

Race and Slavery

Union Presbyterian Seminary

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William B. Sweetser Jr. (Ph.D. 2000) has traced the story of the Seminary from its earliest beginnings in his book *A Copious Fountain: A History of Union Presbyterian Seminary, 1812-2012* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2016). His book provides the most comprehensive history to date of Union Presbyterian Seminary. Union's history includes much to regret and much to celebrate with regard to matters of slavery, race, and Civil Rights in the United States. These webpages are dedicated to chronicling that history in brief in an effort of reflection, repentance, and renewal.

Early Thinking about Slavery: The Hoge Years

In 1805, Moses Hoge was called to be the president and professor of theology at Hampden-Sydney College. He would also preside over the school's theological library, the institutional forerunner of Union Presbyterian Seminary. Dr. Hoge was an impressive man. Writing to Francis Scott Key (author of the national anthem), John Randolph of Virginia wrote:

There is but one man in all of Virginia who ought to preach, and that is Dr. Moses Hoge. I consider Dr. Hoge as the ablest and most interesting speaker that I ever heard in the pulpit, or out of it ... and if he has a fault (which being mortal, I suppose he cannot be free from), I have never heard it pointed out.¹

Dr. Hoge did not see himself as an agent of change in social justice, particularly where the issue of race was concerned, but he also did not accept the *status quo*. Though he took personal action against slavery, he never called for its abolition.² For a time Hoge and his

second wife Susannah even owned slaves. Susannah had inherited slaves following the death of her first husband. She purchased others in Charlotte County when, as a widow, she needed help operating her farm. The new couple quickly became uneasy with slavery. They were disturbed by the deplorable housing slaves endured, their difficult conditions of servitude, and the casual way slave families were ripped apart. They often spoke out against the abuse of slaves even when the offending owners were neighbors. They also used their own money to re-unite slaves who had married and were subsequently separated.³ Hoge sat with sick and dying slaves, was available to talk with them, and welcomed slaves into his home for communion.⁴ In his actions, then, he was an early witness for social change with regard to race. However, it was change on an exclusively personal level.

On the broader social level, Moses Hoge was instrumental in the founding of Virginia's only chapter of the American Colonization Society. He and Susannah freed all of their slaves at that point and resettled them in Liberia. His act of liberation was both gracious and disturbing. His freedom of his slaves did not result from an understanding of racial equality that presaged integrated racial community. While he believed in the universal kinship of all people in God, he also felt that emancipated slaves and free blacks should not live in America but should be deported to an Africa most of them had never known.

Leadership Change and Theological Shifts: John Holt Rice and the Spirituality of the Church

John Holt Rice followed Hoge into theological leadership at Hampden-Sydney. In 1821, Rice was named the Seminary's theology professor by Hanover Presbytery. Agent for the theological library, member of the Hampden-Sydney Board of Trustees, a founder of the American Bible Society, publisher of the most prominent religious magazine in the South, and

the successful pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Richmond, Rice was simultaneously offered the presidency of the College of New Jersey, which would become Princeton University. In Princeton he would have made more money and enjoyed more fame. He chose instead to build up a nearly abandoned theological school in a remote part of Virginia.⁵ His stature, connections, worldview, and energy gave the new seminary a chance to flourish and the potential to make significant theological and social change. Indeed, Rice maintained that seminaries are beneficial to society as the agents of reform and improvement.

As with Hoge, however, where racial justice was concerned, matters of social reform and improvement were complicated. In the matter of race, Rice himself had a complicated history. Licensed to preach by Hanover Presbytery in 1803, he was ordained to the service of the Cub Creek Church in Charlotte Court House, Virginia, where he served for eight years. He ran a farm with the work of slaves that his wife had inherited. Under his leadership, Cub Creek Church grew from 58 white and 55 black parishioners to about 400 white and 100 black members.⁶

Rice published many articles denouncing slavery. The article for which he is best known appeared as “Thoughts on Slavery” in *The Virginia Evangelical and Literary Magazine* in 1819. Rice was clear: “It is to be generally admitted that slavery is the greatest political evil which has ever entered the United States.”⁷ Immediate emancipation was, however, out of the question. Indeed, Rice went on to opine that, “perhaps domestic emancipation will always be impracticable.”⁸ Like Hoge, Rice believed that the long-term goal should be repatriation of slaves to Africa, because “we never can give them here the rights of citizenship.”⁹ Ultimately, with Hoge, Rice became a charter member of the American Colonization Society at Hampden-Sydney. He was criticized for his liberalism.

Despite his perceived liberalism on the issue, Rice helped craft a theological

perspective later known as “The Spirituality of the Church.” While this view did not endorse slavery, it did champion the belief that the church should have nothing to say on such critical social matters, insisting on “the importance of the church keeping quite out of politics.” While Rice believed that slavery was an evil, he also championed the thought “that heated agitation of that question was an evil.”¹⁰ Further, since the New Testament tolerated slavery in its context, the practice in the American South should be considered comparably. Rice wrote:

The reason why I am so strenuously opposed to any movement by the church, or the ministers of religion on this subject, is simply this. I am convinced that anything we can do will injure religion, and retard the march of public feeling in relation to slavery. ... Slaves by law are held as property. If the church or the minister of religion touches the subject, it is touching what are called the rights of property. The jealousy among our countrymen on this subject is such, that we cannot move a step in this way, without wakening up the strongest opposition, and producing the most violent excitement. The whole mass of the community will be set in motion, and the great body of the church will be carried along. Under this conviction, I wish the ministers of religion to be convinced that there is nothing in the New Testament which obliges them to take hold of this subject directly. In fact, I believe that it never has fared well with either church or state, when the church meddled with temporal affairs. And I should – knowing how unmanageable religious feeling is when not kept under the immediate influence of divine truth – be exceedingly afraid to see it brought to bear *directly* on the subject of slavery. Where the movement might end, I could not pretend to conjecture.¹¹

The trend in this less-than-helpful direction was firmly fixed with the call to Union Theological Seminary of J. H. Rice’s successor, George Baxter. Under Baxter’s leadership, Union became a bastion of intransigence and regionalism. Baxter reoriented Rice’s vision of gradual emancipation and colonization (deportation) as Union cooperated in extending the institution of slavery. In the spring of 1818, before the Presbytery of Lexington, Baxter led the

committee that argued against the Presbyterian General Assembly's pronouncement condemning slavery, maintaining that slavery was in accordance with Scripture.ⁱ Throughout his teaching ministry at Union, Baxter consistently advocated the southern position on slavery. The basic position was simple: slavery was an institution founded in the providence of God and the church could not judge the morality of slavery, except to counsel the slave-owner to instruct his slaves on religious matters,ⁱⁱ because slave-holding was legal.

Dr. William E. Thompson (B.D. 1962) argued that not only did other seminary faculty members own slaves, the Seminary itself may also have owned slaves; there are references in the faculty minutes prior to the Civil War to "servants of the Seminary." For example, Mrs. Thomas Miller kept the refectory in Steward's Hall for the theological students. She was often angry about her "back-biting" household slaves, and there is one entry in which Mrs. Miller continued to read her Bible in order to block out the screams of a slave she had directed to be whipped.¹² Contrary to Thompson, Sweetser notes that he was never able to find any documentation that the seminary owned or rented slaves. He suspected that some students brought slaves with them to the seminary and that the slaves worked off the tuition of the students. According to the journal of one student, B.M. Smith, slaves worked at jobs assigned by the seminary. Sweetser also argues that Mrs. Miller was a private contractor and that her slaves would have had no connection to the seminary. Even so, if the account of the beating of slaves is accurate, this would have happened within earshot of attending faculty and students, who did not intervene.

Racism and Freedmen: Robert Lewis Dabney and Benjamin Mosby Smith

Robert Lewis Dabney and Benjamin Mosby Smith succeeded Professor Baxter on the Union Seminary faculty. Dabney was a Confederate officer who served as chaplain and chief

of staff to General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson. After the Civil War, Dabney published *A Defense of Virginia, and Through Her of the South* (E. J. Hale, 1867). It was one of the most influential theological works of its time, serving to bolster the Lost Cause mythology of the South. The book’s argument was a familiar one in the antebellum era: since the enslavement of Africans by Europeans was permitted by the curse of Noah upon Ham, slavery was justified by Scripture. In God’s providence, slavery had actually turned out to be in the best interests of the Negroes, the South, and the nation as a whole.

Dabney’s legacy is one of sad insularity. He constructed an inflexible theology and nurtured a seething hatred for the North. It was his all-consuming racism, however, that seared his view of life. Immediately after the war, he was alarmed over the freedmen in the Mercy Seat community adjacent to Hampden-Sydney. He could not stand to see former slaves become landowners and prosperous, and his solution was to leave. At various times between 1865 and 1880, he thought about emigrating to Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, Venezuela, British Honduras (present day Belize), or Brazil.¹³

In August 1865, Dabney wrote to Moses Drury Hoge:

It appears to me that there are only two prospects for the South. Parts of it will continue under the present paralysis, until they sink permanently into the condition of Jamaica. ... Other parts will again see material prosperity; but only by being completely Yankeeized I fear the independence, the honor, the hospitality, the integrity, the everything which constituted Southern character, is gone forever ... the only chance to save any of the true Christianity of the South is to transplant it as quick as possible.¹⁴

On January 2, 1867 he again wrote to Hoge: “Either the Negro must move, or the College and Seminary must move.”¹⁵

Dabney’s racism was representative of nineteenth-century Virginia culture. Dabney was not the only one to feel anxious about the increasing ownership of land by freedmen. Both seminary and college felt under siege, especially when freedmen owned land adjacent to

the south edge of the Seminary grounds. In the minutes of the Spring 1876 meeting of the Board of Directors of Hampden Sydney College, there is a paragraph entitled “Colored Population”:

Resolved, that Dr. J. D. Eggleston be requested, on behalf of this institution, to aid the faculty in any feasible plan of preventing the settlement of an undesirable population in the vicinity of the Seminary.¹⁶

In 1874 the faculty had ordered that the students and “the Seminary servants” be informed “that no freedmen can be admitted to the Seminary, for service, except those regularly connected with the Intendant’s department, and the messes.”¹⁷ By the 1880s, Seminary professors and trustees were concerned with declining land values.

Dabney’s colleague, Prof. Benjamin Mosby Smith, took a distinctly different approach to postwar adaptation. While Dabney was ratcheting up his tirades against the Yankees, B.M. Smith was cultivating Yankee donors, who rescued the Seminary from financial ruin. Dabney was implacably opposed to public education and believed that black children should only be trained to do manual labor and other service tasks. Smith spent his adult life working to establish public schools in Virginia for all children, regardless of race, supported through tax revenues. He volunteered to chair Prince Edward County’s first public school board from 1865 to 1881 and served as the county’s Superintendent of Schools for eleven years.¹⁸ When he died in 1893, Smith had managed to turn the Seminary toward the future in significant ways.

Physical Change Leads to New Thinking: Walter W. Moore

In 1898, Walter W. Moore presided over the removal of the Seminary from Hampden Sydney, Virginia to Richmond expressly so that students would encounter the urban complexities that Moore believed modern ministers needed to engage. It was during this era that the seeds of a new way of thinking, and a new theological undergirding for that thinking,

took shape at Union, changed Union, and helped transform the world of biblical interpretation and theological thought. When Union moved to Richmond, much more changed than just the landscape.

In 1924, Union Professor Walter Lee Lingle assumed the presidency of the General Assembly's Training School for Lay Workers (ATS) across Brook Road from the Seminary campus in Richmond—later renamed Presbyterian School of Christian Education (PSCE). Sweetser is succinct: “Walter Lee Lingle ... set in motion the forces that ultimately destroyed ‘The Spirituality of the Church.’”¹⁹

Students flocked to Lingle's regular lectures at Union and the Assembly's Training School. He taught the only class on social ethics in any southern Presbyterian seminary. The ministers who were in the forefront of changing attitudes in the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) attributed their own awakening to Walter Lingle. It seems his genius was that he could apply the Social Gospel (whose primary concern was for the city) to rural communities, which formed the locus of mass membership in the PCUS. Dr. Lingle was never so far in advance of the church's members that he alienated them, but always far enough to broaden the church's viewpoint on social issues.²⁰

In 1929, at the request of the students, Lingle was invited to deliver what was apparently one of the most transformative series of Sprunt Lectures: *The Bible and Social Problems* (Fleming H. Revell, 1929). The published lectures had a huge influence on the church. Lingle called for ministers to study the social problems of their communities and then preach about those problems from the pulpit. He urged them not to engage in partisan politics, but unsparingly to apply the social and ethical teachings of Christ. Indeed, Lingle taught that it was the proper business of all Presbyterians “to carry Christianity into every department of life.” He understood a more active social Christian faith not as a departure

from historic doctrine, but as a return to the original teachings of Jesus.²¹ This idea began to take root not only in the Seminary but in the wider church.

Social Justice Orientation Leads to Missions

A new justice-oriented theological perspective, in the context of a seminary in an urban setting, provoked a distinct change in student perspective and activity. Union students established over 40 different missions around Richmond. Students developed an expansive social outlook that pitted them against the values of the culture in which they lived. Less than a decade after Virginia discarded the Reconstruction Constitution in favor of a constitution that institutionalized the “separate but equal” Jim Crow laws (and the Presbyterian denomination kept African Americans at arm’s length), Union students began a mission to the residents of the segregated neighborhood known as Hell’s Bottom.

Union Seminary student Cothran Smith (B.D. 1923), who had worked in the mission, wrote of the Seventeenth Street (or Hell’s Bottom) Mission and its impact:

For almost a mile, the C. & O. Railroad Yards run parallel to a little creek that the city has converted into an open sewer. In the ravine carved out by this stream lie huddled the buildings that serve as homes for seven hundred Negro families. The air of the place is tainted by fumes from the stream and soiled by smoke and cinders from the locomotive works and its switch engines. In this sordid atmosphere, between the factories and shops, their children grow up in much grime and blackness and sin.²²

Smith’s description is an accusation against the church. There within range of a church bell were hundreds of children who played and fought in the streets all day Sunday, because they had nowhere else to play and nothing else to do.

Although his article is steeped in the paternalistic attitudes reflective of the times, it

also expresses a compelling desire to help others across racial lines. In the fall of 1911, three students—Thomas Sheldon (B.D. 1913), Tom Ruff (B.D. 1914), and Arch McKinnon (B.D. 1912)—convinced the Presbyterian League of Richmond to pay \$8.00 a month to rent an abandoned chapel on Seventeenth Street. In November, the students moved in and opened a Sunday School. The school had 12 charter members and during the course of the winter grew to an average attendance of 30 pupils. During the week, 20 volunteers from the Assembly’s Training School and from Union Theological Seminary visited in neighboring homes as well.

Upon the graduation of McKinnon, leadership was assumed by Matt McMurray Grey (B.D. 1914). Of Grey’s ministry, Smith writes:

The Mission has never known such a tireless worker as Mr. Grey. There was scarcely an hour of the day when he was not visiting in the homes of his people, distributing food and fuel, relieving the sick, restoring the fallen, teaching the children. ... Mr. Grey organized a sewing class for the girls and taught the boys to weave baskets and to repair cane bottom chairs. Under his leadership, the Sunday School grew to an attendance of more than a hundred.²³

Cothran Smith relates that their efforts bore fruit in unlikely places:

Some time ago, one of our boys was arrested on the suspicion that he had been raiding a fruit stand. The judge asked the boy point blank whether or not he had taken the fruit. “Before God, Boss,” he said, “I didn’t do it.”

“What do you know about God?” was the Judge’s next question.

The boy braced himself with a long breath and replied, “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in His Being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.”

“Where did you learn that?” the magistrate asked.

He stated that he had learned about God at Seventeenth Street Mission. His case was promptly dismissed.²⁴

Once students from the General Assembly's Training School joined the Mission in 1914 as teachers and volunteers, the effort became largely staffed by women. ATS student Cornelia Wilds reports:

(The mission) is the center of the Presbyterian Colored Mission work in Richmond, and we are interested in it because of the bigness of it and the need of it. On Tuesday afternoon a sewing class is conducted by several of our students and on Sunday afternoon others teach in the Sunday School. Our girls are helping in every way they can to build this work up. It is growing rapidly and we feel it is going to grow for three reasons: prayer for all who are working in this mission ... those who are helped are telling others ... [and] visits to the homes are made every week by the teachers – this is where we come into the closest contact with them, for here we learn of their daily lives, their joys and sorrows, and bring to them their one great friend, Jesus Christ.²⁵

Further information and archival photos of the Seventeenth Street Mission can be found [here](#).

Movement Towards Diversity

Under President Benjamin Rice Lacy, pressure for change at Union itself began to be felt. In November 1934, a student group petitioned the Seminary to have colored delegates to an inter-seminary conference as “guests under our roof.” President Lacy was pleased to invite the students to the campus for the meetings, but stated that they had to stay overnight at the historically black Virginia Union University. Virginia law prohibited any integration of the races in any Commonwealth school.

Across Brook Road at PSCE, familiar segregation patterns continued to be the norm, but they were being questioned by concerned individuals or small groups of people. Louise McComb writes:

One day there was a decision at ATS of momentous proportions: to invite a visiting churchman, a black man, to have dinner in the dining room. The decision was made

with the knowledge that it would present a delicate situation which could have resounding repercussions for hundreds of miles beyond the dining room, mainly in a southerly direction, if not handled discreetly. Carefully selected students were approached and asked if they would sit at the same table. Two students (the writer one of them) were asked to serve this table. All accepted, recognizing the honor of being asked to participate in this precedent-breaking meal. The result: a pleasant meal which gave no evidence that an accepted pattern had been quietly smashed.²⁶

This small incident provides a yardstick with which to measure the progress in this area that took place in succeeding decades. It also illustrates ATS President Edward B. Paisley's determination to take decisive steps in doing what he could to bring about social change. He had already taken a personal stand against the segregated policies prevailing at the Montreat Conference Center. McComb reports that when black Commissioners to the Presbyterian General Assembly had to eat in the pantry, he went there and ate with them.

One month after that meeting, Samuel Govan Stevens, a graduate of Lincoln College, wrote to President Lacy seeking admission to the Th.M. program at Union. In 1937, Stevens became the first African-American Union Seminary graduate.

The interpretation of these events was also changing. Professor Ernest Trice Thompson taught church history for over 40 years, but he was not interested in studying the past for its own sake; he saw in history a means to encourage involvement in current issues and "light the way toward a better future."²⁷ In the March 21, 1949 issue of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, Thompson published a landmark Bible study arguing that racism was unbiblical.

A few years later, a committee of the Board, prompted by student, faculty, and administrative support, made a significant decision. The committee made it clear where they thought Union should stand and presented the Board with a positive policy: *A Brief Statement of the Practice of the Seminary in Educating Negro Students* (April 4, 1956). The committee

recommended admitting and housing all qualified students regardless of “racial origin.” The committee’s statement was a witness to major change:

The Christian Scriptures indicate that racial distinctions have no place within the life and fellowship of Christian believers. Nowhere in the Standards of our Church are there any teachings which justify us in drawing racial distinctions within the Church itself ... there is no alternative but to offer to qualified Negro students the full facilities of our Seminary as they prepare themselves for leadership within the life of the Church.”²⁸

The Board adopted the recommendations unanimously. The recommendation to engage all students without regard to race signaled a transformation in theology that rejected “The Spirituality of the Church” doctrine.

The attitude that the church should stand silently aloof from the ethical conflicts of modern life had become incomprehensible to biblical theologians. A booklet celebrating the centennial of the Seminary’s move to Richmond observed that the teaching students received at Union “grounded us in Reformed Theology, not as an academic discipline alone, but as fuel for illuminating the public life of the troubled and hopeful days through which we were living, as well as of the fourth century when the Nicene Creed was formulated.”²⁹ Union’s tradition, reinterpreted in the face of change, was enabling its graduates to respond to the times.

Integrated Community Recreation

Union Seminary made an effort to extend a welcome to the local community, inviting everyone in the neighborhood to use the athletic fields and the basketball and tennis courts on the Seminary’s property. In the late 1950s, PSCE Prof. Wade Boggs encouraged a young African American to practice on the tennis courts, when segregated facilities were not open to him. That young man was Arthur Ashe, who went on to become a U.S. and world champion

tennis player.³⁰

Also at PSCE at this time was Professor of Recreation and Outdoor Education Glenn Bannerman (faculty member 1957–1989). Living in Ginter Park in Richmond's Northside, he was interested in how the mixed-race community could live together in harmony. He believed firmly that the church should be a part of the community in which it was placed. People came and went in church structures, but the church membership did not necessarily live in the immediate area. The Bannermans and their four children lived two doors away from a large church that had frequent outdoor dinners on the grounds, but at no time were members of the local community invited to take part in the dinners.

Although mandated integration of schools and housing was taking place in the 1960s, social aspects of the change had not been addressed. Those who were white and had money could join a private community center and enjoy sports, creative arts, and swimming, but the City Recreation Department had no plans to provide public recreation facilities in the Northside. An approach was made to neighborhood churches to provide activities such as a basketball clinic or dances, but each church found reasons that would prevent them from participating.³¹

PSCE President Charles E.S. Kraemer was a man of compassion and dedication to the church. When Bannerman talked to him about his concern for social interaction locally, they decided to develop a community recreation program. The basement of Lingle Hall became a skating rink, pool and game parlor, and snack bar. Every afternoon from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. all children and youth, regardless of race or economic status, could come and enjoy recreation together. Family skate nights were a big success. The creative arts workshop in Virginia Hall was opened to the public. High school pupils could gather for live music, snacks, and hanging

out on Saturday nights at a youth center called The Exit.

The program was so popular that the school began a summer session as well. Many children, youth, and adults from all walks of life reaped the benefits from PSCE students teaching courses in sewing, tumbling, pottery, wood carving, jewelry-making, leatherwork, puppetry, cooking, music, writing, dancing, and drama, and got to know one another in the process.³²

Civil Rights Activism

A much more serious and direct challenge to Richmond's racial *status quo* took place in 1960. Sweetser writes:

On February 1, 1960, four African-American college students sat down at a lunch counter at Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina, and politely asked for service. Their request was refused. When asked to leave, they remained in their seats. The "sit-in" was born and became a tactic of the early civil rights movement. Students from Virginia Union University immediately targeted Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads, downtown Richmond's most prestigious department stores, for a sit-in and picketing. Although Union Seminary students were not initially involved, E. T. Thompson pricked the Seminary's conscience with his gentle question: "If this is a struggle for what is right, why are only black students involved?" This observation led to an open meeting a few nights later in the lounge of Lingle Hall. Students from Virginia Union were invited to tell the students of Union and PSCE what they were doing and why.³³

Student George Conn (B.D. 1962) remembers a "standing room only" audience that night.

After a long and emotional evening which included some fine examples of preaching in the black church tradition, which elicited more than one "Amen" from the Presbyterian audience, "God's Frozen Chosen," I made the foolish mistake of asking what we could do to help. I was immediately presented with a "time sheet" and told

to sign my name when I would show up on the picket line. Trapped! Fortunately several classmates joined in responding to this “altar call.”³⁴

One evening later, the Seminary community gathered in Watts Chapel for a public reflection led by faculty members. Professor Benjamin Lacy Rose observed that he had been a public opponent of segregation for a number of years. He went on to say that while he did not see his role on the picket line, participation by the students could be appropriate. Conn remembers Prof. John Leith’s remarks as especially meaningful:

[He warned] the student body that neither those who marched nor those who stayed on campus should feel “right” or “superior” to those who chose otherwise. He reminded us that whatever we did was made inadequate by the distortions of sin, but that when offered up in faith, God had both the capacity and will to make it good. For the first time in my life I understood the Doctrine of Justification.³⁵

Less than a month after the first sit-in, a group of Union Seminary students marched on February 23, 1960. Their “shift” began at 2:00 p.m., but before picketing they received “a brief orientation on how to behave and react. Speak to no one, look straight ahead, do not block traffic, dress well, if struck fall to the ground in a fetal position and protect your head and genitals. The last bit of advice was not encouraging.”³⁶ There were three students from Union who participated on the first day: Aubrey N. Brown, III (B.D. 1961), George Conn, and T. K. Morrison (B.D. 1960). They walked for a 20-minute shift and then others took over. Their pictures were prominently featured in a *Richmond Times-Dispatch* story on March 6, 1960.³⁷ The story and picture were picked up by the Associated Press and printed around the country. George Conn remembers:

As the days wore on, toughs gathered to jeer us, with looks of indescribable hatred on some faces. A little spit here and there marked most days as we took the ninety-six steps from one corner to the next, four steps to make the turn, ninety-six back and so on. There was encouragement, comedy, and sadness. Along the way I remember

the elderly black man who dared not look directly at me as I passed him, but I was renewed by his quietly muttered “God bless you.” I remember the lady with the Chihuahua which charged the police dog, entangling both leashes as the police dog cowered. I remember the frail and elderly “lady,” the seeming epitome of southern gentility, who took one look at me and my sign and who hit me across the head with her pocketbook while calling me a “God damned son-of-a-bitch.”³⁸

An unnamed PSCE student, Class of 1960, wrote:

[PSCE President Charles E. S.] Kraemer, in our meetings about how to handle the situation and our consciences, told us in effect that it was between us and our God, and to do what we felt we had to do. ... I will never forget his leadership and love in this situation. It was a symbol for me of all this school stood for.³⁹

This public action polarized the Seminary community. Some students, mostly seniors, complained that the public demonstrations were jeopardizing their search for pastoral positions upon graduation. While some faculty members disapproved of the public demonstrating, Professors William Bean Kennedy (B.D. 1954, faculty member 1959–1965), who taught Christian Education, Leith, and Rose were outspoken in their support and encouragement.⁴⁰

A similar conflict erupted during and after the March on Washington in August 1963, led by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. During that event, Prof. Kennedy and Union student Arlan East (B.D. 1965) were among the more than 100 members of the PCUS who traveled to Washington to participate. Their decision to do so was fully debated in the pages of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, the primary news publication of the southern Presbyterian church. More information on this event can be found [here](#).

Opposition from Outside Campus

The marches and demonstrations also stimulated reactions from the public at large. There were many letters to the administration threatening to withhold donations: “Neither the citizens of Richmond nor the Presbyterians of Virginia approve of your behavior ... and this is going to prove a great handicap when we again attempt to raise funds to subsidize your education.” Some letters, however, were supportive. One woman wrote: “We cannot find sufficient words of thanks for the brave stand that each of you have taken in a cause we all feel to be just.” George Conn and the others received death threats and insults. Conn recalls:

On one particular day when I had just received and read a particularly seething letter, Dr. Leith met me in the hallway of Watts, and reading my face, asked what the problem was. I gave him the letter to read and he responded, “Only a damn fool would write a letter like that and only a damn fool would pay attention to it. Go to your room and read some theology.” So I did.⁴¹

Later, the student government called for students to vote on a resolution supporting the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The resolution passed 45 to 24. Then, 25 students and four wives signed up to stand vigil in Washington to press for passage of the act.

A march to pressure Congress to pass civil rights legislation was organized in Selma, Alabama, leading to violent confrontations between marchers and police. The Selma March riveted the country and Union Seminary responded. On March 15, 1965, 300 people in Richmond marched from Virginia Union University to the state capitol to show their support for the Voting Rights Act, their sympathy for the death of Rev. James Reeb (a white Unitarian minister who had been murdered in Selma during the march the previous week) and nine others, and “to protest [the] brutality and senseless violence in Selma, Alabama.”⁴²

Newspapers identified one of the leaders of the demonstration as “Dan West, of Dallas, Texas, a white Presbyterian student at Union Theological Seminary.”⁴³ Every faculty member except two and most of the student body participated. Glenn Bannerman recalls, “It was a glorious

celebration of God's people in support of all God's people having equal rights."⁴⁴

Again, reactions to the demonstration and student involvement were immediate and strident. "The phones rang off the hook in Watts Hall, and the secretaries were targets of considerable verbal abuse." Union Seminary President James Archibald Jones, by all accounts, was "gracious and wise." He supported the students by telling them they were free to march if they desired. And he tried to placate enraged donors by reminding them that the march was not sanctioned by the Seminary.⁴⁵

Professor James Luther Mays (B.D. 1949), together with three students—John D. Turner (B.D. 1965, Th.M. 1966), Dan West (B.D. 1965), and Louis Weeks (B.D. 1967)—joined the Alabama demonstrations on March 21, going into Montgomery on March 24, where marchers were confronted by 2000 soldiers, 1900 federalized National Guard troops, as well as scores of FBI agents and Federal Marshals.

Mays had been involved in civil rights throughout his parish ministry. As a Seminary professor, however, he was a more public person. Right after Mays returned from Selma, Second Presbyterian Church in Petersburg sent a delegation of two elders to him and told him he could not preach there anymore. He had been scheduled to preach at the church in the near future and was hurt because he had been their student minister for two years. Union President James A. Jones supported Mays, but there always was pressure on Jones to "do something" about his wayward professor.⁴⁶

The People's March

On May 18, 1968, the civil rights movement arrived on campus in a very public manner. About six weeks after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis, The Poor People's March on Washington took place, under the leadership of the Southern

Christian Leadership Conference. The plan was to start in Mississippi, move through the southern states to Washington, and there construct a “Resurrection City” in which to live and lobby for equal rights. About 450 participants in the Poor People’s March were due to arrive in Richmond for the next-to-last stop on the pilgrimage.

A week before the arrival of the marchers, the institutions then part of the Richmond Theological Center (Union Theological Seminary, PSCE and the School of Theology at Virginia Union University), plus various private individuals, offered to provide food and overnight accommodations for them. Dr. Kraemer called the PSCE faculty and staff together and announced that he planned to open all facilities of the school to serve the marchers. Helpers made every bed on campus, and supplies were donated by businesses, churches, and individuals. More than 250 women volunteers prepared five-pound meat loaves, butterbeans, rolls, gravy, cake, fresh fruit, milk, tea and coffee. A nurses’ station and portable toilets were set up on the grounds.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, Dr. Kraemer was being criticized for not asking permission of the Board of Trustees to host the marchers and others were threatening to cut off funding for the school.

At 4:00 pm on June 18, the marchers moved down Brook Road, led by a mounted police patrol. Police protection was everywhere, as pickup trucks with Confederate flags circled the campus. Church choirs sang all evening and on Sunday morning worship services were held.

Professor Bannerman recalls: “One image is stuck in my brain. As I went into the dormitory to check on things, I saw a mother and two little children kneeling by the bed, and she prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, thank you for a room with clean sheets and a clean place for us to lay our heads this night.’ We did what we had to do! This community is more than bricks and mortar on Brook Road. As Jesus said, ‘As you have ministered unto the least of these, you

have ministered unto me.”⁴⁸

A New Chapter

In 2007, Brian Keith Blount, a respected professor of New Testament studies from Princeton Theological Seminary, became Union’s seventh President and its first African-American President. In 2009, the name of the institution became Union Presbyterian Seminary (an indicator of the legacy of both UTS and PSCE). President Blount offered these thoughts about the Seminary's complicated history:

When I gathered with students to share some of this story, I wanted them to know that they were a part of a context of transformative change. A school that may have owned slaves passed through a tradition in which the church was taught to invest in spirituality but not in the world. This Seminary, struggling with its own demons, shattered that doctrine of “The Spirituality of the Church” and committed itself to a biblical theology that pushed its community toward a sense of inclusion and demonstrated for that principle of inclusion.

Today, Union Presbyterian Seminary is working to develop advocacy initiatives such as Richmonders Involved in Strengthening our Community (RISC) and other social service and justice efforts. The seminary has also invested significant resources in establishing two new centers devoted to justice-related research and action: The Center For Womanist Leadership and the Center For Social Justice and Reconciliation. Students and faculty are seeking to devote more of our energy into making a difference in the community in which the Seminary is located. We are still trying to determine what God wants to reveal in us, in this institution, in its students and faculty, in its curricular and mission endeavors. We want to see UPSem reveal to the world what God is revealing to us. And in so doing, we want this Seminary and its people to continue to embrace positive change.⁴⁹

¹ William E. Thompson, *Her Walls Before Thee Stand. The 235-Year History of the Presbyterian Congregation at Hampden-Sydney, Virginia* (William E. Thompson, 2010), 63.

² William B. Sweetser Jr., *A Copious Fountain : A History of Union Presbyterian Seminary, 1812-2012*

- (Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 55.
- 3 W.E. Thompson, 64-65.
 - 4 Arthur Dicken Thomas Jr., "Moses Hoge : Reformed Pietism and Spiritual Guidance," *American Presbyterians* 71/2 (Summer 1993), 103.
 - 5 William Maxwell, *A Memoir of the Rev. John Holt Rice, D.D.* (J. Whetham, 1835), 232-33.
 - 6 Ernest Trice Thompson, "John Holt Rice," *Union Seminary Review* 43/2 (January 1932), 177.
 - 7 John Holt Rice, "Thoughts on Slavery," *The Virginia Evangelical and Literary Magazine* 2/7 (July 1819), 293.
 - 8 Rice, 295.
 - 9 Rice, 301.
 - 10 Alfred J. Morrison, "The Virginia Literary and Evangelical Magazine, 1818-1828," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 19/4 (April 1911), 270.
 - 11 Maxwell, 307. See also Ernest Trice Thompson, *The Spirituality of the Church : A Distinctive Doctrine of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* (John Knox Press, 1961), 20-21, 25.
 - 12 William E. Thompson, "The Seminary Moves to Richmond, Pt. 4," *Museum : The Newsletter of the Associates of the Esther Thomas Atkinson Museum of Hampden-Sydney* (Spring 2001), 39.
 - 13 Sweetser, 162. See also Charles Reagan Wilson, "Robert Lewis Dabney : Religion and The Southern Holocaust," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 89/1 (January 1981), 82-83.
 - 14 Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, v.2 (John Knox Press, 1973), 112-13.
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 - 16 William E. Thompson, *Railroads, Racism, and Religion : A Re-Examination of the Reasons for the Removal of Union Theological Seminary from Hampden-Sydney to Richmond, with a View to a Modern Day Ministry Amidst the Continuing Reasons for the Departure*, D.Min. thesis (Union Theological Seminary, 1992), 90.
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 - 19 Sweetser, 233.
 - 20 E. T. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, v.3, 265.
 - 21 J. Wayne Flynt, "Feeding the Hungry and Ministering to the Broken Hearted : The Presbyterian Church in the United States and the Social Gospel, 1900-1920," in *Religion in the South*, ed. By Charles Reagan Wilson (University Press of Mississippi, 1985), 90.
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 - 23 Smith, 319.
 - 24 Smith, 323.
 - 25 Louise McComb, *Presbyterian School of Christian Education : The First Seventy Years (1914-1984), An Informal History* (PSCE, 1985), 15.
 - 26 McComb, 37-38.
 - 27 Peter Hairston Hobbie, *Ernest Trice Thompson : Prophet for a Changing South* (Ph.D. dissertation., Union Theological Seminary, 1987), 541.
 - 28 Board of Trustees, Minutes, 1950-59, 803.
 - 29 "A Century in the City," celebrating the centennial of the move of Union Theological Seminary from Hampden-Sydney to Richmond (UTS, 1998), 12.
 - 30 Sweetser, 361.
 - 31 Glenn Bannerman, personal correspondence, June 26, 2018.
 - 32 McComb, 63.

- 33 Sweetser, 322.
- 34 George M. Conn Jr., “96 Steps and Turn,” personal memoir, 1989, 1.
- 35 Conn, 1.
- 36 Conn, 2.
- 37 “Some Students from UTS Join Picket Line at Downtown Store,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), 6 March 1960, D-1.
- 38 Conn, 2.
- 39 McComb, 79.
- 40 Sweetser, 323-24.
- 41 Sweetser, 325. All quotes in this paragraph are found in the same source.
- 42 The Student Body of Union Theological Seminary, *A Christian Witness of Conviction and Sympathy* (March 15, 1964), 1.
- 43 Allan Jones, “700 March in Four Cities,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), 16 March 1965, 1.
- 44 Bannerman correspondence, June 26, 2018.
- 45 “A Century in the City,” 7-8.
- 46 Interview with James Luther Mays, UTS Video History Project, 2009.
- 47 McComb, 84-87.
- 48 Bannerman correspondence, June 26, 2018.
- 49 Brian K. Blount, personal correspondence, June 29, 2018. The address to students took place on Dec 10, 2014.

ⁱ Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South, Volume 1, 1607-1861* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1963), 331.

ⁱⁱ Parker, *United Synod of the South*, 13-14.