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“Cast down on every side”

The Ill-Fated Campaign to Found an “African College”

in New Haven

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In 1831, a group of black and white abolitionists from across the eastern seaboard launched a campaign to build the nation's first black college. With Simeon Jocelyn, a young white minister from New Haven, and Peter Williams, the head of New York's St. Phillip's African Episcopal Church, at the helm, the group sought to expand black men's access to higher education. As few white institutions would admit people of color, the group envisioned an “African College,” where men of color could obtain mechanical and agricultural training and pursue classical studies.

On the first Monday in September 1831, college supporters placed a small advertisement in the Philadelphia Chronicle announcing their intentions. They deemed New Haven, Connecticut the most suitable location for the new institution. The seaport's maritime connections with the West Indies, they hoped, would induce island residents to send their sons abroad to the college. They described New Haven's townspeople as “friendly, pious, generous, and humane” and its laws as “salutary and protecting to all, without regard to complexion.”

It took white New Haveners just three days to disprove such characterizations. The following Saturday, at the request of New Haven's mayor Dennis Kimberly, more than seven hundred white men packed into town hall. As one attendant observed, “so great was the interest to hear the discussions that notwithstanding the excessive heat and the almost irrespirable atmosphere of the room, the hall was crowded throughout the afternoon.” By the day's close, white townspeople had rejected the proposal and agreed to “resist” its establishment “by every lawful means.” The vote had passed 700 to 4.

College supporters never expected the path to be easy. They had come of age at a time when black access to primary learning was expanding largely through the black community's own efforts, but collegiate education remained out of reach. In 1826 for example, E.F. Hughes publicized his school for “colored children” in New York. In Philadelphia the same year, black men and women formed an “Education Society” to “raise funds” to “secure a suitable building...for the reception of color youth.” In Hartford, blacks formed the city's first African Church in 1827 and opened a small school-room in its basement; this was the first such school for black children in city history. Four years later, free blacks in the city constructed a meetinghouse that included a separate Sabbath school.

Over the previous decade in New Haven, white townspeople had encouraged free blacks to build their own schools and open Temple Street, a black church. Personally, Simeon Jocelyn had found his white neighbors generally supportive of his efforts to expand black education.

In light of such efforts to expand blacks' educational opportunity, the black college planners did not anticipate a rejection so swift and so bitter. Many later recalled being awed by the ferociousness of the response against them. As college supporter and black Philadelphian James Forten remarked, "the New Haven opposition was...quite unlooked for, [it] is one of the most discreditable things for a free state, that I ever heard of."

On the surface, it is not hard to understand why college proponents put so much faith in New Haven. By 1830, New Haven was the largest city in Connecticut, and its numbers were rising rapidly. Alternating with Hartford as the capital of Connecticut, the town offered both the benefits of a large, cosmopolitan city and those of a small community intimately linked by ties of family and church. The seaport was conveniently located between New York, some 75 miles to the south, and Boston, about 130 miles to the north. Transportation networks to and around the town were improving daily. The turnpike system was largely finished by 1814; a year later, regular steamboat service connected New Haven with Manhattan. Commercial activity bustled around the wharf, Custom House Square, and East Water Street, where an active West India trade fueled the local economy. Still, its population of just over 10,000 was still tiny in comparison to the other eastern ports of Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York. And while the free black populations in those cities were numerous and expanding, New Haven's black population was small, self-contained, and stagnant, numbering around 600. Relations between the white majority and black minority appeared stable and harmonious. "No place in the Union," abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison concluded, is "the situation [of blacks] more comfortable, or the prejudices of a community weaker against them."

New Haven's general enthusiasm for reform also attracted the college planners. Predominantly Protestant, white, and native-born, New Haveners enthusiastically championed the benevolent movements of the age, especially temperance, colonization, and education.

The seaport also had a tradition of embracing educational outsiders. In addition to Yale University, the town hosted three male academies, two female seminaries, and several boarding schools. At least on the surface, the black college supporters had good reason to believe their institution would complement New Haven's commitment to religion, education, and uplift.

New Haven's swift assault against the college was proof they had woefully overestimated white New Haveners' broad-mindedness. Underneath the city's progressive veneer, the college planners encountered a white community violently hostile to black improvement, particularly to efforts to develop black men's vocational skills. As Forten observed in the aftermath of the institution's collapse, the African college was "cast down on every side." Opposition crossed class and ethnic boundaries. New Haven's wealthier male residents, those eligible to attend the September meeting by their status as freeholders, were eager to keep college education the sole preserve of the white elite. For many of these men, themselves Yale alumni, calling a school for black men a "college" (and building it beside their alma mater) was profoundly unsettling. The concerns they voiced centered around the deleterious effects of the college on the social and economic status of their community, on Yale, and, by extension, on themselves.

Expressing their outrage on street corners and in the local press, New Haven's working classes opposed the college with equal intensity as the upper classes. They rejected the manual labor college because they perceived it jeopardized their social and economic stability. For the previous half-decade, construction on the Farmington Canal had been attracting scores of unskilled workers (predominantly Irish but also free blacks) into the city. Many white mechanics feared this alternative source of cheaper labor endangered their own socio-economic security.

While status and economic anxieties contributed to the college's downfall, such tensions alone do not adequately explain why this community would rise so swiftly against a proposal with reform at its center. How could the college planners have been so wrong in their perception of New Haven?

Two additional factors brought about the planned college's demise. In short, the timing could hardly have been worse.

First, beneath this small seaport's liberal exterior, the racial fabric that tenuously bound its social and economic order had been quietly unraveling for decades. To white dismay, the excruciating process of gradual emancipation Connecticut initiated in 1784 had been eating away at the legal and occupational strictures that fixed blacks' physical, social, and economic mobility. Emancipation in Connecticut moved at a slow and uneven pace. The 1784 statute decreed that all "Negro" or "mulatto" children born within the state after March 1 of that year would be free after their 25th birthday. In other words, masters did not have to release a single slave until 1809. By 1790, approximately 2,700 slaves remained. By the turn of the 19th century, Connecticut whites still held nearly a thousand blacks in bondage. Whites sold black slaves on New Haven's Center Green into the 1820s. In 1830, papers still carried the occasional notice of a "servant" for sale. In 1831, 23 people of color remained enslaved in Connecticut. The state would not formally abolish slavery until 1848.

In response to this protracted emancipation, many whites attempted to fashion systems of control to replace chattel slavery; in the process, free blacks lost many of the "freedoms" they enjoyed as bondspeople. For example, while as slaves, people of color were trained in all sorts of occupations, as free men and women they no longer received vocational education and were often excluded from profitable trades.

Diminished opportunities for vocational education paralleled declines in their rights of citizenship. Connecticut's property-owning free blacks could vote in local and national elections throughout the 18th century, but in 1814, the state denied all African Americans suffrage. Such a statute gave Connecticut the dubious distinction of being the only state in New England to disenfranchise its black population.

In New Haven through the first decades of the 19th century, a rigid system of socio-occupational and residential segregation emerged to replace the boundary that once demarcated enslaved from free. With few exceptions, New Haven's free blacks lived cloistered in the ramshackle neighborhood dubbed "New Liberia," not far from the Mill River, laboring as seamen, domestics, and unskilled workers. And while the percentage of free blacks in New Haven was tiny and decreasing in the fall of 1831, the perceived threat engendered by their presence was on the increase. Few blacks living in the city were controlled by a master's direct supervision or a formal system of curfew laws and travel restrictions. White New Haveners opposed the college from their desire to halt more black arrivals. As one New Havener complained, "The establishment of a College here...would hurry in the blacks, as bees to a hive."

By the fall of 1831, tensions surrounding free people of color in New Haven were reaching their breaking point, exacerbated by calls to extend emancipation nationwide. White abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison's radical publication, the *Liberator*, hit New Haven streets in January 1831. Just one year earlier black Bostonian David Walker had published his *Appeal*, which sanctioned black-on-white violence to secure social change. Where the process of gradual emancipation in New Haven had been corroding white power to control black physical, occupational, and socio-economic mobility, escalating pressure for national emancipation made the notion of an African college (championed by black and white abolitionists) even more unsettling.

Then, in early September, whites' worst fears about emancipation were confirmed. The same week college supporters published their intentions news reached New Haven of the worst black-on-white violence in the nation's history. When New Haveners opened their local papers in early September, they learned simultaneously of the plan to build a college for black men in their back yard and of Nat Turner's rebellion in Southampton, Virginia (during which 55 whites would be killed and, in retaliation, as many as 200 blacks). In some newspapers, articles about the college and the massacre in Virginia appeared side by side. Coverage of the rebellion made no secret of its leader's education. The *Columbian Register*, for example, highlighted Turner's literacy by observing that "Nat is a shrewd fellow" who "reads and writes, [and] preaches." To many New Haveners, the implication that black education fomented black-on-white violence must have been clear. Thus, when white townspeople responded to the college proposal, it was almost impossible for them not to invoke "the lessons" of Turner. For a community already uneasy with the free black population seemingly increasing in their midst, the shock of Turner was too much to withstand. Little could Turner have imagined that among the casualties of his rebellion would be the first college for African Americans.

Even after college proponents rescinded their plans, unrest in New Haven persisted. Less than a month after the meeting, New Haven whites unleashed their anger over the African college by attacking tangible symbols of their frustrations: a black-owned hotel, a black-owned property, and a white abolitionist's summer home. By destroying the New Haven home of abolitionist and college supporter Arthur Tappan, rioters denounced federal interference with local affairs and renounced the prospect of immediate emancipation. The townspeople who attacked Tappan's home were never identified, though Tappan believed they were southern medical students attending Yale. By also razing a black-owned home to its foundations, rioters declared their desire to end the black economic progress they perceived as occurring at their expense. And by raiding a black-owned hotel also rumored to be a "house of ill repute," white men crushed the figurative and literal "amalgamation" a "college for colored youth" would invariably, in their opinion, propagate. Such attacks quashed any hope that the African college might one day open in New Haven.

The abandonment of the plan for the nation's first African college in New Haven represents a critical turning point in the history of black education. This episode ushered in one of the bleakest periods for black schooling in New England. Within the next five years, four other towns in the region would erupt over efforts to expand black education. In 1833, Canterbury, Connecticut exploded into violence in response to Prudence Crandall's effort to establish a school for black girls. On May 24, 1833, the Connecticut legislature passed its notorious "Black Laws" banning the education of African Americans who were not state residents. In September 1834, an unidentified group assaulted Crandall's house, throwing bricks through the window and attempting to set the residence on fire. The following summer, an irate mob in Canaan, New Hampshire stormed Noyes Academy, an integrated classical school. On August 10, 1835, a mob attacked again, removing the school from its foundations and depositing it in a nearby swamp.

Connecticut repealed its "Black Laws" three years later, in 1838. Still, it would be another two decades before the first institution of higher education would be established—in Ohio. Wilberforce University, owned and operated by African Americans, would not open until 1856. Ultimately, the planned New Haven college's demise exposed a widespread white uneasiness with black aspiration and abolitionist agitation, the twin motivations behind the college campaign. In the immediate aftermath of Turner's rebellion, a community uneasy with decades of gradual emancipation and increasing pressure for immediate abolition would not endorse any proposal that might facilitate such racial change. To many white New Haveners, black education and emancipation were intertwined. They refused to sanction such an unholy alliance.

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