Why Penn should know who Harriet Jacobs's tormenter was

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Introduction

"When I was told that Dr. Flint had joined the Episcopal church, I was much surprised. I supposed that religion had a purifying effect on the character of men; but the worst persecutions I endured were after he was a communicant," so Harriet Jacobs wrote of her master, Dr. Flint, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.[1]

All Penn students should know the following: that Dr. Flint was the fictitious name of Dr. James Norcom, who graduated from Penn Medical School between 1797 and 1799; and that his public self masked his private torture of his enslaved woman Jacobs. As Jacobs depicted in her autobiography, published in 1861, Norcom's portrayal as a pious, gentlemanly, and accomplished doctor in public conflicted with his cruel, violent, and lewd behavior toward her. Norcom's public image outside of *Incidents of the Life of a Slave Girl* is seldom explored in academic circles, especially as it reflects his Penn Medical School education. Also overlooked is his long-term relationship with Dr. Benjamin Rush, Professor of Theory and Practice of Medicine and first Dean of the Medical School, who described himself as a "Sincere and affectionate friend" of Norcom in a letter to Norcom on May 25, 1808, and the social status he may have achieved at Penn.[2] This paper explores how Dr. James Norcom, Dr. Flint in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, was depicted in contemporary newspapers of his

[1] Harriet A. Jacobs and Lydia Maria Child, *Incidents In the Life of a Slave Girl* (Boston: Pub. for the author, 1861).
[2] Ronald Numbers and Todd L. Savitt, *Science and Medicine in the Old South* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1999).

time, including the *Raleigh Register*, *North State Whig*, *Roanoke Advocate*, *Wilmington Journal*, etc., and how that portrayal reflected positively his education at Penn Medical School but obscured his enslavement of others, dependence on slave labor, and relentless sexual pursuit of an enslaved woman.

Background

In "Freedom on the Move: A Database of Fugitives from American Slavery," Gregory P. Downs states that "many classroom instructors refer their students to advertisements by Thomas Jefferson for Sandy, or by James Norcom for Harriet Jacobs," during their discussion of runaway slave advertisements in the United States.[3] For example, a clipping of a runaway slave advertisement for the capture of Harriet Jacobs from a July 4, 1835, copy of the *American Beacon* in Norfolk, Virginia, is easily accessible to students who refer to the New York Public Library Digital Collections.[4] The advertisement, placed by Norcom, offers a $100 reward, $75 more than what Norcom offered five years earlier for an enslaved man, Derry.[5] However, these advertisements, which reflect Norcom's standing as an enslaver, are dissonant notes in a public forum in which Norcom was usually depicted as "an excellent scholar, and one of the most distinguished physicians of his day."[6] This public presence, one that serves to obscure his cruel, violent, and lewd behavior towards Harriet Jacobs, is rarely acknowledged for how it relates to

[3] Downs, Gregory P., "FREEDOM ON THE MOVE: A DATABASE OF FUGITIVES FROM AMERICAN SLAVERY," *The American Historical Review* 125, no. 2 (April 2020): 586–587, https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhz718.
[4] Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library, "$100 reward," *New York Public Library Digital Collections*, accessed April 3, 2024, https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47dc-5003-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99.
[5] Norcom, James, "Twenty five dollars," *Digital Public Library of America*, https://dp.la/item/602796792c9b4c153abc4a0e21f7e077.
[6] Satchwell, S. S. "The Late John Norcom M.D.," *The Daily Journal*, March 23, 1857, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/92682173/?terms=%22James%20Norcom%22&pqsid=SadYZ7cGuwmoyBPjDASCVw%3A1533491%3A830185307&match=1.

his social status as a Penn-educated physician. This project is inspired by two of my English courses at Penn, in which Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was assigned, and Norcom's connection to Penn was not divulged. I learned that Norcom was a graduate of Penn in "Witches, Rebels, and Prophets: People on the Margins in Early America" last semester, taught by Professor Brown, during an in-class conversation on the ethics of violence, victimhood, and justice. This report is an effort to both satiate my curiosity on the matter and make this information more readily available to the Penn English Department. This project is also intended to examine the contradictions implicit in the history of U.S. slave ownership, the masking of, or disregard for, such cruelty within the legacy of Norcom in his own time, and the prestige that a Penn medical education may have afforded to enslavers or soon-to-be-enslavers who traveled from the South for medical education.

First, I explored existing research on Norcom, particularly concerning his career as a physician. In "[No] Doctor but My Master": Health Reform and Antislavery Rhetoric in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," Sarah L. Berry suggests that the Norcom family received Harriet Jacobs and her brother, John S. Jacobs, as payment for medical services Norcom provided to Margaret Horniblow, Harriet's unmarried enslaver.[7] Beginning in 1808, Norcom became the family physician, "self-appointed advisor on the daughters' social conduct," and business agent of Elizabeth Horniblow, the widowed mother of Margaret Horniblow. Norcom married a second daughter, Mary Horniblow, in 1810 and she became Mrs. Flint in Jacobs's autobiography. According to Berry, "Norcom was the beneficiary and executor of the wills of several of Elizabeth's children who died of illnesses that he had treated… [and] [l]ike those of her deceased siblings, Margaret's will (1825) names Norcom as her beneficiary in exchange for

[7] Berry, S.L. "[No] Doctor but My Master": Health Reform and Antislavery Rhetoric in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. *J Med Humanit* 35, 1–18 (2014). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10912-013-9265-1.

his 'medical and other services.'"[8] This is the link between Norcom's education at Penn Medical School and his claim to Harriet Jacobs; his access to Jacobs was a product of his medical career. The privilege that Norcom's education afforded him, not his intimate relationship with Mary Horniblow, allowed Norcom to exert control over Jacobs and her brother. Norcom's medical education was an important stop on his path to the authority and wealth that came with being an enslaver.

Historian J.F. Yellin identifies the gap between the Norcom who appears in Jacobs' autobiography and the man who appeared in the public record. Yellin read Norcom's surviving private documents at the State Archives of North Carolina, edited an edition of Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and provided commentary on how she perceived Norcom's character. She writes, "Norcom was a loving and dominating husband and father. In his serious and sophisticated interest in medicine, his commitment as a physician, and his educated discourse, he appears unlike the villain Jacobs portrays. But his humorlessness, his egoism, his insistently controlling relationships with his wife and children… suggest the portrait Jacobs draws."[9] Yellin's interpretation of Norcom's personality supports the notion that he had built a facade, especially within professional correspondence, that obscured his cruel, lewd, and vicious behavior towards Jacobs and those whom he enslaved.

During his time at Penn Medical School, Norcom was a private student of Dr. Benjamin Rush, Professor of Theory and Practice of Medicine and first Dean of the Medical School. Norcom paid tribute to his Penn mentors by naming his sons, Benjamin R., and Caspar W., for Rush and Caspar Wistar, an adjunct professor of anatomy, midwifery, and surgery, and thus

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[8] Berry, S.L., "[No] Doctor but My Master."
[9] Jacobs, Harriet, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

publicly identified himself and his children with Penn Medical School. In "Willing Pain in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," Thomas Constantinesco writes that Rush was an advocate of "heroic" medicine and practices such as bloodletting and purging, practices which Norcom adopted, for example, teaching Harriet's brother "to leech, cup, and bleed" according to *Incidents*.[10] Constantinesco argues that Jacobs reverses Rush's model in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, "casting Dr. Flint as a pathogenic agent and the origin of Brent's contagion by the 'blight' of slavery," injecting her with its poisonous disease.[11] Brooke Krancer of the Penn & Slavery Project researched Rush in the Fall 2018 semester, analyzing two notebooks from the University Archives containing lecture notes from Rush's lectures. One notebook, which belonged to Sam Poultney, a student at Penn from 1785 to 1786, recorded the "dissection of a negro girl of Mr. Jones," on April 13, 1785.[12] Krancer speculates that this dissection was performed in front of the students during Rush's lecture and was performed under his authority. She concludes from this episode that Rush used the body of at least one Black person at Penn without consent from that individual and that Rush taught his students about a biological basis for race, specifically, that people of different races are susceptible to disease in different ways.[13] Constantinesco's and Krancer's work provide insight into how Rush's teachings may have followed Norcom to North Carolina after he graduated from Penn Medical School in the late 1790s, influencing his professional practice as well as how he treated those he enslaved, including Harriet Jacobs.

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[10] Constantinesco, Thomas, 'Willing Pain in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*', in *Writing Pain in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Oxford, 2022; online edn, Oxford Academic, 20 Jan. 2022), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192855596.003.0003, accessed 3 Apr. 2024.
[11] Constantinesco, Thomas, 'Willing Pain in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.'
[12] Krancer, Brooke, *Penn & Slavery Project Report*, Student Research Report, University of Pennsylvania, 2018, https://pennds.org/psp/files/original/11ed6b204b8a5a6b6be6167fc009a8aa.pdf.
[13] Krancer, Brooke, *Penn & Slavery Project Report*.

The State Archives of North Carolina has a collection of James Norcom's family papers, containing "Chiefly letters of Norcom… to his family with advice for his children… comments on Whig politics… his experiences with many diseases, such as yellow fever, smallpox, epilepsy, and cholera… [and] letters… from noted doctors such as Benjamin Rush." Though I ordered a microfilm copy of this collection intending to incorporate these materials into this paper, it took longer than anticipated for me to receive it. As such, I turned my attention to newspapers that referred to Norcom, aiming to dissect how he was portrayed in the public eye. Although I have now had the opportunity to visit the State Archives of North Carolina and have consulted some of these documents to substantiate these newspaper entries, combing through each of the hundreds of documents is an arduous, time-consuming task that I hope to continue in future research.

The Catalogue of the alumni of the Medical Department of the University of Pennsylvania, 1765-1877, lists five alumni with the last name Norcom: James Norcom, Benjamin R. Norcom, Caspar W. Norcom, Henderson S. Norcom, and William A.B. Norcom. Norcom himself is listed as a 1799 graduate.[14] A search on Ancestry.com suggested that these Norcom alumni were Norcom and four of his sons, and secondary source material has supported that assertion. Penn Libraries Guide to 17th-19th Century Newspapers Online, particularly the library-permitted access to Newspapers.com, has helped me to review a collection of newspapers that use the name "Dr. James Norcom" in North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and the surrounding areas between 1778 and 1875. I selected this period to search because Norcom was born on December 29, 1778, and died on November 6, 1850, while Jacobs's autobiography was published in 1861. I included the 25 years after Norcom's death to find depictions of his life after

[14] "Catalogue of the Alumni of the Medical Department of the University of Pennsylvania, 1765-1877" (Philadelphia: Collins, Printer, 1877).

slavery ended in the U.S., and following the release of Jacobs's work, although it is important to recall that Jacobs referred to Norcom as Dr. Flint. During these two time periods, over 100 newspaper pages contain the name "Dr. James Norcom" in what is available on Newspapers.com. For most of his life, Norcom resided in Edenton, North Carolina, in Chowan County, so a majority of the newspaper entries I discovered are from this area.

Research Findings

The death notice for James Norcom, published on December 4, 1850, in the *North State Whig*, notes that he graduated "a Physician at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia at the early age of nineteen in the year 1797, and was the student and friend of the venerable Dr. Benjamin Rush."[15] According to the Catalogue of the Alumni of the Medical Department of the University of Pennsylvania, Norcom graduated in 1799, not 1797; however, correspondence between Norcom and Rush, as well as between Norcom and his sons, which is available at the State Archives of North Carolina, confirm his friendship with Rush. In a May 25, 1808, letter from Rush to Norcom, Rush signed off with "From my dear Sir, your Sincere and affectionate friend."[16] Likewise, in a February 21, 1832, letter from Norcom to Benjamin R. Norcom, Norcom fondly called Rush "my old master Dr. Rush."[17] As stated previously, Norcom also named one of his sons Benjamin Rush Norcom, who was called "Rush" in correspondence between him and his family, presumably after Rush.[18] When Norcom was elected Vice President

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[15] "Died," *North State Whig*, December 4, 1850, Newspapers.com, accessed April 1, 2024, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/66366970/?terms=%22James%20Norcom%22&pqsid=SadYZ7cGuwmoyBPjDASCVw%3A753034%3A2572547&match=1.

[16] Numbers and Savitt, *Science and Medicine in the Old South.*

[17] John Wesley Long, *Early History of the North Carolina Medical Society* (Published, 1917).

[18] James Norcom, *James Norcom Family Papers*, 1805-1873, MfP.252, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh, North Carolina, https://axaem.archives.ncdcr.gov/findingaids/MfP_252_James_Norcom_Family_Pap_.html.

of the Volunteer company in Edenton, NC (Small arms from the Volunteer and Artillery companies), at a July 4th celebration in 1809, he drank a toast to Benjamin Rush, whom he called "The medical luminary of our country."[19] He continued, "With out sound bodies we can't have sound understandings, nor enjoy the pleasures of social intercourse. 4 cheers."[20]

Rush was not only a prominent physician and recognized as the "father of American psychiatry" but also a signatory to the United States Declaration of Independence, aligning him with the likes of Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and Benjamin Franklin. He made a significant impact on the United States as a medical pioneer, educational leader at Penn Medical School, and abolitionist as President of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, the first American abolition society. However, as Krancer notes in her 2018 Student Report for the Penn & Slavery Project, Rush's abolitionism and anti-racist writings, for which he is oft praised today, were at odds with commentary in which he expressed the belief that Blackness was unnatural and warned against interracial marriage.[21] In addition, he himself enslaved someone.[22] Although Rush was an abolitionist, his relationship with Norcom speaks to the complexity of complicity in slavery during the period. Likewise, Norcom's admiration for Rush, evident in his decision to drink a toast to him in public, despite his abolitionism, hints at how enslavers and abolitionists such as Rush navigated or, more likely, overlooked their competing ideologies to form significant relationships. The University of Pennsylvania, no matter how progressive its leanings in the nineteenth century, is likewise not exempt from this contradiction.

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[19] "Volunteers," Edenton Gazette, July 7, 1809.
[20] "Volunteers," Edenton Gazette.
[21] Krancer, Brooke, *Penn & Slavery Project Report*.
[22] Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

Additionally, in an 1809 letter, Rush writes to Norcom, confirming that he has "enclosed [Norcom's] letter to Mr. Macon of the house of Representatives of the United States and accompanied it with… a recommendation of you."[23] Rush writes that he "hope[s it] will be effective… in obtaining for [Norcom] a respectable medical situation in the military establishment of the United States…" and that he has asked Mr. Macon to write to Thomas Blount, a Democratic-Republican U.S. representative from the 5th Congressional District in North Carolina in 1809, for "the cooperation of his influence with the executive of [their] Government in [Norcom's] favor."[24] He signs off, "Health, respect, and friendship from Dear sir yours sincerely Beny Rush."[25] "Mr. Macon" may refer to Nathaniel Macon, a North Carolinian politician who was a member of the United States House of Representatives at the time of this letter. Macon, a slaveowner, was a "staunch advocate for states' rights and for slavery."[26]

Norcom may have, in fact, ended up with "a respectable medical situation in the military establishment of the United States." According to a biography of James Norcom at East Carolina University Libraries, Norcom was briefly an Army Surgeon in the War of 1812.[27] This letter showcases Rush's professional support of Norcom and willingness to use his influence to secure Norcom a position, which may have, in turn, allowed him to advance within the medical field in other ways. Not only does this echo Rush's complicity in slavery, illustrating a willingness to engage with and even support individuals directly implicated in the institution, it shows that Southerners who attended medical school at the University of Pennsylvania gained social status

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[23] James Norcom Family Papers, State Archives of North Carolina.
[24] James Norcom Family Papers, State Archives of North Carolina.
[25] James Norcom Family Papers, State Archives of North Carolina.
[26] North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, "Nathaniel Macon 1758–1837 (E-2)," December 12, 2023, https://www.dncr.nc.gov/blog/2023/12/12/nathaniel-macon-1758-1837-e-2.
[27] East Carolina University Libraries, *Biography of James Norcom, Sr. (1778–1850)*, Record 38992, https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/ncpi/view/38992.

and were able to make valuable connections that supported their political and career ambitions. As Daniel Kilbride contends in his article "Southern Medical Students in Philadelphia, 1800-1861: Science and Sociability in the 'Republic of Medicine,'" Southerners came to Philadelphia for medical education due to the quality of Philadelphia schools, the city's pro-southern atmosphere, and the opportunity of acquiring social status along with a medical degree.[28] Evidently, Norcom acquired a certain level of social status from Penn, gaining him access to new social networks. Although Penn may have produced figures who advocated for social change and, more specifically, abolition, its ties to figures such as Norcom, who were directly involved with slavery, appear to have dominated at the medical school.

Norcom was declared an honorary member of the Philadelphia Medical Society in 1810 according to the March 29, 1810, issue of the *North-Carolina Star*.[29] Likewise, he was published in the Fourteenth edition of the *Philadelphia Journal of the Medical and Physical Sciences*, according to the May 9, 1823, issue of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. I have been unable to locate an existing copy of his article, "Case of Tetanus Cured by Tobacco Enemata."[30] In September 1821, Norcom and M.E. Sawyer, with whom Norcom was once a partner, "respectfully but most solemnly and decidedly" objected to an ordinance that prohibited people residing in or having passed through the Borough of Norfolk or Town Portsmouth, Virginia, to pass through Edenton, North Carolina, due to fear of the spread of Yellow Fever.[31] A December 15, 1809, notice in the *Edenton Gazette* states that the "Copartnership of SAWYER and NORCOM will be dissolved."[32] Both Norcom's honorary membership in the Philadelphia Medical Society and publication in the

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[28] Daniel Kilbride, "Southern Medical Students in Philadelphia, 1800-1861: Science and Sociability in the 'Republic of Medicine,'" *The Journal of Southern History* 65, no. 4 (1999): 697–732, https://doi.org/10.2307/2587585.
[29] "Philadelphia Medical Society," *The North-Carolina Star*, March 29, 1810.
[30] "Medical Journal, No. XI," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 9, 1823.
[31] "Ordinance," *Edenton Gazette*, September 17, 1821.
[32] "Notice," *Edenton Gazette*, December 15, 1809.

Philadelphia Journal of the Medical and Physical Sciences speak to the professional recognition of Norcom and support the notion that he was viewed as a competent, knowledgeable physician during his life, as well as indicates that Norcom contributed to medical publications during the time. Meanwhile, Norcom's objection to the ordinance prohibiting visitors from Norfolk County in Virginia, which was included in the paper alongside the ordinance, demonstrates not only Norcom's community engagement with public health issues but indicates that his opinion may have been considered significant within that community.

Although Norcom's death notice offers a hint of the cruel, brutal behavior that Jacobs describes, stating that his "high and just sense of his position and his duty often gave him the appearance of being harsh and dictatorial in his manner, but his solitude for his patients' welfare and the earnestness of his attention much relieve him from such as imputation," it defends this "harsh and dictatorial" demeanor.[33] Throughout the notice, Norcom is described as "courteous and polite, and to his family kind and affectionate," and "a friend of the Academy," likely the Edenton Academy mentioned in a June 3, 1828, *Raleigh Register* letter.[34]

According to that June 3, 1828, letter, Norcom was a member of the Committee of the Trustees of Edenton Academy. The letter is signed "JAS. NORCOM." The Edenton Academy was a schoolhouse chartered by Act of Assembly in Edenton, North Carolina, where Norcom resided, in 1770, according to a historical marker in Edenton inscribed in 1916.[35] A document from the North Carolina State Archives reports on a Board of Trustees meeting, during which it was decided that the scholastic year would end on July 15th and resume on October 1st. The Trustees also appointed Thomas Manning to lead the male department, praising his "skills &

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[33] "Died," *North State Whig*.
[34] "Died," *North State Whig*.
[35] "The Edenton Academy," The Historical Marker Database, published June 24, 2023, accessed April 22, 2024, https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=226692.

fidelity in teaching."[36] This illustrates that Norcom influenced the Academy's policies, administration, and resources, occupying a position of authority and influence within the school. Norcom is also listed as a supporter of a "School for Young Ladies" in the City of Raleigh, North Carolina, to be opened on May 12, 1843, by Reverend Aldert Smedes of the City of New York.[37] This support for women's education contrasts with the controlling relationships he had with his wife and children, as well as with the misogynistic, sexually violent behavior he displayed with Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents*.

Additionally, Norcom was an officer of the Grand Royal Arch Chapter of the State of North-Carolina, according to a notice published in the *North-Carolina Free Press* on July 3, 1829, identifying "*James Norcom*, D. G. H. P. Edenton" as an officer for the ensuing year.[38] The word "*Masonic*" delineates the notice, suggesting that Norcom was a freemason. Freemasonry, most popular in the United States in the 18th and 19th centuries, is a transatlantic fraternal organization, popularized in England starting in the 17th century, that operates on the principles of brotherhood, morality, and charity—it is an oath-bound secret society. Today, the Grand Royal Arch Chapter of the State of North Carolina aims to promote the "principles of Brotherly Love, Charity, Faithfulness and Justice" and is a "holy" organization according to their website.[39] The word "Masonic" also appeared in a May 7, 1872, entry of *The Weekly Economist* in which Norcom is mentioned, claiming that Edenton "has the official Masonic chair once occupied by General Washington, as Worshipful Master."[40] According to the Mount Vernon

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[36] James Norcom Family Papers, State Archives of North Carolina.
[37] "The Rev. ALDERT SMEDES, of the City of New York, designs to open a School for Young Ladies in the City of Raleigh, N.C., on the 12th day of May next," *The Raleigh Register*, May 6, 1842.
[38] "Masonic," *North-Carolina Free Press*, July 3, 1829, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/67871265/?terms=%22James%20Norcom%22&pqsid=SadYZ7cGuwmoyBPjDASCVw%3A753034%3A2572547&match=1.
[39] Grand Royal Arch Chapter of North Carolina, https://ncgyorkrite.org/grac/.
[40] *The Weekly Economist*, May 7, 1872.

Ladies' Association, whose mission is to preserve, restore, and manage the estate of George Washington, Washington joined Freemasonry in the Lodge at Fredericksburg, Virginia, in 1752, and was a frequent participant in Masonic ceremonies around the country thereafter, much like many other American revolutionaries during the time.[41] Although Washington supported a gradual plan for abolition in the United States, at the time of Washington's death, the Mount Vernon enslaved population was 317 people.[42] While the organization was not uniformly supportive of slavery, the Masons in the nineteenth-century United States were often pro-slavery, butting heads with abolitionists such as John Brown.[43] Although the ideals of freemasonry, brotherhood, morality, charity, appear to promote inclusion and equality and thus were attractive to some African Americans like Prince Hall, who founded his own branch of freemasonry after he was denied admittance to the Boston's St. John's Lodge, historian Steven Bullock writes that "fraternity… often expresses the living, confusing certainties of everyday life where practice and theory come together… sometimes to clash."[44] Freemasonry was often exclusive, and the hierarchical and discriminatory nature of slavery, which not only denied personhood to enslaved individuals but to free Black people whose skin color functioned as a visible marker of social difference, is evident here.

The ambiguity of the meaning of equality was reflected in post-colonial freemasonry not only in its relationship to slavery but in the organization's desire to provide its members high standing and public reputation as an "equal" brotherhood, which it did, in some ways,

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[41] Mark A. Tabbert, "Freemasonry," Mount Vernon, accessed April 22, 2024, https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/freemasonry/.
[42] "Ten Facts About Washington and Slavery," Mount Vernon, accessed April 22, 2024, https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/slavery/ten-facts-about-washington-slavery/#:~:text=At%20the%20time%20of%20George,owned%20by%20George%20Washington%20himself.
[43] Peter Feuerherd, "The Strange History of Masons in America," JSTOR Daily, August 3, 2017, accessed April 22, 2024, https://daily.jstor.org/the-strange-history-of-masons-in-america/.
[44] Steven C. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840,* 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 5.

accomplish. Although the elite monopoly on freemasonry was broken during the American revolutionary period, Bullock writes that "Masonic honor… helped provide [men] with the high standing that justified the leadership of men new to centers of power." Reflecting on the history of Edenton, the May 7, 1872, entry of *The Weekly Economist* also states that the "old colonial Court-House, whose large hall was used, as it is now, on festive occasions, by the citizens of Edenton… [was] a hall… in which James Monroe was welcomed to Edenton by Dr. James Norcom."[45] Norcom was the only resident of Edenton, past or present, mentioned in this entry, and his role in welcoming James Monroe, who would become or already was the fifth President of the United States, speaks to Norcom's social and political influence within the community. In addition to his education at Penn, freemasonry, which "became a key means of asserting [one's] standing" as part of the nation's cultural elite especially in post-Revolutionary America, may have helped Norcom achieve this, as well as built his communications network with powerful, influential brother masons in politics and elsewhere.[46]

Significantly, Norcom's death notice, as mentioned previously, was published in the *North State Whig*, a newspaper associated with the Whig Party.[47] In 1843, Norcom and William. D. Rascoe sent a letter to Henry Clay inviting him to Edenton. Clay's response, in which he stated that he would try to extend his visit to Raleigh to Edenton, but that time might not permit him to do so, was published in the September 27, 1843, issue of the *Whig Clarion*.[48] Likewise, "Dr. James Norcom of Chowan" is listed as an elector on the North Carolina Electoral Ticket for the National Republican party in an October 23, 1832, entry in the *Constitutional Whig*.[49] The

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[45] *The Weekly Economist*, May 7, 1872.
[46] Bullock, Revolutionary Brotherhood, 156.
[47] "Died," *North State Whig*.
[48] "Mr. Clay's Visit to North Carolina," *The Whig Clarion*, September 27, 1843.
[49] "North Carolina," *Constitutional Whig*, October 23, 1832.

Electoral Ticket was Henry Clay for President and John Sergeant for Vice President. Although Clay called slavery "a curse on the master," a "grievous wrong on the slave," and "unjust and a great evil," he continuously bought, sold, and owned enslaved individuals.[50] Clay was the de facto leader of the Whig Party, and his contradictory behavior regarding the issue of slavery reflects what would ultimately cause the party to collapse: the Northern and Southern Whigs' division over slavery. According to historian Mitchell Rocklin of the City University of New York, "the American Whig Party consisted of the most anti-slavery and pro-slavery segments of American politics during the Second Party System" with Southern Whigs seeing themselves as more pro-slavery than the Democratic-Republican Party[51]

Norcom was also involved in politics in other ways. A March 4, 1830, entry from the *Weekly Raleigh Register* states that "Dr. Jas. Norcom" was called to the Chair" during a convention of Delegates from the Counties of Camden, Pasquotank, Gates, Hertford, Bertie, Martin, Washington, Tyrrell, and Chowan "to consider the propriety of memorializing Congress in favor of opening this inlet."[52] Upon the death of President William Henry Harrison on April 4, 1841, Norcom was appointed to a Committee of five people to prepare resolutions expressing what occurred during an April 6, 1841, meeting in Edenton to honor the President.[53] This illustrates Norcom's political influence within Edenton and, more broadly, North Carolina, suggesting that Norcom likely had sway within political circles and decision-making processes.

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[50] "Ashland: The Henry Clay Estate," "Henry Clay and Slavery," accessed April 22, 2024, https://henryclay.org/henry-clay/henry-clay-and-slavery/#:~:text=While%20Clay%20never%20believed%20in,great%20evil%20are%20undisputed%20axioms.

[51] Mitchell Rocklin, "The American Whig Party and Slavery" (2018), CUNY Academic Works, https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/2936.

[52] "Roanoke Inl." *Weekly Raleigh Register*, March 4, 1830.

[53] "Meeting of the People in the Town of Edenton, N.C., on the arrival of the news of the President's death," *The North-Carolina Star,* April 21, 1841.

The year he died, 1850, Norcom owned 21 to 24 enslaved people.[54] In 1830, five years before Jacobs went into hiding at her grandmother's house, he owned at least 58 enslaved people.[55] Outside of the July 4, 1835, *American Beacon* advertisement in which Norcom offered a $100 reward for the capture of Harriet Jacobs and the September 2, 1830, runaway slave advertisement for a man named Derry, few newspaper clippings acknowledged that Norcom was a slave owner. According to an entry in the May 28, 1819, issue of the *Lancaster Intelligencer*, a runaway slave of Dr. Norcom was shot and killed near Edenton, North Carolina, around May 10, 1819.[56] His name was Shadrach, and, in keeping with the mores of the period, he was not characterized as a victim, but as someone who brought it upon themselves: "He had long been depredating upon the property of the inhabitants of this town and county; and was discovered lurking round the house of a widow lady, frequently peeping in the window, with a view no doubt of ascertaining whether she had any person to protect her, that he might plunder with impunity."[57] A May 20, 1830, entry from the *Roanoke Advocate* reports on a "Bear of large size" killed on Norcom's property in "the open field where the negroes were at work," who are likely enslaved people Norcom owned.[58] Additionally, in 1825, Edenton formed a "Society Auxiliary" to the American Colonization Society (ACS), an organization to encourage and support the

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[54] 1850 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedules, Edenton, Chowan, North Carolina, James Norcom, digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed May 8, 2024, https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/91490146:8055?tid=&pid=&queryId=d29edeeb-6ba2-4627-89c4-1e2c45205dc7&_phsrc=GJV4&_phstart=successSource.

[55] 1830 U.S. Federal Census, Edenton, Chowan, North Carolina, James Norcom, digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed May 8, 2024, https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/187076:8058?tid=&pid=&queryId=d29edeeb-6ba2-4627-89c4-1e2c45205dc7&_phsrc=GJV4&_phstart=successSource.

[56] "Edenton, (N.Carolina,) May 10," *Lancaster Intelligencer*, May 28, 1819.

[57] "Edenton, (N.Carolina,) May 10," *Lancaster Intelligencer*.

[58] *Roanoke Advocate*, May 20, 1830.

repatriation of freeborn people of color and emancipated slaves to Africa.[59] According to the *Encyclopedia of North Carolina* published in association with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library, the ACS had 11 auxiliaries in North Carolina by 1829, composed mostly of prominent non-Quaker North Carolinians who viewed blacks "as a menace to white society."[60] Although the organization suggested a loose commitment to abolition, some historians have suggested that the ACS was merely a front for proslavery interests, with powerful southern slaveholders hoping to remove free Blacks, who they viewed as a threat, from the United States to preserve the slave system.[61] One member, James Iredell Jr., who was a Vice President of the Edenton auxiliary, was the 23rd Governor of North Carolina from 1827 to 1828 and a U.S. Senator from 1828 to 1831.[62] He was the son of James Iredell, one of the first Justices of the U.S. Supreme Court and nephew of Samuel Johnston, who was the 6th Governor of North Carolina and a U.S. Senator.[63] Johnston, who Iredell spent most of his childhood with, owned 96 enslaved people in 1790 at Hayes Plantation, where Iredell Jr. was buried, while his father, who publicly condemned slavery, owned enslaved people at the time of his death in 1799 and facilitated the sale of enslaved people in his legal practice.[64] In 1830, a "James Iredell" from

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[59] "Colonization Society…", The Raleigh Register, May 3, 1825, accessed May 8, 2024, https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/59077100/?match=1&terms=edenton%20no%20com%20american%20colonization%20society&pqsid=RHCb0Ow1ekgSURHKsyZ_xw%3A20904%3A466480448.

[60] Jeremy T. Canipe and Memory F. Mitchell, "Colonization Societies," in *Encyclopedia of North Carolina*, ed. William S. Powell (University of North Carolina Press, 2006), accessed May 8, 2024, https://www.ncpedia.org/colonization-societies.

[61] Nicholas Guyatt, "The American Colonization Society: 200 Years of the 'Colonizing Trick,'" Black Perspectives, African American Intellectual History Society, December 22, 2016, accessed May 8, 2024, https://www.aaihs.org/the-american-colonization-society-200-years-of-the-colonizing-trick/#:~:text=While%20some%20historians%20have%20suggested,a%20watery%20commitment%20to%20abolition

[62] Beth G. Crabtree, "James Irdell Jr.," in *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, 6 volumes, ed. William S. Powell (University of North Carolina Press, 1979), accessed May 8, 2024, https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/iredell-james-jr.

[63] Crabtree, "James Irdell. Jr."

[64] 1790 U.S. Federal Census, Chowan, North Carolina, Samuel Johnston, Familysearch.org, Digital image, Accessed May 8, 2024. https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9YY8-

Raleigh, North Carolina, owned 15 enslaved people and 16 enslaved people in 1850, three years before James Iredell Jr.'s death, which suggests that Norcom was not the only enslaver with a leadership role in the Edenton auxiliary.[65] Norcom was elected a Manager of the Edenton auxiliary according to the May 3, 1825, issue of the *North-Carolina Free Press*.[66] This suggests that Norcom was afforded the opportunity to correspond with and access the political elite at the time such as James Iredell Jr., who would become Governor of North Carolina only two years later, on the issue of slavery, which may have allowed him to advocate for policies aligned with the interests of slave owners. Norcom's role in an auxiliary to the ACS, although, on the outside, purporting to "help" free Black people, illustrates the efforts he may have taken to protect the future of slavery.

Future Steps

Although Rush and Wistar have been studied at length, I believe the lecture material, manuscripts, notes, etc. of Rush and Wistar, particularly those between 1795 and 1800, around the time that Norcom was a student, is something that should be explored in greater depth to re-construct Norcom's time at Penn. For this paper, I have focused on material from after Norcom's graduation from Penn; however, it would undoubtedly be valuable to re-create the conditions of Norcom's time at Penn Medical School in determining the influence Penn had on Norcom during his life, specifically his education by Rush, with whom Norcom remained close.

SLXD?view=index&personArk=%2Fark%3A%2F61903%2F1%3A1%3AXHK1-P4M&action=view&display=single&groupId=TH-1942-25121-80928-70

[65] 1830 U.S. Federal Census, Raleigh, Wake, North Carolina, James Iredell, Ancestry.com, Digital image, Accessed May 8, 2024, https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/253494:8058?tid=&pid=&queryId=cf38831e-b901-4a6a-9e37-4612cdecba07&_phsrc=GJV7&_phstart=successSource

[66] "Colonization Society…", The Raleigh Register.

Additionally, Norcom's sons, John, Benjamin R., Caspar W., William A.B., and Henderson S., attended the University of Pennsylvania after their father. How the curriculum at Penn Medical School influenced Norcom's sons, Benjamin R., Caspar W., and Henderson S., who also attended and graduated from the program, and how the University of Pennsylvania shaped the intellect and politics of his son John, who graduated from the collegiate department, at the time they each attended is a fruitful question for further research. The Norcom family has a long, intergenerational legacy at Penn that would be interesting to explore.

Additionally, I would like, in the future, to write a more in-depth comparison of Norcom's portrayal of himself through correspondence, actions, medical writing, etc. with his depiction in Harriet Jacobs's autobiography, pulling from specific passages in her work. Likewise, I would like to look into evidence of how the Norcom family may have reacted to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* upon its release, if any, or how they balanced that legacy once the historian Yellin revealed Jacobs to be its author. [67] I would also like to further explore the relationship between Penn, freemasonry, slavery, and Whig politics, of which I have only scratched the surface of in this paper.

Significance

In 2016, the University of Pennsylvania denied "direct" ties to slavery, which is what inspired the Penn & Slavery Project to start in 2017.[68] Although Penn has since acknowledged its connections to slavery, the University has been hesitant to integrate the Penn & Slavery Project's findings into New Student Orientation and develop an official Penn website to address its history

[67] Jacobs, Harriet, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin.
[68] Zoe Greenberg, "Penn denied ties to slavery. Students sought the truth," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 11, 2022, https://www.inquirer.com/news/inq2/more-perfect-union-university-pennsylvania-history-slavery-research-20221011.html.

with slavery unlike Yale and Harvard.[69] Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is a text assigned frequently within the Penn English Department. To date, I have been assigned her autobiography in three separate classes, and although the Penn & Slavery Project revealed in 2019 that Dr. Flint was actually Dr. James Norcom, his connection and long-standing legacy with the University was never mentioned in any of these classes. Although there are several reasons why a professor may choose not to bring up Norcom's history to not distract from Harriet Jacobs' experiences as a Black woman navigating an oppressive system, Norcom's attendance at Penn serves to highlight the role of this institution in perpetuating slavery and should be common knowledge within the Penn community.

In her autobiography, Jacobs describes how Norcom sexually harassed her relentlessly, constantly threatening her with violence. Characterized as a manipulative, vicious man, he is the chief antagonist of the narrative. SparkNotes, which provides study guides for literature to students, writes that Norcom appears "more like a melodramatic villain than a real man" due to his lack of redeeming qualities.[70] When reading *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, it can be easy to think we are far more removed from slavery than we are. However, Norcom demonstrates how this University was implicated in the slave economy, and how, perhaps, it is still complicit through its lack of accountability. Recognizing how Penn contributed to power dynamics based on race, education, class, and politics, affording Southerners such as Norcom prestige and social status, is a crucial step in regarding the historical legacies of slavery at Penn.

Penn should not continue to obscure a cruel and violent legacy that is already obscured by the historical record. Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is regarded as one of the

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[69] Diamy Wang, "'Demonstrated record of nontransparency': The Penn & Slavery Project's fight for recognition," *The Daily Pennsylvanian*, February 29, 2024, https://www.thedp.com/article/2024/02/penn-slavery-project-administration-recognition.

[70] "Dr. Flint," SparkNotes, accessed April 22, 2024, https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/incidents/character/dr-flint/.

most important and most widely read female antebellum slave narratives, exploring the corrupting power of slavery.[71] Penn has a responsibility to acknowledge how it helped to train the doctor who perpetuated this abuse.

[71] "Harriet A. Jacobs (Harriet Ann), 1813-1897 and Lydia Maria Francis Child, 1802-1880," Armistead Lemon, *Documenting the American South*, accessed April 22, 2024, https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/summary.html.

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