

Penn Slavery Project Report

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The researchers on the Penn Slavery Project started out with only questions to go on. To prepare for our research, we read several books about the history of Philadelphia's black community and Pennsylvania's history of slavery, including *Freedom by Degrees* by Gary Nash and Jean Soderlund, *Liberty's Prisoners* by Jen Manion, and *The Struggle Against Slavery* and *Runaway America* by David Waldstreicher. We also read *Forging Freedom* by Gary Nash early in our research process. These books, especially those by Nash, helped guide both our research and the questions we asked.

The big question that was answered in the affirmative quite quickly was whether any of Penn's original trustees owned slaves. However, this still left plenty of other questions. For instance, we wondered about the proximity of slavery to Penn's campus—did enslaved people live near the school, or even on campus? What was life like for enslaved people who lived on or near campus or who belonged to Penn's original trustees? As for the trustees that did not own slaves, we knew that this did not mean that they were free of any involvement in the slave trade. This led us to question to what extent the wealth of certain trustees—especially merchants—was generated by commercial activity involving the slave trade, such as trade with the West Indies. On a related note, to what extent was Penn's early funding tied to the slave trade?

In addition, as our research went forward, more questions arose. For instance, what became of the enslaved people who were freed, either during the lifetimes of the people holding

them or after their deaths? Even of those who were not freed, what happened to their families, especially after the Gradual Abolition Act of 1780? Would we be able to trace their lineages to find any ancestors alive today? Our research was not able to answer every question; however, those that it could answer were extremely valuable and helped shed some light on the University of Pennsylvania's slaveholding past.

Turning now to our methods, we began looking through Penn's trustee biographies on the University Archives website to see if we could find any information on the original trustees' possible ties to slavery. Unfortunately, the biographies included only one explicit mention of a trustee holding enslaved people; however, they did include other information that helped us single out the trustees that were most likely to be involved in the slave trade. For instance, we were able to find which trustees were merchants, and even that some were involved in trade with the West Indies, which made it likely that their personal wealth (and perhaps, therefore, the wealth of the university) benefitted to some degree from the slave trade. It also helped us find which trustees were considered some of the wealthiest people in Philadelphia, making them more likely to be slaveholders.

Next, we turned to the books we read—especially Nash' *Freedom by Degrees* and *Forging Freedom*—to see if we could find any mention of the original trustees, especially those named explicitly as slaveholders. From this and the information we found in the University Archives biographies we compiled a list of “trustees of interest”—those who were most likely to be involved in the slave trade in some capacity. We collected this information and made it both shareable and editable by making a Google Doc listing the names of these trustees.

After this, we received help from Mark Lloyd, the director of the University Archives and Records Center. He advised us to go right to the source of what Gary Nash cited when using

information from his book and thus cite primary sources instead of secondary sources. He also gave us several additional sources to look at, including *The Legislators of Colonial Pennsylvania* and, very importantly, Ancestry.com. He showed us how we could find Pennsylvania tax lists from 1767-1803 on the website, which included taxes on income and assets. Included in these tax lists were taxes on enslaved people. Thus, using this resource, we could find exactly who held enslaved people, how many they held, and when they held them. Using this information, we searched for the tax records of the trustees we had already noted and made a Google Sheet with all of their names in it. We then recorded on this spreadsheet the information that we gathered from the tax records, allowing us to have an accessible source listing who held enslaved people, how many, and what years they held them.

Next, we focused on primary sources on the trustees outside of the Ancestry.com tax lists. For this, Professor Kathleen Brown taught us how to find these primary sources in several different ways. For instance, she guided us to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and American Philosophical Society online catalogues and told us how to search family names in order to find where trustees' papers were located so that we could find them at either archive. She also gave us additional resources that may have been helpful such as the Pennsylvania Magazine of History. She told us to use the information that we found on these websites to make a list of everything we should investigate about the trustees assigned to us (we were each responsible for looking into about four trustees). As for looking into how the university overall was connected to slavery, she taught us how to use Penn's Franklin resource to connect to the Readex database called "America's Historical Newspapers," allowing us to search for keywords in historic newspapers such as the Pennsylvania Gazette.

Using the various methods described above, we found a plethora of information on the trustees that we marked as being most likely to be involved in the slave trade in some way. Out of the 28 trustees we looked into, we found that tax records showed that 20 of the original trustees held enslaved people between 1769 and 1800. In addition, other sources such as family papers and Knight-Yardley's *Lawmaking and Legislation in Pennsylvania* indicated that an additional two trustees held slaves, totaling 18 original Penn trustees that are proven to have been slaveholders. As there are some trustees such as James Logan who died before the dates of the tax records to which we had access, it is certainly possible that more held slaves.

The wills and family papers of the trustees revealed even more about the activities of these trustees in regards to the slave trade. For instance, one of my trustees was William Allen, whose biography on the University Archives website says that he freed the enslaved people who he held in his will. In his will, which is available at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, he states "I do hereby manumit and make free all of my Negro Slaves" (Allen) confirming the claim in his biography. Thus, we know that Allen held enslaved people up until his death in 1780. As this is the only version of his will available, we also know that he did, indeed, manumit the people that he held in bondage after his death.

The other trustee for whom I was responsible, John Cadwalader, had more detailed information available. Five different versions of his will are available at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. In the first four versions of his will, Cadwalader left "three male and three female negro servants" to his wife; the fifth version says "negro or mulatto slaves" (Cadwalader). In addition, he left to his daughters Anne, Elizabeth, and Maria "all the negroes old and young male and female [sic]" on his farm on Sassafraus River (Cadwalader). In the last version, he adds that he is leaving "a sufficient number of negroes" (Cadwalader) to his "executors." This proves that

not only did John Cadwalader hold numerous enslaved people up to his death, but that he desired to continue their bondage even beyond his death in 1786. Interestingly, in the first four versions of the will, he writes that he will free one “negro servant” named James Sampson, his wife, and their three children (Cadwalader). However, in version five, he makes no mention of James Sampson or anyone in his family. After looking into records on Ancestry Library and searching newspaper archives for reports of manumissions of people named Sampson around the time, I could find no more information on what became of James Sampson or his family.

The other two trustees who I looked into, William Bingham and Thomas Cadwalader, did not appear to have wills available at any archives in Philadelphia. However, Pennsylvania tax records can reveal some information about their involvement in the slave trade. For instance, according to the Pennsylvania, Tax and Exoneration, 1768-1801 on Ancestry.com, Thomas Cadwalader held two enslaved people in 1769. In addition, William Bingham was taxed for two enslaved people in 1769 and one enslaved person in both 1782 and 1783. Therefore, while we may not have access to their wills, it can be said with certainty that both the younger Cadwalader and Bingham were slaveowners.

The findings of the other members of this research team also had interesting implications. For instance, Vanjessica Gladney discovered the first Provost of what is now the University of Pennsylvania, William Smith, owned at least one enslaved person during his time as Provost. She also found that Isaac Norris, who served as a trustee from 1751 to 1755, held enslaved people and actively participated in the slave trade. She also discovered that the same Isaac Norris who suggested the inscription on the Liberty Bell that read “Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.” Similarly, Caitlin Doolittle found that Joseph Reed, who was a trustee from 1778 to 1791, held at least one slave as late as 1774. The same Joseph Reed wrote

the preamble of the Gradual Abolition Act. Both of these examples speak to a pattern of contradictions that we have found in our research of trustees being ideologically or spiritually opposed to the institution of slavery but still engaging in the act itself. Another well-known example of this is Benjamin Franklin, who was also an early trustee, owning slaves for many years and then becoming a leader of the abolition movement later in his life.

There also existed contradictions in who was chosen to be a trustee. As I have discussed here at length, many trustees were involved in the slave trade by owning slaves. Some, such as Edward Tilghman Jr., who was researched by Dillon Kersh, even owned a tobacco plantation with dozens of slaves (albeit only for a short time). Other trustees, however, were heavily involved in the abolition movement. For instance, Kersh found that Benjamin Franklin, who I have already touched upon, served as President of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. Another trustee Kersh researched, Caspar Wistar, served as President of the Society for the Abolition of Slavery as well. So here we see that not only did some trustees have internal conflicts about their attitudes towards slavery, but the men who served together as trustees could have wildly different views about the issue. Thus the theme of contradiction amongst the trustees has several different levels.

This research carries a lot of important implications. First, it sheds a new light on the way that we understand the institution that is now Penn. Although there is no evidence of the university itself having owned slaves, its original trustees and even its founder Benjamin Franklin held enslaved people. As trustees of a university are responsible for raising funds for the institution and often donate money themselves, it is thus a very real possibility that at least some of Penn's early funding came from the slave trade, as the personal fortunes of the trustees who held enslaved people were thanks to the labor that they were forced to provide. For instance,

John Cadwalader, the son of the previously mentioned Thomas Cadwalader, “invested” the money he gained from his wife, the daughter of a wealthy Maryland planter, on “seven slaves” (Doerflinger 43). Even among the trustees that did not own slaves, many were merchants and even openly traded with the West Indies. Any money that Penn received from these trustees was therefore likely generated by the slave trade or the goods produced by slave labor. It is thus exceedingly likely that Penn was funded by money tainted by the slave trade—and therefore directly benefitted from it.

As a Penn student, I think that it is important for members of the Penn community to know about Penn’s implication in the slave trade. I think that our findings should be published in as many places as possible so that Penn students can learn about them—The Daily Pennsylvanian, the Penn History Review, even the History Department website. I think that free, accessible talks on Penn’s campus would also be helpful in getting the word out. However, I think that people in the Philadelphia community, not just people related to Penn, need to learn about this as well. This could be accomplished by going to Philadelphia newspapers such as the Philadelphia Inquirer and the Philadelphia Tribune, and seeking out online publications as well such as Philly Voice and Philly.com. I think that giving free talks at venues outside of Penn, such as at museums or perhaps community centers, could also help spread the word to the larger Philadelphia community.

Another implication of this research is that it contradicts Penn’s previous claim that it had “no direct university involvement with slavery or the slave trade” (Simmons). After all, how can an institution claim no direct ties with slavery or the slave trade when at least 18 of its original trustees owned slaves, including its founder Benjamin Franklin? However, this is not necessarily because of any desire of the university to hide its past. Rather, it is more likely because we went

into this asking different questions than have been asked at other universities conducting similar research. We were concerned not just with the *complicity* of Penn in slavery but also its *proximity* to the slave trade. Essentially, we looked at the topic with the frame that in a slaveholding society, no one is completely innocent. While other universities such as Georgetown University have taken concrete steps to try to atone for their role in slavery (Swarns), Penn's previous assertion of no involvement has made it so that there is felt to be no need to atone for any past actions. However, this research shows that while there is no evidence of the university itself owning enslaved people, its trustees—and more than likely Penn itself—certainly benefitted from slave labor. Which brings me to my next question—what should Penn do to both acknowledge this involvement and deal with the responsibility that comes with it?

The first thing that I think Penn needs to do everything in its power to acknowledge that it has, indeed, been involved in the slave trade. A helpful beginning to this process would be to make an official statement in the form of a speech, for instance, like Georgetown President John J. Degioia (Swarns). Another step would be for us to work with the University Archives to include the information we have found about the trustees' involvement in the slave trade in their biographies on the website. These biographies and the University Archives in general were tremendously helpful in our research, and it would be fantastic if they could be an even greater help to future researchers. As it stands right now, the biographies mention that one original trustee freed his slaves in his will, but there is a plethora of supplementary information that could be added onto many of the biographies on the website to acknowledge that many of the trustees were involved in the slave trade. In addition, the university should retract the statement that it made to the Philadelphia Tribune in 2016 that it had no involvement in slavery (Simmons) and issue a new statement saying that it has found connections.

After acknowledgement should come an attempt at atonement. Although Penn can never make right the fact that several of its original trustees were slaveholders and that it likely benefitted from the slave trade, there are some steps it can take to make some amends. I think that looking to Georgetown as an example here would be beneficial. If, like Georgetown, Penn were to give admissions preference to the descendants of any enslaved people held by its original trustees or founders (Swarns), that could be a step in the right direction. Additionally, the university could go one step beyond Georgetown and offer scholarships to these descendants, as it likely benefitted financially from the forced labor of their ancestors. This would be a very small way of giving back—but it would certainly be better than doing nothing.

The university could also follow Georgetown's example of symbolic penance (Swarns). Perhaps renaming the much talked-about New College House West after an enslaved person or family held by a trustee could be considered. Maybe building a monument to the enslaved people whose labor the original trustees exploited like Georgetown (Swarns) would help to ensure that the Penn community never forgets that the university benefitted from slavery. Probably the most important thing that the university could do, however, would be to make sure that further research is conducted to dig deeper into the university's involvement in the slave trade. Looking once more to Georgetown, Penn could benefit in this regard from following in their footsteps of making an institute to study slavery (Swarns). With an institutional foundation for studying the subject, Penn would be encouraging students to look into it and thus show an openness to being held accountable for the past actions of the university and its associates.

However, it is important to note here that these are simply the conclusions I came to, not the consensus of the research team. Each member of our group came to different conclusions, and when there were disagreements as to what the university should do now they were

respectful. These recommendations are therefore only my own, and I do not necessarily expect the university to meet all of the suggestions of every researcher.

There is still much research that needs to be done on Penn's involvement in slavery. I think it would be worth digging deeper into the records of the university itself to see if the institution itself ever held enslaved people. Similarly, I think that the question of students owning enslaved people still needs to be answered—were there students that held slaves during their time at the university? If there were, did any bring these enslaved people with them to campus? Did they live in university buildings? What about students who may tried to bring enslaved people with them to the university after the passage of the Gradual Abolition Act of 1780—if there were any, did the university allow for this?

It could also be interesting to look into the geography of Penn's slaveholding past. Building from the previous questions, if enslaved people held by students or trustees living in Philadelphia did not live on the university's campus, where did they live? Is there any relationship between the geographic proximity of enslaved people to the university and Philadelphia's historically black neighborhoods—especially those in West Philadelphia that Penn essentially took from previous residents in order to expand the university's campus? There are certainly many questions that could be asked about Penn's slaveholding past and its relationship with Philadelphia's black community, which can be described as strained at best.

I also think it would be an important step towards atoning for the actions of past trustees for research to be done into the genealogy of the enslaved people that they held to whose names or records we have access. That is to say, it would be beneficial to find what happened to their families and if they have any ancestors living today. Looking again to Georgetown, the research that the university conducted on their own history of slavery led them to the ancestors of

enslaved people that the university held. This allowed them to offer priority status in admissions to these ancestors. Penn could do much the same, or do more, such as by offering scholarships or other university-related benefits to these ancestors. Again, it certainly would not make up for the slaveholding past of the university and its trustees, but it would be a step towards amends.

Even if the genealogy of the people who were held in bondage cannot be found or they have no living relatives today, I still think that it is important to tell their stories. For instance, I hope that more is discovered about the man held by Thomas Cadwalader named James Sampson who was freed in the first four copies of his will but not mentioned in the fifth. Were he and his family manumitted before Cadwalader wrote the final copy of his will? Did Cadwalader decide not to manumit him for some reason? If so, why? What happened to his children mentioned in the will, or his wife? On the same subject, we can look to the enslaved people freed by William Allen in his will. Are there records of their names? Where did they go after they were freed? What did they go on to do? There are many questions that could frame further research in a manner that is more focused on the experience of the enslaved people that were connected to Penn and less on the trustees who held them.

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