

NAME

Wendell Mapson for Sonix.mp3

DATE

December 18, 2025

DURATION

1h 1m 44s

7 SPEAKERS

Wendell Mapson

Felix Poon

Speaker3

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START OF TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:00] Wendell Mapson

Yes. My name is Jay Wendell Mapson Jr, and for the last 37 years, I have been the pastor here at Monumental Baptist Church. Uh, 50th and Locust in West Philadelphia. Uh, which is one of the second oldest African American Baptist church in the Commonwealth. And in two years, we'll celebrate our 200th year of our founding.

[00:00:26] Felix Poon

Oh, wow. Yeah, that's quite impressive. Um. And do you prefer I call you Reverend Matsin Wendell?

[00:00:33] Wendell Mapson

That's whatever. That's fine. Reverend maps and Wendell, either one.

[00:00:37] Felix Poon

Okay. Yeah. Um, cool. So I want to know a little bit more about you before we dive into the topic I wanted to interview you about. So it looks like you came to Philly, I believe, in 1987, in order to pastor the historic Monumental Baptist Church. Is that right?

[00:00:54] Wendell Mapson

That's correct, that's correct. Yeah.

[00:00:57] Felix Poon

And so what feelings, what feelings did you have coming into this role and how it's turned out?

[00:01:03] Wendell Mapson

Well, I was I was already, uh, pastoring a, a church in Elizabeth, new Jersey, my home. I was raised in Newark, new Jersey. So once I went away to college, I came back to seminary in the Philadelphia area and was called to my first church in Elizabeth, new Jersey. I was there 18 years and, um, you know, had no reason to think about leaving. But the opportunity arose, uh, for me to come to Philadelphia and the church reached here, reached out to ask that I would come, uh, we have a process called a search committee, uh, brings in, uh, candidates and interviews them and then presents that candidate to the congregation. And in the process of meeting with the pulpit committee, uh, my heart was drawn to to coming here. And even though it was very painful to leave, uh, my first congregation, I felt it was an opportunity and a call of God for greater service in a city like Philadelphia. And so, as difficult a decision as it was, I did make the decision because I believed, uh, in our tradition, belief that God was calling me here. And so I had to go. And so, um, I came and and and it's it's been a wonderful journey for 37 years.

[00:02:34] Felix Poon

Yeah. And I'm just gonna. I forgot to hit the record button on the computer, which is just a backup. Uh, so I'm just gonna start that now. Um, and the screen does this dramatic countdown thing. Um, yeah. So I saw that you've published a few books, uh, about the black church, is there I I'm wondering, is there a leadership role black churches play in black communities as a whole that also includes people who are not Christian as well?

[00:03:08] Wendell Mapson

Yes. The black church has always been at the center of black church life, even among people, uh, African Americans who may not consider themselves religious or consider themselves, uh, connected to the church, but the the. The voice of the black minister has always been, um, kind of, uh, uh, the most influential voice in the community. And, and therefore, uh, the voice of the black church has, has, has been that voice that has advocated for, uh, blacks and minorities. Um, and that's, you know, that goes back to, uh, the, the, the enslavement of African-Americans. And so I would say that, of course, we're living in a time when the institutional church and traditional denominations are in decline, and we know that statistically, church membership is dropping. And but still, in spite of that, the black church is the strongest institution that we have. And the voice of the black, uh, preacher, the black minister is still the voice that people look to for spiritual guidance, but also, uh, guidance in terms of a prophetic voice addressing issues that are of concern to, to black people. Um.

[00:04:38] Felix Poon

And so on that topic, maybe we can segue to the the main thing I want to talk about here, the more in cranial collection. I'm curious, when did you first become aware that the Penn Museum had a collection of over a thousand crania that was used to advance racist science? Do you remember the moment you learned about that?

[00:04:59] Wendell Mapson

I, I remember the impact of of hearing it. And I, you know, like most people, I, I heard about it through the news media and, and, and became very interested in it because I think it's just a part of, um, a narrative of, um, the way that that African Americans have been treated in this country. Um, and, and so, yes. So every, uh, I'm still one of a few, I guess, who actually, I actually get the paper delivered and, uh, and so I've been keeping up with that from the beginning. And then I may have mentioned to you, um, I was asked to be a part of the committee, I think, for two reasons. As a, as a pastor of a black congregation in the community, but also because of, uh, uh, previous, um, uh, discovery, uh, of a burial ground that was connected with our church from the beginning. So from 1829, uh, uh, Burial ground was purchased by some members of our church and another, uh, black church in the area, a methodist church. And that built that, uh, burial ground was used to, to bury black people at a time when, um, blacks could not be buried in white cemeteries. And so blacks had to carve out their own, uh, places and spaces for burial.

[00:06:39] Wendell Mapson

Uh, and there was an organization called African to African Friends to Harmony. It was a mutual aid society, which was, uh, such societies were prevalent then. Um, and, and people would pay dues into this society so that when they died they would be given, quote, a Christian burial, uh, and, and, and be given some kind of value in death that they weren't given in life. And so once that burial ground was closed in the 1880s, uh, it was neglected. It became a parking lot. Pin boarded, uh, and then it was discovered that it was this, this, uh, burial ground pin came to us and said, you know, what should we do? And the two churches, uh, uh, came together and we decided that we would want the remains reinterred elsewhere. And we chose Eden Historic Eden Cemetery because it is, uh, Black cemetery, the oldest, uh, in the country and continuing operation. Uh, it has some very prominent African Americans buried there. So we had a ceremony. Pin took care of all the expense of reinterment. Uh, and we had a ceremony in Eden. Uh reinterring. Those remains. I think it's out of that. I was asked to participate in this group, um, that we're that we're referring to now.

[00:08:23] Felix Poon

Yeah. And, uh, so the 19 remains that were buried at Eden Cemetery earlier this year. Um, what was that ceremony like for you? Was there did you feel a sense of relief? Of justice? Uh, how did you feel?

[00:08:39] Wendell Mapson

I felt a sense, uh, the same feeling I had when when we interred the remains from our cemetery. Um, a sense of of. Of. People who lived at a certain time, um, who had lives, who had stories, who lived, um, in the midst of oppression. But they they carved out a life in a community with the church at its center. And they were concerned not only about life, but concerned about about death. Um, I felt a sense of knowing them without knowing them, of of of trying to imagine what life was like for them and the struggles that they had, but also a sense of, uh, our final resting place may not necessarily be our final resting place. So they were buried in a place where I'm sure they thought it was their final resting place. And it it wasn't. But to reenter the remains, uh, rather than building something on top of the remains, uh, to to respectfully remove the remains and reinterred them, um, with a with a monument in the cemetery as a place for people to, uh, to to relive history and to recognize, uh, persons who were not recognized in life. And so we actually were able to get the records of all of the, the burials, uh, names, sometimes just the first name, uh, many children, their ages, um, and, and and in the ceremony, uh, we called each of the names and rang a bell, uh, following the calling of each name, we had a young person read the names of the children, and it was a very moving, uh, moving moment.

[00:10:48] Wendell Mapson

I felt the same sense, uh, uh, the second time, um, even even though the the remains were not connected to our church necessarily. But they they were people who, uh, who were my people and people who lived and who died. And the issue for me was, how can we, um, how can we do two things? How can we hold pen accountable, um, for having the collection and recognizing that pen is just one among many, uh, museums and, and, and universities across the country dealing with the same issue, but at the same time, um, uh, how can we be respectful of the remains and, and and have a ceremony, um, inter inter, um, denominational, uh, ceremony, uh, interfaith rather ceremony that honors their lives and, and and gives them a respectful burial.

[00:12:01] Felix Poon

Yeah. Uh, before I continue, I'm wondering.

[00:12:06] Speaker3

Okay.

[00:12:07] Felix Poon

I was actually just going to bring up it sounds like there's some chair sounds going on. Is is your chair rickety, by the way?

[00:12:14] Wendell Mapson

No, it's not my chair. I was I was kicking the garbage can under the.

[00:12:19] Felix Poon

Oh okay. I see that's what glad glad we took care of that. Um, so yeah. Speaking of Penn, like, when it comes to the harm that Penn has done, did this latest, uh, interment, did that feel like enough? Did it atone for the wrongdoings?

[00:12:39] Wendell Mapson

No. Absolutely not. It didn't atone. In fact, I think it it helped to bring attention to it and, um, to, um, help us ask questions about how to how to go forward. How does healing take place? Um, and and again, again, for me, as a, as a, as a pastor who has been to cemeteries, uh, for over, well, 60 years that I've been in ministry, um, the the importance of. Of, I would say, recognizing again, recognizing the value of human life that for us came from God and goes back to God. Uh, so that even in the midst of of asking questions about, you know, how to hold Penn accountable, um, what are the next steps? Um, so so the burial is, is not the end of the story or the end of the issue, but it it is a part of the narrative of what needs to be done. Um, and I think some of the, the controversy that, uh, may have surrounded this is, is based on the fact that, um, the burial is, is not the end. And I think for some, some felt that, okay, they want to they want to brush this, they want to get rid of this issue as soon as possible. So let's have, uh, re-interment bury the remains and we bury the problem. Uh, certainly. That was not the thinking of the committee. I don't think it was Penn's thinking, but I think it was, uh, uh, just a part of the a very complex emotional issue that resonates because of the way, uh, the kind of the historic and systemic, um, uh, racial issues that that are prevalent in our, in our country.

[00:14:59] Wendell Mapson

So kind of a part of a larger narrative of, uh, of do we try to do we try to let them sweep it under the rug and, and, and we emotional for a while and then we forget about it. Or is there a continuing dialog, a continuing concern about, uh, what we should what the next step should be? And can this be a model for other institutions, uh, in who are going through the same thing? It boils down to, um, if black lives don't matter now, they certainly didn't matter then. Uh, and the the unethical, you know what what what is unethical for us today apparently was not seen as unethical then, particularly particularly when dealing with, with minorities and with, with black people. So, um, to use, use the remains, uh, to, to to reinforce the notion of, of white supremacy, uh, by looking at the, the, the brains of black people. Just it's also part of the, the narrative of, of a, a racial entitlement on the parts of whites that says that they are, uh, uh, superior. And then to say, well, because they are superior, let's prove let's prove that. And and so once you begin with the premise of superiority, then it's easy to to go, go forth and say, now I'm going to I'm going to prove this. And of course, times have changed. Um, uh, racial reckoning. Uh, um, so much has happened since since then. And I think, I think Penn recognizes the the damage that has been done and is seeking seeking to address that.

[00:16:54] Felix Poon

Yeah. So so I want to know more about the dynamics on the community advisory Group. Um, you talked about why you think they reached out to you. Um, but can I know who exactly did reach out to you? Was it Christopher Woods directly or someone else?

[00:17:13] Wendell Mapson

Ah, fuck. It was. It was Christopher Wood's. Yes. Who reached out and who else was.

[00:17:23] Felix Poon

Yeah. Who else was in the advisory group?

[00:17:27] Wendell Mapson

Oh. There were a couple of professors from Penn. There was, uh, um, Imam, uh. Let's see. There were a couple of other. Community based organizations. And it's just it's been a while. I just I don't recall. Um, sure I do. I do recall that it it appeared to me to be a group that represented the interests of the community. Um, I think what makes issues like that complex is who represents the community. Right. Um, you know, and, and it's easy to say, well, if you don't agree with with me, then you don't represent the community. Um, and so how do you how do you listen? There were there were there were many voices on the committee. There was spirited discussion, uh, uh, on the committee. Um, but there was also this consensus that we needed to come together to do something rather than just to, um, complain about a past wrong. Um, let's move forward and and not brush it under the rug. But but let's move forward and and, uh, and deal with it and and do something. Yeah. And so I think I think the controversy. Uh, arose over who who represents the community. And there's some, some in the community who, who have no, uh, particular respect for the black church. So you could have different voices in the black community, which is which is a good thing.

[00:19:22] Wendell Mapson

Uh, but but those voices are not always monolithic, and they're not always, uh, uh, voices that agree. Because historically, uh, blacks have taken different positions about how to deal with racism. You had a Martin Luther King, you had a Malcolm X, you had a Booker T Washington, you had a W.E.B. Du Bois, uh, all all wanting the same thing for their people, but coming at the problem different ways. And there were times when they were pitted against each other rather than, uh, seeing them as, uh, um, part of the same solution, uh, even though they had different, different, uh, uh, different ways of, of of, of going at some for some it was nonviolence. For some it was let's, let's bear arms and overthrow the government. So yeah, you still have that kind of militant militancy along with other voices, uh, that say, well, you know, is there, is there another way? And, um, yeah. So that's. So. So I never felt that the committee, the voices in the committee were, uh, were were there was an attempt to silence voices that didn't agree, uh, always felt that. And I wouldn't have been a part of of a group where I felt I was just rubber stamping, uh, a decision that already been made by the university. I wouldn't I wouldn't have been a part of that.

[00:21:01] Felix Poon

Yeah. So. So to that regard. Okay. Like, it sounds like there were different opinions. How like, can you bring me into the room of the meeting? Like, was there a leader, like how how did the conversation get organized? Or was it kind of a flat hierarchy where everyone was just kind of chiming in?

[00:21:19] Wendell Mapson

Yes, it was a meeting called by Doctor Woods, but, uh, it once, once the meeting opened, uh, his voice was not heard very much. It was the voices of the committee. There was, um, I think usually in a in a in a committee, in a dialog like that, they have voices that prevail because, um, those voices seem more reasonable in terms of what, what we can do. And I think through, through the, through the dialog, um, several persons felt like we should again do two things. We should hold pen accountable. Um, but then how long will that take? How how many years do we want to, uh, devote to doing the the hard work of of reconciliation and and pen whether it's apology, whether it's whatever that looks like. And at the same time, do we want to keep the remains out until all of that is solved? And it was just, uh, strong consensus that we needed to we needed to, uh, to get these remains in the ground. We need to have a service, um, a religious service that recognizes, again, their value in their lives. And, um, and, of course, if persons are not necessarily religious minded, then they would not have valued that kind of a service. But for those of us who who were and it just wasn't just, uh, the two religious leaders on the committee, but others as well felt.

[00:23:15] Wendell Mapson

And then it was and then there was a, um, uh, a person who objected to where we were going to enter the remains and felt that it should be in a cemetery. In Philly, in Philadelphia city limits. But we're talking about cemeteries that would not bury black people. So for me, um, Eden was the was the was the proper choice because of its history. Um, it Eden was founded as a place of reburial. Uh, there were two cemeteries, black cemeteries in Philadelphia. The city decided for the in the name of progress. They needed to, uh, get that land. And so what are we going to do with the remains? So Eden Cemetery was founded as a place of reinterment of the remains. One was Olive Cemetery. One was, uh, I can't think of the other one. And so in 19 1902 is, is is when those remains were moved to Eden and Eden was was formed. And so for most of us, uh, Eden, even though it was not within Philadelphia city limits, it's a part of the Philadelphia area. And and it would be the likely place to, to, to do this. And they had had history. Yeah.

[00:24:44] Felix Poon

Was that the biggest disagreement that came up? Simply a matter of where to bury?

[00:24:49] Wendell Mapson

I think that that came out of the disagreement over, uh, what Penn needed to do. So once you once you have that kind of disagreement, then.

[00:25:02] Felix Poon

Well, what was the initial disagreement over what Penn should do? What?

[00:25:06] Wendell Mapson

Well, well, well, well, that we needed to focus on holding Penn responsible and and what that looked like and, and not rebury until that happens. So.

[00:25:20] Felix Poon

Well, what were they saying that did look like to hold Penn accountable? What were they calling for?

[00:25:25] Wendell Mapson

Well, well, they were calling it they think that Penn ought to have been involved in, in the process at all. Um, that it should have been totally a community, uh, uh, decision about how to proceed, how to hold Penn responsible. Um, so that that was a very strong song. There was a lot of, again, um, uh, pain expressed about what Penn had done and, and then, um, why should then Penn be involved in the solution? Yeah. But at the same time, we want Penn to. To to to finance what, whatever we're going to do as well. And again, I understand that I, um, I sympathize with that position, but then it goes back again to who the who the the remains belong to and and and how do we define community. Mhm. Um, and and who has a right, even within the community to claim to claim the remains. And then the issue of um, can we identify descendants of uh, of, of these persons which. Even through modern science, could take years if ever, to do that. And so the decision then to have an above ground crypt so that it could be opened at any time, if there was a link to a descendant to one of the to the remains, and could be easily if, if, if the descendants wanted to claim the remains, they could still do that.

[00:27:20] Felix Poon

Yeah. So so let me just clarify that disagreement about whether Penn should be involved at all that originated within the Community Advisory Group.

[00:27:30] Wendell Mapson

Yes, yes. So I can't I can't say I can't say that it wasn't talked about by someone prior to that because I wouldn't know. But I know that the issue did come up in the air again, because there was there was some hostility again, toward Penn. And I think I think that hostility may be around other issues as well. Uh, in terms of Penn's footprint in West Philadelphia, in terms of its its outsized influence in the city and the sense in which, um, uh, gentrification. Um, the, the the movement of Penn further and further what that would be West, um, in communities, uh, all kind of played into, um, what should our communities look like, what's happening in our communities? Um, what's being done to the communities by by institutions of power who've always, always been able to do what they wanted to do. So. So if you put all that in the mix. Sure. Um, it's so it's not it wasn't just this issue of the reburial. It's kind of a whole bag of of grievance.

[00:28:54] Felix Poon

Yeah, but to go back to that kind of, um, it sounds like there were kind of two sides. So how how did one side prevail over the other to say like, no, let's involve pen and let's let's bury them as soon as possible.

[00:29:08] Wendell Mapson

Well, the majority it was it was a majority.

[00:29:12] Felix Poon

Did you all take a vote or something or.

[00:29:14] Wendell Mapson

Yes. As I recall, there was a vote and the majority, overwhelming majority. And then one, you know, one.

[00:29:21] Felix Poon

Remember what the numbers were in that majority. Uh.

[00:29:24] Wendell Mapson

Like I don't.

[00:29:25] Felix Poon

But I something.

[00:29:26] Wendell Mapson

It seems like there was maybe one. Uh, person, but that person had withdrawn from the from the committee. So.

[00:29:36] Felix Poon

So are you talking about Ali Mohammed?

[00:29:40] Wendell Mapson

He? Yeah, I think so, yeah, yeah.

[00:29:43] Felix Poon

Did, uh, did Ali Muhammad leave because of that or like after that or what was the timing of them leaving?

[00:29:53] Wendell Mapson

I think that once the decision was made to reenter the remains at Eden, um, I think by that point, uh, there had been such a dissatisfaction with the direction of the committee that, uh, that he pulled out at that at that point, because I don't recall him being in any, any more meetings. And again, um, I do sympathize with his position, but but I think that, uh, the, the, uh, you know, once, once you withdraw, then then how how can your voice be heard and, and, uh, so but by that, by that.

[00:30:38] Felix Poon

By the time of deciding to enter them at Eden or to enter them at all.

[00:30:43] Wendell Mapson

To enter them at all. And then Eden became the issue of where became another issue because, you know, kind of disagreements kind of pile on each other as you as you move on. So if you're dissatisfied with one thing, uh, in the process, you can become easily dissatisfied with, uh, with the other steps that are taken. Mhm.

[00:31:06] Felix Poon

Um, I don't know if this is fair or not, but some critics have said that Ali was pushed out rather than leaving on their own accord. Is that true in your view?

[00:31:16] Wendell Mapson

If it is, I have no knowledge of it. Um. Mhm. And I don't see how you can be pushed out.

[00:31:24] Felix Poon

Mhm.

[00:31:25] Wendell Mapson

You know I see I can see how you can remove yourself, but I don't see how you can be pushed out. I know that, that um, uh there was several attempts that I, I, I had heard there were several attempts to reach out to him even after that, uh, to no avail. He would not respond.

[00:31:45] Felix Poon

Mhm. Um.

[00:31:49] Wendell Mapson

So but but I think his I think his issue and I can't speak for him was again the issue of who. Who is the community. And I think his feeling was that he and what he represented was the community. Um, and how do you how do you define that? You know, community is complex and, uh, it is composed of many different voices and institutions. Uh, and so, um, right, it you know, how to use how do you how does one voice speak for a community and, and determine what should be done? Um, and I think that's kind of where the, um, the, the division really came, uh, because he obviously felt that his voice was not being heard. Uh, and, and the narrative that. Okay, um, the other, the other voices, there must be, uh, voices that are just, uh, acquiescing and, uh, and their, their, their own on the committee because they're going to go along with the, with Penn's program anyway. So. Yeah.

[00:33:11] Felix Poon

Uh, so I mean, so.

[00:33:12] Wendell Mapson

And, and I do think that that that is unfair because it, it does, uh, question the integrity of other, of other board members simply because they had a different opinion and a different and a different view. I think it's unfair to categorize the rest of the committee, including me, I think as, uh, you know, just kind of going along with, with Penn, whatever want whatever Penn wants to do. I don't think anyone would have been on that committee, uh, if he or she felt that, uh, that that, uh, they didn't have a voice that they weren't being heard. Um, and, and again, I say, I know I wouldn't, I would not have been a part of it.

[00:33:59] Felix Poon

Yeah. I think I'm hearing I don't know if you're, like, hitting the table or something, but I feel like I'm hearing some extra sounds. It's okay. Yeah.

[00:34:07] Wendell Mapson

Sorry.

[00:34:07] Felix Poon

Um, the speaking on that on that topic though. So, um, the kind of most vocal critics of the process, they say that the community advisory group that you were a part of was this hand selected group by Chris Woods, that it wasn't open. The group's process wasn't transparent. So that's why they say it doesn't accurately represent the Black Philadelphian descendant community's interests. And you've already spoken to this a little bit, but I'm wondering what you would say to that specific critique that it was hand selected. It wasn't this kind of, uh, call for who's interested.

[00:34:48] Wendell Mapson

Yeah, yeah. Well, I, you know, again. That even the the dissenting voices were were selected to be on the committee. Um, and so it's. Everyone was selected, I guess the same way. So only after the committee came together could there have been any knowledge that of what dissent would look like and who would who would be in dissent? Um, so again, it's it's easy. It's it's again easy to say if you if you have a certain view, then you must be handpicked.

[00:35:34] Felix Poon

Yeah. It sounds like your church is in on a pretty busy road, huh? I keep hearing some cars zipping by.

[00:35:41] Wendell Mapson

Yeah. It is.

[00:35:43] Felix Poon

Yeah. Um, anyways, uh, so I understand the advisory group, um. Oh, sorry. The museum petitioned the orphans court in May of 2022 to get, uh, I guess, permission to to enter the remains. Um, was the advisory group aware, uh, that that's what the museum was doing? Like was was was there a lot of transparency between the advisory group and the museum?

[00:36:11] Wendell Mapson

Yes. In the meetings, it was it was discussed in terms of of the process, what we had to do, uh, the the date of the hearing, uh, it was open for anyone to attend, I attended. Uh, so it was it was totally an open process.

[00:36:31] Felix Poon

Um, and so when you signed the consent and joinder to petition on behalf of the advisory group, uh, was everyone in the group at that point on on board with it?

[00:36:43] Wendell Mapson

Yes, as far as I know, and I think I was I was asked to because, again, I had gone through that, uh, process previously. Um. Because and again, I learned a lot during the whole process in terms of the the function of the orphans court and the orphans court. Orphans court speaks for the for the dead who who obviously cannot speak for themselves. And so I was I was aware of the process. Uh, and I was I was asked to be one of the one of the speakers. Um, um, at, uh, at the hearing to petition for it. Yeah.

[00:37:24] Felix Poon

I'm curious, um, if you're familiar with the term descendants community, as scholar Michael Blakey coined. Have you heard of that term?

[00:37:35] Wendell Mapson

Uh, not. Not. I've heard of it, but I'm not quite sure. Yeah. The extent of its meeting.

[00:37:45] Felix Poon

Yeah. So, um, I guess this comes out of Michael Blakey as a black anthropologist who did work in New York on the African burial grounds there. And, um, he coined this idea of a descendant community as a group of self-identifying descendants. Um, so not necessarily direct blood descendancy, but, um, instead of this small group, you bring in pretty much anyone and everyone who's black. Uh, in his case, in New York, anyone who's black in New York, if it were applied in this case, anyone who's black in Philadelphia and basically cares to get involved. So that model would have more of an open membership and potentially could include hundreds of people. And I'm wondering if you think that alternative model could have worked here. What do you think?

[00:38:41] Wendell Mapson

Yeah, I think it could have, um. I think any model that. Allows for people to express their opinion, um, in issues like that. To the point though of not again. Assuming ownership of descendants or assuming ownership. Of of one process over, over another process. And I think again that the issue becomes no matter, no matter how it's done, um, what is going to get done? And, and, and what is a respectful way of dealing with those remains from, for for me, from a, a religious point of view that that was my, my main concern. Um, so, uh, if you have a committee that is, is selected or if you open it up and say, who wants to be a part of this? Uh, at at at what, what point do you move from, from that kind of discussion to taking steps to address the issue? Because, um, the, the past cannot be changed. So if I were on any, any committee or group like that and there were remains, uh, that were not buried, that had been disrespectful for, **for all these years, it would be my primary purpose to let's let's get these remains buried. And at the same time not bury the problem and not bury the fallout and not bury the pain.** Uh, and let's continue to work with pen to make sure that nothing like this happens again and and ask questions. And now what? What is Pen's responsibility? Responsibility? And is that enough? Say so I think I think some of the controversy buried the the instead of exposing the issue more buried the issue of again what what are what should the next steps look like. Um and and what is pen willing to do. And is it is that is that acceptable to the committee. And if not then then the committee would be able to again go into dialog and conversation about what what we think should be done.

[00:41:36] Felix Poon

Mhm. Mhm.

[00:41:38] Speaker4

Um, so.

[00:41:38] Wendell Mapson

So if you, if you, if you, if, if the dissenting voices now that that because things are not going their way pull out then how do you how do you. How do you incorporate those voices? Um, because they have something to say. How do you how do you move forward without those voices? Because they they're the ones who voluntarily, voluntarily pulled out. Mhm. So they want to be a part of the conversation anymore. And I think that's unfortunate because um, there is a richness in that diversity that uh, that needs to be affirmed and celebrated. Uh, and certainly not, uh, snuffed out or, or. So.

[00:42:34] Felix Poon

Yeah. Um, I don't know if there was a quick thing. Buffy had to interject.

[00:42:39] Speaker5

Helicopter noise at this. The kind of midway through that answer. I don't know if you want to take it again, or if you feel like you got what you wanted in the second part of that. Felix. Just.

[00:42:49] Felix Poon

Yeah, I think I got what I wanted. It's okay. Um. If I can. Kind of. Um. I guess I'm curious to know. So so to dig a little deeper on on the point you just made. Uh, you know, Ali having left then, they don't have the ability to give their dissenting opinion. It seems like Ali's main complaint was maybe about the process itself. And so then if the dissenting voice is like, well, the process actually matters more than the end result. Um. Like would, would, would it make sense then do you think to then be like, okay, like let's, let's rethink the process. Let's take a step back. And I mean, I know you said your primary interest was getting these remains buried and respected, but but other people are saying like, no, that's not the main, uh, important thing. The main, important thing is the process that involves the all a bigger part of the community.

[00:43:52] Wendell Mapson

Yeah, I would, I would say that there's always room for improving a process. Uh, and I think sometimes you don't know. What that looks like until you go through a process the first time, next time, or for other institutions, could there be a process that that works better? I think that's always, um, uh, that room for, for critiquing, uh, a process and critiquing actions. Um. Because we don't always get it right. We get it as right as we can get it. Uh, at the time. Mhm. Um, but for, for the future. Uh, yes. There's, there's always a way of looking at what we did, how we did it. Um, and, and how can we do a better job of it. And at the same time recognizing that there's always going to be, uh, different opinions and dissent. So so again, how do we if we, if we, if we tweak the process and do it again, what will be different. And, and will it still be, um, based on a disagreement then, uh, then I don't want to participate in it or based on a disagreement again, who who owns who's the voice of the community and even descendant voices? Um.

[00:45:40] Wendell Mapson

Uh. You know, I'm as much a descendant of people I don't know as anybody else is, so. So my voice should count as well. So. Mhm. Uh, how do you again, um, how are you able to reach some type of consensus and even some kind of compromise so that the task is done, uh, rather than getting stuck in agendas that, um, you know, that, that, that really never move the move the process forward. I think that's. Up. Just a problem of human relations anyway. Yeah. In in in a in a very. Uh, chaotic world and the way we talk to each other, the way we dialog, the way, um, we we stereotype people and the way we reject people, um, based on not hearing each other. We we we don't we're not listening as I think, um. I think that there's there's a need to listen, um, and, and in listening to come to some kind of consensus on, on where we go and what we do. And I think if we hadn't done that, we would still be stuck having done nothing. Yeah.

[00:47:11] Felix Poon

Um, one other topic I wanted to make sure to ask you about. Um, you know, the the most vocal critics against the museum, including Ali and, uh, professor named Lyra monteiro. Uh, they, um, were really upset about the museum's handling of the move bombing remains. And so I'm curious, uh, do you think the the museum's handling of the move remains? Is connected to their handling of the Morton cranial collection remains in your mind, or do you think these are separate issues?

[00:47:45] Wendell Mapson

I think they may be separate. And I'm I'm I'm not familiar enough with that to to, um, to have an opinion. Um. But but I also think that it's it's still a part of. The use of an ongoing narrative of of suspicion and, um. Uh, and historic, uh, disrespect. That is carried over to to now and kind of colors. And and taints a the the the need to to address it because, uh, people have already kind of taken sides on what needs to be done. So again, there's no there's no listening. There's no there's no real dialog. There's uh, there's an agenda. And, um, if you don't follow my agenda, then. So then I don't want anything to do with it. And that's again, I think kind of what, what hinders us in a lot of, in a lot of ways. Um, not not being able to listen and. And here are the voices. And then if if the voices don't agree with us, then, um. Then. Then we're gone. And then we, um, uh, we criticized the other voices as if they, uh. Uh, are just, uh, going along with a with, with the system. Um, and so it it just seems like that's, that's what happens in so many different areas, whether it's in our politics or, or in other areas as well. Mhm.

[00:49:52] Felix Poon

So then at the end of the day, do you think Penn Museum. Handle the this situation the best they could. Was this the thing they did?

[00:50:02] Wendell Mapson

I think they did the best they could under the circumstances. And with no no playbook in place with no, um, I think there was a sense in which we even felt that, you know, we're. We are. We're we're we're going to a place we've never been. You know. And. And how do we do that? Uh, there's no real precedent. There's. So I think under the circumstances, I found an openness, a receptivity, um, again, a transparency, transparency that, uh, I think should could be duplicated in other instances. And yes, under the circumstances, and given what we had to work with, the did the best that they could.

[00:50:58] Felix Poon

Mhm. Um. What's next for the advisory group, if anything? Like, uh, I understand one of the, um. Points from the plan. The proposed plan was to do a community led public forum. Um, what was that about? Is that happening?

[00:51:20] Wendell Mapson

Uh, not that I know of. I don't know of any any activity or plans that that, uh, uh, have been made as of yet. I'm sure that there will be I know there I think there was some discussion about, uh, a monument to be placed, um, on Penn's campus that. Other than the burial at Eden, but actually on the campus to to recognize and that the wording of on that monument would uh contain uh, uh, um and admission by the University of of of that wrong. That was done. But again, uh, I'm not. Uh, there's been no activity since the re-interment in January. I think it was such a, uh, kind of, uh. A need to to take, take a breath and and let this settle. Um mm. After the ceremony to maybe to even regroup and and, um, and go at it again. So I think, I think the time was kind of needed to, to take this little pause and, but certainly I don't, I don't think that anyone thinks that this is the end of it. And it's just a matter again of what coming together and and and figuring out the next steps.

[00:52:53] Felix Poon

Mhm. Did you speak at the um interfaith ceremony Reinterring. The, the 19. Yes.

[00:53:00] Wendell Mapson

I spoke at uh, there was a service at the museum. Uh, and I spoke, I spoke there and then um, as, as a Christian minister and a imam, we both, uh, spoke at the, at Eden, uh, kind of in kind of a what we, what we call a in our traditions, a committal. So at gravesite, there is a, a Christian ritual of committal, which I did, and he did one out of his faith. So yes, I did. I did speak at both events.

[00:53:38] Speaker6

Yeah.

[00:53:39] Felix Poon

Um, I'm curious if you can share maybe some of the more memorable parts of what what you said.

[00:53:49] Wendell Mapson

Oh. I talked about. Um. How we came to this point. And the the need to be respectful of of different voices. Uh, the need to be heard and recognized. And then I started talking about the importance of of human life that was not valued at a particular time in American history. Um, but how even in death, those lives speak to us today. Uh, and the stories that that we will never know. But but those remains included stories of real people. Uh, and the need spiritually for eternal rest to that, um, uh, that today marks, uh, a day when maybe we can say, uh, we have laid them to rest and maybe won't disrupt the remains anymore, you know? Uh, because again, as I as I said, how many black people were buried in black cemeteries in Philadelphia who thought it was their final resting place? We used that terminology. Uh, but final isn't always final. And maybe today I said that this this could this could be final. And I talked about, um, maybe we're we're not knowing who they were, but but God knows, because God created each of them in his image and likeness, etc.. So, um, I kind of approached it, tried, tried, uh, a kind of reconciliatory type approach and words that I felt recognized, uh, the pain and the hurt and the descent. Uh, but also recognize that greater issue for me, which was what what do we do with, with these remains? People whose. Whose voices. Who cannot speak for themselves. But they still speak from the grave and from from their ashes.

[00:56:15] Speaker6

Mhm.

[00:56:16] Felix Poon

Did you, um, did you read off of like a prepared speech on paper or something.

[00:56:20] Wendell Mapson

I did, yes.

[00:56:21] Felix Poon

Yeah. I'm curious, do you, do you have that still on your computer.

[00:56:26] Wendell Mapson

I keep, I keep everything I write. Yes so I do I can send it to you if you like.

[00:56:34] Felix Poon

Well, I'm wondering if I could get you on tape reading it. Reading it out would that I could do how long it is.

[00:56:41] Wendell Mapson

It's about three minutes, maybe three minutes. Three, four minutes, I think.

[00:56:46] Felix Poon

Okay. Um, I'm not sure if I'll use it, but I think it would be good if if you're if you're up for it. For for reading it. Uh, right now.

[00:56:57] Wendell Mapson

Okay. No, I don't have it now. Oh, it's it's on my computer at home.

[00:57:03] Felix Poon

Okay. Yeah. Um. All right. Uh, well, if I do decide it would be useful, maybe I can reach back out to you and you could just record it on your phone. Sure is one option to do that. Okay. Um. So I think we're wrapping up here. Is there any you know, I've asked you a lot of questions. Um, is there anything I haven't asked you about that you think is important to this story that you want to tell me?

[00:57:29] Speaker7

Uh, I, I don't think.

[00:57:33] Wendell Mapson

So. I think, um. Uh. I think. I think you covered everything. Um, and I and I tried to respond as best as I as I can. Um. I think it was a very probing I think, I think for, for me, um.

[00:58:00] Speaker6

It.

[00:58:00] Wendell Mapson

It kind of helps me, uh, articulate my own feelings again. Uh, and and to raise the in terms of retrospection. Raise raise questions again about, um, this was this was a significant moment. Uh, for me and for those who were involved and going forward, what needs what needs to be done. And and if we had to do it over again. Would we do it the same way? And that's not to say that this was the wrong way to do it, but it's again, to say that we were in unfamiliar territory and we were, um, in a place that we'd never been before. And so it's an ongoing critique of how we handle these issues and also of how we relate to each other in terms of respecting each other's voices and really hearing each other. Um, we, you know, uh, we I, I don't think I knew anyone.

[00:59:19] Speaker7

On the.

[00:59:19] Wendell Mapson

Committee. I'm sure there were others who didn't know me, and there may be a couple, may have been a couple who knew each other. But but being put together, I wish that there had been more time to get to know each other better. Because that might have helped. That might have even helped with the with the process, because I think we get more done relationally than we do just theoretically. Um, and to have had a meal together to have, uh, just know a little bit more about each other. Uh, I think in all human deliberations that that helps. And so, you know, you helped me to kind of look at what, what I would even recommend if there was another time, a next time to do something like this. What what would that look like?

[01:00:14] Felix Poon

Yeah. Was um, what was Chris Woods like in these meetings? Did he. Yeah.

[01:00:21] Wendell Mapson

Yeah. Chris Woods, um, uh, was very, um. I think he exemplified it, exemplified a wisdom in the in the meetings, uh, even in moments when, uh, there was criticism directed at Penn or at him in his leadership, I thought he was, um, uh, remained very calm and and deliberate and respectful and sensitive to, um, to, to to how to some of the reaction toward him, but but continued to give steady leadership. I never saw him in, in a defensive posture or or get angry, uh, um, or, you know, want to, you know, shut the meeting down or something like that. But it was. Yeah, I think we owe him a lot for how he shepherded the process and and the meeting with such diverse personalities and, again, agendas and and people. Um. Thought he did a magnificent job.

[01:01:43] Felix Poon

Yeah.

END OF TRANSCRIPT



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