

FIFTY YEARS OF HOWARD UNIVERSITY

PART I [206]

Howard University, in common with nearly all the larger private institutions of learning in the southern and border States devoted to the education of the Negro, was founded shortly after the Civil War.[207] These institutions with a few exceptions were originally supported by northern philanthropy, and their courses of study were determined by the zealous missionaries from the North, who successfully attempted to transplant among the freedmen the pedagogic traditions of New England. That such a procedure, so vigorously condemned on many sides when initiated but so gloriously justified in its results, could have been possible may well prove a cause of wonder to the student of education a century hence. And indeed, under ordinary circumstances, the establishment of classical colleges and schools of law, medicine and theology for a primitive people, unable to read or write, would seem the height of folly. But the circumstances were not ordinary. The situation was critical and unusual remedies were required.

The close of the War of the Rebellion in 1865 witnessed something new in the field of educational problems. A group numbering nearly four millions was presented to the American nation for training in the essentials of manhood and the duties of citizenship. The apprenticeship which this group had served had been spent under a system that did little more than acquaint them with the cruder tools of industry and an imperfect use of a modern language. And[Pg 129] while it is true that many individual slaves acquired considerable skill in industrial pursuits and a few became artisans of a rather high order, the great mass of Negroes were laborers of the lowest class, requiring the exercise of an intelligence but little above that of the beasts of burden. On the side of the mastery of letters the best that can be said by even the most generous students of this subject is that, at the beginning of the year 1861, about ten per cent. of the adult Negroes in the United States could read and write.[208]

From the standpoint of the white South the liberation of the slaves had let loose upon the land what they considered a horde of half-savage blacks, descendants of jungle tribes, inferior in every respect to the white man and incapable of assimilating the knowledge of the dominant race or of becoming citizens except in name only. In addition to this attitude there remained in the South the traditional idea that education was the peculiar privilege of the favored few of the white race, and, except in its lowest reaches, a non-essential in the life of the masses. At the close of the Civil War free public schools were unknown in that section.[209] When it came to the question of educating the Negro, all of the teachings and practice of the South stamped

it as a dangerous risk. To offer him the higher courses of college and university grade was indeed an absurdity.

The North, on the other hand, looked upon the slave as a sufferer released from an earthly torment and, because of his long period of involuntary servitude, deserving of recompense of every kind that the nation could bestow. As to his mental capacity, the North believed that in order to rise from his degraded state and to take his place among the races of civilized men the freedman awaited only the same means of education that the Anglo-Saxon for centuries had enjoyed. Whatever may be the judgment of history concerning these two conflicting views, it is clear that the South had neither the inclination nor the means to enter upon the ^[Pg 130] task of educating the Negro whereas the North was abundantly supplied with both.

Here, at any rate, was a situation offering the greatest opportunity for the exercise of philanthropic zeal, both in the way of financial aid and personal service. And to this call the North responded, pouring out treasure, labor and love in a way that stamps the whole movement of educating the Negro in America during the first half century of his freedom as one of the most heroic examples of true missionary zeal of all times. Those who took an active part in the movement, including founders and teachers, seemed imbued with no other idea than that of giving the best and in the largest measure. They went to their tasks and took with them their ideals of human equality and brotherhood. Every effort was bent toward raising the unfortunate race to the level of their own standards of intellect, of society and of morals. They, therefore, applied to the solution of the problem the only educational machinery that they knew. Experiments in education would not supply the immediate need. No man was to be limited in his opportunities for intellectual development. Only his own desire and capacities were to determine his limitations. Besides, such opportunity was necessary for the training of leaders and must not be denied. Howard University was a child of this movement and the greatest embodiment of this idea.

The situation out of which this institution evolved requires some comment. The abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia and later throughout the South resulted in a large influx of freedmen into the National Capital until they formed one third of its population, thus constituting the largest urban group of Negroes in the world. The educational problem presented by this group was quickly realized by various freedmen's aid organizations and philanthropic individuals with the result that day and night schools were immediately established for persons of all ages, providing instruction in the elementary studies. ^[210] In the opinion of ^[Pg 131] many the situation had been fully met by the establishment of these elementary schools. The task had

been difficult and attended with much opposition and even open violence. The problem of the future was the maintenance and extension of such schools at their present grade. Others, on the other hand, considering the task only half done, believed that their duty would be fully discharged only when an institution of higher learning had been established at the capital of the nation, where Negro youth could be trained for positions of leadership.

"Such an Institution," said one of the founders of Howard University, "was demanded by the necessities of the great educational movement which was inaugurated among the freed people at the close of the late war. When primary, secondary and grammar schools were being opened throughout the South, for the benefit of a class hitherto wholly deprived of educational advantages, it became evident that institutions of a higher grade were needed for the training of the teachers and ministers who were to labor in this field. It was with a view of supplying this need that Howard University was founded."[\[211\]](#) On November 17, 1866, at the Columbia Law Building opposite Judiciary Square in Washington, was uttered the first word from which the idea of Howard University evolved. Using this building as a temporary house of worship, members of the First Congregational Church[\[212\]](#) were on that date holding a meeting on missions with Dr. C. B. Boynton, the pastor of the church. After remarks by several persons concerning[\[Pg 132\]](#) various phases of the duty of the country towards the freedmen, Reverend Benjamin F. Morris, a son of former Senator Thomas A. Morris, of Ohio, arose to speak. He referred to his surprise and gratification at the remarkable showing made in theological studies, by half a dozen young colored men in an examination which he had recently witnessed. These were students in what was then known as Wayland Institute, which had at that time only one teacher. In this enthusiasm he expressed the wish that the Congregational Church might some day establish a theological school at the capital of the nation.[\[213\]](#)

The seed thus sown found such fruitful soil in the minds of the pastor and Reverend Danforth B. Nichols that they, with Mr. Morris, resolved to see the plan carried out at a subsequent meeting to be held at the residence of Mr. Henry H. Brewster for the purpose of establishing a New Missionary Society. At this meeting there prevailed the idea that such a society was not needed for the reason that the American Missionary Association was already occupying this field. Mr. Morris thereupon took the floor and advocated the establishment of a theological school for the preparation of colored men for the ministry to work in the South and to go as missionaries to Africa. Dr. Boynton supported the plan and urged immediate action; Dr. Nichols, in answering objections raised concerning the financing of the project, suggested the possibility of aid from the Freedmen's Bureau, an idea which

marked the beginning of the relationship of the University with the Federal Government.

At the next meeting, a committee appointed to bring in a plan of organization, recommended that a night school be

opened at first; that application be made to the Commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau for quarters, fuel and light for the school; and that three chairs of instruction be established. These recommendations were adopted and the first faculty appointed comprised the following: Evidences and Biblical Interpretation, Reverend E. W. Robinson; [Pg 133] Biblical History and Geography, Reverend D. B. Nichols; Anatomy and Physiology, Dr. Silas Loomis. Thus was the University born with neither a local habitation nor a name. It was styled a Theological Institute and its aim was "the education of the colored youth for the ministry." [214]

The development of plans for this new educational center was rapid. Senator Pomeroy, of Kansas, who had become greatly interested in the movement, suggested at first an extension of the original idea so as to include the training of teachers. Later he made a motion that the doors be thrown open to all who wished to enter. This proposition was heartily agreed to, and Howard was given the distinction of being the first University in America to be established without some restriction based on race, sex, creed or color. [215] At a later meeting held to consider the charter, it was decided to embrace in that instrument university privileges and to provide for the departments of theology, law and medicine.

When the question of a name was reached several were suggested and rejected. Finally Dr. Nichols proposed that the University bear the name of "The American Philanthropist, the Commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau, the true friend of the downtrodden and oppressed of every color and nation of the Earth," General Oliver Otis Howard. [216] This was enthusiastically adopted with but one [Pg 134] dissenting vote, that of General Howard himself, who felt that his usefulness to the new institution would be greater under another name than his.

The act of incorporation was drawn by Senator Pomeroy, of Kansas, and presented to the Senate by Henry Wilson, of Massachusetts, afterwards Vice-President of the United States under Grant. Senator Pomeroy was one of the incorporators and a member of the first board of trustees. Senator Wilson had attended several of the organization meetings and was an enthusiastic supporter of the plan. The bill passed both houses of Congress and became a law when President Andrew Johnson affixed his signature, March 2, 1867. The first meeting of the corporation was held at the residence of Mr. Brewster for the purpose of organizing the board of

trustees. This board was made to include the seventeen incorporators with the addition of General G. W. Balloch who was elected treasurer.

The preliminaries disposed of, the University began its work by opening classes in the Normal and Preparatory Departments united on the first of the following May. The first student body consisting of five pupils were altogether young white women, the daughters of trustees Robinson and Nichols.^[217] The recitations were held in a rented frame building, previously used as a German dance hall and^[Pg 135] saloon, which stood on the east side of what is now Georgia Avenue, a short distance south of W Street.^[218] The building and lot were later purchased by the University but finally sold when the classes were removed to their permanent home.

The selection of the permanent site for the University is due largely to the fortunate combination of judgment, persistence and faith characteristic of General Howard. He, with General E. Whittlesey, acting as a committee on the selection of a site, wished to procure the commanding elevation in the northern part of the city where the University now stands. This was part of the tract of 150 acres known as *Effingham* and owned by John A. Smith. On the plea that the location of a Negro school would depreciate the remainder of his property, the owner refused to sell any part of it. After much argument, General Howard asked him to state his price for the whole farm. The rate given was one thousand dollars an acre, making a total valuation of \$150,000, a staggering sum under the circumstances. Undaunted, however, General Howard closed the bargain, although the treasury of the University was without a single dollar. Adjustments brought the final purchase price for the property down to \$147,500, for which the corporation made itself responsible.^[219]

With the exception of about thirty acres, the land was divided into lots and sold at a price averaging about four times its original cost.^[220] The part reserved consisted of^[Pg 136] the main campus now occupied by the academic building, dormitories and residences; the site of the Medical School and the old Freedmen's Hospital; and a park between the two covering four city blocks.^[221]

The main part of the purchase price for the property was supplied by the Freedmen's Bureau. The funds from the sale of the property not needed for University purposes were placed in the treasury to be used for the construction of buildings.^[222] The corporation received additional grants from the Freedmen's Bureau, bringing the sum obtained from this source to about \$500,000.^[223] With these funds several^[Pg 137] residences for professors and four large buildings were erected; namely University Hall, Miner Hall, Clark Hall and the Medical Building. Clark Hall, the boys' dormitory, was named in honor of David Clark, of Hartford, Connecticut, who

contributed \$25,000 toward the support of the University. Miner Hall, the dormitory for girls, was named in honor of Miss Myrtilla Miner, one of the pioneers in the education of colored girls in the District of Columbia.[\[224\]](#)

The early financial management of the University soon brought it into difficulties. The hopeful spirit of the times and the enthusiasm and faith of those in charge of the enterprise were responsible for the too rapid expansion of the first few years of the existence of the institution which resulted in a constantly growing deficit. A financial statement for the first eight years up to June 30, 1875, leaving out of account the value of lands and buildings given by the Government and of borrowed funds, shows receipts of \$645,067.30 and expenditures of \$744,914.56, leaving a deficit of nearly \$100,000. At the annual meeting of the trustees, May 31, 1873, it was decided that a retrenchment of one half the current expenses would be necessary in order to avert disaster. To effect this the management had to make radical readjustment in the faculties and in the salary schedule. To this end every salaried officer in the University resigned upon the request of the trustees.

In reestablishing the faculties the basis was one of rigid economy and the only way by which the situation could be saved; for the nation-wide financial crisis of 1873 and the lean years that followed precluded the possibility of any increase in the income. The success of this measure[\[225\]](#) is^[Pg 138] indicated by the fact that the immediate expenses of the University were reduced from \$57,160.40 in 1872 to \$9,446.19 in 1877. "This heroic treatment," says former President Patton, "far too long delayed, saved the institution, but it cost it much in professors, in students and in prestige." The vessel escaped shipwreck with loss of many of the crew and passengers and a lot of her cargo. The professional departments were cut off from any support from the general funds, and remanded to receipts from tuition fees and special donations. College professorships were reduced from \$2,500 to \$1,200 and a residence worth \$300; and the salaries of other officers were similarly reduced. Incidentals were brought down to the lowest living figure, and finally, with half the main building and a large part of the dormitories closed, the point was reached at which the income covered expenses.[\[226\]](#)

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FOOTNOTES:

[\[206\]](#) The most easily available information concerning the history of Howard University is contained in a number of short sketches, speeches, reports, announcements, and the like, in pamphlet form, and a well-prepared volume of three hundred pages by Dr. Daniel S. Lamb giving the history of the Medical

Department up to 1900. These with the files and annual catalogs have been freely used in the preparation of this sketch.

[207] William M. Patton, *The History of Howard University*, 1896.

[208] Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861*, p. 228.

[209] Albert Bushnell Hart, *The Southern South*, pp. 289-291.

[210] Probably the most famous of these early schools was the normal school for girls opened by Miss Myrtilla Miner, December 3, 1851, and chartered under the name "Institution for the Education of Colored Youth," under the Miner Board. In 1879 it was taken over by the public school system of the District as the Myrtilla Miner Normal School. From 1871 to 1876 it worked cooperatively with the Normal Department of Howard University.

[211] *Annual Report of the President of Howard University, September 2, 1869.*

[212] The relationship between the First Congregational Church and Howard University has been very close from the first. Three of its pastors have become presidents of the University, Doctors Rankin, Boynton and Newman. The church building at the corner of Tenth and G Streets has always been available for use for University exercises when needed. For many years the commencement exercises of various departments were held regularly in that auditorium.

[213] Danforth B. Nichols, *The Genesis of Howard University*, 1892, p. 4.

[214] Nichols, *The Genesis of Howard University*, 1892, pp. 5, 6.

[215] Dean Robert Reyburn, *Address at the Inauguration of President John Gordon*, 1904, p. 9.

[216] "Oliver Otis Howard, the founder of the University, and the one whose name it bears, and who was president from April 5, 1869, to December 1, 1873, was born in Leeds, Maine, November 8, 1830. He was graduated at Bowdoin, 1850, and at West Point in 1854. He was instructor in mathematics at West Point in 1854 and resigned in 1861 to take command of the Third Maine Regiment in the War of the Rebellion, in which he served with distinction. For gallantry at the first battle of Bull Run he was made Brigadier-General, September 3. He lost his arm at Fair Oaks, June 1, 1862, and was in the battle of Antietam. In November, 1863, he was made General of Volunteers. He commanded the Eleventh Corps under General Hooker, served at Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge, and was assigned to the Army of the Tennessee. In the march to the sea he commanded the right wing of Sherman's army, and was brevetted Major-General in the regular army for gallant conduct in the campaign of Atlanta. He was Commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau from March, 1865, to July, 1864, when he was assigned to the command of the Department of the Columbia. In 1877 he led the expedition against the Nez Percés Indians and in 1878 against the Bannocks and Piutes. In 1881-1882 he was Superintendent of the United States Military

Academy at West Point. In 1886 he was commissioned Major-General in the regular army.

"In 1863 he was made A.M. by Bowdoin College, and LL.D. in 1865 by Watervelt College. The same degree was given him by Shurtleff College and Gettysburg University. He was made Chevalier of the Legion of Honor of France in 1884. He published war articles in the *Century* and some stories that are partly autobiographical; also *Chief Joseph* and the *Life of Count Gasparin*. In 1892 he was commander of the Department of the Atlantic, and the second in command of the United States Army. Major-General Howard died at Burlington, Vermont, October 26, 1909."—J. E. Rankin, *Presidents of Howard University*, pp. 11-12.

[217] James B. Johnson, *Address at the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of Howard University*, 1892, p. 18.

[218] William M. Patton, *The History of Howard University*, 1896, p. 30.

[219] The tract as originally purchased may be approximately described as extending eastward to the Soldiers' Home grounds and including almost the entire present site of the reservoir (not including the extreme eastward projection) and running south on its eastern boundary to V Street. Its southern boundary was an irregular line passing south of the Medical School building and including a small part of the ground now occupied by the American League baseball park. Its northern boundary toward the east extended up to and at one point a little beyond what is now Hobart Street, tapering toward the west and meeting Georgia Avenue at Fairmount Street. The western boundary followed Georgia Avenue to Howard Place, whence it followed Sixth Street to the southern boundary.

[220] Daniel S. Lamb, *Howard University Medical Department*, 1900, p. 2.

[221] This park was at one time surrendered to the Federal government for the remission of back taxes and exemption from further taxation. Later, when the new Freedmen's Hospital was about to be erected on that site the ground was transferred back to the University. The ground is now leased by the government from Howard University for a rental of one dollar a year.

[222] William M. Patton, *The History of Howard University*, p. 17.

[223] The Freedmen's Bureau was established in 1866 by the Federal government for the purpose of promoting the general welfare of the freedmen. General Howard was made commissioner of the organization and held this office until 1872, when it was discontinued. It was through this relation with the Freedmen's Bureau that the University became the creature and ward of the Federal Government, a relation that has been maintained continuously ever since.

The commissioner of the bureau was granted large powers, including the control of all subjects relating to refugees and freedmen from slave States or from any district or county within the territory embraced in the operations of the army, under such

rules and regulations as might be prescribed by the head of the bureau and the President.

General Howard during the existence of the bureau disbursed approximately \$13,000,000 in various ways. Much of this was used for educational purposes, including all grades of work. Among some of the beneficiaries of this fund were Lincoln University, Wilberforce University, Berea College, Fisk University, Biddle University, Straight University and Lincoln Institute. In his efforts to enable the people of the District of Columbia to share the benefits of this fund the commissioner offered to erect a building for a certain denominational institution located in Washington at that time, on the condition that it become undenominational. The offer was declined, whereupon the trustees of Howard University immediately made application to receive this Federal aid. Because of the location of the proposed institution at the nation's capital the application was favorably acted upon and liberal appropriations made so that the institution might stand as a monument to the nation's philanthropy.

As these large expenditures for Howard University with the other operations of the bureau brought upon General Howard charges of malfeasance, which led to two investigations, it should be said here that both of the official investigations, one civil, the other military, completely exonerated him.—See *Report of Special Committee of the Trustees of Howard University upon Certain Charges, etc.*, 1873, and *Act of March 3, 1865, establishing the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands*.

[224] It is worthy of note that the magnificent new home of the Myrtilla Miner Normal School of Washington is named in honor of the same noble woman. It stands on a site formerly owned by the University and looks upon Miner Hall several hundred yards away across the campus.

[225] Much credit for the skillful financial management of the institution during these critical times is due to the secretary and treasurer, Mr. James B. Johnson, who was a potent factor in the early struggles of the institution. He was secretary and treasurer for many years, dying while still in service in 1898.

[226] William M. Patton, *The History of Howard University*, 1896, pp. 21, 22.
