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Nathaniel Sheldon Wheaton: Trinity College's Second President

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Professor Manevitz

AMST 406: The History and Memory of Slavery at Trinity

Nathaniel Sheldon Wheaton: Trinity College's Second President

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Introduction:

In 1966, Trinity College began the construction of its new freshman dormitories. Situated in a “concrete jungle,” as it would become known, the college gave each of these buildings a name. One of the buildings was designated ‘Wheaton Hall’ after Trinity’s second president, Reverend Nathaniel Sheldon Wheaton. From 1966 to the present day, this dorm was a part of many Trinity students’ lives, myself included. I spent my freshman year, September 2015 through May 2016, living in this dorm. It looked like it had been built in the 60s, my room was small and simple, a single that looked out towards downtown Hartford. The name always stuck and is the reason why I decided to research “Wheaton” and his relation to Trinity College.

This research paper details the connection that Reverend Nathaniel Sheldon Wheaton had with Trinity College, before, during and after his presidency and how his choices and actions throughout life may have impacted Trinity. I argue that the impact of Nathaniel Wheaton on Trinity College extends beyond the time of his presidency through his contribution to the establishment of the college, his involvement with students in the 1850s and his return to Hartford to become Rector of Christ Church.

Biography:

Nathaniel Wheaton was born on August 20, 1792 in Washington, Connecticut.¹ The United States of America was a fledgling nation under the presidency of George Washington, hoping to prove its worth to the rest of the world, in many ways similar to how Washington College hoped to prove itself to the other academic institutions within the United States and Europe. Wheaton graduated from Yale College in 1814 and was a part of the Linonian Society

¹ Weaver, Glenn. *The History of Trinity College: Volume One*. (Trinity College Press, Hartford CT. 1967).

during his time there, which was one of Yale's secret societies.² Following his education at Yale, Wheaton went to Maryland to teach and prepare for his Episcopal priesthood to which he was ordained by Bishop Kemp in 1818. He was elected assistant rector of Christ Church in Hartford, Connecticut under Bishop Thomas Church Brownell. Bishop Brownell was the first president and one of the key founders of Washington College. It was during Wheaton's time at Christ Church when he became aware of the desire to establish a second college within Connecticut and he quickly became involved with the process. He was devoted to the Episcopal Church and, like many involved with the church during this era, wanted to see a college founded under this religious denomination come to fruition. His desire to assist in the establishment of the college stemmed not only from his religious connections but also his stature within society as a wealthy, religious white man. Wheaton eventually became Rector of Christ Church, a position he held for ten years until he became president of Washington College in October of 1831.³ As rector of the church he served the role of priest in charge of the parish. Typically, rectors have the authority and responsibility for worship and also control the spiritual jurisdiction of the parish.⁴ The position of rector placed the individual higher up in the clergy hierarchy allowing for more access to power and influence as well as respect among members of the community.

Time in Europe

In the summer of 1823, the Trustees of Washington College deployed Nathaniel Wheaton to England in the interests of securing book donations for their library and financial support for the newly established institution. Wheaton was unmarried, therefore, the Trustees viewed him as most fit for the mission. Over the course of a year, Wheaton obtained the initial library collection

² Trinity College, "Trinity Reporter May 1976" (1976). Trinity Reporter and Alumni Magazines. 6-8.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ "An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church." The Episcopal Church.
<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/rector>

of Washington College. Today, these books are known as the Wheaton Collection which remain in the Watkinson Archives at Trinity College today.⁵ He details this experience in his work, *Journal of a Residence During Several Months in London*. This journal describes his journey and discusses the events and places that he encountered during his time abroad. The ship he took traveled from New York to Liverpool. Upon arriving in Liverpool he commented on the city's involvement with slave trade. He stated:

Liverpool is a quite modern city, as it was little known in the commercial world til the middle of the last century. Since that time, its population has increased five fold...To the Slave trade is owing its rapid rise from obscurity, the merchants of the place having formerly engaged in that traffic to a great extent. Since its abolition, manufacturers and foreign commerce have conspired to perpetuate the prosperity begun in so inauspicious a manner.⁶

Here Wheaton showed an appreciation for the impact that the slave trade had on the growth of the city of Liverpool, as if commending the relationship that the city and the trade had. During the time that Wheaton was in England, slavery had recently been abolished and he studied the results of this decision. He talked a lot about the abolition of slavery in England but also mentioned the continuation of slavery in the West Indies. His opinion on either one of these matters is unclear in the journal but he stated, “the abolitionists disclaim any wish for *immediate* emancipation;-they only contend, that measures should be immediately taken to procure a gradual, but certain abolition of slavery throughout the British dominions.”⁷ Additionally, Wheaton discussed a meeting of the African Society for the abolition of the Slave Trade in which a man named Lord Lansdowne stated, “that when the slave trade should have been formally abolished by the different maritime nations who had formerly permitted it; the next step should

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Wheaton, Nathaniel Sheldon. “Journal of a Residence During Several Months in London.” (1830) 30.

⁷ *Ibid.* 282.

be, to cut off all who should be found engaged in inhuman traffic from the protection of society—to declare them *pirates*, and treat them as such.”⁸ These abolitionist sentiments that Wheaton expressed in his journal contradict much of the message that he supported later in his life.

The goal for this mission was to acquire aid from England that would help the college find equal footing with the other literary institutions in the United States. According to Glenn Weaver’s *History of Trinity College*, “Wheaton traveled the length and breadth of England, visiting almost every possible site of historical or literary interest, paying his respects to the most eminent leaders of church and State, and inspecting countless educational and philanthropic foundations.”⁹ In the Watkinson Archives at Trinity College, there is a folder containing miscellaneous tokens that Wheaton acquired throughout Europe, such as cards from hotels across Paris that he presumably stayed in, a business card for a stained glass company and various drawings,¹⁰ demonstrating the various places he traveled to. Wheaton’s task was not all that simple, however. He was expected to persuade donors that their contribution to the fledgling college would be well received and help the institution to grow. He traveled first to Paris and then to London to obtain these donations. In total, Wheaton collected four hundred titles, of these titles 212 of them were purchased just under \$1,800. Approximately 33 percent of these works dealt with religion or theology and 22 percent was composed of Greek and Latin classical authors.¹¹ This mission to acquire financial and academic assistance for the young college made him an influential member of the Washington College community and created the early foundation of his interaction with the institution of slavery.

⁸ *Ibid.* 238.

⁹ Weaver, Glenn. *The History of Trinity College: Volume One*. (Trinity College Press, Hartford CT. 1967). 20.

¹⁰ “Miscellany prob. Collected by Dr. Wheaton during his travels in Europe. Cards, hotel slops, receipt for purchase of clothing, etc. (1824).” Nathaniel Wheaton Collection. Box 3.

¹¹ Trinity College, “Trinity Reporter May 1976” (1976). *Trinity Reporter and Alumni Magazines*. 6-8.

Early Involvement with Washington College

By the time Wheaton returned to Hartford, the establishment of the college was already underway, but not without resistance. The legitimacy and honesty of the Episcopalians was in question and numerous articles in the Hartford Courant—“Honesty No. 1, 2, and 3”—detail the reasons why the Episcopal Church should not be permitted to establish a literary institution. In these articles, commentators believe that the introduction of another college in Connecticut and the United States alone, would increase access to higher education, something that they viewed as a negative. Education was for the wealthy and having an education increased your status within society. They stated;

but multiply your college and universities; plant one in every city and considerable town; please the people in the vicinity of each for its endowment, under the pretence that finally it will make *them* both wealthy and respectable—What *must* be the result? Not *one* will be adequately endowed. An education, smattering, superficial, unfinished—indeed, little more than begun, will be the amount.¹²

Here these editorials are arguing that the increasing amounts of academic institutions in the United States would decrease the value of an education. Following these articles, Allen Goodrich, a member of the Yale Faculty wrote a pamphlet which was published anonymously titled *Considerations Suggested by the Establishment of a Second College in Connecticut*.

Goodrich wrote,

it is possible that one hundred years' possession of the exclusive privilege of educating the youth of this State, has given to the friends of Yale, authority to claim the privilege forever; so that the establishment of another institution “must be regarded by the friends of Yale College as *an encroachment on its rights*.”¹³

¹² COURANT, THE. "Article 1 -- no Title." *Connecticut Courant (1791-1837)*, Apr 20, 1824, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/552510326?accountid=14405> (accessed May 6, 2019).

¹³ *Ibid.* 15

When Wheaton arrived the *Considerations* had been read all throughout Connecticut. The primary audience of this document was the Connecticut General Assembly.¹⁴ Wheaton read Goodrich's pamphlet and penned his own response in 1825, *Remarks on Washington College, and on the "Considerations" Suggested by its Establishment*. In this work, Wheaton examines each point made by Goodrich, one-by-one. Wheaton states that Goodrich was "discrediting the new Institution in the eyes of the publick--by intimidating the General Assembly from ever granting to it any endowment."¹⁵ He argues that Washington College was not made to weaken Yale or to persuade those attending to practice the Episcopalian faith. Wheaton wrote *Remarks* to defend the introduction and the reasons why Washington College would benefit the state and citizens there.¹⁶ Wheaton, at the end of the *Remarks*, makes a statement about the connection between colleges and their students morale. He states, "colleges exert a powerful and lasting influence on the well-being of society. They mingle their interests with the interests and feelings of that class of minds, which is ultimately to give law to every other. A silent influence goes forth from their walls, on the moral condition of a people."¹⁷ This statement shows Wheaton's awareness of how the teachings and culture at a college can impact students long-term. This is significant to the impact that his choices and values throughout life may have had on the Trinity College community.

Following Charles Sigourney's inaugural term as secretary of the Board of Trustees, Wheaton was elected to the position of secretary from 1825 until 1831.¹⁸ Wheaton was also involved with a society known as the Church Scholarship Society that the Board of Trustees

¹⁴ Weaver, Glenn. *The History of Trinity College: Volume One*. (Trinity College Press, Hartford CT. 1967).

¹⁵ Wheaton, Nathaniel Sheldon. "Remarks" on the Considerations suggested by the establishment of a second college in Connecticut." (1825). 5.

¹⁶ Trinity College, "Trinity Reporter May 1976" (1976). Trinity Reporter and Alumni Magazines. 6-8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 20.

¹⁸ Weaver, Glenn. *The History of Trinity College: Volume One*. (Trinity College Press, Hartford CT. 1967).

oversaw. This society was founded in 1826 to “assist meritorious young men, members of the Protestant Episcopal church, in the attainment of a collegiate education.” In 1831, the society declared that they would “assist all meritorious young men, designing to enter the ministry of the Protestant Episcopal church, who shall be approved by the standing committee of the Board.” This meant that Wheaton not only was involved in the society but his involvement on the Board of Trustees allowed for him to vote on who would receive these scholarships. To be considered for the Church Scholarship Society one must “become a member of the college in regular standing, or as a partial student, and must produce to the committee full testimonials of his moral and religious character, signed by at least one clergyman of the Episcopal church.”¹⁹

This also demonstrates Wheaton’s involvement with both the administrative side of Washington College but also with the students, despite the fact that he was not a professor during this time. His ability to select who was able to receive one of the institution’s earliest forms of financial aid allowed him to select who was able to attend the college. Nathaniel Wheaton’s clear dedication to Washington college, its students, and its mission made him the best candidate to follow Bishop Brownell’s presidency.

The Wheaton Presidency

In 1831, Wheaton was appointed second president of Washington College by the Board of Trustees at a salary of \$1,200, which is about \$35,000 in 2019.²⁰ During Wheaton’s time as president of Washington College from 1831 to 1837, he was instrumental in the inclusion of sciences in the curriculum and also helped to establish the Hobart and Seabury professorships.

¹⁹ Trinity College, "Catalogue of Washington College (Officers and Students, Course of Study), 1834-1835" (1835). *Trinity College Bulletins and Catalogues (1824-current)*. 418.
<https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/bulletin/418>

²⁰ “CPI Inflation Calculator.” U.S. Department of Labor.
<https://www officialdata.org/us/inflation/1831?amount=1200>

Under Wheaton the Hobart Professorship was endowed with a sum of \$20,000 and the Seabury Professorship of Mathematics and Natural Philosophy with \$14,000.²¹ The Second Great Awakening swept across the United States during this time. Andrew Jackson enacted the Indian Removal Act and most significantly, slavery was still a very prevalent part of American civilization, intertwined within the economic and cultural aspects of society. The student body at Washington College in 1830 was far more diverse geographically than many of its peer institutions. Almost one-third of the student body hailed from outside of New England. According to Glenn Weaver, “The twenty students from south of the Mason and Dixon Line exercised an influence altogether out of proportion to their number, and it has sometimes been assumed that it was the presence of the southern students at Washington College that, to a degree at least, set Washington College apart from Middlebury, Williams, or Amherst.”²² Weaver discussed that many southerners considered Washington College as “safe haven” from Abolitionist influence. Weaver wrote;

At Washington College, slavery was not a topic of polite conversation, and the single Negro student who was enrolled during the early decades never associated with his fellows, receiving instruction in the evening at the professors’ homes and never appearing either at chapel or on any public occasion. In such an atmosphere, the young southerner could feel pretty much at home, and could even tolerate the inefficiency of “Professor Jim” and the persistence of the Puritan Sabbath to which the College was obliged to accommodate itself even to the extent of inscribing “No Admittance on Sundays” upon the college gates.²³

Weaver gathered this description from an 1880 memoir written by Trinity College alum, Robert Tomes. Robert Tomes also confirmed that there “was a fair proportion of Southern students, to

²¹ Trinity College, "Calendar of Trinity College, 1850" (1850). *Trinity College Bulletins and Catalogues (1824-current)*. 90.

<https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/bulletin/90>

²² Weaver, Glenn. *The History of Trinity College: Volume One*. (Trinity College Press, Hartford CT. 1967). 50.

²³ *Ibid.*

whose companionship I had been especially commended, being told that I should find them to be the most gentlemanly and desirable associates.”²⁴ He joined a society known as Phi Beta that many southern students were a part of and they sent circulars to “all the old members throughout the Southern States, inviting them to pay our bills—an invitation they naturally cared not to avail themselves of.”²⁵ Robert then mentioned that he did not find the company of these southern students to be desirable as stated. He said, “they were the idlest fellows in the whole college—self-indulgent...habitually dirty in person, and negligent in the care of their clothes...They resembled in this respect the negroes, among whom the greatest part of their lives had been spent, and whose habits they had acquired.”²⁶ Tomes also mentioned that under the Wheaton presidency at Washington College discipline increased, he stated “the new president was a prim Puritanical-looking person, of a severe countenance and resolute conduct, but he wanted tact, and could not reform without disorganizing.”²⁷ Tome’s memoir of Washington College introduces a student perspective of the campus climate during the 1830s. It is clear that there was tension between the northern and southern students and the comment by Tomes about southern students’ disheveled appearances resembling habits of the enslaved black individuals of the south, suggests that Tomes, himself, was not a supporter of black rights. This statement, although directed at the southern students is racist and one could conclude that he was not the only student on Washington College’s campus during this time that felt these sentiments. This part of Tomes memoir also shows that the college was comfortable looking to the South for financial support and during this time money coming from the South would most likely have been intertwined with slavery. This suggests that part of the financial contributions made to the college came from

²⁴ Tomes, Robert. *My College Days*. Harper, 1880. 34.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 35

²⁶ *Ibid.* 35-36

²⁷ *Ibid.* 54

money directly tainted by slavery. As stated in Craig Steven Wilder's *Ebony and Ivy* "the ubiquity and persistence of servitude on both sides of the college wall as not a mere consequence of the colonial academy's location in the greater Atlantic economy. Human slavery was the precondition for the rise of higher education in the Americas."²⁸ Although the establishment of Washington College occurred in 1823 and in the Connecticut, the north and south did not exist completely separate of one another. Much of the cotton that was grown on slave plantations down south, traveled north to be made into textiles. In many ways, slavery was at the foundation of the early United States' economy. In *Slavery's Capitalism* the authors state, "one of the most persistent myths in American history—that slavery was merely a regional institution."²⁹ Slavery may have concretely existed in the southern states but it was a nationwide epidemic.

This campus atmosphere described by both Glenn Weaver and Robert Tomes was present under the leadership of Reverend Nathaniel Sheldon Wheaton. Wheaton was described as firm, yet patient when it came to discipline despite the college's strict rules. As the college grew, so too did the need for more resources, including textbooks. Wheaton's collection that he gathered in England had become dated and there was a need for more recent literature. Washington College looked to Reverend Dr. Samuel Farmar Jarvis whose library was rich in literature and history. The Trustees gave Jarvis a position as a professor at Washington College but came into conflict with President Wheaton. This conflict may have been connected to Wheaton's resignation from the role of president in February of 1837 to return to his past role as priest, this time as Rector of Christ Church in New Orleans, Louisiana.

New Orleans, LA:

²⁸ Wilder, Craig Steven. *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery and the Troubled History of America's Universities*. (New York, 2013). 114

²⁹ Beckert, Sven, and Seth Rockman, eds. *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 6

According to the 1840 Census, Nathaniel Wheaton enslaved a man during this time who was between the age of 36 and 50.³⁰ Throughout the research process, the name of this individual could not be found. The lack of data on this man demonstrates the power of the archive and what is preserved and recorded and what isn't. At this time history was written by white men who recorded what they believed would be important in their legacy. The national census did not ask for the names of the members of the household under the 1850s, only asking for the number of enslaved individuals working in a home. This man had a life, perhaps a family but all that was documented of him was a fourteen-year range in which his age fell. During the 1840s, slavery was still very prominent in New Orleans. A large sugar production zone stretched along the Mississippi River from New Orleans to Baton Rouge.³¹ Sugar plantations are notorious for being some of the worst conditions that enslaved men and women were forced to endure. The man that Wheaton enslaved was most likely a domestic servant but Wheaton was a religious man in a society that was run by the slave economy. Perhaps Wheaton's time down south and his direct involvement with slavery sparked a desire to become more proactive in the debate over the institution.

In 1841, a severe yellow fever epidemic struck New Orleans, leaving 1,800 people to die and by 1843 a total of 2,500 had passed from the epidemic. Wheaton helped victims of the yellow fever epidemic; however, this work did not come without consequences and he contracted the illness himself and was forced to resign in 1844. In an attempt to improve his health, Wheaton went to Europe. During this trip, although not on official Washington College business, he sent books and scientific apparatus to the College once more.³² Wheaton's desire to donate to

³⁰ United States Federal Census 1840. "Reverend N S Wheaton." (New Orleans Ward 1, Orleans, Louisiana)

³¹ Whitney Plantation. "Louisiana Slave History." <https://www.whitneyplantation.com/education/louisiana-history/slavery-in-louisiana/>

³² Weaver, Glenn. *The History of Trinity College: Volume One*. (Trinity College Press, Hartford CT. 1967). 96.

the college demonstrates that even after his time in New Orleans he was still well connected with Washington College.

Return to Hartford

In the 1850s, Nathaniel Wheaton returned to Hartford and what was now Trinity College. Under the presidency of John Williams, the Trustees appointed Wheaton Professor of the Institutes and Evidences of Christianity.³³ Wheaton had returned to Hartford and was involved with Trinity College as well as other establishments, including the American Colonization Society. In the twenty-sixth volume of the American Colonization Society Journal from 1853, Wheaton's name appears on multiple occasions. This journal details the idea of colonization which was sweeping across the United States as a solution to slavery. The American Colonization Society (ACS) was launched at a meeting in Washington on December 21, 1816. This group included clergymen, lawyers, clerks of the Supreme Court and famous politicians such as Daniel Webster and Henry Clay. "In his speech, Clay, a Kentucky slaveholder whose distaste for slavery led him to colonization recommended getting "rid... of a useless and pernicious, if not dangerous portion of" the American population and bring "redemption from ignorance and barbarism of a benighted quarter of the globe!"³⁴ Following the establishment of this society the group submitted a memorial to Congress requesting the establishment of a colony in Africa. This African colony would become, in 1847, the independent nation of Liberia. The society came under attack by many abolitionists who felt that colonization was a "slaveholder's scheme."³⁵ The ACS was more than just an white man's answer to the abolition of slavery but also to the removal of black people in general from American society. "The creation of a lily-

³³ *Ibid.* 113

³⁴ Sinha, Manisha. *The slave's cause: A history of abolition*. Yale University Press, 2016. 163.

³⁵ "The African-American Mosaic." Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/afam002.html>

white, slaveholding republic was predicated on the removal of free blacks and the disappearance of Native Americans.”³⁶ The ACS gained numerous critics as it progressed and its true mission became clear. A newspaper from the 19th century called *Freedom’s Journal* became a firm critic of the ACS. It pointed out “that the main aim of the ACS was to force the emigration of southern free blacks by making their condition intolerable.” One member of the article wrote, “It appears very strange to me that those benevolent men should feel so much for the condition of free coloured people, and, at the same time... feel so little concern for those who are held in bondage by themselves.”³⁷ The paradox between wanting free blacks removed from society but also slaveholders wanting to maintain their ownership of their slaves demonstrates the racist goals that this society was founded on.

Many clergymen were part of the colonization movement because of the heavy emphasis that the society gave to missionary work. Thomas Church Brownell appears throughout Wheaton’s life, through his involvement with both of the churches and his founding of Trinity College. Brownell was the priest of the missionary jurisdiction of Cape Palmas, which is in Liberia on the West Coast of Africa. He was involved with Christ Church in New Orleans and may have helped Wheaton secure the position of Rector—he consecrated the church in 1830 and presided over it for nearly four months.³⁸

Following the Civil War, financial support waned for colonization and the society decided to turn its focus to educational and missionary campaigns in Liberia instead of colonization. Nathaniel Wheaton’s name appears within this journal under the list of members of the Connecticut Colonization Society,³⁹ as well as in a list of life members of the American

³⁶ Sinha, Manisha. *The slave's cause: A history of abolition*. Yale University Press, 2016. 164.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 203.

³⁸ “The Church Eclectic: A Monthly Magazine of Church Literature” Vol. 28, 1900-1901

³⁹ *The African Repository and Colonial Journal: Volume 29*. (American Colonization Society, 1853). 46.

Colonization Society.⁴⁰ Additionally, his name also appears under a section titled: “Receipts of the American Colonization Society.” The term receipts refers to member dues and donations, demonstrating that Nathaniel Wheaton donated or paid \$25, as well as three students students at Trinity College: Wm. S. Yerger, B. Barrow, H. A. Perry, who each paid \$5.⁴¹ These three students were attending Hartford during the 1850s. According to the “Calendar of Trinity College of 1853”, William S. Yerger was a junior at the time from Vicksburg, MA. Henry A. Perry was a senior from Brazoria County, Texas.⁴² The Perry family owned a well-known plantation in Texas called Peach Point which enslaved numerous African Americans.⁴³ According to a journal written on the Perry family called “This history of a Texas slave plantation 1831-63” “the labor on Texas farms was done by the farmer and his slaves, if he owned any. The Texans were slave holders, but not on an extensive scale. Large plantations with a hundred or so more negroes did not gain the foothold in Texas that they had in the old south. One negro family was more often the rule than a crew of fifty slaves.”⁴⁴ This journal was published during his time as full-time professor at Trinity College and demonstrates that his teachings may have discussed the concept of colonization given that three Trinity students joined the American Colonization Society.

“Exhibiting the Duty of Citizens of the Northern States in Regard to the Institution of Slavery”

It was during this time as well that Wheaton returned to Christ Church in Hartford, Connecticut where he had been rector twenty years before. On December 22, 1850, Rev. Wheaton delivered a “Discourse on St Paul’s Epistle to Philemon; Exhibiting the Duty of

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 78.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 190.

⁴² Trinity College, "Calendar of Trinity College, 1853" (1853). Trinity College Bulletins and Catalogues. Book 94.

⁴³ Curlee, Abigail. "The history of a Texas slave plantation 1831-63." *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (1922): 79-127.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 88

Citizens of the Northern States in Regard to the Institution of Slavery” at Christ Church in Hartford, Connecticut. This sermon is laced with proslavery rhetoric, focusing on religion as a defense of slavery. He begins the discourse stating that, “for [my opinions] I have no apology to offer, for none I conceive are needed.”⁴⁵ Wheaton examines a letter, located in the New Testament between Philemon and a Christian Apostle St. Paul. Philemon is man of wealth and esteem within his city, however he is also an enslaver. An enslaved individual, Onesimus, runs away to a far off city and is converted to Christianity by St. Paul because he realizes the “wrong he has done his master, and sent back to him, with a letter of commendation and friendly entreaty.”⁴⁶ Wheaton suggests that if St. Paul found any faults in the institution of slavery, he would not have let Onesimus return to his enslaver. Wheaton continues to express his belief that religion is a means to defend slavery stating that the “laws of the United States are the laws of God and that the Fugitive Slave laws are respectable given the way St. Paul returned the fugitive”⁴⁷ and that “on a candid review...slavery has not been *prohibited* by the word of God.”⁴⁸ He also summarized the story from the New Testament and stated,

The essential facts brought to our notice in this epistle, so far as they concern our present purpose, are these: one of the best and most exemplary of Christian men, and the bosom friend of an Apostle, is a slave-holder: The slave escapes from his master, and finds his way to a far distant city, where he is safe from all pursuit: He is met by an Apostle, and by him converted to Christianity—shown the wrong he has done his master, and sent back to him, with a letter of commendation and friendly entreaty, which has ever been consider a masterpieces of its kind.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Wheaton, Nathaniel Sheldon. “A Discourse on St Paul’s Epistle to Philemon; Exhibiting the Duty of Citizens of the Northern States in Regard to the Institution of Slavery.” (Hartford, 1851). Library of Congress. 4

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 8

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 14

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 9

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 8

This quote not only shows that he believed that the Bible was preaching in support of slavery but that the enslaved individual, Onesimus, was in the wrong and treated his master poorly.

Unfortunately, these two statements by Wheaton demonstrate where his values lay when it came to slavery. He clearly believed that religion can be used as a defense for slavery and that since slavery is not prohibited by God, it therefore, is acceptable. He was a devout Christian who dedicated most of his life to the Episcopalian faith, it's clear that he led his life through scripture. If he believed that God was supportive of slavery, then he too felt that way.

Wheaton's time spent in the south is apparent when he talks about slavery in the southern states saying;

I cannot but remember that it was forced upon them in their then condition of colonies, by the mother country, in the days of her moral darkness, when neither she nor any one else supposed there was any thing wrong or even questionable in the slave trade. It does not become us to forget, that the capital and the navigation of New England—"the ships of Chittim"—the navigating people—were largely if not principally engaged in transporting slaves from the barracoons of western African to the shores of Virginia and the Carolinas.⁵⁰

Wheaton made the claim that the Southern states were forced into the condition of slavery, and he also demonstrated his awareness of the Northern states involvement with slavery whether direct or indirect. He states, "If any amongst us have been taught to think hardly of our brethren at the south for retaining the institution of slavery, it is proper to remind such *that it was not of their procuring in the first instance.*"⁵¹ With tumultuous relations between the north and the south, Wheaton is declaring that the north should be more understanding of the southern states' involvement with slavery, suggesting that they did not chose this lifestyle. After this statement, Wheaton moved the discussion toward his beliefs in colonization. He said that "domestic

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 17.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

servitude has become so incorporated with the whole texture of southern institutions and society; how they have so grown up together and are so intermingled, that by no possibility can slavery be suddenly torn out, without the most deplorable consequences both to the master and the servant.”⁵² Rev. Wheaton believed that abolition was not a topic for the Northern states to preach to the Southern states, that it was up to them what they decide to do with slavery. He felt that colonization was the proper solution to slavery, not emancipation, given that once freed African Americans will not be able to coexist within white society. He made harsh and racist statements following these lines saying, “the inferior race must, by a law which we cannot controul, remain under some kind of subordination to the higher intellect of the Anglo Saxon,”⁵³ “dwell together as equals the two races never can, at least in this country”⁵⁴ and “let the native African see with his own eyes, and bear witness to, the superiority of Christian and civilized over brute savage life.”⁵⁵

These statements cannot be seen as anything but racist. Wheaton outright declared that Anglo Saxons were the superior race and that there would never be a time within the United States when freed blacks and white men could live together. These statements are difficult to read knowing that someone with beliefs and public statements this hateful was a former president of Trinity College and continued to involve himself in the Trinity community decades afterwards without objection. The world that Nathaniel Wheaton lived in was a white, male dominant one where he had power and respect among the groups and communities that he was a part of, including Trinity College and Christ Church in Hartford. This discourse, without a doubt, allows for a blueprint of the opinion that Nathaniel Wheaton had on the institution of slavery. These

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.* 23.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 22.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 26.

statements are not vague or left up to interpretation, they clearly and concisely express how Wheaton felt and what he believed.

Later Life

On March 18, 1862 Nathaniel Wheaton died. He was buried in New Milford, Litchfield, Connecticut, where he remains to this day.⁵⁶ Wheaton made the Trinity College the principal beneficiary in his will, with \$10,000 for the general use of the college and \$10,000 to be put towards a new chapel.⁵⁷

Impact on Trinity College: Then and Now

Nathaniel Sheldon Wheaton's strong words in the discourse clearly highlight the beliefs that he had on slavery and race. Wheaton gave this speech in Hartford in 1850, just eleven years before the commencement of the Civil War. If he was this open about his cultural beliefs, even in his religious practice, what does this say about how he composed himself around his students in the 1850s and all of those he oversaw as president in the 1830s? The involvement of Bishop Brownell with the colonization and missionary projects in Liberia, the Trinity students who elected to join the American Colonization Society, as well as the statement made by Glenn Weaver about the overall belief by southerners that Trinity College was "safe" from abolitionist perspectives demonstrates a clear and indisputable connection between slavery and Trinity College and his views on slavery and colonization pose a difficult question as to how Trinity should remember our second president.

Wheaton's declared in his *Remarks* that college has a lasting influence on the "well-being of society" and exerts "a silent influence...from their walls, on the moral condition of a

⁵⁶ Geni.com. "Nathaniel Sheldon Wheaton." <https://www.geni.com/people/Nathaniel-Wheaton/6000000024746292489>

⁵⁷ "Nathaniel Sheldon Wheaton Collection" Box 1

people.”⁵⁸ This statement is essential to the argument that the deeply held beliefs that Wheaton had on slavery and racial relations before, during and after his presidency, continued to have an impact on the Trinity College community. Although he was not as vocal about where his morals lay until the 1850s, much of his life heavily revolved around slavery. His journey to Europe in the 1830s introduced him to one of the most influential British ports during the slave trade and he examined the of the abolition of slavery in foreign country. His time in New Orleans brought him in direct contact with slavery when, according to the 1840 census, he personally enslaved an individual. Unfortunately, not much is known about his dealings with this man and his involvement with slavery down south other than this census, however, based on the actions and statements that he made upon his return to Hartford, living in the southern states on the frontline of slavery had a great impact on Nathaniel Wheaton. Coming back to Hartford he quickly became involved with the American Colonization Society and shortly thereafter, he gave his infamous discourse in defense of slavery that distinctly outlined his thoughts on the matter. All of these actions and events allow for the understanding of who Nathaniel Wheaton was, throughout his life, but specifically with regard to Trinity.

Wheaton was a white male in a society where white supremacy flourished at times openly and sometimes subconsciously. This world he lived in allowed him to believe that the white race was the superior over all others. As Wheaton himself said, colleges are a space that have a lasting impact on the students that attend it. If he expressed his beliefs on slavery with regard to religion so openly at his parish, he surely discussed this conversation in his classes. Given that three of his students joined the ACS and follow his name in the list of donors also demonstrates

⁵⁸ Wheaton, Nathaniel Sheldon. “Remarks” on the Considerations suggested by the establishment of a second college in Connecticut.” (1825). 20

that he had a far greater impact on them than just someone standing at the front of the classroom or someone sitting in the president's office.

Nathaniel Sheldon Wheaton, although the second president of Trinity College and later a professor, held beliefs that do not properly align with the values that Trinity College and its students and faculty wish to convey in modern society. The examination of Nathaniel Wheaton is complex and dark but it is paramount in the understanding and reconciliation of Trinity College's past. Nathaniel Wheaton was one of the founding members of Washington College, he was the second secretary on the Board of Trustees, the second president, he went on missions across Europe in the best interest of the school, he was a highly successful priest and he help to positively impact Trinity College. He was in a position of power for the majority of his life, whether within the Trinity community as president, Board of Trustees member, professor or in his religious life as rector of two large parishes. These cannot be overlooked, but he lived during a time when slavery was beginning to wane and instead of choosing the side to vehemently oppose the practice he chose to use what he devoted the majority of his life to—religion—to defend it.

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