



## Student Researchers Examine Slavery and Columbia's Early History Video Transcript

### **Eric Foner, Dewitt Clinton Professor of History:**

The purpose here today is for, as you know, for everybody to make a little presentation about the research and the paper and their conclusions, and to give President Bollinger a little education on the history of Columbia. I felt, and President Bollinger agreed, that this was a piece of the history of Columbia that was not widely known at all. In fact, it had never been investigated, except by professor Craig Wilder, a Columbia PHD who teaches at MIT and his book *Ebony and Ivy*, which came out a year, a year and a half ago, investigated a whole series of institutions of higher learning and their connection to slavery in the colonial era and the early 19th century. Kings College, Columbia, was in there, but it wasn't the major focus of the book. But it did serve as something of an inspiration for us to delve deeper and really investigate the story fully.

### **Lee C. Bollinger, President of Columbia University:**

I think it's very important for every institution to face its own history. I think it's extremely-- this is something we see in the world all the time-- nations, individual groups, people are not willing to look at themselves and see where they've come from, and it's important I think just as a matter of honesty and self reflection and truth. I mean we say in the university that's our guiding star, the truth, and so it's critical, really, that you know the truth.

### **Jared Odessky, History Student, Columbia College:**

The Columbia University & Slavery Project, not just the seminar, but I think the entire idea of looking into this history is really important for an elite institution. Other universities have begun this task, but I think that Columbia is coming into it at an interesting angle. It's not immediately apparent why Columbia is tied to the slave system, but I think what always puzzles people about slavery is how much everybody was complicit in the system and Columbia, sort of as a merchant's college where students-- a proportion of the student body was largely from the commercial classes-- was intricately linked to this history and it's something we need to recognize, and I think it's timely.

### **Sharon Liao, History and Economics Student, Columbia College:**

I found a document at the New York Historical Society library. It was the account book of Augustus van Horne, one of the college's first treasurers, and it was essentially a list of the different loans that very wealthy businessmen and politicians had taken out from the college.

### **Lorenzo Gibson, American Studies Student, Columbia College:**

So looking through that book, I saw that people owed money to King's College, and I was like, why? Don't banks typically do that? They grant loans to people? and these loans were granted at interest, and I was like, oh that's curious, so I dug a bit more, and also referring back to documents here at the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, and I saw that we were, in fact, granting loans to merchants and other folk in town in the 18th century at interest. We were trying to create revenue off these loans that we were granting, and I was like, that is weird! And then looking at the names of the people that are featured in the account book, it turns out that they are actually very active slave trading merchants, or were slave owners themselves. Augustus Van Horne, he owned at least one slave that we know of. I actually came across a newspaper entry-- I wanna say this was in 1790-- of him posting a runaway ad hoping to get his slave returned to him.

**Foner:**

Slavery was a significant presence in New York City in the colonial era and into the early 19th century it was here. Slavery wasn't abolished completely in New York completely until 1827. All the early presidents except one I think, Miles Cooper, owned a slave or two. This was not a plantation situation, but there were slaves owned, working in people's homes, as domestic workers or one kind or another. Many faculty owned slaves in the colonial era and the 1790s. Most of the students came from families where there were slaves in the household, so I didn't really realize how prevalent slavery of that kind, domestic slavery, household slavery was in the lives of the administrators, faculty, and students of King's College and early Columbia College.

**Megan Kallstrom, Writing Student, Columbia College:**

In terms of general findings, I found, by and large, Columbia faculty had been very indifferent towards slavery. There were professors who joined the Manumission Society which was a society that kind of promulgated the idea that people should manumit slaves, that abolition shouldn't necessarily be run by the government, that people should be freeing slaves, and then there were professors who also actively campaigned for abolition. There was one professor who taught at Columbia in the 1790s who, after he taught at Columbia, went on to be in the New York state legislature, where he pushed for a gradual emancipation bill 3 years before it was passed. There were a couple of professors who were not, including one professor named Richard Sears McCullough who was a chemistry professor who defected to the confederacy in 1863.

**Sabrina Singer, History Student, Barnard College:**

My topic was Columbia's two Civil War presidents. Thinking about how their personal backgrounds were reflected in Columbia's perception and participation in slavery and emancipation during the Civil War era, and for me what I found was surprising. When President Barnard was chosen to replace Charles King, there didn't seem to be any discussion about the fact that he was a slave owner or that he had been in the South for 20 years. He believed that slavery was legal and constitutional and was never tied up in the question of morality surrounding slavery, whereas Charles King, his predecessor, was very concerned about slavery's morality. So for me, it's surprising, and what I think about now walking around campus is, what else is history gonna forget? And history has completely forgotten this side of Frederick Barnard.

**Bollinger:**

We are always trying to figure out what our policy should be, what our practices should be in our institution, in our society, in the world, and in order to do that you have to know where you have come from, the circumstances, and the reason for that is because those circumstances actually continue to define the present. You can't understand the present without understanding the past.

**Foner:**

We have laid a groundwork, but there's plenty more to be researched at various points in Columbia's history. It just shows you that our history, like that of almost any institution in this country, is, has a very complicated relationship to the racial past of the United States, and the reason for studying this is just to know more about ourselves, you know. We're not blaming anybody for what happened in the 1760s. Nobody is alive today who owned a slave in New York City. But nonetheless, this history has not been written and it's an important part of our history, and it needs to be uncovered and talked about.