

Digital Review

Martha A. Sandweiss, et al., *The Princeton & Slavery Project: An Exploration of Princeton University's Historical Ties to the Institution of Slavery*, <https://slavery.princeton.edu/>. Accessed August 18, 2019.

Over the last two decades, scholars at dozens of US colleges and universities have started writing the histories of race and slavery located at their own institutions. This reckoning has taken many forms ranging from class projects to dissertations and from single-scholar initiatives to formal faculty committees. The findings are often similar: schools mirrored the societies and power structures of their time and place. In the case of *The Princeton & Slavery Project*, the authors argue that the “central paradox of American history” is the cohabitation of “liberty and slavery,” and that Princeton University reflected this tension. *Princeton & Slavery*, which began as an undergraduate research project in 2013, is most impressive for its scale. The quantity of resources produced by historians Martha Sandweiss, Joseph Yannielli, Craig Hollander, R. Isabela Morales, Dan Linke, and dozens of students is imposing but also accessible. *Princeton & Slavery* exemplifies what long-term planning, tenacious research, and years of university and external support can yield.

Despite the project's name, *Princeton & Slavery* goes well beyond the enslaved. It covers African American history at Princeton in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as the memories of slavery and continued racism in more recent years. The project's forty authors produced one-hundred thoroughly researched and footnoted essays. They range in subject from the university's attempt to receive donations from wealthy enslavers in the West Indies in 1772 to the last (officially sanctioned) blackface minstrel performance in 1949. There are also essays that discuss the experiences of individual black men and women, enslaved and free, on campus.

For example, one essay addresses the fact that President Samuel Finley held a woman named Peg in slavery in the 1760s. The president's death precipitated the division of his household and probably the separation of an enslaved family. Finley's daughter inherited Peg; executors sold Finley's six other enslaved men and women beneath two sycamore trees that still stand on campus.¹ According to

¹ R. Isabela Morales, “Slavery at the President's House,” *Princeton & Slavery Project*, accessed September 19, 2019, <https://slavery.princeton.edu/stories/presidents-house>.

another essay, the university never officially admitted Bristol Yamma and John Quamine as students in the 1770s, but both men received “private lessons with President John Witherspoon” after Yamma and Quamine purchased their freedom.² In the mid-nineteenth century, white students collected photographs of the black employees. Alfred Scudder, a free black assistant to professors in the 1850s, was identified—in a thought-provoking inscription—as assistant professor of natural philosophy.³

The stories represent the core intellectual work of *Princeton & Slavery*, but the website offers more than essays. Four-hundred digitized primary sources—including but not limited to university records, private letters, bills of sale, sketches, and photographs—make the website a resource for students learning about history, historical memory, or the research process. Not only did the *Princeton & Slavery* team transcribe a majority of these documents, they also link from the primary sources to associated essays. The photograph of Alfred N. C. Scudder, for instance, contains a link to the story, “African Americans on Campus, 1746–1876.” As in the case of the essays, the primary source collection is logically organized and easy to use.

In addition to essays and documents, *Princeton & Slavery* also contains a robust multimedia collection. An interactive campus map contains what might be called digital historic markers that link place and central themes. Here more than anywhere else on the website, the campus map exemplifies a problem that limits *Princeton & Slavery* as a model for other digital projects. Every point on the map describes the actions of at least one white man; only a quarter of the markers mention the name of an enslaved—or free—African American. At the Maclean House, for example, there is no mention of Peg, who would have been familiar with the house and campus as an enslaved person in the 1760s. When the map’s text mentions African Americans by name, it is often only in passing. The product is slavery without many enslaved people and reparative interpretation without interpretive equity. How provocative would it be to imagine Princeton from the perspective of Peg in 1766? Or the formerly enslaved Bristol Yamma and John Quamine in 1775? Or janitor and assistant professor Alfred Scudder in 1860? As is, the campus map and many of the associated essays have the unintended consequence of trivializing the role of African Americans in the very project designed to prioritize their lives.

The project’s collection of videos shifts the focus from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries toward modern memories of slavery and racism. There are hours of content from the Princeton and Slavery Project Symposium (2017), including

² Joseph Yannielli, “African Americans on Campus, 1746–1876,” *Princeton & Slavery Project*, accessed September 19, 2019, <https://slavery.princeton.edu/stories/african-americans-on-campus-1746-1876>.

³ Yannielli, “African Americans on Campus,”; “Alfred N. C. Scudder,” accessed September 19, 2019, <https://slavery.princeton.edu/sources/alfred-n-c-scudder-assistant-professor-of-natural-philosophy>

a keynote address by Toni Morrison. There is also a series of insightful videos about family memories of slavery and the reflections of black Princeton alumni. One video interweaves the memories of white alumni and legacy admissions with black alumni, including those whose ancestors were owned by white Princeton alumni. The videos are a powerful and innovative because they link the history of slavery to living generations.

Princeton & Slavery has received great deal of media attention, including from the *New York Times*, the *Atlantic*, *NPR*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*—and for good reason. While *Princeton & Slavery* was not the first university-produced website about the history of enslaved people and African Americans in the community, it is now a model for how universities might reckon with their troubled pasts. It is a remarkable achievement. And yet, it is strange that national media attention and professional review invitations—including this one—focus on elite northern institutions when discussing slavery and the university. Such unequitable attention overshadows digital exhibits like Hilary N. Green’s “Hallowed Grounds: Race, Memory, and the University of Alabama” and any of the dozens of unfunded or underfunded projects that are part of the Universities Studying Slavery consortium organized by the University of Virginia.⁴ This history matters, and without comparable attention to southern universities there is the potential to overemphasize the uniqueness of slavery at northern schools. Lost in the process are the stories of enslaved men and women who labored far longer at southern colleges and universities than at Princeton.

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4 Hilary N. Green, “Hallowed Grounds: Race, Memory, and the University of Alabama,” accessed September 19, 2019, <http://hggreen.people.ua.edu/hallowed-grounds.html>; “Universities Studying Slavery” accessed September 19, 2019, <https://slavery.virginia.edu/universities-studying-slavery/>.