

Unearthing our Roots

The Legacy of Tufts Overlooked Histories

By Eden Weissman

Tisch Library often teems with familiar sights: rows and rows of seemingly endless books, printers on overdrive, and students huddled around a whiteboard or table, trying to cram in last-minute studying. But walk into the main floor of the library this semester, and your eye will be caught by a new addition: six green placards lining the entrance, accompanied by a historical image of College Avenue. Part of the new *Deep Roots* exhibit at Tufts, which debuted early last November, these materials cast light on the under-discussed lives that are embedded within Tufts' history.

The exhibit highlights some of the first BIPOC students at Tufts' various undergraduate and graduate schools, and was created from research led by the Slavery, Colonialism, and Their Legacies Project (SCL). The SCL, founded in 2022, is a joint effort between the Center for the Study of Race and Democracy, the Center for the Humanities at Tufts, and the Tufts Archival Research Center (TARC), to better examine Tufts' historical relationship with the African-American and Afro-Native communities of Somerville and West Medford. The initiative also aims to explore and unpack the university's broader entanglement with the slave trade and colonialism in Massachusetts. Built upon the research of previous Tufts scholars, exhibitions like *Deep Roots* are asking us an urgent question: how can elite institutions grapple with the recognition of their painfully unjust pasts, while still highlighting the former BIPOC students who contributed to the university's history?

The SCL and its programs are grounded in examining both national

and local history in relation to Tufts. John Hannegan, the SCL Project Manager at TARC, said that "In the past year and a half, [The SCL] has been pretty committed to our stated goals of investigating [Tufts'] ties to the slave trade and slavery both in America. [We've been] researching the connections between Tufts and the communities around here, [including] Charlestown, Somerville, Arlington, Medford, as well as looking into the long presence of African descendant students on campus, which is what led us to the exhibit."

Speaking specifically to how *Deep Roots* fits within the SCL's history, Dan Santamaria, the Director of TARC, said that while "The [SCL] formally started in Fall 2023... the concept really dates back to around 2016, when there was a lot of activity around public history, and [especially] the history of Black students at Tufts." Santamaria explained that, at that time, TARC had acquired the papers of Gerald Gill, a former professor of History at Tufts who completed a significant amount of research on Black student life at Tufts throughout the 20th century.

The *Deep Roots* exhibit is the first to be displayed on campus that uses extensive research from the SCL Project and TARC, although previous exhibits have highlighted similar themes. The *Another Light on the Hill* exhibit, which was first displayed in 1988 and is now on permanent display in Ballou Hall, showcases Black Tufts alumni throughout the 20th century. For *Deep Roots*, Hannegan said that "We knew we wanted to do an exhibit that would help launch the SCL initiative to the university at large, and given the connection to Gerald Gill's work... we

thought it was real easy to highlight some of the research we've done in discovering all these additional students of color."

When it came to synthesizing the research for the exhibit, TARC relied on both in-house materials as well as research completed by students in the Slavery and Tufts Archival Research Seminar. The seminar is part of the SCL's programming, and is held each semester to give interested students a chance to participate in archival research of topics related to the SCL's research goals. Hannegan noted how "One of the fruits of the first semester [that] we taught the course was the rediscovery of Drue King, one of the early Black students at the [Tufts] Medical School," which resulted from a student's efforts to reconstruct his life during the seminar. "We really wanted to make sure we highlighted that in the exhibit as well."

The range of showcased students is part of an effort to ensure the exhibit resonates with different parts of Tufts' student body. "We wanted to choose students that went to different schools at Tufts [as well as] students that represent the broad spectrum of racial and ethnic backgrounds that we're researching," Hannegan said. "We highlighted students that are Black, students that are Afro-Native, one student [that] came from Puerto Rico. We were really trying to be as broad as possible."

Jaiden Mosley, a senior who participated in the Slavery and Tufts seminar in Fall 2024, said that it was "the first class I had about Tufts and its relationship to slavery, and also its relationship to the indigenous people of the area, like the Wampanoag." Mosley explained that each student in the seminar



“the first class I had about Tufts and its relationship to slavery, and also its relationship to the indigenous people of the area, like the Wampanoag.” Mosley explained that each student in the seminar had the opportunity to do further research into former Tufts students that SCL had already identified within the archives. For his part, Mosley focused on the relationship between two of the first Black undergraduate students at Tufts, one of whom, Charles Sumner Wilson, is featured in the exhibit’s placards.

Mosley particularly appreciated how *Deep Roots* foregrounded that sections of Tufts’ campus were the former property of a slave owner, Isaac Royall, in the 1700s. The land that houses the Collaborative Learning and Innovation Center at 574 Boston Avenue, put into use by Tufts in 2015 as part of an expansion of campus, was formerly a part of Royall’s 600-acre slave plantation, Ten Hill Farms. “Not a lot of people fully grasp that [part of] campus... sits on sacred ground for Native Americans, and used to be a slave plantation,” Mosley said. By highlighting individual stories alongside geographic analysis, *Deep Roots* creates a continuity between the land that Tufts sits on and the students that helped shape campus history.

Elizabeth Strehle, a senior at Tufts who grew up in the Boston area, also noted how the lives that the exhibit highlighted allowed her to get a better sense of Black history within Boston. “I was very impressed by the work that went into [the exhibit],” she said. “I know that archival research isn’t easy, and coming from the Boston area, we don’t really learn a lot about local Black history here. It was nice to read about Black students at Tufts and their contributions to the greater Boston area as well.”

Strehle highlighted one placard in particular that focused on Jesse Gideon Garnett, who was the first Black woman to earn a medical degree from the Tufts School of Dental Medicine. However, “because Boston was so segregated... she wasn’t even able to practice in a hospital, [and] had to do it out of her own home, which I imagine was very exhausting and required a lot of patience,” Strehle said. In telling these types of stories, the exhibit shines light on Boston’s own history of segregationist policies. “Boston is so well regarded for its... hospitals... but there is a very long history of segregation up here as well, and that extends to the medical field, which really still isn’t confronted today.” Garnett’s story shows how *Deep*

Roots manages to both spotlight the achievements of the first BIPOC students at Tufts, as well as situate their lives in contexts of structurally racist policymaking.

Looking forward, Hannegan said TARC will use a number of different avenues to expand the findings of *Deep Roots*. “We’re working right now on the digital component of the *Deep Roots* exhibit that will go up on the website and that will have more expansive research,” he said. “Even since we put the [physical] exhibit up, we have found new information about some of these individuals... that is going to be exciting to be able to share in the future.”

Santamaria added that, in the next year or so, there will likely be a more extensive website online that speaks to the goals of the SCL and some of the project’s findings beyond *Deep Roots*. Ultimately, he sees the SCL’s research as much needed due to the specificities of Tufts’ history. “Tufts was founded in 1852, which is much later than [other universities in the Northeast] where there’s a very direct, clear connection to the Transatlantic slave trade,” he said. “We... feel like that makes [the SCL] a more compelling project. It’s a more complex and nuanced story to tell.”