



Storer College



Following the Civil war there were over 30,000 newly freed slaves in the Shenandoah Valley. Recognizing the need for education, the Freedman's Bureau, the Freewill Baptists of New England and John Storer came together and Storer College was born. The school survived for 88 years, enriching the lives of hundreds of students.

A New Beginning

The first building to open its doors to students was the Lockwood House, formerly the U.S. Armory Paymaster's home. In 1865, as a representative of New England's Freewill Baptist Home Mission Society, Reverend Nathan Brackett established a primary school in the war-torn building and began teaching reading, writing and arithmetic to students. From Harpers Ferry, Rev. Brackett directed the efforts of dedicated missionary teachers, who provided a basic education to thousands of former slaves congregated in the relatively safe haven of the Shenandoah Valley by the end of the Civil War.

By 1867 there were 16 teachers to educate 2,500 students. Brackett realized the only way to reach all of the students was to train new African American

teachers. The small school in the Lockwood House needed to become a teaching school.

In 1867, Brackett's school came to the attention of John Storer, a Maine philanthropist. Storer offered a \$10,000 grant to the Freewill Baptists for a school in the south. Several conditions had to be met. First, the school must eventually become a degree-granting college. Second, the school had to be open to all applicants, regardless of race or gender. Finally, the most difficult prerequisite: The Freewill Baptist Church had to match the \$10,000 donation within the year. Following a year-long effort, the money was raised and Storer College officially opened its doors.

More Than the Basics

Raising \$10,000 turned out to be easy compared to facing local resistance to a "colored school." Residents tried everything from slander and vandalism to pulling political strings in their efforts to shut down the school. One teacher wrote, "It is unusual for me to go to the post office without being hooted at and twice I have been stoned on the streets at noonday." These efforts did not succeed in closing Storer College. Eventually, local attitudes changed.

Understanding that former slaves' needed to learn more than the three R's to function in society, Storer founders looked to provide more than a basic education. According to the first college catalog, students were to "receive counsel and sympathy, learn what constitutes correct living, and become qualified for the performance of the great work of life."

As the years went by, Storer remained primarily a teacher's college, but added courses in higher education as well as industrial training. Students graduated with a normal degree for teaching or an academic degree for those going on to college. In 1938 Storer was a full degree-granting college.

In 1954, the Supreme Court decision *Brown v Board of Education* ended legal segregation in public schools in the United States. Immediately after the ruling, West Virginia withdrew its financial support from Storer College. Financial burdens had been accumulating for a decade and in June 1955, Storer College closed its doors forever. Over the years the school had provided an education to thousands of students.

In 1935, Storer President Henry T. McDonald said, "... on the day it (West Virginia) fulfills its obligation to all of its citizens--that day will mark the passing of this college. . ."

In 1960, through the efforts of West Virginia Congressmen the grounds and buildings were incorporated into Harpers Ferry National Monument. Many of the buildings have been restored and today Anthony Hall houses Stephen T. Mather Training Center.

Storer College Presidents:

1867-1897 Rev. Nathan Brackett (Principal)
1897-1899 Rev. E.E. Osgood
1899-1944 Prof. Henry T. McDonald

1944-1950 Dr. Richard I. McKinney
1950-1952 Dean LeRoy Johnson, Acting
1952-1955 Rev. Leonard Terrell

Niagara Movement at Storer College

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the outlook for full civil rights for African Americans was at a precarious crossroads. Failed Reconstruction, the Supreme Court's separate but equal doctrine (*Plessy v. Ferguson*), coupled with Booker T. Washington's accommodationist policies threatened to compromise any hope for full and equal rights under the law.

Harvard educated William Edward Burghardt Du Bois committed himself to a bolder course, moving well beyond the calculated appeal for limited civil rights. He acted in 1905 by drafting a "Call" to a few select people. The Call had two purposes; "organized determination and aggressive action on the part of men who believed in Negro freedom and growth," and opposition to "present methods of strangling honest criticism."

Du Bois gathered a group of men to meet in Buffalo, New York. When refused accommodation, the members migrated across the border to Canada. Twenty-nine men met at the Erie Beach Hotel in Ontario. The Niagarites adopted a constitution and by-laws, established committees and wrote the "Declaration of Principles" outlining the future for African Americans.

From August 15 - 19, 1906, the Niagara Movement held its first public meeting in the United States on the campus of Storer College in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. Harpers Ferry was symbolic. First and foremost was the connection to John Brown. It was at Harpers Ferry in 1859 that Brown's raid against slavery struck a blow for freedom.

The Niagarites arrived in Harpers Ferry with passion in their hearts and high hopes that their voices would be heard and action would result. They were now more than fifty strong. Women also attended this historic gathering where, on August 17, 1906, they were granted full and equal membership to the organization.

The conference concluded on Sunday, August 19th, with the reading of "An Address to the Country," penned by W.E.B. Du Bois. "We will not be satisfied to take one jot or tittle less than our full manhood rights. We claim for ourselves every single right that belongs to a freeborn American, political, civil and social; and until we get these rights we will never cease to protest and assail the ears of America. The battle we wage is not for ourselves alone but for all true Americans."

With thunderous applause, the Harpers Ferry conference drew to a close. Years later recalling this conference, Du Bois referred to it as "...one of the greatest meetings that American Negroes ever held."

The Niagara Movement laid the cornerstone of the modern civil rights era. A new movement found a voice. The organization continued until 1911, when almost all of its members became the backbone of the newly formed National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). There, the men and women of the Niagara Movement recommitted themselves to the ongoing call for justice and the struggle for equality.

Student Perspective



Storer College class, circa 1903

In the spring of 1893, Storer College students looked outside the shelter of their campus and saw a frightening and confusing world. Throughout the country, African Americans faced discrimination and segregation. Although they had the right to vote, few were given the opportunity, especially in the south. Justice for African Americans was hard to come by, lynchings often settled disputes. Few, if any, African Americans held positions of power; in fact, white men governed Storer College until 1944.

Storer students heard the discussions of prominent leaders of the African American community concerning these and other problems. Storer students not only heard these discussions; they also formed their own opinions, as the following excerpts from an 1893 edition of the school newspaper, *The Storer Record*, show us.

The Negro's Future *Prosperous people are those who are industrious, economical, and intelligent . . . Let us now make some heroic efforts toward achieving results, which will forever be tributes to Storer College. . . let this be your motto, Rely upon your self. . .*

Shall the Negro Return to Africa? *[Yes] if the Afro-American were the only people living in this country whose fathers were from some other land . . . [but] . . . nearly every nation on the globe is well represented in her. . .the Negro is the backbone of the labor force in the South. If he should fold his hands . . . the wheels of southern industry would cease tomorrow.*

Mob Law *Can she [the United States] justly boast of being the "land of the free" while the Negro can not lift his eyes to the flag under whose folds he lives and which he fought so bravely to maintain and claim its protection?*

Notable Storer Alumni:

J.R. Clifford (1875) became the first African American lawyer in West Virginia. He owned and operated the first African American newspaper in the state.

Coralie Franklin Cook (1880) became a distinguished professor at Howard University.

Don Redman (1920) known as the "Little Giant of Jazz," was the first great arranger in jazz history.

Nnamdi Azikiwe (1927) became the first President of Nigeria in 1963.