

HOW PLYMOUTH CHURCH LAUNCHED THE JUBILEE SINGERS AND SAVED FISK UNIVERSITY FROM PERDITION, 1871



When it appeared that the scorched red earth could not possibly absorb another drop of Union or Confederate blood, the carnage of the Civil War came to an abrupt halt at Appomattox, on April 9, 1865. With the Southern surrender, the heinous and barbaric institution of American slavery was finally banished from shores that had, for centuries, been tarnished with its stain. Although persecution of African Americans and the abominable treatment by their fellow citizens did not cease, hope of a new beginning finally came into the lives of those who had suffered so severely for so long.

Well-meaning former abolitionists and white Northern missionaries sought to bring education to the emancipated masses. Colleges and Universities were founded, and eager young men and women flocked to these institutions with the understanding that having been liberated from physical bondage they must now wrest themselves free from the manacles of ignorance. The paternal, primarily white, founders of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), felt that their efforts were taken on behalf of those who could not fend for themselves, but, in fact, decades earlier freedmen and women sought to educate themselves by forming what were known as Black Literary Societies.

As early as the 1830s African American newspapers such as *The Colored American* and the *Weekly Advocate*, called for the formation of local literary societies to study mathematics, science, history, literature, language, English, and rhetoric. Oratory and debate were stressed since African Americans knew they would need eloquent, educated representatives to speak on behalf of their rights when the time was ripe. There were single sex societies as well as mixed gender organizations, but in all cases, the goal was a comprehensive education not restricted to the rudiments of reading and ciphering.

There can be no more effective manner of elevating our people than by a spread of literature, and no more speedy way of demonstrating to those in authority in our government that we are susceptible of the highest degree of mental culture and worthy of the rights which have been so long withheld from us (newspaper excerpt in Muhammad, 2020, p. 36).

Although not the first foray into African American education, the rise of the Black University system had the advantage of being institutionalized with dedicated, if at times tenuous, financial support. One of these universities was Fisk, located in Nashville, Tennessee. It was founded by the *American Missionary Association* (AMA) and opened on January 9, 1866, when the faculty and students took up residence in a cluster of abandoned Union hospital barracks.



Resourceful from the start, students discovered heaps of chains and shackles from a former slave yard on the grounds of the college, gathered them and sold them for scrap metal. With the proceeds they purchased Bibles

and books. This entrepreneurial, pragmatic attitude would serve them well through the many trials they would endure on the road to survival.

In 1871, having determined that the university could not survive without considerable external funding, the enterprising Northern missionary Leonard White set out with a group of eleven talented music students to raise money to rescue Fisk from the financial ruin that was the fate of so many of their sister institutions. Against all odds, the troupe made its way north following the route of the Underground Railroad. Their reception, particularly south of the Mason-Dixon line, was not always welcoming. Most southern former slave owners feared African American literacy. To be black and literate was to be a threat to the dominant white culture and the post-bellum Southerner wanted no part of it.

On their journey, the Jubilee Singers suffered from want of food, warm clothing, transportation-equity, and decent accommodations, not to mention the heckling and ridicule they routinely endured. Habitually, they were denied the train carriage for which they had honestly paid the fare, being sent to lesser cars. They were turned away from hotels even when they had reservations or forced to eat in the kitchen lest they disturb white clients. In many cases, even the clergy turned their backs, afraid that their congregations would be offended to hear African Americans singing in their churches. It was a road filled with rejection, sickness, and suffering.

In the latter part of 1871, the Jubilees sang for a gathering of clergymen at Oberlin College where they were warmly received. Throughout the 1860s, Oberlin had been a center of abolitionist sentiment. Coincidentally, Oberlin was the college to which the entire student body had fled from *Lane Theological Seminary*, after the debates over abolitionism vs. “re-patriation,” compelled the trustees to ban all discussions on the topic. The Reverend Doctor Lyman Beecher, then president, did nothing to quell the rebellion. All but devoid of a student body Lane dismissed the elder Beecher who never quite realized the part he could have played in containing the conflict. Incidentally, Beecher was on the “re-patriation” side of the issue while his students were all abolitionists! *

Although the Oberlin offering collected after their recital was modest, the singers were to meet a man who would point the way to their success. It was at Oberlin that the Jubilees made the acquaintance of the Rev. Thomas

K. Beecher of Almira, New York. Henry Ward Beecher's younger brother was impressed and writing a letter of introduction, he strongly urged White to continue North until they arrived at the church of Henry Ward Beecher, the most famous minister of his time.

On the cold night of December 22, 1871, the Jubilee Singers were engaged to sing at Plymouth's Friday night prayer service. The service was wildly popular and always oversubscribed. Beecher "would sit in an enormous armchair in the lecture room (Hillis Hall), sniffing adorably at a bouquet of roses or violets provided by the ladies of the church dilating on all sorts of subjects" (Ward, 2000, p. 153). The bedraggled choir began their program with a perfectly harmonized whisper singing "Steal Away." The audience caught off-guard with the ethereal quality of the sound was mesmerized. When the Jubilee singers had sung their last note, Beecher stepped forward, dramatically opened his purse, and addressing the audience exhorted them to do likewise, saying that although they sang like nightingales, they needed more to eat than birds.

The lead singer Maggie Porter would remember that the Plymouth offering exceeded \$250 and that "Every church wanted the Jubilee Singers from that-time-on" (Ward, 2000, p. 154). Beecher invited them back to sing at a ticketed concert performance and again on New Year's Eve for the Sunday School and their future was secure, at least for the immediate future.

Following Beecher's lead, the clergy of New York City lined up to book concerts. Among the enthusiastic clerics was the Rev. Dr. Richard Salter Storrs, the distinguished minister of the Church of the Pilgrims. For two years, the eleven original Jubilee Singers toured across the States and in 1873, when they returned to Nashville, they carried with them \$20,000 with which they purchased the site of their new school building.



Armed with letters from Beecher to the rich and powerful, they would cross the Atlantic to seek new audiences in London and beyond. Although the public was, at times, more curious about the variety of their skin color than music, Jubilee's artistry made them desirable guests in the upper echelons of society. Even Queen Victoria invited them to tea! The Jubilees eventually toured the British Isles and the continent raising enough money to build a permanent home for Fisk University, a splendid red brick Victorian structure, still extant today. Their earnings were sufficient to cover the cost of the building and considerably reduce the debt of not only the college but of the A.M.A as well.

There would be three different groups of Jubilee singers between the years 1871-1878, all consisting of new recruits with some members of the original troupe. The rigors of the road were taxing and demanding. Some of the Jubilees tired of the many hours on the road, returned home to continue their studies, a couple remained in England, and others succumbed to the damp weather of the British Isles and the grueling travel, either dying of pulmonary disorders or returning home with their health greatly compromised.

Today, accustomed as we are to ubiquitous spirituals, we cannot understand the awe with which they were first met. These mysterious songs, considered sacred to those formerly enslaved, had sustained them in years of servitude, eased their sorrow, provided hope, and communicated essential clues to escape routes north. The Jubilees' perfectly tuned *a cappella* was a revelation to their audiences raised on standard Protestant hymns and Stephen Foster tunes. The effect produced was consistent on both sides of the Atlantic, some audience members wept saying they had heard angels, while others were simply speechless.

Europeans and white Americans were faced with a totally new art form, and they were awe-struck. Ultimately Spirituals would emerge, with the exception of Native American music, as the only genuine American musical genre. As the source of all American music, spirituals would influence gospel, jazz, blues, and rock and roll. Mark Twain, an enthusiastic fan, would remark in his inimitable style "that in the Jubilees and their songs, America has produced the *perfectest* flower of the ages" (Ward, 2000, p. 407).

Valerie Velazquez de Louzonis

The Fisk Jubilee Singers at Carnegie Hall March 19, 2022, at 7 PM



The Jubilee Singers made a glorious return to Plymouth in the 1990s when they once again, captured the hearts of the Plymouth Congregation. Today the spiritual descendants of the first troupe of Fisk Jubilee Singers continue to tour to the delight of their audiences. On March 19, 2022, theirs will be one of the featured performances in a concert by the New England Symphonic Ensemble at Carnegie Hall. For anyone interested in attending, tickets are available starting at \$20. The link for tickets is here attached. If there is critical mass, Plymouth members may wish to travel together. Please either inform me or Jim Waechter if you are interested in attending.

[Get Tickets Here.](#)

[Watch a video.](#)

For a detailed account of the history of the Fisk Jubilee Singers see:

Ward, A. (2000). *Dark Midnight When I Rise*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.

For a history of the Black Literary Societies see:

Muhammad, G. (2020). *Cultivating Genius*. New York, NY: Scholastic Books.

* “Re-patriation” was a movement to ship emancipated slaves to Liberia in Africa. The burning question of the day was whether the former slaves should be sent to Africa or assimilated into the greater American society.