

**THE PRIMUS PROJECT
FALL 2023**

BICENTENNIAL RESEARCH REPORT

**THE ECONOMIC, RELIGIOUS, AND POLITICAL
CONTEXT OF THE FOUNDING OF
WASHINGTON COLLEGE**

**PART 2 OF 3:
RELIGION**



THE PRIMUS PROJECT IS AN ONGOING RESEARCH ENDEAVOR DEDICATED TO A FULLER UNDERSTANDING OF TRINITY COLLEGE'S HISTORY AS IT RELATES TO SLAVERY, WHITE SUPREMACY, AND QUESTIONS OF RACIAL JUSTICE. ON THE OCCASION OF THE BICENTENNIAL, THE PRIMUS PROJECT OFFERS THIS THREE-PART REPORT ON ITS RESEARCH TO DATE, FOCUSING ON THE CONTEXT OF TRINITY'S 1823 FOUNDING AS WASHINGTON COLLEGE. THIS RESEARCH IS ALSO THE SUBJECT OF A FORTHCOMING PODCAST SERIES AND AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CONVERSATION DURING THE COLLEGE-WIDE SYMPOSIUM ON MEMORY, PRESENCE, AND POSSIBILITY ON NOVEMBER 14, 2023.

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THE FOUNDING OF TRINITY COLLEGE PART 2: RELIGION

PREPARED BY:
THE PRIMUS PROJECT

RELIGION



Part 1 of the Primus Project’s Bicentennial research report exposed the centrality of slavery to the economic foundations of New England and Connecticut. Put simply, the wealth that enabled the founding of Trinity College derived significantly from human enslavement.

If every corner of the early nineteenth-century Atlantic world was touched by the institutions of slavery and White supremacy, it may be tempting to think Trinity College’s ties were unremarkable or insignificant. In fact, Trinity was not just one among many institutions built from capital generated by the Atlantic slave economy. It was, further, distinctly

conceived by and for the American religious denomination most deeply implicated in slavery: the Protestant Episcopal Church. Racial slavery and White supremacy were thus embedded not only in the college’s funding but also in its very mission.

In Part 2 of our Bicentennial report, the Primus Project examines the founding of Washington College by the Episcopal Church. It exposes church leaders’ and college founders’ roles in enforcing White supremacy in the US North and abetting slavery in the South. The church’s practical and political complicity with slavery—which has been the subject of Episcopalians’ own historical reckoning in the twenty-first century—informed the founding of Washington College in multiple ways.

Even though Trinity is non-denominational today, its mission then was as an arm of the church, and the Episcopal Church's connections to slavery were no mere tangent to the college's founding. Here—and in Part 3, which extends this analysis into the political context of the 1820s and 1830s—we seize an opportunity, and accept a responsibility, to grapple with Trinity's past, the American past, and the ways both reverberate in the present.

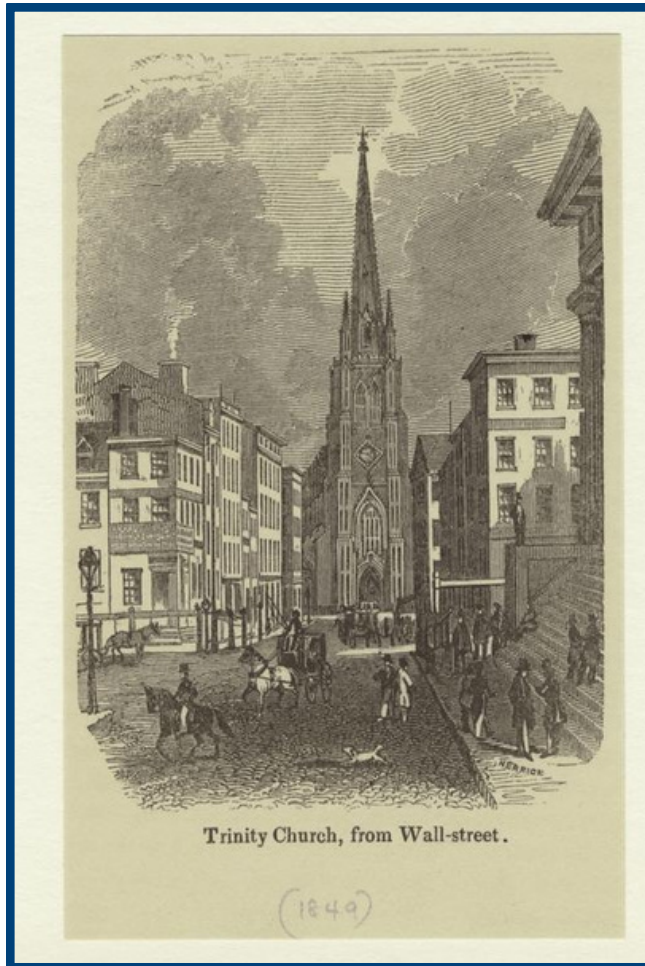
FROM SEABURY COLLEGE TO TRINITY COLLEGE: THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH'S DESIGN

A misperception clouds the early history of Washington College. Trinity's current status as a non-denominational institution tends to diminish the significance of the Episcopal Church in the founding and early operations of the college. The college website today states: "Although our earliest heritage was Episcopalian, our charter prohibits the imposition of religious standards on any student, faculty members or other members of the college, consistent with the forces of religious diversity and toleration in force at the time." As we will see, the charter's protections for religious freedom did not signal the college's distance from the Episcopal Church. On the contrary, they reflected the college's importance to the church's larger design to achieve greater influence in American society. In establishing an alternative to the Yale College, with its known bias against Episcopalians, Washington College's founders were trying to create a college where young men would be fortified in the beliefs of the Episcopal Church. This report begins by situating Washington

College in the context of the church's early nineteenth-century institution-building, then shows how the church's actions and teachings—particularly its racism and support for slavery—informed Washington and later Trinity College. [1]

What became the US Episcopal Church was in disarray at the end of the eighteenth century. During the American Revolution, the Church of England (or Anglican Church) was strongly associated with Toryism, or loyalty to the British crown. The Anglican liturgy included prayers for King George and the royal family; many colonists threatened churches with violence if they continued to offer those prayers, and many Anglican priests shuttered their churches and fled to England rather than violate the prescribed liturgy. In most of the southern colonies, as well as New York and New Jersey, Anglicanism had been the established (tax-supported) church prior to the Revolution, and it lost that status after the Americans won the war. Even after Anglican clergy had reassembled their fragmented church as the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, it was bound to struggle. Not only deprived of its former financial support, the new Episcopal Church also faced suspicion of disloyalty to the newly independent United States, given the church's strong ties to England as well as its structure. As one historian has framed the new Episcopal Church's predicament: "Could the most monarchical, most English, and least evangelical of all America's Protestant churches survive in the new, democratic republic?"[2]

The Episcopal clergy of the new United States were determined to prove that it could, and they met with considerable success during the early decades of the nineteenth century, adding new churches and

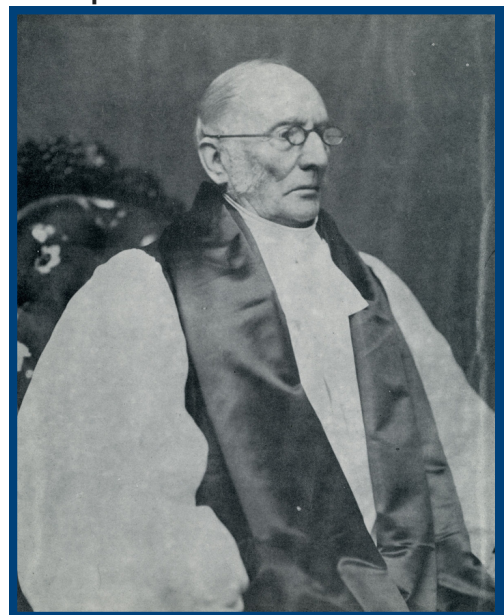


and members at a rapid clip. From the start, though, there had been competing ideas on how best to rebuild the church. In the immediate wake of the Revolution, it nearly split into two factions. That split persisted throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, with Episcopalians largely divided into a more liberal, evangelical faction and a “High Church” faction, dominant in New York and Connecticut, which held itself apart from what it saw as the excesses and dangerous innovations of other American Protestants.

New York, always a Tory stronghold, enjoyed a robust organizational base upon which to rebuild after the Revolution, including the historically Anglican King’s College (now Columbia University) and the wealthiest parish in the nation, Trinity Church Wall Street. In Connecticut, almost as soon as the state’s own Samuel Seabury (1729-1796) became the first Episcopal Bishop in the US, Episcopalians began working to establish their own educational institutions in the state. They faced obstacles the New Yorkers did not. Congregationalism was the established (official, tax-supported) church

of the colony and then the state of Connecticut, and Episcopalians' efforts were frequently obstructed, as Glenn Weaver describes in the first chapter (called "Try, Try Again") of his *History of Trinity College*. Over the course of several years in the 1790s, they succeeded in founding the "Episcopal Academy" (now the boarding school Cheshire Academy), which they hoped could grow into a college. Many Episcopalians in fact began referring to it as "Seabury College." But the state legislature repeatedly rebuffed efforts during the early 1800s to gain approval for the academy to grant college-level degrees.[3]

When the Congregational Church was disestablished by a state constitutional convention in 1818 (see Part 3), Episcopal leaders saw an opportunity finally to achieve their dream of founding a college. Rather than renewing efforts to elevate the Episcopal Academy to collegiate status, they proposed a new institution, and they adopted a strategic approach to harmonize their college with the political tides of the moment. Bishop Thomas Church Brownell(1779-1865) and his collaborators, as they developed their petition for a charter from the state legislature for an Episcopal institution of higher learning, embraced the new (for Connecticut) rhetoric of religious freedom that had taken hold after disestablishment. The charter's provision that " no President, Professor, or other officer shall be made ineligible for or by reason of any religious tenet that he or she may profess, or be compelled, by the Statutes or Standing Rules to subscribe to any religious test whatsoever" sounds to



THOMAS CHURCH BROWNELL
CIRCA 1860

modern ears like high-minded ecumenicism, but it was primarily achieving two more pragmatic goals. First, it offered an unmistakable critique of Yale College's longstanding and much-resented prohibition on Episcopalian faculty or administrators. It also appealed to the state legislators who needed to approve this charter, many of whom had been among the very convention delegates who, just a few years prior, drafted a new state constitution in which Article 7 read: "no person shall by law be compelled to join or support, nor be classed with, or associated to, any congregation, church or religious association."

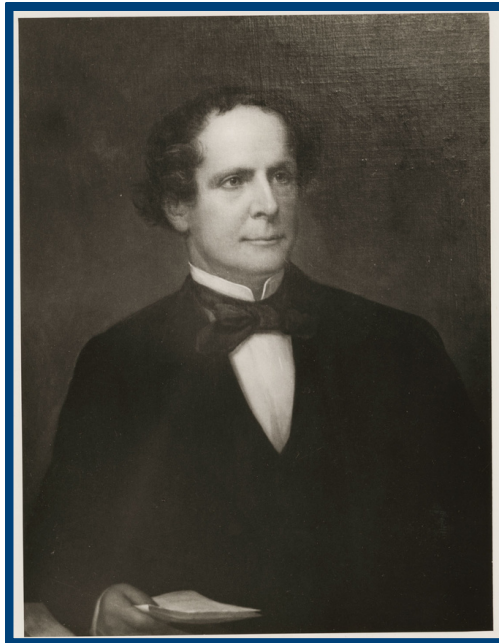
Brownell and his fellow Episcopal clergy took other steps to appeal to their audience in the Connecticut General Assembly. Although Episcopalians had leagued with varied constituencies to accomplish disestablishment, those alliances were relatively thin, and Episcopalians remained subject to suspicion as British sympathizers. Seeking to provide assurance that this new college would serve the entire state, Brownell and his colleagues were pleased to have found some non-Episcopalian supporters. It was of strategic value, for instance, to have David Watkinson (1778-1857), a Congregationalist merchant, included among the petitioners for the charter as well as the chief financial subscribers and founding trustees. (Watkinson's motivations likely had more to do with Hartford boosterism than with the Episcopal Church.) The founders also compromised on the name of their new college. Eben Edwards Beardsley (1808-1892), Washington College Class of 1832, somewhat euphemistically described their calculation this way: "That nothing might be done to peril their petition, [they] allowed a name, dear in the military and civil history of the land (Washington), to be inserted in the proposed act of incorporation, rather than the name of the first Bishop of the Diocese."

Put more directly: they had wanted to name the college after Samuel Seabury, but because that would not have gone over well, they “allowed” the college to be named something more culturally and politically palatable. [4]

The later decision, in 1845, to change the college’s name from Washington to Trinity is generally described as having been motivated by a concern for distinctiveness, given that there were other Washington Colleges. There were indeed, but there were other Trinity Colleges, too—including famous ones at Oxford and Cambridge and in Dublin, as well as a new one in North Carolina. The trustees at the time apparently favored “Brownell College,” but Bishop Brownell demurred. “Trinity” was hardly more distinctive than “Washington,” and its adoption seemed to please few at the time, but it did expunge the last trace of the founders’ apprehensive deference to their fellow Americans’ political sensibilities. Now legally chartered and, after a rocky first decade, financially secure, the college could afford to wear its identity on its sleeve. It was no monument to the American Revolution; it was a key part of the Episcopal Church’s larger effort to train more priests, who could start more churches, which could attract more members, and restore the church to something like the stature and influence it had enjoyed before the Revolution. [5]

Indeed, college leaders—in virtually every setting except their petition for a charter from the state legislature—had made it abundantly clear from the beginning that Washington College was intended to advance the goals of the Episcopal Church, and that its


inner workings were bound to the inner workings of the Church. After all, the prime mover in the establishment of the college, Thomas Church Brownell, served simultaneously as Bishop of the Diocese of Connecticut and president of the college from 1823 to 1831. Indeed, until 1860, when Professor Sam Eliot (1821-1898) became Trinity College president, all the college's presidents had been Episcopal clergymen. And this connection to the church was more than symbolic. The college's early records indicate a difficulty in distinguishing the operations of the college from the operations of the church. For instance, the guidelines for the Seabury Professorship created out of an 1834 bequest stipulated "that the appointment of any person, which may from time to time be made to fill said Seabury Professorship, shall be approved by the Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Connecticut...in writing and to be entered at large in the records of this College." [6]



SAMUEL ELIOT
BY J.R. LAMBAIN


Arguably nothing reveals an organization's true mission better than its fiscal and fundraising priorities, and to "follow the money" during Washington College's first few decades is to reveal an institution thoroughly dedicated to expanding the influence of the Episcopal Church. Many donations in the college's early years—including the Scholarship of St. Paul's Church, Troy (1830), the Hearrt Scholarship (1830), and the Thomas Backus Scholarship (1836)—were made with the stipulation that they be awarded to students "designing to enter the ministry of the Protestant Episcopal Church." For a while, Backus awardees were even required to "pay back principal and interest in four years" should they decide against a career in the ministry. The degree of leverage church interests could exert over college operations would strike modern observers as almost scandalous. To obtain a much-needed \$5,000 donation from Trinity Church Wall Street, Washington College's trustees agreed to provide "the perpetual right and privilege of five free scholarships" to students who would be chosen, not by any college officials, but by the vestry of Trinity Church. [7]

Church leaders believed a dearth of priests was the principal obstacle to the church's revitalization, and they openly celebrated Washington College's potential as a training ground for Episcopal clergy. Rev. Henry Caswall (1810-1870), describing the American church for an English audience in 1839, explained that Washington College "originated in the same necessities which soon after gave birth to Kenyon College" (his alma mater, founded by an Episcopal bishop in Ohio in 1824). "The number of clergymen in Connecticut was wholly



inadequate to the wants of the vacant parishes, and it was obvious that they could not be usefully augmented without laying the literary foundations, which in all ages have proved the nurseries of the sacred order.” Cultivating a new generation of priests was the lynchpin of the church’s future, as the New York-based Episcopal newspaper *The Churchman* editorialized in 1831: “Experience has fully shown, that a sufficient number of educated men will not, under present circumstances, devote themselves, of their own accord, to the sacred office. The experiment of leaving the ministry to take care of itself, has been tried, and the Church is languishing under the results. The call for ministers is awakening the Church to the imperious necessity of making extraordinary provisions for its welfare.”[8]

In one of those extraordinary provisions, Washington College leaders leveraged their positions in the college and the church to make sure that the goals of one worked toward the ends of the other. In 1831, Bishop Brownell, then the college’s immediate past president and still Bishop of Connecticut, offered a printed “Appeal to the Members of the Protestant Episcopal Church,” which touted the recent creation of the Church Scholarship Society to “assist all meritorious young men, designing to enter the ministry of the Protestant Episcopal Church.” To reach this objective, he stated, the “Trustees of Washington College, also, taking into consideration the unprecedented scarcity of clergymen ... ‘Resolved, that one half the amount of bills for tuition be hereafter remitted to the beneficiaries of the Church Scholarship Society.’” On one hand, Brownell led an effort



to assist students interested in careers in the Episcopal ministry. On the other, he secured for such interested students half-price tuition at Washington College. And though Brownell clearly led in this effort, the ties between the Church Scholarship Society and Washington College ran deep. Check the leading men in the Church Scholarship Society against the leading men in Washington College and the reason for the institutional alignment is clear. Thomas Brownell, Harry Crosswell (1778-1858), George W. Doane (1799-1859), Hector Humphreys (1797-1857), William Imlay, Norman Pinney (1804-1862), Horatio Potter (1802-1887), John Smythe Rogers, Charles Sigourney (1778-1854), Griffin Stedman (1838-1864), George Sumner (1793-1855), Isaac Toucey (1792-1869), Samuel Tudor (1769-1862), and Nathaniel Wheaton (1792-1862) were (or soon would be) trustees, donors, faculty, and or administrators of the college as well as being officers of the Church Scholarship Society. [9]

When Nathaniel Wheaton, a trustee and soon to be president of the college, went to New York in 1831 to solicit the \$5,000 donation from Trinity Church mentioned earlier, he began his pitch by laying out “the following facts”:

1. That the College was founded with a particular view to the supply of the ministry in the Episcopal Church. . .
2. That it has held four commencements, at which sixty-four young gentlemen have been graduated; of whom twenty-two are either in orders, or candidates for the ministry, in the Protestant Episcopal Church. . .
3. That of the students now in the College, upwards of twenty design to enter the ministry.

4. That of thirty-six students who have entered the General Theological Seminary since December, 1828, thirteen were graduates of Washington College; and that the influence of the President (the Right Rev. Bishop Brownell) and of the whole faculty, has uniformly been, and will continue to be, exerted, to induce the graduates designed for the ministry to pursue their studies at the General Theological Seminary.[10]


These assertions make crystal-clear that Washington College's mission was to train young men for the Episcopal priesthood, but they also reveal something further: the college was trying to produce a particular kind of Episcopal priest. The college's president and its "whole faculty" were "uniformly" exerting their influence to produce graduates who would enter the General Theological Seminary (GTS). That was the intellectual center of the High-Church wing of the antebellum Episcopal Church, and in the context of American Christianity and the Episcopal denomination during the 1820s and 1830s, it was laden with political implications. If Washington College was chiefly an endeavor to send young men to GTS, it was an institution committed to a church (and, as Part 3 will explore, a state and a nation) that conciliated enslavers, opposed abolitionism, and excluded Black people or relegated them to second-class status.

AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE EARLY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

At first glance, the many, intimate associations of Washington College and the Episcopal Church do not appear to be problematic. After all, where is the harm in Washington College serving as an extension of a religious organization? The answer to this question becomes clear when we grapple with the fact that the close ties between the two institutions had important ramifications for inequity and exclusion in their administration, teaching, ministry, and worship. The church and then the college upheld a widely espoused White supremacy in the early United States.


Three trends marked the earliest history of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States: Whiteness, elitism, and colorism. In this instance, Whiteness indicates an overwhelming privilege White people wielded within the church as leaders and worshippers. Elitism refers to the strong historical alignment of the Episcopal Church with persons of greater economic privilege in American society. Lastly, colorism is the preferential treatment realized by persons of color with lighter skin tones. Black-led Episcopal churches in urban centers in the American South, for example, were often shaped by the forces of colorism. All three of these dynamics, however, fundamentally shaped the Black experience in the Episcopal Church.[11]

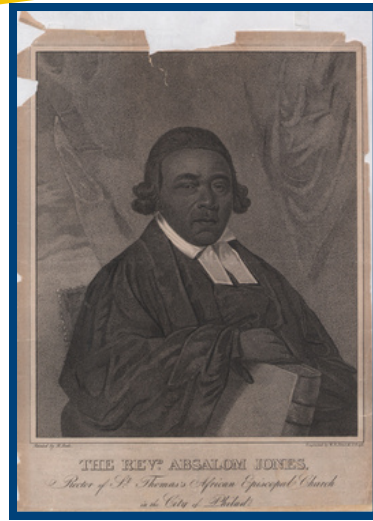
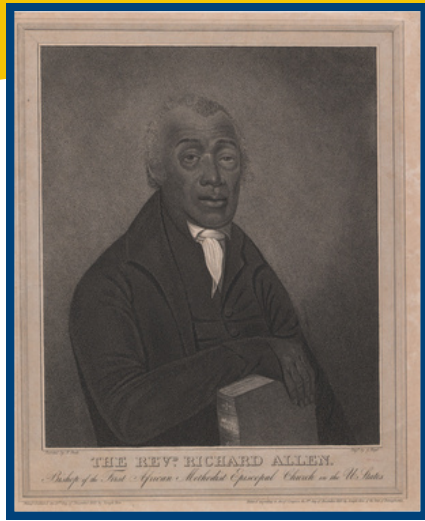
The dominance of White people in the church is readily traceable to the establishment of the Anglican Church in North America. In the 1600s, White Anglicans developed policies that spoke of religious




human equality while advocating for legislation that pacified White enslavers and protected the institution of slavery. For example, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG), formed in 1701 to evangelize Indigenous and enslaved individuals, argued that Black slaves were “human beings equal to whites in every endowment and capable of salvation, education, and general uplift.” At the same time, though, SPG leaders helped enact a statute that safeguarded enslavement. So while the baptism of an enslaved person would provide for a spiritual freedom in Heaven, the law stated that such freedom did not extend to an emancipation from slavery here on Earth. Indeed, the SPG itself owned Black people on the Codrington plantation in Barbados where organization leaders offered, in their view, a more humane form of enslavement. At Codrington, White Episcopalians forbade the separation of enslaved families, banned work on Sundays and religious holidays, and provided the enslaved half-acre plots (to be farmed, of course, only on Sundays). American enslavers and church officials remained committed to an anti-Black racial hierarchy. It did not surprise some of the more liberal members of the church that many Whites did not support ministering to slaves under any circumstance. The Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Secker (1693-1768) said in a sermon to the SPG, “Some [enslavers], it may be feared, have been averse to their slaves becoming Christians, because, after that, no Pretence will remain for not treating them like Men.” [12]

Following in the legacy of the Anglican Church, the Episcopal Church from the start offered a secondary status to Black Americans. The African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas in Philadelphia, founded






by Richard Allen (1760-1831) and Absalom Jones (1746-1818) in 1794, was the first Black congregation associated with the Episcopal Church. A few years earlier, Allen and Jones had removed themselves from the city's Methodist Church, where White leaders had demanded a strict racial segregation. The two men thus created a Black congregation with Black leadership as means of empowerment and solidarity in the face of anti-Black racism. There is a sad irony, then, that when they moved St. Thomas's Church into the Pennsylvanian episcopacy, Allen and Jones faced a similar discrimination. The two men fought for a guarantee of Black leadership and Black control within their church. White Episcopalians granted the guarantee, but then punished the Black congregation. St. Thomas's, they said, was "not entitled to send a clergyman or deputies to the [Episcopal] Convention, or to interfere with the general government of the Church, this condition being made in consideration of the peculiar circumstances of such church [i.e., its Black leadership] at present." The special status that marked St. Thomas's as unworthy of the full privileges and authority granted to White congregations was supposed to be a temporary limitation. However, the Episcopal Church failed to remove the sanction until 1863 and reproduced the same exclusionary restriction on other, subsequent Black parishes. [13]



The General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, from which St. Thomas's was banned, was an innovation of the post-Revolutionary period, designed to replace the hierarchy that, prior to American independence, had run from individual bishops, to the Archbishop of Canterbury, to the English monarch. Substituting a legislative body as the ultimate source of church authority harmonized with American political culture; it even had a bicameral structure, like the U.S. Congress, with a House of Bishops and a House of Delegates. But it had been a segregated institution throughout its existence. Starting with the ordination of the first Black Episcopal priest, Absalom Jones, in 1795, the Church had maintained both that Black individuals would be excluded from the Convention and that Black churches would have no representation there.

The experience of the Black church leaders in Philadelphia, where White ministers developed ways to undermine Black religious autonomy and power, was hardly unique. St. Philip's of New York had its beginnings as early as 1809, when a group of African Americans associated with Trinity Church (they had been allowed to hold a service in the church, but always separate from services for Whites) began meeting in a location of their own choice, still with Trinity's financial support. Soon they petitioned to have "a person of colour" formally licensed by the diocese as their "lay reader" (a designation below priest or deacon); their choice was a young Black man named Peter Williams (1786-1840). The diocese deferred this request for years, during which time the Black congregation undertook to build themselves a church of their own. New York Bishop John Henry Hobart (1775-1830) consecrated this new church as St. Philip and




ordained Peter Williams (as a deacon in 1820 and as a priest in 1826), making him only the second Black priest in the U.S. Episcopal Church. Hobart's interventions were crucial to the flourishing of St. Philip's—but they also came with the same condition imposed on St. Thomas's. When the Standing Committee of the New York diocese authorized Hobart to ordain a Black man, they reiterated the longstanding stipulation that “neither the person so admitted as a Candidate for Holy Orders . . . be entitled to a seat in the Convention, nor the congregation of which he may have the charge to a representation therein.” In welcoming Williams and St. Philip's into the New York diocese, Hobart reaffirmed this segregated, second-class status. [14]

Hobart died in 1830 at age 55, and once he was gone from the scene, it became apparent that racism ran deeper among the rest of the High-Church leadership. Throughout the 1830s, as the abolitionist movement accelerated in the North and free Blacks loudly demanded civil rights, Black Episcopalians bid for greater access to education and representation in their church. They were rebuffed at nearly every turn. In 1836, a member of St. Philip's Church, Isaiah DeGrasse (1813-1841)—who may not even have had any African heritage, though he did have a grandfather from India—sought admission to the General Theological Seminary. Benjamin T. Onderdonk (1791-1861), Hobart's successor as bishop of New York, argued that, regardless of DeGrasse's actual racial identity, he was “strongly identified with the black people of New York,” owing to his membership at St. Philip's. To admit DeGrasse, the White bishop argued, would therefore “deprive [GTS] of their present pecuniary benefits and prevent Southern gentlemen from connecting themselves with this School of Divinity.” A Black New Yorker named Alexander Crummell (1819-1898) was also turned away from GTS in 1839; traveled instead to

Yale, where he was permitted to attend lectures in divinity but not formally enroll or receive a degree; and finally achieved ordination in the Episcopal Church, only to be told, like his Black predecessors, that he could never participate in the General Convention. In 1834, St. Philip's Church, presided over by Peter Williams, was ransacked by anti-abolitionist rioters. Bishop Onderdonk's way of expressing sympathy was to order Williams to resign his membership in the American Anti-Slavery Society, apparently suspecting it was this affiliation that had brought the mob to St. Philip's. A decade later, when the congregation at St. Philip's, tired of being excluded from the convention, petitioned for admittance, church leaders held that "they are socially degraded, and are not regarded as proper associates for the class of persons who attend our Convention." They declined to force any of their White members to associate "with those whom they would not admit to their tables, or into their family circles—nay, whom they would not admit to their pews, during public worship." [15]


This was the religious community into which Nathaniel Wheaton promised that Washington College would exert all its influence to send its graduates. The New York and Connecticut dioceses were as closely connected and like-minded as any in the US Episcopal Church. It is no surprise that Alexander Crummell, upon being turned away from GTS, went next to New Haven in search of a theological education, even if it meant attending the Congregationalist Yale. But he ultimately had to leave the High-Church strongholds to achieve ordination (first as a deacon, by a notably evangelical bishop, in Massachusetts, then as a priest in the new diocese of Delaware). In Bishop Brownell's Connecticut as in Bishop Hobart's New York, Black Americans were welcomed as Episcopalians—but only if their




presence in the community was separate, unequal, and ideally temporary (as Part 3 will explore further). Throughout the 1820s and 1830s, the Episcopal Church was making a concerted effort to expand in the slavery-bound American South and to promote African colonization in places like Liberia. While many denominations would split into northern (antislavery) and southern (proslavery) factions in the 1840s and 1850s, the Episcopal Church did not. This unity required in part providing Black Episcopalians access to religious services but denying them an ability to affect religious authority. It also required studiously avoiding any criticism of slavery.[16]

HIGH-CHURCH SILENCES ON SLAVERY

The disestablishment of the Congregational Church in Connecticut was not the only change roiling the religious landscape during this period. In what was known as the Second Great Awakening, most Protestant denominations were becoming increasingly evangelical—characterized by emotional fervor, an emphasis on believers’ inward transformation, and a commitment to social reform. And the rise of evangelicalism reverberated well beyond the walls of churches and the tents of camp meetings. Most political activism of the antebellum period, particularly the temperance movement and abolitionism, drew strength from evangelical Christian supporters, many of whom held to some form of millenarianism: They believed the time had come for the Kingdom of God to be realized on earth through a moral transformation of society—most especially, through ending the sin of slavery in the United States. [17]




The High-Church faction of the Episcopal Church stood apart from this overall landscape in almost every respect. It maintained close connections to the Church of England; stressed fidelity to tradition and the continuity of “apostolic succession” (from the disciples of Jesus, through the early Christian church and the Church of England, to themselves); and strictly avoided the political involvements of evangelical Christians, including opposition to slavery. The Episcopal clergy who founded Washington College were unequivocally High-Church, as most Connecticut Episcopalians were. Samuel Seabury, after all, represented nothing if not opposition to the spirit of 1776—and to the republican and evangelical cultures that were ascendant in the 1820s and 1830s. The college’s first two named professorships sent an unmistakable message that it was to be a High-Church institution, not an evangelical one. Those professorships honored Seabury and John Henry Hobart, the bishop of New York and “the leading High Churchman in antebellum Episcopalianism.” Trinity Church Wall Street, to which Nathaniel Wheaton had made the fundraising pitch quoted above, had been Hobart’s parish until his death the year before, and it was one of the wealthiest churches in the nation (owing to its considerable holdings of prime Manhattan real estate) as well as the unofficial capital of the High-Church party. It had largely underwritten the General Theological Seminary, which was located only a few miles away from Trinity Church and had been co-founded by Hobart, who also served as its first dean. When Nathaniel Wheaton solicited large donations from Trinity Church by promising Washington College and all its faculty would exert their influence to funnel students to attend the GTS, he was announcing the college’s mission to train Episcopal clergy in the High-Church faction. [18]



Accordingly, Wheaton made no secret of his, and the college's, antipathy toward evangelicalism. If there were not a thriving Washington College, he explained, the sons of Episcopal families would be forced to pursue their education under the influence of other denominations, where they would fraternize with "a class of youth distinguished in many cases by great zeal to engage in the religious and benevolent enterprises of the age." Here such students would be "exposed to the influence of frequent religious revivals" and might therefore be "induced to abandon the church of their fathers, and attach themselves to the Presbyterian ministry." Such horrors could be averted, Wheaton promised, if Trinity Church directed more of its wealth to the fledgling college in Connecticut. But what, exactly, one might wonder, was so fearsome about "great zeal to engage in the religious and benevolent enterprises of the age"? Well, it was 1831. The most prominent such enterprises—temperance (anti-alcohol consumption) and abolition (anti-slavery) —were unmistakably gaining steam. Just down the Connecticut River in Middletown, the third institution of higher learning in the state, Wesleyan, was emerging directly out of a religious revival led by its first president, an evangelical Methodist preacher who was also a prominent temperance activist.[19]

But the emotional and political fervors that so dismayed High-Church Episcopalians surged the most around slavery. Wheaton approached Trinity Church at an especially pitched moment in the history of abolitionism. William Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879) had begun publishing the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* just a few months before. The Black writer David Walker (1796-1830) had released his famous Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World in 1829. Among the educated classes of northerners who were the



Episcopal Church's potential new members, opposition to slavery was, if not yet mainstream, clearly not confined to the fringes anymore. And in the northern churches of other mainline Protestant denominations, condemnations of slavery emanated from more and more pulpits. Within another fifteen years, the Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist churches would all be rent by schism, as southerners angered by those condemnations split away from their former brethren in the North. [20]

To High-Church Episcopalians, for whom their church was a sacred vessel of direct lineage from Christ's apostles, nothing was more important than preserving its unity. And preserve it they would, even if it meant—as, in this climate, it clearly did—maintaining a scrupulous silence on the subject of slavery. The fact that the Episcopal Church, alone among major Protestant denominations, remained intact through the start of the Civil War attests to the completeness of their refusal to challenge slavery. As carefully, though, as northern High-Church Episcopalians kept quiet on political questions, the meaning and significance of their silence did not go unnoticed among contemporary observers.


A writer in a Mississippi newspaper told the story of a southern family, known to be “ardently attached” to a different Protestant denomination, who moved to a northern state and were dismayed to find that, in the churches of their own denomination there, “they heard the ‘poor slave’ prayed for, or rather prayed about.” (Such churches, this writer averred, “offer prayers to audiences instead of to God.”) They decided to take refuge in the Episcopal Church, where they might hear prayers “for the ‘oppressed’ everywhere” but would not be subjected to the view “that every person ‘held to labour’ under the

laws, was in and through that very fact ‘oppressed.’” Episcopalians, these southern worshipers had perceived, have “the will and the power to despise and disregard the cries and exactions of popular fanaticisms even where they most abound.”[21]

If, to a southerner, the Episcopal Church was a safe haven from the “popular fanaticism” which held that slavery is wrong, to many northern lay people, the church was nothing short of derelict in its Christian duty. John Jay II (1817-1894), an Episcopalian abolitionist (and grandson of his namesake the first chief justice of the Supreme Court), castigated “the clergy of the Episcopal Church” for the indirect aid they provided to the institution of slavery:

No rebuke, that we have learned, has ever been administered by them to the Southern bishops and clergy, who hold the very sheep of their pasture in abject bondage—no word has been spoken in our Conventions, disapproving the course of the ‘Christian brokers in the trade of blood.’ The right of the slaves to read the Scriptures has been denied by ‘The Churchman’ newspaper, published at New-York, the organ of the bishop of that diocese. . . , and a Northern organ of the Church has eulogized a Southern bishop who is an avowed advocate of slavery.


A Congregationalist preacher in New Haven, writing in 1836, summed up the Episcopal position more acidly. He used a common White antislavery tactic that looked to foster sympathy for the enslaved by imagining that racial slavery in the US targeted Whites: “If the people of New York should make a law to take the wives and children of Irishmen, and to sell them at auction for the benefit of the canal fund, the question of the right and wrong of such a selling would be a



political question; and the Episcopal church would ‘scrupulously abstain from meddling with it.’ What, to High-Church Episcopalians, was merely abstinence from politics registered with many outside the church as active complicity—“fostering the unchristian prejudice of caste and protecting and participating in the inhuman system of slavery.” [22]


After Great Britain passed its Slavery Abolition Act in 1834, the American Episcopal Church became an outlier in the Anglican Communion, to the dismay of Anglicans beyond the US. For example, Samuel Wilberforce (1805-1873), then the Bishop of Oxford (and the son of Britain’s leading abolitionist, William Wilberforce), offered a crushing critique in his *History of the Protestant Episcopal Church in America* (1844). After taking the reader through sections on the “slave-breeding states” and “morals of slavery,” Wilberforce implicated the Episcopal Church in a White American ethical catastrophe. “What witness, then, has as yet been borne by the Church in these slave-states against this almost universal sin? She raises no voice against the predominant evil; she palliates it in theory; and in practice she shares in it. The mildest and most conscientious of the bishops of the south are slave-holders themselves,” he wrote. Wilberforce was confident that “it is the first duty of the Church to reprove the sins of others, not to adopt them into her own practice; to set, not to take the tone.”[23]

American High-Church leaders maintained they were only guarding the purity of the church by keeping talk of slavery out of sermons and prayers. They were, thus, refusing to challenge the complicity of many of their own church members. Episcopal churches




skewed upper-class, as mentioned, and many parishioners, especially in High-Church bastions like Trinity Wall Street, made fortunes in mercantile trade and finance. They included creditors of cotton planters and vendors of slave-grown produce. These “gentlemen of property and standing” in “rich and fashionable city congregations” found abolitionist agitation to be “exceedingly inconvenient,” wrote William Jay (1789-1858) (John II’s father, and an anti-slavery Episcopalian who set about being a thorn in the side of the church’s leaders). Wealthy northerners whose financial interests were entangled in the Atlantic slave economy were as disinclined to hear prayers for the slave as those Mississippians who had moved north. [24]

By refusing to denounce what Wilberforce called “the predominant evil” of slavery, the Episcopal Church institutionalized anti-Black racism. But the Church was not only engaged in quietism and anti-abolitionism in the North; it also participated directly in slavery in the South through church members and leaders who enslaved Black individuals. Wealthy southern enslavers overwhelmingly gravitated to Episcopal churches; in a study of the religious affiliations of large planters in antebellum North Carolina—those who enslaved 250 or more people—88 percent were found to be Episcopalian. Even priests and bishops held humans in bondage. Rev. Leonidas Polk (1806-1864), a member of the southern slaveholding elite, would later become one of the founders of the University of the South at Sewanee and a general in the Confederate army. When Polk was serving as rector of a church in Tennessee in 1840, the census identified him as the largest slaveowner in the county, with 105 slaves; by 1850, when he was Bishop of Louisiana, the census would count more than 200 enslaved Black men, women, and children on his Louisiana plantation. [25]



This direct involvement with southern slavery was not confined to southern Episcopalians; it also included individuals directly linked with Washington College, including founder Thomas Church Brownell. In November 1829, when serving as the Bishop of Connecticut and President of Washington College, Brownell was sent by the church to survey the religious needs of those in Kentucky, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama. On his trip, Brownell recorded that the “great valley of the Mississippi” was a “vast empire containing nearly 5,000,000 of inhabitants, and in twenty years likely to contain 12,000,000 souls.” Indeed, American enslavers had started to move west and south in the nineteenth century to access cheaper, more fertile, and larger parcels of land that could no longer be found in states in the East. And the movement of slaveholders indicated a movement of the enslaved. In 1829, Brownell visited the edge of a slaveholding empire set to witness explosive growth. Ever sensitive to his fundraising duties, Brownell was right to identify great potential in the region; that such potential was inextricable from American slavery did not seem to matter. [26]

From 1830 to 1838, Brownell led the Diocese of Alabama before helping promote Leonidas Polk to take over. Three years later, at the 1841 General Convention of the Episcopal Church, Brownell advanced the motion that installed Polk as the Bishop of Louisiana. It was at this time, starting with his 1837 resignation as president of Washington College, that Nathaniel Sheldon Wheaton left Hartford to minister at [Christ Church in New Orleans](#) ([find the Primus Project research on Wheaton here](#)). Like Brownell, Wheaton worked closely with enslavers such as Polk and by 1840 had regular access to (and perhaps ownership of) enslaved labor in his New Orleans home. [27]

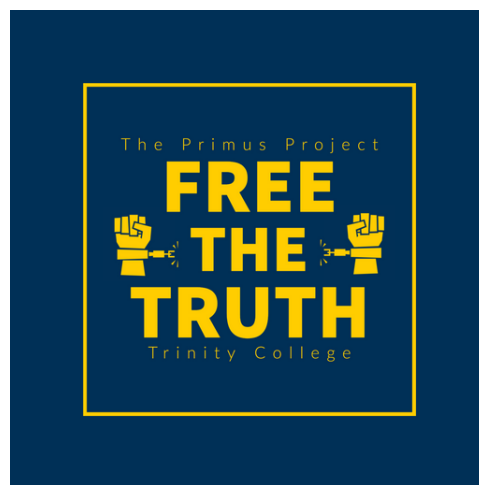


Thomas Church Brownell's involvement with slavery and the development of the Episcopal Church in the American South was not limited to Polk and Louisiana. For instance, in 1841, Brownell seconded the motion that opened the way for the enslaver Reverend Nicholas Hamner Cobbs (1796-1861) of Virginia to become the Missionary Bishop of Texas and, in 1844, he made the motion to approve Cobbs as the Bishop of Alabama. That same year Brownell also led the committee that endorsed the application to establish a diocese in the proslavery state of Missouri. Brownell not only worked with enslavers, he saw proslavery spaces as vital to the interests of the Episcopal Church. In this effort, he helped to institutionalize various forms of racial injustice. [28]

For all these reasons, the growing anti-slavery movement was not only an "inconvenient truth" for those filling the pews in Episcopal parishes. It was a threat to the denomination's very future and to the High Church faction's commitment to apolitical calm and church unity. In 1839, an Episcopal priest and early subscriber of (donor to) Washington College, Calvin Colton (1789-1857), published a furious denunciation of the anti-slavery movement called *Abolition a Sedition*. He argued that abolitionists were "at war with the genius and letter of the National Constitution," that their "revolting and shocking" calls for the immediate abolition of slavery invited "a condition of universal anarchy," and that abolitionism "would speedily lead to insurrection and massacre." Blaming the victims, he further maintained that "It is to the Africans themselves, that [the slave trade] owes its origin—to their barbarism, to their everlasting trade in war, and the glutting of their own marts with the blood and sinew of their own flesh."

All told, he believed, the “the evils of American slavery are blessings as compared with the general fate of the African race in their native Continent.” In 1853, Colton was appointed Trinity College’s first Professor of Public Economy. [29]

It is no surprise, therefore, that Washington College, and then Trinity, would be an inviting destination for the sons of pro-slavery southerners and of northern merchants who benefited economically from the labor of the enslaved—for anyone who preferred to be sheltered from the growing abolitionist chorus in the North’s evangelical churches, lecture halls, and political rallies.



FOOTNOTES

[1] On Yale see Samuel Hart, "Trinity College, Hartford," *The New England Magazine and Bay State Monthly*, 1.5 (May 1886), 393-394.

[2] "Episcopal" means governed by bishops, and antipathy for bishops was deeply embedded in both American Christianity and post-Revolutionary politics. King James I had rebuked early Puritans in England by declaring, "No bishop, no king," and American Protestants never forgot the point. In a paean to "the Pilgrim Fathers" and "the Republicanism of the Puritans," the Whig Senator from Massachusetts Rufus Choate in 1843 toasted the early colony as an idyllic place where "there was a state without king or nobles; there was a church without a bishop." Samuel Gilman Brown, *The Works of Rufus Choate, with a Memoir of His Life*, vol. 1 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1862), 379. Butler, *Standing Against the Whirlwind*, 9. Key sources for this section's history of the Episcopal Church include Robert Bruce Mullin, *Episcopal Vision/American Reality: High Church Theology and Social Thought in Evangelical America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986) and Diana Hochstedt Butler, *Standing Against the Whirlwind: Evangelical Episcopalians in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[3] William White, who ultimately would become the first bishop of Pennsylvania, developed a plan of organization that catered to the new republic's anti-monarchical culture: it would avoid "bishops" in name, adopting terms like "president." But a group of clergy in Connecticut, less concerned with public sentiment, took a blunter approach: they tried to get Samuel Seabury, a loyalist during the war, consecrated bishop of their diocese by an appropriate English authority willing to forego the required oath of allegiance to the king. Finding none, they settled for a Scottish bishop, who, in 1784, made Seabury the first bishop of the U.S. Episcopal Church. See, among others, "Historical Sketch of Trinity College," *The Connecticut Common School Journal and Annals of Education*, vol. 2, no. 6 (June 1855): 293-296. Although the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution required a separation of churches and the federal state, it did not prohibit individual states from favoring a particular religious denomination. In Connecticut (and New Hampshire and Massachusetts), the Congregational Church was the established church into the nineteenth century. This meant that the state could and would direct funds toward Congregationalist endeavors and otherwise privilege one denomination over others.

[4] E. Edwards Beardsley, *The History of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut, from the Death of Bishop Seabury to the Present Time*, vol. 2 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1883), 247. At barely two generations' remove from the American Revolution, almost every non-Episcopalian in Connecticut would have looked on Samuel Seabury about as kindly as Lin-Manuel Miranda does in *Hamilton*.

[5] According to the minutes of a trustees' meeting, a committee charged with studying the name identified three other Washington Colleges, and they worried that—however unlikely this may be—a benefactor might leave a legacy to the college without naming its location, and a different Washington College might successfully claim the funds. The same committee asserted that "There is no literary institution in our Country which bears the name of 'Trinity College,'" but this was untrue; the Trinity College that would later become Duke University had already been in existence seven years. See Trustee Meeting minutes of May 8, 1845, https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1009&context=trustees_mins. Glenn Weaver, *The History of Trinity College*, vol. 1 (Hartford, Conn.: Trinity College, 1967), 90.

[6] "Seabury Professorship" in Trinity College Trustees, "Extracts from the Record: Various Financial Gifts, Funds, Scholarships, Trusts, etc." (1908). *Trinity College Board of Trustees Minutes (1823 - 1967)*. 2. https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/trustees_mins/2_3

[7] Scholarships in Trinity College Trustees, "Extracts." Thomas Church Brownell, *Autobiography of Thomas Church Brownell, Third Bishop of Connecticut* (Hartford: Church Mission Publishing Company, 1940), 12. A significant number of bequests in support of the Episcopal Church spans the history of Washington College, though such bequests decline by the end of the century.

FOOTNOTES

- [8] Henry Caswall, *America and the American Church* (London: Rivington, 1839), 146. Colleges in this time period were frequently referred to as “literary institutions.” *The Churchman*, 20 September, 1831.
- [9] *Appeal to the Members of the Protestant Episcopal Church, In Behalf of the Church Scholarship Society* (Hartford: H. and F.J. Huntington, 1831).
- [10] *Papers Relating to the Part Endowment of the Hobart Professorship, in (Washington, Now) Trinity College, by the Corporation of Trinity Church in the City of New-York* (New York: Pudney & Russell, 1853), 6.
- [11] For the African American experience in the Episcopal Church, see Harold T. Lewis, *Yet With a Steady Beat: The African American Struggle for Freedom in the Episcopal Church* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996); Craig D. Townsend, *Faith in their Own Color: Black Episcopalians in Antebellum New York City* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2005); and Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Alexander Crummell: A study of Civilization and Discontent* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1989).
- [12] SPG in J. Carleton Hayden, “Afro-Anglican Linkages, 1701-1900: Ethiopia Shall Soon Stretch Out Her Hands Unto God,” *Journal of Religious Thought*, 44.1 (Summer/Fall 1987), 25. Secker in Lewis, 22.
- [13] *Journal of the Proceedings of the Seventy-Ninth Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: J. S. McCalla, 1863), 71. Lewis, 29-30.
- [14] The first, Absalom Jones, had been enslaved until he was 38 years old by a wealthy merchant and Episcopal vestryman in Philadelphia. Timothy Safford, “Giving the Full History: Who Owned Absalom Jones,” *Racial Reconciliation* <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/racialreconciliation/giving-the-full-history-who-owned-absalom-jones/>. Craig D. Townsend, *Faith in their Own Color: Black Episcopalians in Antebellum New York City* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2005); quotation from Standing Committee on 36.
- [15] Craig D. Townsend, *Faith in their Own Color: Black Episcopalians in Antebellum New York City* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2005); Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Alexander Crummell: A study of Civilization and Discontent* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1989); Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), 202, 200.
- [16] Moses, 38. Carter Godwin Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington, D.C.: Associate Publishers, 1921), 96. Lewis, 31-32. Walker in Lewis, 5. On Black access but not authority, see Ruha Benjamin who uses this construction when writing about the medical field in the United States. See Benjamin, Chapter 6 in *Viral Justice: How We Grow the World We Want* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).
- [17] For an overview of this period, see E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), esp. chap. 11, “Episcopal Theology and Tradition,” 234-255.
- [18] Butler, 11.
- [19] *Papers Relating to the Part Endowment of the Hobart Professorship*, 9. See David Potts, *Wesleyan University, 1831-1910: Collegiate Enterprise in New England* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1999).
- [20] On this cultural moment, see Louis P. Masur, *1831: Year of Eclipse* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1831).
- [21] *Recent Recollections of the Anglo-American Church in the United States, by an English Layman, Five Years Resident in that Republic* (London: Rivingtons, 1861), 250-51.

FOOTNOTES

- [22][John Jay II], *Caste and Slavery in the American Church, by a Churchman* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1843) , 28. For more on Jay and his Episcopalian family, see David Gellman, *Liberty's Chain: Slavery, Abolition, and the Jay Family of New York* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2022. [Leonard Bacon], "Colton's Reasons for Episcopacy," *Quarterly Christian Spectator* 2nd ser., no. 8 (1836). Unsigned review of *Caste and Slavery in the American Church, in The British Churchman: A Magazine Conducted on the Principles of the Church of England, as Exhibited in her Articles, and Laid Down by her Reformers*, vol. 1 (London: Smith, Elder, 1844), 37.
- [23]Wilberforce, *A History of the Protestant Episcopal Church in America* (London: Levey, Robson, and Franklyn, 1844), 421-423. Lewis, 18.
- [24] William Jay, letter to Joseph Sturge, quoted in Bayard Tuckerman, *William Jay and the Constitutional Movement for the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1893), 145.
- [25] Glenn Robins, *The Bishop of the Old South: The Ministry and Civil War Legacy of Leonidas Polk* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer Univ. Press, 2006), 12n33, 82, 96. Polk's slaves in 1840 U.S. Census, Maury, Tennessee and 1850 U.S. Census, Schedule 2, Bayou Lafourche, Lafourche County, Louisiana, 23 December 1850, n.p.
- [26]Julia Chester Emery, *A Century of Endeavor, 1821-1921: A Record of the First Hundred Years of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America* (New York: Department of Missions, 1921), 55, 44.
- [27] Emery, 414. *Journal of the General Convention. 1841: Together with the Constitution and Canon of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States* (New-York: Swords, Stanford & Co., 1841), 113-114.
- [28] *Journal of the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States, 1844* (New York: James A. Sparks, 1845), 145, 133. Cobbs's slaves in 1840 U.S. Census, Petersburg West Ward, Dinwiddie County, Virginia, and 1850 U.S. Census, Schedule 2, District 1, Tuscaloosa County, Alabama, 17 Oct. 1850, n.p.
- [29] [Calvin Colton], *Abolition a Sedition, by a Northern Man* (Philadelphia: Geo. W. Donohue 1839), pp. 2, 72-73, 78, 163, and 165. Colton's name appears in [] Watkinson. "Subscriptions to Washington College," Trinity College Archives 0.5.1, Watkinson Library. Also see James D. Bratt, "From Revivalism to Anti-Revivalism to Whig Politics: The Strange Career of Calvin Colton," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 52.1 (January 2001): 63-82.

IMAGE CREDITS

Front Cover: Statue of Bishop Thomas Church Brownell on the main campus quadrangle (Trinity College, Hartford CT)

Page 7: Trinity Church, from Wall-Street

Page 8: Bishop Thomas Church Brownell, First President of Trinity College (Hartford, Connecticut) and Episcopal Bishop of Connecticut

Page 11: Samuel Eliot, President of Trinity College (1860-1864)

Page 18: Rev. Richard Allen, Bishop of the First African Methodist Episcopal Church, The Revd. Absalom Jones: Rector of St. Thomas's African Episcopal in the City of Philad.