

The Search for Olivet College's First African-American and Female Graduates

by Hannah Scott

Olivet College has always been an advocate of equality among genders, ethnicities, and creeds. But it took a student's efforts to organize the college's huge volumes of artifacts in its archives to put a face—or faces—on that philosophy. Among the records in the archives that were uncovered were the photographs of the college's first African-American and female graduates.

“Upon this hill, a most unlikely place,” begins author M. Gorton Riethmiller, “a college was founded in 1844.” That college was the ambition of a Presbyterian minister named Reverend John J. Shipherd, fondly remembered as “Father” Shipherd. In his book *Upon This Hill*, former Olivet College President Riethmiller describes how Father Shipherd and a small contingent of 39 friends and family members traveled north from the newly founded Oberlin College in Ohio to an almost uninhabited region of Michigan. Shipherd had discovered the place by accident after getting lost in the wilderness and stumbling upon an area of unusual beauty at the foot of a hill. Believing God had led him to the place, Shipherd named the hill “Olivet” and decided to build a new college there.

The area is in modern-day Eaton County, Michigan, and the name “Olivet” now extends to a town and a college of approximately 1,100

students. Father Shipherd’s dream for Olivet College was to form a Christian institution that would not only educate both men and women but also coeducate them in the same classes, which was uncommon for the era. Even more radical was Shipherd’s promise that the college would be open to black students as well as white and that an education would be available to all regardless of financial status. As a result of that promise, the institution’s philosophy was dramatically ahead of its time.

Early on, there were obstacles to Olivet’s charter. Michigan, along with the nation as a whole, was largely divided over slavery in the 1840s, and Father Shipherd’s abolitionist stance was a barrier to the state’s granting of a charter. It took until 1859 for the college, then known as Olivet Institute, to receive a collegiate charter. The college, which by the 1850s numbered more than 100 students, was then given the established status it needed to continue to expand its outreach to women and minority students, who still could not easily obtain an education elsewhere.



While Olivet College’s progressive philosophy has been a constant since its founding, in recent years, there has been an increased effort to document its notable history. A large part of this

Right: Burrage Library at Olivet College. The archives are located in the top floor of the library. Below: One of Olivet College’s early coeducational literature classes. (All photos are courtesy of Olivet College Archives.)





responsibility has fallen on the Olivet College Archives, located in the top floor of Burrage Library, itself one of the oldest buildings on campus. It has been the work of students and faculty alike to turn those archives from a storage area into a working part of the library.

Ture Farwell, a student at Olivet College, has made the historic education of women and minorities a major focus of his work in the archives for the past year. The culmination of his experience was presented at the 2015 Conference of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters and entitled "Education of Women and Minorities at Olivet College, 1844-1932." Farwell, a senior at Olivet College with a double major in history and information technology management, hopes to become a librarian after graduation. One of his first assignments was to organize the huge volumes of artifacts, which include scrapbooks, personal journals, letters, newspaper articles, public announcements, and photographs, into accessible categories. From there, much of his work involved handling research requests and documenting the things he discovered in the archives.

And there was plenty to document. As his project came to its last months, Farwell estimated that he spent upward of 12 hours a week reading relevant material, not including the time he spent hunting down new

information on specific topics or general browsing. And, although future plans for the archives include optical-character-recognition cataloguing and fully digitizing the collection, it will be years before the sheer volume of printed material is digitally archived. In the meantime, Farwell accomplished his research the classic way, carefully studying documents and photographs that dated as far back as the mid-nineteenth century.



Finally chartered in 1859, Olivet graduated its first students in 1863. The class of 1863 was special in that all three graduates were women: Sophia A. Keys, Mary N. Barber, and Sara Benedict. In fact, due to the American Civil War, no Olivet men would graduate for another four years. And Olivet would continue to have a vocal female presence in the nineteenth century. Olivet would even form one of the nation's first female literary societies in 1847, a precursor to Olivet's Soronian Literary Society, which is still an active organization within the college's fraternity and sorority structure today.

There was also an early African-American presence at Olivet. However, because the college did not document race in its records, Olivet does not know for certain, to this day, who was the first black student. The college can only conjecture based on photographs taken in the late 1800s. But, toward the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the next, there were several notable black students at Olivet, whose lives and accomplishments were well-documented.

Charles Mahoney, for example, was an African-American student and baseball player from 1905 to 1907. In addition to being a member of the integrated baseball team, he was also team captain. Another prominent African-American student athlete at Olivet was Stephen Morgan, who attended the college from 1900 to 1902. Morgan was active

Below: Olivet College's first graduating class in 1863: Sophia A. Keys (top), Mary N. Barber (middle), and Sara Benedict (bottom).



in baseball and football, representing Olivet in the 1901 Michigan Intercollegiate Athletic Association (MIAA) Championship Team and the All-Michigan Intercollegiate Team. Preceding both Mahoney and Morgan was Hiram Archer, who attended Olivet from 1889 to 1895. Archer was one of the first black college athletes in the United States when he was playing on Olivet's varsity baseball team.



Despite the fact that integrated and coeducational colleges were unusual during the time, no newspapers or private documents have been found that record any major altercations or incidents involving race or gender during the time period. On the contrary, Ture Farwell found an ongoing trend among the student body of promoting social change in editorials, articles, and public displays. In a May 1923 edition of the college newspaper, *The Echo*, a staff writer criticizes the use of the term “flapper” to dismiss the women of Olivet College, who showed strong enthusiasm for education, athletics, and extracurricular activities. The article was immediately followed by a story about notable Olivet women graduates, whose ranks included teachers, artists, federal department heads, entrepreneurs, and numerous women who served in support capacities in World War I.

Another article, an editorial by a female student from 1924, criticizes the double standard for the conduct of female students. “Why is it,” asked the author, “that there are rules in this college which apply only to the conduct of women and few (if any) for the men?” The editorial uses much of the same language as the feminist movements of the twentieth century and even closes with an unusually poignant quote: “It

is the Divine right of womankind to be recognized as the equal of man.”



The research into the early presence of women and minorities at Olivet College is expected to continue. Two new interns, Andrew Thompson and Rebecca Dewese, will expand on the topic with the hopes of learning more about individual students at the college. Thompson’s focus will be on African-American students in Olivet sports from 1888 to 1910. His research will begin at the founding of the MIAA—the first college athletic conference in the country—by Olivet and three other Michigan colleges. Dewese expects to study women at Olivet College, hoping to learn more about their participation in sports, academics, and academic societies.

Archive activities are not limited to a few students each semester, however. Every fall and spring, the entire campus comes together for Service Day, a tradition where classes are closed and all students participate in the community service project of their choice. Social Science Professor and Archivist Nikki Magie brings in a group of students from a variety of majors to help with research, as well as heavy lifting and organization of the wealth of material still not catalogued.

Magie’s hope is that within the next few years the archives will become as easily accessible to researchers as the rest of Burrage Library and a place where people can feel comfortable conducting their own research or investigating simply out of curiosity. She would like to see some of the archives’ most valuable artifacts, such as a hymnal from Spain made in 1694—gifted to the college in 1892 to commemorate the 400-year anniversary of Columbus’ voyage to the Americas—put on display so that students and alumni can get a better look at Olivet’s history. The hymnal has recently been digitally scanned and documented but remains in storage while plans for a display are discussed.



As an early proponent of equality among genders, ethnicities, and creeds, Olivet College holds a unique place in Michigan’s history, and as additional research is conducted in its archives, more and more of the college’s forward-thinking past will surely be revealed. ☒

Hannah Scott is a senior in the journalism and mass communication program at Olivet College. She is the third generation in her family to attend Olivet and has found her niche in the college archives, documenting the lives of historical Olivetians.



Above: The 1893 baseball team. Hiram Archer is in the first row, second from the left. Above right: The football team in 1900. Stephen Morgan is in the back row on the right. Right: The college’s 1906 baseball team. Charles Mahoney is in the first row on the left.