Tracing black history at Ohio State

By Erika M. Anderson and Matt Gates • Erika M. Anderson and Matt Gates © August 2, 1996

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Fred Patterson was considered the first black man to attend Ohio State in 1889. He remained at OSU until 1892, but, for unknown reasons, Patterson did not graduate.

Sherman Hamlin Guss is the first black man to graduate from OSU. He earned a liberal arts degree in 1892.

The daughter of freed slaves, Jennie Frances Stephens, became the first black female graduate from OSU in 1905 with a bachelor of arts degree and specialized in modern languages.

William Bell was the first black varsity football player in the 1930s. Bell suffered at the hands of both his teammates and opponents each game, when they used their metal cleats on his legs, leaving them bloody during each game.

In 1931, Herbert Miller, a professor of sociology, was fired for allowing black and white students to dance together on a class field trip to Wilberforce University, an all-black institution.

Doris Weaver, a black woman, took OSU to the Ohio Supreme Court in 1932-33 for not permitting her to live in the Grace Graham Walker House, a racially segregated house for home economics majors. The court ruled in favor of OSU, upholding its "separate but equal" code.

Jesse Owens, one of the greatest athletes of the 20th century, set new Olympic records at the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin. He won four gold medals in the 100 meters, 200 meters, 4x100 meters relay, and as the anchor in the 4x400 relay team — but Adolf Hitler refused to shake his hand. During Owens' freshman and sophomore years at OSU, he became the only track and field athlete to set three world records. Owens earned his bachelor of arts degree in 1937.

Between 1944 and 1947, black fraternities and sororities began to emerge on the OSU campus. Three fraternities: Alpha Phi Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi, and Omega Psi Phi, and two sororities: Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta were available for blacks to socialize among themselves and volunteer in the community. A lack of funds and no access to housing was some of the main problems black greek organizations faced at that time.

Baker Hall became one of the first dormitories to desegregate in 1946.

A series of black protests began in the 1960s. At OSU, students did not act fast enough after the Ohio State Inn and Northwest Gardens apartments were accused of discriminating against blacks. Black student leaders fasted on the Oval to protest OSU's lack of interest in the matter.

In 1968, about 60 members of the Black Student Union (BSU), presented OSU with a list of complaints. The list asked for more support dealing with off-campus housing issues, more black faculty and administrators, and for black history and language courses. In an attempt to call attention to their grievances, the group took over the administration building, blocking the vice president for business and finance, Gordon Carson, in his office for seven hours. Forty-five members of BSU were indicted by a Franklin County jury.

Shortly after the '68 protest, OSU implemented disruption rules with dismissals for any student violent them. BSU was now defunct and a new black group, Afro-Am, took its place. This group became the first group to be charged with violating the disruption rules when it, like BSU, made a list of demands. Its mandates included a black studies program, a minority affairs office, a black cultural center, and financial aid for black students. Administrations alleged failure to act on Afro-Am's grievances, and the group protested. Two members from Afro-Am were notified by mail that they were dismissed from OSU for one year.

Black journalism majors received a $2,500 grant from in 1970 to begin "Our Choking Times," the first successful campus newspaper by and about black students. The timeliness publication was distributed on campus at no cost. However, the paper underwent a small setback after the first issue when Silva M. Sabo, owner of Linmore Carry Out, accused an OTC staff member of threatening him into taking out an ad in the paper. When he refused, his front glass windows was broken. The paper was never officially blamed for anything wrong concerning the Sabo incident. The paper grew to a circulation of 10,000 and went through several name changes, becoming today's "Dimensions."

In 1973, Proud Black Images, a contemporary literary magazine for and by black students, was introduced. Distributed on campus for $1.50 and in prisons for free, the magazine folded because of financial difficulties.

Keith R. Burkes is the first black man to be the "Brutus Buckeye" mascot in 1974.

Beginning in the early 1980s, the enrollment of black students drops by 52 percent. Some of the major

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causes of the decline – the Reagan Administration, cuts in financial aid and "environmental disillusionment."

- Delta Sigma Theta, a black sorority, partnered with Delta Theta Sigma, an agricultural fraternity, during Greek Week celebrations in 1984. This was the first time in OSU history that racially mixed Greek organizations paired for the games. It was not until 1993 that eight of the nine black Greek chapters took part in Greek festsivities – a first in the 60-year history of Greek Week at OSU.
- Frank W. Hale, Jr., the vice provost emeritus of Minority Affairs, was honored when the Hale Black Cultural Center opened on 12th Avenue in 1980.
- A white female student accused a black man of raping her on the Oval on Oct. 24, 1990. Fliers were circulated with a police-composite description of the alleged rapist and several black men on campus were questioned in connection with the crime. The white woman confessed that the rape was a hoax. Black students staged a march on the Oval entitled, "No More Lies," to protest the mistreatment of black men.
- Shootings erupted at the Ohio Union during the 1990-91 school year, causing OSU to cancel black social activities at the Union. Two OSU students were shot, but the alleged gunman was not affiliated with OSU.
- During the latter part of spring quarter 1997, members of the African Student Union marched from the Hale Cultural Center to President E. Gordon Gee's office in Bricker Hall to protest the possible cuts in the Office of Minority Affairs and minority funding. Union members claimed Gee and other administrators were keeping secrets from concerned black students about the impending future of their programs.

Information compiled from the University archives

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