The Unique History Of Alabama State University Essay, Research Paper

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Of Alabama State University

“One must return to the past in order to move forward”, is an old African proverb that has been used to explain the purpose of studying history. This African proverb not only refers to the study of American history, but also the study of one’s family history. Another saying that has been used to refer to the study of history is, “You must learn your history, or you are bound to repeat it.” These principles can apply to education as well. The purpose of attending college is to receive a formal education. The proper approach to begin college level studies is to learn your school’s history. Enlightenment of the difficulties and barriers during the early stages of a school’s development; in addition to a deeper respect for a university, can be obtained, and if obtained, will serve as extra motivation. This holds true on the campus of Alabama State University, in Montgomery, Alabama. The unique history of Lincoln Normal School, present day Alabama State University, is a major focus area in the study of this university’s history.

Modern day Alabama State University is a product of the mid-nineteenth century idea, held by African Americans, to open universities for slaves. This idea was difficult to implement because most slaves were not educated, and there were no means of communication due to the lack of a unifying language. The end of the Civil War in 1865 heightened the nation’s want, especially in the South, to provide a formal education for the newly freed slaves. The nation’s first Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) were founded as a result. The first historic Black universities, which were founded with money from the American Missionary Association, and the famous Amistad trail, are Fisk University, Hampton University, Talladega College, and Lincoln Normal School. After these schools were established, it was still hard for a former-salve to obtain an education. Fisk University for example, only admitted those who were the children of a female slave and a white male, normally a slave master. Many schools during this time period adapted this same entrance criterion. A southern school, Lincoln Normal School, did not have any bias principles rooted in their entrance process.

Peyton Finley founded Lincoln Normal School, present-day Alabama State University in 1867, in Marion, Alabama. Peyton Finley is also noted for being the first African American appointed to the Alabama State Board of Education. Finley’s involvement with the board of education allowed him to get the American Missionary Association and the Freemen’s Bureau to provide books, supplies, teachers, and finances for the new school. However, in 1864, the American Missionary Association went bankrupt, and could no longer support Lincoln Normal School. Therefore, the African American community in Marion, Alabama supported the financial needs of the school. In 1874, Lincoln Normal School became the first state supported institution in Alabama. Prior to this significant event in the school’s history, George N. Card became the first president of the institution in 1873.

George N. Card is mostly noted for serving as president when the Lincoln Normal School became the nation’s first state supported Liberal Arts College for African American. Card also established Alabama State College Laboratory High School, in Marion, Alabama in 1874. During Card’s tenure as president, the Klu Klux Klan in Marion, Alabama endangered the lives of the African Americans attending the institution. In 1878, to the delight of many African Americans in Marion, Alabama, William Burns Paterson became the new president. William Paterson was born in Tullibody, Scotland. The African American community was happy that Paterson was the new president because he was a very aggressive and stern man. They knew that he would be able to help the institution to advance to greater heights. Paterson, along with a few students, showed his aggressiveness by partaking in gunfight with the Klu Klux Klan when they were trying to set the school buildings on fire. Paterson’s aggressive attitude brought social turmoil to the Marion community. Therefore, to protect the safety of the students attending Lincoln Normal School, Paterson relocated the institution. The school was relocated to Montgomery, Alabama in 1887, and renamed Alabama Colored People’s University. Unfortunately, the school loss its state financial support the same year. In 1889, the school was renamed Normal School for Colored Students, and re-gained financial assistance from the state. The school ran thirty-three years on its original plan as a high school teachers-training institution. The school had its first graduating class in 1890. Sadly, William Burn Paterson died in 1915.

The first African American teacher, John William Beverly, became the third president in 1915. Beverly organized and established the school as a four-year institution with the same plan of being a high school teachers-training institution. Beverly also advanced the state of the institution by purchasing additional land to expand the campus. The first dormitory and faculty-dining hall was constructed in 1918. John William Beverly tenure as president ended in 1920. George W. Trenholm seceded Beverly as president.

1920 was George W. Trenholm’s first year as president, and Alabama State College Laboratory High School had its first graduating class. Trenholm’s most important contribution to the institution was in that same year. Trenholm’s addition of the Junior College Program, which comprised two years beyond high school, made the institution a standard “Normal School”. After serving a five-year term, Trenholm’s son, Harper Council Trenholm took over the position as president. At the age of twenty-five, H.C. Trenholm became the institution’s youngest president. H.C. Trenholm elevated the Junior College status of the school to a four-year institution of higher learning in 1928. Due to the new educational status of the school, the name was changed to Alabama State Teachers College in 1929. In 1931, the first graduation for the four-year college curriculum was held. H.C. Trenholm helped the college to advance even further in 1940 by instituting the college’s first graduate program. The first graduate program was in 1943. The college once again was renamed under H.C. Trenholm’s tenure as president to Alabama State College for Negroes in 1948. H.C. Trenholm relinquished the position of president in 1962.

Levi Watkins was appointed as the sixth president of Alabama State College for Negroes in 1962. That same year, under Watkins’ supervision, the college began to offer athletic scholarships. Watkins served as president during a socially turbulent time in the south. The civil rights movement was in full swing in Watkins’ first year as president. The students at Alabama State College for Negroes were vital members in the civil rights movement. Watkins continued to push the college forward while participating in the movement himself. Watkins was an instrumental factor in the accreditation of the college in 1966 by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. In 1969, he approved the proposal to change the name of the college from Alabama State College for Negroes to Alabama State University. A few years later, in 1975, the administrative control of the university changed from the State Board of Education to the Alabama State Board of Trustees. Watkins’ last great contribution to the university while serving as president was the development and commencement of University College in 1975.

Robert L. Randolph, Leon Howard, Clifford C. Baker, and William H. Harris, respectively were the following presidents of Alabama State University. These presidents also made very tremendous contributions to present-day Alabama State University. However, if it were not for the hard work of Peyton Finley, George N. Card, William B. Paterson, John W. Beverly, G.W. Trenholm, H.C. Trenholm, and Levi Watkins, the university would not be as prominent as it is today. The diligent effort of these presidents to make this university a success has not been overlooked. Buildings on the campus today have been named in their honor. Finley Hall was named after the university’s founder, Peyton Finley. The Levi Watkins Learning Center was named after the sixth president that approved the name of Alabama State University, Levi Watkins. Card Hall was named after university’s first president; George Card. Beverly Hall was given its name in honor of the president that had the first dormitory built, John William Beverly. Tullibody Hall was named after the birthplace of William B. Paterson, which was Tullibody, Scotland. H.C. Trenholm Hall and G.W. Trenholm Hall were named after Harper Council Trenholm and George W. Trenholm. H.C. Trenholm elevated the educational status of the university from a Junior college to a four-year college, and G.W. Trenholm advanced the school to a normal school of education.

The unique history of Alabama State University is filled with the dreams of slaves for a better life. Payton Finley made the first step in bringing the dreams of the slaves alive. The obstacles that were overcome by the influential personalities that assisted in the university’s success will always be an inspiration for students attending this prestigious university. Alabama State University truly has stood by its motto, “A proud tradition…the promise of a bright future!”