

Benjamin Mays and Morehouse College

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Morehouse Before Mays. In 1867, Richard C. Coulter, an Augusta, Georgia, resident and former slave, Reverent Edmund Turney, educator of freedmen and organizer of the National Theological Institute in Washington, D.C., and William Jefferson White, an Augusta Baptist minister and cabinetmaker, founded the Augusta Institute (Jones, 1967). With educating the recently emancipated Negroes as their mission, they started a campaign that was highly unpopular in the South. In addition to operating with inadequate facilities during its early years, the Institute also had to deal with protests from the recently formed Ku Klux Klan (Brawley, 1970 [1917]).

However, under the auspices of the American Baptist Home Mission Society and through the friendship of the Reverend James Dixon, a white pastor of an Augusta church, the Institute faltered, but never failed. Dixon encouraged the Reverend Dr. Joseph T Robert, a white minister, to return to the South to run this Institute. Robert had left the South because he sought not to educate his children in a society that perpetuated slavery. With the approval of the Mission Society, Robert did return in 1871 to become the first president of the school (Brawley, 1970 [1917]).

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President Robert provided thirteen years of consistent leadership and secured often hard-to-obtain contributions for the Institute. Other white Southerners would definitely not support this school, so funds were solicited from white Northerners. This met with little success, so Robert turned to the Negro churches for support, and they willingly responded with donations. They helped to pay for badly needed physical repairs and improvement, but the Institute remained in a precarious financial position during its existence in Augusta. In 1879, the school moved to Atlanta and was renamed Atlanta Baptist Seminary. It was later able to receive support from several Northern whites. The Institute continued to prepare future Negro ministers and teachers, and President Robert continued to support it and his students' enthusiasm for education until his death in 1884 (Brawley, 1970 [1917]).

The following year, 1885, President Samuel Graves took over the school and sought desperately to improve its physical condition. He called the students together and asked them to pray with him for his efforts to improve the school. Several years later, after much travel and solicitation on Graves' part, the cornerstone was laid on a building that would be,

...dedicated to the improvement of humanity, the instruction and enlightenment of a neglected people, and the acquisition of moral and intellectual qualities which fit men for usefulness and entitle them to respect and confidence of mankind (Brawley, 1970 [1917]).

The presidents who followed Graves firmly believed in these principles. Great strides in development and remarkable continuity characterized the administrations of President Graves and his successors, George Sale and John Hope (Jones, 1967:10).

President George Sale served from 1890 to 1906. During his tenure the Atlanta Baptist Seminary was renamed the Atlanta Baptist College. His administration also saw the building of the President's Residence and Quarles Hall, a sorely needed classroom and laboratory building. The building was so named to honor the Reverend Frank Quarles who had founded Spelman Seminary in Atlanta and was a black pastor who worked hard to further the education of his people. President Sale also increased community involvement and gave the Atlanta Baptist Seminary what Jones referred to as "...a personality, a dynamic, and a faith in itself and its future (Jones, 1967:10).

The first black president, Dr. John Hope, succeeded Sale in 1906. He

served the institution for twenty-five years. Among his contributions were improvements in enrollment, the physical plant, and the faculty. Robert Hall, Sale Hall, the Science Building, and a gymnasium were among the physical improvements made by Hope; salary increases and an improved endowment were among his other contributions. President Hope also was responsible for wooing a young man by the name of Benjamin E. Mays away from his studies at the University of Chicago in order that he might teach at Morehouse (Jones, 1967).

During Hope's administration the college was once again renamed. This time the name of Morehouse College was selected in recognition of a supporter and friend of Negro Baptists. The superior service and contribution to the advancement of Negro education and ministry made the longtime Secretary of the American Baptist Home Mission Society, Dr. Henry Lyman Morehouse, a popular namesake choice (Brawley, 1970 [1917]).

Also during his administration Dr. Hope's vision of educational cooperation took shape in 1929 in the formation of an Oxford-like complex known as the Atlanta University Affiliation. This consortium, which was a major response to the Depression and a major response to the need to pool resources, saw the uniting through a cooperative agreement of Atlanta University, which offered graduate work, Spelman College for black women, and Morehouse College for black men. It was one of the first consortiums in American higher education. Dr. Hope became president of Atlanta University and agreed to relinquish his presidency at Morehouse when it became more financially secure. He stepped down as Morehouse president in 1931 (Jones, 1967).

From 1931 to 1937, President Samuel Archer led the College in one of the more demanding periods of its history. Archer inherited not only a legacy of achievement and success, as established by his immediate predecessor, Dr. Hope, but he also took charge of the College when the nation was in the throes of a deep financial depression. It is to his credit that he managed to keep Morehouse afloat during these turbulent years. Upon his retirement in 1937, he was succeeded by Charles Dubois Hubert who served as Acting President until 1940. Hubert, like Archer, was not able to effect many dramatic improvements, but nevertheless kept the College alive during austere economic times (Jones, 1967).

According to Jones, the achievements of these two administrators (Archer and Hubert) "...cannot be measured in terms of physical advance-

ment and financial gains." Jones feels that their maintenance and perpetuation of "...principles...traditions...[and] of academic standards..." is worthy of merit considering the "precarious" period of our history in which they served Morehouse (Jones, 1967:113-121). Despite Jones' sentiment, the best efforts and intentions of Archer and Hubert did not move Morehouse in a forward direction. They sustained the College, but few new developments occurred and as a result the College became stagnant. Many of its previous successes had been preserved, but the College was in need of improvement if it were to keep pace with the needs of its students and the dictates of an ever changing society.

President Mays and Morehouse. In 1940, Dr. Benjamin E. Mays became President of Morehouse College, succeeding Acting President Hubert. When Mays arrived, he found the College in a very different state than he had experienced during his earlier years there. Morale was low; the endowment was about to lose \$1,000,000, and Morehouse had assumed the least favorable position among the Affiliation members. Atlanta University was controlling Morehouse's budget and finances; the Morehouse students had lost their dining hall and were eating their meals on the Atlanta University campus; and medical services were provided on the Spelman campus. In his history of Morehouse, *A Candle in the Dark*, Edward Jones summarized, "Morehouse was the stepchild in the Affiliation..." and was "...fast becoming a junior college" (Jones, 1967:137-138).

These were the conditions at Morehouse when Mays arrived in 1940. Such conditions might have discouraged a lesser man, but Mays seemed, as he said later, born to rebel. He seemed to rebel against Morehouse's weaknesses. He seemed challenged by adversity.

In his own words, "the challenge of the job" was a "persuasive factor" in his decision to accept the presidency (Mays, 1971). Accepting such a position would give Mays an opportunity more fully to utilize his various administrative skills, not the least of which was his ability to communicate.

A gifted speaker, Mays was also an impressive author who utilized the written word to evoke more than just one-way communication. His writing was often designed to elicit more than a simple response as it delivered messages that a reader may not have known he was receiving. A good example of this is found in the language used by Mays in his letter of acceptance to the Board of Trustees.

Mays cleverly chose his words as he accepted the position and also suggested areas of concern that the Board should take into consideration:

There are other matters, though not a condition of acceptance, which I do hereby present in the attached memorandum, requesting that the Executive Committee of the Board consider them as if they were conditions of acceptance (Mays, 1971:171).

Mays was able to suggest these concerns for Morehouse as conditions for his acceptance of the presidential post but without having them appear as such. In the referred-to memorandum he outlined the immediate concerns to be addressed by the Board. The first was his previous commitment to the YMCA, which would delay his assuming presidential duties until July 1, 1940. Additional concerns appear in the same memorandum:

As I study the financial condition of Morehouse College, I am convinced that the members of the Board of Trustees were wise in not offering the President of the college more than \$500 and a house. On the other hand, our coming to Atlanta is at considerable financial loss since it would hardly be expected that Mrs. Mays would engage in full time employment in Atlanta as was the case in Washington...In view of this situation, I should hope that the Board would not consider the initial salary of the president as being adequate or static...

As I study the salary scale of teachers in Morehouse college, I am thoroughly convinced that on the whole they are too low. They should be raised all along the line...

I request and urge that steps be taken immediately to do what we can to give Morehouse College equality of status in the system (the Atlanta Affiliation) by electing the President of Morehouse College to membership on the Executive Committee of his own college and on the Executive Committee of Atlanta University. Since the two institutions have the same Board of Trustees, this request appears logical and reasonable....

I am strongly of the opinion that it is unsound administrative policy to have the treasurer of Morehouse College outside of the administration of Morehouse. I am convinced that it would make for better working relationships and that the cause of Morehouse would be better served if the treasurer were within the administration of Morehouse....

That we look forward very soon to having a Dean of Instruction... (Mays, 1971:171-172).

A very precise man who chose his words carefully, Mays did not wish these points to be conditions for his employment, yet he presented them in a fashion in which they could not be ignored. He also felt that they "should set forth now in order to avoid possible misunderstanding later (Mays, 1971:172). It was important to Mays that he be understood. Frequent communication was the primary tool utilized to achieve this goal. Archival reviews have revealed numerous brochures, letters, and other written documents authored by Mays that were used to express his ideas of areas of concern. His audiences included faculty, staff, students, contributors, alumni, and others connected in some way to Morehouse College. His use of the President's Annual Report to the Board of Trustees was his most thorough and comprehensive form of communicating the College's accomplishments, needs and goals.

Mays' first annual report listed other needs for Morehouse College that he had identified after completing his first year as president. He was extremely concerned about raising matching funds for the endowment. In the area of faculty concerns he identified a need for faculty housing, retirement and tenure, and salary increases. He reiterated the need for Dean or Instruction as well as the need for a director of housing, a loan fund, a modernly equipped gymnasium, and an athletic field and tennis courts. The physical plant was in need of a new dormitory, chapel, and academic building. Mays also expressed his wish to evaluate the role of the School of Religion and its continued existence (Jones, 1967). He went on to suggest a study of the College to assess its future role. Wrote Mays:

Since Morehouse is the only college south of Washington, D.C., now devoted exclusively to the education of men, I would like to see a critical study made of the past work of Morehouse College, its activities, curriculum, with the view of determining to what extent we are headed in the right direction. We may be on the right track, but I do not believe we should take it for granted (Jones, 1967:151).

This call for evaluation continued throughout his career and led to a greater and more realistic vision for the College. With these visions he was able to outline needs for Morehouse and develop a means to achieve them.

In his opening address to the College, Mays solicited the help and cooperation of the students, faculty, trustees, alumni, and friends of the institution as he promised to:

...give to Morehouse College all that I have...the best of my mind, heart, and soul...I will give...my money until it reaches the sacrificial point...I will serve this institution as if God Almighty sent me into the world for the express purpose of being the sixth President of Morehouse College (Jones, 1967:140).

He then outlined a plan for the expansion and growth of the College that included: raising \$400,000 in order to match an offer from the General Education Board; securing annual contributors; building a new dormitory, dining hall, chapel, gymnasium, and classroom facility; stimulating alumni, recruiting, and providing housing for the faculty. In addition he sought to collect \$100,000 in student debts and bolster faculty salaries and credentials.

During his administration, Mays saw to it that these goals were accomplished. By 1950, the endowment was increased by \$800,000 and by 1967, the year he retired, the \$1.1 million original endowment that Mays inherited had been increased to \$4.2 million (Jones, 1967). Additionally, annual contributions were secured as well as large grants from the Danforth, Field, and Rockefeller foundations, among others. Mays, in his 27-year tenure raised over \$15,000,000 for Morehouse College and its various needs (Jones, 1967).

Not only were the five buildings of Mays' original plan built, but an additional thirteen buildings were added to the Morehouse campus. Instead of one dormitory, seven were built. A music building and extra science facilities were included in this expansion, as were the needed faculty accommodations (Jones, 1967). The proposed salary increases took place as well. In 1940 the faculty salary range was \$900 - \$2,600. By the 1966-67 school year the salary range was \$6,000 - \$13,500 (Mays, 1971).

Mays saw to it that the problem with student debts was brought under control during his first few years in office by writing letters explaining new collection procedures and sanctions (Jones, 1967). He also improved his faculty's credentials. By securing fellowships and seeking more qualified instructors, Mays saw the percentage of faculty members with doctorate degrees advance from 1.4 percent in 1940-42 to over 54 percent in 1964-65 (Jones, 1967).

It is hard to determine just how much of this growth and expansion occurred merely as a result of the changing economic, social, and educational fortunes of this country. One might argue that inflation could have accounted for salary increases, that improved race relations could have

contributed to Morehouse's new found benefactors, that better overall economic conditions helped to bring about the growth in the physical plant, and that the G.I. Bill of Rights had helped to increase the pool of qualified instructors and thus resulted in the improved quality of faculty at the College. While these are plausible explanations, they are not sufficient to explain the degree to which these improvements were made.

On the other hand, one also could conceivably argue that these improvements were not big enough. Mays would probably agree as he was not completely satisfied with the faculty salaries and was disappointed that he was not able to increase the endowment more than he did. But bigness was not Morehouse's goal nor that of Dr. Mays. His bigness was concentrated more on improving the quality of education for his students. Mays must have agreed with Dr. W.E. B. Du Bois, who wrote, "...Negro mothers and fathers are not being deceived. They know that intelligence and self-development are the only means by which the Negro is to win his way in the modern world (quoted in Hamilton, 1975:118).

The implementation of programs aimed at improving intelligence and self-development were exactly Mays' goals. He sought to fill the need for "a better quality of students" by improving teaching, increasing student participation in extra-curricular activities, constantly upgrading the curriculum, improving the available resources and acquiring those that were necessary, and by obtaining full accreditation for the College. These often intangible, yet so very valuable goals were all achieved (Jones, 1967).

His goals of academic respectability followed by academic excellence were also realized. In the July 1965 issue of the *Morehouse College Bulletin* was a twenty-page supplement on Mays' administration. An appraisal of his service included this summary:

...under the far-reaching leadership of Benjamin E. Mays, Morehouse College has gone beyond mere academic respectability. Morehouse's bigness is not in student population nor financial resources, but in the quality of an educational program that has led to earned recognition as a front-rank liberal arts college (quoted in Jones, 1967:267).

Mays fulfilled his initial promise of service to the College. He served as if heaven sent, which contributed to his many successes at Morehouse. He gave as if his very existence depended upon it, and he led Morehouse in a direction of success and promise. At a Founders' Day address in 1963, alumnus Dr. Butler Alphonso Jones gave Mays credit for bringing Morehouse "...from young adulthood to maturity" (Jones, 1967:265). Although

several of his presidential predecessors were responsible for laying the College's foundation, Mays is given credit for giving it form. He molded it and helped make it into a leading institution of higher education. Samuel DuBois Cook, a Morehouse alumnus and current president of Dillard University, said that "the key to Dr. Mays was the persistent search for higher levels of achievement, higher possibilities of life; [he was] never satisfied" (personal communication). This "persistent search" was part of what Mays had envisioned for Morehouse as he sought to develop its funding sources, its faculty, its students, and its physical plant.

References

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It is discouraging and disturbing to me that there are indications of a subtle move afoot to abolish black colleges. Prior to Emancipation and since, thousands of white writers have taken pride in their determination to brand Negroes as inherently inferior. Something similar has occurred regarding black colleges since 1954. Writers have pounded on the Negro colleges, not with the purpose of helping them, but rather, it seems, of destroying them. Numerous critics have made a crusade of tearing the black colleges apart, but no group of white colleges has been selected and set aside as targets for annihilation. White liberals and white conservatives alike have participated in this tragedy. Colleges that were good enough for brilliant Negro students prior to May 17, 1954, ceased to be so immediately after.

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