

Solomon M. Coles: Preacher, Teacher, and Former Slave—The First Black Student Officially Enrolled in Yale Divinity School

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In September 1872, Solomon M. Coles joined the ranks of first year students at Yale Divinity School. What made his presence unique and worthy of special attention was the fact that only two years earlier Yale University had ended its official policy of racial exclusion. Thus Coles, a former slave, became the first known student of African descent allowed official enrollment in the Divinity School.¹ His enrollment and subsequent graduation in 1875 marked a “milestone” in the history of both Yale Divinity School and black theological education.²

As seminary education became an increasingly important component of ministerial training in early nineteenth century America, only a handful of seminaries and divinity schools allowed formal enrollment of blacks.³ Yale Divinity School was not among these. Since its founding in 1822, YDS officially adhered to the racial, social, and legal proscriptions of the University and wider New Haven that forbade formal enrollment of students of African descent.⁴ Nevertheless, between 1834 and 1839 James W. C. Pennington, a fugitive slave and the first Black pastor of Temple Street

¹ Yale University ended its official policy of racial exclusion with the enrollment of Edward Bouchet in 1870 as its first African American student. Bouchet would subsequently earn both a B.A. (1874) and Ph.D. (1876) from Yale University. See Robert Austin Warner, New Haven Negroes: A Social History (originally published New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940; reprint New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), p. 78.

²National Pilot, no. 19 (December 23, 1897), p. 1.

³ Most prominent among theological seminaries allowing formal admission of blacks during the pre Civil War era was Princeton. Its early black students included James Theodore Wright. Born in Rhode Island in 1797, Theodore enrolled at Princeton in 1825 and graduated in 1828. See Bella Gross, "Life and Times of Theodore S. Wright, 1797-1847," Negro History Bulletin III (1939-40): 134.

⁴ Racism codified in Connecticut's Black Laws and in the policies of Yale University, combined with the lingering controversy related to aborted efforts to establish a “Negro College” in New Haven, doomed any hope that blacks might officially enroll at Yale during this era. On the history of racial relations in New Haven and at Yale University, see Warner, New Haven Negroes.

Congregational Church (which subsequently became Dixwell Avenue Congregational Church), was allowed to audit theological classes at the Divinity School.⁵ Despite severe institutional restrictions, which included denial of both classroom and library privileges, Pennington took advantage of the divinity school's limited racial and religious benevolence in order to advance his theological studies.⁶ In the following decade, Alexander Crummell, instrumental in the establishment of New Haven's St. Luke's Episcopal Church, reportedly endured similar restrictions and humiliation as he also audited lectures at Yale Divinity School in search of a theological education.⁷

It is ironic that though denied formal admission to Yale Divinity School, both Pennington and Crummell subsequently received theological degrees from more prestigious European theological institutions. In 1849, the University of Heidelberg would award Pennington an honorary doctor of divinity degree.⁸ Four years later,

⁵ Hence designation of James W. C. Pennington as Yale's "First Black Student." Bernard Heinz, "The First Black Student," Yale Alumni Magazine (May 1978): 9, and Warner, New Haven Negroes, p. 83. Thus Pennington's legacy includes inauguration of a long and continued relationship between black alumni of YDS and Dixwell Avenue Congregational Church. See James W. C. Pennington, The Fugitive Blacksmith, or Events in the History of James W. C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States (London: Charles Gilpin, 1849).

⁶Although Yale Divinity School would not honor Pennington's academic achievements with a theological degree, his studies apparently contributed to his development of a multifaceted and expansive ministry that included service as pastor, author, educator, abolitionist, founder of the Union Missionary Society, and even president of the Hartford Central Association of Congregational Ministers. Warner, New Haven Negroes, p. 83. See also Herman Edward Thomas, "An Analysis of the Life and Work of James W. C. Pennington: A Black Churchman and Abolitionist." Ph.D. dissertation, Hartford Seminary Foundation, 1975, pp. 81-93.

⁷Warner, New Haven Negroes, p. 86, 78, 183 and William J. Moses, Alexander Crummell: A Study of Civilization and Discontent (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 30. Few scholars have speculated on the influence that YDS professors such as Nathaniel William Taylor may have had on the theological, missiological, and social orientations of Pennington and Crummell. Of related and special concern for this study is the impact that even a limited and constrained black presence may have had upon the theological, missiological, and related social orientations of YDS faculty and students.

⁸ Thomas, "James W. C. Pennington," pp. 94-97, 315-333.

Crummell, en route to a distinguished career as an African missionary, pastor, educator, and scholar, would earn a theological degree from Queen's College Cambridge.⁹

Yale University's termination of its exclusionary racial policies in 1870 would occasion a new and more edifying chapter in the history of black theological education at Yale Divinity School. Apparently inspired by Yale's change of policy, a farsighted black resident of New Haven named Mary Goodman made a remarkable gift to the University. Upon her death in 1872, the New Haven Palladium announced that Mrs. Goodman, who had spent her adult life "in such hard toil as washing and domestic service," left her entire savings amounting to nearly \$5,000 "to the scholarship fund of the Theological School . . . with the idea of aiding colored young men in their studies for the ministry." Reportedly, Mrs. Goodman, "a member and regular attendant of the College Street Church . . . felt that the time was coming in the rapid progress of her race and people, when they would require a more highly educated ministry . . ." ¹⁰ Her will read:

I give and bequest my whole estate both real and personal except as hereinafter mentioned to the President and Fellows of Yale College in New Haven, Connecticut, for the use of the Theological Department in said College for the purpose of establishing a scholarship or scholarships in said Theological Department and I desire that the income derived from the property which shall come to said Corporation under and by virtue of this will shall be used in aiding young men in preparing for the Gospel ministry, preference being always given to young men of color.¹¹

⁹ See Moses, Alexander Crummell, pp. 67-83, and Wilson J. Moses, "Civilizing Missionary: A Study of Alexander Crummell," Journal of Negro History (April 1975): 229-51.

¹⁰ "Bequest to the Yale Divinity School," New Haven Palladium, February 2, 1872.

¹¹ Excerpt from provision of the will of Mary Goodman per Yale endowments, 1917.

Mrs. Goodman's generosity even precluded provisions for her own burial. Yale would arrange for her interment in Grove Street Cemetery with a headstone that acknowledged her remarkable gift.¹² It states:

Mary A. Goodman

Died, January 26, 1872
Aged 68

Of African descent, she gave the earnings of her life
to educate men of her own color in Yale College for the Gospel Ministry.¹³

In the wake of the farsighted generosity of this black "washer-woman," Solomon Coles became the first person of known African descent to be officially enrolled in Yale Divinity School.¹⁴

Like Pennington, Solomon Coles began life as a slave.¹⁵ Born to Charles and Nancy Coles in Petersburg, Virginia, in February 1844, he spent his first eighteen years subject to Virginia's stringent slave codes. However, in defiance and circumvention of laws that forbade the education of blacks, Coles managed to learn his "letters" and acquire a rudimentary education.¹⁶

Upon gaining his freedom at the conclusion of the Civil War, Coles, aspiring to become "an educated man," attended night school while working with the Freedman's Bureau in Norfolk. However, educational opportunities for former slaves were severely limited in the South and he soon migrated to Connecticut to continue his education at

¹² New Haven Palladium, February 2, 1872.

¹³ When vandals destroyed her grave marker in 1998, university, community, and church leaders erected a new monument that retained the original inscription. Yale News Release, October 20, 1999.

¹⁴ The "Goodman Scholarship" was established September 12, 1872. However, it is unknown whether Coles directly benefited from the generosity of Mrs. Goodman. National Pilot, no. 19 (December 23, 1897), p. 1.

¹⁵ Edna Jordan, Black Tracks to Texas: Solomon Melvin Coles (Corpus Christi: Golden Banner Press, 1977), p. 4.

¹⁶ Coles reported that he "was 14 before I ever knew a letter." "Solomon Coles, First Negro Principal, Was Born Slave," Corpus Christi Caller-Times, January 18, 1959.

Guilford Institute.¹⁷ Entering in the fall of 1866, he was the first person of color to attend the preparatory school and apparently enjoyed cordial relations with his classmates and teachers. The principal, Rev. James R. Hoyt, “became much interested” in Coles, and “seeing in him the promise of a useful career, taught him the rudiments of Greek and Latin, and fitted him for college.” It was also reportedly “through the influence and . . . instruction” of Rev. Hoyt that Coles was “led to embrace Christianity.” Coles’ subsequent affiliation with First Congregational Church of Guilford proved fortuitous for both his spiritual and academic development.¹⁸ The church’s pastor, Rev. Eli Edwin Hall, was “a Yale man” who also “became deeply interested” in Coles and additionally sought to assist him in his pursuit of a college education.¹⁹

Upon graduation in 1869 from Guilford Institute, Coles may well have desired to continue his education at nearby Yale University. However, Yale’s racially restrictive policies did not allow this option for educationally ambitious black youth. Consequently, Coles made the trek to Pennsylvania where he entered the sophomore class at Lincoln University. Established in 1854 as Ashmun Institute in honor of Jedidiah Ashmun, the school was intended primarily to educate blacks for the ministry and missionary service in Africa. Although renamed and charged with a broader educational agenda at the close of the Civil War, many of Lincoln’s graduates would continue to enter the ministerial ranks.²⁰ Thus, Coles joined classmates who would distinguish themselves within the

¹⁷ Cole hired himself out as a farm hand to support his education. National Pilot, p. 1.

¹⁸ Coles joined First Congregational Church of Guilford, CT, and was baptized in 1869. See Guilford, Connecticut First Ecclesiastical Society and Congregational Church Records 1717-1921, Vol. 11 (Hartford: Connecticut State Library, 1936), p. 170.

¹⁹ National Pilot, p. 1. Hall was an 1841 graduate of Yale Divinity School. See Bernard Christian Steiner, History of Guilford and Madison, Connecticut (1897 edition reissued by Guilford Free Library, Guilford: Guilford Free Library, 1975), p. 287.

²⁰ Jedidiah Ashmun who is buried in New Haven’s Grove Street Cemetery was one of the major supporters of the American Colonization Society and instrumental in the founding of Liberia. Andrew E. Murray,

ministry—among them, Dr. Walter H. Brooks and Rev. Francis J. Grimke.²¹ Over the course of his three years at Lincoln, Coles excelled in his studies and upon graduation in 1872 was selected to deliver the salutatory address to fellow graduates and guests.²²

Upon his graduation from Lincoln University, Coles, seeking a vocation that would make him most useful to his race, decided to pursue a career as a Congregational minister. In preparation and upon “the advice and assistance of his Guilford friends,” he now essayed to enter the Divinity School of Yale University. His timing was again fortuitous. Yale University had officially ended its policy of racial exclusion two years earlier, and the Divinity School saw fit to follow in 1872 with the official admission of Coles who was hailed and given “flattering notices” in the press as “the first colored man to enter” the Divinity School.²³

During Cole’s matriculation (1872-1875), Yale Divinity School was undergoing more than a revision of its racial ethics and admissions policies. The school had barely survived the Civil War due to its “precarious” financial state, the death and retirement of its senior faculty, and a dearth of students. However, by Coles’ admission in 1872, the Divinity School was able to celebrate and commemorate its semi centennial with renewed vigor marked by a number of new professorships, new facilities, and a larger and more inclusive student body.²⁴

"The Founding of Lincoln University," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 51(1973): 392-410. Murray, *Presbyterians and the Negro*, pp. 79, 84.

²¹ *National Pilot*, p. 1.

²² Solomon Coles, Outline for Alumni Record, Yale Alumni File.

²³ *National Pilot*, p. 1.

²⁴ Roland Bainton, *Yale and the Ministry: A History of Education for the Christian Ministry at Yale from the Founding in 1701* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), pp. 161, 163-165.

Amid such changes, speculation arose regarding the Divinity School's continued allegiance to theological orthodoxy.²⁵ However, Coles was at least a decade in advance of the impending theological revolution that would engulf the school, making it and its faculty key formulators and sponsors of the "New Theology" of "Protestant liberalism."²⁶ Hence, amidst the dissipating remnants of the "New Haven theology," made famous by the Divinity School's previous generation of divines, Coles, under the instruction of Drs. Leonard Bacon, Theodore D. Woolsey, Noah Porter, George E. Day, and George P. Fisher, received a theological education of relatively orthodox and thoroughly Congregational persuasion.²⁷ Cole's theological studies were also complemented by applied work within the home mission field. Under hire by the American Missionary Association (AMA), he spent summers away from the Divinity School honing his ministerial skills while serving numerous small and impoverished Congregational mission stations as distant as Leavenworth, Kansas.²⁸

Despite his race, austere demeanor, and lack of economic resources, Coles reportedly enjoyed cordial relationships with fellow students and faculty. Moreover, at the start of his second year, another black student and fellow alumni of Lincoln University, James William Morris, joined him at the Divinity School. Presumably courses completed in Lincoln's theological program allowed Morris to graduate with a

²⁵ Bainton, Yale and the Ministry, p. 164.

²⁶ Bainton, Yale and the Ministry, pp. 169-195. See also Lloyd J. Averill, American Theology in the Liberal Tradition (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967) and William R. Hutchison, The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

²⁷ Bainton, Yale and the Ministry, pp. 161-173 and National Pilot, p. 1.

²⁸ Jordan, Black Tracks to Texas, pp. 6-8. It was presumably while serving in this capacity that Coles participated in the founding of Nazarene Congregational Church. Later described as the "most impressive church in Brooklyn," Nazarene would be pastored by a succession of black YDS alumni, including Albert President Miller (YDS, 1885) and Henry Hugh Proctor (YDS, 1894). On the history and significance of Nazarene Congregational Church and its links to YDS alumni, see Proctor, Between Black and White, and Moses N. Moore, "Between Heaven and Earth: The Social Gospel Ministry of Henry H. Proctor" (unpublished paper).

Bachelor of Divinity Degree after only one year of study at the Divinity School.

Consequently, Yale records that in 1874 Morris, rather than Coles, became “the first student of African descent” to graduate from the “Theological School.”²⁹ The following year, Coles became the first person of African descent to receive the Bachelor of Divinity degree after completion of the *full* three-year theological program at Yale Divinity School.³⁰

Despite degrees from Lincoln University and Yale Divinity School, Coles found employment opportunities for educated blacks to be severely limited in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Eventually, an all but destitute Coles found employment with the AMA.³¹ Yet, his affiliation with the AMA was more than just an act of economic desperation. Impressed with the efforts of the Congregational Church and the AMA to provide spiritual and educational nurture for blacks, he described both as doing “more good for the colored peoples of the country than any other organization.”³² Although encouraged to accept a foreign mission post, presumably at the AMA’s Mendi mission in Sierra Leone, Coles preferred to serve his race at home in either the southern or western mission field.³³ In a letter to officials of the AMA, he explained his preference:

²⁹ Morris subsequently preached and taught in Beaufort and Aiken, South Carolina and died in 1876 of consumption. Obituary Record of Graduates of Yale College Presented at the Meeting of the Alumni, June 28 1876 and Judith Ann Schiff, “Pioneers,” Yale Alumni Magazine, January/February 2006: 80-81.

³⁰ Solomon Coles, Outline for Alumni Record, Yale Alumni File; National Pilot, p. 1. Jordan, Black Tracks to Texas, p. 5.

³¹ Coles reported to AMA officials that he “came out of the seminary in complete poverty” Letter from Coles, April 17, 1875, quoted in Jordan, Black Tracks to Texas, p. 9.

³² Letter from Coles, April 24, 1875, quoted in Jordan, Black Tracks to Texas, p. 8. For similar assessment of the Congregational Church and the AMA by later black YDS alumni, see Henry Hugh Proctor (YDS 1894), Between Black and White: Autobiographical Sketches (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1925), and Orishatukeh Faduma (YDS 1894), “A Negro Upon Self-Help and Self-Support,” American Missionary 50 (Sept. 1896): 276-279. See also A. Knighton Stanley, The Children Is Crying: Congregationalism among Black People (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979).

³³ On Coles’ rejection of a mission assignment to Africa see Jordan, Black Tracks to Texas, p. 9. On the Mendi mission and its historic ties to Yale Divinity School and the AMA, see Bainton, Yale and the Ministry, pp. 152-155.

. . . My great desire is that my lot be cast where I—with my peculiar advantages—may render the greatest service to my people . . . Slavery is not dead . . . [and] I trust that I may be a means of emancipating my brethren. Of late, I have given the subject considerable thought, and the more I think about the matter, the more I am inclined to believe that it would be best for me to go either South or West and commit myself. . . so that my influence and labor may be thrown both in the line of education and of saving souls.³⁴

An initial AMA assignment to Charleston, South Carolina was brief because of ill health and poverty.³⁵ His next AMA appointment would be to the West and of longer duration. In February 1877, Coles arrived in Corpus Christi, Texas, where he had been assigned to pastor Freedom Congregational Church. The aptly named church was founded in 1866 to serve newly freed slaves (“freedmen”) and black soldiers stationed in Corpus Christi after the Civil War.³⁶ However, Coles was acutely aware that the black population of Corpus Christi was in need of more than spiritual guidance. The city’s teacher-less public school intermittently and inadequately served the town’s approximately three hundred black residents, thus the following fall, the newly ordained Coles” opened a private school.³⁷ Coles clearly envisioned teaching as an important and

³⁴ Letter from Coles, March 23, 1875, quoted in Jordan, Black Tracks to Texas, p. 7.

³⁵ Jordan, Black Tracks to Texas, pp. 7-9.

³⁶ Jordan, Black Tracks to Texas, pp. 11, 14; “United Church to Observe 99th Anniversary Here,” Corpus Christi Caller-Times, Nov. 27, 1965. See also James M. Smallwood, “Early ‘Freedom Schools’: Black Self-Help and Education in Reconstruction-Texas, A Case Study,” Negro History Bulletin Vol. 41, No. 1, January-February 1978:790-793.

³⁷ Coles was ordained to the ministry in the Congregational Church during a regional meeting of the AMA in Goliad, Texas, in July 1877; see Solomon Coles, Outline for Alumni Record, Yale Alumni File. See also Jordan, Black Tracks to Texas, p. 12. See Letter from Coles, March 23, 1875, quoted in Jordan, Black Tracks to Texas, p. 7.

necessary component of his expansive ministry and the following year became principal and teacher at the Colored Public Free School of Corpus Christi.³⁸

After serving simultaneously as preacher and teacher for four years, Coles decided that he “could best serve his race by training the youth.” Consequently, he “resigned the pastorate of the church and devoted himself exclusively to teaching.”³⁹ It would be as a pioneering educator to the black community of Corpus Christi and wider Texas rather than as a minister that Coles would make his most significant contribution and leave a potent legacy.⁴⁰

Because of his pioneering work as a preacher, teacher, and civic leader, Coles was often immersed in the volatile and dangerous arena of Texas racial politics and policies. Acutely sensitive to the economic and racial disadvantages under which he and other black educators were forced to work and live, he helped organize and served as president of the Colored Teachers State Association.⁴¹ A decade later his pedagogical insights would be extended to a new generation of black teachers and leaders when in 1892 he delivered the keynote address to the graduating class of the Colored State Normal School.⁴²

Coles would also join in the national discourse concerning race, religion, and education as reflected in a series of articles published in Lincoln University’s Alumni Magazine. Significant among these writings was “Doubt in the Negro’s Capabilities a Hindrance to His Higher Development” in which Coles drew upon his biblical,

³⁸ On black public education in Corpus Christi, see Jordan, Black Tracks to Texas, p. 18-19.

³⁹ National Pilot, p. 1. On Cole’s membership in and contributions to the Southwest Texas Congregational Association (formerly the General Association of Congregational Churches of Texas) see Rev. B. C. Church, “The Southwest Texas Congregational Association,” The American Missionary, October, 1878 Vol. 32, no. 10: 304-305.

⁴⁰ Jordan, Black Tracks to Texas, p. 21.

⁴¹ Solomon Coles, Outline for Alumni Record, Yale Alumni File.

⁴² National Pilot, p. 1.

theological and classical studies to offer an aggressive refutation of charges of black inferiority.⁴³

Over the course of the following decade, the restrictive and often demeaning racial conditions under which he was forced to work and live in Corpus Christi proved increasingly disheartening. By 1894, a combination of racial, intra-racial and possibly sectarian tensions resulted in his decision to depart Corpus Christi.⁴⁴ Resettling in San Antonio, he continued to serve for another twenty years as a dedicated teacher.

Despite his departure from Corpus Christi, Coles' pioneering contributions as minister and teacher would not be forgotten. Shortly after his death in Oberlin, Ohio in 1924, the new high school for blacks in Corpus Christi was named for Coles. In 1973, it became Solomon M. Coles Elementary School. To further commemorate Coles' expansive ministry and pedagogical contribution, a state marker, providing a synopsis of his life and work, was established at the site where the Public Free School for the Colored once stood.⁴⁵

Although heretofore unacknowledged, Coles' legacy to subsequent generations of black YDS alumni is also significant. Following his admission, the Divinity School

⁴³ Solomon M. Coles, "Doubt in the Negro's Capabilities a Hindrance to His Higher Development," Lincoln University Alumni Magazine Vol. 1, No. 1, November, 1884: 14-18. Significant also was his aggressive defense of the employment of "colored teachers in colored institutions." See Solomon Coles, "Colored Teachers," Lincoln University Alumni Magazine Vol. 1, No. 2, February, 1885: 49-51. In a subsequent discussion on "Caste in Colored Institutions," Coles took an even more direct and aggressive position on the volatile issue of white paternalism and racism in black education. "Caste in Colored Institutions," Lincoln University Alumni Magazine Vol. 1, No. 5, November, 1885: 124-129.

⁴⁴ Letter and petition from black Corpus Christi residents to the City Council of Corpus Christi and to the president and members of the Board of Education, (n. d.) Solomon M. Coles files, Corpus Christi Public Libraries Local History Room; see also Solomon Coles, Outline for Alumni Record, Yale Alumni Files. For growing tensions between the AMA, Congregationalism and the black community see Stanley, The Children is Crying, pp. 98-99 and Joe M. Richardson "The Failure of the American Missionary Association to Expand Congregationalism among Southern Blacks," Southern Studies 18 (Spring 1979): 55-65.

⁴⁵ Jordan, Black Tracks to Texas, p. 26. See commemorative plaque at the following web address: <http://www.co.nueces.tx.us/histcomm/solomoncoles.asp>.

would have a small but continuous stream of black students and graduates who, like Coles, would engage in expansive ministries throughout the United States and abroad. Hence, it was most appropriate that in June of 2000, Rev. Frederick (Jerry) Streets, a black graduate of the Divinity School (YDS 1975), assistant professor (adjunct) of pastoral theology at Yale Divinity School and Yale University Chaplain, was invited to retrace Coles' journey to Corpus Christi. There he served as guest speaker at the dedication of a multi-million-dollar classroom building at Del Mar College in honor of Solomon M. Coles—preacher, teacher, former slave, and the first black student officially enrolled at Yale Divinity School. Cole's life and ministry, Streets noted, were "exemplary" and illustrative of the fact that education and religion have always been intrinsically linked as instruments of "liberation and empowerment for the African American community."^{46*}

⁴⁶ "Del Mar College Names Building after Solomon Coles," Corpus Christi Caller-Times, June 13, 2000.

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