

The History of Historically Black Colleges and Universities and their Association with Whites

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Abstract

An analysis of the history of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) and their interaction with white American organizations. This review discusses the intertwined relationship of the formation of HBCU's and white organizations such as the American Missionary Association. Through a historical lens the author demonstrates the challenges both whites and blacks faced with creating and establishing HBCUs. This historical analysis provides a context to understanding the purpose of HBCUs and their place in the American higher education system.

The quest for knowledge has been a component paramount to American culture. When the Puritans first established themselves in New England, developing an institution of higher education was one major element to their pursuit for religious and political freedom. As the colonial expansion developed, so did the desire for knowledge and truth. The search for wisdom was the catalyst to the formation of the United States of America, democracy, and the American Higher Educational system. Centuries later, this thirst for knowledge did not remain solely with the Puritans. It would also reach throughout the colonies and to those involved with building the New Nation.

Knowledge was revered as religious and was used to separate the educated from the non-educated. One population deprived of education was the African slave in America. To remain in servitude, slaveholders understood that knowledge would provide a slave with the ability to question his bondage and ultimately seek his freedom. During the Colonial period, some slaves were fortunate to have access to education, primarily in black schools in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania. Although some states had black schools that educated slaves, most slaves were self-taught. Slaves often eavesdropped on their masters or obtained copies of the Bible in order to educate themselves. Educating free blacks was also a punishable offense, one not taken lightly. One historical example is that of Margaret Douglass, a white seamstress from Norfolk, Virginia, who provided education to several blacks in 1853. Douglass was eventually arrested for partaking in a funeral of one of her students (Williams, 2005). During her trial Douglass claimed, "I deem it the duty of every southerner, morally and religiously, to instruct his slaves, that they may know their duties to their master, and to their common God" (Williams, 2005, p. 28). Douglass vowed not to continue to break the law, but said, "I will teach them...how to live, and how to die" (Williams, 2005, p. 28). Thus based on her remarks and religious perspective, the court imposed a one-dollar fine, and promised to impose additional fines if she continued to educate blacks.

As slavery continued in America, whites, mostly from the northern States, felt obligated to continue to educate slaves either because of religious convictions or because of social empathy to the plight of the slave. They saw the need to provide them with knowledge. Some early white Christian missionary organizations and individuals also provided a limited amount of slaves with an education.

Up until after the Civil War the clandestine educating of black slaves was a complex system primarily developed by white teachers and black students in order to elude persecution. From Christian missionary organizations, pre-Civil War efforts, to the philanthropy of the post-Civil War, whites have been involved in the education of blacks in many facets. One of the most monumental manifestations of the relationships of whites to the education of blacks is the formation of Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Having their origins prior to the Civil War, HBCUs were institutions created with the specific purpose of educating blacks. Many HBCUs, can trace their origins to white philanthropy or Christian missionary organizations. The American Missionary Association (AMA), Methodist Episcopal Freedman's Aid Society, Presbyterian Board of Missionary for the Freedman, and the American Baptist Home Mission Society (Watkins, 2001), lead in the funding and proliferation of the education of blacks. These missionary societies accounted for the formation of over 30 black colleges, while enrolling 60% of black college students. Viewed as paternalistic, many missionary organizations sought to educate as well as christianize blacks (Watkins, 2001). Several HBCUs have some root of Christianity, which grew from seeds that were often planted by white Christian missionary organizations.

Another objective of the Christian missionary organizations was to "civilize" slaves, and transform them into human beings who could contribute to American society. While on the surface these actions appeared altruistic many missionary organizations held racist views and felt that blacks were scientifically incapable of comprehending and engaging in intellectual discourse. As a result, the focus was not on academic pursuits, but rather on the mastery of skills associated with manual labor for which they would utilize in order to participate in the American society (Allen & Jewell, 2002). These sentiments were apparent in the views of John Alvord in 1865, a northern white missionary, and abolitionist. Alvord believed in freeing slaves, but was convinced that they possessed no intellectual capabilities (Williams, 2005). Based on such views the majority of black institutions created and maintained by Christian missionary organizations focused on industrial education, manual training and religious conversion. Exceptions were Wilberforce University in Ohio and Lincoln University in Pennsylvania which provided a liberal arts curriculum prior to the Civil War.

The question of the appropriate education for blacks would later surface in The Great Curriculum Debate between Booker T. Washington, of the Tuskegee Institute and W.E.D. Du Bois, the first black Harvard PhD (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). Both men had distinct and opposing views of how education of blacks should progress. Du Bois found that vocational education would not suffice to uplift blacks after slavery. Du Bois stated:

"How then shall the leaders of a struggling people be trained and the hands of the risen few strengthened? There can be but one answer: The best and most capable of their youth must be schooled in the colleges and universities of the land. We will not quarrel as to just what the university of the Negro should teach or how it should teach it — I willingly admit that each soul and each race-soul needs its own peculiar curriculum. But this is true: A university is a human invention for the transmission of knowledge and culture from generation to generation, through the training of quick minds and pure hearts, and for this work no other human invention will suffice, not even trade and industrial schools" (Du Bois, 1903, p. 45)

Du Bois felt that Washington was leading blacks incorrectly and that his school in Tuskegee was conducting a disservice to blacks. Washington understood the need for liberal art curriculum, but stressed industrial training for the masses, and stated in *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography*,

"I have had no patience with any school for my race in the South which did not teach its students the dignity of labour." (p.73)

Their debated continued and influenced HBCUs in their development and adaptation of curricula for their institutions

AMA was one of the most active missionary organizations from 1861 to 1876. As to clarify their views on the education of blacks, AMA's mission was stated as the following:

Resolved, that we believe the Christianity of the nation is about to be tested, in view of the late act of Congress for recovery of fugitive slaves, which appears equally at variance with the principles of the Association, the Constitution of the country, and the law of God, and that as Christians we do solemnly covenant with each other and our colored brethren that we cannot obey, nor any law that contravenes the higher law of our Maker, whatever persecution or penalty we may be called to suffer. (Swint, 1941, p. 12)

The members of AMA founded and established seven black colleges and 13 normal schools for blacks during this time period (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). Some of the institutions established by AMA included, Fisk University (Tennessee, 1865), Talladega College (Alabama, 1867), and Tougaloo College (Mississippi, 1869). The AMA required that all faculty be non-secular and exhibit religious enthusiasm (Swint, 1941). AMA faculty, which was predominantly northern whites, often viewed themselves as renovators of the South and felt that educating blacks was divine work. One AMA faculty wrote, "Schools and education were the means which now must be relied upon. Education must be given to the blacks" (Swint, 1941, p. 36). Though the majority of missionaries questioned the intellect of blacks, many AMA faculty expressed excitement in the blacks' capability to learn. One AMA faculty indicated, "After several years spent teaching in white schools at the North, I feel no hesitation in saying that these children learn the alphabet, the figures and rudiments of arithmetic, more readily than the white." (Swint, 1941, p. 67). Another missionary organization that contributed to the formation of black institutions was the Women American Baptist Missionary Society. Led by Harriet E. Giles and Sophia B. Packard of Boston, these members established the Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary in 1881. In 1924, this institution, would later be renamed Spelman College in honor of Mrs. Laura Spelman Rockefeller, for the financial support of the Rockefeller family. Claflin University (South Carolina 1869), Shaw University (North Carolina, 1865) and Benedict College (South Carolina, 1870) also have strong roots to Christian missionary Societies (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). Many of these early institutions received funding from blacks, but Christian Missionaries contributed the greater portion of the funding. The curricula of many of these early institutions consisted of rudimentary studies; which equipped its graduates with skills they deemed essential prior to the Civil War, and the years to follow known as Reconstruction.

With Abraham Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862 and the end of the Civil War, the landscape of America and the educating of blacks would be altered forever. Prior to the Civil War, all southern states, with the exception of Tennessee, prohibited the educating of slaves. Northern states had no legal premise to deny blacks education however, shunned the practice. The post-Civil War era not only allowed Christian Missionaries to emerge from secrecy, but it also provided them with the financial assistance to operate and maintain their institutions. After the Civil War the federal government established a program to assist with the transition of the five million newly freed blacks, called The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen's Bureau). Created by an 1865 act of congress, the Bureau was established with the intent to assist blacks, poor whites, and war refugees' transition after the Civil War. With the influx of slaves, the Bureau primary focused on the responsibility of educating blacks (Roebuck & Murty, 1993).

The first commissioner of the Bureau was General Olivier O. Howard, a graduate from West Point and Civil War hero. With the continued assistance of Christian missionary Organizations, Howard established several black institutions, most notably Howard Institute for the Education of Preachers and Teachers (Watkins, 2001). This institution would later be renamed Howard University, and become one of the premier black universities. The Bureau did not manage the day-to-day activities of the black institutions; rather it provided financial assistance to Christian missionary Organizations to develop educational curriculum, instruction, and administering of these institutions.

One of the most influential members of the Bureau was General Samuel Chapman Armstrong, an agent appointed by Howard to represent Virginia. Armstrong would become one of the most important individuals in the formal creation of educational institutions for blacks. Howard born in Maui, Hawaii, and a graduate of Williams College in Massachusetts, served in the Union Army during the Civil War, and accelerated to major general. His ranking and position in the war required him to oversee black soldiers, and he was acclaimed for his interactions with blacks. Although he was against slavery, he held a negative perspective towards blacks and their intellect. His feelings towards blacks and slavery were exhibited in a letter written to a friend during the Civil War in which he states, "Chum, I am a sort of abolitionist, but I have not learned to love the Negro" (Talbot, 1904, p. 86)

Armstrong also viewed blacks as inferior, but felt that with adequate training and preparation, blacks could overcome and command their own destinies. After the Civil War, General Armstrong was revered as a champion for his usage of black soldiers, and was offered several high level military positions. Despite the accolades, Armstrong decided against furthering his military career and chose to follow what he called serving the Great Master (Watkins, 2001). From his interactions with blacks during the war, he developed an urge to help blacks achieve respect in America. Still possessing a feeling of dismay for blacks, he felt uplifting the black race would be his contribution to humanity, and the ultimate portrayal of his patriotism.

Once appointed by Howard to the Freeman Bureau, Armstrong once again gained praise because of his integrations and relationships with blacks. Armstrong viewed his work with the Bureau as “civilizing” blacks and wrote, “Freedmen as a class are destitute of ambition; their complacency is poverty and filth is a curse” (Talbot, 1906 p.148).

As Armstrong and the Bureau continued their work, the opposition from southern whites mounted, beginning the end of the Freedmen’s Bureau and reconstruction. Tactics of organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan were successful in impeding the progress of the Bureau. Succumbing to the pressure from former slave owners, President Andrew Jackson eventually disbanded the Freedmen’s Bureau in 1870.

Prior to the abolishment of the Freedmen’s Bureau, Armstrong was seeking the assistance of AMA to establish an institution for the training and education of blacks. After much deliberation, AMA provided \$9,000, while Pittsburgh philanthropist, Josiah King contributed \$10,000. Armstrong utilized the funding to create the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia. The institute incorporated manual labor with academic work. Watkins, (2001) wrote, “Students are engaged in manual labor in the morning and studied in the afternoon and evening. Young men did farm work, while young women did domestic tasks”.

Armstrong’s institution not only provided industrial training, but it also focused on creating black teachers, who in turn educated other blacks. Armstrong insisted that educating blacks was good for America and her social-economic progress. His position was that blacks were crucial to the development and restoration after the Civil War. Although, Armstrong’s ideologies were the first to focus on educating blacks for a purpose beyond “civilizing”, but it also demonstrated that educating and preparing blacks was essential to America’s future. Armstrong’s concept attracted the attention of several white philanthropists, who contributed to Hampton Institution’s mission. The early faculty of Hampton was comprised of white northerners primary from AMA, who focused on remedial and vocational training. Like many of the early black institutions, the Hampton white faculty were essential in developing the curricula and managing the day to day activities of students.

Hampton’s popularity with blacks increased, as its student population grew immensely (Williams, 2005). Hampton graduates went on to create and establish several black institutions, with ideologies similar to General Armstrong. One of the most recognized graduates of Hampton was Booker T. Washington, who in referring to Armstrong stated, “in my opinion the rarest strongest and most beautiful character that it has ever been my privilege to meet” (Washington, 1901, p. 73). Washington became the first principal of Tuskegee Institute. Washington employed Armstrong’s model to secure funding from white philanthropists such as Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, and Collis Huntington. Hampton continued its focus on vocation until 1922, when it conferred its first bachelor’s degree. Although not academically focused Armstrong’s model was a defining moment in black education as it illustrated America’s need to educate blacks for the sake of the nation’s future prosperity. It also further demonstrated the influence of whites on developing and shaping the education of blacks.

White philanthropic organizations were instrumental in shaping the education of blacks during the Reconstruction period. The charitable contributions of these organizations helped establish several of today’s HBCUs. The key organizations were the General Education Board of the Rockefeller Foundation, the John E. Slater Fund, and the Carnegie Foundation. Between 1865-1902 white philanthropists donated millions toward establishing private black colleges, such as Shaw University (North Carolina, 1865), St. Augustine College (North Carolina, 1867), Morehouse College (Georgia, 1867), Fisk University (Tennessee, 1866) and Morgan College (Maryland, 1867) (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). The support of these philanthropists was essential as the support from the Christian missionary Organizations and the Freedmen’s Bureau dwindled. The federal government would remain inactive in supporting black institutions until 1871, through the efforts of the Morrill act that established Alcorn State as the first land grant black college in Mississippi (Thelin, 2004)..

The philanthropic organizations almost exclusively hired white faculty and selected whites to serve as trustees at many of the early black institutions. As donations amounted at black institutions so did criticisms from southern whites, who felt white schools were not being funded adequately. Fearful of backlash or retaliation, several white philanthropists either reduced their funding or withdrew their support from black colleges. This lack of funding was also compounded by the Compromise of 1877, which removed federal troops from southern states thus marking the end of the Reconstruction Era (Woodward, 1966). Once troops evacuated, the southern governments passed several Jim Crow laws to separate blacks from whites.

The Supreme Court's decision of 1896 in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, also legalized segregation, and called for separate but equal in all public places, which included schooling. As controllers of their local governments, white politicians insured funding for white colleges, while neglecting the need of black institutions. Several southern states reallocated and directed federal funds, such as federal land grant provisions, to white institutions, while overlooking HBCUs. As the funding decreased, the enrollment at HBCUs increased as black students were only allowed to attend black institutions. Salaries and resources also attracted white faculty to white institutions, transforming the faculty at many HBCUs to have primary black teaching staffs. Several HBCUs reorganized with state governments to avoid closing during the Jim Crow era (Du Bois, 1973). Such was the case of Alabama Normal School, a school initially established by ex-slaves, which gave the state of Alabama full control of the institution in exchange for appropriations. Such reorganizations occurred often in the South, and assisted in the creation of public HBCUs from 1890 – 1899. The Second Morrill Act of 1890 also influenced the creation of public HBCUs by requiring states with separate educational systems for whites and blacks to establish land grant institutions for both systems. Several HBCUs such as Alabama A&M, Florida A&M, and Fort Valley State University, in Georgia were established as a result of the Morrill Act mandate. Southern states often funded institutions that employed the Hampton/Tuskegee model, and neglected those that maintained liberal arts curricula (Allen & Jewell, 2002). HBCUs that emphasized liberal arts had to seek funding from black churches, and white philanthropists.

During the Jim Crow era, several primarily private HBCUs were able to provide a high quality education. Surveys conducted by the federal government and private organizations determined and recommended that HBCUs were deserving of accreditation, and often cited Spelman College, Morehouse College, and Fisk University as elite HBCUs. These surveys conducted up until 1942 also determined that state funded HBCUs lacked the appropriate resources to maintain the education of their white counterparts. It would not be until the Civil Rights Act of 1964, along with *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, in 1953 that separate but equal was constituted as illegal, and brought about desegregation in the South (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). With the Civil Rights Act, several HBCUs received federal funding that attempted to compensate for the funding inadequacies of the previous decades. Additionally the signing of the Higher education Act in 1965 further desegregated education, and aimed to diversify higher education (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). The Higher Education Act contained several provisions most notably Title III, that specified strengthening and developing institutions, that assisted HBCUs financially. With the increase of federal funding, both Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) and HBCUs had to diversify their faculty and student populations.

HBCUs were no longer the sole educators of black students, and enrollment of blacks increased at PWIs, as did black faculty. HBCUs would witness an increase of white faculty with the diversity initiatives of the federal government. The increased funding allowed HBCUs to offer somewhat comparable salaries and funding to their white counterparts, thus attracting both highly qualified black and white faculty. However, the influx of whites did not mirror that of the days of the AMA, but white faculty would again have a distinct presence at HBCUs.

Much has changed since the *Plessy v. Ferguson* court ruling and segregation. The majority of HBCUs have primarily black administrations, and several have been lead by black presidents. Most HBCUs have also adopted liberal arts curricula as opposed to the Hampton/Tuskegee Model (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). As white faculty returned to HBCUs where they were once the primary decision makers, they were looked upon as outsiders. This Historical paradox mirrored the fresh wounds of the civil right moments, as racial discrimination contributed to the perception of white faculty on black college campuses. Given the racial and historical context the socialization of white faculty into HBCUs has been a complicated process.

Although conceptions of several HBCUs stemmed from black churches and black communities, such as Wilberforce University, the funding and support to establish these institutions primarily came from white Christian missionary organizations, White philanthropist, and the federal government (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). Though a few black institutions established and existed solely on the funding of the black community such as Livingstone College, which was established by the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the majority of HBCUs had some relationships with whites (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). The influence of whites was apparent in the curricula and culture of these institutions. During the early days of black institutions, white faculty socialization and the understanding of norms for whites in black environments was nonexistence. Since whites controlled and managed these institutions they were able to create norms and influence the culture.

The paternalistic views held by white missionary organizations, and the Freedmen's Bureau also contributed to a culture and norms constructed by whites. As blacks gained control of HBCUs during segregation, they were able to adjust and influence the norms and culture. Thus, white faculty would return to HBCUs after *Brown v. Board of Education*, and find themselves adapting to a culture where they were once a majority but now a minority.

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