For Good Government & Urban Politics

The Career of R. T. Greener '70

Whether or not Beverly Williams was apocryphal, it seems likely that Richard Theodore Greener '70 was the first Negro to graduate from Harvard College.

Beverly Williams, it will be remembered, is the Negro of whom Carl Sandberg wrote in *Lincoln, the War Years*. When objections were raised to the College's admitting Williams, President Everett, according to Sandberg, replied that admission to Harvard College depended on examinations. "If this boy passes the examination," Everett is quoted as saying, "he will be admitted; and if the white students choose to withdraw, all the income of the College will be devoted to his education."

Whether or not Beverly Williams was admitted, it does not appear that he achieved a degree, which Richard T. Greener did, though the process involved many and diverse years of preparation for admission, and five years as an undergraduate.

A Harvard education was by no means Greener's youthful ambition; in fact, though his grandfather had taught in a school for colored children in Baltimore, there was no college tradition in his family. His father, astonishing in his mining for a while, he was taken ill and suffered losses, and shortly disappeared; his family never heard from him again, and in due time presumed him dead.

The year the father "went to digging for gold" the mother moved the family to Boston. Finding no good schools for colored children in that city she shortly moved hers across the Charles to Cambridge, so that they might attend an "unproscriptive school," and Richard secured his early education at the Broadway Grammar School under the direction of Master Roberts and Miss Lucretia Clapp.

When about fourteen years old, however, he left school to help support his mother, and worked two years in a shoe store, a year with a wood engraver, a year or more as a porter at the Pavilion Hotel on Tremont Street, Boston, briefly in the fruit business and the newspaper trade, and then for two years as a porter for Messrs. Palmer and Batchelder on Washington Street, Boston.

During these years he became convinced that his was a high destiny, that he would make something of his life. While employed by D. J. Smith & Co., wood engravers, he plunged into the intricacies of the craft, and indeed showed considerable aptitude; but one day, either in anger or underestimating his employer's pride, the employer struck him—and Richard walked out of the plant. He seriously considered the life of an artist, on the basis of his experience with D. J. Smith, but when he "found he could not go abroad" he turned his attention to obtaining an education.

While he was at the Pavilion Hotel Richard aroused the interest of a number of the guests. A Judge Russell gave him access to his library, and a Mrs. Maria S. Cook undertook to instruct him in French. Later, when he moved on to Palmer and Batchelder's his duties included that of night-watchman, and he occupied his spare nocturnal time reading English and French books, and also familiarizing himself, from what records were available to him, with the "banking and all the other details of business." Believing he had earned a position superior to that of porter, he approached his employer and suggested promotion. When told that his employer "was afraid to attempt it," he
vowed to “do nothing else but study for the next ten years if necessary.” He was sure that at the end of the war opportunities never before available would open to colored people, and he determined to be in position to take advantage of them.

In the summer of 1862 he wrote Franklin B. Sanborn ’55, later to become a famous teacher and reformer, who was then teaching in a private school in Concord, to ask if he might enter Mr. Sanborn’s school and there prepare for college. To this Sanborn agreed; but, told of the arrangement, Bacheider suggested Oberlin as an alternate; Oberlin was cheaper, he said, and he’d help him financially. Greener deferred to his employer’s suggestion, and while waiting for Oberlin to open in the fall of 1862, began reading Latin with George Herbert Palmer ’64, for he knew he was ill prepared for formal education.

At that time Oberlin offered two years of pre-college work, and in the first of these, the junior preparatory class, Greener plunged with the energy and ambition that was to characterize all his career. Whether he was slighted by reason of “colorphobia,” as he thought he was, or whether (as seems more likely) he was ill prepared for his studies, he did not receive “as high an appointment” as he thought he deserved, and he decided to leave Oberlin—and “carry out a latent desire to enter Harvard.”

To Exeter he applied first, for admission to the senior class, but he was told he was not fitted for it and “Dr. Soule wouldn’t let me try to keep up with it.” (Gideon Lane Soule was Exeter’s third principal.) At Andover he had better luck, and Dr. Samuel H. Taylor told him he might try, though warning him that the preparation he had at Oberlin was far below the Eastern standard. Greener found the going hard, but he tackled his studies with a will, and gained no little distinction for his declamations.

In the fall of 1865, in his twenty-first year, Richard Theodore Greener entered Harvard College, heavily conditioned. It was another year before he could fully rise to his educational challenges, and found he had best repeat his freshman year.

By his own reckoning Greener had a happy and rewarding undergraduate experience. He turned his forensic and literary propensities to good purposes when he won a Bowdoin Prize as a sophomore for elocution, and another as a senior for his English essay, “The Best Way ofCrushing the Agitator is to Give him his Grievance,” which criticized the system of land tenure in Ireland. He belonged to two societies and a “radical religion club.” The last reflected an early disillusionment with the evangelical practices of the time. “Under the mistaken impression” that he was converted, he had joined the First Independent Baptist Church on Joy Street, Boston, when he was working for Messrs. Palmer and Bacheider, in 1861. Convinced later of “his error,” he applied for and secured from the church “honorable dismissal.”

Rumors inevitably sprang up among his Classmates as to his background; he was variously represented as an escaped slave, a genius who had come straight from the cotton field to the College, as a Scout in the Union Army, as the son of a Rebel general, and so on. When these came to his attention, Greener was always pains to divulge his antecedents and background unhesitatingly.

Appraising himself and his prospects at the end of his senior year, Greener admitted a great fondness for art and some aptitude towards it, and strong interests in metaphysics, general literature, and also in the Greek and Latin classics—when “divested of their grammatical pedantry.” He planned to go forth in the world and get all the knowledge he could and make all the reputation he could (and as a corollary to these to make a comfortable competence). He thought he might do best in the profession of the law.

The road to admission to the bar, which he achieved seven years after, was a devious one. First of all he needed a job, and in August of 1870 he found one, as principal of the Male Department of the Institute for the Colored Youth of Philadelphia. Two years later found him principal of the Sumner High School in Washington, and a member of the staff of The New National Era. When that publication expanded into The New National Era and Citizen, he accepted the challenge of associate editorship.

Shortly he achieved a dual appointment in the Office of Public Works and in the office of the District Attorney, where he applied himself for the first time to the study of law.

Then South Carolina, in the midst of its painful reconstruction period, beckoned him, and in October 1873 he accepted an appointment as Professor of Mental and Moral Philosophy at the University of South Carolina. And here, in academic surroundings, his immense energy and ambition found scope. In addition to teaching Philosophy, he assisted in the Departments of Latin and Greek, Mathematics, and Constitutional History. He also acted as librarian, rearranging the university’s “rare library” of 27,000 volumes and beginning the preparation of a catalogue. At the same time he studied law, was graduated from the University’s Law School in 1876, was admitted to the Supreme Court of South Carolina the next year, and to practice at the bar of the District of Columbia the one after that. Greener’s academic career was abruptly terminated in 1877 when the Wade Hampton legislature closed the door of the University of South Carolina to Negroes.

His career became kaleidoscopic: Board of Health of Columbia, S.C.;
Prospects of Winter Sports Teams

YEAR after year, Harvard winter sports prospects never seem to change. The track team keeps winning. The squash team keeps winning. The swimming team beats almost everybody but Yale. But two changes have been made in 1946-47 script: the usually-powerful hockey squad is going to see how the other half lives, while the Crimson basketball team has prospects for a fine season.

Basketball

Back in 1946, Harvard had a pretty decent basketball team; the squad compiled a 16-9 over-all record, and tied for fourth place in the Ivy League. Since then it's been a long, cold eighteen years; for nearly two decades Crimson teams have been mired in the bottom half of the League. Harvard basketball, obscured in the shadows of the College's perennially successful winter sports teams, had become a gloomy thing.

But this is the year of resurrection. Though spoil-sports may point out that the Crimson has no depth and little height, Harvard is going to have an exciting basketball team this year—and presumably a successful one. For the first time in two decades, Harvard will have a legitimate Ivy League basketball contender—though the team probably won't be able to beat the Ivy powerhouses, Penn and Princeton.

The key man on Coach Floyd Wilson's quintet is All-Ivy center Merle McChung. The six-foot-five-inch senior from Montevideo, Minnesota, set an all-time season scoring record last year: 436 points, a 19.8 per game average. McChung has a remarkable arsenal of shots, and even men several inches taller are unable to contain him.

Wilson has said that the finest shooter he has ever had in his Harvard career is Keith Sedlacek, a six-foot-one-inch junior. Sedlacek started last season on the bench, but a few exhibitions of his aesthetic high, arching, twenty-foot jump-shot quickly won him a spot on the starting five. His most brilliant performance last year came against Princeton, when he sank thirteen of sixteen shots, outscored the Tiger All-American, Bill Bradley, 31-30, and led Harvard to a fantastic upset victory.

And this year's Crimson squad is blessed with another player who may be as good as Sedlacek. The sophomore guard Gene Dressler, who averaged twenty points a game for the freshman team, has a jump shot as pretty and as effective as Sedlacek's—and the junior shot at a 47.8 clip last year.

Harvard's only other "big man" besides McChung is six-foot-four-inch junior Barry Williams. He led the squad in rebounding last season with 222, and whenever the graceful Williams gets a rebound it's poetry. Wilson has him playing the high post this season, and Williams should develop into a solid offensive player.

Captain Leo Scully rounds out the starting five. Scully's outside shooting is not exceptional, but he is a hustling player, good on defense, and a skillful driver.

There are problems, of course. Harvard's only two big men stand six-four and six-five, meaning that the Crimson is going to have rebounding difficulties. And behind the starting five there is no depth to speak of; this could be a real problem if either McChung or Williams ever fouls out.

But the Crimson is so loaded with talent that it may be able to overcome these difficulties. The team opened its season with a 36-18 win over the United States Air Force Academy.