

# Leaders of Afro-American Nashville



## FIK UNIVERSITY

Fisk University began as Fisk Free School, one of four schools founded for freedmen during the Union Army occupation of Nashville. In October 1865, the American Missionary Association, the Western Freedman's Aid Commission, and the U.S. Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands decided to open a school to help answer the educational needs of freed slaves. In December 1865, General Clinton Bowen Fisk, head of the Kentucky-Tennessee Freedmen's Bureau, secured housing for the school. It was located in several old Union Army Hospital buildings between Church and Cedar (Charlotte) streets near Shaftesbury Avenue and the Union Army Contraband Camp. On January 9, 1866, the school's founders, John Ogden and Erastus Cravath, and Governor William G. Brownlow addressed the dedication ceremonies. Nelson Walker was among those present in the audience. The school taught basic elementary and grammar school subjects.

With the reopening of the Nashville public schools in the fall of 1867, the need for basic education was less pressing; and the institution was chartered as Fisk University on August 22 of that year. As a college, Fisk needed new quarters. In 1871, the surplus Union Army Fort Gillem was purchased. A student choir under the leadership of Professor George L. White was organized in 1867 and began touring the nation in 1871 in order to raise building funds. This group, known as the Jubilee Singers, raised over \$50,000 for the construction of Jubilee Hall at Salem (Eighteenth Avenue, North) and Jefferson streets. In 1876, Fisk University moved to its new campus. Under its first president, Cravath, some 130 of Fisk's students and graduates were teaching in Negro schools.

By the 1890s, Fisk's curriculum had expanded to include liberal arts, theology, teacher training, and a secondary school. Its physical plant continued to expand.

At the turn of the century with the arrival of a second generation of freed blacks, the school began to undergo changes as black expectations began to rise. Demands were made for more blacks on the faculty and in administration. In June 1911, there was a black protest because President George Gates dismissed six of twelve black teachers for financial reasons; and in 1924-25, a student strike forced President Fayette A. McKenzie to resign over charges of racism and oppression. In 1947, Charles S. Johnson became the first black to head Fisk.

During the 1960s, the civil rights movement radicalized the student body, and support from white donors diminished. Facing increasing financial burdens, Fisk unwisely dipped into its \$15 million endowment. Nineteen eighty-three found the school with a greatly diminished endowment and facing serious debts, but determined to carry on.

Presidents and Acting Presidents of Fisk have been: Erastus Milo Cravath (1875-1900), James Merrill (1901-1908), George Augustus Gates (1909-1915), Fayette Avery McKenzie (1915-1925), Thomas Elsa Jones (1926-1946), Charles Spurgeon Johnson (1947-1956), Stephen Junius Wright (1957-1966), James Raymond Lawson (1967-1975), Rutherford Hamlet Adkins (Acting 1975-1976), George W. Gore, Jr. (Acting 1976-1977), and Walter J. Leonard (1977-1984).

—Reavis Mitchell and Haywood Farrar

This publication is a project of the 1984 Nashville Conference on Afro-American Culture and History. Information was compiled by the Department of History, Tennessee State University. The Metropolitan Historical Commission assisted with design and printing.