

# The Silences of Today Reflect the Silences of the Past: The New-York Evening Post- and the 1807 Act to Prohibit the Importation of Slaves

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## Introduction

On March 7, 1807, Congress passed the “Act to Prohibit the Importation of Slaves into any port or place within the jurisdiction of the United States, from and after the first day of January, in the year of our Lord, one thousand eight hundred and eight.” The passage of this act actually preceded by three weeks the British Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, which passed through Parliament on March 25 of that same year. However, the British Act has received much more attention from scholars and the public than the American one. This imbalance became apparent in 2007 and 2008 during the bicentennial of the passage of both of the bills. While the British marked these joint events with celebrations and even the making of the big budget film *Amazing Grace*, in America the anniversary went largely unnoticed.[1] The lack of attention paid to the American anniversary of the 1807 Act echoes the relatively little contemporary attention given to the Act within New York City society. The silences around this issue can be

seen in how rarely it was covered in the *New-York Evening Post*—a prominent New York City newspaper with clear connections to Columbia. Ultimately, the historiographical neglect of the Act to Prohibit the Importation of Slaves serves as a reflection of the relatively little attention paid to this act within the New York City Columbia alumni community as well.[2]

Silences frequently take center stage in histories of race and slavery. In her article “Venus in Two Acts,” Saidiya Hartman—a professor of African American literature and history at Columbia University—reflects on the silences of the enslaved within the archives. In doing so, she highlights the ways in which the voices of the American slaves were silenced not just in life but also in death.[3] At the same time, the avoidance of issues relating to slavery by the educated elite—both at the time and in the present—also contribute to the silences around race. The lack of attention given to the 1807 Act by its contemporaries and by historians sits as simply another manifestation of the underlying silences that have shaped and continue to shape people’s understanding of American slavery.

I will first explain the background of the *New-York Evening Post* to demonstrate its close ties to the New York City community of King’s College and Columbia University alumni. I will then provide an overview of the reasons given within scholarly work for the dearth of studies on the 1807 Act. While doing so, I will also address those few works that do provide historical interpretations of the Act. I will then provide an overview of the key Congressional debates concerning the Importation Act while highlighting the *Evening Post’s* limited coverage of those debates. Finally, I will address the ways in which the coverage of the 1807 Act was overshadowed by other contemporary news within the *Evening Post*.

## The Founding of the *New-York Evening Post* and Its Ties to Columbia[4]

The election of 1800 saw the fall of the Federalist party from political power both in the federal government of the United States and in the state government of New York. All of

a sudden, most, if not all, of the Federalist political leaders found themselves out of office and out of power. This was a devastating blow to the head of the party, Alexander Hamilton, especially as some of the blame for the defeat rested on his shoulders. In supporting Thomas Jefferson, the Democratic-Republican candidate, over Aaron Burr, the Federalist-backed candidate, for United States president, Hamilton had accidentally divided his party into two factions, weakening it and handing a victory to the Democratic-Republican Party that reverberated down the line to smaller, yet still critical, state elections.

The losses of the Federalist Party and its division into Hamiltonian and Burrite factions had a particularly strong impact in New York City, which, up until then, had been a Federalist stronghold. In fact, according to the historian Allan Nevins, “a majority of the people of the city were Federalists.”[5] This included the portion of the population who had attended or graduated from either King’s College or Columbia University—as Hamilton himself had.[6] From this group emerged a number of Federalist leaders, including John Jay, the second governor of New York; Robert Troup, a statesman and prominent New York City lawyer; and Richard Varick, the second attorney general of New York and the forty-fifth Mayor of New York City, among others.[7]

Hamilton, a prolific writer, along with the other members of the New York City Federalist elite, had for some time before the 1800 elections desired to establish a newspaper that could serve as a mouthpiece for Hamilton’s Federalist views, both in New York City and throughout the country more generally. According to Nevins, the overwhelming party defeat in the election added impetus to this desire as the local leaders became even more aware that the existing Federalist newspapers from other cities did not adequately fulfill the wishes of the more active New York City party members. This was a consequence of both the timidity of the editors at the three Federalist-leaning city papers as well as the emphasis these editors placed on commercial news rather than confrontational articles.[8] As newspapers functioned as the most important means of public communication at the time, a lack in this area could have important public and political ramifications.[9] Throughout May and June of 1801, Hamilton met with Troup and Varick, as well as with two young lawyers named John Wells and William Coleman,

a Commissioner of Bankruptcy named Caleb S. Riggs, and the wealthy merchant William Woolsey—who were among his staunchest Federalist supporters—to lay concrete plans for the establishment of a new Federalist Paper, the *New-York Evening Post*.<sup>[10]</sup>

To raise money for this venture, the founders of the *Evening Post* circulated a founders' list to trusted Federalists requesting a minimum financial backing of \$100.<sup>[11]</sup> Nevins records that this proved successful as Hamilton's followers were typically wealthy and included "almost the whole commercial group of New York."<sup>[12]</sup> Out of the larger group of prominent New York Federalists, around 600 of them subscribed to receive this new Federalist paper from its inception. Within a year, the number of subscribers had increased to 1,104, with another 1,632 individuals—largely from outside of the New York City area—receiving the *Evening Post's* weekly country-wide publication called the *Herald*.<sup>[13]</sup>

After securing the necessary financial backing, Hamilton and the other *Evening Post* founders purchased a building and a printing press and hired William Coleman to serve as the first editor of the paper. Coleman was a lawyer from Massachusetts who had moved to New York after losing a great deal of money in a speculative venture. He had met Hamilton through his friend and colleague John Wells, an active member of the Federalist Party, and thereafter edged his way deeper into the Federalist circle. Capitalizing on these relationships, Coleman had secured a position as a clerk in the Circuit Court that had jurisdiction over New York City. When he lost this position following the election of 1800, his sophisticated manner, passionate belief in Federalism, and education—he had an honorary degree from Dartmouth—recommended him to Hamilton as a valuable first editor for the new newspaper.<sup>[14]</sup>

Although he was not a Columbia graduate himself, Coleman maintained close ties with Hamilton until that Founding Father's untimely death at the hand of Aaron Burr in 1804. In fact, Nevins states that "there is abundant evidence that Coleman wished to do Hamilton personal as well as political service in the *Evening Post*" in thanks for all that Hamilton had done for him.<sup>[15]</sup> This relationship intimately connected Coleman with the Federalist segments of New York's Columbia society, and he maintained these ties

throughout his twenty-eight year tenure as editor of the *Evening Post*. Even as the Federalist party crumbled in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Coleman maintained many of the principles that he had adopted from Hamilton concerning both politics and the publication of the newspaper, so much so that the latter continued to be referred to as “Hamilton’s journal” or “Hamilton’s gazette.”[16] This included a manifestation of the Federalist anti-Jeffersonian position—something that was to have an impact on the Federalist perspective on the 1807 Act for the Prohibition of the Importation of Slaves.[17]

From the beginning, Coleman—with the support of Hamilton—worked to ensure that his paper maintained a greater physical elegance and craftsmanship than its rivals. With the help of a full-time printer named Michael Burnham, Coleman printed the *Evening Post* on superior paper using better and more complete typesets than those employed by other printers.[18] To afford this, Coleman filled his paper with advertisements. Nevins notes that of the roughly twenty columns in each daily paper, around fourteen to fifteen of them were occupied by ads from local Federalist merchants.[19] These ads were advantageous on multiple fronts. By including them, Coleman was not only able to keep the newspaper afloat, but also could establish the elite nature of the publication and connect it to the daily life of the city.

Within the paper, Coleman followed a standard publication procedure. Each issue contained four pages—two pieces of paper folded in half. The first and last pages were dedicated almost entirely to the aforementioned advertisements and to shipping and merchant information. While the second and third pages typically contained ads as well, it was on these pages that Coleman printed local, national, and foreign news. Typically, this news was not written in Coleman’s own voice but instead appeared as extracts from other newspapers or from letters. These columns were titled simply with a reference to their locational origin and the date they were written or published. When dealing with governmental debates—Congressional, local, or even foreign—Coleman would publish the transcriptions for the debates that he found either the most important or the most engaging. Some topics and articles received brief editorializations from Coleman or from other unlisted authors. Meanwhile, the topics that Coleman and other Federalist

leaders found most pressing would receive extensive coverage in multi-day column series and editorializations. The reach of this newspaper and the almost complete control that Coleman had over it, has led one historian—Jerry Knudson—to argue that only one other American newspaper editor from the time “rivaled the power and prestige of William Coleman.”[20]

## The Historiography and the Reasons why the Act Has Been Overlooked

Within the historiography of the international slave trade and of abolition, the 1807 Act to Prohibit the Importation of Slaves receives little attention.[21] William Freehling’s sizeable work on the factors that led up to the North-South divide of the Civil War serves as a striking example of this neglect. In this work, which is over six hundred pages long and often goes into great detail when examining the various factors’ significance, Freehling—a professor emeritus of history at the University of Kentucky—notes the importance of the Importation Ban and yet spends only three and a half pages discussing it.[22] More recently, a select group of historians have attempted to address the dearth of scholarship on this ban by highlighting several factors that they argue contributed to the overshadowing of this act both in its time and in the years following its implementation. Three key reasons are typically highlighted in regard to this.

The first reason focuses on the weight scholars have given to the continued illegal importation of slaves even after the passage of the Importation Act. These scholars argue that the failure of the Act to entirely end importation has diminished its importance within histories of the slave trade and of abolition and, ultimately, that its ineffectiveness made it more easily forgettable. The 1896 work *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade* by W. E. B. du Bois provides one of the earliest and most widely referenced scholarly overviews of this reasoning. In this work, du Bois argues that the lax implementation of the 1807 Act allowed illegal importation to continue apace.[23] He contends that this rendered the Act largely ineffective and that the true limitation of slave importations into the United States was actually the result of international actions against the slave trade and not anything done domestically.[24] This international

argument receives further attention within John R. Oldfield's more recent work *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution*. In this study, Oldfield—a professor of slavery and emancipation at the University of Hull—highlights the ways in which the British and American importation bans built off of each other while also noting that “Congress provided insufficient funding” to render the American Act effective.[25] Both of these works, then, regard the 1807 Act as merely a minor step in the process of abolition.

The second reason offered by historians for the lack of attention paid to the Importation ban centers on the failure of this act to address the internal slave trade. The historian Stephen J. Goldfarb draws attention to the scope of this trade within his 1994 article “An Inquiry into the Politics of the Prohibition of the International Slave Trade.” In it, he notes that after the closing of the international slave trade, the number of slaves in the southern regions of the United States nonetheless increased both as a result of current slaves reproducing and through the selling of slaves from the middle states of Maryland and Virginia into the Deep South.[26] Eric Foner, the well-known Columbia professor of American history, expands on this argument in an article he wrote for the *New York Times* concerning the lack of attention Americans had given to the bicentennial anniversary of the 1807 Act. In this essay, he argues that the expansion of American slavery throughout the antebellum period overshadowed and diminished the effects of the Importation Ban. Because the overall number of slaves was still increasing, the ban felt inconsequential. According to him, this has had lasting effects as it has pushed Americans “to look elsewhere for memories that ameliorate [their] racial discontents.”[27]

The third often cited reason for the contemporary and scholarly neglect of the Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves emphasizes the fact that most states had already imposed their own individual importation bans by the time Congress passed the 1807 Act. This meant that the Congressional Importation Ban was merely a restatement of established state laws at the federal level. According to Foner, the state bans largely resulted from the success of the bloody slave revolution in Haiti in 1791.[28] As American slave owners began to fear a similar uprising at home, they sought to prevent

their slaves from being radicalized by freshly imported slaves. Because the U.S. Constitution prevented Congress from implementing an importation ban prior to 1808, individual states exercised their state rights by establishing their own laws to ban this trade throughout the 1790s instead. Within his 2005 work *Slave Country*, Adam Rothman—a Columbia University PhD holder and professor of history at Georgetown University—highlights the role of the state laws in both serving to push Congress to pass the 1807 Importation Ban while also limiting the public attention paid to the debates over this ban. In his brief mention of the ban, he states that, by the time of its passing, “the trade was legal only in South Carolina—and even there it was controversial.”[29] This controversy stemmed from South Carolina’s reversal of its importation ban in 1803, which demonstrated to the politically aware the ease with which the state bans could be reversed. However, at the same time, the state bans made the slave trade less visible to most American citizens, thereby drawing the issue away from the center of their attention.

The case of South Carolina, however, also provides fodder for those historians who argue for the historical importance of the Importation Ban. These historians estimate that between the 1803 reopening of South Carolina’s ports to slave importations and the beginning of the federal ban on importation in 1808, around 40,000 enslaved Africans were brought into that state.[30] Eric Foner argues that the number of imported slaves was closer to 75,000-100,000 if one also counts the slaves who were brought into the Louisiana Territory.[31] These same historians also note that even those states that had banned slave importations completely had no navies with which to enforce the ban.[32] They suggest that the annual volume of importations would have potentially remained the same, if not grown, throughout the antebellum period had the Importation Ban not been passed by Congress, since only the federal government had access to a navy with which to, at least theoretically, enforce the ban. Even factoring in the number of illegal importations throughout the period leading up to emancipation—one historian estimates that around 50,000 to 60,000 illegal slaves were brought into the country during that period—these historians argue that the 1807 Act saved numerous Africans from enslavement. Goldfarb, in his article, points to the over 1.6 million slaves brought into Brazil and Cuba during this same time frame to further strengthen this argument.[33]

These histories also point to the ways in which the Importation Ban affected North-South power relations throughout the antebellum period as another example of the importance of the 1807 Act. Freehling and Mason both emphasize the fact that the Congressional debates over this Act sit as one of the very first examples of the heated North-South divisions on the issues of slavery. In fact, during the Congressional debates of this Act, a Southern Representative suggested the possible secession of the South from the union for the first time.[34] Freehling and Mason likewise argue that the importation ban left lasting marks on the Congressional power of the North and the South within the House of Representatives due to its impact on population growth. While the population of the Northeastern states increased dramatically throughout the early nineteenth century as European immigrants arrived in the area, the population of the South progressed at a much slower pace. Mason and Freehling argue that had the importation of slaves continued, the population of the South would have matched if not exceeded that of the North. The pairing of that population growth with the three-fifths rule for representation based on the black population, would have increased the number of Southern representatives in the House and shifted the power relations in that legislative body throughout the antebellum period.[35]

Thus, even while historians note the reasons for the relatively little attention given to the 1807 Act, nearly all of them also point to its importance.[36] Freehling demonstrates this position quite clearly in his short coverage of the Act, writing, "The closure of the African slave trade was probably the most important slavery legislation Congress ever passed and among the most important American laws on any subject." [37] He is not alone in this opinion. In fact, Goldfarb and Matthew Mason, another historian who published an article on the 1807 Act, both reference Freehling in their own attempts to argue for the historical importance of this Act.

## The Congressional Debates and the *Evening Post's* Coverage

The first proposed bill to call for the prohibition of the African slave trade appeared in the Senate on December 16, 1805. Put forth by Senator Stephen Row Bradley from Vermont, this bill received two readings before the Senate decided to postpone its

consideration until the following December.[38] The introduction of this bill received a brief coverage within the December 23, 1805 *New-York Evening Post* column titled “Washington, December 19, Senate of the United States.” In this column, Coleman, the likely author of the article, commented that the postponement was “the equivalent to a rejection of the bill.” He then noted that the bill was tabled as a result of debates over the constitutionality of Congress passing a law concerning the importation of slaves prior to 1808.[39]

On February 4 of 1806, a similar bill was introduced in the House of Representatives by Barnabas Bidwell, a Representative from Massachusetts. Similar to the Senate version of the bill, this one received little discussion and by the end of the month had been effectively tabled.[40] Within the *New-York Evening Post*, this proposed version of the importation ban got exactly one sentence of coverage that merely stated that Bidwell’s resolution for prohibiting the importation of slaves had been assigned to a committee.[41] The brevity of this coverage served as the first demonstration of the relatively few mentions that the debates over the Slave Importation Act would receive within the *Evening Post* in the future.

However, according to Matthew Mason, other newspapers took notice of this bill and throughout the summer of 1806 the issue of banning the importation of slaves remained a heated topic of discussion around the country.[42] Despite the growing national interest in such a ban, mention of the sustained discussion on the topic comes through only once in the *Evening Post*. On July 26, 1806, Coleman published a heated article from the *Charleston Courier* that had been written in response to the Northern outcry against South Carolina’s continued importation of slaves. In this article, the author lambasted northerners for failing to recognize that the citizens of South Carolina were participating in a legal activity that was necessary for the cultivation of their land. Despite printing this article in full, Coleman offered no editorial on it as he had done on other equally harsh columns that he had republished within the *Evening Post* in the past.[43] While the printing of the article demonstrates at least a passing interest in the debates over a federal ban on importation, Coleman’s decision not to provide a

personal comment demonstrates that the debates did not hold a central position in his mind or in the concerns of New York City's Federalist population at this time.

Congressional attempts to end the importation of slaves received new impetus just before Congress reconvened in December of 1806. In his Annual Message on December 2, President Jefferson called for Congress to pass a bill that would establish such a prohibition and would be effective at the start of 1808. While Coleman offered an extensive—largely negative—editorial on Jefferson's address in general, he never once mentioned Jefferson's call for legislation on the African slave trade. In fact, the concept of a slave importation ban was not addressed within the *Evening Post* until December 12, 1806 when a brief paragraph mentioned that such a bill had been submitted in the Senate.[44] The silence around Jefferson's position in favor of a ban on the importation of slaves suggests that the pro-manumission but anti-Jeffersonian New York Federalists had yet to determine their position on such an importation ban.

Discussions over the proposed bills to end the importation of slaves took place in the House and the Senate during December of 1806 and into the early months of 1807. While there existed a general consensus over the need to pass a bill of this sort, historians note that the Congressional debates became rather heated over three controversial points.[45] The first dealt with what to do with those slaves who had been illegally imported after 1808; the second addressed what sort of punishment ought to be imposed on those who broke this new law; and the third looked at how to prevent international importation while allowing for coastwise interstate slave sales.[46]

The controversy over the first issue centered around the conflict between northern desires that illegally imported slaves be set free and southern concerns that this would dramatically increase the population of free blacks in the slave states. Within the *New-York Evening Post*, Coleman printed a transcription of some of the most heated of these debates on December 22, 1806.[47] This transcription touched on several of the key points of disagreement—particularly the vehement opposition of northerners to the suggestion that the federal government ought to sell any slaves that were forfeited as a result of illegal importation. The column ended with a short overview of the other topics mentioned within this specific meeting of the House of Representatives. Within this

same issue, Coleman also published an extract from a letter from Washington DC that blamed the lengthy debates over the importation ban for the fact that the House had yet to discuss issues to do with the fortification of New York City, thus refocusing the conversation completely.[48] Page four of this issue also featured two separate advertisements for slaves who were being offered for sale.[49] Both the juxtaposition of these four columns within the same publication and the lack of comment from Coleman on the Congressional debates over the Importation Ban demonstrate the ambivalence of the *Evening Post* to issues of slavery and the slave trade.

Another brief mention of the Congressional disagreements over this first issue appears within the December 29, 1806 issue of the *Evening Post*. In one section of the column covering the proceedings of the House of Representatives, Coleman provided a summary of the debate over another amendment that addressed the forfeiture of illegally imported slaves. He noted, "This amendment being similar to one formerly offered to the bill, occasioned some debates, which took nearly the same turn as before." He then briefly summarized both sides of the argument but offered no indication of which he supported.[50] The second mention of this aspect of the importation debates in the *Evening Post* shows that there was at least some interest among New York Federalists in certain facets of these discussions. At the same time, however, the brevity and limited scope of this article reflects that it did not hold a position of central concern within the party.

This same issue of the *Evening Post* briefly mentioned the Congressional debates over the second controversial issue as well. These debates focused on what punishment ought to be imposed on those who broke the importation ban. Congressmen from northern states argued that depriving a man of his freedom was equivalent to murder and therefore the punishment ought to be death. Southern Congressmen, unsurprisingly, bridled at this suggestion and its underlying assumptions about the morality of slavery. They supported the implementation of a fine instead.[51] The *New-York Evening Post's* issue contained one brief mention of the House conversations of this death penalty clause within the importation bill. However, Coleman offered no transcription or summary of the debates as he had for the first issue. Instead, he merely

noted the objection of one northern Congressman to the removal of this clause before stating, “The question was taken on striking out that part of the section and carried.”[52] This brief mention by Coleman downplayed the heated and highly contentious nature of the debates over this issue. It also once again reflects the tangential nature of the *Evening Post’s* interest in this slave importation bill.

The third controversial aspect of the proposed bill to ban the importation of slaves revolved around the issue of the continued transportation of domestic slaves via the coast after the implementation of the ban. After the Senate voted to remove an amendment that would have prohibited all sea-based slave trade, the House of Representatives offered a new amendment that would prohibit this trade only for ships over forty tons. This angered John Randolph—a Representative from Virginia—who saw this action as an interference of northerners into matters of solely southern concern. In his vehement rejection of this amendment, Randolph threatened that its passage would likely lead to the secession of the South from the Union. Although nothing came out of this threat as Randolph received relatively little support for this idea from other Southern representatives, its discussion within the wider debates over this bill sits as an early prefiguration of the North-South divisions over slavery that would solidify throughout the antebellum period.[53]

The *New-York Evening Post* briefly mentioned this contentious debate in its March 5, 1807 issue. In this column, Coleman provided a mixed transcription and summary of the House debates from February 27th. In particular, he noted that Representative Randolph introduced “a bill to explain the bill passed against the slave trade.” Coleman then explained the purpose of this bill writing, “It disclaims and disavows a right in congress to abridge, modify, or affect the right of masters to their slaves, and also declares that no person shall incur a penalty for transporting and selling slaves not illegally imported, the prohibitory act to the contrary notwithstanding.” [54]

By both mentioning this debate and highlighting the fact that it had continued after the House had already passed a version of the Slave Importation Ban, Coleman pointed to the importance of these debates within Congress. In doing so, however, he actually

underscored just how limited his coverage of the debates had been up to that point relative to their importance within the legislature.

The Act to Prohibit the Importation of Slaves into the United States passed on March 2, 1807. Despite his occasional coverage of this bill, Coleman marked its passage for the first time merely within a list of all of the acts that had been passed in the ninth session of Congress. This list appeared in the *New-York Evening Post's* publication for March 11, 1807. As this session of Congress had lasted for two full years (from March of 1805 to March of 1807), the list contained a total of forty-six items. The Slave Importation Act sat as number twenty-four on this list, receiving no specific, special mention by Coleman, and so was swallowed up by the other items.[55] This serves as a final indication of the little attention that the *New-York Evening Post*—and by extension the majority of New York City's Federalist elite—paid to the 1807 Slave Importation Ban.

## The *Evening Post's* Coverage of Other Events from the Time

The limited nature of Coleman's coverage of the Importation Ban becomes even more obvious when it is weighed against his reporting on other issues and Congressional debates from the period. According to Matthew Mason, the relatively little attention paid to the Act within the *New-York Evening Post* was typical of all newspapers concerning this topic. He concisely states within his article that "what impresses the reader of the newspaper coverage of the 1806-1807 slave trade bill is its relative paucity." While he notes that there was a degree of variation in the coverage across different newspapers and acknowledges that some displayed more interest in the proceedings, he contends that the one constant was the fact that this Act was overshadowed by other news, such as the information coming out of Europe that pertained to the Napoleonic Wars and the scandal at the time surrounding Aaron Burr.[56]

The readers of the *New-York Evening Post*—including the former Columbia and King's College attendees within that group—were no different than the rest of the American population in being interested in all things relating to Napoleon and Burr. As regards the

former, nearly every issue of the *New-York Evening Post* between the date of the first introduction of the slave trade bill in December of 1805 to the mention of its passage in March of 1807 contained at least one—if not multiple references—to the wars going on in Europe. In fact, throughout December 1805 and January 1806, Coleman produced a series of eleven editorials on the infringement of American neutrality by the British.[57] The depth of detail within these editorials and the number of letters and foreign information published on the European situation contrasts with the easily countable and forgettable fourteen mentions of the debates over the slave trade act. This difference becomes even more stark when one takes into account the fact that two of those fourteen articles only mention the debates over the Importation Act in order to highlight the ways in which these debates were preventing other Congressional discussions—such as those about the proposed fortification of New York City—from taking place.[58] Furthermore, another seven of these mentions were no more than one to three sentences long.[59]

Alongside the distractions caused by the Napoleonic Wars, national attention at the time was focused on the sensational case of Aaron Burr's alleged treason. The intense public interest in this episode pushed Coleman to publish even the smallest bits of information that had been shared concerning Burr's activities. This included the publication of small notes detailing the rumors circulating concerning Burr's affairs and Jefferson's intended response beginning in the fall of 1806.[60] The level of coverage of Burr's potentially treasonous actions within the *Evening Post* is not surprising given the animosity of that paper towards the man who had killed Hamilton, its principal founder. However, the extensive and often minute coverage of this topic provides an interesting counterpoint to the few articles written regarding the Importation Ban.

The coverage of the Congressional debates over the 1807 Act within the *New-York Evening Post* were further overshadowed by the discussion of local New York news and issues. For example, in the aforementioned March 5, 1807 issue of the newspaper that addressed the issue of the internal coastal slave trade, Coleman provided the sixth installment of an editorial series on state revenues and their connection to both trade routes and goods.[61] A large number of publications throughout 1806 also contained

articles addressing issues of public health within New York City. The space taken up by these articles necessarily limited the amount of room Coleman chose to dedicate to discussing the Importation Ban.

## Conclusion

The 1807 Congressional Act that prohibited the importation of slaves had a lasting impact on American slave society. It prevented the forced enslavement of numerous Africans within the United States, and the Congressional debates over its contents presaged the North-South divides over slavery that would continue to develop throughout the years leading up to the Civil War. Yet, this Act received little attention in its time and has been the subject of few historical studies. The *New York Evening Post's* limited coverage of the Congressional debates over the bills proposing the end of slave importation demonstrates that the large Federalist population of New York City and the many King's College and Columbia University graduates within that group likewise neglected to see the important implications of the legal end of African slave trade.

Ultimately, the story around the 1807 Slave Importation Act is a story of silences. Non-Congressional sources from the time that address this Act are hard to find and present-day historical scholarship on the subject is bare. As we work to uncover the history of slavery and race at Columbia University, we must remember how little concerned most early King's and Columbia graduates were with these issues. We cannot undo the silences of the past, but we can increase their exposure today. It is our job today to draw attention to both the well-known and the unknown episodes of Columbia's muddied history with issues of slavery and race. And sometimes that simply requires speaking out on the silences of the past.

## Endnotes

[1]Eric Foner, “Opinion | Forgotten Step Toward Freedom,” *The New York Times*, December 30, 2007, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/30/opinion/30foner.html>.

[2]Unless otherwise clearly noted, throughout this paper when I refer to importation I mean the importation of slaves into the United States.

[3]Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 1–14.

[4]To date, only one scholar—Allan Nevins—has ever written a full history of the *New-York Evening Post*. This is remarkable considering the *Evening Post*’s position as the oldest continually published daily newspaper in the United States. Because of the dearth of works on the founding of this paper, the majority of the information from this section will be taken from Nevins’ definitive work on the subject. Allan Nevins, *The Evening Post: A Century of Journalism* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1922).

[5]*Ibid.*, 12.

[6]Prior to the Revolutionary War, Columbia University was called King’s College. When the school reopened after the war, its name was changed to Columbia University in order to distance the college from any perception of ties to the British monarchy.

[7]Nevins, *The Evening Post: A Century of Journalism*, 11–17; *Columbia University Alumni Register, 1754-1931* (New York: Columbia University, 1932).

[8]Nevins, *The Evening Post: A Century of Journalism*, 12.

[9]Jerry W. Knudson, *Jefferson and the Press: Crucible of Liberty* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), xiii.

[10]Nevins, *The Evening Post: A Century of Journalism*, 17.

[11]Knudson, *Jefferson and the Press*, 30.

[12]Nevins, *The Evening Post: A Century of Journalism*, 17.

[13]Ibid., 20, 77.

[14]Knudson, *Jefferson and the Press*, 31; Nevins, *The Evening Post: A Century of Journalism*, 12–22.

[15]Nevins, *The Evening Post: A Century of Journalism*, 28.

[16]Ibid., 25.

[17]David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975), 134–35.

[18]Knudson, *Jefferson and the Press*, 32.

[19]Nevins, *The Evening Post: A Century of Journalism*, 20.

[20]The other was William Duane, the powerful leading editor of the Republican press. Knudson, *Jefferson and the Press*, 35.

[21]Matthew E. Mason, “Slavery Overshadowed: Congress Debates Prohibiting the Atlantic Slave Trade to the United States, 1806-1807,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 20, no. 1 (2000): 61.

[22]William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion*, vol. 1, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[23]For further discussion of the illegal slave importation that took place during this period, see: Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice, *Slavery and Justice: Report* (Rhode Island: Brown University, 2011) and Zora Neal Hurston, *Barracoon: the Story of the Last “Black Cargo”* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2018). The Brown Report notes the involvement of John Brown, a member of the University’s founding family, in the illegal slave importations that continued following the 1794 passage of a federal act prohibiting Americans from bringing slaves into foreign ports. Brown was tried for his breaches of this law but ultimately was acquitted by a jury (see pages 21-22 of the Brown Report). The newly released work by Hurston—who had

close ties to Columbia University and Barnard College—tells the story of the last known illegally imported shipment of enslaved Africans into the United States in 1860.

[24]William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 94–130.

[25]John R. Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution: An International History of Anti-Slavery, c.1787-1820* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 185.

[26]Stephen J. Goldfarb, “An Inquiry into the Politics of the Prohibition of the International Slave Trade,” *Agricultural History* 68, no. 2 (1994): 32.

[27]Foner, “Opinion | Forgotten Step Toward Freedom.”

[28]Ibid.

[29]Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005), 19.

[30]Freehling, *The Road to Disunion*, 1:136; Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823*, 121.

[31]Foner, “Opinion | Forgotten Step Toward Freedom.”

[32]Mason, “Slavery Overshadowed,” 61.

[33]Goldfarb, “An Inquiry into the Politics of the Prohibition of the International Slave Trade,” 31–32.

[34]Freehling, *The Road to Disunion*, 1:136–37; Mason, “Slavery Overshadowed,” 70–71.

[35]Freehling, *The Road to Disunion*, 1:137; Mason, “Slavery Overshadowed,” 60.

[36]One of the exceptions is du Bois, who—as mentioned before—argues that the true end of the importation of slaves into the United States was actually a result of international actions against the slave trade.

[37]Freehling, *The Road to Disunion*, 1:136.

[38]Mason, "Slavery Overshadowed," 62–63.

[39]William Coleman, "Washington, December 19. Senate of the United States," *The New-York Evening Post*, December 23, 1805.

[40]Mary Stoughton Locke, *Anti-Slavery in America, from the Introduction of African Slaves to the Prohibition of the Slave Trade, 1619-1808* (Gloucester, Mass: P. Smith, 1965), 149; Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823*, 134; Mason, "Slavery Overshadowed," 63.

[41]William Coleman, "Congress House of Representatives of the United States, February 28," *The New-York Evening Post*, March 6, 1806.

[42]Mason, "Slavery Overshadowed," 63.

[43]William Coleman, "From the Charleston Courier," *The New-York Evening Post*, July 26, 1806, 1424 edition.

[44]William Coleman, "Congress In Senate of the U. S. Monday, December 8," *The New-York Evening Post*, December 12, 1806.

[45]The same set of debates are highlighted within each of the following works: Mason, "Slavery Overshadowed"; Locke, *Anti-Slavery in America, from the Introduction of African Slaves to the Prohibition of the Slave Trade, 1619-1808*; Goldfarb, "An Inquiry into the Politics of the Prohibition of the International Slave Trade"; Du Bois, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870*.

[46]Du Bois, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870*, 95.

[47]William Coleman, "Congress House of Representatives, Wednesday, Dec. 17," *The New-York Evening Post*, December 22, 1806, 1573 edition, 17.

[48]William Coleman, "Extract of a Letter from Washington City, to the Editor, Dated Dec. 18, 1806," *The New-York Evening Post*, December 22, 1806, 1573 edition.

[49]William Coleman, "For Sale, A Mulatto Boy 15 Years Old," *The New-York Evening Post*, December 22, 1806, 1573 edition; William Coleman, "A Black Girl, For Sale," *The New-York Evening Post*, December 22, 1806, 1573 edition.

[50]William Coleman, "Congress House of Representatives, Tuesday, December 23," *The New-York Evening Post*, December 29, 1806, 23.

[51]Mason, "Slavery Overshadowed," 68–69.

[52]Coleman, "Congress House of Representatives, Tuesday, December 23."

[53]Mason, "Slavery Overshadowed," 70–71.

[54]William Coleman, "Congress. House of Representatives. Friday, February 27.," *The New-York Evening Post*, March 5, 1807.

[55]William Coleman, "A List of Acts Passed during the Second Session of the Ninth Congress," *The New-York Evening Post*, March 11, 1807.

[56]Mason, "Slavery Overshadowed," 77–78.

[57]William Coleman, "Infringement of Neutral Rights, Nos. I-XI," *The New-York Evening Post*, December 5, 1805-January 23, 1806.

[58]William Coleman, "From the Philadelphia Gazette. Washington, 2d Mo. 11th Day. Friend Relf," *The New-York Evening Post*, February 16, 1807; William Coleman, "New-York Evening Post. Saturday, January 3. Washington, Dec. 27," *The New-York Evening Post*, January 3, 1807.

[59]Coleman, "Washington, December 19. Senate of the United States," 19; Coleman, "Congress House of Representatives of the United States, February 28"; Coleman, "Congress In Senate of the U. S. Monday, December 8"; William Coleman, "Congress House of Representatives, Dec. 9," *The New-York Evening Post*, December 15, 1806; William Coleman, "Congress House of Representatives, Friday, December 19," *The New-York Evening Post*, December 24, 1806, 19; William Coleman, "Congress, House of Representatives. Wednesday, Jan. 7.," *The New-York Evening Post*, January 12,

1807; William Coleman, "Congress House of Representatives. Wednesday, February 4. Fortifications and Gun-Boats.," *The New-York Evening Post*, February 12, 1807.

[60]One of the earliest rumors of Jefferson's call for Burr's arrest was printed in the *New-York Evening Post* in November of 1806. This article does not directly name Burr, however, the writer writes in a manner that demonstrates the assumption that the reading knows about whom it is addressed. William Coleman, "Rumour from the Alexandria Expositor," *The New-York Evening Post*, November 3, 1806.

[61]William Coleman, "To the Inhabitants of the City and State of New-York. Letter VI," *The New-York Evening Post*, March 5, 1807.

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