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A Museum is Born to Preserve A Heritage

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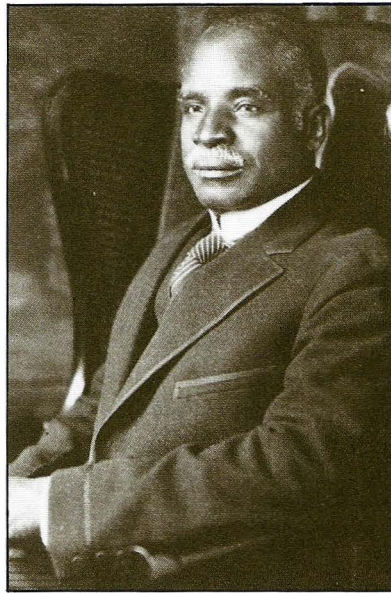
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Kelly Miller
1863-1939

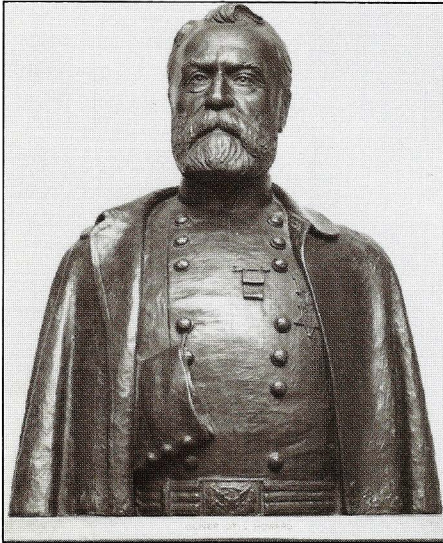


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**A MUSEUM
IS BORN
TO PRESERVE
A HERITAGE**

Items in the inaugural exhibition of the Howard University Museum.

—Bust of **General Oliver O. Howard**
1830-1909



—**The Hunted Slaves**
1865 engraving by C. G. Lewis



By **Lorraine A. Williams**

It took many years of planning and waiting, but finally, Howard University has a museum. What was a dream in the minds of earlier proponents of the museum project became a reality on February 10, 1979 in Founders Library.

The interest in African and Afro-American history and heritage, and the role of Howard University in preserving that heritage is not new. The idea of a museum that is devoted to the preservation and scholarly study of Black history was first advocated in 1890 by Professor Kelly Miller of the faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences.

Kelly Miller's concerns received stimulation from the community, and from some intellectual leaders on campus. And intellectual ferment in the community was fostered by several organizations, especially, the American Negro Academy. The Academy was founded in 1897 by Alexander Crummell, a scholar whose career in Africa and in the United States contributed immeasurably to the perpetuation of the linkages between Africans and Afro-Americans. (Other prominent individuals, such as W.E.B. DuBois, Mary Church Terrell, Marcus Garvey,

Langston Hughes, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Percy Julian, helped to surmount obstacles to an appreciation of the values, integrity, and the meaning of Black culture and history).

In 1912, Kelly Miller proposed the establishment of a "Negro-American Museum and Library." As a first step in implementing his plan, he succeeded in persuading Jesse Moorland, an alumnus of Howard (1891)—who later served on the university's Board of Trustees from 1907 to 1940—to donate his large collection of Afro-American books to the university. This was done in 1914. Thus, the Moorland Foundation was born.

By this time, Kelly Miller had additional support for the museum. The Department of History was established (1913), and Charles H. Wesley was appointed as professor. Professor Wesley's prolific career has been influenced by his study of Afro-American life "from the inside so that the race is presented not as an object but as subject." In his book, *Richard Allen, Apostle of Freedom*, published in 1935, he wrote, "One of the purposes of history is to assist one generation in the comprehension of the problems and ideals which have been received as a heritage from preceding generations. . . ."

Six years later, 1919, Carter G. Woodson was appointed. And in 1922 William Leo Hansberry joined the faculty of the Department of History.

Professor Woodson popularized Africa and the Afro-American experience by establishing the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1915, by founding the *Journal of Negro History* in 1916, and by establishing Negro History Week in 1926.

Professor Hansberry, whose work in history has inspired generations of students, was a pioneer in the study of African history. For his contributions, he was awarded the first Haile Selassie I Prize Trust Award for African Research in 1964.

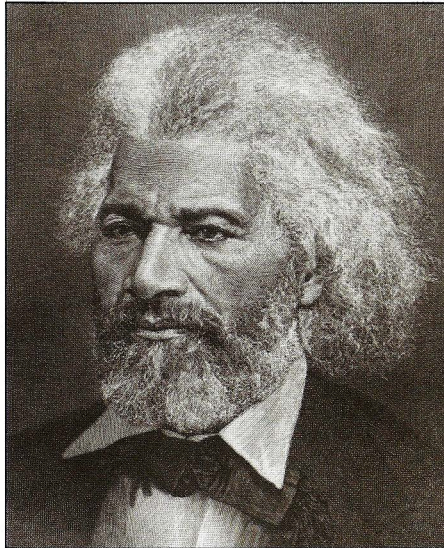
The early period of the 20th century—characterized by segregation and discrimination—was referred to as the *naadir* by the eminent historian Rayford W. Logan, whose career in scholarship and teaching continues to inspire students at Howard. To Afro-Americans, the *naadir* meant preoccupation with problems of survival, gaining a measure of respectability, and winning a semblance of their human rights.

During that period, support for the idea of a museum at Howard came from many individuals, for example, Professor Alaim

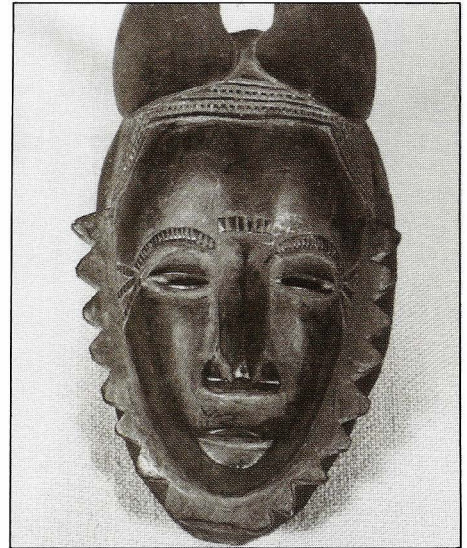


Williams: A Museum is Born to Preserve A Heritage

— Frederick Douglass
1817-1895



— Goro mask
From the Ivory Coast



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Leroy Locke, then chairman of the Department of Philosophy, is particularly noted for his enthusiastic drive to make the project a reality. The evidence can be found today in the Art Gallery in the College of Fine Arts, which serves as a repository for many items of African art donated by him. Like DuBois and Hansberry, Professor Locke emphasized African and Afro-American historical and cultural linkages.

Kelly Miller's dream had not materialized when he retired in 1934. However, with his characteristic determination, he continued with the campaign.

And as a result of his proposal, President Mordecai W. Johnson appointed a Study Committee of the following professors: Benjamin Brawley, Charles H. Wesley, Charles H. Thompson, Alain L. Locke, Ralph J. Bunche, Rayford W. Logan, and E. Franklin Frazier. Dorothy Porter, curator emeritus of the Moorland-Spingarn Collection, was also a member of that committee. Based upon the report of this committee, the Board of Trustees approved on October 28, 1938 the concept of a National Museum and Library at Howard.

After Kelly Miller's death in 1939, the museum project became dormant until President James E. Cheek reorganized

the Moorland-Spingarn Collection as the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center in 1973. In September, 1973, Michael R. Winston was named director of the Center, following the retirement of Dorothy Porter.

Now that the dream to organize a museum on campus has been realized, it would be correct to note some of the facility's functions. There is, on one hand, the task of bringing to one place, and holding in proper order, the materials of the past which tell of the achievements of the human mind and spirit in the humanities and the sciences. This is the collecting and conserving function.

There is, on the other hand, the more difficult and intriguing task of presenting the collected materials in the context of university teaching so as to stimulate the intellectual curiosity of the contemporary student.

The great creative vocation of the university may be said to be that of moving individuals to independent analysis, judgment, and decision. Ultimately, the important thing is what the inquiring student *thinks* of himself, of the world, and his place in the world.

The resources of the Howard museum will undoubtedly provide for the inquiring

student a link between the legacy of the past and the promise of the future.

And, one should always remember the 20 million Africans who caught the last glimpse of the African continent as they left Goree Island, off the coast of Senegal, for strange lands. There was little hope, at that time, that their culture would be preserved.

In this context, the new Howard University Museum represents a symbol of triumph for the preservation of the heritage of Black people. □

Lorraine Williams, Ph.D., is vice president for Academic Affairs at Howard University.