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Built on Their Backs: Slavery at Mercer University

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On a small tract of land roughly 80 miles East of Atlanta lies a secluded yet well-kept cemetery surrounded by a brick wall and dense forest. It is the final resting place for the residents of the small town of Penfield and for any long-standing employees of Mercer University, the school that stood there over 150 years ago. Surnames like Mercer, Sanders, Hendricks, McWhorter, Janes, and others adorn the clean headstones that are maintained by the University. But just beyond the brick wall lies another cemetery, hidden under overgrowth and dead trees. Make-shift headstones puncture the landscape, a few bearing the same surnames as those in the cemetery over the wall, though their burial sites remain far from similar. Discovered in 2019, the cemetery is believed to house Penfield's Black and enslaved populations, and in much the same way as Mercer University's connections to the institution of slavery, they have been forgotten.¹

Today, Mercer is a private university located in Macon, Georgia. With less than 10,000 students enrolled across its undergraduate and professional programs, the small school still manages to boast accolades for community outreach and continually ranks high in student diversity.² Despite this, the legacy of slavery at Mercer remains an unreconciled and largely unknown part of the University's past. While Universities across the United States are beginning to research and acknowledge their connections to slavery, Mercer has failed to launch an investigation into its history with the practice of human bondage. This dissertation strives to be the starting point for that research with the ultimate hope that Mercer will sanction its own investigation and join official research bodies such as the Universities Studying Slavery (USS) consortium. Hosted by the University of Virginia, USS gathers participating institutions to share resources and knowledge regarding individual investigations into a University's past with

¹ This cemetery was discovered by documentary filmmaker Macky Alston and local historian Mamie Hillman in 2019 while working on research about Mercer and its founding families.

² "Facts and Figures," Mercer.edu, Mercer University, 2020, <https://www.mercer.edu/about-mercer/facts-and-figures/>

slavery.³ It has been a useful tool in uncovering and reconciling the past for many of Mercer's institutional peers. Nearby Wesleyan College, located in the same city as Mercer, is one of the newest members of the USS consortium pledging to examine its history with slavery.⁴ The University of Georgia, while previously resistant to acknowledging the role of slavery on campus, allowed student and professor-driven research. These individual efforts ultimately led the University to join USS as of December 2019.⁵ These schools are in the beginning stages of uncovering their history with slavery and the presence of enslaved people on their campuses in the antebellum era.

Unlike Mercer, Wesleyan College and The University of Georgia fall into a larger trend of American institutions investigating their pasts with the practice of human bondage. The forerunner of these investigations is Brown University's report, commissioned by Ruth Simmons in 2003.⁶ The 107-page document traverses the early history of the University's relationship with chattel slavery to suggestions about reparations.⁷ Simmons and other researchers traced the first endowment of the University to profits from the institution of slavery, with many of the school's original donors enslaving hundreds of people.⁸ These findings rendered Brown University one of the first institutions of higher learning to acknowledge its participation in the enslavement of Black Americans. The Brown University report was, in many regards, the first of its kind and it continues to serve as the blueprint for these types of investigations. Ten years later, the

³ University of Virginia, "President's Commission on Slavery and the University," Universities Studying Slavery, 2013.

⁴ University of Virginia, "President's Commission on Slavery and the University-Universities Studying Slavery."

⁵ Ibid. University of Georgia, "African American Experience in Athens-Slavery at UGA," Slavery at the University of Georgia.

⁶ Brown University, "Slavery and Justice: Report of the Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice," 2006.

⁷ Brown University, "Slavery and Justice," 1-107.

⁸ Brown University, "Slavery and Justice," 14-15.

University of Virginia formed a commission to research the school's dependence on enslaved labor.⁹ As the founder of the University and a large-scale enslaver, Thomas Jefferson used many of his own enslaved people to build the foundations of the school.¹⁰ Through extensive research, the University of Virginia discovered the presence of 4,000 to 5,000 enslaved people on campus between 1817 and 1865.¹¹ These people cooked, cleaned, and performed skilled tasks such as carpentry, sewing, and brick making.¹² Though no monetary reparations have been discussed to date, the school has commissioned a memorial to acknowledge and recognize the men, women, and children who lived and worked at the University of Virginia.¹³ From this research, the school created USS to foster a greater understanding of the role of slavery in institutions of higher learning. Since then, dozens of schools have joined the USS consortium, including several international Universities.¹⁴

Although Mercer University is much smaller than Brown University or the University of Virginia, its relationship with slavery is no less pronounced or meaningful. Meeting minutes from the school's sponsoring organization, the Georgia Baptist Convention, shows that most of the donors who provided the funds to establish Mercer were enslavers and made the majority of their wealth from the profits of enslaved labor. Limited surviving account books indicate that Mercer depended on enslaved labor throughout its first decade, hiring enslaved people from local enslavers to cook, clean, tend to the farm, and even construct many of its original buildings. Unfortunately, these account books are limited to the 1830s and early 1840s thus restricting

⁹ University of Virginia, "President's Commission on Slavery and the University."

¹⁰ University of Virginia, "President's Commission on Slavery and the University."

¹¹ University of Virginia, "President's Commission on Slavery and the University-Memorial to Enslaved Laborers."

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ University of Virginia, "President's Commission on Slavery and the University-Universities Studying Slavery."

analysis of Mercer's use of enslaved labor to these decades. However, an investigation into the leaders of Mercer University reveals that every President prior to the Civil War enslaved multiple people and profited from their labor, thus allowing them to carry out their duties to the University and rendering Mercer a participant in the institution of slavery well beyond the 1840s. Ultimately, Mercer University relied on enslaved people to create and sustain it as an institution of higher learning. The contributions of this stolen labor allowed Mercer University to prosper for the next 200 years. While Mercer is a much smaller and less high-profile University than many of those engaging in research about the role of slavery, the explicit nature of its use of enslaved labor makes it a worthy institution for study. As a small, private, Baptist school for the majority of its history, Mercer University serves as a testament to the pervasiveness of human bondage to American institutions of all kinds.

Like many institutions around the world, Mercer University's history with slavery has been concealed for generations. The lasting effects of this practice continue to impact the descendants of those enslaved people whose labor and lives were stolen. While it is impossible to know many of the specific individuals impacted by Mercer University's engagement with chattel slavery, a recognition of this practice is the first step towards reconciliation.

Section One:

Enslavers, Preachers, and Pious Young Men: The Foundations of Mercer Institute

On September 12th, 1828, a man named Josiah Penfield died a thousand miles away from his home in Savannah, Georgia.¹⁵ Penfield was an ardent baptist and upon his death, the wealthy man left a large portion of his estate to the newly formed Georgia Baptist Convention to establish “a fund for the education of pious young men for the Gospel Ministry.”¹⁶ But Penfield, likely knowing the tribulations of the young organization, stipulated that the funds could only be accessed if an equal amount was raised for the same purpose.¹⁷ The convention took up the issue at their next meeting and in a matter of hours, twenty-six donors came forward to match the bequest.¹⁸ The result of Penfield’s Last Will and Testament was the establishment of a manual labor school located on a plantation in Greene County, Georgia, roughly 80 miles East of Atlanta.

Originally a college and not yet a university, the school was named “Mercer Institute” after its second-largest donor and major religious figure, Jesse Mercer.¹⁹ As a product of the Georgia Baptist Convention, an organization aimed at promoting the Baptist denomination in Georgia, Mercer Institute was meant to be used as an instrument in the organization’s mission to evangelize and convert the citizens of Georgia.²⁰ Conversion, however, required many more Baptist preachers than the convention claimed in the early part of the nineteenth century. For the

¹⁵ Josiah Penfield, Folder: Penfield, Josiah, Biographical, Mercer University Special Collections, 1/1

¹⁶ Josiah Penfield, Last Will and Testament, 1828, Mercer University Special Collections, Folder: Penfield, Josiah, Biographical 1/1. 4.

¹⁷ Penfield, Last Will and Testament, 4.

¹⁸ Georgia Baptist Convention, Minutes of the Proceedings of the Eighth Anniversary of the Georgia Baptist Convention Taken at Milledgeville, 1829 (Milledgeville: Printed by Camak & Ragland, 1829), Mercer University Special Collections.

¹⁹ *History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia* (Atlanta, Georgia: Jas. P Harrison & Co., Printers and Publishers, 1881), 146.

²⁰ Dowell, 31-33, 41.

preceding one hundred years, Baptists had been persecuted in the predominantly Anglican English settlement.²¹ With the formation of the United States and new provisions for religious freedom, Baptists began to move past the need for survival and into a period of growth.²² When the religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening began in the early 1800s, public opinion towards protestant religions began to turn.²³ Support for the Baptist denomination grew and with it came organizations like the Georgia Baptist Convention.²⁴ Despite this growth in membership, however, Baptists still lacked formally trained ministers and respect from other Christian denominations.²⁵ In the 1820s, the Georgia Baptist Convention recognized the ability of educational institutions to train future ministers at the same time that it would elevate and legitimize the denomination.²⁶

A consensus formed amongst the Convention members that a school was the next step in the denomination's growth. However, a series of attempts failed to materialize any concrete plans for a Baptist school.²⁷ It was not until Josiah Penfield's death and the financial assistance of the twenty-six original donors that the foundations for Mercer Institute emerged. But these foundations were not built on Christian charity alone, they were built on the profits of slavery. A closer look into the donors who started the institute reveals the importance of chattel slavery in building their independent fortunes. In turn, these fortunes were used to establish Mercer

²¹ Thomas S. Kidd, Barry Hankins, *Baptists In America: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), Preface, Chapter 1.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

²⁵ Kidd, Hankins, 42. Spright Dowell, *A History of Mercer University: 1833-1853* (Atlanta: Foote & Davies, 1958), 31.

²⁶ Dowell, 31.

²⁷ Dowell, 34-40. Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes, 1820-1829*.

Institute, thus demonstrating the school's dependence on the institution of slavery from its very beginnings.

Unlike many of the original donors to Mercer, Josiah Penfield was not from Georgia or even the South. He was born in Fairfield, Connecticut in 1785 to the owner of a government-contracted mail route.²⁸ At an early age, however, he was brought to Savannah, Georgia as an apprentice to his uncle, a prosperous Jewelry maker. Penfield quickly learned the trade and bought the business outright.²⁹ At the time of his death, he owned numerous properties around Savannah, had served as an alderman for the city, and was a deacon at the local Baptist church.³⁰ By the age of thirty-five, Penfield had become so successful that he was able to purchase some of his first enslaved people, allowing him to enter the elite slaveholding class that dominated the South. In 1818, he purchased an eighteen-year-old enslaved woman named Betty for \$200.³¹ She then joined his enslaved population which, by 1820, had risen to a total of eight people.³²

As historians Anthony Parent and Walter Johnson discuss in their respective works, the South was not simply a society with slaves, but rather a slave society, one whose economy, social hierarchy, and daily life depended on the institution of human bondage.³³ To be a slaveholder not only signified prosperity, it also indicated social status and helped to reinforce patriarchal beliefs

²⁸ *Josiah Penfield Biographical Information*, Fred K. Marquand, Letter, Georgia Historical Society, Mercer University Special Collections, Folder: Josiah Penfield, Biographical 1/1.

²⁹ *Josiah Penfield Biographical Information*, Fred K. Marquand, Letter.

³⁰ *Josiah Penfield Biographical Information*, Fred K. Marquand, Letter. Spright Dowell, *A History of Mercer University, 1833-1953* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1958), 40.

³¹ *Josiah Penfield Biographical Information*, Chatham County Courthouse Record of Deeds, Mercer University Special Collections, Folder: Josiah Penfield, Biographical 1/1.

³² U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Federal Census 1820*, Chatham County, Georgia. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed via Ancestry.com.

³³ Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 17-18, Introduction. Anthony S. Parent Jr., *Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660-1740* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), Introduction.

about masculine and feminine identity.³⁴ To enter into this elite class, white men and women continually oppressed Black Americans. Thus, although he was one of the few donors whose primary profession was not agriculture, Penfield's participation in the institution of slavery still mirrored his donation to Mercer. In addition to his own enslaved population, Penfield's business catered to the wealthy elite, many of whom had to own enslaved people to afford his merchandise.³⁵ Penfield's own increasing wealth was made possible by the patronage of these customers, thus allowing him to donate a significant portion of his estate for the establishment of Mercer Institute.

When the call for matching donations arose at the 1829 meeting of the Georgia Baptist Convention, Jesse Mercer was one of the first men to pledge his support.³⁶ Mercer had been a prolific figure in the Baptist community for decades as one of the founders of the Georgia Baptist Convention and the son of one of the first Baptist ministers in the state.³⁷ He served as the Convention's moderator for twenty years and had traveled around Georgia preaching and converting adherents for most of his life.³⁸ Throughout the 1820s, he was also an outspoken voice in support of a Baptist school.³⁹ In 1829, he donated \$250 for the establishment of Mercer

³⁴ Parent, 2, 4-5, 197-198.

³⁵ From several newspaper ads, we know that Penfield's business sold upscale jewelry, watches, gold-plated weapons and other luxury items. These were not easily afforded by anyone in the South who did not enslave people, as the society had a slave-based economy. See also, *The Republican and Savannah Evening Ledger*, Nov. 7, 1812, No. 133, Vol. 10. Via Georgia Historic Newspapers.com

³⁶ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes of the Ninth Anniversary of the Baptist Convention for the State of Georgia, 1830* (Milledgeville: Camak & Ragland Printers, 1830), Mercer University Special Collections, 12.

³⁷ *History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia*, 384-389.

³⁸ *History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia*, 387.

³⁹ *History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia*, 387-388.

Institute and another \$50 to purchase the necessary land in Greene County.⁴⁰ He also enslaved eighteen people at the time.⁴¹

Much of Mercer's wealth is believed to have come from his second wife, Nancy Simons Mills, the widow of a wealthy Jewish merchant and planter named Abram Simons.⁴² Simons owned a plantation in nearby Wilkes County, where, in 1820, he enslaved thirty-three people.⁴³ Upon their marriage in 1827, Jesse legally took possession of Nancy Simons Mills' inherited estate including her enslaved population.⁴⁴ From this wealth, he generously donated to the Institute throughout his life, serving as the first president of the Board of Trustees and creating one of its initial endowments.⁴⁵ As the Georgia Baptist Convention admitted at its meeting in 1911, Jesse Mercer would not have been able to make such donations without the inherited wealth of his wife, a wealth that was amassed through enslaved labor: "So you see that Mercer University is largely indebted to the skill and enterprise of a Jewish financier for much the larger part of its life and power. A copious Providence this, which founds a Christian College on Jewish cornerstones."⁴⁶ As this admission suggests, Jesse Mercer's original donation was only made possible through the estate of his wife's first husband, an estate that included a large enslaved labor force. While the Georgia Baptist Convention could have directly acknowledged the

⁴⁰Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes, 1830*, 12. Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes of the Twelfth Anniversary of the Baptist Convention of Geo., 1833* (Washington: Printed at the News Office, 1833), Mercer University Special Collections, 7.)

⁴¹U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Federal Census 1830*, Wilkes County, Georgia. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed via Ancestry.com.

⁴²Barbara R. Allen, "Early Baptist Women and Their Contribution to Georgia Baptist History," *Viewpoints: Georgia Baptist History* 9 (1984), 38-40.

⁴³ U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Federal Census 1820*, Wilkes County, Georgia. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed via Ancestry.com.

⁴⁴ Lucian Lamar Knight, *Georgia's Landmarks, Memorials, and Legends, Vol. II* (Atlanta, GA: Byrd Printing Company, 1914), 1042-1045.

⁴⁵ *History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia*, 387-388. Allen, 38-40.

⁴⁶ Leon Huhner, "CAPTAIN ABRAHAM SIMONS OF THE GEORGIA LINE IN THE REVOLUTION." *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, no. 33 (1934): 231-36.

contributions of those enslaved people, they missed that opportunity in 1911 and for decades to come. Instead, they credited the man who enslaved them.

Jesse Mercer's original donation constituted only a fraction of what he would give to the school that bore his name. Shortly before his death, Mercer wrote two wills, one before the death of his wife and one after. In the first will dated March 1st, 1841, Mercer bequeathed all of his household items to his wife, including "her two negro women, Charlotte and Clary and Charlotte's children, Wiley, Henry, William and Catherine Burmak."⁴⁷ He specifically mentioned that these enslaved people were to be "used for her sole and separate use," but that the rest of his enslaved population was to be sold to enslavers of their own choosing.⁴⁸ In his second will, written one month after the death of his wife and two months before his own passing, Mercer updated his provisions by stating, "My negroes, I wish disposed of in mercy, I.e. to give them reasonable time to choose owners for themselves, etc."⁴⁹ It was in this same document that he bequeathed the money from the sale of his land and tenements and the entire remainder of his estate to Mercer University, including the profits earned from the sale of his enslaved people.⁵⁰ Although it is unclear exactly how many enslaved people were sold, combined with the entirety of his estate, this endowment is credited as one of the largest in the school's history.⁵¹ Therefore, Mercer University was sustained by the profits of the domestic slave trade, namely the sale of Charlotte, Clary, Wiley, Henry, William, and Catherine Burmak.⁵²

⁴⁷ Jesse Mercer, *Last Will and Testament, March 1st, 1841*, Mercer University Special Collections, Folder: Mercer, Jesse, Biographical.

⁴⁸ Mercer, *Last Will and Testament, March 1st, 1841*.

⁴⁹ Jesse Mercer, *Last Will and Testament, June 3, 1841*, Mercer University Special Collections, Folder: Mercer, Jesse, Biographical.

⁵⁰ Jesse Mercer, *Last Will and Testament, June 3, 1841*.

⁵¹ *History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia*, 387-388. Allen, 38-40.

⁵² There is potential for further research into the sale and subsequent fate of these named enslaved people.

Jesse Mercer's insistence on a Baptist school throughout the 1820s found an unlikely ally and fellow donor in a man named James Shannon. Shannon was an Irish immigrant who had come to Georgia in hopes of becoming a teacher.⁵³ When he arrived in the state, he was converted to the Baptist faith and sought to fulfill his dream through preaching. It was not long before he became an ordained minister, leading churches associated with the Georgia Baptist Convention.⁵⁴ As a lifelong advocate for education, he gave an impassioned speech to the Convention in 1827 that renewed interest in establishing a Baptist school.⁵⁵ In 1829, he donated \$100 to the Institute in support of this cause.⁵⁶ Shannon might well have been credited with part of Mercer's foundation if not for his infamy later in life. Shortly after Mercer's opening, Shannon moved to Louisiana, denounced the Baptist denomination, and played a key role in founding the Restoration movement, a sect that sought to unify all Christian denominations.⁵⁷ From this platform, he began a life-long career as a fire-eater or a southern democrat who ardently defended slavery and petitioned for secession.⁵⁸ As the list of donors to Mercer can attest, southern ministers were far from abolitionists, and many enslaved countless people. But in comparison to James Shannon, their outspoken defense of slavery was relatively subdued. Shannon, on the other hand, actively sought scriptural justification for the enslavement of Black people and published numerous addresses about his findings.⁵⁹ Although much of his beliefs were articulated after his donation to Mercer, Shannon had been an enslaver his whole life. At

⁵³ Barry C. Poyner, *Bound to Slavery: James Shannon and the Restoration Movement* (Fort Worth: Star Bible Publications, 1999), 29.

⁵⁴ Poyner, 29-40.

⁵⁵ Poyner, 40.

⁵⁶ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes 1830*.

⁵⁷ Poyner, 47-69

⁵⁸ Poyner, chapter 4-5.

⁵⁹ Poyner, 82-83.

the time of his donation, he held five people in bondage.⁶⁰ His denunciation of the Baptist faith left Shannon ostracized from his fellow ministers and his legacy at Mercer, but his beliefs in the moral righteousness of slavery still resonated with the donors to the Institute.

Andrews and Cullen Battle were some of the wealthiest men in attendance at the Convention in 1829.⁶¹ They were also two of the only donors who were not ordained ministers. Both brothers were trained physicians but their primary livelihood was the cultivation of crops by their large enslaved labor forces.⁶² Andrews owned property in several counties around Georgia and moved between them frequently.⁶³ Around the time of his \$50 donation in 1829, he held 39 people in bondage at his plantation in Pike County.⁶⁴ Although Andrews was considered successful on many counts, his property and personal wealth paled in comparison to his brother. Cullen was also a physician and planter who had come to the Baptist faith at the late age of 42.⁶⁵ This was fortuitous for the supporters of Mercer who coveted his donation just three years later.⁶⁶ According to Spright Dowell, the president and unofficial historian of Mercer University in the 1950s, Cullen donated anywhere from \$1,000 to \$5,000 to Mercer over the course of his life.⁶⁷ At the time of his original donation, he enslaved 148 people in Hancock County.⁶⁸ At the peak of his wealth in 1850, he enslaved 243 people in Eufaula, Alabama.⁶⁹ Even at the onset of the Civil

⁶⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Federal Census 1830*, Clarke County, Georgia. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed via Ancestry.com.

⁶¹ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes of the Ninth Anniversary of the Baptist Convention for the State of Georgia, 1830* (Milledgeville: Camak & Ragland Printers, 1830), Mercer University Special Collections, 12.

⁶² *The Christian Index*, July 6, 1863. Mercer University Special Collections.

⁶³ *The Christian Index*, July 6, 1863. Mercer University Special Collections.

⁶⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Federal Census 1830*, Pike County, Georgia. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed via Ancestry.com.

⁶⁵ Dowell, 174-175.

⁶⁶ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes 1830*.

⁶⁷ Dowell, 65.

⁶⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Federal Census 1830*, Hancock County, Georgia. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed via Ancestry.com.

⁶⁹ U.S. Census Bureau. *Slave Schedule, Manuscript Census 1850. Eufaula, Alabama*. The National Archives in Washington DC. *Records of the Bureau of the Census*, Record Group 29. Accessed via Ancestry.com

War, his enslaved population still numbered 147 people on plantations in two different Alabama counties.⁷⁰ Cullen was described as an “unshaked believer in the scriptural and moral rightfulness of the ‘peculiar institution’.”⁷¹ So much so, that despite a lack of formal ministerial training, he would gather his enslaved population and preach to them from the bible every Sunday.⁷² This strong faith in the Baptist denomination led Cullen to donate \$200 to the foundation of Mercer Institute.⁷³ A donation that was made possible by the profits of slavery.

However, the Battle family’s donation to Mercer was not entirely selfless. In 1872, Cullen’s son, Archibald J. Battle, was elected president of Mercer University, in large part because of the generosity of his father over several decades, a generosity that was facilitated by enslaved labor.⁷⁴ Archibald himself, while serving his term after the Civil War, had owned 6 enslaved people prior to emancipation.⁷⁵ His brother, also named Cullen Battle, was a General in the Confederate Army just seven years before Archibald took up his post at Mercer.⁷⁶ Therefore, the Battle family’s vested interest in the enslavement of Black Americans directly benefited both the establishment of Mercer in 1833 and its continuation in the postwar period.

Penfield, Mercer, Shannon, and the Battles were just five of the 26 men whose fortunes established Mercer Institute. Of those twenty-six original donors, twenty were enslavers.⁷⁷ The

⁷⁰ U.S. Census Bureau. *Slave Schedule, Manuscript Census 1860. Southern Division, Russell, Alabama*. The National Archives in Washington DC. *Records of the Bureau of the Census*, Record Group 29. Accessed via Ancestry.com.

U.S. Census Bureau. *Slave Schedule, Manuscript Census 1860. Southern Division, Macon, Alabama*. The National Archives in Washington DC. *Records of the Bureau of the Census*, Record Group 29. Accessed via Ancestry.com.

⁷¹ J. H Campbell, *Georgia Baptists: Historical and Biographical* (Macon: J. W. Burke & Company, 1874), 498.

⁷² Campbell, 498.

⁷³ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes 1830*.

⁷⁴ Dowell, 174-175.

⁷⁵ U.S. Census Bureau. *Slave Schedule, Manuscript Census 1860. Tuscaloosa, Alabama*. The National Archives in Washington DC. *Records of the Bureau of the Census*, Record Group 29. Accessed via Ancestry.com

⁷⁶ John H. Eicher and David J. Eicher, *Civil War High Commands* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 121.

⁷⁷ This data was collected from the United States Federal Census of 1830 in various Georgia counties, specifically Greene, Hancock, Jasper, Taliaferro, and Wilkes County.

remaining 6 donors cannot be conclusively linked to the practice of human bondage, but further research into these men may yield a greater understanding of their relationships with the institution of slavery. Almost all of the twenty slaveholding donors made the majority of their wealth from enslaved labor and several were considered significantly wealthy by nineteenth century standards.⁷⁸ Cullen Battle was the largest slave owner with 243 enslaved people at the height of his estate.⁷⁹ A man named Joshua Key followed closely behind with an enslaved population of sixty-seven people in 1830 around the time of his donation and a peak of 128 people in 1860.⁸⁰ The slaveholding donor with the smallest enslaved population was a man named Barnabas Strickland who enslaved one man and one woman in 1830.⁸¹ In subsequent years, however, his enslaved population grew to over twenty people.⁸² In 1830, each slaveholding donor enslaved an average of thirty-three people.⁸³ In total, the donors to Mercer Institute enslaved over 600 people collectively at the time of their donation.⁸⁴ The enormity of this number indicates the pervasiveness of slavery at the same moment as Mercer's foundation and the willingness of the school's leaders to engage in this practice for their own benefit. The slave holdings of these men contributed to their overall wealth and allowed for their donations to Mercer Institute. Therefore, Mercer University was, at least in part, founded on profits from the

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ U.S. Census Bureau. *Slave Schedule, Manuscript Census 1850. Eufaula, Alabama*. The National Archives in Washington DC. *Records of the Bureau of the Census*, Record Group 29. Accessed via Ancestry.com

⁸⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Federal Census 1830*, Burke County, Georgia. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed via Ancestry.com.

⁸¹ U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Federal Census 1830*, Henry County, Georgia. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed via Ancestry.com.

⁸² U.S. Census Bureau, *Slave Schedule, Manuscript Census 1850*, Milton, Autauga, Alabama. The National Archives in Washington DC. *Records of the Bureau of the Census*, Record Group 29.

⁸³ This data was collected from the United States Federal Census of 1830 in various Georgia counties, specifically Greene, Hancock, Jasper, Taliaferro, and Wilkes County. The total slave holdings of the donors (676) were added together and then divided by the total number of donors (20) to produce an average of 33.8.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

institution of slavery and thus owes its beginnings to those 600 unnamed enslaved men, women, and children.

Section Two:

Survival, Labor, and Profit: Mercer's First Decade

After three years of fundraising and planning, Mercer Institute opened in January 1833.⁸⁵ For the next decade, the school would depend on enslaved labor for its most basic operations. From the cooking and cleaning to the profits their labor produced, these people built the literal foundations of the Georgia Baptist Convention's prized school. Evidenced in the amount of money spent on enslaved labor and the ways that the practice of human bondage permeated life at the Institute, Mercer would not have survived its first decade of operation without chattel slavery, demonstrating that not only was the school founded on slavery, it survived on it.

Not yet a university, Mercer Institute functioned more like a high school or preparatory program, with most of its original thirty-nine students falling between the ages of fourteen and twenty.⁸⁶ Through a series of advertisements in the Baptist Newspaper, *The Christian Index*, the school attracted some of its first pupils from neighboring counties and states.⁸⁷ When the Georgia Baptist Convention purchased the land for Mercer in 1832, they simultaneously created the surrounding town of Penfield, named for the school's first benefactor.⁸⁸ As plans for the institute progressed, slaveholding families settled the fertile area intending to send their young sons to Mercer to be educated.⁸⁹ In many ways, Mercer Institute and the town of Penfield were intrinsically the same. Not only did the Institute conduct most of its business with the local

⁸⁵ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes*, 1833.

⁸⁶ This information was collected from various census data after the students had left Mercer. See also, several biographies of students who went on to become Baptist preachers in *History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia* (Atlanta, Georgia: Jas. P. Harrison & Co., Printers and Publishers, 1881).

⁸⁷ James Lawton, *The Baptist Centennial Volume* (Atlanta: Jas. P. Harrison & Printers and Publishers, 1885), 148-151.

⁸⁸ Jonathan M. Bryant, *How Curious A Land: Conflict and Change in Greene County, Georgia, 1850-1885* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 21-22. Dowell, 42.

⁸⁹ Bryant, 21-22.

enslavers who settled there, but in some cases, they also accepted money made from the profits of slavery as tuition.⁹⁰

Although little is documented about Mercer's first inaugural classes, at least several students each year came from slaveholding families. James R. Jenkins, for example, was one of the first students enrolled at Mercer in 1833.⁹¹ His father enslaved nineteen people on his plantation in Greene County.⁹² Jenkins, like most of the students at Mercer, paid between \$1.50 and \$5.00 in tuition each month with an additional fee for boarding, laundry, books, and incidentals.⁹³ Hartwell Jackson, another of Mercer's first students, came from a plantation in neighboring Wilkes County with fourteen enslaved people.⁹⁴ Robert Ligon McWhorter, a later graduate of the Institute, came from a plantation with five enslaved people.⁹⁵ Thomas Janes' father, Absalom Janes, was one of the wealthiest planters in Georgia when he moved to Penfield in the late 1830s to enroll his son at Mercer.⁹⁶ Janes had come from a household with fifty-three enslaved people before arriving at Mercer's modest farm and simple structures.⁹⁷ His father would go on to be a lifelong trustee of the University.⁹⁸

Since the school was originally intended to train young men for the ministry, a group the Georgia Baptist Convention was sorely lacking, the cost of tuition was relatively low and only

⁹⁰ *Steward's Book of Mercer Institute, 1833-1836.*

⁹¹ *Steward's Book of Mercer Institute, 1833-1836.* See also, Arlette Copeland, Manuscript History of Mercer University. Mercer University Special Collections.

⁹² U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Federal Census 1830*, Greene County, Georgia. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed via Ancestry.com.

⁹³ Dowell, 44.

⁹⁴ *Steward's Book of Mercer Institute, 1833-1836.* U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Federal Census 1830*, Wilkes County, Georgia. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed via Ancestry.com. See also, Arlette Copeland, Manuscript History of Mercer University. Mercer University Special Collections.

⁹⁵ Bryant, 39. U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Federal Census 1840*, District 605, Taliaferro County, Georgia. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed via Ancestry.com

⁹⁶ Bryant, 39-40.

⁹⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Federal Census 1840*, District 605, Taliaferro County, Georgia. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed via Ancestry.com.

⁹⁸ Bryant, 39-40.

constituted a small part of Mercer's income over the next forty years.⁹⁹ Several students paid no tuition at all, while others received a scholarship from the Convention.¹⁰⁰ Despite this, the money Mercer did accept from local slaveholding families cannot be discounted in the school's relationship with the institution of slavery. Much like the money used to start the school, the money that contributed to Mercer's success was tainted by the practice of chattel slavery.

Although the Georgia Baptist Convention expected Mercer to be a school for theological training, very few young men entered the Institute with ministerial pursuits in mind.¹⁰¹ Instead, most students received a classical education combined with the school's manual labor curriculum.¹⁰² Brought over from Europe in the early part of the nineteenth century, the manual labor system purported that physical labor was beneficial to the Christian discipline required of young men desiring to enter the ministry. At the same time, the manual labor curriculum was also an effective means of offsetting the cost of education.¹⁰³ Oftentimes, and in the case of Mercer Institute, the young men enrolled in manual labor curricula would work on the school's plantation, or farm; planting, tending, and harvesting a crop to eat and for the school to sell.¹⁰⁴ As such, the need for permanent enslaved labor for an institution like Mercer was relatively low when compared to plantations owned by individuals. Despite this, Mercer frequently "hired" enslaved people from local enslavers to manage the various duties associated with running a farm, school, and boarding house.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁹ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes, 1833-1865. Steward's Book of Mercer Institute, 1833-1836.*

¹⁰⁰ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes, 1833-1865.*

¹⁰¹ Dowell, 41-42.

¹⁰² *History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia*, 249-251.

¹⁰³ Paul Goodman, "The Manual Labor Movement and the Origins of Abolitionism," *Journal of the Early Republic* 13, no. 3 (1993): 363.

¹⁰⁴ Goodman, 363.

¹⁰⁵ *Steward's Book of Mercer Institute 1833-1836* (Ledger Book, Penfield, Ga., 1833-1836), Mercer University Special Collections.

As Jonathan D. Martin discusses in his study of slave hiring in the antebellum South, the practice of hiring enslaved labor traces its roots back to indentured servitude in the seventeenth century when wealthy Englishmen would pay for passage to the new world in exchange for a labor contract of seven years. The length of these contracts “made little distinction between possessing the labor and possessing the laborer.”¹⁰⁶ As chattel slavery grew in the American South, the hiring of enslaved labor became a cheaper alternative to owning enslaved people. Martin estimates that slave hiring in the South was three to five times more common than the practice of selling enslaved people, with most enslaved people being hired out for at least one year before reaching adulthood.¹⁰⁷ The details of these contracts were usually negotiated in private by the enslavers and the hirers, but essentially all “White southerners could rent slaves when they needed them, for as long as they could afford them, and at prices well below the cost of purchase.”¹⁰⁸ For Mercer, this need appeared from the very beginning of the school’s operations.

In an 1833 letter from the first president of Mercer University, Billington M. Sanders, to the future president of Wake Forest University, Samuel Wait, Sanders described the daily operations and provided counsel on how to run a Baptist school with a manual labor curriculum.¹⁰⁹ He stated that students studied for seven hours a day, starting at sunrise, and labored on the farm for an average of three hours per day, tending to a crop of corn, potatoes, peas, and cotton. While Sanders and other leaders of the University were convinced of the effectiveness of the

¹⁰⁶ Jonathan D. Martin, *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004), 6.

¹⁰⁷ Martin, 6-8.

¹⁰⁸ Martin, 9.

¹⁰⁹ Billington McCarter Sanders, *B.M. Sanders to Samuel Wait, Oct. 15, 1833*. Letter, From Mercer University Special Collections, *Folder: Sanders, Billington McCarthy--Dated Items, Mercer University President 1833-1840*. 2/5.

manual labor system, he conceded in his correspondence with Wait that many of the young men were not as easily persuaded.¹¹⁰ In his parting advice to the upcoming president, he suggested that "some extra hands should be on the place to do extra jobs that are occasionally required to be done when the student's labor is over for the day."¹¹¹

Perhaps because several students had come from plantations where enslaved laborers performed most, if not all, of the work, the manual labor curriculum was unpopular amongst Mercer's pupils and required the hiring of enslaved people from the very outset. These enslaved people quickly became an essential part of Mercer's operations. In 1833, the school hired three enslaved people at \$165 to manage the domestic duties of housing thirty-nine students.¹¹² A few months later, local slaveowner J.K. Daniel, "gratuitously furnished a female servant to assist in the cooking."¹¹³ Daniel, who enslaved 103 people at the time, had five sons attending and boarding at Mercer Institute.¹¹⁴ Billington Sanders, while acting as the steward, hired an additional eight enslaved people "for the use of the institute, for little more than five hundred dollars for the present year."¹¹⁵ These enslaved people cooked, cleaned, and tended to the farm while also living at the Institute.¹¹⁶ In 1833, the school spent a total of \$665 on this enslaved labor.¹¹⁷ The following year, the school only claimed \$180 in available funds for the salary of its

¹¹⁰ Sanders, *B.M. Sanders to Samuel Wait, Oct. 15, 1833*.

¹¹¹ Sanders, *B.M. Sanders to Samuel Wait, Oct. 15, 1833*.

¹¹² Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes of the Twelfth Anniversary of the Baptist Convention of Geo., 1833* (Washington: Printed at the News Office, 1833.) Mercer University Special Collections, 9.

¹¹³ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes 1834*, 6.

¹¹⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Federal Census 1830*, Greene County, Georgia. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed via Ancestry.com. Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes 1834*, 6.

¹¹⁵ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes 1834*, 6. \$500 in today's (2020) money would be \$14,906.

¹¹⁶ *Steward's Book of Mercer Institute, 1833-1836*.

¹¹⁷ *Steward's Book of Mercer Institute, 1833-1836*.

teachers.¹¹⁸ Comparatively, the school spent three times as much on enslaved labor as they did on the instruction of its students, indicating the importance of slavery to Mercer's daily operations.

As Martin notes, the hiring of enslaved people blurred the lines of ownership.¹¹⁹ The more the hirer paid for an enslaved person, the more they felt entitled to absolute control or mastery of that person.¹²⁰ These claims of temporary ownership were then upheld in various court cases throughout the 19th century, cementing the fact that the hirers of enslaved people acted as their enslavers for the duration of their contract.¹²¹ Though these claims were challenged in a Southern society that equated slaveholding with social status, masculinity, and patriarchy, many hirers viewed themselves as the owners of their temporary enslaved labor force.¹²² If enslaved people lived with, worked for, and answered to someone else, then who was their enslaver? Although Mercer never officially owned enslaved people outright, the contracts it entered into to hire these enslaved laborers effectively rendered the school a slaveholding institution. This became particularly true when these contracts stipulated that Mercer was responsible for their care.

In June of 1833, Mercer paid \$1.25 to a local woman named Mrs. Williams for "making negro clothes."¹²³ In 1834, Mercer paid a "Mrs. Finley" \$1.00 for the same purpose.¹²⁴ Later that year, the school bought eight pairs of "negro shoes" for \$8 and five "blankets for negroes" for \$8.75.¹²⁵ The school spent a total of \$155 in 1836 and another \$95 in 1838 on cloth for enslaved

¹¹⁸ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes*, 1834.

¹¹⁹ Martin, 118 and Introduction.

¹²⁰ Martin, 118.

¹²¹ Martin, 121.

¹²² Martin, 118-125, Chapter 4.

¹²³ *Steward's Book of Mercer Institute, 1833-1836*.

¹²⁴ *Steward's Book of Mercer Institute, 1833-1836*.

¹²⁵ *Steward's Book of Mercer Institute, 1833-1836*.

people's clothing.¹²⁶ Many of these expenses were listed alongside common food and household items such as eggs, butter, and tar. For Mercer Institute, buying items that facilitated slavery was as common as buying weekly groceries. Since the Institute depended on enslaved people's labor, these items were a necessary expense in the continuation of that work.

The man who acted as the owner of Mercer's first enslaved labor force was its principle and later president, Billington M. Sanders. Like all of the school's administration, Sanders was a Baptist preacher, but his primary occupation was that of a planter and businessman.¹²⁷ Three years before the school opened, he owned and operated a successful plantation in nearby Columbia, Georgia.¹²⁸ Throughout his tenure, Sanders was praised for leaving the comforts of his large home and moving into two log cabins with his family in Penfield.¹²⁹ At Mercer, Sanders acted as the principal, teacher, treasurer and steward who oversaw the farm.¹³⁰ Unsurprisingly, later accounts suggested he did not particularly care for the job, stating he "was an excellent preacher, a good manager of finance but probably not a success as a planter using student labor."¹³¹ But Sanders was a success using enslaved labor. In 1830, he enslaved thirty people at his plantation.¹³² This number dwindled to twelve in 1840, one year after he resigned as president of Mercer University, and then peaked at forty-two enslaved people shortly before his death in the early 1850s.¹³³ At the time, his real estate was valued at \$9,000, making him one of the richest

¹²⁶ *Steward's Book of Mercer Institute, 1833-1836.*

¹²⁷ *History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia, 459-460.*

¹²⁸ *Ibid, 459*

¹²⁹ *Ibid, 459-460.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid, 459-460.*

¹³¹ Rufus W. Weaver, "The Presidents of Mercer During Its First Half Century," *The Christian Index*, February 18, 1926, Mercer University Special Collections, Folder: Crawford, Nathaniel Macon-Chronological, Mercer University President, 1854-1856, 1/4.

¹³² U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Federal Census 1830*, District 8, Columbia, Georgia. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed via Ancestry.com.

¹³³ U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Federal Census 1840*, Greene County, Georgia. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed via Ancestry.com.

men in Greene County.¹³⁴ Although it was never documented why the Convention chose him to lead its prized school, the decision might have hinged on Sanders' success as a planter or more literally, his profitable management of large enslaved populations.

Equally likely, Sanders was, by all accounts, considered a wealthy planter who had made a substantial fortune from the institution of slavery. Unlike other possible candidates to lead the school, this independent wealth allowed him to donate his time to Mercer. When he was first contracted to lead the school, Sanders was responsible for the jobs of four men while his wife, Cynthia Sanders, was in charge of all of the domestic duties that accompanied boarding the thirty-nine original students.¹³⁵ He and his wife were heralded for only accepting a combined salary of \$800 a year, despite having twenty-two children of their own to care for at the time.¹³⁶ Even by nineteenth century standards, this income would have been inadequate for a family so large. Despite this, the Sanders remained at Mercer for seven years, most likely relying on the income they had made as planters and enslavers in the decades prior.¹³⁷ Therefore, Sanders' wealth, acquired through his personal use of enslaved labor, facilitated his duties at Mercer, making the institution of slavery instrumental to Mercer University's success.

Billington Sanders was not the only acting enslaver on Mercer's campus in its first decade of operation. Cynthia Sanders also played a key role in the school's continued use of enslaved labor through her position as head of the boarding department.¹³⁸ During her time at

¹³⁴U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Federal Census 1850*, Greene County, Georgia. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed via Ancestry.com. There were only 7 men with real estate appraised higher than Sanders' in the whole of Greene County.

¹³⁵ *History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia*, 460. Barbara R. Allen, "Early Baptist Women and Their Contribution to Georgia Baptist History," *Viewpoints: Georgia Baptist History* 9 (1984): 36-37.

¹³⁶ *History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia*, 460.

¹³⁷ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes, 1839-1840*.

¹³⁸ Allen, 36.

Mercer, Cynthia Sanders oversaw several enslaved women in the cooking, cleaning, washing, and various other domestic duties associated with caring for so many students.¹³⁹ Although the limited sources from this period make it impossible to determine exactly how many enslaved people Cynthia Sanders relied on, Martin argues that white women were often instrumental in the hiring of enslaved labor: “For rich and poor women alike, a slave hired for domestic work was a boon that eased, for them, the drudgery of household management; to this extra pair of hands could be delegated such noisome tasks as milking cows and emptying bedpans.”¹⁴⁰

The nature of these jobs ingratiated enslaved people into the culture of the school. So much so that in the 1830s, students reportedly began referring to Cynthia Sanders as “Ole Miss.”¹⁴¹

The terms ‘miss’ and ‘master’ have long been used to refer to female and male enslavers. In the antebellum period and beyond, these titles reinforced the superiority of white enslavers and the subjugation of Black people.¹⁴² Students reportedly adopted the term from the enslaved people who labored in the boarding department under the direction of Cynthia Sanders.¹⁴³ While the young white men used the term affectionately to refer to their “college mother,” enslaved people faced physical punishment if they referred to their enslavers as anything else.¹⁴⁴ The appropriation of the language of slavery by young white men indicates the proximity in which both students and enslaved people lived and worked. This intimacy suggests that enslaved people were a vital part of daily life at Mercer Institute. However, the difference in interpretation of these terms suggests that while their lives were connected, their experiences remained far from

¹³⁹ Allen, 37.

¹⁴⁰ Martin, 107.

¹⁴¹ Allen, 36.

¹⁴² Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the Antebellum South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 5-6.

¹⁴³ Allen, 37.

¹⁴⁴ Allen, 36.

similar. We cannot know the repercussions Mercer's enslaved people faced if they did not refer to Cynthia Sanders by her title, but as Stephanie Jones-Rogers uncovered in her work on female enslavers, white women enslaved Black people in the same ways that their male counterparts did, sometimes punishing them with even greater cruelty.¹⁴⁵ Although Sanders was the primary overseer of enslaved labor on the farm, Cynthia Sanders was equally complicit in enslaving the school's domestic labor force and ensuring the necessity of their labor to daily operations.

In addition to the school's farm and domestic obligations, Mercer also depended on enslaved labor for the construction of many of its first buildings. As Mercer Institute grew, the school also sought to expand its physical presence. In 1833, the Institute hired Hermon Mercer, the brother of Jesse Mercer, to build several structures on the school grounds.¹⁴⁶ On February 6th, 1833, he sent six of his enslaved people to live at Mercer Institute while they worked on the buildings. On March 8th, he sent one additional enslaved person to add to the crew of laborers. He was charged two dollars per month for their board.¹⁴⁷ Hermon lived on a plantation in the neighboring Taliaferro county with twenty-eight enslaved people.¹⁴⁸ It is unclear whether he also labored on the buildings at Mercer or simply hired out his enslaved population to do the work for him. Regardless, he received \$1,500 for their labor.¹⁴⁹

Two years later, the school entered another phase of expansion when the young students formed themselves into two "literary societies," the Phi Delta Society and the Ciceronian

¹⁴⁵ Jones-Rogers, 70-72.

¹⁴⁶ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes 1833*.

¹⁴⁷ *Steward's Book of Mercer Institute, 1833-1836*.

¹⁴⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Federal Census 1830*, Taliaferro County, Georgia. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed via Ancestry.com.

¹⁴⁹ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes 1833*.

Society.¹⁵⁰ Under the pretense of an academic and debating club, these societies acted as a social outlet for the young men attending Mercer Institute. As such, in 1835, the members requested to have their own meeting and dormitory halls built to house their activities. While the Board of Trustees report for that year claimed that the buildings would be paid for by students, “with some assistance,” the cost of the buildings appeared frequently as expenses in the Mercer Institute account books.¹⁵¹ A minister by the name of John G. Hendricks was contracted for the project and paid roughly \$400.¹⁵² Hendricks provided the building materials and the laborers, most of whom boarded at the Institute during the construction.¹⁵³ While he appears to have managed a crew of both Black and white workers, Hendricks was known in the area as a wealthy planter and slave owner, amassing a “handsome independence.”¹⁵⁴ Combined with the fact that there were few freed people of color in Greene County and the surrounding area in the 1830s, it is reasonable to assume that Hendricks’ Black laborers were members of his own enslaved population.¹⁵⁵ Each day, they crafted hundreds of bricks before hauling them to the site of the new buildings.¹⁵⁶ It took two years before the new dormitory, improved President’s home, and debating halls were finally completed.¹⁵⁷ These buildings, like most of Mercer’s original campus, were partially constructed with the use of enslaved labor. Therefore, not only did enslaved people

¹⁵⁰ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes of the Fourteenth Anniversary of the Georgia Baptist Convention, 1835* (Washington Ga.: Printed at Christian Index, 1835), Mercer University Special Collections, 8.

¹⁵¹ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes 1835. Steward’s Book of Mercer Institute, 1833-1836*, 8.

¹⁵² Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes 1835*, 8.

¹⁵³ *Steward’s Book of Mercer Institute, 1833-1836*.

¹⁵⁴ *History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia* (Atlanta, Georgia: Jas. P Harrison & Co., Printers and Publishers, 1881), 264.

¹⁵⁵ According to the Greene County Census, there were only twenty-three free men of color in 1830. Several of whom were listed as under the age of 10 or over the age of 55, making the likelihood of their participation in Hendricks’ work crew unlikely. It is also interesting to note that the Mercer Steward’s Books always differentiate between the number of white boarders and the number of Black boarders in Hendricks’ crew, suggesting a potential difference in boarding and labor costs.

¹⁵⁶ *Steward’s Book of Mercer Institute, 1833-1836*.

¹⁵⁷ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes 1835*.

sustain the institution, but they also built the very foundations upon which Mercer University was founded.

Although hiring enslaved people was less expensive than enslaving them, Mercer Institute still spent a sizable amount of its income on enslaved labor during its first decade. In 1834, this expense amounted to \$450.¹⁵⁸ In 1835, the total increased to \$600.¹⁵⁹ That same year, the Institute hired an additional two enslaved people to labor on the school's farm for \$220.¹⁶⁰ There is not another recorded account until 1838 when the Institute spent \$745 on general enslaved labor and another \$470 on enslaved labor for the farm duties.¹⁶¹ The next record of enslaved labor appears in the 1842 Board of Trustees Report, given at the Georgia Baptist Convention in La Grange. It states that the University owed \$900 to various unnamed people for the "hire of negroes."¹⁶² Between the hiring of enslaved people, the items purchased for the facilitation of their work, and the construction of the original campus, Mercer spent a total of \$6,200 on enslaved labor between 1833 and 1842.¹⁶³ Although this amount may seem negligible in the twenty-first century, it was a significant portion of Mercer's budget in its early days of operation. In 1835, for instance, the school spent \$295 on teacher salaries.¹⁶⁴ In 1839, the school only reported \$1,992 in available cash.¹⁶⁵ In 1840, this amount decreased to \$1,269.¹⁶⁶ While

¹⁵⁸ *Steward's Book of Mercer Institute, 1833-1836.*

¹⁵⁹ *Steward's Book of Mercer Institute, 1833-1836.*

¹⁶⁰ *Steward's Book of Mercer Institute, 1833-1836.*

¹⁶¹ *Steward's Book of Mercer Institute, 1833-1836. Mercer Institute and University Work Record, Book of Students, 1837-38, Account Book, 1838-1845, Black Book, 1836-38 (Ledger Book, Penfield, Ga, 1837-1845), Mercer University Special Collections.*

¹⁶² Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes of the Twenty-First Anniversary of the Georgia Baptist Convention, 1842* (Penfield Ga.: Printed by Benj. Brantley, 1842), Mercer University Special Collections.

¹⁶³ This amount was calculated by adding the totals spent each year on enslaved labor, the recorded totals of cloth for enslaved people boarding at the Institute, and the amount spent on the construction projects at Mercer.

¹⁶⁴ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes, 1835.*

¹⁶⁵ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes, 1840.*

¹⁶⁶ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes, 1840.*

Mercer claimed much larger amounts of funding in endowments and donations, the economics of a slave society rendered it a perpetually cash-poor institution.¹⁶⁷ Spending an average of \$680 a year, most of which in cash, on enslaved labor would not have been an easy purchase for a school in its first decade of operation. Despite this, the school's leaders made this choice year after year, signifying Mercer's dependence on the institution of slavery.

After 1838, Mercer Institute was raised to University status, offering college-level courses, conferring degrees, and giving the school an endowment from the Georgia Baptist Convention.¹⁶⁸ Consequently, Mercer's various account books became distorted with leadership turnover.¹⁶⁹ For the next twenty-two years, there is no mention of enslaved labor in either the Board of Trustees Reports or the limited account books of the University. However, this does not mean that enslaved people did not work for the school or that their labor was not used during that time. The Board of Trustees rarely listed enslaved labor in their expense reports despite its documentation in the Mercer account books.¹⁷⁰ From 1833 to 1839, the reports only reference enslaved labor twice, even though the account books list the expense almost every year.¹⁷¹ This inconsistency indicates that while the Board of Trustees failed to report the usage of enslaved labor, the school may have still accrued such an expense. Likewise, the limited surviving account books from this period are inconsistent and incomplete, suggesting that the records of enslaved people at Mercer during those decades might have once existed but are now lost. A lack of

¹⁶⁷ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes, 1834-1842*.

¹⁶⁸ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes of the Seventeenth Anniversary of the Georgia Baptist Convention, 1838* (Washington: Printed at the Office of the Christian Index, 1838), Mercer University Special Collections, 14-17.

¹⁶⁹ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes, 1838. Mercer Institute and University Work Record, 1837-1845*.

¹⁷⁰ *Steward's Book of Mercer Institute, 1833-1836. Mercer Institute and University Work Record, Book of Students, 1837-38, Account Book, 1838-1845, Black Book, 1836-38*.

¹⁷¹ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes, 1833-1839. Steward's Book of Mercer Institute, 1833-1836. Mercer Institute and University Work Record, Book of Students, 1837-38, Account Book, 1838-1845, Black Book, 1836-38*

documentation surrounding enslaved labor does not imply the absence of it. With better documentation, the amount Mercer spent on enslaved labor may be much greater.

Section Three:

Leadership, Conflict, and Debt: Mercer University Through the Civil War

With the start of a new decade, Mercer Institute underwent a multitude of changes. After a failed attempt by the Convention to start a seminary, Georgia Baptists voted to elevate Mercer from a school to a University, pouring resources and money into the institution they had already established rather than a new venture.¹⁷² To lead their new University, the Convention chose a series of distinguished men, all of whom enslaved people. Although no records have been found describing the school's use of enslaved labor during this period, the enslaved populations of Mercer's presidents helped to facilitate their duties in one way or another. From the profits they generated through their labor to potentially being on Mercer's campus, these enslaved people helped to sustain Mercer University's leadership as the school progressed through the politically turbulent antebellum period. When the American Civil War approached in 1861, Mercer unequivocally defended the practice that had sustained it for so long. After three decades, chattel slavery was not only integral to Mercer's success, it had come to define the institution. In the postwar period, Mercer's commitment to race-based slavery meant a denial of the rights of newly freed Black Americans.

When Sanders stepped down from the presidency in 1840 to return to his plantation, a man named Otis Smith was quickly elected in his place.¹⁷³ Smith originally hailed from Vermont but like many northern professors, he was quick to assimilate to life in the South.¹⁷⁴ The same year he accepted the presidency, he enslaved seven people at his new home in Greene County.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes*, 1838.

¹⁷³ Weaver, "The Presidents of Mercer During Its First Half Century," *The Christian Index*, February 18, 1926.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Federal Census 1840*, Greene County, Georgia. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed via Ancestry.com.

Smith was also quick to adopt the slaveholding practice of corporal punishment, reportedly using it on students as a form of discipline.¹⁷⁶ The ease at which this violence translated to Mercer demonstrates the school's intimate relationship with the practice of human bondage and all its atrocities therein.

Unfortunately for Smith, punishing students the same way he would an enslaved person did not last long. In 1843, he abandoned his post at Mercer without any word to the Board of Trustees because they would no longer allow him to whip students.¹⁷⁷ That same year, the school had a deficit of \$3,000, the professors had not been paid in a year, and enrollment had decreased to fifty students.¹⁷⁸ For Smith, slavery was not just a means of profit, but rather a way of life and any threat to his absolute mastery was met with a harsh rebuttal.

Although Smith is not credited with any contributions to Mercer like Sanders, his time at the school was still facilitated by the seven enslaved people he held in bondage and perhaps the opposite is true as well. His move South and subsequent engagement in chattel slavery was driven by the opening of schools like Mercer that attracted Northern religious scholars.¹⁷⁹ After he departed from Mercer, Smith assumed the presidency and ownership of another Georgia school and in 1850, his enslaved population increased to twenty.¹⁸⁰ That same year, his real estate

¹⁷⁶ William H. Kilpatrick, "Tribute to Old Miss (Mrs. Cynthia Holliday Sanders)," Unpublished Speech, May 22, 1923, Mercer University Special Collections. See also, B.D. Ragsdale, *The Story of Georgia Baptists, Volume One: Mercer University, Penfield Period and Related Interests*, (Atlanta: Foote and Davies Co. 1932), 68-78. Arlette Copeland, Manuscript History of Mercer University. Mercer University Special Collections, 14-17, 377-378

¹⁷⁷ *The Christian Index*, January 20, 1843. Mercer University Special Collections. *The Christian Index*, January 27, 1843. Mercer University Special Collections. William H. Kilpatrick, "Tribute to Old Miss (Mrs. Cynthia Holliday Sanders)."

¹⁷⁸ Weaver, "The Presidents of Mercer During Its First Half Century," *The Christian Index*, February 18, 1926.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.* U.S. Census Bureau. *Slave Schedule, Manuscript Census 1850. Georgia Militia District 655, Troup*. The National Archives in Washington DC. *Records of the Bureau of the Census*, Record Group 29. Accessed via Ancestry.com

was valued at \$10,000, making him one of the wealthier men in his county.¹⁸¹ In much the same way that Smith's enslaved people allowed him to serve Mercer, Mercer also gave Smith the opportunity to engage in and expand his enslavement of Black Americans.

Other than his departure, the most notable event of Smith's tenure was the graduation of Mercer's first college class.¹⁸² Benjamin F. Tharpe, Abner R. Wellborn, and Richard Malcolm Johnston received the first degrees in 1841.¹⁸³ They all went on to become successful in their various pursuits and remained closely associated with the University for the duration of their lives.¹⁸⁴ They also all came from large slaveholding families whose wealth allowed them to attend the school, demonstrating the omnipresence of chattel slavery at Mercer University. Abner R. Wellborn came from a wealthy family plantation in nearby Wilkes County. In 1840, his father enslaved seventy-five people and upon his death just a few years later, left a portion of his enslaved population to his son.¹⁸⁵ Wellborn, who was only twenty at the time of his graduation, then traveled North to earn his medical degree from New York University.¹⁸⁶ He settled in Newnan, Georgia, and lived out a prosperous life as a physician and enslaver.¹⁸⁷ Similarly, Richard Malcolm Johnston was born to "one of the largest planters of the South," though not quite as large as the Wellborn estate.¹⁸⁸ In 1830, his father enslaved thirty-one people in

¹⁸¹ U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Federal Census 1850*, Militia District 655, Troup, Georgia, Georgia. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed via Ancestry.com.

¹⁸² Weaver, "The Presidents of Mercer During Its First Half Century."

¹⁸³ Dowell, 78.

¹⁸⁴ Dowell, 78.

¹⁸⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Federal Census 1840*, District 177, Wilkes, Georgia, Georgia. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed via Ancestry.com. Wellborn, Abner, Last Will and Testament, Ordinary's Office Inferior Court, Distributions of Estates; Annual Returns 1828-1831. Mercer University Special Collections. Folder: Wellborn, Abner Render Biographical folder.

¹⁸⁶ Mercer University, *Historical Sketch and Triennial Register of Mercer University* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1897-1898), 16.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 16. Wellborn, Abner, Last Will and Testament, Mercer University Special Collections.

¹⁸⁸ Elizabeth Wiley Smith, *The History of Hancock County, Georgia: Ancestors, Families, and Genealogies* (Washington, Ga: Wilkes Publishing Company, Inc., 1974), 96.

Taliaferro County.¹⁸⁹ After he graduated, Johnston became a successful lawyer, writer, and teacher, eventually opening a school on a plantation, just like Mercer.¹⁹⁰ During this time, he was a trustee of Mercer and had even been offered the presidency in 1857.¹⁹¹ After he declined the offer, he voluntarily became an “agent” for the school, traveling around the state and collecting donations to support Mercer’s endowment.¹⁹² In 1860, he enslaved eleven people, but after the Civil War, he “thought that with the emancipation of the slaves, the white race would deteriorate,” so he picked up his school and moved to Maryland.¹⁹³

Benjamin F. Tharpe’s father, William A. Tharpe, was described as a “planter and capitalist” by later accounts of the University.¹⁹⁴ The same decade that his son went to college, he enslaved forty-six people on his plantation in Twiggs County.¹⁹⁵ The magnitude of this enslaved population allowed Tharpe to pursue his education unabated by financial strain, “Dr. Tharpe was a natural student. Being of the rich antebellum planters of the South, he had both means and leisure to study.”¹⁹⁶ After his time at Mercer, Tharpe became a Baptist preacher and a prominent planter in Houston County.¹⁹⁷ In 1850, just nine years after he graduated from Mercer, Tharpe enslaved twenty-eight people.¹⁹⁸ Shortly after, he became a trustee of Mercer University and

¹⁸⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Federal Census 1830*, Taliaferro, Georgia. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed via Ancestry.com.

¹⁹⁰ Ed. Kenneth Coleman and Charles Stephen Gurr, *Dictionary of Georgia Biography* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983), 541-542. Richard Malcolm Johnston, *Autobiography of Col. Richard Malcolm Johnston* (Washington, D.C.: The Neale Co., 1900). Martha F. Norwood, *Liberty Hall: Taliaferro County, Georgia, A History of the Structures Known as Liberty Hall and Their Owners from 1827 to Present*, Unpublished Manuscript, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Office of Planning and Research, Historic Preservation Section, 1977.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² Ragsdale, 69.

¹⁹³ Norwood, 97-98.

¹⁹⁴ Mercer University, *Historical Sketch*, 16.

¹⁹⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Federal Census 1840*, District 323, Twiggs, Georgia. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed via Ancestry.com.

¹⁹⁶ Osgood Willingham to Spright Dowell, July 9, 1929. Mercer University Special Collections.

¹⁹⁷ Dowell, 78. Mercer University, *Historical Sketch*, 16.

¹⁹⁸ U.S. Census Bureau. *Slave Schedule, Manuscript Census 1850. District 10, Houston*. The National Archives in Washington DC. *Records of the Bureau of the Census*, Record Group 29. Accessed via Ancestry.com

remained so for the next forty years.¹⁹⁹ Like the Wellborns and the Johnstons, the Tharpe family's generational wealth, accrued through the practice of human bondage, allowed Benjamin F. Tharpe and his classmates to attend Mercer and ultimately allowed them to funnel money back into that institution once they had graduated. As the first graduating class of Mercer attests, slavery was not only central to the school's foundation, it continued to support the institution well into the 1840s and beyond.

After Smith's resignation, professor John Leadley Dagg assumed the presidency of Mercer University in 1844.²⁰⁰ Like Smith, Dagg was also new to the state of Georgia, originally hailing from Virginia before moving further South for a teaching position.²⁰¹ He served Mercer for over a decade, earning praise for his superior intellect and theological contributions to the Baptist denomination despite the various impairments he suffered.²⁰² An early accident left Dagg crippled and unable to move around without the use of a crutch. He was also nearly blind by the time he came to Mercer and could not read or write without help. Finally, he suffered from a "throat affliction" that left him unable to speak above a whisper.²⁰³

Despite these ailments, Dagg is still credited with raising the caliber of Mercer University and instructing some of its best students. He is remembered in speeches, articles, and books as one of the best presidents in the school's early history.²⁰⁴ At the same time, Dagg also benefited from the labor of six to nine enslaved people throughout his presidency.²⁰⁵ Although his enslaved

¹⁹⁹ Dowell, 78.

²⁰⁰ *History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia*, 253.

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, 166-171.

²⁰² *Ibid*, 166-171.

²⁰³ Weaver, 4-5.

²⁰⁴ Dowell, 84-91. Weaver, 4-5.

²⁰⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Federal Census 1840*, Tuscaloosa, Alabama. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed via Ancestry.com. U.S. Census Bureau. *Slave Schedule, Manuscript Census 1850. District 162, Greene, Georgia*. The National Archives in Washington DC. *Records of the Bureau of the Census*, Record Group 29. Accessed via Ancestry.com

population did not compare to that of Sanders' or Smith's, Dagg's enslavement of Black Americans still facilitated his time and devotion to Mercer. In the 1853 tax digest for Greene County, Dagg did not list any of his enslaved people as available for hire, indicating that they were for his own personal use.²⁰⁶ He also only claimed ninety acres of farmable land which was meager compared to many of his neighbors who regularly listed acreage in the hundreds and thousands.²⁰⁷ Compounded with the fact that Dagg considered his primary profession to be that of a clergyman, it is unlikely that his land was being used for large scale farming.²⁰⁸ Therefore, if Dagg's enslaved population was not working solely on harvesting crops, it is reasonable to assume that some of them assisted Dagg in his daily duties at the University given his inability to function on his own. Or, at the very least, these enslaved people served the Dagg family in their home as domestic servants, thereby alleviating some of the responsibilities of Dagg or his wife. In this manner, Dagg's participation in the institution of slavery allowed him to fulfill his obligations as president, thereby benefitting Mercer University.

As religious and political leaders, Mercer's administration played an active role in the preservation of slavery in the South. By the mid-nineteenth century, tensions over the issue of slavery had pushed the Baptist denomination to a breaking point.²⁰⁹ Until the 1840s, Northern Baptists had carefully avoided any actions that could be perceived as an endorsement of slavery.²¹⁰ But in 1845, Mercer trustees Thomas Stocks and Absalom Janes, President Dagg, former President Sanders, and several other men, nominated a slaveholding member of the Georgia

²⁰⁶ *Georgia Property Tax Digests*, Militia District 148, 1853, Georgia Archives, Morrow, 31. Via Ancestry.com.

²⁰⁷ *Georgia Property Tax Digests*, 31.

²⁰⁸ *History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia*, 166-171.

²⁰⁹ Robert G. Gardner, Charles O. Walker, J.R. Huddleston, Waldo P. Harris, *A History of the Georgia Baptist Association, 1784-1984*, Second Edition (Atlanta: Georgia Baptist Historical Society, 1996), 167-168.

²¹⁰ *Ibid*, 167-168.

Baptist Convention for a position with the American Baptist Home Missionary Society.²¹¹

According to Spright Dowell, the society declined to review the application resulting in a call for Southern Baptists to form their own organization, one that would not restrict slaveholders.²¹²

Mercer's past and contemporary leaders were instrumental in this separation with several attending the conference that wrote the Southern Baptist Convention's constitution.²¹³ For Mercer's administration, a commitment to slavery meant establishing another denomination entirely.

In much the same way as Mercer's first students, a commitment to slavery was rooted in the early lives of Mercer's first leaders. Nathaniel Macon Crawford served Mercer leading up to and through the Civil War, assuming the presidency from Dagg in 1854.²¹⁴ He was the son of William Harris Crawford, a longtime politician and presidential nominee in the first half of the nineteenth century.²¹⁵ According to his biographer, William Crawford achieved planter-level status in the 1820s and was the largest landowner in the notably fertile Oglethorpe County.²¹⁶ In 1830, he enslaved forty people.²¹⁷ The success William Crawford obtained as a planter and enslaver allowed him to send Nathaniel Macon to the University of Georgia at fifteen years old, where he graduated at the top of his class.²¹⁸ After an arduous career that was characterized by slave trafficking scandals and ganglike political feuds, Crawford Sr. died at his Georgia home in 1834.²¹⁹ His estate was then divided amongst his wife and six children, including his enslaved

²¹¹ Gardner, 167-168. Dowell, 95.

²¹² Dowell, 95.

²¹³ Dowell, 95-96.

²¹⁴ *History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia*, 155.

²¹⁵ Chase C. Mooney, *William H. Crawford: 1772-1834* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1974), 14.

²¹⁶ Mooney, 14.

²¹⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Federal Census 1830*, Walkers, Oglethorpe, Georgia, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed via Ancestry.com. U.S. Census Bureau.

²¹⁸ *History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia*, 155.

²¹⁹ Mooney, 345.

population valued at \$16,175.²²⁰ The future president of Mercer University, Nathaniel Macon Crawford, inherited his share of those enslaved people at the age of twenty-three.²²¹

The presence of slavery in Crawford's early years shaped his future as well. His father's enslaved population not only gave him the opportunity for a quality education in his youth but also allowed him the financial freedom to pursue several different careers as an adult. Crawford was a professor of mathematics and a practicing lawyer before becoming an ordained minister in 1844, arguably the least profitable of his chosen professions.²²² After his ordination, Crawford joined the faculty of Mercer in 1847 as the professor of Biblical Literature.²²³ By 1850, he had amassed his own enslaved population of nine people and was on the track to becoming University President.²²⁴ Each career change required additional training and certification, suggesting that Crawford had an abundance of time and disposable income to pursue his ever-changing passions.²²⁵ Since he had not yet established himself in one field, Crawford most likely gained this financial freedom, at least in part, through the assets passed down to him in the form of enslaved people. By freeing him from financial obligation, Crawford's inherited wealth from slavery led him to the presidency of Mercer and facilitated his own upward mobility to enslaver-status. In this manner, Mercer's leadership during the War era depended on the Crawford family's generational wealth produced by chattel slavery.

²²⁰ Mooney, 345.

²²¹ Mooney, 345.

²²² William Harris Crawford to Jesse B. Thomas, Jan. 9, 1829, in James Z. Rabun and James Harvey Young, "WILLIAM H. CRAWFORD ON THE ELECTION OF 1828: TWO LETTERS," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (1953), 344. *History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia*, 155.

²²³ *History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia*, 155-157.

²²⁴ Slave Schedule, Manuscript Census 1850, The National Archives in Washington DC, *Records of the Bureau of the Census*, Record Group 29.

²²⁵ *History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia*, 155.

Crawford's dependence on slavery naturally shaped his defense of that institution. During his presidency, he published his only written work, *Christian Paradoxes*, which used scripture to justify slavery within the Baptist denomination and provided a biblical framework for mastery.²²⁶ He also used his position as University president to bolster the war effort in the South. In an article appearing in *The Christian Index* in July 1861, Crawford discussed nine reasons why the Confederacy was waging war with the United States and why young southern men, like many of those he taught, should join the fight.²²⁷ His first major argument centered on the right to own enslaved people which he described as property, "We are fighting for property which belongs to us...property, worth two billions of dollars, is worth fighting for."²²⁸ At the close of his article, Crawford once again urged the "men of the South" to join in the fight against "Northern despotism" and Abraham Lincoln.²²⁹ He signed off the letter, "N. M. Crawford, Mercer University."²³⁰ Crawford's defense of human bondage was not only an effort to preserve his own slave holdings, of which he claimed another nine people on the 1860 Census but also for that of Mercer University's continued use of enslaved labor.²³¹

In 1864, the Board of Trustees report listed a \$160 expense for "Negro hire."²³² This was the first recorded instance of enslaved labor in the Georgia Baptist Convention meeting minutes in twenty-two years.²³³ The Convention during which this report was given was held in April of

²²⁶ Nathaniel Macon Crawford, *Christian Paradoxes* (Nashville: South-Western Publishing House, Graves, Marks & Co., 1858), Chapter 20.

²²⁷ Nathaniel Macon Crawford, *Christian Index*, July 24, 1861. Mercer University Special Collections, Folder: Crawford, Nathaniel Macon-Chronological, Mercer University President, 1854-1856. ¼.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid

²³⁰ Ibid

²³¹ Slave Schedule, Manuscript Census 1860, The National Archives in Washington DC, *Records of the Bureau of the Census*, Record Group 29.

²³² Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes of the Forty-Second Anniversary of the Georgia Baptist State Convention, 1864* (Macon, Ga.: Burke, Boykin & Company, 1864), Mercer University Special Collections.

²³³ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes*, 1842-1864.

that year, over one year after the Emancipation Proclamation and just one year before the end of the Civil War.²³⁴ This was also the same month that General William T. Sherman began his military advance towards Atlanta in preparation for his famed “March to Sea.”²³⁵ Based on these dates, the University defied federal orders and faced occupied Union wrath to continue its usage of enslaved labor. This expense was particularly strange when considering the financial strain of the University at the time.²³⁶

During the Civil War, the school steadily lost its student body to the War effort and faced such economic hardship that the Board of Trustees was forced to lay off the majority of Mercer’s staff.²³⁷ The few remaining professors had their salaries drastically cut or worked for free.²³⁸ Why, then, did the school continue to spend money it did not have on enslaved labor, especially when there were so few students to care for? While we cannot know for certain which jobs these enslaved people performed during the Civil War, the daily operations of the school had all but ground to a halt, rendering their labor less vital than in previous years. Whether the decision to hire enslaved people in 1864 was made out of defiance to the encroaching Union army or desperation for workers after the Emancipation Proclamation had encouraged enslaved people to free themselves, the Board of Trustees report indicated that Mercer University relied on enslaved people to sustain it as an institution of higher learning up until the very moment it could not.

Mercer University’s use of enslaved labor not only created and sustained the institution, it also shaped the school’s politics. Despite relative silence leading up to the Civil War, Mercer

²³⁴ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes, 1864*.

²³⁵ Anne Sarah Rubin, *Through the Heart of Dixie: Sherman's March and American Memory* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 8.

²³⁶ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes of the Fortieth Anniversary of the Baptist Convention, 1862* (Macon: John L. Jenkins & Co., Book and Job Printers, 1862) Mercer University Special Collections.

²³⁷ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes, 1862-1864*

²³⁸ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes, 1862-1864*

took a clear stance on the issue of slavery in one of its last printed catalogues before the War began. Published in April 1861, the school requested a larger endowment from the Georgia Baptist Convention on the basis that “Southern students ought not to be sent to a school in a *foreign nation*, and Georgia Baptists ought not to be satisfied with a University *second* to any in the Confederacy.”²³⁹ Suggesting that any other part of the United States was a “foreign nation” indicated the University’s clear agreement with secession and the subsequent autonomy of southern states. Considering this catalogue was published just one month after the creation of a centralized Confederate government and only two weeks after the first battle of the Civil War, Mercer’s support of the Confederacy was enthusiastic. This is further outlined later in the catalogue when the University announced that it was expanding the senior curriculum to include a “special study of the subject of *slavery*.”²⁴⁰ The new course required students to study both proslavery and abolitionist arguments, not in a scholarly effort to be impartial, but rather so that Mercer students would be “qualified to defend the institutions of their country.”²⁴¹ The school justified the new addition by arguing that slavery was the most important question to the citizens of the newly formed Confederacy.²⁴² By educating its students to defend the institution of slavery, Mercer had come to be defined not only by the Confederacy but by the practice of human bondage.

Mercer’s fervent support of the Confederacy is not surprising, nor is its admission that slavery was central to the Confederacy’s existence. It may be easy to write off Mercer’s endorsement as the product of location or its relationship with the Georgia Baptist Convention,

²³⁹ *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Mercer University, 1860-61* (Atlanta, Georgia: “Crusader” Power Press Print, 1861), Mercer University Special Collections, 23.

²⁴⁰ *Catalogue, 1860-61*, 31.

²⁴¹ *Catalogue, 1860-61*, 31.

²⁴² *Catalogue, 1860-61*, 32.

and perhaps both of those factors did play a role in the school's statement. However, when one considers the University's thirty-year reliance upon slavery up until that point and for the next several years, it is clear that the school had an incentive to defend the institution of human bondage. To do anything that might undermine that institution was to undermine the University itself. Whether it was through the echoing of Confederate rhetoric or the miseducation of its students, Mercer's actions during the Civil War further define its relationship with slavery as one of dependence—and increasingly, one of desperation.

Once the Civil War ended in 1865, Mercer was left destitute at the same moment that most of its labor force had either disappeared or been emancipated.²⁴³ The money the school held in Confederate securities had been lost and the War had all but halted the Georgia Baptist Convention's support.²⁴⁴ The president who saw Mercer through the war, Nathaniel Macon Crawford, had left his post for a better-paying position at another university, and the school's hired enslaved laborers had been freed.²⁴⁵ As Mercer navigated a future without enslaved labor, it was resistant to grant any privileges to the same people that had served them for decades.

In 1865, the Board of Trustees nominated Henry Holcombe Tucker to the presidency at the same time that the first Reconstruction policies were being implemented in the state of Georgia.²⁴⁶ As Hannah Rosen discusses, Reconstruction was a period of social, political, and economic progress for Black Americans.²⁴⁷ In the aftermath of the Civil War, the federal

²⁴³ *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Mercer University, 1868-69* (Penfield, Georgia: Mercer University, 1869), Mercer University Special Collections, 20. Bryant, 170.

²⁴⁴ *Catalogue from 1868-69*, 20.

²⁴⁵ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes of the Forty-Third Anniversary of the Georgia Baptist State Convention, 1866* (Macon: Daily Telegraph Book and Job Office, 1866), Mercer University Special Collections, 15-16.

²⁴⁶ Dowel, 115. Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes, 1864*.

²⁴⁷ Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, And the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 5.

government implemented a series of programs and Civil Rights Bills to safeguard the freedoms of formerly enslaved people.²⁴⁸ Although the Reconstruction era was short-lived, white enslavers did everything in their power to undermine the rights of Black Americans during this period and for years to come.²⁴⁹ As a white institution, Mercer University was no exception.

In 1868, Tucker and several other Mercer professors and trustees wrote a letter in the local newspaper titled, “Address of the White People of Greene County, Georgia, To the Colored People of the same County.”²⁵⁰ In the two-page article, Tucker and his colleagues threatened the Black citizens of Greene County, urging them not to listen to “Yankee invaders” and instead to take the advice of their former enslavers.²⁵¹ Of particular concern was Black American’s newly gained right to vote:

“We do not think you are qualified to vote. We know you are not qualified, and so do you know it... If you choose to vote with these few Yankees who are trying to make use of you for their own purposes you can do so. But you may depend upon it no good will come of it. It will set you against your former masters, and it will set them against you. You best keep out of that quarrel.”²⁵²

Tucker ended the address by demanding that Black Americans turn to their former enslavers for instructions on how to vote and even that they ask to be accompanied to the voting booths by the people who once held them in bondage.²⁵³ As a participant in the institution of slavery, Tucker and men like him not only profited from the enslavement of Black Americans, they also defined their power and identity through the subjugation of enslaved people.²⁵⁴

Consequently, when this practice was outlawed, these white men sought any means to continue

²⁴⁸ Rosen, Introduction, 39.

²⁴⁹ Rosen, 6-8.

²⁵⁰ H. H. Tucker, Thomas Stocks, Dan B. Stanford, Geo. C. Davis, W. G. Woodfin, “Address of the White People of Greene County, Georgia, To the Colored People of the same County,” *Weekly Atlanta Intelligencer*, April 8, 1868. Mercer University Special Collections.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Tucker, “Address of the White People,” *Weekly Atlanta Intelligencer*.

²⁵⁴ Rosen, 7.

the oppression of Black people as their newly gained right to vote threatened their sense of superiority. Rosen claims that after emancipation, elites united all classes of white men “under the banner of ‘white supremacy’” to limit the political power of Black citizens.²⁵⁵ In this address, Tucker and his fellow authors were attempting to intimidate the newly freed Black men in Greene county who had recently earned the right to vote, yielding significant influence over the community. Tucker, although not acting in his official capacity as a Mercer president, voiced the beliefs that had long defined an institution built on enslaved labor. That same year, however, Tucker would once again attempt to deny the rights of Black people, this time with the University behind him.

In a letter to Colonel R. L. Hunter in 1868, Tucker discussed Mercer’s implementation of the Civil Rights Act of 1866. Regarded as the first Civil Rights Act in the United States, the legislation declared that all people born in the U.S., regardless of previous status or race, were now legal citizens.²⁵⁶ As such, they also had a right to an education. According to Tucker, the occupying Union forces under General Meade declared that Mercer was “expected to receive under the act all soldiers without reference 1st to the side on which they fought and 2nd without reference to color.”²⁵⁷ The federal government would then pay for these admitted soldiers to attend the University.²⁵⁸ Despite the school’s financial hardship, Tucker unequivocally rebuked this demand, citing that while he might be able to allow *white* Union soldiers into the University, to admit *Black* Union soldiers would be inconsistent with their “sense of propriety and duty.” He warned Colonel Hunter that this was an incorrect interpretation of the Civil Rights Act of 1866

²⁵⁵ Rosen, 7.

²⁵⁶ Rosen, 39.

²⁵⁷ Henry Holcombe Tucker, *H. H. Tucker to Col. R. L. Hunter, May 20, 1868*. Letter, From Mercer University Special Collections, Folder: Folder: Tucker, Henry Holcombe--Mercer University President, 1866-1871. 2/12

²⁵⁸ Bryant, 170.

and he was sure that the taxpayers of Georgia would not be willing to pay for this demand. He went to claim that perhaps if Mercer was “allowed to make the proper distinction as to color,” they might make an exception for white Union soldiers wishing to attend the school.²⁵⁹ Later that year, the Board of Trustees finalized the decision at the Georgia Baptist Convention, stating, “General Meade has prescribed...That negroes shall be received on a footing with whites...We decline to receive students on the terms proposed.”²⁶⁰

It is unclear if any Union soldiers, White or Black, ever desired to attend the University under the provisions of the 1866 Civil Rights Act. Regardless, it is clear they would have been denied. Their Confederate counterparts, however, received very different treatment. From the onset of the war and for years after, Mercer University declared that any Confederate soldier or veteran could attend the school tuition-free.²⁶¹ This decision appears to have been made free from legislative pressure long before the Civil War had come to a close. After Reconstruction ended in 1877, these provisions were voided as discrimination once again became the social norm.²⁶²

Representing Mercer, both the President and the Board of Trustees defied occupying Union forces and federal law to prevent the civil rights of newly freed Black Americans. If the University’s stance on race was not made apparent by their use of enslaved labor or their support of the Confederacy, it was made clear in their denial of equality after the War had ended. While this chapter in Mercer’s history was not unique as an institution within the former Confederacy, it was ironic. For the previous thirty years, the University had relied upon enslaved labor.

²⁵⁹ Tucker, *H. H. Tucker to Col. R. L. Hunter, May 20, 1868*.

²⁶⁰ Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes of the Forty-Sixth Anniversary of the Georgia Baptist State Convention, 1868* (Atlanta Ga.: Franklin Steam Printing House—J.J. Toon, Proprietor, 1868), Mercer University Special Collections.

²⁶¹ Tucker, *H. H. Tucker to Col. R. L. Hunter, May 20, 1868*.

²⁶² Rosen, 5.

Enslaved Black Americans had built the very structures that they lived, worked, and learned in. They prepared the meals that sustained them; tended to the domestic duties that would otherwise have gone uncompleted; they even harvested the crops when students went back to their studies. Enslaved people had lived and worked right alongside them for three decades and yet when afforded the opportunity to repay those Americans with an education that they had helped to facilitate, Mercer refused.

In 1871, Mercer University officially moved its campus to Macon, Georgia.²⁶³ After the financial strain of the Civil War, the move to a new city was a welcome change for the school and one that was hard-fought. Disgruntled Penfield residents sued Mercer University over the relocation, realizing that without Mercer, Penfield was little more than a village.²⁶⁴ After an agreement was reached that the University would maintain its buildings at Penfield and open a high school there, Mercer was finally free to re-establish itself in a promising city.²⁶⁵ But this also meant that Mercer University was free to leave its legacy of slavery in the past. Forgotten were the days of the farm and manual labor curriculum that depended on enslaved people, gone were the boarding students who relied on enslaved people to prepare their meals and clean their rooms, even the buildings constructed by enslaved laborers were left behind, eventually decaying despite the school's promise to maintain them. In their place, came Mercer University's Macon campus, a set of red-brick buildings with ornate finishings still used today. Though the scope of this project is limited to the Antebellum era, further research into the origins of the money used to construct Mercer's Macon campus could prove even greater connections to the institution of slavery. Likewise, the presence of free Black labor at Mercer in the Jim Crow era and beyond would also be a fruitful and timely investigation.

While the move away from Mercer's original campus allowed the school to ignore its past with the institution of human bondage, Mercer's legacy with race still features prominently. In 1963, the school was one of the first Universities to desegregate before the federal mandate

²⁶³Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes of the Forty-Ninth Anniversary of the Georgia Baptist State Convention, 1871*. Atlanta Ga.: Franklin Steam Printing House—J.J. Toon, Proprietor, 1871. Mercer University Special Collections.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

required them to.²⁶⁶ They admitted the now-famous Mercer alumni, Sam Oni, despite backlash and protest.²⁶⁷ While this event in Mercer's history is certainly one to be celebrated, the school's relationship with desegregation and the civil rights movement has eclipsed its relationship with slavery. The name Sam Oni is widely recognizable among Mercer students and the event is memorialized on the school's website.²⁶⁸ In contrast, Mercer's connections to slavery have yet to become a formal part of any curriculum. Whether intentional or not, the complete erasure of slavery at Mercer is a dishonest and damaging legacy for a racially diverse University in the twenty-first century, particularly with consideration of national and international movements like Black Lives Matter. As Colleges and Universities around the world are reckoning with their own troubled and complicated pasts, Mercer University is at risk of being left behind by its institutional peers. Thus this project calls upon the school to launch an official investigation into slavery at Mercer University and to join the Universities Studying Slavery consortium hosted by the University of Virginia.

The history of Mercer University is a complicated one. A distinguished school and a slaveholding institution. A racially progressive place of learning in the twentieth century and a place of prolonged bondage for countless enslaved people in the nineteenth century. Recognizing one success without acknowledging a greater injustice undermines Mercer as an enduring institution of higher learning. Only with recognition of these injustices and a confrontation of its past can Mercer University move forward toward a better future.

²⁶⁶ "History," Mercer.edu, Mercer University, 2020, <https://www.mercer.edu/about-mercero/history/>

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

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