From: Tom Sullivan, President
To: UVM Community
Re: Andrew Harris

I am pleased to announce the formation of a Committee with an unusually important charge: to determine how our University will recognize and celebrate the University of Vermont’s first African American graduate, Andrew Harris. I have asked the Committee to make its recommendations to me by April 21.

The story of Andrew Harris, who graduated in 1838, was unrevealed for more than 160 years. It was first confirmed by Jeffrey Marshall, Special Collections director at UVM Libraries, in 1998, acting on a lead from a Middlebury College archivist. George Washington Henderson, who graduated in 1877, previously was thought to be the University’s first African American graduate. Henderson was the first African American elected to the University of Vermont’s Phi Beta Kappa chapter, in 1877.

Harris’ graduation from UVM was nationally significant. He was the first African American college graduate in America to espouse abolishing slavery and to demand full equality for people of color.

Though he lived just three years past his college graduation, Harris made an impact on the nation as a Philadelphia minister and abolitionist. On May 7, 1839, he was among the speakers at the annual meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society, an event that drew a crowd of nearly 5,000 to the Broadway Tabernacle in New York City. This account of Reverend Harris was reported in 2004 by Tom Weaver, editor of Vermont Quarterly magazine in an article titled, “Breaking News from 1838.”

I look forward to sharing with the UVM community, in a few short weeks, the ideas the Committee generates. Committee members include Aya Al-Namee, President-Elect of the Student Government Association; Mache Chase, President of the Black Student Union; Jesse Cormier, former chair of the President's Commission on Racial Diversity and Head Coach, Men’s Soccer Team; Beverly Colston, Director of the ALANA Student Center; Clarence Davis, Director of State Relations and Special Assistant to the President; and Wanda Heading-Grant, Vice President for Human Resources, Diversity and Multicultural Affairs.