

## **Confronting The Truth About Our Church and Slavery**

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has a morally complicated history with slavery, dating from the earliest colonial days. Although hard to accept, condoning slavery was an historical fact at Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church. Why revisit that history today if doing so is uncomfortable and increasingly divisive?

At least one reason is that the PC(USA) has explicitly asked churches to research their past and share their findings with others. Exploring our history, including what's in the records and what's missing from them, "enriches our understanding of historical events and helps us to interrogate the present in similar ways," Presbyterian Historical Society Executive Director Nancy Taylor notes.

In 2022 at its annual meeting, PC(USA) delegates overwhelmingly approved *An Offer of Apology to African Americans for the Sin of Slavery and Its Legacy*. Previous efforts by the national church to repent for its sins of racism and seek reconciliation notably skipped a crucial intermediate step, according to African American Presbyterians, who insisted that "an apology is necessary before reconciliation is possible."

The approved Apology concludes with numerous recommendations including one encouraging congregations ... "to prepare a history of their community" to better understand the issues and then to "share the resources they find helpful in that preparation with the larger church."

Several years ago as part of its antiracism work, Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church's social justice committee began reviewing the various histories written about SPC with an eye towards updating them.

Our effort accelerated after the committee acquired five handwritten books dating from 1814 through the early 1900s. Containing session minutes and lists of members, the records had been housed in the archives at Richmond's Union Presbytery seminary.

The SPC members retrieved the minutes from seminary's archives during the pandemic, taking them to the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia to be digitized. Then an SPC workgroup began the slow process of transcribing the hand-written text. Transcribing historical records is a common routine intended to make the records easier to read and widely accessible. The original books now reside permanently in PHS'

archives. After months of work, the workgroup shared what they'd learned during a 5-week Lenten series titled *Exploring our Roots*.

Shepherd University history professor Benjamin Bankhurst, PHS' Nancy Taylor, and research historians Jane Ailes and Marie Tyler-McGraw participated in the Lenten series helping us to better understand and provide context to the historical records.

What questions did we have before we got started? Would the records shed light on the role SPC played in the community in the early 1800s? What did an entirely separate set of 1847-1848 minutes titled Old School explain to us? And are we also able to contribute in a meaningful way to the history of the presbytery and possibly the national church? What insights did we hope to gain into how we, as a congregation, might address current affairs? One member wondered what role SPC played in the lead up to the Civil War.

Here is some of what we found causing us to further examine our history and our response. From 1824 to 1844, SPC membership included 18 people listed by first name only with descriptions such as "servant of" or "a colored woman, servant of" or a "colored man, servant of." Historians generally agree that referring to a person by their first name only suggests that they were enslaved. In our remembering, does SPC owe an apology to these persons who were likely enslaved, their voices unheard?

The first congregation at Shepherdstown was recognized in 1743 in northern Jefferson County, Virginia at the time. West Virginia was carved out of Virginia as a state in 1863 during the Civil War.

We expected SPC's church records would confirm that enslavers were among church leaders, and that the enslaved were admitted as members. Unlike many enslaved persons toiling on large plantations in southern states, however, in and around Shepherdstown most enslaved persons likely worked on small farms and as servants in the house, according to Shepherd Professor Bankhurst.

Yet, surprisingly, SPC church records throughout the 1800s, even in the years leading up to and following the Civil War, reveal virtually no mention of slavery except for a vote by session about an earlier church anti-slavery resolution. This resolution, championed by Virginia minister George Bourne, was passed in 1818 by the national church when it approved a statement claiming slavery was "inconsistent with the law of God." At the

same meeting, delegates voted to defrock Virginia minister Bourne for condemning enslavers as sinners.

Year later, SPC stepped ever so slightly into the debate in 1838 when it ordered “our delegates to the presbytery to be directed to move said body to instruct its commissioners to the next General Assembly to move that body to repeal the anti Slavery Resolution passed in the Assembly of 1818.” We realized then that SPC in the 1800s was not anti-slavery.

Nancy Taylor helped us understand that slavery was considered so threatening to Presbyterian national church unity that its leaders gamely tried to walk a middle ground between those favoring slavery and the abolitionists within the church. Many synods, presbyteries and local churches followed the lead of the national church.

While church records are silent after the 1838 directive, SPC did not entirely sidestep the slavery issue. An apparent split in the SPC congregation is reflected in a set of minutes for 1847-1848 titled Old School, which overlapped with the minutes for the years 1841-1871. SPC was considered a New School church. New and Old School churches split over significant differences about slavery, as well as theology and polity.

The discord may not be surprising because serving SPC during those same years was New School minister John Hargrave. Hargrave was a strong proponent of the American Colonization Society (ACS) and was instrumental in helping free enslaved persons in Jefferson County and in facilitating their emigration to Liberia.

ACS experts Jane Ailes and Marie Tyler-McGraw shared with us a letter Hargrave wrote in 1845: “Alexander Jenkins is a free man with papers, his wife belonged to Mr. William McMurren, who cheerfully gives her up to accompany her husband.” Hargrave included in his letter “a certificate also on behalf of Mary. . . the wife of Alexander Jenkins.” In 1842, Mary was listed as a member of SPC.

Hargrave’s support of the ACS may have been too much for some members of his congregation. Frustrating our efforts to better understand any internal debate about the schism, the Old School and primary church records revealed nothing about the split. We can only imagine.

Although the records avoided the morality of slavery, we found frequent reference to the elders’ judgement of members’ drunkenness and promiscuity, not atypical of church leaders at the time. Church leaders felt

more equipped to address the morality of the individual congregants than to debate the social morality of slavery, explained Nancy Taylor.

Texts revealing how much gossip served as the source of the moral shortcomings reported to session surprised us. Those who were found to be unrepentant were denied the sacraments or “sealing ordinances,” a serious punishment in the early church. Those deemed sufficiently repentant or providing satisfactory defense were absolved.

A June 1818 entry records the suspension of a member from the “sealing ordinances of the Church until he manifests his repentance” followed a few months later with session denying baptism to one his children until “evidence of his repentance as are deemed satisfactory.”

Much of what we gleaned from the records of the session meetings, however, was routine and not particularly informative. In fact, policing the morality of the congregation, interviewing new members and securing church funds and overseeing building maintenance were frequently the main functions of session leaders, Bankhurst noted.

We’ve not completed our work because many questions remain, such as where did the church meet from 1831 after the original building burned and the new church was completed in 1885-86? Was the side entrance built specifically for enslaved persons to enter?

We have yet to learn whether presbytery took up SPC’s 1838 request about rescinding the 1818 anti-slavery resolution. With PHS’s help we’ve obtained the Winchester presbytery minutes which may enhance our understanding.

There aren’t any session minutes for 1861-1863 during the Civil War years. It’s possible that session didn’t meet because the war itself was on Shepherdstown’s doorstep, which is five miles from the Antietam battlefield. SPC served as a field hospital for confederate soldiers during the aftermath of Antietam.

We’d like to explore historic Shepherdstown records and courthouse records for deeds and wills that might include more information about local families and who resided in their household, including enslaved persons. Are we able to bring alive the story of Mary? Owned by SPC member

William McMurrin, wife of Alexander, both passengers on the ship Roanoke, bound for Liberia, what became of them?

And as one step towards our own apology, we also would like to create an internal display of SPC historical documents, especially for those mostly unheard voices. We must not forget the 18 members we know were once part of our congregation.

Resources:

- Exploring our Roots, the Lenten series presentations, the transcribed session minutes, and related research is available at:  
[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1WCm7H9Dkc9Ak6NoYP-UppdPv01bQZ3s6?usp=share\\_link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1WCm7H9Dkc9Ak6NoYP-UppdPv01bQZ3s6?usp=share_link)
- Leaving Virginia for Liberia; Western Virginia Emigrants and Emancipators, Jane Ailes and Marie Tyler-McGraw, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/489406>
- American Colonization Society: [Virginians-to-liberia.iath.virginia.edu](http://Virginians-to-liberia.iath.virginia.edu)
- What Kind of Christianity, A History of Slavery and Anit-Black Racism in the Presbyterian Church, Dr. William Yoo

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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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