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Penn and Slavery Project Final Research Report  
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*The 1780 Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery and the Mason-Dixon Line*

In the Fall of 2016, as 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, undergraduate students and faculty on Penn’s campus have been dedicated to examining these “non-existent” ties through archival research, developing what is now known as the Penn and Slavery Project. Through this research, students have uncovered the specific ways that Penn as an institution and its affiliates had contributed to the institution of slavery, playing a role in an important history affecting the lives of African Americans in Philadelphia and across the nation.

*Questions and Preliminary Research*

When I joined the Penn and Slavery Project Fall 2019, my research primarily focused on Penn’s investments to investigate how the university may have been directly invested in, or profited from, the institution of slavery. Through archival research and secondary sources, I discovered that university affiliates and trustees held positions in various government agencies in Philadelphia, and contributed to the mitigation of slavery in the state. After uncovering some

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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).

Penn trustees who held office as state representatives during the passage of the Gradual Abolition Act in 1780, my interest in the project soon became focused on the professional lives of the Trustees in that time period, with particular focus on trustees who held positions in the political arena.

*The 1780 Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery and the Mason-Dixon Line*

On March 1st, 1780, the Pennsylvania General Assembly passed a monumental act, the first of the 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 precedent for other states in the Northeast to follow suit and actively engage in abolition. With this information, and following the discovery of Penn Trustees who were General Assembly members at the time of the vote, I sought to explore more deeply any relevant legislation or decision-making that university graduates may have been involved with at the time.

While exploring the University Archives and Trustees Minutes from 1779-1788, I came across an entry that identified Penn Trustees and affiliates involved in “running the boundary line between Virginia and Pennsylvania,” also known as the Mason-Dixon line, a historical marker that separated “free” states and “slave” states in the nation.<sup>3</sup>

The Mason-Dixon line is a physical boundary that was surveyed by its namesakes Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon beginning in the year 1763.<sup>4</sup> The boundary was surveyed in

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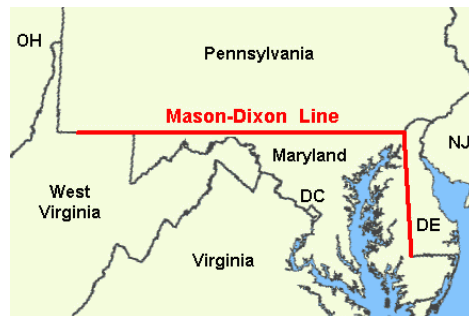
<sup>2</sup> “An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery. (1780).” *Ushistory.org*, Independence Hall Association, [www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/history/gradual.php](http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/history/gradual.php).

<sup>3</sup> <http://sceti.library.upenn.edu/sceti/codex/public/PageLevel/index.cfm?WorkID=821&Page=111>

<sup>4</sup> Nathan, Roger E. *East of the Mason-Dixon Line: A History of the Delaware Boundaries*. Delaware Public Archives. p. 68.

order to resolve a land dispute between the families of colonial proprietors William Penn and Charles Calvert. The land claimed by the respective charters overlapped, requiring meticulous surveying to satisfy the boundaries to both of their liking. After much debate, conflict, and finally compromise, the Penn and Calvert parties commissioned Mason and Dixon to survey the agreed boundary, which would solidify the boundaries of Pennsylvania, Virginia,<sup>5</sup> Maryland, Delaware, and New Jersey.<sup>6</sup>

Mason and Dixon began their survey in 1763, and presented their finalized boundary to Pennsylvania Commissioners in 1767. However, the job was not quite finished. Erected in the aftermath of the Seven Years War, the area surrounding the Mason-Dixon line was not exempt from violence inflicted against Native Americans in the western part of Pennsylvania.<sup>7</sup> This threat of violence was what ultimately ended Mason and Dixon's journey.



Map of the boundary surveyed by Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon in 1767.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Now West Virginia and Virginia

<sup>6</sup> Cresap's War

<sup>7</sup> Janine Black, and Barry Arkles. "The Mason-Dixon Survey at 250 Years: Recent Investigations." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 140, no. 1, 2016, pp. 83–101. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.5215/pennmaghistbio.140.1.0083](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5215/pennmaghistbio.140.1.0083).

<sup>8</sup> <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mason-dixon-line.gif>

A decade later, in 1779, the states of Virginia and Pennsylvania were experiencing some conflict over land disputes. Representatives from both states sent four commissioners from the states to

*extend Mason's and Dixon's line due west five degrees of longitude, to be computed from the river Delaware, for the southern boundary of Pennsylvania, and that a meridian drawn from the western extremity thereof to the northern limit of the said state be the western boundary of Pennsylvania forever.*

The two Penn affiliated commissioners tasked with this survey were Provost and Professor of Natural Philosophy, Reverend John Ewing and Trustee and Professor of Astronomy, David Rittenhouse.

Reverend John Ewing (1732-1802) served as Provost of the University of Pennsylvania from 1780-1802 and Professor of Natural Philosophy from 1762-1778.<sup>9</sup> According to an account written by his great-granddaughter, Ewing was well-known as an astronomer and mathematician, and was instrumental in making astronomical observations for the extension of Mason and Dixon's work.<sup>10</sup> Ewing was also a devout clergyman and served as pastor of the first Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia from 1759 until his death in 1802.

David Rittenhouse (1732-1796) served as Professor of Astronomy from 1779-1782, as Vice Provost from 1780-1782, and as a Trustee from 1782 until his death in 1796.<sup>11</sup> At a young age, Rittenhouse taught himself to create his own mathematical and astronomical instruments, and had a profound interest in the sciences. He served the state of Pennsylvania and the city of Philadelphia through multiple appointments, including City Commissioner, State Treasurer, and

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<sup>9</sup> <https://archives.upenn.edu/exhibits/penn-people/biography/john-ewing>

<sup>10</sup> Ewing, Lucy E. Lee (Lucy Elizabeth Lee). Dr. John Ewing And Some of His Noted Connections. Philadelphia: [Press of Allen, Lane & Scott], 1924.

<sup>11</sup> <https://archives.upenn.edu/exhibits/penn-people/biography/david-rittenhouse>

director of the United States Mint. Together, with their astronomical expertise, Ewing and Rittenhouse embarked on a journey that lasted several years, and permanently established a boundary line that played an extremely significant role in mitigating the physical landscape of where slavery persisted in the nation.

### The Mason-Dixon Line's Implications for Slavery

Though erected to resolve a family feud and unrelated to immediate concerns regarding slavery, the Mason-Dixon boundary evolved to serve as the political and social dividing line between the “North” and the “South” in the United States. After the Pennsylvania General Assembly passed the Gradual Abolition Act in 1780, the border between Maryland and Pennsylvania came to be associated with territories of “free” and “slave” states. Though initially the line extended only to the Ohio river, its reach broadened throughout the following decades. “Mason-Dixon” began to come up in congressional debates and became a guide for which territories prohibited and allowed slavery under the Missouri Compromise of 1820.<sup>12</sup> Through the Civil War, the Mason-Dixon line drew a literal barrier between freedom and slavery and became symbolic as the line between life and death for many enslaved Black Americans.

### *Implications for the University of Pennsylvania*

These findings, based on my own and my predecessors' research, evidence that the institution of slavery has deep roots extending through many institutions, governmental bodies, and political decisions. I believe that these findings contextualize the fact that slavery is

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<sup>12</sup> DeVan, Kathryn. “Our Most Famous Border: The Mason-Dixon Line: Pennsylvania Center for the Book.” Our Most Famous Border: The Mason-Dixon Line | Pennsylvania Center for the Book, [www.pabook.libraries.psu.edu/literary-cultural-heritage-map-pa/feature-articles/our-most-famous-border-mason-dixon-line](http://www.pabook.libraries.psu.edu/literary-cultural-heritage-map-pa/feature-articles/our-most-famous-border-mason-dixon-line).

extremely pervasive in the University of Pennsylvania's history; Penn's complicity does not begin or end with possessing enslaved people. Universities like Penn are heralded as institutions endowed with greatness and intellectual achievement, however, the accomplishments of those great minds can actually turn out to have harmful implications for people. In the case of John Ewing and David Rittenhouse, though they were lauded as innovative geniuses, by extending the Mason-Dixon line, they also played a part in creating the boundary that divided slavery from freedom in America. While this doesn't put them at the center of blame for creating the actual infrastructure of slavery, it does beg a further investigation into the deep embedding of the political in the personal. Anyone can perpetuate oppression, even if they do not directly oppress the flesh.