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Antebellum Black Coeds at Oberlin College*
By Ellen Henle and Marlene Merrill

Ann Hazle, of North Carolina. Detail from photograph of Oberlin College class of 1855.

Nearly a year ago, we began collecting information on the first Black women students at Oberlin College from 1835 through 1865. The impetus for this project came from Professor Gerda Lerner, who, on a visit to Oberlin, remarked that she suspected there was considerable material in the Oberlin College archives which could tell us a great deal about women who have been overlooked or ignored. We decided to work as a team researching Black women in the archives: one of us had had some on-the-job archival training; and the other, a recent Ph.D. in nineteenth-century American history, had taught women's history courses.

We began our work in January 1978, unprepared—we now realize in retrospect—for what was to happen as we began uncovering pieces of the individual lives of these early Black women students—and for what is still happening. We have begun to see Oberlin history in an entirely new way. Black women were an important part of Oberlin College a century ago, not merely peripheral additions to the established institution. These women were part of a dramatic period in Oberlin College history. Through this research we found we more fully understood this town, this college, and American history.

The first Black women at Oberlin College embraced opportunities there which were offered nowhere else. In doing so, they demonstrated special courage, conviction, and faith—as did their families in supporting them, and the college in educating them. A common belief of the nineteenth century was that both Negroes and women had inferior intellects. For Black women pioneering as college students, both sex and race worked against them. It seems likely that these early women pioneers would have agreed with later Black women studying at Oberlin who said the difficulties they encountered as female members of a recently freed race only made their triumphs more sweet.¹

Shortly after its founding in 1833, Oberlin College agreed to admit students (male and female) "irrespective of color." There had been isolated instances of a few Black men enrolling earlier at established colleges like Bowdoin and Dartmouth; Oberlin was distinctive for stating its policy frankly and for being the only college in the United States open to women of both races as early as the 1830s. Despite the fact that Black students constituted less than five percent of the student body, Carter Woodson, scholar of Afro-American history, wrote that Oberlin College "did so much for the education of Negroes before the Civil War that it was often spoken of as an institution for the education of people of color."²

Among Oberlin's early Black students during the period 1833-1865 were at least 140 women. Most of them were students in the Oberlin preparatory school, but 56 were enrolled either in the ladies' (sometimes called literary) course or in the four-year bachelor of arts program occasionally referred to as "the gentleman's course."³ Twelve Black women completed the literary degree by 1865; three received the B.A. One Black woman historian writes: "The first Negro women who entered college were venturesome indeed, considering the fact that their race was still enslaved and that they had no assurances about the future."⁴

The backgrounds of these early Black female students appear to be quite different from those of their white sisters at Oberlin. Most of the latter came from the North—first from New England and New York, then from Ohio; Black female students were as likely to come from the South as the North, and only a few came from the Northeast. (Oberlin's abolitionist network of friends often provided the contact between Black students and the college; this was how they first heard

*This is a revised version of a paper first given at a women's studies "sandwich seminar" at Oberlin College and at the Ohio Academy of History in Spring 1978. This paper was also presented at a Faculty Wives luncheon at Oberlin in Fall 1978 and at a Faculty Seminar at Oberlin in February 1979, and will be presented during Commencement week as part of the reunion activities of the class of 1964.
of Oberlin.) Most white female students had rural backgrounds, while a large proportion of the Black female students came from Cincinnati, Washington, D.C., Pittsburgh, or other cities. Finally, most white female students at Oberlin were far from wealthy; they found the work-study feature of their Oberlin education very welcome as a way of meeting college costs. Several of the Black female students, particularly those with white fathers or with fathers who were skilled craftsmen, came from wealthier families and perhaps had less need to work while at Oberlin than their white sisters did. The community of white women students at Oberlin before the Civil War may well have been more homogeneous than the community of Black women students, who were diverse in origin, in status at birth (free or slave), and in degree of color (from light mulatto to African).

One of the best-known Black women Oberlin graduates was Frances Jackson (Coppin), who graduated in 1865. Her maternal grandfather, half-white, purchased his freedom and that of all his children, except for Miss Jackson’s mother (for some inexplicable reason). When Miss Jackson was born, therefore, she was a slave because her mother was a slave. Her Aunt Sarah Clark then purchased her freedom for $125 out of a monthly wage of six dollars. Miss Jackson later lived as a servant in the home of a wealthy New England family, where she was permitted to study one hour every other afternoon. Here she sufficiently prepared herself to enter Oberlin in 1860. Her aunt again came to her aid, this time with scholarship money to attend Oberlin.

Her college years were busy ones: she studied Latin, Greek, and higher mathematics; took private lessons in French; kept up on the piano and guitar; taught evening classes for freedmen, who flocked to Oberlin during the war; and became the first Black student to teach a class of preparatory students, both Black and white, at Oberlin. Miss Jackson was enough of a rarity to feel, when she rose to recite in her Oberlin classes, that she had, as she put it, “the honor of the whole African race upon my shoulders. I felt that should I fail, it would be ascribed to the fact that I was colored.” Occasionally in Oberlin she forgot about color, but her return to the East after graduation sharply brought home the fact that she belonged to a stigmatized race: a streetcar conductor refused her permission to ride in Philadelphia. Returning to Oberlin for a visit soon after this experience, she met Charles G. Finney, the evangelical leader of Oberlin, who asked her how she was growing in grace. She replied that she was growing “as fast as the American people would let me.”

Miss Jackson claimed she had always, from childhood, wanted “to get an education and to teach my people.” After graduation she worked in Philadelphia at a school which later became the Cheyney Training School for Teachers and is today called the Cheyney State College in Pennsylvania.

Also in Miss Jackson’s class was Frances Jennie Norris, who, like Miss Jackson, was born into slavery. Miss Norris’s father was a white slaveholder in Rome, Georgia, who never married. He saw to it that his daughter received adequate education to enter Oberlin in 1860. When he died, he left his fortune to her, which allowed her to develop a career as a businesswoman in Atlanta, specializing in both real estate and catering. Miss Norris, like several Oberlin coeds, had a slave mother and a white father. She was very light-skinned—so light that a friend once noted she could easily have “passed for white.” She chose to return South after the Civil War and live her life among others of her race in Atlanta. There is no record that she ever married.

These two women, Jackson and Norris, were typical Oberlin Black coeds in being mulatto. It is unlikely that there were many pure African women in our sample. The only examples we definitely know of are Ann Hazle of North Carolina, who appears in the photograph of the class of 1855, and Sarah Kinson, whose African name was Margru and who was stolen from Mendi, Africa, and sold into slavery in Cuba in 1839. She was part of a shipload of slaves being transported from Havana to the other side of Cuba on a Spanish schooner, the Amistad, when the slaves on board rebelled and seized control of the ship. Two white navigators not killed in the uprising guided the ship into American waters instead of sailing it back to Africa as the rebels had demanded. The United States Navy seized the Amistad and imprisoned the rebels pending the outcome of a trial demanded by Spain, which claimed pos-
session of the slaves. Abolitionists like Arthur and Lewis Tappan, Oberlin benefactors, funded the slaves' defense during the trial. Former President John Quincy Adams headed this defense. After 18 months the Supreme Court declared the Mendians free, and they sailed back to Africa, Miss Kinson among them.  

She returned to America in 1847 to be educated as a missionary. At Oberlin, she lived with a white family and did well in her studies. A fellow student remarked that Miss Kinson was "as Black as Black can be, and she is dignified, respected and loved. Her hair is wool, and she is proud of Africa and is going back to it as soon as possible." She returned to Mendi in 1849.  

Unlike our first three examples, most Oberlin Black coeds were freeborn. Among them was Mary Jane Patterson, the first Black woman in the United States to receive the B.A.—in 1862, twenty years after the first white women had earned the B.A. (also at Oberlin), and forty years after the first Black man had earned the degree (at Bowdoin). Miss Patterson, born in 1840 in North Carolina to Henry and Emeline Patterson, free Negroes, came to Oberlin as a child when her parents migrated northward in the 1850s. Mr. Patterson, a skilled mason by trade, possessed $1,500 in real estate and $200 in property when he lived in Oberlin, according to the 1860 census. The oldest son Henry became a mason, too, but four of the Patterson children, including Mary Jane, graduated from Oberlin College in the 1860s and early 1870s. None of these remarkable Pattersons educated at Oberlin ever married. After leaving Oberlin, Mary Jane Patterson and her two sisters taught school in Washington, D.C., for children of their race. In 1870, Mary Jane Patterson was named principal of the first Preparatory High School for Colored Youth in Washington, the predecessor of the famous Dunbar High School, which has produced so many Negroes of educational achievement in its long history. Miss Patterson remained in charge of this high school "until the school increased numerically to such an extent that it was deemed advisable to place a male in charge." Even then, she continued to teach there. 

The four women mentioned thus far were either Southern-born or African-born. Blanche V. Harris was typical of Northern-born Black coeds. One of five children, she spent her early years in Monroe, Michigan, where her father was a carpenter. Since racial prejudice prevented her from entering a young ladies' seminary there, the entire family moved to Oberlin, where she entered the preparatory department of the college and her younger siblings attended the Oberlin public schools. Three of the Harris children graduated from Oberlin: Blanche in 1860, Thomas in 1865, and Frankie (a sister) in 1870.  

During and after the Civil War, Miss Harris taught newly freed slaves in Mississippi, North Carolina, and Kentucky in schools for freedmen run by the American Missionary Association. In the 1890s, she returned to Oberlin to live as the wife of a Black Oberlin graduate from the class of 1859. As it turned out, she was the first of several generations of Black women in her family to attend Oberlin. Her daughter was one of the first women to graduate from Oberlin Conservatory in the 1890s, and her granddaughter graduated from the college in 1926 and was one of the first Negro women to receive the Ph.D. Other early Oberlin Black women also had children and grandchildren who attended Oberlin; this is a subject of research we have only just begun to explore. The account of Blanche Harris's life reveals some important patterns which hold for many early Black women at Oberlin. Both the town and the college provided unique opportunities for Black families, especially those with daughters. By the mid-1850s, a growing and substantial Black community existed in the town of Oberlin, with many families headed by skilled craftsmen—carpenters, masons, harnessmakers, etc. The Oberlin census statistics for 1850 and 1860 indicate that these families provided homes not only for kin but for other Black students attending the preparatory school and the college. 

Oberlin's preparatory department, which Miss Harris attended, enrolled the largest number of students at any given time in these years. Of the 140 Black women studying at Oberlin through 1865, 80 percent at some time were enrolled in the prep school. The preparatory department seems particularly important for Black students and women students, who had fewer opportunities to obtain secondary education elsewhere—this would hold true in particular for Black women students. 

Like Miss Harris, Marion Isabel Lewis, class of 1865, was also an eldest daughter—in this case, of a well-to-do blacksmith named William Lewis of Chattanooga, Tennessee. Both she and her first husband, John Cook, Oberlin College '64, later taught at Howard University, where he was dean of the law school. In trying to locate her papers, we contacted an 81-year-old nephew in Philadelphia who sent us reams of material and photographs of the Lewis family and added, "I hope this will help you in the Colored history of this country which very few know."
A central theme of our research was the importance of the Black family. A portrait of Belle Lewis’s family, for example, taken in 1878, shows her mother, Jane, who was part Cherokee Indian, and her father, William, a white planter. In tracing the family backgrounds of at least 20 of the 56 Black coeds enrolled at Oberlin in this period, we found that half of them were from families like the Lewises: with both a mother and father, and with the father working as a skilled tradesman. It is interesting to note, in the case of the Lewises, that the family chose to educate its daughters, sending three of them North to school, while the sons followed the father’s trade and became blacksmiths and did not attend college. In the case also of the Patterson family, mentioned earlier, the older son followed the father’s trade and did not attend college. Further research is needed into the family backgrounds of other Black coeds to see if there was more family freedom before his own! This meant that his children were born free: he did not have to buy the freedom of each in turn. The status of the wife, then, in this family, was important. Perhaps some of this appreciation carried over into the next generation of daughters and affected decisions and aspirations regarding higher education.16

We wonder if these families, by virtue of their past histories, did not also simply value women more. In the Lewis family, it is worth noting that Mr. Lewis reputedly purchased his wife’s freedom before his own! This meant that his children were born free: he did not have to buy the freedom of each in turn. The status of the wife, then, in this family, was important. Perhaps some of this appreciation carried over into the next generation of daughters and affected decisions and aspirations regarding higher education.16

Briefly, then, what can we say about early Black women at Oberlin College? Although we are still in the midst of our research, we feel the few portraits presented suggest patterns that may persist as we collect more data. First, contrary to a commonly held stereotype, these Black coeds were neither all runaway slaves funded by white abolitionists nor all illegitimate daughters of indulgent white slaveowners—although there were some of the latter in our sample. Second, nearly half of these coeds were from a nuclear family that had sufficient income and status to afford and desire a college education for its daughters. Third, most of the students were light-skinned, which may have affected their reception at a predominantly white college.

No doubt these women were a special group—their experiences not typical of most Black women in the South or in the North before the Civil War. On the other hand, because they were members of an oppressed race as well as an oppressed sex, their history is significant: it is the history of triumph over sexual and racial barriers—individual triumphs that, collectively, become part of the history of Oberlin College and this country. These early Black women who left Oberlin as future mothers and teachers must have had a profound effect on the communities in which they later lived. The values they learned from their families and the college probably influenced the educational aspirations of their children and the larger number of Black students so many of them taught. As new scholarship becomes available in Black history and women’s history, we hope to understand better the part these women played on a larger historical canvas—a canvas which will more fully reveal our collective past.

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Notes

1. Discussion of Mary Church Terrell, Dr. Anna J. Cooper, and Mrs. Miflin Gibbs, reported in Washington Post, 4 April 1952.
3. The “ladies’” degree was a four-year college course which did not require the study of ancient languages and higher mathematics as the bachelor of arts course did.
4. Jeanne L. Noble, Negro Women’s College Education (New York, 1956), p. 20. Official college records did not identify students by race, but Rev. Henry Cowles, editor of the Oberlin Evangelist, in 1862 made a list of Black students who had studied at the institution (in the preparatory school or college or both) from memory. Although this list is incomplete, it numbers more than two hundred names and seems fairly accurate.
5. See Robert S. Fletcher, A History of Oberlin College (Indianapolis, 1943), II, 508-10, for information on the geographical origin of all students at Oberlin in 1836, 1840, and 1860.
8. Ibid., p. 17.
10. See Benjamin Quarles, Black Abolitionists (New York, 1969), pp. 76-78, and Fletcher, Oberlin, I, 260, for descriptions of the Amistad and “Margru.”
13. For a description of the Harris sisters, see Majors, Noted Negro Women (1893), pp. 30-32 and 71-74.
14. Other Oberlin Black coeds who taught the freedmen through the A.M.A. were Louisa Alexander, Sarah Stanley, Clara Duncan, Emma Brown, and Mary J. Patterson.
15. Oberlin College maintains records, albeit incomplete, on preparatory students as well as college students. The prep school was discontinued in the early twentieth century.
17. Chattanooga Times, 3 September 1896.