

Pam Belluck, "Brown University to Examine Debt to Slave Trade"

By Pam Belluck

March 13, 2004

When Ruth J. Simmons became the president of Brown University nearly three years ago, one striking fact could not be overlooked.

A great-granddaughter of slaves, Dr. Simmons was the first African-American president of an Ivy League university. But the 240-year-old university she was chosen to lead had early links to slavery, with major benefactors and officers of it having owned and traded slaves.

"It certainly didn't escape me, my own past in relationship to that," Dr. Simmons said in a telephone interview in early March. "I sit here in my office beneath the portrait of people who lived at a different time and who saw the ownership of people in a different way. You can't sit in an office and face that every day unless you really want to know, unless you really want to understand this dichotomy."

Now, Dr. Simmons, whose office is in a building constructed by laborers who included slaves, has directed Brown to start what its officials say is an unprecedented undertaking for a university: an exploration of reparations for slavery and specifically whether Brown should pay reparations or otherwise make amends for its past.

Dr. Simmons has appointed a Committee on Slavery and Justice, which will spend two years investigating Brown's historic ties to slavery; arrange seminars, courses and research projects examining the moral, legal and economic complexities of reparations and other means of redressing wrongs; and recommend whether and how the university should take responsibility for its connection to slavery.

Dr. Simmons, one of 12 children of an East Texas tenant farmer and a house cleaner, said she was motivated by a sense that the multifaceted subject of reparations had too often been reduced to simplistic and superficial squabbles.

"How does one repair a kind of social breach in human rights so that people are not just coming back to it periodically and demanding apologies," she said, "so that society learns from it, acknowledges what has taken place and then moves on. What I'm trying to do, you see, in a country that wants to move on, I'm trying to understand as a descendant of slaves how to feel good about moving on."

Dr. Simmons does not believe that her history will sway the inquiry. "I don't think there can be a person with a better background for dealing with this issue than me," she said. "If I have something to teach our students, if I have something to offer Brown, it's the fact that I am a descendant of slaves."

Both Dr. Simmons and the chairman of the committee, James T. Campbell, a history professor at Brown, said the effort would be wide ranging and thorough, encouraging all points of view.

"Everyone in a university is always being accused of being 18 miles to the left of the country," said Dr. Campbell, who specializes in American, African-American and African history, but "there are people on this committee who think reparations is the stupidest idea ever."

Dr. Campbell, who said he had conflicting feelings about reparations, said the committee was expecting criticism from both the right and the left.

"You're going to have those that will hear the very word reparations and start blustering that this is just one more way that blacks are asking for a government handout," he said. "And then you are going have those that say the university is just trying to whitewash things. Our hope is to carve out as large a middle as possible."

The issue of reparations has caused friction at Brown before, and at other northern universities built with the investments of slave traders. In March 2001, the student newspaper, The Brown Daily Herald, printed a full-page advertisement listing "Ten Reasons Why Reparations for Slavery is a Bad Idea And Racist Too." The advertisement, produced by David Horowitz, a conservative writer, argued that slavery happened so long ago and was ended by white Christians, and said black Americans should be grateful for their prosperity and freedom in the United States.

The advertisement, also run by a handful of newspapers at other colleges, caused a particular uproar at Brown. Student protesters dumped the newspapers in the trash, formed human chains and demanded the paper pay "reparations" by donating its advertising fee or giving free advertising space to proponents of reparations. The paper defended itself on the grounds of free speech, and in Dr. Simmons's first speech to students after taking office that summer, she stressed her support for the free expression of unpopular opinions.

And in 2002, when nine lawsuits seeking reparations were filed in New York, New Jersey and other states against FleetBoston, Aetna, J. P. Morgan Chase, and other companies, lawyers involved in the cases said Brown, Yale and Harvard Law School were likely defendants in future suits. So far, rulings have gone against the plaintiffs.

Brown started as Rhode Island College. Its founder, the Rev. James Manning, freed his only slave, but accepted donations from slave owners and traders, including the Brown family of Providence.

Four Brown brothers, John, Joseph, Moses and Nicholas, were active benefactors. John, a treasurer of the college, was a slave trader, while Moses freed his slaves and became a Quaker and an abolitionist. Moses was supported by Nicholas and Nicholas's son, Nicholas Jr., who became the university's namesake.

Moses pressed for John to be the first Rhode Islander prosecuted under the federal Slave Trade Act of 1794, which barred American ports from outfitting slave-trade ships. John was fined.

Dr. Campbell pointed out that even Moses's role was complicated because he ran a textile factory that used cotton grown with slave labor. In addition, records suggest that a Brown family company was involved in building University Hall, which houses Dr. Simmons's office, and that the labor crew included at least two slaves.

Dr. Campbell said that the committee included experts on South Africa, the Holocaust and the internment of Japanese Americans by the United States in World War II, and that the panel would look at these and other examples of how societies dealt with historical injustice.

He said that if the committee did recommend that Brown make reparations, several remedies might be considered, for example, providing scholarships or helping African students attend Brown.

Two Brown professors not on the panel did not object to studying reparations but expressed caution.

"I think it's very important that this does not degenerate into a bunch of people congratulating themselves for thinking slavery is bad," said Felicia Nimue Ackerman, a philosophy professor and self-described liberal.

John E. Savage, a computer science professor who says he is conservative on some issues, said: "I can't see the university as a private institution making reparations to anyone. You'd have to identify who the victims were and have to assess what Brown's culpability would be with respect to those victims."

Professor Savage added that even now "there are individuals who commit crimes and before they are discovered they give money to universities," asking, "Should there be reparations made by those universities who took those gifts?"

At least one committee member, James Patterson, an emeritus professor of history, said political realities made him doubt that reparations on a national scale "has any chance at all." Professor Patterson said he had "seen no evidence" that Brown should be held accountable, saying that "Brown, like a great many other people in the late 18th century, was indirectly a beneficiary on a very very small scale of the fact that slavery was a source of wealth in this country."

Dr. Simmons said she would not reveal her opinion on reparations so as not to influence the committee.

"Here's the one thing I'll say," she said. "If the committee comes back and says, 'Oh it's been lovely and we've learned a lot,' but there's nothing in particular that they think Brown can do or should do, I will be very disappointed."

A version of this article appears in print on March 13, 2004, Section A, Page 10 of the National edition with the headline: Brown U. to Examine Debt to Slave Trade.