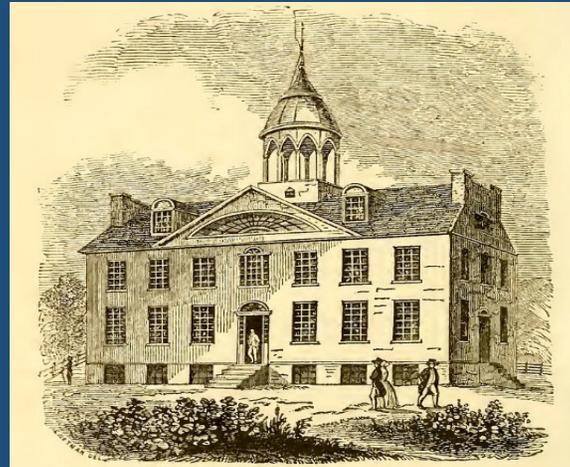


# AUGUSTA COLLEGE

WEST BOARDING HOUSE



1st PRESIDENT'S HOME



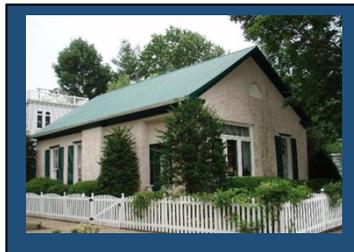
AUGUSTA COLLEGE

EAST BOARDING HOUSE



1st STUDENTS' LODGING

1822



1st METHODIST CHURCH



2nd PRESIDENT'S HOME

2022

# 200<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY



Easter 2007 (Vol LXX, No. 4, p 22-33)

## The Role of Midwestern Christian Higher Education in the Abolition of Slavery

C. Walker Gollar

IN THE SUMMER OF 1831, A KENTUCKY SLAVE NAMED Tice Davis ran away. His master ran after him. Upon reaching the southern bank of the Ohio River, Tice jumped in. His master looked for a boat. Within a short while Tice pulled himself out of the water onto the northern bank of the Ohio River at Ripley, Ohio (about fifty miles east of Cincinnati). By the time Tice's master made it across the river, Tice had disappeared. After searching up and down the riverbank, the master muttered, "He must have gone off on an underground road" (Siebert 57).

Like Tice's master, many slaveholders feared that their slaves would run away. Unwilling to accept the fact that slaves might be discontent with slavery and reluctant to admit that slaves had the courage, intelligence, and faith to escape on their own, frightened slaveholders conjured up the idea of an organized system run by white abolitionists who aimed to steal away slaves. This organized system slaveholders called the Underground Railroad. In essence, the term "Underground Railroad" was coined and promoted by frustrated slaveholders.

Slaves generally knew nothing about any Underground Railroad. The vast majority of slaves simply did not run away. In border states like Kentucky, whose northern boundary was separated from free soil only by the Ohio River, less than one percent of slaves ran away. Even in border cities like Covington or Newport, both of which lie directly across the river from Cincinnati, very few slaves dared to run away. Individuals who helped those rare runaways were even more scarce.<sup>1</sup>

Slaveholders nonetheless had real reason to fear that they might lose their slaves.

Though secret tunnels, hidden codes, and vast networks of so-called "safe houses" for the most part did not exist, other more powerful institutions surely threatened the continuance of slavery. Slaveholders saw these more powerful and more threatening institutions take root on both sides of the Ohio River. These institutions assaulted the intellectual and theological foundations of slavery. More simply put, these institutions challenged the way people thought about slavery. What happened at these

institutions fueled slaveholders' fears that their slaves would be led to freedom. These institutions were Christian schools of higher education.

Along the Ohio River in the Midwest-which in the early-to-mid nineteenth century really was the West, with the area around Cincinnati being perhaps the Middle of the West-five institutions of higher education gave slaveholders reason to fear.

#### Augusta College (1822)

Forty-five miles from Cincinnati up the Ohio River lies the quaint town of Augusta, Kentucky. Augusta is one of northern Kentucky's oldest towns. As early as 1795, Augusta boasted a fine public landing. Commerce coming up and down the Ohio River often landed at Augusta. Products unloaded at Augusta were trucked down early roads into the Bluegrass Region of Kentucky in and about Lexington.

Augusta boasted an early public school for boys called Bracken Academy. Terms were used loosely throughout the early nineteenth century, but an academy such as the Bracken Academy at Augusta generally meant a primary or grade school.

In 1822, the Ohio and Kentucky Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church voted to purchase Bracken Academy and transform it into an institution of higher learning. While church-related colleges dominated higher education in this period, such institutions were rare in the Midwest, and nonexistent in the Methodist Church. Augusta College was the first Methodist institution of higher learning in the world.<sup>2</sup>

Boys as young as twelve years of age were accepted in the preparatory department at Augusta College, but most students were older. Boarders came from Michigan, New York, Virginia, Maine, Louisiana, Pennsylvania, Mississippi, Indiana, Tennessee, Ohio, and Kentucky. Graduates went on to become lawyers, bankers, doctors, ministers, businessmen, military leaders, and college presidents.

The president of Augusta College was a prominent Methodist minister, Joseph S. Tomlinson. President Tomlinson's nephew, a boy named Stephen Foster, occasionally visited Augusta. While in Augusta, Stephen Foster was inspired by the songs coming down from the black church high on the hill. These melodies undoubtedly influenced his subsequent song writing.

President Tomlinson encouraged the formation at Augusta College of two debating societies, which were presumably for the older and younger students, respectively. Debating societies were extremely common at this time. Virtually every college in the first half of the nineteenth century had one. At Augusta College each debating society met for at least an hour (sometimes four hours) on Friday evenings throughout the school year. Meetings were held at the College. Faculty members were invited to attend, but they generally did not come. Students consequently organized and ran each meeting, which usually included about twenty attendees.<sup>3</sup>

The meetings of the two debating societies helped students hone their speaking skills. Students read original works of poetry and prose, as well as debated prearranged topics selected by the group. After each debate, members voted on which side had the best argument. Votes may have occasionally reflected the quality of the debaters, as much as the substance of the debate. Each decision for the most part nonetheless seemed to reflect the mind of the student body.

Throughout the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s, many topics chosen for debate dealt with questions of virtue. For example, students twice debated "Which has the most influence over the human mind, Love or Anger?" The students decided, Love. On another occasion they asked, "Which is the most desirable, Wealth or Fame?" The students decided, Fame. Several times they asked, "Which is the most happy life, Married or Single?" and after each debate on this question they voted in the same fashion. The students consistently chose, Married. But in another debate students concluded that married life weakened the mind (Minutes of the Jefferson Literary Society, hereafter JLS: 5 December 1828 and 5 May 1829, 16 January 1829, 9 January 1829 and 18 November 1831, and 24 October 1847).

From early on the boys at Augusta College concluded that women were mentally inferior to men. At the same time women were consistently judged to have contributed more to the "refined state" of society. In other words, what women lacked in the mind, they made up for in the heart. Such beliefs, which reflected society in general, help to explain why virtually no institution for higher learning was opened for women in the antebellum West (JLS 19 December 1828, and 6 November 1829; 12 May [source of quotation] and 17 November 1848, and 1 June 1849).

After a Female Academy opened in Augusta in the 1830s, the boys at Augusta College debated, "is a frequent intercourse with the Ladies [Ladies, that is, the] more refined and virtuous of the other sex, calculated to preserve a young man from the contamination of low pleasures or pursuits?" More simply stated, several other times the boys asked, "Should students visit the ladies?" Their debates on this matter were split (JLS 16 July 1847; Minutes of the Union Literary Society, hereafter ULS: 30 May 1847 and 11 August 1848).

Before the year was over, Doyle was convicted of enticing slaves to runaway and sent to the Kentucky state penitentiary, where he would die. Another newspaper meanwhile observed, "It is time in all conscience, that the abolitionists of the free states, cease to tamper with the rights and property of Kentuckians, and we hope that the fate of Doyle may teach others to know that Kentucky is dangerous soil for abolitionists to tread upon" (Campaign Flag, 18 August 1848).

In early January 1849 students at Augusta College formally debated slavery for the last time. The minutes recorded that it was a "short debate," which nonetheless ended, as did most other recent discussions, firmly against slavery. By this point in time the students and faculty of Augusta College were generally labeled abolitionists. The summer of 1849 the Kentucky legislature reacted to the college's stance against slavery by revoking the school's charter. The government had determined that it could ill afford to maintain in the state of Kentucky an institution of higher learning with abolitionist tendencies. Serious intellectual discussion had cost Augusta College its license to exist. After twenty-seven years of operation, the school closed in 1849 (JLS 19 January 1849).

#### Lane Seminary (1829)

At the end of 1828, Ebenezer and William Lane offered \$4,000 to start a Presbyterian seminary somewhere in the vicinity of Cincinnati, Ohio. A Cincinnati family then donated an old academy and sixty acres of land in Walnut Hills three miles north of Cincinnati. With just one professor and a handful of students, Lane Seminary opened on 18 November 1829.

After lengthy deliberations, one of the best-known clergymen of the day, Lyman Beecher of Litchfield, Connecticut, was appointed President of Lane Seminary. Beecher's appointment resolved whether Lane

would reflect the Old School or the New School of the Presbyterian Church. Among other things, Old School Presbyterianism emphasized strict Reformed theology. The Old School was consequently suspicious of revivals. New School Presbyterianism, on the other hand, was open to theological innovation and welcomed revivals. Lyman Beecher was of the New School. After his appointment was announced, some

Old School Presbyterians feared Lane would become a "revival seminary."<sup>6</sup>

In his inaugural address of 26 December 1832, Beecher spoke like a revivalist. Lane Seminary aimed to train ministers who would be inspired with zeal, enlarged by comprehensive views, [and] blessed with a discriminating intellect, ... With a clear mind and full heart [Lane students will be able] to look saint and sinner in the face with an eye that speaks, and a hand that energizes, and a heart that overflows, and words that burn.

At Lane there would be no separation between preparation for the ministry and immediate involvement in saving the world. Students were encouraged to make a difference (Beecher 206).

Beecher's inspiring vision for Lane drew talented students from across the country, including thirty-year-old Theodore Weld. Along with about twenty other graduates of the anti-slavery Oneida Institute in upstate New York, Weld enrolled at Lane Seminary in June 1833. As he confided to a friend, Weld had moved to southern Ohio because he intended to "introduce antislavery sentiments, and have the whole subject thoroughly discussed" at Lane (Weld to Tappan quoted in Beecher 235).

But Weld never intended to debate slavery at Lane Seminary. Unlike the Augusta College debates, where students carefully argued both sides of the issue, Weld aimed to promote only one side, namely, that slaves should be set free immediately. As most Lane students did not initially support immediate emancipation, upon arriving at Lane Weld began to work on changing their minds one at a time.

After bringing most students over to his side, Weld then proposed a public forum to discuss immediate emancipation. The eighteen days of discussion beginning on 5 February 1834 often have been called the Lane Seminary Debates, but what occurred should more accurately be labeled the Lane Seminary Anti-Slavery Revival. <sup>7</sup>

Most of the students, along with some of the faculty including Lyman Beecher, attended the Anti-Slavery Revival. For the first nine evenings, the topic was "Ought the people of the Slave holding States to abolish Slavery immediately?" Eighteen students, all of whom had been born or raised in the South, and some of whom were slaveholders, spoke in favor of immediate emancipation. None spoke against it.

Among a number of testimonies, the most riveting came from James Bradley, the only African American student then enrolled at the school. Over nearly two hours Bradley told how he had been kidnapped from Africa and then brought to the United States at the age of two. For the rest of his life, he had been haunted by nightmares. Despite such torment, over a decade Bradley worked in his spare time to earn enough money to purchase his freedom. Bradley then enrolled at Lane Seminary.

After Bradley told his story, the students voted unanimously in favor of immediate emancipation. With this vote, slavery was declared a sin against God, for God had created human beings as free moral agents. The next nine evenings, which discussed the idea of sending slaves back to or colonizing them in

Africa, proved anti-climatic. A number of students originally had planned to speak in favor of colonization, but after the strong vote advocating immediate emancipation, only one student, the son of an agent for the Colonization Society, actually came to the podium. On the eighteenth and final day of the revival this student, alone, voted in favor of colonization.

Upon the conclusion of the Lane Seminary Anti-Slavery Revival, one student withdrew from the school so that he could open a school for blacks in Cincinnati. Moved to tears, President Beecher gave this student his blessing. A week later, the remaining Lane students formed an anti-slavery society. This society assisted in the black school, disseminated pro-abolitionist information, and curiously wore out a horse. The owner of the horse explained, "It was understood that that horse might be taken without question by any brother, who had on hand 'Business of Egypt.'" Some brothers of Lane apparently were assisting runaway slaves

(Huntington Lyman to Theodore Weld, 16 November 1891 in Lesick 90).<sup>8</sup>

Most Cincinnatians knew nothing of the revival at Lane Seminary, that is, until one newspaperman complained that seminaries should not meddle in political matters such as slavery. Theodore Weld strongly objected. Why, Weld asked should not theological students investigate and discuss the sin of slavery? Shall those who are soon to be ambassadors for Christ-commissioned to cry aloud-to show the people their transgressions-shall they refuse to think, and feel, and speak. . . Is it not the business of theological seminaries to educate the heart, as well as the head? ... If not, then give Lucifer a professorship. He is a prodigy of intellect, and an encyclopedia of learning.

Inspired by Weld, and despite some opposition, Lane students continued to discuss slavery, educate blacks, and disseminate pro-abolitionist material ( Cincinnati Journal 30 May 1834). But they also went one step further. Lane students treated African Americans as equals. Students visited black homes and entertained blacks at the seminary. Then on one occasion the students reportedly "brought a colored woman into church, and seated her beside one of the most prominent white ladies in the city." Not realizing the public outrage that this act caused, President Beecher merely tried to dissuade students from having any further close contact with African Americans. After the school term, Beecher left Cincinnati on 19 July for a fundraising trip to the east coast (See Lesick 92).<sup>9</sup>

In his absence, students were threatened, ridiculed, and cursed by many, and then chastised by the Lane Board of Trustees. Though many Cincinnatians recognized that slavery was unjust, Cincinnati essentially was a southern town, especially since its economy was largely dependent upon trade with slaveholding Southern states. Several Trustees of Lane, moreover, were prominent Cincinnati businessmen whose livelihood depended on southern commerce. Concerned that conflicts over slavery would alienate the Southern trade, the Board of Trustees ordered that the students' anti-slavery society be abolished, that students not discuss slavery anymore ( even in private), and that the leading professor of the seminary, John Morgan, be fired. Morgan was the only professor who openly supported the students. Only one student, Asa

Mahan, opposed these measures of the Board.<sup>10</sup>

Shortly after the Board's orders were publicized in local papers, four blacks rode out to Walnut Hills to visit the Lane students. The Board then closed the school for the rest of the summer vacation. As the next school year approached, the Board threatened to dismiss any unlearned student. The Board also

passed resolutions that restricted student movement. In particular, no horses were allowed on the school grounds except those owned by the seminary. The Board apparently had learned about the students' worn-out horse.

When President Beecher returned perhaps on 14 October, that is, the day before the fall term was to begin, he "found all in a flurry." The students gathered, and the faculty announced the new regulations. One student leader rose and proclaimed that "the most solemn convictions of duty to [my] God, [my] conscience, [my] country, and the race, constrained [me] to say, that [I] could not longer continue a student of Lane Seminary." Within a short while seventy-four students joined him. Lane Seminary had lost three fourths of its student body (See Beecher 246; Lesick 130).

Most of the seceding students returned home or went to other schools. About a dozen, including Theodore Weld, moved about four and a half miles away to the small village of Cumminsville. These students were allowed to use a building in which to live and study. Many reported newfound enthusiasm for learning. At Cumminsville they published A Statement of the Reasons Which Induced the Students of Lane Seminary, to Dissolve Their Connection with that Institution. This document adamantly defended the right to free discussion.<sup>11</sup>

President Beecher meanwhile worked to revise the regulations of the Board of Trustees, hoping that this would draw students back to his nearly empty Seminary. But at the end of October, the Board closed the school. About a year later, Beecher delivered an angry address at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, in which Beecher chastised college students for challenging authority. Beecher then changed his earlier views, namely, that there be no separation between preparation for the ministry and immediate involvement in saving the world. At Miami, Beecher proclaimed that education should be "regarded as a preparation for public action [not] the commencement of it" (Beecher quoted in Lesick 141).<sup>12</sup>

Lane Seminary eventually reopened under Beecher's jurisdiction, though it never again included such assertive students as those led by Theodore Weld. Weld and his followers nonetheless had left their mark, including on the Beecher family. Lyman Beecher's daughter, Harriet, eventually married Lane Biblical Professor, Calvin Stowe. Harriet Beecher Stowe's views on slavery were formed while living in Cincinnati and undoubtedly were influenced by what she had learned from the students at Lane.<sup>13</sup>

In the Spring of 1835, Weld and about thirty of the former Lane students transferred to Oberlin Collegiate Institute, which had been opened in northern Ohio about a year earlier. Their transfer had been contingent upon Professor John Morgan and trustee Asa Mahan, both of whom had been let go from Lane because of their anti-slavery views, becoming professor and president, respectively, of Oberlin.

The majority of former Lane students went on to become ordained ministers, mostly in the Presbyterian Church. Many worked for the rest of their lives against slavery, and/or for free blacks. In such work, the former Lane students routinely faced mobs. One was whipped, and another was tarred and feathered.

In 1837 the Presbyterian Church formally split, mostly over theological differences. But members following the Old School generally supported slavery. The New School typically denounced it. Yet these distinctions were not absolute, as some Old Schoolers opposed slavery and some New Schoolers admitted slaveholders. As a result, the Free Presbyterian Church formed in 1841 to unambiguously oppose slavery.

By this time, however, some of the former Lane students had grown discontent with organized Christianity. Frustrated that the Church seemed unable or unwilling to make a real difference regarding slavery, Theodore Weld, for example, in his latter years focused on his personal relationship with God. Reform, he concluded, could only occur within the individual soul.<sup>15</sup>

#### St. Xavier College (1831)

The first Catholic College of the Old Northwest Territory opened as the Athenaeum in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1831. Eight years later classes at the Athenaeum were suspended largely due to inept leadership. Then the Jesuits took over. They immediately renovated the school building, changed the name to St. Xavier College, and reopened the school in the Fall of 1840. A Kentucky Jesuit was especially pleased with this move for in his estimation Ohio was the "chef-d'oeuvre [masterpiece] of American colonization, without slaves and without assassins" (William Stack Murphy, SJ., to Superior General Roothaan, SJ, 10 October 1840 in Garraghan 166).<sup>16</sup>

Though located in the heart of the American West, St. Xavier College followed various European models. Like many German and French schools, for example, Xavier offered a six-year course of studies. The first three years focused on classical languages, history, and English, while the last three added poetry, rhetoric, and philosophy. These six years eventually would split into what we now know as high school and college.

From the beginning, non-Catholics attended Xavier. In fact, non-Catholics were in the majority in the early years. Any qualified boy at least eight years of age (though more commonly about fifteen) could start the six-year classical course of studies at Xavier.

At first Xavier students were mostly of English, Scottish, or Welsh descent. Even after immigrants flooded Cincinnati in the mid-nineteenth century, with the Xavier student body growing to include huge influxes of German and Irish day students, boarders at Xavier continued to be predominantly from the South. In 1850 Louisiana students comprised nearly half of the school's boarders.

#### Conclusion

One early historian claimed that "the greatest glory of Augusta College was its ending." Such could have been said for three, and almost four, of the five institutions of higher education that I have discussed. Due to courageous stances against slavery, the charter of Augusta College was revoked, Lane Seminary closed, and the Western Baptist Theological Institute was disbanded. Wilberforce University was moreover burned and thus could easily have closed were it not for the faith and courage of its president (Rankins 23).

Of these five institutions, Wilberforce University and St. Xavier College, now Xavier University, alone still stand. I have a challenge for each. I first challenge Wilberforce to celebrate what has truly made it a noble university. In his reminiscences of Wilberforce, Bishop Payne never mentioned the Underground Railroad. Instead, he championed the freedom that Wilberforce offered through intellectual advancement. The first thing that leapt out for me when I recently visited Wilberforce's web page was the loud proclamation that Wilberforce was a stop on the Underground Railroad. As far as I know, there is no evidence to suggest that Wilberforce actually was part of the Underground Railroad, at least as it is commonly understood. Bishop Payne never mentioned it. Why must it then be featured, especially when Wilberforce can boast of 148 years of realizing more certain freedom through the exercise of

higher education? I hope that Wilberforce's known accomplishments will not be obscured by the uncertain myth of the Underground Railroad.

This year my institution, Xavier University, celebrates 175 years of serving men and, more recently, women in higher-level intellectual advancement. With such a solid foundation, I hope Xavier does not fear to probe into some of its less admirable acts of the past. By effectively avoiding the issue of slavery, Xavier alone amidst the five institutions I have discussed survived unscathed by the slavery debates. Avoiding controversial issues seems to be a problem for the Catholic Church. Perhaps Xavier can demonstrate another approach by daring to discuss even the sins of its past.

I hope universities of today do not shy away from such power in higher-level critical thinking.

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## Notes

1. Estimating the number of runaways is difficult. Marion Lucas noted that census records revealed that very few Kentucky slaves ran away. Yet Darrel Bigham rightly pointed out that the number of runaways was surely greater than census records suggest. Bigham, who never gave any estimate of the number of runaways, nonetheless seemed to indicate that there were a relatively small number of fugitives even across the border region of the Ohio River valley (see Lucas 61-83; Bigham 22-25). The less than one percent estimate is based on my critical evaluation of every antebellum census report (including slave schedules) for the state of Kentucky, cross-referenced with newspaper accounts of slave runaways, court records, and other historical documents. A number of anecdotes suggest that even persons who did occasionally assist runaways were generally not familiar with any kind of organized system that might be called an Underground Railroad. For example, about the same time that Tice Davis had run away, a group of Kentucky slave hunters lost their way at Fountain City, Indiana. They then banged on the door of a Quaker businessman named Levi Coffin. "Are you the President of the Underground Railroad?" they asked. He replied, what is that? After they explained their notion of an organized system intended to assist runaways, Coffin said he never heard of such a thing. He nonetheless readily admitted that he routinely helped fugitive slaves who knocked on his door and would do so again. If such behavior merited Coffin the title President of the Underground Railroad, he declared to these slave hunters that he proudly would accept the honor (Coffin 126). After the 1893 exhibition at the World's Fair in Chicago of Charles Webber's painting, *The Underground Railroad*, followed by Wilbur Siebert's publication of *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (1898), the "Underground Railroad" became part of American folklore.
2. The Methodist College in Cokesbury, Maryland, preceded Augusta College, but owing to a fire the Maryland institution's existence was short-lived. Historians thus agree that Augusta College was the first established Methodist College in the world.
3. At Augusta College, these debating societies were called the Jefferson Literary Society and the Union Literary Society. Both societies kept minutes describing their meetings. Three antebellum volumes survive. These are the minutes from the Jefferson Literary Society 1828-1832, 1847-1849, and from the Union Literary Society 1846-1849. Augusta's Knoedler Memorial Library has

these three volumes. In a private publication for the library entitled, "Minutes-Jefferson & Union Literary Societies-The Augusta private publication for the library entitled, "Minutes-Jefferson & Union Literary Societies-The Augusta College"(2006) William A. Baker transcribed these volumes.

4. Concerning the Methodist position, see The General Rule on Slavery (1789) (of the Methodist Church)
5. That same year the Ohio Conference established Ohio Wesleyan College at Delaware, Ohio. With that, the Ohio Conference withdrew its support of Augusta College. For a time Augusta fell back tenuously under the auspices of the Kentucky Conference. The Kentucky Conference withdrew its support of Augusta College in 1846, after which the Ohio Conference once again became Augusta's sponsor.
6. The phrase is from Beecher's address to his congregation, early July 1832 (Beecher 206). Lyman Beecher somewhat naively believed that he could appease the Old School Presbyterians
7. The historic record is not always consistent on the dates of the revival.
8. The student who withdrew to open the school was Augustus Wattles. He also induced many Cincinnati blacks to relocate on 30,000 acres of land he had acquired in Mercer County, Ohio. From 1836 to 1840 at least twenty-five emancipated slaves moved there. Wattles later moved to Kansas where he helped fugitive slaves, as well as associated with John Brown. By the end of the summer of 1834, the Lane students ran four black schools.
9. Beecher left Cincinnati on 19 July. Beecher called himself an abolitionist, though he clearly did not believe in the equality of blacks and whites (Lesick 125)
10. Many of the decisions against the students and against Morgan had been made by the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees, but the Board affirmed the decisions when it met in full on the eve of the next school year.
11. From Cumminsville the students also continued their work in the black community of Cincinnati.

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