The Colver Lectureship & Publication Fund
About the Rev. Dr. Nathaniel Colver

By Susan BW Johnson

AN OVERVIEW

Nathaniel Colver was a nineteenth-century Northern Baptist pastor, reformer, and educator, serving for over fifty years in churches, missions, and seminaries across the U.S. in the states of Vermont, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, and Virginia. An avowed abolitionist, Colver’s eloquent and compelling oratory influenced not only his congregations but the public. His opposition to slavery and to secret societies such as Freemasonry, the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, and Ku Klux Klan, provoked public confrontation and threats of violence as he worked, but his unflinching calm and undeniable persuasiveness overwhelmed his detractors and his enemies. Unphased by antagonists, he appreciated opposition as an opportunity to further hone his argument. As a committed Baptist, Colver cherished free speech and free assembly, and actively supported free seats (in church). His biographer and contemporary, Justin Almerin Smith, wrote of him:

“In his intellectual and moral temper, he was a radical. Not an extremist, for an extremist never knows when or where to stop. Dr. Colver did know. But in that sense of the word “radical” which assigns it to one who applies the axe of reform to “the root” of all evil trees, he was a radical. There was a time when to the great majority, probably, of those who knew him, he seemed simply an agitator. There came a time when that sort of agitation became a great national movement, and when
the minority had itself grown to the be overwhelming majority. What would be of the world if there were no such men? If conservatives succeed in gaining forgiveness, at the last, for their own slowness, may they not, in return, well afford to forgive those who once seemed too fast?" 1

Indeed, Colver was a man on fire, often giving three or four sermons a week. At once obedient to his calling and his conscience, he was as itinerant as he was passionate. Between his ordination in 1819 and his death in 1870, he held over a dozen different positions in ministry and teaching, sometimes two at a time, in nine states. Referred to as a “missionary” in his work with anti-slavery societies, his life resembled even more that of an antebellum prophet, preaching repentance and a “circumcision of the heart.” 2 Though he scarcely put down roots, he evidenced such character and charisma that his connection with people was immediate and profound. He was consistently remembered as unpretentious and sincere, possessing both a plain-spokenness that engendered trust and a riveting command of scripture.

PERSONAL LIFE

Nathaniel Colver was born to Rev. Nathaniel Colver, Sr., and Esther Dean Colver on May 10, 1794, in Orwell, Vermont, one of eleven children. In 1796, the family moved to Champlain, New York. The son of a pastor, the younger Nathaniel worked the family farm with his siblings and had only two winters of formal school training. At age fifteen, he was sent ahead of the family to West Stockbridge, Massachusetts where his family then moved. As a child he experienced the deaths of two brothers by accident and illness. Upon the outbreak of the War of 1812, at age 21, Nathaniel volunteered in the militia to protect New York, but saw no fighting and instead made shoes for the soldiers.

After a conversion experience on an overnight in the forest following the war, Nathaniel declined the offer of financial support to earn a law degree. On April 27, 1815, he married Sally Clark. Writing to his brother Phineas Colver in Swanton, Vermont, who was an established pastor and a decade older, Nathaniel professed a call to ministry. He was baptized on June 9, 1817, already outspoken on the issue of slavery and given to public oration on the subject. He was ordained in West Clarendon, Vermont, in 1819, where their first son was born. He began his first pastorate at Fort Covington, New York, in 1820, where his wife gave birth to two more sons, Phineas Clark Colver and Charles Kendrick Colver. His wife died three months after their daughter’s birth in 1824, and their infant daughter died that same year. One year after his wife’s death Colver married Sarah Carter of Plattsburgh, New York in 1825.

ANTI-MASONRY

In Fort Covington, Colver was invited to become a Mason by a church member who believed it would aid his ministry, however Colver later renounced Masonic membership as inconsistent
with Christianity when he was asked to swear an oath “to conceal the secrets of a brother…murder and treason not excepted.” When threatened with violence, he published his renunciation in the local press:

“I believe [Freemasonry] is a moral evil in that its specious ceremonies are licentious and profane; and so far as there is weight in them, they rob its votaries of the inalienable rights of man. In its titles and degrees, it is highly profane and blasphemous. I believe that it is a political evil in that like the silent leech it sucks the very lifeblood of civil justice, and palsies the executive arm of lawful authority, by carrying in many instances a secret though successful influence into the bar, upon the bench, and into the jury-room.” 3

Colver continued to speak out against allegiance to secret societies, and on three separate occasions during pastorates in New York State, received an anonymous death threat by mail, was threatened with an axe when walking to a church member’s home, and was mobbed by men with chains at a public meeting. Throughout his life, Colver would continue to express his deep concern that clergy were “drifting toward excessive regard for mere theological systems, upon the one hand, and toward loose popular tendencies upon the other,” 4 presaging the vision of his colleague William Rainey Harper who felt that only an independent research divinity school and University could counteract current trends in American Christianity.5

### ANTI-SLAVERY AND ABOLITION MOVEMENTS

Colver’s anti-Masonry convictions set him apart in the Northeast as a passionate idealist and a courageous reformer. Over the next several years, he sharpened his rhetorical skills denouncing fidelity to secret orders. Then, while pastor of a church in Union Village, New York, in 1831 Colver made a trip to Washington, D.C. that changed the trajectory of his life and ministry, witnessing firsthand the system of slavery he so abhorred:

“I saw an old man, with gray hair and tottering limbs, going down Pennsylvania avenue, hobbling upon his crutches as fast as he could, weeping and lamenting, trying to catch a glimpse of his lost child, sold to the soul-drivers, and now bound for the rice-swamps of the South, and saying, ‘They promised me [my son] should never be taken from me, but they’ve sold him, and I shall never see him again!’ I could stand it no longer. I hated a system which thus rioted in blood and in broken hearts.” 6

In 1837, he wrote to a dear clergy friend who had been called to a church in South Carolina:

“Do read the slave laws of South Carolina and ask yourself, as in the presence of Him before whose altar you have sworn to teach all the truth and rebuke all sin, if you can go and minister to a church who support such a system of outrage, such an attempt at the annihilation of God’s image in the person
of the doomed slave...He who quietly holds a slave under the laws of South Carolina is guilty of sustaining a system of iniquity, of sustaining a system of law which puts in the power of any slaveholder to despoil all the ties of consanguinity, the virtue, even the life, of his slave with impunity.”

In 1838, Colver spent much of the year on a lecture circuit throughout New England for the American Anti-Slavery Society. He found the rights of free speech and assembly dangerously compromised by a kind of “mob-law” in which anti-slavery speakers were routinely attacked by unrestrained popular violence. In one case, a Baptist house of worship in Connecticut, where he had been speaking, was blown up with gunpowder. In other locations, rioters threw stones through windows where he spoke, and abused him verbally throughout the lecture. Smith attests that “Colver bore himself amidst these scenes with characteristic steadiness; always maintaining his dignity, and often quelling riotous proceedings through the mere ascendency of his strong will and unblenching courage.” He was nevertheless successful in founding numerous anti-slavery societies.

That same year, Colver was introduced to Timothy Gilbert, a renowned abolitionist leader in Boston, who pledged to organize an anti-slavery Baptist church in Boston if Colver would agree to become the pastor. The church was organized in 1839 and, as Tremont Temple, was dedicated 1843. The Boston Daily Mail said of Colver, “He is no time-server. He preaches for eternity. There is no half-work about him. He cries aloud and spares not.” Abolitionism was in fact unpopular in Boston; even anti-slavery sympathizers deemed abolition talk “low” and “vulgar.” But Colver refused any gentler identification of himself as “anti-slavery” or a “free soiler,” and instead embraced being called an abolitionist.

By April 1840, the American Baptist Antislavery Convention advocated a disavowal of fellowship with slaveholders, but that June, Colver and several other New England Baptists, including Rev. Elon Galusha, Wendell Phillips, and William Lloyd Garrison, attended the World Anti-slavery Convention in London, England. Colver supported withdrawing fellowship, but dissuaded the convention from resolving that a slaveholder could not be a Christian. It was not long before such finely tuned relations foundered.

The American Baptist Antislavery Society Convention was held at Tremont Temple in May 1841, and Colver put forward the radical resolution that slavery was not just evil, but a sin: “That slavery has no analogy in servitude tolerated in the Bible, but that in origin and continuance, it is defined in the law of man-stealing, and with whatever mitigating circumstances it may be attended, it is a sin against God,” adding that “[s]lavery has a spirit, and that spirit stops not at the subjugation of the helpless captive to its domination, but claims to wield our benevolent associations as instruments of its power, to cripple energies of the churches, to chain its abominations to their com-
munion, and to secure for itself a quiet retreat under the folds of the Church of God.” Southern Baptists in the U.S. formed a separate Convention, Northern Baptists refused to allow Southern Baptists to serve as missionaries in 1845, and in 1853 Colver moved from Boston to the First Baptist Church of Detroit, along the freedom path to Windsor, Canada. He stayed four years, until the death of his youngest child, Sarah, to cholera.

EDUCATIONAL MINISTRY

In 1856 Colver was called to Cincinnati, where he became involved with Fairmont Theological Seminary, which would soon fold into Granville College (now Denison University). Colver’s thoughts on preaching had matured into convictions regarding thoughtful attention to the biblical text, and he enjoyed offering classes in preaching. Cincinnati, however, was on the border between slaveholding and free states, and he just as quickly became involved in the abolitionist cause there. He offered a series of Sunday evening lectures on “Slavery as a Sin” and packed the church. It was in Cincinnati that a heckler responded to Colver’s position that the Fugitive Slave Law was against the laws of God, shouting, “That is nothing but rank treason!” Colver resolutely replied, “Treason to the devil is loyalty to God!” That year Colver was awarded the degree of Doctor of Divinity by Granville College.

Colver had watched as the Kansas-Nebraska Bill was introduced in Congress in 1854, and in 1859 wrote to the Governor of Virginia following the attack on Harpers Ferry in attempt to save John Brown’s life. In 1861, with civil war all but inevitable, Colver accepted the invitation of the church in the town of Woodstock, Illinois, where he had a farm. Upon his arrival, however, Chicago Baptists who knew his reputation as an anti-slavery reformer and orator, implored him to come to their teeming and only twenty-five-year-old city. There he accepted the call to the Tabernacle Church, and was very quickly swept up into a Baptist movement to establish a theological seminary “in the West,” a quest which had begun in 1859.

The Baptist Theological Union was officially organized in 1861 and was incorporated as an educational organization in 1863. Colver’s signature appears first on the BTU’s Charter, and he began teaching its students in 1865. The next year a second professor had also been hired and they began to use classroom space at the fledgling first University of Chicago, which had been founded by an overlapping group of Baptists a decade earlier. That same year, the BTU accepted a gift of land and cash from Samuel Colgate and voted to move their seminary away from the University to Morgan Park, Illinois, on Chicago’s southern border.

In 1867, Rev. Colver left Chicago quite suddenly at the behest of the National Baptist Theological Institute, formed by the American Baptist Home Mission Society, in Washington D.C. He had been called to establish a theological institute for Freed Men, so that they
could pastor their own churches and lead their people. Up to that point, so called “African churches” were required by their own constitutions to have white male clergy. Colver himself described the situation as dire, with congregations of freed slaves led by their former enslavers: “I cannot rest. I have got my drowning man out of the water and he will freeze to death, if I do not go to him.” He and fellow educator, Rev. Dr. Charles Corey, went immediately to scout a location, and chose Richmond, Virginia as the site for the school.

In April 1867 Rev. Colver preached at the First African Baptist Church, where thirty-five years prior he had candidated when it was a white church, a call he then declined because Virginia was a slaveholding state. It was there that he and Rev. Corey met Mary Lumpkin. Mary was a former slave who had become the wife of Robert Lumpkin, one of the most notorious slavers in Virginia. Mary and her children, whose complexions were quite light, had been sent North to escape enslavement and for formal education. But in 1866, she was widowed and returned to Richmond, where she had become the owner of the former “Lumpkin’s jail,” a slave pen owned by her deceased husband where slaves in Richmond were warehoused and abused before sale. A member of the First African Baptist Church, she heard Dr. Colver and Dr. Corey speak to a crowd about their need for a building in which to establish their theological institute. For $1000, she offered them Lumpkin’s jail. Later, after Colver had left, the school was able to relocate to the old United States Hotel on lower Main Street.

Of Colver’s teaching method, Smith wrote that he devoted himself entirely to his students’ need in the conduct of ministry. He utilized Paul’s Letter to the Romans as the outline for his lectures, “adapting his method of teaching to the capacity and development of his pupils. Without offending them by making his communications too childish, he still brought himself to their level, gradually lifting them back towards his own.” He was deeply loved and the Institute was initially known as Colver Institute. Colver’s health was not good, and he was joined in his efforts by his remaining daughter and one of his sons.

In 1868, Colver’s wife in Chicago became ill. He arrived in Chicago for her death and burial, returning to Richmond until his own health failed in 1869. By that time, the school had 40 students and taught courses in theology and preaching, but also written English, Greek, Latin and mathematics. In his last year, he engaged in a year-long fundraising trip for the Institute across New York and New England, returning to Chicago shortly before his death in 1870. The Pastor of the First African Baptist Church of Richmond, Rev. James H. Holmes, eulogized Colver, telling a story which revealed that his love for the freed men and women was so ardent that it made them wary at first. But Holmes, an early student of Colver’s, recalled how he and his family had lived with Colver in those years. In the evenings, Colver would take their young son on his lap, rock
him to sleep, and place him on his own bed. He impressed upon his listeners that Colver worked for their freedom and treasured their dignity. Over the next eighty years, over 450 pastors were trained at the Colver Institute, later renamed the Richmond Institute, which would eventually merge with Wayland Seminary and become Virginia Union University.

**FOLLOWING COLVER’S DEATH**

The American Baptist Home Mission Society had sponsored theological education for freed people beginning in 1865 at the Colver Institute in Richmond, Wayland Seminary in Washington D.C., and the Augusta Institute in Atlanta. In 1886, the Colver Institute had grown significantly and was renamed Richmond Theological Seminary. A little over a decade later, Wayland Seminary and Richmond Theological Institute merged to become Virginia Union University, while the Augusta Institute became part of Morehouse College. Meanwhile, back in Chicago, the first University of Chicago (later called the Old University of Chicago), was rendered bankrupt in 1885. Though the Baptist Theological Union Seminary remained separate and financially solid, they grieved the loss of a Baptist University. It was then, through the vision of the BTU’s former Old Testament professor William Rainey Harper and the financial support of abolitionist and philanthropist John D. Rockefeller, that the new University was formed, with the BTU seminary as its Divinity School and the BTU as the trustees and benefactors of the University’s Divinity School.

**NOTES**

Susan BW Johnson is an alumna of the University of Chicago Divinity School and a trustee of the Baptist Theological Union.

2 Taken from Romans 2:25-29. Colver developed a curriculum for teaching preaching, which he used in Cincinnati, Chicago and Richmond, was based on the *Letter to the Romans*.
3 Ibid., p. 78.
4 Ibid. p. 222.
6 Smith. op. cit. p. 124.
7 Ibid. p. 117.
8 Ibid. p. 128.
9 Ibid. p. 133.
10 Ibid. p. 227.
11 Ibid. p. 177.
12 Ibid. p. 163-5.
13 Ibid. p. 229.
15 Smith. op cit. p. 271
About the Lectureship & Publication Fund

THE DONORS

In 1915, Susan Esther Colver Rosenberger, granddaughter of Nathaniel Colver, and her husband Jesse L. Rosenberger, donated Nathaniel Colver’s homestead in Woodstock, Illinois to the University of Chicago. (Ms. Rosenberger was the daughter of Nathaniel Colver’s son Charles Kendrick Colver, who taught at Shimer College in Mt. Carroll, Illinois). The Rosenbergers had met while both were students at the Old University of Chicago. Ms. Rosenberger was able to complete her bachelor’s and master’s degrees before the University went into bankruptcy, however Mr. Rosenberger was forced to finish his bachelor’s at the University of Rochester (New York). He subsequently earned a law degree at the Chicago College of Law at Lake Forest University.

THE GIFT INTENT

The Rosenbergers made multiple gifts to the University of Chicago. The sale of her grandfather’s property endowed the Nathaniel Colver Lectureship and Publication Fund. The Fund gift letter stipulates that the Fund be:

“permanently maintained [as endowment], the income from which, or any portion therefore not added to the principal, to be used to defray expenses of lectures or lecture courses to be known as the ‘Nathaniel Colver Lectures,’ to be given from time to time by persons of eminent scholarship or other special qualification, on religious, biblical or moral, sociological, or other vital subjects, preferably in or in connection with the Divinity School…[A]vailable money will be used to publish a book from lectures previously delivered…and any of the net income not used added to the principal of the endowment, ‘which may be permitted to grow to any size that your Board may deem best.’” 16

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16 BTU Endowment, internal report provided by the University of Chicago, 1994.
UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO DIVINITY SCHOOL

The University of Chicago Divinity School is dedicated to the critical study of religion as a category and the religions of the world, their history, beliefs, and practices. The Divinity School advances the study of religion with the conviction that doing so not only enriches various publics but is of critical importance to our understanding of human societies both past and present. Recognized as one of the world’s leading institutions in the academic study of religion, the Divinity School brings together – and indeed has pioneered – multiple perspectives on and varied theoretical approaches to religion.

The School is a community of learning in which reasoned inquiry about religion informs various kinds of professional formation: that of undergraduates for a lifetime of critical engagement with religion in all its manifestations, of master’s and doctoral students for careers of scholarship and teaching, and of ministry students for careers of public religious leadership and service.

BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL UNION

The Baptist Theological Union (BTU) is an independent educational endowment dedicated to the support of the University of Chicago Divinity School. Organized in 1863, the BTU established a theological school in 1865, hiring the charismatic Baptist and abolitionist, Dr. Nathaniel Colver, as its first professor. John D. Rockefeller, also a Baptist and a steadfast abolitionist, became a generous benefactor of the school.

In 1890, a young former BTU professor and educational visionary, William Rainey Harper, approached Rockefeller with the radical vision of a school that would bring together rigorous theological inquiry, preparation for ministry, and the academic study of religion within an independent research university. In keeping with the Baptist “free church” tradition of freedom of religion, thought, inquiry and conscience, Rockefeller agreed to provide funds to establish the University with Harper as its first President and the BTU theological school as its Divinity School.
Rockefeller stipulated that the BTU Board of Trustees continue to govern the Divinity School. The BTU Board of Trustees remains Baptist, managing a significant independent endowment and preserving the BTU’s historic commitment to rigorous intellectual and personal freedom.
The 2023 Colver Lecture is presented in partnership with the University of Chicago Divinity School and the Proctor School of Theology of Virginia Union University. The lecture has also received support from The Divinity School’s Martin Marty Center for the Public Understanding of Religion.