



The Hail-Storm

JOHN DABNEY IN VIRGINIA

PRESENTED BY

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Discussion Guide

*written by Samantha Willis
produced by Field Studio*

Organizing a screening of *The Hail-Storm* for your community group, museum, or students?

This 20-minute film is made for conversation, easily fitting into even short gatherings of your community group, museum guests, or students.

Watch *The Hail-Storm* at hailstormdabney.com. Then, use this guide to spark discussion about the film's major themes. These prompts will get the conversation going, but don't hesitate to let your discussion take its own turns.



Tips for a successful conversation:

- The facilitator should watch the full film and get familiar with the discussion guide before convening the group. Make sure to read the full story of John Dabney's life at hailstormdabney.com. Watch the video extras there, and study the recipes.
- Structure the room in such a way that allows everyone to see one another and sit at the same level.
- Foster a respectful environment where everyone is listened to and heard. Ask participants to raise their hands when they would like to speak, and ensure everyone who wishes to speak gets a chance to share their perspectives.
- Talking about race and the history of slavery may be difficult. But as Americans, our history is powerfully shaped by constant tension between slavery and freedom — tension that endures because this past hasn't settled. For this reason, discussing this past with our fellow citizens is one of the most important things we can do to promote mutual trust and respect, and build a future in common cause with one another.
- Remember that the experience of slavery differed, often radically, from person to person and region to region. Avoid using John Dabney's remarkable accomplishments to negatively judge others who were enslaved, and avoid generalizing about how slavery looked or felt. Most of all, remember that there was nothing like slavery; it is a status without comparison, and none of us can fully imagine how it felt to live every day in bondage.

This guide was written by Samantha Willis in collaboration with Hannah Ayers and Lance Warren, the film's directors. *The Hail-Storm: John Dabney in Virginia* was produced by Field Studio (fieldstudiofilms.com) and sponsored in part by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities (virginiahumanities.org). The Foundation was established in 1974 to develop and support public programs, education, and research in the humanities, and to relate the humanities to public issues. VFH promotes understanding and use of the humanities through public debate, group discussion, and individual inquiry. VFH is non-profit and non-partisan and receives support from private gifts, grants and contributions, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Commonwealth of Virginia. The film and guide are presented together as a public service to address in an objective and nonpartisan context topics of concern and interest to citizens of the Commonwealth of Virginia. The views and opinions expressed within do not necessarily represent those of the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, its contributors, or its supporting agencies.

Discussion theme 1 — Struggle and success

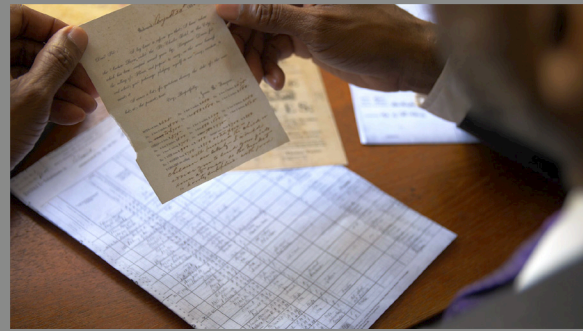
Wendell, John Dabney's son, recalled that his father once said, "Never let a white man know how much you really do know about anything except hard work." Wendell also remembered his father's advice, "You had better lose a little than a whole lot." What might these statements reflect about Dabney's understanding of his role as a successful African American entrepreneur working and living in Reconstruction-era Richmond? How do these statements illustrate what Dabney may have felt were the keys to his success?

Wendell tells us that his family lived in a large home on Broad Street in Richmond, near the State Capitol, and that all of their neighbors were white. This was many decades before the integration of neighborhoods was accepted in Richmond and elsewhere in the South. What does the location of the family's home suggest about their standing in the community, and Dabney's own reputation?



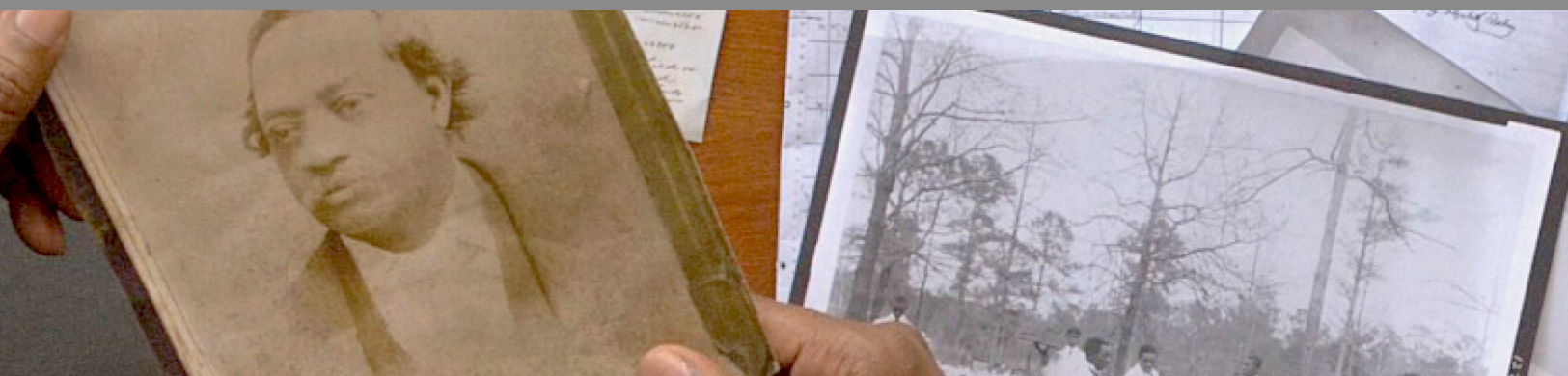
Discussion theme 2 — Family

Dabney purchased his wife's freedom, releasing her from enslavement. It is stunning that Dabney was able to afford such a feat — and, as Wendell tells us, that he was able to secure "the help of some of his white friends" to pull it off. Enslaved families were very often separated; starting with the beginning of slavery in British North American colonies in 1619, at Virginia's Point Comfort, the law refused to acknowledge the concept of family among those in bondage, and slaveholders often kept or sold enslaved people as they would any other property or investment. What effects do you imagine that this had on the enslaved families who were torn apart? How might some of these families have sought to come back together?



Discussion theme 3 — Culinary traditions

Kevin Mitchell credits African American chefs like John Dabney with "the creation of Southern cuisine." In what ways have African Americans contributed to the culinary history of Virginia, the South, and the nation? Can you think of restaurants, recipes, and other markers of African American culinary contributions that endure today? What unique challenges did African American culinary professionals face — in the past, and today?





Discussion theme 4 — Climate and reputation

Wendell Dabney describes his father's decision to complete planned payments for his freedom even after Emancipation, and he notes that the effort did not go unnoticed: "Richmond," he tell us, "never forgot the deed." When white Richmond residents read about Dabney's act in 1866, what might they have thought? How might African Americans in Richmond have viewed his decision?

As a caterer, Dabney orchestrated high-society gatherings of Richmond's white elite. Wendell describes the conversational tenor of such events this way: "Here a sketch of 'darkie' humor, there a witticism, then a story illustrating the mental superiority of 'Johnny Reb,' over that of the overrated Yankee." What might John Dabney have been thinking and feeling while hearing such things? How might this climate have shaped the way Dabney thought of himself and his business?



Discussion theme 5 — Memory

Jennifer Jackson Hardy, Dabney's great-great-granddaughter, says her family is "privileged" to know their history, because many African American families "do not have any inkling as to what happened to their ancestors." Come up with several specific reasons for why this would have been the case. What strategies might be embraced by African Americans and people of all backgrounds with exceptionally difficult histories to recover the details of their ancestry?



Activity — Make a monument!

Whether you've been working in pairs, in a group, or with everyone on their own, ask every participant to respond to the prompt below. Then, discuss with a partner to trade ideas and revise. Ask each pair to share responses with the full group. And then, reflect: What were the common themes that emerged? What are the most effective ways to remember individuals like John Dabney? How might we work around the obstacles?



The Dabney family home no longer exists. It was demolished at some point after his death in 1900 and before the mid-20th-century construction of the highway ramp that now runs through the site. If an historical marker were to be installed there, what should it say? Considering all that you've learned about Dabney's life and legacy — and keeping in mind the modest size of such plaques — write a 75-word inscription that walkers would see when passing by the site.

Keep learning!

Discover more about the history of *The Hail-Storm* in-print and online.

Discover books, articles, sites, and digital tools to keep the story going. From food and drink to family history and Reconstruction, there's so much more to uncover: HAILSTORMDABNEY.COM/MORE