



# Postscript: Andrew Harris at the University of Vermont

*A remarkable set of resolutions that the student body of Bowdoin College in Maine passed in 1838 denounced the “unfounded and wicked prejudice” displayed against Andrew Harris at the University of Vermont “for possessing a complexion which God saw fit should be dark.”*

By KEVIN THORNTON

**I**n the summer/fall 2015 issue of this journal I published an article on the life of Andrew Harris (1814-1841), the University of Vermont’s (UVM) first African American student, who went on to become an abolitionist leader, advocate for black equality and minister before dying while still a very young man.<sup>1</sup> As with many relatively unknown figures, there were gaps in the sources: I had learned almost nothing about his early life, for example, and all of his sermons had been lost. But I especially wished I had been able to find out more about his life as a student, which I had become sure had been difficult.

It was certainly difficult at both the beginning and the end of his time at the university. UVM President John Wheeler had only reluctantly admitted Harris (after he had previously been rejected by Union and Middlebury colleges). Harris’s mere presence at UVM then sparked a revolt by students before Wheeler faced them down. That was the beginning. At the end, in 1838, Harris, though on the schedule to give an oration along with every other graduating senior, was excluded from his gradua-  
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*Vermont History* Vol. 86, No. 1 (Winter/Spring 2018): 9–19.

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tion after his classmates threatened to boycott the ceremony if he attended. “The class declared that if he came upon the stage, they would have nothing to do with the exercises.”<sup>2</sup>

But what of in between? Harris arrived at UVM as a sophomore in March 1836 and graduated in August 1838. He spent the winter of 1836-37 in Troy, N.Y., but for most of his two-plus college years was resident in Burlington. For that period the record was extremely scanty, but the available evidence indicated that, while in attendance at UVM, Harris faced systematic racial discrimination. This is partly deducible by omission: He was not listed in the catalogue of students while he was at UVM, and until the last set of exams his senior year his name was always listed last, out of alphabetical order on the exam record—as if, perhaps, he took his examinations separately. Finally, we have this report from the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* in 1843: “Mr. Andrew Harris, unable to obtain a regular standing at Union College, went to the University of Vermont; but even there, though allowed more privileges, he was not suffered to stand on the same footing with the other students.”<sup>3</sup>

That, in 2015, is all we knew. What “not suffered to stand on the same footing with the other students” meant was unclear. In other words, while there was reason to think that Harris had been treated differently from (i.e., worse than) other students, the ways in which he was treated worse were unclear. We knew nothing of Harris’s daily life at UVM.

Now we do, thanks to the sharp eyes of Dr. Richard Candee, a retired Boston University professor and historian of Portsmouth, New Hampshire. While working in the archives of the American Antiquarian Society, Dr. Candee came upon a remarkable set of resolutions that the student body of Bowdoin College, in Maine, passed in 1838 to denounce the “unfounded and wicked prejudice” displayed against Harris at UVM “for possessing a complexion which God saw fit should be dark” (see appendix). The document goes on to detail the ways in which that wicked prejudice was manifested on a daily basis: “Harris ... has been deprived of those privileges, usually granted to members of our collegiate institutions, in not being permitted to attend college prayers, recitations and other college exercises in company with the other students.”<sup>4</sup>

This is close to being a description of complete seclusion. Let us break it down. First, as was common in nineteenth-century American colleges, UVM required mandatory attendance at daily chapel in the 1830s.<sup>5</sup> It was a particularly petty act (and a remarkably unchristian one) to exclude Harris, a very religious man, from the ritual of common prayer. But it apparently happened, and every day.

To understand the importance of “recitations,” we must delve into the history of higher education and the particulars of the UVM curriculum in the 1830s. After 1828, when Yale remade its curriculum, American colleges were in a state of transition that would last until the Civil War, moving from an older tradition that emphasized classical languages and biblical studies—in what had been primarily a ministerial education—to a newer emphasis on math, science (including newly developing lab classes), and modern languages.<sup>6</sup> In the 1830s, UVM’s curriculum was almost evenly divided between “Languages” (Greek and Latin literature extensively, and introductory French), and “Maths” (which included science). In the senior year the course of study extended both in the older direction (such as Logic, Metaphysics, Moral Philosophy) and the newer (Physiology, Psychology, Political Economy, Astronomy). The recitation method, which was based on the memorization and repetition of texts, would have been used in the courses from the older curriculum. To be banned from recitations, then, meant Harris, who was studying for the ministry and for whom the classical languages would therefore be particularly important, effectively could not attend those courses along with everyone else.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, “other college exercises”: This surely meant such ceremonies as graduation, as we have seen. My best guess is that Harris was unwelcome at any public event associated with the university.

To be fair to UVM, there is a bit of ambiguity in the record. *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* reported that only “a few” students objected to reciting with Harris, and that “this insubordination was very soon put down by the College authorities,” which indicates that Harris was indeed allowed to recite after the revolt was quashed.<sup>8</sup> But that report was in 1854, sixteen years after Harris left college, and nearly thirteen after he died. The contemporary evidence—the document from Bowdoin—indicates that Harris was not allowed to recite “in company with the other students” at all.<sup>9</sup>

Is it possible he did his recitations alone with one or two of the professors? Harris’s obituary in the *Rochester American*, written by his friend and UVM classmate Alexander Mann—by far the longest, most detailed and warmest source on his life—states that “the writer has several times heard different members of the Faculty pronounce high encomiums on the excellent character, and scholarship of the deceased.”<sup>10</sup> So at least some individuals among the five-member faculty were sympathetic to Harris. In any case, whether he was allowed to recite or not, he was an excellent student in the classics.

Math was another story. Harris was a miserably poor math student

(though he did well in his science classes). In 2015 I assumed that Harris was either not mathematically inclined or that, having determined his career path early, was uninterested in math. Now I wonder if he was banned from math lectures.

To sum up, it appears that Harris was expected to be a silent presence in class, as well as invisible when it came to any public event. Hostile students may have succeeded in banning him from recitations, and they definitely succeeded in banning him from chapel and from graduation. Faculty members, sympathetic or not, failed to stand up to this hostile majority of students when they threatened to boycott the 1838 graduation, and evidently failed to enforce Harris's right to attend worship.

Records of the UVM student societies of the 1830s reveal in detail one of the calculated insults that Harris regularly had to bear. In the 1830s there were two competing student societies at UVM devoted to both literature and debate: The Phi Sigma Nu society and the University Institute.<sup>11</sup> Apparently weary of the fierce competition for new members, in April 1837 the leaders of both societies reached an agreement that, in the future, instead of competing, they would hold an annual draft that divided up the names of all unaffiliated students school-yard style — with one society picking first, the other second, the first one third, and so on, until each society had an exclusive list of available men.<sup>12</sup> 1838, Harris's senior year, was the first year this system went into effect. Though a senior, he was still unaffiliated with either society. His name fell among the list of twenty-one names apportioned to the University Institute.<sup>13</sup>

The election of new Institute members took place at the meeting of April 7, 1838. The group quickly elected seven new members without controversy. Then discussion turned to the more problematic nominees:

Mr. Shedd proposed Mr. Harris. Motion withdrawn. Mssrs. Caldwell and Bradley proposed but not elected. Mr. Macrae proposed Mr. Harris, and moved that he be appointed Vice President pro-tem;\* which motion was decided by the chair to be out of order.

There being no further business,  
Institute adjourned  
Attest  
B.J. Tenney  
Secretary

\* Seconded by Mr. Gregory<sup>14</sup>

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Through this parliamentary maneuver Harris's name never officially came up for consideration. Harris's supporters did not give up, however, and at the meeting of May 19 they put the issue to the test through debate:

The question "Should colored students be allowed the privileges of this society?" came before the Institute,<sup>15</sup> and after further discussion by Messrs. A. Robertson, G.R. Robertson, Dana, Macrae and Houghton, was decided in the negative by a vote of 18 to 9.<sup>16</sup>

Despite this decisive margin, on June 2 the minority again tried to propose Harris:

Mr. Shedd moved to elect Mr. Harris, and was seconded by Mr. Putnam; When by a vote of 19 to 10 institute adjourned.

Attest  
B.J Tenney  
Sec'y<sup>17</sup>

members being present.) Mr. Putnam moved to elect Mr. Caldwell. Motion passed 29 to 3. Mr. Shedd moved to elect Mr. Harris, and was seconded by Mr. Putnam; When by a vote of 19 to 10, Institute adjourned  
Attest  
B. J. Tenney,  
Sec'y

University of Vermont, June 2<sup>nd</sup> 1838.

Institute met; roll was called and journal read  
Mr. Forsyth offered to read an Oration for Mr. Fayles

Illustration 1: Minutes of the University of Vermont Institute, June 2, 1838. Special Collections, University of Vermont Libraries.

In other words, someone moved to adjourn while the Harris nomination was still on the floor, and this motion passed. This meant that the Harris nomination would remain on the floor as soon as the next meeting began, but it also apparently gave time for Harris's opponents to decide how they would handle the question.

On June 9, it was decided once and for all:

The first extraordinary business being on the election of Mr. Harris; Mr. Deane moved to postpone it until January next [i.e., January 1839]. Mr. Wells moved to amend so that the motion should stand "to postpone till the 2nd meeting in Jan." Amendment accepted and motion passed 14 to 11.<sup>18</sup>

Harris graduated in August 1838. There were no meetings whatsoever in January 1839. The vote to postpone the question was in effect a vote to gag further debate on his admission.

The Institute's minutes reveal that the majority was decisively hostile to Harris, even to the point of denying the theoretical possibility of any fellowship whatsoever with a colored student. More than once, they had refused to allow him so much as the courtesy of a direct vote on his admission—presumably because to do so would have been to concede his eligibility. The curious final vote on Harris, on the amended motion to delay consideration to a "second" meeting that everyone knew would never come, and would in any case be moot because Harris would have graduated, has the air of cynicism about it.

It is difficult to overemphasize how cruel all of this shunning must have been. Harris's class, the class of 1838, graduated only twenty-four students, including him. The class of 1839 graduated twenty-three; the class of 1840, fourteen; and the class of 1841, twenty-two. The class of 1837 graduated eighteen; the class of 1836, seven.<sup>19</sup> Probably only during Harris's senior year at UVM were there ever as many as one-hundred students on campus at any given time, including those who never graduated. They all lived, went to lectures and recitations, studied, visited the library, and attended chapel in a single building.<sup>20</sup> Under those circumstances it requires work to ignore someone. Harris was a social, talkative young man with a capacity for deep friendship. He had been raised since the age of two by a white family in a northern white community. There was no social or cultural distance between him and the other students that might help excuse the majority's behavior.

At the same time, Harris did have friends, friends who were willing to fight stubbornly on his behalf. The one recorded example of Harris's being socially accepted at UVM was his membership in the student-run Society for Religious Enquiry, in the records of which he is listed, with-

out comment, as an “ordinary member” (that is, a regular, as opposed to an honorary, member).<sup>21</sup> Harris, a very devout Christian, was both temperamentally and intellectually well-suited for this group. Membership required election by a “three-fourths vote of the members present at any regular meeting,”<sup>22</sup> so Harris necessarily had multiple supporters in the society. His friend William Greenough Thayer Shedd, the one who attempted twice to nominate him for the University Institute, was also a member. Shedd went on to become a distinguished Presbyterian theologian.<sup>23</sup> We know another of Harris’s close friends, Alexander Mann, later a journalist, was antislavery at least as early as 1838.<sup>24</sup> He kept in touch with Harris until Harris’s death.<sup>25</sup> William Frederick Macrae, Isaac Newton Gregory, and either Albin Kendall Putnam or Charles Symmon Putnam proposed him for University Institute membership. The brothers Andrew and George Robertson, Edmund Trowbridge Dana, and either George Frederick Houghton or Daniel Clay Houghton probably spoke up for him at the Institute. That is as complete a list of Harris’s friends as I can come up with.<sup>26</sup> There were probably at least a handful more among the members of the Society for Religious Enquiry.

In all, it appears that perhaps a third of UVM’s students were willing to tolerate the presence of Harris. But the rest, the vast majority, were openly hostile to him, and more than willing to resort, repeatedly, to petty machinations in order to insult him. Perhaps none of this should be surprising. UVM was a conservative, Congregationalist-dominated (and therefore colonizationist, as opposed to abolitionist) institution. Furthermore, during Harris’s time at UVM Vermonters in general were often antagonistic to the still small number of the state’s abolitionists. Nevertheless, there was something particularly ugly about the treatment Harris received at UVM. It was so personal. The university was a small, intimate community and the people in it got to know one another well. It is depressing to learn that even in those circumstances they could not do better. To dismiss their actions as products of the times is to excuse them far more than they deserve. None of the things that happened to Harris at UVM were either inevitable or historically, socially, or culturally determined, even in the 1830s. The students at Bowdoin certainly didn’t think so. “We heartily sympathize with him,” they wrote of Harris, “and feel entire willingness to receive him as a fellow student to participate freely with us, in all the advantages and privileges afforded by this institution.”<sup>27</sup> UVM has to face the fact that it was a racist and cruel place toward Andrew Harris.

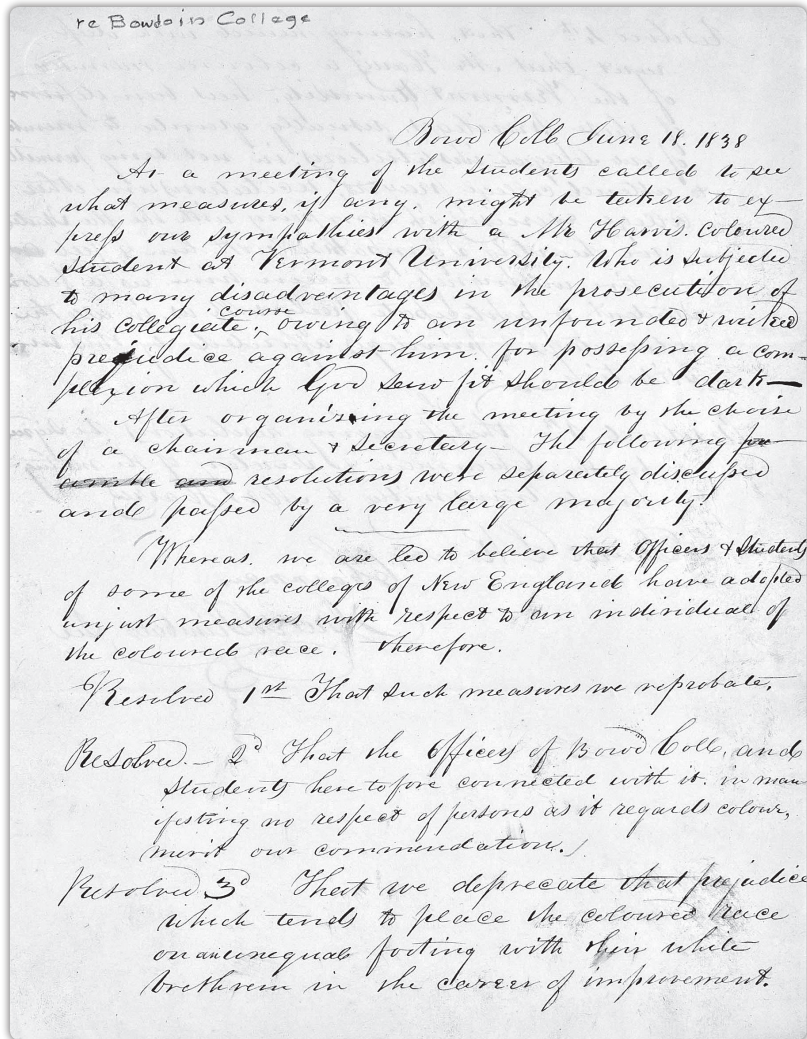
Has it faced it yet? I wonder. Just as in the 1830s, the people running

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the university today apparently find it far easier to think of Harris as a symbol than as a person. When I successfully petitioned the state of Vermont to erect a roadside historical marker to him, the university's administration placed it at the back of a parking lot.<sup>28</sup>

## APPENDIX

**Appendix 1.** Photocopy of the Bowdoin College Resolution concerning Andrew Harris.





Resolved 4<sup>th</sup> That, having heard with deep  
 regret that Mr. Havis a coloured member  
 of the Vermont University, had been deprived  
 of those privileges, usually granted to members  
 of our delegate institutions, in not being permitted  
 to attend college prayers, recitations and other  
 college exercises in company with the other students  
 — we heartily sympathize with him & feel our  
 entire willingness to receive him as a fellow  
 student to participate freely with us, in all the  
 advantages & privileges afforded by this in-  
 stitution

Resolved 5<sup>th</sup> That <sup>the</sup> foregoing resolutions be signed  
 by the Chairman & Secretary of the meeting  
 and transmitted to Mr. Havis

David S. Row, Chairman  
 Isaac Kimball Sec

Illustration 2 and 3: Bowdoin College, Resolution, June 18, 1838, in Israel Kimball Papers, 1837-1839, Mss miscellaneous boxes K, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.

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**Appendix 2.** Transcript of the Bowdoin Andrew Harris document (some punctuation and spelling corrected for clarity), from the Israel Kimball Papers [manuscript], 1837-1839, American Antiquarian Society.

Bowd Coll June 18, 1838

At a meeting of the students called to see what measures, if any, might be taken to express our sympathies with a Mr. Harris, coloured student at Vermont University, who is subjected to many disadvantages in the prosecution of his collegiate course, owing to an unfounded and wicked prejudice against him for possessing a complexion which God saw fit should be dark —

After organizing the meeting by a choice of a chairman and Secretary — the following resolutions were subsequently discussed and passed by a very large majority.

Whereas, we are led to believe that Officers and students of some of the colleges of New England have adopted unjust measures with respect to an individual of the coloured race. Therefore

Resolved 1st. That such measures are reprobate.

Resolved. 2d. That the Officers of Bowd Coll, and students heretofore connected with it, in manifesting no respect of persons as it regards colour, merit our commendation.

Resolved 3d That we deprecate that prejudice which tends to place the coloured race on an unequal footing with their white brethren in the career of improvement.

Resolved 4th. That, having heard with deep regret that Mr. Harris a coloured member of Vermont University, has been deprived of those privileges, usually granted to members of our collegiate institutions, in not being permitted to attend college prayers, recitations and other college exercises in company with the other students — we heartily sympathize with him and feel entire willingness to receive him as a fellow student to participate freely with us, in all the advantages and privileges afforded by this institution.

Resolved 5th. that the foregoing resolutions be signed by the Chairman and Secretary of the meeting and transmitted to Mr. Harris

David S. Rowe, Chairman

Israel Kimball, Sec

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kevin Thornton, "Andrew Harris, Vermont's Forgotten Abolitionist," *Vermont History* 83 (Summer/Fall 2015), 119-156.

<sup>2</sup> "What has the North to Do with Slavery?" *The Liberator*, 25 October 1839.

<sup>3</sup> "For the New-York Observer: Colleges and Colored People," *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, 23 November 1843, 98.

<sup>4</sup> Israel Kimball Papers [manuscript], 1837-1839, American Antiquarian Society.

<sup>5</sup> T. D. Seymour Bassett, "Origins of UVM, 1791-1833: Overview," in Robert V. Daniels, ed., *The University of Vermont: The First Two Hundred Years* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1991), 10-41. Most of UVM's old chapel is now the John Dewey Lounge in the Old Mill building. The rest has been reconfigured into the foyer for that floor of the building. See also John D. Thomas, *University of Vermont* (Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2005), 13, 40.

<sup>6</sup> John S. Brubacher and Willis Rudy, *Higher Education in Transition: A History of American Colleges and Universities* (New Brunswick NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2004), 84-91.

<sup>7</sup> *Records and Examinations, 1828-1852*, in Record Group 41, Registrar's Records, Special Collections, University of Vermont Libraries.

<sup>8</sup> Anonymous, "Colored Students in American Colleges," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 22 September 1854.

<sup>9</sup> Israel Kimball Papers.

<sup>10</sup> Harris obituary, "Died," *Rochester Daily Democrat*, 17 December 1841.

<sup>11</sup> Betty Bandel, "Student Debates . . . and Thaddeus Stevens" in Robert V. Daniels, ed., *The University of Vermont*, 49. I must thank Chris Burns of UVM Special Collections for letting me know of the existence of these records as well as the fact that Harris is mentioned in them.

<sup>12</sup> This agreement can be found in both the records of Phi Sigma Nu and the University Institute (Phi Sigma Nu records: University of Vermont Archives, Record Group 80, Carton 2, Phi Sigma Nu Society Record Book C, 1835-1879, 160-162. University Institute records: University of Vermont Archives, Record Group 80, Carton 14, Records of the University Institute, 1834, Vol. I, April 1, 1837 (there are no page numbers in this volume)).

<sup>13</sup> University of Vermont Archives, Record Group 80, Carton 14, Records of the University Institute, 1834, Vol. I, April 7, 1838.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Harris was the only colored student at UVM.

<sup>16</sup> University of Vermont Archives, Record Group 80, Carton 14, Records of the University Institute, 1834, Vol. I, May 19, 1838.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, June 2, 1838.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, June 9, 1838.

<sup>19</sup> *Triennial Catalogue of the University of Vermont, 1854* (Burlington: Free Press Print., 1854), 27-41; *General Catalogue of the University of Vermont and State Agricultural College, Burlington Vermont 1791-1900* (Burlington: Free Press Association, 1901), 59-71.

<sup>20</sup> Pomeroy Hall, a separate medical building, had been built in 1829. Non-medical students wouldn't have used it in any case, but in addition the medical school was closed during Harris's time at UVM due to the university's strained economic circumstances. See Thomas, *University of Vermont*, 15, 18.

<sup>21</sup> University of Vermont Archives, Record Group 80, Carton 13, Sol13c, Constitution and Laws, Society for Religious Enquiry, 67, 153. See also University of Vermont Archives, Record Group 80, Carton 13, AW15 R, Sol13c, MSS UVM (1879).

<sup>22</sup> University of Vermont Archives, Record Group 80, Carton 13, Sol13c, Constitution and Laws, Society for Religious Enquiry, 57.

<sup>23</sup> *General Catalogue of the University of Vermont*, 67.

<sup>24</sup> Mann wrote an antislavery, anti-Gag Rule letter to his father in March, 1838. University of Vermont Archives, Mann Alexander—Burlington, VT.: Letter to Father, Re: Slavery Mar. 6, 1838, CAT MSS File 1838 Mar 6.

<sup>25</sup> Thornton, "Andrew Harris, Vermont's Forgotten Abolitionist," 124, 144. The student from the class of 1837 who, years later, recalled attending antislavery meetings failed to mention Harris.

<sup>26</sup> I compared the last names listed in association with Harris in the University Institute records with the names in the UVM Triennial Catalogue of 1854 and the General catalogue of 1901.

<sup>27</sup> Israel Kimball Papers.

<sup>28</sup> It's behind the admissions office, off S. Prospect Street (don't look for it while driving).