

Dear Johns Hopkins Community,

In 2013, we established the [Hopkins Retrospective](#), a universitywide initiative to more deeply explore our history. Today, we write to provide you with an update on this work and to share some significant new information about our founder, Johns Hopkins.

For most of the last century, our institutions believed Johns Hopkins to be an early and staunch abolitionist whose father, a committed Quaker, had freed the family's enslaved people in 1807. But over the past several months, research being done as a part of the Hopkins Retrospective has caused us to question this narrative. We now have government census records that state Mr. Hopkins was the owner of one enslaved person listed in his household in 1840 and four enslaved people listed in 1850. By the 1860 census, there are no enslaved persons listed in the household.

There is no comprehensive biography of Mr. Hopkins and considerable additional research will be needed before we have a full picture of his life—research that we will be pursuing vigorously in the months ahead. But we felt it was important to share this new information with you now, as part of our ongoing work, announced last summer, to deepen our historical understanding of the legacy of racism in our country, our city, and our institutions.

These newly discovered census records complicate the understanding we have long had of Johns Hopkins as our founder. He launched our university—as America's first research university—in 1876, a little over a decade after the conclusion of the Civil War. At the time, his was the largest philanthropic gift ever made in the United States. In his bequest, Mr. Hopkins also created a hospital, opened in 1889, that has transformed American medical education and set the standard for modern patient care. Importantly for his time, Mr. Hopkins specifically directed that the hospital extend its care to include the indigent of Baltimore regardless of sex, age, or race. Further, he called upon his trustees to create an orphanage for Black children in Baltimore.

The values and aspirations embedded in these bequests have inspired and enriched our institutions and, at our best, fueled our promise. But the fact that Mr. Hopkins had, at any time in his life, a direct connection to slavery—a crime against humanity that tragically persisted in the state of Maryland until 1864—is a difficult revelation for us, as we know it will be for our community, at home and abroad, and most especially our Black faculty, students, staff, and alumni. It calls to mind not only the darkest chapters in the history of our country and our city but also the complex history of our institutions since then, and the legacies of racism and inequity we are working together to confront.

We offer below additional information about the research that has been underway and the new findings of our expert historians—led by Martha S. Jones, Society of Black Alumni Presidential Professor and professor of history and the SNF Agora Institute—as well as the steps we will take ahead, together with you and the broader Baltimore community.

To begin the dialogue, we invite you as students, faculty, staff, alumni, and neighbors to join in a virtual town hall meeting at 11 a.m. on Friday, Dec. 11, when you will have a chance to ask questions of our historians and to offer your advice and ideas for the path forward.

## Our process for historical research and discovery

The Hopkins Retrospective was established seven years ago to explore the history of our university, including diverse voices and contributions. This initiative has also supported the work of the Homewood House Museum and the university's Museums and Society program to examine slaveholding on the Homewood property by the Carroll family prior to the founding of the university and to create historical signage marking the locations where enslaved persons lived and worked.

In late spring 2020, we learned for the first time of the possible existence of the 1850 census document indicating that Johns Hopkins was a slaveholder, and we are deeply grateful to Martha S. Jones and to Allison Seyler, program manager of Hopkins Retrospective, for their painstaking efforts over the ensuing months to investigate and confirm the connections between this document and our founder, Johns Hopkins, such as the accuracy of the location and the listed value of his real estate holdings.

At this time, we do not know the names of the enslaved people listed in the Hopkins household, and we have no other information about their circumstances or the nature of the relationship with Johns Hopkins, nor why he no longer had enslaved people in his home in 1860.

Unfortunately, as far as we are aware, Johns Hopkins' personal papers were either destroyed prior to his demise or lost subsequently. As a consequence, up to this time, we have used as our primary, foundational reference documents his detailed will and letter of instructions to his original trustees. In addition to these documents, we have had relatively few pieces of known archival material.

Taken together, these materials and others that our researchers are now finding—which are posted for public view through the [Hopkins Retrospective website](#)—offer new evidence that Johns Hopkins' and his family's connections to slavery were more extensive than we had previously known, and we hope to learn more about these connections and the family's views of slavery over time, as we amass a fuller archival picture.

To this point, our institution's long-standing narrative about Mr. Hopkins' life has been traced primarily to a short book written by Johns Hopkins' grandniece Helen Thom and published by our university press in 1929. Thom's book collected and retold family memories, including the story that Johns Hopkins' parents, motivated by their Quaker convictions, freed all the "able-bodied" enslaved people on their Anne Arundel plantation in 1807. According to Thom, this act imposed significant financial hardship on the family and caused Johns to leave the plantation for Baltimore five years later, at age 17, to embark upon his commercial career. In Thom's words, Johns became "a strong abolitionist."

The current research done by Martha Jones and Allison Seyler finds no evidence to substantiate Thom's description of Johns Hopkins as an abolitionist, and they have explored and brought to light a number of other relevant materials. They have been unable to document the story of Johns Hopkins' parents freeing enslaved people in 1807, but they have found a partial freeing of enslaved people in 1778 by Johns Hopkins' grandfather, and also continued slaveholding and

transactions involving enslaved persons for decades thereafter. They have looked more closely at an 1838 letter, now available through our archives, from the Hopkins Brothers (a firm in which Johns Hopkins was a principal) in which an enslaved person is accepted as collateral for a debt owed, and recently located an additional obituary in which Johns Hopkins is described as holding antislavery political views (consistent with the letter conveying his established support for President Lincoln and the Union) and as purchasing an enslaved person for the purpose of securing his eventual freedom. Still other documents contain laudatory comments by Johns Hopkins' contemporaries, including prominent Black leaders, praising his visionary philanthropic support for the establishment of an orphanage for Black children.

Like so many others who have made meaningful contributions to our country's history, Mr. Hopkins' story is complex and contradictory, and holds within it multiple truths—both his participation in slaveholding and his extraordinary and specific gifts to the people of Baltimore, particularly those gifts that supported Black Baltimoreans at a time when other white leaders of similar means did not.

### Unanswered questions

The emerging documentary record and researchers' ongoing interpretations raise further important questions, as we consider the full scope of Johns Hopkins' life and work and its implications for our institutions, among them:

- Who were the enslaved people working in Mr. Hopkins' household in the mid-1800s and what more can we learn about their lives over time?
- How did Mr. Hopkins' status as a slaveholder comport with his Quaker roots?
- Why did we, as an institution, rely for so long on the narrative of Mr. Hopkins as an early and inveterate abolitionist, without fully investigating and verifying such claims?
- What more can we learn about the circumstances and terms by which enslaved people came into Mr. Hopkins' household?
- What influenced Mr. Hopkins' move from being a slaveholder in the mid-1800s to incorporating terms into his 1873 will that specified access to the hospital for all races and created an orphanage for Black children?
- What more is there to learn about Mr. Hopkins' support for President Lincoln and the Union during the Civil War and can any of that support be fairly traced to his having developed "anti-slavery" views in the later part of his life?

### The work ahead

These findings call upon us, first and foremost, to continue—with diligence and openness—our research into the full scope of the life and work of Johns Hopkins. Our findings are early and provisional, and we look forward to better understanding these new materials before coming to any firm conclusions about their meaning and implications for our institution's history, its present, and its future.

In doing so, we will delve deeply into the historical record, work to build a public repository of documents and knowledge, and ensure rigorous, scholarly engagement with, and interpretation

of, these materials. We will strive to keep the perspectives and concerns of the enslaved people in Hopkins' household, and in Maryland and the U.S. generally, at the forefront of our inquiry and concern. We will work together to acknowledge and account for the complex picture that is emerging of our founder, his connection to the institution of slavery, and his relationship to anti-slavery politics and post-war reconstruction.

We are fully committed to continuing this research wherever it may lead and to illuminating a path that we hope will bring us closer to the truth, which is an indispensable foundation for all of our education, research, and service activities.

To support this work, Johns Hopkins University and Medicine will be joining the [Universities Studying Slavery \(USS\)](#), which allows us to work with a consortium of peers who have embarked upon similar efforts in recent years. We also have asked Professor Jones to bring together a group of senior colleagues—including Sheridan Libraries Dean Winston Tabb, incoming Krieger School Dean Chris Celenza, and Director of the Institute of the History of Medicine Jeremy Greene—to propose a set of initiatives that explore the historical connections to slavery of Johns Hopkins, the Hopkins family, and other important figures associated with our institution's founding.

We expect this to be a multiyear project, closely linked to the Hopkins Retrospective. It will encompass a broad range of scholarly activities and opportunities for direct community participation and engagement, such as lectures and forums, academic courses, community conversations, commemorative events, and public art.

We will begin seeking your ideas for this initiative at the virtual town hall this week and via an open comment and suggestion email on the Hopkins Retrospective website. We also will work closely with our chief diversity officers, Katrina Caldwell (JHU) and Sherita Golden (JHM), to align our ongoing efforts and strategic priorities in diversity, equity, and inclusion with this important new history initiative.

We are not alone in undertaking the difficult but essential work of reckoning with a complex history and the legacy of racial injustice. This is a solemn responsibility and an important opportunity not only to seek truth but also to build a better, more just, and more equitable future for our institution and all we serve.

Sincerely,

Ronald J. Daniels  
President  
Johns Hopkins University

Paul B. Rothman  
Dean of the Medical Faculty  
CEO, Johns Hopkins Medicine

Kevin W. Sowers

President of the Johns Hopkins Health System  
EVP, Johns Hopkins Medicine