Arts & Humanities

History's Burden

Taking a close look at Columbia's links to slavery.

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Henry Izard, Columbia College Class of 1789, thought it useful to have his name inscribed on his property. That way, should Charlotte ever run away (which she did), he could mention in his newspaper advertisement that “Izard” was branded upon her left cheek.

Izard’s ad was one of forty-four runaway-slave ads submitted by twenty-eight King’s College and Columbia students from the classes of 1760 to 1805 in New York papers, according to Jordan Brewington, a Columbia College senior. Brewington is one of sixteen students who have contributed original scholarship to Columbia University and Slavery, a website dedicated to examining Columbia’s connections to slavery and abolitionism.

The website grew out of a course taught by history professor Eric Foner ’63CC, ’69GSAS in 2015, which was itself inspired by the 2013 book *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities*, by Craig Steven Wilder ’94GSAS. That book spurred historical introspection at a host of elite educational institutions.

Foner, an eminent historian of the Civil War and Reconstruction who retired from Columbia last year (the course on Columbia and slavery has since been taught by Thai Jones ’02JRN, ’12GSAS and Karl Jacoby), recently spoke in Low Rotunda alongside Brewington and Jared Odessky ’15CC to mark the website’s unveiling. Slavery, Foner said, was “intertwined with the life of this institution and of course of New York City,” which in the Colonial period had more slaves per capita than any city besides Charleston, South Carolina.

Many of Columbia’s early students came from slave-owning Northern families, the researchers found, and most of Columbia’s early presidents owned slaves. In addition, the Trustees and donors at that time included merchants who built their wealth on products made from slave labor, or else profited directly from the slave trade itself.

Brewington’s research focused on slaves. As a descendant of slaves, she wanted to “talk about this history through enslaved Black lives.” But she could find no primary sources — no narratives of slaves or free persons. The slaves were invisible. “It got to me,” she said.

There was one type of documentation that hinted of their lives, however: runaway-slave ads in newspapers. These ads typically had a physical description of the escaped slave and a monetary reward, and were “the only type of literature that was widely published in public that was singularly about Black life,” Brewington said. One thing she deduced from this evidence was a “real undercurrent of Black resistance.”

She also disputed the notion that because slavery was common (the original Columbia campus downtown was proximate to many enslaved people working and building the city), slave owners were not really conscious of the atrocities they were committing. “Students were actively engaged and knowledgeable about what they were doing,” Brewington concluded. “They chose to ignore the humanity of their slaves for their own profit.”

The ads held clues. Brewington found that some were submitted multiple times over several years, indicating that a slave was repeatedly escaping from the same person, which, she argued, “speaks to the consciousness of the slave owners — knowing these people are running away, seeking self-determination, and continually trying to recapture them.” Half the ads described scars, brandings, missing toes — brutal tokens of “the day-to-day abuse that these students [the slave owners] were aware of.”

On a more positive note, some Columbians embraced anti-slavery causes. As Foner pointed out, Founding Fathers Alexander Hamilton and John Jay were members of the New York Manumission Society, and Gouverneur Morris 1768KC, a coauthor of the US Constitution, condemned slavery at the Constitutional Convention.

But Columbia’s most important anti-slavery activist, as researcher Odessky emphasized, was John Jay’s grandson, John Jay II 1836CC, who inveighed against slavery as a lawyer and churchman. Odessky called Jay II a “lone wolf” at Columbia, where most students held “extremely conservative attitudes.” In college, Jay II became a manager of the New-York Young Men’s Anti-Slavery Society, which zealously condemned slavery as “the highest crime that can be committed on moral being.” Later, he represented fugitive slaves in court and pushed the Episcopal Church toward anti-racist and abolitionist positions.

As President Lee C. Bollinger observed in his introductory remarks in Low, contemporary life has been “deeply determined” by the history of slavery. “This past is not past; it is very much in the present,” he said.

Brewington took up that theme: it wasn’t just “evil individuals” behind slavery, she said. It was a whole society. “Once you see that,” she said, “you start to understand how that world ended up birthing the world of 2017.

“Then you end up asking yourself the question: ‘Who would I have been in that world? Who am I in this world? And is there a difference?’”

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