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HIST273: Penn Slavery Project

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How did students from slaveholding families bring those values/identities to Penn in the mid-nineteenth century?

Part 1: Research Questions and Methodology

At the beginning of the Fall 2018 semester of the Penn and Slavery Project, I set out to explore the question of how wealth, and more specifically intergenerational wealth, caused disparities in who was able to attend the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) in the early to mid-nineteenth century. This led to the question of how these families obtained this wealth that led to the disparities. I decided the most efficient approach to investigate this issue would be to focus on the college students that matriculated at the university because it would presumably be their parents' wealth that allowed them to attend Penn - and thus we could examine the intergenerational transmission of wealth, including the provision of higher education, and investigate further into how their parents achieved this wealth.

The information that spurred these questions came from a book found in the University Archives named "Catalogue University of Pennsylvania 1830-52 (List of Matriculants)."¹ In this book, I observed that amongst the list of Penn Graduate school students from the years between 1830 to 1852, there was an even shorter list of

¹"Catalogue University of Pennsylvania 1830-52 (List of Matriculants)," University of Pennsylvania University Archives

undergraduate students. If each year, the graduate school class accepted approximately 100 students, the undergraduate class accepted 30. For every year, between the time period of 1830-52, I went through the list of college matriculants and identified all the students who hailed from the southern states. This included all states located south of Pennsylvania. I decided to focus on southern students because these students were more likely to come from families that obtained their wealth through the institution of slavery. This assumption can be made because first, it is costlier to send a child to school out of state, so these families had a higher probability of being wealthier during a time when white southern wealth, as well as much northern wealth, mainly came from ties to slavery. Second, the abolition of slavery began as early as 1780 in Pennsylvania with the Pennsylvania Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery. By conducting my investigation this way, I narrowed my search to focus on students who most likely came from wealthy planter families. By no means does this imply that students from northern states did not also come from these planter families. Although the Act of 1780 worked to gradually end slavery in Pennsylvania, which was approximately fifty years prior to when the students investigated in this study went to college, there were many loopholes that northerners were able to take advantage of. So, slavery still persisted in the north but it was simply harder to track as there was less documentation on the practice. Even still, enslavers most likely gained their wealth from slavery and passed it down to their children. This means that these northern students could have also contributed to the slaveholding culture that was present at Penn in the early nineteenth century. However, for the purpose of this research paper, I will focus on the students who matriculated from the southern states since almost 75%

of the students who attended Penn for undergraduate school lived in Pennsylvania. By focusing on the southern states during the time period of 1830 to 1852, I was able to compile a list of 3-4 students from the south for each year. At the end of the search, I had identified 15 names from southern Penn college students. These students came from Alabama, Georgia, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and South Carolina.²

The second source that I utilized also came from the University Archives. Once I identified the 15 students to investigate further, I looked into the records that the University of Pennsylvania held on each student.³ These records included information such as the years the student attended Penn, the student's birthplace, their address after college, their profession, and the location of their death. Much of the information in these files came from newspaper clippings. In rare cases, families of the students were able to contribute additional insight and information to the student's files. The 15 students I identified were Franklin P. Pope (attended in 1829) , Henry Ludlam (attended 1829-1833), Samuel McKinney(attended 1832), Robert M'Millan (McMillan) (attended 1828-1831), William J. Grayson (attended 1834- 1838), Peter Custis Jr.(attended 1839-1842), Samuel Wolff (attended 1839-1842), John Harvey, Jr. (attended 1845-1848), Thomas Newbold (attended 1845-1848), William J. Feltus (attended 1847-1849), Henry J. Feltus Jr.(attended 1847-1849), Abram M. Feltus (attended 1851-1854), William R. Johnson (attended 1850-1853), Louis P. Henop (attended 1851-1854), and George H. Waring (attended 1851-1855).⁴ Consulting another source, I identified Lovick

² Ibid.

³ "Penn student files," University of Pennsylvania University Archives

⁴ Ibid.

Feltus, of the Feltus family, as someone who had attended Penn at a later time (attended 1857).⁵

My final source was Ancestry.com.⁶ Through this website, I was able to confirm the relationships between the Penn students and their families. Further, I used this site to establish the slave schedules and census, which allowed me to identify how many people each family enslaved.

After subsequent investigation into the Penn files of the students and supplementary archival and internet research, I decided to focus on the four brothers of the Feltus family and Peter Custis Jr. I felt that focusing on these families would prove most beneficial because of the plethora of information available on the families of these students.

As is the case with research conducted on enslaved people during the time period between the sixteenth and nineteenth century, it has been very difficult to find any information on these enslaved people. Much of their history is told through the stories and biographies of the white people with whom they interacted. Because of this, the information I could find on enslaved people associated with and enslaved by the Feltus and Custis families was limited. Even finding mere names proved difficult.

On the contrary, the lives and history of the Feltus and Custis families have been very well documented. These families, who profited from the enslaved, have books dedicated to recounting their history. Peter Custis Sr. has a myriad of print sources that

⁵ "Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi, Embracing an Authentic and Comprehensive Account of the Chief Events in the History of the State and a Record of the Lives of Many of the Most Worthy and Illustrious Families and Individuals : Goodspeed Brothers : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming." *Full Text of "Passing"*, London : F. Warne ; New York : Scribner, Welford, and Armstrong, 1 Jan. 1891, archive.org/details/cu31924066295209., 730

⁶ Ancestry.com.Wilkinson Co., MS, Inventory and Account Book 17, [database on-line]

speak to his travels on the Freeman and Custis expedition of 1804,⁷ and the Feltus family has an entire genealogy book dedicated to their roots and ancestors from 1775 to 1917.⁸

Although I am unable to give voice to the enslaved people who never had their story told, in this paper I will attempt to attest to their legacy and work that allowed for the wealthy, white planter class to be successful. I will do this by focusing on the four Feltus brothers and Peter Custis Jr. to show how the institution of slavery made it possible for their attendance at Penn in the mid-nineteenth century. Further, I will argue that the Feltus brothers brought their pro-slavery ideologies to Penn and influenced the thinking of others.

Part 2: The Feltus Family

The four Feltus brothers who attended Penn are William J. Feltus, Henry James Feltus, Lovick Ventress Feltus, and Abram Morrell Feltus Jr.

William J. Feltus was born on December 22, 1827 in Wilkinson County, Mississippi and died on August 22, 1865 in Woodville, Wilkinson County, Mississippi.⁹ He entered the junior class at Penn in 1847 and was a member of the Zelosophic Society. The significance of this society will be discussed later. Following his graduation from the college in 1849, William J. Feltus became a lawyer.¹⁰

⁷ Spurgeon, John. "Freeman and Custis Red River Expedition." *Osage - Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=3541.

⁸ "Penn student files," University of Pennsylvania University Archives

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Feltus, George H., *FELTUS FAMILY BOOK: Containing a Biographical Sketch of the Rev. Henry James Feltus, d. Late Rector of St. Stephens, New York City*. FORGOTTEN BOOKS, 2016., 25

Henry James Feltus was born on December 11, 1829,¹¹ in Woodville, Wilkinson County Mississippi.¹² In 1847, he entered the sophomore class at Penn and left at the close of his junior year. At Penn, he was also a member of the Zelosophic Society.¹³ In January of 1849, Henry James and his brother, William, became founding members of the fraternity, Delta Phi (St. Elmo). According to *Penn's Biographical Catalogue of the Matriculates of the College* (1894), of the thirty seven students involved in this fraternity, thirty-two members completed their undergraduate courses and earned their Bachelor of Arts degree. This grand feat occurred at a time when the average graduation rate of Penn was only sixty five percent, illustrating that members in this fraternity held a great advantage over other members in their class in their pursuit of a bachelor's degree.¹⁴ Like many of his fraternity brothers, in 1850, Henry James Feltus obtained his Bachelors of Arts degree from Penn. Following his graduation, Henry James Feltus went on to become a cotton and sugar planter in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.¹⁵

Lovick Ventress Feltus was born on October 21, 1831 and died on May 15, 1904 in Natchez, Adams, Mississippi.¹⁶ It is not clear when he first enrolled at Penn, but he graduated with honors in 1857.¹⁷ Following his time at Penn, Lovick Feltus became a cotton planter in Woodville, Mississippi from 1865 to 1874, and then a sugar planter in Iberville, Louisiana from 1847 to 1882.¹⁸

¹¹ Feltus, 26

¹² There is conflicting evidence on the birth of Henry James Feltus. The "Penn student files" from the University Archives list his date of birth as November 11, 1827, which would make him older than William.

¹³ "Penn student files," University of Pennsylvania University Archives

¹⁴ Carlson, Benjamin Foster. "Histories of Early Penn Fraternities: Delta Phi (St. Elmo)" University of Pennsylvania University Archives <https://archives.upenn.edu/exhibits/penn-history/fraternities/listing/delta-phi>

¹⁵ Feltus, 26

¹⁶ "WikiTree." WikiTree: Where Genealogists Collaborate, www.wikitree.com/wiki/Feltus-].

¹⁷ "Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi,..." 730

¹⁸ Feltus, 26

Abram Morrell Feltus Jr. was born on October 6, 1883 in Woodville, Wilkinson County, Mississippi. He entered the sophomore class at Penn in 1851 and also became a member of the Zelosophic Society. Following his graduation from Penn in 1854, he became a lawyer.¹⁹ Abram Feltus Jr. died as an officer in the Confederate Army in the Battle of Wilderness, Spotsylvania, Virginia on May 12, 1863.²⁰

It is clear that the Feltus family had significant opportunities, but how was the Feltus family able to afford to send four sons to Penn? How was this family's wealth obtained?

The Feltus brothers' grandfather, Henry James Feltus, was born in Dublin, Ireland on December 25, 1775 and immigrated to the United States in 1795 with his wife, Martha Ryan.²¹ In the United States, he settled in Elizabethtown, New Jersey. The Feltus family relocated frequently, and Henry James Feltus took on a couple of jobs, ultimately becoming a Reverend in New York until his death from cholera in 1828.²²

Abram Morrell Feltus was born to Henry James and Martha Ryan Feltus on January 19, 1796 in Elizabethtown, New Jersey. He was one of fifteen children. Abram Feltus went on to marry Eliza Ann Ventress and subsequently moved to Woodville, Mississippi where he became a merchant. Following his role as a merchant, Abram Feltus became a cashier at the Planters' Bank at Woodville, until he was suspended, whereafter he became a cotton planter. Mr. Abram Feltus died on June 20, 1861 in Elizabethtown, New Jersey.²³

¹⁹ "Penn student files," University of Pennsylvania University Archives

²⁰ Ibid., 26

²¹ Ibid., 11

²² Ibid., 18

²³ Ibid. 23

Despite being born to an immigrant, Abram Feltus was able to acquire a substantial amount of wealth. Mr. Feltus' estate inventory of 1861 shows that by this year he enslaved 150 people on his estate.²⁴ This inventory list includes the names, age, gender, and "price valuation" of each enslaved person in his estate. Mr. Feltus' will states that the people he enslaved should be divided amongst his wife and children. Of these six sons born to Abram Morrell Feltus and Eliza Ann Ventress who survived to collegiate age, five of them were able to attend college at a time when only the wealthy could afford to go to college.²⁵ It can be extrapolated that the wealth that allowed the four Feltus brothers to attend Penn came from the exploitation of black bodies and their labor.

Further, these four Feltus brothers took ideologies shaped by their slaveholding family to Penn. The curriculum at Penn in the 1830s was composed of small and intimate courses which every student was required to take. These courses included the class of Moral Philosophy,²⁶ where it can be inferred that conversation regarding the ethics of the institution of slavery was present, especially since the Feltus brothers were in school around the time that tension over the institution of slavery was building up to the Civil War.²⁷ As members of a slaveholding family, the four Feltus brothers would have likely have been in favor of slavery and could have contributed to the dialogue of Penn from this perspective.

²⁴ Ancestry.com.Wilkinson Co., MS, Inventory and Account Book 17

²⁵ Feltus, 26

²⁶Friedman, Steven Morgan, "Selected Class Histories College Class of 1831: Introduction" University of Pennsylvania University Archives

²⁷ The United States Civil War of 1861 is said to have been started over the issue of states' rights in regards to slavery. As a generalization, the Northern states were in favor of the abolition of slavery and the Southern states were for the institution of slavery.

Similarly, the issue of slavery would have been debated in the clubs and organizations in which the brothers were involved. Three of the four Feltus brothers - William, Henry, and Abram - were members of the Zelosophic Society. The Zelosophic Society was formed in October 1829,²⁸ with the purpose of discussing literature and conducting debates and its name roughly translates to “endowed with a zeal for learning or wisdom.”²⁹ Much of the intellectual life on campus was centered around the Zelosophic Society and its rival, the Philomathean Society (founded in 1813), as these clubs publicly debated each other on ethical, theoretical, and practical issues, such as slavery, temperance and economics.³⁰ Little information is available on exactly what was debated during the Feltus’ attendance at Penn in the 1830-50s, but a document written by the Zelosophic Society in 1870 shows that there was a debate over the repeal of the 15th Amendment,³¹ an amendment that granted citizenship to African Americans. There is no evidence for what was concluded at the end of this debate, or which group spoke in favor of which side, but the existence of this debate proves that the topic of slavery was discussed prominently on Penn’s campus. It can be assumed that the Feltus brothers, hailing from a slaveholding family would have contributed to the argument in favor of the institution of slavery.

Part 3: Peter Custis and Peter Custis Jr.

²⁸ The “Selected Class Histories College Class of 1831: Introduction” University of Pennsylvania University Archives cites the founding month of Zelosophic Society as May of 1829

²⁹ “Zelosophic Society of the University of Pennsylvania Records UPS 44.2” University of Pennsylvania University Archives

³⁰ Friedman, Steven Morgan, University of Pennsylvania University Archives

³¹ “Zelosophic Society Debate on Repeal of the 15th Amendment, c.1870,” University of Pennsylvania University Archives

Peter Custis Jr. was born in New Berne, North Carolina on June 1, 1823. He entered the sophomore class in 1839 and left the college in 1842.³² While in undergraduate school, Peter Custis Jr. was also a member of the Zelosophic Society. Following graduation, he enrolled in the medical school at Penn in 1844 and served as a physician thereafter. Peter Custis Jr. also went on to serve as a surgeon in the 31st North Carolina Regiment Confederate Army and afterwards became the surgeon in charge of the Confederate Army Hospital in Wilmington, North Carolina. Custis Jr. died in Wilmington, North Carolina on March of 1863.³³ Not much more is known about Peter Custis's experience at Penn, but there is significant documentation on his wealthy father who was a Penn alumni.

Peter Custis Sr. was born in 1781 in Accomack County, Virginia. He started medical school at Penn in 1804 and became a protege of Benjamin Smith Barton, who was America's leading academic naturalist. In 1806, Peter Custis Sr. was selected by President Thomas Jefferson to join the expedition of the Red River, along with Thomas Freeman. This expedition would be come to known as the Freeman and Custis expedition.³⁴

The Freeman and Custis expedition was comprised of 24 men and included Thomas Freeman, Peter Custis, Captain Richard Sparks, Lieutenant Humphrey,³⁵ two non-commissioned officers, 17 privates, and a black servant.³⁶ Many sources have cited this black servant, but a name is never mentioned. It can be assumed that the black

³² It is unclear as to whether or not Peter Custis Jr. graduated from or just left the college in 1844.

³³ "Penn student files," University of Pennsylvania University Archives

³⁴ Flores, Dan L., "The Ecology of the Red River in 1806: Peter Custis and Early Southwestern Natural History," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 88 (July 1984). Dan L. Flores, ed., *Jefferson and Southwestern Exploration: The Freeman and Custis Accounts of the Red River Expedition of 1806* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984).

³⁵ first name unknown

³⁶ Spurgeon, John. "Freeman and Custis Red River Expedition." *Osage - Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=3541.

servant was contributing to the work completed on this expedition, with minimal pay - if there was any at all. Again, this goes along with the theme of how white men profited from enslaved people and built their wealth to provide security and wealth for their respective families. Similarly, this supports the idea that enslaved people have little written information about them, while the white men who have profited from their labor have a plethora of articles and books outlining their lives.

Peter Custis graduated from Penn Medical School in 1807 and settled as a doctor in New Bern, North Carolina. He died in North Carolina on May 1, 1842, leaving a plantation and enslaved people to his wife and six children.³⁷ His legacy and wealth gained from his expedition and his enslaved people allowed his son, Peter Custis Jr. to attend Penn. As for the fate of the black servant who contributed to this expedition and Custis's future family, we continue to know little.

Part 4: Concluding Remarks

Based on these findings, I conclude that the use of enslaved people's services, whether in the form of an escort on an expedition or physical labor on a cotton or sugar plantation, allowed for white alumni of Penn to build their wealth. Not only did these white men capitalize through profit, but also through the opportunities they were able to afford their children to continue the cycle of success based on the institution of slavery. I have shown that these white men took their pro-slavery values and ideologies with them to Penn where they were able to engage in discussions with other white men, and likely share their views. This spread of knowledge was not limited to Penn's campus, because many of these men traveled across the world or relocated to other states

³⁷ Flores

following their education at Penn. These white men contributed to, and were responsible for, the diffusion of anti-black views that were pervasive across the United States during the those times.

The University of Pennsylvania has argued that it was not involved in the institution of slavery because it did not enslave people or enlist their labor in the building of their properties. However, Penn is not innocent from the institution of slavery. Penn was culpable for encouraging an environment in which primarily elites with slave-based wealth were able to afford a college education for their children, as well as for providing a breeding ground for the slaveholding elite to thrive. Penn educated these students, providing them with an advantage in society and furthering their pro-slavery ideals in states across the United States. While proof of the existence of enslaved people on the undergraduate campus still eludes us, it can be seen that Penn relied on and contributed to America's slave society.

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