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**Francis
Sumner:**
A Short Essay

By James A. Bayton

4 **This school year marks the golden anniversary of the arrival at Howard University of the late Francis C. Sumner, psychologist and teacher.**

Who was this man whose influence has touched generations of students, beginning with the school year 1928-1929 until his death in 1954? What did he stand for?

Francis Sumner was born on December 7, 1895, in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. His elementary school education took place in Plainfield, New Jersey, Washington, D. C., and Norfolk, Virginia. His parents were dissatisfied, apparently, with the level or quality of secondary education available to Black students in Virginia at that time. This is shown in the fact that Sumner's application for employment at Howard stated that he had received "private instruction in secondary subjects by (his) father."

In any event, Sumner applied for admission to Lincoln University (Pennsylvania) and was admitted "by examination" in 1911. He was 15. Four years later, in 1915, Sumner earned the AB degree, *magna cum laude*, with special honors in English, modern languages, Greek, Latin and philosophy. He continued his education at Lincoln, receiving the MA degree in 1917.

Sumner entered Clark University (Massachusetts)—at that time one of the leading centers for psychology in the country—in the fall of 1917 and received the Ph.D. in 1920. While at Clark, he was named a University Fellow, 1917-1918 and 1919-1920. (During 1918-1919 he was in the infantry in France).

Among Sumner's professors were some of the great names in the history of psychology—G. Stanley Hall, E. Boring, T. W. Baird, S. W. Fernberger and K. Karlson.

Sumner taught at Wilberforce University from 1920 to 1921, and at West Virginia College from 1921 until he joined Howard in 1928.

During his long career, Sumner produced at least 45 publications.

His interest in applied psychology led him to write a number of articles on measuring the relevancy of pictures to copy in advertising, and the influence of color on the legibility of copy. But one of his main interests was the psychology of religion, which he taught as a subject while at Howard. In that course, he familiarized his students with, among other books, William James' famous "Varieties of Religious Experience."

Sumner had a deep interest in languages. One of the most unusual aspects of his career was the work he did for *Psychological Abstracts*. His specialty was preparing abstracts of articles published in foreign journals of psychology. Over the years, he did approximately 2000 abstracts. During the school year 1948-1949 alone, he did 505 abstracts, from articles in French, German, Spanish and Russian.

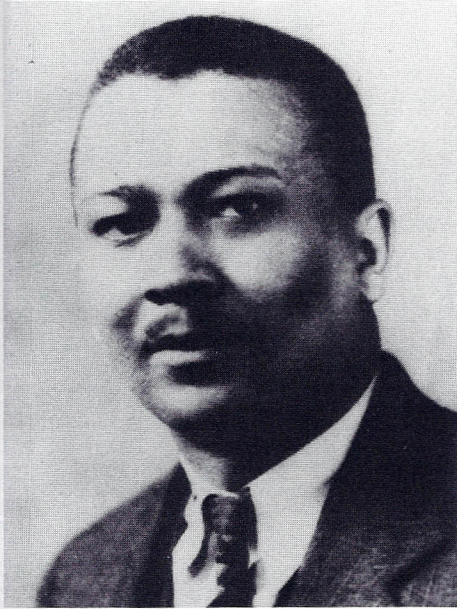
Throughout his professional years, Sumner was concerned with psychology as it applied to Black life. This is evident in his own research and in the MS theses by students working under him. There was research on the mental health status of Black college freshmen and on environment as a factor prohibiting creative scholarship among Blacks. In 1940, one of Sumner's students did an MS thesis on attitudes toward the administration of justice as it related to Blacks, (how contemporary they sound!).

Sumner's monument, however, is the psychology department at Howard.

From Sumner's time, the department has been one of the most productive in the College of Liberal Arts and the Graduate School. It is estimated that there are approximately 700 Black holders of the Ph.D. in psychology. Eighty of these individuals received their BS and/or MS degrees from Howard.

The department has been the main single source of Blacks who eventually became Ph.Ds in the field of psychology. In addition, there are about 300 individuals who work professionally as psychologists who received, as their last degree, the MS at Howard. There is no other department of psychology in the nation that has had anywhere near this total impact on the production of Black psychologists.

Sumner, 50 years ago, initiated the program and the spirit that has produced this record. When he came, the department had two other teachers (Max Meenes and Frederick Watts.) Today, the faculty comprises 22 full-time persons, each with the Ph.D. The department is fourth in number of majors in the College of Liberal Arts,



Francis Sumner

with approximately 100 graduate students.

Sumner and his early colleagues put great emphasis on teaching the fundamentals of psychology. They gave rigorous courses in the basic areas of psychology—experimental psychology, learning, developmental psychology, personality, abnormal psychology, applied psychology.

The MS degree program was designed to prepare students for the Ph.D. level study at other institutions. There was more intensive work in the fundamental areas to which the students had been introduced as undergraduates. At that period, passing examinations in German and French were required for all Ph.D. candidates. Sumner and Meenes taught, therefore, courses in "Readings in German Psychology" and "Readings in French Psychology."

There was a course in "Psychological Journals," which was designed to acquaint students with the contemporary research being published in major journals of psychology. Still another important activity was the departmental graduate seminars. All students and faculty attended these seminars, and students presented published research on the issue assigned for a given semester, such as

controversial theories of learning, perceptual defense and validation of projective testing techniques. These seminars were so outstanding that the then dean of College of Liberal Arts (J. St. Claire Price), the associate dean (Carroll Miller), and faculty members from other departments attended regularly.

Sumner was particularly alert to spotting young Blacks with potential for achieving a career in psychology. These individuals were encouraged to go on to the Ph.D. degree. Those who did so went on to successful doctoral work at other leading universities, among them Columbia, Pennsylvania, Cornell, California, McGill, Rochester, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Kansas, Clark, Tufts, and Colorado. They included Keturah Whitehurst, long-time chairman of the psychology program at Virginia State; Bernard Harleston, dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Tufts; Clayton Stansbury, a vice president at Morgan State; Gloria Twine Chisum, director of a key research facility at the Office of Naval Research, and Lawrence Johnson, of Johnson Associates.

The individual universally recognized as the major Black figure in psychology, Kenneth B. Clark, was a BS and MS product of the Sumner years. Among Clark's many accomplishments was being elected president of the American Psychological Association. His wife, Mamie Clark, (BS and MS from Howard) is the director of an outstanding child development center in New York. These are but a few of the alumni of the Sumner psychology department and are cited to demonstrate the variety of accomplishments to be found in the group.

Now, the enlarged program of the psychology department still represents the basic approaches established by Sumner. There is still emphasis upon teaching the fundamentals of contemporary psychology. There still is emphasis upon the research aspects of psychology. For example, in the past two years, at least six students have had their M.S. theses or Ph.D. dissertations published. This accomplishment must be weighed against

the fact that in the journals in which they published, 85 percent of the manuscripts submitted are usually rejected.

Last May, the department held a luncheon to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the coming of Sumner to the university. It was a fitting tribute to a scholar whose contributions—both as teacher and as chairman—greatly enhanced the development of the department. □

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