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Columbia College and the New York Antebellum Welfare State: Constructing an Intellectual History

The New York City of the Antebellum Era would be unrecognizable to residents today. The city was still heavily wooded, with populations a fraction of what they are today. Livestock ran along the streets and single families owned acres worth of land. Upon first glance, the New York City of today has little in common with the New York City of the past. However, that assumption ignores the rich history that led to the social programs that exist at the heart of the city's function. While governmental agencies and public works functioned differently in the Antebellum Era, it was during that time that the foundations for the modern welfare system were created. Never before had New York City seen a public form of relief for its struggling residents led by state programs. With that, stigmas toward those using public relief programs also developed–the legacy of which still exists today. Those stigmas were both racist and classist, created and perpetuated by the elite, ruling class that had financial stakes in maintaining the status quo which often included maintaining slavery. In Antebellum New York City, the ruling class was a highly concentrated group that received their education predominantly from Columbia College. The education these wealthy elites received at Columbia College only further heightened their biases toward those seeking welfare. Most importantly, their biases affected tangible policy decisions that many Columbia College alums had the power to implement. Ultimately, the Columbia College culture and student constituency altered the public perception of the welfare state in New York City during the first half of the 19th century and that legacy lives on with each passing generation.

At the beginning of the 19th century, a complete overhaul of the welfare system occurred. While previously poor relief came almost exclusively from "private groups like churches," the Antebellum Era marked the rise in outdoor relief, indoor relief, and public relief.[1] "Outdoor

[1] Seth Rockman, *Welfare Reform in the Early Republic: A Brief History with Documents* (Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc, 2014), 6.

relief consisted of direct aid in the form of food, fuel, clothing, or cash," whereas indoor relief meant recipients moving into spaces outside of their homes like almshouses, asylums, or regulated facilities.[2] Public relief, on the other hand, came from state and local governments that were funded with tax dollars.[3] While outdoor and indoor relief were both popular welfare reforms of the period, public relief will be the main focus of the paper because public opinion was most heavily influenced by this form of relief. One caveat to remember, however, is that in practice, "the boundaries of public/private and indoor/outdoor relief were permeable."[4] For instance, "public officials arranged for the elderly, disabled, and orphaned to receive care at the taxpayer's expense without public knowledge."[5] This is important because it serves as a reminder that public perception was influenced by propaganda rather than the realities of the welfare state. Additionally, despite the public outcry about tax dollars going toward poor relief, the reality was that the welfare system experienced such drastic changes during the Antebellum period due to sheer necessity.

Accelerated economic growth and industrialization, while positively impacting per capita growth during the Antebellum period, also was associated with rising inequalities in New York.[6] Welfare structures exist as a general rule to provide a safety net for those unable to adequately support themselves in an ever-changing society. Poverty rates skyrocketed in the Antebellum period and therefore, welfare structures had to change. In 1823, the first year that public relief data is currently available, only 1.13% of citizens received public assistance.[7] By 1859, that

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[2] Ibid, 6.
[3] Ibid, 6.
[4] Ibid, 7.
[5] Ibid, 7.
[6] Joan Underhill Hannon, "Poverty in the Antebellum Northeast: The View from New York State's Poor Relief Rolls," The Journal of Economic History 44, no. 4 (1984): 1007–32, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2122116?seq=1.
[7] Ibid.

number had risen to 6.8%, a stark change.[8] With the rise of public relief, so rose social stigmas associated with welfare. Members of the ruling class who were becoming increasingly further removed from poor communities feared that "desperate populations of impoverished laborers would undermine political order" and generally, public welfare was seen as a sign of moral shortcomings.[9] Because of the stigma associated with receiving public relief, many of the specifics of the welfare system were shrouded in secrecy. Even today, information about the Antebellum welfare system can be difficult to acquire due to the intentionally convoluted system. White, working-class individuals did not want to be associated with a welfare state that was becoming progressively racialized in the public mind. "Poverty imposed special burdens on African Americans" and in time, poverty became inherently associated with Blackness in New York. Interestingly, African American communities were not receiving the majority of poor relief, though the realities of welfare did not seem to matter in terms of public opinion.

Communities that received the most public relief versus communities that the public focused on were extremely dissonant in Antebellum New York. The majority of public relief recipients and the fastest-growing group at the time were white, able-bodied adults and their children.[10] Institutionalism and other forms of indoor relief, while technically welfare reform movements, were decreasing in popularity to favor relief for those who could be more productive in an ever-increasing industrialized society. Welfare was meant to increase societal productivity and by providing it to predominantly able-bodied citizens, that ensured that public funds were directly and positively impacting capital growth in New York. That was not the reputation that welfare garnered though. Welfare was seen as enabling to communities like "women, children,

[8] Ibid.
[9] Seth Rockman, *Welfare Reform in the Early Republic*, 19, 8.
[10] Joan Underhill Hannon, "Poverty in the Antebellum Northeast."

Native Americans, and African Americans" that were not a part of the same industrial working class in which white men receiving public relief participated.[11] While free African Americans did receive some levels of public assistance, the numbers of Blacks receiving municipal relief in the 1820s and onward actually fell substantially, while white numbers continued to soar into the late 19th century.[12] However, because African Americans accounted for one in every five clients obtaining relief at the almshouse and its privately operated arm, the Colored Home,[13] welfare became associated with undesirable Black communities since those operating privately run relief agencies consisted entirely of upper-class elite who controlled the welfare narrative. The conflation of public and private welfare systems was particularly harmful because the two helped entirely different groups, with public relief rarely benefiting African Americans. Those who ran private welfare institutions intentionally drew false comparisons of the two to negatively alter perceptions of African Americans across New York. It is also noteworthy that linking welfare perceptions to impoverished African American communities drastically impacted the slave question, ultimately benefiting the upper class who enslaved people most directly.

Manumission efforts were on the rise in the early 19th century and public welfare perceptions were weaponized against those movements. "In 1773, the colony of New York passed a law to 'Prevent Aged and Decrepit Slaves from becoming Burdensome,'" with a fine attached to breaking the law.[14] By the 1800s, those attempting to manumit their slaves had to appear in front of the Register's Office to prove that their slave would not become a burden to the welfare system upon manumission.[15] Hundreds of these documents exist to this day, all

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[11] Seth Rockman, *Welfare Reform in an Early Republic*, 8.
[12] Gunja SenGupta. *From Slavery to Poverty: The Racial Origins of Welfare in New York, 1840-1918*. (NYU Press, 2010), 38.
[13] Ibid, 38.
[14] Ibid, 33.
[15] Jacob Radcliff and Richard Riker. "Register's Office Lib No. 2 of Manumissions Page 62," 1814.

signed between the years 1785 and 1849, most of which by Jacob Radcliff, the mayor at the time, and Richard Riker while he was still the Recorder for New York City.[16] Each document looks slightly different, a combination of print and ink, but the requirements remain largely the same throughout. Slave owners had to sign that the enslaved individuals they were attempting to manumit were "under 45 years of age" and "of sufficient ability to provide" for themselves.[17] Information that slave owners had to input themselves included the name of the enslaved person, their gender, and the year the document was created.[18] These documents signify the public fear that freed African Americans would become a burden on the welfare state. Enslaved African Americans were not the only Black people who had to prove they were not burdensome to the welfare state. In 1821, Thomas Miller, a 23-year-old Black man, had to prove that he was a free man and a taxpayer but his own word was not sufficient in the eyes of the law.[19] Instead, John T. Tate, a white man acquainted with Thomas Miller had to vouch that he was, in fact, a legal tax-payer with an address to prove it. Had Miller not had someone to advocate for him, the state could have sold him into slavery regardless of what his freedom status truly was. Few documents like Miller's freedom papers exist because free African Americans often did not interact with white Americans closely because of segregation and therefore, did not have sufficient evidence to advocate for their freedom. Miller's case was not unique and freed African Americans often had their freedom status questioned by the state. There were ulterior motives for the white and wealthy to keep African Americans enslaved. "The enslavement of African Americans dramatically reduced the need for poor relief" for white Americans, and therefore, significant

[16] "Register of Manumissions of Slaves in N.Y.C June 18, 1816-May 28, 1818.," cdm16694.contentdm.oclc.org, 1785-1849, https://cdm16694.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15052coll5/id/30046.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Joh T. Tate. "Document of the City and County of New-York," 1821.

measures were taken to shackle freed and already enslaved African Americans to the institution of slavery.[20]

Offices that managed manumission and freedom efforts were overwhelmingly corrupt in the Antebellum period. Manumission documents were completely at the discretion of the manumission office bureaucrats which meant proving corruption was an almost impossible task. Richard Riker, Recorder for New York City for three terms between 1815 and 1838, was notorious for abusing the Fugitive Slave Act to send free blacks to the South to be sold into slavery.[21] Riker made such a name for himself in this work that he became one of "the most well-known members of what Black and white abolitionists called the New York Kidnapping Club."[22] The same man who physically kidnapped freed men and fugitives to force them onto Southern plantations was also one of the key figures to approve the formal manumission of over one hundred slaves over twenty-three years. While ironic, Riker's position was indicative of the wider public's sentiments about welfare and African Americans. Having a notoriously corrupt but powerful man leading the manumission office sent a message that those he approved truly would not be a burden on the welfare state. Additionally, his status implicitly justified and even encouraged his actions as he received no reprimand for his crimes. While not proven with written evidence, it is possible that Riker maintained his position in the Manumissions office for so many years because of his crimes rather than despite them. His role in the Kidnapping Club was no secret to his colleagues and their disregard for African Americans' freedom may have encouraged his continued position. Powerful men like Richard Riker shaped New York City

[20] Seth Rockman, *Welfare Reform in the Early Republic*, 12.
[21] Leslie M Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago Univ. Of Chicago Press, 2004), 206.
[22] Ibid, 206

society and crafted the narrative about the welfare state. Institutions that enabled these men were equally culpable.

The New York City elite of the early 19th century were a small, influential circle. Many of these New York elites came from families with generational wealth who held all types of powerful positions in government and academia. Due to New York City's small population size (census maps show under one million residents before 1860), most wealthy families were close with one another and were all educated at the same elite colleges.[23] While some families sent their sons out of state to attend Harvard, Yale, or Princeton, the majority of New York's elite families had direct ties to Columbia College. Columbia College was where many of these elite young men began their intellectual pursuits and formed their thoughts about the world around them, including slavery and the welfare system. Columbia was an institution that only accepted students with elite status who were white and could pay the full tuition. Therefore, none of the student body had any personal experience with public relief nor did they personally interact with those who did as "prosperous urban residents were increasingly strangers" to the poor and met those requiring poor relief with criticism because of it.[24] The curriculum at Columbia College during the Antebellum period only further cemented the biases against African Americans, poor relief recipients, and the welfare state. Race science, eugenics, and colonization were among the most popular theories taught and advocated for by professors and had lasting effects on the public perception of welfare for years to come.

Being poor was considered a condition that had moral implications and could be fixed among prominent Columbia faculty. John Griscom, for example, one of the first professors to

[23] Census History Staff US Census Bureau, "History - U.S. Census Bureau," www.census.gov, n.d., https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/fast_facts/1860_fast_facts.html.
[24] Seth Rockman, *Welfare Reform in the Early Republic*, 19.

teach chemistry in the nation, was the founder of the New York House of Refuge in the 1820s and spoke openly about how impoverished people were a result of the "weakness and depravity of human nature."[25] Griscom did not believe in traditional poor relief, stating that to "effectively relieve the poor" clothing and feeding them was not enough and rather, it was the responsibility of society to "erect barriers against the encroachments of moral degeneracy."[26] Griscom, along with many of his contemporaries, infantilized the poor, all the while believing that their position in society was a result of poor choices rather than circumstance. There are records from the New York House of Refuge stating why those who were living there needed housing assistance and an overwhelming majority of them were orphaned, ill, or traumatized in other manners outside their control.[27] And yet, when Griscom spoke publicly and in his lectures about those seeking welfare, including from his own organizations, he characterized them as "idle," "ignorant," and with an "intemperance in drinking."[28] These were just some of the messages that Columbia College students were receiving from well-respected professors at Columbia. Griscom was not the only professor who spoke about the indolence of those seeking welfare. Other professors only further compounded students' biases against the working class and those seeking welfare by bringing race into the conversation.

Many professors at Columbia with abolitionist stances believed in colonization, the idea that Black people should all be freed from slavery and sent back to Africa. While colonization was considered an anti-slavery stance, those who subscribed to it believed that integrating Black people would be far too difficult because many of these abolitionists still held white supremacist

[25] Ibid, 51.
[26] Ibid, 54.
[27] Ibid, 86.
[28] John Hoskins Griscom, Memoir of John Griscom, LL.D., Late Professor of Chemistry and Natural Philosophy, 1859.

beliefs. Colonization is an ideology that relies on the misconception that African Americans are a burden upon American society. Those who subscribed to the colonization ideology implicitly acknowledged their beliefs that the welfare system was negatively impacted simply by having Black people in the country. Among these men who advocated for colonization was Columbia professor and President of the Columbia Physicians and Surgeons School, John Augustine Smith, who taught both eugenics and colonization in his classroom. Few materials from courses and lectures taught before the 20th century exist in Columbia's archives, however, some details about Smith's classes exist today. Smith taught a course entitled "Anatomical Instruction" in which he explicitly attempted to demonstrate European supremacy over other races.[29] The class appeared to be entirely about eugenics, examining "anatomical structure, facial angle, and the capacity of the cranium."[30] Outside of Smith's role as a professor, he publicly advocated for white supremacy, and in a lecture given in 1843, he stated that "Caucasians… might justly be said to stand at the head of all the races of the earth, while Blacks' mental powers are upon an inferior scale."[31] Despite his racist beliefs, Smith was an abolitionist, thought he predominantly advocated for colonization.[32] Smith is a great example of how the Columbia curriculum had a far wider outreach than the college campus itself. While Smith was an important figure within the academy, he was also well-known throughout the New York City community. Columbia gave him a platform to proselytize his ideology to his students and entrench another generation in racist ideology. Thus, Columbia professors not only contributed to campus culture but also to public perceptions of race and class as well. That legacy is evident when researching Columbia alumni and the impact they had in their public-facing careers.

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[29] Eric Foner, "Columbia and Slavery: A Preliminary Report," 2016, p 40.
[30] Ibid, 40.
[31] Ibid, 40.
[32] Ibid, 41.

Backing up to slightly before the Antebellum period, the Livingston family was one of the most influential in all of New York. The family, with deep connections to Columbia, had amassed its wealth through the slave trade.[33] Among the members of this prominent family was Robert R. Livingston, Columbia alum and eventual Chancellor of New York City.[34] Robert Livingston was a lawyer and after quickly making a name for himself, he was appointed as the Recorder of New York City, the same position that would eventually take part in signing manumission documents.[35] Livingston only held that position for two years, being let go in 1775 for "his attachment to liberty and his active sympathy with the revolutionary spirit of his countrymen."[36] The supposed reason for his firing from that position does not tell the whole story. 1773, the year Livingston received the Recorder position, was the same year that a law was passed to "Prevent Aged and Decrepit Slaves from becoming Burdensome." By 1785, the first known manumission documents were signed by Richard Riker, the new Recorder of New York. As mentioned earlier, Richard Riker was not sympathetic to the abolitionist movement, however, the same cannot be said for Robert Livingston. Livingston was an outspoken abolitionist early in his career, helping to veto a bill passed by the 1785 legislature that "provided gradual abolition but barred blacks from voting and holding office."[37] It is possible that other members of the manumission office feared Livingston would be too sympathetic to enslaved people seeking their freedom. However, Robert Livingston was not as progressive of a figure as his abolitionist stances portray him. Likely from the influence of his elite family and his

[33] Ibid, 11.
[34] Ibid, 11.
[35] Frederic De Peyster, *A Biographical Sketch of Robert R. Livingston*, 1876, p 16.
[36] Ibid, 16.
[37] Eric Foner, "Columbia and Slavery," 11.

Columbia education, Livingston put his career and comforts above his supposed values of abolition and equality for African Americans.

As the first Chancellor of New York with over twenty years in the position, Robert Livingston had the opportunity to create genuine change in public opinion regarding contentious social issues at the time. Instead, Chancellor Livingston stopped publicly speaking out against slavery and enjoyed a career with political affiliations to the Jeffersonian Republicans, a party that openly campaigned on maintaining slavery.[38] While this may appear contradictory to Livingston's stances on abolition, the Chancellor owned at least fifteen slaves himself, only freeing them upon his death.[39] Livingston's hypocrisy when it came to abolition was indicative of the culture of silence that elitism perpetuated, particularly for those who attended Columbia. For instance, many Columbians joined the original New York Manumission Society, founded in 1785, but refused to admit Black members to the group or free their own slaves.[40] Columbia, an institution founded by and for the wealthy elite, taught its students to be cutting-edge thinkers but ultimately, to remain palatable enough to retain power and status. Chancellor Livingston had one of the most public-facing positions in all of New York City and he could have used that platform to speak out against slavery or create social programs for the poor. Instead, he sat back and said nothing–a product of the lessons he learned from the culture of elitism that his education and peers perpetuated. Columbia benefited from prosperous alumni who would in turn send their sons to the college and donate large sums of money. Livingston was by no means the only high-profile Columbian who sold out his ideals to advance his career. Columbia's influence on the

[38] Frederic De Peyster, *A Biographical Sketch of Robert R. Livingston*, 28.
[39] Eric Foner, "Columbia and Slavery," 11.
[40] Ibid, 21.

negative public opinion concerning welfare and African Americans was only established because powerful alumni routinely chose their careers across many disciplines over their conscience.

Perhaps the most emblematic figure of this phenomenon was Hamilton Fish. Hamilton Fish, born and raised in New York City to a wealthy, well-connected family, graduated from Columbia College in 1827 and was made Commissioner of Deeds for the city by 1833.[41] As the Commissioner of Deeds, Fish was able to authenticate affidavits, depositions, and acknowledgments of deeds. Within that position, Fish would have directly worked with property deeds that included enslaved people. By holding his position as Commissioner, Fish implicitly upheld slavery as an institution. Fish went on to become a State Senator in New York and eventually, the 16th Governor of New York.[42] As for Fish's personal opinions about slavery, he was not particularly forthcoming until put in a position where he realized his political career was coming to an end and he no longer had personal reasons to stay silent.[43] Only then did Fish oppose the Kansas-Nebraska Act that attempted to expand slavery.[44] Even then, Fish did not specify whether he was against slavery as an entire institution or just the expansion of slavery. Even with his moderate opinions, Fish's vote demonstrated that he did believe there were problems with slavery as an institution. Despite this, Fish had no issue taking the position of Commission of Deeds, a job that required him to interact intimately with slaveholders. While Fish's decisions cannot be directly tied to his Columbia education, the repeated pattern of powerful New Yorkers receiving their Columbia degrees, taking on influential positions in state government, and refusing to advocate for anything more than moderate opinions on welfare and slavery cannot be discounted. Despite there being fewer slave-owning Columbia alums than

[41] Amos Elwood Corning, *Hamilton Fish*, 1918, p17.
[42] Ibid, 16.
[43] Ibid, 31.
[44] Ibid, 31.

other elite colleges of similar stature, there were even fewer Columbia abolitionists willing to risk their careers or statuses. The culture at Columbia that did not explicitly denounce slavery, advocated for white supremacy, and only allowed wealthy white men to attend influenced politics and public opinion, especially about race, in ways that are still being unraveled today.

Constructing an intellectual history of Columbia's influence on New York, even if there are gaps, is necessary because Columbia has the power to make a tangible difference in poor New Yorker's lives. Historical narratives are often told as progressive ones but that may not be true with Columbia. In New York City today, there are still perceptions that the welfare state helps serve those too lazy to help themselves. Additionally, there are flagrant racial stereotypes associated with the public perception of the modern welfare state. The question is, does Columbia still contribute to that narrative? Research conducted in the last two decades suggests that the attainment of a college degree, while associated with higher racial tolerance, may also be associated with negative racial perceptions and welfare attitudes.[45] Further, when those same welfare programs are described as public assistance programs without the use of the term "welfare," the associative with negative racial perceptions decreases.[46] From this research, we can conclude that welfare to this day has negative associations with Black populations, regardless of which groups are seeking welfare. While Columbia is of course not solely responsible for these perceptions, tracing welfare back to the Antebellum period and evaluating Columbia's role allows us to begin understanding where these negative associations originated. This is particularly true in New York City where the inequality gap between the wealthy and the poor only continues to rise and more families desperately need access to welfare programs.

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[45] Christopher M. Federico, "When Do Welfare Attitudes Become Racialized? The Paradoxical Effects of Education," American Journal of Political Science 48, no. 2 (2004): 374–91, https://doi.org/10.2307/1519889.
[46] Ibid.

Negative associations with welfare become huge barriers for those who need access to it most and powerful institutions like Columbia can make substantial changes through curriculum, community outreach, and monetary assistance.

New York City's history, particularly during the Antebellum Era, reveals intricate connections between societal perceptions, welfare systems, and the influential role of institutions like Columbia College. While the modern-day New Yorker might perceive the city's past as distant and alien, the roots of many social challenges and stigmas that persist today can be traced back to the early 19th century. The welfare systems that began to form during the Antebellum period were not just responses to economic and societal shifts; they were deeply intertwined with racial prejudices, class divisions, and the power dynamics of the elite. The narrative was shaped by a select few who, through their education and societal standing, influenced public opinion and policy. Institutions like Columbia College played a pivotal role in molding these perceptions, often at the expense of marginalized communities. The legacy of the Antebellum welfare system and its associated stigmas continues to resonate in contemporary society. The negative associations with welfare, particularly racialized ones, have persisted, creating barriers for those most in need. It becomes imperative to reflect on the role of influential institutions and their impact on societal perceptions. Columbia, with its rich history and vast influence, holds a unique position to re-examine its past and actively contribute to a more inclusive and equitable future. A future without racial stigma about welfare can exist, but only if those in charge of the propagandized narrative take steps to change it. As members of the Columbia community, it is our job to ensure this happens.

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