In his latest book, *Ebony and Ivy*, Wilder documents the relationship between slavery and some of America’s prestigious institutions of higher education. Some of the institutions Wilder researches include: Harvard University, Princeton University, Yale University, Columbia University, and the University of Pennsylvania. This compelling research dispels the myths behind the founding of America’s first colleges. Wilder notes, “the American campus stood as a silent monument to slavery” (p. 137). Not only did the college campus stand silent to slavery, many founding college presidents, religious leaders, and political figures in the 18th and 19th centuries publicly supported and encouraged slavery. For example, Rutgers president Jacob Hardenberg, Yale University land donor George Berkeley, and New Jersey governor Jonathan Belcher, who oversaw Princeton University, each contributed slave labor to their respective universities. Wilder’s research reveals the various governmental and political constituents that were involved in slavery. Many college presidents, who were also religious leaders, were the most vicious and dehumanizing towards slaves. These college presidents and religious leaders were one and the same, and often “…
instructed [their] congregants to beat their slaves” (p. 129). Here, the muddled intersections between school and religion infused their way into the education system, starting with religious proselytizing and slavery.

Wilder’s research provides an archived account of many prestigious colleges and universities. He focuses specifically on colonial history, with an examination into the untold stories of African slaves in New England. Ivy league schools, including: the College of New Jersey (Princeton), the College of Philadelphia (University of Pennsylvania), the College of Rhode Island (Brown), King’s College (Columbia), Dartmouth College, Yale College, and Harvard College each were founded and funded by forced servitude and slave labor from African and Native American populations. According to Wilder, both Yale and Harvard historians assert, “it was a common custom of the times to own Negro or Indian slaves” (p. 120). Acknowledging the influence of slavery on these schools helps to reshape colonial history. Essentially Wilder asserts, it was the slaves, not the founding “fathers,” who built this country. More specifically, slaves singlehandedly built many of the prestigious 18th and 19th century universities. Not only did slaves manually build schools, such as the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, they were equally important in the daily operations of the school.

The slave’s role on college campuses was varied, but each founding institution was dependent on slave labor:

“In the mornings, the professors and scholars needed woods for fires, water for washing, and breakfast after morning prayers in the chapel. As students ate, their rooms were cleaned, chamber pots emptied, and beds made. Multiple meals had to be produced every day in the kitchens. Ashes needed to be cleared from fireplaces and stoves, and floors needed sweeping. Clothes and shoes were cleaned and mended. Fires were lighted and maintained. Buildings wanted for repairs, and servants were impressed into small- and large- scale projects. There were countless errands for governors, professors, and students” (p. 134).
The above description of daily slave activities demonstrates the tireless work many slaves endured. Hypothetically, this brings to question the vitality of these institutions without slave labor. Wilder suggests that the slaves, not the famous religious and political figures were the backbone of higher education in the United States. From domestic work to repairs, slaves worked tireless hours for the maintenance of these segregated universities. Sadly, these institutions also housed many of the dangerous scientific studies that explored race, racial hierarchy, and human biological variation.

Wilder’s comprehensive research on the founding of America’s premier institutions is unmatched. He chronicles the development of U.S. colleges, while also connecting the important role of the church. As the author notes, each Ivy League institution had its origins in religious organizations. In addition, his indictment of America’s colonial elite is complimentary to existing research on capitalism and slavery. Similar to Eric Williams’ work, Capitalism and Slavery, Wilder accounts for how capitalism’s strength and vitality only survived from free labor. As indicated by Wilder’s accounts of the Native American populations, this free labor source was only sustained through Africa’s contributions of slaves. Yet, one strength of Wilder’s research is his focus on the role of Christianity during slavery. This perspective extends Williams’ previous research, which primarily focuses on the economic role of capitalism and slavery. This is an advantage of Ebony and Ivy. Because Western religion, especially Christianity, served as a catalyst for the perpetuation of slavery, the need for critical discussion on these topics is paramount. It is impossible to discuss slavery without discussing capitalism and Christianity.

The historical ramifications of slavery were damaging to the plight of African Americans and the quest for education. As Wilder demonstrates in Ebony and Ivy, capitalism, Western religion, and scientific racism all irreversibly damaged race relations in the United States. Ebony and Ivy is a must read for all historians and higher education
faculty. This book is especially important for those interested in the historical aspects of higher education, religion, and slavery. Wilder’s exemplary research surveys the role of slavery and uncovers the role of slavery in some of America’s most prestigious colleges and universities. Ironically, most slaves were forbidden from attending the universities that they helped to build. Every urban educator, higher education researcher, and historian should read this book to reexamine the influence of slavery on education. As the book suggests, many of the preconceived notions about the beginnings of higher education ignore the role of forced slavery and indentured servitude. Each of today’s Ivy League institutions were built, supported, and cultivated by the transatlantic slave trade. Most importantly however, are the countless lives lost at the expense of higher education expansion.

I would recommend *Ebony and Ivy* to all historians, researchers, and those interested in the origins of America’s postsecondary institutions. Wilder’s research is compelling, comprehensive, and well researched. In addition, having the support of university archives and extensive primary resources adds to the current discourse on slavery and higher education. Wilder uncovers many of the untold stories of higher education, and reclaims the resiliency of African Americans during this tumultuous time in human history. *Ebony and Ivy* provides an essential, alternative perspective that should be embedded into every colonial story.

References


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Marcia J. Watson grew up in Omaha, Nebraska. She later attended Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, where she received her B.S. in Middle Grades Education. After her undergraduate studies, she worked for Atlanta Public Schools as an alternative middle school teacher. While working for Atlanta Public Schools, she received her M.Ed. in Educational Leadership from Georgia State University in Atlanta, Georgia. Marcia is currently an Urban Education doctoral student at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her research interests include: alternative education, discipline policy, and Black education.
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