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“Botany Bay”: The State of Society at Union College during the Early Nineteenth Century

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“Botany Bay”

The State of Society at Union College during the Early Nineteenth Century

By

Andrew Cassarino

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ABSTRACT

CASSARINO, ANDREW

“Botany Bay”: The State of Society at Union College during the Early Nineteenth Century

The history of Union College spans nearly the entire history of the United States. Founded in 1795, the school emerged as one of the nation’s premier educational institutions in the early nineteenth century. The changes occurring on the national stage often entered public life on Union’s campus, and President Eliphalet Nott and students actively participated in the civil discourse of the period. The most prevalent issues on campus included the authority of government, temperance, and the question of enslavement. Historians often like to find commonality among individuals with regards to their views on the most pressing topics of the time, but these categories – social, economic, and political – often prove too simplistic. Students at Union, who shared very similar backgrounds, often ardently disagreed with each other on solutions to society’s problems. Union College provides scholars with a complex microcosm of how individuals perceived the world during the first several decades of the Early Republic.

Most northern colleges established before the abolition of the slave trade and enactment of gradual emancipation laws bear a relationship to the peculiar institution, Union College is no exception. Records of the finances for the construction of West College, now known as “Old Stone College,” at the end of the eighteenth century, reveal that the architects of the building depended on hired enslaved labor from local elites. A quarter of the first Board of Trustees of Union College owned slaves. Eliphalet Nott, a man the college remembers as ardently anti-slavery, owned at least three slaves, one of whom he kept while president of the college. None of this should be shocking since the post-Revolution North existed as a society with slaves, especially in New York, which pursued gradual emancipation; but it is significant that the college today does not engage in serious research of its institutional connections to enslavement.

Students at Union College during the early nineteenth century debated the most pressing issues facing the nation, including enslavement. From the 1810s till the 1830s, the percentage of southern students at Union College were higher than most similar institutions. This high ratio led to fierce disputes among the student body regarding the future of enslavement. These discussions occurred in a culture of public discourse, which the literary societies at the college fostered. These groups allowed students to converse in a space free of the supervision of professors or President Eliphalet Nott, who used a paternalistic style of authority to control the lives and moral character of his students.

While president of Union College, Nott felt duty bound to ensure the young men under his watchful eye engaged in righteous activities and avoided the temptations of vice. He accomplished this by placing disciplinary control under his sole authority and constantly talking with his students about early nineteenth century reform movements. The emergence of temperance reform at Union College came about through Nott's actions and exemplified a top-down social movement expressed by the scholarship of Paul E. Johnson. However, today the college remembers Nott more for his anti-slavery activity than his work for temperance. When looking at the writings of Nott and students in the 1830s, it becomes clear that students initiated anti-slavery events and Nott often avoided the controversial subject and then supported colonization. In this regard, anti-slavery activism occurred bottom-up at Union College.

The writings of students at Union College between 1810 and 1840 reveal that students thought critically about current events, and their actions demonstrate that none of them fit perfectly into the general molds created by historians of the early nineteenth century. This should not come as a surprise because students then, much like today, were growing intellectually and beginning to establish their own moral principles.

Introduction: An Exploration of Early Nineteenth Century Individualism

In February 1834, a concerned Asa Bigelow, wrote his son John, a member of the Union College Class of 1835, “I am almost led to believe you learned from experience, if you do, I hope you are fully satisfied & and will make & strictly adhere to the resolution of never being tempted in like manner again, one sure way to escape temptation it to keep out of the way of it.”¹ While the reason for Asa’s concern is lost to history, the letter had little impact on John, who continued to engage in what his father perceived as reckless behavior. John, who would become an ardent Republican in his adult life, cared very little for reform on an individual or communal level while a student at Union College. The paternalistic authority of his father did not sway the mind of the young John and he continued to explore his place in what appeared to be an ever changing society.

Known to many as the Age of Jackson, the years between 1815 and 1848 witnessed massive geographic, economic, and demographic expansions across the United States. Historian Lawrence Kohl argued that the Jacksonian generation witnessed change so rapidly “that it seemed its world had been transformed overnight.”² In the thirty-year window the population of the United States grew from just over seven million to almost twenty-three million. People across the country watched a nation be built through internal improvement projects focused on constructing better roads and new canals. Factions, which the Founding generation distrusted, emerged and gave rise to the modern two-party system. Debates on American Indian removal, enslavement, the National Bank, and the role of the federal government dominated public

¹ Asa Bigelow, letter, January 8, 1834, *Special Collections*, Union College.

² Lawrence Frederick Kohl, *The Politics of Individualism: Parties and the American Character in the Jacksonian Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 4.

discourse. The rapid changes caused millions of individuals across the country to respond in unique ways.

The population growth, especially in urban areas, pushed society from Thomas Jefferson's vision of the yeomen farmer towards an industrialized nation. In 1787, James Madison feared "a great majority of the people will not only be without landed, but any other sort of property," but did very little as a Constitutional delegate to prevent that due to the prevalence of free land.³ However, by 1807, most of this "free" land had been claimed and farming expenses increased dramatically with new demands. The growing population, according to historian Reeve Huston, made it difficult for Americans to achieve economic independence through traditional agriculture.⁴ Many farmers, facing poor prospects in agriculture, sought livelihoods in commerce and manufacturing in cities as the early industries in the United States emerged.⁵ For those engaged in successful agricultural cultivation, improvements in farming equipment and more of their children surviving to adulthood decreased their need for hired hands.⁶ This pushed many into the ever-increasing urban areas in the United States.

As the nation grew, strong political factions emerged over how best to deal with the changing society. Many of the Founding Fathers strongly advocated for avoiding political parties because they believed parties posed a threat to democracy. In his Farewell Address of 1796, George Washington warned the nation that political parties agitate "the community with ill-

³ Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 626.

⁴ Reeve Huston, *Land and Freedom: Rural Society, Popular Protest, and Party Politics in Antebellum New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 49.

⁵ Huston, *Land and Freedom*, 51.

⁶ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 526.

founded jealousies and false alarms, [which] kindles the animosity of one part against another.”⁷ Despite Washington’s admonition, parties emerged during the election of 1800, and for the following decade, political leaders debated how the new country should proceed – centralization and commercial development or limited government based on agricultural production by yeomen farmers. A politically divided and relatively weak United States entered a second war with Britain between 1812 and 1815 and emerged from it eager to end political division. By the election of 1816, with the presidential election of Democratic Republican James Monroe, many believed the nation entered an “Era of Good Feelings,” which would not be plagued by party strife.

Debates over the role of the national government and the American System, which sponsored internal improvements, tariffs, and the National Bank, reignited party conflict. The Panic of 1819, which blighted rapid economic growth following the Treaty of Ghent in 1815, generated tensions within the Democratic Republican party and produced severe economic anxiety among the American people. Due to these internal tensions, active political campaigns replaced the practice of a “mute tribune,” in which a candidate “stood” for office rather than “ran” for office during elections. As historian Lynn Parsons contends, our idea of modern politics based on a two party system was born during the election of 1828.⁸ These factions debated the major social and political issues of the day, like the role of the national government, enslavement, and American Indian removal.

⁷ George Washington, “Washington’s Farewell Address 1796,” *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy*, Yale University Law School, web.

⁸ Lynn Hudson Parsons, *The Birth of Modern Politics: Andrew Jackson, John Quincy Adams, and the Election of 1828* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2009), xviii.

Following the conclusion of the War of 1812, nationalism swept across the nation and fostered support for internal improvement projects. The ability to civilize the wilderness, which included American Indian removal, encompassed much of the noncoastal areas of the United States represented an opportunity to promote an American identity. Prior to these improvement projects, Americans often complained of the country's lousy infrastructure. "The roads, never very good, were very bad in the spring," recalled Thomas Nichol about his childhood in New Hampshire after the War of 1812.⁹ He complained, "There were few turnpike roads, made and kept in repair by companies, who gathered tolls for their use; but these were never properly made."¹⁰

According to the work of historian Carol Sheriff, "By improving the physical world around them, by building highways of 'profitable intercourse,' Americans could realize their special destiny of universal moral and material prosperity."¹¹ However, not all Americans embraced the surge of internal improvement projects. Many felt they corrupted Americans' moral character and gave too much power to the national government. While Thurlow Weed, a strong supporter of internal improvement projects, celebrated the Erie Canal, the most ambitious project of the antebellum era, as a "monument of American Genius and American patriotism," others simply called it "Clinton's big ditch," referring to the strongest supporter of the project, the whiggish New York Governor DeWitt Clinton.¹²

⁹ Thomas Nichol, "A Portrait of America, 1830," *Eye Witness to History*, Ibis Communications Inc., Web.

¹⁰ Nichol, "A Portrait of America, 1830."

¹¹ Carol Sheriff, *The Artificial River: The Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817-1862* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 25.

¹² Evan Cornog, *The Birth of Empire: DeWitt Clinton and the American Experience, 1769-1828* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 158.

The disputes over the Second National Bank not only fueled political factions, but also gave birth to an entirely new political party – the Jacksonian Democratic Party. The debates surrounding the re-chartering of the Second National Bank in 1832 focused on the issue of financial concentration, foreign influence, and, much like the internal improvements project, the powers of the national government. Jacksonian Democrats viewed the National Bank as a source of corruption that sought to line the pockets of wealthy businessmen. National Republicans, like Kentucky Senator Henry Clay, viewed it as necessary to promote national economic growth and support a vigorous role for the national government.¹³ President Andrew Jackson’s removal of deposits from the bank and placing them in his “pet” banks and veto of the charter of the bank fostered the creation of the Whig party, which consisted of former National Republicans, and sought to oppose the rule of “King Andrew.”

These political problems were not limited to disputes over internal improvement projects and the National Bank: issues surrounding social questions, such as the institution of enslavement and American Indian policy, dominated political discourse. Justification for enslavement in the United States drastically shifted during the Jacksonian Era. By the 1840s, rather than being seen as a “necessary evil,” many people, both slaveholders and non-slaveholders, defended the institution as a “positive good” for the nation and the enslaved African Americans.¹⁴ As for American Indians east of the Mississippi River, the national government and military, especially under the presidency of Andrew Jackson, implemented harsh removal policies, which created the infamous Trail of Tears. In contrast, the Second Great Awakening, a protestant religious revival in the early 19th century, promoted postmillennialism,

¹³ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 374.

¹⁴ John C. Calhoun, “Slavery a Positive Good,” February 6, 1837, *Teaching American History*, Web.

which encouraged Americans to support efforts to make the United States the most progressive country in the world.¹⁵ This helped increase the size of anti-slavery societies and movements and challenged removal policies of American Indians. These movements also reached an individual level, most notably temperance, that sparked fierce debates.

People in the United States during the antebellum period witnessed rapid change, confronted political and social issues, and reflected on their individual identities. *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (2007), by Daniel Walker Howe, provides one of the most complete studies on American society during what many historians refer to as the “Age of Jackson.” Howe’s rejection of the term, “Age of Jackson,” to describe the years between 1815 and 1848 reflects his larger break from previous works that emphasis Jackson is the driving force of democratization. This rejection, according to Howe, is appropriate “because [“the Age of Jackson”] suggests that Jacksonianism describes Americans as a whole, whereas in fact Andrew Jackson was a controversial figure and his political movement bitterly divided the American people.”¹⁶ While Howe contends his work “tells a story,” rather than “argue a thesis,” the central theme of the book is the rapid change in American society caused by the “communication revolution.”¹⁷ This theme is more unique from previous scholarship on this era, especially from the work of Charles Sellers.

The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1856 (1991), by Charles Sellers, generated a school of thought focused on the “market revolution” as the central cause of the transformation of the American economy and American society.¹⁸ Grounded in Marxist

¹⁵ Christina Snyder, *Great Crossings: Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in the Age of Jackson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 8.

¹⁶ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 4.

¹⁷ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 849.

¹⁸ Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1856* (New York: Oxford, 1991), 5.

interpretation, Sellers' work represents an extension of the studies completed by historians like Arthur Schlesinger, who argued that the defining principle of this period was the class struggle between the farmer-workers majority and the business elite.¹⁹ Prior to 1815, according to Sellers, most Americans lived as subsistence farmers primarily concerned with the immediate needs of their families. However, the growth of commercial pressures, generated by national leaders, following the War of 1812 forced many Americans into a "market world" dominated by capitalism.²⁰ For Sellers, this change represented the success of capitalism over democracy, and the presidency of Andrew Jackson stood as the last defense of democratic "class politics."²¹

In his book chapter, "Charles Sellers, The Market Revolution, and the Shaping of Identity in Whig-Jacksonian America," (2002), Howe finds several faults in Sellers' conclusions and analysis. While Sellers contends the "market revolution" occurred in the early 19th century, Howe argues the revolution occurred in the 18th century. "To be sure," Howe writes, "markets expanded vastly in the years after the end of the War of 1812, but their expansion partook more of the nature of a continuing evolution than a sudden revolution."²² Howe also fundamentally disagrees with how people reacted to the rise of modernity. While Sellers contends that many "mourned" the emergence of a modern world, Howe states, "Most American family farmers welcomed the chance to buy and sell in larger markets" and did not mourn, as Sellers suggests.²³ The market revolution, according to Howe, offered individuals more autonomy through the

¹⁹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Age of Jackson* (Old Saybrook, Conn.: Konecky & Konecky, 1945), 339. A quick note on Schlesinger, while I recognize the importance of his contribution to the historiography of the era, I believe the work of Sellers, which is more recent, exemplifies the same principles argued by Schlesinger.

²⁰ Sellers, *The Market Revolution*, 19.

²¹ Sellers, *The Market Revolution*, 363.

²² Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 5.

²³ Sellers, *The Market Revolution*, 363; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 5.

expansion of the market readily available to them.²⁴ For Howe, Sellers places people as subordinate to “the market.” Howe asks whether this power dynamic is the reverse: “What if the market was not an actor, but a resource, an instrumentality, something created by human beings as a means to their ends?”²⁵

While Howe argues Sellers does not accurately depict the benefits of the market revolution, Sellers believes similar work to Howe’s chapter written in 2002 fails to address the negative cost of the emergence of a capitalistic society in antebellum America. Based upon his own social understandings of a market economy, Sellers believes “Capitalism commodifies and exploits all life.”²⁶ Because of this, Sellers views capitalism and democracy at odds. Capitalism, which is driven by cutthroat tactics, sacrifices the rule of Jacksonian democracy based upon the will of the majority for the interests of a select elite, which are represented by “business-oriented politicians.”²⁷ Sellers asserts that the Panic of 1819 represented the failure of capitalism and that the eventual election of Andrew Jackson reflected the democratic efforts of grassroots organizations to weaken the power of the market economy.²⁸ While elites brought capitalism to the American public, “the people” defied the actions of National Republicans through securing the White House for Jackson.

Howe and Sellers’ works stand as cornerstones of studies focusing on America during the transition from the Early Republic to the Antebellum. Sellers demonstrates how the negative

²⁴ Daniel Walker Howe, “Charles Sellers, The Market Revolution, and the Shaping of Identity in Whig-Jacksonian America,” in *God and Mammon: Protestants, Money, and the Market, 1790-1860*, ed. Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 62.

²⁵ Howe, “Charles Sellers, The Market Revolution, and the Shaping of Identity in Whig-Jacksonian America,” 61.

²⁶ Charles Sellers, “Capitalism and Democracy in American Historical Mythology,” in *The Market Revolution: Social, Political, and Religious Expressions, 1800-1880*, ed. Melvyn Stokes and Stephen Conway (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 313.

²⁷ Sellers, “Capitalism and Democracy in American Historical Mythology,” 318.

²⁸ Sellers, “Capitalism and Democracy in American Historical Mythology,” 322.

effects of the market revolution upon society created anxiety and concern over the moral character of the nation. However, Howe effectively argues how the communication revolution and expansion in markets fostered individual autonomy through connecting Americans to more resources and information. While both are critical of each other's work, Howe and Sellers fail to recognize their commonality in their critiques.²⁹ Howe contends Sellers' work is negatively influenced by his affection for Jacksonian Democrats and Sellers claims Howe's work to be problematic due to his fondness for National Republicans and Whigs.³⁰ While Howe is more willing to accept the fluidity of belief systems in antebellum society than Sellers, the two historians' biases oversimplify the complex culture that emerged during the Jacksonian Era. They are not alone in this. *The Politics of Individualism: Parties and the American Character in the Jacksonian Era* (1989), by Lawrence Frederick Kohl, offers another example of this problem.

To understand the social changes of the Jacksonian Era, Kohl relies heavily on the work of American sociologist David Riesman, primarily *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (1950). Kohl argues that party affiliation during the Jacksonian Era could be determined by Riesman's concepts of "inner-directed" and "tradition-directed" social characters.³¹ In a preindustrial society, "tradition-directed" social characters' values are

²⁹ The work of Sellers and Howe proved a more nuanced take on the Age of Jackson, but for the sake of this thesis, I have boiled their massive works to their most simplistic conclusions.

³⁰ Howe, "Charles Sellers, The Market Revolution, and the Shaping of Identity in Whig-Jacksonian America," 69; Sellers, "Capitalism and Democracy in American Historical Mythology," 322. The claims presented by both authors on their peers' bias prove accurate upon analyzing their work. Sellers, a Marxist historian, focuses on the class structure of Jacksonian Democrats and romanticizes the image of the "average man" in antebellum American (See, Sellers, *The Market Revolution*, 9; Sellers Capitalism and Democracy in American Historical Mythology," 322). While hyper-focusing on the issues of class, Sellers fails to address the negative aspects of Jacksonian Democracy, such as Indian removal, questions of enslavement, and proper gender roles. Howe, almost representing the opposite of Sellers, often comments on the reform movements of the National Republicans and Whigs, while failing to mention the ethnic and class structure of the party (See Howe, "Charles Sellers, The Market Revolution, and the Shaping of Identity in Whig-Jacksonian America," 60).

³¹ Kohl, *The Politics of Individualism*, 6.

determined by a larger societal structure.³² Kohl describes Democrats as representative of this description because of their yearnings for personal bonds to a larger community.³³ An “inner-directed” social character reflects the dominance of the individual and is less impacted by a larger social structure. Whigs, according to Kohl, were more comfortable with an “individualistic” society and thus can be viewed as “inner-directed.”³⁴ Kohl’s study suggests special characteristics of individuals from the Jacksonian Era can readily define their political party affiliation. This oversimplification removes the multifaceted identities of the American populace during this time period.

The issue of oversimplification in the studies of Howe, Sellers, and Kohl can be attributed to the scope of their works. Their broad, survey books use national identities to help explain the driving forces of change, which has its merits but can also be problematic to understanding the complexity of change on an individual or at a local level. Regional studies and microhistories of this era present readers with a more nuanced understanding of society and how people understood the changes that were occurring so rapidly. Luckily, there is a rich field of works focused on microhistories of the Jacksonian Era.

In his book *Land and Freedom: Rural Society, Popular Protest, and Party Politics in Antebellum New York* (2000), Reeve Huston uses the Anti-Rent Wars in the early 19th century,

³² It should be noted, historians have critiqued Kohl’s usage of Riesman’s terminology and these critiques merit a response. The work of Riesman analyzes the evolution of urbanization and societal values. As society evolves, so do the social characters described by Riesman. Kohl treats these characters as existing in contemporary time periods while failing to address the concept of evolution presented in Riesman’s original sociology study. Because of this failure to use evolution with the social characters, Kohl largely ignores the third character, “other-directed,” which Riesman contends represents how similar “peer groups” influence individuals in a heavily industrialized society. This characteristic might have been most appropriate since various reform societies and political parties emerged during the Jacksonian Era. For a deeper analysis of Riesman’s social characters, see Kassarian, “A Study of Riesman’s Theory of Social Character,” pp. 213-230.

³³ Kohl, *The Politics of Individualism*, 6.

³⁴ Kohl, *The Politics of Individualism*, 6.

primarily in Albany, New York, to explain how average Americans understood their role in society. According to Huston, the growth of the market economy created a “new order” and shaped the “values and practices” of Americans.³⁵ While Howe’s and Seller’s books represent broad surveys of the United States, Huston focuses on the rural population of New York. This regional study emphasizes the actions of individuals rather than the power of national political parties. The burst of change during the Jacksonian Era forced rural farmers to reevaluate their place in society. “The anti-renters were participants in a broad, international trend, as rural people throughout the modern world translated ancient desires for lands into language of republican, liberal, or socialist revolution,” Huston argues.³⁶ The expansion of the market and the improvements in communication, Huston contends, represented the two largest factors generating change among the populace of his study, which allowed for the expansion of social movements and political participation by increasing availability to information.

Carol Sheriff’s book, *The Artificial River: The Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817-1862* (1996), is case study on how American reacted to the construction of the Erie Canal. Primarily focused on its political, economic, and societal impacts, the study explores how the canal simultaneously represented the march of technological progress and the issues of moral decay. Sheriff’s study is more concerned with individual understandings of the canal and how people along the canal’s route adapted to the change rather than how national political parties influenced the populace. Her work is more focused on local political influence than those of the national stage. Prior to the construction of the canal, people believed an infrastructure project like the canal was impossible, including Thomas Jefferson. However, as Sheriff argues, the

³⁵ Huston, *Land and Freedom*, 6.

³⁶ Huston, *Land and Freedom*, 8.

construction of the canal represented the power of American determination and the nation's ability to shape their surrounding environment.³⁷ Sheriff's work "traces the ways in which the citizens of New York took one of the extraordinary achievements of the young Republic and rendered it – along with the culture it helped to create – ordinary."³⁸

A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837

(1978), stands as one of the most highly acclaimed microhistories of the Jacksonian Era. Peers of Paul E. Johnson have described his book to be "path-breaking work."³⁹ At the heart of Johnson's study is a Marxist approach to the social control thesis of reform in antebellum America. For Johnson, businessmen used the evangelical revivalism of the 1830s to maintain authority of community affairs as an "autonomous" working class appeared.⁴⁰ Johnson's assertion of the paternalism inherent in the "control thesis" represents arguments similar to those presented by Sellers. As Johnson contends, which clearly influenced Sellers' work, the business elite used religiosity to control the workingmen in a changing society, Sellers argues societal elites used capitalism to retain authority over an increasingly democratized society. In this regard, Johnson fails to address the autonomy argument presented by historians who follow Howe's interpretation. In Howes' 1991 article, evangelical revivalism represented "social empowerment" because it allowed individuals to voluntarily decide their faith and identification with a larger religious sect.⁴¹ Other historians, most notably Teresa Murphy, argues that working people used

³⁷ Sheriff, *Artificial River*, 59.

³⁸ Sheriff, *The Artificial River*, 8.

³⁹ Jama Lazerow, "Review:" *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837*, in *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Spring 1980): 508.

⁴⁰ Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 106.

⁴¹ Daniel Walker Howe, "The Evangelical Movement and the Political Culture in the North During the Second Party System," in *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 77 No. 4 (Mar., 1991): 1235.

evangelicalism in labor protests against the business class, whereas Johnson contends that the elite used evangelicalism as a form of social control.⁴²

At the heart of many studies focusing on the Age of Jackson lays reform. Reform movements during this time period emerged in response to rapid industrialization, urbanization, and partisan politicization. In *Creating the Culture of Reform in Antebellum America* (2006), T. Gregory Garvey argues antebellum reform developed under the structures of debate rather than “part of an identifiably liberal tradition.”⁴³ This arose primarily from concerns generated by an increasingly pluralistic society. The reformers in antebellum America, according to Garvey, rejected intentional manipulation and promoted public discourse, which encouraged critical thinking among the general public.⁴⁴ The actions of the reformers forced American society to reevaluate the traditional belief systems nurtured during the American Revolution. His analysis runs counter to Johnson’s work because Garvey, echoing Murphy, recognizes the autonomy granted by the evangelical reform movements to individuals, while Johnson sees the revivalism as a mechanism of control wielded by the upper class over the emerging working class.

Garvey briefly explores the political implications of the antebellum reformers, but John Hammond’s *The Politics of Benevolence: Revival Religion and American Voting* (1979) explores this relationship in more depth. Central to Hammond’s study is the work of Charles G. Finney, a revivalist preacher, in New York during the 1820s. The evangelical revivalism taught by Finney to people across upstate New York, according to Hammond, translated directly into political

⁴² Teresa Anne Murphy, *Ten Hours' Labor: Religion, Reform, and Gender in Early New England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 82.

⁴³ T. Gregory Garvey, *Creating the Culture of Reform in Antebellum America* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2006), 10.

⁴⁴ Garvey, *Creating the Culture of Reform in Antebellum America*, 199.

activism focused on enslavement and temperance.⁴⁵ Using statistical analysis based on the number of converts during the revivals, Hammond explores to what extent these waves of evangelical fever spread across what historians refer to as the “Burned Over District.” The appeal of revivalism to people in Upstate New York was that it offered religious individualism, a distinctly American quality. Hammond argues that the importance of revivalism is evident because the districts most impacted by evangelicalism continually voted Republican, which replaced the Whig party in 1854, until the 1960s.⁴⁶

One area often lacking in the studies of the Jacksonian Era is higher education. This lack of historical interpretation pertains to the school of thought that argues major shifts in secondary education in the United States did not occur until after the Civil War. The few studies focused on higher education during this time in American history concentrate on academia’s roots in traditional education and unwillingness to evolve as other parts of American society progressed. Historian Harold T. Shapiro’s “The Transformation of the Antebellum College: From Right Thinking to Liberal Learning” (2005) is an example of this approach. According to Shapiro, “In general terms, erudition in the pre-Civil War America flourished outside, not within, higher education.”⁴⁷ He contends that American education prior to the American Civil War focused on a traditional style of teaching, which emphasized religion and sought to discover “higher” truths. “In America on the eve of the Civil War,” Shapiro argues, “the curriculum and role of the antebellum college were, at best, sufficient to help preserve the older traditions and accumulated

⁴⁵ John Hammond, *The Politics of Benevolence: Revival Religion and American Voting* (Norwood: Ablex Publishing, 1979), 1.

⁴⁶ The one exception to this is the appeal of William Jennings Bryan in the “Burned-Over District” during the presidential election of 1896 (See Hammond, *The Politics of Benevolence*, 184).

⁴⁷ Harold T. Shapiro, “The Transformation of the Antebellum College: From Right Thinking to Liberal Learning,” in *Higher Education and Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 44.

learning of the Western civilization among a very small group of citizens.”⁴⁸ The concepts of modern education, which incorporated the “practical sciences,” did not emerge until after the Civil War when political leaders created an “American way” of education to unify a sectionally divided country.

Burton J. Bledstein’s *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (1976) follows a similar argument. Bledstein argues that the conception of the modern university occurred concurrently with the middle class identity crisis of the mid-19th century.⁴⁹ He attributes this manifestation to the emergence of middle class professionalism, which structured an individual’s vision of society as “the vertical one of career.”⁵⁰ While Shapiro diverged over the occurrence of change, Bledstein focuses primarily on the decades following the Civil War and examines the careers of several prominent college presidents who gained their positions in the 1860s and 1870s to demonstrate how middle class values shaped the American system of higher education. Largely missing from his study of this development is the importance of antebellum reform and concepts of evangelical revivalism in the transformation of higher education.

Shapiro and Bledstein do recognize the individual efforts of several antebellum college presidents in creating a “modern” system of education. Thomas Jefferson, founder of the University of Virginia, introduced a diverse curriculum to the student body, which stood as a divergent from the more classical style of education.⁵¹ “It is safer to have the whole people respectably enlightened than a few in a high state of science and the many in ignorance. This last

⁴⁸ Shapiro, “The Transformation of the Antebellum College,” 57.

⁴⁹ Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976), 123.

⁵⁰ Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism*, ix.

⁵¹ Shapiro, “The Transformation of the Antebellum College,” 41.

is the most dangerous state in which a nation can be. The nations and governments of Europe are so many proofs of it,” Jefferson wrote to Joseph C. Cabell in 1823.⁵² College presidents throughout the Early Republic demonstrated their commitment to higher education and creating the next generation of republican citizens through expanding their curriculum and promoting their institutions as havens of debate and learning. Francis Wayland, the president of Brown University for much of the Jacksonian Era, stated during his early years as president, ““The paramount duty of an American citizen is, to put in requisition every possible means for elevating universally the intellectual and moral character of our people”” and this could only be achieved by expanding the American system of education.⁵³

Craig Steven Wilder added considerable contributions to the historiography of nineteenth century higher education with his book, *Ebony & Ivy*, which explores the relationships of American colleges and enslavement. In the early nineteenth century, according to Wilder, colleges directly benefited from the wealth produced by enslavement and promoted racist ideology among the public.⁵⁴ In his introduction, Wilder states, “American colleges were not innocent or passive beneficiaries of conquest and colonial slavery...The academy never stood apart from American slavery – in fact, it stood beside church and state as the third pillar of a civilization built on bondage.”⁵⁵ Even though his book transformed the way Americans interpreted colleges and enslavement, he spends very little time analyzing the ways students regarded and reacted to questions concerning slavery.

⁵² Thomas Jefferson, letter, January 13, 1823, “Jefferson Quotes and Family Letters,” *Thomas Jefferson Monticello*, web.

⁵³ William G. Roelker, “Francis Wayland A Neglected Pioneer of Higher Education,” in *American Antiquarian Society* (April 1943): 47.

⁵⁴ Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony & Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 9.

⁵⁵ Wilder, *Ebony & Ivy*, 11.

While scholarship is certainly lacking on higher education during the Jacksonian Era, that should not diminish its importance to the rapidly changing American society. The work done by Shapiro, while aware of the impacts of higher education, fails to completely understand how the era shaped education and how education shaped the era. As evidenced in the writings of Jefferson, Wayland, and several other noteworthy college presidents, education reform was indeed in the forefront for many collegiate leaders. The faculty, staff, and students of American colleges during the Jacksonian Era were not passive characters in a rapidly transforming society, but active agents who sought to understand these changes through grappling with the pressing social, political, and economical issues of the era. They took their education and experiences from college to better understand themselves and entered a world that demanded a thinker capable of critically addressing a variety of topics. Union College, in Schenectady, New York, stood at the epicenter of this transformation and offers a rich narrative on how a variety of people dealt with the “revolutions” and “evolutions” of the complex Jacksonian Era.

One of the first schools chartered after 1776, Union College stands as a distinctly American institution. The founding of the institution represented the democratization of American society in a post-Revolution age because it was a collective effort of local citizens rather than a singular elite or a church. Union also stands as the oldest non-denominational college in the United States, which represents the school’s commitment to inclusiveness, regardless of religious affiliation.⁵⁶ Under the leadership of President Eliphalet Nott from the early 19th century until the start of the American Civil War, Union became the forefront institution in implementing a modern curriculum and produced prominent alumni, including the

⁵⁶ Wayne Somers, *Encyclopedia of Union College History* (Schenectady: Union College Press, 2003), 299. Albeit, that inclusiveness had its limits, the student body was predominantly Protestant Christian and white prior to the American Civil War.

previously mentioned Francis Wayland. During the Jacksonian Era, Union stood as one of the nation's most prominent institutions of higher education.

Students at Union College influenced the character of the school and witnessed the dramatic changes affecting the nation. Numerous students commented on the magnificent Erie Canal, located a short distance from the college, and the progress it represented. Coming from diverse regions and backgrounds within the Appalachian Mountains, students debated the most pressing social issues, including enslavement, temperance, and American Indian policy. These debates led to the creation of several reform societies, including an Anti-Slavery Society and Temperance Society, both auxiliary chapters of national organizations. The debates and formations of moral reform societies demonstrate how seriously students took evangelical revivalism and the culture of reform in antebellum America. Much like today, national politics dominated discourse on the campus. The writings and discussions of Union students and faculty speak to a larger national narrative.

While often accepting of these progressive movements, Union College did not exist as solely a liberal bastion. The social and political thought on campus reflected the complexity of the national story during the Jacksonian Era. The Union College Anti-Slavery Society existed in an institution founded, in part, by several prominent slave owners of the region. Eliphalet Nott himself purchased an enslaved African when he first arrived in Schenectady and actively recruited the sons of wealthy southern planters during his presidency. The financial support of these planters proved critical to the success of the institution during the Jacksonian Era. While Nott preached a modern system of education based upon the practical sciences and inclusiveness, the president still held prejudicial beliefs, especially regarding the mental capacity of African Americans and the legitimacy of Catholicism.

The student body also represented more conservative views on society and the place of reform. During the creation of the Union College Temperance Societies, many spoke in opposition and decried the potential tyranny of such an organization. Southern students, who often felt attacked by anti-slavery advocates on campus, formed a secret society where they could openly discuss their views on enslavement and the damages of northern urbanization. Not all northern students believed in the anti-slavery campaigns of the Jacksonian Era and many sympathized with their southern peers. At least one student born in the North, took advantage of the South's peculiar institution by buying several plantations in Georgia. Even as many hailed the ingenuity of the Erie Canal, others feared it only added to the moral decay of society by creating a degrading working class more concerned with drinking and gambling than improving themselves.

This study's primary focus is on the writings of Union College students and faculty during the early nineteenth century. *The Diary of Jonathan Pearson*, edited by Harold C. Martin, is invaluable to this study. Jonathan Pearson's writings discuss his time as a student at Union College between 1831 and 1835. What makes Pearson especially interesting is he remained at the college upon graduation until the end of the Civil War as a professor and librarian. A lesser known diary, but equally as rich on student life at Union in the 1830s, comes from Martin Van Buren Burt, class of 1838. The letters and writings of these students reflect how young men struggled to understand their society and themselves as the world around them succumbed to rapid change. Focusing on the people involved with the development and growth of the college during this period, this study hopes to offer a fresh perspective from a group of historical actors largely neglected by scholars. This is supplemented by local newspaper articles, census data, and diaries of local travelers.

The Jacksonian Era remains one of the most complex ages in American history. However, many historians continue to treat the subject as a simple narrative of conflicting beliefs systems clashing during a period of rapid societal change caused by a specific new development in the economy, transportation, or communication. These histories often use the dichotomy of the belief systems of Whigs and Democrats as the basis for their studies. They often fail to recognize the multifaceted dimensions of individual belief systems. During this period, an individual could profess to be an avid reformer, but still vote for a Democratic president during a national election. A college president could embrace the ideas of paternalism and the necessity of being responsible for the moral character of his students, while still allowing students autonomy to control their own individual ethics. The study of Union College during the Jacksonian Era is a story of the “everyman” during a time when most individuals reevaluated their position in society. While a microhistory, the story speaks to a national narrative based upon complex relationships between individuals, and those same individuals to their humanity.

Chapter One: The Founding and Early Years of Union College, 1777 - 1812

The citizens of Schenectady received news of the Treaty of Paris, which ended the American Revolutionary War in 1783, with great excitement and exuberance. After several years of hard fighting and constant threats of attack by British troops and their American Indian allies, Schenectady celebrated the treaty with a fitting festivity. The “Whigs” of the city, according to Cherry Hill resident Jane Ferguson, “had their house illuminated” and the “Tories would not light theirs until they were threatened to be mobbed.”⁵⁷ The citizens of the city gathered around a “large bonfire” and burned Benedict Arnold, the infamous traitor in the eyes of those in attendance, in effigy and cheered as the smoke rose into the night air. People returned to their homesteads to rebuild their lives in the newly secured United States of America.

Immediately following the Treaty of Paris in 1783, settlers in New England flocked to western New York, especially Schenectady, which had a population of less than 4,000 people. The newly arrived settlers sought to secure for themselves plots of the highly valued rich lands of the region. The Mohawk River, which ran directly along the city’s northern boundary, boosted commerce and transformed the small town into a city of bustle and business, with a population of almost one thousand more people by 1790. To meet the demands of a rapidly growing population, local leaders, most notably General Philip Schuyler, implemented modern transportation techniques and formed the Inland Lock Navigation Company.⁵⁸ To distinguish the city further and become a more competitive area, city leaders devoted themselves to establishing an institution of higher education.

⁵⁷ “Jane Ferguson’s Revolutionary Recollections,” *The American Monthly Magazine* (April 1902), 318.

⁵⁸ Willis T. Hanson, *A History of Schenectady During the Revolution* (Brattleboro, VT: E. L. Hildreth & Co., 1916), 121-125.

Prior to the American Revolution, colleges founded in British North America were often the result of actions taken by a few wealthy men. According to historian Craig Steven Wilder, the reconfiguring of merchant wealth transformed the education values of the colonial elite.⁵⁹ “American colleges,” argues Wilder, “had their genesis in this Atlantic economy. Colonial merchants were not for the most part scholars, but they became the patrons of higher education.”⁶⁰ Before the 1760s, most wealthy colonial officials sent their children to receive their education in Britain, but as tensions rose between the Crown and its colonies in North America, many of these families actively sponsored the creation of their own colleges. These institutions trained future community leaders and missionaries to convert their heathen neighbors, American Indians.

Colonial colleges sought to train new clergymen not only to meet the demands of the growing white settlements, but also convert American Indians and promote cultural assimilation. The founding of Harvard College, the oldest institution of higher education in what would become the United States, exemplifies how colleges in British North America operated as a pillar of colonialism. With the influx of Puritan migrants in New England the early 17th century, the Massachusetts General Court chartered Harvard College in 1636. While the college educated clergymen for the growing white population, it also produced generations of missionaries who worked diligently to infuse European values in local American Indians.⁶¹ Along with producing missionaries, Harvard accepted American Indians on the condition they “think and speak in the

⁵⁹ Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy*, 48.

⁶⁰ Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy*, 48.

⁶¹ Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy*, 23.

language of imperial Europe.”⁶² The Indians who attend these schools often stood as tangible examples to their tribes of the benefits of English culture.⁶³

Colonial colleges represented a larger narrative of colonization in the “New World.” Wealthy leaders used colleges to legitimize their claim to their newly claimed territory. The funding of the schools depended on the purse strings of a small class of wealthy merchants and planters. The wealth accumulated by these academic sponsors stemmed from the trade in human flesh. As with most colonial institutions, the colonial college was intertwined with the transatlantic slave trade and depended heavily upon the wealth created by this trade to support the newly established schools.⁶⁴ Once firmly established, these schools taught countless missionaries who aimed to spread the word of Christianity to local American Indians and force them to accept the cultural norms of the European settlers. The leaders of education in the newly formed United States sought to replace the colonial institution of learning with a more democratized system.

Many leaders in the United States believed the colonial structure of education favored only a select few, which mirrored their feelings towards England.⁶⁵ For many “middling” American leaders, colonial schools focused too heavily on the clergy and gentry. These Revolutionary Era leaders, like Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Rush, believed education represented a public good and states should actively invest in schooling. However, this education, according to historian Gordon Wood, did not focus on the individual, but rather on the ability to use education to create an American identity.⁶⁶ In an essay written in 1798, Dr.

⁶² Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy*, 28.

⁶³ Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy*, 28.

⁶⁴ Some of these schools included Harvard, Yale, Georgetown, and Brown.

⁶⁵ Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 472.

⁶⁶ Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 473.

Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, asserted, “Our schools of learning, by producing one general, and uniform system of education, will render the mass of the people more homogeneous, and thereby fit them more easily for uniform and peaceable government.”⁶⁷ In Rush’s view, institutions of learning could foster a sense of unity in the newly formed nation.

Education for numerous Founding Fathers was the foundation for a successful society. Noah Webster, often credited as the “Father of Education,” detailed the vast benefits of education in *Education of Youth in America*, which he published in 1788. For Webster, the Revolution offered an opportunity to replace the archaic colonial institutions of England with modern establishments that would make the United States a utopia. “It is an object of vast magnitude that systems of education should be adopted and pursued which may not only diffuse a knowledge of the sciences,” Webster argued, “but may implant in the minds of the American youth the principles of virtue and of liberty and inspire them with just and liberal ideas of government and with an inviolable attachment to their own country.”⁶⁸ Schools like those envisioned by Rush and Webster offered the ability to give the “common folk” a practical education, while simultaneously instilling a sense of national unity. This belief, in part, is what fueled attempts to charter a college in Schenectady, which would become nineteenth oldest college established in North America.

Throughout the Revolutionary War, Schenectady citizens, as a whole, supported independence from England and participated in events promoting the United States. In the winter of 1777, a regiment of the Continental Army made camp in the city and the citizens welcomed

⁶⁷ Benjamin Rush, “Of the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic,” *The Founders’ Constitution*, University of Chicago, Web.

⁶⁸ Noah Webster, “U.S. Founding Fathers on Education, in Their Own Words,” *National Association of Scholars*, Web.

their arrival.⁶⁹ On the second anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, military camp celebrations in Schenectady quickly swept across the city and the soldiers and citizens marked the occasion by firing a cannon from the French and Indian War.⁷⁰ It was in this environment that leaders of Schenectady's Dutch Reformed Church in 1779, under the guidance of Senior Elder John C. Cuyler, distributed a petition across Northern New York asking the state legislature to charter and fund a college in Schenectady.

The petition received broad support. It garnered 843 signatures from people across Upstate New York and even parts of southern Vermont, which New York claimed as its domain during this period.⁷¹ This extensive support represented a democratization in American education. Dixon Ryan Fox, a former president of Union College and author of *Union College: An Unfinished History*, argued that the petition “represented the first really *popular* demand for higher education in America; its support was broadly regional, and not merely local.”⁷² The demand for a school, while broadly supported, also arose from the desire to establish distinctly American institutions. “In some degree,” Fox argues, “[the petition] voiced the craving for an informed guidance of social and religious life, but more particularly the need of political affairs of the state and nation, which as the signers felt in the light of Burgoyne’s defeat at Saratoga two years before, were now sure to stand as permanent.”⁷³ With greater military success, Americans, including the petitioners from Schenectady and nearby towns, believed they could safely invest in American institutions, like a college.

⁶⁹ Joel Henry Moore, *Schenectady: Ancient and Modern* (Geneva: Press of W.F. Humphrey, 1914), 133.

⁷⁰ Moore, *Schenectady*, 135.

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⁷² Dixon Ryan Fox, *Union College: An Unfinished History* (Schenectady: Graduate Council, Union College), 10.

⁷³ Fox, *Union College*, 10.

Believing Schenectady to be the best city for a college in America, the petitioners asked the state legislature to “will, ordain, grant and constitute that there be a college, called Clinton College.”⁷⁴ They named the college after New York Governor George Clinton, who, through executive order, sought to establish a school in Schenectady. However, the state legislature, preoccupied with the war effort, failed to implement Clinton’s order and attempts to create a college in Schenectady stagnated. Another attempt to open a school during the American Revolution, made in 1782, gained 200 more signatures than its 1779 predecessor, but met the same fate. State officials worried more about acquiring independence than creating its legacy. Opening a college in Schenectady would have to wait until the newly united states secured nationhood.

Shortly after the Treaty of Paris of 1783, Reverend Dirck Romeyn, ordained in the Dutch Reformed Church, arrived in Schenectady. Two years earlier, Romeyn, who always had an interest in education, penned a letter to Schenectady city leaders about his desire to establish an academy in the city. In the letter, dated December 27, 1782, Reverend Romeyn praised local leaders for Schenectady ““rising to considerable Eminence.”” He continued, ““if to the weight of Commercial Influence be added the enchanting prospect of becoming the Nursury [sic] of Liberal Arts to a great people and heaping Obligations upon them by fitting their youths for public life...I think it impossible for any intelligent Person to hesitate a moment.””⁷⁵ Following the reasoning presented by the Founding generation, Romeyn understood that the foundations of society depended upon the ability to educate its citizens.

⁷⁴ Fox, *Union College*, 10.

⁷⁵ Dirk Romeyn, in *Encyclopedia*, 619.

With Romeyn's support, the Schenectady Consistory, a council of church leaders, received the approval of the Dutch Reformed Church to form a college in Schenectady. The construction of a school in Schenectady began in March of 1785. On April 6, 1785, a meeting was held between members of the community and the church to discuss the plan moving forward with the academy. In the "Articles of Agreement," the two parties agreed that five of the twelve trustees of the academy would be chosen by the Dutch Reformed Church, seven of the trustees would be elected annually at the "schoolhouse," and students shall pay an annual fee to the church since they erected the physical building. They also agreed to leave the power of selecting the academy's president to the church.⁷⁶ While members outside of the Dutch Reformed Church received some authority, the nearly all of it remained within the church.

The academy received broad support from the community and thrived during its initial years after it opened in 1785. The academy, which was run by local leaders, hired local teachers, and attracted local students, represented a strong communal attempt to support better education in Schenectady. Rather than limit attendance to the wealthy, the academy brought students from a wide variety of social classes and during its second year of existence it boasted a school of more than 100 students. Several young women were permitted to study at the academy, but the advanced classes were reserved for the young men because the leaders expected them, but not the women, to attend college.⁷⁷ By 1792, the academy offered a full-year college course, which it modeled after King's College (Columbia).⁷⁸

As the academy continued to grow and more students enrolled, education leaders in the community pushed for the academy to become a college, which would attract older students

⁷⁶ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 628.

⁷⁷ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 629.

⁷⁸ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 629.

from across the nation and not just locally. According to historian Wayne Somers, the founders of the academy always intended for their institution to become a college and waited for an ideal opportunity to make this transition.⁷⁹ In previous attempts, community leaders faced difficulty in persuading the New York legislature to charter a school in Schenectady due to lack of political support and more pressing issues. Thus, Romeyn and his supporters turned to the newly formed New York Board of Regents.

The Board of Regents of the University of the State of New York, which the state created in 1784 to remove the burden of supervising education from the legislature, governed public and private education institutions in the state. The creation of this division represented the expansion of democratization because it expanded the level of state interest in a public education and sought to include representatives from various regions. However, this goal of addressing concerns of the populace with regards to education failed due to the lack of initial representation of officials outside of King's College.⁸⁰ To combat this, the state legislature reorganized the Board of Regents in 1787 and expanded the Regents, both in numerical and geographical terms. The reorganization incorporated Schenectady leaders, and Romeyn and General Philip Schuyler were elected Regents on April 13, 1787. These two men proved instrumental in the founding of the college due to their influence among their peers.

During their campaign to charter a college, Schenectady leaders highlighted the fact the city and individual citizens were willing to donate land, labor, and funds to secure the success of the college. In February of 1792, several citizens wrote to General Schuyler to inform him they

⁷⁹ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 629.

⁸⁰ Sidney Sherwood, *The University of the State of New York: History of Higher Education in the State of New York* (Washington: Government Printing Press, 1900), 52.

acquired 5,000 acres and \$2,500 for a college from local organizations and private citizens.⁸¹

Despite this commitment, the Board of Regents rejected the petition, stating that the founding of a college required at least \$35,000 in capital.⁸² The Regents also worried the Dutch Reformed Church, which controlled the Schenectady Academy, would dominate the college. The new nation valued religious freedom and the authority of the Dutch Reformed Church over an institution of higher education reminded many of what the New York Constitution of 1777 referred to as “spiritual oppression and intolerance,” which “scourged mankind.”⁸³

On August 19, 1794, in order to meet the demands of the Regents, Schenectady Academy appointed a committee to draft an application to submit to the Board of Regents. The committee held several community meetings to engage the public and, in the words of the committee, “to collect the sentiment of others.”⁸⁴ These meetings demonstrated the local leaders’ commitment to advancing a college that represented the interests of the many, rather than the few, which represented a major break from colonial schooling. They took to heart, knowingly or not, the views of a founding father and future president. “The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people and be willing to bear the expenses of it,” John Adams wrote in September 1785. “There should not be a district of one mile square, without a school in it, not founded by a charitable individual, but maintained at the public expense of the people themselves.”⁸⁵ An American school rested on the will of the people and the meetings held in Schenectady represented the value placed upon this notion.

⁸¹ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 297.

⁸² Fox, *Union College*, 11.

⁸³ Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 47.

⁸⁴ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 297.

⁸⁵ John Adams, letter, September 10, 1785, “Founders Online,” *National Archives*, Web.

According to Somers, in a meeting following the community discussion, the name “Union College” was first used. The meeting on December 16, 1794, approved the proposal for a college and the name, Union College, highlighted a “union of religions.”⁸⁶ In the wake of the First Great Awakening in British North America, the idea of American exceptionalism with regards to tolerance of religious diversity influenced the actions of many social leaders in the Early Republic. In part, this is what influenced the concerns of the Board of Regents regarding the control of the Dutch Reformed Church and the actions of the sponsors of the proposed college in Schenectady. To overcome this perceived problem, the committee proposed that the majority of the Trustees would not be of the same religious denomination, the president would not be allowed to intermingle responsibilities of a pastoral duty with the college’s duties, and no faculty member could hold a pastoral position.⁸⁷ Along with limiting the role of any single denomination, the sponsors also secured an additional \$3,475 and 300 acres of land for the school.

Albany, much like Schenectady, was a rising city following the American Revolutionary War and several attempts were made to establish a college after the Treaty of Paris in 1783. It appears the actions occurring in Schenectady reignited calls for a college in Albany because on December 31, 1794, the Albany proponents of a college created a full plan for establishing an institution of higher education in their city.⁸⁸ The supporters promised more than \$50,000 in capital and concerns arose in Schenectady over the fate of their plan. Due to the close proximities of the cities, the Board of Regents would accept only one plan. In the competition between Albany and Schenectady, the influence of Dirck Romeyn proved critical. Writing after

⁸⁶ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 297.

⁸⁷ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 297.

⁸⁸ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 297.

the decision, Governor DeWitt Clinton said, “The weight and respectability of [Dirck Romeyn’s] character procured a decision in favor of Schenectady.”⁸⁹ The influence, according to Clinton, came from Romeyn’s “dignified and benevolent” manner, which he used to create “veneration as well as affection.”⁹⁰ On February 6, 1795, the Board of Regents approved for Schenectady to draft a charter and nineteen days later, February 25, they approved the charter of Union College, despite the lower promised capital from Albany.

Schenectady erupted in celebration after learning of the successful charter. The students of Schenectady Academy marked the occasion by illuminating the halls and windows of the academy. According to one newspaper account, the lighting “made [a] most brilliant appearance, and greatly displayed the taste of the young gentlemen. The whole business was conducted with decency and good order.”⁹¹ During the first semi-centennial celebration of the founding, Joseph Sweetman, a member of the class of 1797, remembered the arrival of the news being met with a “hearty welcome.”⁹² Bells rang across the city and students celebrated with “sympathizing spectators.” “Had you been there,” Sweetman recalled, “you would have witnessed a joyful night when the old Academy was metamorphosed into Union College.”⁹³

The massive celebrations in the streets of Schenectady can be attributed to the relatively diverse socioeconomic and regional backgrounds/characteristics of people involved with the charter. Most colonial colleges, as previously mentioned, stemmed from the efforts of a few elites. The sponsors of Union College included hundreds of local citizens living in the Upstate

⁸⁹ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 620.

⁹⁰ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 620.

⁹¹ “Schenectady, Feb. 24,” March 6, 1795, *Gazette of the United States and daily evening advertiser*, “Chronicling America,” *Library of Congress*, Web.

⁹² Joseph Sweetman, “The First Semi-centennial Anniversary of Union College. Celebrated July 22, 1845,” *Special Collections*, Union College.

⁹³ Sweetman, “The First Semi-centennial Anniversary of Union College.”

area. The support for the college, based on early account books, reveal the sponsors ranged in socioeconomic status. The sponsors included lawyers, clergymen, merchants, and farmers. Some contributed substantial funds, like John Yates, while others simply loaned tools needed to expand the academy.⁹⁴ The founding of the college represented the democratization of society, which meant it expanded participation to a broader group of people, since it included members of almost every socioeconomic class.⁹⁵ While this stood as a break from colonial traditions, the role of enslavement at Union College mirrored the schools of the colonial era.

Prosperity in the British North America depended on land and labor. While there was an abundance of land, there was a shortage of labor. To meet these demands, especially on the plantations in the south, slave traders brought roughly 200,000 enslaved Africans to British colonies in North America between 1619 and 1807. While the institution did not dominate the economy, which it would do later in the 19th century, enslavement proved profitable. Many members of the Founding Generation, including Jefferson and Washington, boasted of their inalienable rights to freedom and liberty, owned some of the largest plantations. These men often favored gradual emancipation policies, but refused to act immediately due to the perceived economic necessity of the practice.⁹⁶ In a letter written four decades after the Revolution, Jefferson believed owning slaves was like having “a wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go.”⁹⁷ Even though written long after the founding of the nation, his

⁹⁴ *West College Accounts, 1797-1799*, Special Collections, *Union College*.

⁹⁵ It is important to note that when using the term “democratization,” I am referring to the expanded involvement of white males in American society.

⁹⁶ Source here maybe? for GW; he did not free his slaves during his lifetime; but his will stipulated the manumission of his slaves (he couldn’t do it for Martha’s b/c they actually belonged to her first husband and would be inherited by his kids when she died).

⁹⁷ Jefferson to John Holmes, April 22, 1820, “The Thomas Jefferson Papers,” Special Collections, *University of Virginia Library*, Web.

words reflected how many from that generation regarded enslavement, including those living in northern states.

During the years of the prior to and after the American Revolution, enslavement was not confined to the south and figured prominently in the north. On the eve of the Revolutionary War, roughly 50,000 slaves, or 10% of the enslaved population, lived in north.⁹⁸ In New York State, enslaved people composed roughly 14% of the entire population.⁹⁹ Most enslaved people in the north worked as farmer laborers in rural communities or semi-skilled laborers and servants in cities. The slaves in New York proved vital to maintaining, building, and growing many cities across the state. Progress during this time period depended on the success of business and industry so cities exploited enslaved labor to achieve their goals. Often times these slaves served as skilled workers who their masters would rent their labor to city leaders. Schenectady and the founders of Union College were no exceptions. On the eve of the American Revolution, 459 enslaved people lived in Schenectady, or roughly 8% of the city's population.¹⁰⁰

Based on those figures, it is not surprising that several prominent founders and supporters of Union College owned slaves. Of the twenty-three original members of the Board of Trustees, at least seven of them owned slaves.¹⁰¹ They represented a third of the Board of Trustees and in total owned 34 slaves. Stephen Van Rensselaer, a major financial backer of Union College, owned almost half of this total number with fifteen slaves. Abraham Ten Broeck, the second largest slaveholder among the trustees and the trustees' president, owned twelve.¹⁰² Ten Broeck

⁹⁸ Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 515.

⁹⁹ Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 516.

¹⁰⁰ "Schenectady County, New York Census Statistics: 1790," Schenectady Digital History Archive, *Schenectady County Historical Society*.

¹⁰¹ "Schenectady County, New York Census Statistics: 1790, 1800," *Schenectady County Historical Society*.

¹⁰² "Schenectady County, New York Census Statistics: 1790, 1800."

used his enslaved labor to run local errands. On August 3, 1795, just months after Union received its charter, Ten Broeck had his “Negroe Man John” bring two yards of fabric to Mrs. Christina to be bleached.¹⁰³ These holdings, while appearing small compared to southern plantations, were actually quite large for a northern slave owner. These men owned three to four times more slaves than the average New York slave-holder who was more likely to own two to four slaves.¹⁰⁴ While northern slaveholders often used their slaves to demonstrate their wealth and perform daily tasks, they also used them for larger projects, like constructing a building, as they did at Union College.

After receiving a charter, Union College operated in the old building of Schenectady Academy. In 1798, looking to expand the college, the Trustees began raising funds to erect a new building in Schenectady. Travelling through Schenectady in October of 1798, Timothy Dwight, a traveler, commented on the construction of the city and the success of the new college, which Dwight referred to as a “prize” for “the people of Schenectady.”¹⁰⁵ The new building was constructed from “stone dug in the neighborhood, and fortunately discovered since the edifice was projected.”¹⁰⁶ Local citizens, as evidenced by the buildings account book, provided most of the supplies, tools, funds, and labor for the new college building.¹⁰⁷ Of the almost 70 men who contributed to the building and appeared in the 1800 local census; more than 20 owned slaves. Records reveal that many of these men who owned slaves contributed labor to the project, but who performed the labor is never specified in the accounts.

¹⁰³ Abraham Ten Broeck, delivery note, August 3, 1795, *Albany Institute of History and Art*, Folder MS – 002368 No. 11.

¹⁰⁴ Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 516.

¹⁰⁵ Timothy Dwight, “Notes of Travelers,” in *Collections on the History of Albany: Discovery to its Present Time*, ed. Joel Munsell (Albany: J.A. Munsell, 1870), 401.

¹⁰⁶ Dwight, “Notes of Travelers,” 401.

¹⁰⁷ *West College Accounts, 1797-1799*.

Thirteen of the slave-owners who contributed some form of capital for the building of the new college also provided labor for the construction, including Joseph C. Yates, John Van Patten, and Jellis J. Fonda. These three men, who contributed necessary funds to the building of West College, owned several slaves each and for the building of West College required labor in the form of transporting timber and stone and actually building the school.¹⁰⁸ None of the three men's occupations involved construction, even though they are listed as being reimbursed for labor costs. Yates worked as a lawyer and politician, Van Patten served as a militia officer and farmer, and Fonda was a gunsmith.¹⁰⁹ Since each man owned a dozen slaves, it is possible and highly likely, the men employed the labor of their slaves in the building of the new structure for Union College.¹¹⁰

The account books for Union College probably omitted the mention of slave labor for two main reasons: the perceived embarrassment of mentioning slavery directly or they did not believe it to be significant enough to note. Many historians of American enslavement note the great pains political and community leaders during the Early Republic went to in order to avoid using the word "slavery." In the Constitution, there are three articles that deal with slavery, but the word "slave" or "slavery" is never used. The writers of the Constitution intentionally omitted it because they realized it stained the document due to the irony of a nation announcing its freedom while holding more than 400,000 people in bondage. This thinking extended to American colleges. In an article on enslavement and higher education in western Massachusetts,

¹⁰⁸ *West College Accounts, 1797-1799*.

¹⁰⁹ "A History of Schenectady During the Revolution," *Schenectady County Historical Society*, Web.

¹¹⁰ For more on the prevalence of hiring slaves in urban areas see *Slavery in the City: Architecture and Landscapes of Urban Slavery in North America*, ed. Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg (2017).

Robert H. Romer emphasizes that “slave” almost never appears in official college documents and often is replaced by terms like “servant” and “Negroes.”¹¹¹

It is clear slavery, while not as prominent as it was at other institutions, played a notable role in the initial years of Union College. More than a third of the original members of the Board of Trustees and of those who founded the building of West College owned slaves. Enslaved labor was more than likely used in erecting the first sole building of Union College. None of this evidence should elicit shock, because in the Early Republic and in New York prior to 1799, when the state legislature required gradual emancipation, slave holding was quite common. The problem arises in the failure of the modern Union College to recognize the significance of the institution of enslavement in its history. Much like the accountants of West College, Union today either refuses to confront the school’s ties to enslavement or believes it to be so insignificant that no further research is necessary.¹¹² This is the reason why Eliphalet Nott, the fourth and most influential president of the college, is remembered as an anti-slavery advocate and not a slave owner.

In the late 1790s, while on his way to Cherry Valley, New York, Eliphalet Nott, a young minister, happened to meet John Blair Smith, the first president of Union College. Nott, in the chance meeting, greatly impressed Smith and the president recommended that the First Presbyterian Church of Albany offer Nott a position.¹¹³ The church extended an invitation to Nott and in the summer of 1798, Nott moved to Albany to fill the vacant pulpit position at the First Presbyterian. Upon his arrival in Albany, the new minister quickly noticed the role of

¹¹¹ Robert H. Romer, “Higher Education and Slavery in Western Massachusetts,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 46 (Winter 2004-2005), 99. Database?

¹¹² While the number of college studying their connections to enslavement is small, over the past decade more colleges are engaging in this type of research.

¹¹³ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 511.

slavery in the city. In 1845, Nott informed Jonathan Pearson, a graduate of and teacher at Union College, about his ignorant views on enslavement when he arrived in Albany. “I was once so benighted on the subject of slavery as to own one. I bought one of one Van Eps out here on the Mohawk flats when I preached in Albany, and didn’t think there was any harm of it, of course.”¹¹⁴ Often, this admission by Nott is omitted in Union College histories of the man. His early views on slavery did not differ greatly from Smith, who helped Nott secure a job in Albany, since Smith, a former president of a southern college, owned several slaves and privately defended the practice while president of Union. Nott would alter his views in the 1830s and 1840s and become more in favor of anti-slavery as reflected by his speeches and his actions to manumit his slaves in 1801. But in 1798, the two men had much in common.

While Nott impressed the local president of Union College, he would achieve national attention following the death of Alexander Hamilton at the hands of Aaron Burr. While falling out of fashion in the north, dueling was still quite common in the United States. On July 11, 1804, Hamilton, a national political leader and former Secretary of the Treasury, met Aaron Burr, the sitting Vice-President of the United States, in Weehawken, New York, to settle a political dispute and resolve a long rivalry through a duel. The duel led to the death of Hamilton after being shot in the rib by Burr. Nott, who was angered over the needless death of Hamilton, used the opportunity to condemn the practice of dueling. “I can not forgive that judge upon the bench, or that governor in the chair of state, who has lightly passed over such offenses. I can not forgive the public, in whose opinion the duelist finds a sanctuary,” Nott proclaimed to his congregation a short time after the death of Hamilton. He placed the blame not solely on Burr and Hamilton, but every member of society who failed to prevent duels from occurring. “I can

¹¹⁴ Pearson, *Diary*, 723.

not forgive you, my brethren, who till this late hour have been silent while successive murders were committed.”¹¹⁵

His words reached across the nation and led to several national campaigns to outlaw dueling in the United States.¹¹⁶ Students in grammar school used the oration to practice public speaking and more advanced schools used it to teach their students the importance of moral righteous.¹¹⁷ Nott’s words spoke to the moral superiority of the new nation and how the United States needed to abandon the barbarous nature of practices like dueling. This resonated with countless churches in major cities like Boston and New York and pulpit offers poured into the home of the young Nott. However, Nott rejected these offers and accepted the presidency of Union College. His decision to reject major ministerial positions, according to Wayne Somers, arose from Nott’s desire to create major societal change and he believed working with young men offered the best opportunity.¹¹⁸

After three insignificant presidencies between 1795 And 1803, Union College faced financial difficulties and declining enrollment. In 1800, Nott became a Trustee of the college and would have been well aware of the problems within the school prior to accepting the presidency in 1804. While considering the position, Nott noted his strong ties to his congregation in Albany, but admitted he was willing to do the work of “his Master,” God. In a letter, he admitted he would follow the career path that gave him the best opportunity for creating a new Zion, a world of peace and harmony.¹¹⁹ To usher in this millennium, Nott believed, depended on teaching the future leaders of the nation American values and ideas informed by a moral compass based on

¹¹⁵ Eliphalet Nott, “On the Death of Hamilton, 1804,” *Bartleby*, Web.

¹¹⁶ Codman Hislop, *Eliphalet Nott* (Schenectady: Union College Press, 1971), 8.

¹¹⁷ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 511.

¹¹⁸ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 511.

¹¹⁹ Hislop, *Eliphalet Nott*, 10.

Protestant Christianity. Union College gave him this opportunity. Wayne Somers best encapsulates this sentiment, stating, leading Union College gave Nott “an opportunity to demonstrate for America that, given leadership, perseverance would conquer all.”¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 511.

Chapter Two: The Emergence of Public Discourse at Union College, 1812 – 1837

The primary concern for the newly selected president of the college was acquiring more funding for the school. A lifelong supporter of education, Nott believed the responsibility of funding fell to the people and the state.¹²¹ To achieve his goals, Nott successfully lobbied New York State legislators to use a state lottery to fund Union College. Nott's idea to use a lottery system to acquire money for the school represented an early example of his willingness to embrace new methods and tactics in promoting higher education. The lottery, which raised roughly \$80,000, allowed Nott and the Trustees to begin plans for expansion.¹²²

Even though Union College moved from its original location at the close of the century, it still stood in the heart of Schenectady, a city both on the mercantile rise and slipping, as Nott perceived it, into moral decay. The Mohawk River, situated alongside Schenectady, allowed Schenectady to become a growing commercial city at the turn of the century. While the many of the citizens welcomed this newly created prosperity, they were less thrilled with the types of people water commerce brought, especially boatmen. Americans, who began to embrace middle class values of gentility and morality in the early stages of the Second Great Awakening, viewed boatman, who worked along the rivers and ships, as the vagabonds of society who only cared about drinking, swearing, and fighting.¹²³

These citizens often feared the boatmen might “corrupt” their city. While visiting the Upstate New York region, Reverend Timothy Dwight, the president of Yale, noted “few collections of men are more dissolute, than the boatmen on the Mowhawk...The corruption

¹²¹ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 512.

¹²² Hislop, *Eliphalet Nott*, 32.

¹²³ Sheriff, *The Artificial River*, 25.

which they contribute to spread among the ordinary inhabitants, is a greater evil than a stranger can easily imagine.”¹²⁴ John Howard Payne, a member of the class of 1812, stated, “Union College is built on the worst [moral] swamp in America.”¹²⁵ During this time, each class contained roughly five students thus the entire school size stood around 20 students. This moral corruption greatly concerned Nott, especially since students of Union College, due to the small size of West College, boarded in the city and mingled with the boatmen described by Dwight. Nott believed the best way to counteract the influence of vice was to remove the students from its source, the city.

In November 1812, construction of North and South College, located on its present day site, away from the city, began under the leadership of David Burt, a local builder.¹²⁶ However, the project was quickly taken over by a young architect, Joseph Ramée. Ramée first arrived in the area thanks to David Parish. Parish, a wealthy banker and merchant, brought Ramée to Ogdensburg, New York to design him a mansion.¹²⁷ However, due to a variety of economic issues caused by the War of 1812, the project stalled and Ramée found himself unemployed. In 1813, feeling guilty, Parish brought Ramée with him to Philadelphia and on their journey they stopped in Schenectady, where Parish introduced the architect to President Nott and informed the college’s president of Ramée’s talent. With Burt removed from the plan, Nott commissioned Ramée to complete the project for \$1,500, with work beginning in the spring of 1813.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Hislop, *Eliphalet Nott*, 33.

¹²⁵ “Union College, Founded 1795. Sesquicentennial Celebration,” (September 15, 1945), *Special Collections*, Union College.

¹²⁶ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 505.

¹²⁷ “A Plan, a Campus, a Legacy,” *Union College Magazine* (Winter 2013), Web.

¹²⁸ “A Plan, a Campus, a Legacy,” Web.

The building of the new campus, Nott firmly believed, would serve to create a family culture between himself and his students. This desire to create unity among the student body stemmed from his fears of the young men falling to the temptation of vice in the city of Schenectady. His vision for the physical campus reflected this sentiment. With the foundation for North and South College laid before the arrival of Ramée, Nott intended for the campus to be several rows of buildings connected by one large central structure. With this in mind, Ramée produced more than a dozen designs for Nott's college. While they varied, two factors remained constant: the compact, connected layout of the buildings and a massive courtyard facing the West.¹²⁹ The latter detail was not a mere stylistic touch, but a direct embodiment of the future of American progress, which carried weight in a post-Louisiana Purchase world.

President Thomas Jefferson's purchase of the Louisiana territory, which nearly doubled the size of the continental United States, prepared the nation for an "empire of liberty." Jefferson believed America stood as an "empire of liberty," which meant the nation had the moral responsibility to defend and spread American freedom. Jefferson believed this "empire" depended on westward expansion. Extending the United States towards the Pacific Ocean would eliminate the threat of European intervention in American affairs by forcing their removal from the continent and opening a land of opportunity to eager settlers.¹³⁰ In a letter dated January 24, 1804, just several months after the United States purchased the Louisiana territory from France, Jefferson wrote of the recent purchase, stating, "I confess I look to this duplication of area for the extending of a government so free and economical as ours, as a great achievement to the

¹²⁹ Frederick W. Mayer, *A Setting for Excellence: The Story of the Planning and Development of the Ann Arbor Campus of the University of Michigan* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 19.

¹³⁰ Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 369.

mass of happiness which is to ensue.”¹³¹ The purchase represented the opening of the American empire, which would allow more American individual opportunity for success. This vision of an open land of success for an individual who strove for it influenced Nott and the construction of the college.

Eliphalet Nott realized his school would become the home to the next generation of American statesmen and leaders. The young men he taught, in his mind, would lead the nation as it marched across the continent and expanded the American empire. In the early 19th century, Schenectady stood directly on the frontier of the United States and gazed into the vast new territory of the nation. The decision to have the college face west highlighted his belief that the men of Union could become the men of an empire, they were to become the Jefferson’s of their generation. In the words of Professor Taylor Lewis in the late 1830s, “To make men of energy, ‘men of action,’ was [Nott’s] favorite idea.”¹³² These “men of action” grappled with the major issues of the era, including the War of 1812.

While Nott and Ramée diligently worked to construct the new campus, the United States entered into war with Great Britain. War erupted in 1812 after several years of England restricting US trade, impressing American sailors, and occupying forts they had agreed to surrender after the War for Independence. During the first two years of fighting, American forces suffered major defeats, including the burning of Washington D.C. in August 1814.¹³³ While widely supported by the Democratic Republicans under the leadership of President James Madison, many northern Federalists, especially those who depended on trade with England,

¹³¹ Thomas Jefferson, letter to Joseph Priestly, January 24, 1804, *Library of Congress*, Web.

¹³² Hislop, *Eliphalet Nott*, 166.

¹³³ Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 690.

criticized the war and blamed Madison's party for inciting conflict. The guests at Union College's Commencement in 1812, who were primarily local merchants and Federalists, expected Nott to use his speech as an opportunity to condemn "Mr. Madison's War."¹³⁴

In the beginning of his Commencement speech, Nott recognized the revolutions that recently occurred throughout the world and how quickly they changed society. He opened by stating, "Half the civilized world has suddenly been revolutionized. Institutions the most solid in their materials, as well as the most firm in their contexture, have been swept away."¹³⁵ His disturbing descriptions of destruction and chaos that follow a revolution aligned with Federalist mentality, which favored order over liberty. While he noted these global changes and their negative impacts, he shared that the members of Union College, and presumably the United States, "have contemplated these changes as spectators merely."¹³⁶ Too many Americans, Nott believed, assumed the security of their young Republic. For Nott, the War of 1812 represented the social revolutions of Europe manifesting in the United States. Referring to the European and American revolutions as "our bark," Nott said, "Our bark begins to be carried forward by the stream, whether to be moored again in safety, or to be wrecked and lost for ever, God only knows."¹³⁷

Nott believed the vitality of the United States depended on the outcome of the War of 1812. "Either we shall rise united under that heavy pressure which will soon be felt," he said, "Or we shall sink beneath it, divided, humbled and disgraced."¹³⁸ He concluded his remarks on

¹³⁴ Codman Hislop, *Eliphalet Nott* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), 138.

¹³⁵ Eliphalet Nott, *Counsels to Young Men on the Formation of Character: The Principles which lead to Success and Happiness in Life, Being Principally Delivered at the Anniversary Commencements in Union College* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1855) 98.

¹³⁶ Nott, *Counsels to Young Men*, 98.

¹³⁷ Nott, *Counsels to Young Men*, 99.

¹³⁸ Nott, *Counsels to Young Men*, 99.

the war by sharing with the students that the conflict stood as a test against the Young Republic. He stated he would not give his opinion on the war, because he did not wish to “agitate this question,” but his comments speak volumes as to where he stood on the issue. The words of Nott, which he delivered early in the war, represented a warning to the Federalists. He believed the United States could only survive through uniting and protecting itself against an enemy determined to impose its will. His speech exemplified the argument that the War of 1812 represented a “second war for independence.” Failure to support this effort, as Nott cautioned, would lead to being “humbled and disgraced,” a that lesson members of the Federalist Party learned after the Treaty of Ghent.

As mentioned earlier, numerous Federalists in the United States opposed the war and many northern governors did very little to support the war effort. Many northern officials viewed the policies of President Madison as oppressive to the interests of northern states and manufacturing. In response to this perceived grievance, Federalist officials gathered in Hartford, Connecticut during the last weeks of 1814 to discuss solutions to their growing concerns regarding the political power of the Democratic Republicans and the South. While a majority of the delegates supported constitutional changes to represent their interests, a radical minority called for secession from the Union. Unfortunately for the Federalists, while they met, a ship was crossing the Atlantic Ocean carrying the news of the Treaty of Ghent, which ended the War of 1812. With the news of the armistice and the American military victory of Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans, the majority of the American populace saw the Federalists as traitors for their actions in Hartford and their national appeal quickly vanished. As Nott warned at the start of the war, failure to support the efforts of the United States, let alone discuss disunion, promised doom and failure. For the Federalist Party, this meant political death.

During the War of 1812, the number of European goods being imported into the United States dropped tremendously. Blockades imposed by the British navy across the coast of the United States, forced Americans to depend more on domestic manufacturing. However, after the war, British manufactures, who wanted to undermine the nascent industry of the United States, flooded American markets with their products.¹³⁹ In reaction to this, Congress passed the Tariff of 1816, which sought to protect American manufacturing from overseas competition. The tariff received broad regional and political support due to the rise of nationalism in the United States following the Treaty of Ghent. After fending off the British army for a second time, the world recognized the independence of the United States and Americans welcomed this shift in attitude with patriotic zeal. Union students were not exempt from this surge in nationalism.

On December 4, 1820, Union College students formed the Franklin Society. The students created the society out of a sense of duty. In their formal constitution, the students stated, “Conceiving it to be the duty of every American Youth to contribute, what is in his power, to the promotion of the national economy,” all members will “give preference to all productions which are exclusively American.”¹⁴⁰ Along with promoting American made clothing, the society encouraged its members to embrace thrift and required all suits “must not cost more than \$15.”¹⁴¹ The Franklin Society was quite influential over their peers and even as late as 1828, the Board of Trustees noted the large number of students wearing the “American gray cloth.”¹⁴² The popularity of the groups speaks to the level of nationalism prevalent on Union’s campus. Many of the students who attended Union following the War of 1812 came from wealthy families who

¹³⁹ Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 709.

¹⁴⁰ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 692.

¹⁴¹ *Providence Patriot, Columbian Pohenix* (Providence, Rhode Island), Wednesday, January 10, 1821; Issue 3.

¹⁴² Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 693.

often enjoyed the finer things in life. To demonstrate their commitment to the United States, these students wore lesser quality American made cloth rather than the finer cloth most often produced in England.¹⁴³ Students interacted with each other to not only rally behind a cause, but also discuss varying beliefs of American society. Literary societies provided students with a space to engage in these types of dialogue.

Literary societies on college campuses are some of the oldest student organizations in American history and represented an early pillar of academics outside of the classroom. In these societies, members debated the pressing topics and issues of the day. According to historian Helen Horowitz, “College was for [students] the literary society where they gathered in comfortable quarters to write on and debate issues of philosophy and politics.”¹⁴⁴ Literary societies offered students the freedom from teachers and presidents to expand their worldly knowledge by engaging in intellectual discussions with their peers, thus turning colleges into “urban places teaching them the ways of the world.”¹⁴⁵ These societies also reinforced the importance of masculinity in becoming an influential leader in the nineteenth century.¹⁴⁶ This mentality dominated Union College during the first decades of the century.

Offering students the only extracurricular activities on campus, the two earliest literary societies, Philomathean and Adelpic Societies, housed some of the richest dialogues among the students. Members of these societies wore armband-badges and adhered to a strict set of rules

¹⁴³ Around this same time, William Seward received a complaint from his father for spending too much money on clothing. While there is no document evidence the “homespun” vs foreign cloth influenced his father’s concerns, it does raise the possibility that Seward’s father wished he would wear American cloth.

¹⁴⁴ Helen L. Horowitz, *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 27.

¹⁴⁵ Horowitz, *Campus Life*, 41.

¹⁴⁶ Horowitz, *Campus Life*, 41.

and guidelines.¹⁴⁷ The societies, which were located in North and South College, boasted of impressive libraries that students created through purchasing books they found most interesting.¹⁴⁸ The Philomathean and Adelpic Societies drew membership from a wide-variety of students and both attracted a large number of students. While the debates had among these students often proved controversial, none seemed to spark tensions more than the question of enslavement. These discussions fueled the isolation of the southern students on a campus and led to the creation of a literary society dedicated to defending the “peculiar institution.”

Thanks to the national reputation of the college created by President Nott, southern students attended Union in relatively large numbers as compared to similar institutions. Due to a lack of schools across the south, wealthy planters who desired to provide their sons with premier educations, sent their children north to academic institutions.¹⁴⁹ Throughout the Antebellum period, most notable northern schools maintained a southern student population around 8% of the total class, while Union’s southern population floated between 10% and 16% until the late 1830s.¹⁵⁰ “Nott said he was intimately acquainted with many Southern gentleman,” wrote a student in 1849, and “was an intimate friend of J.C. Calhoun.”¹⁵¹ Nott presumably recruited the sons of planters because he understood the financial resources these men could offer the college. The southern students tended to stay close together and a national debate on the question of enslavement and the west intensified this tendency.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁷ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 459.

¹⁴⁸ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 459.

¹⁴⁹ Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy*, 111.

¹⁵⁰ Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy*, 109; Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 665.

¹⁵¹ Somers, *encyclopedia*, 459.

¹⁵² Pearson, *Diary of Jonathan Pearson*, 1214.

In 1818, the Missouri Territory acquired a population large enough to petition Congress for statehood and debates surrounding the future of enslavement were part of the deliberation regarding the territory's request. By 1818, it became clear to most politicians that if Missouri entered the Union as a state, it would enter as a slave state, and thus power would shift in favor of the southern states because it would break the equal proportion of free and slave states represented in Congress. The issue of Missouri statehood also raised the question of what was to become of the other regions in the recently purchased Louisiana Territory. Senator Henry Clay, known as the "Great Compromiser," proposed the admission of Maine as a free state and drew a line on the 36°30' to determine where enslavement could and could not exist in American territories applying for statehood. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 received broad regional support and passed easily in both the House and Senate.¹⁵³ While many politicians saw the legislation as a major victory, other Americans grew more concerned on the fate of enslavement and the Union. In a letter to John Holmes, an elderly Thomas Jefferson wrote, "But this momentous [Missouri] question, like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union."¹⁵⁴ What was prophetic for the Union, was a reality on the campus of Union in 1820.

Founded on February 22nd 1819, the Delphian Institute provided Southern students with a safe space to discuss their views on enslavement. Prior to its founding, the southern students were involved with the two literary societies on campus. However, with the rise of regional tensions regarding the issue Southern students no longer felt comfortable belonging to the two societies, which both often spoke out against the institution of enslavement.¹⁵⁵ The debates

¹⁵³ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 156.

¹⁵⁴ Thomas Jefferson, letter, April 20, 1820, paulrittman.com.

¹⁵⁵ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 461.

surrounding the question of Missouri statehood proved to be the final straw for many of the Southern students. Due to the tensions surrounding the issue of enslavement, the members of the Delphian Institute actively worked to maintain secretive meetings. For the first few years of its existence the society was primarily composed of Southern students. One of the most notable members was Robert Toombs, a member of the class of 1828. Toombs, who was born in Georgia, found a home within the Delphian Institute where he could express his views about the positive benefits of enslavement.¹⁵⁶ However, as sectional tensions increased over the next several decades, the number of Southern students decreased in the 1830s and so did the prominence of the Delphian Society on Union's campus. Along with the literary society, southern students founded the fraternity of Sigma Phi in 1827 as another space for them to comfortably discuss their views on enslavement.¹⁵⁷ Even though the number of southern students declined, the fraternity still has a home on the college's campus today.

The profound burst of energy that affected Americans after the War of 1812 fueled calls for infrastructure projects, most notably the Erie Canal. A year before the outbreak of war, DeWitt Clinton, then a New York state senator, proposed the idea of a western canal that would improve transportation across New York. However, once fighting erupted, his plans were placed to the side. Two years after the Treaty of Ghent, Clinton won the New York gubernatorial race and successfully persuaded the state legislators to fund a canal project that would connect Lake Erie to the upper Hudson.¹⁵⁸ The project resonated with many New Yorkers and northerners because of its basis in "improvement." During the early 19th century, in the American psyche,

¹⁵⁶ Mark Scroggins, *Robert Toombs: The Civil Wars of a United States Senator and Confederate General* (Jefferson: MacFarland & Company, 2011), 11.

¹⁵⁷ *Concordensis*, November 1885, *Special Collections*, Union College.

¹⁵⁸ Sheriff, *Artificial River*, 21.

“improvement” and “progress” were intertwined. According to historian Carol Sheriff, improvement “could refer at once to economic and material advancements and to a less tangible sense of human accomplishment.”¹⁵⁹ Most importantly, the construction of the Erie Canal represented American success. Much as the United States defeated England in the war two years earlier, they would conquer the natural world around them. While many citizens of Schenectady welcomed the Erie Canal, Union College student William Seward, a member of the class of 1820 who would go on to serve as President Abraham Lincoln’s Secretary of State, emerged as a strong opponent.

The most distinguished alum of Union, Seward, who made his political career as a Whig and Republican, entered college a staunch supporter of Martin Van Buren, a founder of the Democratic Party. In 1816, in the midst of his junior year, Seward involved himself with New York politics after a dispute arose among the state’s Democratic Republicans. Governor Clinton and then state senator Martin Van Buren fought over the future of New York and the proposed Erie Canal. Even though the two men hailed from the same party, they represented vastly different philosophies that were factors in the creation of the second American party system. The faction lead by Van Buren sought to dethrone the incumbent Clinton by selecting Daniel Tompkins, the sitting Vice-President of the United States, to oppose Clinton in the gubernatorial election. In the debates between Clinton and Van Buren, Seward most often supported the latter. “My training at home,” recalled Seward, “had me prepared to be an earnest supporter of Tompkins, and of course hostile to Clinton.”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Sheriff, *Artificial River*, 25.

¹⁶⁰ William Seward, *William H. Seward: An Autobiography*, ed. Frederick W. Seward (New York: Derby and Miller, 1891), 36.

During the election, Tompkins traveled across Upstate New York campaigning and found himself in Schenectady during his tour. The city held a grand celebration for Tompkins and students of Union College invited Tompkins to attend a series of speeches given by the college's "Buck-tails."¹⁶¹ Buck-tails referred to members of the Democratic-Republicans who opposed Governor Clinton. The name derived from the insignia of Tammany Hall, a New York political machine, which featured a buck's tail. Seward, a member of the Union College Buck-tails, delivered his first political speech at the small rally held at Union College in 1816, "I did study the speech, and I did make it," Seward wrote, "but like many other well-studied speeches, made to or for political candidates in our country, this effort of mine 'fell on stony ground.'"¹⁶² Seward's lament refers to the reelection of Clinton and the defeat of his candidate, Tompkins.

After the election, Seward and his "buck-tail" peers continued to denounce Governor Clinton and the Erie Canal. Many of the early critics of the canal project, including Seward, believed the project was a waste of money because a canal could never be constructed across the mountainous region of Upstate New York.¹⁶³ Referring to the project as "Clinton's Ditch," Seward argued while a student at Union, "an impossibility, and that even if it should be successfully constructed, it would financially ruin the state."¹⁶⁴ Seward's argument, which represented a minority opinion in the state of New York, proved ill-founded and the financial impacts of the Erie Canal proved beneficial and helped turn New York City into one of the leading ports of the world. The success of the Erie Canal urbanized Schenectady and brought a

¹⁶¹ Seward, *William H. Seward*, 36.

¹⁶² Seward, *William H. Seward*, 36.

¹⁶³ Sheriff, *The Artificial River*, 27.

¹⁶⁴ Hislop, *Eliphalet Nott*, 181.

diverse population to the city. While many celebrated this change, others viewed it with caution and believed it ushered in a new wave of vice.

Along the path of the Erie Canal local businessmen opened hundreds of taverns, hoping to profit from the increased number of travelers along the route, Schenectady was no exception. While travelling to Union College in 1837, Martin Van Buren Burt ventured inside a tavern that stood at the canal's stop for people going to the school. Burt believed the tavern "breaks down and ruins a strong and healthy man in the prime of life and sends him with the paltry earnings of his feeble labor, to the grog shop."¹⁶⁵ He drew this conclusion from the two men he saw drinking at the tavern. The first patron "was a man who appeared old – his eyes were so red that it appeared as of very light coloured blood was running out from them."¹⁶⁶ The other man Burt encountered appeared to belong to the poor laboring class that many middling Americans believed might become permanent due to the high demand for cheap labor on the Erie Canal.

The canal diggers and boatmen, according to historian Carol Sheriff, "posed a threat to civilized society. Middle-class observers portrayed them as profane, lewd, and violent."¹⁶⁷ While these middle-class concerns were often exaggerated, they were based in partial reality. Newspapers often ran stories of fighting and vice that followed this laboring class along the Erie Canal. As Sheriff simply states, "drinking, swearing, and fighting were part of their culture, a way of life they had no desire to shed."¹⁶⁸ The canal worker Burt met in the tavern "could not walk erect but crept across the room" due to the hard labor of his job. As he looked at the crushed man, "sheets of Heaven's Fire flashed in [the canal worker's] face, and the tremendous

¹⁶⁵ Burt, *Diary*, 42.

¹⁶⁶ Burt, *Diary*, 42.

¹⁶⁷ Sheriff, *The Artificial River*, 142.

¹⁶⁸ Sheriff, *The Artificial River*, 142.

peals of thunder rolled over his head.”¹⁶⁹ Burt concluded that the man, who was younger than 30, presented “a Sickening – Horrid sight!” Burt believed it was the duty of the state to legislate vice in order to ensure men like the canal worker he encountered would be redeemed and capable of returning to civilized society. Burt was not alone in this belief and thousands of New Yorkers called on their officials to take action.¹⁷⁰ Fearing vice, Nott went to great lengths to regulate the behavior within his society: Union College.

¹⁶⁹ Burt, *Diary*, 42.

¹⁷⁰ Sheriff, *The Artificial River*, 106.

Chapter Three: Nott's Presidential Paternalism, Reform, and Student Reaction, 1817 - 1840

As the United States commercialized and industrialized in the early nineteenth-century, particularly in regions like Upstate New York, reform movements emerged.¹⁷¹ These reform efforts stemmed from concerns of increased social problems, a new moral sensibility, and commitment to Christian principles. For the students of Union College during this time period, the most popular, or burdensome, reform movements focused on temperance, vice, and enslavement. They debated and reflected on the role of moral reform, which concentrated on the sin of an individual, and social reform, which applied to broader, public issues. Students who supported reform movements often organized groups on campus to improve society with a defined goal. However, not all students embraced these movements and, in some cases, viewed them as a hindrance to progress. Many often disregarded these movements because of the ways Eliphalet Nott implemented them through his paternalistic style of governance.

At the end of the eighteenth century, after touring factories in England, which was in the midst of an industrial revolution, Samuel Slater brought new manufacturing technologies to the United States. Using this knowledge, Slater opened the first American cotton mill in Massachusetts. As demand for finished goods grew on the domestic and international markets and American officials, after the War of 1812, learned their nation could no longer depend on foreign markets, the American elite focused on industrializing the United States and mills like Slater's emerged across the nation and heavily in the northeast.¹⁷² Seeking to become an independent, individual nation, the United States actively promoted manufacturing and the first

¹⁷¹ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 45.

¹⁷² Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 703.

several decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the American Industrial Revolution. The rise of the factory during the early 1800s, directly powered the surge of cities in the northeast.

Occurring simultaneously as the American Industrial Revolution, improved farming technology required fewer laborers in the agricultural sector. New techniques and improved transportation drove prices for agricultural products down across the globe and diminished profits for small scale farmers, the men who Jefferson believed would inhabit his ideal American society.¹⁷³ These men, seeking to improve their lot, moved their families to cities to take advantage of the newly created industrial jobs. The families who entered the cities in the early nineteenth century relied more on the market economy than they previously had while living as sustenance farmers. They could no longer afford to independently sustain themselves but had to depend on the production of others to meet their basic needs.¹⁷⁴ Urban migration strengthened the market economy, but also gave rise to social anxieties associated with cities.

One of the driving forces behind the rise of reform movements during this time period was the increase of social problems caused by urbanization. Many viewed cities as dens of vice, crime, violence, and poverty. Cities, for nineteenth century reformers, corrupted individuals by creating sharply defined social classes and permitted easy access to activities like drinking and gambling.¹⁷⁵ The question became, could too much freedom, too much democracy lead to anarchy? The answer for President Nott was simple: yes. The urbanization of Schenectady at the turn of the century worried Nott because he believed he might lose control over the morality of his students. Wanting to maintain authority over the enticement of the city, Nott relocated Union

¹⁷³ Huston, *Land and Freedom*, 27.

¹⁷⁴ Sellers, *The Market Revolution*, 21.

¹⁷⁵ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 188.

College to its current site after the completion of North College in 1814. While delivering a lecture on temperance in late 1838, Nott declared cities to be, “caverns fitly called ‘hells,’ where, in our larger cities, fraud undisguised finds protection, and wholesale deeds of darkness are securely and systematically performed.”¹⁷⁶

A new sense of moral sensibility swept across the nation and people believed they possessed the ability to solve the problems of society. This belief stemmed primarily from Enlightenment and Revolutionary ideology, which expressed the importance of the individual within society. Lyman Beecher, a Presbyterian minister and contemporary of Nott, believed reforming society depended on “ordinary people” organizing local societies to crusade for virtue and create a “disciplined moral militia.”¹⁷⁷ Eliphalet Nott preached a similar ideology as Beecher. When asked how he viewed efforts to create asylums, or homes for the “inebriates,” Nott informed Dr. Edward Warner, religious leader, “I know that the indomitable will of an individual, bent on doing good, can and often does, by the blessing of God, accomplish much.”¹⁷⁸ The individual played an important role in perfecting society, but as Nott mentions, God and religion still hold an important position in reform efforts.

During the 1830s, a commitment to Christian principles emerged among the American populace through the Second Great Awakening. By the late eighteenth century, most Americans no longer regularly attended church due to a variety of factors, including the belief that God did not worry himself with the affairs of an individual and the growth in time spent laboring in the emerging market economy.¹⁷⁹ While a senior at Union College in 1835, Jonathan Pearson

¹⁷⁶ Eliphalet Nott, *Dr. Nott's Ten Lectures on Bible Temperance* (London: Trubner & Co., 1863), 114.

¹⁷⁷ Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 487.

¹⁷⁸ Nott, *Memoir*, 336.

¹⁷⁹ Seller, *The Market Revolution*, 30.

commented, “The truth is that the church has been slumbering for ages and those measures which were easiest and cost least trouble were generally preferred to all other. Men wanted to get to heaven without troubling themselves about the spirit of religion or the salvation of others.”¹⁸⁰

In Pearson’s view, men wanted to spend more time on worldly problems, which included the market economy, and to “sleep all the way” and only “open their eyes in glory,” meaning men only concerned themselves with religion when it behooved them.¹⁸¹

In response, religious leaders, most notably evangelist Charles G. Finney, held religious revivals across the United States, especially in towns in Upstate New York, during the 1830s. The goal of these revivals, which often occurred at camp meetings in the wilderness, was to promote individual perfectionism, which would usher in the millennium.¹⁸² To accomplish this, Finney and other evangelical preachers realized they must make their message attractive to the “common man.” Pearson, a young intellectual about to graduate from one of the nation’s finest institutes, struggled to understand “why I could be pleased at such common everyday talk.”¹⁸³ He referred to the preaching of Finney, whom he saw in Schenectady, as “primitive...it is simple, plain, and clear.”¹⁸⁴ The “simplicity of [Finney’s] manner,” made his sermons more accessible to wider group of Americans.

The camp meetings, which were often spectacles, attracted thousands of people to reconnect with God and in the frontier of Upstate New York, these gatherings offered citizens a social opportunity to connect with friends and family. Describing the scene of a camp meeting, a young attendee wrote, “The noise was like the roar of Niagara. The vast sea of human beings

¹⁸⁰ Pearson, *The Diary of Jonathan Pearson*, 434.

¹⁸¹ Pearson, *The Diary of Jonathan Pearson*, 434.

¹⁸² Johnson, *The Shopkeeper’s Millennium*, 4.

¹⁸³ Pearson, *The Diary of Jonathan Pearson*, 435.

¹⁸⁴ Pearson, *The Diary of Jonathan Pearson*, 435.

seemed to be agitated as if by a storm. Some of the people were singing, others praying, some crying for mercy.”¹⁸⁵ One Union student who engaged in the revivals wrote of his experience, “I felt as though I was standing on the verge of the eternal world, while the floor under my feet was shaken by the trembling of anxious souls, in view of a judgement to come.”¹⁸⁶ Roughly 3,000 people attended the revival Pearson described in his diary. The religious revivals were quite popular in Schenectady, with numerous held that lasted for several days and attracted hundreds of people. While students at Union never engaged at the level of those in Schenectady, revivals occurred on the campus.

In the second decade of the nineteenth century, revivalism swept across the college thanks largely to the efforts of Reverend Asahel Nettleton. One of the most influential preachers of the Second Great Awakening, Nettleton converted roughly 30,000 people to Christianity. In 1812, Nettleton lived in Saratoga Springs and worked in the surrounding cities, including Schenectady. Francis Wayland, a member of the class of 1813, believed Schenectady to be “overspread by a revival of religion” and he attributed this to the work of Nettleton.¹⁸⁷ “There was a powerful impression made upon the students, and many of them were converted,” including himself.¹⁸⁸ In response to Nettleton’s rhetoric, students formed their own prayer meetings and met every evening, in the room of Wayland, for “Scriptures and prayer.” Nettleton would find himself on the grounds of Union College seven years after the graduation of Wayland.

¹⁸⁵ James Finley, diary (1802), “The ‘Second Great Awakening,’” *George Mason University Archives*, Web.

¹⁸⁶ Francis Wayland, *A Memoir of the Life and Labors of Francis Wayland: The Late President of Brown University* (New York: Sheldon and Company, 1868), 107.

¹⁸⁷ Francis Wayland, *A Memoir of the Life and Labors*, 106.

¹⁸⁸ Wayland, *A Memoir of the Life and Labors*, 107.

In February 1820, a member of the senior class died following a three-day illness. In a letter to a classmate, a student commented, which was subsequently published in a regional newspaper, “Death has entered our walls and executed his commission at a time when we least expected it.”¹⁸⁹ While the college mourned the passing of the senior, the student writing the letter believed the death changed the “face of the things in the college” and it actually produced a “good effect.” He credited this change to the same man Wayland spoke of almost a decade earlier, Asahel Nettleton. Professor Thomas McAuley, who was also a graduate of the class of 1804, befriended Nettleton during the second decade of the nineteenth century and invited him to campus to talk with the mourning students. Upon his arrival at Union, Nettleton believed the students’ interest in religion occurred after they “became deeply impressed with a sense of their lost condition” after seeing the “lifeless remains of their departed friend.”¹⁹⁰ He told the students to see the death as a “warning to us to flee from the coming wrath” and if they wanted salvation, they could find him in his study “on a certain night.” Over the next few weeks, students joined the preacher in series of meeting that created “a general outpouring of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁹¹ Throughout the early nineteenth century, students attributed their own conversions to the work of revival preachers in Schenectady.

By 1825, religious revivals were still alive and well on Union’s campus. One student, recalling the climate on the college, wrote, “Many students spent their time in revivals. An unusual degree of devotion now appears.”¹⁹² This student, John McDowall, might have attended the nightly meetings held by Wayland because he concluded, “I think I shall spend a portion of

¹⁸⁹ Pearson, *The Diary of Jonathan Pearson*, 646.

¹⁹⁰ Wayland, *A Memoir of the Life and Labors*, 107.

¹⁹¹ Pearson, *The Diary of Jonathan Pearson*, 646.

¹⁹² John R. McDowall, *Memoir and Select Remains of the Late Rev. John R. McDowall* (New York: Leavitt, Lord, & co., 1838), 44.

each day in prayer for a revival in college.”¹⁹³ However, McDowall feared the spirit of revivalism might soon disappear if there was not a more concerted effort by students. While many celebrated the revivals, others saw them as spectacles of faith that did very little to demonstrate an individual’s commitment to God. When discussing the rising religious spirit on campus, McDowall commented, “But this ardor will decline unless we live very near to God.”¹⁹⁴ The fears of McDowall proved true and over the course of the next decade, religious revivals slowly disappeared from the campus even as they began to attract more national attention.

During the first couple decades of the nineteenth century, many students commented on the number of revivals and successful conversions among the student body, however by the 1830s students shifted their attention from revival to reform. One student who paid attention to the morality of the campus during the 1830s was Martin Van Buren Burt, class of 1838. After attending preparatory school in Utica, Burt was admitted to Union College as a sophomore in 1836. The extracurricular activities on the college’s campus, which often reflected the national political climate, attracted Burt’s interest and he often attended meetings for a variety of groups out of pure interest. One such group was the Moral Reform Society. On the evening of June 6, 1837, towards the close of the school year, Burt and several of his friends attended a meeting in West College of the newly created Moral Reform Society, which advocated the notions of the Second Great Awakening. The group sought to encourage individual reflection and control in order to create a more perfect society. According to Burt, roughly four or five students wished to form the society.¹⁹⁵ However, roughly 50 students, who opposed the creation of such a group, confronted the five students. The students who wanted to form the group were “argued, scaped

¹⁹³ McDowall, *Memoir and Select Remains*, 44.

¹⁹⁴ McDowall, *Memoir and Select Remains*, 44.

¹⁹⁵ Martin Van Buren Burt, *Diary*, 1836-1838, Special Collections, *Union College*, 128.

and hissed down on the ground that they had no right to charge licentiousness and debauchery indirectly upon the students of Union College.”¹⁹⁶ The protesting students viewed the creation of a moral reform society as too burdensome on the freedoms of the students. The students who opposed the society feared that the society suggested the students of Union needed to be redeemed because they engaged in excessive vice, which directly challenged their honor.

An explanation for the student rejection of such a group stems from the way Eliphalet Nott viewed and treated students under his supervision. As previously discussed, Nott felt compelled to move the school in order to remove the students from the temptation of vice in Schenectady. In the nineteenth century, Union College became known as “Botany Bay,” which referred to the British penal colonies in Australia. Contemporaries used the phrase to describe how Eliphalet Nott accepted students who were expelled from other universities and colleges. While touring the college in 1837, the same year of the failed Moral Reform Society Burt discussed, Frederick Marryat wrote, Union “is called Botany Bay, from its receiving young men who have been expelled from other colleges, and who are kept in order by moral influence and paternal sway.”¹⁹⁷ The main force behind this “moral influence and paternal sway,” which according to Marryat was the only way to subdue “wild young men,” was Eliphalet Nott.

Nott ran Union College through, what he termed, a “paternal government,” which ensured his authority at the center of college life.¹⁹⁸ In an address given by Nott in 1854, the aging president stated, “whenever an individual has been found offending in conduct, or delinquent in study, he has been sent for and treated nearly as possible as a parent would treat a

¹⁹⁶ Burt, *Diary*, 128.

¹⁹⁷ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 121.

¹⁹⁸ Hislop, *Eliphalet Nott*, 514. This attitude of Nott is very similar to that of the mill owners Johnson studies in *The Shopkeeper's Millennium*. Nott used reform movements in the same way as the businessmen of Upstate New York to control the lives of the students under his guidance .

child under similar circumstance.”¹⁹⁹ Nott believed the Union community functioned like a family and, viewing the students as “his children,” Nott placed himself as the patriarch. Nott’s belief in himself in this role was based on republican ideology that arose during the American Revolution. The duties the “Republican Patriarch” included overseeing the economic, social, and moral prosperity of his family or clan.²⁰⁰ Nott’s “clan” was the young men of Union College. He took it upon himself to ensure his students, his “children,” obeyed his strict rules and moral standards to ensure they would leave Union College as well-prepared gentlemen ready to leave the nation towards a utopian state.

Throughout the early history of the college, the faculty and staff attempted to regulate the behavior of the students by issuing *Laws*, which predated the presidency of Nott, that described in depth, what would and would not be tolerated by the college. Prior to Nott, the enforcement and punishments for these laws depended on the president, faculty, and trustees. The *Laws* prohibited many of the perceived vices of the nineteenth century, including drinking, gambling, swearing, and smoking. For most of the presidency of Nott, students were not allowed to leave Schenectady without permission or the company of a professor.²⁰¹ Other measures in the *Laws* under Nott included forbidding students from attending any establishment that offered alcohol, going to “festival entertainment” in the city, or even joining locals at dancing schools without permission.²⁰² Even though many of those regulations predated the presidency of Nott, the *Laws of 1815* gave Nott all authority over the enforcement of these rules, which in the words of Nott’s biographer, Codman Hislop, meant everyone “responded to his will.”²⁰³ This trend continued

¹⁹⁹ Nott, *Memoir*, 151.

²⁰⁰ Annette Gordon Reed, Peter S. Onuf, “*Most Blessed of the Patriarchs*”: *Thomas Jefferson and the Empire of Imagination* (New York: Liveright, 2016).

²⁰¹ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 530.

²⁰² Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 530.

²⁰³ Hislop, *Eliphalet Nott*, 168.

over the next few decades and led then student Jonathan Pearson to write, “Dr. Nott is evidently drawing the reins of government tighter than customary at Union.”²⁰⁴

Eliphalet Nott, who constantly concerned himself of the morality of his students, lobbied for state laws that would reduce the amount of vice in Schenectady, the students’ local community.²⁰⁵ In 1813, the New York State legislature passed a law that directly forbade establishments in Schenectady from tempting the students of Union College to indulge in the “vice of gaming,” provide students with “wine or with any other spirituous liquor,” or to offer them “facilities to dissipation or debauchery.”²⁰⁶ Many felt as if Eliphalet Nott had gone too far and become too burdensome upon their independence. Discussing the climate on the campus, Pearson wrote, “Some swear they will go and others vow the ‘old man’ [Nott] is getting too tyrannical [*sic*], such is the spirit of the young men.”²⁰⁷ Pearson wrote that comment just a few years before students protested the creation of the Moral Reform Society. The student group represented many of Nott’s convictions regarding the morality of Union’s students and those who opposed the creation believed the society would just place more limits upon the student body. Students also opposed Nott’s moral authoritarianism through the creation of fraternities.

In 1825, three seniors at Union College held regular informal meetings to sing, tell stories, read banned works, and smoke pipes, which occurred outside of the already established literary societies. Word of these meetings spread among the students and quickly attracted more participants who were eager to engage in activities that President Nott discouraged. On November 26, 1825, nine students gathered for the first formal meeting of the group and drafted

²⁰⁴ Pearson, *Diary of Jonathan Pearson*, 222.

²⁰⁵ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 530.

²⁰⁶ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 530.

²⁰⁷ Pearson, *Diary of Jonathan Pearson*, 222.

a constitution, officially becoming the Kappa Alpha Society.²⁰⁸ Over the next few years, students established more fraternities that operated as secret societies. Initially, Nott avoided confronting these groups because he desired to avoid controversial conflicts with his students.²⁰⁹ However, Nott quickly came to think the fraternities on his campus diminished his control over his students and on December 3, 1832, Nott proclaimed, “the first young man who joins a secret society shall not remain in College one hour.”²¹⁰ The ban on entrance to these secret societies did not last, and after a year “Dr. Nott has at last removed the veto and gave full sanction to their future operations.”²¹¹ While numerous students joined these groups, many viewed the secret societies with disdain.

During the 1830s, the nation saw a rise in people opposed to secret societies. The rise had roots in earlier Revolutionary ideology that suggested secret societies cared very little for the general public and only concerned itself with the benefit of their members. In this context, people viewed antebellum secret societies with disdain and believed they posed a threat to democracy. The growth of the Anti-Mason Party, which was founded as a one-issue party, exemplified how numerous Americans viewed secret societies like the Masonic Order. Opponents of Freemasonry formed their political party following the disappearance of William Morgan in 1826. The party organizers accused the Masons of murdering Morgan after he threatened to reveal the secrets of the society to the public.²¹² Many businessmen, bankers, and politicians belonged to the Masonic Order and the public began to view these men as elitists concerned with protecting their fellow brothers without concern for justice, as was the case with

²⁰⁸ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 427.

²⁰⁹ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 305.

²¹⁰ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 305.

²¹¹ Pearson, *Diary of Jonathan Pearson*, 300.

²¹² Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 268.

the Morgan's suspected killers.²¹³ A government consisting of men belonging to the Masonic Order corrupted the republican virtues of the nation and the Anti-Mason Party sought to purge these men from civil society.

One of the driving forces behind the attacks on Freemasons was the secrecy that shrouded their gatherings and this is what influenced how students at Union College viewed fraternities. The rapid rise of anti-fraternity sentiments amazed Jonathan Pearson. "It is astonishing how quick the fever of 'Anti-secretism' spread among the classes after the matured plans of opposition were once made."²¹⁴ He believed if the students who opposed these groups rallied the support of the younger students, Greek life would be terminated. In the fall of October 1836, an Albany paper published the meeting minutes of Kappa Alpha, a group Martin Van Burt referred to as a "secret society," after receiving them from an unnamed source.²¹⁵ Burt and his friends greatly opposed the fraternities and he stated one of his friends stood as a "violent opposer [*sic*] of secret societies."²¹⁶ When discussing the groups, Burt and his friends used similar arguments as the Anti-Mason Party, highlighting the elitist culture of the fraternities. Despite the concerns of Nott, fraternities continued to grow in the nineteenth century.

While those who opposed Nott's paternal government formed groups, others who supported his reform centered approach to the world also created groups dedicated to a variety of reform movements. Intemperance, for countless nineteenth-century reformers, stood at the heart of the problem of society. Alcohol consumption led many to be idle, mistreat their families, inappropriately spend money, and created a "waste" class. The men Burt described while visiting

²¹³ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 268.

²¹⁴ Pearson, *Diary of Jonathan Pearson*, 210.

²¹⁵ Burt, *Diary*, 69.

²¹⁶ Burt, *Diary*, 69.

the tavern along the Erie Canal withered away while they drank and the young college student failed to understand how anyone could have a “license to sell this ‘liquid fire and distilled damnation.’”²¹⁷ The driving force behind temperance movement was Eliphalet Nott.

During the “waves of revivalism,” Nott fully committed himself to the cause of temperance.²¹⁸ Nott’s involvement in the temperance movement began at the state level when he supported the efforts of Cornelius Delvan to form the New York State Temperance Society in 1829. In the next couple years, Nott focused locally and helped establish the Schenectady City Society for the Promotion of Temperance in 1831.²¹⁹ While delivering a lecture on the issue of intemperance in the same year, Nott declared, “Over all classes in that beloved city intemperance hath cast its withering influence. Nor over these only. There is no city, or town, or hamlet, known to the speaker, where it is otherwise. Of all the avenues to death, the world over, this is the broadest, steepest, most frequented. The sword hath indeed slain its thousands, but alcohol its ten thousands!”²²⁰ Many students agreed with the logic of Nott, leading one to write, “At the commencement of the nation it was a spot infected beyond the measure of disease of intemperance and cursed all with all its moral and corporal evils.”²²¹ While Nott engaged with temperance, he allowed students a certain level of freedom with regards to alcohol. However, the students did not take it upon themselves to engage in temperance and Nott believed he should take action. It was in this light that Nott worked with students, who were supporters of temperance, to create a Union College temperance society.

²¹⁷ Burt, *Diary*, 42.

²¹⁸ Hislop, *Eliphalet Nott*, 407.

²¹⁹ Hislop, *Eliphalet Nott*, 408.

²²⁰ Nott, *Dr. Nott’s Ten Lectures on Bible Temperance*, 52.

²²¹ Pearson, *Diary of Jonathan Pearson*, 360.

On February 9, 1837, Nott called for the assembly of all Union College students. In this meeting, Nott discussed the positive benefits of the “great temperance reformation.”²²² Realizing his *Laws* did not eliminate drinking among the student body, Nott “wanted to devise some means by which the students might co-operate with the Government of college, so that thus, acting as a college we may be able to do something effectively in aid of the course of temperance.”²²³ After a discussion among the seniors, a committee was created of students and faculty to promote temperance. Nott urged students to sign a pledge committing themselves to total temperance while living at Union College. According to Burt, those who did not sign the pledge, which represented one of the earliest temperance societies on campus, “may be watched closely” by the president.²²⁴ While he made joining the temperance society voluntary, Nott’s decision to keep an eye on those who did not write their names on the pledge reflected his belief in the value of a paternalistic style of governing of the college.

Even with Nott’s efforts, drinking remained popular at Union College among the students. Towards the end of the school year in 1837, Burt and a few of his friends, which he wrote engaged in the college’s temperance society, went out for a beer. On that evening, a large number of students gathered at “Truax’s” and, in the words of Burt, made “a great noise.”²²⁵ The scene was “the most general turnout for drinking” he ever witnessed while a student at Union College. This large gathering occurred just a few days after Nott met with students to create a temperance society for students. While most of the students engaged in the festivities for their

²²² Burt, *Diary*, 87.

²²³ Burt, *Diary*, 87.

²²⁴ Burt, *Diary*, 88.

²²⁵ Burt, *Diary*, 129.

own enjoyment, the scale and timing of the party can be attributed to the Nott's strict suppression of individual decision regarding temperance.

The stance of Burt regarding temperance represents a break from how historians address antebellum reform. As his name might suggest, Martin Van Buren Burt was a staunch Democrat and throughout his diary he is quite critical of Whiggish ideology, which often is associated with reform.²²⁶ However, in his diary, Burt recognizes the value of these reform movements and often attends meetings of reform groups on campus, like the Moral Reform Society and Temperance Society. Even though Burt supported the reform societies on campus, like temperance, he often engaged in activities that opposed the moral reform societies. His experience exemplifies the complexity of the era and how reform movements like temperance were not uniquely Whig, but transcended party lines. The question of slavery on Union's campus offered a similar narrative.

As discussed earlier, Union College during its formative years benefited from enslavement, whether it be with labor from locally owned slaves or wealth acquired by local school leaders through the institution. With the introduction of gradual emancipation in 1799, direct contacts of the two institutions – the educational and the economic – institutions. Nonetheless, being one of the most prestigious colleges of the age, debates on enslavement penetrated the gates of Union. As stated in the last chapter, a noticeable proportion of southern students enrolled at the college. However, with the rise of sectional tensions, the total number of southern students steadily rose following the 1820s. Often, the debates on enslavement during this time period occurred between students from the north.

²²⁶ Kohl, *The Politics of Individualism*, 74.

The majority sentiment on the campus of Union College favored anti-slavery. On June 14, 1836, fifty-one students formed an auxiliary branch of the New York State Antislavery Society and the majority of these efforts, unlike temperance, were driven by students.²²⁷ On July 23, the *Liberator*, the newspaper of famed abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, published the preamble of the Union College Antislavery Society. The preamble listed several problems regarding the institution of enslavement, which focused on the moral evilness of the system, and concluded, “And, finally, feeling that *we* are bound by the most solemn obligations to the oppressed, to our country and our God to do all in our power for the redemption of our brethren in bondage, and the removal of this soul stain from our national escutcheon; *we* do hereby form ourselves into a Society for the promotion of the above objects, and agree, &c. In bonds for the slave, till his redemption.”²²⁸ The words of the preamble were radical and the choice to publicize their society in the most radical newspaper in the United States demonstrated their desire for immediate rather than gradual emancipation. A few months later, an article in Garrison’s paper commented on Union College’s society, stating, “The young men of this country, who are in a course of liberal education, *will be* abolitionists, and no laws and no array of college dignity against discussion can stop them. Their business is to *investigate*, and investigation, full and candid, is all that is wanted to make men abolitionists.”²²⁹

While many of these students of the “liberal education” favored anti-slavery and abolition, Nott often found himself supporting policies that proved most beneficial to the college. In a diary entry regarding enslavement, Jonathan Pearson wrote, Nott “Never trusts an opinion

²²⁷ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 693.

²²⁸ “Preamble,” *The Liberator*, July 23, 1836, *Accessible Archives*, Web.

²²⁹ “Abolitionism among Young Men in Literary Institutions,” *The Liberator*, November 5, 1836, *Accessible Archives*, Web.

where it will injure his influence.”²³⁰ Nott often transformed his views on enslavement as the national mood changed. When the practice was fashionable in Albany and Schenectady at the turn of the century, Nott owned a few slaves, including one while president of Union College in 1810. However, as he reflected on his own moral understanding of enslavement, he invoked the notion of “higher law,” which sought to correct what was wrong in society. For a growing population in the north, enslavement exemplified a dangerous wrong.

By 1825, Nott came to think that African colonization offered the best solution to the enslavement question. In a letter to John Taylor, Nott wrote, “If this project of colonization is feasible, it should be seized on by the national authorities, and rendered efficacious to the fullest extent that is possible. To keep our slaves in thralldom forever, if it were possible, is to entail wretchedness on them – to free them and retain them is to do the same.”²³¹ In other words, freeing African American slaves would, in fact, make their lives worthless. Nott’s thinking was not unusual among anti-slavery advocates of this period. Nott made this statement a few years after the founding of the American Colonization Society in 1817, which by 1825 become a fairly popular organization. Using the reasoning of “higher law,” it was not, in the eyes of Nott, natural or morally righteous to keep enslaved Africans and free people of color in the United States. The argument can be made that he wanted to return these people to their native lands in Africa, but the relative position of the races offers a more compelling answer. One article in the *Liberator* criticized Nott for still supporting colonization groups in 1839.²³² Professors at Union College, even if they never publicly criticized Nott, often delivered speeches far more radical than most remarks delivered by Nott.

²³⁰ Pearson, *Diary of Jonathan Pearson*, 668.

²³¹ Hislop, *Eliphalet Nott*, 404.

²³² “Dignitaries,” *The Liberator*, August 16, 1839.

According to an article in the *Liberator* published on May 17, 1839, “The doors of Union College had been shut against” a young African American man “simply on account of his color.”²³³ Unfortunately, the article does not explain what occurred, but a similar incident, which occurred in 1859, might offer an explanation. David Rosell, a young man of color, who claimed to be of American Indian ancestry, applied to attend Union and the trustees left the admittance in the hands of Nott. Nott, who often sought to avoid controversy, allowed the class of 1860 to vote on whether or not to admit the student. The students voted to allow his admission and after Nott had a professor examine the hair of the prospective student to determine their American Indian ancestry, Rosell was admitted to the college. However, Nott soon learned Rosell attended Central College as a “negro,” Rosell left the college.²³⁴ Nott, throughout this incident, never came directly out in support of the Rosell and his right to a quality education, even though a majority of the students approved his admission. Nott made his decision, according to Pearson, working as a tutor at Union College, to not cause “another rumpus among the negro-haters,” these young men were the sons of planters who still attended Union College in the 1830s. In 1839, it is safe to assume Nott reacted in a similar fashion and was not enthusiastic about welcoming an African American student to Union College, which was quite common among American universities.

Three years after rejecting an African American student in 1839 and seventeen years before the incident involving, Rosell, Nott hired Moses Viney, a recently escaped slave, as his servant. Nott deeply appreciated the support of Viney, who served Nott from 1842 until Nott’s death in 1866. Following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, Nott helped Viney to flee the country until he could purchase his freedom, which Nott successfully did July of 1855.²³⁵

²³³ “Abstract of Speeches,” *The Liberator*, May 17, 1839, *Accessible Archives*, Web.

²³⁴ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 109.

²³⁵ Somers, *Encyclopedia*, 771.

Nott welcomed Viney onto the college's campus but rejected the two African American men as Union College students. This can be attributed to Nott seeing the role of African Americans as subservient to whites and did not find it proper to allow black students to be held as equals as students. Similar to Nott, even in the minority, numerous students rejected the equality of the races and failed to understand why the north concerned itself with southern enslavement.

"I don't see why these men of the North," wrote Martin Van Buren Burt on May 4, 1837, "who go frothing and spouting about the country, who cannot possibly know so much about the southern institution of slavery of southern men, should be believed, in preference to these southern men."²³⁶ For Burt, the Union College Antislavery Society proved a danger to society because it sought to provide solutions to problems that the students never experienced. Perhaps in regards to the members of this group, Burt wrote, "Northern people can do nothing but inflame the matter by irritation."²³⁷ These words did not come from a southern student, son of a plantation owner, but from a young man born and raised in Upstate New York. He engaged in reform movements and fit the description of a "liberal education" the *Liberator* praised, but staunchly defended the rights of southern men to their property, slaves, which would become a tenant of Northern Democrats from the 1830s to 1861. While Burt defended the practice, some Union students took even more radical moves to promote enslavement.

Several northern students, upon graduation, moved south to take advantage of the rapidly growing slave economy. Charles N. Rowley, a member of the class of 1829 and a native of North Granville, New York, moved to Natchez, Mississippi five years after graduation. After establishing himself financially with his law practice, he bought several plantations and quickly

²³⁶ Burt, *Diary*, 114.

²³⁷ Burt, *Diary*, 114.

entered into slave owning.²³⁸ This New York native, at the outbreak of the Civil War, demonstrated his loyalty to enslavement when he enlisted in the Confederate States Army in 1862. Another Union student, who attended the college at the same time as Pearson and Burt, returned to his home in Georgia after graduation in 1840 to run his family's plantation. Twelve years later, he would be found dead, killed by his slaves, for "excessive cruelty."²³⁹ The five slaves who killed their master, an alumnus of Union College, were hanged without a trial.

²³⁸ Charles N. Rowley, *Alumni Folder*, Special Collections, *Union College*.

²³⁹ James E. Huston, *Alumni Folder*, Special Collections, *Union College*.

Conclusion

The men who attended the college during the early nineteenth century often ventured into new communities or returned home and became local and national leaders. In the early nineteenth century, Union College produced more influential alumni than any other time in its history. Most notably is William Seward who would rise in the Whig and eventually Republican Party to become Secretary of State in the Lincoln administration. Martin Van Buren Burt travelled west, practiced law in the frontier towns of Ohio, and served as a local elected official for a variety of positions. These men took their experience from Union and implemented them into their adult lives.

However, when we remember these men, we often think of them as living in a vacuum in their adult lives. Seward is remembered as a champion of the Republican Party, but when his entire life is researched it becomes clear that he was an ardent supporter of the Democratic Party of New York. Even though he supported a strong national government later in his career, as a student at Union, he favored leaders who supported a small national government. At Union, he even supported candidates that openly disregarded the problems of enslavement and concerned himself very little with the issue. This might surprise many who only know Seward as Secretary of State. This is part of the problem facing historians, the oversimplification of history.

History is not a hard science. There are not set “laws” that govern the ways people interact with each other and society. Often, we like to find neat patterns to help explain the world around us, but in the study of history, this can be difficult. Experiences of individuals vary widely and so do their reactions to events. Two people raised in similar homes, from similar racial, social, and economic status can often live very different lives. Seward and Charles N.

Rowley, who shared a similar background, both travelled south within a decade of each other. Seward returned to the north, disgusted by enslavement, and Rowley returned in order to secure funds to open his own plantations. For these reasons, we can never make assumptions about history and must constantly critically analyze people and events to present fresh takes on a variety of subjects, even if the topic is well established.

Union College remembers Eliphalet Nott as a leading abolitionist and the moral leader of his college and society. However, when we read the writings of Nott and students regarding enslavement it becomes clear the college's anti-slavery activities began with the students and Nott often tried to avoid the topic among the student body. More troublesome, the college refuses to recognize the slave owning past of Nott. Instead, they chose to focus on his work later in life and his relationship with Moses Viney. The college have actively chosen to only research the institutional history that is positive and fails to research the history in its entirety. As the school fails to accomplish this, other colleges and universities in the nation are taking a more active role in studying their complete institutional history.

Within the past decade, more universities and colleges are investing time and resources in researching their institutional links to enslavement. In 2003, the president of Brown University appointed a Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice to investigate the university's historical relationship to enslavement and the transatlantic slave trade. The committee, which was composed of faculty, students, and administrators, spent three years researching these connections. The committee, after completing their research, recommended the school recognize its historical ties and promote "ongoing consideration of issues related to slavery and justice." The success of their research inspired institutions across the nation to engage in similar research.

In 2015, due to the high number of schools researching this subject, the University of Virginia created “Universities Studying Slavery.” According to their website, “Universities Studying Slavery (USS) is dedicated to organizing multi-institutional collaboration as part of an effort to facilitate mutual support in the pursuit of common goals around the core theme of ‘Universities Studying Slavery.’” The USS currently has 35 schools, primarily from the South. However, several prominent northern schools, including Brown University, have committed themselves to the USS and exploring the darker side of their institutional histories. To the best of my knowledge, Union College has not invested time in researching their college’s connections to enslavement.

Founded in 1795, Union College predates the gradual emancipation law of New York by four years. Many of the founders and early financiers of the college owned slaves, including the famous Eliphalet Nott, who owned at least three slaves. While the two he owned prior to his administration are well-known, even though they are not discussed, very few people realize he owned a slave while president of the college. West College, also known as Stone College, was built by community members who gave funds and resources for the construction. When examining the account books, several of the men who owned slaves are paid for their labor. After establishing the occupations of these men, it is safe to assume that they did not provide the labor but rented their slaves to the college. While the documentation is thin, it is there.

Colleges and universities have used a variety of tactics when exploring their connections to enslavement. Most created committees of faculty and students to research and explore their archives to find these connections. Often, these committees spend anywhere from one to three years working within the archives and producing reports of their findings. MIT has even created a course focused on enslavement and the history of their college. The course is a full year and

students spend half of the year being taught on universities and enslavement and the second half examining their archives for material and documentation that relates to the topic. Almost all the schools performing this type of research established public website with their findings and promote events and discussions on the subject.

Union College, if it is truly committed to diversity, inclusion, and academic integrity, must take a more active role in researching its historical connections to enslavement. In the modern world, schools must constantly compete against similar institutions and are constantly finding the best material to sell the college to prospective students. While a school's relationship to slavery is certainly a dark blot, it is none the less a part of the school's history. When the school ignores this history, it ignores the lives lost and sacrifices made by the men, women, and children who toiled under the harsh conditions of enslavement.

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