

1 **Introducing: Benjamin E. Mays**

Preface

When the great saints of human history and destiny “go marching in,” a man named Benjamin E. Mays is going to be in that number.¹

Dr. Samuel DuBois Cook

More than admiration and friendship prompted Dr. Samuel DuBois Cook, former President of Dillard University in New Orleans, to include Benjamin E. Mays among the great saints of human history in the Introduction he wrote to Mays’ 1983 book, *Quotable Quotes of Benjamin E. Mays*. Cook, who had been president at Dillard University for over five years at the time he made that statement, had credentials to make such an assessment of Mays, and they were twofold. He was assessing a peer—another president of a college similar to his own—a traditionally black institution. He had also known Mays as “his” president, for Mays had been president of Morehouse College while Cook was an honors student there. Indeed, Benjamin E. Mays was the Dean of College Presidents, for he had served as Morehouse’s president for twenty-seven years. Twenty-seven years of service is, by its nature, an historic occurrence. However, lengthy tenure alone does not qualify one for greatness.

Dr. Mays’ life demonstrated that against seemingly insurmountable odds, one can still rise above these odds and succeed in life. He was a distinguished leader in the fields of civil rights, religion, and education. Mays intricately interwove them all into his career, which spanned the years in this country’s history when black leadership in all these fields was both crucial and outstanding. Although he was highly influential and successful in each of these three fields, his crowning achievements came in the field of education. It was to this field that he contributed the most. As with religion and civil rights, Mays excelled in education and further challenged others to do the same.

Against the odds he achieved greatness so one might conclude that

destiny played a major role, but it was in no way the only force that guided him. A closer look at his life reveals an inner determination not only to succeed, but to do so in an exceptionally superior manner. The times in which he lived may have provided the opportunity for success, but it was Mays' determination that allowed him to reach high levels of achievement and renown.

Introduction

Benjamin E. Mays was an ordained Baptist minister, a college dean, a college president, and president of the city school board in Atlanta, GA. He was constantly in search of educational excellence, and this quest extended beyond himself to all with whom he came in contact. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, a former student and close friend, considered Dr. Mays to be his spiritual mentor and "one of the great influences in my life."² This kind of impact was felt by many who had the pleasure of knowing Dr. Mays.

However, far too many people did not get to know this man or his work. His story alone is worth knowing, but there is more to be learned from this man than just a story. His works and his writings, combined with his story, are important parts of the black experience in America. They are important parts of the American higher educational experience, as well.

The importance of his experiences prompted Dr. Mays to write an autobiography entitled, *Born to Rebel*. Written over a period of years and concluded four years after he retired from the presidency at Morehouse, this book chronicled Mays' personal experiences as a black man as well as the experiences of the nation. He also clearly stated what he hoped the book would accomplish:

I would be glad indeed if this book would in some way make a modest contribution toward enabling us to see more clearly what the United States must still do to make the American dream a reality for every American and to motivate us to fulfill that dream, not in the next century but now.³

The Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr., who, like his son, was a close friend of Mays, chronicled in a similar fashion an autobiography entitled, *Daddy King*. (It is interesting to note that the Reverend King, Sr. chose

Dr. Mays to write the foreword for his book.) In his book, King presented the rationale behind the writing of his life story:

My life has been chronicled for history because I hope and pray that it will be an inspiration to the young people who read it not to be overwhelmed by the odds against them, and I offer my fervent prayers that succeeding generations will not have to struggle to prove to themselves and to this great nation of ours their human worth, as I have had to struggle to prove mine.⁴

This same rationale can be used to explain the necessity for learning about a man like Mays. Beyond learning a great deal about one individual's life, a look at the words as well as the efforts and accomplishments of Benjamin Mays will offer insights into what constitutes human dignity. By examining the examples he set, the perceptive reader can learn about perseverance and dedication, the need for spiritual harmony, equitable race relations, and the necessity for education and for current and future leaders.

However, this presentation could not possibly develop all the themes and fields that Mays embodied. What it can do is provide a look at that segment of his life for which he was most noted, the development of Morehouse College. It was in this arena, education, that Mays stood out like the giant of a man that he was.

Karl Grisso justified his study of former University of Illinois president, David Kinley, by stating that all too often historians merely "restudy ... certain historical periods, institutions, and individuals while virtually ignoring others."⁵ This complaint can be used to further substantiate the present work on Dr. Benjamin E. Mays. Too little historical study is done on blacks in higher education and particularly the black higher education administrator. Not enough is known about the educational leaders of the traditionally black colleges, and further, not enough research is done on major black educators' contributions not only to black higher education, but to the larger field of American higher education. Instead, such noted higher education historians as John Brubaker and Willis Rudy, Richard Hofstadter, Fredrick Rudolph, and Laurence Veysey have chosen to concentrate and reconcentrate their efforts in American higher education on the study of either major universities or the most notable leaders of those institutions. Charles W. Eliot at Harvard, Andrew D. White at Cornell, Henry Philip Tappan at Michigan, and William Rainey Harper at the University of Chicago are

examples of the more prominent figures in higher education that have been extensively studied and interpreted.⁶

Important contributors like Mays, have all but been ignored. The lone exception to this phenomenon is Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee Institute, who was a leader and administrator in black higher education and who has been studied in great depth.⁷ It is the goal of this study to shine more light on this subject. This presentation is not intended to canonize Mays, as Dr. Cook has previously done. It is designed, however, to illuminate a great figure in higher education and his contributions to one of higher education's more successful institutions. It is further intended to fill a void, one that if properly filled, will lead to further research and study in this neglected area of higher education.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this presentation is historical analysis coupled with intensive interviewing. Both Benjamin E. Mays and Morehouse College were studied in an historical context. A look at the life of Mays, the development of Morehouse, and the relationship between the two provide the core of this study. Interviews were conducted with persons familiar with Mays and Morehouse to augment the study as well as to provide points of departure.

Historical information was gathered from both primary and secondary sources. A major source of primary data was obtained from visits to several archives. Archives visited included: American Baptist Historical Society in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania; Amistad Research Center at Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana; Atlanta University Center Woodruff Library Archives in Atlanta, Georgia; Moorland Spingarn Research Center at Howard University in Washington, D.C.; National Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.; and Rockefeller Archive Center in North Tarrytown, New York. These various archives held assorted letters and papers produced or received by Mays in addition to the papers of John and Lugenia Hope, members of the Rockefeller family, trustees of Morehouse College, and several other individuals who had a relationship to the college and a subsequent bearing on the study. As well, numerous files on or related to Morehouse were consulted at these archival sites.

A variety of primary sources were utilized in order to obtain a more comprehensive study. The information obtained at these archives provided a great deal of these sources, including the papers and files

already mentioned. Additional sources were consulted at these archives, at several libraries, and at various locations including Morehouse College, Dillard University, and Atlanta University. These sources included records and written correspondence from and to Mays; official documents of Morehouse and the foundations with which the college was affiliated (e.g. Morehouse annual reports, catalogues, bulletins, pamphlets, yearbooks, student handbooks); numerous magazine and newspaper accounts of events involving Morehouse and Mays were consulted including *The Atlanta Constitution*, *The Atlanta Voice*, *The Columbia Record* (Columbia, South Carolina), and *The New Courier* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania). First-hand accounts of Mays and various related events were obtained through interviews with individuals who had worked with or known Mays. Written recollections, additional correspondence, and other documents were also consulted.

Most of the secondary sources consulted included histories of Morehouse and other traditionally black colleges, histories of the development of higher education, with an emphasis on the black college, and books and articles written about Mays and Morehouse. The most illuminating of these sources was Mays' autobiography, *Born To Rebel*. His book provided the genesis for this study and the answer to many questions that arose along the way.

When researching a contemporary figure or institution, it is possible to discover many individuals who are quite familiar with the topic of study. Some of these people document their relationships with the subject; yet most merely possess vivid images and verbal recollections of such relationships. Mays encountered a great number of people, few of whom committed to writing their recollections of their encounters. Many of those individuals who did not possess written recollections were contacted and interviewed. As previously mentioned, the works of those individuals who did produce written recollections of Mays were also consulted.

This study was aided by the inclusion of intensive interviews, which consisted of loosely structured, open-ended questioning of various individuals. Such interviews can provide very helpful information and additional documentation. When used properly, intensive interviewing can provide keen insights to unanswered questions, validate previously discovered information, and contribute original pieces of information for further study. This researcher was able to contact many individuals who were acquainted with Mays and Morehouse. Interviews were conducted with people who knew him while they were students, colleagues, faculty members, alumni, friends, or even neighbors of Mays. Persons contacted

included Mays' immediate Morehouse Presidential successors, Hugh M. Gloster and Leroy Keith; current and former faculty members, Alton J. Hornsby, Tobe Johnson, Ronald J. Sheehy, and others; former students, Samuel DuBois Cook, Charlie Moreland, Lonnie King, and others; also contacted were several friends of Mays including Richard and Mildred Barksdale. Of these individuals, Gloster, Johnson, and Cook should be singled out for their vivid imagery and powerful insight. Their unwavering cooperation and meticulous attention to details provided precise and invaluable contributions. The interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to just over three hours. Most of the interviews were conducted in Atlanta, and the remainder were conducted in Champaign, Illinois; Columbus, Ohio; New Orleans, Louisiana, and Washington, D.C. Nearly all were conducted on an individual basis with prior notification and an appointment. Several unscheduled interviews were conducted with individuals who were not previously contacted, but who possessed important perspectives for this study.

The purpose of the interview and the research was explained at the outset of each interview. Questions asked included: "How long and in what capacity did you know Benjamin E. Mays?" ... "What was your opinion of him?" ... "What did others think of him?" ... "In what ways did he affect Morehouse?" ... "What were his successes and failures?" Other questions were asked relative to the individual's relationship with Mays and the college. Subsequent questions were borne out of the responses to these general inquiries and other related topics of interest or concern. Notes and recordings of these interviews provided documentation that was later processed as either further verification of previous information or new information that required further investigation and substantiation. On occasion, the value of unwritten recollections has been questioned outside the field of social research. Nevertheless, the individuals who failed to produce written documentation of their relationships with Mays possessed invaluable amounts of insight and enlightenment. Without the benefit of previously written documentation, proper interview techniques were used to elucidate findings that otherwise would have been inaccessible.

The individuals interviewed for this study were all quite knowledgeable about Mays and, as well, about the effective uses of interviews in research. They proved to be most cooperative and willing to share their insights. These individuals gave generously of their time and on several occasions, provided subsequent information following their interview.

However, not everyone contacted was willing to share information.

Several had specific reservations (e.g. "... I don't want to talk about that particular issue ..." or "... this is off the record ..."), and others asked that certain statements not be attributed to them (e.g. "... don't say that I told you this, but ..." or "... I'll deny ever saying this ..."). Two individuals, who agreed to be interviewed, later became unavailable or specifically wished not to be included. Their anonymity is respected here.

In an effort to be as thorough as possible, the use of interviews accompanied the historical examination which utilized a variety of primary and secondary sources. Use was made of all available resources and materials in an attempt to increase insight into the relationship between Mays and Morehouse.

Outline

In the chapters that follow, the first one-hundred years of growth and development of a small black college and the development of a leader for that institution will be examined. The relationship between Morehouse College and Benjamin E. Mays, the president during the last quarter of Morehouse's inaugural century provides the basis for this study. A closer look at the college will be provided in later chapters, but in this next chapter, Chapter 2, the family background, education, and moral development of Mays prior to his becoming president of Morehouse will be presented. This chapter provides necessary background information on Mays and the forces that guided his educational and professional maturation.

Chapter 3 examines the historical development of black higher education. It traces the educational longings of blacks in America. Also presented are sketches of several early institutions of black higher education and their supporters. The chapter concludes with a detailed history of Morehouse College prior to May's administration.

Chapter 4 reviews the financial development of Morehouse under the Mays administration, while Chapter 5 reviews the development of faculty, students, and the physical plant while Mays was in office. Finally, Chapter 6 examines Mays' leadership qualities and abilities that helped to make him the kind of person that he was and that helped to make Morehouse the kind of institution that it has become.

Notes

1. Benjamin E. Mays, *Quotable Quotes Of Benjamin E. Mays*, (New York: Vantage Press, 1983), xix.
2. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), 125.
3. Benjamin E. Mays, *Born To Rebel*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), viii.
4. Martin Luther King, Sr., *Daddy King* (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1980), 5-6.
5. Karl Max Grisso, "David Kinley, 1861-1944: The Career of the Fifth President of the University of Illinois" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1980), vi.
6. John S. Brubacher and Willis Rudy, *Higher Education in Transition*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1976). Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith eds., *American Higher Education: A Documentary History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961). Fredrick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962). Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965). All of these authors have contributed significant works in higher education and most even make reference to traditionally black institutions. But none has gone into detailed study of individual traditionally black institutions and their administrative leaders as they have done with the cited presidents and institutions. Several comprehensive histories of black higher education in America have been written but are lacking, as well, in their presentation of individual institutions and their administrative leaders. See: Dwight Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Evolution of the Negro College* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1934). Carter G. Woodson, *The Education Of The Negro Prior To 1861* (New York: Arno Press, 1968). Additionally, several good histories have been written about individual traditionally black institutions, usually by the institution's official or unofficial historian. While these histories do a good job of chronicling the individual institutions, they are often lacking in presenting complete biographical information of the various presidents and interpretations of their administrations. See: Frederick A. McGinnis, *A History And An Interpretation Of Wilberforce University* (Blanchester, Ohio: The Brown Publishing Co., 1941). Horace Mann Bond, *Education For Freedom: A History of Lincoln University, Pennsylvania* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976). Florence M. Read, *The Story of Spelman College* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961). Recent books have come out that take a more critical and comparative look at black higher education. Included among them are: James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988). Addie Louise Joyner Butler, *The Distinctive Black College: Talladega, Tuskegee, and Morehouse* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1977).
7. Among the many written works about Booker T. Washington is this autobiography: Booker T. Washington, *The Story of My life and Work* (Toronto, Canada: J. L. Nichols and Co., 1900).; and the following works: Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington—The Making of a Black Leader, 1865-1901* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972). Basil Matthews, *Booker T. Washington: Educator and Interracial Interpreter* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948). Emmett J.

Scott and Lyman B. Stowe, *Booker T. Washington: Builder of a Civilization* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, Page, and Co., 1918).