Contributions of African Americans to the University of Minnesota History Project

Young, Gifted, and Black
Ninety Years of Experience and Perceptions of African American Students at the University of Minnesota 1882-1972
Introduction

In 1999, on the 30th anniversary of the Black student take-over of Morrill Hall, it was suggested that a more in-depth history of the Black student, faculty, and staff involvement at the University of Minnesota be undertaken. Concern was expressed that if scholarly research was not undertaken on the events leading to the take-over of Morrill Hall, an opportunity to recapture part of the University of Minnesota’s history would be lost. The first history of the University (Grey, 1950) focused on the past administrative leadership of the University and contained very little socio-cultural material. On the occasion of the University’s sesquicentennial celebration, a concerted effort was made to make the updated history of the University since 1950 more inclusive (Lehmburg and Pflaum, 2000).

To this end, a planning group, the Coalition for the History of African American Contributions to the University of Minnesota, was organized. A steering group was identified and funds were raised to hire a project director. In 2001 and 2002, a director was hired, the scope of the project was refined, archives were explored, and interviews conducted. Members of the Steering Committee assisted Dr. Ann Pflaum in her interpretation ofunal events relating to Black students on campus for the updated University history.

During fall 2002, Minnesota, the University of Minnesota Alumni Association magazine, engaged the services of Tim Brady to write a three-month series on the experiences of Black students at the University. The three installments were published in issues published during fall 2002 and early winter 2003. This publication reprints those articles, enhanced by additional photographs, documents, and text. By disseminating this material it is the hope of the steering committee that increased interest in the rich history of African Americans at the University of Minnesota may translate into greater support for this important research project.

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General College

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UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
the Students for a Democratic Society organization (SDS), and then walked toward the admissions office where a chair barred the door. She knocked, and a skeptical face greeted her. Then someone from inside called, “That’s Kate’s mother!” and Gloria Williams was let inside, where she saw her daughter among the protestors. “I stayed for a while and talked with the students,” Williams says. “It seemed to me they knew exactly what they were doing, so I left.”

Through a day of back-and-forth negotiations between black students, administration officials, and community intermediaries, a settlement was hashed out. Administrators agreed to accelerate the pace of the creation of an Afro-American studies department, agreed to the placement of an AAAC presence on the Martin Luther King scholarship committee, and agreed to fund the first student conference. The black students agreed to leave the building.

There were recriminations. Moos came under intense criticism in some quarters for his handling of the situation and according to student demands. Some $11,000 damage was done to the offices of Morrill Hall, though it was disputed then and now just who did the destruction (black students or the SDS, whose members had come late to the sit-in). A commission was formed by Moos to investigate the circumstances of the takeover. And in March, a Hennepin County grand jury indicted Freeman, Huntley, and Warren Tucker and charged them with riot, criminal damage to property, and unlawful assembly. In the ensuing two-week trial in October and November 1969, Warren Tucker was acquitted of all charges while Freeman and Huntley were acquitted of felony charges of riot and criminal damage and given a year’s probation for the misdemeanor charge of unlawful assembly.

When the dust settled on the scene, it revealed a fresh landscape at the University of Minnesota. By June 1969, the University’s Board of Regents had approved a new Department of Afro-American and African Studies, and by 1970 courses were being offered within it. El-Kati, Earl Craig, Josie Johnson, and Lillian Anthony were hired as faculty. They would soon be joined by Anita Brooks (M.A. ’71, Ph. D. ’77), Reginald Buckner (Ph.D. ’74), and Geneva Sowden in an interdisciplinary program that covered subjects that ranged from jazz to African history to the sociology of the African American family.

The corps of African American faculty and graduate students in the program created on campus a community that had never existed before: a thriving intellectual assembly dedicated to the study and enhancement of the African American community. Some of the first to benefit from the program were those who struggled to create it: John Wright, the son and nephew of 1930s graduates of the University, would switch from engineering to American studies; he is now an associate professor in the Department of Afro-American and African Studies. Horace Huntley is a history professor at the University of Alabama–Birmingham. David Taylor (B.A. ’68, Ph.D. ’77) is dean of the General College at the University of Minnesota.

The Department of Afro-American and African Studies has stood central to the intellectual and cultural life of African American students at the University of Minnesota since its inception in 1970. Its history and the history of African American students in general at the University continues to be written—even as we acknowledge the sacrifice, courage, and diligence of the pioneer black students at the U. Andrew Hilyer (1882), Frank Wheaton (1894), Elvira Turner (’96), Olive Howard (’14), Roy Wilkins (B.A. ’21), Barbara Cyrus, Bill McMoore, and scores of others created a foundation for a better and more accepting home for African American students on the campus of the University of Minnesota.

Still, more work needs doing. African American students and faculty have continued to express a sense of isolation. The campus remains largely white, and acceptance of cultural differences remains a struggle. But the generations of black students who have followed their elders keep adding to that foundation and the house keeps rising.

Tim Brady, a St. Paul-based freelance writer, thanks the University of Minnesota Archives and Librarian Lois Hendrickson for invaluable assistance in writing this series of articles.

Almost Perfect Equality

The first African American graduates of the University of Minnesota were few in number but strong in aspiration, many joining a growing professional class of black Minnesotans at the turn of the last century.

By Tim Brady

The early history of African Americans in Minnesota has been enhanced recently by a number of projects. David Taylor (B.A. ’67, Ph.D. ’77), dean of General College at the University of Minnesota and one of the leading historians of African Americans in Minnesota, has published Cap Wiggins: An Architectural Legacy in Ice and Stone, which tells of the life of St. Paul’s first African American architect. Paul Nelson (J.D. ’77) has written Frederick L. McGhee: A Life on the Color Line, 1861–1912, a biography of Minnesota’s first black lawyer. In addition to these books, Twin Cities Public Television is planning to produce a documentary history of African Americans in Minnesota.

Little has been written about the experiences of African American students at the University of Minnesota in the school’s early years. Minnesota hopes to help illuminate this history with its forthcoming series, which is the first of three on African Americans at the University.
The first African American woman to graduate from the University of Minnesota was Scottie Primus Davis of St. Paul’s Central High School, who earned her bachelor’s degree in 1904. Elvira Turner, who graduated in 1906, became a teacher at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Olive Howard was the first woman to achieve a professional degree from the school of pharmacy in 1914. She was the daughter of Dr. A.O. Howard, one of the earliest African American doctors to practice in the Twin Cities. Dr. Earl S. Weber, another St. Paulite and the first black graduate of St. John’s Academy, became the first black graduate of the University of Minnesota’s dental school in 1921.

Andrew Hiley moved to Washington, D.C., soon after graduating and eventually earned a law degree. He worked in the U.S. Treasury Department and became a trustee of Howard University. His son, Gale Hiley, followed his father at the University of Minnesota and earned both bachelor’s and law degrees in the 1950s. Gale practiced law for many years in Minneapolis, and among other distinctions, he became, in 1980, the first black law of Ralph Bunche when his wife’s sister married the future United Nations ambassador and Nobel Peace Prize recipient.

Gloria Williams (Ph.D., ’78), a professor in the Department of Biology, has taught at the U of M for 44 years. She was on the faculty in 1969 when African American students, her daughter among them, took over Morrill Hall and was called in to help mediate the situation.

Gloria Williams had never been contacted by the president’s office before. Now she was asked to help mediate the situation. "When I was called to Morrill Hall, I didn’t even know the president knew I worked on campus," she says. Williams grabbed an old, fur-collared coat, "in case I had to spend the night," she recalls. "I thought the curtain would make a good head rest," and went down to the administration building. She entered the bursar’s office, which had been occupied by a group of white demonstrators from

List of demands presented to University President Malcolm Moss by the Afro-American Action Committee leadership during the occupation of Morrill Hall, February 1969.


appose their demands. Led by Freeman and Huntley, the students left the president's office, but instead of exiting the building, they simply went down a floor and took over the admissions office. Morrill Hall was occupied, and it would remain so for the next 24 hours.

In all the years that African American students had been at the University of Minnesota, there was no other moment like this one. For the first time in the school’s history, its central concern—the concern of the administration, of faculty, of alumni, of the student body, and of the state’s citizens—was focused intensely on the University’s African American students.

Andrew Franklin Hiley: the first African American graduate of the ‘U’

N 1883, The Washington Bee, the leading African American newspaper in the District of Columbia, included a brief note on a meeting of the Bethel Literary Club: “There were assembled men and women of all races, and the representatives of the highest walks of our best society; to hear the theme: ‘The two-hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.’” Mr. Hiley [sic] of Minnesota made some remarks on the question of amending the constitution of the United States. Very few knew the young man, but before he took his seat the question went around the hall like wildfire: Who is he?”

The short answer was that Andrew Franklin Hiley was the first African American graduate of the University of Minnesota. Born a slave in Georgia in 1858, Hiley migrated with his mother and two siblings to Omaha, Nebraska, after the Civil War. There he received an elementary education and was orphaned. By 1877, he was in Minneapolis, the co-proprietor of his own barbershop. In Minnesota, he befriended Edward Chemery Gale, the son of one of the leading attorneys of the city, and the future son-in-law of John S. Pillsbury, the “father of the University.” Gale and Hiley became classmates at the University of Minnesota, where Hiley was the first student of African American descent to enroll, and the first to graduate. In a few spare moments, Hiley managed to serve as associate editor for one of the first African American journals to be published in the state, The St. Paul Reverb. In June 1882, Hiley delivered in Latin, the salutatory address to his class. By the fall of that year, he was off to Washington, where he began to study law at Howard University as he clerked at the U.S. Treasury Department.

His career was just beginning. For the next 43 years, Hiley was one of the leading lawyers of the African American community in Washington. He received his law degree from Howard in 1884 and would serve as a trustee for that school from 1913 until his death. As he continued to work at the Treasury Department, Hiley amassed a small fortune in real estate holdings and became a lobbyist investor, holding patents on a hot-air register system and a water evaporator. He was a founder of the Union League in Washington and published an important study of African American business enterprises in the D.C. area in 1901. He lectured frequently on economics, and was asked by the U.S. Commission for the Paris Exposition of 1900 to put together an exhibit on “Negroes in Merchandise, Factories and Allied Occupations.” He was a friend of Frederick Douglass and a correspondent of Booker T. Washington. In an era when the prominence of African American thought and politics was drawn between Washington’s accommodationists notions of economic advancement and W.E.B. Du Bois’ agitation for African American acceptance into the American mainstream, Hiley stood in the middle, advocating for both economic development and political might.

One of Hiley’s three children, Gale (whose name was perhaps eponymous with the Gale family of Minneapolis), graduated from the University of Minnesota law school and practiced for many years in Minneapolis.

—Tim Brady
In the spring of 1967, STRAP sponsored Carmichael’s visit to campus. That fall, Stone and other STRAP leaders led a demonstration that disrupted the opening convocation of the school year. The protest began with a silent sit-in in the front aisle of Northrop Auditorium during the program and ended with speeches and a tense on the plaza outside Northrop. The ostensible reason for the protest was that an invitation to the convocation had not been extended to Ida Elam, the president of STRAP. But the deeper issues centered on black student frustrations with their isolation on campus and the lack of regard and respect shown them by the University. More disruptions were on the way.

In the winter of 1967–68, STRAP changed its name to the Afro-American Action Committee (AAAC). The organization continued to grow, and new student leaders, like Rose Mary Freeman (B.A. ’70), Horace Huntsly (B.A. ’70), and John Wright, emerged. By the time of Martin Luther King’s assassination in April 1968, AAAC was a force to be reckoned with. “There had been a great deal of growing on campus for a long time,” recalls David Taylor, “but until AAAC came along, it tended to be non-directional. It’s also important to note the town-gown connection.” Wright says of the increased politicization of the black student body, “We found encouragement and support through African American community organizations like the Urban League, in the community centers like Phyllis Wheelely and Har- ler Q. Brown, and through the Way, led by Mhamood El-Kat.”

In the wake of King’s murder and a mass demonstration that followed, AAAC created a list of seven demands that it presented to University President Malcolm Moos.Drafted by Wright, these included an insistence that 200 full scholarships be granted African American high school students from Minnesota in Martin Luther King’s name; that guidance, counseling, and recruitment agencies be established and geared toward black students; and that an elec- trical curriculum be established at the University “that would reflect the contributions of black people to the culture of America.”

In response, Moos and the administration began raising funds for a scholarship program to begin in the fall, established a Task Force on Human Rights to examine racial issues on campus, and formed a faculty committee to begin work on a “minority studies program.”

Through the course of the summer, Wright and others helped recruit black students to the University. In 1915, when Gale Hillyer first entered private practice, he joined the law firm of Albert Hall, a man who was a classmate of his father’s. It was a rare invitation for the time—an African American attorney being asked to join a white attorney’s law firm—and perhaps given added credence to the assessment of Andrew Hillyer’s classmate that Hillyer “mingled with . . . almost perfect equality.”

Tracking the lives and careers of African American students who attended the University of Minnesota in this era is impressive work. It is creating a list of “names” or documenting a who of black graduates. The Uni- versity did not keep records of its students by race, and there is evi- dence to suggest that some students of mixed racial background passed as white. A pair of brothers, for instance, who graduated in the early 1890s—one from the U’s school of dentistry, the other from its college of medicine—were listed as “mulatto” in an 1880 Minnesota census. Each would have been the first graduate of African American descent from his respective school, but their death certificates declare them both to be “Caucasian” and evi- dence suggests that they lived their professional lives as whites.

The most diligent keeper of statistics regarding African American higher education was the black community itself. Both the local and national African American press were intensely interested in supporting and promoting education and reported frequently on black graduates and the successes of African American students.

In St. Paul, the longest-lived African American newspaper in the area, The Appeal, consistently noted a given year’s graduates of area high schools and colleges. An article published in its pages in 1905 listed a total of seven African American graduates from the Uni- versity of Minnesota up to that time. These included Andrew Hilly- er, as well as Wheaton, Stewart, Davis, Ricks, and the two broth- ers mentioned above.

In 1910, educator and writer W.E.B. DuBois, who for many years edited The Crisis, the NAACP journal of African American sociology, literature, and politics, began publishing annual reports in the magazine on black graduates of higher education. Initially these surveys were devoted to the graduates of “Negro Colleges” which had sprung up, primarily in the South, during the years of Reconstruction following the Civil War and served as the first choice of higher education for the great majority of black students across the United States.

During and after World War I, however, as African Americans began to migrate to industrial jobs in the north, increasing num- bers of students began choosing northern state colleges. The Cri- sis reports reflect the change. The University of Minnesota makes its first appearance in the annual tally in 1919. By 1923, the U of M is listed as having 18 African American students. There were 26 in 1924, 30 in 1925, and 39 in 1928, including two graduates of the medical school and one graduate of the school of dentistry.

Black students at the University during its earliest days were certainly subject to racial stereotyping, some sanctioned by the academic institutions itself. In the early 1910s, University anthrop- ology professor Albert Jenkins openly and loudly expressed his the- ories on the “racial degradation” that would inevitably follow the miscegenation of an integrated society.

Personal slurs were common too. Robert “Bobby” Marshall, who starred for the powerful Gopher football teams of 1904, ’05, and ’06 as an all-conference end, was described in the pages of the 1905 Gopher annual as a “tank-limbed child of sunny Ethiopia.”

Marshall was not only the first black athlete to play at the University, but probably the first black athlete in the Western Con- ference, the forerunner of today’s Big Ten. He went on to a leg- endary athletic career in the Twin Cities area, playing professional baseball and football, with a brief stint as a pro motorcycle racer thrown in for good measure.

For all the triumphs of the racial perspectives of the day, how- ever, the small numbers of African American students at the Uni- versity in these early times tended to isolate racial problems. It wasn’t until the black student population on campus grew through the 1920s, and became a community in its own right, that segregationist elements around the University came fully to the fore and civil rights became an issue at the U.

Five African American co-eds were refused service at the Oak Tree Restaurant on 14th Street near the campus in 1926, prompt- ing a local black paper, The St. Paul Echo, to editorialize: “Racial discrimination, undoubtedly due to the larger registration of colored students this year and heretofore unheard of in any of the eating houses surrounding the campus, has de- finitely raised its head at the university.”

It had raised its head ear- lier in the decade as well. In 1921, The Minnesota Daily reported that several Big Ten campuses were said to have Ku Klux Klan organizations with- in their student bodies.

Though the story presented no evidence that a chapter existed at the University of M., the threat was serious. “That there are existing units of the Ku Klux Klan in St. Paul and Min-neapolis”

The photograph of Gopher football star Robert “Bobby” Marshall in the 1920 Gopher is accompanied by a blurb that begins: “This tank-limbed child of sunny Ethiopia...”

Olive Howard, pictured in the 1916 Gopher, was the first woman to earn a professional degree from the University’s school of pharmacy, in 1914. Not to her photo is the quote: “When, oh, when will these two tests tube be made of wood?”

Black Student Leadership Conference program, sponsored by the Afro-American Action Committee (AAAC) at Coffman Memorial Union, February 1969.
neoplis has been known for some time,” wrote the St. Paul Pioneer Press in a follow-up article to the Daily report. "Extension of the organization to the State University was not regarded with surprise by some alumni." University President Louis Coffman issued a statement at the time, asserting that “actions will be taken to quash the order, if reports [of its existence] are found to be true.”

Neither were the classrooms of the University immune to racism. In 1921, a political science professor named Jeremiah Young purposely omitted the name of an African American student, William Morrow, when he assigned seats for his class in alphabetical order. Professor Young subse-

Just a year prior to this incident at the University, three African American circus workers accused of assaulting a young white woman in Duluth were lynched by a mob—the state’s most infamous moment of racial brutality. The Duluth's progressive stance stands in stark contrast to that notorious event and suggests the volatile nature of racial relations in Minnesota during the era.

Roy Wilkins was a University sophomore when the tragedy occurred. He was a junior and had recently become the first black reporter at the Daily when the editorial appeared. While there is no evidence he wrote the piece, Wilkins served on the campus newspaper staff for two years as a reporter and night editor.

Wilkins would go on to fame as the longtime head of the NAACP and one of the leading figures in the nation’s long strug-
gle over civil rights. At the Uni-

A photograph of Roy Wilkins (back row, second from right) and the Omega Psi Phi fraternity, the first black organization ever to be pictured in a Gopher annual, appeared in 1923. The same volume also featured the Ku Klux Klan float was pictured.

no scholarship programs for African American students, no cultural programs, no attempt to recruit stu-
dents of color.”

“I would estimate that there were about 30 or 60 African Americans on the campus at that time,” says John Wright (B.S. ’68, M.A. ’71, Ph.D. ’77), who also arrived at the University in 1963. “There were more international students from some individual countries than there were African Americans.”

Gloria Williams (Ph.D. ’75) came to the University the same year as Clarence Taylor, in 1958. She held a master’s degree from New York University and had taught in elementary schools in Boston before enter-
ing the doctorate program in the School of Home Economics at the University. She was hired as a teaching assistant and assigned to the Department of Textiles and Clothing. “I always felt a little isolated on the St. Paul campus,” she says. “I still do.”

For 44 years, Williams has taught in what has now become the College of Human Ecology. She received her doctorate in 1975 and sent a daughter, Kate, to the University. She recalls that during the 1960s there were just a handful of African American faculty and students at the University—the School of Social Work hired the first black woman faculty member, Ruby Per-

Bill McInroe (B.A. ’65), who graduated with a degree in education, was not able to find a job in the Minneapolis School District until 1958. He eventually became director of health, physical education, and athletics for all Minneapolis schools, a position from which he retired in 1989. He then worked as manager of community relations for the Minnesota Timberwolves.

Fitters it seems that here at Minnesota—or at any other institution of learning—where we have whole departments devoted to Americanization and Sociology, to studies of American government and things allied, that anyone among us should take such an attitude [as Professor Young]’. Perhaps in the past, one or several students might have protested against being seated beside a colored student. It was then the duty of that professor to teach them that they were wrong, not to preserve the incident and apply it later.

P. Inge  H. Inge  Butler  Richardson  King  Wilkins  Harris  T. Inge  Kyle

The powerful legacy of Malcolm X, the emerging Black Panther move-
mant, and a growing acknowledge-
ment—inculminating in the urban riot of the mid-1960s—that racism was not isolated to southern states led to an escalating tension that was felt deeply on the campus of the Uni-

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isolated at the U, and an uneasy future loomed. The student body as a whole had changed. The University of Minnesota was teem- ing with new students, many of them war veterans, many with fam- ilies, and many in need of housing. But African American students were still few and far between and most concerns expressed toward their well-being on campus came in the form of studies that doc- umented what black people already knew namely, that discrimi- nation was firmly embedded in the life of the campus and the com- munity around them.

A 1948 survey from the Office of the Dean of Students, for instance, indicated that 7 student organizations at the Universi- ty—almost all of them fraternities and sororities—had restrictive clauses expressly prohibiting Negroes from joining them. Hous- ing remained a problem as well. It wasn’t until 1950, at the prodd- ing of the NAACP that the University cuit asking its approved roster of landlords to list religious and racial preferences for renters. Like so many other students of the era, McMoore had arrived at the University in 1946, after a two-year stint in the U.S. Army. A graduate of Minnesota South, he was the first member of his family to earn a high school diploma and would become the first to graduate from college. At the U, he majored in education and was the only black person in the department. “That wasn’t any-

thing new to me,” McMoore says. “I was the only black player on the football team and the only black boy too.”

McMoore remembered that the football team played no south- ern schools during his stint at the University but that he roamed by himself on the road, until teammate Ted Christiansen volun- teered to busk with him. When he graduated in 1951, McMoore couldn’t immediately find a job in the Minneapolis school district. (A 1947 “Survey on Human Relations” conducted for the city of Minneapolis showed that in all 121 of Minneapolis’s public schools, exactly one African American was employed, as a clerk. There were no black teachers in the system.) McMoore spent two years working as the athletics director at a community house in St. Paul, then earned his master’s degree from a school in Missouri.

McMoore returned to Minneapolis in 1958, when “the district was finally willing to hire me,” he says. He spent a number of years teaching at Minneapolis South before becoming director of health, physical education, and athletics for all Minneapolis schools, a position from which he retired in 1989. He spent another half- dozen years in the 1990s working as manager of community rela- tions for the University. At his years at the U, McMoore says, “I learned never to quit. My experiences helped me to just keep going.”

Clarence Taylor (B.A. ’62) arrived at the University from St. Paul Central in 1958 and was soon recruited into one of the Uni- versity’s first attempts at educating itself and the community about matters of diversity: a branch of a nationwide student organiza- tion called the Panel of Americans. Instituted at UCLA during World War II in response to the wave of anti-Japanese sentiment that came with the onset of war, the Panel of Americans sent groups of students of diverse religious, racial, and ethnic backgrounds into the community to discuss their experiences and to educate Minnesotans about their differences. The U’s branch of the organization was first suggested in 1954 but didn’t get off the ground until 1958. Taylor was one of the first African American students to enroll.

“Basically we went all over the Twin Cities and out state too,” says Taylor, a recently retired sales associate from Twin Cities-based Best Buy. “There’d be five students on each panel, and we’d talk about our experiences and then answer questions: ‘Do you feel like outsiders? What do you think about Martin Luther King? Would you ever date a white woman?’

The panel would also typically include a Jew, a Catholic, a member of a large Protestant faith, along with a person from less well- represented racial, ethnic, or religious groups on campus, includ- ing Native Americans, Asian Americans, Mormons, and Unitarians. The Panel of Americans would exist at the U until the late ’60s, and through the years it visited hun- dreds of high school assemblies, fra- ternities, sororities, women’s clubs, and Saturday school assembly.

The Civil Rights movement itself was just beginning to be a presence at the U during Taylor’s years, and he recalls numerous campus conversa- tions about sit-ins and being a part of an early Civil Rights organization called Freedom Minnesota. But African Americans at the University were still isolated, and—with the exception of a group of star football players—kept a low pro- file. Like Taylor, they tended to live off campus.

The football players included Sandy Stephens, Judge Dickinson, Bob Bell, Bill Monsey, and Bob McNeill. They were part of the program’s first major effort at recruiting black athletes and would help carry the Gophers to the 1960 Big Ten championship and a 1961 Rose Bowl victory—the last time the University of Minnesota has won that title. Stephens was the school’s first black All-Americ- an quarterback; Bell would also receive all-American honors and go on to a great pro career as an all-star tackle.

The Gopher basketball team was not as quick as Murray War- rian’s football program to recruit African American players. It wasn’t until 1967 that the University awarded scholarships to its first three black players, the extremely talented trio of Lou Hudson, Archie Clark, and Don Yates.

That was the same year Clarence Taylor’s brother, David, arrived on campus. David Taylor (B.A. ’67, Ph.D. ’77) was one of a very few African American students in the College of Liberal Arts and was a little overwhelmed by the sheer size of the University and the lack of black students on campus. “I would go for days without seeing another black student,” says Taylor. “We were basically dumped into the masses at the U and told to make it. There were outstanding student, a win- ner of the prestigious Pills- bury Oratorical Contest in 1922, and a member of Omega Psi Phi fraternity, which became the first black organization ever to be pic- tured in a Gopher annual, in 1923. Wilkins remembered the photo in his memoirs and thought that he and his fraternity mates looked like a group of young, would-be lodge brothers.

Omega Psi Phi was not the only black fraternity on campus. The first, Pi Alpha Tau, came in 1911. There was also an Alpha Phi Alpha chapter. The first African American sorority on cam- pus, Alpha Kappa Alpha, was established in 1922. In 1926, Alpha Kappa Alpha won the distinction of having the highest scholastic average of all the fraternity and sorority chapters on the Universi- ty campus.

Helen Jackson of Minneapolis was a Phi Beta Kappa student in 1928. Walter Minor and John Chenault graduated from the Medi- cal college in 1910. The first black athletes since Bobby Marshall competed for the University in the late ’20s. They were Art Wiesager and William O’Shields for the track team, and Ellsworth Harpole, who would become the first black Gopher football play- er since Marshall, in 1930. Vernon Wilkerson is thought to be the first African American to earn his Ph.D. at the U, in agricultural bio- chemistry in 1932.

But for all of the successes of individual students at the U of M, African American students, as a group and on the whole, did not share in the full life and benefits of a college education at the Uni- versity. After Roy Wilkins and his fraternity brothers appeared in the 1923 Gopher one can look in vain through the next dozen annu- als for a photograph of an African American group, or an individ- ual African American, among the numerous literary societies, pro- fessional groups, fraternities, sororities, and debating clubs that were such prominent features of the campus of the day.

Prospects for graduates were limited. Through most of the 1920s and ’30s, there were no African Americans hired to teach in any Twin Cities public schools. Employment of black graduates at a professional level in area businesses was virtually nonexistent. Talented African American students tilted to- ward professional schools at the Uni- versity because it gave them an opportunity to earn a living within the black community, so that they didn’t have to rely on the dominant white society for income.

In addition, African American student protests at the University were not accept- ed for assignment at area hospitals because of the color of their skin. And black stu- dents had very few housing options, none of which involved them living in inte- grated housing with their white peers.

From the University of Minnesota, African American students had asked for and received little or no help in alleviating these problems. They would not be so quiet in the 1960s.

A photograph of a Kloe Kloe Klen float in the homecoming parade appeared in a “Minnesota Life” pictorial in the 1923 Gopher. There is no mention whether the float was made by students, but an introduction calls the creators of photos “composite pictures of comedy and tragedy that make up the life of a great institution. . . . a mirror of your Minnesota.”

Helen Natalie Jackson, pictured in the 1922 Gopher, was a Phi Beta Kappa student that year. Among other activities, she was on the University’s Bi-Racial Commission.
The Way Spaces Were Allocated

In the first few decades of the 20th century, African American students had no housing options at the University of Minnesota and few near campus. World War I would come a second time before the segregation ended. 

By Tim Brady

In 1935, Gopher football player Dwight Reed was kept out of the homecoming game because Tulane University refused to play against African American athletes.

The University of Minnesota graduated its first African American student, Andrew Hilger, in 1882. Through the next 40 years, a small number of black students followed Hilger at the U, including such notable figures as Frank Wharton (1894), Roy Williams (B.A. '23), and 1906 all-American football player Bobbie Marshall.

As the numbers of African American students in northern colleges, including the University of Minnesota, began to increase after World War I, campus began to feel the strains of racial tension. At the University of Minnesota, those stresses would be felt most acutely in areas where black students and whites were most intimately mixed.

This is the second in a series of three articles that outline the history of African Americans at the University of Minnesota.

N 1925, LOTUS COFFMAN, president of the University of Minnesota, was contacted by the local head of the Women’s Christian Association on behalf of a young, out-of-town student at the University named Dorothy Waters. Waters had applied to the school’s nursing program and been accepted, only to be refused assignment as a St. Paul hospital because of the color of her skin. How could this happen? asked Mrs. James Paige.

“While the University of Minnesota has no prejudice against Miss Waters because she is colored,” Coffman wrote, “nevertheless if we had known that she was colored we would have advised against her coming.” The St. Paul hospital was a private facility. The University was only affiliated with it and did not control its personnel. “Those whom we send must be agreeable to the officers at the hospital.”

The dean of the medical school moved further toward the cross of the matter in a letter of its own. When Waters arrived at the campus and it was learned that she was black, the nursing program “found it impossible to accommodate her because of the intimate work with white patients which our nurses have to undertake.” You will note that the prejudice is not on our part at all but on the part of the patients.

Over the next two decades, the University of Minnesota would spend a good deal of time denying its own prejudice, even as it countered and supported the practices of racial dis-

No Other Moment Like This One

After decades of segregation and isolation for African Americans on the Twin Cities campus and amid escalating racial tension nationwide, the 1969 takeover of Morrill Hall by black student leaders was a turning point for the University of Minnesota.

By Tim Brady | Photographs by Mark Luinenburg

The small numbers of African American students at the University of Minnesota in the early years of the 20th century served to isolate racial problems on the Twin Cities campus. As more black men and women arrived in the 1920s, the University seemed less interested in responding to their needs than in creating separate spaces for whites and African Americans to function within their own segregated communities. World War II helped open minds to the possibilities of an integrated society at the U, as elsewhere across the United States. But change came slowly in the postwar years, even as the Civil Rights and Black Power movements gained momentum.

I N FEBRUARY 1950, BILL MCMOORE (B.A. ’51) of the University of Minnesota boxing team received a front-page Minneapolis Tribune apology from the school’s president, James Morrill. The light-heavyweight had been kept home from a team trip to Miami because coach Ray Chisholm said he wanted to rest McMoore for an upcoming Big Ten bout with Michigan State. In truth, the stay at home was prompted by Florida boxing rules that prohibited white fighters from facing black fighters in the ring. The boxing team wasn’t interested in making an issue of the matter. It won’t happen again, Morrill told McMoore through the newspaper. “The right of a home team to prescribe conditions of athletic contests on its own campus has generally been recognized in intercollegiate competition,” he wrote, “but the University of Minnesota cannot participate if those conditions are contrary to its own fixed policy.” The Minnesota boxing team, which was in Miami at the time of the announcement, would be allowed to compete, said Morrill, but it would be a last time for Gopher athletics teams. “No further intercollegiate contest will be scheduled under circumstances that might bar eligible members of its teams from participation.”

In the years following World War II, the segregation that had characterized pwear campus race relations was becoming an embarrassment to much of the University community. But black students remained
The administration would sanction all-white facilities, like Pioneer Hall, and sanction all-black facilities, like an “International House,” but a mix of students still violated its sensibilities.

Barbara Cyrus is retired from a long career as a Twin Cities editor. She first enrolled at the University of Minnesota in 1937 and joined the Council of Negro Students that fall. After spending her freshman year at Minneapolis, Cyrus transferred to Spelman College in Atlanta, black women’s college, before returning to the University of M in the fall of 1939. The contrast between schools was sharp. “I was the only black student in my first three classes at the University,” she says. One of the reasons that she chose to return to the University after her year at Spelman was because the University Theater was planning to stage a version of the play Porgy and Bess and she had been offered a role in the production.

“I had seen two or three stagings of Porgy including one starring Cab Calloway and I thought it was just terrible that we were going to produce it here at the University,” she says. It was to be the first all-black play on campus, a fact that brought it a great deal of attention. In fact, Life magazine was considering using it as the subject of a photo essay.

But from the moment the staging of the play at the University was announced, it caused controversy within the local African American community. “They complained about the language in the play,” says Cyrus. “Then the people in the city heard about the staging and they got upset. We kept hearing this phrase, ‘Detrimental to the race.’”

Porgy and Bess was seen by many black people as a vehicle that promoted racist stereotypes. Opponents of the production doubted that a white audience would grasp the fact that the characters in the play, and the play itself, were depictions and not a broad view of African American life. “We do not dispute the existence of a ‘Cafish Row’ no more than we would dispute the existence of a Tobacco Road,” which portrays similar conditions among whites in the south,” wrote editor Cecil Newman in the local paper, the Minneapolis Spokesman. “Unfortunately, most of those who see the play will not remember that it offers a social picture. They will trend to regard it as a typical illustration of Negro life everywhere.”

African American students of the day were “bound and determined to be seen as first-class citizens,” Cyrus recalls. “We felt this intense pressure to always be perfectly groomed; to not be too loud or boisterous.”

Porgy and Bess was ultimately canceled by the University, a fact applauded by its opponents as a sign of the growing influence of the black political voice in the community.

That increased political voice also helped bring an end to “Jim Crow” housing at the University. Its final days began in 1941, when the Phyllis Wheatley settlement house decided it would no longer take boarders and the University felt obliged to find substitute housing for its black students. Lotus Coffman was dead, but his idea for an International House was resurrected to meet the new housing demands. The U purchased and refurbished a home on Washington Avenue and placed it in the charge of an African American graduate student, who rented rooms to a mix of white and black students.

The University immediately shut the place down, claiming the house was meant for African American students only. The administration would sanction all-white facilities, like Pioneer Hall, and sanction all-black facilities, like an “International House,” but a mix of students still violated its sensibilities.

Protests followed. Rallies on campus against the closing drew hundreds of protesters. Virtually every political group at the U, the local branches and national offices of the NAACP, and the African American community at large in the Twin Cities all protested the closing. Finally, it seemed the University would have to do something. “Times had changed,” says Soderhok. “The world was at war. This old form of segregation seemed suddenly unpatriotic.”

The end of housing discrimination at the University came with no great drama. Prompted by the protests, a committee was formed to look into the issue. Quietly the group agreed to open housing in the fall of 1942 to students of all races.

It was typical of how racial conflicts were resolved during the period. The same structures of power which had instituted policies of segregation determined when they would end. Deeper issues would deal with another day.

In the postwar years, however, as the African American student body continued to grow, it became more urban and more steeped in the passions of the civil rights movement. Racial problems at the University would feel first a nudge, and then a shove into the light of day. When he arrived at the University as an undergraduate in the early 1960s, David Taylor (B.A. ’67, Ph.D. ’77), dean of the General College at the University of Minnesota, says, “The campus had never really wrestled with the profound circumstances of having a diverse student body.

There’d be a whole lot of wrestling before that decade was through. ■

“[J]ust wasn’t any place to live on campus at the time. I think one group of young men lived in a rooming house in Dinkytown, above a drugstore. Otherwise, you either lived in a private home or at Phyllis Wheatley” settlement house. "Under the guise of doing what was best for all concerned, the University of Minnesota in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s often segregated black students and routinely denied them the full life of the campus. While the U of M was far from alone in its practices, and far from the worst transgressor in the ranks of colleges across the country, it was also slow to rectify the problems of racial inequality that became apparent on campus in the years before World War II. Prior to World War II, segregation was viewed by the administration as the solution to the problem, rather than a problem itself," says Mark Soderholm, an historian and doctoral candidate in the University’s history department who is writing a study of race relations at the U. The stated aim of segregation as practiced at the U, he says, was to guard against troubles that would arise from the interaction of the races. To keep African Americans and whites from each other, “there was a very sophisticated mindset that mapped the way spaces were allocated. There was a space where [interaction] was appropriate and a space where it just couldn’t happen.”

Perhaps the most visible place where mixing couldn’t happen was in the dormitories. It was a problem that first came to public attention in the fall of 1931 when freshman John Pinket Jr., arrived
This was an era when touring black entertainers—renowned performers like Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington—would stay in local homes because they couldn’t find hotel rooms in the Twin Cities.

criminalization, showed that of the 62 sanctioned dwellings, 18 would not accept African Americans. Yet black students who applied to dorms were routinely given a list of these homes by the University, under the guise of helping them find alternative housing.

“Just there wasn’t any place to live on campus at the time,” recalls Barbara Cyrus, who spent her years at the University commuting to school from the home she’d grown up in on the north side of Minneapolis. “I think one group of young men lived in a rooming house in Dinkytown, above a drugstore. Otherwise, you either lived in a private home or at Phyllis Wheatley settlement house.”

Cyrus, who was Barbara Mallory then, worked in the library at the settlement house, which, along with the Hallie Q. Brown Center in St. Paul, served as a social center for University students. “We had fraternity and sorority dances [at Phyllis Wheatley] and basketball tournaments and plays.”

Though no one kept precise numbers of students by race, the All-University Council survey counted 45 African Americans at the University in 1915. This included graduate students, many of whom arrived in Minneapolis from southern black colleges.

According to Cyrus, the University at that time was particularly welcoming of people studying social work. There were very limited job opportunities. Teaching wasn’t a possibility, except in the southern schools. You couldn’t teach locally. And, of course, no business or industry was hiring [black graduates]. Social work seemed to be a good out.”

A number of Minnesota social work students began filling the ranks of the Urban League, including Whitney Young (M.S.W. ‘47), who did his graduate work at the University and who would go on to fame as the national director of the league.

Meanwhile, housing problems continued to plague the U. In 1935 the All-University Council, in conjunction with its report on the state of African Americans on campus, asked President Coffman and the Board of Regents to allow blacks to integrate Pioneer Hall.

Coffman denied the request: “It is the unanimous opinion of the Board of Regents that the housing of Negro students in Pioneer Hall at present would not be conducive to their best interests, nor to the interests of other students who may be residing there. The Regents recognize that deficiencies exist at the University with regard to housing and they wish to correct them as rapidly as possible for all students, including Negro students.”

Though Coffman gave no indication in this public letter how the University planned to “correct” the housing deficiencies, in a private message to the All-University Council, Coffman suggested that the University and critics of its policy “do something constructive” to change it. His idea was to provide an “International House,” which would offer rooms to African Americans only.

Such houses were already in existence at Columbia University, the University of Chicago, and the University of California, Berkeley, according to Coffman. “I am wondering if the Council would be willing to join me in making a study of this matter,” he wrote.

But no one seemed quite interested in the idea at the time, or they were confused by the notion that an “international” house should be home to African American students.

The local black press, the All-University Council, campus progressive groups, and, beginning in 1937, the first African American political group formed at the University, the Council of Negro Students, all clamored for change at the U. But discriminatory practices continued, and not just in housing and not just on campus.

This was an era when touring black entertainers—renowned performers like Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington—would stay in local homes because they couldn’t find hotel rooms in the Twin Cities. It was an era when some black Americans were being denied service to African Americans. On campus, there were few places where black students could gather, and few places nearby where they could meet. A number of local restaurants flatly denied tables to African Americans, offered slow service, or brought heavily salted food to the table.

In October 1935, the same month that Coffman and the Regents issued their statement barring African Americans from the dorms, came one of the period’s most notorious moments of prejudice. The Golden Graphers were preparing for the year’s homecoming game. Minnesota’s opponent was Tulane University of New Orleans. Walter White, secretary for the national office of the NAACP, outlined the controversy in a telegram sent to President Coffman a few days before the game:

“National Association for the Advancement of Colored People is informed that [Dwight] Reed, first string Negro end on University of Minnesota football team, will be kept out of Tulane game on October 19 because southern people oppose playing against Negro athletes (stop) We respectfully urge cancellation of game as deceptive to unsophisticated and prejudiced attitude of Tulane (stop) We do not believe University of Minnesota will surrender high moral standard for other northern institutions in similar situations and will give growing number of fair-minded southern students encouragement in their efforts towards fair play (stop) I am sure you will agree University of Minnesota cannot descend to racial attitude of late Ivey Long state.”

White’s request fell on deaf ears. Despite local anger and national attention from the African American community, the game was played and Dwight Reed watched from the press box.

Change would come at the University, but it would come slowly.

“It wasn’t until people began to contest the system that said, ‘this is where whites belong and this is where blacks belong’ that things started to happen,” says Soderholm. “It was a small thing, but I think that one of the most revolutionary acts in the period was in January 1937, just after the formation of the Council of Negro Students. They went on a joint sledding party with a group of white students from the American Student Union. This kind of socializing was unheard of. There were probably dozens rolling in their graves.”