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“THE HARVARD SLAVERY REPORT: FOUNDED ON HALF-TRUTHS & DISTORTED HISTORY” (Sept. 2022)*

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“...our commitment to truth means that we must embrace it even when it makes us uncomfortable or causes us pain.”

LAWRENCE BACOW, President, Harvard University (April 2022)

These are the words of Harvard’s current President, Lawrence Bacow, in presenting the University’s April 2022 report titled, “Harvard & The Legacy of Slavery” (<https://legacyofslavery.harvard.edu/report>).

However, after a careful review of this report, one must question just how deep the University’s commitment to the truth really is. While the report does document some painful historical truths and rightly shines a light on them, it mixes those in with numerous half-truths, historical sleights of hand, extreme bias, and, in some cases, what can only be seen as anti-Christian bigotry and animus. It goes way beyond true history.

Veritas is Harvard’s motto. It is Latin for “The Truth.” *Veritas* also stands for the **process** of **searching for and finding the Truth**. What emerges from a careful reading of this report is its commitment to an ideological agenda – a ‘woke’ agenda – rather than an honest historical assessment.

Slavery is a subject that has **not** been explored sufficiently enough by past historians of Harvard’s history. The report **might** have made a significant and useful contribution to our understanding of that history. But what contributions it does make are completely interspersed with many deeply flawed assumptions. It is neither balanced nor nuanced and, in the end, comes off as propaganda, which, unfortunately, renders much of the project suspect.

The report’s authors ‘see slavery’ even where the historical record is vague, exerting every effort to attempt to tie slavery to the very origins of the institution itself. It is the proverbial hammer that sees everything it encounters as a nail. It is mostly an example of extreme over-reach in service to a worldview of historical revisionism.

Harvard’s report on slavery is a stepchild of the deeply flawed ‘1619 Project,’ promoted by the *New York Times* and propagandists on the Left who have sought to reinterpret America’s founding not as a beacon of liberty but as a “slavocracy.”¹ 1619 Project critic Mary Grabar has

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termed The 1619 Project “a polemic, steeped in ideology.” She asserts that the “sins of commission and omission in The Project go deep and range wide” and that its case for “replacing 1776 with 1619 as the true founding of America is built up with half-truths and untruths.”² She adds, “The 1619 Project ‘reframes’ American history by twisting evidence and leaving out exculpatory facts.”³ The Harvard report on slavery does much the same.

It certainly does **not** measure up to President Bacow’s expressed desire when he stated: “My hope,” he said, “is [that] those who succeed us will look back and judge us to have been champions of *veritas* – to have stood for truth and to have acted upon it.”⁴

No, not by a long shot. Sadly, rather than focusing on the most significant issues that need to be shared and are well-documented, the report’s authors seemed more interested in pursuing a particular narrative – a narrative filled with distortions and half-truths.

That agenda-driven narrative has already been breathlessly disseminated by a lapdog media eager to re-write American history. One of the biggest lapdogs of them all, *The Washington Post*, asserted on April 22, 2022, soon after its release, that the report “*represents a landmark acknowledgment from one of the world’s most prestigious universities of the breadth of its entanglement with slavery, white supremacy and racial injustice for centuries after its 1636 founding.*”⁵

Harvard’s attempt at virtue signaling had found its mark, which was apparently its goal all along.

Former President Faust’s 2016 Statement

What led up to all this? Well, let’s start with a statement by Harvard’s former president, Drew Gilpin Faust, who wrote in 2016 that: “... *Harvard was directly complicit in America’s system of*

¹ Cited in Mary Grabar, *Debunking the 1619 Project: Exposing the Plan to Divide America* (Regnery, 2021), 2, citing Nikole Hannah-Jones, “The Idea of America,” in “The 1619 Project,” *New York Times Magazine*, August 4, 2019 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/black-history-american-democracy.html>

² Mary Grabar, *Debunking the 1619 Project*, op. cit., 38.

³ Mary Grabar, “Debunking The 1619 Project: Real History as Antidote to Critical Race Theory,” *Townhall.com* (September 7, 2021). <https://townhall.com/columnists/marygrabar/2021/09/07/debunking-the-1619-project-real-history-as-antidote-to-critical-race-theory-n2595392>

⁴ Opening remarks by President Larry Bacow to the Harvard Radcliffe Institute conference, “Telling the Truth About All This: Reckoning with Slavery and Its Legacies at Harvard and Beyond,” in Alvin Powell, “One lie leads to another until we tell the truth,” *The Harvard Gazette*, April 30, 2022 <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2022/04/one-lie-leads-to-another-until-we-tell-the-truth/>

⁵ Nick Anderson and Susan Svrluga, “Harvard University leaders and staff enslaved more than 70 people, researchers report,” *The Washington Post* (April 26, 2022), picked up by the *Anchorage Daily News*, <https://www.adn.com/nation-world/2022/04/26/harvard-university-leaders-and-staff-enslaved-more-than-70-people-researchers-report/>

racial bondage from the College's earliest days in the 17th century until slavery in Massachusetts ended in 1783..."⁶ To be clear, Harvard was **not** "*directly complicit in America's system of racial bondage from the College's earliest days...*" There **were** Indian captives from the colonists' wars with the Indians, some of whom were taken by Overseers of the College and some of whom were later sold into slavery in the West Indies during this period following the 1637 Pequot War (The story of the aftermath of the Pequot War, the status of Indian war captives and Puritan-Indian relations will be the subject of another podcast).

And while the Harvard slavery report conflates African and Indian servitude, that was not even what Faust was referring to in her 2016 editorial, since in the very sentence before this she was specifically referring to the "*presence and contributions of people of African descent at Harvard...*"

In any event, with this 2016 editorial, Faust helped lay the foundation for what was to follow some six years later, culminating in this 'official' report on slavery with the imprimatur of the President and Fellows of Harvard College – that is, the Harvard Corporation.

The 2011 Slavery Report

Faust had been a sponsor of an earlier, more balanced report in 2011 titled, "Harvard and Slavery: Seeking A Forgotten History," by faculty member Sven Beckert, Katherine Stevens, and the students of the 'Harvard and Slavery Research Seminar.' That report, which Beckert described in 2011 as a "quest that began with fears of finding nothing ended with a new question – how was it that the university had failed for so long to engage with this elephantine [that is, enormous] aspect of its history?"⁷ It's a fair question, and it has a straightforward answer: it's not that anyone was hiding this history; it's just that no one had previously compiled everything together in one place. Beckert and his students in 2011 rightly sought out that forgotten history, and they found it. Former President Faust gave the project her support and wider legitimacy.

But somewhere along the way in the intervening eleven years since that initial report appeared, that previously forgotten part of Harvard's history has now been transformed into one single reductionist racial narrative on Harvard's past: with intimations and accusations throughout of white supremacy, exploitation, Marxian-style explanations of economic motives, not-so-subtle anti-Christian bigotry, and on and on.

Thus, while former Harvard President Faust is to be commended for urging this initial process forward, in helping uncover this forgotten history, she should not be commended for making the kind of hyperbolic and unsubstantiated conclusions that she did in 2016 – the fruit of which we now see also in this 2022 report. Beckert himself also seems to have abandoned whatever balance was reflected in the 2011 report. Now he simply says: "*What I think is the most powerful finding is that slavery permeated almost everything about Harvard's early history.*"

⁶ Drew Faust, "Recognizing Slavery at Harvard," The Harvard Crimson, March 30, 2016 <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2016/3/30/faust-harvard-slavery/>

⁷ Sven Beckert, Introduction, "Harvard and Slavery: Seeking A Forgotten History," Harvard and Slavery Research Seminar (2011), 3.

That is ludicrous, but it does demonstrate just how far this entire project has strayed from the original mission.

This is very important to understand, because ‘Woke Harvard’ is now trying to build its entire early history – and, by extension, the origin of *all* American higher education - on the premise that slavery was an integral part of the institution from its very beginnings. But that is not true.

We will now get into the heart of the matter.

‘The Moor’

To begin our assessment, who was the first supposed enslaved person at Harvard? According to the report,

The enslaved man known as “The Moor,” who could have arrived aboard the *Desire*, was the first of many enslaved people who would serve Harvard students in the colonial era.

Elsewhere the report states: “*It is possible that the man known to us only as ‘The Moor’ – who was enslaved by Harvard’s first schoolmaster, Nathaniel Eaton, and in that capacity served Harvard’s earliest students – arrived in New England aboard the [ship] Desire.*” (Harvard Slavery Report, p. 13).

So, while it is true, perhaps even likely given his moniker, that this man known as ‘The Moor’ may have arrived in New England as an enslaved person,⁸ we do not know that for a fact. We certainly do not know whether or not he arrived on the ship *Desire*. He may have or he may not have.

It is also true that renowned Harvard historian Samuel Eliot Morison, in a footnote to his 1935 work, *The Founding of Harvard College*, assumed that, “The Moor was “apparently a negro slave, the first in New England of whom we have any record.”⁹ In his comment that The Moor was apparently a slave, Morison was merely repeating the offhand comment of James Savage, who in 1825-26 produced extensive notes to the now lost second volume of Governor John Winthrop’s notebooks.¹⁰ These were published as *The History of New England from 1630 to*

⁸“In Massachusetts, ‘Negroes were first imported’ from Barbados around 1636 or 1637. Slavery was first sanctioned in 1641 for ‘captives, taken in just wars’ (Indians) and for ‘such strangers...sold to us’ (‘Negroes’).” See Mary Grabar, *Debunking The 1619 Project: Exposing the Plan to Divide America* (2021), 71, citing Robert L. Paquette, “Slave Resistance,” in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery, Volume 4, AD 1804 - AD 2016*, ed. David Eltis, Stanley Engerman, Seymour Drescher, and David Richardson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 272-95.

⁹ Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Founding of Harvard College* (or, *FHC*), p. 232, footnote 2.

¹⁰ Richard S. Dunn, “John Winthrop Writes His Journal,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* **41** (April 1984), No. 2: 185-212.

1649. In 1825-26, Savage speculated that “The Moor was probably a slave.”¹¹ Other nineteenth century historians of Harvard, including Benjamin Peirce and John Langdon Sibley, repeated the same basic story about ‘The Moor’.¹²

The problem is that, clearly, neither Savage nor Morison apparently thought through the details of this story, but simply made a passing reference to “The Moor” in a footnote. Certainly, if either of them had realized how this brief story would later be used to implicate all of Harvard’s earliest history as allegedly being “*complicit in America’s system of racial bondage from the College’s earliest days,*” to cite former Harvard President Drew Faust, they would have paid closer attention.

A more telling example was a letter written in 1645 from Emanuel Downing to his brother-in-law, then Governor of Massachusetts, John Winthrop, Sr., in which he wrote of, “*the ships that shall bring Moores....*”

Now **this** mention of ‘Moores’ was clearly a reference to Negro slaves. Downing added, “*An I suppose you know verie well how wee shall maynteyne 20 Moores cheaper then one English servant.*”¹³ Downing was writing to Winthrop about wanting to exchange Indian captives from the Pequot War for African slaves. So it’s very clear from this correspondence that some form of slavery was emerging in New England at this time.

Thus, it is very possible that “The Moor” (as he was referred to in the only document that we have) **did originally** arrive in the New World as a slave.

But I believe it is also **very unlikely** that he was in an enslaved status when he lived and worked at Harvard. To explain why I think this is the case and to walk our way through this, let’s go back to the ship *Desire*, which is mentioned numerous times in the Harvard slavery report.

The Slave Ship “Desire”

The *Desire* was a ship commanded by an English privateer named William Peirce from Massachusetts Bay Colony. Although originally headed to Bermuda, Peirce ended up in the Caribbean. He had taken with him seventeen Pequot Indians - 15 boys and two women, who had been taken captive during the Pequot War and sold them into slavery. In exchange he bought

¹¹ John Winthrop, *The History of New England from 1630 to 1649*, Savage’s Notes, pp. 373-374, pp. 310-311 in Winthrop, footnote 1.

¹² The story is found in Benjamin Peirce his *A History of Harvard University* (Cambridge, 1833, Appendix No. VIII, Section 4, pp. 28-34) and in John Langdon Sibley’s famous compilation of Harvard graduates in his work, *Biographical Sketches of Graduates of Harvard University – Volume I. 1642 - 1658* (1873, pp. 2-6) published some forty years later.

¹³ Emanuel Downing, writing to Governor John Winthrop in 1645 (Margaret Ellen Newell, *Brethren by Nature: New England Indians, Colonists, and the Origins of American Slavery* (2015), 52, citing Emanuel Downing letter to John Winthrop, ca. August 1645, *Winthrop Papers* 5: 38-39)

“some cotton, and tobacco, and **Negroes...**”¹⁴ and returned to New England. Peirce thus pioneered what emerged as the New England slave trade, which in its early years appears to have included this type of exchange of some Pequot Indian war captives for African slaves in the Caribbean.

So, was The Moor one of those slaves brought to Massachusetts from the Caribbean? Possibly. On the other hand, another source on the history of slavery in New England states, regarding the 1638 arrival of the *Desire*, that “*there were most likely people of African descent in the region before this nefarious swap*” of Pequot Indians for African slaves.¹⁵ In other words, someone of African descent like ‘The Moor, whoever he was, may have arrived in Massachusetts at another time and by another means than aboard the slave ship *Desire*.¹⁶

But let’s play this out. Let us stipulate that perhaps he **was** on the *Desire*. Let us imagine that soon-to-be Harvard schoolmaster Nathaniel Eaton was at the dock that day when the ship was unloaded in Boston harbor. Let’s say that there was a slave auction almost immediately and that Eaton purchased one of those slaves and that this person was “The Moor.”

The Eatons had not yet moved to Cambridge. Classes at Harvard had not yet begun and probably would not begin for at least the next four or five months.

In looking at the situation logically, that’s a scenario that might have occurred. But if it did indeed occur, there is **no** evidence that this had anything to do with Harvard, which to this point, only existed on paper. It would have been an action undertaken entirely on Eaton’s part. Some three months later, Eaton was granted a parcel of land in the Town of Cambridge. This land grant consisted of “two and two-thirds acres in the Old Ox Pasture, set aside on May 11, 1638...,” while “The Town also at the same time made two allotments to Eaton personally.”¹⁷

There is no mention of the purchase of a slave in any of this. In other words, there was no allotment for a slave for the Eaton household as being part of his employment ‘package,’ so to speak, before arriving at the College.

So, if Eaton had indeed purchased The Moor prior to moving to Cambridge, it was because **he himself** wanted a personal slave. Nothing else makes any sense.

¹⁴ Newell, op. cit., 51, citing *The Journal of John Winthrop* (Dunn version): April 1645: 573.

¹⁵ Jared Ross Hardesty, *Black Lives, Native Lands, White Worlds: A History of Slavery in New England* (Bright Leaf - University of Massachusetts Press, 2019), 11.

¹⁶ Robert C. Twombly and Robert H. Moore, “Black Puritan: The Negro in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 24 No. 2 (April 1967), 225-226. We know that there were probably somewhere between 100 and 200 blacks in Massachusetts by 1680, with at least one arriving as early as 1633. They included free men, servants, and slaves.

¹⁷ Margery Somers Foster, *Out of Smalle Beginnings: An Economic History of Harvard College in the Puritan Period* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1962), 103.

We will discuss later the implications of this, if indeed The Moor **was** the Eatons' personal slave or servant, which actually introduces another whole set of circumstances into the equation.

Another scenario is that The Moor arrived in New England in February 1638, was purchased by someone else, then worked for them for just some four months, and **then** was sold to Eaton as a personal family slave **after** the Eatons arrived in Cambridge? Possibly, but that also does not make much sense.

Let's move on to the College itself. As Margery Somers Foster wrote in her 1962 book, "*Out of Smalle Beginnings: An Economic History of Harvard College in the Puritan Period*," "Master Eaton," as he was called, or "The Professor": "received and expended College monies, but the twelve Overseers, or such as them as lived and remained in the area, supervised his activities."¹⁸

However, as we shall soon see, they didn't supervise him very well!

There is no existing record, so far as I know, of the College purchasing a slave for Eaton, and it is almost certain, given everything that we **do** know about Eaton, that he would **not** have used his own funds for such a purpose after arriving in Cambridge. While it's true that we don't have complete records from that time, common sense tells us that a slave who was considered part of Harvard College property would have eventually been recorded somewhere. There is no such record.

TIMELINE OF THE EATONS and HARVARD COLLEGE

- Nathaniel Eaton and his wife arrive in Boston in June 1637 and settle temporarily in Charlestown.
- The *Desire* arrives in Boston Harbor in February 1638, bringing the first confirmed African slaves to Massachusetts.
- In May 1638, the General Court [or the Town of Cambridge] grants Eaton a parcel of land in Cambridge, where "the first Harvard building was raised." There is no mention of a slave in the records.
- Around May 1638, either Eaton "or the Overseers acquired the Peytree House and land in Cow Yard Row on Braintree Street" (present-day Massachusetts Avenue)
- The Eatons move from Charlestown to Cambridge probably sometime in May or early June 1638.
- The first college classes probably begin in July or August 1638.
- John Harvard dies on September 14, 1638, leaving half of his estate to the young college. Harvard College was subsequently named in his honor (see <http://johnharvard.us/>)
- The Briscoe trial, where the entire story of 'The Moor' comes out, takes place a year later, in September 1639.

¹⁸ Margery S. Foster, op. cit., 5.

'The Moor' Probably Not Enslaved at Harvard

The main point is this: there is no specific evidence that The Moor was in an enslaved status while he served at Harvard. In fact, what little we **do** know actually *argues very strongly against that idea.*

Further, the sum total of what we **do** know about him is based **solely** on the handwritten transcript of notes from a trial covering the testimony of one Mistress Eaton, Nathaniel Eaton's hapless wife. And the transcript itself does not focus on The Moor but rather on how poorly Harvard's first students were treated and fed, as well as the fact that they were physically abused with punishments.

In her statement to the court, Mrs. Eaton sought to counter the very damaging testimony that had just been shared with the magistrates by some Harvard students and apparently other witnesses.

Awful Food Served by the Eatons

Much of this damaging testimony at the trial was about food and drink.

Cheese

The first issue to be discussed, of all things, involved **cheese!** Mistress Eaton admitted that, on occasion: *"I must confess, that I have denied them [that is, the students] cheese, when they have sent for it and it have been in the house, for which I humbly beg pardon of them, and own the shame, and confess my sin."* Then she said that she knew nothing about some of the servants allegedly using so-called "provoking words" with the students. The picture painted by her testimony was one of the servants apparently **ruling the roost over** the students under Eaton's iron hand. Presumably, "The Moor" was part of that system, which seems to have been a hierarchy of sadism, with the Eatons at the top, the servants as their 'enforcers' in the middle, and Harvard students at the very bottom. The picture is **not** one of students having servants or a slave at their beck and call. Rather, the students appear to have been daily supplicants.

This is very important to understand. It is a picture completely contrary to the kind of picture that the Harvard slavery report tries to convey, which is one of entitled, white colonial students being waited on by a presumed person of color who was allegedly a slave.

While it is true that, through the centuries, Harvard has often had its issues with privilege, the picture that is painted or implied by the report with respect to the brief Eaton era is a completely unfair and distorted one.

‘Goat Dung in the Hasty Pudding’!

The Eatons at one point had apparently served the students bad fish with their guts still in them, while another time there was **goat dung** found in the hasty pudding. That’s right! Try to picture that for a moment! **Goat dung!** Unless this was some sort of prank of one or more students against other students (which seems rather unlikely, given the humorless circumstances of the place at the time), it would seem just as likely or even more likely that someone on the staff deliberately gathered goat dung in order to put it into the students’ pudding! Mrs. Eaton, in fact, readily confessed her negligence concerning this incident, all but admitting that whatever had occurred had been under her control.

Some 150 years later, in 1795, a famous social club, The Hasty Pudding Club, was founded at Harvard. It has had five U.S. Presidents among its members.¹⁹

‘The Moor’ Acted with Impunity

It is **right after** this disgusting portion of her testimony that Mrs. Eaton first mentions ‘The Moor.’ In responding to another complaint in student testimony, she admitted that ‘The Moor’ had, on at least one occasion, decided to lie down in one of the student’s beds, the bed of a Mr. Samuel Hough, which was very upsetting to young Samuel. Mrs. Eaton did acknowledge that the incident **had** actually occurred, and she apologized to the court for it. She also said that Samuel was justified in being offended by this. But note this key point: ‘The Moor’ apparently had no fear of doing so; there was no indication that he had been punished for doing so; Mrs. Eaton merely admitted that he was ‘out of line’ when he did it. What kind of so-called ‘slave’ could this have been? “The Moor” – whoever he was, apparently acted with impunity. If he had truly been a slave, at this moment in time Mrs. Eaton would likely have said that he **had been** punished or that he **would be** punished, but she said nothing of the sort.

Eating the ‘Moor’s Crusts’

But *that* was just the beginning! In her next bit of testimony, Mrs. Eaton sought to counter the assertion that the students had often been relegated to eating, “the Moor’s crusts.” What did *that* mean?! Well, to simply take the words at face value, it apparently meant that “The Moor,” the supposed slave, was fed **prior** to the students, and was perhaps getting fresh bread?, and that the students themselves were reduced to just eating the crusts that he had left over!²⁰ Or, alternatively, ‘The Moor’ was being fed bread crusts and the students also had to make do with only receiving bread crusts. But notice that, even according to this interpretation, these are still designated as “*The Moor’s*” crusts – showing that **he** had them first (or got them first) and that the students got the leftovers. Again, this is evidence of a **hierarchy**, with Harvard’s students at the bottom. The College at this time sounds more like a prison camp than a school – almost like something out of Dickens!

¹⁹ Hasty Pudding Club origin, <https://www.hastypudding.org/hasty-pudding-club/> (Accessed Sept. 2022)

²⁰ Benjamin Peirce, in his *A History of Harvard University* (1833), refers to the “ill and scant diet” of the boarding students, where he says they were mostly fed “ordinarily nothing but porridge and pudding, and that very homely.” (Peirce, Appendix, 29)

To make matters worse, Mrs. Eaton next tried to counter additional testimony that Harvard's students even had to share these bread crusts with the college pigs – in a “share and share alike” arrangement! Truly disgusting!

And yet Harvard wants to 'officially' build its history of slavery at the College starting with this whole revolting episode as its foundation??!! It is an absurd mangling of limited historical fact with an imaginary structure of white students allegedly lording it over a supposed slave when ***just the opposite*** appears to be the case!

“Penny Beer”

In the next part of this horrendous story, Mrs. Eaton next discussed beer. She said that she was an “utter stranger” to the accusation that ‘The Moor’ himself **had** beer and that **they** – the students – were **denied** said beer. She even appealed to one of the students, John Wilson, to affirm to the Court that “generally,” bread and beer were available to the students.

This question of beer requires further explanation.

We talk about beer at early Harvard in one of the other podcasts at EarlyHarvard.com, the podcast about Sister Bradish and Henry Dunster. This was not beer as we think of it today. What existed in New England at the time was something called **penny beer**. It was slightly alcoholic, but the main point was that it was safer than regular water. It was, if you will, the bottled water of that day. As Samuel Eliot Morison has written, “Beer was the universal English beverage at the time, morning, noon and night; water was deemed unwholesome.”²¹ It was expected that students would have beer as part of their regular diet.

Beef

Finally, Mrs. Eaton also confessed that she also knew that she was **supposed** to feed the students beef, but acknowledged that, “*truly I must confess, to my shame, I cannot remember that they ever had it...*”²²

Beatings!

So, little or no beer, little or no beef – but Harvard students did have lots of something else that began with a ‘B’ – **beatings!**

Master Eaton was aptly called “*Master.*” He demanded absolute obedience. Students were apparently beaten at the slightest sign of disobedience. Morison notes that sometimes the students were “given twenty or thirty stripes at a time, until they would confess what the master compelled

²¹ S.E. Morison, *Harvard in the Seventeenth Century*, I, pp. 91-92.

²² S.E. Morison, *Builders of the Bay Colony*, citing Mistress Eaton's testimony before the General Court, p. 191.

them to.”²³ Eaton himself readily confessed to this at trial and was actually proud of it. He told the court that “he had this rule, that he would not give over correcting till he had subdued the party to his will.”²⁴ Harvard College at this time truly exemplified the old joke, “The beatings will continue until morale improves!”

The Nathaniel Briscoe Episode

We need to back up a bit. Why was there a trial in the first place? How did this all come about?

The trial where all of this awful information came tumbling out was precipitated by an earlier event. That event involved Nathaniel Eaton’s beating of *another* Nathaniel, an Englishman named Nathaniel Briscoe, who had been a job applicant for a job at the College – the position of usher, an assistant instructor role. Things did not work out during the job interview, to put it mildly. Briscoe was clearly put off by what he saw. The two men got into an altercation. This story is covered at length in another podcast here at EarlyHarvard.com, the one that describes Eaton’s Reign of Terror.

Eaton had Briscoe brought up on charges for pulling a knife on him. That was the purpose for the trial. Everyone – except those on the inside, of course, thought that Briscoe was in the wrong, that he was some sort of wild ruffian who had threatened Eaton. Prior to this trial, Eaton had everyone hoodwinked.

But then at the trial it came out that Eaton himself had been the aggressor against Briscoe. He had beaten Briscoe possibly to within an inch of his life – all because the two had ‘had words.’ The authorities were appalled! According to the testimony, Eaton had used a walnut wood cudgel a yard long - big enough to have killed a horse - to beat Briscoe. He reportedly hit him some two hundred times with this massive cudgel while two of Eaton’s servants held him down. Was ‘The Moor’ possibly one of the servants who held Briscoe down while he was being beaten by Eaton? We don’t know, but the whole story was a **nightmare!**

What is clear is that Harvard’s first year as a working school during 1638-1639 - was a House of Horrors!! It is ridiculous to use it as a measuring-stick for anything!

But that did not stop the authors of this report in prominently listing “The Moor” in its “List of Human Beings Enslaved by Prominent Harvard Affiliates” as supposedly being the first enslaved person at Harvard.

Interestingly, the earlier student report from 2011 titled, *Harvard and Slavery: Seeking a Forgotten History*, was more nuanced. Unlike its later counterpart, it did not assume that ‘The Moor’ had

²³ S.E. Morison, *The Founding of Harvard College*, op. cit., 232-34.

²⁴ Winthrop, op. cit., 372.

been a slave. It stated simply, “If ‘the Moor’ was indeed a slave, he was likely the first to be connected to Harvard.”²⁵ True enough.

From a Possibility to Indisputable Fact?

But here we have an interesting dilemma: in the eleven years since that statement appeared, has some new historical fact about ‘The Moor’ been discovered by the *Presidential Committee on Harvard & the Legacy of Slavery* that has now transformed the nuanced statement of 2011 about the Moor *possibly* being a slave into becoming in 2022 a **supposedly indisputable fact**? I think not, but I would challenge the Harvard Committee on Slavery and The Harvard Corporation, which has endorsed their report, to produce such a source, and I will happily withdraw my complaint.

It would appear that the **only** thing separating the 2011 report from the 2022 report on this point is Harvard’s new agenda of ‘wokeness’ and its sacrifice of historical truth on the altar of historical revisionism. This is doubly sad because it is so unnecessary.

Well, to get back to The Moor, we never hear anything more about him. Following the trial, after the Eatons were dismissed for all of their malfeasance, apparently ‘The Moor’ moved on as well. He disappears from the record, although we continue to learn **a lot** about what happened to the Eatons after this.

To make the point once again: we would not even have known of ‘The Moor’s’ existence except for the brief statements by Mrs. Eaton. He flits in and out of history through her statements and her statements alone.

In 1640, Henry Dunster, Harvard’s first president, arrived in Cambridge and more or less re-built the College from scratch. There is **no evidence** that Dunster, nor any of his early successors as **President**, had slaves until we get to the time of Increase Mather, some forty-five years later.

After the Eaton disaster, the College all but closed down almost for an entire year, from September 1639 until August 1640. Some students were apparently too traumatized to return.

Meanwhile, after his crimes at Harvard College became known, Eaton himself was imprisoned. After an insincere confession, the authorities released him from prison on his own recognizance, awaiting further legal action. But instead of owning up to what he had done, he decided to escape Massachusetts and fled to Virginia. Here we see some additional drama and subterfuge. Before actually escaping, he was intercepted at a dock by three constables. In a ruse, he boarded a Virginia-bound boat along with the three officers. When two of them stepped back ashore, Eaton “quickly ordered the boatmen to shove off,” then threw the third constable overboard and “scrambled aboard the ship, which promptly set sail for Virginia.”²⁶ He was now out of the jurisdiction of Massachusetts and never returned to face justice.

²⁵ Sven Beckert and Katherine Stevens and the students of the Harvard and Slavery Research Seminar, *Harvard and Slavery: Seeking a Forgotten History* (2011), 9.

²⁶ S.E. Morison, *FHC*, pp. 237-238, citing Governor John Winthrop’s *Journal*, 1908 edition, I, p. 314..

Later, his wife and children - except for the child named Benoni – decided to try to join him in Virginia. They left on a ship out of Boston, but that ship was later lost at sea without a trace.²⁷

Eaton never found a way to retrieve his remaining son, if he ever even tried? Benoni ended up being raised by Thomas Chesholme and his wife. Chesholme, who lived from 1604 to 1671, was the Harvard College Steward from about 1650 to 1660.

Eaton later re-married but subsequently abandoned his **second** wife as well, fleeing Virginia to return to England after piling up debts that he could not pay. After additional transgressions, he died in debtors prison in England.²⁸

But let us now return to the question I posed earlier.

I believe that I have convincingly shown that The Moor was not the *College's* slave but a servant, one of the earliest employees of a barely established Harvard College. But was he the Eaton family's **personal** slave?

We learn many details about what happened to the Eatons after the trial, after their malfeasance had been exposed. But one thing that we never hear anything about is a slave. It strains credulity to think that we should learn all these details about the Eaton family, about a ship lost at sea with all hands, about Eaton's second marriage in Virginia, about his return to England and eventual death in a debtors' prison, about a son left abandoned in Cambridge - but hear **not a word** about a slave. What was he doing all this time? Waiting at home for **instructions**?!

No, applying logic and Occam's Razor, it seems quite clear that, whatever his original status was in coming to New England, 'The Moor' was no slave of Harvard College and no family slave of the Eatons.

But what about the rest of the story?

The Reverend Thomas Shepard, the local minister, was also one of the local Overseers of the College at the time. One of his responsibilities had in fact been **to oversee** what was happening 'on campus,' so to speak, just a stone's throw away from the First Church of Cambridge. Unfortunately, he had been oblivious to everything that was happening right under his nose. He felt the sting of Eaton's deception and betrayal very personally and was quite shook up over the whole affair and his own blindness to it. It took him some time to recover – *if he ever did*. He once noted that his own lack of care and watchfulness over the situation at the college at that time was "**very great, for which I desire to mourne all my life.**"²⁹

²⁷Willard De Lue, "Tales of the Old Towne," *Boston Daily Globe*, March 13, 1922, p. 12.

²⁸ Morison, *FHC*, pp. 237-240.

²⁹ From *Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, XXVII, p. 389, cited in Morison, *The Founding of Harvard College*, p. 233.

In his massive 1840 work, *The History of Harvard University*, former Harvard President Josiah Quincy said this about the Eaton affair: “*Of this man nothing has been transmitted worthy of being repeated.*”³⁰

Eaton was a tyrant, a liar, a cheat, a bully and a sadist. In 2019, *The Harvard Crimson*, in an article titled, “But for the Grace of Henry Dunster,” commented thus on this period of Harvard’s history:

*“Eaton’s tenure was a debacle. He not only mismanaged finances but embezzled money from the school.... With terrorized students, uncertain funding, and no leader, Harvard shut down for a year. That Harvard exists today is largely thanks to the work of Henry Dunster, who was appointed president in 1640.”*³¹

Dunster saved the day and literally restarted what was left of Harvard College. But some might ask, ‘How did a rogue like Eaton get hired in the first place?’ That might take another entire podcast, but let us simply say that, within the Puritan world at the time, Eaton came with the highest credentials – he had been a student of William Ames (1576-1633) – the primary theologian impacting New England Puritanism³² – and he fooled everyone. Ames himself had passed away some five years before these events took place.

That is the story of Nathaniel Eaton and this awful period of Harvard’s earliest history. To leave all of this out in its report, to merely assert that The Moor was “an enslaved human being” – while, from what little we do know, he clearly enjoyed a status certainly equal to and apparently **above that** of Harvard students themselves at the time – seems an **absurdity**.

But the deeper issue goes to intent.

The report **might** have mostly skipped this episode and moved on to the Wadsworth and Holyoke eras some 80-100 years later in the 18th century, where the documentation is quite clear that some Harvard Presidents **did** own slaves, some **did** serve on campus, and **now**, because of this renewed focus, we know many of their names: Titus, Venus, Bilhah and Juba.³³ By doing so, it would have had greater credibility and still gotten its message across.

But no, the report did not do that. And the question is why?

³⁰ Josiah Quincy (Vol. 1), op. cit., 13.

³¹ Nicole B. Farina and Mateo N. Wong, “But for the Grace of Henry Dunster,” *The Harvard Crimson* (Nov. 7, 2019) <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2019/11/7/harvard-incompetence/>

³² Ames’s impact on New England Puritanism took place from a distance through his writings and reputation. He himself never made it to New England.

³³ “To Titus, Venus, Bilhah, and Juba” (Harvard Gazette, April 6, 2016) <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2016/04/to-titus-venus-bilhah-and-juba/> (April 6, 2016). This moving video shows the dedication of a plaque at Wadsworth House in their memory.

The answer seems quite evident. The overall narrative would collapse if they had done that. Clearly, the goal was to tie the stench of slavery to Harvard's very beginnings, to its very origin as an institution. This is how 'woke' ideology begins to corrupt everything it touches.

Let me add one more thing. Like a lawyer arguing a case before a jury, with Harvard's early history sitting in the dock, I have provided reasonable doubt that 'The Moor' was a slave. But whether you are persuaded or not, the key point is that this short and awful Eaton era was an **anomaly**.

Past historians of Harvard have covered it briefly but quickly moved on. Why? Because they were ashamed of it, embarrassed in fact, and it offered next to nothing of value to Harvard's later storied history.

But the report makes no distinctions here. There is no discussion of Eaton being a complete scoundrel. Instead, it presents a pre-conceived ideological narrative. The report's authors went in search of certain facts while ignoring other facts.

Now it is absolutely true that, later on, there were slaves of African descent owned by a few specific individuals with Harvard connections **prior** to the 18th century. One of them was Thomas Danforth, who served as College Treasurer from 1650-1668, then as Steward from 1668-1682 and also during later years as an Overseer. At some point in his life, Danforth acquired a personal slave whose name was Philip Ffeild.

To my knowledge, when and how Philip Ffeild became a slave in the Danforth household is not known. Danforth was also Deputy Governor of Massachusetts for twenty years. He was in many respects a walking contradiction: as a leading colonial official he was also one of the fiercest champions for liberty and self-government in Massachusetts against royal encroachments from England, and yet he owned a slave.³⁴ He persecuted the Quakers in Massachusetts, but he also opposed the Salem witch trials.³⁵

Danforth died in 1699. There is no evidence that Philip Ffeild had any direct connection to Harvard College, although it's possible that he did. In his will, Danforth stated that, after his death, Philip should serve his son-in-law, Mr. Francis Foxcroft, for an additional four years and then become a free man and also receive ten pounds and forty acres of farmland around Cambridge.³⁶

Then you also have Cotton and Increase Mather. Both of them **did** own slaves, for which there is a lot of documentation.³⁷ But the Mathers are a complicated case, both father and son. In the case of Cotton Mather, I would direct you to a book by Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Kenneth

³⁴ Roger Thompson, *Cambridge Cameos* (2005), 264.

³⁵ Thompson, *op. cit.*, 264.

³⁶ *Historic Guide to Cambridge* (1907), 161.

³⁷ Henry W. Haynes, "Cotton Mather and His Slaves," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*; (Worcester, Mass. Vol. 6, April 1, 1889): 192. Cotton Mather, his son, writing in his diary in 1681, stating: "Memorandum. About this time I bought a *Spanish Indian*, and I bestowed him for a *Servant* on my Father..."

Silverman's 1984 biography, titled *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather*. At the time Harvard scholar Sacvan Bercovitch, in an endorsement, called the book, "a model of historical scholarship... remarkable both for its enormous learning and for its clarity of analysis."³⁸ Those are attributes that one can certainly **not** ascribe to the slavery report.

Increase Mather became Acting President of Harvard in 1685. He was the first example that we know of, of a President of Harvard who owned slaves. He also spent as little time in Cambridge as possible during his tenure. A study of the Mathers, their relationships to Harvard and the New England community, their households, and how they treated their slaves and servants, could also easily take up an entire podcast by itself.

Despite these examples, which I agree should be criticized but done in context, there is no evidence, so far as I know, that these personal family slaves were ever resident on campus or served any Harvard students during the forty-five years from 1640 to 1685. And even after 1685, we really need to wait until the early eighteenth century and the presidencies of Presidents Benjamin Wadsworth (from the period 1725–1737) and Edward Holyoke (1737–1769), to get to a point where we know for sure that there were enslaved people working on campus.

These stories need to be told. However, it would have been far better and more accurate for the Harvard report to have focused on a "Tragic Century of Slavery" from roughly the 1680s until 1783 and not to have cast the entire institution under a cloud.

Instead, I direct you again to former Harvard President Drew Faust's words that "... *Harvard was directly complicit in America's system of racial bondage from the College's earliest days in the 17th century until slavery in Massachusetts ended in 1783...*"

The report's authors should also not have completely entangled the story of Pequot Indian War captives with the story of African slaves brought to New England. Yes, there were connections between the two groups as the slave trade developed, but the report lacks all context and makes no distinctions. It simply conflates the two histories into one narrative with a single purpose – to cast the New England Puritans and Harvard's founders in the worst possible light and to make them out to be fundamentally racist and exploitative. This shall be the subject of a future podcast.

Just as The 1619 Project was oriented to denounce America's **entire** early history as a "slavocracy," Harvard's report on slavery seeks to define Harvard's own earliest history as being completely mired in the evils of slavery.

Remember - the *Washington Post* had no problem in figuring out the report's real message and purpose. To repeat, it said that the Harvard slavery report, "*represents a landmark acknowledgment from one of the world's most prestigious universities of the breadth of its entanglement with slavery, white supremacy and racial injustice for centuries after its 1636 founding.*"

³⁸ Sacvan Bercovitch endorsement of Kenneth Silverman book, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather* (New York: Welcome Rain Publishers, 1984).

To reduce Harvard’s story to this is a disgrace – but this is just another example of how woke ideology clouds the truth, the **whole** truth, in support of a particular agenda. Yes, Harvard’s early history includes some black marks, and we have looked at some of them, and let me emphasize, we **need** to look at them, but Harvard’s story is also **a story of glory** in the midst of struggle and pain and contradiction.

All the available facts need to be brought to light, but they also need to be placed in context.

The Harvard slavery report is not real history; it represents mostly cherry-picked facts seen through the ideological lens of present-day wokeness. To the extent that it obscures the full story and clouds the search for full historical truth, it is *anti-history*. It is **certainly not *Veritas***.

And in the end, *that* is all we have. If our search for the truth is not honest and thorough and transparent, then we really have nothing at all.

We shall look at other examples of distorted and shoddy history in the Harvard slavery report in future articles and podcasts.

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