

The Blacks who First Entered the World of White Higher Education

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The Blacks Who First Entered the World of White Higher Education

The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education publishes its survey of the first identifiable black person to graduate from each of the nation's most highly selective colleges and universities.

Among the nation's most prestigious colleges and universities, early leaders in the admission of black students were Amherst, Bowdoin, Middlebury, and Oberlin. Bringing up the rear were the southern schools such as Duke, Rice, and the University of Virginia, which remained off limits to blacks until the 1950s and 1960s.

by Robert Bruce Slater

FOR NEARLY TWO CENTURIES after the first institution of higher learning in the New World was established in 1636, no black student received a degree in any shape or form from an American college or university. Prior to, and for many years following, the Revolutionary War, blacks were thought of as intellectually inferior and undeserving of a higher education. Even the profound intellect of Thomas Jefferson could not see through the racist dogma of those times. Jefferson wrote of the Negro mentality:

In reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous. Never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration.*

Despite the generally held belief that blacks were intellectually incapable of pursuing higher learning, a small number of African Americans did manage to win admission to colleges and universities. There are conflicting claims as to who was the first black to graduate from an American college. For many years, John Russwurm, who graduated in 1826 from Bowdoin College in Maine, was considered to be the first African American to earn a college degree. Russwurm went on to become editor of *Freedom Journal*, a New York-based newspaper. He later immigrated to Liberia. However, in recent years new evidence has come to light that other blacks preceded Russwurm. Edward Jones, son of a free black who ran a hotel in Charleston, South Carolina, entered Amherst College in 1822. According to Amherst records, Jones graduated two weeks before Russwurm.

*Albert E. Bergh, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 1903.

Probably an even earlier black graduate was Alexander Lucius Twilight, a Vermont native, who graduated from Middlebury College in 1823. He was later elected to the Vermont state legislature. Also, in 1804, Middlebury College awarded an honorary degree to Lemuel Haynes, an African American who fought in the Revolutionary War.

Prior to the Civil War, African Americans were also welcome at Oberlin College in Ohio. George Boyer Vashon received a bachelor's degree from Oberlin in 1844. He later went on to establish a successful legal practice in New York. In 1850, Oberlin awarded the first bachelor's degree ever given to a black woman in the United States. Her name was Lucy Ann Stanton, and she went on to become a schoolteacher in the South during the Reconstruction era.

Other light-skinned African Americans who kept their racial identities a secret may have preceded these pioneers. There is evidence in later years of light-skinned blacks who surreptitiously graduated from all-white segregated schools. For example, Anita Hemmings was the first black to graduate from Vassar College in 1897, which at the time did not admit black students. When she declared her race after graduation, the college administration expressed outrage at the deception but did not rescind her degree. We do not know if any similar instances occurred prior to the awarding of Lucius Twilight's degree at Middlebury College in 1823.

Before the end of the Civil War, approximately 40 blacks had graduated from colleges and universities, all of which were in the North. These pioneering institutions in the higher education of African Americans had strong religious traditions which compelled them to practice what they preached, that all men are created equal under the eyes of

**The African-American
Pioneers of Higher Education
at the Nation's Highest-Rated Universities⁺**

Institution	First Black Graduate	Year
Harvard University	Richard T. Greener	1870
Princeton University	Unknown	????
Yale University	Edward A. Bouchet	1874
Mass. Inst. of Technology	Robert R. Taylor	1892
Calif. Inst. of Technology	Grant D. Venerable Jr.	1932
Stanford University	Unknown	????
Duke University	Nathaniel White Jr.	1967
	Mary Mitchell Harris	1967
	Wilhelmina R. Cooke	1967
Dartmouth College	Edward Mitchell	1828
University of Chicago	Corabelle Jackson	1896
Cornell University	Sara W. Brown	1897
Columbia University	Unknown	????
Brown University	Inman Page	1877
Northwestern University	Lawyer Taylor	1903
Rice University	Linda Faye Williams	1970
Johns Hopkins University	Reginald G. James	1946
University of Penn.	William Adger	1883
Georgetown University	Samuel Halsey Jr.	1952
Washington University	Walter Moran Farmer	1889
Univ. of Calif., Berkeley	Charles E. Carpenter*	1905
Vanderbilt University	Maxie T. Collier	1967
University of Virginia	Robert Bland	1959
Univ. of Calif., Los Angeles	James C. Williamson*	1926
	Hilda I. Johnson*	1926
	Jefferson Brown*	1926
University of Michigan	Gabriel F. Hargo	1870
Carnegie Mellon Univ.	Esther B. Summers	1922
Emory University	Charles L. Dudley	1967
University of Notre Dame	Frazier L. Thompson	1947

⁺As rated by *U.S. News & World Report*. Universities are listed in rank order.

*Information obtained from sources other than official university graduation records.

Note: The first blacks to earn college degrees in the United States appear to be at Middlebury College (1823), Amherst College (1826), and Bowdoin College (1826).

Source: JBHE research department.

God. These schools all had strong abolitionist sentiments among the faculty and administration.

In the antebellum period, nearly all the free blacks who went on to pursue a higher education attended the first black colleges. The institution now known as Cheyney University in Pennsylvania was established in 1832 although it did not become a degree-granting institution until 1932. Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and Wilberforce University in Ohio both began operation in the 1850s.

After the Civil War, a large number of private colleges were formed by white religious groups for the education of freedmen. Subsequently, in the late 1800s, separate state-sponsored institutions for blacks were established in order that the states' other universities could remain lily-white. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, most African Americans who enrolled in higher education attended these segregated schools. But a few very talented black students managed to win admission to some of the nation's most prestigious colleges and universities. W.E.B. Du Bois reported that 390 blacks had earned diplomas from white colleges and universities between 1865 and 1900.

The First Black Alumni of Top-Tier Universities

The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education has recently conducted a survey of the highest-ranked* universities in the nation today to determine in each case when it first conferred a degree on an African American. Remarkably, some of these top-tier universities such as Stanford and Princeton cannot identify their first black graduate. Others are quite proud of their early black alumni and maintain extensive biographical information on them. At many of the nation's most prestigious, predominantly white universities in the South — which did not admit any blacks until the 1950s or 1960s — their first black alumni are still alive today. Following is our summary of the first black graduates from the nation's top-ranked universities — listed in rank order.

• **Harvard University:** Richard Theodore Greener graduated from Harvard College in 1870. A native of Philadelphia, Greener moved to Boston when his father left for California to search for gold. Greener dropped out of school in 1858 at the age of 14 in order to support his family. He worked in a shoe store, as a wood engraver, and as a hotel porter. While employed at the Pavilion Hotel in Boston,

*As rated by *U.S. News & World Report*.



Richard T. Greener in 1870

Greener established several valuable contacts that helped him continue his education. Later, as a private porter, Greener convinced his employer to sponsor him at the college preparatory school at Oberlin College. After a year, he was admitted for his senior year of high school at Andover Academy. Upon graduation, he entered Harvard in the fall of 1865. Finding the academic rigors most challenging, Greener was forced to repeat his freshman year but was able to complete his studies and graduate in 1870. He went on to teach and study law at the University of South Carolina before the school was closed to blacks in 1877. Greener later taught at Howard University Law School. He served in a number of government posts and established a successful private law practice. Greener died in 1922.

In 1895, W.E.B. Du Bois was the first black to earn a doctorate at Harvard. Despite the racial breakthroughs established by Greener and Du Bois, Harvard, under its intensely bigoted President A. Lawrence Lowell, remained a bastion of racism well into the twentieth century. Blacks at Harvard were not allowed to live in dormitories with whites until the 1950s.



• **Princeton University:** In its early days, Princeton was not nearly the academic powerhouse it is today. In fact, it was generally viewed as a college for wealthy young whites from the South, who sometimes brought their black slaves to serve them during their residence in Princeton. Princeton does not know the name of its first black graduate. The school's archives do note that some black students studied privately with the university's president as early as 1774. One of these students, John Chavis, a black Presbyterian minister from North Carolina, was sent to Princeton by a

Early Segregation at Harvard

We owe to the colored man the same opportunities for education that we do to the white man; but we do not owe to him to force him and the white into social relations that are not, or may not be, mutually congenial.

We give him freely opportunities for room and board wherever it is voluntary; but it seems to me that for the colored man to claim that he is entitled to have the white man compelled to live with him is a very unfortunate innovation which, far from doing him good, would increase a prejudice that, as you and I will thoroughly agree, is most unfortunate and probably growing.

— A. Lawrence Lowell
President, Harvard University (1923)

white sponsor “to demonstrate whether a Negro could assimilate higher education.” It is generally believed that Princeton was the last of the eight Ivy League schools to award a degree to an African American.



• **Yale University:** Edward Alexander Bouchet was the first black to graduate from Yale College in 1874. Bouchet came to New Haven with his family in the 1840s. His father was the personal valet of a Yale student from South Carolina. Later his father became a janitor at Yale and his mother laundered clothes for students. On entering Yale, Bouchet had a distinguished academic career and graduated sixth in his class. He was the first black person in the nation to be elected to Phi Beta Kappa. Two years later he earned a Ph.D. in physics from Yale. He appears to be the first African American to earn a doctoral degree and the sixth person in the United States to earn a Ph.D. in physics. Under the restricted career opportunities of that time, Bouchet was forced to take a teaching post at what was



Edward Alexander Bouchet

The First African American to be Elected President of a College

Although General Colin Powell and former Assistant Secretary of State Clifton R. Wharton Jr. are names that often appear on search committee short lists, it appears that no black American has ever served as president of any of the most prestigious predominantly white universities. The first president of a black college was Daniel P. Payne, who was born a free black in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1811. He was educated at the Miner's Moralist Society in Charleston and at the Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary. After the seminary, he started his own school for blacks in the city. The state outlawed the education of black children in 1835, so Payne closed his school and moved to Philadelphia. Payne was instrumental in the decision of the African Methodist Episcopal Church to establish Wilberforce University in Ohio. Payne was selected as the first black president of any college or university in the nation and served in that position for 16 years.

Only two other blacks served as college presidents in the nineteenth century: Hiram Rhodes Revels, who was one of only four blacks to ever serve in the United States Senate, was named president of Alcorn College upon its founding in 1871, and John Mercer Langston, who headed Virginia State College when it opened its doors for the first time in 1882. Howard University did not have a black president for its first 59 years. Spelman College in Atlanta did not appoint its first black president until 1953, 72 years after it was founded in 1881.

to become Cheyney State University outside of Philadelphia where there was no library, no graduate students, and no laboratory. He later returned to New Haven and died in 1918 at the age of 66.

- **Massachusetts Institute of Technology:** Robert Robinson Taylor, an architecture major, was valedictorian of the Class of 1892 at MIT. Taylor was born in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1868. His father was a well-respected builder of residential and commercial properties as well as

of cargo ships. While at MIT, Taylor's academic record became known to Booker T. Washington, who persuaded the young Taylor to come to what was then called the Tuskegee Institute to establish a department of mechanical industries. While there, Taylor designed and supervised the building of many of the campus buildings including his favorite, the chapel which was built entirely by student labor. Even the bricks that went into the building of the chapel were made by the students.

Taylor left Tuskegee for a spell to pursue a career with an architectural firm in Cleveland but returned to assume the post of vice principal. In all, Taylor devoted 41 years of his life to Tuskegee before retiring back home in Wilmington. While there he served as the first black on the board of trustees of what was to become Fayetteville State University. In December 1942, Taylor returned to Tuskegee where he died while worshipping in his beloved chapel. The building was later destroyed by fire.

- **California Institute of Technology:** William Shockley, a graduate of CalTech who would go on to win the Nobel Prize in Physics for his work on the transistor, will be remembered for his efforts to prove that the mental capacity of blacks was genetically inferior to that of whites. Ironically, a black man, Grant Delbert Venerable Jr. overcame immense odds and graduated in 1932 in the same class at CalTech as Shockley. Born in Kansas City in 1904, Venerable moved to California and graduated from San Bernardino High School at the age of 16. He attended a string of universities including the University of Southern California, the University of California at Berkeley, and the University of California at Los Angeles. At a time when he was very close to earning his degree at UCLA, he was expelled for dropping a course without the permission of a department chairman. He applied to CalTech



Grant Delbert Venerable Jr.

and was admitted as a sophomore in 1928. Forced to live off the CalTech campus, Venerable earned spending money by working as a butler for a family in Beverly Hills.

Venerable graduated from CalTech with a bachelor of science degree in civil engineering in 1932. However, he was not able to find a job in his field until 1940 when he worked as a mining engineer. Later he used his knowledge of optics working as an engineer for the Hayward Spyglass Company. Afterwards he went into the hotel business and eventually bought an eraser manufacturing firm, which he managed until his death in 1986. CalTech has established a memorial book fund in his memory.

- **Stanford University:** Stanford has no record of its first black graduate.

- **Duke University:** Unlike its peer institutions in the North, the history of blacks at Duke University does not go back for centuries. In fact, blacks were not admitted to Duke until the fall of 1963 when five black undergraduates were the first African Americans to matriculate at Duke. Cassandra Smith Rush dropped out of Duke reporting that some students and many townspeople were openly hostile. She finally returned to school and earned a bachelor's degree in 1979 from Chestnut Hill College in Pennsylvania. Gene Kendall came to Duke from a segregated high school

The Earliest Black at Duke

Duke's irony is that while it records an intensely racist history, virtually the entire campus was designed by a black architect, Julian Francis Abele.* Abele was the first black graduate of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. After graduating from this distinguished French academy, Abele joined the architecture firm of Horace Trumbauer, who was famous for designing the Philadelphia Art Museum. Abele served as chief designer at the firm from 1909 to 1938 and as partner until 1950. In 1924, when James B. Duke endowed Trinity College in return for the university adopting his name, he called on the Trumbauer firm, which had previously designed the Duke mansion in New York City. Many of the more notable buildings on the Duke campus including the landmark chapel were designed by Abele.

*Joyce Mendelsohn, *The New York Times*, September 22, 1993.



Duke's First Black Graduates: Wilhelmina Reuben-Cooke, Nathaniel White Jr., and Mary Mitchell Harris

in Greensboro where he was at the top of his class. He was forced to drop out after his first year when his scholarship was not renewed due to poor grades. He joined the Navy, which helped him pay for college when his tour was over. He eventually earned degrees in engineering and physics at the University of Kansas.

Three of the five students went on to graduate. Nathaniel White Jr. reports that during his years at Duke he did not associate with very many students. He remembers that *Dixie* was played at every basketball game, and he organized a protest against this ritual. White went on to become the director of the Public Health Sciences Institute at Morehouse College. Mary Mitchell Harris had a rather smooth course through Duke. She was a psychology major and made the dean's list during her freshman year. Wilhelmina Reuben-Cooke remembers that at Duke she never had a black professor and only once had another black student in one of her classes. However, she made friends easily and has fond memories of her years at Duke. Reuben-Cooke is now an associate dean and professor of law at Syracuse University Law School.

- **Dartmouth College:** There is very little information on the first black graduate of Dartmouth. His name was Edward Mitchell. He was born in Martinique in the West Indies in 1797 and earned a bachelor's degree at Dartmouth in 1828. Mitchell died in 1872. Lemuel Haynes, whom we referred to earlier as the recipient of an honorary degree from Middlebury College, attended Dartmouth prior to Mitchell but did not earn a degree.

- **University of Chicago:** The first black graduate of the University of Chicago was Corabelle Jackson, a transfer student from Howard University. Jackson matriculated at the University of Chicago in January 1893, which was only the second term in which classes were held at the university. Jackson was only the 652nd student to enroll at the school. Jackson graduated in 1896 and went on to teach high school in Indianapolis and Baltimore.

The University of Chicago also lays claim to other significant firsts for African Americans in higher education. In 1921 at the University of Chicago, Georgiane Simpson was the first black woman in the United States to be awarded a Ph.D. The University of Chicago was also the first northern predominantly white university to grant tenure to an African American — anthropologist Allison Davis.*



Sara W. Brown

- **Cornell University:** Edward Brooks earned a degree in law from Cornell in 1892, the first African American to receive a diploma from the university. Cornell's records show that Sara W. Brown, a black woman, who was a native of Winchester, Virginia, earned a bachelor's degree in

1897. She died in 1948. Brown's sister, Nancy, also graduated from Cornell in 1899 and went on to become a medical doctor.

*For more information on the career of Allison Davis, see "Black Heritage Award for an African-American Educator," JBHE, Number 3, Spring 1994, p. 23.

- **Columbia University:** The identity of the first African American to graduate from Columbia is in doubt. A report on diversity at the school in the campus newspaper points out that in the eighteenth century Alexander Hamilton, whose mother was a Creole and could trace her lineage back to Africa, attended Columbia, which was then known as King's College. The report also states that four blacks whose names are not known today earned degrees between 1875 and 1900.* Columbia points with pride to the graduation in 1906 of Pixley ka Isaka Seme of Zululand. Seme won the George William Curtis Gold Medal for Oratory at the school. He went on to study law and open a practice in Johannesburg in 1910. Two years later, he founded and became the first president of the African National Congress.



- **Brown University:** The university appears to have been closed to blacks prior to the Civil War. Elizabeth Buffum Chase, an antislavery activist, wrote in her book *Anti-Slavery Reminiscences* "about the beginning of the [Civil] war, a lad of rare excellence and attainments was refused an examination for admission by the authorities of Brown University, on account of the color of his skin." Nearly two decades later, Inman Page in 1877 was the first African American to graduate from Brown University. He was selected to speak at graduation.

The following account appeared the next day in the *Providence Journal*:

Mr. Page did not receive his position as class orator from a chivalrous recognition of his race by his white associates, although the choice is none the less creditable to them. He is an orator of rare ability, speaking with weight and sententiousness without effort at display and at times rising to a profound and impressive eloquence. The scope of the essay indicated grasp of thought and the language was often remarkable for elegance and power. There is no doubt that he fairly earned his honors.

Page went on to become president of several black universities. Between 1877 and 1912, Brown graduated five black men who went on to become presidents of historically black colleges and universities. John Wesley Gilbert in 1888 was the first black to earn a master's degree from Brown. He went on to teach at Paine Institute in Augusta, Georgia.

**Columbia Daily Spectator*, April 6, 1994.

Samuel M. Nabrit was the first African American to earn a Ph.D. at Brown in 1932. Professor Nabrit had a long teaching career at Atlanta University before becoming president of Texas Southern University in 1955. Nabrit also was the first black to be elected in 1967 to the Brown University board of trustees.



• **Northwestern University:** Lawyer Taylor came to Northwestern University in 1899 at the age of 34 and earned a bachelor of science degree in 1903. Taylor was born in Louisville, Kentucky, and lived in Austin, Texas. In preparation for college he attended Northwestern Academy for three years. On his college application he reported that he had taught first grade for 10 terms and intended to go back to teaching after winning his degree. Taylor went on to teach mathematics and astronomy at Clark University in Atlanta. Married in 1906, Taylor was the father of nine children.



Linda Faye Williams

• **Rice University:** Of all the universities ranked in the top 25 nationally, it appears that Rice was the last to graduate an African American. Linda Faye Williams earned her bachelor's degree at Rice in 1970. A National Merit Scholar, Williams was an academic star who pursued a double major in English and political science and minored in French. She later received a master's and doctorate

from the University of Chicago. Dr. Williams has taught at Roosevelt, Chicago State, Johns Hopkins, Northeastern, Brandeis, Cornell, and Howard universities.

Presently Dr. Williams is an associate professor of government and politics at the University of Maryland. She is on leave until next spring and is serving as the director of the Institute for Policy Research of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation. She is the author of *We Shall Overcome: The Role of the Black Church in Shaping Black Male and Female Political Leadership* (Basic Books, 1994) and coeditor with her husband, Ralph C. Gomes, of *From Exclusion to Inclusion: The Long Struggle for African-American Political Power*.

Blacks Integrate the University of Kentucky

The first black student to enroll at the University of Kentucky was John Wesley Hatch. In 1948, Hatch matriculated at the College of Law on the main campus in Lexington. Yet, because segregation was mandated by state law, he was forced to take classes on the campus of Kentucky State College in Frankfort. Five members of the University of Kentucky's law school faculty traveled to Frankfort several times a week to tutor Hatch. They gave him the same lectures they had delivered to roomfuls of white students in the morning.

In the fall of 1949, another black student, Lyman T. Johnson, won a lawsuit forcing the state to allow black law school students to attend classes at the main university campus. Hatch moved to the Lexington campus and for the first time sat face to face with his fellow law students. However, he was still required to sit at a separate table in the library. "It was difficult," reports Hatch. "Segregation was a fact of life in Kentucky. It was a stressful situation to be set apart like that."

Ultimately the tension was too much to bear. Hatch left the University of Kentucky after his third semester to teach high school. After serving in the Army, he returned to school and earned a master's degree at Atlanta University and a doctorate in health education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. There today, he holds the William R. Kenan Chair in Health Behavior and Health Education.

• **Johns Hopkins University:** According to university archives, the first black person to earn a degree at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore was Reginald G. James, who earned a master's degree in public health in 1946. However, blacks attended Johns Hopkins as far back as 1887. That year Kelly Miller was admitted as a graduate student in mathematics, physics, and astronomy. For financial reasons he was forced to leave two years later without a degree. Miller later taught mathematics at Howard University.



William Adger

• **University of Pennsylvania:** William Adger, a Philadelphia native, was one of 13 children born to former slaves from South Carolina. Adger enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania in 1879, and in 1883 he was the first black to earn a diploma from the school. After graduation, Adger entered the divinity school at the university but died of

what was reported as a hip disease before he could attain his goal of becoming a minister in the Episcopal Church. Adger lived to be only 30 years old.

• **Georgetown University:** In 1952, Samuel Halsey Jr. was the first black undergraduate to earn a diploma from Georgetown University. A year earlier, Elmer Henderson graduated from the Georgetown University Law Center.

• **Washington University:** Walter Moran Farmer was born in Brunswick, Missouri, in 1867. He attended Lincoln University in Jefferson City from 1881 to 1884. After graduation,



Walter Moran Farmer

Farmer decided to pursue a law degree and enrolled at Washington University in St. Louis. He was not well received by his classmates. Many refused to march with him at graduation ceremonies in 1889 when Farmer became the first black to earn a degree from the university. It was necessary for the dean of the law school to escort him on the route to receive his diploma.

Farmer had a successful law practice in Missouri. He was the first African American to argue a case before the Supreme Court of the State of Missouri, and he was one of the first blacks to appear before the U.S. Supreme Court. Twice, Farmer was a delegate to the Republican National Convention.

• **University of California at Berkeley:** The University of California at Berkeley has no official record of its first black graduate. However, the university archives contain a letter written by Charles E. Carpenter, a confirmed graduate of the Class of 1905, in which Carpenter claims he is the only black to have graduated from the school. In the letter, written to secure a job as a messenger in the U.S. Senate, Carpenter wrote: "I have learned that the capacity is usually filled by a colored man. I am inspired to strive for the position because I feel that Senator Perkins would prefer a man who is a resident of his state and furthermore a graduate from the university of his own state. And since I am the only colored graduate of the University of California, I feel that my preference might excel, in the senator's judgment, that of any other colored man east or west."

• **Vanderbilt University:** A native of Tennessee, Maxie T. Collier was the first black man to receive a degree from Vanderbilt University in 1967. At Vanderbilt, Collier majored in psychology. After graduation he pursued graduate work in African studies at Howard University and then in 1973 enrolled at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. From 1987 to 1990, Dr. Collier served as commissioner of health for the city of Baltimore. At present, Collier has a private practice as a psychiatrist in Baltimore and serves as a clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins. He is the author of *Phoenix Arising*, a book on African-American psychology.



• **University of Virginia:** The first African American at the University of Virginia actually owned the tract of land which is now part of the campus. In 1833, Catherine Foster, a free black woman paid \$450 in cash for a two-acre plot. Ironically, the tract is now scheduled to be made into a parking lot for the school's Carter G. Woodson Center for Afro-American Studies. It was 122 years later before an African American was to enroll at the university. The state university system, rigidly

The Pioneer of Black Poetry

*"In every human Breast, God has implanted a principle, which we call Love of Freedom;
it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance."*

—Phillis Wheatley, 1774

Long before any African American graduated from any college or university in the United States, there was a black literary figure of extraordinary accomplishments. In 1761, a young African girl no older than the age of eight was brought to Boston on the slave ship *Phillis*. She was purchased at auction by a wealthy merchant, John Wheatley, and his wife Susannah. Given the name of the vessel that brought her to the New World, Phillis Wheatley was put to work as a household slave attending to the needs of Mrs. Wheatley. Phillis had her own room and ate with the family. Mary and Nathaniel Wheatley, teenage twins of John and Susannah, taught Phillis to read and write. Within 16 months of her arrival in the New World, Phillis had command of the English language. Within the next year, she had mastered Latin. When she was 14 years old, Phillis Wheatley published her first poem in the *Newport Mercury*, a Rhode Island colonial newspaper.

Wheatley's fame quickly spread. Her poetry often espousing the theme of freedom was held in high regard by those who favored the abolition of slavery. Wheatley's work also received wide acclaim from the American colonists who were anxious to win freedom from the British. Wheatley was published widely in England where there was a strong antislavery movement. In 1772, a proposal to publish a book of Wheatley's poems was rejected by all American publishers. However, when Wheatley traveled to England in 1773, her mistress arranged for financial backing for publication from the Countess of Huntingdon, who was a great admirer of Wheatley's poems. The book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, contained 38 poems and was reprinted four times in 1773 alone. The book was the first to be written by a black person in the colonies and her work was the second book of poetry published by an American woman.

Returning to America in 1773, Wheatley was granted freedom by her dying mistress. In 1776, Wheatley penned a poem in honor of General George Washington's birthday. In a letter of thanks to the poetess, Washington invited her to meet with him at the headquarters of the Continental Army. Washington wrote: "Thank you most sincerely for the elegant line you enclosed. The style and manner exhibit a striking proof of your poetic talent." Thomas Jefferson, however, was not as impressed. In writing his views of the inferior intellect of blacks, he wrote: "Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, but no poetry. Religion indeed has

produced a Phyllis Whately* but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism."

In 1778, Wheatley married a shopkeeper, John Peters. She bore three children, all of whom died in infancy. Peters later deserted Wheatley and she was forced to work in a boarding house. She died in December 1784 at the young age of 31.

There are 55 poems that are known to have been written by Wheatley. However, there are references in her letters to dozens more that have never been discovered. These poems may be collecting dust in attics of some old New England homes or be tucked away within the pages of old family Bibles. Perhaps they are lost to the ages. But unlike these lost poems, Phillis Wheatley will never be forgotten as she is a lasting inspiration for the African-American poets who succeeded her.

Wheatley is not without her critics. For instance, James Weldon Johnson writing in 1922 said, "One looks in vain for some outburst or even complaint against the bondage of her people, for some agonizing cry about her native land." However, contemporary black scholars passionate in their praise of Phillis Wheatley's extraordinary talent have taken issue with those who have criticized the lack of protest in her work. Henry Louis Gates Jr. has called Wheatley "the progenitor of the black literary tradition." Poet Nikki Giovanni has written a poem entitled *Linkage (for Phillis Wheatley)* in which she compares the eighteenth-century poet to the lost generation of children today. In *Linkage* Giovanni writes:

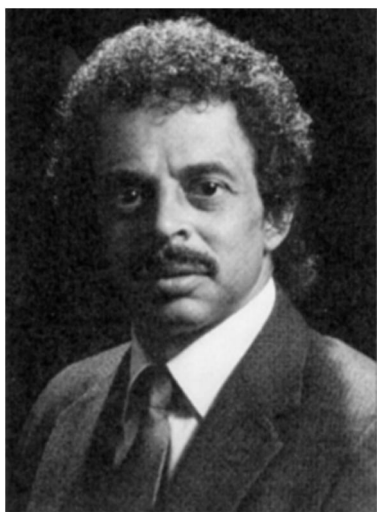
Phillis was her own precedent . . . her own image . . . her only ancestor . . . She wasn't like Harriet Tubman because she is Tubman . . . with Pen . . . rather than body . . . Leading herself . . . and therefore her people . . . from bondage . . . not like Sojourner Truth . . . she was Truth . . . using words on paper . . . to make the case . . . that slavery is people . . . and wrong to do . . .

We asked Poet Sonia Sanchez to comment on the importance of Phillis Wheatley:

Amazing Grace I call her though her name was Phillis. Within 16 months she spoke their language, read their scriptures, wrote their English. This genius child, teenager, woman of prerevolutionary America. She published her first poem at fourteen. She told us she was black and holy and spiritual and good. Remarkable for one so young. Remarkable for one enslaved. Amazing African woman I call her.

*Jefferson misspelled Wheatley's name despite the fact that he reportedly owned a copy of the poet's published work in which her name is spelled correctly.





Robert Bland

went on to earn both a master's and a doctorate. He is presently employed as director of the Combat Systems Projects Division of the Naval Ship Weapons Systems Engineering Station in Port Hueneme, California.

• **University of California at Los Angeles:** The University of California at Los Angeles was founded in 1919. But it did not grant bachelor's degrees until 1924. Prior to that time, only teaching certificates were issued. The university did not note the ethnicity of applicants at that time.

However, a visual search of school yearbooks by Diana de Cardenas at UCLA's Office of Public Information identified some early black students. She then checked official documents at the office of the registrar to determine if these individuals were awarded degrees.

Lucille Catley Culberson received a general professional certificate in music and the elementary music credential in 1920. She returned to UCLA 20 years later and earned a bachelor's degree in education in 1940.

James C. Williamson attended UCLA from 1919 to 1921 and was awarded a general education certificate in 1921. Williamson was a member of the football and track teams. He returned to UCLA and earned a bachelor's degree in 1926.

Two other blacks also earned bachelor's degrees that year. Hilda Ivan Johnson earned a bachelor's degree in English and Jefferson Brown also earned a degree, but university archives do not record his major. Brown was a member of UCLA's first black fraternity, Kappa Alpha Psi, which was founded in 1923. By 1924, the year Brown graduated, the fraternity had seven black members. It is quite possible,

segregated for decades, finally admitted Robert Bland, George Harris, and Theodore Thomas in 1955. Bland was the first to graduate. In 1959, he earned a bachelor of science degree from the School of Engineering. After graduation, Bland accepted a job with the Naval Weapons Center in Corona, California. He

African-American Doctoral Pioneers

Recipient	Subject	University	Year
Edward A. Bouchet	Physics	Yale	1876
Alfred O. Coffin	Biology	Ill. Wesleyan	1889
William L. Bulkley	Latin	Syracuse	1893
W.E.B. Du Bois	Social Science	Harvard	1895
Saint Elmo Brady	Chemistry	Univ. of Ill.	1916

although unlikely, that other blacks whose pictures did not appear in the yearbook were awarded degrees prior to 1926.



• **University of Michigan:** The first black graduate at the University of Michigan was Gabriel Franklin Hargo, who earned a bachelor's of law degree in 1870. The university has no biographical information on Hargo.

• **Carnegie Mellon University:** In 1921, Esther B. Summers was the first black graduate of Margaret Morrison Carnegie College, which was later to become Carnegie Mellon University.

• **Emory University:** In 1967, Charles L. Dudley was the first black to earn a bachelor's degree at Emory University. Mr. Dudley is still alive and resides in Vancouver, Canada.



• **University of Notre Dame:** Frazier L. Thompson entered the University of Notre Dame in 1944 as part of a naval officers' training program. When the war ended, he stayed on at the school and was the first African American to earn a bachelor's degree at the school in 1947. Thompson earned a varsity letter as a sprinter on the track team. Unable to find a job as an engineer, after graduation Thompson worked for the Postal Service. In 1955, he finally landed an engineering position with International Resistor Corporation. He later tested space suits for a NASA contractor. **JBHE**

Robert Bruce Slater is the managing editor of The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education. The author would like to thank Annette Gonella, the director of research at JBHE, for her assistance in the preparation of this article.