

Hardly Student Activists:

Columbia College Students in the Early Republic

Chloe Hawkey

Columbia University and Slavery  
Professor Eric Foner  
May 4, 2015

### Time Line

1776: Declaration of Independence declares that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

1785: The New York Manumission Society was founded to promote slaveholders’ willing release of individual slaves from bondage.

*1795: Daniel D. Tompkins graduates from Columbia College.*

1799: New York state passes its gradual emancipation law.

*1807: Egbert Benson, Jr. graduates from Columbia College.*

1808: The U.S. slave trade closes.

*1816: The Philolexian Society minutes that survive begin.*

The American Colonization Society is founded to relocate freed slaves to Liberia in order to promote an end to slavery without having a class of free black people in America.

1817: Gov. Tompkins encourages the NY state legislature to pass a law setting July 4, 1827 as the date for final emancipation.

1820: The Missouri Compromise admits Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state and sets the southern border of MO as the northernmost boundary of slavery in new territories, thus temporarily ending debate over the expansion of slavery.

1822: White South Carolinians became convinced that Denmark Vesey was plotting an uprising and a massacre in Charleston. The uprising was suppressed but paranoia ensued.

1827: Slavery was completely abolished in New York.

1831: Nat Turner’s Rebellion resulted in the deaths of sixty white Virginians and the tightening of slave codes.

Columbia, for all its 1968 radicalism, has long been a conservative institution. In recent decades, students have tended to fight that inertia, occupying a place somewhat to the left and ahead of faculty. In its early years, however, students largely stood with the institution in resisting social and political change. The college, after the War of Independence and its being renamed Columbia from King's, attracted almost exclusively students from the city's elite, students who had every reason to want things to remain the same.

For most students in early republic Columbia College, slavery was not a topic that warranted much discussion, or at least not discussion sufficiently formal to survive in the archive. Slavery was all too common in New York at this time, and it was not yet the major source of tension that it would be in the decades to come. Slaves were on the streets with Columbians and in their homes, either as family property or as guests' servants; slaves made the goods that their fathers and grandfathers traded. Few students felt the need to comment at all on its presence or its justice—it was simply a fact of life. Still, a minority of students wrote down their opinions and participated in recorded debates, and they tended to oppose slavery on moral grounds. These young men—and they were young: many graduated while still in their teens—debated slavery in clubs and wrote essays on its evil. This paper aims to establish a clearer sense of who some of these more vocal students were and how Columbia may have enabled them to voice their opinions. In addition to examining the minutes of Columbia's literary debating organization, the Philolexian Society, it focuses on the essays of Daniel D. Tompkins, class of 1795 and the manuscript of an essay by Egbert Benson, Jr., class of 1807. Then, as now, Columbia students went on to have prominent careers, in which they had the authority to influence how their countrymen viewed important issues, and if any of them proceeded to

influence policy or public sentiment in a significant way, it would say something about our school.

Alas, with very few exceptions, they did not do any such thing.<sup>1</sup> Even those students who did have prominent careers did not take strong or influential positions on slavery, and most of them left their anti-slavery debating at Columbia. The most that can be said is that Columbia encouraged an atmosphere in which young men could think and argue and write about an emotionally and ethically difficult topic.

During the early republic, the students' approaches to thinking and arguing and writing about slavery changed. The essays by Tompkins and Benson, which were considerably earlier than the Philolexian debates, expressed strong moral qualms about slavery, showing concern for the character and humanity of the slaves and acknowledging that it would be better had slavery never existed. With the language of the Declaration of Independence still in mind and almost all of the public debate over slavery still in the future, Columbians could afford to rely exclusively on the moral and religious views inculcated at their school. But by the time that the Philolexian minutes began in 1816, things had begun to change on the political front, and they continued to do so. The debates continued to employ the sort of ethical arguments and religious language that the essays did, but they also included practical approaches to the issue, such as fear of civil unrest and the potential profit from turning to hired labor. Experience, then, led the collective student body of Columbia away from using only grand, hypothetical declarations of humanity and dignity and toward more practical political and social arguments.

---

<sup>1</sup> For one notable exception, see Jared Odessky's paper on John Jay II, "Possessed of but One Idea Himself": John Jay II's Challenges to Columbia on Slavery and Race.

### **Columbia, New York, and Unremarkable Bondage**

When King's College was reopened as Columbia College in 1784, it was determined to encourage enrollment by keeping tuition low, at just fifteen dollars per year.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately for the sons of the less wealthy families of New York, this commitment to affordability did not last long, and by 1815, the tuition had spiked up to one hundred dollars, dipped down to fifty dollars, and then settled at eighty. By contrast, Yale was charging a mere \$33.<sup>3</sup> And while Columbia was narrowing the economic class from which it drew students, it was simultaneously narrowing the religious one, so that it had an ever more wealthy and more Episcopalian student body.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, it goes without saying that the college did not accept women, or students of anything other than European ancestry.

Of course, many schools today have a similar problem, tending to attract students from a rather narrow demographic base. The difference lies in the importance of getting an education today: Americans know that a college degree is almost always required to enter into the professions. But in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, this was not at all the case, and New Yorkers knew it. As Robert McCaughey writes, there was “little social and even less economic utility” to attending college.<sup>5</sup> A degree was not required to enter into law or banking, or even medicine, though there were ongoing efforts to regulate the last of these. Indeed, even the students were aware of the superfluous nature of their education. In 1834, they debated whether the “present

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert A. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia: A History of Columbia University in the City of New York, 1754- 2004* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 54.

<sup>3</sup> George W. Pierson, *A Yale Book of Numbers Historical Statistics of the College and University 1701 – 1976* (New Haven: Yale University, 1983), 536. Online at <http://oir.yale.edu/1701-1976-yale-book-numbers>.

<sup>4</sup> McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia*, 81.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

system of College education [is] calculated for entrance into the practical life.”<sup>6</sup> They decided in the negative.

Columbia thus served a remarkably small proportion of the city’s population in a remarkably unpractical way. Like the liberal arts colleges of the future, Columbia trained its graduates how to think, more than how to practice a trade or profession. Fortunately, this thoughtfulness might have countered the strongly pro-Southern attitudes that accompanied New Yorkers’ involvement in commerce. While personal investment in the slave or cotton trade tended to increase one’s own approval of slavery, studying literature and moral philosophy may have discouraged it.

Discouraging slavery, however, was no easy task, for it had deep roots in Manhattan. The “peculiar institution” that we associate so strongly with the South, was, in fact, an integral part of life in New York City for more than two centuries. When the Dutch arrived to claim the island of Manhattan in 1625, they brought with them slaves belonging to the Dutch West India Company, slaves whom they immediately set to work clearing land and constructing company headquarters.<sup>7</sup> Though they were certainly considered property, slaves in New Amsterdam did not operate under any particular race-based code of law, and they hardly endured the sort of atrocities that their 18<sup>th</sup> century counterparts would come to know. Unfortunately for the colony’s black population, the successors to the Dutch on the island had a different and decidedly less tolerant idea of the place of people of African descent. Once the British captured New Amsterdam in 1664, they began to import slaves at the rate of one hundred and fifty men

---

<sup>6</sup> Philolexian Society Records. Columbia University Archives-Columbiana Library. Volume 2.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Moore, “A World of Possibilities: Slavery and Freedom in Dutch New Amsterdam,” in *Slavery in New York*, ed. Ira Berlin and Leslie M. Harris (New York: The New Press, 2005), 31.

and women per year, so that by the eighteenth century, New York had a higher ratio of urban slaves to free people than any city other than Charleston.<sup>8</sup> Like elsewhere, with the increase of slaves came a corresponding increase in laws and restrictions on slave mobility and rights.

Still, the considerable presence of slaves was not enough to blind New York's founding fathers to the contradiction between the institution of human bondage and the calls for human liberty that accompanied the Revolution.<sup>9</sup> Thus it was that in 1785, the New York Manumission Society was founded and began to call for the abolition of slavery in the state, and that in 1799, the state passed a law for gradual emancipation.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, to agree to eventually free the children of slaves was not to be an enthusiastic abolitionist, and especially not while New York continued to occupy a major place in the international trade of slave-labor commodities.

Despite these deep roots, however, there were qualities of life at Columbia that seem to have created the space for a mild form of anti-slavery sentiment. The first of these was that the professors who expressed clear opinions on slavery more often opposed it than favored it.<sup>11</sup> Admittedly they, like the students, tended to be silent on the issue, but even a few authoritative voices on campus may have created an atmosphere in which anti-slavery sentiments were acceptable. While it is hard to imagine personal anti-slavery opinions playing much of a role in a lecture on Latin or Ancient Greek or Algebra, the school did routinely offer one course in which slavery may have come up: Moral Philosophy. In Columbia's early years it was taught by four

---

<sup>8</sup> Jill Lepore, "The Tightening Vise: Slavery and Freedom in British New York," in *Slavery in New York*, ed. Ira Berlin and Leslie M. Harris (New York: The New Press, 2005), 60.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Rael, "The Long Death of Slavery," in *Slavery in New York*, ed. Ira Berlin and Leslie M. Harris (New York: The New Press, 2005), 115.

<sup>10</sup> The New York Manumission Society, New-York Historical Society, accessed March 29, 2015, <http://nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool/history/manumission-society.html>.; For more information on Columbia and the NYMS, see Cody Nager's paper.

<sup>11</sup> See the paper by my colleague Megan Kallstrom, "Entrenched Apathy Toward Horrible Iniquity: Columbia College Faculty's Views on Slavery, 1784-1865."

consecutive Johns: John Daniel Gros (1787-95), John McKnight (1795-1801), John Bowden (1801-17), and John McVickar (1817-57). Like most of their colleagues and students, they unfortunately left very little to posterity, and practically nothing about their academic lives.

One potential insight into their teaching comes in the form of William Paley's *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, which they likely used in their lectures.<sup>12</sup> Published in 1785, this book was popular and influential in England (especially at Cambridge University) and America alike. During the whole early republic period, *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* was part of the curriculum, and the first of the Johns, John Daniel Gros, frequently cited it in his *Natural Principles Of Rectitude For The Conduct Of Man In All States And Situations Of Life* (1795).

An entire chapter of Paley's book was dedicated to the issue of slavery, and though the author managed to maintain a certain degree of philosophical even-handedness, he stated his opposition to American slavery in no uncertain terms: "The slave-trade upon the coast of Africa is not excused by these principles... But defect of right in the first purchase is the least crime with which this traffic is chargeable."<sup>13</sup> If whole classes of respectful and obedient students were taught to refer to slavery as a crime, it is not surprising that some students learned to oppose slavery in similarly strong and moralistic ways.

The second of the ways in which Columbia itself may have affected student views on slavery was its cosmopolitan location in southern Manhattan. Though almost all early Columbia students were born in the New York City area and were thus accustomed to life there, it was

---

<sup>12</sup> Wilson Smith, "William Paley's Theological Utilitarianism in America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (1954): 402, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1943313>.

<sup>13</sup> William Paley, *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, Foreword by D.L. Le Mahieu (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002). [Online] available from <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/703>, 136.



relatively easy for students to go away to other schools, and plenty of them did. There was, after all, an excess in the supply of colleges in early America, and a decided lack of demand.<sup>14</sup> But then, as now, choosing to attend Columbia enabled students to come of age in the middle of a fast-paced city, a city where the constant exchange of goods meant a similar exchange of ideas and where the relatively dense population allowed a variety of anti-slavery institutions to arise.

### Two Thoughtful Students

At least in the early years, though, that fast-paced city did little to dampen the youthful idealism of Columbia students, who transferred their moral and religious beliefs into their writings on slavery, untempered by practical concerns. The essays of Daniel D. Tompkins, who graduated in the Columbia College class of 1795, offer a clear idea of how at least some of those early students thought about the issue. Tompkins was born into a family of farmers in Westchester County, in the town that has now become Scarsdale.<sup>15</sup> In addition to farming, his father was a judge, a member of the state legislature during the Revolutionary War and a regent of the State University of New York. The family owned four slaves.<sup>16</sup> Thus, though his family seems not to have had any direct connection to the increasingly harsh slavery of the South, he grew up experiencing how slavery worked. No doubt his father spoke at home of the political discussions around slavery that occurred after the end of the war, and the young Tompkins saw how his family's slaves were treated.

---

<sup>14</sup> McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia*, 82.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel D. Tompkins, *A Columbia College Student in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*, ed. Ray W. Irwin and Edna L. Jacobsen (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1940).

<sup>16</sup> Jonathon G. Tompkins in U.S. Census. Year: 1790; Census Place: *Mamaroneck, Westchester, New York*; Series: M637; Roll: 6; Page: 154; Image: 595; Family History Library Film: 0568146

Of his surviving college compositions, the ones on slavery are from 1792 and 1793, and they ring with morality. Tompkins appealed to humanitarian sentiment and called for cultivation of the mind; he reminded his reader of the ideal of “Liberty.”<sup>17</sup> He wrote in his first such essay, “There are perhaps but two particulars in which the Americans are culpable and these are not civilizing the Indians and Africans...ought not Americans to remember that he who crowned their labors with success did it that they might be free and will not *O! gratitude will not* every tender mind shudder at the awful charge against Americans of retaining in ignorance the unhappy Africans.”<sup>18</sup> Tompkins was certainly a man of his time, if a rather sensitive one, and we can hardly be surprised that he believed in the white American’s duty to *civilize* others. Still, his willingness to condemn his countrymen was remarkable at a time when white superiority was such an accepted idea. He grounded that blame in moral assertions; he employed almost sentimental language. This was not an argument about creating a better or more secure national political, economic, or military order; it was about creating a better national character.

When Tompkins did address concrete issues, they tended to be those with a more intellectual bent, such as the importance of spreading education and religion. He was concerned, both in his three essays relating to slavery and others on Native Americans, about prejudice and false ideas of innate inferiority. Like later social scientists, Tompkins believed that access to culture and education shaped the mind and talents of people, and that it had been through the deprivation of these opportunities that African-Americans, slave and free alike, had gained a reputation for ignorance. In the same essay in which he asserted the necessity of education, he

---

<sup>17</sup> Tompkins, *A Columbia College Student*, 14.

<sup>18</sup> Tompkins, *A Columbia College Student*, 4.

offered another criticism of white slave traders, blaming them for the creation of this image of blacks and accusing them of cultivating it in order to cover the malevolence of their actions.<sup>19</sup>

Though Tompkins is known for the three decades of his life that followed his 1795 graduation from Columbia—namely, his ten years as Governor of New York, from 1807-17 and his two terms as Vice President under James Monroe—never again did he speak with the straightforward eloquence of his Columbia days. After accusations of corruption regarding his handling of state funds during the War of 1812, he was haunted by a declining reputation, challenging personal finances, and worsening alcoholism.<sup>20</sup> Even the biggest moment of his political career with regard to slavery—his successful recommendation in 1817 to the state legislature to set a final date for emancipation—was not particularly forceful or even brave.<sup>21</sup> Though the law was no small accomplishment, it was only upon his resignation from office to assume the Vice Presidency that he made this suggestion, and, as mentioned above, it had already been eighteen years since the gradual emancipation law had been passed. For a supposedly radical action, this was a very safe plan. After that last anti-slavery push, his engagement with the issue tapered off further. Ongoing sickness and financial struggles kept him away from Washington—including during the vote on the 1820 Missouri Compromise, for or against which he could have potentially cast a tie-breaking vote. As it happened, none was needed, but the very fact that such a vote was possible and yet he allowed himself to be away from Washington speaks to his lack of concern for slavery in his later years.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>20</sup> Mark O. Hatfield, with the Senate Historical Office. *Vice Presidents of the United States, 1789-1993* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1997), pp. 73-79.

<sup>21</sup> Cardozo, *A History of the Philolexian Society*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Hatfield, *Vice Presidents of the United States, 1789-1993* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1997), pp. 73-79.

Thus Columbia's first major statesman to graduate after the war ended up having relatively little to say on the issue of slavery after his outspoken days as a student. Another Columbia student, Egbert Benson, Jr. left behind a single composition on the issue of slavery apparently written, like Tomkins', for a class. Benson, Jr., the nephew of the founding father and US representative, Egbert Benson, was born in 1789 in New York City in a family that both owned slaves and had connections to the New York Manumission Society (Benson Sr. was an early member of it). He entered Columbia in 1803, at age fourteen, and graduated with the class of 1807. To an even greater extent than Tompkins, his later career was undistinguished: he became a lawyer in 1810 and then seems to have been the Master of Chancery under James Kent, a lawyer who had worked under Benson, Sr. Though the young Egbert Benson was not an active participant in any of the anti-slavery movements, the anti-slavery sentiment that he picked up from those around him seems to have influenced his beliefs.

In 1805, Egbert Benson, Jr. was a sophomore at Columbia College, the same school that his uncle had attended before the revolution. Mostly, he was receiving the same very traditional, very classical education that generations of students before him had: Latin, Greek, mathematics, rhetoric, moral philosophy.<sup>23</sup> But in his sophomore year, Benson had the opportunity to write an essay on a topic that, though ancient in origin, was all too much a part of his daily life in New York City—the slave trade. Unfortunately, though Benson carefully noted the date of each of his compositions (and, unoriginally, the name of the college), he left no indication of either professor or subject. The only instructor likely to have assigned this paper, though, was John Bowden, the professor of moral philosophy, belles-lettres, and logic, who was also an ordained assistant at Trinity church.

---

<sup>23</sup> McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia*, 85.

But whatever the class, Benson was clearly passionate about the subject matter. The basic premise of this short (barely two pages long) paper was that the slave trade was a morally indefensible and utterly cruel enterprise. Unlike slavery in New York at this time, the slave *trade* was not necessarily en route to abolition in 1805. Article 1, section 9 of the Constitution had prevented Congress from making any decision about it until 1808, so Benson had no way of knowing for sure that its closure was less than three years away. The enslaved population of New York City had increased twenty percent in the final decade of the eighteenth century, and though the number of slaves being imported to Northern states was dropping, it was at an all-time high in the South in the first years of the nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup>

Benson, then, was writing on an issue that was prevalent and increasingly debated during this period, and his language certainly reflects that tension. Like his fellow early Columbians, he eschewed statistics and economic and political arguments in favor of highly rhetorical, moral statements. He opened his composition with a rather clunky sentence in which he assured his reader that nothing promotes the dignity of a nation quite like commerce. This was, however, the last positive thing he had to say on the subject, and he thus announced his thesis: “Among its [commerce’s] varieties, there is none which is so repugnant to our feeling, none which so much deserves the anathema of sensibility as the *Slave Trade*.”<sup>25</sup> As previously discussed, Benson was not unusual in his use of these sorts of purely moral arguments: sentimentalism pervaded turn of the century anti-slavery rhetoric.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Columbia’s close connection with the

---

<sup>24</sup> The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database. <http://slavevoyages.org/tast/assessment/estimates.faces?yearFrom=1700&yearTo=1810&flag=5&disembarkation=205.204.201.203.202>; Rael, “The Long Death of Slavery,” 127.

<sup>25</sup> Egbert Benson, Jr. in Benson Papers, New York Historical Society, box 2.

<sup>26</sup> Brycchan Carey, “PhD Thesis Outline: The Rhetoric of Sensibility: Argument, Sentiment and Slavery in the Late-Eighteenth Century; University of London, 2000,” <http://www.brycchancarey.com/thesis.htm>.

Episcopalian Trinity Church meant that religious language was never far from mind, and if Bowden was indeed the professor who assigned this essay, it is even less surprising that Benson relied so heavily on morality. Given Bowden's professional connection to both religion and studies of morality, it seems probable that he would have approved of Benson's choice of argument. "Here we behold," Benson wrote, "the dictates of religion and humanity trampled under foot, and despised to give room for Avarice and Inhumanity." It is hard to imagine a sentence more appropriate to a class about morality taught by a man of the church.

Still, though his arguments may have been reasonable under the circumstances, they were not average. Not only were most Columbia students focused on issues other than slavery and thus uninvolved in any anti-slavery movement, but in the early republic, property rights were a major concern among the upper classes. Recently enshrined in the Constitution, they were held as almost sacred, and they were used in arguments against the abolition of slavery more often than racism was.<sup>27</sup> Benson's only allusion to property rights in this essay, however, is to those of the slaves and their right to their homeland and their families. If he was concerned with property rights at all, it would seem that he chose the black man's right to maintain his property over the white man's right to acquire new property.

But nor is it clear that he was free of racist beliefs. In a peculiar bit of editing, the manuscript contains a sentence that reads as follows: "the conduct of those thus concerned [i.e. slave traders] would not be so extremely culpable, if treated with humanity ~~due to brutes~~, when on the plantation of the ~~destined~~ master; but if the stings of hard fortune gall them and they but complain, cruelties and punishments are renewed."<sup>28</sup> It is impossible to tell whether these edits were Benson's own or were made at the suggestion of an editor or professor, but no matter their

---

<sup>27</sup> Rael, "The Long Death of Slavery," 116-7.

<sup>28</sup> Benson, Jr. in Benson Papers, Box 2.

origin, they served to mitigate the racism of the writing. The removal of just these few words succeeded in changing the whole tone of the writing so that people of African descent were not presented as inherently inferior, but rather as people deserving of fairness and freedom from abuse.

### **Students Debate Slavery**

Another way in which Columbia created the potential for anti-slavery sentiment was through its literary debating organization, the Philolexian Society. The society's meeting minutes, currently stored in Columbia's Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, offer a better understanding of the ways in which Columbia students thought about slavery on a day-to-day basis than any formal writing can. The arguments about slavery revealed here suggest that the increasing public attention to slavery, due to new emancipation laws, slave rebellions, and new anti-slavery organizations, may have added an element of real-world practicality to earlier students' humanitarian concerns.

The Philolexian Society was founded in 1802, and though the specific details of the founding are lost to history, one of the earliest histories of the society suggests that its purpose "was presumably the same as that of the several previous societies in the college—mutual improvement in oratory and composition."<sup>29</sup> While their goals were practical, the tone of the debate—and indeed, of the entire meetings, from the orations to the discussions of a library—was decidedly moralistic and almost philosophical. Though they clearly deemed themselves a *literary* debating society, their questions for debate were as often political as not: they covered

---

<sup>29</sup> Ernest A. Cardozo, *A History of the Philolexian Society of Columbia University from 1802 – 1902* (1902; Internet Archive 2008), ch. 1, <https://archive.org/stream/historyofphilole00cardrich#page/n7/mode/2up>.

everything from “what kind of life is most conducive to happiness?” to (during the Nullification Crisis in 1832) “should the government of the U.S. use force to secure the obedience of S. Carolina?”<sup>30</sup>

Unlike many of today’s college clubs, which are numerous and operate largely independent of the administration, the Philolexian Society was the main extracurricular activity available to students and was closely regulated by the school. Indeed, the officers met rather frequently with the Board of Trustees—an idea barely comprehensible to students today. The aforementioned 1902 history of the society states that in 1821, 1826, 1829, and 1836, students met with the trustees to discuss various aspects of their proceedings, plans, and policies.<sup>31</sup> At one point in 1821, the trustees agreed to fund the construction of a building specifically intended for use by the Philolexian and Peithologian Societies.<sup>32</sup> Apparently, the building was never actually constructed, but it is significant that the school was not only aware of the importance of this organization, but was also prepared to spend a good deal of money to support it.

Nor was the Board of Trustees content to offer uncritical support to the group: time and again, they proposed regulations on who could become members (for a while, freshman could not), what sort of academic standing the members need to have, and who would possess the key to the room in which the society met.<sup>33</sup> The society, then, was sufficiently connected to the administration of the college to be considered an integral part of Columbia, rather than a haphazard student pastime, and the students’ opinions on slavery can be read as a relevant aspect

---

<sup>30</sup> Philolexian Society Records, Volume 2.

<sup>31</sup> Cardozo, *A History of the Philolexian Society*, 14-6.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 12. The Peithologian Society was another smaller and shorter-lived debating society at Columbia.

<sup>33</sup> Cardozo, *A History of the Philolexian Society*, 20.



of the campus atmosphere. Indeed, it is worth remembering that when most of the campus was silent, even a few, relatively subdued voices could have rung out.

The records that remain from their nineteenth century minutes begin in 1816, so they cover a generation of students after Tompkins and Benson. But despite the rigidly political questions that the Society asked, the minutes of the society reveal an equally moralistic tone. For most of the meetings, all we have after the statement of the question is a list of affirmative and negative speakers and then the final vote of the society members. But for the first three years, the secretary recorded not only this final outcome, but also the arguments that each side used to make their claims.

In the twenty years between 1816 and 1836, the Philolexian Society debated issues related to slavery, suffrage, and race fifteen times, with no trend either in favor of or opposed to abolition. Five of these debates were specifically about colonization, and with but one exception, the society voted in favor of it. The next most common topics were emancipation and suffrage, each of which was discussed three times. In general, they tended toward mild opposition to the institution as it stood: they favored colonization and sometimes suffrage, and they denied the morality of slavery and the inferiority of people of African descent.

Unhappily, the members almost always voted against emancipation—in fact it was the only form of anti-slavery measure that they routinely voted down. Their concerns, it seems, were practical ones: what would become of a large class of free people of African descent? Would there be civil unrest, or even civil war? What would be the effect on commerce? Could the young and unstable nation survive the shock to its system? When the practical and the moral collided, as they did in questions of emancipation, these well-to-do Columbians were as inclined to follow

a conservative passion for social stability as they were to advocate change in favor of the slaves' humanity.

On April 10, 1817, a dozen young men gathered in Columbia College's single building on the southern tip of Manhattan and called to order a formal meeting of the Philolexian Society. After calling roll, they set out to debate the following question: "Would emancipation of the slaves be beneficial to the United States?" Ultimately, they decided that it would not be good policy, but before that, a long debate ensued. Of particular note is the reassurance put forward by those arguing against emancipation that they did not approve of the institution of slavery. As the secretary noted in the meeting's minutes, "They [the Negative] do not mean to countenance slavery. It is repugnant to every feeling of humanity and they would cordially unite in abolishing the detestable traffic of human flesh provided it would not be injurious to our country." Thus the three young men speaking for the Negative emphasized a distinction between political wisdom and moral gain. They brought up fears of rebellion and revenge, and they questioned the ability of "vulgar" white people to accept former slaves as their equals.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, their opponents made arguments of high morality, focusing on the betterment of humanity, rather than the political expediency of emancipation. As the secretary admonished in the minutes, "So potent say they is the charm of interest, that men frequently lose sight of equity in the pursuit of their own emolument," and they urged, "Let the talents now concealed in the breast of the untutored savage be called into action."<sup>35</sup> Both the lack of political argument on the Affirmative's part and the final decision against emancipation remind us that as much as these Columbians studied Paley's book on moral philosophy and as sensitive as they were to

---

<sup>34</sup> Philolexian Society Records. Columbia University Archives-Columbiana Library. Volume 1, April 10, 1817.

<sup>35</sup> Philolexian Society Records, April 10, 1817.

religious and ethical problems, they were a conservative group with professional careers to protect and plan. They feared any disruptions to their interests, and this was the second time in two years in which they voted against emancipation while citing practical concerns.

But nor were they blind in their opposition to abolition. A year later, in 1818, the society met to discuss whether, “the abolition of slavery in the US consistent with good policy.” For the Negative was Mr. Henry Nicholas Cruger, the son of the prominent and prodigious New York slave-trading family. His presence in this debate suggests that opinions may not have been casually assumed; indeed, in the young Cruger’s case, they may have been deeply ingrained beliefs. If that was the case, this was a bad week for Mr. Cruger: unlike in their previous two debates, this week, the final student vote was in favor of abolition.<sup>36</sup>

As in past debates, the arguments were heavily ethical but contained elements of the practical. The Affirmative (in favor of abolition) opened with the reminder that slavery was “inconsistent with humanity & justice” before proceeding with a series of highly rhetorical arguments. First the students attempted to make the strictly abstract slightly more concrete. “The slave-holders are no more wronged by the ransom of the slaves,” they wrote, “than the child or grandchild of a thief is wronged by being obliged to restore the property stolen.” Though they approached it in a wholly theoretical, ethical way, they also were attempting to address issues of property rights, a common concern in post-revolutionary America. Later, they employed another argument that they normally avoided, that of financial gain. They declared that many respected Southerners, including Thomas Jefferson, believed that paying wages would result in better work and thus bigger profits. In the end, however, they returned to their old standby of moral

---

<sup>36</sup> Philolexian Society Records, 164-5.

obligation and revolutionary ideals, citing avarice as the crime and the new Constitution as the standard to which they are all obliged.<sup>37</sup>

As in the previous debate, the Negative was anxious not to defend slavery—they aimed, apparently, only to avoid abolition. In a particularly passionate opening sentence, they said that they “do not pretend to defend those [who?] introduced slavery, on the contrary, if there be a place in Hell, where the torments are severer than in any [other?] they deserve to be destined there.” The slaveholders may have deserved Hell, but the Negative still urged the audience to pay attention to practical matters: a large class of freed slaves might result in life similar to that on Saint Domingue, former slaveholders might resort to civil war. Still, they seem to have found the moral argument alarmingly persuasive, for they hastened to accuse the Affirmative of insincerity. “It is not humanity that influences them,” they wrote, “but the hope of celebrity.”<sup>38</sup> The audience, was not convinced, however, and the final vote was 10-3, in favor of abolition. This was no minor reversal of the previous two debates’ emphatic rejection of emancipation, so the question is whether this represented a larger shift in student beliefs, or simply a reflection of the Affirmative’s superior rhetorical skill.

There is some reason to believe that the change in the vote from 1817 to 1818 resulted from the changing political scene, and thus that student opinions actually had evolved. In March 1817, between this debate and the previous one, the New York state legislature passed a bill to set a date for the complete abolition of slavery: July 4, 1827. As mentioned above, this was not a terribly radical action. But it still represented an ideological shift in the state’s policymakers, and what had been viewed as the personal responsibility of individual slaveholders now became an

---

<sup>37</sup> Philolexian Society Records, 164-5.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 166.

issue for more definite state control. It is possible that the students were reacting to that development on the political front, that absolute abolition now seemed more reasonable.

Still, because gradual emancipation had been part of life in New York since they were born, and since the actual effect of the law lay a decade down the road, it seems unlikely that the students genuinely reversed their position. It is important to bear in mind that these were student debates, ultimately decided based on a student vote. Though the seriousness with which they take themselves has made me inclined to take them equally seriously, their professed goal was the improvement of oratory, and the Affirmative no doubt was superior in that respect. It seems likely that the apparent reversal of opinion was actually closer to a reversal of perceived rhetorical ability.

The society proceeded to debate issues related to slavery three times in the next three years, but then it fell silent. Beginning in 1821, the society did not discuss a single question related to race, slavery, suffrage, or colonization for five years. This was a period of relative political calm on issues of slavery: the Missouri Compromise of 1820 had just resolved the issue of slavery's expansion, and New York state was toward the tail end of its gradual emancipation. Perhaps, then, the students felt no pressing need to debate, or perhaps these particular classes were less political than those that came before and after. At any rate, the classes that followed showed none of this apathy, and beginning in 1826, the society debated slavery-related questions twelve times in ten years. These debates, lacking any record of the arguments used, reveal no trend in student thought on slavery, but their sheer volume suggests a certain degree of commitment to serious discussion of the issue. The students in the society must have either had strong opinions themselves, which they were eager to share, or been aware that it was becoming an issue of national debate in which they ought to take part.

\* \* \*

Columbia was not at all the hotbed of political activism that it would become in later decades—it was a very small and relatively new school, populated by the sons of the merchant elite, which like other elites, stood to benefit from the status quo. They were a conservative lot, and with but a few exceptions like John Jay II, they did not go on to anti-slavery careers. But it seems that Columbia, with its politically aware, if academically classical faculty, its cosmopolitan setting, and its organized debating society, created a space in which students could discuss slavery—and some of them certainly did discuss. Though many were silent on the issue, unable or unwilling to see it around them, a select few were not, and they spoke out against it in highly rhetorical and moralistic ways. As the years went by and the slavery became more a part of the national debate, students came to temper those ways with a more practical concern for property rights and civic peace.

## Bibliography

- Cardozo, Ernest A. *History of the Philolexian Society of Columbia University from 1802 – 1902*. 1902. Internet Archive, 2008.  
<https://archive.org/stream/historyofphilole00cardrich#page/n7/mode/2up>.
- Carey , Brycchan. “PhD Thesis Outline: The Rhetoric of Sensibility: Argument, Sentiment and Slavery in the Late-Eighteenth Century; University of London, 2000,”  
<http://www.brycchancarey.com/thesis.htm>.
- Hatfield, Mark O. with the Senate Historical Office. *Vice Presidents of the United States, 1789-1993*. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1997), pp. 73-79.
- Lepore, Jill. “The Tightening Vice: Slavery and Freedom in British New York.” In *Slavery in New York*, edited by Ira Berlin and Leslie M. Harris, 59-89. New York: The New Press, 2005.
- McCaughey, Robert A. *Stand, Columbia: A History of Columbia University in the City of New York, 1754- 2004*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.
- Moore, Christopher. “A World of Possibilities: Slavery and Freedom in Dutch New Amsterdam.” In *Slavery in New York*, edited by Ira Berlin and Leslie M. Harris, 31-56. New York: The New Press, 2005.
- The New York Manumission Society. New-York Historical Society. Accessed March 29, 2015.  
<http://nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool/history/manumission-society.html>.
- New York State Colonization Society Records. New York Public Library. Accessed March 29, 2015. <http://archives.nypl.org/scm/20819#bioghist>.
- Paley, William. *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, Foreword by D.L. Le Mahieu. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002. [Online] available from <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/703>
- Philolexian Society Records. Columbia University Archives-Columbiana Library. Volume 1-2.
- Pierson, George A. *A Yale Book of Numbers Historical Statistics of the College and University 1701 – 1976*. New Haven: Yale University, 1983. Online at <http://oir.yale.edu/1701-1976-yale-book-numbers>.
- Rael, Patrick. “The Long Death of Slavery.” In *Slavery in New York*, edited by Ira Berlin and Leslie M. Harris, 113-146. New York: The New Press, 2005.

Tompkins, Daniel D. *A Columbia College Student in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*. Edited by Ray W. Irwin and Edna L. Jacobsen. Port Washington, N.Y. Kennikat Press, 1940.