International Conference on James W.C. Pennington

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Press Release
Heidelberg, 18 August 2021

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James W.C. Pennington (1807 to 1870) escaped slavery at 18, learned to read and write, and from 1834 was the first black American to enroll at Yale University. In 1838 he became a minister of the Presbyterian Church. Pennington was part of the abolitionist movement that worked to abolish slavery. At the World Peace Congress in Paris in 1849 he came to know the Heidelberg scholar Friedrich Carové. The latter was so impressed by James W.C. Pennington that, in the same year, he convinced his university to award him an honorary doctorate in theology. “Probably it was the first honorary doctorate for an Afro-American in Europe, possibly even worldwide,” underlines Jan Stievermann, who is based both at the university’s Faculty of Theology and at the HCA where he teaches and does research on the history of Christianity in the United States.

The conference, entitled “James W.C. Pennington and the World of Transatlantic Reform”, is primarily concerned with Pennington’s relationships and connections with the reform movements of the time. Besides abolitionism, they included the Afro-American civil rights movement and the international peace movement. The papers given by the researchers from different disciplines will touch upon issues such as slavery and emancipation, peace, education and intercultural understanding. They will also deal with the transatlantic exchange processes between Protestant communities in Germany and the United States.
Ten years ago, the HCA and the Faculty of Theology of Heidelberg University founded the James W.C. Pennington Award with the support of the Manfred Lautenschläger Foundation. It honours scholars who research topics that were of particular importance to Pennington. The award comes with a month-long stay in Heidelberg for research purposes. Three of the previous prize-winners will attend the Heidelberg conference as guest speakers, including co-organizer Eddie Glaude. A prominent expert on African American religious history, he received the award in 2018. When this new award was established in June 2011, then US President Barack Obama sent a message of greeting in which he thanked the HCA for its initiative and expressed his conviction that the esteem for Pennington’s achievements would inspire future generations of Americans and Germans.

The conference will be held both online and at the HCA, where the number of places is limited. Registration to attend – whether virtually or in person – is possible by email to bs230@uni-heidelberg.de

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