

### Penn Alums and the 1780 Gradual Abolition Act

During the fall of 2016, when many prestigious universities in the Atlantic Northwest began to examine their participation and complicity in American slavery, the University of Pennsylvania announced publicly that the institution had “no direct university involvement with slavery or the slave trade.”<sup>1</sup> Since 2017, groups of undergraduate students and faculty at Penn’s campus have been dedicated to examining these “non-existent” ties through archival research, and developed what is now known as the Penn and Slavery Project. Through engaging in this research, students have uncovered the specific ways that Penn as an institution and its graduates contributed to the institution of slavery and the important history affecting the lives of African Americans in Philadelphia and around the nation.

#### *Questions and Preliminary Research*

When I joined the Penn and Slavery Project, I focused my research on Penn’s investments to determine whether the university directly invested in or profited from the institution of slavery. Through archival research and secondary sources, which will be mentioned later, I discovered that university affiliates and trustees held positions in various government agencies in Philadelphia. My interest in the project soon became focused on the professional lives of the university’s trustees outside of their university affiliation, particularly in the political arena.

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<sup>1</sup>Simmons, Sheila. “UPenn Claims No Traces of Slavery in Its DNA.” *The Philadelphia Tribune*, 9 Sept. 2016, [www.phillytrib.com/commentary/upenn-claims-no-traces-of-slavery-in-its-dna/article\\_0d8072c4-96ff-5617-82d0-f00b0ab4c910.html](http://www.phillytrib.com/commentary/upenn-claims-no-traces-of-slavery-in-its-dna/article_0d8072c4-96ff-5617-82d0-f00b0ab4c910.html).

## An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery

The first issue that became the subject of my research was the Gradual Abolition Act of 1780 and the General Assembly of Pennsylvania. The General Assembly was the state legislative body and it played a critical role in the political history of the United States. On March 1, 1780, the Pennsylvania General Assembly passed a monumental Act, the first of its kind in the nation, that sought to gradually abolish slavery and slave importation into the state.<sup>2</sup> The passage of this act set a precedent for other states in the Northeast region of the country to follow suit and actively engage in abolition. Armed with this information, I sought to explore who the decision makers and stakeholders were in the passage of this act and their connection with the University of Pennsylvania.

The Gradual Abolition Act passed on March 1, 1780, “by a vote of 34 to 21.”<sup>3</sup> This fact indicates that a total of 55 people voted on the act, and it prompted me to want to discover who these people were and whether they had any ties to Penn. Upon further research, I discovered that there were 72 members of the Pennsylvania General Assembly in 1780, and utilized this information to cross-reference the list of Assembly members with the founding members and Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania. At first glance, it did not seem that there were many General Assembly members who voted and had significant ties to the university, but after more research it was evident that two prominent University of Pennsylvania leaders were members of the General Assembly at the time of the vote.

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<sup>2</sup> “An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery. (1780).” *Ushistory.org*, Independence Hall Association, [www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/history/gradual.php](http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/history/gradual.php).

<sup>3</sup>Nash, Gary B., and Jean R. Soderlund. *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and Its Aftermath*. Oxford University Press, 2011. (104)

### *University Trustees with Legislative Ties to Abolition and Slavery*

One influential member who served in this dual position was the Honorable George Bryan. George Bryan served as a Trustee of the University of Pennsylvania from 1779-1791, and as the Treasurer of the Board from 1779-1788.<sup>4</sup> During this time, Bryan also played a pivotal role in influencing Pennsylvania state legislature through his involvement in governmental institutions at the time, serving on both the Supreme Executive Council and the Pennsylvania General Assembly. Several historians have noted that Bryan was pro-abolition and was very sympathetic to the cause of African American liberation. The Act for the Gradual Abolition of enslaved people in Pennsylvania was put to the vote three times in the General Assembly, and it was documented that Bryan attempted to sway opposition to the Act by influencing constituents and legislators alike to vote in favor of abolition. According to historians Gary Nash and Jean Soderlund, Bryan, along with a man named Anthony Benezet, attempted to overcome the resistance to abolition by “visiting every member of the legislature and... publishing a set of anonymous newspaper articles in December 1779.”<sup>5</sup> Bryan felt it important that members of the legislature held to their principles outlined in the 1776 state constitution that stated “all men are born equally free and independent, and have certain natural, inherent and unalienable rights.”<sup>6</sup> While it is not known whether Bryan had a direct stake in enslaving or profiting from the institution of slavery, his involvement in the direct political opposition to the oppression of a people are important to tell and make known.

Another University of Pennsylvania Trustee, John B. Bayard, also served a dual role at the University and in the Pennsylvania legislature. Colonel John Bayard served as a Trustee of the

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<sup>4</sup>“George Bryan.” *University Archives and Records Center*, archives.upenn.edu/exhibits/penn-people/biography/george-bryan.

<sup>5</sup> Nash, Gary B., and Jean R. Soderlund. *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and Its Aftermath*. Oxford University Press, 2011. (104)

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*

university from 1779 to 1780, and another term from 1784-1789.<sup>7</sup> During this time, Bayard also served as the speaker of the Pennsylvania General Assembly for the county of Philadelphia.<sup>8</sup> Though he was quite involved in matters of the Assembly, it is important to note that John Bayard abstained from voting on the matter of abolition all three times that the vote was called to the attention of the legislative body. Learning this fact prompted me to consider more fully the idea of complicity, and what it meant for a Penn Trustee and state legislator to actively choose not to engage or take a stance on a piece of legislation that was integral in liberating a body of people.

After conducting further research and consulting with genealogist Scott Wilds, we were able to discover that Bayard was in fact, a slave owner himself. In an excerpt from his daughter's autobiography, she recounts a time during the American Revolution when the family was "removed for greater safety to the Manor House in Maryland" where some of the "ancient slaves still remained in these quarters."<sup>9</sup> The account continues and states, "The oldest man among them still went to the tobacco-field... He called my father by the accustomed name of Johnny. 'Massa Johnny, oh, I carried him many a day in my arms.'"<sup>10</sup> The Manor House in question was Bohemia Manor in Cecil County, Maryland, which John B. Bayard inherited from his father, along with the

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<sup>7</sup> "John Bubenheim Bayard." *University Archives and Records Center*, archives.upenn.edu/exhibits/penn-people/biography/john-bubenheim-bayard.

<sup>8</sup> Pennsylvania. General Assembly. House of Representatives., Brown, R., Hillegas, M. (1782). *Journals of the House of representatives of the commonwealth of Pennsylvania: Beginning the twenty-eighth day of November, 1776, and ending the second day of October, 1781. With the proceedings of the several committees and conventions, before and at the commencement of the American Revolution. Volume the first*. Philadelphia: Printed by J. Dunlap.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.35112203943164&view=1up&seq=402>

<sup>9</sup> Wilson, James Grant. *Colonel John Bayard (1738-1807) and the Bayard Family of America: the Anniversary Address before the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, February 27, 1885*. Trows Printing & Bookbinding Co., 1885,

<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=2pNQAAAAYAAJ&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA13>. (13)

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid* (12)

21 enslaved people he held.<sup>11</sup> An account of the Supply Taxes of Maryland also cites Bayard owning six slaves in 1783, who also resided at Bohemia Manor.<sup>12</sup>

The fact that Bayard owned slaves and did not vote in the Gradual Abolition Act exemplifies the idea of complicity that members of the Penn and Slavery Project have dedicated themselves to defining. As explained in a research report by VanJessica Gladney,<sup>13</sup> the Penn and Slavery Project defines complicity as the “many ways in which universities established during the colonial period relied on and contributed to America’s slave society in the years prior to the Civil War.”<sup>14</sup>

### *Future Implications*

These findings from my research, build on the findings of students before me who have engaged in research on Penn and its connections to slavery. They provide additional evidence that the institution of slavery, and oppression in general, are very complex with many moving parts and key players. I believe it also exemplifies that we cannot take information that is presented to us for granted, that and every idea should be probed to figure out what is factual, and paint a fuller picture of important moments.

That being said, I believe that my findings contribute to the Penn and Slavery Project by helping students to further understand how slavery was extremely pervasive and embedded into

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<sup>11</sup> Inventory of the Estate of James Bayard, father of John B. Bayard, with list of names of 21 enslaved people in his possession. Cecil County, Maryland, Inventory Book 3, pp. 316-321, Inventory of estate of James Bayard, 4 September 1753; digital images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9YZC-932C>).

<sup>12</sup> Maryland State Archives, 1783 Supply Tax List, Cecil County, Second District (Middle Neck, Bohemia Manor, and Back Creek Hundreds); digital image, *Maryland Sons of the American Revolution* ([https://www.mdssar.org/sites/default/files/archives/1783taxlists/Cecil\\_Co\\_MD1783OPT.pdf](https://www.mdssar.org/sites/default/files/archives/1783taxlists/Cecil_Co_MD1783OPT.pdf)), reproducing images from the Maryland State Archives, MSA S1161-36 to 41.

<sup>13</sup> Gladney, VanJessica. *Penn and Slavery Project*.

<http://pennandslaveryproject.org/files/original/104bffb3df1910d98780f7aacc0533a1.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

the history of the University of Pennsylvania and cannot be defined narrowly as possessing slaves. It is critical to remember that institutions and systems of oppression are inherently political. The people of the past had passive as well as active stakes in those politics. Going forward, I think it is important for people who are engaging in this research, or any historical archival research, to continue to question and examine every sphere of life at the time, including but not limited to geographical, political, and personal, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the importance of untold or overlooked history. Adopting this lens will enable us to examine how we are contributing to history in our own moment and execute our duty of dismantling enduring injustices and oppressions.