Columbia

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Introduction

Columbia University stands among the oldest and most influential institutions of higher learning in the United States, its saga inseparably bound to the history of New York City and the development of the modern American university. Established in 1754 as King's College under the auspices of King George II and the Church of England, Columbia's original purpose was to provide a refined classical education to the youth of the Province of New York. Yet the university's journey from a modest cohort of eight students in a borrowed schoolhouse to an expansive and global research powerhouse is a reflection of the forces—political, social, cultural, and scientific—that have shaped both the city it calls home and the nation it serves.

This book aims to trace Columbia's story from its inception through the major epochs of its existence: from colonial foundation, through war and rebirth, to its evolution into a pioneering center of research and innovation. It is a history that mirrors the complexity of the American experience itself, marked by periods of tumult and conflict, renewal and expansion. Major events—such as the disruption caused by the Revolutionary War, the re-founding as Columbia College in a new republic, and the postwar transformation into Columbia University—each left indelible marks on the character and mission of the institution. The chapters that follow reveal not only the history of brick-and-mortar buildings, but also the evolution of ideas, pedagogy, and principles that have guided Columbia's rise.

Central to the narrative is Columbia's unique relationship with New York City—a dynamic, sometimes challenging, yet always generative interplay. The university has drawn continuous inspiration from its urban environment, integrated its teaching and research with the city's resources, and contributed to the cultural and intellectual life of New York. The migration to Morningside Heights in the nineteenth century and the monumental expansion into Manhattanville in the twenty-first are emblematic of Columbia's enduring connection with the city's pulse and future vision.

The story of Columbia is also a story of the people who shaped it: the presidents who steered its course through eras of opportunity and crisis; the faculty whose research has changed the way we think about the world; the students and alumni who have transformed disciplines, professions, and societies; and the communities with which Columbia has engaged, sometimes contentiously, always consequentially. Their collective impact can be seen in the university's remarkable roster of achievements, including leadership in scientific discovery, educational reform, and public service.

As Columbia enters its third century, it remains a leader among global research universities, committed to advancing knowledge, addressing the world's grand

challenges, and serving an increasingly diverse and international student body. Its legacy is not merely historical but living—embodied in the daily pursuits of teaching, scholarship, and public engagement.

In telling the story of this great American university, this book endeavors not only to chronicle its institutional milestones, but also to delve into the spirit of curiosity, resilience, and aspiration that continues to animate Columbia and the generations who call it home.

CHAPTER ONE: Origins in Colonial New York: The Birth of King's College

The idea of a college in the Province of New York was a long-simmering one, dating back to the early 18th century. Initial appeals for a university to the Church of England in 1704, however, proved fruitless. The colony, a vibrant and diverse tapestry of ethnicities and religions, was a melting pot, and establishing a singular institution of higher learning was bound to be a contentious affair. It wasn't until 1751 that concerted efforts, primarily through funds raised by the Church of England, began to solidify the dream of a college in New York City.

The journey to King's College was far from a straightforward academic endeavor; it was deeply entangled with the political and religious currents of colonial America. The desire for a local institution was clear, especially with the rise of other colonial colleges like the Presbyterian College of New Jersey (later Princeton University), which drew aspiring scholars away from New York. This competitive landscape fueled the urgency among New York's proponents for their own college.

On October 31, 1754, the vision finally materialized with a royal charter from King George II, officially establishing "King's College in the Province of New York, in the City of New York." This act marked a significant milestone, making it the oldest institution of higher learning in New York State and the fifth oldest in the United States. The name itself, "King's College," immediately signaled its allegiance to the British Crown, a fact that would become a source of both prestige and profound controversy.

The selection of a leader for this fledgling institution was critical. The choice fell upon Samuel Johnson, an Anglican priest and a prominent scholar. Johnson, who had even been considered to preside over the College of Philadelphia (now the University of Pennsylvania), brought a gravitas and intellectual rigor to the nascent college. His commitment to a classical education, combined with a broader study of science, would shape the early curriculum.

In July 1754, King's College opened its doors for the first time, though perhaps "doors" is too grand a word for the humble setting. Classes commenced in a schoolhouse conveniently located adjacent to Trinity Church in Lower Manhattan. Dr. Johnson, with his formidable intellect and singular dedication, served as the sole instructor for the initial cohort of just eight students. This small group, meeting in borrowed space, represented the unassuming beginnings of what would become a global academic powerhouse.

The Anglican identity of King's College was undeniable and often a point of contention. The governing body was heavily influenced by Crown officials, including powerful figures like the Archbishop of Canterbury. This strong Anglican presence raised concerns among non-Anglicans in the diverse colony, who feared it might infringe upon their religious freedoms. Despite these anxieties, the college's charter and stated policies committed to principles of religious liberty, a crucial caveat in a period of fervent denominational rivalries.

In 1760, a significant physical relocation took place when King's College moved into its own dedicated building. This new home was situated on a three-acre site at Park Place, a more fitting environment for a growing institution. The completion of College Hall, the first proper building for King's College, provided a more permanent and substantial presence in the city.

A particularly notable development during this colonial period was the establishment of the first American medical school in 1767. This pioneering institution, now known as the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, was a significant milestone in American higher education. King's College also holds the distinction of being the first institution in America to grant the Doctor of Medicine (M.D.) degree, doing so in 1770. The medical faculty, organized in 1767, laid the groundwork for a long and distinguished history of medical education and innovation.

As the political climate in the colonies grew increasingly volatile in the lead-up to the American Revolution, King's College found itself in a precarious position. Its deep ties to the British Crown and its predominantly Loyalist leadership made it a natural target for burgeoning revolutionary sentiment. Myles Cooper, who succeeded Samuel Johnson as president in 1763, was an ardent Tory and a staunch supporter of the Crown. His political views often put him at odds with the growing Patriot movement, even within the college's own student body.

The looming conflict proved catastrophic for the operations of King's College. Instruction was suspended for eight years, commencing in 1776 with the arrival of the Continental Army in New York City. The college's solitary building was immediately repurposed, serving first as a military hospital for American forces, and then, after the British occupied the city, for British troops. During this tumultuous period, the college's library suffered significant looting, its valuable collection dispersed and plundered.

Despite the overwhelmingly Loyalist leanings of its administration and a significant portion of its faculty, King's College surprisingly produced a number of prominent figures who would become key players in the American Revolution. This paradoxical outcome highlights the complex and often deeply personal nature of allegiances during the war. Among the notable revolutionaries who emerged from King's College were John Jay, Robert Livingston, Gouverneur Morris, and the fiery Alexander Hamilton.

Alexander Hamilton, a student at King's College, famously found himself in a peculiar situation involving President Myles Cooper. While Hamilton was an enthusiastic advocate for American independence, even writing pamphlets to that effect, he also held a certain respect for Cooper as a dedicated teacher. In May 1775, as revolutionary fervor reached a boiling point, a mob of Patriots, enraged by Cooper's outspoken Tory views, marched on King's College with the intention of tarring and feathering him.

In a scene that almost belongs in a dramatic play, Hamilton reportedly stood before the angry crowd, delaying them with an impassioned speech about the inadvisability of violence. Whether he genuinely sought to calm the mob or simply bought Cooper time, the diversion worked. While Hamilton was lecturing, a friend of Cooper's snuck inside to warn the president. Cooper, roused from sleep and somewhat hard of hearing, reportedly peered out the window, saw Hamilton gesticulating wildly, and, misinterpreting the scene, shouted, "He's crazy! Don't listen to him!" before making a hasty escape out a back door. He found refuge on a British ship and soon sailed back to England, never to return.

The departure of President Cooper and the cessation of classes marked the end of King's College as it had been known. The institution, deeply intertwined with the British imperial system, had fallen victim to the very conflict that would birth a new nation. Its building stood as a silent witness to the war, a hospital rather than a place of learning, its future uncertain in a world irrevocably altered by revolution. Yet, the seeds of future greatness had been sown, and the individuals who walked its halls, on both sides of the conflict, would play pivotal roles in shaping the destiny of the United States.

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