

King's College's Real Estate Projects and Slavery,
1765-1772

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“A Merchant’s College”

The board of trustees of King’s College (1754-1784), initially titled the Board of Governors and later renamed the Corporation of the College, consisted of a veritable “who’s who” of colonial New York City’s top merchants. Trustees including John and Henry Cruger, John Watts, and John Livingston were drawn from some of the colony’s wealthiest and most powerful families. For this reason, historian Craig Wilder has aptly described King’s as “a merchant’s college.”¹ Membership on the board meant access to considerable financial opportunities; at times, the trustees used the College’s treasury as their own private bank and even went so far as to give themselves preferential lines of credit from the College’s funds.² Inter-marriage between elite families ensured further concentration of mercantile influence on the board: James Duane, another King’s trustee, was a member of the extended Livingston family via his 1759 marriage to Robert Livingston’s daughter Mary.³ John Watts was aligned with the powerful DeLancey family (also well-represented on the board) through marriage.⁴ In short, the board of King’s College provided a mechanism for colonial New York’s merchants to pursue and protect their personal economic interests. It is sometimes difficult to tell where the interests of those merchants begin and the College’s interests end.

Slavery was fundamental to the economy of colonial New York, and the board of King’s College was no exception. The merchant-trustees of King’s were heavily involved in the African slave trade, as well as numerous other business ventures dependent on the labor of enslaved people. Slave-trading voyages provided trustees such as John Livingston with lucrative streams of income, as did extensive investments in Jamaican plantations. Livingston was a slaveholder himself as

¹Craig Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 63-64.

²Sharon Liao, “A Merchant’s College:” *King’s College (1754-1784) and Slavery* (Columbia University and Slavery Seminar, 2015), 20.

³Memoir of the Hon. James Duane, by the Hon. Samuel W. Jones, *Documentary History of the State of New York* (Albany: Parsons & Co., 1849), 1064.

⁴*The Letter Book of John Watts: Merchant and Councillor of New York* (New York: New York Historical Society, 1928), ix-x, Sharon Liao, “A Merchants College:” *King’s College (1754-1784) And Slavery* (Columbia University and Slavery Seminar: 2015), 10.

well.⁵ Other prominent trustees, including members of the Watts and Cruger families, also owned slaves and made significant investments in the “triangular trade” between Britain, the West Indies, and New York City. John Watts, for example, made most of his money trading sugar, molasses, and rum produced by enslaved workers in the Caribbean. He also invested in the transatlantic slave trade.⁶ Trafficking enslaved people and the commodities they produced enriched and empowered the merchants on the board of King’s College – and they used their positions on the board to protect their positions in colonial New York’s economy.

One crucial yet underacknowledged component of the process was the trustees’ use of the College’s land acquisition and development projects. Such projects increased the college’s endowment – which doubled as the trustees’ line of credit – and consolidated their advantage in New York City’s extremely profitable real estate market. The period from the mid-1760’s to the early 1770’s saw a substantial increase in the College’s real estate transactions, contributing to its immense wealth. Beginning in 1766, certain trustees enjoyed broad authority to lease land owned by the College on whatever terms they wanted. In this paper, I will investigate the College’s land acquisition and development projects in the 1760’s and early 1770’s. Transactions during this period were typically conducted between members of the city’s upper echelon of investors and speculators whose business ventures were closely linked to colonial Britain’s mercantile economy and the institution of slavery that propelled it.

“A Committee to Lease the College Lands as They Shall Think Fit”

On November 20, 1766, the board of King’s College formed a committee composed of trustees who were also wealthy merchants and land speculators including John Watts, James Duane, Leonard Lispenard, Henry Cuyler, and John Livingston. They were authorized “to Lease such part of the College Lands as they shall think fit, and upon such Terms and Conditions as they

⁵Sharon Liao, “A Merchant’s College:” *King’s College (1754-1784) and Slavery* (Columbia University and Slavery Seminar: 2015), 8.

⁶Ibid, 10.

shall think right for any Term not exceeding Twenty one years.”⁷ Less than five months later, the trustees dramatically expanded the committee’s authority, granting members “full power to agree for and lease any of the said Lands upon the best Terms they can and for any Number of Years they shall think proper not exceeding the Term of Ninety nine Years.”⁸ This development represented a marked shift in King’s College’s land development projects. Members of the committee now wielded increased financial and social power through their control of access to lucrative real estate investments.

To put the terms of these leases in context, some information about New York City’s economy in the 1760’s is instructive. Then, as now, real estate was one of the city’s most valuable commodities. In 1762, even the most competitively-priced plots of land in Manhattan were appraised with the expectation that their value would double each year.⁹ When the 1763 Treaty of Paris ended the Seven Years’ War – and profitable war privateering contracts along with it – the city’s economy entered into a severe downturn. Merchants, including King’s College trustee John Watts, worried for the future of their commercial endeavors with the British military no longer stationed in New York to patronize their businesses.¹⁰ The mercantile economy had been disrupted by the end of the war, making land one of the most secure investments available in the city at the time. Assuming the value of land was expected to double each year (likely a conservative estimate, since the Treaty of Paris increased demand for land by halting settlement west of the Proclamation Line of 1763), access to an investment as stable as a 99-year lease could be the determining factor in a merchant’s success or failure. Trustees of King’s College used their authority to lease the College’s lands not only to fund operations but also to preserve their positions in colonial New York

⁷Early Minutes of the Trustees, 1755-1770; November 20 1766; Minutes of the Board of Trustees; University Archives, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

⁸Early Minutes of the Trustees, 1755-1770; April 7, 1767; Minutes of the Board of Trustees; University Archives, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

⁹Edwin G. Burrows, Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 187.

¹⁰*Ibid*, 191.

City's economy. The board was a significant source of their wealth and power, in part because the merchant-trustees of the committee had exclusive authority to lease the College's landholdings in Manhattan.

King's College's well-known status as a "merchant's college" is clearly deserved. However, the College's importance to building the wealth of colonial New York's merchants is often understated: King's was a merchant's college not only because its wealth was donated largely by colonial New York's mercantile elite (as Wilder has argued) but also because those merchants used the College to enrich themselves even further. Access to the board meant access to exclusive banking and credit opportunities, and potentially the authority to make decisions about the future of New York City's real estate market. On the other side of the equation, access to a 99-year lease could be the decisive factor in a merchant's ability to stay financially solvent, especially as the city's economy was becoming increasingly volatile. Throughout the 1760's and 1770's, the College's landholdings and revenues continually grew and King's became by far the wealthiest educational institution in colonial North America.¹¹ These real estate transactions, intertwined as they were with the ventures of wealthy merchants such as the Livingston and Watts families, were impossible to separate from the "triangular trade" between Britain and its colonies in North America and the Caribbean; therefore they are impossible to separate from the institution of slavery. Profitable land acquisition and development projects were a stable source of income for merchants with numerous financial ties to the slave trade or to industries based directly or indirectly on the labor of enslaved people, as an examination of the evidence illustrates.

Samuel Skinner's Rum Distillery

Rum distilleries were a vital component of colonial New York City's mercantile economy. Merchants who invested heavily in imports from the West Indies, including slaves, molasses, and sugar, often diversified their commercial activities by opening distilleries to process molasses – a

¹¹Robert McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 37-8.

byproduct of sugar refinement on Caribbean plantations – into rum. In the 1750's the Livingston family owned and operated one of the largest rum distilleries in lower Manhattan.¹² According to the family's biographer Cynthia Kierner, King's trustee John Livingston was listed as the owner of that distillery in 1767.¹³ Trustees shared important economic ties through their involvement in the city's rum production chain: Leonard Lispenard, for instance, belonged to one of New York's foremost rum-brewing families, while the Livingstons were prolific in the rum distillation business.¹⁴

During this period, participation in the legal rum trade was an option for only the wealthiest investors. Especially after the end of the Seven Years' War, the cost of importing rum or molasses legally was prohibitive for many merchants due to a series of taxes and regulatory interventions by the British Crown. The American Revenue Act of 1764, more commonly known as the Sugar Act, imposed heavy taxes on sugar and molasses imported to the North American colonies from the Caribbean. One result was increased concentration in the ownership of legal rum-trading businesses. Another was an uptick in smuggling. In 1766, an updated American Revenue Act regulated the trade of sugar and molasses even further.¹⁵

The following year, the trustees of King's began leasing unused lots held by the College to be used for rum distillation. On March 26, 1767, a man named Samuel Spencer Skinner wrote a letter to Henry Cuyler, a member of the committee authorized to lease the College's real estate assets. His purpose was to inquire about two lots "on the S.W. Corner of the Colledge grounds" – about a block away from the Hudson River – with the intention of constructing a "brick dwelling house" and a rum distillery on the property.¹⁶ On April 13, Skinner reached an agreement with

¹²Edwin G. Burrows, Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 183-4.

¹³Cynthia Kierner, *Traders and Gentlefolk: The Livingstons of New York, 1675-1790* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 79.

¹⁴Virginia D. Harrington, *The New York Merchant on the Eve of the Revolution* (New York, 1935), 148.

¹⁵Edwin G. Burrows, Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 195.

¹⁶Skinner, Samuel Spencer, New York City, March 26, 1767, to Henry Cuyler; March 26, 1767; Columbia College Papers; Box 1; University Archives, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

James Duane to lease the lots for a term of 99 years: “3 £ a lot for 21 years, 5 £ a lot for the next 21 years, 7 £ a lot for the next 21 years and 10 £ a lot for the last 36 years.”¹⁷ The terms of this transaction are remarkable for their profitability and scope: a lease in a city where the value of land is expected to at least double each year, with rent that increases 40% or less over a period of 21 or 36 years. The committee to lease the College lands had likely granted Skinner one of the most lucrative opportunities available in the city at the time.

King’s College’s agreement with Skinner also exposes the connection between the College’s land development projects and the institution of slavery. Trustees not only owned slaves, invested in the slave trade, and participated in ventures tied to plantations in the West Indies such as rum production, they also funded the College with real estate holdings, such as Skinner’s rum distillery, which depended on slave labor in the Caribbean. Molasses created on sugar plantations would have been imported to Manhattan’s docks by ship and then fermented by brewers such as the Lispenards. Fermented molasses would then be transported to lots on the College grounds to be distilled into rum. Skinner would collect the profits and pay rent to the College, which in turn became extremely wealthy. King’s trustees could then extend credit to themselves for their own commercial endeavors, often tied to slavery, using the College’s newly accumulated resources. It is impossible to separate King’s College’s real estate ventures from the larger economic circumstances at play in New York City during the colonial period – prominently including slavery.

The Water Lots

On May 14, 1765, the trustees appointed Watts, Lispenard, Duane, Cuyler, and John Livingston to “a Committee to consider of the Propriety of Leasing the College Lands.”¹⁸ One of the

¹⁷Agreement with Samuel Spencer Skinner; April 13, 1767; Columbia College Papers; Box 1; University Archives, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

¹⁸Early Minutes of the Trustees, 1755-1770; May 14, 1765; Minutes of the Board of Trustees; University Archives, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

committee's central concerns was the procurement of rights to lease "the water Lotts opposite the said Lands."¹⁹ Water lots, which were underwater lots beside Manhattan's shoreline, were granted by the city on the condition that owners fill them in with landfill, thereby extending the island's valuable waterfront real estate. As the lots were filled in, the slips along the city's docks would be extended further into the Hudson and East Rivers and the lots along the previous shoreline would be converted into city blocks. The legal framework for the sale of water lots to land speculators had been created by the 1680 Donogan Charter, which granted the city the right to lease water lots to private developers, and refined by the Montgomerie Charter of 1731, which gave the city the exclusive rights to sell water lots up to four hundred feet from Manhattan's rivers.²⁰ There were numerous economic advantages to this system: for one, extending the wharves along the city's shore allowed larger ships to dock in the deeper waters further from the coast instead of anchoring in the shallow end of the river. In addition, the expansion of the waterfront created more lots adjacent to Manhattan's docks – among the most profitable real estate investments in the city because goods were mostly delivered by water. For this reason, wealthy merchants often used their political connections to secure highly sought-after rights to create new land out of New York City's rivers.²¹

The British Crown as well as city officials took a pronounced interest in the privately-funded expansion of Manhattan's waterfront for several reasons. Development of the city's ports was crucial to New York's role as a node in the "triangular trade" and subcontracting development to independent landowners provided a means of offsetting the expense. Private developers were keen to get involved because of the relatively low risk and enormous profitability. As was often the case, colonial New York City's mercantile and political elite found themselves in a mutually beneficial relationship. In this way, as Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace have argued, the city's water lot policy functioned as "a device for moving some prime urban real estate into the hands of

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Anne-Marie Cantwell, Diana diZerega Wall, *Unearthing Gotham: The Archaeology of New York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 225-226.

²¹Ibid, 226.

wealthy speculators and developers.”²² Considering the amount of wealth and political influence concentrated among King’s College’s trustees, it follows that they were in an ideal position to take advantage of the policy. The evidence indicates they acted consistently to do so.

Historian Robert McCaughey has written that as early as 1762, water lots along the Hudson River were a major source of income for King’s College.²³ I have not been able to independently confirm his findings, but by 1765, the board of trustees was clearly pursuing the investment opportunities afforded by the city’s water lot grants. Upon the formation of the committee to discuss leasing the College’s landholdings, appointees were instructed to report back to the board with their recommendations for what terms the board should seek in their negotiations with municipal authorities about the water lots.²⁴ In March of 1770, King’s College was granted an alteration to its charter, authorizing trustees to “Lease for the Term of Ninety nine Years the extent of two hundred feet from Hudson’s river” – essentially granting the board the exclusive rights to lease water lots along the College’s landholdings.²⁵ King’s College profited tremendously from renting out water lots in the Hudson River during the 1760’s and 1770’s.²⁶

Only cursory information about the College’s water lot rentals remains in the archival record. However, contemporary maps of lower Manhattan reveal evidence of significant development along the Hudson River waterfront in the period after King’s College acquired the rights to lease the water lots. A city plan surveyed in 1766 and 1767 does not show any docks along the Hudson River north of Dyes Street (modern-day Dey Street). At that time, Manhattan’s shoreline extended no further than Greenwich Street to the west.²⁷ Judging by later city plans dating from the

²²Edwin G. Burrows, Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 141.

²³Robert McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 131.

²⁴Early Minutes of the Trustees, 1755-1770; May 14 1765; Minutes of the Board of Trustees; University Archives, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

²⁵Report of the Committee for applying for an Amendment & Alteration in the College Charter; March 20, 1770; Columbia College Papers; Box 1; University Archives, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

²⁶Robert McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 131.

²⁷Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division, The New York Public Library. “Plan of the city of New York

1790's, the Hudson River waterfront had developed considerably. The island had been expanded by the length of one block westward, and the docks extended much further north. The new waterfront real estate included several docks in the vicinity of the College.²⁸ Considering that King's had acquired exclusive rights to lease the length of 200 feet from the shore along the border of its property, King's College must have owned a portion of the lucrative new waterfront real estate created in the interim period, including the docks opposite the College's landholdings.

Figures 1 and 2, shown below, demonstrate the scale of the Hudson River waterfront's expansion between the late 1760's and the 1790's. I have outlined the land granted to the College by its 1754 and 1770 charters in black. However, there may have been more real estate in the area owned by King's than I have been able to ascertain in my research. Between the 1760's and 1790's, new lots along the Hudson appear to have been filled in next to the College as well as several blocks to the west, suggesting a significant increase in the College's waterfront real estate assets. These properties would have been highly profitable because their proximity to the river made them ideal locations for commercial ventures. Exclusive rights to lease the water lots opposite the College's landholdings made King's an investor in the development of Manhattan's ports – and the development of colonial Britain's transatlantic economy in which slavery played a key role.

in North America: Surveyed in the years 1766 & 1767" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed November 8, 2022. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/ed619490-c5aa-012f-7ed8-58d385a7bc34>

²⁸The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Print Collection, The New York Public Library. "Plan of the City of New York" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed November 8, 2022. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/474bd700-c5f0-012f-e302-58d385a7bc34>



Figure 1: Manhattan in 1767, King's College's landholdings outlined in black. Source: Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division, The New York Public Library. "Plan of the city of New York in North America: Surveyed in the years 1766 [and] 1767" New York Public Library Digital Collections.



Figure 2: Manhattan, approximately 1790-1799, King's College's landholdings outlined in black. Source: The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Print Collection, The New York Public Library. "Plan of the City of New York" New York Public Library Digital Collections.

Philip Livingston and the “Lots Adjoining Hudsons River”

Philip Livingston (1716-1778) is best known as a signer of the Declaration of Independence and delegate to the First and Second Continental Congresses. Less discussed are his commercial enterprises as one of colonial New York City’s most prominent slave traders and landholders.²⁹ Livingston’s brother was none other than John Livingston of the committee to lease the college lands, and his first cousin was married to James Duane, another member of the committee.³⁰ He apparently took advantage of these connections: At some point in 1771, Livingston applied for “Some of the Lotts behind the College for Leases of Ninety nine years.”³¹ These were highly valuable waterfront properties “adjoining Hudsons river.”³² On October 8 of that year, the trustees created a new committee to transact with him. The following day, the minutes of a board meeting record that a lease had been agreed upon at the same rate offered to Samuel Skinner a few years earlier: “Three Pounds pr annum for the first Twenty one years, Five Pounds pr annum for the next Twenty one Years, Seven Pounds pr annum for the third Twenty one years, and Ten Pounds pr annum for the last Thirty six years of the said Term.”³³

In a paper written for the Columbia University and Slavery Project in 2015, Sharon Liao noted that various biographers and historians list Philip Livingston (1716-1778) as a major financial donor to King’s College during the colonial period, although his name does not appear on surviving subscription lists.³⁴ It is likely that his real estate investments, conducted through King’s College’s board of trustees, account for at least a portion of his contributions. Philip Livingston, as one of the

²⁹Sharon Liao, “A Merchant’s College:” *King’s College (1754-1784) and Slavery* (Columbia University and Slavery Seminar, 2015), 20.

³⁰Cynthia Kierner, *Traders and Gentlefolk: The Livingstons of New York, 1675-1790* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 260-261.

³¹Minutes of the Board of Trustees; Volume 1, 1770 April - 1781 July; October 8, 1771; University Archives, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

³²Minutes of the Board of Trustees; Volume 1, 1770 April - 1781 July; October 9, 1771; University Archives, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴Sharon Liao, “A Merchant’s College:” *King’s College (1754-1784) and Slavery* (Columbia University and Slavery Seminar, 2015), 16-17.

leading importers of slaves into New York Harbor, could have had a number of uses for property along the Hudson River. As discussed above, waterfront real estate in Manhattan was one of the most valuable commodities available at the time, and was crucial to the distribution of enslaved people and slave-produced goods. A 99-year lease with such preferential terms would have been hard to pass up for such a prolific speculator in land and human beings as Livingston.

I have not been able to locate information about how Philip Livingston used the lots he rented from King's, but they were almost certainly profitable for him. Lots were almost invariably one square block in size, and could have been used for businesses owned by leaseholders or rented out to other tenants. The highly favorable terms of his lease agreement would have allowed Livingston to reinvest his profits back into the slave-based economy of the "triangular trade", expanding his slave-trading and land speculation endeavors all while taking on very little risk – the perfect arrangement for a merchant like Livingston invested in so many high-risk commercial ventures. His connections to the board of King's College gave him access to lucrative real estate assets which helped secure his position as one of New York's top slave-trading merchants. In return, the College received a portion of Livingston's profits in the form of rent for its waterfront land-holdings. It was also a family affair; members of the Livingston family used their seats on the board of trustees to pass along valuable real estate opportunities to each other below market rate, consolidating the family's economic power.

The Township of Kingsland

The ambitions of King's College's board extended far beyond the city limits of New York. As early as 1763, James Jay (cousin of King's trustee John Jay) in contact with representatives of King George III on behalf of the trustees regarding the possibility of obtaining a tract of land to help fund the College.³⁵ Jay was looking exclusively for prime real estate; if the land was in "the distant

³⁵Early Minutes of the Trustees, 1755-1770; November 1, 1763; Minutes of the Board of Trustees; University Archives, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

extreme parts of the Colony,” he wrote, the grant would “scarce be worth our acceptance.”³⁶ He also pointed out the board’s friendly relationship with Sir William Johnson, New York’s Superintendent of Indian Affairs. Jay opined that Johnson would be able to “render every Thing easy with the Indians” should it be necessary to increase the College’s landholdings.³⁷ The College was gifted a land grant somewhere in the colony of New York by one Lord Shelbourne. King’s would soon acquire more real estate from land grants by the Crown in the colony outside of New York City proper.³⁸

In November of 1766 – at the same meeting where the committee to lease the College lands was formed – the trustees decided to petition Sir Henry Moore, the newly appointed royal governor of the Province of New York, for a 20,000 acre land grant to fund the College’s operations.³⁹ In another connection to the world of British colonial slavery in the Caribbean, Moore had risen to prominence as Lieutenant Governor of Jamaica for his brutal suppression of a slave uprising known as Tacky’s Revolt.⁴⁰ The trustees had established contact with Moore the previous year to congratulate him on his appointment as Governor.⁴¹ Their request for land was approved on February 26, 1767 when Moore granted the College 24,000 acres in the northernmost portion of the Province (in modern-day Vermont) and the trustees promptly ordered that the land be surveyed.⁴² With this acquisition, King’s College expanded its real estate holdings significantly when it was already the wealthiest college in North America. By 1767, the board’s development projects had

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Early Minutes of the Trustees, 1755-1770; November 20 1766; Minutes of the Board of Trustees; University Archives, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

⁴⁰For more information about Moore’s role in suppressing Tacky’s Revolt, see Vincent Brown, *Tacky’s Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2020.)

⁴¹King’s College, Governors. New York [Nov. 1765] to Henry Moore. Congratulations on his appointment as Governor of New York; November 1765; Columbia College Papers; Box 1; University Archives, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

⁴²Early Minutes of the Trustees, 1755-1770; February 26, 1767; Minutes of the Board of Trustees; Library, Columbia University Libraries.

far exceeded any need to fundraise for the College, but profitable real estate ventures continued and even accelerated.

A few years later, in 1770, the committee appointed to petition Moore for the land grant issued a report to the board. They suggested the College's new acquisition be transformed into a township and "speedily settled". The trustees approved the committee's plan and declared that "for the encouragement and more speedy settlement of the said Township that this Corporation will give and Grant Five hundred acres of Land to such actual settlers thereon so this Committee hereafter appointed shall think proper."⁴³ It was eventually decided that the College's new township would be named Kingsland. At no upfront cost, the College had become a direct financial stakeholder in the colonization of North America. The trustees envisioned an orderly town center with plots allotted for a "town Court House, Church and Church yard" and recommended settlement begin as soon as possible.⁴⁴

Apparently, the committee had difficulties attracting new residents. At a 1772 board meeting, the trustees admitted that "the former Encouragement given by this Corporation for the settlement of the Township of Kingsland has proved insufficient to answer the purpose thereby Entended."⁴⁵ In response, yet another committee was created and tasked with finding and negotiating with the township's first twelve settlers. Its most active member was undoubtedly James Duane, a fixture of the board's real estate acquisition committees. Duane himself was heavily involved in land speculation in upstate New York. His memoirs state that his marriage to Mary Livingston "caused him to become actively engaged in all the lawsuits and discussions relative to the boundaries" of the colony, likely due to the Livingston family's extensive real estate holdings and political ambi-

⁴³Early Minutes of the Trustees, 1755-1770; March 20, 1770; Minutes of the Board of Trustees; University Archives, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Order of the Governors of the N.Y. College for the Settlement of their Township of Kingsland, February 17, 1772, *Documentary History of the State of New York* (Albany: Parsons & Co., 1849), 767.

tions.⁴⁶

Documentary evidence about the fate of Kingsland Township is lacking. Most likely, the land grant was in the area claimed by both the colonies of New York and New Hampshire. Most of those counties were not heavily settled by New Yorkers, and the settlers who arrived from other areas eventually formed the independent republic of Vermont, which was admitted into the Union in 1791. Such was the fate of James Duane's landholdings upstate; he was compensated only a fraction of his initial investment's value and considered it a grave injustice for the rest of his life. Land speculation could be risky at times, especially when the colony of New York declined to enforce its territorial claims on land owned by speculators, as Duane bitterly complained.⁴⁷

More research will be necessary to uncover the full story of the Township of Kingsland. There are likely more close ties between the real estate transactions of King's College trustees and the process of the colonization of North America to be found. Landholdings in upstate New York were also important stable investments for wealthy slaveholding and speculating merchants such as the Livingston and Watts families, suggesting potential further connections between wealthy New York City merchants on the board of King's College and the rapid expansion of settlement in the period leading up to the American Revolution.

From King's to Columbia: Slavery's Legacy

An examination of King's College's real estate transactions during the 1760's and 1770's offers a window into the affairs of colonial New York City's wealthiest and most powerful merchant families. King's trustees used their positions on the board and their political connections to increase the College's landholdings until its treasury overflowed with the spoils of the British colonies' "triangular trade." They used those landholdings to enrich the College, themselves, their fellow merchants, and sometimes their own family members and political allies. Trustees could

⁴⁶Memoir of the Hon. James Duane, by the Hon. Samuel W. Jones, *Documentary History of the State of New York* (Albany: Parsons & Co., 1849), 1064.

⁴⁷Ibid, 1068.

even borrow money from the College's treasury below market interest rates thanks to enormous profits partially acquired through real estate transactions.⁴⁸ When the College couldn't find enough profitable land to lease to merchants and speculators, the trustees found a way to create more by obtaining the right to physically expand the island of Manhattan. Even after King's was extremely wealthy, trustees continued to seek out land and even attempted to create a township so they could lease out another 24,000 acres of real estate. There is a strong possibility that King's trustees and their associates also directly reinvested profits from the College's real estate transactions back into ventures related to slavery or leveraged assets acquired from the College to finance such ventures; perhaps future research will confirm my suspicions.

The American Revolution dramatically reconfigured the social and economic landscape of 18th-century America, and the administrative structure of King's was reorganized after it became Columbia.⁴⁹ However, the University remained extremely wealthy and slavery remained a key component of New York City's massive economy; trustees also retained financial ties to slavery through the Revolution and after.⁵⁰ Centuries later, the power of America's top educational institutions can be measured primarily by the size of their endowments – and real estate holdings. The institution of slavery is long gone, but it has left a social and financial legacy that is very much still with us today. Columbia may no longer be a “merchant's college”, but the University is the seventh-largest property owner in New York City, according to the first comprehensive research on the subject, conducted in 2018 by journalist Ashley McHugh.⁵¹

How can a university like Columbia meaningfully address its historical ties to slavery? From the beginning of the institution's history, Columbia has contributed to the reproduction of social inequality. Through projects such as real estate acquisition and development schemes, the

⁴⁸Sharon Liao, “A Merchant's College:” *King's College (1754-1784) and Slavery* (Columbia University and Slavery Seminar, 2015), 20, Robert McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 37-8.

⁴⁹Eric Foner, *Columbia and Slavery: A Preliminary Report* (Columbia University and Slavery Seminar, 2015), 17.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 17-21.

⁵¹Ashley McHugh, Eddie Small, “Who Owns All of New York?,” *The Real Deal*, September 1, 2018, https://therealdeal.com/issues_articles/who-owns-all-of-new-york/

trustees of King's worked to ensure the College would entrench the interests of the wealthiest merchants in colonial New York City. By virtue of its links to the institution of slavery, the College's enormous financial resources rested on a foundation of human suffering so staggering it is impossible to put into words. Today, the city's economy is no longer dominated by slaveholders and rum traders, and slavery has since been abolished, but Columbia still depends on social inequality to maintain its ability to confer an elite status on a privileged few. The only reason the University can imbue its students and faculty with that status is because the vast majority do not possess the social or economic resources required to become members of the chosen few selected by the most prestigious universities. In this way, Columbia benefits from the profound inequality in our society – and is obligated to uphold it at the risk of giving up its own elite status.

To fully assess the legacy of slavery at institutions like Columbia, we will need a robust and nuanced analysis of how universities reproduce social and economic inequality in our society. Without such an analysis, we cannot completely understand the historical roots of the injustices structurally embedded in our institutions of higher education. I believe that is the only way we can seriously address slavery's legacy in American universities. Until then, researchers are likely to find many more connections between universities and the institution of slavery, but the question of how to move forward will be no closer to answered.