The Polis

Member-only story

History ✓ Money + Education + Culture + Life +

Fisk vs. Howard: The Race to Bring Phi Beta Kappa Society to a Black University

Fisk and Howard Spent Generations Proving That Black Higher Education Meant More Than Basic Schooling. In 1953, Phi Beta Kappa Recognized Both.



William Spivey Follow 12 min read · 1 day ago

154 1 3



File:Phi Beta Kappa Key.JPG — Wikimedia Commons

In the spring of 1953, two of America's most respected historically Black universities were preparing for an achievement that carried significance far beyond their campuses. Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, and Howard University in Washington, D.C., were about to become the first historically Black colleges to establish chapters of Phi Beta Kappa, the nation's oldest and one of its most prestigious academic honor societies. For nearly a century and a half, the society had recognized academic excellence at colleges and universities across the country. Now, for the first time, two institutions created to educate Black Americans in the aftermath of slavery would receive the same recognition.

It was a distinction worth pursuing. Phi Beta Kappa, founded in 1776 at the College of William and Mary, had become a symbol of achievement in the liberal arts and sciences. Its chapters represented an institution's academic standing, faculty strength, curriculum quality, and commitment to intellectual inquiry. Membership was not simply an award for individual students. A chapter signaled that a university had reached a level of academic recognition acknowledged by an influential national organization.

For Fisk and Howard, the achievement also challenged an American educational system that had long treated Black colleges as institutions intended primarily to provide basic instruction, vocational training, or teacher preparation. Both universities had been established with ambitions that extended far beyond those limitations. Their founders envisioned

Open in app ↗

Medium Search Play Games Write

a segregated society.

The race to Phi Beta Kappa can therefore be understood as a contest for recognition between two institutions that had spent generations demonstrating that Black Americans were entitled to the highest levels of

education. The outcome was unusual: Fisk and Howard received their charters at the same time, but Fisk held its installation ceremony four days before Howard. It was a small difference in the calendar, but a meaningful distinction in the history of Black higher education.

Fisk's beginnings were rooted in the extraordinary hunger for education that followed emancipation. The Civil War had ended in 1865, leaving millions of formerly enslaved people confronting the challenge of building lives in a society that had denied them literacy, property, political rights, and educational opportunity. Schools for freedpeople appeared throughout the South, often in churches, abandoned buildings, and temporary structures. Many were designed to teach reading, writing, arithmetic, and the practical skills necessary to navigate a world in which formerly enslaved people were expected to become independent citizens.

Fisk began in Nashville in 1865, when John Ogden, Reverend Erastus Milo Cravath, and Reverend Edward P. Smith helped establish the Fisk School under the American Missionary Association's sponsorship. General Clinton B. Fisk, an official associated with the Tennessee Freedmen's Bureau, helped secure former Union Army barracks for the institution. The school opened its doors on January 9, 1866. Its earliest students ranged in age from seven to seventy. Many had been born into slavery, and some were adults who had never been permitted to learn to read.



File:CravathHallFiskUNashville.jpg — Wikimedia Commons

The response was remarkable. Hundreds of students arrived, demonstrating that the desire for education among formerly enslaved people was not a minor social aspiration but a powerful demand. Fisk initially provided elementary instruction, but its founders and supporters understood that the needs of the newly freed population required something more substantial. The South needed teachers, ministers, administrators, and professionals who could help build institutions within Black communities. Education could not stop at literacy if freedom were to become meaningful.

In 1867, the school became Fisk University. Its ambitions were reflected in a founding philosophy that the institution should measure itself against the highest standards of American education, rather than accept a separate and inferior standard for Black students. That was an important distinction. Fisk

was not established simply to provide a place where Black Americans could receive an education unavailable to them elsewhere. It intended to become a university whose academic standards could stand alongside those of the nation's established colleges.

Fisk's early history demonstrated that ambition. The university developed a curriculum that went beyond basic instruction and teacher training. It educated men and women in the liberal arts, preparing students for advanced study and professional careers. Its first graduating class in 1875 included eight students, among them, women and white students. That detail reflected an institutional commitment to education that was not restricted by race or sex, even though Fisk's central historical mission was to educate African Americans.



File:The Story of the Jubilee Singers.jpg — Wikimedia Commons

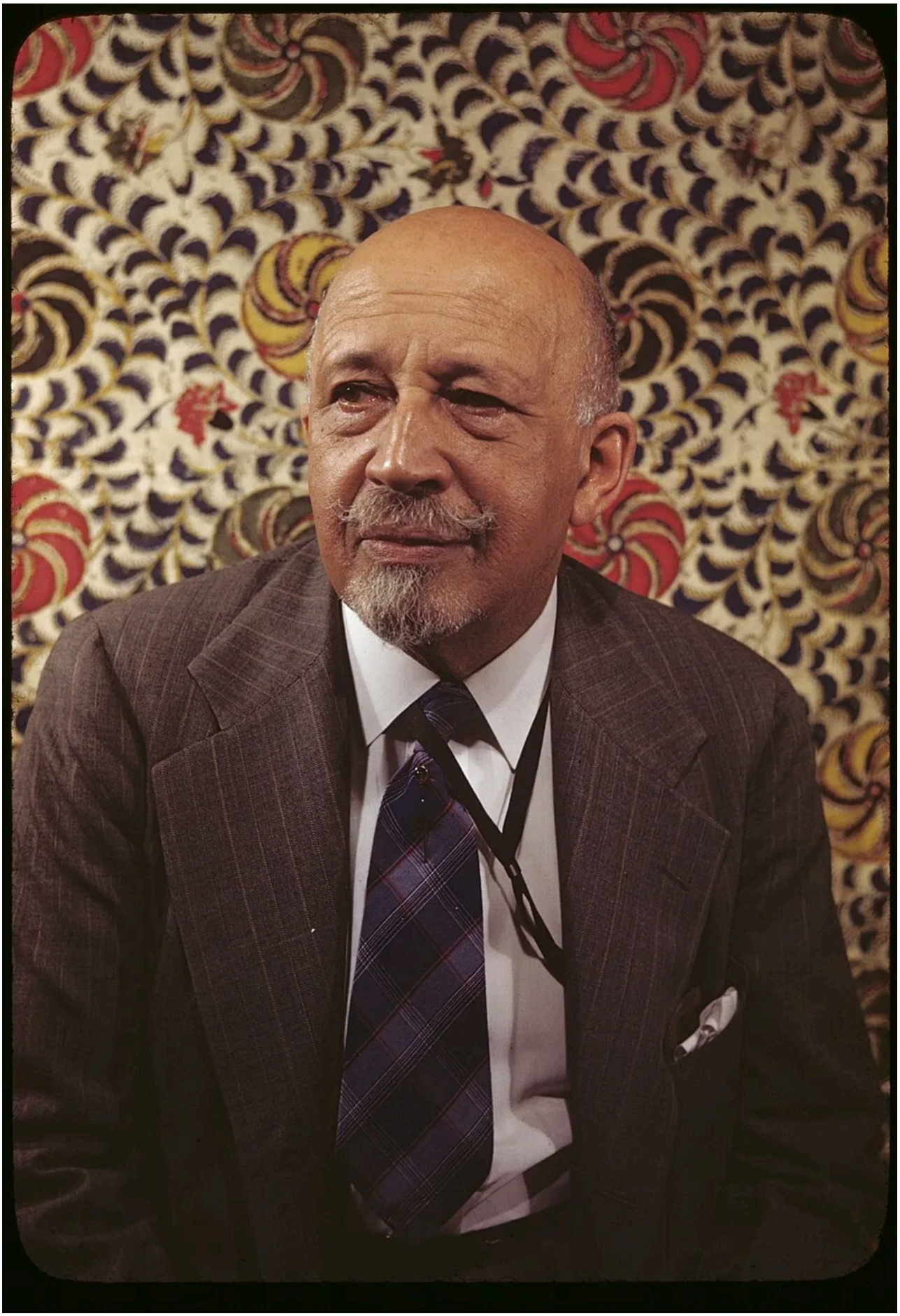
The Fisk Jubilee Singers became one of the most consequential parts of the university's early history. Beginning in 1871, the group traveled to raise money for the struggling institution. Their performances introduced spirituals to audiences in the United States and Europe and helped make Fisk internationally known. The money they raised contributed to the construction of Jubilee Hall, Fisk's first permanent structure, dedicated in 1876. The building became a physical statement of the university's determination to survive and grow. The singers turned the music of enslaved people into support for an institution meant to educate their descendants.



Photo by Reginald D Jackson '82

Fisk's academic achievements continued over the next several decades. W.E.B. Du Bois graduated from the university in 1888 and later became one of the most influential scholars and civil rights leaders in American history.

His presence in Fisk's alumni history reflected the university's growing role in producing intellectual leadership. Other scholars, artists, writers, and public figures would follow. The university was developing a reputation that reached well beyond Nashville.

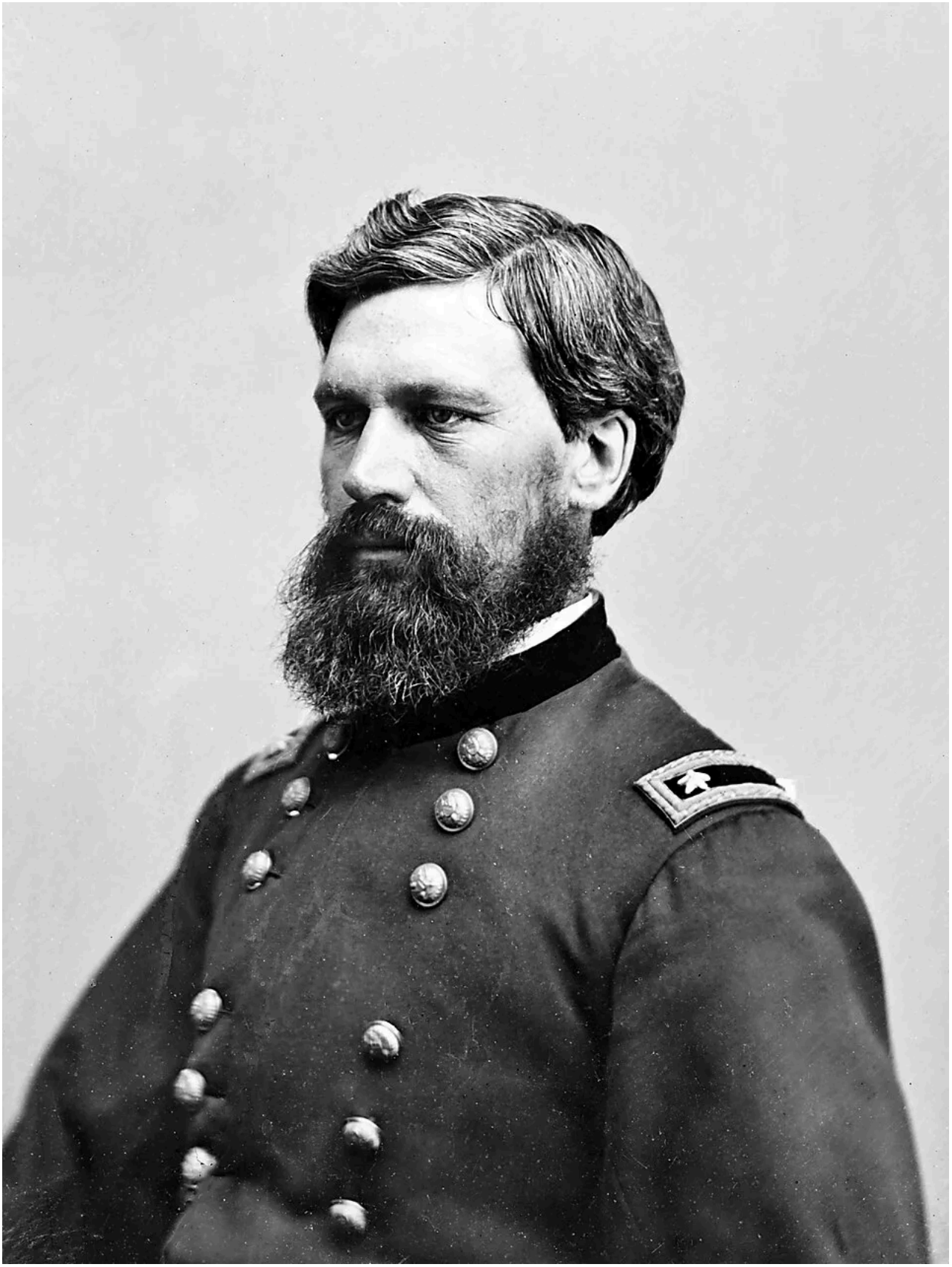


File:Du Bois, W. E. B. 9.jpg — Wikimedia Commons

But Fisk's academic ambitions unfolded in a country where Black institutions faced financial disadvantages, racial prejudice, and skepticism from many white educational authorities. The university had to demonstrate its academic quality while operating in a system that often denied Black colleges the recognition and resources available to predominantly white institutions. Accreditation became an important measure of that struggle.

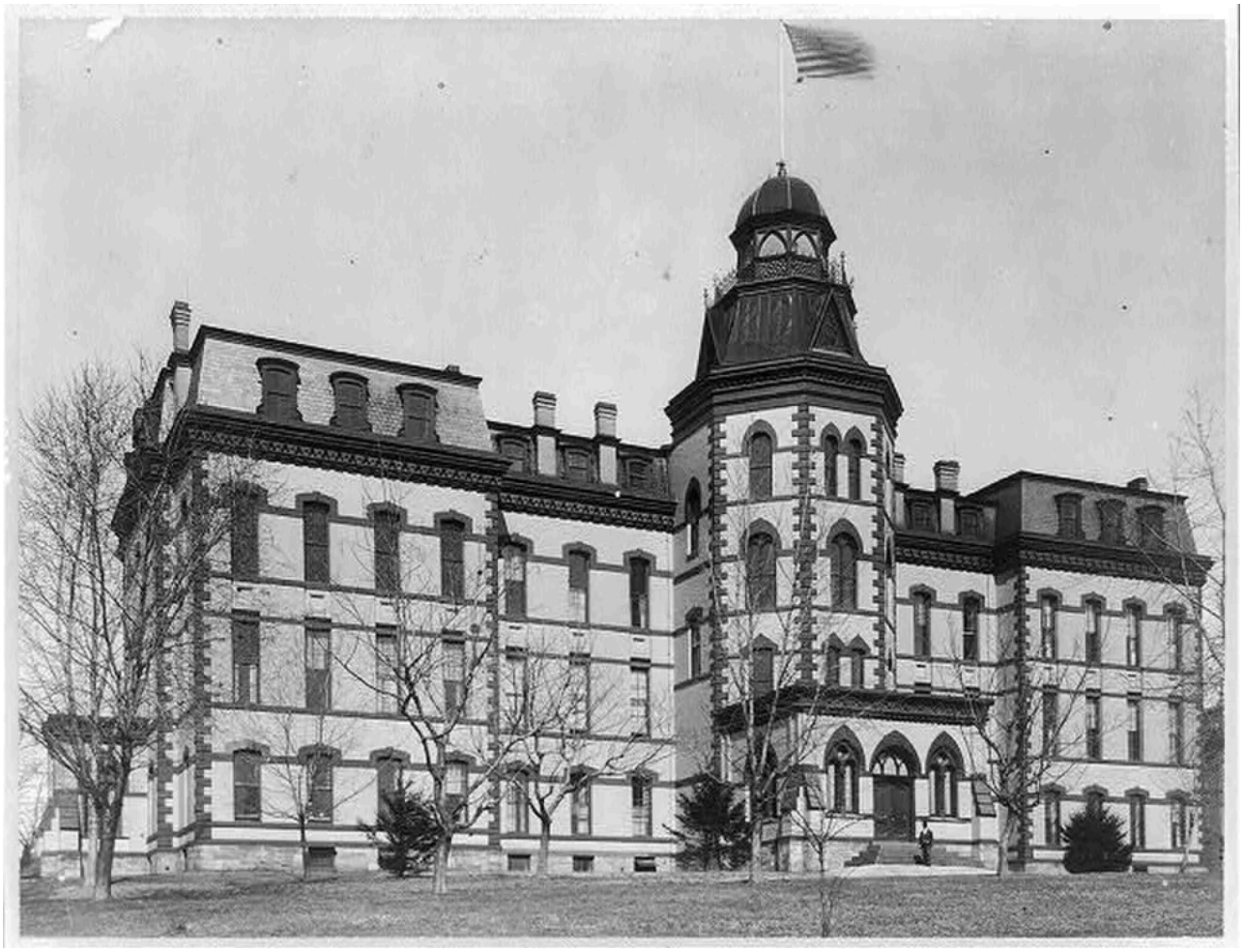
In 1930, Fisk became the first African American institution accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. In 1933, it became the first Black institution on the Association of American Universities' approved list. In 1948, it became the first historically Black institution approved by the American Association of University Women. Each achievement represented another step toward recognition by organizations that influenced the standing of American higher education.

Howard University pursued a similarly ambitious course, though its beginnings were different. Founded in Washington, D.C., in 1867, Howard emerged from discussions among members of the First Congregational Society and other supporters who believed that the country needed an institution to prepare Black ministers, teachers, and leaders. The original idea of a theological school expanded into a university with a much broader mission. Its founders wanted an institution that could educate African Americans in the liberal arts and sciences while also preparing them for professional careers.



File:Oliver Otis Howard.jpg — Wikimedia Commons

The university was named for General Oliver Otis Howard, a Union officer who had served as commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau. Howard helped found the institution and became one of its early presidents. Congress approved the university's charter on March 2, 1867, and President Andrew Johnson signed it into law. The charter authorized departments in normal and preparatory education, collegiate studies, theology, medicine, law, and agriculture. The breadth of those plans showed that Howard was not intended to be merely a training school. Its founders envisioned a comprehensive university.



File:HowardUniversity1900.jpg — Wikimedia Commons

Howard opened in May 1867. Its early enrollment was small, but its academic plans were expansive. The university began developing professional schools almost immediately. Its Medical Department opened in

1868, helping address the severe shortage of physicians available to Black communities. Howard's medical school became a major institution for training African American doctors. At a time when Black patients were frequently denied adequate medical care and Black students faced barriers to medical education, Howard offered a path into a profession from which African Americans had been largely excluded.

The School of Law opened in 1869. Its purpose mattered especially during Reconstruction. Newly emancipated people needed lawyers who understood the legal challenges confronting Black communities, including citizenship, property, contracts, voting rights, and the protection of civil rights. Howard's law school trained generations of Black attorneys who would participate in the struggle for equality. Its graduates would include important civil rights lawyers and public officials.



File:Howard University School of Law main building exterior in May 2023.jpg — Wikimedia Commons

Howard's development as a comprehensive university distinguished it from institutions that concentrated primarily on elementary education or vocational training. It educated students in the liberal arts while preparing others for medicine, law, religion, and public service. Its influence extended beyond Washington because its graduates entered professions throughout the country. Howard became one of the principal institutions responsible for producing Black professionals and leaders during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Fisk and Howard therefore shared an important purpose. They were not simply providing educational opportunities that white institutions had refused to provide. They were building institutions capable of producing scholarship, professional leadership, and intellectual contributions to the entire country. Both understood that Black freedom required more than the right to attend school. It required access to the highest levels of education and the ability to participate in the professions and institutions that shaped American society.

That common ambition made the Phi Beta Kappa distinction especially important. The society had been founded in 1776, long before the Civil War and emancipation. Its chapters were associated with academic excellence, and its membership included prominent scholars, public officials, and intellectual leaders. The society had admitted its first Black member, George Washington Henderson, a student at the University of Vermont, in 1877. But admitting an individual Black student at a predominantly white university was not the same as recognizing an entire historically Black institution by establishing a chapter on its campus.

For decades, Fisk had built the academic reputation needed to earn such recognition. Its accreditation achievements had already established important precedents. Its faculty included accomplished scholars, and its curriculum had developed into a serious liberal-arts program. The university

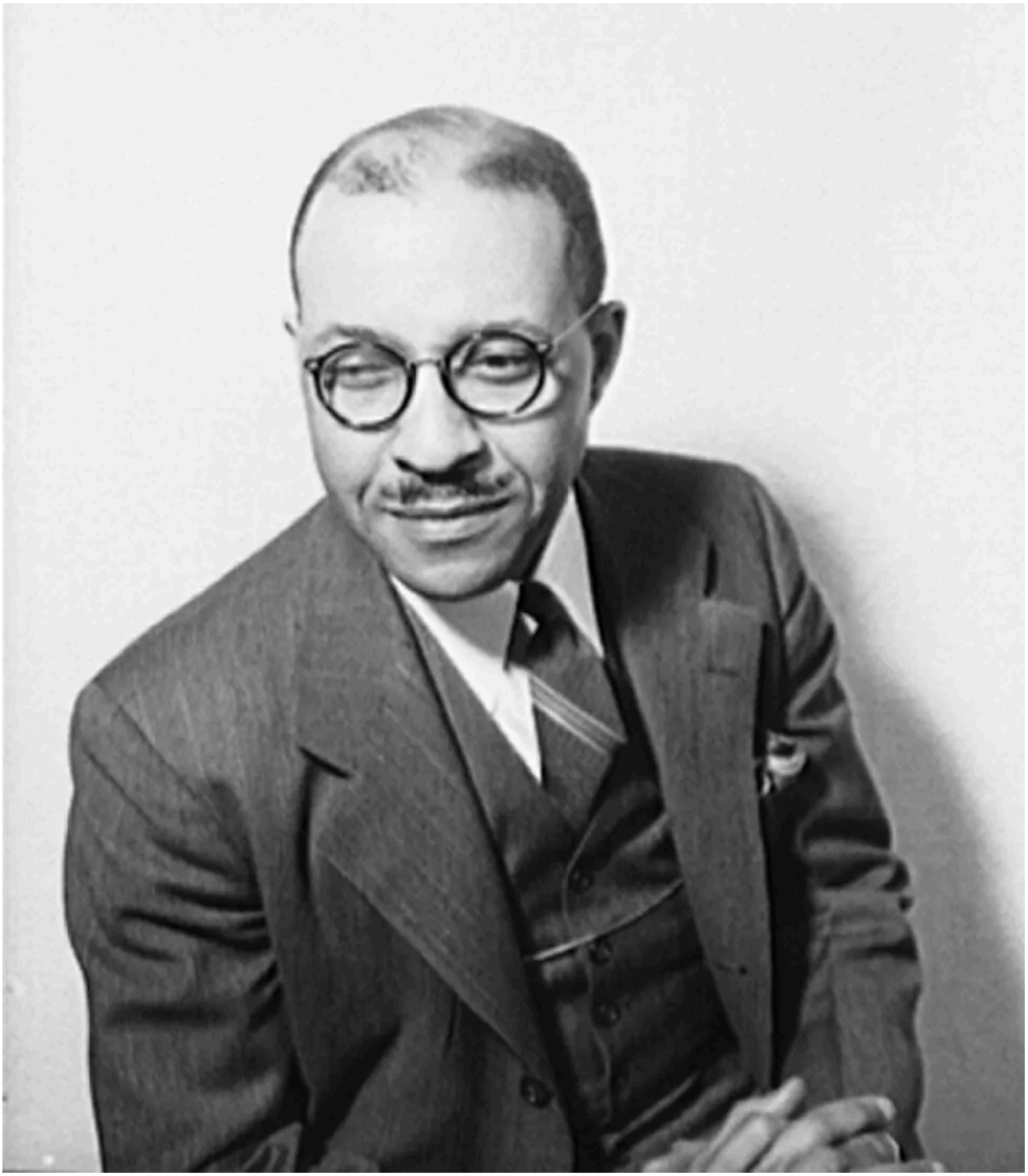
had demonstrated that its graduates could compete for admission to graduate and professional schools. Phi Beta Kappa would provide another form of recognition, one that went beyond accreditation and placed Fisk among the institutions whose academic programs met the society's standards.

Charles Spurgeon Johnson's leadership was especially important during this period. Johnson had arrived at Fisk in 1927 and became a central figure in the university's intellectual development. A sociologist of national reputation, he had previously served as director of research for the National Urban League in New York. He edited *Opportunity*, a journal that became an important publication of the Harlem Renaissance. At Fisk, he developed the Department of Social Science and helped establish the university as a center for studying race relations.

In 1944, Fisk established its Institute of Race Relations, with Johnson as its director. The institute brought scholars and public figures together to examine racial inequality and the social conditions confronting African Americans. Johnson's work extended beyond the university. He had served on national commissions, advised public officials, and earned recognition in the broader academic community. He was among the country's most accomplished Black sociologists.

Yet Fisk had not previously had a Black president. Although the university was established to educate African Americans, its leadership had remained in white hands for about eight decades. That history reflected a contradiction in Black higher education. White philanthropists and religious organizations helped establish and finance several early Black colleges, but their influence often extended into those institutions' governance and administration. The question of who should lead a university created to advance Black education was therefore more than an administrative matter.

It involved authority, representation, and Black scholars' ability to direct the institutions they had helped build.



File:Charles S. Johnson.jpg — Wikimedia Commons

Johnson’s appointment in October 1946 marked a major turning point. The Fisk board of trustees selected him as the university’s sixth president and its

first African American president. He had spent years demonstrating his academic and administrative ability before receiving the position. His appointment was not simply a symbolic concession. He was an internationally respected scholar who had already helped make Fisk an important center of social science research.

The appointment also marked a significant shift in the university's relationship to its mission. Fisk was no longer led by a white president while preparing Black students for leadership elsewhere. It had placed a Black scholar at the head of the institution. Johnson became president in 1947, and his leadership continued the university's effort to establish itself as a first-rate academic institution.

Johnson's presidency is especially closely tied to the Phi Beta Kappa achievement. Fisk received its charter during his administration, but he did not live long enough to see the chapter's later development. He died in 1956, just three years after the installation ceremony. His death came after a relatively brief presidency, but his influence on Fisk's academic standing and its intellectual life was substantial. The university's first Black president helped guide it through a period when national educational organizations increasingly recognized its accomplishments.

Howard, meanwhile, had its own distinguished record and its own claim to the Phi Beta Kappa distinction. Its academic departments, professional schools, faculty, and alumni had established the university as a major center of Black intellectual and professional life. Its graduates entered medicine, law, education, government, and the arts. Howard was not simply following Fisk's example. It had developed its own institutional reputation and was equally capable of meeting the society's standards.

The national Phi Beta Kappa organization approved new charters for both Fisk and Howard in September 1952. The decision was part of a larger round

of charter approvals, following a period of evaluation. The society identified the two universities as the first historically Black institutions to receive chapters. There is no clear evidence that the society conducted a winner-take-all contest between them or that either institution sought to block the other's admission. Their simultaneous approval suggests that both were judged worthy of the distinction.

But the calendar gave Fisk a small historical advantage. On April 4, 1953, Fisk installed its Delta of Tennessee chapter. Howard followed with its own installation on April 8. Fisk therefore became the first historically Black college to establish a Phi Beta Kappa chapter, with Howard following only four days later. The difference was narrow, but it gave Fisk a place in history that the university still recognizes.

Fisk's chapter began with eight charter members and two foundation members. One of those foundation members was John Hope Franklin, the distinguished historian who graduated from Fisk and later became the first Black president of the national Phi Beta Kappa Society, serving from 1973 to 1976. Four students were inducted as the chapter's first student initiates in May 1953. The installation was not merely a ceremony. It established the society's continuing presence on the Fisk campus. It created an opportunity for future generations of students to be recognized for outstanding achievement in the liberal arts and sciences.



File:John Hope Franklin 2006.jpg — Wikimedia Commons

The achievement also mattered to Howard. Its chapter placed the university in the same distinguished company and demonstrated that the academic accomplishments of Black institutions could no longer be dismissed as exceptional or marginal. Fisk and Howard had reached the same milestone at virtually the same moment. Their chapters challenged the assumption that academic excellence belonged to a small group of established white colleges.

The two institutions would not remain alone among historically Black colleges with Phi Beta Kappa chapters. Morehouse College and Spelman College would later join them. But Fisk and Howard had opened the way. They demonstrated that historically Black universities could meet the standards of an organization founded in the eighteenth century and long associated with the traditional centers of American higher education.

The story is not simply that Fisk beat Howard by four days. The more important achievement was that both universities had reached a point at which a national academic society recognized their standing. Their founders had established institutions in the immediate aftermath of slavery, when millions of Black Americans were struggling to obtain even elementary education. Those institutions had grown into universities with professional schools, research programs, distinguished faculty, and alumni whose influence extended throughout the country.

In the end, Fisk and Howard were not competing merely for a plaque, a ceremony, or a line in a university history. They were challenging a hierarchy that had long separated Black institutions from the most prestigious symbols of American education. Fisk may have crossed the Phi Beta Kappa finish line four days before Howard, but both universities had won something more consequential. They had helped establish that the pursuit of academic excellence had no racial boundary, and that the

universities created in the aftermath of slavery belonged among the nation's great centers of higher learning.

History ✓ Money + Education + Culture + Life +



Written by William Spivey

54K followers · 26K following

Follow

I write about politics, history, education, and race. Follow me at williamfspivey.com and support me at https://ko-fi.com/williamfspivey0680



Published in The Polis

36K followers · Last published 1 hour ago

Following

Writing on politics, policy, and anything else related.