In Pierson’s Lower Court, a tainted history
Yale Daily News front-page story

BY SARAH MASLIN
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Tucked in the southeastern corner of Pierson College, at the end of a winding stone path, sits a small, shady courtyard once called the “slave quarters.”

Students bestowed the nickname in 1933, shortly after Pierson was built, because of the courtyard’s humble appearance compared with the rest of the Georgian-brick college’s grounds. The term lasted until the 1980s.

A search through Yale archives unearthed dozens of references to the “Pierson slave quarters,” in newspapers, guides and books, from a caricature of a dark-skinned man in the college’s newsletter, The Pierson Slave, to ads for a “plantation party” in the 1950s and a “bring a slave” party in 1980.

Following protests by the Black Student Alliance at Yale, the nickname was abruptly dropped in 1980. Students, faculty and University officials interviewed at the time said they found the term offensive and embarrassing, and the “slave quarters” was renamed “Lower Court.” Today, hardly anyone, including Pierson’s new master, is aware of the courtyard’s awkward past.

While it is not surprising that this nugget of Eli lore is not one that campus tours and admissions brochures choose to mention, faculty members and students interviewed wonder if the Yale community should be aware of Lower Court’s old nickname and its 50-year history.

In the past, when revelations about Yale’s ties to slavery have sparked dialogue about how to deal with “tainted” histories, the University’s response has often been characterized by “embarrassment, disinterest or refusal to acknowledge them,” said Jonathan Holloway GRD ’95, a specialist in post-emancipation American history and the second black master of Calhoun College.

When Pierson Master Stephen Davis GRD ’98 found out about the “slave quarters” nickname in an interview with the News, he said that campus dialogue about it would be important and beneficial.

As Yale looks forward to naming two new residential colleges, students like Patricia Okonta ’15, the current president of BSAY, hope the administration will carefully examine both the good and the bad of Yale’s past.

“Knowledge is power,” she said. “All histories should be known.”

PIERSONITES AS ‘THE SLAVES’
Pierson’s main courtyard is green and vast, with towering residence halls that channel southern grandeur. Meanwhile, the corner courtyard has a simple stone floor, low-sloping roofs, whitewashed walls and buildings of only one or two stories.

“They actually look like slave quarters,” Holloway said. “Nice ones, but still, there’s definitely a visual resonance.”
When the first Pierson students began referring to the courtyard as “the slave quarters,” the nickname caught on fast.

In 1934, the News assigned mascots to each residential college. The “slave quarters” nickname had already become commonplace, so the logical choice for Pierson was “the Slaves.” Pierson’s weekly newsletter, founded in 1937, was deemed the Pierson Slave. It featured headlines like, “Slaves Third in Baseball, Softball; Golfers Behind,” and, following a co-ed College Weekend in 1954, “Slaves Entertain 100 Girls.” The founder of Yale’s graphic design program, Alvin Eisenman, created a new nameplate for the tabloid in 1954: a bold font with prison bars through each letter and a pen-and-ink caricature of a dark-skinned man holding a stick.

Yale historian Gaddis Smith ’54 GRD ’61, who was an undergraduate in the 1950s, said that then-Master Sidney Lovett did not like the slave nomenclature and “urged that it be cooled down.” As a result, the slave mascot ceased to appear in the News after 1960. Old issues of the Pierson Slave in Sterling Memorial Library’s Manuscripts and Archives stop in the year 1956.

But Jay Gitlin ’71, a history professor who teaches the seminar “Yale and America,” said that when he was a Yale undergraduate in the early 1970s, students still called the courtyard the “slave quarters.” A Nov. 16, 1973 edition of the News with a notice for a “Pierson Bladderball Victory Party in Slave Quarters” confirms Gitlin’s memory.

Smith said that while giving a tour to a group of visiting clergymen that included a black minister in the 1950s, Lovett accidentally used the nickname “slave quarters,” to his profound embarrassment. The story, said Smith, demonstrates that the term was so embedded in undergraduate culture that students and faculty members alike no longer thought about its significance.

BSAY PROTESTS ‘SLAVE QUARTERS’
Holloway was surprised to learn that the slave nickname persisted through the civil rights movement. In the 1960s and 1970s, African American enrollment increased substantially. Black students began to claim a stronger presence on campus, pushing for the creation of the African American Studies Department and the Afro-American Cultural Center — a cultural house that today sits just a stone’s throw away from the former Pierson “slave quarters.”

In 1970, Yale students and faculty members displayed overwhelming support for the May Day Riots. When tens of thousands arrived in New Haven to protest the trials of Black Panther Party members, Yale University President Kingman Brewster ’41 opened campus gates to the protesters.

The Pierson “slave quarters” lasted through all of this.

In 1980, Pierson residents plastered campus boards with posters advertising a “Bring a Slave” party. The word “slave” was crossed out and replaced by “friend.”

Members of the Black Student Alliance at Yale protested the “racist” language of the posters, and Smith, who served as master of Pierson from 1972 to 1981, called a meeting of the Pierson College Council. It was decided that the term “slave quarters” would be officially abolished and the southeastern courtyard would be renamed “Lower Court.”

“I want to emphasize that no one in Pierson ever used the nickname with intent to cause ill feeling,” Smith was quoted saying in an Oct. 9, 1980 News article.
At the time, BSAY representative Paul Butler said the “Bring a Slave” posters demonstrated “a severe lack of sensitivity,” breaking a promise from Yale’s social committees “to avoid throwing parties with themes that could potentially be construed as racist.”

But other Pierson students dismissed BSAY’s anger: “This epitomizes the oversensitivity of black groups,” one student said.

“I’m always going to call it the slave quarters,” said another. “My parents called it that.”

Most students, the News reported, “seemed to view the change with indifference.”

DEALING WITH ‘TAINTED HISTORIES’

The official name for the “slave quarters” is now “Rosenkranz Court.” The Pierson Slave is no longer in print. Pierson students compete as the “Pirates,” though no one really knows how the mascot came about. Nearly all the other college mascots are animals.

Though there are numerous references to the “slave quarters” in history books, Davis, the current Pierson master, had never heard of the nickname when he began his term last month.

“If it’s true, it’s appalling,” he said when he found out, seated in an armchair in the Pierson Master’s Office, his belongings still in boxes around the room. A black-and-white photograph of Abraham Lincoln rested against the fireplace, ready to be hung above the mantel.

Davis was surprised that the history of the “slave quarters” is so scarcely known. He wondered how to “unmask it” and relate it to a larger dialogue that would perhaps include other lesser-known Yale histories.

The issue of institutional memory is by no means simple, especially when it comes to so-called tainted histories. If it is generally agreed that universities like Yale should not erase chapters of their histories — even those that do not fit with current notions of political correctness and enlightened education ideals — then how should they acknowledge such histories?

Yale is not the only university with skeletons in the closet. In 2003, Brown’s president appointed a commission to investigate the college’s ties to slavery. The three-year process included “a revision of [the university’s] official history so that it presents a more complete picture of the origins of Brown,” and resulted in a 106-page report.

Brown’s official response attempted to address current social injustices along with past historical gaps. In 2007, the Brown Corporation endorsed a set of initiatives including the creation of a doctoral program in Africana Studies, a pledge to raise $10 million for Providence’s public schools and the formation of a Public Art committee to develop ideas for how the history of the Rhode Island slave trade “may gain its appropriate and permanent place in the public historical record.”

At Yale, a similar report was published in 2001, entitled “Yale, Slavery and Abolition.” It was written not by an official University committee but by three graduate students. The report alleged that the University had failed “to tell the full story of Yale’s relationship to slavery” and unearthed provocative information about various pro-slavery affiliates honored by Yale — including John C. Calhoun, the vocal advocate of slavery for whom Calhoun College is named. The report did not discuss the Pierson College “slave quarters” nickname.

The controversial report prompted the University to host a conference titled “Yale, New Haven and American Slavery” in September 2002.
Responses to the conference were mixed.

“It made for a wonderful discussion that lasted for all too short a time,” said R. Owen Williams LAW ’07 GRD ’09, a conference attendee, in a 2012 News article. Williams saw the conference as Yale’s way of “making the report go away” without ever intending to continue the dialogue.

Likewise, Holloway saw the conference as a “missed opportunity” to establish an ongoing public conversation about darker aspects of Yale’s history. When Holloway first heard about Pierson’s “slave quarters” in 2007 during committee meetings to discuss the naming of the two new residential colleges, the discussion occurred behind closed doors.

SPARKING AND SUSTAINING CONVERSATION
In recent years, dialogue about Yale and slavery has waxed and waned. At various moments over the past two decades, students have protested the namesakes of Yale’s residential colleges, eight of whom were slave owners. An anonymous campaign in 2009 posted fliers proposing new names for each college and chalked walkways with the phrase “Emancipate Yale.”

More recent discussion has focused on several stained-glass windows in various campus buildings that depict scenes of slavery: Should Yale remove them for their stereotypical qualities or preserve them as historical evidence of a bygone era in which racist artwork was socially acceptable?

Regarding the history of Pierson’s “slave quarters,” Smith said he was glad that Davis was ignorant of the nickname.

“It means the term has been suppressed,” he said.

Holloway said the only way to avoid amnesia about Yale’s ties to slavery is to “do it in a way that’s not fleeting.” He mentioned long-lasting initiatives like campus monuments or an endowed professorship as potential ways to construct a collective memory about this particular aspect of Yale’s history.

But for some students, this collective memory has always existed.

Many members of BSAY and other resident groups of the Af-Am House have known about the “slave quarters” since they came to Yale.

“It’s not news to anyone here,” said Okonta, the current BSAY president.

As Yale moves forward with long-lasting decisions, like the naming of the new residential colleges, Okonta hopes the University will make sure to look back at its past.

Pierson’s Master Davis considers dialogue about uncomfortable aspects of history like the “slave quarters” essential for understanding the problems society faces at present.

“Racism is not simply a matter of individual attitudes and actions: It also comes to expression through systemic abuses of power and destructive patterns of language usage,” he said in an email. “This is why remembering the past is so important even and especially when that past is not pretty.”