Wealth accumulated from participation in slavery created a colonial aristocracy whose members would found Queen’s College, serve as its trustees and officers, and patronize the institution as pupils. Prominent slaveholding families donated money and land to Queen’s College (Rutgers), which helped the college reopen and remain in operation when it struggled financially. These families had relationships with Queen’s College for generations. Prominent individuals who descended from the colonial aristocracy passed their wealth and privilege to subsequent generations, and the college continued to benefit from “old money” that was earned through the economic exploitation of enslaved people.

In *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities*, Craig Steven Wilder traces the development of America’s institutions of higher education from the early colonial period through the nineteenth century. His research demonstrates that the creation and development of American universities “were thoroughly intertwined” with the slave trade and decline of indigenous peoples in the Americas. Queen’s College was among the early institutions to benefit from the profound “economic and social forces” of the slave trade.¹ This chapter builds on Wilder’s work to provide an overview of the political and economic climate that existed at the time of the founding of Queen’s College, and how the growth of the slave trade facilitated the development of these institutions.

The story of Rutgers University and slavery in New Jersey both originate in the Netherlands. The Dutch West India Company and the Dutch Reformed Church were two institutions that played a key role in the development of the economy in the Mid-Atlantic region and Queen’s College. As historian James
Gigantino has noted, slavery’s beginning in New Jersey cannot be divorced from its interaction with the Atlantic world and its relationship with neighboring New York. In 1626 the first African slaves arrived in New Netherland (New York) to work for the Dutch West India Company. This company of merchants traded in the West Indies (Caribbean) and dominated the Atlantic slave trade. It also enacted a “patroon” system, which granted vast tracts of land in the New Netherland colony to European settlers. Slave labor soon became extremely important to the region as few European immigrants chose to settle there and the colony suffered chronic labor shortages. By 1630, Dutch and Walloon settlers had spread to the west bank of the Hudson River in present-day Bergen County and brought the first slaves to New Jersey. The Dutch had settled New Brunswick by 1681.²

Queen’s College would be founded within the slaving belt of East Jersey, where slave trading and slaveholding was common. Under British rule, East and West Jersey operated as separate proprietary colonies for twenty-eight years (1674–1702) before reuniting as a royal colony in 1702. Slavery in East Jersey was greatly influenced by the West Indies. Planters from Barbados, along with their slaves, came in droves to East Jersey and New York in the 1660s and 1670s. By 1700 Barbadian immigrants owned the largest concentration of slaves, whom they forced to labor on large estates granted by the colony proprietors. After East and West Jersey reunited, the colony passed, in 1704, a slave code that used previous East Jersey statutes as a model and included provisions influenced by the Barbadians. The 1704 law imposed severe restrictions on black people, including prohibiting slaves and free blacks from owning property.¹ By the time Queen’s College was established, the institution of slavery was entrenched in the political, economic, and social facets of New Jersey, especially in East Jersey counties. This included Middlesex County, the future home of Queen’s College.

The Dutch Reformed Church was also a key institution that shaped the culture of New Jersey. Prior to the founding of Queen’s College there was no seminary in the Americas to train those who aspired to be ministers in the Dutch Reformed Church. Prospective ministers had to take the long, dangerous, and expensive journey to Amsterdam for their education and ordination. Some Dutch ministers in New York and New Jersey favored autonomy for colonial churches, rather than having to submit to the Church in Amsterdam. Through the efforts of colonial ministers such as the Reverend Theodore Frelinghuysen (1724–1761), a Dutch college was established in New Brunswick. Queen’s College received its charter in 1766 and in 1771 commenced instruction “to cultivate Piety, Learning, and Liberty.”³

Yet in the early colonial era, colleges functioned as tools of empire. Wilder calls them “imperial instruments akin to armories and forts, a part of the colonial garrison.” They educated future colonial administrators, advanced civilizing
missions, and sought to spread Christianity to indigenous peoples and "extend European rule over foreign nations." Britain supported colleges in the colonies financially in the early portion of the seventeenth century, but as a growing merchant class began to gain power and wealth by mid-century, colonists were able to finance their projects "without metropolitan interference." Merchants became the major financiers of higher education, and in the case of Queen’s College, they along with Dutch ministers founded the institution. The Dutch Reformed Church did not see the enslavement of Africans as a social evil or moral sin. Thus, many of college’s early trustees and officers, students, and donors came from wealthy families with financial ties to slavery.

By the mid-eighteenth century, trade with Africa and the West Indies reshaped cities in New England and the Mid-Atlantic. Shops sprouted in port cities, and grand homes were filled with luxury goods from Europe and the Caribbean. Members of New York’s old guard branched out into the shipping and insurance industries: “These were the families that laid the foundations of the metropolis.” They sat on boards and founded major social institutions such as New York Hospital and the first public library in New York City. Prior to the American Revolution, sixteen merchants served as trustees of King’s College (Columbia University). Merchants were integrated into the Atlantic economy, and as the slave trade grew, so did their wealth.

In addition to merchants, slave traders and planters gained power in colonial society, allowing them to take "guardianship over education.” The development of campuses was intertwined with merchants’ and planters’ rise to power in the decades leading up to the American Revolution. According to Wilder, “Slaveholders became college presidents. The wealth of the traders determined the locations and decided the fates of colonial schools. Profits from the sale and purchase of human beings paid for campuses and swelled college trusts. And the politics of the campus conformed to the presence and demands of slaveholding students as colleges aggressively cultivated a social environment attractive to the sons of wealthy families."  

Take for example, Jasper Farmar, who was born into a middle-class family and began his career as a slave ship captain. In 1739, he forged a contract with John Walther of New York and Arnot Schuyler of New Jersey to captain the maiden voyage of their ship, Catherine. Farmar sailed to Angola and returned with 130 people to Perth Amboy, New Jersey, and New York City. Thirty Africans died aboard Catherine during the journey from Angola to the colonies. Farmar continued as a slave ship captain and went on to command voyages between New York and London, which proved to be more lucrative. He eventually garnered enough capital to invest in his own ships and partnered with his brother Samuel to open a merchant house. By mid-century, Farmar was involved in slaving ventures with John Watts, a merchant and trustee of King’s College. Farmar
amassed enough money to send his son, also named Jasper, to Queen’s College. Farmar demonstrates that the emergence of merchants not only financed schools but also supplied the wealth to send students to college. The tie to slavery was not only at the administrative level but present within the student body.

The slave trade also lined the pockets of those who founded and became the trustees of Queen’s College. The charter trustees came from some of the most prominent slave-trading and slaveholding families in the region. The founding president, Jacob Hardenbergh, was a slave owner. The first tutor, Frederick Frelinghuysen, Hardenbergh’s stepson, also owned slaves. The earliest graduates came from Dutch slaveholding families, including the Schencks, Van Cortlandts, and Van Hornes. The trustees, Philip Livingston, Robert Livingston, Theodorus Van Wyck, Peter Schenck, and Abraham Hasbrouck, were all from prominent slave-trading and slaveholding families in the region. In the Mid-Atlantic and New England regions, the greatest period of expansion in higher education occurred at the peak of the African slave trade. By the 1750s, the number of trustees involved in this trade increased. Two of Queen’s College’s original 1766 trustees were brothers Philip Livingston (1716–1778) and Robert Livingston (1708–1790), who came from the prominent Livingston Manor in upstate New York. Many of the early trustees were not residents of New Jersey but of New York City, because of the Dutch Reformed Church’s strong presence in that city. The Livingstons belonged to the “colonial aristocracy” and its members were “distinguished culturally from their humbler neighbors,” in wealth and manners. This landed family traced its roots back to the first Robert Livingston (1654–1728), a Scotsman brought up in the Netherlands who arrived in the New York colony in 1675. By 1686 he had assembled the 160,000-acre tract called Livingston Manor. The estate’s great wealth was acquired in part by the labor of enslaved people. The first Robert Livingston purchased several slaves in New York City to provide for the manor’s labor needs and for his children’s need for servants.

Robert’s son Philip (1686–1749) was a leading importer of slaves from Jamaica and Antigua during the 1730s. In August 1733, Philip’s sloop Katherine brought in fifty blacks from Jamaica, an unusually large shipment from that source. He was also part-owner of a number of vessels, some of which were owned in partnership with his sons Philip and Robert, the Queen’s College trustees. The younger Philip Livingston, who was a signer of the Declaration of Independence, continued in his father’s slave-trading business and became a merchant in New York City. He also received “slaves and commercial slaving interests” from his parents and his in-laws, the Van Brugh family. Philip and Robert Livingston’s involvement with the slave trade was not exceptional among major mercantile families. Thus, we can assume that other early trustees and Queen’s College affiliates who were listed as New York merchants likely had financial ties to slavery.
Robert and Philip’s younger brother was William Livingston, the first governor of New Jersey following the American Revolution, for whom Rutgers University’s Livingston campus is named. William Livingston attended the Constitutional Convention and helped to frame the document that emerged from its deliberations. William was also a lawyer, but he apparently did not choose the profession with much enthusiasm. Since his older brothers were merchants and landowners, the family wanted him to look after its legal interests. Thus, William was compelled into the law profession. Livingston’s connections with New York’s most prominent and wealthy families aided his legal career considerably; he executed their wills, drew up their deeds, and sued their delinquent debtors. The Livingstons and their relations constituted the source of William’s earliest legal practice, and his membership in the legal profession served his slave-trading family’s financial interests.

William Livingston’s family connections also took him far in politics. In 1772 Livingston moved from New York to New Jersey and was elected governor of New Jersey in 1776. As governor, Livingston was sympathetic to abolitionists. In 1786 he wrote that “slavery was an indelible blot . . . upon the character of those who have so strongly asserted the unalienable rights of man.” In referencing the Declaration of Independence, William highlighted the fact that the liberal promises of the American Revolution stood beyond the reach of enslaved people. At the beginning of the Revolution, the founding fathers declared, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Yet all men were not equal, and they did not pay an equal price for the nation’s freedom from Britain. During the Revolutionary War, landed families were able to flee from the battles taking place in New York and New Jersey. For example, John Henry Livingston, the future president of Queen’s College, was able to evade the danger of living in Flatbush by fleeing to the manors of family and friends in upstate New York and Connecticut. These large estates, which served as safe havens, were built and maintained by unfree blacks.

Like William Livingston, members of slaveholding families who opposed slavery often occupied a place of contradiction. They condemned the institution while they benefited from the wealth it created. Likewise, the people closest to them continued to benefit financially from slavery. Livingston worked with Quaker abolitionists to instigate an end to the Atlantic slave trade and the abolition of slavery in New Jersey. However, Livingston eventually abandoned the combined plan, believing that trying for both ran the “risk of obtaining nothing.” He claimed it was “then prudence not to insist upon it, but to get what we can and which paves the way for procuring the rest.” As the privileged and wealthy governor of New Jersey, William Livingston could afford to have a “be
patient” attitude. But enslaved men and women in New Jersey agonized every day that freedom remained elusive.

The prominent Livingston family continued to have close ties with Queen’s College in the next generation. The fourth president of the college was the Reverend John Henry Livingston, who served from 1810 until his death in 1825. In addition to being president, John Henry Livingston was a theological professor for the college. John Henry was the son-in-law and distant cousin of trustee Philip Livingston (1716–1778). Livingston had grown up in Poughkeepsie, New York, in a family who owned slaves and he had almost certainly owned slaves himself as late as 1790 while he was still in New York City, although by 1800 he apparently no longer did so. John Henry Livingston’s branch of the family was the least prosperous; his grandfather was the first Robert Livingston’s youngest

FIGURE 2.1 Reverend John Henry Livingston, president of Queen’s College and professor of Theology. Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries.
son, Gilbert. However, Gilbert Livingston did benefit financially from the family’s slaveholding and was relatively wealthy. In fact, Gilbert apparently did not mind suffering a financial loss to demonstrate his mastery over his slaves. John Henry Livingston’s grandfather once subjected a slave to a severe beating for the offense of having run away. The unfortunate man “died out of doggedness” within ten days. For wealthy slaveholders like Gilbert Livingston, enslaved people’s lives were expendable.

John Henry Livingston, who married his second cousin Sarah Livingston, never expected to participate in the slave-trading business of his father-in-law Philip. He was always an astute scholar, and after briefly studying law, he decided his true calling was to devote his life to God and the religious profession. An event in 1765 made an unforgettable impression on John Henry and cemented his religious conversion and decision to devote himself to the ministry. For many months he had been ill with a constant pain in his chest along with a fever. In the spring of 1765, John decided that a voyage to the West Indies would improve his health. However, after making all the necessary arrangements and preparations for the trip, for some unexplainable reason, he lost all desire to go and “suddenly gave up the voyage.” John later learned that the vessel he had planned to take to the West Indies had been seized and all who were on board were murdered. Realizing that he would have died had he gone on the voyage, he interpreted the outcome as Divine Providence working in his favor. This moment of divine intervention that shaped the course of Livingston’s life—and Queen’s College—was tainted by slavery. Livingston had probably planned to visit the West Indies because the family had been importing slaves from the West Indies and had many connections there.

Though he was not actively involved in his father-in-law’s slave-trading business, John Henry Livingston did inherit some of his wealth from his slave-trading father-in-law. When Philip Livingston died in 1778, his daughter Sarah and son-in-law John Henry Livingston were named as heirs. Excluding Brooklyn real estate left to his wife, Philip Livingston bequeathed all of his estate to be divided equally among his six children, which included Sarah Livingston. Since Philip’s son Abraham had died not long after his father, part of his inheritance was also passed on to Henry Alexander Livingston, the son of John Henry and Sarah Livingston.

Besides inheriting wealth, John Henry Livingston served as one of the administrators of Philip Livingston’s estate. For decades after his father-in-law died, John Henry conducted business on behalf of the estate. In his May 18, 1778, last will and testament Philip stipulated that the executors of his estate should sell whatever was necessary to settle his debts, and then divide the rest of his property among his children. Philip’s property included “goods and Chattels” and it is plausible that John Henry Livingston could have overseen the sale of this property as one of the administrators of the estate.
As president of Queen’s College from 1810 through 1825, John Henry Livingston certainly encountered many enslaved persons in New Brunswick and the surrounding area.42

Livingston’s former student Benjamin Taylor recalled a time he and the Reverend Livingston walked through New Brunswick where they encountered several people, including a young black man:

As we passed down the street, the first person we met was a young colored man, who very politely bowed to the Doctor, who quickly replied, “Good morning, boy!” Turning his face toward me, he said, “my son, learn a lesson: never be outdone in politeness by a negro.” Presently we met a prominent lawyer of the city. Stopping for a moment, he with his hand lifted his hat, and saluted him gracefully. Then having passed on a few steps, he said: “my son, always be very respectful to gentlemen of intelligence.
and influence.” Advancing somewhat further, he saw a venerable lady, the widow of a distinguished judge of our supreme courts, coming toward us. “My son, Mrs. Paterson is coming—a most estimable lady. We must be very courteous.” Then, with both hands, in a most dignified manner, he took off his hat, and bade her good-morning. Turning to me, he [said], “my son, always remember there are distinctions in society. Ever have respect to the characters you meet with and the positions they occupy.”

From this we can see that Livingston saw blacks as the lowest in society. The young black man had to bow to the Reverend Livingston, something he probably had to do to most whites he encountered. He also had to bear being called a “boy” even though Taylor admits that the person he and Livingston encountered was in fact a young man.

The Livingstons were not the only aristocratic family with ties to the college. Stephen Van Rensselaer (1764–1839) served as a trustee of Queen’s College from 1829 to 1839 and donated $1,000 for a professorship in 1824. Van Rensselaer was the son-in-law of Philip Livingston (he married Sarah’s sister Catherine), a descendant of Kiliaen Van Rensselaer, and a director of the Dutch West India Company, which had enacted the “patroon” system. Kiliaen Van Rensselaer was the most successful patroon and had a large estate in upstate New York called Rensselaerswyck, which he passed down to his male descendants. The Manor of Rensselaerswyck relied on slave labor, and the family owned many slaves. Stephen Van Rensselaer inherited Rensselaerswyck in 1785 and became one of the wealthiest Americans of his era. His brother Philip S. Van Rensselaer also donated a piece of land in New York to the college. Stephen Van Rensselaer Jr. was also a trustee and donor to the college.

After the Revolutionary War, America emerged as a new nation and had to define for itself the role slavery would take in the young country’s future. Much of the United States, including New Jersey, chose to embrace or accept the institution of slavery as a vital part of their political, social, and economic life. Deference to white men’s property rights resulted in gradual rather than immediate emancipation in most of the North. Northern merchants who profited from carrying slave-produced agricultural commodities from Southern states to foreign markets remained invested in the institution. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the new nation experienced unprecedented prosperity and rapid technological advances that created a “Market Revolution.” Yet, the early Republic’s bustling economy opened up new possibilities for some Americans precisely because it closed down opportunities for others.

The Revolutionary War battles fought in New Jersey had caused much destruction and pushed the state into a deep economic recession. White New Jerseyans decided that slavery could spur economic recovery and thus refused
to advance abolition, even as it moved forward in other Northern states. The need to rebuild the devastated East Jersey economy and the growing demand for New Jersey’s grain crops led to the growth of slavery in New Jersey during the two decades after the Revolution. Slave labor enabled New Jersey farmers to profit from the increased value of wheat and flour that the nation witnessed between 1780 and 1790. Uncompensated slave labor was the key factor that allowed New Jersey to keep pace with the worldwide demand for the state’s foodstuffs.

At the opening of the nineteenth century the city of New Brunswick was noted as a shipping and commercial point. Ships owned by locals such as John Voorhees sailed from the Raritan on voyages to Bermuda, the Bahamas, Jamaica, and Hispaniola in the West Indies, as well as to South Carolina, Delaware, North Carolina, and Georgia. Cargo shipped from New Brunswick included grain, pork, leather, and iron ore. Carriages were shipped to the South, and the vessels brought back sweet potatoes and other products.

There were merchants and dealers of all types located on Church and Albany Streets. For example, Thomas Brush conducted a land and intelligence office. He was also an auctioneer who sold “houses, lots, plantations, negro men, wenches and children.” On business trips to New York, the city’s merchants generally proceeded by private conveyances to what is now Jersey City and Hoboken, where they crossed New York Harbor either in a sailboat or rowboat. This journey took three days. It was not uncommon for businessmen to encounter “stray negroes” or blacks who could not give an accounting of their presence on the road. These “strays” were sometimes put in jail. If no owners appeared, they were sold to pay the expense of arrest and jail fees. One of New Brunswick’s principal merchants in the early nineteenth century was Jacob R. Hardenbergh Jr., one of Queen’s College’s early trustees and son of its first president.

While businesses in New Brunswick thrived in the early years of the nineteenth century, the same could not be said of Queen’s College’s financial situation, though its investors remained involved in slavery. Due to financial difficulties Queen’s College fell on hard times and closed from 1795 to 1807. After a few years of renewed operation the college closed again from 1816 to 1825. Only the monetary donations from wealthy slaveholding benefactors saved the institution. In 1807 Queen’s College president Ira Condict along with Andrew Kirkpatrick generated renewed interest in the college and raised $6,000 from patrons in and around New Brunswick. With this money they were able to construct “Old Queen’s,” the college’s first permanent building, in 1809. The land that Old Queen’s was built on was donated by prominent families, whose wealth stemmed from their engagement with slavery. The family of James Parker, a former delegate to the Provincial Congress and an East Jersey proprietor, donated five acres bounding Somerset and George Streets, where Old Queen’s was built in 1809. James Parker was a merchant in New York City and the son of the
The Parker family held slaves as late as the 1820s. Mrs. Ann Parker of North Brunswick appears twice in the Middlesex County records for manumission of slaves. On March 31, 1817, a thirty-five-year-old woman named Charlotte was manumitted and on August 20, 1821, a twenty-three-year-old man named Edward was manumitted. The Parkers were close friends with another family who had ties to the university. Jacob Dunham, whose father and brother were Queen's College trustees, was the Parker family's physician. Mrs. Ann Parker had a running account with Dr. Dunham, who visited Ann and Gertrude Parker on several occasions in the early 1820s. Dunham also treated the Parkers' "blk girl."

The college's land expanded from the Parkers' donation to include a contribution from the Neilson family. Colonel John Neilson, who was elected as a trustee of the college in 1782, profited from personal and familial slaveholding connections. The colonel's uncle, James Neilson, arrived in New Brunswick in 1730. At the time of his death, James Neilson held two enslaved men, "Negro Jack" and "Negro Sampson." John Neilson, born March 11, 1745, at Raritan Landing, joined his Uncle James's shipping business and continued with it after James's death in 1783. The business traded "corn, wines, rum, gin, flour, and cloths" between Madeira, the Dutch West Indies, and New Jersey. In her 1935 master's thesis, Thelma Doyle noted that in one case the Neilson business sold "a negro and that was for the sum of one thousand dollars." In 1778 John also inherited his uncle's estate, including possession of Jack and Sampson.

John Neilson purchased and sold enslaved Africans before and after the Revolutionary War. On February 20, 1777, Neilson wrote to a fellow officer during the war, informing him, "I herewith send you the negro woman taken from Smith of Spotswood, two sight horses arrived last night from South Amboy." According to a report by David J. Fowler, Neilson purchased at public vendue in November 1777 "a negro Man taken from the Enemy." According to Fowler, this man may have appeared again in Neilson's records when in October 1779, a tailor, John Henry, billed Neilson for making a jacket "for your Negro Will." In January 1787, Neilson bought "a certain negro Woman named Flora together with her two female Children, one called Phillis, the other Ann" from Anthony L. Bleecker of New York.

In 1795, John Neilson bought the farm of John Voorhees in New Brunswick, where Neilson's slaves, and possibly free blacks as well, worked for decades. In addition to purchasing enslaved Africans as chattel property, Neilson also purchased an enslaved man, it appears, through a form of indenture. In July 1798, Neilson purchased a "Negro Man named Tony" for a five-year-term, which, according to Fowler, was formally arranged between Neilson and Tony. In 1815, Neilson purchased another enslaved man, Prince, for a period of four years. John Neilson continued to buy and sell enslaved people in New Jersey well into the nineteenth century. Two receipts from Hannah Clark in 1814 and 1815
indicate Neilson sold two enslaved women, Grace and Dine, making a profit of $150 and $75, respectively, from the sale.\textsuperscript{72}

John Neilson’s son, James, was also a slaveholder and a major benefactor to Rutgers College. In 1814, he purchased an enslaved man, Lewis, from Joseph Baldwin in Newark for the sum of $126.\textsuperscript{73} The following year, Neilson paid $250 to purchase an enslaved woman, Elizabeth.\textsuperscript{74} In 1816, Neilson purchased another man, Mark, from a man in New Brunswick, Benjamin Taylor. In the receipt, Neilson promised to manumit Mark in 1821. However, almost two decades later in 1838, Neilson sold Mark to Abraham Ranby. In 1825, Neilson paid $100 for another enslaved woman named Jerima. In his will, James Neilson bequeathed a fund to the college.\textsuperscript{75}

James Neilson pledged $500 to Rutgers as early as 1845 and continued to pay the college 6 percent interest on this sum until his death. He also maintained a scholarship of $30 per year. The New Brunswick Theological Seminary, closely affiliated with Rutgers, was likewise the beneficiary of Neilson’s generosity. The \textit{New Brunswick Fredonian} gave the following details concerning his gift in 1855 to the Seminary: “Mrs. Anna Hertzog of Philadelphia, having recently made a donation of $30,000 for the purpose of building a Theological Hall . . . Colonel James Neilson, of this city, has made the thing complete by giving five acres of ground to build the Hall on, situated back of the college adjoining the property of Messrs Bishop. For building purposes this ground is among the handsomest in this City, and will ever call up grateful recollections of its donor from the students of old Rutgers, who pursue the study of Theology.”\textsuperscript{76} James Neilson’s son, James Neilson Jr., also studied at Rutgers, graduating in 1866 and later being elected as a trustee in 1886.\textsuperscript{77}

The most substantial donation the college received during its period of financial troubles was from the Dutch minister Elias Van Bunschoten. A Queen’s College trustee from 1787 to 1815, Van Bunschoten gave a gift of $14,640 ($13,840 in bonds payable over the next ten years and $800 cash) near the end of his life in 1814. When he died in 1815, Van Bunschoten left the college additional property amounting to over $4,000 in his will. His generous donation was to be used for “the purposes of theological education.” Besides his role as a loyal trustee of Queen’s College, Van Bunschoten was also influenced to give to the college by a “most moving and beautiful letter from his old schoolmate and life-long friend,” John Henry Livingston, who was president of Queen’s College at the time.\textsuperscript{78}

Elias Van Bunschoten did not gain his wealth or social position from his occupation as a minister. He was a frontier preacher with a modest salary. The rural churches of the Delaware Valley where Van Bunschoten was called to serve as pastor were located in “a backwoods region whose scanty settlements were marked by much of that semi-barbarism by which civilization usually is temporarily overcome at its first contact with the wilderness, and was still haunted by
those uncomfortable neighbors, the savage red men,” as narrated by Van Bunschooten’s descendant. Additionally, throughout Van Bunschooten’s time in the Delaware Valley “there was much friction over salary.” His stipend of somewhat more than a hundred pounds was raised by the three congregations in unequal proportions and they were “much of the time in arrears.”

However, Van Bunschooten came from a wealthy slaveholding family. Elias was the son of Teunis Van Bunschooten, the owner of a large property near what became New Hackensack, approximately 1,196 acres of land in Duchess County, New York. Teunis was in fact “one of the three largest tax-payers in the county during the Revolution.” Teunis died in 1788 and his will left three of his sons land “together with all my slaves to be equally divided among them.” As the oldest son Elias inherited four-hundred pounds to “be paid to him in silver or gold” as well as a share of other property that was divided among Teunis’s other children. Teunis had previously expended “upwards of two hundred and sixty pounds” toward Elias’s education (Elias was from the generation of ministers that had made the journey to Amsterdam for their training and ordination). Thus, Teunis Van Bunschoten’s large landholding and reliance on slave labor also secured for Elias his education and future position in the Church.

Elias Van Bunschoten took his inheritance and invested it in a huge farm, which was worked by slaves. In about 1800, Van Bunschoten purchased a 700-acre farm where he built a mill and a “commodious mansion.” Elias’s vast wealth was often attributed to his savvy business practices and his frugality. He was described as “systematic as a business man” and a “model farmer” who had every item of his business recorded carefully in his account books. A family biographer concluded that through “industry and frugality Mr. Van Bunschoten rapidly increased his worldly substance.” Yet the uncompensated labor of people enslaved to Van Bunschoten was the true source of the wealth that he would pass on to Queen’s College.

The Van Bunschoten family Bible recorded a long history of slave ownership.

Of those slaves whose names are recorded in the old Dutch family bible, we know twelve sprung from the Joins of the Nanna family, five from Cetty, fourteen from the tribe of Cay, twelve from the Ginna, twelve from Susanna, four from Betty, and others from Tudd, Ezebel and Robe Hearman Judge. The dates of births recorded range from July 30, 1749, when Susanna Betty was born, onwards through a succession of primitive names such as Nanna, Ginna, Cay Betty, Betty Susanna, Pega Susanna, Caty Suanna, Eve Ginna, Robe Susanna, Nanna Betty, Adam Susanna, Cay Robe and many others, until the even century is reached when more common names appear, such as Silver in 1801, Simon in 1802, Dorcas in 1804, Ruth 1806, Alfred 1807 and Henry 1810.
The Van Bunschooten family stories mention that Elias Van Bunschooten owned slaves. For example, one story tells of Van Bunschooten’s frugality. “Whether in paying or receiving money he insisted upon ‘the utmost farthing,’ usually remarking that otherwise the account could never be balanced. He carried this so far that, in settling with a customer at his mill one day and finding that he was owed three cents, [Van Bunschooten] . . . sent a negro in chase who followed the fugitive creditor several miles and at last succeeded in making payment in full.” Another story about Elias Van Bunschooten featured his gardener, an old enslaved man named Caesar. According to the story, Caesar once ripped up the vines of the cucumbers Van Bunschooten liked after Elias had entered the garden and ruthlessly tore up the melons Caesar was growing. In short, the bulk of the wealth Elias Van Bunschooten accumulated and ultimately donated to Queen’s College came from his inheritance, which his father used slave labor to amass, and from Elias’s farm, where he also used slave labor.

While not as large as Elias Van Bunschooten’s, a financial gift from Colonel Henry Rutgers also came at a vital time for the college from money rooted in slavery. The university’s namesake, Henry Rutgers, was a slaveholder during the time he served as a trustee and made donations to the college. The federal census recorded that Rutgers owned two slaves in 1790, five slaves in 1800, three slaves in 1810, and one slave in 1820. Upon his death, Rutgers’s will recorded an enslaved woman named Hannah, described as his “Negro wench slave,” whom his will stipulated was to be “supported out of my Estate.” In 1826 Colonel Rutgers donated the interest on a $5,000 bond and a bell to the school that was named after him. This donation in the early years of the school’s reopening certainly aided the college’s financial stability. When the college reopened in 1825, its president, the Reverend Phillip Milledoler, suggested that Queen’s College be renamed in honor of trustee Colonel Henry Rutgers. A devoted member of the Dutch Church, Rutgers epitomized the Christian qualities held in high esteem by both the synod and the trustees.

Henry Rutgers had long-standing connections to slavery. Rutgers’s family had profited from slavery since the early decades of the eighteenth century; his father and grandfather owned slaves, and other family members were also slaveholders. Three enslaved men—Quash, Galloway, and Jacob—owned by Henry Rutgers’s grandfather Harmanus were implicated in the 1741 slave conspiracy in New York. Hendrick Rutgers, Henry’s father, owned slaves who labored at his brewery in New York.

Like many of the other slaveholders linked to Queen’s College, Henry Rutgers had a conflicted relationship to slavery. In 1786, Rutgers added his name to a petition for a bill before the New York legislature “for checking the progress of Slavery in our Country.” The petition, also signed by Alexander Hamilton and other prominent New Yorkers, requested a law to prevent “the practice of exporting
[enslaved people] like cattle and other articles of commerce, to the West-Indies and the Southern States.” Rutger joined the American Colonization Society, and from 1817 to 1830 was annually elected vice president of the society. The year he joined the organization he manumitted one man, Thomas Boston. While Rutgers did support colonization as well as gradual emancipation, he never supported abolition in the United States. Upon his death, Rutgers’s will stipulated that his “superannuated [slave]” was to be “supported out of my Estate.”

In 1824 Theodore Frelinghuysen, a U.S. senator and future president of Rutgers College, directly acknowledged the state of New Jersey’s connection to the institution of slavery. Frelinghuysen asked New Jerseyans to “survey your cultivated fields, your comfortable habitations, your children rising around you to bless you. Who, under Providence, caused those hills to rejoice and those valleys to smile? Who ploughed those fields and cleared these forests? Remember the toils and tears of black men, and pay your debt to Africa.” Frelinghuysen admitted that New Jersey had a debt to enslaved people for the state’s economic prosperity. However, he prescribed colonization as the best way for whites to repay this debt, something that most free blacks in New Jersey opposed. Still, Theodore Frelinghuysen recognized the ways New Jerseyans continued to benefit from slavery and the financial rewards that passed to subsequent generations of whites. Frelinghuysen’s words also apply to Rutgers University. Queen’s College would never have existed without the institution of slavery. This is not unique to Rutgers but rather reflects the legacy of all nine institutions of higher education chartered in the American colonies. All colonial colleges have an institutional history that is deeply intertwined with slavery.

Another few years of financial struggle closed the college again from 1816 to 1825. Only the monetary donations from wealthy slaveholding benefactors saved the institution. Part of the university’s duty in dealing with this history is to acknowledge that the United States of America—which sought freedom from Great Britain—and Queen’s College—which was established to provide colonists more freedom from the Dutch Reformed Church in Amsterdam—only prospered because the freedom of Africans and their descendants was stolen and their labor exploited. Acknowledging the university’s deep ties to slavery requires stating and accepting that Rutgers has not been “revolutionary for 250 years” in the eyes of enslaved and disenfranchised people in Rutgers’s history, or their descendants. Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, has been in step with the nation’s historical trajectory, and this means that the institution participated in and benefited from the economic exploitation of marginalized groups.

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