Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities

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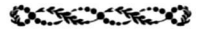
Craig Steven Wilder

Ebony and Ivy



BY THE SAME AUTHOR

A Covenant with Color: Race and Social Power in Brooklyn

In the Company of Black Men: The African Influence on African American Culture in New York City

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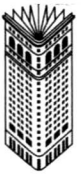

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TO

Gloria Wilder

Contents

There is no drama like the drama of history.

—C. L. R. JAMES, *THE BLACK JACOBINS* (1938)

[Henry] Watson's behavior merely showed that Connecticut tutors could become Alabama cotton planters in a single generation.

—HERBERT GUTMAN, *THE BLACK FAMILY IN SLAVERY AND FREEDOM* (1976)

A catastrophe occurred which was so great that it is little discussed. Else it would dominate all discourse about the human story in the Western Hemisphere. Plymouth Rock and Pilgrims, Columbus and Captain John Smith would shrink to footnotes. Even the losses of the American Civil War of 1861–1865 were trifling when compared to the Great Dying.

—ROGER G. KENNEDY, *HIDDEN CITIES* (1994)

PROLOGUE

A Connecticut Yankee at an Ancient Indian Mound

"Remember me to all my friends and relations—I wish you and others of the family as many as can write to write to me often and tell me about every thing and any thing," Henry Watson begged his father, "about every body and thing I care any thing about." Written from New York in November 1830, where the young man had booked passage on the schooner *Isabella* to Mobile, Alabama, the letter mixed a premature homesickness with a sense of youthful expectation. Watson was from East Windsor, Connecticut, just north of Hartford, and he was heading south to find work as a teacher in an academy or on a plantation. He carried a packet of introductory letters from his professors at Washington College (Trinity) in Hartford and Harvard College in Cambridge, family friends including Professor Benjamin Silliman of Yale College, and his father's business acquaintances. After graduating from Yale, Silliman had considered a job in the South, and his brother Selleck did leave Yale to become a tutor in Charleston, South Carolina.[1]

College initiated Henry Watson into the slave regimes of the Atlantic world. The founding, financing, and development of higher education in the colonies were thoroughly intertwined with the economic and social forces that transformed West and Central

Africa through the slave trade and devastated indigenous nations in the Americas. The academy was a beneficiary and defender of these processes.

College graduates had exploited these links for centuries. They apprenticed under the slave traders of New England, the Mid-Atlantic, and Europe. They migrated to the South and to the West Indies for careers as teachers, ministers, lawyers, doctors, politicians, merchants, and planters. The end of the slave trade and the decline of slavery in the North did not break these ties. The antebellum South represented a field of opportunity, where the wealth of the cotton planters was funding the expansion of the educational infrastructure.

The *Isabella* could carry a handful of passengers, and Watson had a small, comfortable cabin. He stored his trunk on board and then explored New York City while he waited for departure. He detailed his spending, documented his efforts to be frugal wherever possible, and sent weekly updates on his progress to his father. Those communications were also filled with complaints about things like the cost of the books that he needed to further his education. Like Selleck Silliman, Watson did not intend to spend his life as a plantation teacher. He wanted to earn a salary for a year, improve his health in a warmer climate, and then study law. Later that month, this twenty-year-old aspiring tutor boarded the schooner for the voyage south.[2]

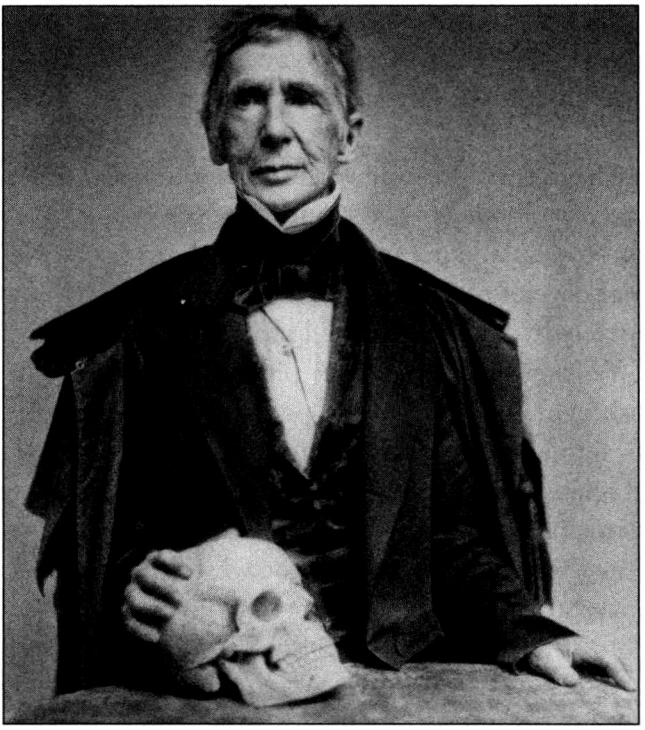
An education in Hartford and Cambridge was reasonable preparation for living among the slaveholders of Alabama. The presidents of Connecticut's colleges and universities led one of the most extreme branches of the American Colonization Society—founded in 1817 to transplant free black people outside the United States. New England's colonizationists cast African Americans as a threat to democracy and social order, encouraged campaigns to halt the development of free black communities, and even destroyed schools for African American children. They silenced debate about slavery and vehemently attacked abolitionism as the cause of political tensions between the slave and free states.[3]

Harvard was approaching its two hundredth anniversary, which meant that it was also nearing the bicentennial of its intimate engagement with Atlantic slavery. Beginning with the first graduating

class, boys from Cambridge had been seeking fortunes in the plantations. By the time Henry Watson matriculated, Harvard's history was inseparable from the history of slavery and the slave trade.

College had armed Watson with theories of racial difference and scientific claims about the superiority of white people. The academy refined these ideas and popularized the language of race, providing intellectual cover for the social and political subjugation of nonwhite peoples. In a class with the Harvard anatomist John Collins Warren, Watson learned that in physical development, cultural accomplishment, and intellectual potential, black people sat at the bottom of humanity. Professor Warren also revealed that the most advanced scientific research confirmed the biological supremacy of the boys in that room. It is likely that Henry Watson Jr. already believed in the natural dominion of white people, and that the scientific certainty with which most of his professors argued the primacy of Europeans and the backwardness of Africans only confirmed his views. Harvard, like Washington College, was a pillar of the antebellum racial order. Not only were the students, the faculties, the officers, and the trustees white, but people of color came to campus only as servants and objects.[4]

From Mobile, Watson traveled north toward Greensboro, through territories where "plantations are very thick." It was now December and he was focused on securing a salary. "These regions seem to be a fine place for *female* teachers, they are in great demand," he reported despondently to his father. He still could not find a teaching job at an academy or on a plantation, and an opening at the public school "would but little more than pay my board." While in Greensboro, he called upon Dr. John Ramsey Witherspoon—a South Carolina relative of the Reverend John Witherspoon, president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton) and signer of the Declaration of Independence—who was rumored to be in need of a teacher. The six months since Watson left home had been spent to little profit, which was all the more disappointing and insulting in a place he believed to be dominated by greedy planters, and where "the people are almost ignoramuses on some things. The Doctors are miserable, the Lawyers are not much better." To make matters



Professor John Collins Warren of Harvard
SOURCE: Countway Library, Harvard Medical School

worse, he lost his purse from a torn coat pocket. "It was one of the Christmas holidays and the streets were full of negroes," he explained, "so that I hardly expect to hear from it again." He went out with his host in search of the wallet but found nothing. The next morning, apparently unconscious of irony, he dispatched "a negro to hunt for it but unsuccessfully."[5]

"I PASSED AN INDIAN MOUND"

In May 1831 this would-be tutor packed his belongings and prepared to leave Alabama on horseback. The idea of returning to New England by horse likely had come from Caleb Mills, a New Hampshire resident who graduated from Dartmouth College in 1828. The two men passed near Northampton, Massachusetts, as

Watson was beginning his trip south. Mills later became professor of Greek and Latin at Wabash College and superintendent of education in Indiana. Watson took note of a particular piece of information during the exchange: "He said he had rode that same horse 5 or 6000 miles at the rate of 40 & 50 miles a day. Had just come from Kentucky." Short on cash, the young tutor chose that same method for his return. It was the perfect way to learn the geography and history of the region. "I passed an Indian mound different from most. . . . It appeared like a pyramid with a square base cut of about 15 ft. high. It is a regular square," Watson excitedly jotted while outside Tuscaloosa. He had already seen Indian mounds, and had stopped to carefully examine one near Carthage. He began searching for mounds and artifacts. The very next day, Watson rode through a portion of the "lands of the Cherokee nation" near the Tennessee border, but he "saw no indians or indian relics."[6]

Travelers at a Chattanooga Indian Mound
SOURCE: Library of Congress

That area was part of an enormous expanse of territory—tens of millions of acres—that the state and federal governments seized from Native nations and tribes, the most recent in a succession of human tragedies that transformed the demography of North America. Prior to the "Great Dying," an estimated four million people lived in the greater Mississippi Valley. New waves of death had come with the expansion of European outposts two centuries before Watson's journey. Violent raids into the interior from the Carolina colonies transferred microbes inland, forced flights and migrations that upset the socioeconomic order of indigenous societies, altered age distributions, and caused abrupt changes in diet and health that made the new diseases more deadly. Watson's attention had been drawn to the remnants of these civilizations—monumental architecture constructed at least a millennium before Stonehenge. The largest ruins in the Mississippi and Ohio valleys, equal in size and crafting to the pyramids of Egypt, could hold St. Peter's Basilica and its gardens. These sites were once the centers of civilizations supported by trading networks that stretched across the continent.[7]

There is a background to Watson's interest in these archaeological remains. As an undergraduate he had lived on campuses that were decorated with Indian bones and artifacts and that hosted lively discussions of the impending extinction of Native peoples, legacies of a long relationship between colleges and conquest. European nations founded academies to secure their colonial interests, and they supported these schools by exploiting the decline of Indian nations and the rise of African slavery.

A young college graduate riding horseback over ethnically cleansed lands carved into slave plantations had plenty to ponder. Watson's mind was quite busy. He marveled at the beauty and richness of the region. He saw planters driving Indians from the path of cotton, and took notes on the crop economy, hauling distances, and regional markets. At the home of a man whom he met on the road, he watched forty enslaved black people working 350 acres. "Cotton plantations go as far as the eye can reach. Corn, rye, and wheat abound. Large bodies of Negroes at work," he recorded as he passed from Alabama to Tennessee through Cherokee country.

He was, it is fair to note, impressed with the rewards of human slavery. When he reached Kentucky in June, he used his letters of recommendation to gain an audience with Henry Clay. "Said to be well off but not rich," Watson added after a lengthy and pleasant visit with the Great Compromiser, the senator and colonizationist who for a generation managed the political conflicts between the slave and free states.[8]

Henry Watson's generation had begun to wrestle, albeit poorly, with the moral and social implications of this history. In September 1831—shortly after Watson had returned to Connecticut—James Kent delivered the Phi Beta Kappa lecture during Yale's commencement. In 1793 Kent had become the first law professor at Columbia College in New York City. He bought a house, purchased an enslaved woman, and became a colonizationist and a prominent opponent of extending suffrage to free black people in New York State. Kent celebrated his chapter's fiftieth anniversary with a lecture that used science, theology, and history to proclaim the inevitable rise of the Europeans. It was the will of God that "the red men of the forest have . . . been supplanted by a much nobler race of beings of European blood," he began. It would have been a sin and "a perversion of the duties and design of the human race" to permit "roving savages of the forest" to maintain these lands as "a savage and frightful desert."[9]

YANKEES AND PLANTERS

Henry Watson was quite happy to get back to northern soil, but he was also allured by the wealth that he had seen in the South. He studied law under Henry Barnard, a Yale graduate who later served as a state and federal education commissioner. Although he claimed to hate slavery, Watson left Connecticut for Greensboro, Alabama, after just a couple of years, set up a law practice, and became a slave owner—a "sin," he confessed, but one that promised great benefits. Shrewd investments following the Panic of 1837 increased his wealth. He snatched up plantations and slaves in what once had been the home of the Creek. He referred to his enslaved black

people as his children and discovered the "charm" of mastery. He spent his summers in New England, where cotton traders were dominating the commodities markets and massive cotton works were catalyzing an industrial revolution. Within a decade Watson owned more than fifty people. Letters to his parents show that his motive was money. He disdained southerners: their religious practices were noisy and rude, their company was unenlightening, and their culture was organized around avarice. For all his harsh judgments about the region and its people, he had become an excellent southern planter. Within two decades he counted more than a hundred black people as property, became a founder and the president of the Planters Insurance Company, and emerged as a staunch defender of human slavery. On the eve of the Civil War, this Connecticut Yankee belonged to the planter elite.[10]

Long after the collapse of slavery in the Mid-Atlantic and New England, northern colleges continued sending young men like Watson to the South and the Caribbean. The most successful cotton planter in the antebellum era was born, raised, and educated in Pennsylvania. Dr. Stephen Duncan moved to Mississippi after his undergraduate and medical training in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. He had graduated from Dickinson College, which was founded by Benjamin Rush—an opponent of slavery and a signer of the Declaration of Independence—to democratize education. Duncan married into a Mississippi family, and, by the outbreak of the Civil War, owned several cotton plantations, two sugar plantations, and more than a thousand human beings.[11]

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Henry Watson Jr.'s career as master of a "degraded race" forced to work the lands of a "vanished people" embodies central themes in the history of the American college. It provides glimpses into the complexity of that past. The course of Watson's life flowed through grooves that were carved across the society by emotionally wrenching and brutal historical events. Watson likely never appreciated the intimacy of his connections to Native and African peoples—the