

# **“The First Generation: Thirty Years of the Office of African-American Affairs at the University of Virginia”**

**An abridgement of a lecture by Professor Ervin L. Jordan Jr.  
(University of Virginia Records Manager & Research Archivist),  
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African-American males survive and succeed within a double consciousness as blacks and as men. Five have served as deans of the Office of African-American Affairs and its story is reflected by this generation of excellence: Dr. William L. Harris (1976-1981); Dr. Paul L. Puryear (1981-1986); Father Joseph A. Brown (1986-1988); Dr. M. Rick Turner (1988-2006), and, Dr. Maurice Apprey (August 2006-present). During this lecture I will differentiate their tenures as the Harris Era, the Puryear Period, the Brown Years, the Turner Age, and the Apprey Interregnum.

## **THE 19TH CENTURY BLACK UVA EXPERIENCE**

The OAAA’s antecedents are based on slavery. A farm bequeathed to the University in 1835 by Martin Dawson, university commissioner of accounts, was sold at public auction for \$19,500 and six faculty houses constructed during 1859 were later converted into dormitories. Dawson’s sixty-two slaves were housed in two “Negro quarters” near the Grounds while employed at UVA. Throughout the Civil War, Dawson's Row housed Confederate patients cared for by local Blacks; only the Luther P. Jackson House survives of the original houses. Also, #3 Dawson’s Row was known as “Monroe’s Slave Quarters” because James Monroe, fifth president of the United States and member of the Board of Visitors, housed slaves at what is now Monroe Hill before the property was sold to the University. Educational segregation began in 1870 when Virginia General Assembly prohibited black and white students from attending the same public schools; this prohibition remained in effect for the next one hundred years.

## **THE 20TH CENTURY BLACK UVA EXPERIENCE TO THE 1970s**

It was not until 1935 that a Black student, Alice Jackson, a twenty-two-year-old teacher at Virginia Union University and daughter of a Richmond pharmacist, the first Black applicant, was denied admission because of her race, state law and “common customs and traditions.” Worried she might become a successful NAACP court test case because of her strong academic credentials, the 1936 General Assembly passed a law offering funding to Black students who sought graduate degrees not available in the state. Under this law, Negro students had to first be denied admission to the University of Virginia (or another white state school) in order to qualify for out of state tuition assistance; this program continued until 1968. Fifty-five years after her thwarted admission attempt, Alice Jackson Stuart, keynote

speaker at the OAAA's annual awards banquet (1990), remarked: "This invitation to address the children and grandchildren of my generation . . . in the name of this great university leaves me with a sense of great joy and long reminiscences."

After World War II, for the first time, Black scholars were invited to UVA as guest lecturers. Dr. Luther Porter Jackson, professor of history at Virginia State College, delivered a conference paper, "Virginia and Civil Rights" in 1949. Twenty-eight years later the University named the Luther P. Jackson House in his honor. Dr. Walter Nathaniel Ridley (1910-1996), admitted in 1951, became UVA's first Black graduate in June 1953 and the nation's first African-American to receive a doctorate degree from a white southern university. He became president of Elizabeth City State Teachers College, North Carolina. His 1951 admission is additionally significant because the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision ordering the desegregation of public schools was three years in the future.

During the 1960s and 1970, Blacks made some progress. In 1960, Wesley L. Harris of Richmond, a student in the School of Engineering, was the first Black student assigned a room on the Lawn and graduated with honors in 1964 with a bachelor's degree in aerospace engineering; his brother, William, became the OAAA's first dean a decade later. The Rotch Report (1969) investigated recruitment, admission, and retention of Black students and faculty, and recommended the appointment of a dean to coordinate these activities. Dr. Donald W. Jones was appointed as President Frank Hereford's advisor on minority affairs in 1973. He served in this role for several UVA presidents, became founding director of the Office of Minority Procurement, and retired in 2006.

## **BIRTH OF THE OAAA**

The Black Student Alliance's 1975 "Proposal For The Establishment of an Office of Minority Affairs At The University of Virginia" called for it to be operational by the summer of 1976. Although President Frank Hereford had announced the appointment of Dr. Jones as his minority affairs advisor, three hundred Black students marched to his Carr's Hill residence whereupon he promised the University would begin addressing Black concerns. The chairman of the Student Council's Minority Affairs Committee, Leroy Hassell, now chief justice of the Virginia Supreme Court, received Hereford's pledge to make Blacks welcome.

But a year later, "the Farmington Incident" erupted when students protested President Hereford's continued membership in Farmington County Club, a racially exclusive private club in Albemarle County. Although other university officials and members of the Board of Visitors resigned due to Farmington's policies against blacks as guests or members, Hereford did not announce his club resignation until shortly after Farmington's president publicly reaffirmed its racial restrictions in February 1976. (The 1967 Student Council declared segregated businesses off-limits to university student organizations; in 1968 the University prohibited the expenditure of university funds at racially discriminatory clubs. These bans were rescinded in November 1993 after Farmington enacted a new membership policy banning discrimination and extended membership to five African-Americans).

## **THE HARRIS ERA: 1976-1981 (5 years)**

The Office of Afro-American Affairs was established "temporarily" at #4 Dawson's Row; Dr. William M. Harris, Sr. (School of Architecture), its first dean and assistant provost, was appointed in July 1976; the OAAA formally opened on March 4, 1977. Twenty years later Harris recalled his greatest accomplishments as "the fulfillment of the mission of the

Office to bring about purposeful social change in an often hostile racial environment and to maintain a steadfast priority focus to that of academic achievement over student services or social development.” More than 250 persons attended the Luther P. Jackson House’s formal dedication as the OAAA home and a Black Culture Center in October 1977. It was named in honor of Dr. Luther Porter Jackson (1892-1950), a Virginia State College history professor and one the state’s leading civil rights activists. His son and guest speaker Luther Jr. (a journalism professor at Columbia University) described his father as a dedicated scholar and civil rights crusader who “measured his victories in terms of one Black person being registered to vote.”

A student at the time, Dr. Cassandra L. Newby-Alexander, now a tenured history professor, lately recalled: “I fondly remember Dean Harris who was like a father to all of us struggling to find ‘our place’ during those years.” In one of his “State of Race” reports (1979), Dr. Harris cited significant failures in improving the numbers of Black students and professionals, academic advising, cultural programming and research due to a lack of promised resources and itemized examples of petty harassment directed against himself and his staff. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the LPJ House was racially vandalized; Dean Harris often allowed these to remain for several weeks as a graphic reminder of “the kind of shabby business that sometimes occurs at this university.” Irrespective of difficult circumstances the OAAA extended services contributive to increased Black enrollment and graduation rates. In the OAAA’s fifth year (1981) it published its first newsletter, Ujamaa: Newsletter of the Office of Afro-American Affairs (from the Swahili word for ‘extended family’ or ‘community’).

### **THE PURYEAR PERIOD: 1981-1986 (5 years)**

Dr. Paul Puryear (Institute of Government, later the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service) succeeded Dr. Harris as OAAA dean in August 1981. (His wife, Leah Puryear, long-time director of UVA’s Upward Bound program, was elected to the Charlottesville School Board in 2006.) During his pragmatic tenure “multiculturalism” became the preferred term instead of integration/desegregation and was defined as “a social condition where members of different ethnic, racial, religious, sexual orientation, gender and other groups coexist as a pluralistic community, yet maintain their individual identities and perspectives.”

Despite the Black Student Alliance’s opposition to his appointment and accusations of the OAAA as “a yes man to the white power structure,” the Office expanded its offerings and services notwithstanding the periodic obstruction of its role and authority by unrepentant conservative elements at UVA. Dean Puryear resigned in April 1986 and returned to teaching: “The day I resigned I was satisfied that I had accomplished all that I would be permitted to accomplish to support the academic performance of African-American students.” Among his accomplishments was the updating of “the professional and educational standards of the academic division of the OAAA, particularly the Summer Prep Program, tutorials and counseling services,” and grants from the State Council of Higher Education and the U.S. Department of Education in support of fellowships and racial sensitivity workshops.

### **THE BROWN YEARS: 1986-1988 (2 years)**

After Dean Puryear’s resignation, the African-American community became suspicious a successor would not be hired nor the Office continued and accused university officials of undermining the OAAA because of tentative plans to turn over the LPJ House’s

tutorial programs to the provost's office. Anxious about the retention of its academic, cultural, and social services, students painted "Save The LPJ House" on Beta Bridge. Legend has it that Jesuit priest Father Joseph A. Brown, at the time an English and religious studies professor, appeared unannounced at Madison Hall and Carr's Hill to volunteer his services as OAAA dean in June 1986 and, so the story goes, insisted university officials accept his call to service. Father Brown served as interim OAAA dean and special assistant to President Robert O'Neil during the next two years. Dynamic and innovative, Father Brown often addressed board of visitors meetings, and advocated faculty enrollment in multiculturalism seminars.

In 1987 the OAAA joined the Council of Black Student Leaders in sponsoring "Celebrating Excellence in the Community" awards programs and the first annual Black Alumni Weekend. Among the 220 alumni who attended was Dr. Walter Ridley, Class of 1953; he told me it was the first time in thirty-four years the University had officially invited him to return since his graduation; a minority scholarship fund was created in his honor. In October 1987, the Luther P. Jackson House was rededicated following renovations the previous summer; the W. E. B. Du Bois Tutorial Center was also dedicated as the beginning of a yearlong tenth anniversary celebration of the OAAA. But in a move that stunned many of his supporters, Father Brown announced in February 1988 that he would not seek to become permanent OAAA dean and afterward resigned from the University in 1991. He recalled his greatest challenge as "maintaining any degree of optimism . . . [of] my integrity as an educator, administrator, and priest in an environment that was too often buffeted by concerns that were parochial, short-sighted and divisive."

### **THE TURNER AGE: 1988-2006 (18 years)**

A 1992 Supreme Court decision United States v. Fordice (a Mississippi case), held that "if policies traceable to [the previous dual] systems are still in force and have discriminatory effects, these policies must be reformed to the extent practicable." Hailed as the higher education equivalent of the landmark 1954 Brown decision, Fordice required states including Virginia to eliminate any lingering vestiges of segregation. At UVA, "diversity," the inclusion of historically under represented groups, became the term of choice regarding racial matters though viewed with deep misgivings by African-Americans as meaning respect and assistance to every other ethnic group except them.

Dr. M. Rick Turner, director of the University of California's tutorial assistance program, was appointed in July 1988 as the fourth OAAA dean, the first from outside UVA. His eighteen years' tenure is the longest in OAAA history. He was an outspoken, passionate and productive advocate to his admirers, a "verbally confrontational . . . liberal socialist . . . with a blatantly anti-American political philosophy" to his critics. He oversaw a variety of changes (among them a website and online services). In 1990, as part of efforts to keep Black parents informed, the OAAA began publication of **Visions: A Newsletter for Parents of African-American Students**, dedicated to their "hard work, sacrifice, [and] love to their children" and edited by Associate Dean Sylvia Terry. She had joined the University faculty in 1980 and became Director of Minority Recruitment. As assistant dean of Afro-American Affairs beginning in 1989, her foremost contribution has been the recruitment of Black students and their retention through the Peer Advisor Program that serves as national model and an important factor in UVA's continued success in retaining and graduating Black students. In her words: "All of us know that what happens during the first-year affects whether a student chooses to remain or stay at an institution. For many, the Peer Advisor Program helps them to stay." As OAAA associate dean, Terry was the 2003 recipient of the

University's Algernon Sydney Sullivan Award for "excellence of character and service to humanity."

Dean Turner announced in 1993 the changing of the Office of Afro-American Affairs to the **Office of African-American Affairs**. It celebrated its twentieth anniversary "Dream Keepers" program in April 1996 with a series of public events including a panel discussion with Dean Turner and two of its three former deans (Dr. Harris and Father Brown). He identified his greatest challenge as the "building [of] the image of our Office as one which delivers quality services to African American students in a timely manner. I want the University to recognize the OAAA as an integral part of Student Affairs and as an asset to both the University and Charlottesville communities." Upon its 25th anniversary in 2001, the Office celebrated in part by naming its new computer lab in honor of Dr. Harris, its first dean.

Near the end of the 1990s the Task Force on the Realignment of the OAAA, chaired by Dr. Turner, recommended the Office of African-American Affairs's restructuring as the Center for Multi-Ethnic and Cultural Affairs, "an umbrella office providing academic and support services for African-American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian and Native American students." University officials insisted this did not represent downgrading of African-American concerns nor dismantling of the OAAA but blacks accused the OAAA of betrayal because they suspected restructuring might draw already limited resources away from African-Americans. Eventually university officials decided converting the OAAA into the Center was unfeasible.

A series of ugly racial incidents involving blackface, Aunt Jemima parodies and "drive-by" racial epithets during the early 2000s attracted national attention and spotlighted a reluctance to punish perpetrators on the grounds of not wanting to infringe on student governance and First Amendment free speech rights. Although the facts are too well known for extensive discussion on this occasion, the University's hate crime of the century occurred during Daisy Lundy's 2003 campaign to become the first African-American female Student Council president. This student of African-American and Korean descent was attacked by an unidentified white male, resulting in several injuries. Prompted by this incident, the University pledged \$120,000 for repairs to the Luther P. Jackson House as the OAAA joined other organizations in rallying moral support and resources against intolerance. Lundy was elected student council president and completed her undergraduate degree; in April 2005 she received OAAA's highest honor, the M. Rick Turner Distinguished Student Award.

During his 1997 "State of African-American Affairs at the University of Virginia" address, Dr. Turner reported the Black student retention rate as 89.3%; two years later he noted Black UVA students were graduating at a rate 20% higher than other ranking institutions of higher education. Upon his retirement in the summer of 2006, Turner and the OAAA could look back on nearly twenty years of success, and for the twelfth year in a row UVA "had the highest graduation rate of African American students in public institutions of higher education." Yet he anticipated a continued need for curriculum change, greater faculty roles in promoting racial diversity and more "fostering of racial understanding among students."

### **THE 21ST CENTURY AND THE APPREY INTERREGNUM (3 months)**

In 2004 African-Americans became the nation's second largest minority group after Hispanics. Asian undergraduates outpaced African-Americans as the university's largest minority group in 2000; by 2003 there was slightly more full-time Asian than Black faculty. As for the OAAA during Dr. Apprey's current tenure as dean--that remains to be seen. A

member of various diversity task forces, Dr. Apprey is an international expert in conflict resolution and so would appear to be the right man at the right time for the relevant tasks ahead.

Has the OAAA (or for that matter, African-Americans) taken its rightful place in University history? One example would be University buildings named for and oil paintings of Black alumni, faculty and staff but to the best of my knowledge only three African-Americans are similarly commemorated in paintings that are displayed almost exclusively at the OAAA: W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963); Carter G. Woodson, “the Father of Black History” (1875-1950), and Luther Porter Jackson, “Mr. Civil Rights of Virginia” (1892-1950). Jackson is the subject of oil paintings at the Luther P. Jackson Cultural Center (painted 1955), the LPJ House’s Nat Turner Library (painted 1992), and a third (1978) at the Special Collections Department, Harrison/Small Library (on loan from the OAAA). Furthermore, the Nat Turner Library is the only public facility commemorating Nat Turner (1800-1831), leader of the largest slave revolt in Virginia history.

## **CONCLUSION**

On October 17, 2006, according to “NBC Nightly News,” an African-American woman in Atlanta, Georgia, gave birth to a daughter who changed America into a nation of 300 million; according to unidentified Census Bureau sources, a son born to a Hispanic woman somewhere in California was the 300 millionth citizen. Today, “nearly half of [America’s] children under [the age of] 5 belong to a racial or ethnic minority”; the racial/demographical implications for the nation and the University are obvious. But has the racial climate changed here since 1976? Will the OAAA celebrate its fiftieth anniversary twenty years from now in 2026? Money is not the entire answer; it merely pays for part of the answer; fate and history have chosen the OAAA as a link during one of the most challenging times in the University’s history, and it must not be the weakest link. If this link breaks, the entire chain will shatter.

With the OAAA as an indispensable cornerstone, UVA’s preeminence as America’s university might be enhanced through our mutual contributions, successes and faith as worthy legacies for the next generation.