

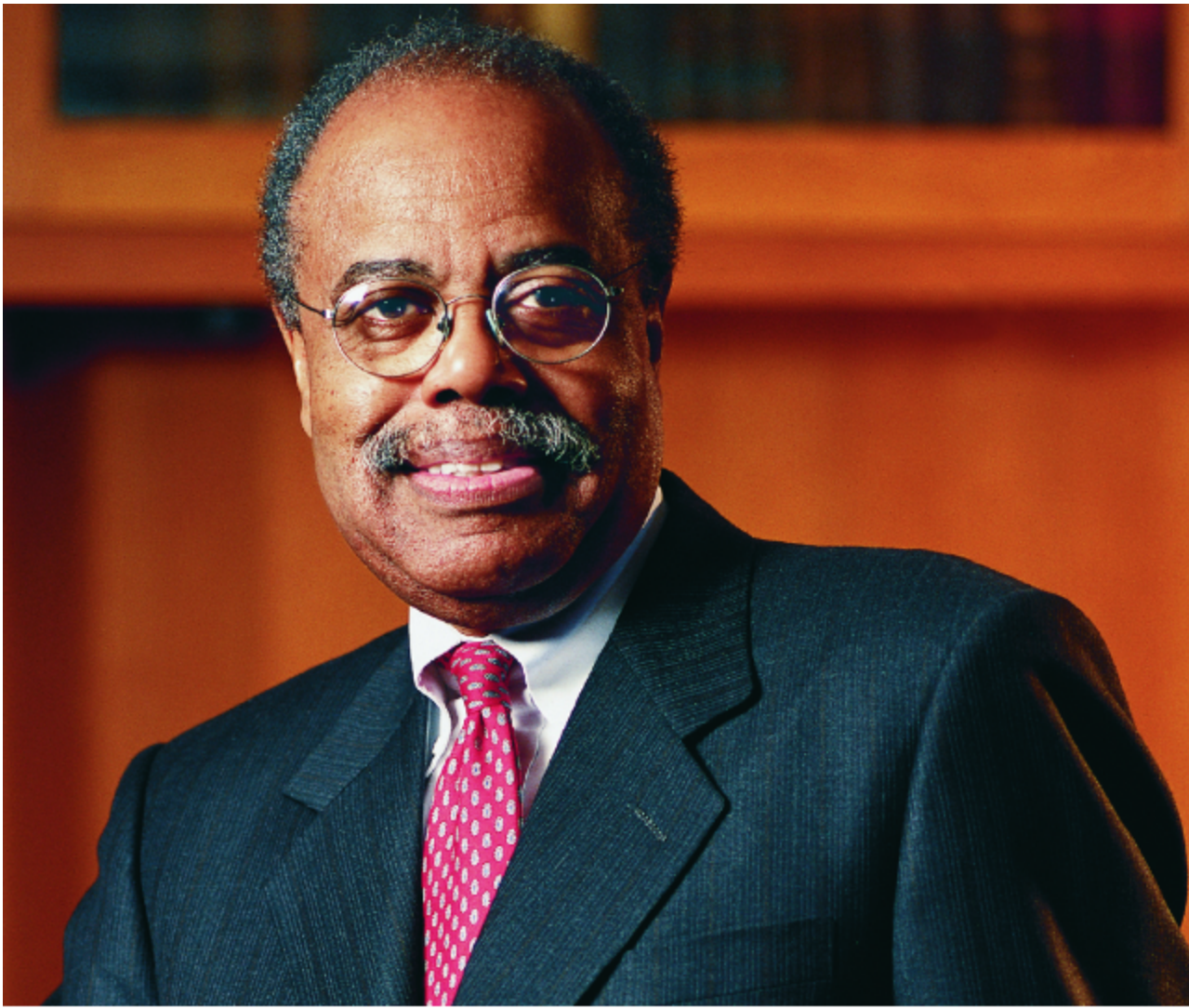
Illinois State University Took Stand For Equality In Education After Civil War

by Tom Emery

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NORMAL - Illinois State University in Normal has long been known for its beliefs in equality. That is reflected in its recent past and many hirings, including Will Robinson, the first African-American men's basketball coach in NCAA Division I history, in 1970.



African-American alumni of ISU include luminaries like Donald McHenry, the United States Ambassador to the United Nations in the Carter administration.

The history of Illinois State in educational equality dates back to its earliest years. During the Civil War, the student body opposed slavery and threw their support to President Lincoln.

Many ISU students served the Union in the "Teachers Regiment," the 33rd Illinois, which was raised by the first university president, Charles Hovey.

On April 7, 1863 – less than midway through the Civil War and only six years after ISU's founding – Hovey's successor as president, Richard Edwards, wrote that black students should be admitted.

Edwards' stance was in conflict with the 1855 Common School Act of Illinois, which expressly restricted free education only to white students. However, he was not alone in the Normal community.

After the war, the Normal school district had passed a resolution to prevent African-American pupils from the public schools of the village and district. In response, a meeting was held in Old Main, the primary campus building at ISU, to address this

The *Pantagraph* reported that those in attendance were serenaded with "soul-stirring music from a number of the Normal students" under the direction of John Cook, an 1865 graduate who, at the time, was principal of the grammar department. The songs included "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "Equal Rights for All" – setting an obvious tone for the evening.

Edwards opened the meeting by declaring that public schools had a responsibility to educate all children, and if he were forced to exclude a child under the 1855 act, it would elicit his "strong and earnest protest." Next came a forceful statement from Edwin Hewett, who would succeed Edwards as President in 1876, serving until 1890. Hewett argued that "the black child should be educated *exactly* like the white; first, because it is *right*, and second, because it is *expedient*."

While part of the audience agreed with Hewett, there was plenty of opposition. Among the dissenters was local landowner Edwin Bakewell, who vehemently declared his support of the 1855 act and its exclusion of African-Americans. As he spoke, a "volley of cheers" rose from the room.

Following Bakewell's impassioned reply, Albert Stetson, a longtime professor of language at ISU, presented a letter from Jesse Fell, who was absent from the meeting. Fell, who did more to secure Illinois State for Bloomington-Normal than anyone else, wrote in the spirit of his close friend Abraham Lincoln, and makes a clear reference to the struggle of the Civil War.

Fell's impassioned letter was "against the crying injustice of excluding from our Public Schools any child of the district, no matter what the color of his or her skin." He continued that "I feel deeply mortified as a citizen of Normal – a town distinguished no less for its schools than for its devotion to human rights – that the exigency should have arisen requiring such a protest."

"In view of what we have all seen during the last five years," concluded Fell, "I am not only mortified but astonished...it is not only in our power, but it is made our duty to educate all children of the district..."

After Bakewell rebuked those in favor of equality, Stetson offered resolutions “that (black) children are entitled in law and justice to all the privileges of the public schools of the Normal district” and if there was any uncertainty in the law, “(black) children shall have the benefit of that doubt.” The resolutions passed by a total of sixty-five to one.

Indeed, it was a resounding victory for the university men and their challenge for equality. Longtime Illinois State faculty member John Freed, an acclaimed writer and historian, correctly declared that “April 24, 1867 was the finest hour in the university’s history.”

Freed adds that several of Edwards’ students continued their careers in the public teaching of African-American students. Among them was Sarah Raymond, a member of the Class of 1866, who allowed black students into one of Bloomington’s local schools in 1872. The superintendent overruled Raymond and forced the students out, only to Two years later, Raymond herself became the Bloomington school superintendent, another step in the fight for equal education with an Illinois State University influence.

Tom Emery collaborated with Carl Kasten to create Abraham Lincoln and the Heritage of Illinois State University, a look at the role that Lincoln played in founding the university, and his lingering influence on the institution. To order, send \$28.61 (includes tax and postage) to Kasten at 1075 West Main, Carlinville, IL 62626.