

# Penn & Slavery Project Report

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In previous semesters on the Penn & Slavery Project, my research focused largely on Penn's early trustees and their links to the slave trade. In September, however, the University of Glasgow issued a press release detailing the publication of a report by Professor Simon Newman and Dr. Stephen Mullen entitled "Slavery, Abolition and the University of Glasgow report."<sup>1</sup> This report led me to the initial focus of my research this semester. When discussing the report, Professor Kathleen Brown informed me that prominent North American physicians, such as those who helped found the University of Pennsylvania's medical school (the Department of Medicine in the College of Philadelphia<sup>2</sup>), often received their medical education at Scottish universities. This raised the question that I initially decided to pursue in my research this semester: what were the intellectual links between Penn and Scottish institutions of higher learning, particularly the University of Glasgow and the University of Edinburgh, concerning racial science and the institution of slavery? Were the founders of Penn's medical school

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<sup>1</sup> "University of Glasgow Publishes Report Into Historical Slavery," The University of Glasgow, last modified 2018, [https://www.gla.ac.uk/news/headline\\_607154\\_en.html](https://www.gla.ac.uk/news/headline_607154_en.html). The full report can be read here: [https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media\\_607547\\_en.pdf](https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_607547_en.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> "Benjamin Rush, 1746-1813," Penn University Archives & Records Center, accessed 26 December 2018, <https://archives.upenn.edu/exhibits/penn-people/biography/benjamin-rush>.

learning racial science and justifications of slavery at these Scottish institutions and taking these teachings back to North America?

My research began at the University Archives and Records Center at the University of Pennsylvania, where director Mark Lloyd guided me to John Morgan, William Shippen, Jr., and Benjamin Rush as some of the most important figures of the early medical school. As the University Archives had a copy of L.H. Butterfield's collection of Benjamin Rush's letters, the first volume of which contains letters from Rush's time as a student at the University of Edinburgh, I decided to focus on Rush. I thus began my research by reading Rush's letters during his time studying in Edinburgh from 1766 to 1768.<sup>3</sup> However, after some days of reading these letters, I found that they contained almost no information about the curricula of Rush's classes and rather focused more on details of Rush's personal life such as with whom Rush spent time and his activities outside of class.<sup>4</sup> From here, I took a step back and decided to turn my research in a different direction by looking instead more broadly into Benjamin Rush's personal convictions about race and slavery. Butterfield's footnotes were invaluable in leading me to primary sources that revealed details about Rush's life and his ideas about race. Specifically, they pointed me to Rush's autobiography, which discussed how Rush held an enslaved man named William Grubber whom he writes that he freed after ten years.<sup>5</sup> Further exploration of online secondary sources about Rush led me to an article from Dickinson College, an institution founded by Rush in 1783.<sup>6</sup> Entitled "Benjamin Rush, Race, Slavery, and Abolitionism," the

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<sup>3</sup> "Benjamin Rush, 1746-1813."

<sup>4</sup> Rush, Benjamin. *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, vol. 1, ed. L.H. Butterfield (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951).

<sup>5</sup> Rush, Benjamin. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1970), 246.

<sup>6</sup> "Benjamin Rush, 1746-1813."

article mentioned Rush's belief that "the disease of leprosy caused the blackness in skin color"<sup>7</sup> alongside its discussion of his well-known abolitionism and anti-racism writings. This guided me to Rush's paper, "Observations Intended to Favour a Supposition That the Black Color (As It Is Called) of the Negroes Is Derived from the Leprosy," arguing that blackness results from leprosy. This paper contains notable ideological contradictions—for instance, while the central argument is that black skin is caused by disease, Rush writes that black people are as healthy as white people and that "claims of superiority the whites over the blacks [...] are founded alike in ignorance and inhumanity."<sup>8</sup> With these sources and a new perspective on Rush's conflicting personal views about slavery and racism, I decided to research what he was teaching his own medical students at Penn about race to try to add some nuance to the conversation surrounding the figure frequently hailed for his abolitionism.

To begin my new line of inquiry, I read two notebooks from the University Archives. The first of these, UPA3 1648, was the notebook of a student named Samuel Poultney. Poultney's University Archives file indicates that he was a student at Penn from 1785 to 1786,<sup>9</sup> and the relevant entries in his notebook are from 1785. This notebook contains both lecture notes and a section labeled "cases" that contains notes on dissections. The second of these notebooks, UPA3 1649, was less relevant to my research as it contained notes recorded by "Elihu H. Smith in collaboration with Robert Johnson, a fellow student"<sup>10</sup> on a lecture series given by Rush at Penn from 1790 to 1791. This source was not as relevant to my question because, due to the phrasing

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<sup>7</sup> "Benjamin Rush, Race, Slavery, and Abolitionism," Dickinson, [https://www.dickinson.edu/info/20043/about/3480/benjamin\\_rush](https://www.dickinson.edu/info/20043/about/3480/benjamin_rush).

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Rush, "Observations Intended to Favour a Supposition That the Black Color (As It Is Called) of the Negroes Is Derived from the Leprosy." *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 4 (1799): 289-97. doi:10.2307/1005108.

<sup>9</sup> File of Samuel Poultney, University Archives.

<sup>10</sup> UPA3 1649, University Archives.

“lecture series,”<sup>11</sup> the lectures it contains appear not to be instruction to medical students but rather more general public lectures. I also used other secondary and primary sources to find more information about Poultney and his notes, such as a FindAGrave.com entry indicating that Poultney most likely died in 1788,<sup>12</sup> confirmed by 1788 Philadelphia Monthly Meeting notes recording the burial of a Samuel Poultney of about 22 years of age on Ancestry Library.<sup>13</sup> This is consistent with the age noted in Poultney’s University Archives File.<sup>14</sup> Genealogist Scott Wilds also guided me to the notebooks of William Martin, another Penn student who studied under Rush, at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. I read Martin’s notes on Rush’s lectures to find out more about the lectures that Poultney recorded, but as Martin studied under Rush after Poultney did this did not prove fruitful in uncovering more about Rush’s time at Penn in when he was teaching in Poultney 1785. In working with these sources, I initially hoped to examine an entire cohort of Rush’s students to find as much as I could about what Rush was teaching his students about race. However, only so many lecture notes from his classes were available to me. I thus largely used the particularly rich example of Poultney’s notes, which contained material relevant to my research.

Poultney’s notes revealed several interesting findings. Most significantly, in the “cases” section of the notebook, Poultney recorded on April 13, 1785 the “dissection of a negro girl of Mr. Jones.”<sup>15</sup> As this was in the notebook labelled as notes on Rush’s lectures, this dissection most likely occurred in Rush’s class as part of instruction. It is possible that this dissection did

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> L. Evans, “Samuel Poultney,” Find A Grave, last modified 17 July 2015, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/149406295/samuel-poultney>.

<sup>13</sup> Haverford College; Haverford, Pennsylvania; Minutes, 1785-1804; Collection: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Minutes

<sup>14</sup> File of Samuel Poultney, University Archives.

<sup>15</sup> UPA3 1648, University Archives, 5.

not actually occur in Rush's class and that he simply lectured his students on the details of a previously performed dissection; however, Poultney's use of the word "we" (saying, for instance, "we found upon the external part of the lungs [...]") indicates that the dissection was actively performed in front of students. While it is likely that Rush did not perform the dissection himself, if it occurred in Rush's lecture then it was evidently performed under his authority. Poultney records that "the girl was sixteen years of age,"<sup>16</sup> but nothing else about who the girl was. This lack of detail stands out compared to other entries in this section. For example, in an earlier entry, Poultney records the dissection of a "Doctor Joseph Kendle,"<sup>17</sup> who likely was white. The inclusion of the name of the person whose body was dissected immediately stands in contrast to the later entry. The most significant difference between this entry and the entry for the sixteen-year-old girl, however, is that here Poultney discusses consent. Poultney writes that "a few hours before his death [Kendle] desired Doctor Foulk to examine his body after his death."<sup>18</sup> While not every other entry mentions the consent of the dead, the fact that it was mentioned in Rush's lecture indicates that consent over the uses of one's dead body held some value in medical teaching in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. No mention of the sixteen-year-old girl's consent thus implies that most likely neither she nor her family consented to her body being dissected. In addition, the mention of "Mr. Jones" raises the possibility of the girl being enslaved. It is possible that the description "of Mr. Jones"<sup>19</sup> indicates that she was held by a man named Jones. However, it is also possible that the designation "of" means that the body was procured from a man named Mr. Jones. Scott Wilds pointed me to a listing of a health officer named John Jones

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 5.

on page 37 of the 1785 Philadelphia Directory.<sup>20</sup> However, there is no evidence thus far that this John Jones had any connection to the university. The meaning “of Mr. Jones” is thus unclear, but it opens the possibility that the girl dissected in Rush’s lecture may have been enslaved. Overall, this entry from Poultney’s notebook indicates that the bodies of black people who may have been enslaved were dissected in at least one of Rush’s medical lectures at Penn, most likely without consent.

Poultney’s notebook also reveals what Rush was teaching his students about race in medicine. While there are few mentions of race in Poultney’s notebook, there is one particularly significant entry on yellow fever. In his lecture notes, he writes that diseases are “confined to particular colours,” and that in a “years 62” yellow fever epidemic in South Carolina “there was not a negro known to be affected.”<sup>21</sup> It is a known fact that Rush, like many others in medicine at the time, believed that black people could not contract yellow fever and were thus more suited to caring for yellow fever patients. This led him to ask the Reverend Richard Allen to enlist the help of Philadelphia’s black community in the 1793 Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic; within a few weeks, however, black Philadelphians began dying of the disease at similar rates to white Philadelphians, proving this theory of immunity to be incorrect.<sup>22</sup> Poultney’s notes reveal that Rush not only built his treatment protocol around this theory in 1793 but spread this idea to his students nearly a decade earlier. This also shows little change over time in Rush’s thinking about racial immunity to diseases. While it would have been enlightening to follow Poultney after the

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<sup>20</sup> “The Philadelphia Directory,” Internet Archive, 1785, <http://www.archive.org/stream/philadelphiadire1785phil#page/36/mode/2up>.

<sup>21</sup> UPA3 1648, University Archives, 26.

<sup>22</sup> Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 122-124.

completion of his medical education with Rush, the fact of his death only three years after attending Rush's lectures unfortunately makes this an impossibility.

While these findings were substantial, what I did not find is almost as important to my research process. Reading notes from various students and various lectures, I could not find any more information of the dissection of the sixteen-year-old girl recorded by Poultney. The other notes I could find were all from at least five years after Poultney's time as Rush's student, and none of them mentioned additional dissections. This could imply that Rush stopped including dissections in his curricula by the 1790s. It also raises the possibility that the dissection did not occur in Rush's class and was simply coincidentally recorded in the same notebook, although I believe that this is less likely. There is also a notable absence in Elihu H. Smith's notes from Rush's lecture series concerning different diseases in 1790-1791. In Rush's lecture on yellow fever there is no mention of racial immunity to the disease,<sup>23</sup> which is unexpected as evidence shows that Rush continued to believe that black people were immune until evidence from the 1793 epidemic suggested otherwise. The identity of Mr. Jones and his relationship to the sixteen-year-old girl is also perplexing. Next semester I therefore plan to focus on looking into Mr. Jones in order to find out more about the girl who was dissected.

These findings also left me with questions that I hope to explore further going forward. For instance, Mr. Jones's identity is still unknown. Next semester I plan on exploring the health officer John Jones's links to Penn, if any exist, to determine the likelihood of him supplying the sixteen-year-old girl's body to the university. I also hope to find more notes from Rush's 1785 lecture to see if other students recorded more details about the girl—perhaps Mr. Jones's first

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<sup>23</sup> UPA3 1648, University Archives.



name, his relationship to the girl, or whether she was enslaved or free. To uncover the identity of the girl, I will most likely have to trace Mr. Jones and establish what connection he had to her. From there, I hope to find what the girl's name was and what her life was like. I also hope to use any additional lecture notes I can find to determine if Rush used the bodies of any other black people or, specifically, enslaved people for dissection in his classes. I also hope to find out more about William Grubber, the man whom Rush enslaved. Little is known about him or his life with Rush, and I would like to move away from research focused mostly on the life and actions of a white man about whom much has already been written and look instead at those who have been largely written out of history.

From these findings several conclusions can be reached. First, Rush most likely used the body of at least one black person who may have been enslaved in his teachings at Penn. Even if she was not enslaved, it can also be concluded that the body was not obtained with the consent of the deceased or her family. This speaks to who was vulnerable in 18th century Philadelphia society and whose family was not in a position to protect the body of a loved one—especially one so young. I can also conclude that Rush was teaching his students at Penn about a biological basis for race—specifically, that people of different races are differently susceptible to disease. While these teachings had important possible consequences in practice—for instance, a student of Rush's may have followed a research agenda based on assumptions of black people's different immunity to disease—they also helped lay the foundation for later teachings about race theory at Penn. For example, famous proponents of later racial pseudoscience such as Penn alumnus and professor Samuel George Morton, who published *Crania Americana* in 1839 while teaching at

Penn, later taught entire courses on racial difference at the Penn Medical School.<sup>24</sup> While medical theorists like Morton and his correspondent and fellow promoter of biologically based racial difference Josiah Clark Nott, who also graduated from Penn in 1827 and lectured at the university until 1829,<sup>25</sup> were practitioners of race science, technically Rush was not. Rather, lecturing nearly half a century before these figures, Rush's teachings about differences in the disease susceptibility of different races, and therefore spreading of the not-uncommon concept of race as being rooted in biological difference, show that he was a precursor of race science at Penn. He wrote the paper arguing that one could "remedy"<sup>26</sup> the skin color of black people, as he believed it resulted from leprosy, in 1799, indicating a possible change in his views on biological differences between the races. However, his early teachings about race, while evidently not a frequent topic in his lectures, were enough to lay a foundation at Penn that would be followed by race scientists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

These findings are significant because most of the conversation surrounding Rush in recent years has focused on his abolitionism and anti-racism.<sup>27</sup> It is certainly true that Rush was an abolitionist—he was a member of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society in the 1780s<sup>28</sup> and was even the president from 1803 to his death in 1813.<sup>29</sup> He also published material with anti-racist messages, writing in his paper on leprosy that "all the claims of superiority of the whites over the

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<sup>24</sup> E. Carson Eckhard, "Penn Slavery Project Spring 2018 Findings" (2018), 8-9.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 6-8.

<sup>26</sup> Rush, "The Black Color," 295.

<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, "Meet the 'Original Typical Penn Student,'"

<https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/meet-original-typical-penn-student>; Stephen Brumwell, "'Rush' and 'Dr. Benjamin Rush' Review: American Hippocrates,"

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/rush-and-dr-benjamin-rush-review-american-hippocrates-1537493843>, "For the Record: Benjamin Rush," <https://penntoday.upenn.edu/for-the-record/for-the-record-benjamin-rush>.

<sup>28</sup> Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 104.

<sup>29</sup> Donald J. D'Elia, "Dr. Benjamin Rush and the Negro," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 30, no. 3 (1969), 413.

blacks, on account of their color, are founded alike in ignorance and inhumanity.”<sup>30</sup> However, in the same paper, he writes that attempts to “cure this disease of the skin in negroes” to change the skin from “black to a natural white flesh color”<sup>31</sup> should be encouraged—clearly indicating a belief that blackness is unnatural. In the same paper, Rush also echoes rhetoric warning white people against interracial marriage, writing that “a white woman in North Carolina not only acquired a dark color, but several of the features of a negro, by marrying and living with a black husband,”<sup>32</sup> and the harmful theory that black people had a “morbid insensibility”<sup>33</sup> to pain. The contradictions throughout this paper reflect Rush’s personal contradictions. He joined the Pennsylvania Abolition Society in 1784 and yet simultaneously held an enslaved person, according to Gary Nash.<sup>34</sup> That even the eventual president of the Abolition Society once held an enslaved person for years, helped lay intellectual foundations for later race science at Penn, reiterated harmful ideas about black people, and benefitted from black people’s place in eighteenth century Philadelphia by most likely dissecting the body of a girl whose family did not or could not consent shows the extent to which slavery and racism permeated Philadelphia and American society as a whole.

Discussions surrounding any historical figure should be nuanced, and Rush is no exception. Adding nuance to the conversation about a figure commonly held up as a champion of abolitionism and racial progressivism speaks to America as a slaveholding society during Rush’s time. Powerful white figures such as Rush connected with powerful institutions such as Penn

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<sup>30</sup> Rush, “The Black Color,” 295.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 295-297

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>34</sup> Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 104.

inevitably benefitted from slavery and the racism that permeated every part of society. Even academics, especially in the medical field, who were progressive for the time would often advance ideas with deadly consequences for black people about race. For future conversations around Rush to acknowledge this would contribute to a greater understanding of the inherent and pervasive harmfulness of a slaveholding society, often promoted even by those notionally opposed to the institution of slavery itself. This points to the Penn & Slavery Project's idea of complicity: not necessarily a person's or institution's active enslavement of people, but the ways in which institutions of higher learning "relied on and contributed to America's slave society."<sup>35</sup>

My research this semester within the Penn & Slavery Project as a whole shows the extent to which my focus and the focus of the project has expanded. When we began, we simply examined Penn's early trustees, searching for direct links to slavery through slave ownership. Through tax records, wills, and family papers, we determined whether Penn's early leaders held enslaved people and found that many did. Since then, however, we have come to develop our idea of what it means for an institution be involved with and contribute to slavery. In the spring of 2018, we looked at Penn's ties to slavery through an intellectual history lens—how did the University contribute to nationwide rhetoric around racism and justifications of the slave trade? It was in this vein that I conducted my research into Benjamin Rush, one of the early figures in the medical school. It is known that he held an enslaved man, but complicity in the slave trade goes beyond that. As important are the ways in which he laid an intellectual foundation for later justifications of slavery and racism at Penn and benefitted from the status of black people in a slaveholding society. We realized early in the project that simply being a member of an

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<sup>35</sup> Eckhard, "Penn Slavery Project," 2.

abolitionist society did not preclude powerful people in early American society from being slaveholders. However, the contradictions in the actions and rhetoric of Americans around slavery in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries have revealed themselves slowly and continuously in our project, with Rush being only the latest subject of research to show such inconsistencies. As the project has expanded our understanding of complicity in slavery, I have increasingly understood the extent to which slavery touched every part of American society, infiltrated the practice of medical professionals, influenced university lectures—even among those who were theoretically opposed to it. No longer simply a question of whether someone held enslaved people, over the past three semesters the Penn & Slavery Project has shown the various, more veiled ways in which the University was complicit in slavery in its early years.

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