THE FIRST GENERATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PhDs in ECONOMICS: 1921-1943

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1. PhDs in Economics

There have been some publications dealing with the careers and contributions of a number of pioneering African American economists. Sadie Alexander, Abram Harris, and Robert Weaver are perhaps the best known of these early black economists, and each have at least some secondary literature concerning them (Malveaux 1997; Banks 2008; Alexander and Banks 2021; Darity 1987; Darity and Ellison 1990; Conrad and Sherer 1997). In addition, Samuel Myers (2017) has discussed the first few black economists to graduate with PhDs from Harvard, including Robert Weaver, William Dean, and B. T. McGraw. There are, of course, others. In 1946 Harry W. Greene published his *Holders of Doctorates Among American Negroes* (Greene 1946), a major resource for the study of early African American scholars in all disciplines from 1876 to 1943. In terms of economics, Greene lists sixteen individuals with PhDs in economics as a single subject in his main text and one more in the appendix. This list does have some flaws: W. G. Henry who is listed as obtaining an economics PhD in 1918 turns out to have been white.[1] Two others are listed as obtaining degrees from the University of London, but neither were American or working in the US at the time. One is W. Arthur Lewis,[2] the other, A. T.

[1] This error is probably due to Henry's thesis title "The Negro as an Economic Factor in Alabama." See Collier (2020a). Greene's book has been produced in spreadsheet form but with numerous errors introduced.
[2] Arthur Lewis' PhD was from the LSE in 1940. His career was in the UK and the West Indies until he joined Princeton in 1963.

Table 1

African-American PhDs in Economics 1921-1943

(From Greene 1946)[3]

Name	PhD Date	Institution	Title (Supervisor if known)
Alexander, Sadie M.	1921	Pennsylvania	Standards of Living Among 100 Negro Migrant Families in Philadelphia
Harris, Abram	1931	Columbia	The Black Worker (H. Seager)
Francis, Robert C.	1934	Berkeley	A History of Labor on the San Francisco Waterfront
Weaver, Robert C.	1934	Harvard	The High Wage Theory of Prosperity (W. Z. Ripley)
Dean, William H.	1938	Harvard	Theory of Geographic Location of Economic Activity (A. P. Usher)
Banner, Warren M.	1939	Pittsburgh	The Housing of Negro Families in Greater New York (F. D. Tyson)
Davis, Frank G.	1939	Iowa	The Effects of the Social Security Act on the Status of the Negro (W. L. Daykin)
McGraw, B. T.	1939	Harvard	French Monetary Policy 1927-1938
Brazeal, Brailsford R.	1942	Columbia	The Origin and Development of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (L. Wolman)
Jackson, F. A.	1942	New York	Price Level Stabilization Through Monetary Control (Walter E. Spahr)
McLaurin, Dunbar S.	1942	Illinois	An Examination of the Genesis and Nature of the Recent Reform-Recovery Movement (Ralph H. Blodgett)
Smythe, Mabel M.[4]	1942	Wisconsin	Tipping Occupations as a Problem in the Administration of Protective Labor Legislation (D. Lescohier)
Warren, Samuel E.	1942[5]	Wisconsin	The Negro in the American Labor Movement (S. Perlman)
Bailer, Lloyd H.	1943	Michigan	Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry

[3] Modified by the omission of W. G. Henry, W. Arthur Lewis, and A. T. Peters. See Greene (1946: 50-77). Greene does not provide a date for Jackson's PhD. It was 1942.

[4] Smythe married Robert Haith (sometimes misspelt as Haithe), her second husband, in 1985.

[5] Warren's dissertation manuscript is dated 1941, but both Greene and Lampman (1993: 311) list his degree as awarded in 1942.

Peters, appears to have done a PhD in theology and not economics.[6] That gives an adjusted figure of fourteen African American holders of PhDs in economics from the first in 1921 until 1943.

Greene does list another eight individuals with PhDs in economics together with sociology, history, or in general social science. It was not uncommon at the time to find economics taught in departments also offering courses in sociology and political science. Some of these degrees have been described as PhDs in economics in the secondary literature.

Table 2

African American PhDs in Social Science to 1943

(From Greene 1946)

Name	PhD Date	Area	Institution
Haynes, George E.	1912	Social Economics	Columbia
Brown, Thomas I.	1920	Econ and Sociology	Clark
Donald, Henderson H.	1926	Econ, Govt, Soci	Yale
Wright, Milton S. J.	1932	Social Science	Heidelberg
Oak, Vishnu V.	1937	Econ and Sociology	Clark
Williams, Eric E.	1938	Econ and History	Oxford
McGuinn, Henry J.	1940	Social Science	Columbia
Nyabongo, A. K.	1940	Social Science	Oxford

[6] Correspondence with archivists at the University of London revealed an Aaron Theophilus Peters who graduated at about the right time in theology. No other A. T. Peters was found in the archives. He may have been from British Guiana and later a member of the Fourth Legislative Council, elected in 1947.

In several cases, further research has made it clear that the PhDs concerned were *not* in economics. Williams and Nyabongo obtained their PhD degrees from Oxford, Williams' degree was in history and Nyabobgo's in anthropology.[7] McGuinn's PhD was in sociology from Columbia in 1939 (Ellison 1974) and listed as such in the *American Journal of Sociology* (1939: 89).[8] Thomas Brown and Vishnu Oak both graduated from Clark which had a single Department of Economics and Sociology and their theses are labelled "Economics and Sociology." Brown's PhD thesis topic (business mores) was more sociological than economic and was listed in the *American Journal of Sociology* as a dissertation in sociology (1920: 96). A note in *Crisis* (Allison 1920: 126) also describes his degree as in sociology.[9] As Vishnu Oak's name suggests he was born in India. He had previous degrees in journalism and commerce. His PhD thesis was titled "Commercial Education in Negro Colleges," and was classified under sociology in the *American Journal of Sociology* (1938: 106).[10]

James Stewart describes Haynes 1912 PhD from Columbia as in economics (Stewart 1997: 214).[11] Haynes' PhD, however, was not in economics, but in "social economy." The term

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[7] Eric E. Williams became the first Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago. His PhD work was in history and his thesis was later published as *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944). He is listed by Greene as having taught in the Department of Political Science at Howard. The other Oxford PhD listed is A. K. Nyabongo whose PhD degree was in anthropology and who was born a prince of the Western Ugandan kingdom of Toro. He obtained a BA from Howard and an MA from Harvard and later taught at Alabama State Teachers College and North Carolina A&T University. He returned to Uganda in 1957. He was active in the African anti-colonial movement and in that respect had contacts with Du Bois. See Matera (2010).

[8] Not in 1940 as Greene states. His MA was also from Columbia. His PhD thesis was "The Courts and the Changing status of the Negro in Maryland." His career was at Virginia Union University and he wrote extensively on the legal restrictions on the educational and career choices for African Americans.

[9] See the entry on Brown in Yesterday People Jamaica (2013).

[10] He had previous degrees in economics, journalism, and commerce. A review of his book on black newspapers states his employment as publicity director at Wilberforce (Holsey 1948). Carter Woodson gave a critical review of his book on *The Negro's Adventure in General Business*, while also giving a slap to Abram Harris' negative view of black business (Woodson 1949).

[11] Haynes headed up the Wilson's administration's Division of Negro Economics between 1918 and 1921, and wrote an important report on the Division's finding concerning black employment (Haynes 1921), as has been discussed by Stewart (1997) and Kumekawa (2024). Apart from Haynes, it is important to note that many black historians and sociologists from Du Bois onward produced work with significant economic content (Wilson 2006; Rutherford 2024).

"social economy" had a very specific meaning in terms of the development of sociology at Columbia. In 1905 a formal connection was made between the independent New York School of Philanthropy[12] and Columbia University with Edward Devine and Samuel McCune Lindsay from the School appointed to Columbia to teach "practical sociology." This program was placed within the Department of Sociology and officially referred to at the time as "social economy" (Wallace 1992: 504-507). The major focus of this "practical sociology" was to train social workers in field work. Haynes' own field work for his thesis had been conducted at the New York School of Philanthropy, and he particularly credits Samuel McCune Lindsay in his preface.[13]

Francille Wilson describes Henderson Donald as an economist (Wilson 2006: 122), but Greene describes his 1926 PhD from Yale as in economics, government, and sociology, indicating three sub sections of the then Department of Social and Political Science.[14] Correspondence with Yale archives confirms his program as primarily a mixture of economics and sociology, possibly with an emphasis on economics. At the time he completed his PhD he was a member of the American Economic Association and his dissertation is listed in the *American Economic Review* as a doctoral dissertation in economics (1926: 578). He joined the economics department at Howard in 1928, but a year later he moved to the sociology department and the rest of his career was as a sociologist.

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[12] Later the Columbia University School of Social Work.

[13] The link between Haynes thesis work and the New York School of Philanthropy is made clear in the preface to his thesis (Haynes 1912). Haynes' central interest in social work is borne out by his work at Fisk prior to 1918, where he was appointed a professor of social science and developed a graduate training program in social work. After 1921 Haynes worked on race relations, first for National Interracial Conference and later for the Commission on Race Relations for the Federal Council of Churches.

[14] Yale did not develop a separate department of economics until 1937.

Milton Wright completed an MA at Columbia in 1927 with a thesis on "The Historical Development of Negro Journals." This is listed as a degree in "social science." He then taught at Samuel Huston College but in 1930 was given leave to study at Heidelberg University. He took summer courses at Oxford and Geneva and completed his PhD at Heidelberg in 1932. His studies at Heidelberg involved the broad approach to social science common in Germany, encompassing economics, sociology, and history. He also studied journalism. His thesis was titled "Economic Development and Indigenous Policy in the African Protectorates, 1884–1918," supervised by Carl Brinkmann, well known as a historian, economist, and sociologist. His degree has been referred to as a PhD in economics (Fikes 2020).[15] Returning to the US he became professor and head of Department of Economics and Political Science at Wilberforce University, but the only post PhD publications I have found are editorials in the *The Sphinx*[16] on educational issues. The rest of this paper will focus on the fourteen PhDs in economics as a single subject listed in Table 1.

2. PhD Dissertations

In reviewing the PhD dates and dissertation titles listed in Table 1 a number of observations can be made. The first is the very slow pace of the production of African American PhDs in economics prior to the late 1930s and 1940s. The first is Sadie Alexander's in 1921 and then it is ten years until the next, Abram Harris in 1931. This compares unfavorably with the record in history and sociology where African American PhDs were being produced earlier and with somewhat more regularity. For example: Du Bois in 1895, R. R. Wright in 1911, George

[15] Milton Wright's great claim to fame came from his four-hour interview with Adolf Hitler while a student at Heidelberg. See Fikes (2020) and Jesse Karjalainen's "Finding Milton" podcast and biography.
[16] *The Sphinx* was the product of the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity of African Americans.

Haynes and Carter Woodson in 1912, and Charles Johnson (PhB) in 1917 (Rutherford 2024). Moreover, in the economics case only three universities produced more than one PhD: Harvard with three (1934; 1938; 1939), Columbia with two (1931, 1942); and Wisconsin with two (both in 1942), so most of these students would have been isolated. By way of contrast, over the period covered by Greene, Harvard produced seven African American PhDs in history, and Chicago six in sociology. Given the high level of interest of African American students in labor economics[17] the fact that Columbia and Wisconsin produced only two students each is noticeable. It is also surprising that the University of Chicago, which was such a center for the training of black sociologists should have produced no black economics PhDs at all. This speaks to the relative lack of interest in recruiting or attracting black graduate students among economics departments that I have discussed elsewhere (Rutherford 2024).

In terms of dissertation topics, nine of the dissertations were directed towards issues in labor, housing, household economics, or economic policy with very specific African American concerns. In contrast, the dissertations from Harvard were not orientated towards specifically black issues and are also noticeably more theoretical than the others. Other than labor market issues the only other topic dealt with by more than one dissertation was that of monetary and stabilization policy (Weaver, McGraw, McLaurin, and Jackson).

All of the dissertations represent significant pieces of work. Particularly noteworthy among the dissertations dealing broadly with black labor issues are Sadie Alexander's survey of the standard of living among migrant families in Philadelphia, a shorter version of which was published in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (Mossell 1921); Abram Harris' "The Black Worker" that was incorporated into his major book with

[17] A great deal of the black labor studies literature was produced by historians and sociologists rather than by economists (Wilson 2006; Rutherford 2024).

Stirling Spero *The Black Worker: The Negro and the Labor Movement* (Spero and Harris 1931); Brailsford Brazeal's dissertation on the first black led union to achieve recognition by the AFL, and that later appeared as *The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters* (Brazeal 1946); and Lloyd Bailer's thesis on black workers in the automobile industry, which was originally conducted as part of the Carnegie studies for Gunner Myrdal's *American Dilemma* (Foote, Whatley, and Wright 2003), and informed his articles in the *Journal of Political Economy* (Bailer 1943) and *Political Science Quarterly* (Bailer 1944).

Also significant, although unpublished, are Warren Banner's thesis that provided the first detailed examination of the housing conditions faced by African Americans in all five of the boroughs of New York (Banner 1940); Robert Francis' dissertation "A History of Labor on the San Francisco Waterfront" that detailed the background to the major, and violent, 1942 strike of longshoremen in San Francisco, a strike that resulted in the formation of the International Longshoremen's Association and the opening of the San Francisco waterfront to black workers; and Frank Davis' study of social security, notable for its argument that the program had failed to improve the economic status of black workers because of their low wages and intermittent employment, and that simply including domestic and agricultural employments, as most critics recommended, would not solve the problem (Davis 1939). Mabel Smythe's dissertation takes on the issue of tipping and argues that tipping tends to depress paid wage levels and increase the economic insecurity faced by employees. Tipping also creates problems in the design and application of minimum wage laws and the calculation of unemployment and social security benefits (Smythe 1942). Smythe opposed tipping and wished to see it replaced by a minimum wage system paying a living wage. Samuel Warren's very lengthy dissertation covers the history of black labor from slavery and plantation labor to urbanization and industrial work, with a

particular emphasis on the history of black labor and trade unionism (Warren 1941). Perhaps the most significant thing about Warren's dissertation is that Wisconsin labor economists such as Commons and Perlman (his supervisor) had paid almost no attention to black workers. As pointed out by Peck (1966: 61): "in their four-volume work on the history of American labor, John R. Commons and associates made less than fifteen minor references to Negro workmen," while Perlman "scarcely referred to the Negro laboring class" at all. Warren's thesis served to correct this major omission in Wisconsin labor economics.

Of the four dissertations dealing with macro issues, Weaver presents an under-consumptionist analysis of depressions, quite similar to those found in some of the institutionalist literature of the time (Rutherford 2011: 291-298). Booker McGraw's thesis stresses "the limitations of pure monetary theory in achieving economic stability" and the importance of "basic institutional instruments and arrangements" (Myers 2017: 18). Somewhat similarly, Jackson argues that a monetary policy aimed at price stabilization will not be able to achieve economic stability on its own (Jackson 1942). Dunbar McLaurin's dissertation critically discusses the many and various proposals for economic planning that emerged in the late 1930s including those suggested by Lewis Lorwin, George Soule, Stuart Chase, Gerard Swope, and others (McLaurin 1942). William Dean's thesis is something of an outlier dealing with location theory and making important contributions that were utilized by Walter Isard and others in the further development of location theory (Myers 2017).

3. Outline of Post PhD Careers

Of our African American PhDs, six pursued teaching/academic careers, spent almost entirely within the system of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Abram

Harris did obtain employment in the undergraduate college at the University of Chicago in 1945, but the other five seem to have remained in the HBCU system. Four others began with significant stints teaching at a HBCU before moving in other directions, while four had careers entirely outside of the HBCUs (Table 3).

This, of course, is a reflection of the unwillingness of predominantly white colleges and universities (PWIs) to hire African Americans, leaving the HBCUs as the only choice for those seeking teaching or academic careers.[18] This remained the case for a remarkably long time.

Table 3

Careers of African American Economists

(PhDs 1921-1943)

HBCU/University	HBCU/Other	Non HBCU
Harris, Abram L. (1931) Howard; U of Chicago	Dean, William H. (1938) Atlanta; Govt; United Nations	Alexander, Sadie M. (1921) Lawyer and Civil Rights Activist
Francis, Robert C. (1934) Lincoln; Southern	McGraw B. T. (1939) Lincoln; Government	Weaver, Robert C. (1934) Federal and State Gov; HUD; CUNY
Davis, Frank G. (1939) Morgan State; Lincoln; Howard	Smythe, Mable M. (1942) Lincoln; NAACP; State Dept; Northwestern	Banner, Warren M. (1939) National Urban League (NUL)
Brazeal, Brailsford R. (1942) Morehouse	Bailer, Lloyd H. (1943) Howard; NUL; Labor Mediation	McLaurin, Dunbar S. (1942) Law, Business, Banking
Jackson, Frederick A. (1942) Morgan State; Prairie View		
Warren, Samuel E. (1942) Prairie View; Texas College		

[18] As Myers has documented William Dean was a very highly rated student—the best in his year at Harvard—but could only be recommended for jobs at black colleges (Myers 2017).

Abram Harris was able to move into a predominantly white university (University of Chicago) in 1945, but he was not hired into the main graduate department. Moreover, his appointment was the result of Frank Knight's personal interest in his work on Veblen, Marx, and institutionalism which had been published in the *Journal of Political Economy* (Harris 1932; 1934),[19] and not because of his work on black labor. This lack of movement out of HBCUs occurred despite some of these individuals, such as Frank Davis, having publishing careers that stretched into the late 1980s. In contrast, having already made a significant reputation outside of the HBCU system in both Federal and State government positions, Robert Weaver was appointed Professor of Economics at City University of New York in 1970, and then Distinguished Professor of Urban Affairs at Hunter College CUNY in 1971. Similarly, in 1981 Mabel Smythe-Haith became the Melville J. Herskovits professor and director of African Studies at Northwestern University.

The second most important employer was government, especially after the mid 1930s. The New Deal administration offered some opportunities. Robert Weaver became Advisor on Negro Affairs under Harold Ickes in the Department of the Interior and a consultant on housing issues in the Public Works Administration. He was a member of Roosevelt's so called "Black Cabinet" that worked to increase the participation of African Americans in New Deal Programs. He opposed the racial "dual wage" system of the National Recovery Administration, and drafted the 1937 U.S. Housing Program. From 1940 to 1942 William Dean worked for the National Resources Planning Board and then, during the War, for the Office of Price Administration. World War II multiplied the number of government agencies willing to hire African Americans. Weaver, McGraw, and Bailer also all held positions with war time agencies dealing with

[19] For Knight's relationship with Harris see Levy and Peart (2025).

production, labor, and housing issues. Bailer continued to serve on a variety of advisory boards after the War while Weaver and McGraw continued to work on housing issues. Both would serve the Kennedy/Johnson administrations dealing with housing, writing frequently on housing issues affecting black communities, and Weaver becoming the first head of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Mabel Smythe-Haith also served on a variety of government bodies and in 1977 became an ambassador to Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea.

A third class of employer consisted of black organizations such as the National Urban League (NUL), or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and international organizations such as the United Nations. Warren Banner worked for many years as the Director of Research for the NUL conducting many studies of black communities across the country. Bailer became Director of Industrial Relations for the Urban League of New York. Both Robert Weaver and Mabel Smythe-Haith had involvement with the NAACP, and William Dean worked in Africa for the United Nations.[20]

There are only three people who had or developed independent careers: Sadie Alexander, because she could not obtain a college job and turned to the law while maintaining a strong presence in civil rights advocacy; Dunbar McLaurin who took opportunities in business and banking and did much to promote black businesses; and Lloyd Bailer who, with the growth of black representation in labor unions, was able to establish his own labor mediation company.

4. Contributions

As mentioned above there is already secondary literature outlining the careers and contributions of Sadie Alexander, Abram Harris, Robert Weaver, William Dean, and B. T.

[20] Dean's work for the OPA in Haiti and in Africa for the UN undermined his health and contributed to his suicide in 1952 (Brewer 1953).

McGraw and it is not intended to repeat that material here more than has already been done. It is, however, worth remembering that Sadie Alexander was not only the first African American PhD in economics, but also the first black woman to graduate from the University of Pennsylvania Law School, and that she had a career full of important contributions to civil rights (Banks 2008); that Harris' book with Spero was a major contribution to the literature on trade union discrimination against black workers, and that he was involved attempts to move the NUL to a more aggressive stance on race relations and form a multiracial working class political party; that McGraw published frequently on residential restrictions by race and on promoting equal opportunity in housing (McGraw and Nesbitt 1953; McGraw 1955; 1958; 1964); and that Weaver published a large amount on labor union issues and black workers in wartime industries such as aircraft (1942; 1944a; 1944b; 1945), as well as on housing issues (1944c; 1948; 1964; 1965). Weaver and Bailer were the first African Americans to publish on black labor issues in the leading economics journals since Du Bois in 1906 (Rutherford 2024).

On the other hand, it has proved difficult to find very much information beyond what has already been said on Francis, Jackson, and Warren. It has been claimed that Francis was possibly the first black PhD from Berkeley as a whole and not just in economics (Fleming and Millard 2017: 203), but correspondence with archivists at Berkeley has not provided confirmation of this claim. After completing his thesis, he taught at Lincoln College (overlapping with B. T. McGraw) and then at Southern, publishing a short article in *Social Forces* arguing that from the point of view of the black worker industrial unionism and the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) should be strongly supported rather than attempting to "force a begrudged recognition from a debilitated aristocracy of labor" (Francis 1936: 273). According to Fleming and Millard (2017: 204), Francis returned to San Francisco after six years but became severely

alcoholic. Jackson, I have found nothing on except that he taught at Morgan State and Prairie View Colleges. Warren taught at Prairie View and Texas College, and gave occasional papers at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, one in 1939 on "The Historical Development of Negro Labor" and one in 1957 on "The Negro Worker in Texas Since 1860." The 1939 paper was published in *The Journal of Negro History* (Warren 1940) and consists of an elaborate outline for a course on the history of black labor. Warren refers occasionally to his unpublished manuscript "The Negro in Industry," that most likely developed into his doctoral dissertation. His thesis strongly supported black trade unionism. More information is available on the six others.

Frank G. Davis taught at Morgan State and Lincoln before moving to Howard where he became Chair of the Department of Economics. As a relatively new PhD Davis attended and provided information concerning the meeting of the First Phylon Institute in 1941 (Davis 1941). This meeting involved an address by Du Bois and contributions from Robert Weaver, and William Dean, with many others such as B. T. McGraw, and Brailsford Brazeal present. Just after he moved to Howard, Davis published his book *The Economics of Black Community Development* (Davis 1972). Davis argues that the conventional analysis focusing on the ghetto labor market and the role of discrimination on both the demand and supply sides is insufficient. Instead, he presents a two-sector model in which the "black ghetto" is labor intensive subeconomy surrounded by a capital intensive and oligopolistic "general economy." With technological change in the general economy displacing unskilled labor, the ghetto economy becomes a "labor intensive one-sector export economy with nothing to sell to the rest of the economy but low priced unskilled labor" (Davis 1971:102). The solution runs in terms of providing capital and raising productivity in the ghetto economy and Davis suggests the

establishment of a National Ghetto Development Corporation for this purpose (Davis 1972).[21] Davis continued to elaborate this model bringing in more detail on the consumption and savings of black households and referring back to his PhD thesis on social security (Davis 1982). In addition, Davis became a member of the Black Caucus of the AEA, signing the 1970 "Statement of Concern" to the Association highlighting racial and professional bias and lack of social responsibility in the profession. Davis also became a member of the AEA Committee on the Education and Training of Minority Group Economists.

Warren M. Banner obtained his PhD from the University of Pittsburgh although in the process he also spent time at the University of Pennsylvania and Columbia University. In 1937, two years before he finished his PhD, he was appointed as Director of the Department of Research of the National Urban League, a position he continued to hold for many years (Banner 1940).[22] The NUL's mandate was to improve the economic and social conditions of minority groups and to combat discrimination, particularly in employment and housing. Under Banner's direction his department conducted a vast number of surveys concerning the conditions facing minority communities all over the country. Local groups facing some issue in employment, housing, or racial tension could request the Urban League to conduct a survey to pinpoint the issues and suggest community solutions. These surveys included information on income, employment, labor relations, housing, health, education, crime, race relations and more. A brief version of Banner's survey of New York was published in *The Journal of Educational Sociology* (Banner 1944a). Another report that attracted broader attention was the 1944 report on Hartford Connecticut, that focussed on employment and housing issues during the War (Banner 1944b). The wartime employment of black workers in industries where they had not been employed

[21] The large literature on ghetto development is surveyed by Harrison (1974).
[22] For a history of the NUL see Parris and Brooks (1971).

previously created serious racial problems, including riots, in numerous cites and the NUL and Banner's department made particular efforts to help provide for "war industry cities faced with racial problems" (Granger 1943). After the War Banner and his department delt with the issues created by highway construction, urban renewal, and public housing projects such as those in Miami (Banner 1953).[23] Initial reports were often followed by later surveys to measure progress made. Seattle, for example, was the subject of surveys conducted eleven years apart in 1943 and 1954.[24]

Dunbar S. McLaurin came from a family with a history of civil rights activism, his father, George McLaurin, used the courts to first gain admission to the University of Oklahoma in 1948, and then, in 1950, to prevent his segregation within the university (Levy 2020).[25] The latter became a Supreme Court case, *McLaurin v Oklahoma State Regents*, and an important step on the way to overturning *Plessy v Ferguson* (Brophy 2009).[26] Dunbar McLaurin was something of a prodigy, graduating high school at twelve and obtaining his PhD at twenty-one. He then served in the Philippines during World War II, afterwards setting up the "McLaurin Far East Trade Association" and making a great deal of money refurbishing and selling army surplus vehicles and equipment. On his return to the U.S. he obtained a law degree and became a well-known figure in the black business community of New York. In 1964 he founded, along with Jackie Robinson, the Freedom National Bank, the first black bank in Harlem. He became a consultant to the Human Resources Administration in New York and suggested that the City devote up to 10% of its purchases to businesses in black and other minority communities, and later drafted what he called the "Ghetto Economic and Industrialization Plan" that called for the

[23] For discussion of the racial housing issues in Miami redevelopment see Mohl (1995).
[24] Seattle Urban League (May 1954).
[25] For lectures his desk was set up on its own in an anteroom to keep him apart from the white students.
[26] In 1921 his mother, Peninah, was the first black person to apply to the University of Oklahoma. She was rejected.

establishing of development corporations to funnel Small Business Administration funds into ghetto areas. He set up Ghettonomics, a consulting firm, to promote these ideas, and became an adjunct professor of business at Columbia University. He also worked consulting on business projects in Nigeria and helped African students to come to the U.S. to study.

In 1973, due to business difficulties and in the midst of his efforts to establish a second black bank, The Universal National Bank, Dunbar McLaurin died by suicide. *The Sphinx* (Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity 1973) published a ten-page tribute to his work for black people and black communities around the world.

Brailsford R. Brazeal's undergraduate work was at Morehouse College and he returned there after completing his MA in economics from Columbia in 1928. By 1934 he was Head of the Department of Economics and Business Administration and Dean of Men. The Rosenwald Fund supported his further graduate work and he received his PhD in 1942. He would become Dean of Academics at Morehouse and did much to enhance the standing and academic reputation of the College, writing on issues such as curriculum and counselling services (Brazeal 1934; 1947). He opened his house to students, among them Martin Luther King Jr. and Maynard Jackson, who became the first black Mayor of Atlanta. His home was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2005 (Cyriaque 2006; Collier 2020).

Brazeal's thesis dealt with the long struggle involved in the formation of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first labor organization led by African Americans to receive a charter from the American Federation of Labor. As part of his research he worked as an assistant cook on the line that went South from New York. Black sleeping car workers had been heavily discriminated against by the Pullman company, and the formation of the union was a triumph for union leader A. Philip Randolph. The published version of Brazeal's thesis (Brazeal 1946)

became a widely reviewed and cited book. He also wrote a biography of Randolph that remained unpublished.

Brazeal continued to follow Randolph's career, contributing papers on the formation and functioning of the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) set up by Roosevelt in 1941 to ban "discriminatory employment practices by Federal agencies and all unions and companies engaged in war-related work" (Brazeal 1951; 1954a; Collins 2001). Roosevelt's actions were pushed along by Randolph's advocacy and threats to organize mass marches on Washington, something that had the support of both the Brotherhood and the NAACP. Brazeal himself emphasized the radical nature of these tactics: "this pressure technique represented a distinct departure from the conventional protest methods which the Negro had used," but this method succeeded in enlarging the "movement for economic equality which is a basic ingredient of democracy" (Brazeal 1954a). Brazeal outlined the heavy political opposition to the attempts to establish a permanent FEPC, including opposition from businesses and unions with discriminatory practices and real estate companies concerned to maintain segregation in housing, but pointed to the progress against discrimination being made at the state and municipal level in numerous places (Brazeal 1951).

Brazeal was also highly active in the promotion of voting rights, working on voter registration and writing about discrimination against black voters. He conducted a series of studies of African American voting in counties in Georgia and South Carolina (Brazeal 1960), and also engaged in many other civil rights issues. He forcefully opposed the forces of reaction that he saw endangering civil rights in the McCarthy period, forces that "propel America toward the strangulating tentacles of dictatorship" (Brazeal 1954b).

Mabel M. Smythe[27] (later Smythe-Haith) came from an academic family with ties to Atlanta University and the University of Wisconsin. Her own university education began at Spelman College, but she moved to Mount Holyoke where she completed her bachelor's in 1937. She taught at high school level at Fort Valley College until 1939 and then completed an MA in economics in 1940 from Northwestern. She received support from the Rosenwald Fund and obtained her PhD in economics, with a minor specialization in law, from Wisconsin in 1942. In 1939 she married Hugh Smythe, an anthropologist.[28] Her PhD on tipping occupations "was not just to satisfy a degree requirement" but to provide evidence "useful in efforts to raise the minimum wage and to extend its coverage," including to the large number of African Americans involved in those occupations (Perkins 2003). After completing her PhD she taught at Lincoln University (1942-44), Tennessee State College (1945), and, as an adjunct, at Brooklyn College (1946-47). While at Lincoln, she and her husband wrote an article examining the state of economics and business education in black colleges. They argued that most colleges were too small in terms of both student numbers and faculty to be able to "educate for economic leadership," and needed to consolidate (M. Smythe and H. Smythe 1944). They also wrote on the effects of the war on black colleges and the needs of the veteran (H. Smythe and M. Smythe 1944; M. Smythe and H. Smythe 1945).

From 1951 to 1953 she and her husband were in Japan as part of a program to help improve Japanese higher education after the war. Mabel Smythe taught English and economics

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[27] The material here is taken largely from entries in encyclopedia.com, and *Notable Black American Women* (Elliott 1992) and interviews with Mabel Smythe conducted for the Foreign Affairs Oral History Project by Ann Morin (1986) and Ruth Njiiri (2008).

[28] His PhD was from Northwestern and Melville Herskovits was his supervisor. For Hugh Smythe's career see Anderson (2008) and interview with Mabel Smythe (Njiiri 2008). H. Smythe obtained his MA from Atlanta University. He later studied with Du Bois when Du Bois returned to Atlanta, and then worked with him at the NAACP in the late 1940s.

at Shiga University. Their view of university training in Japan was that it was "shackled" particularly by the hierarchical and formal nature of faculty interactions, the lack of co-operative scholarship, the clique controlling entry to the leading schools, and the adherence to traditional teaching methods (H. Smythe and M. Smythe 1952). They also warned of the difficulties in US-Japanese relations caused by Japanese views of American racism: "The United States is scrupulous in her diplomatic behavior—she goes abroad in a gown of purest white: but the soiled petticoat of domestic prejudice is too long to be hidden, even if she could succeed in keeping it from touching the nonwhite allies beyond her borders" (M. Smythe and H. Smythe 1952). To combat the sometimes startlingly false views of the position of African Americans held by people in Japan and elsewhere in Asia, and to broaden the educational experience of African American students, Mable Smythe proposed that students from Asia be encouraged to attend HBCUs on a visiting basis (M. Smythe 1952). Her interest in student exchanges led to her close involvement with James H. Robinson in the founding of Operation Crossroads, and with the African Scholarship Program for Nigerian students to attend American universities.[29]

Back in New York in 1953 she was appointed as Deputy Director of the NAACP Legal Defence and Education Fund where she was an important part of the team preparing the material for Thurgood Marshall in the *Brown v Board of Education* case. She felt she "was taking part in history" realizing the huge impact the case could have. A description of her immense contribution to the historical research involved can be found in Perkins (2003). Between 1954 and 1969 she taught at the New Lincoln School, the last ten years as Principal. During the 1960s she was also appointed to numerous governmental advisory positions relating to her educational

[29] This involved travel to Nigeria in 1957-58, and an analysis of the formation of a Nigerian upper-class elite (H. Smythe and M. Smythe 1960a; 1960b).

and foreign experiences,[30] and taught as an adjunct professor at the Baruch School, Queens College, and at the City University of New York. From 1970 to 1977 she was Director of Research and then Vice President for the Phelps-Stokes Fund, editing the *Black American Reference Book* (1976). As if that was not enough, she served as scholar in residence at the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in 1973 and 1974.

In 1977 President Carter appointed her as U.S. Ambassador to Cameroon and subsequently also to Equatorial Guniea.[31] She traveled with American representatives to several other African countries, and on her return to the U.S. in 1980 she was appointed Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs. She was a part of the U.S. delegation participating in the International Conference for Assistance to Refugees in Africa, an experience that gave rise to her article on the pressing need to improve the aid to African refugees (M. Smythe 1982).

In 1981 she was appointed as Melville J. Herskovits Professor of African Studies at Northwestern University, becoming the Associate Director of the African Studies Program in 1983. She retired in 1985, but that did not stop her continuing her engagement with African affairs, both economic and political, for several more years.

Lloyd H. Bailer obtained his BA and MA from Wayne State University and then shifted to the University of Michigan for his doctorate, which was awarded in 1943. His thesis research was done as a part of the Carnegie-Myrdal project, and dealt with the racial situation in the automobile industry. Bailer's contribution "The Negro Automobile Worker" was written in 1940 and included in the unpublished "Negro Labor and its Problems" edited by Paul Norgren, and

[30] U.S. Advisory Committee on International Educational and Cultural Affairs, and Advisory Council on African Affairs for the State Department among them. Hugh Smythe was appointed as ambassador to Syria in 1967, and then, due to the "seven-day war," to Malta. Mabel Smythe accompanied him.

[31] Hugh Smythe died of cancer shortly before she took the appointment. In 1985 Mabel Smythe married Robert Haith.

summarized in appendix 6 of *American Dilemma* (Myrdal 1944: 1119-1122). Bailer's work was "based on independent statistical information he assembled, as well as extensive interviews with auto industry officials and both white and black auto workers" (Foote, Whatley, and Wright 2003: 496). He detailed the discrimination that concentrated black workers in the least desirable and least skilled jobs. Between 1941 and 1946 Bailer was a member of the Department of Economics at Howard, with Abram Harris as a colleague. War-time also involved him with the War Production Board and the National War Labor Board. He produced major articles in the *Journal of Political Economy* (Bailer 1943) and the *Political Science Quarterly* (Bailer 1944) combining his dissertation research with concerns relating to the conversion of auto plants to war time production. The first paper detailed the racial frictions, strikes, and other conflicts that the wartime upgrading of black labor had occasioned in the auto industry. These racial frictions caused riots in Detroit and put wartime production in danger. Bailer examined the extent of racial tension in various different plants and under what circumstances it was greater or lesser. Bailer pointed to the example of specific policies in one plant that had worked to reduce tensions. The second paper dealt more specifically with automobile union policies and attitudes toward black labor. While union leadership was committed to equality its ability to bring about change was limited by the "the tremendous expansion in membership which has brought into the union large numbers of workers bitterly opposed to equality between Negroes and whites on the job or in the union" (Bailer 1944: 576). In terms of bringing about greater equality in those plants that had traditionally excluded black workers Bailer was not optimistic.

After leaving Howard, Bailer developed his own labor mediation practice based in New York. He also worked as Director of Industrial Relations for the Urban League of New York, as a field examiner for the National Labor Relations Board. He was appointed to the New York

State Board of Higher Education and taught at various times as a lecturer at Rutgers, Brooklyn College, and Columbia University. He continued to write on organized labour, racial minorities, and "The Negro in the Labor Force" (Bailer 1951; 1953), and also continued to serve on a variety of federal advisory boards, but increasingly devoted his time to labor arbitration. He moved to Los Angeles in 1967 where he became the first Chairman of the Los Angeles County Employee Relations Committee.

5. Conclusion

Of these fourteen economics PhDs some, not surprisingly, had more prominent careers than others, but achieving a PhD under the circumstances of the time, full of discriminations and microaggressions, must itself be seen as a major accomplishment. Many of these individuals made their way to their PhD institutions via previous degrees earned at HBCUs, and all but four spent significant time afterwards teaching in HBCUs. The key role of these institutions in providing opportunities for African Americans both as students and as academics is obvious but at the same time hard to exaggerate. In 1990 Mabel Smythe-Haith was to say the following:

> Black colleges fulfill a need that white colleges fail to provide for black students. The black colleges receive the black students wholeheartedly and work with them until they reach acceptable levels. Today the black college continues to believe in the black student, for they know that students will succeed if motivated. Again, they provide black role models when blacks were seldom acknowledged in the public media. Then and now, black colleges provide an artistic and cultural life in the black community. At such

> colleges, students do not face prejudice against their blackness and their cultural background (Smith 1992: 1054).

Of course, as the Smythe's had previously argued, HBCUs had their limitations. Small student bodies, small faculties, heavy teaching and administrative loads, and lack of resources to support research. In looking at HBCU catalogs from the 1930s and 40s it is not uncommon to find a faculty of two people teaching virtually all the economics and business courses on offer. For most of the late 1930s and 1940s Abram Harris and Edward Lewis[32] were the only regular economics faculty at Howard, although supplemented by Lloyd Bailer as an instructor in the early 1940s. Similarly, in the mid 1930s the economics teaching at Lincoln was done almost entirely by Robert Francis and B. T. McGraw. The limitations of the HBUCs at the time undoubtedly had an adverse effect of the level of research output produced. For example B. T. McGraw published much more while in government than he did while at Lincoln. Funding from the Rosenwald Foundation undoubtedly aided the PhD and other research projects carried out by Harris, Dean, McGraw, Brazeal, and Smythe (Ciesla Foundation 2018), while in terms of the research activity at HBCUs, Howard appears to have been the most successful with Harris, Davis, and Bailer all publishing significant work while there.

None of the individuals considered here obtained a regular entry level position at a predominantly white institution (PWI). New African American PhDs began to be hired by PWIs in the 1940s but this was "usually only one per institution and often as adjunct faculty" (Elfman 2020). It was another generation before even small numbers of black academics began to be

[32] Edward Lewis was white and a PhD in sociology from Columbia. His thesis had been on the Great Migration and had a strong economic/statistical orientation (Rutherford 2024).

hired into regular positions at PWIs,[33] and in economics the numbers were especially low.[34] The teaching that McLaurin, Weaver, Smythe, and Bailer did in PWIs was as visitors or adjunct faculty, until Weaver obtained a professorship in 1970 and Smythe in 1981. Even in 1994 *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* found only eight US born African Americans in the economics departments of the 25 top-rated universities.

The personal histories outlined above also clearly indicate the importance of World War II, both as a source of employment opportunities for black economists, and as an event that in a variety of ways helped to break down discrimination against black people in employment. Government employment of black social scientists in various advisory positions began with the New Deal, but the War expanded those opportunities. Weaver, Dean, McGraw and Bailer all served on war-time agencies and boards. This increase in the hiring of black people extended well beyond those discussed here and included a general upgrading in the job status of black employees of the Federal Government (Roberts 1943). Moreover, the war's demand for labor, the rise of industrial unionism, and governmental efforts such as the FEPC brought about real changes to the economic position of black workers more generally. William Collins has argued that "although labor economists have devoted considerable attention to black economic progress in the post-1964 period, it is surprising that the 1940s, and the wartime experience in particular have been neglected" (Collins 2001: 272). Neglected by white economists perhaps (with the exception of Herbert Northrup), but certainly not by black economists. Weaver, Banner and the NUL, Brazeal, and Bailer were all acutely aware of the significance of the wartime efforts to increase the participation of black workers in wartime industries and the efforts made both by

[33] The exception was Allison Davis who obtained a PhD in anthropology and who was hired into a regular position at Chicago (in the department of education) in 1942. He obtained tenure in 1947 (Varel 2018).
[34] It is notable that none of the six Harvard PhDs examined by Myers (the last awarded their PhD in 1951) obtained an entry level position in a PWI. See also Anderson (1993) and Slater (1998/99).

black organizations such as the NAACP and the NUL and the federal government (on the basis of the FEPC) to reduce discrimination. According to Collins the FEPC, even without direct recourse to penalties, "was surprisingly effective in its efforts to promote Roosevelt's antidiscrimination policy outside of the South" and to have "accelerated the pace of black economic advancement" by "opening doors for black workers in industries, occupations, and firms that had previously excluded them" (Collins 2001: 284-285).

It is also noticeable that regardless of the topic of their PhDs almost all of the people discussed here spent their careers in work designed to improve the economic condition of black people and communities, either through teaching or other activities or both. The partial exception is Abram Harris who stopped writing on black issues on his appointment to Chicago, and only began again in the 1960s. The three Harvard PhDs are a good example. As noted above none of their PhDs dealt with specifically black issues. Nevertheless, Weaver and McGraw moved to work primarily on housing issues relating to black communities, including discrimination in housing and the problem of ghettos, while Dean worked in projects in Haiti and the West Indies during the war and then as a Director in the United Nations Department of Economic Affairs involved in missions in Libya and Somaliland. Brewer (1953) speaks of Dean's ambition "to bring relief to the disadvantaged and exploited in Africa." Among the others, Sadie Alexander was heavily involved in civil rights advocacy throughout her career; in the pre-Chicago part of his career, Harris was an important voice in the criticism of union discrimination against black workers prevalent in the AFL; Bailer, Francis, and Warren were all supportive of the CIO industrial unions efforts to increase black membership; Davis and McLaurin worked on the the issue of ghetto development; Banner worked with the NUL to mitigate racial tensions in cities all over the country; Brazeal advocated for voting rights and

supported the efforts to establish a permanent FEPC; Smythe worked with the NAACP on *Brown v Board of Education* among many other contributions; and Bailer worked to improve the position of the black worker. McLaurin and Smythe, as well as Dean, worked in Africa and sought to improve economic conditions there.

For this group, teaching and scholarship were not separated from the "struggle against racial discrimination" (Perkins 2003: 348). There is a passage from Ta-Nehsis Coates concerning his feelings while teaching writing at Howard that applies here: "it begins with our institution and the fact that it was founded to combat the long shadow of slavery—a shadow that we understood had not yet retreated. This meant that we could never practice writing solely for the craft itself, but must necessarily believe our practice to be in service of that larger emancipatory mandate" (Coates 2024: 3).

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