

The Earliest Black Graduates of the Nation's Highest-Ranked Liberal Arts Colleges

Source: *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 38 (Winter, 2002-2003), pp. 104-109

Published by: The JBHE Foundation, Inc

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3134222>

Accessed: 10-06-2020 21:34 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

The JBHE Foundation, Inc is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*

The Earliest Black Graduates of the Nation's Highest-Ranked Liberal Arts Colleges

The nation's small liberal arts colleges were pioneers in the admission of black students to higher education. The first four blacks to earn a college degree in the United States won their diplomas at colleges that today are among the nation's 25 highest academically ranked liberal arts institutions.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY WAS founded in 1636. It did not graduate its first black student until 234 years later. Princeton University, which dates to 1746, did not award a diploma to a black student for two centuries after its founding. Duke University traces its origins to 1838. But no black student graduated from Duke until 1967.

For most of the history of our country, blacks were not considered educable at the college level. Driven by strong, prevailing shared values about the biological and cultural inferiority of the Negro, virtually all institutions of higher learning in the United States adopted a universal rule of racial exclusion. As to professors and students alike, the rule essentially was: "No blacks need apply."

As was their academic duty, the people who controlled admissions to higher education celebrated scholarly ability, honored academic ambition, and cherished intelligence and learning in their student applicants — *but not in black people.*

Moreover, there was no competition to correct the injus-

In 1823, he was in all likelihood the first African American to earn a bachelor's degree.



Alexander Lucius Twilight

tice. A highly gifted black student or professor could not punish rejection by a racist institution by going elsewhere because there was no "elsewhere." As Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois discovered on many occasions, it was most impertinent to even raise the question.

Throughout most of our history all state and federal governments shared the same racial views as society as a whole. This meant that there was no legislative or judicial body — or indeed any rebellious educational institution — that was prepared to break the grip of race on college student admissions or faculty selections. The corrective powers of Adam Smith's vaunted marketplace were totally suspended. To be sure, there was no Orval Faubus or George Wallace standing at the schoolhouse door, but the end result was precisely the same.

The fact that almost no blacks were regularly admitted to higher education surprises us to this day. But it must be remembered that biological racism ruled our country well into the 1950s. Until the second half of the twentieth century scholars at America's great universities believed that blacks were intellectually inferior and as a race generally unsuited for higher education.*

Before the end of the Civil War, only about 40 blacks all told had graduated from colleges and universities in the United States. All of these colleges were in the northern states. Almost always these blacks graduated from small liberal arts colleges such as Amherst, Bowdoin, Middlebury, and Oberlin. These pioneering institutions in the higher education of African Americans almost invariably had strong religious traditions. In many cases, these schools

A White Philanthropist's Advice to Southern Blacks

"Avoid social questions; leave politics alone; continue to be patient; live moral lives; live simply; learn that it is a mistake to be educated out of your necessary environment; know that it is a crime for any teacher, white or black, to educate the Negro for positions that are not open to him."

— William H. Baldwin, philanthropist and director of the Southern Railway, quoted in "The Present Problem of Negro Education, Industrial Education," *Proceedings of the First, Second, and Third Conferences for Christian Education in the South, 1898-1900* (Washington, D.C., 1900)

*See, for example, Lee D. Baker, "Columbia University's Franz Boas: He Led the Undoing of Scientific Racism," *JBHE*, Number 22, Winter 1998/1999, p. 89.

were governed by charters that compelled them to practice institutional values that held that all men are created equal under the eyes of God. Furthermore, in almost every case these liberal arts colleges had strong abolitionist sentiments among their faculties and administrations. Indeed, a number of these schools served as stops on the Underground Railroad.

Yet not all liberal arts colleges had enlightened racial views. Some of the nation's oldest and most prestigious liberal arts schools clung to beliefs that higher education was largely wasted on the Negro. Colleges such as Haverford, Vassar, Davidson, and Swarthmore did not regularly admit blacks until well into the twentieth century.

JBHE recently surveyed the nation's 25 highest-ranked liberal arts colleges to determine the date and name of their first black graduate.* Unfortunately, the records are sketchy and in many cases unreliable. But here is our best effort.

All told, it appears that 13 of the nation's 25 highest-ranked liberal arts colleges granted college degrees to black students in the nineteenth century. It is generally accepted that Lucius Twilight is the first black student to earn a college degree from an American college or university. Twilight graduated from Middlebury College in Vermont in 1823. However, as we explain later, there are some scholars who dispute this claim.

Bound by strong southern traditions, Davidson College in North Carolina was the last of the nation's 25 highest-ranked liberal arts colleges to graduate a black student. Davidson did not award a diploma to a black student until 1968.

Here we present — in chronological order — the first black graduates of the liberal arts colleges that today are ranked among the top 25 liberal arts schools in the nation.

Middlebury College: Alexander Lucius Twilight is generally considered to be the first African American to earn a college degree in the United States. He earned his diploma in 1823. (Again, there is some dispute on this matter. See reference to Washington and Lee University on page 109.)

Twilight was born in Corinth, Vermont, in 1795. He was

*This is the third in a series of JBHE studies of early black graduates of the nation's colleges and universities. See also, "The Blacks Who First Entered the World of Higher Education," JBHE, Number 4, Summer 1994, p. 47, and "The First Black Graduates of the Nation's 50 Flagship State Universities," JBHE, Number 13, Autumn 1996, p. 72.



John Brown
Russwurm

An Early Twentieth Century View of the Value of Negro Education to the Negro

"The knowledge of books does not seem to produce any good substantial result with the Negro, but serves to sharpen his cunning, breed hopes that cannot be fulfilled, creates an inclination to avoid labor, promotes indolence, and in turn leads to crime."

— Governor James Vardaman of Mississippi
quoted in Stuart Grayson Noble's *Forty Years
of Public Schools in Mississippi: With Special
Reference to the Education of the Negro*
(Negro Universities Press, 1969)

indentured to a farmer but was able to purchase his freedom at the age of 20. In 1821, at the age of 26, Twilight enrolled at Middlebury College as a member of the junior class. After graduation he became a teacher and a minister. In 1836 he was elected to the Vermont legislature.

It would be 76 years before a black woman would graduate from Middlebury College. Mary Annette Anderson, daughter of a former slave, was valedictorian of the class of 1899. She was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. She later taught at Howard University. Anderson died in 1922 at the age of 47.

Amherst College: Edward Jones was a native of Charleston, South Carolina. His father ran a first-class hotel in Charleston where he was known as one of the city's best caterers. Jones graduated from Amherst College in 1826. It is generally believed that he was the second African American to earn a college degree.

After graduating from Amherst, Jones attended the Andover Theological Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut. In 1830 he was ordained a minister in the Episcopal Church. Jones went to Liberia and Sierra Leone working as chaplain of the British Colonial Regiments. He married an English woman and had two children. Jones died in England in 1864.

Bowdoin College: John Brown Russwurm graduated from Bowdoin College in Maine in the spring of 1826, two weeks after Edward Jones received his diploma from Amherst. Russwurm was the son of a white man and a slave woman from Jamaica. He was accepted into the family of his wealthy white father. When he was eight years old, Russwurm was sent by his father to Quebec for schooling.

After graduating from Bowdoin, Russwurm moved to

**African-American Pioneers of Higher Education
at the Nation's 25 Highest-Rated
Liberal Arts Colleges⁺**

(Colleges Listed in Alphabetical Order)

Institution	First Black Graduate	Year
Amherst College	Edward Jones	1826
Bates College	Henry W. Chandler	1874
Bowdoin College	John B. Russwurm	1826
Bryn Mawr College	Enid Cook	1931
Carleton College	Alvis Lee Tinnin	1949
Claremont McKenna	Larry Moss	1966
Colby College	Adam S. Green	1887
Colgate University	Matthew W. Gilbert	1887
Davidson College	Wayne E. Crumwell	1968
Grinnell College	Hannibal Kershaw	1879
Hamilton College	Joseph L. Spurlarke	1889
Harvey Mudd College	Paul B. Vitta	1966
Haverford College	Paul Moses	1951
Middlebury College	Alexander L. Twilight	1823
Mt. Holyoke College	Hortense Parker	1883
Oberlin College	George B. Vashon	1844
Pomona College	Winston M.C. Dickson	1904
Smith College	Otelia Cromwell	1900
Swarthmore College	Gloria E. Clement	1947
Trinity College	Kenneth Higginbotham	1950
Vassar College	Anita F. Hemmings	1897*
Washington & Lee Univ.	John Chavis	1799**
Wellesley College	Harriet Alleyne Rice	1887
Wesleyan College	Wilbur Fisk Burns	1860
Williams College	Gaius C. Bolin	1889

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

*Vassar College did not know Anita Hemmings was an African American when she was admitted. The first student to graduate from Vassar who openly acknowledged her African-American heritage was Beatrix McCleary in 1940.

**It is not known if Chavis earned a bachelor's degree. After Chavis, no black student attended the university until 1966.

Source: Information obtained from colleges and other sources by the JBHE research department.

New York City and edited *The Freedom's Journal*, the first black-owned newspaper in the United States. He later sailed to Liberia to work for the American Colonization Society.

Today the Africana studies program at Bowdoin is housed in a building that bears Russwurm's name. The building is thought to have been a stop on the Underground Railroad.

Trinity College: As mentioned earlier, Edward Jones graduated from Amherst College in 1826. He went on to earn a master's degree at what is now Trinity College in 1830. The Trinity College archives also report that a student from Africa was awarded a bachelor's degree in the early 1830s but there are no records as to his identity.

Trinity College reports to JBHE that it did not keep records on the race of its students until the middle of the twentieth century. The first African-American student who the school can identify as being black earned a bachelor's degree in 1950. His name is Kenneth D. Higginbotham. Currently, Higginbotham is a priest at the Christ Episcopal Church in Bradenton, Florida.

Oberlin College: Oberlin College has a long history of dedication to African-American higher education. During the Civil War, Oberlin students were actively involved in the Underground Railroad. Black students were admitted to Oberlin as early as 1835, but the first black student to graduate was George B. Vashon.

A native of Pennsylvania, Vashon was the valedictorian of the class of 1844 and delivered the commencement address. Vashon stayed on to earn a master's degree from Oberlin in 1849. He then practiced law and was the first black to become a member of the New York State Bar Association. He was a founding faculty member of the Howard University School of Law and also taught at Alcorn College in Mississippi. Vashon died from yellow fever in 1878 at the age of 54.

Oberlin College also has the distinction of being the first American college or university to award a bachelor's degree to a black woman. Mary Jane Patterson, the daughter of fugitive slaves, graduated from Oberlin in 1862. She went on to a teaching career in Philadelphia and Washington.

Wesleyan University: Wesleyan University often leads the pack in our annual survey of the number of black freshmen at the nation's highest-ranked liberal arts colleges. In the fall of 2001 there were 77 black freshmen at Wesleyan making up 10.6 percent of the incoming class. Both in actual numbers and percentages, Wesleyan led all the high-ranking liberal arts colleges in percentages of black students.

Wesleyan has had a long history of support for African-American higher education. Its first black graduate was Wilbur Fisk Burns in 1860. Fisk was born in Liberia and

returned there to practice law after graduating from Wesleyan. He was also engaged in the farming of coffee and sugar cane. Burns' wife Angie was the daughter of John Russwurm, the first black graduate of Bowdoin College.



Henry W. Chandler **Bates College:** Born in Bath, Maine, Henry W. Chandler earned his diploma at Bates College in 1874. Chandler excelled at public speaking earning a prize in his junior year. As a senior he was elected to the prestigious Euro-sophian Society. After graduating from Bates, Chandler enrolled at Howard University School of Law. He practiced law in the state of Florida for 44 years. During that time he edited two newspapers and served on the Republican state committee. He was a delegate to the Republican National Convention on five occasions. He also served two four-year terms as a state senator.

Grinnell College: Hannibal Kershaw originally enrolled at the University of South Carolina, the only flagship state university in the southern states that accepted black students during the Reconstruction period. But when his favorite professor left to take a teaching post at what was then Iowa College, Kershaw went with him. In 1879 Kershaw became the first black graduate of what is now Grinnell College. After graduation he returned to South Carolina to start a teaching career. He fell into alcoholism and ill health and died only four years after his college graduation.

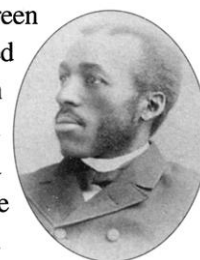


Hortense Parker

Mount Holyoke: In 1883 Hortense Parker from Ripley, Ohio, was the first black graduate of Mount Holyoke College. Her father, a former slave, was a conductor on the Underground Railroad. It is believed that Parker was admitted to Mount Holyoke sight unseen on the assumption that she was white.

In 1916 another black student, Frances Williams, was admitted to Mount Holyoke. She too did not reveal her race. When officials discovered that she was black, Williams was informed by the college's administration that she would not be happy at the college. Nevertheless, she remained at Mount Holyoke and graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1919. By 1964 only 39 black women had graduated from Mount Holyoke College.

Colby College: Adam Simpson Green was a native of Mississippi. He attended Colby College in Maine when he was in his late twenties and earned his diploma in 1887. After graduation he became a church pastor and moved around the country, finally settling in New Orleans.



In 1900 Marion Thompson Osborne was the first black woman to earn a degree from Colby. Her father, a former slave, worked as a janitor at Colby for 37 years.

Colgate University: In 1887 Matthew William Gilbert became the first African-American graduate of Colgate University. A native of Mechanicsville, South Carolina, Gilbert later taught at South Carolina Colored State College, now South Carolina State University. He was also an ordained minister and edited the *South Carolina Standard*, the African-American newspaper with the largest circulation in the state.

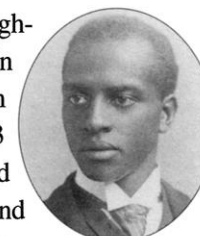


Matthew William Gilbert

Wellesley College: In 1887 Harriet Alleyne Rice was the first black woman to earn a bachelor's degree at Wellesley College. A native of Newport, Rhode Island, Rice's father was a steward on a steamship. Rice went on to earn a medical degree and served as an Army medical intern during World War I. After the war she conducted medical research at Columbia University School of Medicine. She died in 1958 at the age of 92.

Hamilton College: Joseph Lee Spurlarke was a native of Baltimore, Maryland. He entered Hamilton College in 1885 and graduated four years later in 1889. He then attended Auburn Theological Seminary earning a degree in 1892. Spurlarke went on to become pastor of a Presbyterian church in Roanoke, Virginia. He died at the age of 32 from typhoid fever.

Williams College: A native of Poughkeepsie, New York, Gaius Charles Bolin was the first black to graduate from Williams College. He was one of 13 children of former slaves. He received his diploma from Williams in 1889 and then studied law. He practiced law in Poughkeepsie and was active in Repub-



Gaius Charles Bolin

lican politics. His brother and grandson also attended Williams.

Bolin was not the only member of his family to be a pioneer in breaking racial barriers. His daughter Jane graduated from Wellesley College in 1928. Later, she was the first black woman to earn a law degree from Yale. In 1939 she was named a judge of the family court in New York City. She was the first black woman to be named a judge in the history of the United States.



Anita Florence Hemmings

Vassar College: The story of Anita Florence Hemmings is well known to readers of this journal.* A native of Boston, she enrolled at Vassar in 1893. Very light skinned with distinct Caucasian features, Hemmings did not reveal her race until days before she was to receive her diploma in 1897. After graduation Hemmings worked for a time at the Boston Public Library. She then married Andrew Jackson Love, a light-skinned black man who had graduated from Meharry Medical College. The couple lived in Manhattan and passed as whites. When Hemmings' mother, who had darker skin, visited the couple's home, she was required to use the servants' entrance. Hemmings' daughter, Ellen Love, also attended Vassar, graduating in 1927. On Ellen Love's application she claimed that she was white and the college never realized until many years later that Love was Hemmings' daughter or that she had an African-American heritage.

The first person to attend Vassar who openly acknowledged she was black was Beatrix McCleary. She enrolled at Vassar in 1940 and graduated Phi Beta Kappa four years later. During the 1940s and 1950s, black students at Vassar were required to live in segregated areas of the dormitories.

In 1948 McCleary became the first black woman to graduate from the Yale School of Medicine. She then practiced pediatrics in New York City.

Smith College: In 1900 Otelia Cromwell of Washington, D.C., was the first black to earn a college degree at Smith College. She originally enrolled in Miner Teachers College in Washington and transferred to Smith as a junior. She was not permitted to live in the school's dormitories and was obliged to live in the home of a professor. Cromwell went on to earn

a master's degree in 1910 and a Ph.D. in English from Yale in 1926. She later chaired the English department at Miner Teachers College. She was the author of three books.



Winston M.C. Dickson

Pomona College: Pomona College in Claremont, California, was founded in 1887. Only 17 years later, in 1904, did it graduate its first black student. Winston M.C. Dickson of Houston, Texas, was Pomona's first black graduate. At Pomona he was active in the debating and choral societies and edited the school newspaper. He later attended Harvard Law School but earned his degree from the law school at Boston University. He then returned to Houston to practice law. Dickson died in 1959.

Bryn Mawr College: In 1903 Jessie Fauset, later one of the luminaries of the Harlem Renaissance, finished at the top of her class at Philadelphia's Girl's High School. Tradition called for the valedictorian of the school to attend Bryn Mawr College but the school's president would not consent to the admission of a black student. Accordingly, he raised money to send Fauset to Cornell University.



Enid Cook

In 1922 a black student from New England enrolled at Bryn Mawr but she left the school after one week. This unnamed black woman requested that her records be removed from the archives of the institution.

Enid Cook entered Bryn Mawr in 1927 and became its first black graduate in 1931. She was not permitted to live in the college's dormitories. She spent her freshman year in the home of a professor and the next three years living with a black family in the surrounding community. After graduation Cook went on to earn a Ph.D. in bacteriology from the University of Chicago.

Swarthmore College: A Quaker college founded in suburban Philadelphia in 1864, Swarthmore did not graduate a black student until 1947. Two black women graduated that year. One, who now lives in New York City, wishes to remain anonymous. The other black graduate in the class of 1947 was Gloria Eleanor Clement, a native of Philadelphia.



Gloria Eleanor Clement

*See Olivia Mancini, "Vassar's First Black Graduate: She Passed for White," JBHE, Number 34, Winter 2001/2002, p. 108.

She became an Army wife and was an active member of the National Council of Negro Women. Clement died in 1978.



Alvis Lee
Tinnin

Carleton College: In 1949 Alvis Lee Tinnin, a black man who fought in World War II, was the first black graduate of Carleton College in Minnesota. Carleton was founded 75 years earlier, in 1874. Tinnin majored in English and was active in theater. After receiving his degree, he entered graduate study at Yale.

Carleton did not graduate its first black woman student until 1960. She was H. Amelia Cobb who is currently a professor of theater at the University of the District of Columbia.



Paul Moses

Haverford College: The oldest Quaker college in the United States, founded in 1823, Haverford College did not graduate a black student for the first 128 years of its existence. In 1951 Paul Moses, a native of the nearby town of Ardmore, became the school's first black graduate.

He was a member of the French and Latin clubs and played varsity football. The college lost track of Moses after his graduation.

Harvey Mudd College: Harvey Mudd College did not graduate a black student until 1966, 11 years after its founding in 1955. In 1966 Paul B. Vitta, the son of an African tribal chief, earned his bachelor's degree in physics. He later earned a master's as well as a Ph.D. in physics from Emory University. Vitta returned to Africa to teach physics at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. In 1977 he began working for UNESCO and now heads the Nairobi office of that United Nations commission.

Claremont McKenna College: Founded in 1946, Claremont McKenna College did not graduate a black student until 1966. Larry Moss was the black student who broke down the racial barrier at the California school. After flying a helicopter in Vietnam, he earned a master's and Ph.D. in political science from Atlanta University. He has taught at Spelman College, Clark Atlanta University, and Morehouse School of Medicine. He currently is on the faculty of the communications department at Georgia State University.

Washington and Lee University: Officials at Washington and Lee University in Virginia believe that John Chavis, a black man who had served in the Revolutionary Army,

may be the first African-American college graduate. He began his study in the classics under the private tutelage of Professor John Witherspoon at what was then the College of New Jersey, now Princeton University. At that time, and for the next century and a half, Princeton did not admit black students. When Witherspoon died in 1795, Chavis enrolled at Washington Academy, now Washington and Lee University. He completed his studies in 1799, but it is not known if he was awarded a degree.

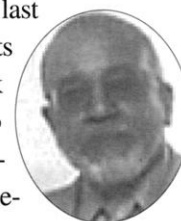
The building housing the school's records burned to the ground in 1803. Records from the Rockbridge County Court office in 1802 state: "It is ordered that the clerk of this court certify that Rev. John Chavis has been considered a free man and that he was always while in this county, conducted himself in a decent orderly and respectable manner, and that he has been a student at Washington Academy where they believe he went through a regular course of academic studies."

Ted DeLaney, an associate professor of history at Washington and Lee University, told JBHE that he has records showing that Chavis went through extensive examinations in order to become a Presbyterian minister and was required to write exegeses in Latin and Greek on complex theological matters. In that day and age "the Presbyterians required their ministers to have college educations," DeLaney told JBHE.

Chavis went on to teach school and preach as a Presbyterian minister. He died in 1838 in North Carolina.

No other black student enrolled at Washington and Lee University until 1966 and the college is uncertain who was the first African American to be awarded a bachelor's degree.

Davidson College: Davidson was the last of the nation's highest-ranked liberal arts colleges to award a diploma to a black person. Blacks were not admitted to Davidson prior to 1962. Wayne E. Crumwell enrolled in 1964 and reported widespread resentment about his presence on campus among white students. He persisted and earned his degree in 1968. Crumwell then went on to earn an MBA at the University of Wisconsin and a law degree at Duke University. Crumwell currently operates a private practice in Burlington, North Carolina. He was the lead attorney in a recent class-action lawsuit filed by a group of black farmers who allege discriminatory practices on the part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.



Wayne E.
Crumwell

JBHE