

Voices of the 250th Interview with José Pabón 05-28-2026

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with José Pabón and Erica Bess conducted on May 28, 2026. The interview took place at the Princeton Public Library as part of the Voices of Princeton Project's Voices of the 250th collection.

José Pabón has reviewed, edited, and approved the following transcript. Their corrections and amendments appear below in brackets with initials.Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Transcript

Erica Bess: [00:00:02] My name is Erica Bess. Could you please state your name?

José Pabón: [00:00:05] Hello to everyone listening here. My name is José Pabón.

Erica Bess: [00:00:10] José, can you tell us, how did you come to Princeton, and how long have you been here?

José Pabón: [00:00:15] Yes, I came here for college. [... (JP)] I came here for college. I graduated from Princeton University in 2019. So, between the time as an undergrad and since my graduation, I've been here for about a decade, like 10 years.

Erica Bess: [00:00:32] Great. Are there stories about Princeton's past, which you feel aren't well known enough?

José Pabón: [00:00:38] Yes. Thanks for the question. I appreciate it. I have learned quite a bit of the history of the town, which—a very illustrious history. The guy who used to play Superman, Christopher Reeve, he used to live around here. He went to Princeton Day School, and he seemed to be an admirable person. He's since deceased. Another wonderful person that was here that I read and admired was Paul Robeson, for whom the Arts Council is named after him. So I admire that person very much, who was admitted to Princeton University, but then when he showed up and they saw that he was black, that's what I heard, that they said, "I'm sorry, you can't go to school here." So he, it was Princeton's loss and Rutgers gain, because he

went to Rutgers, he became an actor, a scholar, lawyer, an amazing person. One of the traditions, because a town like this, I think a town like this is very historic for many reasons. Princeton University is a very famous university. And this town, being the seat of that, having had a battle in the—in the war against, for independence with England, I think Princeton is known and famous, and so there's traditions, and there's a lot of good traditions, right, like we cover our noses when we sneeze, and you know, wash[ing (JP)] your hands before surgery, these are really good traditions [... (JP)].

[However, (JP)] we also had some traditions that weren't nice, like racism and [the not allowing women to vote (women's suffrage), JP], and all these other things. One story that I'm a little emotional talking about, sorry. One story I learned about seeing a display at the University. Right after the Civil War, there was a lemonade vendor on Princeton University campus. I don't remember his name.[1] I looked online right now to see if I could find it, but I couldn't find it, because he's obviously not near famous enough. But he was a freed slave. He was a freed slave that—he made his living by selling lemonade to the undergrads here at Princeton right after the Civil War, so [*inaudible*] something. And thank you so much, that's so nice of you. And yeah, I read his story, and it was very touching. It's a story of resilience, overcoming slavery was something that I haven't known, and I will never know, and it was so touching. And aside from surviving all that, the rest of his time here, where he was integrated, this was a town, but even then, you know, we're learning to overcome the traditions of slavery, he was not very well respected. They would call him "Stinky," ["Jimmy Stink," perhaps (JP)] because he was out there all day in the hot sun selling lemonade, you know, and that was a little

[1] In an email communication shared on June 29, 2026, José Pabón added the following clarification: "His name was James Collins Johnson. More information is available about him at https://universityarchives.princeton.edu/2015/02/princeton-college-bought-me-the-life-of-a-fugitive-slave-in-princeton/."

disrespect that African Americans would live with in that time. So, as we come on the centennial here, I reflect, and I hope that we can be respectful, kind, and cognizant to each other. Not all of us, not all our ancestors, had the same trials and tribulations today, where we are now, and so, with that in mind, that's one story of Princeton that I wanted to share with the Oral History Voices of Princeton project.

Erica Bess: [00:04:04] Thank you so much for sharing, José. As you look around at how the 250th is being marked, whether it's here in Princeton, throughout the state, the nation, what has caught your attention? Does any particular part of the 250th observation stand out to you, and how do you feel it should be observed? And then part two, thinking about 1776, 1976, and today, how do you see the political trajectory of the United States? What feels like progress to you, and what feels unfinished?

José Pabón: [00:04:37]
Thank you. Thank you for the great question. So, yeah, along the lines of what I said earlier about how, as a society, we have–we still have traditions at a place like Princeton, Princeton Town, Princeton University. I heard this one professor, this African heritage female professor, say a place like this fetishizes traditions, but there are some traditions that we no longer hold for very good reasons, [such as banning (JP)] interracial marriages, women not being able to vote, and so on and so forth. So, as I look around, and now in the 250th centennial, I think it's famously Franklin, no, the guy with the kite—

Erica Bess: [00:05:23] Benjamin Franklin.

José Pabón: [00:05:24] Benjamin Franklin, yeah, I was gonna say Franklin Roosevelt. Benjamin Franklin, when he came out of the Philadelphia Assembly and was asked what's the government going to be, he famously is thought to have said, "It's a republic, if we can keep it." So I, yeah, I see a lot of divisiveness in our country, and even in a town that is, as I can appreciate it, as I am, very cognizant of human rights and very respectful of all races and all genders, you still see some people who openly support the convicted felon, who's currently in the White House, and see support of federal government [agents that kidnap (JP)] without due process and deports citizens and non-citizens alike, and I'm fearful–I'm concerned, emotional, as you can see, and I apologize for that, but I do think that it's likely we can keep this republic, but it's going to take all of us being cognizant of what's going on and speaking up about the things that we need to speak up and protest when we need to protest, vote whenever we need to vote, so that we can keep the republic that our forefathers in 1776 set up. Thank you for the question of your time.

Erica Bess: [00:06:48] Thank you so much for being here. Thank you for sharing your voice. We appreciate you.

José Pabón: [00:06:52] Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you, whoever's listening.
[End of Transcript]