

Slave Trading Trustees: Penn's Connection to the Trans-Atlantic Slavery

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HIST 273: Penn and Slavery Project Spring 2020
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In 2017 the Penn and Slavery Project began, uncovering connections between the University of Pennsylvania and slavery that were long ignored. Over the years, student researchers have shown that, like its contemporary institutions, Penn was extensively involved in slavery. The University accepted donations from slave owners, and many of its students, faculty, and trustees owned slaves. However, the University and its affiliates' relationship with slavery is not just one of mere participation but rather facilitation. Over the course of this semester, I have found documentation confirming that the University's first trustees were actively engaged in importing and auctioning slaves, directly strengthening the institution of slavery.

Having spent my first semester on the Project researching the University's Jamaican donors, most of whom had clear and strong connections to slavery, I began this semester looking into Penn's Caribbean ties. Since the University's first fundraising trip to Jamaica was in 1772, I compiled a list of Caribbean students who attended the University between 1760 to about 1790, using the Penn archives. In an attempt to find a more concrete connection between Penn's Caribbean patrons and the University, I researched these individuals with little success. Of the Caribbean alumni I found, only two were from Jamaica, and none were extensively documented online.¹ This dead end prompted me to turn my attention towards trading trips from Philadelphia to the Caribbean, more specifically, Jamaica.

Following this new line of inquiry, I started examining the "Slave Voyages" Database, a source I was already familiar with. Created by an interdisciplinary team of academics, programmers, and more, this database provides a list of all documented slave trading voyages. I narrowed my search by looking only at voyages between Philadelphia and Jamaica, still hoping to find the original Caribbean connection I was searching for. Finding about a dozen voyages, I

¹ Interestingly, most of the Caribbean students I found were connected to Barbados. Also, I assume these individuals are better documented in their home colonies.

combed through each voyage record and cross referenced the names I found to the 1877 *Catalogue of the Alumni of the University of Pennsylvania*. After completing this process, I found one overlapping name: William Plumstead.

A founder and trustee for the University from 1749 onward, Plumstead was listed in the database as the owner of the “Five Friends,” a ship that travelled from Jamaica to Philadelphia with some slaves aboard.² Following this lead led to an article published by Darold D. Wax, who detailed the arrival of slave ships to Philadelphia and their importers. Again, referring to the *Catalogue of Alumni*, I checked for overlapping names among the trustees, as many of these importers were far too old to attend the University itself. Twelve trustees in total imported slaves at one point or another, six before the University was founded and six before and during the early years of the University.

I again visited the Penn Archives to find more information about the Trustees. However, there was little primary source information available, though the archives did provide some basic information about the trustees. Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, I had planned to visit the Historical Society of Philadelphia, which houses many of the trustees’ family archives, including Plumstead’s. I expected that letters to business associates and financial records would further substantiate Wax’s list of voyages, but with visiting the archives no longer being an option, I turned to online sources.

Wax had repeatedly cited the *Pennsylvania Gazette* as his main source of information, so I examined the *Gazette*’s digitized archives. Focusing on the names of the six trustees who were still actively trading during and after the formation of the University, I surveyed the archives for slave advertisements. This process not only confirmed that Wax’s list was sound, but also

² Society of Alumni, *Catalogue of the Alumni of the University of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Collins, 1877), 7-8.

allowed me to compile a more extensive list of these trustees' slave dealings. While Wax focused on shipping transactions, I included details that Wax excluded: slave trading transactions that did not involve importation and runaway advertisements placed by the trustees. This information, supplemented with further information from various online secondary sources, provides a clear picture of these six trustees and their slave trading efforts.

The Trustees

The six trustees involved in the importing slaves - William Plumstead, Charles Willing, Thomas Willing, Robert Morris, William Coxe, and Samuel McCall - were well established within Philadelphia and the Atlantic. Three of the six, Plumstead and the Willings, served as mayors of Philadelphia, while Morris, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and the founder of the First Bank of North America, is considered the “financier of the Revolution.”³ Over half of the men were already known to the Project for owning slaves for personal use at one time or another, but their advertisements in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* indicate that their involvement in the slave trade went beyond ownership.

William Plumstead, the first focus of my research, appeared in the *Gazette* five times in relation to slave advertisements from 1733 to 1765. His sold enslaved people in groups ranging from three to one hundred people. Plumstead forcibly moved these people from Africa and Jamaica.⁴ However, their origins are not all listed, indicating Plumstead may have been focused

³ “Robert Morris: 1734-1806,” University Archives and Records Center, University of Pennsylvania, accessed May 10th, 2020.

“Charles Willing: 1710-1754,” University Archives and Records Center, University of Pennsylvania, accessed May 10th, 2020.

“Thomas Willing: 1731-1821,” University Archives and Records Center, University of Pennsylvania, accessed May 10th, 2020.

“William Plumstead: 1708-1765,” University Archives and Records Center, University of Pennsylvania, accessed May 10th, 2020.

⁴ “JUST imported in the ship Five Friends,” *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, September 25, 1755. #36244, Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, Slave Voyages.

on local markets and felt no need to list enslaved people's origins. In one advertisement, Plumstead offers a reward for an enslaved person named Harry who had escaped from the man who purchased him, Thomas Meade.⁵ Why Plumstead would offer this reward on behalf of another enslaver is unclear, but the ad again shows that Plumstead likely had local slave trading interests in addition to his imports from abroad. Beyond his direct transactions, multiple ads, like one placed for seventy enslaved people by fellow trustees, Thomas Willing and Robert Morris, reference "Plumstead's Wharf" as a dock for slave trading and other vessels.⁶ Receiving some form of compensation for the use of his dock, Plumstead was probably actively involved or at least complicit in even more slave trading transactions, though his role is not acknowledged by the *Gazette* and other contemporary newspapers.

Responsible for placing the ad for seventy enslaved people being sold at Plumstead's wharf, Willing, Morris & Company were among the most prominent Atlantic slave traders in Philadelphia and they also happened to be led by men who were University trustees. Owner of a mercantile house, Charles Willing primarily advertised for sales of one to two enslaved people, and they were not usually connected to recent slave voyages, suggesting he was selling people he enslaved or those enslaved locally. From his first ads in the late 1740s until his death in 1754, Willing maintained this pattern of selling the enslaved.⁷ It was during this time, he invited Robert Morris to apprentice for him. Upon Willing's death, Morris formed Willing, Morris & Co. with Willing's son Thomas.⁸ Both the Willings and Morris were enslavers in their own right.⁹ Charles

⁵ "RUN away on Saturday last," *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, October 22, 1747.

⁶ "JUST imported in the Ship Granby," *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, July 25, 1765.

⁷ "Just Imported, In the *Brigantine George*," *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 25, 1747.

"Just imported, and to be sold by CHARLES WILLING and SON," *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, September 4, 1754.

⁸ "Robert Morris," Archives and Records Center.

⁹ "Miscellaneous Trustees," Penn and Slavery Project, University of Pennsylvania, accessed May 10, 2020.

"Thomas Willing," Penn and Slavery Project, University of Pennsylvania, accessed May 10, 2020.

even bequeathed another slave, John, to Thomas in his will.¹⁰ However, forming their new company, the younger Willing and Morris expanded Charles' enterprises, transforming from slave owners to wholesale slave traders.

Advertisements reveal that the network of Willing and Morris was expansive. The duo transported hundreds of captives from Africa with their largest group numbering 170 people from the "Gold Coast."¹¹ Although not as numerous, they also received smaller "parcels" of enslaved people from the Caribbean, and two individuals from Lisbon, Portugal.¹² Throughout the accounts of Willing and Morris's ventures, the *Gazette* documents two instances of enslaved people escaping, though there may be more incidents that the company did not advertise. In June of 1763, Jack fled from the ship *Sarah* and Joe from the *Catherine*.¹³ Given that both had names and Joe was even branded, these enslaved people probably worked on the ships rather than being offered to Philadelphia markets for sale. Despite their investments, by the late 1760s, Willing and Morris found they were not profiting from their slave trading exploits and made more money from importing indentured servants.¹⁴ In 1769, the pair helped negotiate a non-importation agreement to prevent enslaved people from being shipped into the colony, a change of practice that was likely business driven, since five years later, the pair would forcibly

¹⁰ "John Wollaston: Charles Willing 1752," Worcester Art Museum, accessed May 10, 2020.

¹¹ "Pennsylvania Gazette, May 6, 1762," *Colonial North America and the Atlantic World: A History in Documents*, ed. Brett Rushforth & Paul Mapp (Routledge: 2016).

¹² "Just imported, and to be sold by WILLING, MORRIS, and COMPANY," *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, September 4, 1760.

"Just imported in the Ship *Pretty Nancy*," *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 12, 1761.

¹³ "June 28, 1763. RUN away last Night," *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 30, 1763.

"FIVE POUNDS Reward," *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 23, 1763.

Jack and Joe's advertisements were placed seven days apart, suggesting they could have run away together or were inspired by each other to run away.

¹⁴ "Robert Morris," The Society of the Descendants of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence, December 11, 2011.

It is possible that the new tariffs placed in the early 1760s on slaves brought to Pennsylvania was a factor in the company's losses. One ad alludes to the tariff by stipulating that buyers would be responsible for the tariff.

transport¹³⁴ enslaved people from Barbados to Mississippi.¹⁵ While their motivations remain unknown, the agreement [which one?] ensured that slavery would not interfere with Willing, Morris & Co.'s investment in indentures in Pennsylvania.

In contrast to the prolific slave trading of Willing and Morris, the final two trustees, William Coxe and Samuel McCall, engaged in trading patterns more like those of Plumstead. Throughout the mid eighteenth century, both Coxe and McCall, acting either independently or with a one-time partner, advertised mostly small “parcels” of enslaved people or one to two enslaved individuals at a time, like Plumstead. Moreover, Coxe and McCall each transported captives from Africa at least one point in their careers. Of Coxe's three advertisements, one listed the sale of seventy-five people from Africa.¹⁶ Data from the Slave Voyages database adds further context by showing that before the Middle Passage crossing, the ship was carrying ninety-five people, meaning twenty people died during the journey.¹⁷ Likewise, McCall received a large shipment of captives from Africa on the ship the *Company*. Again, the database yields further information about this voyage. The database shows that 114 captives were on board, though it is unclear if this is the number of enslaved people before or after the Middle Passage. Regardless, the figure emphasizes that the trustees engaged in significant slave trading. The database also includes an itinerary of the ship in Africa, indicating that the *Company* travelled along the coast of West Africa, stopping at slave trading hubs, like Cape Coast Castle, before departing for North America on June 9th, 1761, and arriving four months later.¹⁸ Currently the only itinerary of the trustees' slave voyages available, this schedule probably resembles the

¹⁵ #102250, Intra-American Slave Trade Database, Slave Voyages.

¹⁶ Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (New York: Bloomsbury Press: 2013), 73.

¹⁷ #23010, Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, Slave Voyages.

¹⁸ #25062, Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, Slave Voyages.

itineraries of the other slave ships coming from Africa, further illuminating the experience of the captives who arrived in Philadelphia.

The Enslaved

The exact names of the people enslaved by the trustees remain mostly unknown, other than the few who escaped, like Harry, a “comely” twenty-year-old who ran away from Plumstead, or Tom, another man who escaped from McCall in his early twenties.¹⁹ Though both of these escaped men fit similar descriptions, the people traded by these trustees fit no specific mold. They varied in their country of origin, age, gender, and even skills. Ads show that the trustees imported enslaved people from West Africa, specifically the Gold Coast, Guinea, and the “River Gambia.”²⁰ They also brought enslaved people from Jamaica and Barbados. Somewhat surprisingly, there is one account of two “mulattoes” and another man imported from Lisbon on the *Pretty Nancy*, demonstrating exactly how highly connected the University’s trustees were to the rest of the Atlantic slave trading network.²¹ Usually, larger groups of enslaved people came from West Africa, while smaller “parcels” or groups of slaves came from the Caribbean or had unlisted origins. These smaller groups were likely enslaved laborers from plantations in the Caribbean and the South. Nevertheless, the trustees openly advertised the arrival of newly transported captives from Africa or the Caribbean, sometimes to boast of their possession of characteristics desirable in laborers, as was the case for enslaved people from the Gold Coast whom Willing and Morris claimed had “natural good dispositions.”²² Similarly, the ads often noted the youth of newly arrived captives, presumably because they could be assumed

¹⁹ “RUN away on Saturday last.”

“RUN away from Samuel McCall,” *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, July 3, 1746.

²⁰ Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy*, 73.

²¹ “Just imported in the Ship *Pretty Nancy*.”

²² “JUST imported in the Ship *Granby*.”

to have longer work lives. McCall clearly listed enslaved children as young as nine to ten years old for sale, and Coxe sold a group of children whose ages ranged from eleven to fourteen and another girl who was about sixteen.²³ The other trustees occasionally specified that they were selling “boys and men,” a differentiation that indicates they, too, took part in trading children.²⁴

Apart from basic biographical information, many of the ads actively noted or hinted at the work enslaved laborers had done in the past and would likely continue to do in the future. The men who escaped from the docks were often well dressed with coats, stockings, and other articles of clothing the a new captive would not possess, suggesting that they might have worked as members of the ship’s crew, a privileged position.²⁵ McCall’s ad for Tom explicitly makes this connection, noting that Tom was involved in privateering.²⁶ In addition to admitting to an individual’s privateering, the trustees occasionally noted when enslaved people had specific skills, such as being a “goldsmith,” “blacksmith,” or “house carpenter.”²⁷ These skills raised the an enslaved person’s value but also probably resulted in their receiving better treatment, similar to that of the privateer. Alternatively, trustees also noted when enslaved people were believed capable of “much drudgery” or “hard labour.”²⁸ However, while an assessment like this one allowed the trustees to set a higher purchase price, these people had likely already endured taxing physical labor or, in the case of those newly transported to the colonies, would do so in the

²³ “To be SOLD by SAMUEL McCALL,” *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, November 23, 1749.

“To be sold by WILLIAM COXE,” *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 13, 1751.

“SHIP TIMBER, ABOUT 170 trees,” *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, August 31, 1774.

²⁴ “Just Imported, In the *Brigantine George*.”

²⁵ “June 28, 1763. RUN away last Night.”

²⁶ “RUN away from Samuel McCall.”

²⁷ “Just imported in the ship *Carrington*,” *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 11, 1758.

“To be sold by SAMUEL McCALL, senior,” *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 20, 1751.

“To be SOLD by WILLING, MORRIS and COMP.,” *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, February 12, 1761.

²⁸ “SHIP TIMBER, ABOUT 170 trees.”

future.²⁹ Of course, not all advertisements detailed the work an enslaved person could be expected to do. Some simply noted that an enslaved person could accomplish vague “town and country” work and more frequently said nothing at all, leaving the fates of many enslaved people a mystery.³⁰

When describing their human merchandise, the trustees not only commented on the types of work enslaved people could engage in but their physicality as well. The trustees often wrote that enslaved people were “lusty” or “likely,” in an attempt to prove to buyers that the slaves would be fit for labor.³¹ Discussing a teenage girl in 1774, Coxe even mentioned that the girl had already contracted and overcame smallpox.³² In essence, he was advertising her immunity to the disease and reinforcing in the minds of buyers that she was a strong laborer. Still, one ad reveals that the health of newly arrived captives was far from perfect. Willing and Morris’s advertisement published in 1762 mentions that fourteen of twenty people imported from the Gold Coast were being held by Dr. John Mckinley.³³ Housing newly imported captives with a doctor might in itself seem like a routine practice, but the fact that just one portion of the new captives were diverted to a doctor suggests that the health of these enslaved people was cause for concern. This incident demonstrates that as much as the trustees tried to portray the enslaved people they sold as strong and healthy, they had suffered the harsh conditions of the Middle Passage and the general disregard for their health by traders, until it came time to step on the

²⁹ Though “hard” labor in Philadelphia may not have been as treacherous as work in the Caribbean or the South, slave labor was used throughout Pennsylvania. Further, being a relatively Southern city, slaves in Philadelphia could eventually find themselves in Delaware and even deeper within the South.

³⁰ “THREE likely young Negroe Men fit for Town or Country Business,” *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, October 25, 1733.

³¹ “TO be SOLD, By SAMUEL McCALL, next to Mr. Allen’s,” *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, August 18, 1743. “CHARLES WILLING being removed,” *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, September 3, 1747.

³² “SHIP TIMBER, ABOUT 170 trees.”

This girl was likely from the city or the surrounding area because she was sold after the 1769 ban on importation.

³³ “TWENTY NEW NEGROES,” *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 3, 1762.

auction block.³⁴

Further Research

These findings tie the University to the wider slave trading network of the Atlantic world, leading to far more avenues of inquiry. Connecting this work to my previous research, I believe that there may be a relationship between the slave trading trustees and some of the University's Jamaican donors. Thomas Hibbert, a famed Jamaican slave trader and Penn donor, comes to mind as a possible supplier of slaves for these trustees. However, the only way to confirm this possibility is by examining the personal correspondence of the slave trading trustees and Hibbert.

Specific ties to Jamaica aside, future research can investigate the slave trading trustees in more depth. It is indeed possible that the trustees engaged in more slave trading than the instances found in the databases and advertisements, transactions that possibly occurred outside of Philadelphia. Personal finance records and receipts would be the most direct way to confirm this theory. However, future research could also focus on the origins of enslaved people. Given that the trustees transported captives from Africa, the Caribbean, and Europe, as well as other parts of America, this project would be a significant undertaking and likely require investigation into archives at these locations as well as British naval and trade records.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, research should be conducted into the fates of the enslaved people traded by trustees. Letters and diary entries contain details of the trustees' slave trading, for example, the atmosphere of auctions and the response of the enslaved. These personal documents could also provide information about purchasers and where they transported the people they purchased from Penn's trustees.

Conclusions

³⁴ An online excerpt from a letter between Willing and Morris mentions repayment to a third party for a sick slave, first indicating that Willing and Morris, as slave traders, guaranteed the health of the slaves, and that dealing with sick slaves was not uncommon.

While this period of slave trading in Philadelphia was relatively short-lived, spanning only the middle decades of the eighteenth century, the six trustees who took part in the trade directly enslaved hundreds of people and indirectly impacted many more. Their advertisements, which attempt to reduce the enslaved to mere products, still provide an understanding of who these trafficked people were and what they had to endure. As young as nine years old, enslaved people placed on Philadelphia's slave market had been transported hundreds to thousands of miles, harsh conditions, sickness, and futures of hard labor. Though the eventual fates of these people are unknown and will likely remain so, their connection to the University is clear. The profits gained by selling away the lives of these people financed these trustees and by extension their contributions to the University. Today, the legacies of the enslaved remain unknown or forgotten, yet vestiges of these slave-trading trustees live on throughout Penn, as Morris and Coxe have entire dormitories named in their honor. Though it was known that many of the University's trustees, alumni, and professors owned slaves, by actually engaging in the slave trade, these trustees link themselves and the University to the global slave economy and the worldwide violence it created, showing that the Penn's connection to slavery is far deeper than originally thought.

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