

## **Jonathan D. Wegner**

### **Swift 101 Lecture**

I would like to thank you all for attending tonight. Thanks to Miriam Attia and the Divinity Students Association for handling the logistics and publishing where and when this talk would be held. Special thanks to members and professors at the Divinity School who have constructively dialogued with me about aspects of the issues under consideration this evening. Tonight is a testament to the weighty intellectual, moral, even religious matters that a commitment to principles of Diversity and Inclusion poses for us as a community.

A little less than a year and a half ago, I discovered that I, despite originally being from Chicago, had been living largely unaware of our University's regrettable history of racial segregation and economic discrimination. To my surprise, I learned after mentioning this history to fellow PhD students and professors, not all Div, that a significant number of them were as unfamiliar with it as I was. I offer what follows on the belief that knowing this history, and knowing the place wherein one exists, is essential to a commitment to the life of the mind. I do not claim that what follows is anything close to a comprehensive account of our shared University's regrettable history of racial discrimination and its persistent effects and afterlives. The amount of research I have done suggests otherwise. But I hope that it is the start of greater acknowledgement and dialogue on the part of us all about this obscured, even elided, part of our history. Many of us attend this University and/or live in its surrounding neighborhood, so I trust that the content could not be more immediately relevant. Finally, I emphasize that I am not an Americanist of any kind, and that nearly all the the alleged points of fact on which my remarks are based rely heavily, first and foremost, on the work of Richard Rothstein, author of the recent critically acclaimed book *The Color of Law*, and a chapter titled "A neighborhood on a hill: Hyde Park and the University of Chicago" from Arnold R. Hirsch's classic monograph, *Making the Second Ghetto*. A little bit of what I have to say is based on one personal consultation with the special collections on our University's history at the Regenstein Library.

A useful starting point into tonight's discussion is the exhibit essay titled "Harold H. Swift and the Swift Family" sponsored by our University Library. It is an influential essay affecting the public memory of Harold H. Swift and our University's adjacent history. A simple Google search of the name "Harold H. Swift" reveals that it is one of the very first pages, if not the first, to be generated by the internet. Universities are of course, to a fair extent, quite literally, built through its donors, and naturally enough, the piece emphasizes the historic importance of Harold H. Swift on this point. Now Harold was one of the many children of the famous Gustavus Franklin Swift, the tycoon of an immensely lucrative meat-packing empire. Harold graduated from the University of Chicago with a Bachelor of Philosophy degree in 1907. He was for a period Chairman of the Board of Swift Meats, but he was unquestionably more devoted to our University. Our Library's online essay fondly recalls Harold's "generosity", which involved successfully and emphatically encouraging his other family members, also Swift rich, to help fund and found some of the buildings, the library, our collections, professorships, and other of the basic stuff of our robust University.

One particularly curious Swift related set of collections are those housed in the Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center. There one can find the so-called Harold Swift Papers of 1897-1962. As the name suggests, they are a collection of documents from Harold H. Swift spanning that period, mostly during his time as Chairman of the Board of Trustees from 1922-1949. Moreover, one can also find in the Research Center a collection of official papers on buildings documenting the administrative origins of campus buildings. After looking over the ones on Swift Hall, I must say that it is impossible to understand the making of the Divinity School building, Swift Hall, apart from Harold Swift, as, in fact, the building's name already suggests. Harold Swift and his older brother Charles officially supplied hundreds of thousands of dollars for the development of the Divinity School's Main Building; when additional funds were required, Harold Swift sent a check of \$35, 000 to the University, a gift jointly funded by the children of Ann M. Swift, Harold's mother whom Swift Hall now also commemorates. Harold Swift received special thanks from the University for his role in the construction and successful completion of the Theology Building, as it was

once called. Furthermore, as Chair, Harold was not only crucial to the formative planning and administration of the Theology Building, but also Bond Chapel and this Cloister.

This incredible level of involvement in the University by Harold Swift was born out of his deep sense of ownership of the University. As the Library essay states from the outset, he would refer to the University as his very own: “Swift was deeply devoted to *‘his school,’* a commitment he demonstrated time and again by means of anonymous contributions. His devotion seems to have consumed his life: he was a life-long bachelor, he never developed deep social relationships beyond his family. His true love was the University, which inspired him to mobilize and channel the family’s money on behalf of “his school”. The historian Dorothy V. Jones characterized Swift as manifesting a powerful sense of proprietorship toward the institution;<sup>1</sup> and as Chairman, he personally believed that he had the responsibility to “understand and interpret the institution to the public.”

After warmly recalling the many contributions Harold Swift made to the University’s literary collections, the Library essay then concludingly lauds him as an exemplary figure. Harold, we are told, was a worthy successor to “heroic early donors” like Hutchinson, Reyerson, and Rockefeller. It alleges that he showed the “determination” and, get this, “courage” to “launch the new University”. Now, it is evidently something of a commonplace to think of Swift as a sort of virtuous founder even beyond esteemed universities. In January of 2020, an article appeared in *bizjournals.com* titled “How one man’s passion for purpose changed the University of Chicago”. The author seeks to draw lessons from Harold Swift’s allegedly inspiring life for leadership, concisely tracing much of the same ground as our own fawning and tendentious Library piece. Now, as all of you surely have begun to suspect, I feel epistemically obligated to introduce points of fact and historical scholarship that forcefully militate against this incomplete and sanitized remembrance of the founding Harold Swift. Indeed, as a PhD Divinity student, who works alongside and teaches future religious leaders, I should say I feel morally compelled as well. The matters I now

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<sup>1</sup> *Harold Swift and the Higher Learning*

turn to address are the very ones I discovered that I and so many of us at the Divinity School (and beyond), were largely ignorant of, matters which must concern us, united as we are by a covenant to the truth, and by our common pursuit to foster a truly inclusive environment for all.

In the 30's and 40's, a span of time within Harold's 27 year tenure as Chairman of the Board of Trustees here, our academic home systematically endeavored to bar local African-Americans off from migrating and living around our University. African-American efforts to occupy areas like the Washington park subdivision triggered fear of what was then commonly termed, even in administrative circles, "Negro invasion"; and in response, our Univeristy undertook bold action. Rothstein helpfully summarizes the activities our academic home engaged in (pg. 105), such as organizing and guiding property owners' associations committed to barring African-American families from moving nearby. According to Hirsch (pg. 145), whom I quote: "by 1944 the university counted among its 'accomplishments' the seven-year-delay in "the conversion of the Washington Park Subdivision from a white to a colored neighborhood', the eviction of 'three groups of Mexicans, and other persons considered unassimilable in the community,' and its services as "custodian of older restriction agreements and sponsor ... [of] new block restriction agreements".

As one could guess, University trustees played a determinative role in this unheroic history. Rothstein (pg. 145) points out that during this timeframe, the University of Chicago trustees, with Harold Swift as presiding Chairman, officially supported Robert Maynard Hutchins, then Chancellor, in ensuring neighborhoods around campus were racially segregated. Robert's father, William James Hutchins, then president of the famously interracial Berea College, counseled his son to reject the segregationist agenda, but was unsuccessful. When the University trustees and administration came under public criticism for utilizing racially restrictive covenants in 1937, Hutchins publicly defended them on the grounds that the University "must endeavor to stabilize its neighborhood as an area in which its students and faculty will be content to live," and as such it had the right to invoke and defend racially restrictive covenants (Hirsch p. 145). Hutchins openly maintained a staff of lawyers whose job it

was to sue African-Americans who moved nearby. Between 1933-1947 the University of Chicago spent around \$100,000 on legal services to defend racially restrictive covenants (Hirsch p. 145).

Another method used to establish residential segregation was to control the surrounding area by buying and rebuilding deteriorating property. Under Swift's tenure, per Hirsch's scholarship, the University administration in the 1940s managed to persuade the Board of Trustees to create a revolving fund of \$500,000 for rehabilitative area protection by taking them on a bus tour through "typically colored neighborhoods lying between the loop and campus" (Hirsch p. 147). Hirsch spotlights a verse, authored by Hutchins, that praises someone responsible for a "stabilizing" purchase of nearby property:

The Chancellor and the President gazed out across the park,  
 They laughed like anything to see that things were looking dark.  
 "Our Neighborhood," the Chancellor said, "once blossomed like the lily."  
 "Just seven coons with seven kids could knock our program silly."  
 "Forget it," said the president, "and thank the Lord for Willie" (Hirsch p. 147).

Now, this history is extremely disappointing, to say the least. Harold Swift, Hutchins, even the entire University, can objectively be said to have a strong history of explicitly and systematically perpetrating racial segregation around its neighborhood. As proposed at the outset, this is a history that calls for acknowledgement and democratic discussion by the Divinity School, the University, and its surrounding neighborhoods. Indeed, ultimately, this is a history that deserves the acknowledgement and attention of all the United States inasmuch as it is a small piece of a much bigger national history of racial apartheid. Although it is conventionally believed that government-supported, legal segregation is a mark distinguishing the US North from the South, this is simply untrue. As Hirsch, Rothstein, and others have persuasively demonstrated, the persistent racial-segregation in residence, between Blacks and Whites, is largely a consequence of the

decisive regulation of the US Government itself. During the Great Depression, the Public Works Administration consistently created Public Housing, on a racially segregated basis, separate and unequal. Even worse, from the 40's into the early 60's, as the federal government was massively suburbanizing the United States, it supported and subsidized the movement of its White working-class population into affordable, rapidly appreciating single-family homes. African Americans were prohibited from participating in this federal subsidy, and consequently continue to be deprived of a key source of intergenerational wealth accumulation. As members of this University, we must all vociferously object to the heroization of exploitative segregationists, especially when blatantly done in an academic space. And the responsibility falls on us as members of the University, at the Divinity school and elsewhere, to know about this national tragedy and proactively push the powerful to do something about it. As a very bare minimum, our Library's influential but lopsided essay merits a balanced amendment that acknowledges the complete nature and significance of Harold Swift's foundational involvement in racially segregating our University neighborhood.

I end on a related bit of overlooked history pertaining to the latter stages of Martin Luther King's life. As I hope many of us Divinity and University of Chicago members know, shortly after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Dr. King moved to Chicago, in North Lawndale on the city's Westside. King's northern movement was part of a protest against the intolerable living conditions quite characteristic of segregated Black Northern neighborhoods. King called for, quote, "the unconditional surrender of forces dedicated to the creation and maintenance of slums". One time, while King was about to lead a march to a realtor's office to demand that properties be not sold in a discriminatory fashion, a White mob of hundreds began to hurl bricks and other violent objects at him. Making it out alive, King gave the rather chilling remarks to reporters: "I've been in many demonstrations all across the South, but I can say that I have never seen, even in Mississippi and Alabama, mobs as hostile and as hate-filled as I'm seeing in Chicago." The Life of the Mind is not merely to know the Truth, which is its precondition, but by so knowing, to live out of what the truth demands.