Hidden in Plain Sight: AMERICAN SLAVERY AND THE UNIVERSITY
This exhibition has been curated by the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice, a scholarly research center with a public humanities mission that was created out of the 2006 “Slavery and Justice” report.

Archival Materials on display and additional materials on Brown’s connection to the slave trade can be found at the University Archives located at the John Hay Library as well as the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University.
In 1764, the same year as the founding of the College of Rhode Island (today Brown University), the Brown brothers, John, Nicholas, Moses, and Joseph, launched the slave ship Sally. Captained by Esek Hopkins, first commander in chief of the United States Navy, the brig-antine headed to West Africa in search of slaves to sell in the Caribbean.

The story of the Sally is intertwined with the history of Brown University and the United States. Slavery and slave labor generated great wealth and fueled colonial expansion of the Atlantic world. The institution of racial slavery created a network of trade between continents, creating new businesses and a powerful merchant class. For colleges in the colonial era, including the College of Rhode Island, the historical records show that many of the founders, trustees, and donors to the endowments acquired their wealth through commercial activities involving the African slave trade. In part, some of the building structures for the College of Rhode Island were constructed with slave labor. The first chancellor, Stephen Hopkins, owned slaves. The liberty imagined by the Founding Fathers at the creation of the American republic did not include enslaved people. Racial slavery was a foundation of American society. Its legacies continue to haunt us and therefore demand our attention.
Enslaved native American and African labor was used to build University Hall, the College of Rhode Island’s first building on its then newly established Providence campus. Displayed here are some of the names of people who appear in the building record, including “Mary Young’s Negro Man,” “Earle’s Negro,” “Abraham,” and “Pero.” These are the names of some of the enslaved people whose owners donated their labor for University Hall’s construction. In addition to the donation of enslaved labor, benefactors also provided in-kind gifts of materials including wood by Newport’s slave-trading firm Lopez and Rivera.

Gravestone of “Pero, an African Servant to the late Henry Paget”

Pero was 62 years old when his owner, Henry Paget, donated his labor for the construction of University Hall. This image shows his grave in Providence’s North Burial Ground, not far from campus.

Image Courtesy of Robert Emlen, University curator and professor of American studies
Job, a Native American, a free African named Mingow, as well as Pero are listed in this building record from the construction of University Hall.

The College to Nicholas Brown & Co., Dr.: 1770–1771, Rhode Island College miscellaneous papers, MS-3E-3, Box 3, Folder LIII, Brown University Archives.
Rhode Island’s Economy: SLAVES, MERCHANTS, AND MANUFACTURERS

The Rhode Island economy was linked to the Atlantic slave trade and depended on a close trading relationship with the Caribbean. Leading merchants in the state were owners of major plantations in the Caribbean. Sugar, one of the major goods exported from slave plantations of the Caribbean, was an integral ingredient for rum distilleries thousands of miles north in Rhode Island. Profits from rum funded many voyages to the west coast of Africa, becoming a form of currency in the slave trade. Some newly enslaved Africans were taken first to the Spanish Caribbean to work on sugar plantations and then to mainland Spanish America. Because the Caribbean plantations’ economies focused almost exclusively on sugar production, these colonies relied on Rhode Island products such as furniture and home goods to outfit their plantations. When the slave trade declined, the state became a leader in the manufacture of “Negro cloth,” a cheap fabric used to clothe enslaved African Americans in the Southern states.
Using cotton picked by enslaved people in the South, Rhode Island textile manufacturers became pioneers and primary marketers of “Negro cloth,” a cheap fabric used to clothe the enslaved and signify an inferior status.

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“Negro Cloth”

Contemporary replica of “Negro cloth,” woven by Seth Rockman, associate professor of history.

Courtesy of Seth Rockman
Mapping Rhode Island’s Colonial Economic Network

The wealth that was derived from slave labor propelled the various European colonial empires. In Colonial America enslaved labor of indigenous people and Africans was the basis of global economic growth. Slave labor and the wealth derived from the trade of people of African descent fueled colonial expansion of the Atlantic world. In Colonial America, slave labor linked far-flung places and the local American economy into a powerful network.

Design courtesy of Erin Wells, archival map courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University
Raw materials (sugar, cotton, and lumber) and manufactured goods (molasses, clothing, and furniture)

Enslaved Africans

Enslaved indigenous people
The voyage of the Sally was a disastrous one. The enslaved captives started to die even before the journey to the Caribbean slave markets began. Of the 196 Africans acquired by the ship’s master, at least 109 perished. In his captain’s log Hopkins records that one of the first to die was a woman who “hanged her Self between Decks.” On August 28, 1765, the enslaved Africans rose up against the crew. Hopkins provides no further details of this act of resistance, other than the crew “obliged [to] fire on them.” Eight Africans died in this incident.

Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University
Sea Captains Carousing in Surinam, c.1752–1758
John Greenwood
Oil on bed ticking
37 ¾ x 75 in. (95.9 x 190.5 cm)

This scene of a tavern in the Dutch Caribbean colony of Surinam shows a half dozen men who would become trustees of the College of Rhode Island, today known as Brown University. Their presence highlights Rhode Island’s close connection to the Caribbean as a result of the slave trade. Captain Esek Hopkins of the Sally is pictured near center, with a sick partygoer to his left.

Courtesy of the Saint Louis Art Museum, Museum Purchase 256:1948
Stephen Hopkins, 1999
John Philip Hagen
Oil on canvas
Courtesy of Brown University Portrait Collection

“The Rights of Colonies Examined”
Stephen Hopkins
Printed by William Goddard, 1765
Courtesy of the John Hay Library at Brown University
In 1765, Chancellor Stephen Hopkins, former Rhode Island governor and slave owner, penned the pamphlet, “The Rights of Colonies Examined,” arguing against British taxation. In the pamphlet, he compared the experience of the American colonist to that of the enslaved. He wrote: “those who are governed at the will of another, and whose property may be taken from them…without their consent… are in the miserable condition of slaves.” Yet Hopkins owned the following enslaved people: Fibbo, St. Jago, Prince, Bonner, Adam, and Primus. His pamphlet tells us of the paradox of the birth of the American republic – a passion for liberty ensnared by a slave society. It is this paradox that remains one of our country’s major challenges today.
After three years of research and investigation by the faculty, staff, and students on the University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice, the “Slavery and Justice” report was published in 2006 under the direction of President Ruth J. Simmons. The committee referred to the University’s complicity in the slave trade as “hidden in plain sight.” Many of the documents, material culture, and stories about the University’s role in the slave trade were not new. But the report created the opportunity to read these documents in a new way and better understand the contemporary world that unfree labor had created. Globally, we are still grappling with how to acknowledge this past. More than a decade later, many institutions are beginning the work of uncovering their links to the slave trade and to slavery. In the aftermath of the report, Brown University
established a memorial to the history of slavery on the Front Green outside of University Hall. Designed by Martin Puryear, the Slavery Memorial recognizes Brown University’s connection to the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the work of Africans and African Americans, enslaved and free, who helped build our university, Rhode Island, and the nation. The University also established the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice, a scholarly research center with a public humanities mission that examines the history and legacies of the racial slavery. Today both the University and the country continue to struggle with the legacies of slavery, particularly around the questions of justice and freedom and issues of structural racism. The juxtaposition of liberty and slavery at our nation’s founding remains central to our present and generates challenges for our times.