, Sherman issued Special Field Orders No. 15, which is the directive that provided 5.3 million acres of land to be set aside for the freedmen, stretching from the sea islands of South Carolina to northern Florida at the border of the St. Johns River. That [was] the original directive for 40 acres [and a mule].

So what happened?

[The federal government] proceed to start this process, [but] once they settled 40,000 of the freedmen on 400,000 acres, President Andrew Johnson—Lincoln's successor after Lincoln was assassinated—terminated the program and restored the land to the former slaveholders.

When Lincoln ran the second time, he pushed out his former vice president Hannibal Hamlin and replaced him with Andrew Johnson, a Southern Democrat who stayed with the Union, for the purposes of having a unity ticket to try to win the 1864 election. And they were successful.

But after Lincoln was assassinated, essentially you put somebody who was actually quite sympathetic with the Confederate cause, and certainly was not a friend of Black people, in the presidency. That began the process of unraveling efforts to really implement the reparations plan.

There have been several major attempts at reparations since the Civil War. What is the most recent?

[In the early 1890s], a woman named Callie House led a movement to get pensions for the formerly enslaved. She [was] able to submit a petition to Congress that had 300,000 signatures on it, and [it was] ignored. The federal government [brought] mail fraud charges against her, and she [was] actually held in prison for, I think, two years or so. It [was] the same sort of

charges, essentially, they brought against Marcus Garvey ... [during] the second major effort at reparations.

In the 20th century, there were a number of overtures, but perhaps the most significant was Queen Mother Moore going to the United Nations. Of course, if the U.N. had embraced that claim, it still would not have had any capacity to enforce it.

The most recent effort to instrumentalize reparations at the federal level was the 1989 [bill] H.R. 40, which was introduced by the late Congressman John Conyers. [It] proposed a congressional commission ... to study the issue and to provide Congress with proposals. This legislation has been rewritten [**for the worse**] multiple times over the course of the past 30 years.

There are a couple of [Congressional] representatives who have [indicated] interest in writing a bill for reparations and circumventing the commission process altogether. They say we already have studied the problem and we have enough information. But it has not happened yet.

Why hasn't the U.S. been able to make progress on reparations?

Ever since [the Civil War], you've had significant political influence from the old-line Confederacy. That's reflected in the January 6, 2021 invasion of the Capitol, with all the Confederate regalia that was being flown.

But I also think that there's a deep reservoir of racism that extends beyond the spirit of the former Confederacy. [It] leads people to say, 'Well, Black Americans don't deserve this type of a handout.' Many people have [a perception] that the challenges and limitations Black people face are a consequence of their own behavior, rather than a host of [federal] policies.

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