

Top Brass Polishing Other People's Brass: Evaluating Aspects of the Marred Legacy of an African American College President

by

Travis D. Boyce, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Africana Studies and Social Science
University of Northern Colorado
travis.boyce@unco.edu

Abstract

In the spring of 1967, Benner C. Turner retired as one of the most controversial Black collegiate presidents of his era. For seventeen years, he had presided over South Carolina State College, a historically Black land-grant institution. Despite having improved the infrastructure, staff, and academic programs at the institution, his legacy was marred because during the violent social upheaval of the era, members of the university and community considered him too conservative on civil rights. They also viewed him as too compliant with the school's pro-segregationist Board of Trustees. But how did he see his strategy? Thus far, scholars have interpreted only his actions, not his rationale.

Several of Turner's contemporaries have written autobiographies illuminating their experiences as college presidents, which subsequently highlighted their self-perception and motives. Yet nothing is published on how Turner viewed himself. This article, using archival data and interviews from his relatives, seeks to show how Turner viewed himself as a president of a state-supported, historically Black college; how he regarded his tactics through his philosophy of education and position on civil rights; and his view about his own racial identity. The article offers a unique look at what it was like for Turner to run a college in the 1950s and 1960s during a time of violence and social upheaval, with glimpses from 1896 through 1967 of how other college presidents handled control over their schools.

Introduction

“We must not allow other people’s limited perceptions to define us.”
~ Virginia Satir

In 1952, Benner Creswill Turner submitted an update of his whereabouts for inclusion in Harvard College’s twenty-fifth anniversary class report. By then, Turner was serving as the fourth president of South Carolina State College (now South Carolina State University), a historically Black land-grant institution organized in 1896 in Orangeburg, South Carolina. South Carolina State College (SCSC) was originally named the Colored, Normal, Industrial, Agricultural, and Mechanical College of South Carolina. Since its beginning, the school was organized and controlled by a state legislature that sought to preserve racial segregation in the state after Reconstruction was toppled.

The politics of racial segregation and White supremacy forced Turner and his predecessors into administering the school in a way that complied with an all-White Board of Trustees and the state legislature. The compliance of the school presidents could be easily misunderstood as being an accommodationist (or worse, “Uncle Tom”). This article follows Turner’s 1950s through 1960s term specifically. But it also details, in comparison, the strategies of similar presidents prior to the 1970s. What did it take, in the time period of 1896 to 1967, to keep a college running and controlled, despite difficult events? Which college presidents were more constrained in how they brought law and order to the schools? How did Turner’s methods compare to others between 1896 and 1967?

Evaluating the Top-Brass: Dissecting the Top Four Issues

Turner might have been seen as the top brass, but to get things done, he still had to strategize his dealings with the governor, the Board of Trustees, and the legislature. This article will show him walking on a tightrope during the 1950s and 1960s when it came to administering a historically Black college (HBCU) during the era of racial segregation and the Civil Rights movement. He was not unlike many other administrators from the 1890s to 1970s who tried to run their HBCUs through a gauntlet of restrictions. This article will show how Turner viewed himself as a college president at a predominately Black college, his philosophy of education, his silent activism, and his racial identity in relationship to colorism in the Black community and position on racial segregation.

Perception of Self

The primary issue examined in this article is Turner's self-perception. As the article will show that, above all else, Turner first viewed himself as a college president. In that respect, he was a servant to the people of the state of South Carolina. As a president of state-supported institution, he realized that he was in a complicated situation. He had to comply with a pro-segregationist Board of Trustees and state legislature. At the same time, he had to provide the best educational opportunities for his students. To understand how he governed the school, there are three more important issues to examine: his educational philosophy, his view on activism, and how he perceived his racial identity.

Philosophy of Education

In wake of legal challenges to school segregation in the United States, Turner tactfully (in the interests of his students) chose to use the issue of racial segregation to his benefit, to maintain state funding for SCSC. This was his strategy to keep SCSC open and funded. This paper will show that it was his primary goal to keep the school at its best in order to teach students effectively. His philosophy of education can be seen as being based in an "academic work ethic." An explanation of this viewpoint is that a combination of academic excellence and the accumulation of life skills would benefit a student after college.

Sideline Activist

Similar to many of his contemporaries, Turner understood the racial politics of the South during the 1950s and 1960s. As previously stated, above all, his top priority was to run the school, which meant to improve the academic and physical plant of SCSC. Therefore, he publically remained silent when it came to the Civil Rights issue, in order to continue bringing in the funding necessary to improve the school's campus. His correspondence illustrates that he had been in the position of turning away hundreds of qualified students, just for lack of space. Further, as this article will discuss, during periods of student unrest, his Board told him to either maintain order or they would shut the school down—hence his attempts to quell trouble with expulsions and firings. Nevertheless, his silence on Civil Rights issues did not make him an "Uncle Tom," and it was known by his few friends and family that he privately criticized racial segregation.

His Racial Identity

Turner's perception of self has to be examined in this article through the lens of perceived racial identity. Despite his light complexion (and people's perception that he was literally and/or figuratively a White man), it is clear that Turner self-identified as Black man, such as using the colored section of a restaurant. Understanding how Turner self-identified is a critical piece to grasping his full legacy as president of a state-supported HBCU during the 1950s and 1960s.

The Control Style of SCSC Presidents Prior to Turner

Thomas E. Miller would be a good example of a compliant SCSC president. Miller was a former congressman and South Carolina State College's first president, serving from 1896 to 1911. He openly supported Booker T. Washington's Hampton-Tuskegee model curriculum. Yet this curriculum was vehemently opposed by the progressive, liberal, Black intelligencia (Boyce & Chunnu-Brayda, 2012).

Another example of a compliant administrator would be Miller F. Whittaker, SCSC's president from 1932 to 1949. In *Dear Senator: A Memoir by the Daughter of Strom Thurmond*, Essie Mae Washington-Williams (Strom Thurmond's African American daughter) wrote about her relationship with her father during her undergraduate student years at SCSC during the 1940s. Thurmond was governor of South Carolina from 1947 to 1951, and he funded his daughter's education at SCSC. During her student years in Orangeburg, she recalled her secret meetings with her father via Whittaker's office. For these meetings, Whittaker left them alone, and he probably knew of their relationship but assumedly did not reveal it. Thurmond, who was the leading political advocate for racial segregation, met with her discreetly because of the implications this relationship would have on his political career.

Benner Turner did not have it any easier. When he took on the leadership of the college, he vowed his goal was stimulation of the faculty for greater academic preparation, for more research, and for more participation in the programs of learned organization, resulting in higher moral and better academic performance. (Reid, 2008)

As SCSC's president from 1950 to 1967, Turner later in private sarcastically described an SCSC college president's role:

He is a hewer of wood and a drawer of water, a dray hose, a galley slave, a bellhop, a hack, and a nursemaid all wrapped up in one. He may seem to be the top brass of an educational institution, but actually he spends most of his time polishing other people's brass—and breaking his back in the process. Amen. (Turner, 1952, p. 1011)

Turner, a fair-skinned man who could have passed for White, was selected as leader of the college because he was viewed as having the “correct understanding of the American way of life—especially here in South Carolina” (Burke & Hine, 2003, p. 46). Thus it is hardly surprising that Turner walked a tightrope as president of a historically Black college during the era of racial segregation.

A visual image of the dilemma was provided by Benjamin E. Mays (mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr.). Mays, who ran Atlanta’s Morehouse College from 1940 to 1967, notes in his autobiography: “To be a president of a college and white is no bed of roses. To be president of a college and black is almost a bed of thorns” (Mays, 1971, p. 169). This image is an accurate reflection of what it was like to be an African American and a college president.

Today, several of the past Black college presidents have mixed reputations, and it is easy to see why. African American college presidents at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) during the era of racial segregation (the legal challenging of racial segregation in education and the civil rights movement in particular) found themselves working between a rock and a hard place. On one hand, they were pressured by students and faculty to support civil rights causes. But on the other hand, their primary job was to run a college, which meant ensuring students’ safety and development, both intellectually and professionally. To manage the college, the presidents usually had to please a conservative, racial-segregationist Board of Trustees, state legislature, and governor. For example, William J. Hale, founder and first president (1912-43) of Tennessee State Agricultural and Industrial College (now Tennessee State University) was known for presenting members of Boards of Trustees with tailored-made suits (made by his students) as a way to ensure that his respective university maintained the financial support from the state legislature. Moreover, North Carolina College for Negroes (now North Carolina Central University in Durham) President James E. Shepard refused to release a transcript of a student seeking graduate admission to the all-White University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill out of fear that the state legislature would withhold funding to the Durham institution (out of retaliation). Furthermore, Horace Mann Bond, president of Fort Valley State College (now University in Fort Valley, Georgia), invited rabid racist Governor Eugene Talmadge to speak at his institution and for photo opportunity in order to neutralize him on the issue of a Jewish donor that was connected to the university (Fairclough, 2007b). They all had to play ball with other segregationist political authorities in order to receive funding. To preserve the reputation and existence of their respective institutions, they had to fire and expel faculty and students who were activists, negative about the school, or who sought to overturn the Board. In doing so, the presidents upheld the power of the segregationists. This is why they were seen as racial accommodationists.

But research that describes their accomplishments in light of the era's constraints shows that many presidents did privately address their opposition to the racial status quo. These studies examine how they viewed their work (Boyce & Chunnu-Brayda, 2012; Davis, 1998; Gasman, 2006; Gasman, 2011; Gilpin & Gasman, 2003; Jelks, 2012; Lefever, 2005; Mays, 1971; McKinney, 1997; Patterson & Goodson, 1990; Robbins, 1996; Roper, 2012; Smith, 1994; Urban, 1992; Williamson, 2008).

To understand how Turner viewed himself, it is important to know about the legacies of his contemporaries. The next section summarizes some of the research about them.

Significant Literature: The Legacies of African American College Presidents

Marybeth Gasman is a leading authority on HBCU presidents during the civil rights movement. She says that the scorecard of what these presidents accomplished is necessarily complex. This complexity is because their terms were during a time of social upheaval, and their jobs had tough requirements (Gasman, 2011). Recent studies (particularly the biographies and autobiographies) of many of these college presidents reveal a balanced perspective on their legacies and clarity on how they viewed themselves (Gasman, 2011; Robbins, 1996; Smith, 1994).

The national issues of civil rights and the Cold War impacted all college campuses, but particularly HBCUs, given that there were not that many Black schools (Fariello, 1995; Lewis, 1988; Lewis, 1993). By the 1960s, HBCUs were seedbeds of Civil Rights activities, so the administrations and the presidents of those years were marred in their image by the sociopolitical context of the times. For example, many HBCU presidents expelled activist students and dismissed activist faculty.

In *Charles S. Johnson: Leadership beyond the Veil in the Age of Jim Crow*, Gasman and Gilpin (2003) detail the tenure of Fisk University's Charles Johnson, who served from 1946 to 1956. To comply with his Board, in 1955 Johnson dismissed one of his top faculty members, Lee Lorch, even though Lorch had successfully secured a federally funded grant to the Nashville school. Because Lorch was an outspoken critic of the racial status quo during the 1950s, he had been investigated by the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HCUA). HCUA labeled Lorch as a communist. Although Lorch had brought prestige to Fisk's mathematics department and had delivered the grant, Johnson complied with Fisk's Board of Trustees and dismissed Lorch from the university. Nevertheless, Johnson is still remembered as an effective college president who organized a Race Relations Institute at Fisk, as well as privately supported the Civil Rights movement (Robbins, 1996).

With regards to the complexities of HBCU presidents such as Johnson, there is a growing thread of literature that has examined the lives and administrations of these presidents during the 1950s and 1960s (Roper, 2012; Lefever, 2005; Williamson, 2008; Zaki, 2007). Regardless of whether or not the presidents were perceived as collaborative authoritarians of the status quo or openly supported the Civil Rights movement, the literature has revealed that *all* of the HBCU leaders administered to provide the best for their respective institutions.

In *Black Colleges and Civil Rights: Organizing and Mobilizing in Jackson, Mississippi*, Williamson (2008) compares and contrasts the actions during the 1960s of President Jacob L. Reddix of Jackson State College and President Adam Beittel (a White man) of nearby Tougaloo College in Tougaloo, Mississippi. Clearly, there are differences between presidents Reddix and Beittel, despite the fact that both presidents believed in universal equality and believed that student participation in the Civil Rights movement was the right thing. However, the two presidents were in different situations. Reddix, who served from 1940 to 1967, was at a state-supported institution; he had to comply with a White Board. They ordered him to maintain law and order on campus. According to Williamson's research, Reddix "ruled with an iron fist." The implications for the state-supported school could have been dire if Reddix had not responded to disruptions in the way that he did (Williamson, 2008).

At nearby Tougaloo College, Beittel served from 1960 to 1964. He had more flexibility to openly criticize the racial status quo. Tougaloo was a private institution, so Beittel did not rely on state funding. The son of Quaker parents, he devoted his academic career to HBCUs, supporting both his students and African Americans. Prior to accepting the presidency of Tougaloo College, Beittel served as the president of Talladega College (a private HBCU) in Alabama from 1945 to 1952. At Talladega, Beittel hosted an "interracial conference on desegregation and voting rights, [wrote] articles equating segregation with a violation of Christian principles and democratic ideals, and [sent] letters to the governor expressing his opposition to Alabama laws and customs" (Williamson, 2008, p. 119). Beittel continued these actions while president at Tougaloo; he provided housing for the Freedom Riders, participated in protest marches in Jackson, and refused to expel his students who participated in the various Civil Rights activities.

Williamson's book addresses the paradigm shift from the old way of thinking about HBCU presidents, to today's view. The older, more simplistic view saw their management style as accommodationist, despotic, and authoritarian. The new view is more complex because it examines their responsibilities and accomplishments in the context of the turbulent times.

Alonzo Moron, who served as president of Virginia's Hampton Institute from 1949 to 1959, is an HBCU president who has been overlooked in history. He is another good example of a president facing the racial and civil rights movement of the era. In *Civil Rights and Politics at Hampton Institute*, Zaki (2007) describes Moron as an "activist college president" (p. 3). Moron was an outspoken critic of racial segregation.

According to Zaki (2007), Moron viewed it to be his mission to move the institution forward with the times and to promote civil rights. A native of St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, Moron used his platform as president of Hampton to address the social issues on an international stage. He was fully committed to racial equality in the United States. Moreover, like many presidents of HBCUs at the time, Moron was labeled a communist. During the era of the Cold War, this label was commonly used by White conservatives to discredit African Americans (Anderson, 2003; Daniel, 2000; Horne, 1986). Moron denied the accusations and condemned communism.

This type of defense mechanism—a simple denial of accusations—was attempted by many HBCU presidents. Although portraying someone as a communist was a serious accusation, the accusers had no evidence to prove that these presidents were communists or communist sympathizers. For example, in Mays's autobiography *Born to Rebel* (1971), he points out that during his tenure as president of Morehouse College, critics and staunch segregationists accused him of being a communist simply because of his criticism of segregation.

Moron and Mays were outspoken critics of the racial status; but their forthright advocacy was possible because both Morehouse College and Hampton Institute were private institutions. Thus they had more freedom to address social issues than managers of state-funded schools.

How did presidents of public institutions manage to run their schools despite the constraints? Two good examples are Rufus Atwood of Kentucky State College (serving from 1929 to 1962) and Frederick Patterson of Alabama's Tuskegee Institute (serving from 1935 to 1953). Like Turner, Atwood and Patterson had to work with the pro-segregationist state legislatures and officials in order to make progress for their respective institutions.

In *A Black Educator in the Segregated South: Kentucky's Rufus B. Atwood*, Smith (1994) describes Atwood as more of a politician than a college president. Atwood used the issues of desegregation to pressure the Kentucky state legislature to appropriate more money to his institution. However, Atwood, like other presidents of public HBCUs, was forced by the Trustees and politicians to expel students and dismiss faculty in 1960 when students staged sit-ins at local lunch counters in Frankfort, Kentucky. It is important to remember that Atwood was both brave and smart. Atwood was a courageous man who had served in World War I. He had distinguished himself on the battlefield by restoring a communications post after German shelling, for which he was awarded a Bronze Star. Although he believed in the ideals of the Civil Rights movement, as the manager of the school, he was in a position where he did not have much of a choice. From a historical perspective, Atwood would have been deemed an "Uncle Tom" or a collaborator; however, Smith's (1994) broad perspective of the complexities that Atwood faced allows the reader to understand why Atwood administered in the manner that he did.

Tuskegee Institute's president at the time, Dr. Frederick Patterson, had similar dilemmas, and he explained why he could not be outspoken. In his autobiography, *Chronicles of Faith: The Autobiography of Frederick Patterson* (1990), he talked about walking in the shoes of Booker T. Washington and Robert Moton:

I had to read carefully. Some people had called both Booker Washington and Dr. Moton “Uncle Toms.” To some extent, I found that I, too, needed to bow to the exigencies of race relations. When I saw things that made me angry, I didn’t react as strongly as I felt. I didn’t want to tarnish the image of Tuskegee Institute, and so I couldn’t be a spitfire. If being a spitfire was what I had wanted to do, I would have left Tuskegee rather than blemish the record of an institution to which many people had contributed and which was important to its students. I didn’t feel that I truly could be a spitfire; perhaps some people did call me an Uncle Tom. (p. 49)

Patterson did support the Civil Rights movement. In fact, he encouraged his students and faculty to vote and participate in Civil Rights activities. However, he asked the students and faculty not to use the name of the institution (school letterhead, and so forth) if they participated in the movement, to protect the image of Tuskegee. Patterson is most remembered as having established a college fund for Black students. One of the reasons that the fund was established was because during World War II, many philanthropists were not contributing as much money to the colleges as they had in the past. Patterson, along with Benjamin Mays, organized the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) in 1944. UNCF created a consortium of private HBCUs to share resources and to ensure each other’s survival (Patterson & Goodson, 1990).

Through these numerous examples, it can be seen that presidents of HBCUs prior to the 1970s had to deal with various sociopolitical issues that impacted their respective institutions, including the Civil Rights movement, the Cold War, and other domestic problems. College presidents had to work within the system to ensure that their respective institutions survived.

The Legacy of College President Benner C. Turner

Turner, who served as SCSC’s president from 1950 to 1967, continues to be represented in the literature as one of the most controversial HBCU presidents of his time (Fairclough, 2007). It is true that he had an autocratic leadership style that rubbed many people the wrong way. Many viewed him as compliant with the ultra-conservative and all-White Board of Trustees. They believed that he had conservative views on the Civil Rights movement (Fairclough, 2007a; Hine, 1996).

Recent research, however, shows that he administered the school effectively, preserving and improving the school’s infrastructure and academic quality. Research has revealed his disdain for the racial segregationists (particularly Strom Thurmond). Letters show that he correctly feared that civil rights activities would become dangerous to students. He did not want faculty to be involved, either. His focus was on the reputation and existence of the college; the school’s aim was to improve the future of students through education.

While Turner improved the academic programs, the physical plant, and the quality of the faculty during his tenure, his method of handling student and faculty unrest about civil rights overshadowed these accomplishments. In 1956, 1960, 1963, and 1967, Turner suppressed a series of incidents of student Civil Rights activism, which included a boycott of the college's cafeteria, class boycotts, and many protests in downtown Orangeburg. The 1967 student protests proved that there was a disconnect between Turner and the student body. After student complaints and negotiations with Governor Robert McNair, Turner was forced to retire (Grose, 2006; Hine, 1996). Turner essentially disappeared, never returning to Orangeburg and essentially dying in relative obscurity many years later.

Why was his legacy as an effective administrator so overshadowed? Turner, like many of his contemporaries, approached his job carefully and strategically, often seeking to not offend the school's Board and the state legislatures who controlled his institution. Although there are many aspects to explore regarding this complex leader, the next sections will specifically examine questions about Turner's self-perception. What was his philosophy of education? Did he have a viewpoint about the racial status quo? How did he see his racial identity?

Turner's Self-Perception

The existing literature to date that explores Turner fails to examine how Turner viewed himself as a president of a Black college during a time of social change. Turner's contemporaries viewed themselves as diplomats when it came to the issue of civil rights (Fairclough, 2007a; Hine, 1996). In respect to keeping their jobs and most importantly good standing of their respective institutions, Turner's contemporaries had to maintain a balancing act by challenging racial segregation, but not isolating Whites. For example, Turner's contemporary and close friend Benjamin Mays (a theologian by training) of Morehouse College sought to win over the White middle class by delicately condemning racial segregation through the narrative of Christian ethos (Roper, 2012). Personal correspondence and interviews from his children and former students disclose that Turner's actions were no different than other HBCU presidents of the time. In fact, an August 29, 1967 correspondence to Benjamin E. Mays shows Turner expressing his frustration at the system (which that year had dismissed him). He felt misunderstood and betrayed by some faculty and students. He laid out his accomplishments during his seventeen-year tenure as president, as well as his fears that the surge in student protests would result in ruining the reputation of the institution.

The statement or implication that I had no interest in quality education is really ironical. As a matter of fact there are seventeen closely typed pages of changes made and things done that were all designed to afford the students constantly better educational opportunities. In addition to putting up 50 new buildings, there were such things as producing graduates who became doctorates, increasing faculty doctorates from 2 to 28, increasing the annual state appropriation from \$650, on to nearly 3 million, inaugurating entrance examinations—and on and on. ...

But a more disturbing situation is that South Carolina State College is now a political football. The students enjoyed the disturbances they were able to create, but as we both know, they will be the losers in the long run. Quality education requires quality effort from quality students. Only the opportunity can be offered—the rest is up to them. (Turner correspondence to Mays, August 29, 1967)

He worried that students would get hurt and possibly killed. This dreadful scenario was far from what the school was meant to offer, which was an education leading to a better life for graduates. Unfortunately, several youth were killed by State Troopers during civil rights protests in Orangeburg. This tragedy occurred after Turner had been dismissed. Turner learned of the tragedy immediately after it happened, from a phone call from Acting President Maceo Nance. Turner and Nance cried over the phone (personal communication from E.A. “Turner” Klimas, August 11, 2008).

Turner’s Philosophy of Education

In the era when racial segregation was being challenged in the courts, HBCU presidents, especially those at state institutions, were forced to address the issue, but in a diplomatic way. Kentucky State University president Rufus Atwood (who privately supported school desegregation) tactfully aligned with himself with the segregationists in the interest of maintaining state funding, thus guaranteeing longevity of his respective institution (Smith, 1994). In effect, HBCU presidents did not trust the Brown decision to amount to a real change. Instead, the presidents were seeking the material gain (bolstering their schools’ resiliency). It was as if they saw only a symbolic gain of legal victories toppling racial segregation, particularly as the victories impacted higher education. The bigger prize was creating a competitive academic institution that would equip its students to be competitive in all fields of human endeavor. As Fairclough (2007b) notes, “State college presidents argued that their dealing with white politicians, although distasteful and demeaning, were necessary. They were protecting and strengthening black higher education at a time when there was no alternative to segregation” (p. 72). In that respect, Turner solely focused on improving the academic quality of the institution, such as getting more space, upgrading buildings, and getting more faculty with advanced degrees.

Turner believed strongly in “an academic work ethic” (Benner C. Turner II, personal communication, September 8, 2008; Elizabeth Turner Klimas, personal communication, August 11, 2008). This ethic, according to Turner, was the combination of academic excellence and the accumulation of life skills that would benefit a student after college. He arrived at this philosophy because he knew about the poor quality of African American primary and secondary education in South Carolina. His own educational experience proved to him that college made a difference (Elizabeth Turner Klimas, personal communication, August 11, 2008).

This concept of an academic ethic is clear in one of his written statements to the Board of Trustees, just after a period of student unrest:

[An] educational institution should devote itself to its chief purpose; namely, that of educating young people and inculcating into future citizens the techniques of learning and independent thought, and of a feeling of responsibility which goes to make good citizenship. (Reid, 2008)

From his childhood as a student in the Columbus [Georgia] City Schools, to his time at Harvard Law School, Turner excelled in his courses. He had a drive for academic excellence. He also wrestled at Phillips Academy and at Harvard, and he was an avid reader. There were times when his father was unable to send him home during the school breaks. Turner, alone on campus, closed his door, pulled down the shades, and read Greek and Latin classical literature (Maceo Nance, William C. Hine Oral History Interviews, March 14, 1989). Reading became a life-long interest (Benner C. Turner, II, personal communication, September 8, 2008). He may have believed that education was the surest way for Blacks to achieve a better income and a better life.

Because of the substandard education received by Black youth, many students who entered SCSC during Turner's tenure were neither prepared to do college-level work, nor had the necessary life skills that would help them in their careers (Benner C. Turner II, personal communication, September 8, 2008). Turner was faced with educating students who were not prepared for college academics but who wanted to pursue careers requiring a lot of careful learning, such as careers as army officers and medical doctors (Potts, 1978). He wondered how to provide the best college education possible for these unprepared students. As a result, Turner created a "communications center," which simply was a remedial center. It helped students to acquire basic skills they should have learned in primary and secondary school. His son said:

He lamented that a lot of the students came from the South Carolina system— students he said were permanently handicapped. You know, smart kids who were permanently handicapped by an inferior educational system. Well, one of the things you might see that he set up was something called the communications center.... It's to improve the reading, writing, speech skills, and so basically remedial work. Just closing that gap so the students can do college level. (Benner C. Turner II, personal communication, September 8, 2008)

This communications center was very effective at getting smart students up to speed. According to Potts (1978), the academic achievements among the students improved significantly. Further, Turner's compliancy with the Board and state politicians allowed him to have the funds he needed to improve the college. These improvements gave many students access to a better education, thus providing a gateway for them to some of the top graduate programs in the country. For example, in 1961, Turner reported to the Board that several students were admitted to schools such as Pennsylvania State University, the University of Kansas, and Fordham University, and that they had earned graduate assistantships at those schools. One student earned a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship in 1963.

Part of his philosophy of work ethic was that you needed to look the part. He pushed students to learn proper business attire and to improve their social skills. At the time, most HBCUs, including SCSC, had a lecture series or lyceums for its students (Williams & Ashley, 2004). But Turner made weekly chapel services or vespers mandatory. Further, students were assigned seats, and they were required to be dressed professionally: coats and ties for men and dresses for women (Franklin Roosevelt Jackson, William C. Hine Oral History Interviews, July 20, 1990; Nelson & Bass, 1970; South Carolina State College Board of Trustees Minutes, January 31, 1957). The student dress code and mandatory attendance at vespers were among the issues that students filed as grievances against Turner during the 1966–67 academic year (Issac "Ike" Williams, William C. Hine Oral History Interviews, June 21, 1995). Why did he think it necessary? Turner's son remembered his father telling him:

"I always want these kids to know how to dress up. A young man should go out and know how to tie a tie, make a good impression." And when they went downtown on these marches, one of the things my father was proud about was how well they're dressed. Can you imagine that? He was very proud that they went dressed well. (Benner C. Turner II, personal communication, September 8, 2008)

So although Turner did not approve of students participating in Civil Rights marches in downtown Orangeburg, he was proud that the students did not look unkempt, because they were a reflection of the school.

Moreover, he wanted to prepare them for their careers (Benner C. Turner II, personal communication, September 8, 2008), in which appearance and manners would count. It was as if he was trying to instill in them the passion to succeed, the drive to get an education that would improve their lives. If that was his goal, it is no wonder that he opposed the participation of students and faculty in Civil Rights activism that he believed was, at most, dangerous, and at the least, not something that should take students' focus away from their studies. He may have reasoned that education could uplift Blacks, but that activism could not guarantee changes in laws in their favor.

He believed fervently in the mission of the Black college (Elizabeth Turner Klimas, personal communication, August 11, 2008). Undoubtedly, HBCUs were crucial to the African American community. When Blacks were shut out of other schools, the HBCUs would be there for them. And what if desegregation of higher education never came? Turner could not have known if that day would come or not. His job as president was to improve SCSC so that Black students could have a quality, state-supported institution of higher education (Benner C. Turner II, personal communication, September 8, 2008; Elizabeth Turner Klimas, personal communication, August 11, 2008). In fact, under Turner, SCSC reached its highest academic level of achievement since the start of the school (Reid, 2008).

Sideline Activist

In his Harvard College's twenty-fifth anniversary class report, Turner also briefly remarked about the political shifting in the American South (i.e. Dixiecrat revolt). His position within the framework (as a college president in a political party in many areas of the South) was, by default, the state and local government. He stated, "Politically, I am not willing to carry any party label. I do believe the country's population is grouping into camps of conservatives and liberals cutting across present party lines eventually to emerge with an entirely new alignment. My sympathies are with the liberals" (Turner, 1952, p. 1011). This brief, but very powerful statement in many respects reflects the dilemmas of his contemporaries as well as his predecessors who were presidents of HBCUs. While many presidents expelled students and faculty who challenged the racial status quo, they ironically privately supported the Civil Rights Movement (Smith, 1994). Nevertheless, because they complied with the status quo, this compliance created a perception that they were merely racial accommodationists or Uncle Toms. This is the image that that fell upon Turner.

The perception was that Turner supported the racial status quo because he had expelled activist students and dismissed faculty members who attempted to organize protests or speak out against the system. In truth, he hated the concept of segregation. What activist students and faculty did not realize, perhaps, was that during the episodes of student unrest in his tenure, the Board of Trustees was proposing that Turner either maintain law or simply close the school. Turner opted to try to keep order so that he could keep the school open. As Turner's son related,

My father viewed the threat to close the school as a mortal blow. A lot of his students came from poor families who made a sacrifice to send their sons to college. If the school was closed [for a period], many would not come back. (Benner C. Turner, II, personal communication, August 29, 2009)

So it was not as if Turner misunderstood racism's evils. He had grown up in the segregated South during the early twentieth century. As a boy, he had witnessed the lynching of an African American youth. As an adult, after receiving academic honors at a prestigious college, he was systemically blocked from being admitted to the Georgia Bar (his exams were tossed, unreviewed, because of his race). He had no respect or endearment for his oppressors. His son recalled that his father cringed when he walked past the Confederate soldier memorial that was located in downtown Orangeburg. In fact, Turner owned a roll of toilet paper that had the Confederate flag printed on it, as a reminder of how he felt about the segregated South (Benner C. Turner, II, personal correspondence, August 29, 2008). Turner not only hated the philosophy of segregation and its symbols, but he also privately practiced economic boycotts.

As previously mentioned, SCSC students had boycotted the school's cafeteria. Specifically, they would not buy the bread or Coca-Cola, because the local distributor was seen as racist. Prior to this 1955 student boycott, Turner privately did not purchase these two products because of his disdain for the distributor. The distributor was Mayor Robert H. Jennings, who openly supported segregation. He owned Palmetto Bakery, Orangeburg Fuel and Ice, Paradise Ice Cream, and the local Coke franchise. Turner's son remembered growing up at home only drinking Pepsi, never Coca-Cola (Benner C. Turner, II, personal correspondence, August 29, 2008). His son explained, "We did not think of it as a boycott. It was just that my father did not believe he had to subject himself to any racial slight... he would not give his business to anyone who did not treat him with respect" (Benner C. Turner, II, personal correspondence, August 29, 2008). Moreover, Turner stayed away from downtown Orangeburg as much as possible, buying only as few items as necessary.

He was highly protective of the students, showing mistrust of not just White politicians, lawmakers, officials, police, and his Board of Trustees, but also of the motives of some national Black adult activists. For example, at the height of the student boycott during the 1955-56 academic year, the Board threatened to close the school for the rest of the year. Disturbed and angered, Turner offered twice to resign. After meeting with Turner, Governor Strom Thurmond stormed out of Turner's office, shouting "You goddamn nigger!" (Benner C. Turner, II, personal correspondence, September 8, 2008). In another example, Turner wisely thought it would be a conflict of interest and even dangerous for White police officers to come to campus in an event of a campus emergency. Instead, Turner lobbied the state and was able to create a campus police force that employed African American officers. In addition, he also lobbied for funding and was able to create an on-campus medical clinic. In effect, he wanted his students and the campus to be left alone (Benner C. Turner, personal correspondence, September 8, 2008). As for his mistrust of African American politicians, Turner feared that outsiders were using his students as "unnecessary martyrs."

Only Turner's family knew his feelings about civil rights. They knew he would not buy from Jennings, but no one else did, because appearing to endorse a student boycott would have given the Board a reason to fire him. As president, he had to comply with the Board, whether he liked the policies or not. The students' boycott of bread and Coke at the cafeteria was the first of many battles between Turner and the students. His silence on social issues was similar to other college presidents at public HBCUs. The tactic was to remain quiet about social concerns, so that it would be easier to gain additional funding for the school. Further, he did not allow faculty to publically demean the school in any way. In this respect, Turner's behavior was nothing out of the ordinary (Smith, 1994). Like his contemporaries, Turner picked his battles, keeping the best interests of the institution as his top priority (Williamson, 2008). Even when sacked by the Board and governor after seventeen years of accomplishments, he makes it clear that as president, he had been trying to preserve the goal of the school, which was to teach:

... [T]he influence of non-campus organizations, individuals, and their effect on the work of the college, have become so pervasive and continuous that the situation has become difficult for the faculty, administration, and student body to carry on the normal routine of the institution. ... (Dr. Turner Retires from State College, 1967)

His Racial Identity

Although Turner could have passed as White (his death certificate even lists him as White), research reveals that he presented himself as an African American (Reid, 2008). Yet there are those people who have perceived Turner as White or as trying to pass as White. These erroneous impressions have affected his legacy (Hine, 1996). As Franklin Jackson put it,

Dr. Turner, you wouldn't have known he was black unless he told you. Dr. Turner was literally white. I guess he had one-sixty fourth blood in him. But Dr. Turner was white. You wouldn't have known it [that he was Black]; no way you could have known it—from speech, from mannerisms, behavior, everything. (Dr. Franklin Roosevelt Jackson, William C. Hine Oral History Interview, July 20, 1990)

It is evident that he would have been able to pass as White, based on his photos, an excerpt from a letter of recommendation from an official of Phillips Academy to Harvard University, personal accounts, literature, and even his death certificate. Did he do so? There are several accounts that have made the accusation that he tried to pass as White. But based on the findings of this study, along with supporting secondary literature, this accusation is untrue.

There are many ways in which Turner shows that he identified as Black, not the least of which is that Turner was a proud member of a Black fraternity called Alpha Phi Alpha. Turner's experiences during his childhood and throughout his adult life developed his African American identity, through the good times and bad.

Turner grew up in an insulated Black community in the segregated South. His father, a medical doctor, made a commitment to fight for better medical services for African Americans. His father's prominence in the community gave the young Turner the chance to interact with other prominent African American families, officials, and working-class African Americans (B. C. Turner II, personal communication, September 8, 2008). Early on, he became wise to the evil of racism, when as a boy he witnessed the lynching of an African American youth. Records show that on several occasions, he encountered bigotry firsthand. When he was at Phillips Academy, he was bullied by a hostile student from the South. He was denied the opportunity to gain admission into the Georgia Bar because of his race. He was taunted by an official when voting (Benner C. Turner II, personal communication, September 8, 2008). Such experiences reflect the life of person who identifies as African American.

He was clear to others about how he identified. For example, occasionally his family shopped in downtown Orangeburg. Turner's daughter remembers White people in Orangeburg staring oddly at her and her family when SCSC students and faculty stopped to greet them while they were shopping. That was because many Whites in Orangeburg mistook the Turners for being at least of southern European descent. On one occasion, the Turner family entered a restaurant and sat in the colored section. The waitress asked Turner if he realized that he and his family were in the colored section. Turner replied that they were colored (Elizabeth Turner Klimas, personal communication, August 11, 2008).

Turner was not unique in deciding to identify as Black. There were numerous high-profile biracial individuals during the era who also chose to identify as African American, even though they appeared White. For example, Morehouse College president Dr. John Hope (1868–1947), who had a fair complexion, was born in Augusta, Georgia to an African American woman and a White man. Hope, like Turner, had attended prestigious schools in New England. Although Hope could have passed for White, instead he presented himself as an African American (Davis, 1998). In another example, former NAACP executive director Walter White (who had mixed ancestry on both sides of his family) was fair-skinned, with blonde hair and blue eyes. He lived from 1893 to 1955. As an adult, he famously put his own safety in jeopardy as he fought for social justice for African Americans. Because of his White features, he was able to navigate into the Ku Klux Klan to investigate a race riot in Arkansas in 1919 (White, 1995).

Conclusion: Another Perspective of Turner

Previous literature and conventional wisdom has viewed Turner negatively, as an autocratic leader who did not help in the fight for Black civil rights (Fairclough, 2001; Grose, 2006; Hine, 1992; Hine, 1996). However, these views do not put Turner in historical context. He was an African American college president at a public HBCU during the era of de jure segregation. His contemporaries managed their jobs similarly, but their legacies have been placed in perspective while Turner's has continued to be misunderstood (Williamson, 2008; Gasman, 2006; Smith, 1994). Research shows that it was true that Turner was an authoritarian leader, which was what he believed, would save the school. He probably realized that his scuffles with activists had marred his legacy, and he referred to the fights the very night he left Orangeburg for retirement. "I'm on my way out and I'm not going to look back," he said to Mrs. James Pierce. "I'm shaking the dust off of my feet" (Geraldine Zimmerman, personal correspondence, July 19, 2008). But overall, other than the student unrest issues, his management of the school was effective. Several alumni have revisited his legacy. For instance, when asked about Turner, Dr. John H. Corbitt stated,

He was a good administrator. I thought the school ran pretty smooth, and the school prospered. They had a good football team, good baseball team, and good academic programs. And so I think if you just leave out the civil rights controversy, it was a good school. (Dr. John H. Corbitt, personal communication, July 5, 2008)

When asked the same question about Turner's leadership, Cecil Williams said,

Yes ...I would say that he did a lot for the school. There were many buildings built...he expanded the educational curriculum a good deal, and he also brought many, many people with a doctorate degree to State College. (Cecil Williams, personal communication, July 17, 2008)

Dr. Lewis C. Roache, a former biology professor at State College, was particularly revealing:

He was one of the most efficient guys I ever saw. He knew nothing of compassion. He knew nothing of tempering justice with mercy. But everything that crossed his desk, he read and he reacted to it. (Dr. Lewis C. Roache, William C. Hine Oral History Interview, August 16, 1990)

How Turner managed the school should be placed in context with the social unrest of the time, and questions about how he self-identified racially should be put to rest. He was a man who could have passed for White, but instead chose to identify as Black and worked to provide access to education for Blacks. It was a big responsibility with many constraints. He operated a state-funded school and had to comply with a White Board, which meant that to further the school's survival, he personally had to be silent about his views about racial injustice. At great personal cost, he removed student and faculty activists to keep the school's reputation clear of any issue that might restrict its funding. He accomplished much from his precarious spot between a rock and a hard place; the school was vastly improved physically and in academic quality during his tenure, as he promised to do when he was given the job. Just as many scholars have revisited the lives and legacies of his contemporaries (Gasman, 2006; Smith, 1994), it is time to put Turner's life and legacy into context.

References

Oral Histories

Oral history interviews with William C. Hine, professor of history at South Carolina State University, by
Jackson, F.R. (July 20, 1990)
Nance, M. (March 14, 1989)
Roache, L.C. (August 16, 1990)
Williams, I. (June 21, 1995)

Documents

Benner C. Turner correspondence to Benjamin E. Mays, August 29, 1967.
Dr. E.A. Stearns correspondence to Dean Greenough, April 3, 1923.
“Dr. Turner Retires from State College,” *The Times and Democrat* (May 11, 1967).
New Hampshire, State of. (1988, filed February 1). “Certificate of Death: B.C. Turner.”
Department of Health and Human Services.
South Carolina State College Board of Trustees Minutes (1957, January 31).
Turner, B.C. (1952). *Harvard College Class Report*.

Secondary Sources

- Anderson, C. (2003). *Eyes off the prize: The United Nations and the African American struggle for human rights, 1944-1955*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Boyce, T.D. & Chunnu-Brayda, W.C. (2012). "I Shall Not Be Muffled Here": Thomas E. Miller, the Lost African American Congressman. In Matthew Lynch (Ed.), *Before Obama: A Reappraisal of Black Reconstruction Era Politicians* (pp. 265–285). Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
- Burke, W.L. & Hine, W.C. (2003). *The School of Law at South Carolina State College: Its Creation*. Paper presented at the meeting of The Citadel Conference on Civil Rights in South Carolina, Charleston, SC.
- Daniel, P. (2000). *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Davis, L. (1998). *A Clashing of the Soul: John Hope and the Dilemma of African American Leadership and Black Higher Education in the Early Twentieth Century*. Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press.
- Fairclough, A. (2007a). *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Howard University.
- Fairclough, A. (2007b). *The Black College Presidents Who Tired to Thwart the Racial Integration of Higher Education*. *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (No. 55): 71-75.
- Fairclough, A. (2001, Spring). "Tuskegee's Robert R. Moton and the Travails of the Early Black College." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (No. 31): 94–105.
- Fariello, G. (1995). *Red Scare: Memories of the American Inquisition*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Gasman, M. (2011). "Perceptions of Black College Presidents: Sorting through Stereotypes and Reality to Gain a Complex Picture." *American Educational Research Journal*, 48 (4), 836–870. doi: 10.3102/0002831210397176
- Gasman, M. (2006). "The President as Ethical Role Model: Instituting an Ethic of Leadership at Fisk University in the 1950s." *Journal of College and Character*, (2). Retrieved August 23, 2006, from <http://www.collegevalues.org/articles.cfm?id=510&a=1>

- Gilpin, P.J. & Gasman, M. (2003). *Charles S. Johnson: Leadership beyond the Veil in the Age of Jim Crow*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Graham, L.O. (2000). *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Grose, P.G. (2006). *South Carolina at the Brink: Robert McNair and the Politics of Civil Rights*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.
- Hine, W.C. (1996). "Civil Rights and Campus Wrongs: South Carolina State College Student Protest, 1955–1968." *South Carolina Historical Magazine* (No. 97), 4: 310–331.
- Hine, W.C. (1992). "South Carolina's Challenge to Civil Rights: The Case of South Carolina State College, 1945–1954." *Agriculture and Human Values*, 38–50.
- Holmes, S.L. (2004). "An Overview of African American College Presidents: A Game of Two Steps Forward, One Step Backward, and Still Standing." *The Journal of Negro Education*, 73 (1), 21–39.
- Horne, G. (1986). *Black and Red: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Afro American response to the Cold War, 1944-1963*. Albany, NY: State University of New York.
- Jelks, R.M. (2012). *Benjamin E. Mays, Schoolmaster of the Movement: A Biography*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Lau, P.F. (2006). *Democracy Rising: South Carolina and the Fight for Black Equality Since 1865*. Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press.
- Lefever, H.G. (2005). *Undaunted by the Fight: Spelman College and the Civil Rights Movement, 1957–1967*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press.
- Lewis, L.S. (1993). *The Cold War and Academic Governance: The Lattimore Case at Johns Hopkins*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Lewis, L.S. (1988). *Cold War on Campus: A Study of the Politics of Organizational Control*. New Brunswick & Oxford: Transaction Books.
- Mays, B.E. (1971). *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography of Benjamin E. Mays*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

- McKinney, R.I. (1997). *Mordecai, The Man and His Message: The Story of Mordecai Wyatt Johnson*. Washington, DC: Howard University Press.
- Nelson, J. & Bass, J. (1970). *The Orangeburg Massacre*. New York and Cleveland: The World Publishing Company.
- Patterson, F.D. & Goodson, M.G. (Eds.). (1990). *Chronicles of Faith: The Autobiography of Frederick D. Patterson*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.
- Potts, J.F. (1978). *A History of South Carolina State College, 1896–1978*. Columbia, SC: The R.L. Bryan Company.
- Reid, R. (2008, June 11). “S.C. State’s Fourth President: Dr. Benner C. Turner.” *The Times and Democrat*. Retrieved from http://thetandd.com/news/s-c-state-s-fourth-president-dr-benner-c-turner/article_17ea5764-a15e-5630-9440-6733ffd465bd.html
- Robbins, R. (1996). *Sideline Activist: Charles S. Johnson and the Struggle for Civil Rights*. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press.
- Roper, J.H. (2012). *The Magnificent Mays: A Biography of Benjamin E. Mays*. Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press.
- Smith, G.L. (1994). *A Black Educator in the Segregated South: Kentucky’s Rufus B. Atwood*. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky.
- Urban, W.J. (1992). *Black Scholar: Horace Mann Bond, 1904–1972*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Washington-William, E. & Stadiem, W. (2005). *Dear Senator: A Memoir by the Daughter of Strom Thurmond*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.
- White, W. (1995). *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press.
- Williams, J. & Ashley, D. (2004). *I’ll Find a Way or Make One: A Tribute to Historically Black Colleges and Universities*. New York: Amistad/HarperCollins, Inc.

Williamson, J.A. (2008). "Black Colleges and Civil Rights: Organizing and Mobilizing in Jackson, Mississippi." In Peter Wallenstein (Ed.), *Higher Education and the Civil Rights Movement: White Supremacy, Black Southerners, and College Campuses* (pp. 116–137). Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

Zaki, H.M. (2007). *Civil Rights and Politics at Hampton Institute: The Legacy of Alonzo G. Moron*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.