

Land and Labor Acknowledgment
A Historical Review by the Abiyala Sovereign Nations Citizens' Collective,
Which Is a Collective of Indigenous Faculty at UNC
Voted On and Adopted by the Department of Anthropology
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) was chartered in 1789 as an institution designed to educate and further the careers of White men. It was founded with the intent of promoting the expansion of White supremacy and settler colonialism in North Carolina and in the rest of the newly created United States of America. Notably, despite the critical role that the illegitimate acquisition of land belonging to Abiyala's (the Americas') original inhabitants and the exploitation of enslaved African American labor played in the establishment of UNC, the benefits of a UNC education would not be enjoyed by a citizen of one of Abiyala's original sovereign nations until Henry Owl, a citizen of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, entered UNC in 1928, and by an African American until Kenneth Lee, Floyd McKissick Sr., Floyd Lassiter, and Harvey Beech entered UNC in 1951.

With this statement, we acknowledge that UNC was founded as an institution of White supremacy on the unceded lands of one or more of Abiyala's original sovereign nations, the name(s) of which have not yet been affirmed.¹ We also acknowledge that UNC has substantially funded its operations through wealth derived from land documented as stolen from the Chickasaw Nation, the Cherokee Nation, and several other sovereign nations in California and other western states.² UNC reaped significant profits—profits that are worth, with interest, an estimated \$7 billion in 2021—from stolen Chickasaw and Cherokee lands that together total more than 200,000 acres.² Third, we acknowledge that UNC relied upon enslaved and otherwise unfree African American labor to construct its buildings and facilities, and profits from the sale of enslaved human beings to fund University operations. We acknowledge that, without this labor and the wealth derived from this stolen land, UNC would not exist as we know it today. In fact, historians Lucas P. Kelly and Garrett W. Wright have concluded that, without the profits that UNC reaped from more than 200,000 acres of stolen Chickasaw and Cherokee lands alone, more than 100 years ago UNC would have closed its doors due to insolvency.²

We further acknowledge that UNC must proactively undertake actions to redress this illegitimately acquired land and labor that was crucial to the establishment and continued operation of this University. To this end, we call upon UNC to support three initiatives. First, UNC should fund, fully and without monetary restraint, independent research into the history of illegitimately acquired land and labor so that we have a more comprehensive knowledge of what happened, including answers to the question of which nations and individuals have legitimate claims based upon these illegitimate and unethical actions. Second, UNC should consult with these nations and individuals, identifying ways to redress, fully and without monetary restraint, these illegitimate and unethical actions. Third, we call upon UNC to undertake substantial actions to reconfigure itself as an anti-racist and anti-colonial institution, especially in light of its historical origins as an institution of White supremacy and settler colonialism.

¹ The question of which people or peoples owned the land on which UNC now sits requires additional research. While a comprehensive archaeological survey of UNC's campus has never been completed, leading archaeologists knowledgeable about the region have communicated to us that there is no accepted historical or archaeological evidence that any Indigenous peoples (such as the Shakori, Sissipahaw, or Eno) lived on this land during the three decades preceding the establishment of North Carolina as a Crown colony in 1729. The alleged absence at this time and in this area of Abiyala's original inhabitants raises important questions that are well worth exploring about colonization, violence, and disease, all of which likely worked to reduce or even eliminate the original inhabitants from this land during this period.

It is likely that the land was not simply uninhabited, but rather that settlers rendered it relatively (or perhaps wholly) uninhabited by Abiyala's original peoples. This land was not ownerless, and we have no evidence that the owners received compensation for their land. It is possible that the original owners of the lands where the University now sits fled to and joined the Catawba Nation. If so, their descendants and the Catawba Nation may have unresolved ownership claims to these lands.

² Historians Lucas P. Kelly and Garrett W. Wright have conducted research that has helped illuminate the economic dependence of UNC on stolen lands prior to the Civil War. Their research reveals that UNC's dependence on this wealth was substantial and in AY 1834-35 constituted 94 percent of the university's budget (See [Without profit from stolen Indigenous lands, UNC would have gone broke 100 years ago – Scalawag \[scalawagmagazine.org\]](#)). Following the Civil War, UNC leader Kemp Battle financed the reopening of the university from funds made available through the Morrill Act of 1862. Robert Lee and Tristan Ahtone (Kiowa Tribe), who have researched this act, found that UNC benefited from Morrill-Act lands that were illegitimately acquired from original sovereign nations of what is now California and a number of other states. UNC benefited from these funds until 1889, when the funds were transferred to the then newly established North Carolina State University. For more information see [Land-grab universities \(Land-Grab Universities\) — High Country News – Know the West \(hcn.org\)](#). The Chickasaw Nation, the Cherokee Nations (Cherokee Nation, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians), and these other sovereign nations appear to have significant unresolved claims that UNC needs to address.