Early African-American Scholars in the Classics:
A Photographic Essay

by Michele Valerie Ronnick

THERE WAS A TIME not so long ago in the United States that the opportunity to obtain even the most rudimentary elements of an education was denied to persons of African descent. After the Civil War, however, this dynamic changed, and across the country black people began to consume with gusto the “Bread of Knowledge,” to use Frederick Douglass’ phrase. The educational curriculum of the day had been in place for centuries, established long ago in Europe. It mandated a rigorous training in Greek and Latin, the languages of ancient Greece and Rome. As a result, at the core of a liberal arts education was a firm foundation in the classical languages.

Young black students, boys and girls alike, quickly took up the study of classical languages. As adults, a good number of them became teachers of Greek and Latin in black colleges and high schools. This time in American history merits our closest attention for these men and women constitute the first generation of African Americans who could select as a career path the study and teaching of languages. By mastering Greek and Latin, they were equipped to enter into the learned discourse of the dominant intellectual tradition of the West and they also took their places as professionals in the larger community of educators here and abroad. They proved to masses of people mired in prejudice or awash in doubt that they had the mental capacity to meet the educational standards of the day. Against great odds these brave pioneers worked to achieve the status of professionals. They joined the prominent learned societies such as the American Philological Association (1869), and the Modern Language Association (1883).

All who teach languages today be it English, Latin, Swahili, or Vietnamese are indebted to these heroes, the first African-American classicists. Look into their faces and salute them!

William Sanders Scarborough was born a slave in 1852 in Macon, Georgia. After study at Atlanta University he earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees at Oberlin College. His 1881 Greek textbook drew national attention. He was a member of the American Philological Association for 44 years and presented many papers before the membership of this organization. In 1884 he became the first black member of the Modern Language Association. Scarborough served as president of Wilberforce University from 1908 to 1920.

Michele Valerie Ronnick is an assistant professor of the classics at Wayne State University in Detroit. This photographic exhibit has appeared at several leading colleges and universities across the United States in recent months.
Edward Wilmot Blyden

Blyden was born in the West Indies in 1832. He was brought to the United States by the Rev. John P. Knox to study theology. But when no school would admit him because of his race, Blyden went to Africa. He was professor of classics at Liberia College from 1862 to 1871 and then served as the institution’s president. He later embarked on a career as a diplomat. Blyden was the second black member of the American Philological Association.

Daniel Barclay Williams

Born in Richmond, Virginia, in 1861, Williams graduated from Woodward Academy in Massachusetts in 1880. He then entered Brown University. In 1887 he was appointed professor of ancient languages and instructor in pedagogy at Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute, now Virginia State University. Williams died at the age of 34.

Frazelia Campbell

Frazelia Campbell graduated from the Institute for Colored Youth in Philadelphia in 1867. She then began to teach Latin, German, and Spanish at the school. She rose to become the principal of the school’s female department. When the Institute discontinued its academic work, Campbell accepted a similar position at Allen University in Columbia, South Carolina.
James Monroe Gregory

Gregory was born in Lexington, Virginia, in 1849. He studied for a time at Oberlin College in Ohio but earned his degree from Howard University in 1872. After teaching in the preparatory department at Howard for several years, he was appointed professor of Latin in 1875. Gregory was the fourth black member of the American Philological Association.

George Morton Lightfoot

Born in Culpepper, Virginia, Lightfoot earned a bachelor’s degree from Williams College in Massachusetts in 1891. In 1912 he was named professor of Latin at Howard University. With a thesis on Roman satire, Lightfoot earned a master’s degree in 1922 from the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. Founder of the Howard University Classical Club, in 1930 Lightfoot set up a special celebration in honor of Virgil’s 2000th birthday.

Reuben Shannon Lovinggood

In 1864 Lovinggood was born amid great hardship in Walhalla, South Carolina. He graduated with honors from Clark University in 1890. In 1895 he was called to Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, to build up the classics program. He later served as president of Huston College in Austin and founded a classics department there in 1910.
William Henry Crogman

Born in 1841 in the Leeward Islands, Crogman spent his early years as a seaman. After years of self-study he earned his degree at Atlanta University in 1873. He then became a professor of Greek at Clark University in Atlanta and served on the university faculty for 40 years. From 1903 to 1910 he was president of Clark. He was a member of the American Philological Association from 1898 to his death in 1931.

Richard Theodore Greener

Born in Philadelphia in 1844, Greener was educated at Oberlin College and Phillips Academy. In 1870 he received a bachelor's degree from Harvard University, the first African American to do so. After some 10 years as a teacher and a professor, Greener turned to a career as a lawyer and diplomat. He was the first black member of the American Philological Association.

Wiley Lane

Born in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, in 1852, Lane was a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Amherst College in 1879. In 1883 he was appointed professor of Greek language and literature at Howard University. He was the first black scholar to hold such a position at Howard. Full of unrealized promise, he died suddenly in February 1885. His death was widely lamented. Among his eulogists was Frederick Douglass.
John Wesley Gilbert

Gilbert was born in 1864 in Hephzibah, Georgia. His parents were slaves. After completing study at Paine College, Gilbert earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees in Greek at Brown University. His thesis was entitled, The Demes of Attica. In 1890 Gilbert went to the American School in Athens, Greece, the first black to do so. Gilbert then taught Greek at Paine College until his death in 1923.

Lewis Baxter Moore

Born in Huntsville, Alabama, in 1866 Moore earned a bachelor’s degree at Fisk University in Nashville in 1889. He went on to study for a master’s degree at Fisk. In 1896 he earned a doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania with a dissertation on The Stage in Sophocles. He taught Latin at Howard University until 1899, then joined the university’s administration.

Suggestions for Further Reading on Black Scholars in the Classics