Preliminary Research Report of the Penn Slavery Project

Caitlin A. Doolittle
Penn Slavery Project
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Department of History, University of Pennsylvania
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Part 1 – Questions

The story of Penn's relationship to slavery is a complicated one that is filled with contradiction. In recent years, many teams of researchers have begun to look into the link between their University and the institution of slavery. Many have found explicit and clear connections in their research. As students at the oldest liberal arts college in the country, which also happens to be located in the city that is often heralded as the birthplace of American abolition, we found ourselves compelled to ask some of the same questions that are being asked in history departments all across the country.

The first thing that we had to spend some time thinking about was what constituted individual or institutional – implication in slavery. With the help of Mark Lloyd, and by reading *Freedom by Degrees* by Gary Nash and Jean Soderlund, we had a good sense of the world in which the early trustees were living. We knew that many of the early trustees owned slaves at some point or were part of families that owned slaves. We were relatively confident that we would not find any evidence that the University itself owned slaves. Because of this, we shifted our focus on the proximity of the University to slavery – were slaves ever employed by the University? Did they live on campus? Did they live nearby? Our curiosity pushed us to want to know to what degree an average early student of the University would see and interact with the institution of slavery.

From reading the biographies of the trustees posted on the University Archive website, we knew that many of the trustees were merchants, and therefore were intimately connected with trade.[1] Philadelphia at the time was a major Atlantic trading port involved in the West Indian trade as well as the trade with Britain. Many of these trustees were likely engaged in trading goods produced by enslaved people or goods consumed by plantation societies for the support of the slave population, if not in the slave trade itself.

It was also very important to us as researchers not to lose sight of the humanity of the enslaved people that were truly the subject of our research. As often as possible, we hoped to link a story to a name, so that in engaging with research on slavery we would not gloss over what slavery does to an individual. Remembering that both the trustees and the slaves we were investigating were humans who truly lived and breathed and walked some of the same streets that we still walk today gave us an extra motive to want to do justice to this project and to the lives of those who may have been harmed – directly or indirectly – by the University and its ties to slavery.

Part 2 – Method

The first step in our research was to find our starting point. At the suggestion of Prof. Brown, we read through the biographies of the early trustees of the University, located on the University Archive's website. From here, we collectively assembled a list of the people we thought were most likely to have clear ties to slavery and the slave trade – merchants were our primary focus, along with big landholders and those who operated mills and other production

[1] http://www.archives.upenn.edu/histy/features/1700s/trustees.html

sites. We created a google doc so that we could share our research with one another and map out who owned how many slaves and when.

Our next move was to visit the University Archives. Archivist Mark Lloyd agreed to meet with us, and introduced us to the general history of the University's establishment and earliest years. He then introduced us to the documents that we would be able to find through the Ancestry databases. This was a crucially important step for us, as it allowed us to look at the tax reportings of the trustees, which often documented not only their extreme wealth, but also sometimes enumerated the exact items they owned – including slaves. We spent quite a bit of time going through these tax records for as many trustees as we could find, and successfully were able to gather slave ownership information on many of them.

After having completed this, we decided that we needed to look more into the personal documents and records of those who owned slaves. We split these men up so each researcher was responsible for looking in depth into four trustees. We looked for each of their wills, and when we struggled to find it we were often aided by Mark Lloyd.

Secondary sources were often our first step. A simple google books search had the potential – and sometimes did – lead us to information on our trustees which was relevant to their lives, and thus to their connection to slavery. We revisited Nash's book, as well as looking in his book *First City*, which focused specifically on Philadelphia history and sometimes mentioned especially prominent or influential trustees by name. When this was the case, we looked at the source material that Nash pulled from and tried to revisit those ourselves.

Another way of examining primary sources was through the Early American Newspaper database which we accessed through the University Library website. Through this we thought

we may be able to find newspaper ads that linked trustees to slavery – runaway ads, for-sale ads, etc. We had mixed success with this source. Although we often could find mentions of the trustees we were investigating, it was often not explicitly connected to their involvement in slavery and the slave trade. In a few cases we were able to find some tangentially related documents, but overall, we decided to move on from this source, hoping we would have better luck elsewhere.

Our next step was to look at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP)'s records. Through their database we were able to identify the papers they housed either in their building or at the Library Company of Philadelphia (LCP)'s building. Many of our trustees, as some of the most prominent men coming from wealthy families in the region, had boxes of family documents at HSP or LCP. It was sometimes a challenge to determine what documents specifically were in each box, which encouraged us further to visit to research.

We each had different schedules, but tried as much and as often as we could to go to HSP to do research, ideally in pairs or groups. When I visited, my starting point was to look at mentions of my trustees in the Pennsylvania Gazette, an index of which exists in printed manuscripts at HSP. Though it looked promising, this was largely a dead end for me. I then moved on to HSP biographies of notable people. While this did give me more biographical information and understanding of family connections, which is of course very valuable, it did not necessarily lead me to explicit information about slaveholding or slave trading. I revisited the Historical Society's database, and realized that many of the documents I would want to look at were in the Library Company, conveniently right next door to HSP.

At the Library Company, with the help of the kind archivists, I was able to look at documents and manuscripts that outlined many of my subjects' lives and connections to slavery. This is where I had the greatest success in my research, the findings of which I will detail later.

Part 3 – Findings

Our findings suggest that the lives of the trustees were riddled with contradiction. We found trustees who both owned slaves in their early years and went on to be intensely involved in abolitionist work in the city, and trustees who, while owning slaves, wrote words that became symbols of freedom and liberty in the early years of America's formation. No one's life is ever consistent throughout – we all live in and with contradictions. That is part of what makes this project and the stories of the trustees so interesting.

In the 18th century, there were a total of 126 trustees. Of this number, we identified 28 we believed would be most likely to own slaves. Of these 28 who we investigated more closely, we found with certainty that 20 of them owned one or more slaves at some point in their life.

Benjamin Chew, perhaps one of the most well-known of the trustees, came from one of the wealthiest families in the Chesapeake region during this time period. His family owned multiple plantations and homes in Maryland, Delaware, and Pennsylvania, including the well-known Cliveden property in Philadelphia's Germantown neighborhood, which served as the Chew family's summer home, and a townhouse on South Third Street. Chew was a protégé of the Penn family and was deeply involved in the Judiciary branch of Pennsylvania. In 1747, the

Chew family owned at least 52 slaves, some of whom are named in their family papers.[2] Notably in Philadelphia history, the Chew family also owned African American minister Richard Allen, before trading him to another owner who later freed him. Allen later went on to found the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia.

Joseph Reed was a trustee from 1778-1785, and he was President of the Board of Trustees from 1779-1781. He was a very well-connected man, aide-de-camp to George Washington during the Revolution, and eventually Governor of Pennsylvania. According to tax records, he owned at least one slave in 1774.[3] Six years later, in 1780, the Gradual Abolition Act was passed in Pennsylvania. Records show that Joseph Reed was, in fact, both a strong proponent of the act and the author of the preamble. For multiple sessions of assembly leading up to its passage, Reed pleaded with the assembly to pass an abolition law. One source, dated September 9th, 1779, quotes Reed as saying

> Our anxiety to perpetuate and extend the blessings of freedom, and enlarge the circle of humanity, induces us to remind you of the bill emancipating the children born of negro and mulatto parents. We wish to see you give the complete sanction of law to this noble and generous purpose, and adorn the annals of Pennsylvania with their bright display of justice and public virtue.[4]

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[2] Nancy E. Richards, "The City Home of Benjamin Chew, Sr., and his Family A Case Study of the Textures of Life," Cliveden of the National Trust, Inc., 1996, http://www.cliveden.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Benjamin-Chew-townhouse.pdf.

[3] Ancestry Library. "Joseph Reed 1774 tax records from Philadelphia County, in Pennsylvania, Tax and Exoneration, 1768-1801." Accessed October 26, 2017. http://bit.ly/2keq4Zh

[4] *Life and Correspondence of Joseph Reed*, ed. Charles R. Hildeburn, (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1847), 176.

Clearly, there is some inconsistency in Joseph Reed's life. While what I have read about him suggests that he is morally opposed to slavery, he certainly owned a slave at one point in his life. Perhaps his opinion on the matter changed, perhaps he did not see his owning of a slave as in opposition to his belief in abolition. He may have seen himself as a kind master, and therefore not included in the plague of slavery. Regardless, it is clear that Reed fell on both sides of the slavery issue during his life.

William Masters and William Plumsted were both Founders and early trustees of the University. According to one source, Masters owned an "astonishing number of slaves" on his plantation. According to an inventory from 1740, there were at least 34 slaves on the property. When Masters died in 1761, his remaining slaves were inventoried and sold a few weeks later.[5] Plumsted, also a founder and trustee, inherited three slaves from his father. Plumsted purchased a slave as late as 1762, three years before he died.[6] These men, both prominent Philadelphia slaveholders, had signed the Petition of 1741, a plea to the crown to send extra troops in case the slaves of Pennsylvania decided to rebel like their counterparts in New York City earlier in the year. The petitioners wanted sufficient force to be able to put down such a rebellion.

While these are just some of the numerous stories of the trustees that we were able to find in our initial research, they are demonstrative of a larger pattern. These prominent, wealthy Philadelphia men who were integrally important to early development of the

[5] Knight-Yardley, Vol. 3, 843.
[6] Ibid., 1073.

University of Pennsylvania owned slaves, benefitted from slave labor, and played a role (either in favor of or in opposition to) in abolition.

Part 4 – Interpretation

It is remarkably easy for a University whose mascot is the "Fighting Quaker" and which lies in the City of Brotherly Love and the Birthplace of American Abolition to claim that it has no ties to slavery. And perhaps the University of Pennsylvania did manage to avoid the explicit ties to slavery that have plagued other institutions like Princeton and Georgetown. To deny the influence of slavery on Penn's growth, though, is to do an injustice to the lives and the suffering of those whose enslavement lined the pockets of these men.

This prompts the question of what it means for a University to be "complicit" in slavery. As far as our research has shown thus far, Penn as an institution did not own slaves in the way Georgetown University did. The wealthy and powerful men who were the founders and earliest trustees were men who gained their power and influence directly and indirectly through the slave trade. Some were owners of many slaves who built their wealth through plantation work. Others were businessmen in the city whose daily operations were largely possible because of slave labor. Even some who were merchants and did not necessarily own slaves themselves were undeniably linked to slavery through trade – a trade system that relied very heavily on the capture, transport, and selling of enslaved Africans in the British colonies and the production of valuable commodities with slave labor. The University could not have been established without the wealth and widespread influence of these men; wealth and influence that was created through the institution of slavery. These men and the early attendees of the University also undoubtedly used and owned products that were made with materials that were reliant on

slave labor. As one of my fellow researchers put it, there is no innocence in a slaveholding society.

There are many examples of trustees of extreme wealth whose lives were intertwined with slavery. William Bingham held slaves until at least 1783. By the 1790s, he was considered to be the wealthiest man in America. Thomas Willing, who was the President of the Bank of North America, owned three slaves in 1769 and none by 1782, both years which intersected with his time serving as a trustee of the University. Although it appears that he may have freed his slaves, his owed at least a portion of his wealth and prominence to the labor of enslaved people. Robert Morris, a merchant who Founded the Bank of North America, owned slaves up until 1797. Both in his involvement in trade and his own ownership of enslaved people, his wealth was tied to slavery, which certainty improved his ability to found the Bank.

There are also early trustees whose lives linked with the abolitionist movement. Benjamin Franklin, Founder and Trustee of the University, owned at least two slaves during his life. He was also famously involved in early abolition. Isaac Norris, who was passed down slaves from his family and later freed them, was the same man who suggested the inscription for the Liberty Bell: “Proclaim Liberty Throughout All the Land Unto All the Inhabitants thereof.” Both the bell and its inscription later became integral parts of the abolitionist movement. Caspar Wistar, a professor of Anatomy and member of the Board of Trustees, was also one of the leading abolitionists in the country. He was at one point President of the Society for the Abolition of Slavery.

These men and their stories are all inextricably linked to the story of the founding and early management of the University. Regardless of the extent of each trustee’s contact with

slavery, they owed at least a portion of their influence and wealth to the Atlantic economy enslaved people had built with their labor. This influence and wealth, in turn, is what made them qualified and positioned to be a part of the leadership of what would later become the University of Pennsylvania. The University was built on the shoulders of these men whose power was built on the shoulders of the enslaved people who made their wealth.

There is a lot more work that needs to be done before anyone truly understands the link that the University had to slavery, but these preliminary findings certainly suggest that the link is more significant and stronger than anyone at Penn has previously acknowledged. Though its current location and buildings are not the same as those of the original University, Penn was built on top of former slave quarters. As one historian has suggested to us, if we dug deep beneath the ground of College Hall, we might find remnants of a slave quarters that once existed here. Similarly, the physical buildings of the original university – the bricks, the glass, the supplies – may have been made through skilled slave labor.

Additionally, though this research has not yet been done, we have good reason to believe that many of the early students – particularly those in the medical school, which in its earliest years pulled students primarily from the South and Latin America – may have brought personal slaves to school with them, working around the law that would have freed their slave after six months on Pennsylvania soil. Similarly, many of the doctors trained at the Penn Medical School went back to their slave-owning communities. They may even have served as doctors at the trading blocks, inspecting the bodies and teeth of slaves who arrived there, appraising their value before they were sold. The fact of the matter is that Penn's primary purpose is to educate students, and the students are therefore tied to the success of the

university. Their ability to attend the prestigious school, the possibility that they brought slaves with them, and the potential that they used what they learned to bolster the slave society, connects the students (and therefore the University) to slavery.

In teaching others about the link between the University of Pennsylvania and slavery, it is natural to fall into the trap of comparing Penn to other colonial Universities who have done similar research. This, however, is dangerous. Through this comparison, some may unintentionally downplay the effect that slavery had on the University in its earliest years, and therefore downplay the experiences of the enslaved. Saying that Penn was “not as bad” as Georgetown is an oversimplification of a complex reality.

It is necessary, then, to teach effectively about Penn’s relationship to slavery through acknowledgement and highlighting of the nuance. As previously stated, the story is one that is rife with contradiction. Instead of shying away from these moments and looking for one side of the argument that each person (and therefore the University) falls on, it is important to not only recognize but investigate these moments of discrepancy. Similarly, teaching the story of Penn’s connection to slavery necessitates an understanding and recognition of the intertwined-ness of the slavery and trade in a slave society.

I think part of the history of the institution’s relationship to slavery is its acknowledgment of this relationship. In the past, a representative from the University has stated publicly that it has no trace of slavery in its founding.[7] This is obviously not true, and in order for the University to ethically confront its past, it needs to retract this statement, and

[7] Sheila Simmons, "UPenn claims no traces of slavery in its DNA," The Philadelphia Tribune, September 9, 2016, , http://www.phillytrib.com/commentary/upenn-claims-no-traces-of-slavery-in-its-dna/article_0d8072c4-96ff-5617-82d0-f00b0ab4c910.html.

publicly acknowledge the institution's ties to slavery. Similarly, Penn needs to acknowledge that the prominence and wealth of the trustees (and thus their ability to serve as a trustees) were integrally related to slavery, even if they did not own slaves themselves. While I am currently unwilling to say empirically that the University should offer priority admission status to the descendants of the enslaved people owned by trustees, as Georgetown is doing, I think it is certainly important for the University to keep that option open and to be thoughtful in its handling of atonement. Similarly, there is currently only one trustee on the University Archive's website who is said in his biography to have owned slaves. The University Archives should publish each trustee's slaveholding status to the best of its ability, and ideally also publish our research on the Archives website.

Part 5 – Further Research

Something that is clear to us all is that there is a lot more research to be done to do this subject justice. Our goal to keep our research as focused on the lived experience of the enslaved proved to be incredibly difficult, as tax reports largely did not include slave names. Who were those that were held by the trustees? What happened to those that were manumitted? What about those that were not?

We also have yet to tackle some of our questions about geographic proximity – where were slaves in relation to the early University? It has also been suggested to us that we might want to look more into what used to be where the University currently resides in West Philly. We may also want to explore how Penn's slaveholding past may affect its relationship with Black Philadelphians, particularly those in West Philly.

We want to look more into the financial history of the University, something which might be challenging but that would give us necessary information. What funds were used to create the original university? Was it donations from trustees? Where did this money come from? Were slaves ever sold to fund the University? Was money taken from trade connected to slavery to fund the University? Also, if students brought slaves on to campus, where did they live? What did they do? Similarly, our conversation and definition of what it means for the University to be “implicated” or “complicit” is one that must continue to develop as we learn more information.