

**“Where They Live Like Lords of the Manors”:**

**A Primary Source-Based Lesson on Education, Masculinity, and the Politics of Slavery in the Early United States**

In this lesson students study connections between the histories of slavery, higher education, and masculinity via a set of unpublished primary sources from Yale University’s archives. The lesson would be appropriate for the portion of a US History Survey course on the increasing polarization of the US electorate over the issue of slavery in the aftermath of the War of 1812, including the Missouri Crisis of 1819-20. The letters are excerpted from the correspondence between two former roommates from the Yale College class of 1815: Isaac Edward Holmes of South Carolina and Joseph Dresser Wickham of Connecticut. The sources can be found in the Wickham Family Papers in the Yale University Library’s Manuscripts and Archives Division. Holmes was a confident, ambitious young man born into the slaveholding class of South Carolina, the state whose politicians were most devoted to pro-slavery advocacy. Wickham, Holmes’s roommate and close friend, was a more anxious and retiring young man descended from New England Puritans. In the immediate aftermath of graduation, Holmes spent a summer in Philadelphia and then commenced upon an increasingly successful legal and political career in Charleston. Wickham, meanwhile, retreated for many months to his parents’ home before embarking upon graduate study at Yale. Over time the two friends drifted apart. Holmes became a well-known advocate for pro-slavery radicalism in print and in Congress. Wickham enjoyed a less public but still successful career as a Congregationalist minister and educator, eventually serving as the longtime headmaster of a preparatory school in Vermont. These letters, however, after beginning in the immediate aftermath of the Yalies’ graduation, document a period during which the trajectory of Holmes and Wickham’s friendship might have taken a drastically different turn. In 1820 Wickham pursued an open mathematics professorship at what is now the University of South Carolina. Holmes tried to help his former roommate win this position before eventually admitting defeat—he claimed that there was too much prejudice against Yankees in South Carolina for Wickham to have a decent chance in his job hunt. (I have modernized punctuation and spelling in these letters for ease of reading comprehension.)

**Discussion Questions**

1. What sense do you get from these letters about the two young men’s time at Yale College? What are some of the effects of their education? What impression do you get of Yale’s role as an institution where students from the North, South, and West congregated on New England soil?
2. All adults are, in a sense, the authors of their own *bildungsromans* (coming-of-age novels or novels of education). Over time we construct narratives about the relationships between our starting points and our destinations—highly selective accounts of how we have reached adulthood and what kind of adults we have become. How does Isaac Holmes’s sense of himself as communicated in these letters change over time?

3. What is your impression of Holmes's sense of his masculinity? How do ideas about gender inform both the way he portrays his own early adulthood and the advice he gives to Wickham?
4. How is the South's so-called "peculiar institution" portrayed in these letters? What do you think Holmes means when he says that two of the former roommates' mutual friends "are both married both Parents & both settled on their Plantations\_\_where they live like Lords of the Manors"?
5. Place these letters in dialogue with the slave narratives (such as the one written by Olaudah Equiano) we have read earlier in this course. In what way can these narratives help us contextualize and comprehend the implications and silences of Holmes's letters to Wickham?
6. In what way do these letters reflect the interconnectedness between scales of history (the big scale of national politics and the small scale of the relationships between individuals)? What can we learn about the Missouri Crisis from these letters that we could not be able to glean from a traditional political history?
7. Do these letters resonate with your own efforts to chart a path for your career and for your adult life more generally? With your attempts to navigate your relationships with your peers? Why or why not?

**Isaac E. Holmes to Joseph D. Wickham, February 26, 1816, Charleston to New Haven.**

Dear Joseph,

The Clock has just struck two and I lay aside my Law Book for the more agreeable duty of writing a friend – your letter was received two days since. I rejoice to find you are still mindful of your friend, unwilling that separation of bodies should separate souls...I often meditate on Yale, and often wish myself among the companions of my youth. But as this is denied me I must rest satisfied where I am. The appearance of our city is not agreeable to one who has just left either N York or Philadelphia, the streets not being paved over in dry weather and muddy in wet. We have, however, fine broad foot pavements, but these (of course) are unable to prevent the dust in commoding up while walking. We have few handsome public buildings and not many elegant private ones, but as these only interest for a moment as the mind soon becomes accustomed to the sight of them, I am always [inclined] to [view] the merits of a city rather upon society than the appearance of its streets. Our ladies are more delicate than those of any other state, so far as it regards their persons, and not inferior to those of any other city in respect to the delicacy of their minds. What is remarkable in a southern city, their complexions are equally fair with those of the northern states, having as great a share of the white and red, I am forced to remark that their minds are usually less cultivated than those of the eastern [New England] or middle states. They devote more attention to music, dancing, drawing, etc. than to the Sciences or to History. They possess, like other girls, great flow of Language, though are generally too reserved. They have fine voices, read clean and distinct, and sing remarkably well. They are usually acquainted with the French Language and [possess] true genuine piety, make excellent wives. They go much in company before marrying, but become domestic when their families increase. They are very attentive to their children, affectionate to an excess, more capable of making a gown or an elegant head dress than of constructing a sentence in Greek or Latin, though they write very delicate & correct letters.

**Isaac E. Holmes to Joseph Wickham, July 17, 1820, Charleston to New Haven**

Dear Wickham,

Two days ago I returned in the afternoon from court and upon entering the house a letter postmarked of New Haven was delivered to me. I was unable to ascertain from the Superscription whose epistle it could be, and confess the thought of its being yours never occurred, after being conscious not only of having written you the last letter in 1817, of having several of the letters given by me to young men going from this place to New Haven unanswered, but of not having received the slightest communication for so many years from any of my classmates in the North. I relinquished forever, not without regret, the hope of hearing from them again, for I do not assent to your proposition that the duties of life render incompatible mutual Communications. There is no incident, however trifling, connected with the Character, fortune, or situation of those I love not deeply interesting to me, and there was no man at College for whom I entertained more sincere affection, than yourself. Imagine, then, what gratification I received, when, upon breaking the Seal, your name was apparent. A crowd of recollections rushed upon my soul, and emotions well excited of a deep and mingled kind. The satisfaction of learning that men are to be found, whose finer affections the world has not yet blunted, but who remember, and love to remember, those with whom they mingled in the most interesting period of life, when the heart was not yet chilled with the disappointment experience of mankind invariably brings, when the character was unfolding, and when our feelings were unacquainted with disguised, is perhaps to my mind the most full and complete capable of being received. And the prospect, Dear Wickham, of having you in my native State is contemplated with equal satisfaction for though my Father never was an associate Judge, but only recorder of our city and as such holding the Corporation Court, yet my brother is married to the daughter of Chancellor DeSaussure, the most influential Character among the Trustees, and to him I shall write respecting you. Knowing the respect entertained by Chancellor DeSaussure for Mr. Silliman, I entertain great hopes that recommendations from the President and Professors of Yale College will procure you the Place... You have my anxious wishes for your success, not only as I regard you, but as I wish the Mathematics to be cultivated in our State. The fond anticipation of once more seeing the place of my education is every day growing less, and the Places and objects with which I was connected in early life, are gradually cast in the shade as I move through life, with other scenes unfolding to my view. I am steadily engaged in the practice of Law, and inform you with satisfaction, that I have not proved unsuccessful... I rejoice to learn that, amid the Cloisters of a College, you have not been insensible to the tender & pleasing intercourse of female Society, and can recommend matrimony from my own Experience. Harleston & White are both married both Parents & both settled on their Plantations, where they live like Lords of the Manors...

**Isaac E. Holmes to Joseph D. Wickham, October 25, 1820, Charleston to New Haven**

D[ea]r Wickham

I shall make no apology for not answering your last letter, though I regret the cause which delayed the answer until this late period. I had written to my friends at Columbia, stating your intention of becoming a candidate for the professorship and recommending your character and experience. But the recommendations of President Day & Professor Silliman were not received when I last heard from Columbia, and no definite answer could be given; the fact is that a very narrow feeling pervades the breasts of many persons in this state, and great alterations have taken place between

certain characters in Columbia, respecting the propriety of electing northern gent[lemen] to fill our professors' seats; as you have no doubt heard of their shameful disputes, I shall say no more respecting them, for I am heartily ashamed of them. I have not had, as I before remarked, any definite answer on the subject of your claims. But I am sorry to state, that I do not believe your chance a good one, as Dr. Caldwell of North Carolina is spoken of as the candidate most likely to succeed. I shall not, my dear friend, attempt to conceal my chagrin on the disappointment which will be occasioned me by not seeing you. There are a few men for whom I entertain an unaffected esteem, and yourself among the number. My own business has never permitted me to visit any of my friends out of the State since I have left college and very few of those I regard have visited Charleston. Thus time rolls on, and we are separated from each other, but all its waves mingle with Eternity, and we shall meet again. I know not how it is, but I feel a melancholy, though not unpleasing, sadness when I think of the connections formed by me at College. I am convinced the heart is susceptible of emotions at that early stage of life, which never come with as warm an impress after we get acquainted with the dark ways of men, the fraud and deep hypocrisy of the moving actors of the stage of life. When at College I thought I knew the world, but, alas, knowledge of man is a science boundless as metaphysics and as chilling in its influence on the sensibilities as the philosophy of the Stoics. I suppose you have taken your departure from N[ew] Haven, yet [I] direct to that place, under the impression that your friends will take out the letter for you. If you still incline to carry on a correspondence, I shall be happy to communicate with you, for I take delight in hearing from my friends and in relating to them the news of our own State...