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## John M. Ellison within the veil: Confronting the challenges of leadership in the age of Jim Crow

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JOHN M. ELLISON WITHIN THE VEIL: CONFRONTING THE CHALLENGES OF  
LEADERSHIP IN THE AGE OF JIM CROW

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A dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Sherman John Curl

April 2007

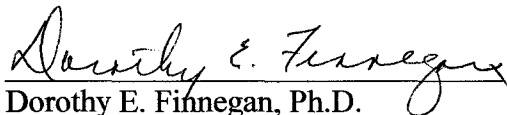
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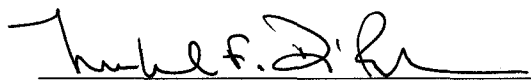
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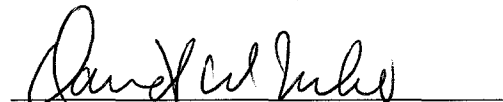
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*Dedicated to the future – Christopher and Stephanie*

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JOHN M. ELLISON WITHIN THE VEIL: CONFRONTING THE CHALLENGES OF  
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ABSTRACT

This study examines the shift in the mantle of leadership at Virginia Union University. That transfer of power witnessed the end of seventy-five years of the American Baptist Home Mission Society's administrative dominance over Virginia Union and the initial phase of black leadership under John M. Ellison. During this shift, John Ellison as the institution's first black president confronted a range of challenges that included: institutional governance, financial reorganization, and institutional (internal) and national (external) relationship building. Ellison employed a variety of strategies to meet those challenges, which incorporated aspects of both transactional and transformational leadership. Furthermore, Ellison crafted his approach to and management of the unique demands placed on a black president of a southern private, religious, and historically black institution within the context of the segregationist era. Handing over the keys and the reigns of the historically black university to the true owners was no small matter given the Jim Crow tenor of the times. Belief in the abilities of the administrations and leadership of blacks was thin at best for many whites, regardless of their regional domicile. This study, one of a socially subjugated man who assumed responsibility for the communal well-being of students and faculty and the continued existence of a vital and benevolent institution, documents Ellison's skill and capacity as Virginia Union University's first black president.



**JOHN M. ELLISON WITHIN THE VEIL: CONFRONTING THE CHALLENGES OF  
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## CHAPTER ONE

### The Gateway to Opportunity

In black American society, the institution that historically served as the gateway to opportunity has been the black college or university. Lincoln University of Pennsylvania, established in 1854, has the distinction of being the first of these gateway institutions. Two other institutions, Cheyney State University (1837) and Wilberforce University (1856), like Lincoln University, were established before the Civil War. However, formal education for most blacks was not permissible until after the Civil War when the Freedmen's Bureau, the black communities and their churches, freedmen's societies, philanthropists, and foundations and churches from the North organized schools for blacks in the South.<sup>1</sup> Most historically black colleges and universities are located in the South. These institutions were specifically "created to develop leadership for the emancipation and involvement of Blacks in American society" after the Civil War.<sup>2</sup> The very existence of these institutions today represents a continuation of the cherished belief in the liberating power of education. The 1982 National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) report on traditionally black institutions of higher education reminds us of how different the development of HBCUs was from that of their white counterparts during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>3</sup>

### **Separate and Unequal**

The 1982 NCES report recognizes that HBCUs, while an integral component of the American educational and cultural fabric, "were founded and evolved in an environment unlike that of any other group of colleges—one of legal segregation and isolation from the rest of higher education." The report also emphasizes a characteristic

unique to HBCUs in that “the population from which these colleges drew their students lived under severe legal, educational, economic, political, and social restrictions.”<sup>4</sup> The pronouncement from the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in 1896 became the basis of saddling the “separate but equal” doctrine on all levels of education in the South.<sup>5</sup>

In *Plessy*, the Supreme Court actually went out of its way to acknowledge that segregation in education was a general American practice, not a uniquely southern one. From 1896 to 1954, a dual system of education—one black and one white—was developed and expanded throughout the South. Schools remained but grew increasingly unequal.<sup>6</sup> Southern states chose quite simply to invest more heavily and deliberately in the white institutions and over time the disparity in the amount of funding received by HBCUs created poor replicas of their white counterparts.<sup>7</sup>

#### **Finances and Peers**

From their inception, HBCUs have operated on small budgets, limited by their students’ ability to pay tuition and, for public institutions, by small appropriations from their respective states. Consequently, after more than a century of inadequate support, most HBCUs still operated with a marginal surplus or deficit each year and many have no, or small, endowments to serve as buffers during times of financial uncertainty.<sup>8</sup>

During the 1930s enrollment at HBCUs declined because of the economic depression. The revenues at these institutions deteriorated not only from a loss of tuition, but also from a decrease in church support, financial gifts to colleges, and scholarships for students.<sup>9</sup> From 1920 to 1940, HBCU financial support from foundations and wealthy individuals also waned precipitously. Two significant events, the Great Depression and the onset of World War II certainly played major roles in that decline. However, student

access to these schools was critical; HBCUs were the only colleges open to black Americans in the segregated South. These institutions were educating over half of all black Americans enrolled in college.<sup>10</sup> Schools such as Fisk, Howard, Morehouse, Spelman, and Virginia Union produced the majority of black leaders and intellectuals between 1870 and 1970.<sup>11</sup>

During the early to mid-twentieth century, some extraordinary individuals led several of the more recognizable HBCUs. Notable among these individuals were: Mordecai Johnson, president (1926-1960) of Howard University in Washington, D. C.; Charles Spurgeon Johnson, head of the sociology department and president (1946-1956) of Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee; Frederick D. Patterson, founder of the United Negro College Fund and president (1935-1953) of Tuskegee Institute (now University) in Tuskegee, Alabama; and Benjamin Mays, advisor to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and president (1945-1957) of Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. These extraordinary individuals, along with countless lesser-known college presidents, “helped their students face the realities of race in America.... They infected their students with an unquenchable spirit of rebellion and protest.... They dissected the hypocrisy of the verbal promises of democracy and the perpetuation and intensification of racism in American society” while guiding their respective institutions through uncertain economic, political, and social conditions.<sup>12</sup>

John M. Ellison, one of these lesser-known college presidents, headed Virginia Union University from the early 1940s through the mid-1950s. His presidency overlaps each of the individuals’ presidencies mentioned above and, although not as demonstrative as Mordecai Johnson or Benjamin Mays or as inventive as Charles Spurgeon Johnson or

Frederick D. Patterson, Ellison was considered by each of them as a source of trustworthy, enlightened counsel throughout their respective administrations.<sup>13</sup>

### **Diverse Leadership, Diverse Institutions**

Virginia Union University was not among the first HBCUs to appoint a black president. In fact, Ellison's appointment in 1941 came rather late in the history of such appointments. In the North, for example, Cheyney State University in Pennsylvania appointed the first black president in 1856 and Delaware State University in 1895. In the South, Alabama A&M University appointed a black president in 1875 and Morehouse in 1906. At least 47 other HBCUs had appointed black presidents decades before Union's Board of Trustees considered Ellison for their leadership post.<sup>14</sup>

Presidential appointments aside, HBCUs were quite different in a number of other respects as well. Although HBCUs share a common history of development during the period of legal segregation in the South, there existed a clear distinction among these institutions "in mission, organization, programs, student body, faculty, and finances."<sup>15</sup> In 1936, the same year Ellison received his teaching appointment at Virginia Union, of the 121 black institutions of higher education in the United States only 65 granted at least bachelor degrees.<sup>16</sup> Educational standards in states that required faculty to hold advanced degrees for the development of professional and graduate programs placed overwhelming demands on the majority of faculty in black colleges to acquire advanced degrees.<sup>17</sup>

Faculty members were required to obtain graduate education—education which was largely unavailable to them because of segregation in the region where they taught. Although a few of the black colleges offered professional and graduate programs, the majority of faculty members had to work on their post-baccalaureate degrees during the summer in institutions outside the States with segregated systems of education.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to logistical challenges faced by faculty seeking advanced degrees in order to progress in their academic careers, students encountered unique challenges during their undergraduate years as well. HBCU students generally came from low-income families with few financial resources. Most of these students were the first in their family to attend college. Thus, attending college much less the completion of college became even more remarkable considering their financial standing. Nevertheless, in the year preceding the *Brown v. the Board of Education* (1954) decision about 75,000 undergraduate students and about 3,200 graduate students attended black colleges.<sup>19</sup> In addition, black institutions serviced 44,000 summer students (mostly elementary and secondary teachers) and 5,000 students in extension or short courses. In that same year, black institutions awarded approximately 12,000 bachelor's and first-professional degrees and 1,300 master's degrees.<sup>20</sup>

Black public institutions of higher education faced financial challenges similar to those encountered by the students of black private institutions such as Virginia Union. The financial challenges public institutions faced were created by federal and state policies that promoted the unequal allocation of resources between black and white institutions.

The massive outlays of federal and state funds ... that made ... quality higher education available to the white citizens of the south ... were either denied to the subsystem of black public colleges or granted in such insufficient amounts as to make a mockery of the promise of equality in the separate but equal formula.<sup>21</sup>

Despite or because of the shared challenges and impositions placed on the development of HBCUs, the common practice in research was to identify historically black colleges and universities as a monolithic category. Research on HBCUs had generally resulted in some all-positive or all-negative description of these institutions. Such "studies took for

granted a unified system of 'Negro Higher Education,' based on a system of separate but equal, that omitted the uniqueness of each institution."<sup>22</sup> Identifying the characteristics and qualities of one black institution, when considered from such a perspective, was to identify the characteristics and qualities of all black institutions as either good or bad. At the very least, this widely held misconception failed to take into account the differences between church-related, public, and private institutions. Such a perspective also failed to consider the normal differences that occur in any large and diverse environment such as that represented at over 100 individual college and university campuses. Taking such diversity into account some historically black institutions have been judged to be better or worse than others. Factors such as student ability level, the quality of the faculty, community support—both black and white—and the institutions' financial stability will have a positive or negative impact each institution.<sup>23</sup> Virginia Union University's transformation from an institution administered from distant church headquarters to an institution independent of such control will be considered in light of such diversity in the following chapters.

### **Where Do We Go from Here?**

As the president of Virginia Union University, John M. Ellison created and received documents from a diverse group of individuals including: presidents of black and white colleges and universities, Virginia Union alumni, community leaders, influential black and white pastors, and prospective and current students and their parents. By thoroughly examining the content of Ellison's correspondence over his fourteen-year tenure, I am able to present a unique perspective of the roles assumed by

Ellison and the distinctive challenges he encountered as Virginia Union's first black president.

The initial years of Ellison's administration are particularly noteworthy for several reasons. First, Ellison became president of Union at a pivotal point in world history that had an impact on both the nation and the university. Only a few months after his appointment as the fourth president of Union in 1941, the United States entered World War II. Our nation's entry into that conflict had significant impact on the ranks of male students attending Union and exacerbated the institution's historically tenuous financial position. Second, insufficient financial resources were a well-established concern at the separate schools that combined in 1899 to form the university. Relying primarily on the financial support of northern white Baptist churches, Union began to experience uneven financial support from those sources prior to and during the Great Depression. With the outbreak of World War II, however, Ellison's ability to maintain the academic integrity of the institution (including a major expansion of the university's physical plant) was severely tested. Third, in addition to the demanding role of university president, Ellison often found himself serving as an academic counselor, admissions officer, student financial aid advisor, fund raiser, local and national spokesman for the university, advocate for graduates of the university's School of Religion, and liaison between the black and white community. Throughout the next four chapters, I discuss the development of Virginia Union University and its leadership, the rise of John M. Ellison's to the presidency of his alma mater, and the various roles Ellison successfully undertook as president from 1941 to 1955.



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- <sup>1</sup> Susan T. Hill, *The Traditionally Black Institutions of Higher Education 1860 to 1982*. (Washington, D.C. U.S. Department of Education. Office of Educational Research and Improvement. National Center for Educational Statistics, 1982).
- <sup>2</sup> J. John Harris, Cleopatra Figgures, and David G. Carter, "A Historical Perspective of the Emergence of Higher Education in Black Colleges." *Journal of Black Studies* 6 (1): 55-68.
- <sup>3</sup> Hill, xii.
- <sup>4</sup> Hill, ix.
- <sup>5</sup> 163 U.S. 537 (1896).
- <sup>6</sup> John P. Davis, ed., *The American Negro Reference Book, Volume 1*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966).
- <sup>7</sup> Gil Kujovich, "Public Black colleges: The long history of unequal funding," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 2 (Winter, 1993), 73-82.
- <sup>8</sup> Hill, xvii.
- <sup>9</sup> Kujovich, "Public Black Colleges." 77
- <sup>10</sup> Shuana K. Tucker, "The Early Years of the United Negro College Fund, 1943-1960." *Journal of African American History* 87: 416-432.
- <sup>11</sup> Mary Frances Berry and John W. Blassingame, *Long Memory: The Black Experience in America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).
- <sup>12</sup> Kenneth B. Clark, "Higher Education for Negroes: Challenges and Prospects." *The Journal of Negro Education*. 36 (3, Summer, 1967): 196-203.
- <sup>13</sup> Correspondence to and from these individuals are found throughout the Ellison papers, Virginia Union University, Wilder Library Archives (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>14</sup> The Tradition of White Presidents at Black Colleges. *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 16 (Summer, 1997): 93-99.
- <sup>15</sup> Hill, 77.
- <sup>16</sup> Hill, 10.
- <sup>17</sup> The legal suits that attempted to challenge the separate but equal principle in higher education developed out of a lack of graduate and professional schools for blacks in the states operating with dual systems of education in the late 1930s. These suits began with *Missouri ex rel, Gaines v. Canada, Registrar of the University of Missouri, et al*, 305 U. S. (1938) followed by *Sipuel v. Board of Regents*, 332 U. S. 631 (1948); *Sweatt v. Painter*, 339 U. S. 629 (1950); and *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents*, 330 U. S. 637 (1950).
- <sup>18</sup> Hill, 9.
- <sup>19</sup> 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
- <sup>20</sup> Hill, xiii.
- <sup>21</sup> Kujovich, "Public Black Colleges."
- <sup>22</sup> Frederick Chambers. "Histories of Black Colleges and Universities," *Journal of Negro History* 57 (3, July, 1972): 271.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 270-275.

## CHAPTER 2

### Virginia Union University: An Unlikely Beginning

Created by the combination of the Richmond Theological Seminary and Wayland Seminary, the first classes convened at Virginia Union University on October 4, 1899. Built on thirty acres of land that had been once the sight of a plantation owned by Nathaniel Bacon, nine partially-completed buildings of Virginia granite designed by architect John Coxhead in late-Romanesque Revival style provided the new campus with a distinctive atmosphere.<sup>24</sup> The architectural design of the buildings was chosen to express a clear sense of permanence and parity with other institutions to compare “favorably with those of any institution to be found anywhere in the South.” Thomas. J. Morgan, Corresponding Secretary of the American Baptist Home Mission Society, observed at their dedication on May 18, 1900, “these buildings made of granite will resemble in their durability the ancient hills from which the stone is quarried ... no doubt that a thousand years hence ... men and women will thankfully recognize our work of today.”<sup>25</sup> In 1932, a third institution, Hartshorn Memorial Women’s College located adjacent to the university and established in Richmond, Virginia in 1883 became a part of the institution.

The history of Virginia Union University, however, is more than just the combination of three previously separate and independent institutions. The tale actually begins on Monday, April 3, 1865 with the retreat of General Robert E. Lee from Richmond, Virginia and General Ulysses S. Grant in pursuit. Early that morning after the Confederate forces had departed, Richmond was set ablaze by the order of Confederate General R. S. Ewell. The conflagration destroyed some thirty square blocks of the city

containing millions of dollars of property. Union forces entering Richmond, however, “laid down their arms and undertook to save the property of citizens, and restore confidence.”<sup>26</sup> One of the building complexes spared from those flames was Lumpkin’s Jail in the section known as Lumpkin’s Bottom.<sup>27</sup> Lumpkin’s Jail “held men and women for safe keeping until they were disposed of at private or public sale” for slavery. In one of the four buildings comprising the Jail, black “students were invited to assemble for instruction in matters pertaining to the Christian ministry.”<sup>28</sup> In that building, the foundation of what would become Virginia Union University by century’s end was established.

### **The First Attempt**

Seven months after the evacuation of Richmond, Reverend J. G. Binney, D.D. began “a school under the patronage of the American Baptist Home Mission Society, for the instruction of colored men preparing for the ministry.”<sup>29</sup> Unable to secure an adequate building for that purpose and unaware of the availability of buildings such as Lumpkin’s Jail, Binney left Richmond to return the mission fields of Burma not long after arriving in the city.<sup>30</sup> Two years later, on May 13, 1867, Reverend Nathaniel Clover, D. D.—former president of Columbia College, now George Washington University—arrived in Richmond to attempt the completion of the task relinquished by Binney. On July 1, 1867, the 73 year old Clover took out a three-year lease at \$1,000 a year “from the fair-faced, freed-woman widow of Mr. Lumpkin, the slave dealer,” on Lumpkin’s Jail.<sup>31</sup>

Clover resigned his position at the Richmond school, then a branch of the National Theological Institute, thirteen months later due to his failing health. On September 16, 1868, Reverend Charles H. Corey was transferred by the American Baptist

Home Mission Society to Richmond from Augusta Institute (now Morehouse College) in Atlanta, Georgia, and began his thirty-year tenure as the head of the Richmond school.<sup>32</sup> Known consecutively as the Clover Institute in honor of Nathaniel Clover (1867 to 1870), Richmond Institute (1870 to 1886), Richmond Theological Seminary (1886 to 1899), and finally as Virginia Union University (1899), Union was headed by white Baptist ministers for the first seventy-five years of its existence.<sup>33</sup> The automatic succession of white presidents, however, ended in October 1941 with the inauguration alumnus John M. Ellison as Union's fourth president overall and its first black.

### **Presidential Succession at Virginia Union University**

Presidents MacVicar, Hovey, and Clark were beneficiaries of the almost universal reluctance of the white Baptists to entrust control of their institution to blacks. The automatic succession of white presidents at Virginia Union is understandable when one considers the enormous expenditure of time and money the Baptists had made for over seventy-five years to the institution.<sup>34</sup> Their dedication to the institution and its students, however, should not be judged by the reluctance of distant administrators to relinquish control. MacVicar, Hovey, and Clark were well-qualified and each could have easily pursued a career at white institutions if they had chosen to do so.

#### **Malcolm MacVicar**

Virginia Union University's first president (1899-1904) was the Malcolm MacVicar a Scottish-born Canadian whose family immigrated in 1835. MacVicar was ordained a Baptist minister (1856), graduated from Rochester University (1859), and received his Ph. D. from the University of New York (1859). He began his career as an

educator as the head of the Normal School in Brockport, New York and is credited with founding the normal school system in New York State.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to serving as the first president of Virginia Union, MacVicar was the architect of the curricula for the nurse training (1886), teacher professional courses (1892), and an advocate for initiating a college course (1897) at Spelman College, an all women's college in Atlanta, Georgia founded in 1881.<sup>36</sup> From 1890 to 1899, MacVicar served as the Superintendent of Education of the American Baptist Home Mission Society. He resigned from that position to assume the presidency of Union in 1899. MacVicar was president for only four years before his death in 1904 at the age of seventy-five. MacVicar apparently had, "a genius for organization, a keen intellect, strong convictions, robust piety, unswerving integrity, and whole-souled devotion to his work."<sup>37</sup> A biblical scholar, George Rice Hovey, followed MacVicar to the presidency of Virginia Union University in 1905.

### **George Rice Hovey**

George Rice Hovey was born in 1860 in Newton Center, Massachusetts. His father, Alvah Hovey, was a distinguished Baptist theologian, educator, writer, and a president of Newton Theological Institute. George Hovey was graduated from Brown University (1882), Newton Theological Institute (1885), and received an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Temple University (1901). Hovey also studied Hebrew under William Rainey Harper at Yale University for several years.

In 1887, Hovey began his career as a professor of Hebrew and Greek at the Richmond Theological Institute, which, in 1899 under MacVicar had merged with Wayland Seminary to form Virginia Union University. Ascending from the faculty, he

became Union's second president in 1905 and served in that capacity until 1919, when he was replaced by William John Clark. Hovey was then appointed Secretary of Education for the American Baptist Home Mission Society, a position he held until his retirement in 1930.<sup>38</sup> Hovey's administrative and academic influence "resulted in the establishment and standardization of Negro colleges...in many Southern states" with Virginia Union University, of course, benefiting from his fourteen years as its head.<sup>39</sup> Hovey died in 1943 at the age of 83.

### **William John Clark**

A teacher in Virginia Union's Divinity School and the College of Arts and Sciences, William John Clark was elected in March 1919 to succeed George Rice Hovey as Union's third president. A number of significant expansion programs highlight the first and last few years of Clark's administration. Under his direction, the School of Education (1922) began offering a four-year course leading to a Bachelor of Arts in Education degree. In the same year, responding to the request of citizens of Richmond, Clark established a law school at the university, which closed in 1931. Clark was also responsible for the establishment of Union's Norfolk branch, which would become Norfolk State University, and securing the accreditation of the university by the Southern Association of Secondary Schools and Colleges.<sup>40</sup>

Clark's most significant contribution to the university occurred the last three years of his presidency. During that period, Clark helped to facilitate the transfer of the Belgian Building from New York City to Virginia Union, a move almost doubling the student capacity of the institution. The building was originally constructed by the Belgian government to serve as an exhibition hall during the 1939 World's Fair.<sup>41</sup> The completion

of that monumental move and the resulting expansion of the university's physical plant would be successfully completed during the first few years of John M. Ellison's presidency. Ellison's success, however, was far from a certainty when he assumed the presidency from Clark in 1941.

### **Union Alumni Awake!**

The year 1941 ended tumultuously for the United States. The attack on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor by the Japanese Imperial Navy, and America's subsequent entrance into World War II, set into motion circumstances that would influence the American cultural landscape in the decades to follow. America's entrance into the war began a period of increased uncertainty for the leadership in private HBCUs such as Virginia Union University. Financial uncertainty, always an issue for private HBCUs supported primarily by philanthropic and religious organizations, coupled with the potential loss of male students to the war effort, became a major concern for these institutions—a concern Ellison was forced to address even before the congratulatory letters and telegrams acknowledging his appointment as president arrived on campus in the spring and fall of 1941. For Ellison, however, the year began with a concern of a somewhat more critical nature—his survival.

Early in April 1941, the Executive Committee of the Trustee Board of Virginia Union announced Ellison's appointment to the newly created position of Executive Vice-President in charge of the Belgian Building Campaign. Ellison had returned to his alma mater in 1936 as a professor of Social Sciences and Ethics, a position he held until his appointment as Executive Vice-President. Almost immediately after the Board's announcement, an alumnus initiated a letter-writing campaign intended to derail Ellison's

appointment; it was an appointment seen by at least that alumnus as the first step in the process of his becoming Union's first black president. Almost as soon as Ellison's appointment as Executive Vice-President was made public, however, the following letter was circulated on campus and mailed to 3,000 Union alumni and supports throughout the United States. It read in part

Union Alumni Awake! Come to the rescue of your Alma Mater before it is too late. Recently the Executive Committee of the Trustee Board of Virginia Union, composed of Drs. Theodore Adams, Churchill Gibson, Joseph T. Hill, William T. Johnson, and Mr. Tennant Bryan, all local men, created the office of Executive Vice-President and elected to that office Dr. J. M. Ellison. The duties of that office as outlined by Dr. Adams in a letter to Dr. Clark which was posted on the bulletin board for the information of the faculty and students, are full control of the Belgian Building Campaign and administrative duties which will permit him to recommend directly to the Board of Trustees any changes in the administration which he may desire.... Scarcely had Dr. Ellison been informed of the appointment before he was questioning the attitudes of members of the faculty even to the point of demanding full acquiescence with his wishes or subsequent dismissal, this action coming while Dr. Clark is still President of the institution. Heretofore Union teachers have enjoyed full freedom of speech and expression because the administration believed in their integrity. So far is Dr. Ellison's action from the action of the administration in the Union of Hovey, Union's second president, King, Jones, Barco, and Simpson—all career professors at Union—that Alumni who are familiar with the old Union question the survival of her traditions. The dictator-like tactics are ill suited to an institution of Union's prestige.<sup>42</sup>

That this alumnus, who seems to have been privy to inside information, was disturbed with the selection of Ellison as Executive Vice-President over other possible tradition-minded choices is clear. More to the point, the anonymous alumnus questioned Ellison qualifications to hold such a post based on what was considered limited and questionable experience and abilities. The alumnus asked

Except for being a non-influential member of inter-racial circles, what has Dr. Ellison done? ... [A]s far as activities: He was principal of Burgess Store and Northern Neck Academy, (have you ever heard of these schools?) ... Students at Virginia State report that Chapel services during his period were the driest [and]



dullest ... in the history of the school. He was generally referred to by the students as “Chloroform.”<sup>43</sup>

And, as far as Ellison’s teaching ability was concerned, the alumnus asked his readers to “look at his work at Virginia Union—as a teacher the students rated him as unfamiliar with subject matter, uninteresting in presentation, dilatory in method, aimless and irregular in meeting classes.”<sup>44</sup>

Ellison responded to the anonymous letter in the April 19, 1941 edition of the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* by stating the letter was, “entirely false and ... he paid no attention to it because it was unsigned.” The letter did not achieve its desired effect—the removal of Ellison from his post as Executive Vice-President. In fact it had just the opposite effect.<sup>45</sup>

**“Like Christ, any man who has to deal with public life suffers”**

Virginia Union students were quick to condemn the anonymous letter and express their support for Ellison’s appointment with a statement of their own; it was released through the student senate of the university and published in the April 26, 1941 edition of the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*. In their statement, the students were emphatic in their support of Ellison and his promotion, “we are glad to acknowledge and recognize the promotion of Dr. Ellison because we feel that his faithfulness, diligence, and efficiency in serving the institution warrants such recognition.”<sup>46</sup>

The students were not the only “Unionites” to support Ellison’s promotion. Reverend D. C. Rice, a Union alumnus and pastor of the influential Bank Street Baptist Church in Norfolk, Virginia, said in referring to the effort to oppose Ellison’s promotion to Executive Vice-President and the possibility of his becoming the first black president of the institution

It is quite safe to say that there is no one at the institution or away from it who enjoys such confidence of both the trustees and the General Education Board. Not only that, but there is no one who is as well qualified to know the details of the building program as Dr. Ellison because he has worked hand in hand with the president [Clark] in putting the program across. He is a prepared man if ever there was one and to try to undermine his possibilities as the successor to the president would be a major disaster, not to the aspirations of Dr. Ellison, who does not seek the job, but to the university which needs him as never before in this period of transition.<sup>47</sup>

Dr. Mary E. Williams, health supervisor at the Virginia Manual Labor School for Colored Boys in Hanover, Virginia, in referring to this and other instances of early opposition to Ellison, reminded him to “pay no attention to certain people whom we discussed, any Racial loving group would be proud of you as the FIRST colored President of the University ... don’t expect anything from small minded people. “Like Christ,” she reminded the Baptist preacher, “any man who has to deal with public life suffers unnecessarily hard.”<sup>48</sup>

Ellison welcomed the support of the students and heeded the advice of Reverend Rice, Dr. Williams and others. He successfully weathered the transient storm caused by the anonymous letter. In just under six months Ellison would become Union’s fourth president overall and the first black president in the history of the school.

### **The Inauguration of John M. Ellison**

At approximately 10:30 in the morning on October 17, 1941, to the sound of the hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” the inaugural ceremonies for John M. Ellison as Virginia Union University’s fourth president began. The choice of that hymn was clearly appropriate as Virginia Union was established and maintained as a Christian college from its founding. The inaugural ceremonies were closed with another hymn fitting to the occasion as well, “Our God Our Help in Ages Past.” The first few lines of that closing

hymn begin with the words, “under the shadow of Thy throne Thy saints have dwelt secure; sufficient is thine arm alone, and our defense is sure.”<sup>49</sup> The words of the hymn spoke volumes to those in attendance who were aware that Ellison had withstood an attempt to remove him from the office of Executive Vice-President, only a few months earlier. Ellison, as a Baptist minister, believed that day was divinely inspired and the successful defense of the charges leveled against him only a few months earlier was, as the hymn promised, sure.

Theodore F. Adams, President of Union’s Board of Trustees and pastor of Richmond’s, segregated, First Baptist Church, began the induction ceremonies by encouraging Ellison to remain true to the original mission of the institution by continuing to supply its students with Christian instruction.<sup>50</sup> Adams also reminded Ellison of the great responsibility he was being given that day. “The men who believed in the Lord God have built ... an educational institution ... to fit the needs of life today” for the purpose of building a better tomorrow for the black community.<sup>51</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, President of Morehouse College, added to the remarks by reminding those present that Ellison “will need friends.... He will need the support of each student generation. Let him have it.... He will need the confidence and good will of the Union graduates. Give him these.” And, on a more practical level consistent with the tenor of the times, Mays recognized Ellison would “need the sustaining hand of the white South, the white North, and Negro Baptists of America.”

Following up on Adams’s comments, Mays ended his prayer by adding, “may the new president prove himself worthy of the great trust committed to his care.... Enable

him to keep faith with those heroic souls who, possessed with a sense of mission, came to this place decades ago in order that a newly emancipated people might have light.”<sup>52</sup>

Ellison was clearly cognizant of the spiritual as well as the secular significance of his appointment as president of one of the oldest institutions in the country for the education of blacks.

In his inaugural remarks, Ellison assured those assembled that he was well aware of the responsibilities, both religious and secular that were now his. “I am as deeply aware of the weighty meaning of this hour as I am appreciative of your confidence that makes it possible.... I accept the responsibility and the challenge that this occasion offers.”<sup>53</sup> In recalling the contributions and personal sacrifices of Union’s past leadership, Ellison noted, “I am solemnly moved as I pause to remember the faith, achievements and unselfish service of the founders. I must also pay homage to the heroism and consecration of my predecessors.” And, with the administrative acuity of a seasoned leader, Ellison embraced those he realized could either make or break his presidency by adding, “With implicit confidence in my associates here, we mutually brace ourselves to continue the task of Christian Education. We recognize and accept this opportunity as a great trust.”<sup>54</sup>

### **Ellison’s Work Begins**

The first fiscal year of Ellison’s administration was, according to Everett Battan Poole the university’s business manager at the time,

an experimental one during which certain sharp and unexpected trends entered the economic picture to test the financial survivability of educational institutions. These trends were peculiar to colleges and universities in that the prosecution of the war cut enrollments and increased operating costs.... Virginia Union was suddenly caught in an almost impossible situation.<sup>55</sup>

Miles W. Connor, a 1909 graduate of Virginia Union University and the first president of Coppin State University in Baltimore, Maryland, agreed with Poole and noted that the early years of Ellison's administration fell within a critical period of world history:

During those years, fear, suspicion, doubt and uncertainty had their enervating influence upon peoples, institutions, and in many cases, took their tool. Many colleges, especially those of the private and denominational group, suffered from decreased enrollment of male students. Philanthropists withheld their contributions, shrinkage of income from investments and the depletion of faculty members by government and industrial demands created a situation of near despair.<sup>56</sup>

Under Ellison's leadership "the University quickly adapted itself to an emergency operating basis and through close budgeting, controlled spending, and, 'cutting the garment' to the barest essentials, was able to finish the year without any permanent scars."<sup>57</sup> The years 1942 and 1943 were considered by Ellison to have been the most difficult in the institution's history. Male students were being drafted steadily. Male faculty and staff were drafted in mid-term during that period and, those that were not already drafted, were on the brink of being drafted. Ellison recalled that, "morale was low. Operating costs soared 25 percent above budget estimates. Necessary equipment and supplies were unobtainable. Labor was at a premium. Some teachers resigned to accept more lucrative employment. The rate of turnover among non-teaching employees and service personnel was enormously high taxing the institutions resources to their limits."<sup>58</sup>

Commenting on those difficult first years of his administration, Ellison said, "I can assure you that the Administration of Virginia Union was at times greatly alarmed because it seemed to us that we had no particular advantages to make us secure." By the end of World War II, however, Ellison was able to say, "It all turned out better than we could hope for in the beginning."<sup>59</sup> One of Ellison's most difficult, yet ultimately

rewarding, experiences—one that turned out better than he could have hoped for—was the reconstruction of the Belgian Friendship Building at the university during the early 1940s.

### **The Belgian Friendship Building**

Besides adjusting to the demands placed on the university by the exigencies of the war effort, perhaps the most challenging issues for Ellison, during those first few years of his presidency, was the reconstruction of the Belgium Pavilion built by the Belgian government for the 1939 Worlds Fair. The Belgium Pavilion, renamed the Belgian Friendship Building, was a gift from the Belgian people to Virginia Union after it became clear the war had made it impossible for the building to be dismantled and returned to Belgium as originally planned.<sup>60</sup>

In July 1941, when Ellison took over the administration of the university, he inherited the Belgian Friendship Building project and, as he put it, “all the problems incident to it.”<sup>61</sup> One of the last acts of President Clark, along with the trustees, was to negotiate the exchange of the Belgian Building from the World’s Fair Grounds in New York to the campus. Because Dr. Clark’s strength was noticeably diminishing at the time, the task of actually moving the building fell into Ellison’s hands. It was calculated that the Belgian Friendship Building would meet three longstanding needs in the development of Virginia Union—a new, or expanded, library facility, a larger modern science laboratory, and a gymnasium. The General Education Board provided \$84,000 for the demolition and transportation of the building from New York to the campus. However, it was estimated that the reconstruction would cost approximately \$150,000. This figure, according to Ellison, “was far from being realistic. In addition, another \$150,000 was

needed for interior renovations and campus improvements related to erecting the building.”<sup>62</sup>

The timing of Ellison’s acceptance of the presidency, which coincided with the acceptance of the university to remove and reconstruct the Belgian Pavilion on Union’s campus, was tantamount to his agreeing to secure \$150,000 to match a gift of \$150,000 donated by the General Education Board for that purpose. In 1942, Virginia Union University owed a mortgaged indebtedness of \$150,000 for which Ellison assumed the responsibility of raising the money to repay. By the end of May 1945, Ellison had secured the monies and repaid the loan in full.<sup>63</sup>

Retiring the debt incurred as a result of the Belgian Building project was only one of the many issues confronting Ellison at the beginning of his administration. In addition to stabilizing the finances of the institution, Ellison was required to shift the mindset of many who clung to established examples of what a president should do and look like at Virginia Union. Liberating the thinking of these individuals from the constraints of such long held beliefs and practices was perhaps the most difficult of Ellison’s challenges. Without successfully changing attitudes about the authority and responsibility of a president who could no longer depend on the type of support his predecessors received, Ellison would have found it difficult to institute the changes needed to assure the institutions survival.

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<sup>24</sup> Adolph H. Grundman in his “Northern Baptists and the Founding of Virginia Union University: The Perils of Paternalism,” *Journal of Negro History* 63 (1, January, 1978): 26-41 lists only five original buildings. The nine buildings under various stages of construction were: The Dean’s House, the President’s House, Pickford Hall (the original classroom), Kingsley Hall (the original dormitory), Colburn Hall (the original chapel and library), Gray Hall (the original dining hall), the Industrial Building, the Power Plant, and the barn.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Charles H. Corey, *A History of the Richmond Theological Seminary with Reminiscences of Thirty Years’ Work among the Colored People of the South*. Richmond, Virginia, 1895, 44-45, (VUU-WLA).

- <sup>27</sup> Today the same section around 15<sup>th</sup> Street between Franklin and Broad Streets, near Richmond's Farmer's Market, is known as Shockoe Bottom.
- <sup>28</sup> Charles H. Corey, *Historical Sketch of the Richmond Institute founded at Richmond, Virginia in 1867, One of Seven Institutions Sustained by the American Baptist Home Mission Society, for the Education of Teachers and Preachers among the Freedmen of the South*. (Richmond, Virginia: Clemmitt & Jones, Steam Book and Job Printers, 1876, 4-5), (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 5.
- <sup>30</sup> Corey, *History of Richmond Theological Seminary*, 52.
- <sup>31</sup> *Virginia Union University Twenty-fifth Anniversary Souvenir*, 1924, (VUU-WLA):31.
- <sup>32</sup> Corey, *Richmond Institute*.
- <sup>33</sup> Mary C. Reynolds, *Baptist Missionary Pioneers Among Negroes*. n. d., Valley Forge, PA: American Baptist Historical Society Archives (ABHSA).
- <sup>34</sup> "The Tradition of White Presidents."
- <sup>35</sup> An active and interested teacher, MacVicar became convinced the teacher education then commonly available at the private academies was insufficient and took a leading role in the campaign to get the state of New York to establish more Normal Schools. In this he was successful, and the Brockport Collegiate Institute became one of four new Normal Schools established in 1867. The new Brockport Normal included a practice or training school, that [was] an elementary school within the Normal School in which the student teachers could practice teaching under the eyes of experienced "teacher-critics." This reflected MacVicar's view that teaching was an art, best learned by doing. He was an early advocate of the study of childhood development, and the effect of the environment on the child. See <http://www.brockport.edu/~library1/archive3.htm>.
- <sup>36</sup> See [http://www.spelman.edu/about\\_us/facts/](http://www.spelman.edu/about_us/facts/)
- <sup>37</sup> Annual Report, American Baptist Board of Education and Publication. Division of Christian Higher Education, Senior Colleges, Virginia Union University. 1905, (ABHSA), 1905, box 144.
- <sup>38</sup> Coe Hayne, "George Rice Hovey, D. D.: Educator and Mission Administrator." *The Watchman Examiner*. (11 February, 1943): 136.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>40</sup> Raymond P. Hylton, Virginia Union University History, <http://www.vuu.edu/aboutVuu/history.htm>
- <sup>41</sup> Sidney E. Hening, "A Glorious Conclusion to the World's Fair." *The Baptist Monthly Digest* (February 1941): 408.
- <sup>42</sup> Anonymous, *Union Alumni Awake*, April 1941, folder 1, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>45</sup> Response to *Union Alumni Awake* from John M. Ellison, published in the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, 19 April 1941, folder 1, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>46</sup> Response to *Union Alumni Awake* from the Virginia Union Student Body, published in the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, 26 April 1941, folder 1, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>47</sup> Response to *Union Alumni Awake* from D. C. Rice, published in the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, 19 April, 1941, folder 1, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>48</sup> Letter from Mary E. Williams to John M. Ellison, n.d., folder 17, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>49</sup> See <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/o/g/ogohiap.htm>
- <sup>50</sup> In Our Time Faithful to the Call. Publication of the National Ministries of the American Baptist Churches USA. Valley Forge, PA, 2002.
- <sup>51</sup> Inauguration speeches, 17 October 1941, folder 150, Section XI, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>53</sup> Inauguration speeches, 17 October 1941, folder 150, Section XIII-3B, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>55</sup> Ellison papers, n.d., Biographical Outline, "The Decade of the 1940s", folder 192, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid*
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>59</sup> Ellison papers, n.d., folder 73, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>60</sup> Hening, "A Glorious Conclusion."
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid*.



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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ellison papers, n.d., folder 192, (VUU-WLA).

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Liberation from the Past, Liberation for the Future: Administrative and Culture Change at Virginia Union University

John M. Ellison's presidency can be viewed as having two fundamental purposes: to guide the institution in its transition to independence from the ABHMS's control and to shepherd Virginia Union's students in much the same way he and generations of Virginia Union students had been guided since the institution's inception. When Ellison was inaugurated as Virginia Union University's first black president in 1941, the institution had existed in one form or another for over three-quarters of a century. For all of that time, the educational and fiscal policy of the university was entirely in the hands of the American Baptist Home Mission Society (ABHMS) and its white administrators appointed to oversee the management of the institution.

The ABHMS, which had been supporting Baptist missions and promoting Baptist education since 1832, had three departments: one "to establish churches and Sunday schools," another "to aid in the erection of church edifices," and a third "to provide normal and theological schools for the Freedmen and Indians."<sup>64</sup> Direct control by the ABHMS of its black educational institutions was consistent with the practices of other religious denomination of the period as well. Until World War I, the membership of the various religious denominations that had established schools for blacks after Emancipation and had served as their boards of trustees of their individual institutions, were composed almost entirely of northern white men and women. Likewise, the presidents, and, in many instances, the faculties were white northerners.<sup>65</sup> The ABHMS to its credit, however, did provide the opportunity for a number of blacks to serve as

faculty members and a number of “the best men possible” were selected as trustees of Virginia Union University almost from its inception.<sup>66</sup>

The transition of Virginia Union’s leadership from one dominated by its white northern benefactors and their onsite administrators to an institution headed by one of its own is a story of dual liberation: a liberation of northern Baptists from the administrative and fiscal responsibility of sustaining Virginia Union University and a liberation of Union’s rising black leadership from the constraints of a well-intentioned, yet out-dated paternalism. This paternalism portrayed blacks as culturally deficient and “greatly in need of the guiding hand and wisdom of dedicated teachers who could show them the way to take their ‘proper’ place in society.”<sup>67</sup>

From its inception, and largely out of necessity, Virginia Union University had been sustained through the financial and human resources provided by committed northern Baptist congregations and their missionary-minded pastor-educators. These pastor-educators “were sincere in their missionary zeal, and if anything they were often overwhelming in their sense of mission” to ameliorate the plight of the newly freed slaves and the generations of their descendants that would follow.<sup>68</sup> Such a sense of mission alone, however, was not enough during the Depression years to sustain an institution that had a history of “barely scraping by financially.”<sup>69</sup> F. W. Padelford, a member of Virginia Union’s Board, discussed the organization’s difficult financial situation with Virginia Union’s third President William J. Clark in September 1937.

This year we are having to wait for receipts from churches, and during the first six months there is very little money coming in. we have, therefore, not been in a position to know how much money we would have to distribute and the receipts of the first six months have been so small it was not worth while to make a distribution.<sup>70</sup>

The diminishing financial resources northern Baptists dedicated to the educational and spiritual advancement of southern blacks was supplemented by the meaningful, although understandably limited, resources of black Baptist churches both north and south. Virginia Union and other ABHMS-related colleges and universities became the beneficiaries of this dual benevolence and financial straits.

The diminishing sources of financial resources traditionally distributed to their institutions precluded the ABHMS to adequately prepare its church-related institutions for a future without support. The colleges' financial stability and growth was no longer guaranteed, and additionally, long-term mentoring of black leadership for the inevitable changes was impossible. By the beginning of the twentieth century, northern missionary societies, such as the ABHMS, "had become too weak financially to keep their colleges abreast of modern standards."<sup>71</sup> They could no longer keep pace with the ever-increasing budgetary requirements of the schools under their direction. The timing could not have been worse for Virginia Union and other ABHMS institutions because "the missionaries became bankrupt at a time when black colleges depended almost exclusively upon private aid."<sup>72</sup> This private aid predominately from the northern Christian denominations had sustained church-related black higher education for generations. The abrupt withdrawal of the ABHMS, as with the any "sink or swim" situation, presented challenges to the college personnel for which they were not adequately prepared. As the aid from these denominations lessened, it became necessary for these institutions to secure more support from Negro state Baptist conventions and individual Baptist churches throughout the country. For many years it was the income from school choirs and quartettes, such as the

Fisk University Jubilee Singers, and the personal solicitations by presidents all over the nation that helped keep many church-related institutions functioning.<sup>73</sup>

The benevolence of the northern benefactors rarely translated into decision-making positions for blacks at their institutions of higher education. The lack of opportunity for hands-on administrative training continued to be the case well into the twentieth century, even though “the Negro race [had developed] a number of men who [were] qualified by every test of efficiency and experience to man and manage their own institutions.”<sup>74</sup> John Hope, for example, was named the first black president of Morehouse College in 1906. Mordecai Johnson, a Morehouse graduate himself, began an unprecedented program of expansion and development at Howard University in 1926 as a result of sizable grants received from the General Education Board and the Julius Rosenwald Fund.<sup>75</sup> Johnson’s expansion established Howard as, arguably, the leading center of black intellectual development for much of the twentieth century.

### **Economic Pragmatism and Leadership Change at Virginia Union**

Virginia Union University, originally known as the Richmond Theology School for Freedmen, was one of seven schools established by the ABHMS after Emancipation.<sup>76</sup> The ABHMS provided most of the operating expenses for these institutions from their founding until well into the twentieth century. By 1910 the American Baptist Convention established its Board of Education and the organizational nature of the ABHMS’s colleges began shifting to more of a pure educational enterprise.<sup>77</sup> The thrust of the ABHMS immediately following Emancipation was missionary. The organization concentrated on educating black pastors and teachers for work among their people at that time. By the dawn of the new century, the ABHMS had

become less of a missionary force and more of an educational oasis for southern blacks as the number of trained black pastors increased and educational opportunities decreased. By 1935, the transition was completed when the ABHMS turned over to the Board of Education \$29,000 in funds dedicated for black education. In addition, the General Education Board provided Virginia Union with an endowment of \$200,000 and the ABHMS added an additional \$100,000 in order to establish an endowment of \$300,000.<sup>78</sup>

The ABHMS imposed several conditions with the establishment of that endowment however. First, the funds were to be held in trust by the ABHMS; second, the ABHMS retained title to certain properties, maintaining fire insurance on those properties; and third, the transfer of funds “was given with the understanding that income from those funds be considered in lieu of further financial responsibility of the ABHMS or the [northern Baptist] Convention to annual operating budgets.”<sup>79</sup> The Baptist Board of Education was sending a clear message to Virginia Union and its administration: the time was at hand for the black church and the black community to provide the financial support to maintain its own enterprise. In other words, through its Board of Education the ABHMS was initiating the process of liberating itself from its decades-long mission of providing for the educational needs of Virginia Union’s students. It was relinquishing responsibility and finally placing the fiscal and administrative responsibility of the institution permanently in the hands of the black educators.

By this point, the prospect of the exchange of administrative responsibility at Virginia Union was all but certain. During the financially stressful conditions of the Depression, northern Baptists were increasingly asked if Negroes were not in a position to finance their own schools after so many years of support from the ABHMS.<sup>80</sup> Thus, the

dual factors of philanthropic fatigue experienced by white northern Baptists and the economic depression of the 1930s coalesced in the late 1930s and early 1940s to create an atmosphere conducive to a change in leadership at the university.

The administrative descendants of the northern missionary founders and supporters of black higher education at Virginia Union, who had been reluctant to relinquish control of the institution to blacks in the past, were now more than willing to provide Ellison, their hand-picked successor to MacVicar, Hovey, and Clark, with the challenge of facilitating Union's administrative liberation. As an alumnus, and because of his graduate training at Oberlin College and Drew University, Ellison appeared to have been the right person for the job. Selected by the Executive Committee of Virginia Union's Board of Trustees, he was a Unionite,<sup>81</sup> available at a ripe time and with the right training to assume the "big task" of transitioning Union from the external control of the Baptist Board of Education to financial and administrative self-sufficiency.<sup>82</sup>

Although not everyone was as certain as Virginia Union's Executive Committee in Ellison's ability to be the transitional force the institution required as its first black president, Ellison was determined to be successful as president of his alma mater. He wanted to demonstrate both his ability as a competent and purposeful leader of the university and the capacity of black leadership to successfully undertake any significant opportunity afforded them. But he recognized the need for a unity of purpose among alumni, students, and external supporters. "I believe it absolutely necessary and important at this time," Ellison informed James E. Shepard that, "Negroes should ... present ... a solid ... front to the dominant group" as his administration moved forward.<sup>83</sup>

To solidify his administration and to prove his abilities, Ellison had to garner support from both sides of the color line. With some, the task was easy. With others, it proved difficult. Ellison's history-making appointment required him to take a pragmatic approach in rallying support from both sides of the color line. He was confident enough in his leadership abilities early in his administration to accept advice and guidance from Sidney E. Hening, Treasure of the ABHMS. Hening provided Ellison with extensive direction concerning the laying of the cornerstone of the Belgian Friendship Building on June 9, 1941 and throughout the entire reconstruction program.

Hening reminded Ellison, "let me again stress what seems to me important, namely, that you invite and recognize every person who has shown interest in the Belgian Friendship Building.... Be sure that every single person entitled to recognition is seated on the platform...[and] hold down the ceremony part of the program to a reasonable length" [emphasis in the original].<sup>84</sup> Ellison was aware that for all of those like Hening who encouraged and supported his presidency, others would question it as well. Ellison was uncertain, for example, how his immediate predecessor, William J. Clark interpreted the Executive Committee's decision to appoint him as the Executive Vice-President of the university in charge of the Belgian Building's reconstruction. Writing to Sidney E. Hening, Ellison confided:

I am glad to know that Dr. Clark wrote you a cheerful letter. I have noted several varying attitudes. The first is a determination to tenaciously hold to the reins of things even to the point of making unnecessary but rather arbitrary decisions about things or holding up certain things by an attitude of uncertainty which he calls caution. The other vary obvious attitude is one of emphasis on what he is doing. For example: a play up of the monies that are coming in as if they were the results of very personal efforts. The several things that have been set going such as Mr. Poole's apprenticeship at Va. State [College], the suggestions that Mr. Poole and I have worked out relative to budget, centralization of purchases, etc.... all of these were laid claim to as the efforts of the President.<sup>85</sup>



In what appears to be a reference to the Executive Committee's predetermined decision to appoint Ellison to the presidency of the university, Ellison continued:

This came as a statement made in the faculty meeting this afternoon. In the same meeting, I think upon the suggestion of Dr. Adams, a statement was made as to intentions to resign at the forthcoming Trustee meeting. Rference [sic] was made to the appointment of an Executive Vice president and explained as follows: "The action was taken merely to give Dr. Ellison some kind of title so that he might be recognized as he goes out to collect money for the Belgian Building. That is all it means." At the close of his talk to the faculty [Dr. Clark] reminded the members that it was the policy of the Board of Education to retire workers at a certain age and that he had come to that period, so "I am giving the trustees the chance to do what they want to do."<sup>86</sup>

Clark's comments about his mandatory retirement, quoted by Ellison above, seem to have been made deliberately. If they were, Clark was clearly setting the stage for his departure and Ellison's ascendancy. Ellison concluded his remarks to Hening:

I refer to these statements because they illustrate the attitude. Dr. Adams is trying the persuade Dr. Clark to take a fine stand. The Executive Committee is holding a meeting tomorrow. I think the Committee will formulate its recommendations for the Trustee Board in that meeting.<sup>87</sup>

Clark's "fine stand," or his acceptance of the fact that Union's Executive Committee would recommend his retirement and Ellison's appointment as president, seems to have been facilitated by the Chairman of the Executive Committee of Virginia Union's Board, Theodore F. Adams. Although no conclusive evidence is evident that Adams was singling to Clark that a change in administration was forthcoming, it appears from Ellison's comments above, such an intervention may have taken place prior to any public announcement of the change. Clark, in turn, used the occasion of his comments to the faculty to suggest he was going to retire and a new president appointed. On April 29, 1941, only a few days after writing to Hening, the Executive Committee of Union's

Board of Trustees announced Ellison would replace Clark as Virginia Union's first alumnus president.<sup>88</sup>

### **Supporters and Critics**

Most Virginia Union alumni approved of Ellison's appointment as president. Thomas L. Dabney, a 1924 graduate and Ellison supporter, took time to offer the new president his support. "I can not speak for others but as for myself I think that it is my duty as an alumnus of Virginia Union to back the trustees in their selection and thus support you as the first Negro president of the university."<sup>89</sup> Some alumni, however, did not support Ellison's appointment as enthusiastically. That lack of support does not appear to have been widespread. In fact, it appears to have been isolated.

In a letter written to Detroit resident and Union alumnus, Edward A. Baker, Ellison acknowledged he would encounter resistance to his appointment as president of the university from an unexpected source—Union graduates themselves. Ellison informed Baker that several years before his appointment he "had gotten an inkling from one of the [Detroit] men ... that a Negro president of Virginia Union would not be supported."<sup>90</sup> Ellison, in acknowledging the appointment of any black as president of Union would not be universally welcomed, made it clear to Baker in December 1942 that under his administration "Union is going forward in a most splendid way" with or without support, financial or otherwise, from Detroit men or others less than enthusiastic about his appointment to the presidency.<sup>91</sup> Ellison, aware that some Detroit area alumni lacked support for his appointment, had made a special point to contact graduates and former students living in that area only months after his inauguration. "I wrote each one of our men out there a letter and asked for the names of any that I might have omitted,"

Ellison told Baker, but “no reply came from any of the letters.”<sup>92</sup> Why the Detroit alumni held such an unfavorable opinion of Ellison’s leadership, at least initially, remains unclear.

By June of 1943, however, Ellison’s leadership ability was evident and apparently paying dividends even among the Detroit alumni. Reverend Horace A. White, an alumnus and pastor of the Plymouth Congregational Church in Detroit, Michigan informed Ellison that he “was thrilled by the vision you have shown there. I am very confident that the school will go on to further heights under your direction.”<sup>93</sup> More significant, however, were the pastor’s comments concerning the current opinion of Ellison’s leadership ability by Virginia Union’s Detroit graduates. Reverend White enthusiastically informed Ellison he had “a chance to talk with some of the Virginia Union men: all of them were big enough to admit that they were short-sighted when you first became president, but they are now beginning to see the light” and that their previously unflattering opinion of black leadership at the university was, fortunately, without foundation in Ellison’s case.<sup>94</sup> Ellison took the occasion of Reverend White’s letter to make clear his position of his ability as president of the university and the ability of black leadership in general. “It is also gratifying to know that you have had the opportunity to talk with some of our fellows and to inform them of what is going on at Va. Union,” Ellison told Reverend White. Furthermore, “I trust they’ll soon be thoroughly convinced and sincere about the ability of Negro leadership.”<sup>95</sup> Alumni voiced few negative opinions of Ellison’s appointment, at least publicly. Other than the anonymous letter circulated early in 1941 when Ellison was appointed Executive Vice

President, the Detroit alumni seems to be the only group voicing such a negative opinion prior to his appointment.

### **Leadership Was Always an Issue**

The process of transforming Virginia Union University from an institution directed from distant church headquarters to an institution independent of such control, involved changing long-held attitudes concerning the proper locus of leadership. The debate over leadership at Virginia Union predates the controversy that developed over Ellison's appointment. The issue of the participation of blacks in the administration of Virginia Union actually resulted from the separation of black Virginia Baptists into one group that supported independent leadership and another group that favored a continuing alliance with the ABHMS. The liberal group, the Virginia State Baptist Convention led by Howard University graduate Philip Fisher Morris, advocated independence from the ABHMS and complete black control of their educational institutions. The conservative group, the Baptist General Association of Virginia, supported continuing to cooperate with the ABHMS in the administration of their schools.<sup>96</sup>

This bifurcation of Virginia's black Baptists was apparent almost from the institution's inception. In 1871, Charles E. Corey the principal of the school that would become Virginia Union University wrote, "in many places ... leaders are ready to prejudice the people against the young men from the college." The conservative group of "old [religious] leaders" was distrustful of and in opposition to the ABHMS's control of the school.<sup>97</sup> To counter such opposition and to encourage an alternate more liberal view of the ABHMS's role, Corey employed two former students, Joseph E. Jones and David N. Vasser, to teach at the school. In addition, Corey persuaded the ABHMS to appoint

two prominent black ministers, James H. Holmes and Richard Wells, to the school's board of trustees.<sup>98</sup> Although these appointments were a step in the right direction, the underlying cause of the division between conservative and liberal factions was the ABHMS's slow pace in establishing a genuine men's college and a theology school in Virginia. Neither would occur until the formation of Virginia Union 1899.<sup>99</sup>

The long-standing issue of the proper locus of leadership aside, Ellison was faced with another type leadership problem at Virginia Union. Ellison recognized his appointment was not validated by the unanimous support of all students and alumni. That realization was represented by the anonymous letter written in reaction to his appointment as Executive Vice President and the negative comments concerning the appointment of any black man as president by Detroit alumni.<sup>100</sup> Ellison successfully weathered these early difficulties, however, and began to develop his own leadership style as president.

### **The Second Mile: Ellison's Principle of Leadership**

In a September 1943 address to the members of the staff and university officers, Ellison demonstrated a willingness not to temper his remarks concerning what would be required of the university's staff if VUU and his administration were to survive. In a section of his presentation entitled "Our Implicit Obligations," Ellison advised his staff that, "the person who works by the clock or in terms of his pay check is a poor worker and cannot be relied upon. In a small college like ours it is urged that every employee will be governed by the 'Second Mile' philosophy."<sup>101</sup> So that no one should misconstrue his meaning, Ellison clarified his Second Mile concept by suggesting that, "there are times when one should feel it is his duty to work until the task is done. That may require

an hour earlier to work, or an hour later leaving.... No one should object to willingly helping in such matters if free to do it.”<sup>102</sup>

Ellison insistence on university personnel complying with a new system of management that was, in his words, necessarily “different from other years” was not arbitrarily initiated.<sup>103</sup> Ellison’s management of the university differed from past administrations in that he recognized the university could no longer depend on the lion’s share of support coming from the ABHMS. In order for the university to survive, especially during the war years early in his administration, Ellison understood he had to require every aspect of the institution—its finances, its personnel, and its students—to be well-managed and accountable.

He was concerned that the university’s image presented to commuters passing by the campus daily on the heavily traveled Brook Road and Lombardy Street thoroughfares project a similar representation of “Unionites of the old fashioned caliber.”<sup>104</sup> Apparently startled by an escalating display of affection between male and female students on Union’s visually open campus, Ellison in an open letter to the students expressed his growing dissatisfaction with such displays, some of which took place directly under the president’s office window. Ellison complained:

The excessive petting and indecent lying out on campus of boy-girl couples is most distressing. It seems that the matter of associating and entertaining on the part of many of our students degenerate into a most unbecoming familiarity with no respect for the kind of culture that college students should desire to exhibit. How can any couple take 2, 3, 4 hours from their studies in undue socializing and oftentimes objectionable caressing, is more than anyone can understand ... It is alarming that so many young men have so little respect for the girls of the campus. It is no less distressing that so many girls seem so thoughtless about their reputation and their character development [emphasis in the original].<sup>105</sup>

The students' open displays of affection were particularly disturbing to Ellison because he understood the power of perception. How the university was viewed by the public could negatively impact his ability to raise financial resources needed for the successful operation of university. It was a responsibility that was going to be almost entirely in the hands of Virginia Union's president for the first time in its history. "People who visit our campus," Ellison grumbled to Virginia Union's overly affectionate students, "as well as those of both races who drive along Highway #1 and note the loitering, petting, and indifference to study of so-called college students, must have a feeling of disappointment about Education and disgust at such tendencies."<sup>106</sup>

Ellison even went so far as to suggest students' failure to discontinue such open displays of affection could result in expulsion from the university. "Will you as students heed this advice and warning. We cannot continue in the institution," Ellison cautioned, "students who have so little regard for simple regulations and gentlemanly and lady-like conduct."<sup>107</sup> Undoubtedly, many of those students guilty of such open displays of affection were dependent upon the university for some level of financial assistance.

### **Changing Financial Attitudes**

Ellison slowly introduced a new degree of responsibility into the campus to both students and alumni. For the students, that responsibility meant a deliberate effort on their part to take pride in themselves and the atmosphere they created on campus. For the parents and alumni, that responsibility meant an end of the university's ability to overlook unpaid debts. In 1942, Reverend George R. Yancy of Greenwich, Connecticut paid a debt of \$79.02 to the university from the 1932-1933 school year. Reverend Yancy told Ellison of his shock at receiving a collection notice concerning the overdue account.

Attempting to assure Yancy he had no direct involvement with the notice, Ellison reminded him “that in the change of administrations it was necessary that all of our accounts be investigated by Certified Accountants. There were many outstanding accounts about which I knew nothing. These accounts were taken over by the auditors for collection.”<sup>108</sup> Ellison reinforced the idea that the actions of the auditors were a regrettable yet necessary aspect of the change in administration designed to get the university on track financially. Ellison assured Yancy that, “we had no alternative but to cooperate with them in the effort to put our business reorganization in the best possible condition.”<sup>109</sup>

Dr. J. E. Fountain received a similar letter from Ellison concerning a debt of \$39.70 owed to the university by his daughter, Marye Louise. Using a similar tactical approach to the one he employed with Reverend Yancy, Ellison alerted Dr. Fountain to the fact that,

You may not know that our system is different from other years. We have to operate on a very strict business basis, and are under the supervision of Certified Public Accountants who demand of us to collect our accounts. If we don't they force us to turn over delinquent accounts into the hands of collecting agencies which we do not like to do because of the embarrassment.<sup>110</sup>

Not all of the debtors were able to comply with the new management initiative though. Reverend John L. Wood of Richmond, Virginia also received a collection letter for \$238.75 owed the university for more than three years. Reverend Wood, unlike Reverend Yancy and Dr Fountain, was unable to take care of his debt. He returned a brief note to Ellison indicating his inability to pay the debt and a copy of his bankruptcy notice from the District Court.



In an attempt to deflect any growing criticism from alumni concerning the reorganization procedures, Ellison explained to Dr. J. A. Martin of Bristol, Virginia, and other graduates with outstanding balances that,

When there was a change in administration, in order that we protect ourselves, we felt it was wise to have an independent auditor to examine our books. As a matter of fact the Home Mission Society and the General Education Board audited.... When the auditors came they took everything. The records were taken to New York and of course they brought pressure upon us to show good business procedures. We felt it was wise to follow their suggestion.<sup>111</sup>

Ellison understood better than anyone the need to implement new collection procedures in order to collect current and outstanding debts. And, for the first time, indebted alumni were coerced into repaying the debts they owed the university. Ellison recognized such reorganization, though not welcomed by many, was necessary if the university were to survive. Most of the correspondence concerning the collection of outstanding tuition debt of current students or alumni was generated during the early transitional years of the Ellison administration. To undertake such a distinct break from past administrations in the collection of monies owed the university demonstrated a clear willingness on Ellison's part to change the culture of the institution concerning its fiscal accountability. Under his leadership, the university was going to operate on what he liked to call "a strict business basis" if the institution were to continue its mission of educating leaders, preachers, and teachers for the black community. For Ellison, changing the culture of the university meant incorporating a number of elements intended to stabilize the institution and his administration: the responsibility of students to project a proper campus image, the responsibility of staff to do whatever was needed to ensure the education process continued, and, certainly, the unprecedented task of reorganizing the institution's finances were key elements.

Ellison's efforts in changing the institution's fiscal culture did not go unnoticed. Thomas L. Dabney, one of Ellison's earliest supporters congratulated Ellison on his strict business approach, "Your business administration appeals to me mightily. That's one thing we need to pull up on: the ability and willingness to be successful administrators."<sup>112</sup> Dabney concluded his comments with something Ellison was sure to appreciate, "Lots of people can make money, but fewer can spend it wisely – or handle it honestly. I want to congratulate you ... for making an excellent beginning in this direction."<sup>113</sup>

### **If You Can Bring a Little Something with You**

The original intent of the ABHMS was to support Virginia Union's mission by providing as much financial support as possible. Once the ABHMS's support ended, the subvention was no longer available and the university had to find a way to survive on its own. It was up to Ellison to find that way. Operating on a strict business basis was, almost from its inception, not viewed as a necessity at Virginia Union. As the primary financier of Union's operation, the ABHMS bore the brunt of the institution's expenses. Students' tuition and fees supplemented the operations at Virginia Union but were never intended to provide the major source of operating income.

Many of Union's students, however, were unable to provide even a modicum of financial resources to offset the institutions costs. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., an 1892 graduate of Wayland Seminary (Washington, DC), paid only eight dollars for his college education.<sup>114</sup> Wayland Seminary merged with Richmond Theological Institute in 1899 to form Virginia Union University. Many future Unionites began their college careers at Virginia Union just as Powell did with little or no financial support other than that

extended by the university. In return for the university's financial support, students were required to work for the institution in some capacity.

From his first days as president, Ellison responded on almost a daily basis to numerous requests from VUU applicants for financial assistance as well as from parents, high school teachers and administrators, and pastors of churches on behalf of prospective students. Applicant Margaret Harrington of Downingtown, Pennsylvania, similar to other daily appeals for assistance, appealed to Ellison directly:

I am interested in entering college this fall to major in science.... My biggest problem is one of finance. I received the faculty scholarship of fifty dollars on my graduation June tenth. Mr. Waring has given me employment for the summer, and I intend to use my earnings toward my college expenses. But even with this assistance, I shall have to work.... I shall appreciate it very much if you will inform me concerning work opportunities for girls at your school.... For any consideration of my case, I shall be deeply grateful.<sup>115</sup>

Requests for help arrived from in-state as well as out-of-state applicants. Most students, whether Virginia residents or not, were more than willing to work for the opportunity to attend Virginia Union. Elizabeth McDaniel's, valedictorian from John Mercer Langston High School in Danville, Virginia, request for admission and financial aid in the form of work-study was typical of those Ellison received:

Sometime ago I wrote to your school concerning the possibility of obtaining a scholarship and also of acquiring a part-time job.... I am willing to do my best on whatever job I may by chance be placed ... It has always been my desire to further my education at your school.<sup>116</sup>

Ellison typically replied within a few days, generally extending hope to the applicants.

Two days after receiving Ms. McDaniel's inquiry, he informed her that he was

“enclosing an application blank for [you] to fill out and send us. I am sure we can help, but I am not sure now to what extent and amount.”<sup>117</sup>

Upperclassmen also corresponded with Ellison seeking financial help to continue their education. These students were willing to go an extra mile to continue their education, yet recognized that Ellison was open to helping them. Helen Lee of New York City, a rising sophomore, was one of those students. Lee informed Ellison that her mother had paid her expenses freshman year but that:

In all fairness, and to show my appreciation [to my mother], I should attempt to go ahead alone. I am not saying that my mother is not willing to help me but realizing the hardships she had to go through, I want to do the rest of my education with as little help from her as possible. Believe me, because I say it in all earnest, it is no easy task for a young woman, without any help, to put a daughter through college.”<sup>118</sup>

Ellison responded to Ms. Lee personally, as was his usual practice. The university would do all it could to help her and that she should plan to return to school at the beginning of the fall semester.<sup>119</sup>

From time to time, however, Ellison did receive request for admissions from parents or guardians of perspective students who did not require any financial assistance in order to attend Virginia Union. “My niece, Miss Nettie Powell, graduated from the Sterling High School of Greenville, South Carolina, as salutatorian of her class this past commencement. I promised to see her through college.... I would like to have all necessary material from Virginia Union sent to her,” wrote Benjamin E. Mays, Virginia Union alumnus and President of Morehouse College. “Although I am willing to assume full financial responsibility for her, I would like for her to have some work to do that would pay her \$12 or \$15 a month ... I think it will be good for her if she does something to help herself in some form.”<sup>120</sup> Mays’ niece was admitted to Virginia Union and received a \$100 scholarship to attend. Ellison informed Mays that Virginia Union was,

very happy to have your niece with us, and we will give her the most careful attention. I have met her personally and talked with her and would be vary glad to continue seeing her and offering any advice when necessary as she goes on with her work. She seems to like Virginia Union very much and to be making her adjustment very nicely.”<sup>121</sup>

What appears to be Ellison’s preferential treatment of President Mays’ niece was, in actuality, standard operating procedure for this people-centered president. Throughout his presidency Ellison was conspicuously involved with Union students on a personal as well as a professional level. In a letter written in 1952 to perspective student, George K. McKinney of Petersburg, Virginia, Ellison demonstrated he had lost none of his enthusiasm for the university or its students after eleven years as president. “Virginia Union is still a family atmosphere where students live close together and in friendly relations with teachers,” Ellison advised McKinney.<sup>122</sup> And, in terms of students’ intellectual development, Ellison assured McKinney that, “I need not try to persuade you of the freedom for expression and growth that one has on this campus. That is a long and subtle tradition at Virginia Union.” A long and subtle tradition that began early on in the institution’s life and, according to Ellison, permitted students and teachers alike to “express themselves more or less freely.” Ellison also indicated that there was “no disposition to curtail this freedom” on his part.<sup>123</sup>

No doubt Ellison’s own need of financial assistance as a student, the university’s long tradition of providing for students in need, and Ellison’s pastoral experience had much to do with the fatherly, people-centered approach that he brought to leadership of his alma mater. In his address to the 1953 incoming class at Virginia Union students, Ellison’s leadership approach is clear. “Our life together is as a community. We live together in friendliness and seek to be mutually helpful.... Thus, to be a student at Union

is to live in a growing and good fellowship.” Concluding his welcoming remarks, Ellison stated that “I shall want to know each student and share with you in any way that you may need.”<sup>124</sup> Emphasizing his sincerity, Ellison invited the incoming students visit him in his office located at “the south end of the first floor of Pickford Hall” at anytime.<sup>125</sup>

### **Pastor and President**

Indeed, Ellison was interested in doing all within his power and within the university’s ability to provide deserving students with the financial resources needed to attend Virginia Union; he personally responded to numerous such requests throughout his presidency.<sup>126</sup> In addition to providing financial support, however, Ellison also was deeply committed to ensuring that Virginia Union students had an opportunity to develop their moral and spiritual character as well. In this one regard, Ellison’s leadership was far from an attempt to liberate his presidency from ties to past administrations. On the contrary, his mission remained consistent with that of his predecessors: the moral as well as the intellectual uplift of the black race through the education of preachers, teachers, and leaders.

Ellison was more than just the precedent-setting first black president of Virginia Union. First and foremost he continued the long line of pastor-educators fashioned in the mold of Presidents MacVicar, Hovey, and Clark. Ellison’s presidency, therefore, should be considered with the understanding that his presidential responsibilities were inseparable from his pastoral inclinations and training. In other words, Ellison’s presidency can be viewed as having two fundamental purposes: first, to guide the institution in its transition to independence from the ABHMS’s control and; second, to shepherd Virginia Union’s students in much the same way he and generations of Virginia

Union students had been guided since the institution's inception. In this respect, Ellison demonstrated his presidency continued to educate students so that they developed into "Unionites of the old fashioned caliber."<sup>127</sup>

Ellison's leadership style was as much a result of his people-centered personality as it was a result of his undergraduate preparation, graduate pastoral training, and ministerial calling. To separate his approach to the presidency from his background and training would be to disregard his, and the university's *raison d'être*. As a private Baptist undergraduate college that supported a graduate school of religion, Virginia Union was a center of religious activity for the black community throughout the United States.

Virginia Union graduates became pastors of churches, presidents of other historically black colleges and universities, community leaders, and teachers throughout America. In his capacity as pastor-president of the university, Ellison was constantly called upon to recommend prospective pastors and teachers or to offer recommendations of candidates for such positions.

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<sup>64</sup> Kenneth W. Rose, "Why a University for Chicago and not Cleveland? Religion and John D. Rockefeller's Early Philanthropy, 1855-1900." This essay is a revised version of a paper prepared for the Western Reserve Studies Symposium in Cleveland, Ohio, October 6-7, 1995, and included in *From All Sides:*

*Philanthropy in the Western Reserve. Papers, Abstracts, and Program of the Tenth Annual Western Reserve Studies Symposium, sponsored by the Case Western Reserve University American Studies Program. (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University, 1995), pp. 30-41. Acquired at: [archive.rockefeller.edu/publications/resrep/rose2.pdf](http://archive.rockefeller.edu/publications/resrep/rose2.pdf) on November 25, 2006.*

<sup>65</sup> Charles H. Thompson, "The Control and Administration of the Negro College." *Journal of Educational Sociology*. 19 (8, April, 1946): 484-495.

<sup>66</sup> Adolph H. Grundman, "Northern Baptists and the Founding of Virginia Union University: The Perils of Paternalism." *Journal of Negro History* 63 (1, January, 1978): 30.

<sup>67</sup> Johnetta Cross Brazzell, "Bricks Without Straw: Missionary-Sponsored Black Higher Education in the Post-Emancipation Era." *Journal of Higher Education*. 63 (1, January- February 1992): 31.

<sup>68</sup> Mary Frances Berry and John M. Blassingame, *Long Memory: The Black Experience in America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982): 277.

- <sup>69</sup> Grundman, "Northern Baptists," 34.
- <sup>70</sup> Letter to William J. Clark from F. W. Padelford, 27 September 1937, box 144, (ABHSA).
- <sup>71</sup> James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982): 252.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>73</sup> William J. Trent, Jr., "The Relative Adequacy of Sources of Income of Negro Church-Related Colleges." *Journal of Negro Education* 29 (3, Summer, 1960): 356-367.
- <sup>74</sup> Berry and Blassingame, *Long Memory*, 278.
- <sup>75</sup> "Julius Rosenwald: The Great American Philanthropist Who decided What Blacks Should Teach." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 24 (Summer, 1999): 52-55; Berry and Blassingame, *Long Memory*, 277.
- <sup>76</sup> The National Theological Institute was organized in Washington, D. C. in December of 1864 and began operations in early 1865. The Congress of the United States officially chartered the Institute on May 10, 1866. The original charter was amended on March 2, 1867 changing the name to the National Theological Institute and University. On May 26, 1869, the work of the National Theological Institute and University was formally transferred to the American Baptist Home Mission Society. The Richmond, Virginia branch of the National Theological Institute and University was originally known as the Richmond Theology School for Freedmen (the name was later changed to the Richmond Theological Institute) while the Washington, D. C. branch became known as Wayland Institute.
- <sup>77</sup> John M. Ellison, "Policies and Rationale Underlying the Support of Colleges Maintained by the Baptist Denomination." *Journal of Negro Education* 29 (3, Summer, 1960): 330-338.
- <sup>78</sup> Ellison, "Policies and Rationale," 331.
- <sup>79</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>80</sup> Ibid. 332.
- <sup>81</sup> Unionite is the term Ellison uses for graduates of Virginia Union University.
- <sup>82</sup> Letter to Geroge H. Sims from John M. Ellison, 25 September 1941, folder 16, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>83</sup> Letter to James E. Shepard from John M. Ellison, 26 February 1943, folder 21, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>84</sup> Letter from Sidney E. Hening to John M. Ellison, 29 May 1941, Box 144, (ABHSA).
- <sup>85</sup> Letter to Sidney E. Hening from John M. Ellison, 6 June 1941, Box 144, (ABHSA).
- <sup>86</sup> ABHSA, Box 144.
- <sup>87</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>88</sup> Letter from Thomas L. Dabney to John M. Ellison, 30 April 1941 in which Dabney congratulates Ellison on his April 29, 1941 election to the presidency of the university, folder 1, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>89</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>90</sup> Letter to Edward M. Baker from John M. Ellison, 24 December 1942, folder 19, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>91</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>92</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>93</sup> Letter from Horace A. White to John M. Ellison, folder 25, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>94</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>95</sup> Letter to Horace A. White from John M. Ellison, folder 25, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>96</sup> Grundman, "Northern Baptists," 26.
- <sup>97</sup> Ibid. 29.
- <sup>98</sup> Ibid. 29.
- <sup>99</sup> For a more complete discussion of this issue see Adolph H. Grundman, "Northern Baptists and the Founding of Virginia Union University: The Perils of Paternalism." *Journal of Negro History* 63 (1, January, 1978).
- <sup>100</sup> In a letter to Sidney E. Hening from John M. Ellison dated 15 April 1941, Ellison suggests that Davis and Bassett were the authors of the "Anonymous Letter." Box 144, (ABHSA).
- <sup>101</sup> Address to the Faculty and Staff of Virginia Union University, 20 September 1943. folder 73, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>102</sup> Ibid.



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- <sup>103</sup> Letter to J. E. Fountain from John M. Ellison, 20 November 1942, folder 18, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>104</sup> Letter to Clarence R. Harper from John M. Ellison, 2 November 1942, folder 18, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>105</sup> Open letter to Virginia Union University's student body from John M. Ellison, n.d., folder 50, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>106</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>107</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>108</sup> Letter to George R. Yancy from John M. Ellison, 2 December 1942, folder 19, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>109</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>110</sup> Letter to J. E. Fountain from John M. Ellison, folder 18, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>111</sup> Letter to J. A. Martin from John M. Ellison, folder 6, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>112</sup> Letter from Thomas L. Dabney to John M. Ellison, 6 August 1943, folder, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>113</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>114</sup> Letter from Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. to John M. Ellison, 27 February 1941, box 144, ABHSA. Adam Clayton Powell became the pastor of Harlem's prominent Abyssinian Baptist Church in 1908. He was father of the 20<sup>th</sup> century New York City politician, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.
- <sup>115</sup> Letter from Margaret Harrington to John M. Ellison, 17 June 1943, folder 25, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>116</sup> Letter from Elizabeth McDaniel to John M. Ellison, June 1941, folder 1, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>117</sup> Letter to Elizabeth McDaniel to John M. Ellison, June 1941, folder 1, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>118</sup> Letter from Helen Lee to John M. Ellison, 10 June 1943, folder 25, Ellison Papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>119</sup> Letter to Helen Lee from John M. Ellison, June 1943, folder 25, Ellison Papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>120</sup> Letter from Benjamin E. Mays to John M. Ellison, 18 June 1943, folder 25, Ellison Papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>121</sup> Letter to Benjamin E. Mays from John M. Ellison, 19 June 1943, folder 28, Ellison Papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>122</sup> Letter to George K. McKinney from John M. Ellison, 26 May 1952, folder 53, Ellison Papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>123</sup> John M. Ellison address to Virginia Union staff and officers, 20 September 1943, folder 73, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>124</sup> John M. Ellison address to Virginia Union Students, 8 July 1953, folder 60, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>125</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>126</sup> Over 800 of Ellison's letters, or approximately 17 percent of his correspondence, from 1941 through 1955 referenced some aspect student aid or support. See Table 19 (Correspondence 1941-1955), Appendix C: Admission, Student Support, and Tuition Issues. Appendix B (Correspondence 1941-1955) contains representative samples of Admission, Student Support, and Tuition Issues categories.
- <sup>127</sup> Letter to Clarence R. Harper from John M. Ellison, 3 November 1942, folder 18, Ellison Papers, (VUU-WLA).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### An Institution that Will Fit Your Men and Women

The result of the fusion in 1899 of the Richmond Theological Seminary for Freedmen and Wayland Seminary, Virginia Union University was established to educate blacks in “the knowledge, rights, privileges, and duties of Christian citizenship and to prepare leaders—theological and intellectual—among their people.” According to the stated aims of the university published in their 1947-1948 *Bulletin*, the institution had “never swerved from [that] purpose.”<sup>128</sup> Ellison, as well as those closely associated with the administration of the university, was intent on ensuring the university would not swerve from its purpose during his presidency. For an institution that boldly proclaimed its fundamental contribution to American education was keeping “alive the best traditions of liberal scholarship inherent in the small, Christian college ... in an atmosphere of sound learning and Christian living,” an adherence to these fundamental traditions by Ellison was extremely important.<sup>129</sup>

### To Maintain the High Ideals and Traditions

Virginia Union University had established itself as a dominant force in the training of black Baptist preachers and teachers well before Ellison’s appointment as president in 1941. Dating back to 1865, Virginia Union and Morehouse College in Atlanta were known as the premier institutions for developing “well-equipped and highly organized” pastors for service to black community—pastors who were highly sought after by black Baptist congregations throughout the United States.<sup>130</sup> Theodore F. Adams took the occasion of Ellison’s induction as Virginia Union’s president to remind him of his position in the institution’s history. “You are the fourth in a distinguished line of men,” Adams observed. “They are saying to you, as we do, to maintain the high ideals

and traditions which have made Virginia Union a great school.”<sup>131</sup> And, in a remark that addressed the milieu of segregated America in the 1940s, particularly in the South, Adams acknowledged the unique function of Virginia Union and indeed all other black colleges and universities at that time: “the men who believed in the Lord God have built well in the past here an educational institution that will fit your men and women to fit the needs of life today, and build a better tomorrow.”<sup>132</sup> Adams, as president of Virginia Union’s board of trustees, was confident that Ellison was well-prepared for the new responsibility as president. He also believed Ellison was more than capable of sustaining an institution originally established for the express purpose of building better tomorrows for the community of freedmen that compelled its founding.

Benjamin E. Mays, president of Morehouse College, in offering Ellison’s inaugural prayer was more direct in his heavenly entreaty for a successful Ellison presidency. His words were spoken, no doubt, as a result of his own experience as president of an institution with a similar history. Mays prayed, “In hours of joy and sadness; in moments of ease and anxiety; in periods of success and failure; in times of darkness and light—never leave him alone—for all of these experiences will come to him in this office.”<sup>133</sup> Echoing the significance of the historical legacy found in Adams’s remarks, Mays concluded his prayer:

May the new president prove himself worthy of the great trust committed to his care. Help him walk manly in the footsteps of his predecessors. Enable him to keep faith with those heroic souls who, possessed with a sense of mission, came to this place decades ago in order that the newly emancipated people might have light; souls who had faith in a people at a time when it was unpopular to believe in the Negro race. Help him to hold high the torch, which they though dead, pass on to him today.<sup>134</sup>

Ellison, keenly aware of the significance of his appointment as president of a black private Christian university welcomed the practical counsel as well as the spiritual focus of the remarks made by Adams and Mays. Ellison offered the following:

The Christian college is peculiarly fitted to offer special educational service. ... The possession of intelligence [however] is not sufficient in any social and human relationship. There is no guarantee that the possession of it will always mean its rightful use. Our intelligence must be under girded with moral and spiritual sanctions.<sup>135</sup>

In those remarks, Ellison's appreciation of the depth of Adams's and Mays's comments is clear, and they express his understanding of the relationship between intelligence and moral and spiritual development. A combination of the three, in his estimation, would be necessary for the fitting of Virginia Union men and women to fit the needs of life of that day while building for better tomorrows.

#### **Accepting the Responsibility and Identifying the Challenge**

Ellison's acceptance remarks reflect both his understanding of the historical significance of his appointment and his personal commitment to carry on the tradition of his predecessors—a tradition that meant transmitting “college experiences and disciplines into practical and helpful community living.”<sup>136</sup> From the outset, Ellison intended his presidency to be consistent with the goals and objectives of its founders and its previous presidents, but he also wanted to be a unifying force between the old and the new. “I am solemnly moved as I pause to remember the faith, achievements and unselfish service of the founders,” Ellison assured the invited guest assembled at his inauguration on October 17, 1941. Acknowledging their contributions, Ellison was resolute in expressing both his respect for the resolve of those early pioneers of black education and his intent on building upon their legacy. “I must also pay homage to the heroism and consecration of

my predecessors,” he conceded, and “I pledge to you and to them unalloyed reverence and loyalty to the ideals and faith that motivated them.”<sup>137</sup>

The ideals and that faith of which Ellison spoke were grounded in the notion that a black Christian college was, at its core, an agency of social change. Ellison’s predecessors understood that fact and Ellison committed his presidency to sustaining an atmosphere at Virginia Union in which a student’s sense of social-mindedness would be nurtured, and in which students were expected to transfer their college experiences into practical and useful community activities, either through the church as pastors, or through the broader community as teachers, businessmen and parents. Virginia Union University, Ellison asserted:

must ever [keep] in mind that it is an integral part of the communities which maintain it and for which it exists.... The worth of what [a student] gains in the classroom and in all his participations is tested by how he shares these experiences when he returns to the community.... The community needs to know how it can organize for social, economic, moral and religious improvement—how it can best utilize its resources. It has a right to look to the college as the institution that is not only prepared intellectually and scientifically to give leadership, guidance and interpretation, but as one that has the social passion to serve.... Our obligation is to lift the vision and the level of living in the community.<sup>138</sup>

At the core of Ellison’s vision was the belief that what the black community needed, especially during the tumultuous period between *Plessy v. Ferguson* and *Brown v. the Board of Education*,<sup>139</sup> was well-trained leadership. More specifically, Ellison believed what was required above all else was well-trained *Christian* leadership.

Ellison, on the occasion of his inauguration, pledged that he was:

committed to the conviction that leadership, to be most effective, must be carefully and definitely trained. The training should include such factors as leadership techniques, social-mindedness ... orientation in the principles of cooperation, social planning, and many others.... Because of the prestige that institutional backing gives such leadership, it is preferable that it grow out of the church and school.... [The church] is still the most potent force in the social and moral development of the community.<sup>140</sup>

And, from Ellison's perspective, graduates of Virginia Union University, especially its school of religion, were the most "carefully and definitely trained" individuals available to guide the black church in service to the black community.<sup>141</sup>

### **The Spiritual and Educational Life of Our Community**

As an alumnus, and as the president of Virginia Union, Ellison's personal experiences helped to construct his belief in the capacity of Virginia Union graduates to become leaders within the black community. The primary method to achieving such an end meant the continued implementation of a generic strategy for leadership development, which Ellison saw as the original intent of the institution. Such leadership development, an inherent aspect of Virginia Union's training, would result in the planting of school of religion graduates in positions of church leadership throughout the country. Ellison believed the well-trained pastor—a Virginia Union trained pastor—could have a significant and ameliorating effect on the secular as well as the spiritual lives of blacks living in the racially-segregated and opportunity-constrained social order that was America between 1896 and 1954. On the training students received at Virginia Union, Ellison remarked: "We believe in our education that we seek the highest moral and spiritual values. We must not only be educated people, but good people—that is honest, of high moral character, trustworthy and socially helpful and inspiring to others," especially through their pastors.<sup>142</sup> And Ellison was not above pushing his agenda.

Writing to Mrs. Johnella Jackson, an administrator at the Virginia State College for Negroes (now Virginia State University) in Petersburg, Virginia and a member of the Gilfield Baptist Church of Petersburg, Ellison commented on Gilfield Baptist Church's efforts to secure a good pastor.

I am writing to you as one among many people interested is securing a good pastor for the Gilfield Baptist Church of Petersburg.... I am so anxious that the church will not make a mistake and overlook the best available person for one who may be inferior.... I think I know some of the people who are advising behind the scenes. That of itself is most regrettable. The whole thing is cast on a competitive basis which I feel should not enter the heart of a great church.<sup>143</sup>

Ellison then offered an appraisal of one of the candidates the church is considering: an appraisal that even Ellison admitted was self-serving in that he was recommending one of his own students:

I may seem a bit selfish, but I pray that I am not when I say that the best man before you now, and quite superior to all who have been before you is the Reverend T. Wyatt Walker of Virginia Union University.... Mr. Walker is a man of high character—honest, consecrated, fervent in his religious convictions and faith, and whole-heartedly committed to the work of the Christian ministry.<sup>144</sup>

In summarizing his appraisal of Walker, Ellison concluded:

As you already know, he is a good speaker without any foolish and superficial demonstration; one who will win young people as well as elders.... He is an excellent student ... one of the few students who has equipped himself in the study of New Testament Greek.... Though he is a young man, I believe his youthfulness will be an asset to Gilfield Church and the entire community.<sup>145</sup>

Ellison's primary interest in involving himself in such decisions was not so much to ensure a Virginia Union trained minister would be hired as pastor, although that was certainly desirable, Ellison believed that the black community, through educated church leadership, would be better served by men who were academically well-prepared. Such preparation would equip them to assess and respond to issues of both a spiritual and a secular nature. This belief was especially significant in an era that witnessed some of the first successful battles against legal segregation in the United States.

Ellison campaigned throughout his presidency to ensure quality in the Virginia clergy. Writing to Dr. B. A. Harrison of Franklin, Virginia concerning the church's pastoral selection process, he opined, "I know you will pardon me for appearing to have personal interest in the matter.... But for more that twenty years now I have been most

active in trying to improve the ministry of our churches.”<sup>146</sup> As a former pastor, and as head of a university with a prominent school of religion, Ellison believed black Baptist churches made two critical mistakes when selecting pastors. First, too many churches were concerned more with employing pastors who performed the gospel rather than taught the gospel. In Ellison’s words, the churches “elect men on the judgment of people who do not take into account the essentials of character and intelligence.”<sup>147</sup> The other mistake was “to elect men who may not be recommended by responsible people.”<sup>148</sup> Ellison, as president of an institution with a significant school of religion, was frequently engaged in assisting churches, such as Dr. Harrison’s, to improve the quality of their leadership and avoid such mistakes. In a more forceful statement, Ellison cautions Dr. Harrison:

Now the Reverend Preston Hayes has been before your church as [has]...the Reverend James Banks—a very fine man. You will not find men superior in character and intelligence to these two well-trained young men.... I mention this to you as an intelligent religious layman, and because I know you as a leader in your community.... Please do not make the mistake that some churches too often make—pick men for arousement rather than character and intelligence.<sup>149</sup>

Such ill-advised decisions in which churches chose their pastors for their theatrical religious speechifying rather than for their capacity at measured biblical oratory, in Ellison’s estimation, would “always end disastrously.”<sup>150</sup>

Churches across the country actively sought out Virginia Union’s School of Religion graduates as pastoral candidates. A request from Michigan Avenue Baptist Church in Buffalo, New York is illustrative of the many such requests Ellison received during his tenure as president.<sup>151</sup> Mr. G. Lee Edwards, Chairman of the Deacon Board of the church wrote Ellison the following:

My dear Dr. Rev. J. Edward Nash an alumnus of your Schol [sic], whom I think you know is about to retire from the pastorate of our, the Michigan Ave. Baptist church of this city which he will have served for sixty years this coming June. We



are writing to ask you please to put us in touch with some one with whom we may arrange to fill our pulpit. We will be very thankful to you.<sup>152</sup>

Ellison acknowledged Edwards's letter on April 16, 1953: "We will be very glad to recommend desirable and capable young men.... Within the next day or two I shall send you names of members of our senior class or recent graduates from our School of Religion."<sup>153</sup> Further, Ellison specifically suggested that, Wellington D. Abrams, a 1952 graduate of the university, would be an "inspiring preacher and ... his friendship warm and convincing."<sup>154</sup> And, of course, as a Virginia Union graduate, Edwards would surely find Wellington D. Abrams to be intellectually competent, moderate in temperament, and a well-equipped and highly organized candidate.

### **Students Well-Equipped and Highly Organized**

In April of 1953, Ellison received a request from the North Carolina Mutual Life Assurance Company to explain why blacks should go to college. The company was preparing a featured article on education in the company's upcoming quarterly publication *The Whetstone*.<sup>155</sup> In Ellison's reply is found the core of the qualities he believed a well-equipped and highly organized individual should possess.

Many people go to college with the primary purpose of gaining skills by which to make a living. Such a purpose is laudable, indeed, but not enough.... There is a vast number in college who are moved by a mighty and compelling purpose. They not only seek skills, but culture and a deeper understanding of life, people, and their universe. Thus college may mean any or all of the following:

1. College experience and discipline help to make their purpose meaningful and challenging.
2. The search and discipline are sources of inspiration.
3. A college education broadens one's world as it helps us to appreciate the past: history, art, classical literature—the present, and plan for the future.
4. College education helps us to formulate a satisfying philosophy of life—for leisure, for work, and for service to others.<sup>156</sup>

For Ellison, a well-equipped and highly organized individual, particularly for the Baptist ministry, meant that a Virginia Union graduate should be educated to be a disciplined,

purposeful, inspired, well-rounded, intelligent individual committed to the service of others. Ellison's administrative philosophy, a philosophy certainly grounded in his own experience as a Virginia Union student, professor, and administrator, was to do all within the scope of his office to support students in the pursuit of those transcendent core qualities.

Throughout his presidency, Ellison displayed a consistent pattern of supporting and being involved in the lives of the Virginia Union students. Such support and involvement is demonstrated by his ongoing correspondence with the parents or guardians of students, the churches, the organizations that provided financial support to students, and with the student themselves. Alberta Lorean Moody, a student from Philadelphia, was one of the many recipients of Ellison's assistance. On February 9, 1943, Ellison wrote to the pastor of the First African Baptist Church in Philadelphia, Dr. W. H. Harrod, concerning Ms. Moody's tenuous financial situation, "I am writing you in the interest of Miss Alberta Moody a member of the First African Baptist Church," Ellison began, "[She] is having difficulty in paying her bills for the second semester.... So far she has been unable to pay anything and is very much disturbed. I told to her," Ellison confided to Harrod, "to give her time and energy to her studies and not to spend too much of it worrying about her bills."<sup>157</sup> No doubt his intercession served to calm and reassure Miss Moody, help her refocus her attention on her academic tasks, and assure her everything would certainly work out in addition to seeking financial assistance for her from her church. Noting that Ms. Moody was quite a capable student, Ellison concluded, "I think Miss Moody is a very deserving girl, both from the point-of-view of her conduct and her scholarship. I have no doubt that anything the church will do will be a good investment."<sup>158</sup> Ellison was not above trying to involve a student's community, through

the local church, in aiding a student financially. Ellison understood any support a student received meant support for the university. Ultimately, a church's support spared the university that portion of the student's cost it would have had to assume otherwise.

Ellison also reminded local churches the community would receive an educated individual in return for their support. And, in an example of his assurance that deserving students such as Ms. Moody would be supported to the best of the university's ability, Ellison assured pastor Harrod that "we shall do our best to help her from this end."<sup>159</sup>

Ellison did not stop with his letter to Pastor Harrod in seeking support for Ms. Moody however. At the request of Miss Moody, Ellison wrote to the Elks Lodge in Washington, D. C., as a possible source of financial support for her continued education.

Ellison inquired:

Miss. Alberta Moody ... told me that ... the Elks Educational Committee might offer her some aid. Miss Moody is very much in need at this time, and if there is such a possibility, I would be very glad to be advised so that I can make arrangements for her staying in school. [She] is a very worthy young woman, does her work well, and conducts herself in a very commendable way.... Please let me know if there is some chance of her getting some help through your splendid organization.<sup>160</sup>

Although the Elks Educational Committee was unable to offer any support to Ms. Moody, as a result of the organizations rules for the distribution of educational funds, she was able to continue her studies at the university through the efforts of Ellison and the support of her church.

### **An Unexpected Source of Support**

During the war years two initiatives developed outside of Ellison's control. Those initiatives were designed to secure financial resources for Virginia Union enhancing Ellison's ability to support students needing financial assistance. One of these initiatives became extremely successful and one did not. In February 1943, Ellison received a letter

from Fredrick D. Patterson, president of Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University) in Alabama.<sup>161</sup> Dr. Patterson had the idea that a number of private black colleges and universities should join together in a combined effort to raise funds for their institutions.

Patterson informed Ellison that he had

discussed the matter ... with a few presidents of private colleges. They have indicated their interest and expressed willingness to cooperate. I should like to know your views and if you would be willing to join a dozen or fifteen other college presidents in a discussion of this plan in the near future.<sup>162</sup>

The fact that Ellison was included in the small group of HBCUs presidents to be contacted indicates his standing in the black higher education community. Using what amounts to a snowball method of gaining other participants, Patterson asked Ellison to suggest other institutions that, in his opinion, would be prominent enough to contribute to such an undertaking. Patterson asked:

I should also like to have you list ... approximately fourteen other private colleges which you feel because of their national contribution in the education of Negro youth might well be included in a joint appeal such as is hereby proposed.<sup>163</sup>

And, in order to ensure Ellison's confidentiality at this stage in the process, Patterson suggested, "If you prefer, the colleges can be typed on a blank sheet of paper without identification of the writer."<sup>164</sup>

On February 10, 1943, Ellison responded to Patterson's request via airmail special delivery stating:

I want to thank you for your letter and for the enclosed statement which you prepared for the Pittsburgh Courier.... I should like to have you list me as one of those who will want to cooperate to the fullest extent in working out such a plan. Whenever you are ready for a conference where such a matter can be thoroughly discussed and the plans made for carrying out this program—count on me.<sup>165</sup>

The organization that developed out of this initial correspondence between Patterson, Ellison, and twenty-five other presidents of private black colleges became the United

Negro College Fund (UNCF).<sup>166</sup> UNCF was incorporated in 1944 and remains one of the leading sources of financial support to private black colleges.<sup>167</sup>

Another attempt to secure financial support for a trio of private black colleges developed around the same time as the UNCF. Dr. Vernon Johns, pastor of the Court Street Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, initiated that attempt.<sup>168</sup> Dr. Johns suggested to Robert P. Daniel, president of Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, that he would like to spearhead an effort to raise financial support for three specific institutions: Morehouse College, Shaw University, and Virginia Union University. President Daniel replied that, “Ellison, Mays, and I are to be together ... at a meeting in Atlanta. At that time I had planned to discuss with them the matter which we talked about concerning your service in behalf of our three schools.”<sup>169</sup> Daniel further asked Johns to develop a proposal outlining his plan to raise funds for the three institutions. Johns expressed a number of reasons that lead him to believe he could raise funds for the three schools. He had managed to raise \$1400 for black education in one year at his church despite the fact that his church was only paying him \$1200 a year. Johns also believed that because of the increased and improved administrative authority of blacks at these institutions, blacks should be challenged to provide more of their support. Johns also calculated that a simultaneous fundraising campaign would facilitate the involvement of the entire community. At the core of Johns’s reasoning for becoming a fundraiser for these institutions was his deep personal respect for the three presidents and the three institutions they headed. “I have a warm personal feeling for the Gentlemen heading the colleges in question,” Johns told President Daniel. And “I have great respect for these particular institutions.”<sup>170</sup>

Ellison wrote to Johns on March 12, 1943 informing him that he had received a copy of his proposal and that he believed something could be worked out that was “mutually agreeable to all concerned.”<sup>171</sup> Mutually agreeable to all concerned meant that not only would the three institutions receive the benefits of Johns’ fundraising efforts, Johns himself would receive personal and operating expenses in addition to a percentage of the proceeds he actually raised.<sup>172</sup> After assessing the Johns proposal, presidents Daniel, Ellison, and Mays recognized the similarity with and the conflict between the Johns proposal and Frederick D. Patterson’s proposal to the presidents of the private black colleges that established the UNCF. Ultimately, Daniel, Ellison, and Mays decided to participate in Patterson’s proposed venture, joining with the other black college and university presidents in that effort.<sup>173</sup>

#### **“Virginia Union is being Seriously Affected by Discrimination”**

By March of 1943, the decision for Presidents Daniel, Ellison, Mays, and others to join in the combined effort to raise funds was an easy one for them to make. The war effort reduced the ranks of male students as well as sources of financial support to practically every institution of higher education in the nation both black and white. Some institutions of higher education, however, were helped through this period by federal intervention. The federal government contracted with approximately 500 white institutions to serve as specialized Army and Navy training centers during the war years.<sup>174</sup> Such intervention, and the financial boon that accompanied it, eluded Virginia Union University and practically every other black institution of higher education in the United States. Benjamin E. Mays wrote an extensive letter to Ellison criticizing the federal government’s apparent discriminatory practices in not allocating contracts to black institutions to serve as training centers for the Army and Navy. Mays complained:

It seems clear to me that the Government is discriminating against the Negro liberal arts colleges in its selection of schools to do the specialized Army and Navy training work.... It is true that Tuskegee, Hampton, Wilberforce, West Virginia State, Prairie View A & T (Greensboro), and Howard have been selected but they are all ROTC centers.... [But] not only does [the lack of contracts] keep Negro colleges from making their maximum contribution to the war effort, but it keeps Negro colleges from receiving some financial support from the government that will enable them to survive for the duration.... This cuts deep.<sup>175</sup>

Mays asked Ellison to persuade 75 to 100 Virginia Union graduates to inquire of Paul V. McNutt, Chairman of the War Man Power Commission, whether black liberal arts colleges were to be given an opportunity to serve as basic training centers like their white counterparts. "The colleges that are qualified to do a good job in physics, chemistry, mathematics, history, English, geography, and such courses, are able to do the work required by the Government," Mays insisted.<sup>176</sup> Knowing that Virginia Union was a coeducational institution, Mays conceded that Virginia Union might be able to sustain itself through increased enrollments of women; the same tactic was not an option for Morehouse as an all male institution. Ellison agreed with Mays and assured him that he would initiate a "vigorous effort in the interest of Negro Liberal Arts Colleges sharing in the specialized army and navy training work. You may rest assured," Ellison informed Mays, "that Virginia Union, like any other of the schools, is being seriously affected by this apparent discrimination." Ellison also informed Mays that he would write Paul V. McNutt, Chairman of the War Manpower, concerning the status of "Negro ... Colleges" and how, if at all, they were going to be used for such training.<sup>177</sup>

### **Virginia Union a Good Place to Study and Develop**

Financial issues would remain a constant throughout Ellison's presidency, as would his concern for the intellectual, moral, and personal development of Virginia Union students and graduates. "Your letter came in my absence a few days ago," Ellison informed Samuel M. Jackson, whose daughter was a Virginia Union student. "I have just

talked with [her] a little while ago. She seems very happy and to be going forward with her work in a fine way.”<sup>178</sup> Several weeks prior to Ellison’s letter Jenkins had thanked Ellison for the personal consideration he had given his daughter and assured Ellison that he intended to demonstrate his “appreciation in a more tangible way when the opportunity presents itself. I would highly appreciate,” he continued, “[your] advising her as to the best steps to take ... and to govern herself accordingly.”<sup>179</sup> Your daughter “is always cheerful and courteous. I am particularly happy to note that,” Ellison assured the understandably concerned father, “rest assured that I shall keep in touch with her and help her in every way possible as she may need.”<sup>180</sup> No doubt Ellison did exactly what he said he would do. The amount of correspondence Ellison generated between himself, parents, and students indicates that he personally interacted with a considerable number of students while president.

As would be expected, not all of Ellison’s correspondence with parents was of a positive nature. From time to time, Ellison had to communicate disappointing student outcomes, even after having gone his customary second mile in the interest of students and parents. “I have not said this to the boy,” wrote Dr. Joseph C. Carroll of Indianapolis, Indiana concerning his son who was asked to withdraw from the university, “but I felt and still feel that the punishment was out of all proportions to the seriousness of the offense, since that was not the first time boys have been giulty [sic] of drinking parties in college, and it will not be the last, even on the campus of Union.”<sup>181</sup> Ellison responded to Dr. Carroll one week later assuring him that he was personally involved in his son’s situation and that he had gone

quite beyond the “second mile” in dealing with him considering the fact that he was your son. I have the fear that our extreme sympathy and interest and tolerance was not effective. Personally, I took him into consultation constantly. I was kind



to him, but tried to be positive for his own good. Unfortunately, that didn't seem to help him.<sup>182</sup>

Ellison assured Dr. Carroll his son's drinking was not the only reason he was asked to leave the university. "Your son was not asked to withdraw from school merely on account of his conduct, but as much because of his refusal to attend classes and to live up to his obligations as a student" Ellison forcefully informed the understandably disappointed father.<sup>183</sup>

In another incident involving a female student from Muskogee, Oklahoma, Ellison not only had to inform the parents of Miss Ivy Joe Reed of her misbehavior but the church association that supported her while a student at Virginia Union as well. "We regret very much that we find it inadvisable to keep your daughter in school," Ellison's letter began, "I believe that she is a girl with a good mind and with possibilities. However, I think that she is not willing to submit herself to the rigid discipline and accept the guidance that we here at Virginia Union would like to offer her."<sup>184</sup> In a compassionate show of support for Miss Reed, Ellison offered this suggestion to her father and mother, "so it seems to us that it is much better that she withdraw from Virginia Union and go to some school nearer her home where she can have the help of her home influence."<sup>185</sup> "We thought it alright for her to go. We did not know that there was any concern about her conduct in school,"<sup>186</sup> Ivy Joe's parents said in a letter to Ellison. "We realize that your being the president...you know what should be done....Whatever are your vews [sic] in regard to her, we wholeheartedly agree." Ivy Joe's parents assured Ellison in conclusion that they did "not approve of the wrong things she might be doing ... and it is our exclusive purpose to cooperate with you in the fullest."<sup>187</sup>

Ellison did not discuss the full details related to Miss Reed's dismissal with her parents, perhaps sparing them further distress. He did, however, share such details with Reverend A. L. Branch who was the Moderator of the Creek District Baptist Association in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the organization providing financial support for Miss Reed to attend Virginia Union. Ellison informed Reverend Branch:

It is with real regret that I write you regarding Miss Ivy Joe Reed whom your Association has generously helped during the year. We have made every possible effort to help Miss Reed make her adjustment and to live up to a record worthy of the confidence and support of the Association. But I am convinced that we just cannot help Miss Reed.... Her conduct throughout the year has been most unsatisfactory.... On several occasions she has been known to be either intoxicated or near intoxicated. I mention this as just one sample of her conduct.<sup>188</sup>

True to his "second mile" philosophy of student engagement, Ellison took time to thoroughly investigate Miss Reed's situation and uncovered a startling bit of information.

Ellison related his findings to Pastor Branch:

On investigation, I found that Miss Reed is not a Christian—not only that, but isn't interested in religion. It seems rather unfortunate that a church Association would be supporting a girl who is in no way related to the Church, and with no interest in religion.... We have had other students from Oklahoma who have lived up to a very high record.... Miss Cleomine Lewis of Tulsa [for example] ... is making an excellent record.... Today she is the leader of the choir of the great Metropolitan Church in Washington, D. C.<sup>189</sup>

Ellison ended his letter to Pastor Branch with the following suggestion, "we would much prefer that when churches or church groups send us students, that they would at least be religious inclined—and even more, members of some church."<sup>190</sup> Ellison also assured Mrs. Vassie B. Marsh the Corresponding Secretary of the Creek District Baptist Association that, "we did all we could to be helpful to this young lady but it was impossible.... I believe she would have been a problem anywhere. I doubt that she would have stayed as long at any other place."<sup>191</sup>

Often Ellison received and responded to letters similar to that of Reverend P. W. Cook of Cape Charles, Virginia. “Permit me to thank you for the very personal interest you have shown in my boy John B. It is my earnest desire that he continue in pursuit of those essentials for the Christian Ministry,” wrote Cook. As was his custom, Ellison responded in a positive, affirming tone, “it is a real delight to have your fine son here.... He is a very exemplary young man. His presence brought back the tradition of the years past.”<sup>192</sup>

From time to time, Ellison as president of the university was asked to recommend Virginia Union students for graduate study to various colleges and universities that accepted black graduate students. One such student was Z. Orphelia Graves. In 1941, Ellison recommended Z. Orphelia Graves to the graduate program in Sociology at Fisk University in Nashville, which at the time was under the direction of Professor Charles S. Johnson.<sup>193</sup> Two years later Johnson wrote to Ellison with the following update and request:

I thought you would be interested in knowing that Miss Z. Orphelia Graves, whom you recommended to us for graduate work two years ago, received her Master’s degree on May 17<sup>th</sup>. And this leads me to ask if you have any prospects for graduate work here. If so, I would be glad to have the names and addresses, or you might have such persons communicate directly with this department.<sup>194</sup>

“I am glad to have your letter telling me of the successful work of Miss Orphelia Graves,” Ellison told Johnson eleven days later. Assured that Virginia Union students such as Miss. Graves were well-equipped by their experience at Union, Ellison confidently responded, “I felt sure that she would do that.”<sup>195</sup> Ellison responded to Johnson’s request for prospective students by recommending Emily Madden and Florence B. Perkins, two recent Virginia Union graduates majoring in Sociology—both of whom, it appears, were admitted to the program.

### **Moving Beyond Tradition**

From his inauguration as president of the university in 1941 through his retirement in 1955, Ellison maintained at Virginia Union University an institution that, paraphrasing the words of Theodore F. Adams, was fit for his men and women. Ellison's vision for the university was certainly grounded in the traditions of an optimistic past to be sure. Yet, his was a much more economically, politically, and socially inclusive vision than his predecessors could have imagined.

His vision was unfettered by the constraints of the past; it was a vision unwilling to accept a life, for himself or his students, circumscribed by legal mandate and social custom. Ellison was as unyielding and vocal in his commitment to race advancement as were those presidents with whom he regularly communicated, such as Mordecai Johnson, Benjamin Mays, and Frederick Patterson, although his voice was heard on the smaller and less visible venue that was Virginia Union University. His commitment to race advancement was well known. A commitment that was recognized by one of the leading investigators of the black experience of the day, Charles S. Johnson who, in 1944 asked Ellison to become a charter member of the Southern Regional Council. The Council's purpose, according to Johnson, was to improve the:

economic, civic, and racial conditions in the South ... to attain through research and action programs the ideals and practices of equal opportunity for all peoples ... to reduce race tension, the basis of racial tension, racial misunderstanding, and racial mistrust ... and to cooperate with local, state, and regional agencies ... in the attainment of the desires objectives.<sup>196</sup>

A year later Johnson invited Ellison to attend the Second Annual Institute of Race

Relations at Fisk University. Johnson informed Ellison:

You will note from the outline of the program an unusual opportunity has developed ... for persons who are seriously and maturely dealing with the welter of social, economic, cultural and educational issues involving race relations.... I

believe it would be far from a misuse of urgent time ... if [you] saw fit to spend a period here.<sup>197</sup>

Carter G. Woodson, a pioneer in the scholarly investigation of the history of the black diaspora, was aware of Ellison's commitment to advancing racial equality for blacks. He asked Ellison to deliver an address "dealing scientifically with some neglected aspect of the past of the Negro" at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History.<sup>198</sup> Ellison was unable to attend either of these pioneering programs because of prior commitments. Nevertheless, his stature within the black higher education community at that time is confirmed by Johnson's and Woodson's personal invitations.

Ellison's method of preserving Virginia Union University as an institution that fit his men and women was a practical one. He maintained ties to the institution's past in terms of the intellectual, moral, and spiritual heritage that served almost four generations of Unionites so well. Where he differed with past leadership was in his approach to race advancement. He labored to advance civil rights and education for blacks while championing interracial cooperation. Ellison summed up his position in a statement made to Dr. J. L. Horace pastor of Monumental Baptist Church in Chicago. Ellison stated:

The situation in which we find ourselves today is having a revolutionary effect upon our thinking. Social thinking, economic thinking, political thinking—these, we may believe, are taking a direction which only occasionally one even anticipated a few years ago.... The important thing, however, is that men and women of good will and faith should everywhere face the revolutionary issues and conditions now involving human society. They must begin now to think through these issues and accept it as their responsibility to act.<sup>199</sup>

People need guidance to think through issues and act responsibly however. And what better place was there for that guidance to come from than churches guided by a phalanx of Virginia Union trained ministers? "The church and its leadership have an inescapable obligation," Ellison asserted, "if the Negro will here and now face this challenge and

seize this unparalleled opportunity, [he] will capture the vision, the purpose, the undaunted faith and courage of an oncoming generation whose chief responsibility will be to reshape society.”<sup>200</sup>

Under Ellison’s leadership, Virginia Union University was, in one respect, the institution it had been in the past—an institution capable of preparing well-trained and highly organized men and women for leadership, be it spiritual or secular. In another respect, it was becoming what it never had been—an institution preparing “revolutionary, dynamic, purposeful and channeled” men and women who were well-prepared as a result of Ellison’s lifelong dedication to the university.<sup>201</sup> Men and women grounded in the certainty of the past yet well fit for the uncertain challenges of a post-*Brown* America.

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<sup>128</sup> Virginia Union Bulletin, Catalog of Virginia Union University, Announcements for 1947-1948, April, 1947, Volume XLVII, Number 6. 17.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Inauguration speeches, 17 October 1941, folder 150, Section XIII-1A, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>131</sup> Inauguration speeches, folder 150, Section XI, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Inauguration speeches, folder 150, Section XII, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Inauguration speeches, folder 150, Section XIII-3B, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>136</sup> Inauguration speeches, folder 150, Section XIII-1B, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>137</sup> Inauguration speeches, folder 150, Section XIII, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>138</sup> Inauguration speeches, folder 150, Section XIII-2, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>139</sup> 163 U.S. 537 (1896); 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

<sup>140</sup> Inauguration speeches, folder 150, Section XIII-3A, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> John M. Ellison address to Virginia Union staff and university officers, 20 September 1953, folder 73, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>143</sup> Letter to Mrs. Johnella Jackson from John M. Ellison, 24 September 1952, folder 54, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Letter to Dr. B. A. Harrison from John M. Ellison, 24 September 1952, folder 54, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>147</sup> Letter to B. A. Harrison from John M. Ellison, 24 September 1952, folder 54, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ellison received 52 pastoral appointment requests during his presidency and 39 requests for Virginia Union's School of Religion students to serve as guest preachers. In addition, Ellison received 270 requests himself to either preach or speak at churches or other services. Ellison also was asked to provide 232 recommendations many of which dealt specifically with pastoral appointments.

<sup>152</sup> Letter from G. Lee Edwards to John M. Ellison, n.d., folder 57, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Letter to G. Lee Edwards from John M. Ellison, 4 May 1953, folder 57, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>155</sup> Letter from North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company to John M. Ellison, 20 April 1953, folder 57, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>156</sup> John M. Ellison's response to North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company request dated 20, April 1953, folder 57, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>157</sup> Letter to Dr. W. H. Harrod from John M. Ellison, 9 February 1943, folder 21, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Letter to W. H. Harrod from John M. Ellison, 9 February 1943, folder 21. (VUU-WLA).

<sup>160</sup> Letter to The Honorable Judge W. C. Houston from John M. Ellison, 9 February 1943, folder 21, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>161</sup> On Saturday, January 30, 1943 Frederick D. Patterson published a statement in the Pittsburgh Courier titled, "Would It Not Be Wise For Some Negro Schools To Make Joint Appeal To The Public For Funds?" In his statement, Patterson informed readers that private black colleges were receiving a double assault on their ability to survive in the form of the loss of male students to the war effort and the loss of income as a result of that same effort. He noted that the financial situation was especially grave for the private black colleges because these colleges had always relied heavily on the support of philanthropic minded whites for their upkeep and maintenance. In his statement, Patterson suggested for the first time that a unified financial campaign seemed an idea at least worth exploring.

<sup>162</sup> Letter from F. D. Patterson to John M. Ellison, 8 February 1943, folder 21, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Letter to F. D. Patterson from John M. Ellison, 10 February 1943, folder 21, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>166</sup> The History of United Negro College Fund. <http://www.uncf.org/history/default.asp>

<sup>167</sup> Ellison papers. Folder 47. June 1945. United Negro College Fund Campaign Pledge Card. The 1945 United Negro College Fund Campaign Card listed the following 32 member schools: Atlanta University, Atlanta University School of Social Work, Benedict College, Bennett College, Bethune-Cookman College, Bishop College, Clark College, Dillard University, Fisk University, Gammon Theology Seminary, Hampton Institute, Howard University, Johnson C. Smith University, Knoxville College, Lane College, Le Moyne College, Lincoln University, Livingstone College, Morehouse College, Morris Brown College, Paine College, Philander Smith College, Samuel Huston College, Shaw University, Spelman College, Talladega College, Texas College, Tillotson College, Tougaloo College, Tuskegee Institute, Virginia Union University, and Wiley College.

<sup>168</sup> Vernon Johns preceded Martin Luther King, Jr. at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama organizing site of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

<sup>169</sup> Letter from R. P. Daniel to Vernon Johns, 2 March 1943, folder 22, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>170</sup> Letter to R. P. Daniel from Vernon Johns, 8 March 1943, folder 22, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>171</sup> Letter to Vernon Johns from John M. Ellison, 12 March 1943, folder 22, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Letter to F. D. Patterson from John M. Ellison. 10 February 1943, folder 21. Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>174</sup> Letter from Benjamin E. Mays to John M. Ellison, 4 March 1943, folder 22, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Letter to Benjamin E. Mays from John M. Ellison, 11 March 1943, folder 22, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA). The available literature does not indicate if Mays' and Ellison's interventions were successful.

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- <sup>178</sup> Letter to Samuel M. Jenkins from John M. Ellison, 25 October 1943, folder 29, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>179</sup> Letter from Samuel M. Jenkins to John M. Ellison, 8 October 1943, folder 29, Ellison Papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>180</sup> Letter to Samuel M. Jenkins from John M. Ellison, 25 October 1943, folder 29, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>181</sup> Letter from Joseph Carroll to John M. Ellison, 22 June 1943, folder 25, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>182</sup> Letter to Joseph Carroll from John M. Ellison, 29 June 1943, folder 25, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>183</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>184</sup> Letter to Mr. and Mrs. John R. Reed from John M. Ellison, 1 June 1945, folder 47, Ellison papers (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>185</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>186</sup> Letter from Mr. and Mrs. John R. Reed to John M. Ellison, 16 December 1944, folder 43, Ellison papers (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>187</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>188</sup> Letter to A. L. Branch from John M. Ellison, 1 June 1945, folder 47, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>189</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>190</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>191</sup> Letter to Mrs. Vassie B. Marsh from John M. Ellison, 7 June 1945, folder 47, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>192</sup> Letter from Reverend P. W. Cook to John M. Ellison, 29 June 1943, folder 25, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>193</sup> Charles Spurgeon Johnson, famed sociological researcher of American race relations, became the president of Fisk University in 1947. For a discussion of Johnson's Race Relations Institute, see Katrina M. Sanders "Intelligent and Effective Direction: the Fisk University Race Relations Institute and the Struggle for Civil Rights, 1944-1969. New York: Peter Lang.
- <sup>194</sup> Letter from Charles S. Johnson to John M. Ellison, 28 May 1943, folder 25, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>195</sup> Letter to Charles S. Johnson from John M. Ellison, 28 May 1943, folder 25, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>196</sup> Letter from Charles S. Johnson to John M. Ellison, 1 February 1944, folder 33, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>197</sup> Letter from Charles S. Johnson to John M. Ellison, 14 June 1945, folder 47, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>198</sup> Letter from Carter G. Woodson to John M. Ellison, 30 September 1943, folder 29, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>199</sup> Letter to J. L. Horace from John M. Ellison, 14 February 1944, folder 33, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>200</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>201</sup> Ibid.



## CHAPTER FIVE

No One Can be a True Leader Who Does Not Teach the  
Supremacy of Spiritual Values and Live in Accordance with Them

John M. Ellison's rise to the presidency of Virginia Union University was the culmination of years of determined effort to live what he termed "a fuller and more meaningful life."<sup>202</sup> Born on February 2, 1889 in Northumberland County, Virginia, during an era characterized by historian Rayford Logan "as the Nadir of American Democracy," Ellison's childhood was an unusually difficult one.<sup>203</sup> In addition to the economic, political and social uncertainties beginning to marginalize the lives of black Americans during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Ellison experienced several life-changing tragedies as a child. These misfortunes, Ellison would later recall, "had a profound influence" on the direction of his life. His father died when he was only fourteen months old in an accident at sea and his twin brother died at the age of two from undetermined causes. He lived with his grandparents until the age of five when his mother remarried. Ellison's relationship with his stepfather was strained because he "never felt fully accepted" by him.<sup>204</sup> That lack of acceptance by his stepfather was accentuated when, at the age of fourteen, Ellison's stepfather hired him out as a farm laborer for \$7.00 per month. That experience, Ellison acknowledged later in life, caused him "much unrest and anxiety."<sup>205</sup>

Opportunities for formal schooling in Northumberland County, Virginia were limited for Ellison during the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Consequently, at the age of seventeen, Ellison enrolled in the Virginia Normal Industrial Institute (now Virginia State University) in Petersburg, Virginia and remained there for

two and a half years. He transferred to Wayland Academy, the high school component of the University, completing his high school and collegiate work by 1917.<sup>206</sup>

Upon graduation from Virginia Union, Ellison accepted an appointment as pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church in Northumberland County, Virginia. After a number of years as pastor of the church and as principal (and founder) of Northumberland High School, Ellison entered Oberlin College's Graduate School of Theology and was awarded a Master of Arts degree in 1927. Ellison returned to Virginia Normal Industrial Institute, where he had begun his early academic training, in 1927 to become the institution's minister and professor of Sociology and Ethics. Ellison obtained a leave of absence from his position at Virginia Normal Industrial Institute to continue graduate study at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey and was awarded a doctorate in Christian Education and Sociology in 1933.<sup>207</sup>

Ellison was also a Special Research Assistant for the Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station in Blacksburg, Virginia during the summers from 1928 through 1936. He served as pastor of Zion Baptist Church and Professor of Religious Education at Howard University, both in Washington, D.C., from 1934 to 1936. Hired as a Professor of Social Studies and Ethics at Virginia Union University in 1936, Ellison remained in that position until early in 1941 when he was appointed Executive Vice President of the university. In October of the same year, Ellison was appointed as its first black president. Ellison remained in that position until 1955 when he became Chancellor of the university, a position he retained until his death in 1979.<sup>208</sup>

Ellison's quest for a fuller more meaningful life involves more than the accomplishment of his individual goals in and out of the Academy. His was a search for a

fuller more meaningful life that accentuated a collective progress and the spiritual significance of living over secular accomplishments. “If you train a man’s mind and do not train his desires you are simply putting a repeating rifle in the hands of a barbarian,” Ellison advised those attending his inauguration. “There can be no complete living,” he concluded, “if spiritual idealism be left out of life.” Ellison was sincere in his conviction that at “the heart of education and in the life of every individual there be planted some kind of moral control,” that would, “[safeguard] character and [give] direction, lest highly developed powers go wrong.”<sup>209</sup> Ellison’s outlook on life as well as his presidency was based on this principle—a principle that permeated every aspect of his relationships both on and off Virginia Union’s campus.

### **The First Law of Friendship is Sincerity**

Born in an era when Jim Crow segregation was solidifying its hold on the cultural norms of the nation, and assuming the presidency of Virginia Union during a period of widespread racial unrest in the United States,<sup>210</sup> Ellison’s formative years, in childhood, in the pulpit, and in higher education, were influenced by the veil of transparency that characterized the lives of most black Americans at that time. Although forced to live behind the veil, Ellison steadfastly refused to allow himself, his university, and his community to be defined by it. In addition to a declining male enrollment as a result of World War II, a costly and unprecedented building campaign, and the reorganization of the institution’s administrative and financial operations during the first few years of his administration, Ellison bore the additional burden of contradicting the unflattering stereotypes and misconceptions of the culturally-assigned black social identity, an

identity, which, by that time, had developed into a mature indifference to black participation in America's social norms.<sup>211</sup>

Unfortunately, the Christian church was not immune to such indifference.

Reverend George H. Orser, Pastor of the Charlotte Methodist Church in Drakes Branch, Virginia, asked Ellison for his opinion about the local Ruritan (a white service club) Club hosting a minstrel show to raise funds. Reverend Orser wrote:

Today a group of my friends and I were talking about the possibility of our Ruritan Club putting on a "Black-Face" minstrel show in order to raise money. I suggested that I would not be in favor of us staging a minstrel [show], stating that if I were a Negro person I would resent what strikes me as a burlesque of a race [Emphasis in the original].<sup>212</sup>

Reverend Orser's accurate assessment of how blacks would perceive such an undertaking was not matched by his fellow Ruritans, and provides a tangible example of the indifference toward black Americans held by many white Americans on a local level.

My friends thought me extreme, and maintained that I was thinking into the Negro mind something that has never, nor need never, occur there: that there is any harm in a take-off of funny Negro characters and a capitalizing upon their notorious ability at lively music.<sup>213</sup>

Ellison was graciously unequivocal in his response:

I want to be very frank and direct in registering my personal objection to any such show. In doing so I am almost positive that I represent 100% the opinion of thoughtful Negroes.... [Such a] show would appear to represent the average white person's thought of the Negro which seems to be on a low plane.... It seems to me that we owe it to any group of people in times of tension such as these to represent them at their best.<sup>214</sup>

Reverend Orser assured Ellison he would heed his advice on the matter. Ellison thanked Orser for his "good judgment and sincere appraisal of the ability of our racial group."<sup>215</sup> Ellison's disarming response to Reverend Orser's inquiry, a response that demonstrates his desire to develop friendships, is an essential component of who he was as an

individual and what he worked toward as a leader. Ellison summed-up his philosophy on the significance of friendship building in his book on the art of friendship.

No one can be happy without friends. A sympathizing heart finds an echo in a sympathizing bosom. It is one of life's rarest blessings to have a friend to whom one's deepest thoughts can come simply and safely. The first law of friendship is sincerity. He who violates this law will soon find himself destitute of that which he erringly seeks to gain.<sup>216</sup>

Throughout Ellison's correspondence is found a consistent pattern of his establishing and nurturing friendships in both his personal and professional life. In and out of the university, with students and parents, with supporters and detractors, and even with those as unsympathetic as the members of the Drakes Branch Ruritan Club, Ellison pursued friendships. "Where persons are united by bonds of genuine friendship there is nothing that is so productive," Ellison wrote, and "the relation of friends, though not as sharply defined as that of the family and the state, is nevertheless just as real and just as essential to a full and happy life."<sup>217</sup> For Ellison, a full and happy life could be achieved only through the integration of Christian ideals, practices, conduct, and relationships in his daily activities.

### **We Seek To Be Christian in Our Ideals, Practices, Conduct, and Relationships**

To understand Ellison's presidency and his style of leadership, one must understand the man and his relationship to the environment in which he lived and worked. At his core, Ellison was both a pastor and an educator: deeply religious, people centered, and goal oriented. He was very much cut from the same cloth as his missionary-minded predecessors in terms of his missionary-like zeal "to mold students into useful, virtuous, Christian ... citizens."<sup>218</sup> Ellison was, as noted in his autographical essay written while Chancellor of the university, "called to be a minister" while a college

student and he pursued that vocation throughout his career—in the pulpit, in the classroom, and during his presidency.<sup>219</sup>

In the fall of each school term, Ellison gave an address to the faculty and staff of the university designed to inspire and set the stage for the upcoming academic year. In his annual remarks, Ellison consistently reminded everyone of the university's reason for being. In one of his early addresses delivered on September 20, 1943, Ellison reminded those assembled that, “in all activities as teachers, officers, and workers on the campus of Virginia Union University, I wish to urge you that we keep in mind that we are working in a Christian school. Thus, our ideals and emphases must be in harmony with Christian principles.”<sup>220</sup> Directing his remarks specifically to the teaching staff, in which he included himself, Ellison used pastoral phrasing to inspire his professorial fellowship in preparation of the upcoming academic year:

The fellowship of learning and teaching offers an incomparable challenge. May we accept it with courage and consecration. As teachers, we are called upon to enrich, ennoble, and sanctify all experiences that the [students] will be worthy of sharing with other people. Thus the teacher must “study to prove himself a workman that needeth not be ashamed.” We must grow in patience, knowledge and skill. We must develop broad understanding, large sympathies, the ability to interpret accurately, and counsel wisely.<sup>221</sup>

For Ellison, Virginia Union teachers determined to prove themselves workmen who needeth not be ashamed could not limit their energies to classroom preparation and instruction alone. Their efforts would have to extend beyond their classroom presentations:

We seek to be Christian in our ideals, practices, conduct, and relationships.... A teacher teaches not only by what he does, but just as much by what he is. The teacher should be the most persuasive example of courtesy, politeness, self-control, punctuality, and cooperation that the student can find.<sup>222</sup>

different in that respect from secular institutions and Ellison was firm in reminding his staff of the difference. Ellison's stressed that every member of Virginia Union's staff had an obligation to reflect a Christian difference in their daily activities whether in or out of the classroom.

In another address delivered in September 1947, Ellison was resolute in emphasizing the importance of every employee representing the Christian character of the institution in his or her personal and professional life:

We are a school under the auspices of the church and supported by the church. We make no compromise, therefore, in emphasizing that we seek to be Christian in our ideals, practices, conduct, and relationships. It is earnestly hoped that all who work with us will respect and reverence the principles and ideals for which we stand.... The very fact that you accept to work at Union should indicate that you are in accord with our stated aims.<sup>223</sup>

In the very public position that was Ellison's as president of Virginia Union, however, he was concerned with more than just the spiritual department of his staff and students. Ellison was troubled over the economic, social and political disparities that existed between the black and white communities as well. In February 1944, Ellison discussed the unprecedented opportunity for change just beginning to take place in certain segments of society with J. L. Horace the pastor of Monumental Baptist Church in Chicago, Illinois. "The situation in which we find ourselves today is having a revolutionary effect upon our thinking," Ellison optimistically suggested. Our "social thinking, economic thinking, political thinking— these, we may believe, are taking a direction which only occasionally one even anticipated a few years ago."<sup>224</sup> Ellison was quick to point out, however, that such opportunities would not come to fruition without the involvement of the black church. In comment suggestive of the role the black church would play in the Civil Rights movement during in the 1950s and 1960s, Ellison

the involvement of the black church. In a comment suggestive of the role the black church would play in the Civil Rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s, Ellison predicted, “it is not likely that religion and the church will or can escape the prevailing mood. The pertinent and demanding question is, what does religion and the church have to say to baffled and confused people ... for the days that lie ahead.”<sup>225</sup>

As a rule, Ellison did not publicly criticize religious or secular leadership. In this instance, however, he emphasized that the leadership of Christian church, as well as the leadership within the black community had, “an inescapable obligation ... to carry out [God’s] redemptive purposes in human history.” In an uncharacteristically candid statement, Ellison openly rebuked the black church for its historical inaction on social issues and challenged it to do more.

Here is a special challenge to the Negro church of America which has never come to any grips with the social and moral world problems. We have spent out time on the one hand soothing the sorrowful and handicapped and [on the] other hand seeking a kind of security for a leadership that is not too sure of its sense of direction. If the Negro will here and now face this challenge and seize this unparalleled opportunity, [he] will capture the vision, the purpose, the undaunted faith and courage of an oncoming generation whose chief responsibility will be to reshape society.<sup>226</sup>

Perhaps, as Brazell has suggested, the lack of vision of which Ellison spoke was due to the benevolence of the white missionaries who headed the black institutions that trained black religious leadership. These white Baptist missionaries continued to see blacks as greatly in need of a guiding hand that could show them the way to take their “proper” place in American society for well into the twentieth century.<sup>227</sup> In a remark that seemed to challenge such benevolence and portend the ascendancy of Martin Luther King, Jr. and other visionary leaders of the black, church-based Civil Rights Movement, Ellison suggested:



large visioned, prophetic and possessed by a sense of vicariousness, a leadership that places the cause ahead of any kind of selfish or political advantage.<sup>228</sup>

Ellison also cautioned that, “no one can be a true leader or be fully educated, who...does not teach the supremacy of spiritual values and live in accordance with them. Any other type of leadership without a moral and ethical foundation would have tragic results.”<sup>229</sup>

Ellison’s presidency was characterized by his determination to both teach and live the supremacy of spiritual values. Only by practicing what he preached, Ellison believed, could any leader assist people successfully confront what he termed “the common crises of ordinary life.”<sup>230</sup>

### **The Common Crises of Ordinary Life**

In the introduction to his small book, *They Sang Through the Crisis: Dealing with Life’s Most Critical Issues*,<sup>231</sup> Ellison informs his readers that he was offering the book out of concern for the social condition of the country regarding the mistreatment of its black citizens, a social condition that began to moderate only near the end of his life. The Ellison’s concern was personified by the unacceptable “notions and established practices” of the racial segregation suffocating the ordinary lives of black Americans.<sup>232</sup> His quest for a fuller more meaningful life—a quest that began as a farm laborer in his youth—had always been a search for a way to achieve an individual sense of worth in order to be able to convey that same sense of worth to the local black community. It was a sense of worth that necessitated a reversal of the customs and practices of segregation that had become such an intimate part of the American social fabric during Ellison’s life. His search led him to seek an education, serve in the ministry, and work in a collegiate setting. It was through this series of life changing experiences that Ellison began to conceptualize how racial segregation had “crystallized into a system of animosity and suppression” that was

racial segregation had “crystallized into a system of animosity and suppression” that was “perpetuated on the basis of prejudice and suspicion.”<sup>233</sup> This prejudice and suspicion attempted to constrain the noblest aspirations of millions of Americans both black and white. Ellison observed:

When social customs and practices become so binding, life is encumbered rather than enhanced the social order becomes festered with obstructive social lags. Mankind is then enslaved; it endures the abuses of the past and fails to create new attitudes toward people and ways of living. Practices and customs of the past have valid meaning only as they can be related to the present. Their purpose must be the growth and development of the moral and spiritual life of the race.<sup>234</sup>

Throughout his presidency, Ellison’s implemented the practices and customs derived from the examples established by MacVicar, Hovey, and Clark the university’s three preceding presidents. They were presidents who believed “the Lord God [had] built well ... an educational institution that ... fit well [Ellison’s] men and women.”<sup>235</sup> D. L. Bradford, an alumnus and student of each of Ellison’s predecessors, remarked upon hearing of Ellison’s appointment as president:

Your predecessors were not only great builders and administrators but they had great faith in God and great love for the common folk. They built more than stone buildings; they built human lives. Their lives were so indelibly impressed upon their students that they cannot die. May your lot be the same.<sup>236</sup>

Ellison’s presidency is exemplified in Bradford’s words above; he attempted in all earnest to build an institution that continued to build human lives. In 1953, nearing the end of his presidency, Ellison summarized the philosophy that undergirded his life and his administration with the following:

When men seriously commit themselves to the spiritual meaning and ethical demands of the universe they will find fuller and richer meaning in the adventure of living. The supreme requisite for that discovery is unselfish, appreciative, and satisfying relationships with other members of the human family.... [We] not only desire to overcome but long to discover some disciplinary and compensatory meaning in [our] experiences. [My administration] is but an echo of the voices

with only here and there a bit of warmth and hope.... When men learn to take spiritual convictions and the mandates of religion seriously and without compromise, they will more and more come to love God with their whole heart and their fellow men as themselves.... Every man then will feel himself to be his brother's keeper.<sup>237</sup>

John M. Ellison, the first black president of Virginia Union University and its fourth overall, felt himself to be his brother's keeper.

<sup>202</sup> Letter to James H. Croushore from John M. Ellison, n.d., folder 62, Ellison papers, Wilder Library.

<sup>203</sup> The "nadir" was first used by historian Rayford Logan in his 1954 book titled "The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901." The nadir of American race relations refers to the period in United States history at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. According to Logan, racism in the United States was worse during this time than at any period before or since. During that period, African Americans lost many of the civil rights gains which they had made during Reconstruction. Segregation, racial discrimination, and expressions of white supremacy all increased. So did anti-black violence, including lynchings and race riots.

<sup>204</sup> Letter to James H. Croushore from John M. Ellison, n.d., folder 62, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>205</sup> Autobiographical outline – Decade of the 1940s, n.d., folder 192, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Inauguration speeches, 17 October 1941, folder 150, Section XIII-1A, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>210</sup> Katrina M. Saunders. *Intelligent and Effective Direction: The Fisk University Race Relations Institute and the Struggle for Civil Rights, 1944-1969*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2005): 1. For additional information on the period see James N. Upton, *A Social History of Twentieth Century Urban Riots* (Bristol, IN: Wyndham Hall Press, 1984).

<sup>211</sup> "Social identity" is the process by which an individual is classified by others in terms of a culturally prescribed category. For a discussion of social roles and social identity see: Alvin W. Gouldner's "Cosmopolitans and Locals: Toward an Analysis of Latent Social Roles I." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 2: no. 3, 281-306, December 1957 and "Cosmopolitans and Locals: Toward an Analysis of Latent Social Roles II." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 2: no. 4, 444-480, March 1958.

<sup>212</sup> Letter from George H. Orser to John M. Ellison, 16 February 1944, folder 33, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Letter to George H. Orser from John M. Ellison, 18 February 1944, folder 33, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> John M. Ellison. *The Art of Friendship*. (Richmond, Virginia: Self published, 1943): 15.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid. 17-18.

<sup>218</sup> Johnetta Cross Brazzell. "Bricks without Straw: Missionary-Sponsored Black Higher education in the Post-Emancipation Era." *The Journal of Higher Education*, 63: no. 26-49, January-February 1992. 31

<sup>219</sup> Autographical outline – Decade of the 1940s, n.d., Folder 192. Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>220</sup> Annual statement to the members of the university staff, 20 September 1943, Folder 73, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Annual statement to the members of the university staff, 15 September 1947, folder 74, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>224</sup> Letter to J. L. Horace from John M. Ellison, 14 February 1944, folder 33, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

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- <sup>227</sup> Brazzell. "Bricks without Straw." 31.
- <sup>228</sup> Letter to J. L. Horace from John M. Ellison, 14 February 1944, folder 33, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>229</sup> Paul Michael Williams. *Black History: Virginia Profiles*. John Malcus Ellison. February 25, 2004. Richmond Times Dispatch. Metro and Virginia. Section B.
- <sup>230</sup> John M. Ellison. *They Sang Through the Crises: Dealing with Life's Most Critical Issues*. (Chicago: The Judson Press, 1961): 11-12.
- <sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>232</sup> *Ibid.* 23
- <sup>233</sup> Ellison. "They Sang Through." 24.
- <sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>235</sup> Inauguration speeches. Section X.
- <sup>236</sup> Letter from D. J. Bradford to John M. Ellison, 3 May 1941, folder 1, Ellison papers, (VUU-WLA).
- <sup>237</sup> Ellison. "Tensions and Destiny." Author's preface.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Conclusion

This case study examines the shift in the mantle of leadership at Virginia Union University.<sup>238</sup> That transfer of power witnessed the end of seventy-five years of the American Baptist Home Mission Society's administrative dominance over Virginia Union and the initial phase of black leadership under John M. Ellison. During this shift, John Ellison as the institution's first black president confronted a range of challenges that included: institutional governance, financial reorganization, and institutional (internal) and national (external) relationship building. Ellison employed a variety of strategies to meet those challenges, which incorporated aspects of both transactional and transformational leadership.<sup>239</sup> Furthermore, Ellison crafted his approach to and management of the unique demands placed on a black president of a Southern private, religious, and historically black institution within the context of the segregationist era.

Handing over the keys and the reigns of the HBCUs to the true owners was no small matter given the Jim Crow tenor of the times. Belief in the abilities of the administrations and leadership of blacks was thin at best for many whites, regardless of their regional domicile. This story, one of a socially subjugated man who assumed responsibility for the communal well-being of students and faculty and the continued existence of a vital and benevolent institution, documents the skill and capacity just waiting for permission to flourish.

Ellison's story is unique in that only a small number of institutions possessed characteristics similar to those found at Virginia Union: black, Baptist, church-related, established immediately after the Civil War, and private. His story is also unique for the

time period in which it takes place. At most HBCUs, the transfer from white to black administrations had already taken place. Between 1941 and 1955 when Ellison led the university, the nation and the world was experiencing monumental upheaval. The economic uncertainties created by World War II placed a serious financial burden on most of American higher education. For an historically black institution such as Virginia Union, the war added an unexpected burden to an institution already straining under the weight of expanding financial demands. During the same period, segregationist policies influenced virtually every facet of life for black Americans regardless of their regional domicile. Those policies were especially severe throughout the South and influenced to varying degrees how black institutions of higher education operated day-to-day.

Segregationist policies even influenced how the federal government interacted with institutions such as Virginia Union. During World War II, the federal government was oblivious to the idea of establishing military training centers on the campuses of historically black institutions. While white institutions were selected as training centers benefiting from the financial support those programs brought with them, Ellison and his peers had to institute a letter writing campaign to the war department just to have their institutions recognized as viable training center options.

In addition to the practical challenges Ellison encountered in transitioning the day-to-day operations of the university from white to black control, he was also faced with the task of tactfully transforming the paternalistic mind-set of the white Baptists who entered into a partnership with their former charges for the first time. A tactful approach on Ellison's part was certainly required. This is so because the denominational

leadership that controlled private black institutions, historically acted with less sensitivity and decorum in their relationships with blacks than was desirable.<sup>240</sup>

In terms of governance, Ellison's leadership approach was more transforming than transactional. He attempted to inspire staff and students in such a way that they would "raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality."<sup>241</sup> Such an approach is certainly consistent with transformational leadership as well as the Christian principles upon which the institution was founded and upon which he based his leadership. Descriptive terms such as: "elevating ... inspiring ... uplifting ... preaching ... and evangelizing" sprinkled Ellison's correspondence.<sup>242</sup>

Likewise, in the area of financial leadership, Ellison displayed a decidedly transforming approach. His personal approach of explaining the need to collect outstanding debts from students and alumni is a primary example of this leadership style. Through his personal correspondence with both current and former students, Ellison strove to raise the level of ethical conduct to benefit the university community by having the debtors fulfill their financial obligation to the university. If Ellison were successful in securing those outstanding funds, which he was more often than not, the university could recoup financial resources that would serve a greater purpose, a stronger institution. Thus, rather than permitting communication to occur merely between those who owed money to the institution and the collection agency (a transactional approach), Ellison stepped in to use the situation to transform the values, attitudes, and behaviors of others.

Ellison's institutional or internal relationships displayed an equally transformational nature. He challenged his staff to do what ever was necessary to accomplish their tasks in a timely and professional manner, even if that meant arriving



early to work or leaving late. With students, he was not satisfied that they merely copy the models they may have seen of other students lounging on the campus lawns, but taught them to respect their environment as a means toward developing personal respect. Maintaining a correspondence relationship with the parents, he established a university norm that a bona fide institution of higher learning supported the motivated and released the slackers.

His own behavior vis-à-vis external constituents and the public, on the whole, tended toward the transactional. The seemingly endless number of preaching and speaking engagements in which Ellison participated produced specific and deliberate ends. He viewed each of these engagements as an opportunity not only to extol the virtues of the university to those assembled, but expected in return an offering or contribution for support of the university. Yet, his relationships on the national level with other HBCU presidents were transformative in nature. Although ultimately, Virginia Union, the university, its students, and staff would benefit, he partnered with other presidents by challenging the social milieu that held the seemingly impervious perceptions of a racial caste system for the purpose of uplifting black people to their rightful place as citizens.

While Ellison's process of leadership can be described as both transactional and transformational, the underlying motivation behind his leadership is best illustrated by use of the concept of servant-leader. Robert F. Greenleaf (1970) defines the servant-leader as a leader who is first a servant, one who makes "sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served."<sup>243</sup> Ellison was clearly committed to meeting the needs of students, parents, faculty, staff and members of the institution's extended community



as well. In his relationships with each group, Ellison modeled the very essence of Greenleaf's servant-first leadership: he attended to the needs of the university, ensuring that the students and therefore graduates would serve the greater needs of society to ensure its shift to a new day of equity.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Base on the limited focus of this study, many questions remain concerning leadership and leadership change at historically black colleges and universities during the pre-*Brown* era. More leadership studies that investigate private, church-related institutions could determine if Ellison's financial, governance, and organizational challenges were unique or if such challenges were common among his peers. Studies that investigate the relationships between presidential peers could provide enlightening insights into the unique world shared by these individuals. A world specifically dedicated to the economic, political, and social advancement of black Americans that was located in the segregated south, an environment that was unmistakably hostile to such advancement.

During World War II, many white institutions of higher education served as federally funded training centers for the United States Armed Forces. As such, they benefited from the financial support the welcomed federal dollars brought in—dollars that helped to make up for the loss of income due to the war effort. Black institutions of higher education, on the other hand, were all but excluded from such federally funded intervention. Studies that investigate this type of federal discrimination, the resulting mobilization to protest by the HBCUs through a letter writing campaign that occurred via

the network of presidents, and the results of the protest could expand our understanding in this area considerably.

Ellison communicated frequently with a number of black presidents of historically black colleges and universities. Notable among these presidents were: Charles S. Johnson at Fisk University, Mordecai Johnson at Howard University, Benjamin E. Mays at Morehouse College, and Frederick Patterson at Tuskegee Institute (University). A comprehensive analysis of both the institutional and personal correspondence of these individuals could provide an enhanced appreciation of their lived-experiences as individuals and as a network of individuals as well. In addition to these first-tier private black institutions, a similar analysis of second-tier privates, as well as the comparable public institutions, would provide a picture of the networking, common concerns, and successful strategies that engaged these men and institutions.

Boards of trustees also played a determining role in the selection of presidents at historically black colleges and universities. A careful analysis of their minutes and other correspondence pertaining to all aspects of institutional governance might lead to a fuller understanding of the reasons that prompted white boards to relinquish their custody across HBCUs.

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<sup>238</sup> Case study research is an in-depth and detailed exploration of single examples (an event, process, organization, group, or individual) that is an instance drawn from a class of similar phenomena. See Gretchen B. Rossman and Sharon F. Rallis. *Learning in the Field: An Introduction to Qualitative Research*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003) for a full discussion of case studies.

<sup>239</sup> See James MacGregor Burns. *Leadership*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1979) for a complete treatment of transactional and transformational leadership.

<sup>240</sup> See Henry N. Drewry and Humphrey Doerman's *Stand and Prosper: Private Black Colleges and Their Students*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) for an insightful presentation of black private higher education and its leadership during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

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<sup>241</sup> Burns. 20

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader*. (Westfield, IN: The Robert K. Greenleaf Center, 1991), 7.

## EPILOGUE

John M. Ellison served as president of Virginia Union University from 1941 to 1955. In addition to his correspondence, another record of Ellison's administrative wherewithal is found in the Annual Reports he presented to the university's Board of Trustees. The reports can be used to assess how successful his initiative was to reorganize the practices of the university's business office. In his second Annual Report, delivered to the Board on April 26, 1943, Ellison's official remarks provide a sober assessment of his initiative at the close of his second year in office.

The year through which we have come has presented many problems, and has, therefore, been one of severe testing. By the Grace of God and relying upon the strength He imparts, we have come through with a fair measure of success.<sup>244</sup>

Ellison apparently ran a tight fiscal operation. A fair measure of his success is demonstrated by the fact that, although student enrollment declined by 15 percent from 1,120 during the 1941-1942 term to 905 for the 1942-1943 term, Ellison projected to the Board that, "the [educational] budget for [the] fiscal year may be balanced." The balancing of the budget was accomplished primarily as a result of "the implementation of new accounting procedures" initiated by Ellison and discussed earlier.<sup>245</sup>

By the end of the 1943-1944 fiscal year, Ellison again reported to his Board that the operating expenditures were slightly less than the operating income.<sup>246</sup> And, in 1945, an operating surplus of about ten thousand dollars [was] realized.<sup>247</sup> A record of either balancing or demonstrating small positive balances is presented in each of Ellison's Annual Reports.

Samuel DeWitt Proctor, a Union alumnus, followed Ellison as president of the university (1955-1960). Following the business practices established by Ellison, Proctor

also presented the Board of Trustees with a balanced budget each year of his presidency.<sup>248</sup> In fact, through 1970 the final year of Thomas Howard Henderson's presidency (1960-1970) the data contained in the Annual Reports indicate each president was able to balance the university's educational budget.<sup>249</sup> This was due, no doubt, to their adherence to the practices put in place by Ellison almost thirty years earlier.

Thus, Ellison, inheriting an institution that had lost a significant funding source when the ABHMS withdrew much of its support and weathered the loss of enrollment and the exclusionary funding practices of the government during World War II, managed to shepherd the university, its students, and its faculty and staff toward stability. And he led his flock to embrace its role in the dawning of a new era.

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<sup>244</sup> Annual Report of the President to the Board of Trustees of Virginia Union University (Annual Report). 26 April, 1943. Box 16. (VUU-WLA).

<sup>245</sup> Ibid. 25.

<sup>246</sup> Annual Report, 24 April, 1944. Box 16. (VUU-WLA): 19-20.

<sup>247</sup> Annual Report, 30 April, 1945. Box 16. (VUU-WLA): 18.

<sup>248</sup> Annual Report, 9 May 1956. Box 16. (VUU-WLA): 31-32.

<sup>249</sup> See Annual Reports, 1960 through 1971. Box 21. (VUU-WLA).