

History 118 US Since 1877 Discussion Transcript for February 4, 2021

Main Reading: Dickinson & Slavery report

Dickinson College is in the midst of a multi-year reassessment about how to refine the way it commemorates its ties to slavery and antislavery. The goal of such a project is not only to study the past (as we do in the classroom), but also to figure out the most appropriate way to use this institutional history to help inspire the community moving forward. That's the difference between history and heritage, between academic study and public memory. Heritage and memory more directly involve moral judgments than classroom study does. Erasing the past, or whitewashing it, is never a good idea in any circumstance, but when an institution like Dickinson chooses names for a building or statues and markers for a campus location, it sends a message about its values. Here are selections from student comments after reading the 2019 report:

THE REPORT IN CONTEXT

STUDENT COMMENT: During the past few years, countless American colleges have begun to reflect on their school's founding and investigate their own pasts. These colleges, Dickinson included, are checking to see if or how their school is connected to slavery in the United States. For Dickinson College, this reflection has been done through the Houses Divided Project. During Dickinson College's founding period, slavery was still legal in the United States and present in the state of Pennsylvania. In response to some of the Dickinson College history found by faculty and student research, a response was written about how Dickinson College is connected to slavery in the United States and how it should be remembered at the college. It appears that in the early history of Dickinson College, there were quite a few issues that arose due to relationships between the college's student body and the janitors who used to work at the school.

STUDENT COMMENT: As an incoming student coming to Dickinson College, the final draft of the House Divided Project, spearheaded by Professor Pinsker, opens the eyes to this idea of "forgotten history," as previous "college publications" fail to mention Dickinson's slave past. In doing so, the House Divided Project was similar to what Frederick Douglass tried to achieve with the remembrance of the Civil War's ideological nature, allowing the once silenced voices of the enslaved to be heard and for their impact not to be forgotten. As a student at Dickinson put it best, "to see these men, women, and their stories honored alongside those of Rush and Buchanan would instill a sense of acknowledgment in me" (Pinsker 3). The project's purpose was for those at Dickinson to "self-reflect" on its past, not only of its white, slave-owning founders but also to emphasize the stories of those they enslaved.

CONFRONTING THE PAST

STUDENT COMMENT: When reading this, I was shocked to learn so much about the history of the college regarding slavery, and how divided the college was. It was shocking to learn the founding fathers of Dickinson, John Dickinson and Benjamin Rush, claimed to be abolitionists but owned slaves. Not only that but when Pennsylvania “first adopted its gradual abolition statute”, more than 300 slaves were still living in Cumberland County. The hypocrisy is so frustrating, and I can't imagine how it felt to be a slave and white men basically hanging freedom in your face and not allowing you to grab it. On the other hand, fortunately, there were true abolitionists at Dickinson, Charles Nisbet, who stated, “concealed hatred”, and “masked resentment” of slaves, could “animate to destruction”. I immediately thought of modern-day racial injustice because even the problems today are a result of the past, and has led to intuitional and societal racism.

STUDENT COMMENT: All the stories on the legacy page revolved around racism and segregation in the mistreatment of black employees at Dickinson College. In 1892 Henry Spradley had been a janitor at Dickinson for years and brought his son into the business. When \$40 went missing the president called the police and had his son arrested. These allegations proved to be false when Spradley's son was able to prove that all the money he had come from somewhere else. Regardless, it was still saddening to read that just because of the color of his skin he was instantly accused, even though his father had proved to be a good janitor for years. George Reed, the Dickinson president at the time did not even apologize for accusing Spradley's son. Five years later in 1897, Henry Spradley passed away. Dickinson College held a memorial service for him, the entire student body attended the event as well as the black community of Carlisle. Everyone in the town embraced the actions Henry had made in his life toward seeking equality for his race. And his memorial service would prove to be the first event in the path toward less segregation and more equality at Dickinson.

STUDENT COMMENT: When reading about the legacy of slavery and racial related norms at Dickinson it is fascinating to see how those norms changed over time. What I found most interesting was that after the civil war, and after the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth amendments had been added to the constitution to protect the rights of former slaves and blacks in the south, Dickinson was initially hesitant to allow Robert Young Jr. to attend the college. This is especially surprising because his father had worked for Dickinson, as a janitor, for many years preceding this attempt. Dickinson's hesitation to admit him made their view of black rights very clear. They were accepting of blacks working for them, but not working alongside them. This was the last time that this view was displayed because they later admitted him and began a new era for blacks at Dickinson. Although he never graduated, his admission changed the norm for future black students, as the first black man graduated 13 years later, and the first black woman graduated 31 years later. Dickinson's House divided project states, "In 1940, 69-year-old Robert G. Young, was still proudly listing his educational experience as one year of college". This reflects how much the admission meant to him, even if he could not sustain his studies until graduating, and how much it must have meant to those first few black students who did graduate from Dickinson.

STUDENT COMMENT: Several cartoons and caricatures of the black staff and janitors at Dickinson from student publications appear in the Dickinson & Slavery report. Two images of the college janitor, Henry Spradley stand in stark opposition to each other. One, a stately photograph of Spradley in a suit and hat paints the picture of a well-respected member of the community. The other image is a racist cartoon of Spradley missing hair accompanied by a letter wrongfully accredited to Spradley that includes jokes about African American vernacular English. One of these images denotes the janitor as a valuable member of the community while the other depicts the students' racists sentiments and degradation of the janitor. Other notes on the treatment of janitors at Dickinson depict the same dichotomy. In 1885, Spradley hosted members of the senior class at his home where the Carlisle Sentinel report "the class felt especially delight upon the occasion" (Dickinson & Slavery, 16). In juxtaposition, seven years later students wrongfully identified Spradley's son as a thief. The case was reported to the police and eventually overturned (Ibid). Dickinson students were appreciative enough of Mr. Spradley to be honored by his company and his work, yet their attitudes and racially fueled beliefs led a different set of students to racially profile the younger Spradley. The juxtaposition of the yearbook's images of Spradley is jarring but together both pieces show the full sentiment of Dickinson students towards their janitor.

STUDENT COMMENT: Throughout much racism, prejudice, and chaos occurring at this time in the United States, there were also heartwarming moments that brought people together that made me smile as I was reading, that I want to focus on in my reflection today. One of those moments was when Henry Spradley and his wife Mina hosted a dinner for the senior class, in South College building (which doesn't exist anymore), at Dickinson in November 1885 (Freedom's Legacy). Henry Spradley was a slave who escaped and a veteran of the Union army. He was a janitor and a bell ringer at Dickinson and had a son named Shirley. Many local newspapers reported on the dinner that the Spradley's hosted because it was such a surprise. The *Carlisle Sentinel* reported that "the class felt especially delighted" and "so honored" to be a part of the occasion (Freedom's Legacy). From reports we have now, the evening was nothing but a success and the senior class was grateful for the Spradley's as hosts. They even ended the night "with toasts to Spradley" and a song that went "Here's to Mr. Spradley / Who never does things badly" (Freedom's Legacy). This section of writing about Henry Spradley, his wife Mina, and the dinner they hosted, ties in perfectly with the rest of the exhibit because it adds another layer of complexity to how students at Dickinson were treating janitors, and other staff, and how it wasn't always such a one-way street, like George Norris, for example, who was treated horribly as staff and a person of color.

FROM PAST TO PRESENT

STUDENT COMMENT: Dickinson's history with slavery reflects the country's divided opinion on the peculiar institution. Just like the nation, the foundations of the college were built with slave labor. When John Montgomery laid down the foundations for first constructed building, a Carlisle slaveholder John Holmes was contracted to hire out his slave. Montgomery himself was in the business of selling slaves. But as the report explains, Dickinson was melting pot for both pro-slavers and abolitionists. Charles Nisbet, the first president of the college, was anti-

slavery. Perhaps because of his Scottish origins, he gave a series of lectures in which he warned his listeners of a possible retaliation on the young nation by those in bondage. There was also the McClintock associated riot in 1847. While he may not have instigated the commotion, Professor McClintock was an abolitionist who tried to convince the Methodists to give up their pro-slavery stance. Students were also not exempt from this tension. Dickinson did not have any enslaved people after the 1800s, but it had a collection of free black janitors and workers whose legacy have been intertwined with Dickinson. There were mixed reactions to their presence. An example is Henry Spradley, a janitor, who held a dinner party where he invited students to his house to celebrate. When he passed, Dickinson obtained a memorial card for him, a gesture which was mocked in the student yearbook. While slavery ended, the racism it had sparked continues. In addressing its past, Dickinson does not just address and acknowledge the permanent fixtures, but also, it evolves and creates new ways to form a more progressive future. The House Divided Project is one way through which this happens, and another is the current effort to change the names of buildings that commemorate slave owners. They symbolize how far Dickinson has come and why the need for this dialogue needs to continue.