

The Johns Hopkins slavery “scandal”

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Historical census records show that Johns Hopkins—founder of his namesake university in Baltimore, Maryland—was a slave-owner, university officials announced on December 9, in an open letter. The revelation has been seized on to generate a racist campaign at Johns Hopkins University, site of the nation’s leading medical college.

The open letter, entitled “Reexamining the history of our founder,” states that university officials received a tip from a Maryland state archivist about the existence of the census records in the spring. A team of university historians followed up on the tip and found “government census records that state Mr. Hopkins was the owner of one enslaved person listed in his household in 1840 and four enslaved people listed in 1850. By the 1860 census, there are no enslaved persons listed in the household.” Additional documents from the 1830s showed that Hopkins sometimes purchased slaves to settle debts.

Martha S. Jones, a professor of history at Johns Hopkins who led the investigation, followed up with an opinion piece published in the *Washington Post* entitled: “The founder of Johns Hopkins owned enslaved people. Our university must face a reckoning.” Jones claims that the revelation has “shattered” the myths surrounding Hopkins as a Quaker entrepreneur and an abolitionist.

Hopkins, she said, “largely derived his wealth from real estate, railroads, banking—and by being party to slavery’s crime against humanity... Centuries ago, wealthy men such as Hopkins amassed their fortunes through endeavors only two or three degrees removed from the exploitation of people treated as property. Before the Civil War, Americans held more wealth in enslaved people than they did in railroads, banks and factories combined.” She added that it was “all too callous for a man whose vast riches financed the university for which I work today.”

Dismissing the fact that Hopkins was ever “subscribing to abolitionist views,” Jones went on to write : “This is the beginning of a long and probing inquiry on our part into the consequences of slavery, yes, but racism, in particular, and how that has shaped our institution across

time... Among the first obligations is to finish the research that we have begun.”

A chorus of voices from the press repeated Jones’ narrative. The *New York Times* joined the *Washington Post* in dismissing Hopkins’ abolitionist past—of which, they claimed, there was not “any evidence of at all”—and quoted a statement by the Johns Hopkins University leadership: “The revelation about Johns Hopkins calls to mind not only the darkest chapters in the history of our country and our city but also the complex history of our institutions since then, and the legacies of racism and inequity we are working together to confront.”

An op-ed by Johns Hopkins Professor of English and History Lawrence Jackson published in the *Baltimore Sun* carried the same message, declaring that the announcement showed that Hopkins “wasn’t an abolitionist, as history has held, but instead a slaveholder... making him exactly like the others of his class and race in Baltimore.”

The spectacle reached its height in a virtual town hall meeting organized by the university leadership on December 11. In her opening remarks, Katrina Caldwell, Chief Diversity Officer at Johns Hopkins, said that the findings about Hopkins, “reinforces the need to pursue, with intention and speed, our ongoing commitments to our strategic diversity, equity and inclusion work. And the commitments that we have already made to address the legacy of racism that plagues our institution.”

This was followed by Johns Hopkins President Ronald Daniels, who histrionically referred to the revelations about Hopkins as “painful and distressing” and “devastating.” He promised “a new set of goals around diversity, equity and inclusion,” before repeating himself about feeling “waves of distress, despondency, pain.”

He was joined by Kevin Sowers, president of the Johns Hopkins Health System, who stated: “It is clear that the anti-racism, equity seeking and inclusion views we espouse must guide our continued examination into our history and really inform our future.” He added, “We also have to commit to diversify our leadership team.”

Another colleague stressed that it was important to “acknowledge the pain that many members of our community must be feeling.”

Johns Hopkins, born in 1795, grew up on his family’s tobacco plantation in Anne Arundel County, Maryland south of Baltimore. In 1807, the Hopkins family freed their slaves, abiding by a decree issued by the local Quaker group, of which they were a part. Thereafter Hopkins, then 12, left school to help his parents work the fields. At 17, Hopkins went to work for his uncle in Baltimore, where he learned how to run a wholesale grocery shop.

In 1819, Hopkins established his own wholesaler business with his three brothers as partners. The business prospered, shipping goods throughout Maryland, Virginia, Ohio and North Carolina. Hopkins, by all accounts true to his Quaker roots, lived a life of asceticism. He never married, and rarely spent money on personal indulgences, devoting himself almost exclusively to his business. However, most of his wealth came from his investments in assorted enterprises, including railroads, real estate, insurance companies, steamship lines, and warehouses. He retired in 1847, a very wealthy man at age 52.

For a wealthy man in pre-Civil War Maryland to own slaves was not out of the ordinary, and it is certainly not a shocking revelation, as the petty-bourgeois racialists have characterized it. Slavery was the dominant form of labor exploitation in the Southern states of that era. Objectively, the fact that Hopkins owned slaves does not preclude him from having been an abolitionist, just as Thomas Jefferson being a slave-owner does not invalidate the progressive character of the principles espoused in the Declaration of Independence.

It should be noted that Hopkins was a strong supporter of Lincoln and the Union during the Civil War, earning him the ire of many of the rich and powerful in Baltimore. In the years before the war, he worked with a number of abolitionists, including Myrtilla Miner, whom he supported in her efforts to establish a school for African American girls, which would become the University of the District of Columbia.

Before his death in 1873 at age 78, Hopkins donated \$7 million—about \$150 million today—for the establishment of a free hospital, medical training colleges, a university, and an orphanage for black children. It was, at the time, the largest act of philanthropy in US history.

In his conception of historical materialism, Friedrich Engels rejected interpretations of history that placed the subjective motives of individuals as the primary driving

force, describing them as: “essentially pragmatic; it judges everything according to the motives of the action; it divides men who act in history into noble and ignoble and then finds that as a rule the noble are defrauded and the ignoble are victorious.”

“Pragmatic” fittingly describes the attitude of the race-obsessed middle classes towards history. For them, the material basis of ideas and events is to be glossed over, because there is no objective truth. Rather, “narratives” are to be constructed to serve present political aims. This irrational, unscientific approach to history has nothing in common with Marxism and, it must be stated, is inevitably used to serve the most reactionary ends.

While these right-wing racialists denounce the exploitation of chattel slavery, they reserve no such condemnation for the dominant form of labor exploitation today: wage labor under capitalism. In an era in which social inequality—the irreconcilable chasm between the needs of society and the interests of the possessing capitalist class—represents the inescapable “irrepressible conflict” in American society, the abject silence of this petty-bourgeois milieu speaks volumes. The very real human suffering of those who were enslaved is being cynically utilized by this privileged layer to gain access to wealth and influence.

Predictably, the supposedly stunning discovery about Johns Hopkins owning a few slaves is being used to demand new programming on race at JHU. This, amidst a global pandemic that has killed 1.7 million people, which scientists at JHU are playing a leading role combatting; in Baltimore, among the poorest big cities in America; in the greatest social catastrophe since the Great Depression, with millions unemployed and struggling to pay rent; in the sharpest political crisis since the Civil War, with the outgoing president openly cultivating a fascistic movement.

In the Johns Hopkins slavery “scandal,” the class character of racial politics is on full, grotesque display.



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