

Reexamining WPI's Roots in the Histories of Slavery

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Abstract

WPI was founded just after the Civil War in a Massachusetts heavily intertwined with both slavery and antislavery. We investigated how a subset of WPI's founders were connected to slavery and antislavery, and how these connections influenced WPI. We also investigated how and where WPI publishes its own history to see where it fails to discuss the time in which the founders created it. We discovered that several of WPI's founders had indirect financial connections to slavery, which contributed to the monetary foundations of the university. We found that WPI's published histories largely ignore the social environment the university was founded in. In light of the connections we found, we recommend that WPI adjust how it discusses its own history to highlight the era it was founded in and the questions of slavery, freedom, emancipation, and citizenship its founders grappled with.

Introduction

The majority of WPI's telling of its own history comes back to the ideals of the two towers, atop Boynton Hall and Washburn Shops. These were the first buildings on campus and were named after the founders of the university. WPI has spent plenty of time on what these towers mean to us, by citing them as symbols of theory and practice and urging students and alumni to go "Beyond These Towers" with new campaigns.¹ What WPI has not done in the way we advocate for in this project is look more closely behind our towers at the people who founded this institution. More specifically, this project examines WPI's founders and how they may have been connected to slavery or anti-slavery movements. These connections would shine a light on how their choices around these politically charged subjects shaped this institution.

It is especially important to investigate these connections now, with the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020.² This movement highlights the fact that racism is often institutional, and as such has been embedded in our ways of life and the institutions we interact with. The choices people made to own slaves and profit from their labor over 150 years ago created a legacy of white supremacy that still reverberates today.³ It is necessary to investigate the ways in which WPI may have been connected to slavery, and examine how those connections may still affect the university and its students today.

We have good reason to believe there may be connections to slavery in WPI's past due to the time and environment in which it was founded. WPI was created just as the Civil War was ending, but its founders lived and worked in a Worcester that was home to both

¹ "WPI 150 Years: Theory and Practice"; "WPI Launches \$500 Million 'Beyond These Towers' Campaign."

² Buchanan, Bui, and Patel, "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History."

³ Turner, "5 Things People Still Get Wrong about Slavery."

anti-slavery movements and industries that indirectly profited from slave labor while excluding free Black workers.⁴ The signing of the Emancipation Proclamation would not have immediately removed all ties to slavery. Universities in Massachusetts, as well as New England as a whole, benefitted from these ties to slavery in their early years. These connections are as concrete as a slave sale on campus or as indirect as donations from those in the textile industry. Many of these universities have grappled with such legacies and brought that knowledge into their educational programs. As such, WPI has models to follow in changing how we understand the legacies of our founders.

This project is not meant to be an inexhaustive inventory and last word on this subject. A large history such as WPI's will take more examination than one IQP can accomplish. There are nine founders of WPI, and this IQP takes a first look at three of them: John Boynton, Stephen Salisbury II, and Ichabod Washburn. There are more founders to be investigated, and more connections to find beyond our founders. However, this project is created in hopes that others will pick up the threads that we cannot unravel, and that our findings can inform the future of this institution. Our project is not only about what we discover in our research, but the ways we should use this information to change the way we discuss our own history.

Background and Literature Review

Worldwide Phenomenon to Peer Institutions

Asking these questions at WPI follows the work of other colleges and universities across the United States and in other Western countries that have conducted research into

⁴ Rockman, "Slavery and Abolition along the Blackstone."

their ties to slavery.⁵ Many of these institutions point to Brown University as an inspiration, and it is widely agreed that Brown was the first to formally research this topic.⁶ Brown's President Ruth Simmons created a Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice in 2003. She charged the committee with examining the University's historical connections to slavery and reporting them openly. The committee was also asked to connect this history to the present day with educational activities that would help the university "think deeply, seriously, and rigorously about the questions raised by this controversy".⁷ The committee report, released in 2006, described multiple areas of heavy involvement with slavery in the University's past. Founders of the University had purchased slaves, and numerous other high-level officials in the University had been involved in slave trade or industries that profited from slave labor.⁸

Since the report was released, Brown has opened a Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice, which oversees research and continuing education on both historical and modern slavery.⁹ They maintain and promote further exploration of structural racism, including human trafficking, mass incarceration, medical racism, and more.¹⁰ Thus, more than being the first, Brown also provided a model to follow, showing other universities both how to research these issues and how to use what they found to understand their past and its legacies in a new light.

Inspired by Brown and recognizing the ways the legacies of slavery still structure our lives and institutions, dozens of other colleges and universities began the task of

⁵ "Universities Studying Slavery."

⁶ "Universities Studying Slavery Welcomes Brown University."

⁷ "Brown University Committee on Slavery and Justice Home"; "President Ruth J. Simmons' Letter to Prospective Committee Members, April 2003."

⁸ Allen et al., "Slavery and Justice."

⁹ "CSSJ | Brown University."

¹⁰ "CSSJ | Brown University."

untangling their histories. These institutions found a wide range of connections to slavery in their past. Most prominent, longstanding universities would find direct connections to slaveholding or slave trade. Similar to Brown, prominent colleges such as Princeton (founded in 1746) and Harvard (founded in 1636) found connections in their past. Princeton's first nine presidents all owned slaves, and a slave sale took place on their campus in 1766.¹¹ Similarly fraught with connections, a seminar at Harvard found that enslaved people worked on campus and in the homes of three presidents.¹² Harvard also found more indirect financial connections, where the university was funded for a time by industries run on slave labor, both directly and indirectly.¹³

These types of indirect financial connections were more common the later an institution was founded and the further north it resided. MIT was founded in 1861, and thus began in a similar time and place to WPI. Their research, which formally began in 2017 under Craig Wilder, discovered myriad ways in which the university was indirectly connected to slavery. While their founder and charter-president, William Barton Rogers, had owned slaves, the university had also indirectly profited from industries tied up in slave labor. Several technical schools in the North were funded by investors in cotton factories, sugar refineries, mining operations, and canal projects, and Rogers lobbied to gain these funds for MIT. When classes began at MIT they focused on the technical needs of these industries, further aiding and fueling industries connected to slavery.¹⁴ Though MIT has found mostly indirect connections at this point, they have begun displaying their

¹¹ "Overview."

¹² Walsh, "Radcliffe-Based Program Rolls out Research Efforts."

¹³ Walsh.

¹⁴ "Slavery and the Founding of MIT | MIT and Slavery."

findings on a section of the library's website, as well as on their greater MIT Black History site.¹⁵ Thus, MIT is an institution similar to WPI and a model worth following.

WPI, founded in 1865, is likely to have indirect connections similar to MIT, considering Worcester's history of profiting from provisioning plantations and processing their crops. Direct ownership of slaves is unlikely to be in WPI's past, given Massachusetts had outlawed slavery approximately 80 years prior to its founding. However, the likelihood that WPI was indirectly funded by an industry driven by slave labor was significant.

No matter what types of connections we find between WPI's past and the institution of slavery, the model of examining a university's past to discover these connections is well-tested. Many other institutions founded in the same time and geographical area as WPI have looked at their legacies. Many of these institutions are continuing to examine their pasts, and continuing to grapple with what they have found by educating in the present and driving their future research and outreach. Additionally, they're using this research to change how they talk about themselves. This too is a model we recommend that WPI follow.

WPI's Unchanging Story

WPI tends to repeat the same, unchanging story of its history. You have Boynton's idea of higher education for industrial workers, Washburn's desire for practical instruction, Salisbury's gifts of land and money, and the other founders' efforts to pull them all together. This story is reflected in Mildred McClary Tymeson's *Two Towers* (1965), WPI's Archives & Special Collections webpage, and the *Tech Bible* given to freshmen each year, among

¹⁵ "Slavery and the Founding of MIT | MIT and Slavery"; "MIT and the Legacy of Slavery (2018) | MIT Black History."

others.¹⁶ However, these histories fail to mention Black people or the effects of slavery on our institution. This could be because Black people only made up about 1% of Worcester's population at the time, or perhaps existing Black people were brushed aside over the years in favor of white legacies. The fact remains that there is no mention of Black people in WPI's most forward-facing histories.¹⁷ Neither is there discussion of the context WPI was founded in, which included tumultuous issues of freedom, emancipation, and citizenship rights. The stories of Black people and their struggles can and should be elaborated to fill this gap and tell WPI's story in a new light.

Now is an especially good time to revisit these stories, as most of them haven't been updated in several years. *Two Towers*, an oft-cited telling of WPI's history, was published in 1965. The Archives & Special Collections pages on each founder cite a WPI Journal issue from 1990.¹⁸ Finally, the last substantial update of the *Tech Bible* was about 10 years ago.¹⁹ These histories are long due for an update, both culturally and in terms of time passed.

A Modern Telling

The ways we tell these stories need updating as well. Many of WPI's histories are only available through print books, or web pages that don't match up to the rest of WPI's internet presence. The previously mentioned *Tech Bible* is only available in print, and *Two Towers* is only available in print or digitally through web.wpi.edu, an old, archived version of WPI's website.²⁰ Another book chronicling WPI's history, *Seventy Years of the Worcester*

¹⁶ Tymeson, *Two Towers*; "Institutional History"; Student Alumni Society and WPI Alumni Association, *Tech Bible*.

¹⁷ Greenwood, *First Fruits of Freedom, The Migration of Former Slaves and Their Search for Equality in Worcester, Massachusetts, 1862-1900*.

¹⁸ "Founders."

¹⁹ Student Alumni Society and WPI Alumni Association, *Tech Bible*.

²⁰ "Gordon Library: Two Towers EBook - WPI."

Polytechnic Institute, is only available in print or through another outdated webpage.²¹ By not telling these stories through new, innovative mediums, our history is failing to reach some of the audiences it otherwise could. Prominent universities such as Brown and MIT have devoted whole websites to their research on slavery and Black history. These websites combine text, photos, and video to tell this story in different mediums and reach a wider audience.²² There are even more innovative methods of telling these stories, such as University of Pennsylvania's augmented reality tour of slavery's effects on the university.²³ WPI should look to these examples of other universities' histories, and use them to help tell our own story through a new medium.

Method

Our first step in exploring this topic was to do a literature review. First we investigated the work other universities had done on this subject. We focused primarily on universities in the American Northeast founded near the same time as WPI. We looked at many members of the Universities Studying Slavery consortium, then branched out to WPI's peer institutions and other colleges in the area. Looking at these institutions helped give us a framework to utilize in further research.

Firstly, it gave us a spectrum from direct connections to indirect connections to slavery, and gave us a rough idea of where we thought WPI would fall. Most other colleges founded in the area and time that WPI was founded had more indirect connections, so this gave us a direction to look in. The review also gave us spectrums to place individual

²¹ "Seventy Years Of The Worcester Polytechnic Institute: Index Page."

²² "MIT and the Legacy of Slavery (2018) | MIT Black History"; "CSSJ | Brown University."

²³ "P&SP Augmented Reality App · Augmented Reality Mobile Application ·."

founders on regarding their anti-slavery sentiments and involvements. Some schools had founders that espoused anti-slavery and upheld that belief in their lives, others had remarkably pro-slavery ideals, and even others held anti-slavery beliefs but still owned slaves or profited from their labor. Thus, we created scales based on what views these people espoused, and how that lined up with the actions they took.

In addition to these scales, other universities' sources and discussion thereof gave us an idea of what types of sources may be useful to us. Many universities used old tax records, census records, wills, business records, and other such documents to unravel these connections, and thus we could as well. Lastly, we could see what formats the final products were published in to decide what form we'd like the project to take. We looked at the content and presentation of the web pages other universities produced to inform our own.

Next, we conducted a review of the literature on WPI's history. This focused on two main points: the content and the format. We first wanted to look at what WPI knew about the founders' potential connections to slavery to give us a baseline to start from. This would also give us another, more specific set of bibliographies to utilize in our work. Then, like the review of other colleges, we also looked at the format of WPI's published history. Most of WPI's history is published in print, or on the old, archived version of WPI's website. The Archives & Special Collections site is a welcome exception to this, but overall the presentation of our history is just as outdated as its content.

Our research into the founders began with a broad search regarding all the founders to see what was available on each. This let us prioritize the founders that would be likely to have connections to slavery. We chose to start with Stephen Salisbury II and Ichabod Washburn due to their business connections, with some research into John Boynton as well.

This broad search also gave us another glimpse of what resources may be useful in our research, such as local archival libraries. From there, we began searching in these libraries for Boynton, Salisbury, and Washburn. This included research in WPI's archives²⁴, the American Antiquarian Society²⁵, and Harvard Business School's²⁶ archives. At each institution, we prioritized sources we thought were more likely to lead to connections. For example, at the American Antiquarian Society, we preferred documents on Salisbury's business dealings over his personal communications. The majority of time was spent at the American Antiquarian Society due to the volume of their collections. Research at outside institutions was cut short due to the resurgence of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 and subsequent temporary closures of libraries. Lastly, we filled in the knowledge of the founders' environment with secondary sources.

A Pattern of Connections

When discussing the founding of WPI, three names tend to come to the forefront: John Boynton, Ichabod Washburn, and Stephen Salisbury II. While other founders aided in the synthesis and execution of Boynton and Washburn's wishes, these tend to be most prominent. John Boynton, a tinware seller turned self-made businessman, contributed \$100,000 to his idea of a school that would provide young workers with the well-rounded education he never received. Ichabod Washburn, the wire manufacturer who had the idea

²⁴ In WPI's Archives & Special Collections, we searched the financial records in UA67: Washburn Shops, Tech Bibles in UA50: University Publications Collection, and materials about early finances, donations, or intentions in creating the school within UA15: Worcester County Free Institute of Industrial Science Records. We also read "John Boynton - Farmer to Founder" by Charles Gammal from these archives.

²⁵ In the American Antiquarian Society we searched through the Salisbury Family Papers (catalog record #272075) in boxes 22, 26, 27, 30, 31, and 34, mostly looking for financial and business records.

²⁶ In Harvard Business School's Baker Library, we looked at Series I-III in the Records of American Steel and Wire Company and its predecessors, regarding Washburn's company's early days.

for practical machine shop instruction alongside Boynton's classroom education, also donated funds. Lastly, Stephen Salisbury II donated the land for the campus and significant amounts to the endowment.²⁷ As Boynton was a self-made businessman rather than an industry leader, less information is available about his life. Salisbury and Washburn, however, were eminent figures in Worcester and beyond and left numerous records of their life and business dealings. Examining these documents gives us some insight into what connections they had to both slavery and antislavery.

Stephen Salisbury II

Stephen Salisbury II was a prominent Worcester businessman, as well as land owner and developer, with his hands in many pies. He owned numerous shops and houses in the Lincoln Square area of Worcester, and developed Court Mills and other factories on Prescott Street, Union Street, and Grove Street for industrial purposes. He was a high ranking member of several corporations, including banks, railroads, and a canal company. He held local government positions, including selectman and alderman for Worcester and state representative and senator. He was also a member of the American Antiquarian Society and the Massachusetts Historical Society.²⁸ With such broad involvement, it is largely unsurprising that he had several connections to both slavery and antislavery.

Salisbury owned and developed the Court Mills industrial area, which was the first factory in the area to provide rental space and power for small manufacturers. This set the pattern for Worcester's industrial development, dominated by small firms based on their owners' inventions. The Court Mills also began the Salisbury family's significant

²⁷ "Founders."

²⁸ American Antiquarian Society, "Salisbury Family."

involvement in Worcester's development, as the family continued to build factory space for major industries in the city.²⁹ One business renting factory space from Salisbury was Ruggles, Nourse, Mason & Co., a Worcester-based firm that manufactured and sold farm implements.³⁰ These farm implements were preferred by southern plantations, and were touted by a Charleston reviewer to be superior to the competition.³¹ They advertised their implements specifically to the South as well. Their catalog boasted several plows that would be a "labor-saving implement for the South" and an "admirable plow for the rich lands on the Mississippi".³² Leasing these properties to Ruggles, Nourse, and Mason earned Salisbury \$1,432 annually, which is an indirect financial connection to slavery.³³

Salisbury was also involved in several transportation companies. He was treasurer for Blackstone Canal Company, which maintained and regulated the Blackstone Canal between Worcester, MA and Providence, RI.³⁴ It was built for the purpose of shipping merchandise and passengers to stimulate the economy and industrial development in the area, which in turn would stimulate development of cotton manufacturing and other industries connected to slave labor.³⁵ During the time that Salisbury was treasurer, the Blackstone Canal Company had several investors that owned slaves. Colonel Richard Arnold, one of the investors, at one point owned nearly 200 slaves in Georgia.³⁶ James DeWolf (also spelled D'Wolf) was another investor and was part of the DeWolf slave trading

²⁹ Department of the Interior. National Park Service. (3/2/1934 -), *Massachusetts MPS Salisbury Factory Building*, 2013; Department of the Interior. National Park Service. (3/2/1934 -), *Massachusetts MPS Salisbury Factory Building*, 2013.

³⁰ "Indenture Between Stephen Salisbury and Draper Ruggles, Joel Nourse, and John C Mason"; Rockman, "Slavery and Abolition along the Blackstone."

³¹ Rockman, "Slavery and Abolition along the Blackstone."

³² Rockman.

³³ "Indenture Between Stephen Salisbury and Draper Ruggles, Joel Nourse, and John C Mason."

³⁴ "WHM- Blackstone Canal- History of the Canal."

³⁵ Department of the Interior. National Park Service. (3/2/1934 -), *Rhode Island SP Blackstone Canal*.

³⁶ Rockman, "Slavery and Abolition along the Blackstone."

family, who combined were responsible of the importing of approximately 12,000 slaves.³⁷ These two investors would have in part paid Salisbury's wage for his work as treasurer, thus indirectly earning him more money from slavery.

Salisbury was also director and president of the Worcester and Nashua Railroad. The planning phases to develop this railroad included assessing the manufacturing capabilities of the towns it went through. The assessment for each town included documenting spaces for the number of cotton mills, cotton spindles, yards of cotton cloth per week, and bales of cotton used per annum. Out of thirteen towns surveyed, seven had cotton production listed.³⁸ It is reasonable to assume that the Worcester and Nashua Railroad transported cotton, or else was gaining money from cities that manufactured cotton goods. This railroad likely would have spurred economic growth in these towns as the Blackstone Canal did, boosting the cotton manufacturing industry. So again, Salisbury was earning money from the transportation of slave-produced crops and the products thereof, again indirectly tying him to slavery.

Interestingly, Salisbury was also connected to antislavery in central Massachusetts. He was a chairman of the Whig County Committee, a Worcester-area branch of the Whig Party. The Whig Party formed in the 1830s in opposition to President Andrew Jackson, gathering former members of several other political parties. Thus, as time went on the Whig Party dissolved into factions on certain issues, including slavery. Some Northern Whigs supported antislavery, some Whigs resisted slavery's spread into new territories, and some Southern Whigs supported the continuation of slavery.³⁹ The local branch of the

³⁷ "Tracing Center | James DeWolf and the DeWolf Family."

³⁸ "Statement of Business and Travel in Towns on the Route of a Rail Road from Worcester to Nashua, N.H."

³⁹ Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*.

Whig County Committee was insistent that slavery should not extend into new United States territories, and urged their members to vote based on this belief. A letter sent out asked recipients to vote for Henry Clay, because voting for his opponent, James Polk, would be supporting “the Annexation of Texas and the continuance of Slavery.”⁴⁰ As such, Salisbury was a high-ranking member of a committee in support of the containment of slavery’s expansion, and was, therefore, connected to both slavery and antislavery.

Ichabod Washburn

Another well-connected founder of WPI was Ichabod Washburn, an innovator who championed practical instruction in WPI’s machine shop. Ichabod Washburn was a pioneer wire manufacturer who, along with Phillip Moen, started a business that would become the American Steel and Wire Company. He pioneered methods to make wire more efficiently, and used these methods to create many types of wire, including barbed wire and crinoline wire.⁴¹ He also owned a cotton mill in Worcester to wrap cotton around his crinoline wire, and there are records of his company purchasing carding machines to work with the cotton.⁴² If nothing else, Washburn’s company produced cotton goods, and thus he earned money from the products of slave labor.

However, Washburn was also involved in many antislavery groups, including the Church Anti-Slavery Society and the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, as well as the Freedman’s Aid Society which provided support to former slaves.⁴³ He was offered the office of Vice President of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, but turned it down as he

⁴⁰ Salisbury and Fuller, “Letter from Whig County Committee,” 1844.

⁴¹ “Gordon Library: Ichabod Washburn - WPI.”

⁴² Nutt, *History of Worcester and Its People*; “Daybook, Copy of Letters to England, 1828-1845.”

⁴³ Cheever and Washburn, *Autobiography and Memorials of Ichabod Washburn*; “Letter from Ichabod Washburn, Worcester, [Massachusetts], to Amos Augustus Phelps, 1839 June 18th.”

felt unable to perform the duties of the office.⁴⁴ Though our time investigating Washburn was cut short, he began to follow the same pattern as Salisbury; he earned money from industries connected to slavery at the same time as he supported anti-slavery groups.

A Local Contradiction

While we may see connections to both slavery and antislavery as a contradiction, or the actions of a hypocrite, the founders likely would not have seen this as such. Such contrasting connections were common at the time, such as how someone today that is very aware of the harms of carbon pollution may continue to fly to vacation destinations. These contrasts were a product of the time WPI was founded. WPI's charter was signed on May 9th, 1865 at a pivotal moment in the national struggle over slavery.⁴⁵ The Emancipation Proclamation had been signed a mere two years prior, and the American Civil War had concluded just a month before.⁴⁶ The 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery in the United States, was passed by Congress in January of 1865 and would be ratified in December.⁴⁷ However, signing a few documents does not dissolve lifetimes of involvement with industries built on enslaved people. Though Massachusetts had abolished slavery in the early 1780s, this did not prevent businessmen in the region from choosing to reap the profits of slave labor. Most obviously, Southern plantations produced the cotton that New England used to feed a massive textile industry. Almost one and a half million pounds of cotton were transported from the South to central Massachusetts each year to be spun, woven, dyed, and marketed.⁴⁸ To sustain the processing of this much cotton, several central

⁴⁴ "Letter from Ichabod Washburn, Worcester, [Massachusetts], to Amos Augustus Phelps, 1839 June 18th."

⁴⁵ "Institutional History."

⁴⁶ "The Emancipation Proclamation"; "American Civil War | Causes, Definition, Dates, History, & Facts."

⁴⁷ "The 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution."

⁴⁸ Rockman, "Slavery and Abolition along the Blackstone."

Massachusetts companies produced looms and other machinery to process slave-grown cotton, including Crompton Loom Works in Worcester.⁴⁹ Central Massachusetts companies were suppliers for Southern plantations as well. As previously mentioned, Ruggles, Nourse, Mason & Co. in Worcester produced plows and other farm implements for plantations, including some specifically for cotton and sugar. Other Massachusetts companies produced clothing and shoes for slaves, as well as firearms that may have been used to police slave uprising and runaways.⁵⁰ Thus, Central Massachusetts businessmen profited indirectly but not insignificantly from slave labor, only a few steps removed from the plantation owners in the South.

It was not as if these profits were paid to free Black people in the area, either. Black people were largely denied work in the area, especially in manufacturing industries, such that very few Black workers lived in the Worcester area.⁵¹ In 1860, only 272 of the nearly 25,000 people in Worcester were Black. The majority of Black workers in Worcester performed unskilled labor, such as domestic service or common labor.⁵² Central Massachusetts industries had largely chosen to entangle themselves with slave-produced commodities, but refused to hire the free Black people in their own communities. Slaves weren't farming crops in Massachusetts, but that doesn't mean that the industries weren't profiting from slave labor elsewhere.

On the other hand, Central Massachusetts was also a home for anti-slavery efforts. Prominent abolitionists, such as William Lloyd Garrison, Arthur Buffum, Charles Stewart,

⁴⁹ Rockman.

⁵⁰ Rockman.

⁵¹ Rockman; Greenwood, *First Fruits of Freedom, The Migration of Former Slaves and Their Search for Equality in Worcester, Massachusetts, 1862-1900*.

⁵² Greenwood, *First Fruits of Freedom, The Migration of Former Slaves and Their Search for Equality in Worcester, Massachusetts, 1862-1900*.

and George Thompson lectured in the area throughout the 1830s, and helped establish several anti-slavery societies in that time. When the topic of slavery began reaching national politics in the 1840s, Worcester County became the seat of anti-slavery in Massachusetts. Worcester County residents would sign petitions against slavery, and several times had the highest percentage of votes for anti-slavery parties in Massachusetts. When the federal Fugitive Slave Acts passed to allow the capture of runaway slaves, Worcester's next mayor prohibited city police from helping to recapture runaway slaves. Worcester County continued to grow its opposition to the Fugitive Slave Acts, and its support for anti-slavery. Central Massachusetts voters rallied around Abraham Lincoln, and some abolitionists in the area urged even more radical action with new political parties and conventions.⁵³ Thus, support for anti-slavery was growing in Central Massachusetts, and was at a peak by the time WPI was founded.

While support for antislavery was growing in Worcester, that did not necessarily translate into support for free Black people in the community. Black people struggled to find skilled work in Worcester even while Worcester's residents signed antislavery petitions. Though the city often hosted antislavery lecturers, it also created a strict color line in its manufacturing industries. The difference between antislavery sentiments and tangible support for free Black workers is yet another contradiction making its home in Worcester.

Connections vs. choices

⁵³ Rockman, "Slavery and Abolition along the Blackstone."

Though people in 1860s Massachusetts were constantly encountering questions of slavery and antislavery, it is important to remember that people in New England had choices in how they engaged with these issues. People chose to ship slaves (such as the DeWolf family), or purchase slaves (such as Col. Arnold), or sell them to others.⁵⁴ Continuing from that, people developed industries around these slave-produced goods, such as New England's massive textile industry or Washburn's cotton mill for his wire. People chose to supply the plantations that exploited the slaves, giving them farm implements and clothing and shoes.⁵⁵ Then, people chose to support the companies supplying plantations or producing their goods. Companies made the machines to process cotton, or supplied companies with loans or buildings, like Salisbury.⁵⁶ Banks chose to fund companies, while railroads and canals chose to ship slave-produced goods. Swaths of people created industries on the backs of slaves, or bought into these industries by purchasing goods. Beyond that, business owners chose to exclude free Black workers, especially those in manufacturing businesses, to the point where very few Black people stayed in the area.⁵⁷ Thus, it was not a central Massachusetts industry connected to slavery, but a national economy intertwined with slavery.

On the other hand, supporting slave trade, or profiting from it, was not inevitable. Some people chose to avoid slave-produced goods and preferred local alternatives, such as those who advocated for the use of sugar beets and maple over slave-produced cane sugar.⁵⁸ Many Worcester residents chose to support anti-slavery political candidates or sign

⁵⁴ "Tracing Center | James DeWolf and the DeWolf Family"; Rockman, "Slavery and Abolition along the Blackstone."

⁵⁵ Rockman, "Slavery and Abolition along the Blackstone."

⁵⁶ Rockman; American Antiquarian Society, "Salisbury Family."

⁵⁷ Greenwood, *First Fruits of Freedom, The Migration of Former Slaves and Their Search for Equality in Worcester, Massachusetts, 1862-1900*.

⁵⁸ Glickman, "Buy for the Sake of the Slave."

anti-slavery petitions.⁵⁹ Lastly, there were people who chose to do nothing, and simply engage with the world as it was, slavery or no. The important theme is choice. The decisions that common people made shaped the lives of people around them; the decisions made by businessmen and politicians shaped entire regions. These choices persist through the institutions people founded and influenced, thus affecting us today.

The choices made by WPI's founders would shape education and employment opportunities in the region for decades. The founders created WPI as a school that would give its students an instruction in the applications of science to industry, allowing them to "engage in those branches of active industry with intelligence."⁶⁰ The Institute would hopefully aid young people in their chosen profession, setting them up to be successful, and perhaps become industry leaders. It should not be overlooked that at the time, many industry leaders had chosen to engage with and profit from slave labor, while barring local Black workers from skilled jobs.⁶¹ Additionally, early courses of study included mechanical engineering, civil engineering, chemistry, drawing and architecture.⁶² Some of these courses, especially mechanical engineering, would be setting up students for the type of manufacturing that was supplying plantations and processing their goods. Whether it was purposeful on the founders' part or not, they created WPI to continue and advance the Industrial Revolution that was built upon the enslavement of Black people.

There are more concrete ways in which the choices of WPI's founders affected the institution as well, and these choices still affect the institution today. Our endowment was begun by several large donations from the founders. John Boynton's famous \$100,000

⁵⁹ Rockman, "Slavery and Abolition along the Blackstone."

⁶⁰ Tymeson, *Two Towers*.

⁶¹ Greenwood, *First Fruits of Freedom, The Migration of Former Slaves and Their Search for Equality in Worcester, Massachusetts, 1862-1900*.

⁶² "Institutional History."

donation to the school went largely into a Library and Apparatus fund, as well as a John Boynton Scholarship Fund. These funds are still part of our endowment, and have accounting numbers in WPI's systems.⁶³ Salisbury and Washburn's significant donations to the school were funded in part by industries connected to slave labor. That money is still in WPI's endowment, with account numbers and all, funding the continued operations of our school. The education of every student at WPI since 1865 has relied in part on money gained indirectly from slave labor. The founders' choices and connections shaped this institution in ways that sustain and affect it today.

Impact

Some of WPI's founders had ties to slavery and antislavery, and they brought those ties with them when they founded this institution. Now, WPI can decide what to do with this information. My recommendation would be to use this information to change how the institution tells its own story. As mentioned previously, WPI has not revised how it narrates its history in many years, reciting the same tale from the *Two Towers* book 60 years after its publishing. But even our newer stories, like the *Tech Bible*, don't acknowledge this part of our past. Stories of WPI have a tendency to use the Civil War as a starting point, if they acknowledge it at all. The *Tech Bible* says that "As the country started to rebuild from the American Civil War in 1865, Worcester Tech was building itself."⁶⁴ Other tellings of WPI's history, such as the "About WPI" section of our website, cite the height of the American Industrial Revolution as its starting point.⁶⁵ Other publications made to sell our institution

⁶³ Gammal, "John Boynton - Farmer to Founder."

⁶⁴ Student Alumni Society and WPI Alumni Association, *Tech Bible*.

⁶⁵ "WPI History."

to investors do this as well, such as the Beyond These Towers campaign prospectus.⁶⁶ We would suggest that WPI change how it tells its story to acknowledge its past. The fact that WPI was founded at the end of the Civil War should be more than a marker on a timeline. The consequences of the Civil War and Reconstruction permeated every aspect of life at the time, and affected the founding of this institution and its early years. The institution of slavery has consequences that stretch forward to today, and the first thing we can do is acknowledge this and discuss it.

Future Work

This section will discuss the limitations of our research, and lines of inquiry that may be rewarding to others researching this topic in the future. This topic was researched by one person over three terms, and as such there are many leads that could not be covered. These leads tend to fall into three categories: further research into the founders covered in this paper, research into other founders, and research into WPI's founding and early days beyond the founders.

Boynton, Salisbury, Washburn

This paper covers research into John Boynton, Stephen Salisbury II, and Ichabod Washburn. Each of these founders were multifaceted businessmen, but this project reported on only a portion of their lives. Boynton and Salisbury both spent time in Massachusetts state government, Boynton as a member of the House of Representatives and Salisbury as both a representative and Senator.⁶⁷ Salisbury also participated in

⁶⁶ Worcester Polytechnic Institute, "Beyond These Towers Campaign Prospectus."

⁶⁷ Gammal, "John Boynton - Farmer to Founder"; American Antiquarian Society, "Salisbury Family."

Worcester city government as a selectman and alderman.⁶⁸ Research could be done on the decisions the founders made while in office, including bills they voted on or participated in. For instance, John Boynton voted against the repeal of a law banning interracial marriage during his time as representative.⁶⁹ Research into these founders' actions in public office could give some insight into their opinions beyond their monetary connections.

Due to time constraints, this project could not look at all the business dealings of the three founders either. Very little time was spent on Boynton, and research into Salisbury and Washburn was cut short. More research could be done on Salisbury's business dealings at the time WPI was founded and in its early days. Only about half of Harvard Business School's records on Washburn's business dealings were examined, so that research could be completed. Additionally, insights could be gained into Washburn's personal business dealings and donations to various organizations. Lastly, very little research was done into any of these founders' personal opinions and relationships. Financial connections can tell us a lot about how the school was funded, but personal opinions can inform us on how the school may have been run.

The Other Six

Depending on the source, nine people are credited with the founding of WPI. This project only looked at three of them, but the others are worth investigating as well. In particular, both Emory Washburn and George Frisbie Hoar spent their careers in state and national government, and much could be learned from their actions in these offices.⁷⁰ The

⁶⁸ American Antiquarian Society, "Salisbury Family."

⁶⁹ Gammal, "John Boynton - Farmer to Founder."

⁷⁰ "Founders."

actions of all of the founders would have influenced the early years of the school, especially those who outlived Boynton and Washburn. While Washburn and Boynton provided the original ideas for the school, the other founders were the executors of this vision. They would have had a larger effect on the day-to-day operation of the school, and the institution going forward. Thus, it is worth some research into their personal beliefs and actions.

Beyond the Founders

Lastly, attention should be paid to the early days of WPI itself, rather than its founders' lives outside the institution. While WPI itself is unlikely to have connections to slavery beyond the founders, it is likely to have connections to systemic racism. For instance, we know that in the early days of the institution, the founders grappled with the idea of admitting female students. Boynton's original idea included both male and female students, but the founders eventually decided not to admit female students for the first few years.⁷¹ The question of whether to admit students of color likely also would have been on their minds, and research should be done into this deliberation and decision. The first Black graduate of WPI was in the class of 1923, nearly 60 years after WPI's founding.⁷² What decision-making or policy led to such a gap in the student body? More research should be done in this area.

More questions can be asked of WPI's early days. Other universities have found professors teaching racist rhetoric, such as Harvard Professor Louis Agassiz who was a proponent of racist scientific theories.⁷³ It is possible that professors in WPI's early days

⁷¹ Tymeson, *Two Towers*.

⁷² Baron, "The Odyssey of Naudin Oswell, WPI's First Black Graduate – WPI Journal."

⁷³ Walsh, "Radcliffe-Based Program Rolls out Research Efforts."

held such views. The demographics of WPI's employees could also be a topic of interest. Since Black people in Worcester were largely relegated to unskilled positions, it is worth investigating whether WPI followed this pattern, or if they hired Black people at all in the early days.⁷⁴ We can also conduct research into how early Black students and employees were treated in their time at WPI. An article on Naudin Oswell, WPI's first Black graduate, indicates he experienced discrimination while at the school.⁷⁵ As such, we can ask if other Black students or employees faced similar discrimination. Research can be conducted into nearly every aspect of WPI's beginnings and early years to see what racism could have, and likely did, permeate the institution.

Lastly, the original charge of this IQP was to investigate the founders' connections to Native American dispossession, as well as slavery. Attention should also be paid to this important topic. How did the land our campus is on come to be in our possession? Which peoples were displaced to confer land titles from hand to hand until Salisbury's donation? Native American dispossession is its own, equally important topic and should be researched and discussed as such. Any such discrimination, dispossession, or systemic harm in our institution's past should be examined, for it most certainly affects our education and how we present our own history today.

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⁷⁴ Greenwood, *First Fruits of Freedom, The Migration of Former Slaves and Their Search for Equality in Worcester, Massachusetts, 1862-1900*.

⁷⁵ Baron, "The Odyssey of Naudin Oswell, WPI's First Black Graduate – WPI Journal."

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