

# The Influence of Extracurricular Activities on Racism at Columbia University Through 1930

By Talia Balakirsky

Columbia University & Slavery Course

2017

Talia Balakirsky discusses The Influence of Extracurricular Activities on Racism at Columbia University Through 1930: [video]

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Dyl2p\\_kHXY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Dyl2p_kHXY)

## Introduction

Over the last few years, universities nationwide have begun to unearth their rocky relationships with slavery and racial discrimination. As with many of these universities, Columbia University has been forced to come to terms with the practices that took place on its campuses for decades. When Columbia was founded, it mainly catered to the New York-based wealthy, white and Episcopalian population. As it began to expand, however, students from different backgrounds arrived on campus. Beginning in the early twentieth century African American students matriculated at Columbia in small but significant numbers. Given the continued discrimination against blacks that would only grow stronger as the 1900s progressed, the Columbia community, which was very

interested in maintaining its status as a university for wealthy whites, was not a place that the black students could easily call home.

A pattern of daily discrimination against black students is clearly illustrated by the extracurricular clubs, groups and activities of the Columbia community. Many Columbia-sponsored events during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were also clearly anti-black. These actions perpetuated discrimination against blacks on campus as well as within New York City boundaries, contributing to a broad acceptance of racist ideas and actions that continued far into the twentieth century.

This paper explores events up to 1930, as the university is seeking to expand its research on the topic of slavery and its legacy into the modern day where, although slavery no longer exists, its consequences surely do. In this way, my research serves as a reminder that the effects of slavery did not die along with the practice. The paper provides a background of the student body as well as an outline of the political climate of New York City between the 1870s and 1930. It then explores many of Columbia's prominent extracurricular activities, including clubs and groups, literary societies and university-sponsored events. Next, I summarize how black students coped with this blatant discrimination. Finally, I close by recounting my findings and connecting my research to the present day. Overall, I demonstrate that the discrimination posed by several of Columbia's extracurricular groups as well as by university-sponsored events created an environment that isolated black students in favor of maintaining a seemingly all white campus. It should be noted that this paper spells out the derogatory terms used by these groups and during on-campus events and activities to preserve their original impact and to maintain historical accuracy.

## Columbia's Early Student Body

Established in 1754 as King's College under English colonial rule, the institution known now as Columbia University, had a hapless beginning stemming from its high tuition and its exclusivity in choosing whom to admit. As Robert A. McCaughey writes in *Stand, Columbia*,

In the 'era of the common man' and in a city overwhelmingly composed of common laborers and artisans, early Columbia College failed to democratize. Instead, it remained a bastion of class privilege catering to the city's tiny reservoir of property holders and professionals, capitalists and creditors. Its ninety-dollar tuition, by the 1820s again the highest in the country, both reflected and reinforced its economic exclusivity. Rather than a vehicle for individual upward social mobility, early Columbia College served as an emblem of achieved familial social status.[1]

The vast majority of Columbia's students were wealthy white New Yorkers with little idea of a world outside of their own experiences. Moreover, during Columbia's early days when New York City was beginning to diversify, Columbia further isolated itself from the community in favor of maintaining its small community of white and wealthy presidents, faculty, trustees and students. Not only was this isolation apparent in the realm of religion, where there was rarely a Columbia member that was not Episcopalian, but it was also heavily evident when looking at race and gender. McCaughey writes,

Early Columbia College failed to make a place for either young women or blacks (where there were some fifteen thousand of the latter in the city in 1830). There is an inference embedded in any such litany of early Columbia's failures that had Columbia opened its doors to a wider segment of New Yorkers—to non-Episcopalians, to the sons of middling sorts and of the working classes, to women and African Americans—they would have come.[2]

This desire to keep Columbia's gates closed to all but a very select few continued on for decades, until students who did not fit the original "Columbia mold" began to arrive on campus. The extracurricular activities of the Columbia community capture the feelings and beliefs of students and faculty at early Columbia. These activities also show how racist beliefs often negatively affected the broader New York City community and continue to influence the campus today.

## The Influence of New York City Politics on Columbia

New York's history is steeped in anti-black and proslavery rhetoric. As Leslie M. Harris writes in *In the Shadow of Slavery*, "New York's first emancipation law, passed in 1799, freed no slaves and granted only partial freedom to the children of slaves."<sup>[3]</sup> As one of the major ports within the cotton industry in the early 1800s, New York City played a significant role in sustaining slavery and racism against blacks.<sup>[4]</sup> This racism only grew stronger as the city became further politicized through the power of Tammany Hall and other political machines. Though the Manumission Society, which, "work[ed] on behalf of black New Yorkers [and] provided legal assistance to both free and enslaved blacks who were being abused," seemed to have black New Yorkers' best interests in mind, it also supported colonization which,

Led New York blacks to question the society's commitment to their political and economic well being in New York. With few exceptions, black commentators adamantly opposed the Colonization Society's policies as racists. But as blacks continued to support the African Free Schools, until [Charles] Andrews, [the white principal of the African Free Schools,] caned Sanders, [a young student named Sanders for calling a black male visitor to the school a gentleman]. The caning echoed the punishments of slaves. Terms such as "gentleman" or "lady" implied middle-class economic status, as well as proper morals. Andrew's refusal to recognize a black man as a gentleman (and by extension, black women as ladies) demonstrated to blacks that by the 1830s the Manumission Society has given up on its goals of incorporating blacks into American society as full citizens.<sup>[5]</sup>

Another instance indicative of the position toward blacks in early New York City is the story of Seneca Village, a haven for the black community. According to the Central Park Conservancy, "In 1855, there were 2,000 African Americans in the city and only 100 were eligible to vote. Of those 100 residents, ten lived in Seneca Village," reflecting the importance and role of those living in the village at the time.<sup>[6]</sup> At its peak, the community had over 250 residents.<sup>[7]</sup> When officials were looking to create more room for Central Park, however, they ousted the entire community from the village against

their will, which also included three churches and a school, thus essentially destroying the history of this very influential community.[8] This story is another difficult example of New York's unwelcoming nature toward blacks and its desire to do everything to wipe these communities off the map, literally and figuratively. Barbara Speed, a journalist for CityMetric, wrote of this story in 2015, noting that, "If you visited the park during its first 150 years of existence, you [would] have no idea this village ever existed. It was only in 2001 that a small group called the Seneca Village Project pressured the city to install a small plaque; it describes the village as a "unique community," which may well have been, "Manhattan's first prominent community of African American property owners." [9] Today, thousands enjoy the land where the Village once stood. Still, few know of its true history.

These examples serve as only a small insight into the politics surrounding New York City at the time in which both Columbia was growing and its clubs and groups were starting to gain prominence on campus and elsewhere. Given that many of these groups catered to the larger city community, it is undeniable that the politics of the city at the time affected the attitudes of Columbia's student body and officials towards people of color. As such, when considering the examples presented below, it is important to reflect back upon the political climate of the city at the time and consider how moments like the above many have further influenced the actions of the Columbia community.

## Columbia Publications

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the most prominent publications on Columbia's campus were *The Columbia Daily Spectator* and *Acta Columbiana*. Because these publications were read widely by students for activity announcements, they had the direct ability to influence racism on campus. Many instances of discrimination are apparent in the coverage of the Glee Club's performances, of Columbia-related events and in humor-based stories. For example, *The Spectator* wrote a review of the Annual Concert of the Glee, Mandolin and Banjo Clubs writing, "The three clubs did exceptionally fine work, the best numbers being 'The

Medley of Southern Songs,' by the Glee Club, 'The Blacksmith,' by the Mandolin Club, and the 'Coon Medley,' by the Banjo Club.”[10] By deeming these anti-black songs as the best of the evening, *The Spectator* betrayed its racist biases. Another clear example of the racism expressed by *The Spectator* is in its coverage of a minstrel show that was to be performed by Columbia College sophomores. The article states, “In [the minstrel show] many of the famous coon songs are sung, with the many varieties of jokes between.”[11] Another similar instance occurred in 1915, when *The Spectator* was covering the annual dinner of the junior class. A reporter writes, “Gay and festive music mingled with much merriment and wit of the speakers, marked the successful dinner of the Junior class last evening at the Hof Brau Haus. In between the acts given by local talent coon orchestra, consisting of six pieces, entertained.”[12] The racist nature of *The Spectator* is undeniable in these instances, as the authors could have selected another word to describe blacks and yet chose to use derogatory language.

Racism in *The Spectator* is also seen in the fiction stories it published. For instance, in February 1881, the newspaper published, *Wilbur of Williams: A Simple Story of College Days* in which it included a character named “Old Nigger Jackson.”[13] A short story named “Smiles” was also published the same month, where it is written, “My friends accused me the other day of wearing a smile that was too benign: “Tis only a nigger, I made reply, that can smile a smile that is 2 x 9.”[14] Moreover, in 1926, a short play called *The Suburbs of Columbia: The Rise and Fall of the Black Boy* was published. In part of the script it is stated,

A vagrant ‘nigger,’ Black Boy, wanders into a training camp, knocks out the heavyweight, and with the aid of his victim’s manager, rises to the championship. At the peak of his fortunes, the manager turns against him, bets heavily on Black Boy’s opponents, and forces the octaroon girl [“a person of one-eighth black ancestry”] whom the negro had worshipped as a white angel to get him drunk on the night of the fight.[15]

This scene depicts black men as untrustworthy and dangerous. In the same *Suburbs of Columbia*, a black woman is referred to as a, “gaudy nigger wench.”[16] These are only a few small examples of the language that *The Spectator* used when describing blacks; but these examples prove that *The Spectator* was less than welcoming toward black

students. *Acta Columbiana* also produced glimpses of racism, though they not as readily available because only a few editions have been preserved. One clear example, however, is the coverage of Glee Club's performance at Steinway Hall in 1883 where an author writes that "Nigger" was performed in "good style." [17] By praising the performance of this highly derogatory song, the newspaper endorsed its message.

*The Spectator* only became financially independent from the university in 1962, meaning that anything the newspaper published had to be approved by the university in order to continue its funding. [18] Considering this agreement, it is revealing that the university did not prevent the newspaper from publishing any of the above language. *The Spectator* served as the main voice of the campus, reflecting the racist nature of the early university and its disregard for minority students.

## Columbia Clubs and Groups

### Glee Club:

As with today, there were on-campus clubs that were familiar to all students. During the late 1800s and throughout the 1900s, one of the most-recognized clubs was the Glee Club. Founded in 1873, the Glee Club was the Columbia community's entertainment in a world without electronics. According to Nick Rudd, CC '64, "Intramural singing competitions pitted the top 'quartette' from each class against each other, and the entire student body was known to sing at select occasions during the academic year." [19] As a student-funded group, the all-white and all-male club often performed for groups of prominent New Yorkers in locations such as Steinway Hall and community town halls, therefore creating heavy influence outside of Columbia's gates. [20]

Beginning at least as early as the Glee Club's second off-campus performance in 1881 which was held in Assembly Hall in Yonkers, the club performed highly derogatory songs, including "Nigger." [21] According to *The Spectator*, these performances were met with such adoration and requests for encores were so numerous that the concert was "prolonged until ten o'clock, when the warblers retired to the Peabody House where

they spent the night.”[22] In March 1883, the Glee Club appeared again in Yonkers. An author for *Acta Columbiana* writes, “[the concert] was both creditable to the members and enjoyable to those who heard it. ‘Nigger’ pleased the audience.”[23] In March 1884, the club performed “Nigger” at Stamford, which was, “met with enthusiastic applause.”[24] The fact that these songs were met with such adoration demonstrates that much of New York City and the surrounding areas shared the same racist beliefs as those within the Glee Club and Columbia.

Although the enthusiastic acceptance of these songs by community members is unsettling, the types of organizations that the Glee Club performed these songs for makes the audiences’ support even more shocking. Some organizations included the Brooklyn Nursery and Infants Hospital, the Christian Union Committee in Peekskill, the Lawyers’ Club, the Y.M.C.A and the New York Teachers’ Association.[25] When the club performed for the New York Teachers’ Association in 1883 at Steinway Hall, a review of the performance was written in *Acta Columbiana* and states that, “During the afternoon, ‘George Washington,’ ‘Pope,’ ‘Nigger,’ ‘Bzt-Bzt,’ and ‘Chinese Song’ were all given in good style and called forth repeated *encores* from the large and attentive audience.”[26] This enthusiasm is especially significant. It is clear that the club chose songs that would be pleasing to its audience. The club’s performance of “Nigger” in front of the New York Teachers’ Association is especially problematic because the audience was made up of teachers who had a direct role in influencing their students’ interpretations of major issues of the time. Another troubling example is the club’s performance at the Y.M.C.A of Mount Vernon in 1885. The club performed “plantation melodies,” which were, “rendered in an excellent manner, the dialect peculiar to the colored race being marvelously well imitated.”[27] Given that the Y.M.C.A. was founded on the principles of creating a “healthy body, mind and spirit,” it is disconcerting that the club’s songs were met with such adoration.[28] Further, Anthony Bowen, an African American man, created the first American-based Y.M.C.A in 1853.[29] By performing these songs for prominent groups, the Glee Club was projecting its beliefs of the black population to a listening audience.



Although there is less documentation of the Glee Club's performances on campus, existing notices about the club's appearances are revealing. For example, in April 1900, the club participated in the Annual Concert of Musical Groups, which included the Mandolin and Banjo Clubs. As part of the program, the Glee Club performed a "medley of 'coon' songs." In the same concert, the Banjo Club also performed a "coon" medley.[30] Moreover, in May 1924, the Glee Club dedicated a large portion of its performance to the singing of "negro spirituals." [31] These songs included "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "A Little Wheel A-Rollin." Although these songs are not inherently offensive, the club could have very easily advertised the songs without the title of "negro spirituals." By choosing not to do so, it allowed for the appropriation of black culture without acknowledging the meaning behind these songs. The club performed these songs again the following month as part of its end-of-year concert.

As these examples demonstrate, the Glee, Banjo and Mandolin Clubs were both unafraid of demonstrating their beliefs about blacks to the Columbia and non-Columbia communities and did not create a welcoming space for classmates of color. The performance of these songs by white men for the entertainment of white audiences further isolated black students by taking songs close to their identity and using them for their own entertainment. In "The Social Implications of the Negro Spiritual," John Lovell Jr. writes artfully on this topic, stating, "the Negro slave was the largest homogenous group in a melting pot America. He analyzed and synthesized his life in his songs and sayings. In hundreds of songs called spirituals, he produced an epic cycle; and, as in every such instance, he concealed there his deepest thoughts and ideas, his hard-finished plans and hopes and dreams." [32] Even today, the Glee Club does not discuss its past with racism. On its website, the club provides its long history and demonstrates how the now-dwindling club truly had a major impact on both the campus and the city at large. It does note, however, that its history has not been completely without issue, writing,

The Glee Club's roller-coaster history brought it to a trough, a place where it has been before and from which it has emerged before. Today's Columbia University Glee Club

looks back on that musical history since 1873 with a combination of amazement, frustration, amusement, and satisfaction, but more importantly looks forward to many more years of singing choral music with the spirit that has consistently charmed audiences and of taking pride in being the musical voice of Columbia.[33]

While the club seems to implicitly acknowledge its history with racism, the fact that it does not outwardly mention the issue suggests that when it refers to its “roller-coaster history,” it likely refers to the financial issues it faced as a student-run group.

Teacher’s College:

Issues of racism in student groups were not only present within the Glee Club, *The Spectator*, and *Acta Columbiana*. Since 1887, Columbia’s Teacher’s College has been a leader in preparing future educators. Although a torchbearer in its field, it mainly served as a white institution until 1933 when, “Southern states [began to offer] out-of-state scholarships for black college graduates, [allowing Teacher’s College to become] the premier destination for black educators seeking a master’s degree.”[34] During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, very few black students were admitted to Columbia’s programs due to racist admissions policies, not their ability to pay tuition. From 1887 to 1933, then, many conversations, lectures and other events were held to discuss the African American student population, similarly to in undergraduate circles.

In 1903 Teacher’s College hosted an event on the “Negro Problem and Education,” where Dr. Hollis Burke Frissell, then-president of the Hampton Institute, spoke.[35] The Hampton Institute was, “a product of Booker T. Washington which trained an army of black educators and those teachers [who] emphasized self-improvement and job training to enable black students to become gainfully employed and self-supporting as craftsmen or industrial workers.”[36] On first glance, this would seem like a positive step; yet, Frissell was a white man, not black, thus further isolating the community from the black population despite the fact that the topic was on black education. Moreover, in December 1922, Teacher’s College Rural Club hosted an event to discuss the “problem of Negro education.” According to *The Spectator*, representatives from the Hampton Institute were again present at the meeting.[37] Of the speakers was Thomas Jesse

Jones, who earned his Ph.D. from Columbia and was quite controversial in the world of educational reform because, while he did advocate strongly for minority groups, he was also white.[38] According to Herbert M. Kliebard in the *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*,

1. E. B. DuBois once proclaimed Thomas Jesse Jones to be “that evil genius of the Negro race.” Whether Jones was in fact a genius or, for that matter, evil, is open to debate; but one thing is certain: Jones was white. In the context of his remarks, DuBois was objecting to the fact that a white man was occupying a position of leadership in African American affairs; but, perhaps more importantly, he was also bitterly opposed to the course Jones was steering in educational policy, [as he] objected to Jones’s emphasis on allegedly practical activities and vocational education to the detriment of courses designed to develop the intellect.[39]

It is likely that the College invited Frissell to speak because he was the president of the Hampton Institute at the time and invited Jones to speak because he is both a graduate of Columbia and because he was apparently well versed in the issues surrounding black education. However, the fact that both are white is another indication of Columbia’s attempt to maintain its white campus. While conversations about black life in America were occurring on Columbia’s campuses, those leading the conversations were largely detached from the true struggles of blacks. This, therefore, further solidified the discriminatory culture. It also provides a glimpse into American society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where even an institute that was created with the intention of catering to black students was run by white men.

Interestingly, Teacher’s College hosted Booker T. Washington to speak on Industrial Education in April 1903.[40] Unlike W.E.B. DuBois who believed that blacks should look to educate themselves in order to break away from discrimination, Booker T. Washington believed, as documented in the Atlanta Compromise, that blacks should accept discrimination and work for whites until they can prove that they are indeed equal. Industrial education, then, was a part of Washington’s viewpoint. Although Teacher’s College invited a black speaker to discuss education for black Americans, Washington’s viewpoint is one that white students could support, because it allowed for

the continued supremacy of whites over blacks. There is no clear record of the College—or the Columbia community at large—inviting W.E.B DuBois to even though he was a resident of New York.

## Columbia Literary Societies

Many students turned to literary societies for social interaction during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Of these societies, the most prominent were the Philolexian Society, the Peithologian Society, and the Barnard Literary Society. The Philolexian, Peithologian, and Barnard Societies had a yearly Joint Debate, where they discussed the fate surrounding the black population in the United States. For example, in the Joint Debate of 1880, an essay titled, “Our Treatment of the Negro” was read in opposition to the topic, “*Resolved*, that Free Trade is more advantageous to the United States than Protection.”[41] Moreover, the Joint Debate of 1890 was based around a resolution that the “negro should be disenfranchised.”[42] Finally, in December 1900, the Philolexian and Barnard Societies debated the question, “*Resolved*, that the second part of the second section of the fourteenth amendment to the Constitution be repealed.”[43]

Besides debating with Columbia-affiliated groups, many groups also engaged with societies from other American institutions to discuss the black population. For example, in 1900, Columbia’s Philolexian and Barnard Societies debated the teams of the University of Pennsylvania and Cornell University on the same topic described above. According to *The Spectator*, “It is the question whether representation shall be according to population or to the number of voters, and its chief interest lies in its bearing on the negro question.”[44] In 1901, Columbia and Cornell debated in front of over two thousand attendees. Differently, though, the debate focused around the question, “*Resolved*: That the second portion of section two of the Fourteenth Amendment be retained as an integral part of the Constitution and be rigorously enforced.”[45] In February 1903, the Philolexian Society argued for the affirmative and won at Hamilton College on the question of “*Resolved*, that the President [Roosevelt]’s action in appointing negroes to offices in states where the public opinion is against it is

unwise.”[46] Interestingly, the following month when the Philolexian Society debated the same topic with the Twenty-Third Street Y.M.C.A. Literary Society, it argued for the negative, perhaps to give off the perception that Columbia was welcoming to blacks since the Y.M.C.A catered to a large black population.[47]

On its own, the Barnard Literary Society debated, “*Resolved*, that the federal government should interfere in the protection of the rights of the Negro voters in the South” and the Freshman Debating Society, a popular choice for extracurricular activity among first-years, held a debate on, “*Resolved*, that the disenfranchisement of the Negro is an unwarranted and unjust procedure.”[48] Columbia President Seth Low was also a judge in most on and off-campus debates during his time in office between 1890 and 1901, illuminating yet again the claim that Columbia’s leaders were very entrenched in discussions about blacks that were led by only-white speakers.

## University-Sponsored Events

While the events hosted by students reveal the discrimination that black students endured at Columbia, events sponsored by the university are even more meaningful, as university officials publicly approved of this discrimination. One example of a university-hosted event that discussed African Americans was the ongoing Blumenthal Foundation Lecture Series hosted by Professor J.W. Jenks of Cornell University. The choice of Jenks is particularly significant. Jenks was a co-author of the *Dictionary of Races or Peoples* that was used in several Congressional hearings about immigration. Accordingly, the dictionary was looking to determine, “whether there may not be certain races that are inferior to other races... to show whether some may be better fitted for American citizenship than others.” In the dictionary, Jenks’s clarified his beliefs about blacks, defining “the negro” as, “belonging to the lowest division of mankind from an evolutionary standpoint.”[49]

It was this man that Columbia brought to campus in 1907 to speak on “The Suffrage.” According to *The Spectator*, “Professor Jenks expects to go into the subject very thoroughly, touching on the Negro question, and its relation to the political development

of the country.”[50] In reviewing the event, *The Spectator* notes that Jenks was against suffrage for women and blacks.[51] This is another powerful component considering that Columbia was very interested in keeping its student body limited to white men. Further, providing women with the right to vote threatened to empower them to seek higher levels of education in order to become informed voters.

Another university-sponsored event that demonstrates the campus's attitude toward blacks concerns the awarding of the George William Curtis Medal, Columbia's "highest oratorical honor.”[52] Though George William Curtis was a vigilant supporter of African American rights, the essay topics selected by the university year after year suggest that Columbia officials did not necessarily share the same belief. For example, the Curtis Medal essay options included "The Education of the Negro" in 1905, "Should/Can the South Solve the Negro Problem Alone?" in 1907 and "Is the Negro Fitted for Full Citizenship?" in 1909.[53] Questions about the black community were likely chosen because the contest is named after a strong advocate for black rights. Still, many of the essay questions like, "Is the Negro Fitted for Full Citizenship" do not foster strong interracial community relations as they explicitly question the rights of fellow classmates.

Columbia also sponsored events that included racist content that were not speaker-based. For example, when Columbia played the University of Pennsylvania in football in November 1901, *The Spectator* listed the songs that students sang in support of Columbia during the game. One song is sung to the tune of the chorus of "Coon, Coon, Coon," a clearly anti-black song.[54] The chorus of the song reads, "Coon, coon, coon, I wish my color would fade. Coon, coon, coon, I'd like a different shade. Coon, coon, coon, both morning, night or noon; I'd rather be a white man instead of being a coon.”[55] The lyrics to the altered song read, "Penn, Penn, Penn, you'll find your team won't do. Penn, Penn, Penn, it's come right up to you. Penn, Penn, Penn, old Sandy has the men. They'll make you wish for any name than Penn, Penn, Penn." This song choice indicates that Columbia students used to sing in attempts to offend their competitors. This song is also listed under the heading of "Columbia Songs," suggesting that this song was performed during many sporting events. In the end, by outwardly

professing their racist ideology through singing these songs on various occasions, white students were subjecting their black classmates to racism, even through an activity as simple as a football game.

## Black Student Response

If black Columbia students had a strong response to this discrimination, it is not readily evident except for very sporadic articles published in *The Spectator*. This is not to say that black students did not create their own student organizations as a result—indeed, they did. Rather, it is possible that the university simply did not pay much attention to those clubs, echoing once again the university's attitude toward blacks.

The most obvious proof of this disregard for early black students on campus is in the reasoning for the creation of the Touchstones Club in the late 1920s. According to Granville W. Lee in a 1941 letter to Roger Howson of the Department of History,

In the fall of 1929 a group of Negro students, mainly from Columbia College, the Graduate School and Teacher's College, got together in an informal group and formed the [Touchstones]. The formation of this organization was an attempt on our own part to overcome one of the disadvantages of a large metropolitan University. Negro students coming from various parts of the country passed one or two years at Columbia with very few opportunities to meet socially and form friendships with students in the various schools of the University. By bringing together men and women who were working in the many professions, in business, in public administration and in other fields of endeavor with those students who had not yet gone beyond the academic world, we attempted to bring about an exchange of ideas, and to secure first-hand information regarding opportunities in the field, problems to be encountered and obstacles to be overcome. It was by bringing together these relatively diverse groups that we hoped to establish stepping-stones or touchstones with the outside world.[56]

The letter continues to note that the group grew from 25 members in 1921 to nearly 100 in 1931, suggesting that many black students were feeling disconnecting from the larger Columbia community, likely due to the many racist activities documented above that

were occurring on campus. Unsurprisingly, the club was not once mentioned in *The Spectator* or other publications. Instead, the word “touchstone” was only referred to when talking about the Philolexian Society’s performances of Shakespeare’s comedy, *As You Like It*.<sup>[57]</sup>

Another example of the disregard for black students on campus is the response to the founding of Columbia’s chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi, a historically African-American fraternity. *The Spectator* announced in 1921 that the chapter was formed, but there were no announcements afterward.<sup>[58]</sup> No correspondence from Frank Fackenthal, the university’s secretary up until 1930 and later its acting president from 1945 to 1948, suggests that the chapter was recognized after Fackenthal gave the go-ahead for its founding.<sup>[59]</sup> Further, there was no clear mention of the fraternity in the 1921 Columbia yearbook, indicating the desire to discount the fraternity’s presence on campus. The university now recognizes, “five out the nine largest historically African American Greek-letter fraternities and sororities, as determined by the National Pan-Hellenic Council,” according to *Go Ask Alice!*, Columbia’s team of health professionals who answer questions posed by students.<sup>[60]</sup> These fraternities and sororities include the Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta Sororities and the Alpha Phi Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi and Omega Psi Phi Fraternities. But, the fact that the university and its publications barely recognized Kappa Alpha Psi despite that it was the first of its kind on the campus, is a clear effort to distance itself from black students.

## Conclusion

For decades, Columbia failed to create a community that welcomed all students under the common goal of gaining a renowned education. Today, universities nationwide have made significant strides toward coping with their past relationships with both slavery and racism. Although Columbia is now one of the most diverse Ivy League institutions that accepts students from all economic, social and racial backgrounds, it must continue to look at past instances such as the ones outlined above as a reminder of where the university and its students and faculty once stood. As one of the world’s leading institutions, Columbia is in a unique position to serve as an example for other



institutions of higher learning. By continuously working to make its campuses a welcomed place for all, Columbia can hopefully prove that while recognizing past experiences and actions is important, the lessons and actions taken because of those events are even more important in paving the path toward continued understanding and equality.

## Endnotes

- [1] Robert A. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia*, (New York: Columbia U Press, 2003), 81.
- [2] Ibid.
- [3] Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626 – 1863*, (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2004), 11.
- [4] “New York City.” *History.com*. A + E Networks, 2010. Web. 23 Apr. 2017.
- [5] Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, 134.
- [6] “Seneca Village Site.” *Central Park Conservancy*. Central Park Conservancy, n.d. Web. 23 Apr. 2017.
- [7] “Seneca Village Project.” *Seneca Village Project*. Columbia University, n.d. Web. 23 Apr. 2017.
- [8] Ibid.
- [9] Barbara Speed, “New York destroyed a village full of African-American landowners to create Central Park.” *CityMetric*. New Statesman, 30 Mar. 2015. Web. 23 Apr. 2017.
- [10] “Musical Club Concert a Success.” *The Columbia Daily Spectator* [New York City] 27 Apr. 1900: n. pag. Print.
- [11] “The Minstrel Show.” *The Columbia Daily Spectator* [New York City] 10 Dec. 1901: n. pag. Print.
- [12] “Juniors Enjoy Their Annual Class Dinner.” *The Columbia Daily Spectator* [New York City] 28 Apr. 1915: n. pag. Print.
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