
The Pursuit of Excellence: Kentucky State University, 1886–2020

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The Pursuit of Excellence: Kentucky State University, 1886–2020

By
John A. Hardin



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PREFACE

In 1636, the Harvard School opened in Cambridge, Massachusetts to provide education for divinity students in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In a similar but different fashion, another institution of higher learning opened 251 years after that important occasion in American intellectual and cultural history.

On October 22, 1887, dedicatory exercises were held in Frankfort, Kentucky for the State Normal School for Colored Persons, which had been sanctioned by the 1886 Kentucky General Assembly. The opening of the school and its successive evolution into Kentucky State University in 1972 is an important narrative that is largely untold. Its progress amid criticism from unfriendly quarters is not unusual for historically Black institutions. However, it is unusual for such an institution to serve in a state that persistently lost its Black population from 1900 forward. It is also unusual for what was founded as a Black institution to thrive and prosper despite repeated external efforts to close it, thus depriving students of all races, whom Kentucky State University now serves, of an opportunity to acquire a college education based on academic excellence.

Given the above, the following is a narrative history starting in 1886 of that pursuit of educational excellence by the faculty, staff, students and alumni of the institution known today as Kentucky State University. Along the way, challenges were encountered and resolved. This narrative is not without omissions or inadvertent errors. Any such narrative is subject to human frailty and honest mistakes by the author.

—John A. Hardin

FOREWORD

M. Christopher Brown II
Eighteenth President

I often reflect on Charles Dickens' (1859) opening prose in the historical novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*. Dickens writes,

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way. (p. 1)

Over the past year, every continent, nation-state, and community has been grappling with the effects of a global coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic—the primary non-therapeutic responses, such as sheltering in place, quarantining impacted persons, and social distancing. The stratagem for social distancing included the depopulation of university campuses and classes, including Kentucky State University.

In March of 2020, Kentucky State University took the unprecedented step of canceling our in-person classes, evacuating the residence halls, and reducing the campus staffing to primarily of essential personnel. The summer of 2020 conjoined with nationwide (and some international) protests related to social justice, racial reconciliation, and an inexplicable litany of killings of unarmed Black and brown men and women by uniformed police officers. The cauldron of apocalyptic

omens cloaked the nation in unrest and uncertainty. Yet amid an overwhelming grim context, Kentucky State University enrolled its largest and most academically prepared freshman class in the fall of 2020.

At the dawn of our 135th anniversary, there was an energy bubbling at “The College on the Hill” bridled only by COVID-19 constraints. The continuing growth and progress at Kentucky State University in the penumbra of a global pandemic is both sign and signal that its mission and services are central to transforming the lives of students, preparing workers for the marketplace, and creating civic participants for the nation. When I commissioned a new university history for the trigensiquincentennial of our founding, I aimed to mark the key institutional moments that fomented the spirit of excellence that the campus has tenaciously pursued since May 17, 1886.

There is a blend of fact and folklore regarding the opening of the Kentucky State Normal School for Colored Persons (the original name of Kentucky State University). There are questions about who did what, when, and why. However, this new institutional history chronicled by Dr. John A. Hardin provides clarity and context to what we know, what we think, and what we can prove. We know for certain the university first opened its doors on October 11, 1887. We think the institution’s founding was a response to the growing number of school-age African Americans in the Commonwealth of Kentucky who required trained teachers—teachers who the state had no intention of producing at any of its exclusively white colleges. We can prove that the alumni of Kentucky State University ultimately changed the state, nation, and world with their contributions to education, politics, journalism, agriculture, healthcare, and industry.

As Kentucky’s only public historically Black institution, its only second *Morrill Land-grant Act of 1890* institution, the only institution of higher education in the state capital, and the only college in the state to ever be granted membership in the prestigious Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges, it would be reasonable to assume that Kentucky State University would be a jewel of the Commonwealth. Sadly, this is not true. The nation’s complicated history of racial enmity, structural oppression, and capitalistic hostilities have sought to delimit institutional progress (Brown & Davis, 2001). However, in the face of daunting circumstances, Kentucky State University has always thrived and exceeded expectations.

THE RACIAL HISTORY OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

In the United States of America, persons of African descent have always experienced dissimilar and unequal access to education. Reified by the realities of the enslavement of Africans in America, a fictitious narrative of unmerited intellectual inferiority became entrenched in the minds of pro-slavery and anti-slavery Whites alike and helped to rationalize the denial of educational resources to Blacks (Brown & Dancy, 2018). Even today, 150 years after the legal abolition of

human enslavement in the nation, access to higher education and its immeasurable benefits remain colored and contoured by race.

Despite countless efforts to restrict African American participation in collegiate education, the quest to learn, build, and grow using higher education tools, African Americans created education institutions providing them an opportunity to self-define and navigate their participation in the health and wealth of our nation. Roebuck and Murty (1993) note: “Southern Blacks from the beginning of the Civil War had made concentrated efforts to educate themselves, despite White hostility, via informal and formal church-linked organizations” (p. 24). They also note: “Following the Revolutionary War (1783), free Blacks established African churches, African private schools, and African fraternal organizations in both northern and southern cities where they could worship, educate their children, and protect themselves. Some of these schools were founded by free Blacks, some few by Whites, and some others by freed Blacks after 1865” (p. 21). In 1865, there were five million freed African Americans living in the United States, and more than 90 percent lived in southern states until the early 1900s.

At the conclusion of the Civil War and throughout Reconstruction (1863–1877), the responsibility for providing instruction for the mostly illiterate formerly enslaved persons was shared among the federal government through its Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen’s Bureau); a number of church-related missionary societies in the North, and Blacks themselves. With regard to higher education, only 28 Blacks received baccalaureate degrees from U.S. colleges and universities prior to the Civil War (Anderson, 1988). Occasionally, a few institutions such as Berea College in Kentucky (established in 1855) and Oberlin College in Ohio (1833) admitted a few African Americans on a selective basis. The need to transition from meager to mass participation led to the creation of the nation’s historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Kentucky State University is a living testament to the ability of African Americans to navigate the racial history of higher education in the United States.

PUBLIC BLACK COLLEGES AND COLLEGIATE DESEGREGATION

After the Civil War, state governments for a host of reasons (extending beyond the space provided for this foreword) joined the list of financial patrons of historically Black colleges and universities. When Kentucky State University was founded, legislators in the state General Assembly pledged biennial contributions of \$3,000 for operating expenses and \$7,000 for classroom construction. This altruistic offering was no doubt in response to a federal mandate for southern states to “provide a public school education for all citizens, in keeping with the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments” (Roebuck & Murty, 1993).

Nineteen southern and border states took a sinister approach to the federal support of African American participation in public education—“separate but equal.” The states decided that would keep the races separate, fund them differentially,

but provide them access to educational facilities with similar names (i.e., colleges, schools). The first gathering to design and implement a dual system of education was held two years after the Supreme Court's ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (163 U.S. 537 [1896]) that "separate but equal" was constitutionally permissible.

In June 1898 at Capon Springs, Virginia, a group of influential citizens from both the North and South held the first of a series of sessions to plan the development of a segregated system for African American and white students in the South (Browning and Williams, 1978). Not only did this group explore the financing of education, but they also made curriculum decisions—the arts and sciences for white students, and industrial and vocational training for African American students. The permissibility of dual funding streams was bolstered by the loose wording of the *Morrill Act of 1890* (Ch. 841, 26 Stat. 417). The act specifically prohibited payments of federal funds to states that discriminated against Blacks in the admission to tax-supported colleges or who refused to provide "separate but equal" facilities for the two races. It was this latter clause that led to the immediate establishment of dual public land-grant institutions in 17 of the 19 southern states. Even now, there is one stream of 1862 funds for the University of Kentucky and another stream of 1890 funds for Kentucky State University.

The existence of separate, publicly supported colleges designed by and for African American students embodied a series of legal and educational paradoxes (Brown & Hendrickson, 1997). The public HBCU was expected to serve the unique educational requirements of African American students while simultaneously duplicating the Eurocentric curriculum offered at historically white colleges. Black colleges like Kentucky State University must concomitantly preserve African American culture and to prepare all of its students for white-dominated mainstream of American life. Public HBCUs are singled out in national rankings and reports as evidence of the inferior condition of African Americans and then in other publications praised for the development of an African American middle class. Public HBCUs like Kentucky State University are both hero and villain – a symbol of the power of education and a mark of historic segregation in "the land of the free and the home of the brave."

KENTUCKY STATE UNIVERSITY IS AN HBCU

The amended *Higher Education Act of 1965* defines historically Black colleges and universities as an accredited institution of higher education founded prior to 1964 whose primary mission was, and continues to be, the education of Black Americans (Brown, 1999; Brown, Donahoo, & Bertrand, 2001; Garibaldi, 1984; Roebuck & Murty, 1993; Williams, 1988). The year 1964 is significant because it marked the passage of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin regarding federally assisted programs and activities (Hendrickson, 1991; Williams, 1988). There are over 100 regionally or nationally-accredited public, private, four-year, and two-year historically Black colleges and universities in the nation's 19 southern and border

states (Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia), with two exceptions—Michigan and the District of Columbia. Kentucky State University is proud to be an HBCU.

My first recollection of Kentucky State University was during my master's program in Lexington. In my Legal Issues in Higher Education class, we read an article themed "Black by day, white by night." The central question was what happens to an institution when there is a transdemographic shift. Most of the campuses covered in the piece were from the border states of Ohio, West Virginia, Oklahoma, Missouri, and Kentucky. More than a decade later, I explored the issue of white students attending HBCUs in a seminal study, *Good Intentions: Collegiate Desegregation and Transdemographic Enrollment* (Brown, 2002). In an ethnographic case study of one of the states (not Kentucky) mentioned during my graduate school years, I examined several HBCUs, one of which had a 92% white faculty composition and even a white president at the time the study occurred.

Geraldine Ogden was the first white student enrolled at Kentucky State University. Since that time, our campus has been multiracial, multigenerational, and multidimensional in composition and mission delivery. Garibaldi (1984) reminds us:

Black colleges are not monolithic. Although they are similar to predominantly White institutions in many ways, their historical traditions and their levels and types of support make them distinct. Like many other institutions of higher learning, Black colleges reflect the diversity that is so characteristic of the United States' postsecondary education system. This diversity should always be remembered when considering their past, their current conditions, and their future roles in higher education (p. 6).

Throughout the years, Kentucky State University has practically extended an open-door policy that welcomed all that applied without respect to race, class, sex, or religion. Hedgepeth, Edmonds, and Craig (1978) suggest that the "heterogeneous student body of the Black college gives them a unique status among institutions of higher education. The policy of open admissions goes beyond the acceptance of students with varying preparation for college work. It includes the acceptance of African, Asian, Caribbean, European, Latin American, and White American students" (p. 98).

Research shows that historically Black universities have been the primary educators of African Americans (Allen et al, 1991; Fleming, 1984; Garibaldi, 1984; Thomas, 1981). Kentucky State University, like other HBCUs, has created pools of qualified individuals who have traditionally been underutilized in academia and corporate America.

Thompson (1973) writes, "Black colleges constitute an indigenous, unique, most challenging aspect of higher education in this society, and as such are still badly needed. [Since] college enrollment is expected to continue to increase for

at least another generation and Black colleges will be needed to participate in the education of more and more students” (p. 284). The history of Kentucky State University as an HBCU should not only be applauded but celebrated. Since our founding, Kentucky State University has not only pursued excellence, we attained it in academics, access, athletics, and agriculture.

CONTINUING OUR PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

I was privileged to join the Thorobred family as the 18th president on May 15, 2017. I arrived with the focused intention to build on the institution’s extant legacy in each of the four pillars—academics, access, athletics, and agriculture. This volume, *The Pursuit of Excellence, Kentucky State University, 1886–2020*, chronicles our institutional engagements and achievements in each of these areas. My tenure has been anchored by the bold agenda to increase enrollment and improve retention; emphasize service learning; increase faculty and student research and creative activities; add relevant graduate programs; develop programs to address social ills; expand community outreach and economic development initiatives; and win in every possible athletic contest. Kentucky State University is both remembering and making history.

Past, present and future, Kentucky State University is intent on providing opportunity and access to all students. Although we have changed presidents, names and educational philosophies over our 135-year history, we have always remained true to the mission. From 1886 until now, Kentucky State University plays a critical role in providing opportunities for students seeking access to higher education within the commonwealth of Kentucky and beyond.

As we launch the Spring 2021 term, we look back with awe and wonder at the history and promise of “The College on the Hill.” We remain resolute in our charge to educate, employ, and empower a diverse population of students and citizens. Kentucky State University is an indispensable part of the national higher education landscape.

The legendary academic classroom building on the Kentucky State University campus, Carver Hall, bears the words “Onward and Upward.” We vow and commit to also take Kentucky State University “FORWARD.”

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CHAPTER 1

FORGING A PATH: 1886–1912

In 1873, the Kentucky legislature allowed Blacks to attend all-Black public schools in the state. These schools initially lacked sufficient Black graduates of teacher training or normal schools. Berea College, which had admitted Blacks and whites since 1866, could not provide enough teachers for Kentucky's Black public schools. Hence, finding teachers for Black public schools became a problem that defied an easy solution.

In 1877, the Black school teachers met in Frankfort to form a state teacher organization. Led by John Henry Jackson, a Black Berea College alumnus of Lexington, the association met in Danville on August 7, 1878, and resolved to formulate not only an organization but a teacher training institute for "colored teachers." In a series of annual "memorials" to the state legislature, the Colored Teachers State Association (CTSA) under Jackson's leadership persisted in a demand for a state-supported normal school for Blacks.

Privately-supported normal schools such as Ariel College, Atkinson Literary and Industrial College, Ealy Normal School, London Colored Baptist College, Chandler Normal School, and Kentucky Normal and Theological Institute had offered Blacks teacher training. Of these, only Kentucky Normal and Theological Institute survived under the name State Colored Baptist University.



FIGURE 1.1. Domestic Science Class at Normal School (c. 1900–1906) Kentucky State. Photo by Gretter Studio. Photo credit: Kentucky Historical Society.

State Colored Baptist University was the only all-Black private college during the 19th century. Despite the tenuous nature of private Black higher education, the president of State Colored Baptist University, William J. Simmons, encouraged the CTSA to push for the creation of a publicly supported state normal school. Simmons' speech before the Kentucky House of Representatives on January 26, 1886 urged the legislators to create such a school. His speech, according to Charles H. Parrish Sr., "electrified" the audience:

...in obedience to the demands of our constituents, we venture to lay before you in a manly, honorable way, the complaints of as true hearted Kentuckians as ever came from the loins of the bravest, truest and most honored of women sired by the most distinguished fathers. As Kentuckians we meet you, with the feelings and aspirations, common and peculiar to those born and surrounded by the greatness of your history, the fertility of your soil, the nobility of your men and the beauty of your women, we come plain of speech, in order to prove that we are men of judgement meeting men who are really desirous of knowing our wants.

Subsequently, the petitioning committee of 14 Black teachers asked the legislature to approve a state normal school to train Black teachers for Kentucky's racially-segregated Black schools.

Fortunately, political conditions accommodated the May 11, 1886 passage of such a bill in the House of Representatives. On May 18, 1886, Governor J. Proctor Knott approved Chapter 1297, pages 232–235, Acts of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, 1885–1886, which established the State Normal School for Colored Persons (SNSCP). Knott, a former Confederate officer, apparently decided that such an institution would be both politically astute as well as beneficial to the Black populace.

Under this law, a state normal school for “the preparation of teachers for teaching in the colored public schools of Kentucky” had its legal beginnings. The statute also required the governor to appoint a three-person Board of Trustees with a member from each superior court district. The same Board could select a site, hire the teachers and establish the curriculum.

Additionally, the statute defined entrance requirements for the school:

Section 8, Any pupil to gain admission to the privileges of instruction in the said normal school shall be at least sixteen years of age, possess good health, give satisfactory evidence of good moral character, and sign a written pledge, to be filed with the principal, that said applicant will, as far as practical, teach in the colored common twice the time spent as a pupil in said normal school together with such other conditions as the Board may from time to time compose.

It appeared that the legislature feared that SNSCP graduates might leave the state following completion of their studies, which was highly probable in 1886.

The school also received \$3,000 annually “to pay the teacher and defray other necessary expenses in the maintenance of said normal school...” Another \$7,000 was set aside for the construction of the SNSCP's first building.

With this statutory foundation, SNSCP's Board of Trustees began to act. Composed of J. D. Pickett, superintendent of public instruction (chairman), L. G. Simrall (Lexington), John O. Hodges (Lexington), and C.V. McElroy (Bowling Green), the trustees met and selected a faculty and site for the school.

The site, about one mile from the city limits of Frankfort, was chosen over other sites in Owensboro, Knottsville, Hopkinsville, Bowling Green, Danville and Lexington. The Frankfort city council and Mayor E. H. Taylor Jr. donated an additional \$1,500 to purchase the property on a scenic bluff overlooking the town and state capitol grounds.

The Board selected the ubiquitous John Henry Jackson as president and faculty member and Chapman C. Monroe as a faculty member. The trustees indicated in their 1886 report that “two experienced and reliable teachers whose characters were well known by members of the Board, were selected to conduct the school which was opened for its work on the first of October last...” Also, Mrs. Mary B. Monroe was appointed as matron in charge of female students.

The records for the early years of SNSCP are fragmentary and skimpy. What is known indicated that the school attracted numerous Blacks interested in a sound and rigorous elementary-level education with special emphasis on basic pedagogical techniques. Unlike similar schools, SNSCP operated with a regular income, a new brick building and an ideal location in the state capital.

The first session of the school enrolled 55 students from 21 Kentucky counties. By the second year, 87 students from 32 counties had matriculated, which required the hiring of Mrs. Ida Joyce Jackson as an additional teacher. By the fall of 1888, two additional wooden frame buildings were built, including the first of three presidential residences. The institution was growing in student enrollment and support from the public. It also experienced its first brush with controversy.

According to a front-page article in the Louisville *Ohio Falls Express* of July 12, 1890, two SNSCP female students were found “in the company with four white men under the bushes at the State Normal School.” Professor Monroe expelled the students immediately. At a meeting of the trustees on June 18, 1890, the expulsions were upheld, particularly since the entire faculty threatened to resign if they were not. Although the students involved claimed they simply were sitting and talking to the men, the appearance of impropriety could not be tolerated. SNSCP easily survived its first brush with controversy.

Also in 1890, SNSCP established the departments of agriculture, mechanical and domestic economy. These departments were opened to justify receipt of funds from the second Morrill Land Grant Act of July 30, 1890. Yet, the Commonwealth did not give its share of 1862 land grant funds to SNSCP until 1897, a delay probably affected by the massive defalcation of Kentucky’s infamous state treasurer, James W. “Honest Dick” Tate. Regardless, the school’s student body and curricula grew amid the rising popularity among white political and education circles of the industrial education approach advocated by Samuel Chapman Armstrong and Booker T. Washington.

Washington’s early success with industrial education at Tuskegee Institute and the advocacy of cooperation with local southern whites did not go unnoticed at SNSCP. President Jackson emphasized in biennial reports after 1891 that agriculture and industrial training programs helped to shift Blacks from “mere consumers—incubus upon the body politic—by encouraging and promoting, by every means in its power, those industrial pursuits that are so wholesome and so helpful in raising up a class of producers.” Jackson argued further that industrial training expenditures prepared the teacher to teach others to develop “productive industries.”

To accomplish this task, Jackson requested in his 1893 biennial report that certain institutional needs be met: 1) the power to grant state certificates to “normal course” graduates; 2) the construction of separate dormitories for male and female students; 3) additional faculty; 4) the creation of scientific and business courses; and 5) an increase of \$2,000 in the state appropriations for current operating expenses. Jackson claimed that these additional funds would assist SNSCP in be-