

Princeton project explores past ties to

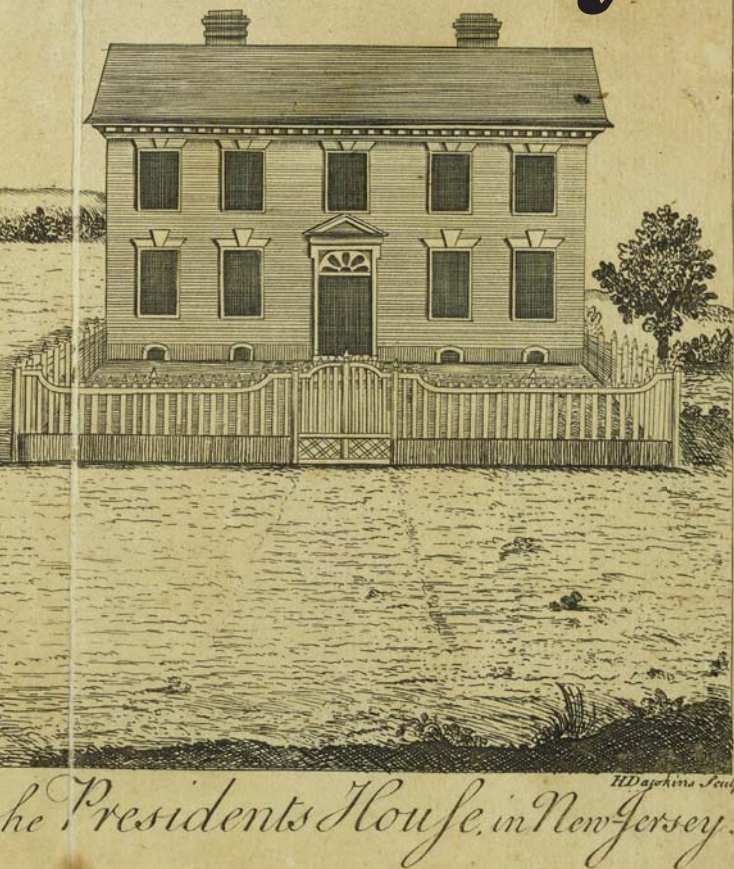


A North-West Prospect of Nassau-Hall, with a Front View of 1

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By Catherine Zandonella

slavery



A 1764 copper engraving by artist Henry Dawkins of the earliest campus buildings, Nassau Hall (left) and the President's House (now Maclean House), which still stand today.

“TO BE SOLD AT PUBLIC VENUE on the 19th of August next ... all the personal effects of Revd. Dr. Samuel Finley, consisting of two Negro women, a Negro man, and three Negro children, household furniture, horses ... some hay and grain, together with a variety of farming utensils.”

The “personal effects” belonged to the estate of the Reverend Dr. Finley, the fifth president of the College of New Jersey, now known as Princeton University. The sale, advertised in the *Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser*, took place in 1766 in front of the President’s House near two newly planted sycamore trees. The house and the trees still stand today near the north border of campus.

That a slave sale took place on campus and that the first nine Princeton presidents were slaveholders at some point in their lives are two of the major findings from a sweeping new endeavor by Princeton scholars and students to explore the ties of early University trustees, presidents, faculty and students to the institution of slavery.

The Princeton and Slavery Project has released the findings on a public website. The online materials include over 80 articles, video documentaries, interactive maps and several hundred primary source documents.

Leading the project is Professor of History Martha Sandweiss, who was surprised when she joined the faculty in 2009 to find that Princeton had never conducted a comprehensive study of its ties to slavery, as many other universities had done. Those studies revealed that slavery was an integral part of the history of American higher education, in both the North and the South.

The Princeton project did not find evidence that the University as an institution owned slaves, nor that students brought slaves to campus, but the scholars and student researchers involved in the project did establish that the man who deeded the University’s original 4.5 acres, Nathaniel FitzRandolph, was a slave owner. Funds from donors with ties to slavery funded the construction of several prominent campus buildings, and all seven of Princeton’s founding trustees were slave owners.

Much of the research was conducted by undergraduates in Sandweiss’ upper-level history seminars, which she organized starting in 2013 with the dual goals of investigating slavery and exposing students to methods of archival research. The project received support from the University’s Humanities Council, as well as the Princeton Histories Fund, which provides funding to explore “aspects of Princeton’s history that have been forgotten, overlooked, subordinated or suppressed.” Many other departments contributed to the project.

“Professor Sandweiss and her colleagues and students have brought creativity, diverse perspectives and rigorous academic standards to bear on research that sheds new light on previously unexamined aspects of this University’s past. Although the project began before we established the Histories Fund, it exemplifies the innovative work that we hope the fund will support,” said Princeton President Christopher L. Eisgruber. “The symposium that the project has organized brought a

remarkable group of scholars and artists to our campus to reflect on its findings; I expect that the symposium and the project will stimulate ongoing discussion, additional research, and a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of our history.”

For help finding original materials, she approached University Archivist Daniel Linke. Linke taught students to navigate the nearly 400 collections in the University archives, which include alumni records, student letters, Commencement speeches, sermons, treasurers’ reports, and trustee and faculty meeting minutes. Students also used digital resources purchased by the Princeton University Library such as newspaper collections and business and court records. “When students would make a discovery, I would help them find additional documents to identify the context of the information and corroborate their findings,” Linke said.

The nation’s fourth-oldest college

Chartered in 1746 as British North America’s fourth college, the institution then known as the College of New Jersey was located first in nearby Elizabeth and then Newark before moving in 1756 to its current location in “Prince-Town.” The University took its present name in 1896.

The young college, founded by Presbyterian ministers who embraced the Enlightenment, nurtured several American independence leaders, including John Witherspoon, Princeton’s sixth president and a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and James Madison, the nation’s fourth president. Both were slave owners.

To fund the college’s growth, Witherspoon actively cultivated students from well-off Southern and Caribbean families. Before his tenure as college president began in 1768, about 20 percent of students came from the South, but by 1790 the percentage was 67 percent.

As cotton plantations spread into states such as Mississippi and Louisiana, and slavery spread westward, so too did the states of origin of the student body. Between 1746 and 1865, Southern-born students made up about 40 percent of the class on average. “You can see the westward spread of slavery as you track our student body,” Sandweiss said.

The finding helps explain why the anti-slavery movement at Princeton was relatively weak compared to peers like Harvard and Yale universities. Princeton was the founding location of the American Colonization Society, which was a movement to send free blacks back to Africa. “Princeton was a place where people with vastly different viewpoints came together, and the emphasis was on ‘keeping the peace,’” Sandweiss said.

Southern wealth was not the only money that came tainted by human bondage, however. One of the most prominent donors in Princeton’s history is Moses Taylor Pyne, a Northerner whose name adorns several campus buildings and a prestigious undergraduate prize.

In the records of the New York Historical Society, Maeve Glass, who earned her Ph.D. in history at Princeton in 2016 and is now an academic fellow at Columbia University, discovered that Pyne’s fortune — which he inherited from his grandfather — stemmed from a shipping business that transported sugar grown by slaves on Cuban plantations. Glass and other students traced the sources of funding for many of Princeton’s buildings to slavery.

Gown and town

Despite its location in the North, New Jersey was one of the last Northern states to ban slavery, and its “gradual emancipation” law, enacted in 1804, kept some individuals in bondage right up until the end of the Civil War. But the town of Princeton was home to a vibrant free black community — in 1862, one-sixth of Princeton’s 3,700 residents were of African descent — a fact that did not sit well with some of the Southern-born students.

In 1846, when a black man accused two students of harassing a black woman on a town street, violence broke out. A mob of 14 students, angered by the black man’s “insolence,” went to the farm where the man worked. Despite resistance from a “dozen brawny Irish laborers” who tried to protect the man, the mob forcibly took him into town, threatening to lynch him. A professor, John Maclean Jr. — a future president of the college — tried to stop the mob but failed, and the students whipped the man to “within an inch of his life,” according to a classmate’s account.

Isabela Morales, a graduate student in history, described how she felt when she read about this event. “I was sitting in Firestone Library, reading the diary of a long-ago student, John Robert Buhler,” she said, “and I gasped at what I found. In some ways this incident was a preview of the kinds of divisions that would happen among the students at the start of the Civil War. Some would go home to fight for the Confederacy and others would fight for the Union.”

Another spate of violence broke out in 1843 over the plight of a fugitive slave named James (Jimmy) Collins Johnson. He’d escaped from a Maryland plantation and was working as a janitor at the college when a student from a nearby plantation recognized him. Although the law required Johnson to be returned to his master, many townspeople came out in his support, and the case was

This page from the July 31, 1766, *Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser* lists six people among the items for sale from the estate of the fifth president of the College of New Jersey, now known as Princeton University.

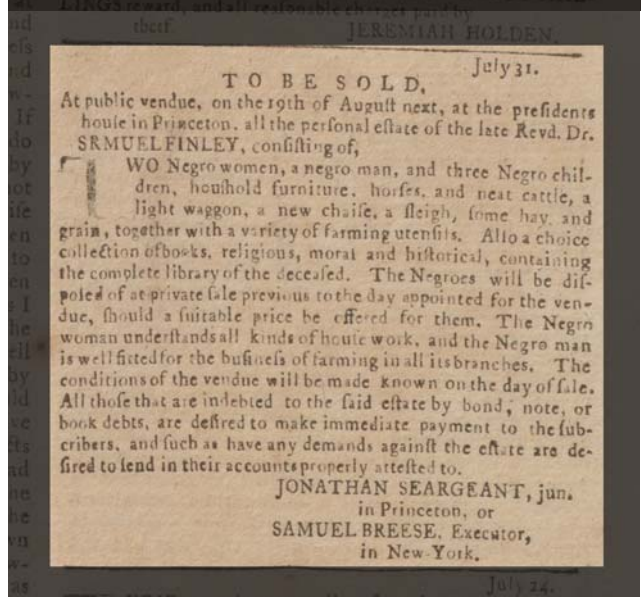


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settled only when a local citizen paid \$500 for his freedom. Johnson was allowed to stay, and over his lifetime he worked off his debt, including by selling sundries to students outside Nassau Hall.

A long reach into people's lives

To make these and other findings available to the public, Sandweiss and her team created a public website hosted by the University library. Joseph Yannielli, a post-doctoral research associate with the Humanities Council and the Center for Digital Humanities, is the website's project manager and lead developer.

"The sheer size of the project is staggering," Yannielli said. "It is, by far, one of the largest studies of a university's relationship to slavery yet attempted. We have over 6,000 files in our archive, covering thousands of students and dozens of faculty members across three centuries of history. Grappling with all of that data is an ongoing challenge."

To ensure that the local community learns of the findings, Sandweiss collaborated with the Princeton-area public schools to create lesson plans for high school students. "Most students are surprised to find that there was slavery in the town of Princeton," Sandweiss said. "I hope that high school teachers not just in Princeton but around the country will be able to use the lessons we've developed."

Sandweiss also reached out to the University's arts community to suggest creating public works of art and theater. "I believe in sharing history with the broadest possible audience," Sandweiss said, "so I wanted to collaborate with artists who, while honoring the facts of the past, can elaborate and speculate in ways that historians — always bound by footnotes — cannot."

Sandweiss said she is touched by how the findings about the University's past resonate with today's students and alumni. In a freshman seminar, Sandweiss asked students to create videos from interviews with their peers, alumni and others with Princeton connections who are descended from slaveholders, slaves or both. For example, in one video, a student of African American descent learns that she is descended from a family of mixed-race slaveholders in New Orleans.

"This isn't a story that ended in 1865," Sandweiss said. "This is a story that has a long reach into people's lives."

Impact on students

The project has been a rare opportunity for students to conduct original archival research that will reach a wide audience. Many of the historical articles on the website were written by Princeton undergraduates under the guidance of Sandweiss and graduate students. "Each time the class was taught, the students had greater success, because we became better at framing questions for them to research," Sandweiss said. "But it is impossible to overstate how open-ended this was at the beginning."

Craig Hollander recalls the excitement of those early days of discovery. He was then a postdoctoral researcher at Princeton and is now an assistant professor of history at today's The College of New Jersey, located about 10 miles from Princeton. Hollander spent hours hunched over boxes of documents, photographing them as fast as possible, and then bringing them back to the computer to blow up the images so he could examine them.



Professor of History Martha Sandweiss leads a research project to explore the role slavery played in the early days of Princeton University.

PHOTO BY DENISE APPELWHITE

"We would marvel over the discoveries we were making every day," Hollander said. "You had to read these documents with a fine-tooth comb, because you didn't know if a sentence or phrase was the smoking gun that provided evidence for a larger finding. Sometimes I would come away from a day's work with a single document and say to myself, 'This is why I got up in the morning.'"

One undergraduate who contributed to the project is Sven (Trip) Henningson. Although he graduated with a bachelor's degree in history in 2016 and now works in Washington, D.C., Henningson still spends some of his free time on the research.

Henningson remembers going to the Library of Congress one Saturday morning and finding an original 1864 memorandum from a former Princeton student demanding that his escaped slaves hiding behind Northern lines be returned to him. "Holding that document in your hand is just something that gets you fired up and ready to go for another round in the archives," he said.

An American story

This fall, a new group of students enrolled in Sandweiss' research seminar and began to delve into Princeton's history, this time in the post-Civil War era. "We've been examining issues of how people were talking about race in the aftermath of the Civil War," Sandweiss said, "and how people wrote the history about what the war meant."

The natural question to ask is what do these findings mean for Princeton? But the broader question, Sandweiss said, is how does what we are learning change our feelings about America's history?

In many ways, the story of Princeton is the story of America writ small — how its leaders ignored the economy's ties to slavery so that it could continue to thrive on the fruits of human bondage. The young nation espoused liberty while rationalizing its deeply troubling footings.

"To acknowledge that history, to be upfront about it, that is what universities do best," Sandweiss said. "Educational institutions should sponsor this kind of inquiry no matter where it goes, and Princeton has done that. What we've uncovered does not set us apart in any way, nor should it embarrass us. Our institutional history embeds us in the paradox of liberty and bondage that underlies the development of our nation.

"We are not special, we are simply American." **D**

The more than 600 pages of documents, maps, videos and essays are available at slavery.princeton.edu.