

Penn Slavery Project Preliminary Research Report

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In beginning to research the role slavery played in the University of Pennsylvania's founding, the main topic our team looked to address was the University's proximity to slavery. Since the University did not, itself, own slaves, we used the approach of "proximity to slavery" to investigate the relationship of the early trustees to slavery. This relationship could take several forms: owning slaves themselves; being a merchant involved, actually or tangentially, in the slave trade; or advocating for the abolition of slavery. Also included in the definition of proximity are the experiences of enslaved people living near the campus. This part of the definition of proximity to slavery requires reconstructing the interactions enslaved people may have had with faculty and students attending Penn.

The goal of this project is to provide transparency about the trustees' and the school's dealings in an era where slavery was widespread and normative. As the project progressed, we formulated new questions related to the original question about proximity. Was the University complicit in the slave trade or in slavery through the actions and situation of its trustees? Based on our findings, what are the implications of the research we have done, and what is an appropriate response for Penn to take to address this situation today?

We started our research by looking at the University Archives¹ for a list of all the early trustees of the University. The University Archives has a page dedicated to all of the trustees before 1800, and that list of 126 trustees is what we used in determining who qualified as an early trustee. We looked at pre-1800 trustees only because Pennsylvania enacted "An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery"² that stated all slaves born after March 1st, 1780 would be freed after 28 years of servitude. The Act also freed slaves who moved to Pennsylvania for more than

¹ "Penn Trustees 1749-1800," University of Pennsylvania Archives and Records Center, Accessed on November 28, 2017, <http://www.archives.upenn.edu/histy/features/1700s/trustees.html>.

² Pennsylvania, *An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery (1780)*, ed. The Avalon Project (New Haven, Yale Law Library), http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/pennst01.asp.

six months. Thus, it is unlikely that we would find any slaves owned by Penn trustees in the state of Pennsylvania post-1800. To orient ourselves to the topic, we began by reading Gary Nash's *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black community, 1720-1840*.³ Nash's book outlines the daily lives of enslaved and free blacks in Philadelphia at the time. His book provided vast amounts of information about the locations of black neighborhoods, freedmen's religions, black family structure, and listed the names of some of the slave owners and important families in Philadelphia at the time. I cross-checked the names Nash listed as either owning slaves or were abolitionists against the names on our list from the University Archives to see if Nash mentioned any Penn trustees. Once I had compiled a list of everyone Nash mentioned, we read the brief biographies of all 126 trustees before 1800. We compiled individual lists of who we believed were the most likely to have owned slaves, and as a group decided on the twenty-eight trustees most likely to have had a proximity to slavery. The twenty-eight were chosen based on their profession, wealth, and where they owned land. We especially focused on merchants, due to the possibility of their involvement in the international slave trade or trade with the West Indies.

Once we narrowed the group of 126 down to 28, we met in groups with Mark Lloyd⁴ for advice on where to look to find information about possible slave ownership. He suggested numerous books in the University's library system that might prove useful, as well as introducing us to Ancestry Library's records and their collection "Pennsylvania, Tax and Exonerations, 1768-1801."⁵ Tax records are useful to us because in years where there were itemized tax returns, slaves (being considered property) were listed on tax returns as taxable

³ Gary Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black community, 1720-1840*, (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press), 1.

⁴ Mark Lloyd is the Director of the University Archives and Records Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

⁵ "Pennsylvania, Tax and Exoneration, 1768-1801," Ancestry Library, Accessed November 28, 2017, <https://search.ancestrylibrary.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=2497>.

income. Thus, we can get a general understanding of who owned slaves in Pennsylvania, how many slaves they owned, and in what years they owned slaves.

Once we figured out who listed slaves on their tax records, we tried to find the personal papers of those trustees. This project relies almost entirely on primary source documentation, and the majority of our primary source documents are housed at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania's (HSP) archives in Philadelphia.⁶ As a group, we made numerous trips to the archives and utilized HSP's online documents to perform our research. Other archives where some of our documents were found include the American Philosophical Society, the City of Philadelphia Archives, the City of Philadelphia's Department of Wills, and newspaper archives from the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. By narrowing the list to those who owned slaves, we were better able to utilize the HSP archival resources to find further details into the slaveholders and enslaved people.

To organize ourselves, we created a folder on Google Drive where all of our information would be kept.⁷ This includes a spreadsheet⁸ with information on the number of slaves owned during a calendar year for each trustee and possible locations where their archival documents might be found.

On the spreadsheet, we noted that twenty out of the twenty-eight trustees we researched owned slaves.⁹ The Ancestry Library tax records proved extremely fruitful, as we collected information on the number of slaves owned on seventeen of the twenty-eight trustees from these

⁶ "Discover HSP Online Catalogue," Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Accessed November 28, 2017, <https://discover.hsp.org>.

⁷ "Penn Slavery Project," Google Drive folder, Accessed November 28, 2017, https://drive.google.com/drive/u/1/folders/0B_kiq2LTwpB3STB1bUdmdEdXN0k.

⁸ "Trustees of Interest," Google Sheets, Accessed November 28, 2017, https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/u/1/d/18uG34IX8aor8uqduQORw9-1XRk3lhJelDcmkekPPaxo/edit?usp=drive_web

⁹ Ibid.

records. Eleven of the twenty trustees who owned slaves owned fewer than three people, while the rest owned 4 or more slaves. Of particular note are William Masters and Benjamin Chew. Masters owned an “astonishing number of slaves for an eighteenth-century Pennsylvanian,”¹⁰ and in a 1740 inventory he listed thirty-four slaves.¹¹ Benjamin Chew, on his Whitehall Plantation in Delaware, alone, had up to fifty slaves.¹² This figure does not appear to include the two slaves living with Chew in Philadelphia¹³, nor the enslaved people at his other properties in the region. While these two appear to be outliers in terms of the number of enslaved people they owned while they were trustees of the school, it does speak to the incredible wealth of these early trustees.

As part of my individual research, I focused on Edward Tilghman Jr., James Tilghman, Gen. James Potter, and Caspar Wistar. Edward Tilghman was a lawyer who enjoyed living a private life, shunning all offers to join the courts or the legislature. He was the son of Elizabeth Chew, making Benjamin Chew Tilghman’s granduncle. James Tilghman was a lawyer, and he served both Lord Baltimore and the Penn family in their land offices, rising to become Secretary of the Proprietary Land Office in Pennsylvania. Gen. James Potter was one of the highest-ranking generals in Pennsylvania during the Revolution¹⁴, and served as Vice-President of Pennsylvania. He was also one of the largest landowners in the state during his life. Caspar Wistar was a renowned Professor of Anatomy at Penn and trustee. He was President of the

¹⁰ Craig W. Horle et. al., eds., *Lawmakers and Legislators in Pennsylvania: A Biographical Dictionary*, vol. 3, (Harrisburg: Commonwealth of Pennsylvania House of Representatives, 2005), 844.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “Whitehall Plantation list of enslaved persons, 1787-1801,” Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Digital Library, Accessed November 28, 2017, http://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/5574.

¹³ “Benjamin Chew Esquire, in Pennsylvania, U.S. Direct Tax Lists, 1798,” Ancestry Library, Accessed November 29, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2iFjjyc>.

¹⁴ Horle et. al., eds., *Lawmaking and Legislators*, 1087.

American Philosophical Society, the Pennsylvania Prison Society, the Humane Society and the Society for Circulating the Benefit of Vaccination.¹⁵

Gen. Potter¹⁶, as one of the largest landowners in Pennsylvania, utilized slaves to work that land. While his tax records appear fairly infrequently in the records, we do know that he owned at least 2-6 slaves during his lifetime.^{17,18} In addition, on September 13, 1770, one of Potter's slaves named Jack was written up in a *Pennsylvania Gazette* advertisement by the jailor alerting James Potter that he had four weeks to pay the charges on behalf of his slave or have the state sell Jack to pay off the debts.¹⁹ This is the only record I have found so far of James Potter's slaves that lists their names.

James Tilghman²⁰ grew up at the Tilghman family estate on the eastern shore of Maryland before moving to Annapolis and later Philadelphia to pursue a law career. The family tobacco plantation, the Hermitage, was the residence of dozens of slaves living there in the late 18th century, though no data exists for how many slaves were on the property during Tilghman's youth.²¹ However, he continued to own slaves throughout his life. After moving to Philadelphia in 1760 to serve in the Pennsylvania land office, his tax records indicate that he owned four

¹⁵ "Penn Biographies: Caspar Wistar (1761-1818)," University of Pennsylvania Archives and Records Center, Accessed November 28, 2017, http://www.archives.upenn.edu/people/1700s/wistar_caspar.html.

¹⁶ "Penn Biographies: James Potter (1729-1789)," University of Pennsylvania Archives and Records Center, Accessed November 28, 2017, http://www.archives.upenn.edu/people/1700s/potter_james.html.

¹⁷ "James Potter 1781 tax records from Northumberland County, in Pennsylvania, Tax and Exoneration, 1768-1801," Ancestry Library, Accessed November 28, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2AJiFua>.

¹⁸ Horle et. al., eds., *Lawmaking and Legislators*, 1093.

¹⁹ Joseph Thomas, "Announcement to James Potter to collect his slave, Jack, from jail," *Pennsylvania Gazette*, September 13, 1770, <http://bit.ly/2A69HE8>.

²⁰ "Penn Biographies: James Tilghman (1716-1793)," University of Pennsylvania Archives and Records Center, Accessed November 28, 2017, http://www.archives.upenn.edu/people/1700s/tilghman_jas.html.

²¹ Lavoie, Debra Elizabeth. "Documentation of the History and Physical Evolution of Hermitage Farm, Centreville, Maryland." Master's Thesis. University of Pennsylvania, 2000. http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1448&context=hp_theses

slaves up until 1776.²² The tax records listing his taxable property past 1776 are not listed on Ancestry Library, so it is not clear what happened to those four slaves after the gradual abolition law was passed in 1780.

Edward Tilghman Jr.²³ was also born on the eastern shore of Maryland in Wye. His side of the family had extensive land holdings in Delaware, since Edward Tilghman Sr. married Benjamin Chew's niece. Included in the family landholdings was the Whitehall Plantation. In 1748, following the death of Samuel Chew, Whitehall Plantation was passed down to his daughter, Elizabeth, and her husband, Edward Tilghman Sr.²⁴ Edward Sr. held the property until his death in 1772, when he passed the property down to Edward Tilghman Jr.²⁵ However, part or all of the land that was passed down to Edward Tilghman Jr. was sold to Benjamin Chew in 1772. The document is difficult to read, but it appears that the number of acres assigned to Edward Tilghman and his heirs roughly correspond to the number of acres Benjamin Chew purchased from Edward Tilghman.²⁶ Whitehall kept detailed records of their slaveholding. Among the records kept include name, age, birth-year, status (died, sold, working somewhere else, working at Whitehall, etc.), the cost of their clothing and shoe size,²⁷ and keeping track of the slave parents and children on the plantation for the end of the 18th century.²⁸ However, it is

²² "Benjamin Chew 1776 tax records from Philadelphia County, in Pennsylvania, Tax and Exoneration, 1768-1801," Ancestry Library, Accessed November 28, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2BBuhxj>.

²³ "Penn Biographies: Edward Tilghman (1750-1815)," University of Pennsylvania Archives and Records Center, Accessed November 28, 2017, http://www.archives.upenn.edu/people/1700s/tilghman_edwd.html.

²⁴ "Duck Creek Hundred, Kent County, Delaware," Delaware American History and Genealogy Project, Accessed November 28, 2017, http://deahgp.genealogyvillage.com/kent/duck_creek_hundred_kent_county_delaware.html.

²⁵ Edward Tilghman Surrender to Edward Tilghman Jr., January 9, 1772, Box 775, Folder 12, Chew Family Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

²⁶ Edward Tilghman Copy Deed to Benjamin Chew, May 1772, Box 774, Folder 22, Chew Family Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

²⁷ Whitehall Plantation Slave Expenses, 1786-1797, Box 773, Folder 14, Chew Family Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

²⁸ Benjamin Chew, Memos Book for Whitehall & Kent Affairs, ca. 1790, Box 773, Folder 21, Chew Family Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

interesting to note that while it is likely Edward Tilghman Jr. owned slaves, he is only confirmed as owning slaves for the 4 months between being bequeathed Whitehall and selling the property to Benjamin Chew. He was never listed as having owned slaves in itemized tax records, thus further research is required to figure out why a successful member of two prominent slave-holding families has no record of owning any slaves.

However, not all of the early trustees supported slavery. In fact, a number of prominent early trustees were heavily involved in the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS), including Benjamin Franklin, who served as President,²⁹ and Caspar Wistar, who served as President of the Society for the Abolition of Slavery.³⁰ Two other trustees, William Lewis and William Rawle, performed pro bono legal work on behalf of PAS to win the freedom of slave children and pregnant slave-women taken across state lines to state that had not yet abolished slavery and thus deprived them of their rights as people who were guaranteed freedom under the law. Their work helped enact a 1788 amendment to the 1780 gradual abolition law that outlawed the practice of taking children and pregnant women south in order deliberately to deprive them of their rights.³¹ It is certainly possible that the cases Lewis and Rawle litigated were against other slaveholding trustees in pursuit of their abolitionist goals, although a thorough examination of court records would be needed to verify this claim. Another trustee, George Bryan, who served as President of Pennsylvania, on the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, and in the General Assembly, was an ardent opponent of slavery. He authored the 1780 “An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery,” the first legislative act abolishing slavery in the Western World.³² While this project has focused on

²⁹ Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 108.

³⁰ “Caspar Wistar,” University of Pennsylvania Archives.

³¹ Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 108.

³² *Ibid.*, 60-63.

researching likely slave-owners, there was still a prominent portion of the board of trustees who were opposed to the institution of slavery.

The case of Benjamin Franklin is especially important to this research project, since he founded the University of Pennsylvania and is still the face of the university. He was known to be a slaveholder throughout his life, but in the last 5-10 years of his life, he had a change of heart. Franklin took a leadership role in PAS and was President of Pennsylvania when the loophole was removed from the gradual abolition law in 1788. He is quoted as saying that slavery is “an atrocious debasement of human nature”³³ in 1789, a year before his death. As our university’s founder, Franklin appears to have completely changed his views on slavery. I think that Franklin is representative of some of the trustees we have researched thus far, in that he appears to have fully embraced the abolition of slavery in Pennsylvania at the end of his life. Other trustees who have also embraced the anti-slavery movement include William Rawle, William Lewis, Caspar Wistar, and possibly Isaac Norris Jr.³⁴ His change of heart follows the trend of the city of Philadelphia as a whole. The Quaker population of Philadelphia had been rapidly increasing the rate at which they freed their slaves in their wills, up to over 3/7 of the time in the 1760s compared to only 1/7 of the time in the 1730s. Quakers in 1772 also agreed amongst themselves that they would push to end the practice of owning slaves by community guilt or threats of expulsion, not by law. This plan, though it had pushback, was largely successful.³⁵ This was followed by other religious orders; 1/3 of all Presbyterian, Anglican, and Swedish Lutheran wills manumitted their slaves upon their death in the 1760s.³⁶ However, Franklin’s change of heart does not detract from the reality that he owned slaves for much of his

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ See VanJessica’s paper.

³⁵ Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 32.

³⁶ Ibid, 33.

life. His life story, rather, speaks to the complexities surrounding slavery of this era. In a society that revolved around the institution of slavery, what does it mean for someone to be both a slaveholder and abolitionist?

What does all of this research mean for how we understand the early years of the University of Pennsylvania? Based on the research we have done so far, I believe that slavery was certainly an important factor in the wealth of Penn's trustees, but I am not yet convinced that the daily activities of the University itself were strongly defined by or organized around slavery. At the time, slavery was pervasive and entrenched in American society. All facets of Philadelphia's economy, including the University of Pennsylvania and its trustees, benefited from this system. I believe there should be a hierarchical reaction to the University's responsibility for its past trustees' ties to slavery. While the University certainly bears responsibility for its trustees' ties to slavery, I believe the strongest condemnation should be reserved for the possibility of slaves actually being on campus. I draw this distinction because slaves on campus would have direct interactions with the students, faculty, and administration of the school. In essence, slavery on Penn's campus touches all aspects of running the school, and is something for which the University is directly responsible. In terms of slavery enriching their trustees, while still reprehensible, does not directly affect the lives of those on campus. The core functions of a university are to teach students and perform groundbreaking research, neither of which are more than tangentially tied to slavery through funding means. Enslaved people on campus, however, directly affects the core goals of a university. However, this is something we have yet to come across in our research thus far. Further research on the trustees would doubtlessly lead to our uncovering more trustees with ties to slavery. Over two-thirds of the trustees we researched owned at least one slave and about half of the trustees that owned slaves

owned at least four enslaved people. However, I think this speaks more to the pervasiveness of slavery in the culture of the 18th century Middle Colonies, and especially Pennsylvania, than it does about Penn's ties to the slave trade.

I believe the sheer number of trustees that owned slaves warrants a response from the university. I believe an appropriate response would be to update the trustees' individual pages on the University Archives website to more accurately represent their relationships to slavery. William Allen currently is the only trustee listed as having owned slaves in his lifetime. While the evidence points towards Pennsylvania as a whole moving away from the institution of owning slaves before the rest of the colonies, it does not erase the fact that there is a dark past to this country's history where slavery was considered a normal facet of daily life. By shining a light on our own university's less storied past, it allows us to come clean about our past and move forward, ensuring that we as a university can continue to work to call out the injustices we see in the world today. Along these lines, I also believe the university should put out a statement acknowledging its past, ensuring that the goal of our project to provide transparency on Penn's founding is achieved.

However, I do not believe that the school should feel obligated to provide reparations of sorts to the descendants of the slaves owned by its early trustees. As of now, I do not believe there is enough evidence to warrant more than an honest acknowledgement of Penn's past. Again, should further information come to light that slaves were involved in the running of the university or staffed the university, my position on this would change. There are numerous differences between Penn and Georgetown, for example. The latter institution did enact reparations in the form of preferential admission policies for the descendants of enslaved people it sold to keep Georgetown solvent. The University of Pennsylvania did not sell any slaves, nor

did it own slaves. I think this stark difference in the situations warrants the public acknowledgement of a history that violates the core values of the university, but more research is needed into the University's actual claim on the lives of enslaved people.

One possible way to bring this to light in an honest and transparent way would be to create an interactive website featuring biographies of all the trustees. The public would be able to click on each trustee and see documents relating to their proximity to slavery. This could include documents related to slavery, abolitionist activities, or whether they were neighbors with freedmen. This would allow us to showcase the documents we have uncovered thus far and would provide a unique space for future research to be added.

This project is still only in its beginning stages. There is still much more work that needs to be done to paint a complete picture of the University of Pennsylvania's proximity to slavery. For starters, we only looked at 28 of the 126 trustees before 1800. It is likely that the trustees we chose to look at do not represent all slaveholders that held positions at the school, nor do they represent all those who worked to abolish slavery or all those who came into contact with slaves. With more time, it would be interesting to look into all 126 trustees from this period to more accurately portray the influence of slavery during the early years of the University. It would be beneficial for further research to determine if slaves lived in the campus's neighborhood during the early years of the school. We have focused largely on the trustees' ownership of enslaved people thus far, but we have yet to answer what their daily interactions with students might have been. Since this is one of the original questions we sought to answer, this should be a future project to undertake to more fully examine the proximity to slavery part of our original question.

Another angle we could take for further research is looking at the students' backgrounds to see if the student body was comprised of slave-holding families. If so, did early students bring

slaves to school with them? If so, did students stop bringing slaves to Penn after the Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery (1780), or did they continue to bring them, but for periods of less than six months? This topic would further address the daily interactions part of our initial question of proximity.

One personal disappointment for me with this project is that I was unable to locate the wills of any of the four trustees I was responsible. Finding their wills would provide important information on possible slave-holdings outside of Pennsylvania, and if they did, what happened to the slaves after they died. A limitation on the research performed by the group so far is that it largely looks at slaves owned in the state of Pennsylvania, but as a group we did not focus much on the slave holdings of trustees that were held outside of Pennsylvania. For example, the Chew/Tilghman families owned vast swaths of land in Delaware and Maryland, and those states did not have a gradual abolition law on the books during this time-period. Thus, while we did not find any reported slaves in the tax records for Benjamin Chew or his brother's grandson, Edward Tilghman Jr., in Pennsylvania after 1780, the family's Whitehall plantation in Delaware kept incredibly detailed records about the slaves that lived there through at least 1800. Though Pennsylvania tax records are easier to obtain, thanks to their public availability on Ancestry Library, it is necessary that future projects continue to examine these twenty-eight trustees to determine if they owned land in another state, and if so, did they keep slaves on those properties. Only after these steps are completed will we have a clear understanding of the University of Pennsylvania's proximity to slavery in its first 50 years.

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