

Chapter 7

The University and the Slaves: Apology and Its Meaning

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Hidden behind the grand president's mansion on the campus of the University of Alabama are several small brick buildings. They are nondescript and today are used for storing garden tools. Yet in the years before the Civil War they housed slaves. For, until federal troops arrived in Tuscaloosa on April 4, 1865, and freed them, slaves were owned by the university.

Such is the hidden connection between race and the university that many people think that blacks were not present on the campus until Vivian Malone and James Hood enrolled with the help of Nicholas Katzenbach and the National Guard in June 1963. But blacks were present at the university before students arrived in 1831 (Clark 1995). One of the University's first acts was the purchase of a slave, Ben, who worked building the campus. And now the University of Alabama's faculty senate has apologized for the antebellum faculty's use of slave labor and for the role of the faculty in punishing slaves. This essay explores the case for apology and the conflict over the apology. It is a case study of what we may expect from an institution's apology.

Slaves and Slaveholders on the University of Alabama Campus

The connections between the University of Alabama and slavery are many. The university owned one slave from 1828 to 1834, maybe none until 1838, a second in 1842, more thereafter, perhaps many more by the early 1860s. Records are incomplete (Sellers 1953). Most often when there was work to be done by slaves, the university rented slaves from Tuscaloosa residents. Slaves appeared frequently on the campus. Often they were brought by students. At least once, slaves appeared on campus as a place of refuge. When some fugitive slaves were found hiding in Franklin Hall, the university investigated whom they belonged to and apparently returned them.

Several faculty members owned slaves—some of them owned a significant number of slaves—and they rented out their slaves. Basil Manly, who served as president of the university from 1837 to 1855, owned 38 (Fuller 2000: 265). English Professor Landon Cabell Garland brought three wagonloads of slaves with him when he and his family moved from Virginia. The University's historian, James Sellers, makes the story of the move from Randolph Macon College, where Garland was teaching literature, to the University of Alabama, into a story of what was once called the moonlight and magnolia school—a story about the South that mythologized the beautiful landscape at the expense of the realities of life. Sellers adopted this description of Garland's biographer.

Dr. Garland was very fond of his slaves. When he and his wife were married, a special gift bestowed upon them by their parents was the choice of slaves for their servants. In the course of years, however, the number of slaves increased from three to sixty. Nevertheless, "Old Master"'s black women folk wanted to stay with him and refused to be sold to owners of their husbands, as Dr. Garland had prospered. His policy . . . had always been to keep families as nearly intact as possible; consequently, he bought the women's husbands. (Sellers 1953: 79)

In 1855 Garland became president of the university. On the eve of the Civil War he delivered a trio of lectures at the YMCA on proslavery thought (Sellers 1953).

Slaves made the bricks that went into buildings; they worked the grounds and buildings around the campus. They carried water, serviced the dormitories, worked in the dining halls. One slave, Sam, who was rented by the university, worked as a laboratory assistant for Professor F. A. P. Barnard, a brilliant young science professor, president of Columbia University after the war and the namesake of Barnard College. President Manly recorded in his diaries frequent conflict with Sam. Once, Sam "behaved very insolently to Thos. G. Grace, and refused to measure or receive a load of coal which Grace had brought. By order of the Faculty, he was chastised, in my room, in their presence. Not seemingly humbled, I whipped him a second time, very severely" (Manly 1840). And when slaves died, they were occasionally buried on campus. Until the summer of 2004, those graves were unmarked. However, a monument at the University cemetery now commemorates the graves.

Plaques and other commemorative devices elsewhere on campus memorialize the era of slavery and Civil War. There is a granite monument to Confederate veterans outside the library. There are also plaques on the library's exterior commemorating Confederate veterans, as well as a plaque commemorating the reparations paid for the era of slavery and civil war. A plaque outside Clark Hall notes that it is named after the trustee who chaired the committee that oversaw the 46,000 acres of land given to the University, "in reparation for the 1865 destruction of the

campus by Federal troops." Such is the nature of reparations for the era of slavery and Civil War.

Several buildings on campus are named after prominent slaveholders. There is Morgan Hall, built in 1910 and named after Alabama senator John Tyler Morgan, who led the battle to obtain federal funds in reparation for the university's destruction in 1865 by Union forces. Morgan might also be remembered as a leader of the Alabama Secession Convention, who said something along the lines of, the best thing we could do is to go to Africa and bring back as many Africans as possible and turn them into slaves. There are also halls named after the two slaveholding presidents, Garland and Manly.

Then there is Nott Hall, named after Josiah Nott, who founded a medical school in Mobile in the late 1850s. He was a polygenesist—that is, in his writings on proslavery thought he explored the idea that blacks and whites have a separate origin (Nott 1854). His ideas provided intellectual machinery to support the slave system. Those are some of the physical connections of slavery to the campus; there are also important intellectual connections.

Proslavery Thought at the Antebellum University of Alabama

The early history of the university, which opened in 1831, was one of reverence for Enlightenment ideas of reason. In the late 1820s and early 1830s, James G. Birney, who later ran for president on the Liberty Party, was a trustee of the university. He was responsible for hiring many of the early faculty, including Henry Tutwiler, who had been educated at the University of Virginia. Birney and Tutwiler actively promoted the American Colonization Society in Tuscaloosa, and Birney wrote some antislavery essays in Tuscaloosa. One important, though underappreciated, story is that Tuscaloosa had a tradition of exploring radical views at least into the mid-1830s. Then, as happened elsewhere in the south in the 1830s, that changed. In 1835, alumnus Alexander Meek wrote that Birney was "the most deluded of abolitionist fanatics" (Quist 1998: 318). In 1836, the Philomathic Society, one of the two literary societies at the university, expelled Birney from honorary membership. The society cited Birney's "espousal and endeavors to propagate opinions which militate and are at direct variance with the rights of the South, the peace of society, and the perpetuity of our government" (Sellers 1953: 179–80). Birney and Tutwiler had once supported the termination of slavery through colonization. Their views represent an alternative view of Alabama—of what might have been. In November 1837, Basil Manly departed from his South Carolina pulpit to assume the presidency of the University of Alabama. Manly is a critical figure in understanding the intellectual history of the antebellum

south. He was seemingly ubiquitous: in the pulpit of the First Baptist Church in Charleston, South Carolina during the nullification controversy; leading southern Baptists out of the American Baptist Convention in 1845; swearing in Jefferson Davis as president of the Confederacy at the start of the Civil War.

Manly did much that was positive at the university. He was a proponent of the democratization of education. He was one of those antebellum educators who believed in the promise of education. He brought order to the university, created a grand campus (with the assistance of slaves' labor, of course), and brought some excellent faculty.

The problem came with the content of that education, for, while Manly supported many people learning, the lessons he taught were of obedience to the status quo. They were lessons that confirmed the worldview of his students, which fit neatly with the demands of the powerful. In a series of sermons and lectures, he taught his audiences that slavery is the natural order of things. He delivered lectures on ants and bees, to illustrate the natural order that exists in society—constant warfare, conflict over property, hierarchy of some working for others. In his correspondence with Brown University president Francis Wayland, Manly expanded on the virtues of slavery (Manly 1850). Manly's 1845 sermon on the "Duties of Masters and Servants" makes slavery out to be a positive good, something that, in the words of his biographer, "made slaves happy and industrious and masters prosperous and beneficent" (Fuller 2000: 214). Manly became a frequent target of abolitionists for his statement that he believed that Southerners supported the right to sell slaves at will—and that "however great the trial to my feelings in other respects, I have none as to the rights of property" (Fuller 2000: 222).

The Meaning of Apology

Given this history, the faculty senate considered an apology in the spring of 2004. The current faculty are the intellectual successors to those antebellum professors who owned slaves, used them, supervised their discipline, and spoke widely in favor of slavery. The senate apologized to the memory of those enslaved by the university, to the people brutalized, to those who worked without pay on this campus, as well as those whose names we will never know who suffered in part because this university failed to oppose the slave system. Apology is part recognizing the past and giving closure to it. It is part of making the campus more welcoming to African American students. Part of it is also opening a serious dialogue about what the university's current identity is and ought to be.

The questions, what good comes of this talk of the past, and why there should be an apology, are critically important. For the apology has

significant implications for how we think about the past and its current meaning. Novelist Ralph Ellison wrote about the ways that history is important, yet ignored by Americans in his essay "Going to the Territory" (1995). By "pushing significant details of our experience into the underground of unwritten history, we not only overlook much which is positive, but we blur our conceptions of where and who we are" (Ellison 1995: 595). The past does not stop having meaning just because we do not talk about it. In Ellison's magical phrasing, "our unwritten history looms as . . . obscure alter ego [of written history], and although repressed from our general knowledge of ourselves, it is always active in the shaping of events."

The apology reminds us of our complex history. That history demonstrates that African Americans have a much richer history at the university than we remember. That past is important to those who have been left out of history's mainstream. It is an important part of remembering their contributions and honoring them.

There are lessons in the apology for us now. The university supported, indeed reinforced, the accepted power arrangements of the antebellum era. One lesson is that it is easy, but also dangerous, for university officials to accept the power structure. The university's role should be to question, not accept ideas of the powerful. Our identity ought to be of a university that honors and includes the entire community (Brophy 2004). An apology can be part of the process of reconciliation. And we can assist in providing a lesson to the local community about our shared past, as we have a common discussion. One other lesson of the apology is that universities are particularly important places to seek redress. The sentiments of the campus community may make them more receptive than many other institutions to the case for apology. Moreover, there are other things that the community can do to correct our imbalanced history. For example, a common way of changing names is by changing use. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Colleges and books only copy the language which the field and work-yard made" (Emerson 1837/1983: 62). We can call the buildings what we will, and they will, after sufficient time, be known by that name. So if students think we should honor someone other than President Manly we can rename Manly Hall by calling it by another name. Perhaps we can call it Luna Hall, in honor of one of the women slaves owned by Professor F. A. P. Barnard and who labored on the campus. Luna Hall will, eventually, become the name of the hall, no matter what the university's maps label that building.

The Arguments Against Apology and Their Meaning

Much of the cultural significance of the apology appears in the arguments against the apology. The campus debate over apology became one

of the leading news stories in the state in March and April 2004. It was on the front page of virtually every newspaper in the state and was a topic of intense discussion on radio and television programs throughout the state. The intensity of the discussion and opposition suggests just how meaningful the battle over memory of the era of slavery is for Alabamians. We are fortunate that so many people wanted to talk about the apology, for it provided an opportunity to revisit the memory of slavery and its meaning (Grahn-Farley 2004).

Those opposing apology advanced a series of reasons for doing so. Often the opposition was emotional and based on anger. Such was the response of a vice-president of Laureate Education, who wrote about the apology, "I am sick and tired of the African Americans making excuses based on the 'slavery era.'" Similarly, one anonymous poster wrote of the apology, about his anger at integration at liberal Southern universities:

No surprise here. Our Southern universities have been transforming into clones of Berkeley for a long time now. The only reason for a young Southron [sic] to attend one of these cesspools now is to undermine it. I admit that I still go to University of Georgia football games, but I take a good hot shower when I get home because after seeing all the miscegenation, [sic] and the general deconstruction of our beloved Southland I feel like I've been raped.

A post to a story in the student newspaper, the *Crimson White*, wished for a return of a politician like Governor George Wallace, who would, presumably, deny requests for apology or reparations: "I admire George Wallace—probably the last statesman this country has seen. If only the men we elect today had the courage of Governor Wallace. He'd give these money-grubbing reparation morons exactly what they deserve—nothing. Call that racism? I call it common sense" (Clark 2004). Another anonymous post threatened violence. He wrote, "Send Brophy to my house. I'll teach him about slavery. Jesse Jackson wannabe."

The responses that provided reasons against the apology more specifically fall into several broad categories:

1. The current generation is not responsible for prior crimes and an apology is, therefore, meaningless.
2. An apology dishonors the memory of the university or the South more generally, or at least distorts the role of slavery in the university's history. The request for apology might also force Alabamians into giving an apology when they do not want to give one, or it attaches moral blame to Alabamians who have no culpability and are, themselves, oppressed.
3. It causes more harm than good, because it opens old wounds and causes further conflict.

4. An apology is not sincere; it is designed for political purposes or to obtain publicity.

Those rationales tracked the national debate over apologies for slavery. The apology, while centered on one institution, opens up a host of issues related to continuing culpability, the meaning of apologies to those making them and those receiving them, and the cultural war over how we remember the past and what, if anything, we should do about it.

At base the first reason—that there is no responsibility—says that we may inherit traditions and the benefits of those traditions, but that we have no responsibility for the crimes of the past. This appeared in a lot of forms. In its most radical form, it was that slavery was not so bad; perhaps even there was never anything to apologize for. One opponent of the apology argued that the slaves were happy with slavery:

Sorry folks, but the slaves would disagree with you, even those of you who say that slavery was evil and unconscionable. Just a casual browsing of the Federal Government's "Slave Narratives" will show many slaves that were quite happy in their position in society, and even those who preferred it and admitted that they wouldn't mind returning to those days. Don't believe me? READ the Slave Narratives. It [sic] is online. You will be surprised at how little truth there is to the general "Uncle Tom's Cabin" version of slavery. Apologize? If you want to. But first make sure you know what you are talking about, Mr. Brophy and Ms [Lisa] Dorr. I just don't think the real slaves would care much either way.

For there is a well-engrained belief in the moonlight and magnolia myths of the antebellum south—the place of happy slaves working on the plantation and making their cultivated masters wealthy. Such a story is often mixed with misinformation about the nature of slavery itself.

But leaving aside whether there was culpability in the past, opponents claimed that the current generation is not responsible for (or seemingly a beneficiary of) slavery. Often the statements of lack of culpability were accompanied by statements about the need to remember history.

The second argument—that the apology distorts the University's culpability—rests on an argument about the presence of slavery elsewhere in the United States and in human history. For some argued that the University of Alabama had no particular culpability for slavery: slavery was part of society at the time; others owned slaves in the South at the time. The argument quickly moved beyond the university. The South was not alone in supporting slavery, for slavery has been nearly ubiquitous in human history. A sort of equal protection argument is invoked to say, "we're not so bad. Other people were also bad." The argument is that unless every society that held slaves is held liable, then none can be.

Opponents of the apology want to move on and they think the university is not responsible for the crimes of the university in the past. A music

professor who was the most prominent faculty opponent of the apology argued that those asking for an apology, like history professor George Williamson, are

“visitors in a foreign land,” strongly predisposed to maintain that alien perspective, establish moral authority, and control the agenda to their perpetual advantage. Dr. Williamson has already warned us “not in your lifetime, nor in the lifetime of your children, nor in the lifetime of your grandchildren . . . can we move on and let the past be past.

In fact, the desire to be freed from responsibility is the central feature of the opposition. The music professor feared “that we may be led down the garden path to admitting fundamental flaws, incurable weakness and permanent unworthiness of citizenship.”

The *Montgomery Advertiser* questioned the value of an apology at the present time, noting that neither slaves nor slave owners are still alive:

It is worth asking whether an apology in 2004 can have any real meaning. If this were 1904, when former slaves and former slaveowners still lived, perhaps that question would not be asked, but this debate is taking place a century later. (*Montgomery Advertiser* 2004)

The *Advertiser* thought that, because there are no living slaves or slaveholders, there is no culpability and no harm. For “No one living today can plausibly claim to suffer now because slavery existed in Alabama 140 years ago, nor can anyone living today plausibly claim to benefit now for the same reason.”

So the opponents rallied a series of arguments, which tended to dispel the University’s liability and to demand that we stop talking about the past. There were fears that the apology was unneeded, divisive, or, in the words of an editorial in Auburn University’s student newspaper, a “Big Mistake” The apology is seen also, however, as an attack on Southern heritage. This is part of the culture war (Goldfield 2002; Applebome 1997; Horwitz 1999; Feller 2004). One post on the student newspaper website stated, “In my opinion, Professor Brophy is a advocate for all the forces now waging a war of cultural genocide against Alabama’s history and traditions.” Or, in one extreme example, the request for an apology is likened to terrorism:

The source of the University of Alabama Professor Alfred Brophy’s anti-Southern cultural bigotry is not at all hard to trace. It is apparent if you consider the fact that his Ph.D. was awarded by those neo-Puritan monoculturists at Harvard University. . . . Brophy should be ashamed for promoting such hair-brained, hateful, prejudicial and divisive schemes as apologies for slavery. He should be especially so now when American soldiers are dying every day to protect us from fanatics who have exactly the same philosophy as the so-called “secret six.” These were the six prominent Yankees who financed and supported that original American fanatic and terrorist named John Brown. By the way, at least four of those six

were Harvard alumni. If Brophy or any other neo-Puritan wants apologies for past injustices let them start by apologizing for the policies and philosophies promulgated by Harvard that led directly to an unnecessary fratricidal war that killed 620,000 Americans and kept most Southerners (of all races) in an impoverished and subjugated condition for three generations.

The criticism of the faculty who sought the apology points to the importance of identity of those seeking the apology. As one anonymous discussant wrote about me, “I am sorry that your owner in Africa sold you to some white guy instead of to another african [sic]. There’s your apology. Maybe that professor needs to learn a little of his own history.” There was substantial interest in the racial and geographic identity of who was seeking the apology. Perhaps because the apology came from the beloved university, which represented Governor Wallace’s stand in the schoolhouse door in the minds of so many, it was more meaningful than it would have been had it come from other institutions in the state, like the *Mobile Register* or the *Montgomery Advertiser*, two newspapers that were in existence before the Civil War.

Lessons for the Present

Yet the apology is about acknowledging the continuing guilt of an institution, which was intimately involved in slavery and its legacy of Jim Crow discrimination afterward. Much of apology is about truth and inclusiveness. It tells people who have been left outside history that they are to be included. It rebalances history, which is meaningful to many. Gwendolyn M. Patton wrote in response to a *Montgomery Advertiser* editorial opposing the apology:

I find your editorials devaluing the importance of an apology to descendants of African-Americans whose forebears were forced into slavery at the University of Alabama dehumanizing. I have traced my paternal family history from 1835. My forebears without a doubt were forced into slavery. An apology from the descendants and institutions who “owned” my ancestors would mean much to me. Much could come from this contemporary reconciliation as a pledge that present white descendants will not engage forever white-skin privilege of the horror of racism, exploitation, discrimination, injustice, inequality and the variations thereof that we still, unfortunately, experience today. (Patton 2004)

If we remember that alternative history, of violence and forced labor, then we will be more likely to question the current distribution of power. The process of obtaining an apology, which was built on an intense discussion of the university’s relationship to slavery, and the aftermath of the apology provides an opportunity for on-going exploration of history and the meaning of that history. For apologies are part of a larger process of negotiating different understandings of the past held by divergent groups.

And one hopes that the discussion around the apology has increased the knowledge of history on the campus.

The credibility of the historians' account comes in part from providing complete and accurate accounts of what happened. They must give due process and adjudicate competing claims. It is critical to pay attention to competing claims, even if some of those claims are ultimately rejected. There are differences, of course, between an interpretation of history and what to do about that history. The former permits a relative consensus; questions about the latter, however, cannot be answered by historical facts alone.

In thinking about having apologies that are productive of harmony, we need to be sensitive to the current generation. The people who are alive today are, obviously, not the people who enslaved others. They may, however, be the beneficiaries of that enslavement; some are also the descendants of those who were enslaved. And even some of those who are arguing the fiercest against acts like the apology are themselves engaged in remembering the past. The League of the South, a neo-Confederate group, for example, celebrates Confederate history and seeks to effect a return to the values of the Confederacy, even as it opposes Congressional investigation of the history of slavery. Harmony and building something positive for the future is critical. But at some point, some groups are likely to be offended, for there are alternative understandings of history. Sometimes those understandings cannot be reconciled. One way of trying to minimize those taking offense is to have a history that is as complete and accurate as possible. Apologies for the past, though, are controversial precisely because they take a stand and they rebalance past, inaccurate histories. They are controversial because history and self-image have value. Apologies may also lead to calls for making atonement complete by other concrete acts, such as scholarships or changes in names of buildings, or actions to increase the presence of black students, staff, and faculty.

An apology functions to define us, as well as to send messages to others. It tells us about our current identity and makes a statement to those excluded from the University and to others about the past and the present, as well as those who are beneficiaries of that past. An apology is a part of how we remember our history and it is also an antidote to selective memory. And now we have a monument to the slaves who worked on the campus and are buried on it.

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