



## Free at last!

What started out as a Black History Month presentation by Dr. Darrell Walden (pictured above) and Dr. Roice Luke is turning into "the equivalent for African-Americans [to] the records of Ellis Island" in the words of Virginia Gov. Tim Kaine.

The governor made that comparison in October when he announced the Virginia Freedmen Project, which will help the descendents of 4 million freed slaves trace their genealogies. Many of their ancestors were unable to reunite with their families following the Civil War. Now the Virginia Freedmen Project will help their families find them, thus removing one of the last vestiges of slavery.

The project started when Walden, associate professor of accounting and information systems, and Luke, professor of health administration at Virginia Commonwealth University, developed a presentation called "Whispers from the Dust" to educate descendents of slaves about the records.

"Our presentations started in February 2005 and have never stopped," Walden recalls. "We have presented it all over Virginia and have been invited as far away as Salt Lake City."

Walden and Luke have worked closely with the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and the Genealogical Society of Utah to ensure that Virginia will be the first state to digitize its Freedmen's Bureau records. The NARA has preserved the information since the Freedmen's Bureau closed in 1872, and for the past five years, it has been microfilming the records. Virginia alone has 203 rolls of film to be digitized, and each roll contains about 1,500 images.

By focusing exclusively on records generated by the Virginia Freedmen's Bureau, the Virginia Freedmen Project will serve as a pilot for subsequent projects throughout the South. Eventually, Howard University will place the digitized, indexed images on the Web for public access.

For more information about the Virginia Freedmen Project, visit [www.richmond.edu/~dwalden/vafreedmen](http://www.richmond.edu/~dwalden/vafreedmen).