

James Hillhouse Commemorative Events, September 2001

The Amistad Committee, which administers the Connecticut Freedom Trail, has proposed designating the grave of James Hillhouse as a site on the Trail. I would like to propose that a commemorative event be held during September 2001, Freedom Trail Month, as part of the Yale Tercentennial Celebration. This event could include a dedication ceremony at the gravesite, a public forum on "James Hillhouse and his World," a moveable exhibit of Hillhouse letters and memorabilia from the Yale Manuscripts and Archives collection, and a reception for Hillhouse High School students and alumni at Stiles and Morse Colleges, the site of the old Hillhouse building.

James Hillhouse (1754-1832; Yale College 1773) was one of the towering figures of New Haven and Yale history. Known as "the Sachem," he commanded the Governor's foot guard when New Haven was invaded by the British, planted the elm trees that made New Haven the Elm City, and created Grove Street Cemetery, the first landscaped cemetery in the United States. He served as the secretary of Yale for fifty years, from 1782 to 1832; and was the first commissioner of the Farmington-New Haven Canal. One of Hillhouse's most important, but least-remembered roles, however, was that of the antislavery leader of the U.S. Congress in the early days of the republic.

As early as 1799, Senator Hillhouse served on a committee to investigate the ending of the slave trade, which he helped to pass at the earliest constitutionally-authorized moment. After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Hillhouse fought to bar the importation of slaves into the Louisiana Territory. "I consider slavery as a serious evil," he proclaimed, "and wish to check it wherever I have authority." Two of Hillhouse's amendments restricting slavery actually passed the Congress and were signed into law. Although the stiffest restrictions did not pass, the historian Don Fehrenbacher asserts that "the magnitude of [Hillhouse's] effort ought to be recognized." His amendments constituted "the strongest antislavery restriction imposed on any portion of the Deep South between 1735 and 1865." Proslavery forces soon overwhelmed Hillhouse's restrictions, however, and the Louisiana Territory became the heartland of the cotton explosion, embedding slavery inextricably into the fabric of the nation.

Hillhouse continued his antislavery crusade throughout his senate career. In 1808, he introduced a series of constitutional amendments designed to limit the political power of the slaveholding South. Even after his retirement from the Senate, he continued his outspoken opposition to slavery. During the Missouri controversy of 1819-21, he circulated an attack on the institution that was so blistering that his colleagues in Washington warned that it might incite Southern representatives to disunion.

Throughout his life, Hillhouse maintained strong ties with New Haven's black community. He was a strong supporter of William Lanson, the African American builder of Long Wharf and the New Haven section of the Farmington Canal. Hillhouse passed his legacy of philanthropy to his daughter Mary, who established the Goffe Street School for Colored Children in 1865.

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