
*George Boyer Vashon, 1824-1878:
Black Educator, Poet, Fighter for Equal Rights
Part Two*

by Catherine M. Hanchett

THE first part of this article described George Boyer Vashon's background, his early work with other nineteenth-century black leaders in the struggle for equal rights, his professorship at New York Central College, McGrawville, New York, and his major poems and essays up to 1859. Perhaps from his own choice, the full extent of Vashon's efforts for his people seems to have been known only to close associates.

Pittsburgh

Not long after he returned to Pittsburgh in December 1857 to become principal of the city's black public schools, Vashon was a leader in the black community, acknowledged to be "a gentleman of superior scholarly attainments," a poet, an orator, a man of law, and a good linguist.¹ His stature was enhanced when, in the latter part of 1863, he assumed the presidency of Avery College in nearby Allegheny City.² This institution's founder, Charles Avery (1784-1858), had been among the civic leaders of Pittsburgh who supported blacks in their struggle for public education, equal rights, and economic advancement. Coming to the city at age twenty-eight from Westchester, New York, Avery invested in cotton mills and other industries, acquiring great wealth. After a move to Allegheny City, in 1849 he erected near his residence a three-story Greek Revival-style building; the first two

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1 Smith, "Colored People of Pennsylvania," *Pine and Palm*, Sept. 21, 1861, in *BAP*, reel 13, frame 764; Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York, 1969), 243; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Dec. 3, 1859, Aug. 2, 1867; *Christian Recorder* (Philadelphia), Feb. 4, 1865, in *BAP*, reel 15, frame 702; GV took part in the activities of the People's Moral and Intellectual Institute, a local literary society (*ibid.*, Dec. 30, 1865, in *BAP*, reel 16, frame 616) and was a member of the Freedmen's Educational Association, *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Sept. 16, 1867.

2 "Sketch of George B. Vashon," Daniel Murray Papers.

floors became the Allegheny Institute (called Avery College from 1858), and the third floor housed a mission church.³ Incorporated by the state legislature "for the education of colored Americans in the various branches of Science, Literature, and Ancient and Modern Languages," the institute usually had about a hundred students in an academic course of study.⁴

Vashon's contribution to Pittsburgh's Civil War effort has not been discovered. His wife, Susan Paul Vashon, directed several "sanitary relief bazaars" that netted thousands of dollars for the care of sick and wounded soldiers and for the housing of blacks from war zones who sought refuge in the city.⁵

Vashon produced at least four significant literary pieces in this Pittsburgh period: an essay on the history of astronomy, an open letter to President Lincoln, the poem "A Life-Day," and a short essay on the Emancipation Proclamation. The first may have been a lecture prepared to satisfy a craze for astronomy that swept the city about the time of the appearance of Donati's Comet in early 1859.⁶ In August 1862 Lincoln tried to gain support for a scheme to send freed slaves to coal-mining colonies in Central America. In explaining his plan to a black deputation, the president said: "But for your race among us there could not be war. . . . It is better for us both, therefore, to be separated,"⁷ a remark that angered black spokesmen. Vashon's public letter to Lincoln protested that blacks had earned the right to stay in their land of birth, that the antipathy between the races would pass away with the removal of slavery, and that blacks' labor was needed in the land. Vashon concluded that the black man may have been the occasion of the war, "but he has not been its cause. . . . The white man's oppression of the negro, and not the negro himself, has brought

3 Stanton Belfour, "Charles Avery, Early Pittsburgh Philanthropist," *WPHM* 43 (Mar. 1960): 19-22; Avery College file, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh; Wilmoth, "Pittsburgh and the Blacks," 27-28, 181-84; Ullman, *Delany*, 69-70.

4 *FDP*, Jan. 27, 1854. From 1880 Avery College offered mainly vocational courses. It ceased about 1915; Avery A.M.E. Zion Church used the premises until the building was demolished about 1972 to make way for a super-highway.

5 H. Q. Brown, *Homespun Heroines*, 134.

6 GV, "The Successive Advances of Astronomy," *Anglo-African Magazine* 1 (July 1859): 204-08, and *New Era* (Washington, D.C.), Mar. 3, 10, 1870; Wallace R. Beardsley, "The Allegheny Observatory During the Era of the Telescope Association, 1859-1867," *WPHM* 64 (July 1981): 213-36.

7 Abraham Lincoln, "Address on Colonization to a Deputation of Negroes, August 14, 1862," Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J., 1953), 5: 372.

upon the nation the leprosy under which it groans."⁸ The third important piece, "A Life-Day," written in 1864, was an allegory "founded upon incidents which took place in one of our Southern states." The poem told of a white man who died after twelve years of marriage to his faithful slave. The marriage was declared illegal, and the widow and children were returned to slavery. Critics considered the 125-line poem disappointing when compared with "Vincent Ogé," but of merit in conception and execution.⁹ "The Proclamation and Its Promise," an essay probably also written in 1864, had as its thesis that black freedmen were "the sole hope that the United States of America will successfully carry out the mission assigned to them by the God of Nations."¹⁰

After three and a half years of Civil War, Democrats in the House of Representatives defeated the constitutional amendment that would abolish slavery. During the presidential election campaign, many blacks came to believe that a Democratic victory would "restore slavery to all its ancient power."¹¹ Alarmed and fearful, the nation's black leaders convened in early October 1864 in Syracuse, New York, uniting in favor of the proposed Thirteenth Amendment and in support of Lincoln's reelection. Pittsburgh's black community sent two of its leaders, Vashon and John Peck, to the convention, where the 144 delegates named Vashon to the rules and finance committees. On the latter he served with his associate from Syracuse, Jermain W. Loguen. John Mercer Langston, Vashon's protégé from Oberlin, headed the business committee, and his student at New York Central College, John B. Reeve, was a vice-president. The work of the convention led to organization of the National Equal Rights League, in structure similar to the National Council of the Colored People founded at the 1853 convention in Rochester, New York. The league campaigned for recog-

8 "Letter from Geo. B. Vashon. To His Excellency Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States of America," *Douglass' Monthly* 5 (Oct. 1862): 727-28; at this time GV shared the fundamental belief of his black contemporaries that condition, not color, lay at the root of racial prejudice; see George A. Levesque, "Boston's Black Brahmin: Dr. John S. Rock," *Civil War History* 26 (Dec. 1980): 340.

9 Benjamin Brawley, *Early Negro American Writers* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1935; reprint ed., New York, 1970), 274-78; Sherman, *Invisible Poets*, 60; Loggins, *Negro Author*, 238-39.

10 In Benjamin T. Tanner, *An Apology for African Methodism* (Baltimore, 1867), 299-304.

11 *Proceedings of the National Convention of Colored Men Held in the City of Syracuse, N.Y., October 4, 5, 6, and 7, 1864* (Boston, 1864), 49, in Bell, ed., *Minutes of the Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions*.

tion of black equality before state and national law, successively urging ratification of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments. Elected the first corresponding secretary, Vashon seems to have held office in the national league up to 1870.¹²

State and local leagues were quickly established. The Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League¹³ had an organizational meeting in Harrisburg, February 8-10, 1865, at which Vashon chaired the business committee; he probably wrote the convention's address to the people of the state and the memorial to the legislature. In the weeks before the meeting, Congress had proposed and President Lincoln had approved the Thirteenth Amendment. Slavery was now dead, but a poisonous prejudice, "a direct result of the defunct system of barbarism," survived. Against this, the convention asked for security. Simple justice, together with the loyalty of black soldiers in defense of the state and union, demanded restoration of black suffrage.¹⁴

This and three succeeding conventions named Vashon a corresponding secretary, thus a member of the state league's executive board. That body, however, usually met in Philadelphia; Vashon and other members from Western Pennsylvania seldom participated personally in the board's deliberations.¹⁵ The board supported the ultimately successful campaign for admission of blacks to Philadelphia's streetcars. At the same time, it guided the development of local leagues in other parts of the state. Focusing energies of seventeen such groups occupied the August 1865 state convention. In its report, the business committee, which Vashon again chaired, urged all to avail themselves of "the opportunity to form combinations for mutual protection, mental and moral culture, and political rights." Two petition campaigns were announced: one for a Constitutional amendment against "race" legislation and the second against admission to the Union of any former Confederate state that restricted the franchise on account of race or color.¹⁶

12 *Ibid.*, *passim*; *Syracuse Journal*, Oct. 7, 1864.

13 For details on founding of the Pennsylvania State League, see GV and John Peck, "National Equal Rights League," *Christian Recorder*, Feb. 4, 1865, in BAP, reel 15, frame 701.

14 "Proceedings of the State Equal Rights Convention of the Colored People of Pennsylvania, Held in the City of Harrisburg, February 8th, 9th and 10th, 1865," in Philip S. Foner and George E. Walker, eds., *Proceedings of the Black State Conventions, 1840-1865*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1979), 1: 139-70; Wilmoth, "Pittsburgh and the Blacks," 138-41.

15 Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League, Minutes of the Executive Board, 1864-1872, Leon Gardiner Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

16 GV, Pittsburgh, to Jacob C. White, Jr., July 28, 1865, Jacob C. White Papers,

Surviving correspondence showed that the state league cooperated with members of Congress, notably Thaddeus Stevens, William D. Kelley, and Charles Sumner, in gaining passage of the civil rights amendments. For example, Senator Kelley wrote: "I look to the proscribed citizens of my State to help me fight the battle to which I dedicated myself at the opening of the Slaveowners' rebellion. . . ." ¹⁷ Another letter revealed how Vashon came to write a document used in the battle. In January 1866 Congress was deliberating what would become the Fourteenth Amendment. The state league's executive board decided to send a delegation to present a memorial to Congress. Named to the delegation were the president of the state league, William Nesbit of Altoona, Joseph C. Bustill of Philadelphia, and Vashon. On January 20 Nesbit reported to the board: "I visited Prof Vashon at Pittsburg, and he readily accepted the office you have conferred on him. . . . He will prepare the Address. . . . I stated to him that the Text of the Address is to be the new proposed Constitutional Amendment against class legislation, The general aims of the League, And that through it all the League is to be kept prominent." ¹⁸ Vashon could not go to Washington; the memorial, plainly his work, was signed, not by him, but by Nesbit, Bustill, and William D. Forten of Philadelphia. ¹⁹ Other specific contributions by Vashon to the state league have not yet been identified.

In 1847 Vashon's application for admission to the Allegheny County bar had been rejected because of the 1838 state constitutional denial of political existence to black men. Apparently he believed that the 1866 Civil Rights Act, which declared that persons born in the United States are its citizens, overrode Pennsylvania's constitutional provision. On July 13, 1867, Vashon again sought admission to the Allegheny County bar on the ground that he had been admitted in New York State. ²⁰ In expectation that admission would be a relatively

Manuscript Div., The Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.; undated clippings, *Christian Recorder*, Aug.-Sept. 1865, in Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League, Minutes of the Executive Board, Leon Gardiner Collection.

17 Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League, Minutes of the Executive Board, Dec. 5, 1865, 86; Apr. 3, 1866, 102; William D. Kelley, Washington, D.C., to Jacob C. White, Jr., Dec. 7, 1868, Leon Gardiner Collection.

18 William Nesbit, Altoona, Pa., to the Executive Board, Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League, Jan. 20, 1866, Leon Gardiner Collection.

19 Memorial, "To the Honorable the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States in Congress Assembled," Feb. 20, 1866, copy in Leon Gardiner Collection. The memorial was also printed in the *Washington [D.C.] Chronicle*.

20 *Pittsburgh Daily Gazette*, July 15-22, 1867, Feb. 24, 1868.

swift formality, he resigned the presidency of Avery College. But his motion before the Court of Common Pleas proceeded slowly, and fall came without a decision.

Washington, D.C.

About October 1867 Vashon visited the nation's capital in the hope of finding a suitable livelihood for himself and his family, which then numbered eight, including his own four children and the two Colder nieces who made their home with the Vashons.²¹ He came to a city only slowly recovering from the effects of the Civil War.

Between 1860 and 1870, because of the influx of "contrabands" and other freed slaves, Washington's black population more than tripled.²² The sudden increase led to massive problems in economics, housing, and public health. This southern city had always been an inhospitable place for the majority of black persons. A few managed to own property, but most were trapped as laborers or domestics in low-paying jobs, intermittently employed with no chance for advancement. The special census of November 1867 revealed that only 6 percent of government positions were filled by blacks; with very few exceptions these jobs were of the lowest grades. Wartime inflation had more than doubled the cost of food, fuel, and clothing, while housing rents had more than tripled. Inadequate sanitation in parts of the city led to a high incidence of disease and death. Both whites and blacks were certain that the freedmen's condition would improve if they were simply encouraged to be independent, hard-working, and public-spirited. Many believed that government action in behalf of blacks should be confined to administration of justice. Therefore, the black leaders with whom Vashon associated himself concentrated on asserting claims for the franchise, equal education, access to public facilities, and right to civil service employment.

During his six years in Washington, in addition to his work for equality, Vashon had temporary government positions, contributed to the *New Era*, a national black newspaper, and helped organize and set standards for the capital's black public school system.

21 Dyson, *Howard University*, 349; GV, Washington, D.C., to Gerrit Smith, Apr. 20, 1868.

22 This description based on Constance McLaughlin Green, *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital* (Princeton, N.J., 1967), 33, 75-118, and Allan John Johnston, "Surviving Freedom: The Black Community of Washington, D.C., 1860-1880" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1980).

He applied for several posts on his October visit; the one he obtained was that of an assistant in the Solicitors' Office of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands — the Freedmen's Bureau. By a special appointment of General O. O. Howard, the bureau's head, Vashon began his duties on October 27. In this small office, under direction of the bureau's assistant commissioner for the District of Columbia, Vashon's assignment included frequent appearances as counsel for freedmen in magistrates' courts.²³ Congress sustained the bureau's work only to the end of 1868; Vashon's discharge resulted a month later.²⁴

Meanwhile, on February 22, 1868, the three-judge Court of Common Pleas of Allegheny County heard argument on Vashon's motion for admission to its bar. His attorney, P. C. Shannon, cited provisions of the 1866 Civil Rights Act and two recent similar instances in which the court had allowed admission. Several members of the bar attempted to make "the matter of color" of primary relevance. Vashon was not present to hear their expressions of virulent prejudice. In its decision of March 28, handed down eight months after the original motion, the court chose to interpret its rules for admission narrowly, "without regard for color." Vashon had not produced two certificates — neither one attesting to good moral character from the president judge of the court in which he had last practiced (the judge had died), nor a second attesting that he had been in practice for the preceding three years (because he had not practiced law since 1854). Both facts had been apparent in his original motion, but on this basis the court refused his application.²⁵

News of the rejection reached his long-time friend, Gerrit Smith, the radical abolitionist of Peterboro, New York. Vashon replied with gratitude for Smith's words of sympathy and cheer, adding that he did not take greatly to heart the insult contained in the ruling of the Allegheny County Court. Rather, he considered himself amply compensated by the action of the Supreme Court of the United States in admitting him to its bar on April 6, 1868.²⁶ In the next year he was

23 A. K. Browne, Office of Solicitors, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, To whom it may concern, Dec. 21, 1868, in GV's application for Mission-Hayti, General Records of the Dept. of State, Record Group 59, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as NARS), microfilm M-968, reel 63.

24 GV, Washington, D.C., to George Boutwell, Secretary of the Treasury, June 18, 1872, General Records of the Treasury Dept., Record Group 56, NARS.

25 *Pittsburgh Daily Gazette*, Feb. 24, Mar. 30, 1868.

26 GV, Washington, D.C., to Gerrit Smith, Apr. 20, 1868; GV wrote that he

also admitted to practice before both the Criminal Court and the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia.²⁷

Before the 1868 presidential election — considered crucial to the cause of equal suffrage — many black leaders worked for a Republican victory to ensure continuation of congressional Reconstruction: the Thirteenth and Fourteenth amendments were incomplete without a Fifteenth Amendment to spell out a citizen's right to vote. While the desired resolution was before Congress, 130 delegates to the January 13-17, 1869, National Convention of Colored Men of America assembled in Washington. Delegates included Frederick Douglass, John Mercer Langston, and Henry Highland Garnet, along with representatives from all the southern and border states. Historians have declared this to be the most significant of the postwar black conventions, for its work materially contributed to passage of the Fifteenth Amendment. Vashon was chosen chairman of the credentials committee and a member of the committees on rules and business. He also prepared the convention's "Address to the People of the United States."²⁸ This eloquently justified blacks' right to the franchise and urged all black men to send petitions and memorials to Congress. Vashon was one of nine convention delegates sent to seek support for the amendment from president-elect Grant and his vice-president, Schuyler Colfax. After this encounter, Vashon expressed great admiration for Grant in a speech and two rather extravagant political odes.²⁹

From early 1869 the Reverend J. Sella Martin, pastor of Washington's Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, headed a group that hoped to publish a national black weekly newspaper and to persuade Frederick Douglass to be the editor. Douglass refused the post, advis-

was admitted on motion of John A. Wills, Esq., took the prescribed oath at direction of Justice Samuel Nelson, and received his certificate authenticated by the signature of D. W. Middleton, clerk.

²⁷ *Syracuse Journal*, July 19, 1869; GV was admitted to the bar of the District of Columbia Supreme Court Oct. 26, 1869, on motion of A. K. Browne, reported Charles Sumner Brown, attorney, Washington, D.C., in a letter to the author, July 11, 1983.

²⁸ "National Convention of the Colored Men," *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, Jan. 23, 30, 1869; this account showed GV as delegate from Rhode Island and from New York; in the official roll call he was listed as "Solicitor, Freedmen's Bureau, Washington, D.C."; but in *Proceedings of the National Convention of the Colored Men of America Held in Washington, D.C., on January 13, 14, 15, and 16, 1869* (Washington, D.C., 1869), GV was consistently stated to be the Rhode Island delegate.

²⁹ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), Apr. 17, 1869; GV, "Ode on the Proclamation of the Fifteenth Amendment," *New Era*, Apr. 7, 1870, and "Thrice Called, Thrice Chosen," *New National Era*, June 6, 1872.

ing the group to acquire a much larger financial base before embarking upon their venture.³⁰ However, by the time *New Era's* first issue appeared on January 13, 1870, he had consented to be a corresponding editor, with Martin as chief editor. The paper was attractive and of high quality; it had commentary on political, labor, and educational concerns, essays on many subjects, and correspondence that appealed to a national readership.

In its first months the paper chronicled the culmination of the thirty-year battle for equal rights — the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment. In particular, the *New Era* covered the work of a successor to the National Equal Rights League. This Washington-based National Executive Committee of the Colored Men of America, of which Vashon was a member, had been set up at the January 1869 National Convention of Colored Men to organize a grass-roots campaign urging approval of the amendment. The committee also monitored congressional proceedings, lobbied for black educational and political interests, and was instrumental in gaining legal recognition of blacks' political rights in the District of Columbia. On adoption of the Fifteenth Amendment on March 30, 1870, the national organization and its executive committee arranged numerous grand celebrations throughout the country,³¹ after which both seem to have disbanded.

For Vashon the *New Era* supplied the medium for a grand display of his literary talent. In issues between January 27 and April 28, 1870, nine essays, poems, and translations appeared under his name. Under the pseudonym "E.R.N." (the last letters of his names) were two further essays.³² He seems to have contributed even more than that; further research may reveal that he had a major role in editorial production of the paper during its first four months. That summer, Douglass's prediction came true: the *New Era's* finances failed. Martin resigned his editorship and left Washington for Louisiana. Douglass bought the paper and kept it going into 1873, when he turned it over to his sons and Richard T. Greener.³³ Vashon's connection, whatever it was, did not continue after April 1870.

In contrast, his contributions to education in the national capital

30 Foner, *Douglass*, 4: 54-57, 213-15, 220-26.

31 *Proceedings of the National Convention of the Colored Men, Washington, D.C., 1869*, xii; *New Era*, Jan. 27, Feb. 10, 17, Mar. 17, 24, Apr. 7, 1870; Dyson, *Howard University*, 351.

32 Two poems by "Prof. Paul" were probably also by GV: *New Era*, Mar. 24, 31, 1870.

33 Foner, *Douglass*, 4: 58, 60-63, 89-90, 274-76; Green, *Secret City*, 104-13.

continued during his six years there. On the same day that he started work with the Freedmen's Bureau, October 27, 1867, he began teaching in an evening school under the aegis of Howard University's Normal Department; thereby he became the university's first black professor. The new institution had held its first classes in May in rented quarters; that fall construction was begun on the main building and several others. Vashon's class went into the next spring with as few as nine students; his pay consisted of their tuition fees. He asked the university's board of trustees to make up the difference to him between these fees and twenty-five dollars a month. The board could not see its way clear to grant his request, and the evening school was apparently discontinued. Vashon did more in behalf of the institution than he has formally been credited with, concluded a historian of Howard University, who quoted at length from a letter written in 1924 by Vashon's son. During 1867-1869, according to the son, the family lived in a renovated barracks on campus. Under the direction of General O. O. Howard, a founder of the university, Vashon in his free time was "a general handyman, without pay beyond expenses, in getting Howard firm on its wobbly legs." At this time "the school (after its first buildings fell down faster than they were erected) was more of a question mark than an institution." Vashon, the son went on, "devised the first chemical laboratory there and platted its first library"; through at least one winter, he also lectured to the law class.³⁴

During the years he lived in the nation's capital, Vashon served as an examiner of teachers' credentials for the Washington-Georgetown black public school system, and for several short periods was a member of its board of trustees.³⁵ The system's first elementary school had opened in 1864, with other schools gradually being taken over from

34 Rayford W. Logan, *Howard University, the First Hundred Years, 1867-1967* (New York, 1969), 54-55; GV's appointment ran from Oct. 8, 1867, to Sept. 21, 1868; Dyson, *Howard University*, 335-36, 350.

35 During 1868-1869 GV prepared tables and essays, including one on Avery College, for U.S., Office of Education, *Special Report of the Commissioner of Education on the Condition and Improvement of Public Schools in the District of Columbia* (Washington, D.C., 1871); reprinted as *History of Schools for the Colored Population* (New York, 1969). GV, Washington, D.C., to George Whipple, Feb. 26, 1869, American Missionary Association Archives, Dillard University, New Orleans, La. As trustee, GV was involved in a controversy over admission of the Rev. J. Sella Martin's daughter to a "white" school: see Lillian G. Dabney, *The History of Schools for Negroes in the District of Columbia, 1807-1947* (Washington, D.C., 1949), 118-20, n. 81; Green, *Secret City*, 101; *Evening Star*, Nov. 25-Dec. 3, 1869, Mar. 8, 1870.

the Freedmen's Bureau and benevolent groups that operated them during and after the Civil War. From 1867, the system had its own superintendent; the secretary of the interior, the district's "guardian," began appointing blacks to the three-member board of trustees. Over the next decade several major changes occurred in this administrative structure; nevertheless, successive boards worked closely with the superintendent, relatively quickly building up a system in which the community had great pride, even though there were places for only about half the school-age children. The superintendent and board adapted older premises to public educational needs, financed and erected new buildings, set standards for teachers and pupils, and waged continual war with local governmental organs to gain fair apportionment of education funds.³⁶

Vashon seems almost continually to have been an examiner of prospective teachers and administrator of twice-yearly written and oral examinations of pupils. On August 1, 1871, the board of trustees appointed to the superintendency George F. T. Cook, an Oberlin graduate and experienced Washington educator. Soon after, a formal board of examiners was established to which Vashon was named.³⁷ With the goal of raising instructional standards, Vashon and Cook usually conducted examinations together. *New National Era* and other Washington newspapers carried detailed reports on these sessions, the results of which, good and not so good, were an important community interest hotly discussed in public meetings.³⁸

From 1856 into 1860 Susan Paul Vashon had been an assistant teacher in the Pittsburgh black public schools. She returned to teaching on November 4, 1872, as the principal of Washington's S Street School. After the board of trustees closed that building, she became principal of Thaddeus Stevens School, serving from 1873 to about 1884, when she retired. She, too, had literary ability, to be seen in three of her letters on school matters that were printed in *New National Era*.³⁹

³⁶ Dabney, *History of Schools*, 115, 199, 203; Green, *Secret City*, 99.

³⁷ *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Colored Schools of Washington and Georgetown, 1871-'72* (Washington, D.C., 1873), 21, 29.

³⁸ *New National Era*, May 23, 1872; Dyson, *Howard University*, 351. Not all GV's reports on examinations were favorable; he gave "bad marks" when students in the Preparatory School (later Dunbar High School) showed little evidence of progress: *New National Era and Citizen*, June 19-July 24, 1873.

³⁹ *Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of Public Schools in and for the District of Columbia and Superintendent of Colored Schools of Washington and Georgetown, 1873-'74* (Washington, D.C., 1875), 48; at Stevens School Mrs. Vashon taught the highest grade and had charge of 11 teachers and 955

Records have been found of Vashon's applications for the post of United States minister at Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and of temporary civil service positions that he held. On his visit to Washington in October 1867, he made his first bid for the Haitian post. His application cited his educational and professional qualifications; he added that his two and a half years in Haiti had acquainted him with the history and resources of the country, and "with the genius and spirit of its laws and institutions."⁴⁰ He pointed to the suitability of a black diplomatic representative to this first black republic. But President Andrew Johnson named a white man to the office.

Vashon's second application in March 1869 for the Haitian ministry was no more successful. By now he had made "a special study of international law, as well as of the conduct of negotiations, and of the various matters pertaining to diplomacy."⁴¹ He had formidable black rivals: Frederick Douglass, George T. Downing, a wealthy Washington caterer, and Ebenezer D. Bassett, principal of the Institute for Colored Youth, Philadelphia, a distinguished educator and linguist. President Grant nominated Bassett; after some controversy the Senate on April 16 confirmed his appointment to the highest government office yet held by a black.⁴²

Vashon's civil service positions were varied. As we have seen, the first was with the Freedmen's Bureau from the fall of 1867 to early 1869. From August of that year to January 1870, he held a clerkship in the Bureau of Statistics of the Treasury Department.⁴³ After taking the required examination, he worked from mid-1870 as a clerk in the Census Office, Department of the Interior. At this stage in the development of the federal civil service, departments customarily hired only temporary personnel for their projects. Thus, Vashon's Census Office employment extended over the period during which 1870 returns underwent their various stages of tabulation. Employee records listed

enrolled pupils; *New National Era*, Feb. 22, Aug. 15, 1872; Jan. 20, 1873; she sometimes used the pen name "Cordelia": *New National Era and Citizen*, Aug. 28, 1873.

⁴⁰ GV, Washington, D.C., to Andrew Johnson, Oct. 7, 1867, Letters of Application and Recommendation During the Administrations of Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson, NARS, microfilm M-650, reel 5C.

⁴¹ Application of George B. Vashon, Mission-Hayti, Mar. 18, 1869, Records of the Dept. of State, Record Group 59, NARS, microfilm M-968, reel 63.

⁴² Foner, *Douglass*, 4: 36-38, 215-17; Nancy Gordon Heintz, "America's First Black Diplomat [E. D. Bassett]," *Foreign Service Journal* 50 (Aug. 1973): 20-22.

⁴³ Application of George B. Vashon, June 18, 1872, and accompanying documents, General Records of the Treasury Dept., Record Group 56, NARS.

his assignments under several supervisors to the end of 1871.⁴⁴ The last of his government posts was again in the Treasury Department. He passed the examination for a class-one clerkship in June 1872, but did not enter upon a position until almost a year later. Then, effective September 30, 1873, he resigned to assume a professorship of mathematics at Alcorn University in Mississippi.⁴⁵

Alcorn University

Mississippi returned to the Union under a constitution that promised to provide a public education system for all its citizens. The first governor elected there since the end of the Civil War, James Lusk Alcorn, felt he owed his office to black voters. He pledged to provide equal, though separate, educational facilities. Lukewarm to the idea of separate schools, legislators nevertheless followed through by planning for an outstanding institution for black higher education, to equal the University of Mississippi at Oxford. They authorized purchase of the defunct Oakland College in Claiborne County, near Rodney, a village on bluffs above the Mississippi River. Supported by a "guaranteed" annual state appropriation of \$50,000 and by interest from Morrill Act funds, Alcorn University was established by the legislature on May 13, 1871, for male students with no racial limitations. Governor Alcorn had already chosen its president, Senator Hiram Rhodes Revels (1822?-1901), the first black to serve in Congress. The school opened in February 1872. By March 1873 enrollment had increased to 140 and prosperity seemed at hand.⁴⁶

44 Personnel records and ledger, 1870 Census, vols. 33-36, General Records of the Census Office, Record Group 29, NARS.

45 Application of George B. Vashon, June 18, 1872, NARS; Sherman, *Invisible Poets*, 55, reported that according to Walter Washington, president, Alcorn A and M College, no record of GV's affiliation exists in either the college records or the State Department of Archives.

46 Vernon Lane Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi, 1865-1890* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1947; reprint ed., New York, 1965), 175, 253-54; James Wilford Garner, *Reconstruction in Mississippi* (reprint ed., Gloucester, Mass., 1964), 279; William C. Harris, *The Day of the Carpetbagger: Republican Reconstruction in Mississippi* (Baton Rouge, La., 1979), 348; George A. Sewell, "Hiram Rhodes Revels: Another Evaluation," *Negro History Bulletin* 38 (Dec. 1974): 336-39; *New National Era*, Mar. 20, 1873; Melerson Guy Dunham, *The Centennial History of Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College* (Hattiesburg, Miss., 1971), 5, 7, 14-23, noted that Alcorn offered "academic," "college preparatory," and "classical" courses; in 1878 agricultural courses were added; it became the leading trainer of black teachers in the state.

Vashon received his call to a professorship because at least two faculty members resigned in mid-1873 after a dispute with the school's business manager. In the gubernatorial electoral campaign that fall, Revels supported his patron Alcorn against Adelbert Ames. The latter won, taking office in January 1874. Continuing disputes with the business manager and the board of trustees made it impossible for Revels to function effectively; his resignation of July 1 was accepted by the governor, who in any case wanted to install his own appointees in state offices. When the new term began in October, the students, incensed at Revels's dismissal, refused to attend classes for two weeks — a gentlemanly walkout, for the only untoward incident was the cutting off of the tail of a trustee's horse! After a legislative committee investigated charges of mismanagement, the governor named a new board and business manager.⁴⁷

Perhaps because of the disorder and changes, Vashon seems to have considered returning to the law. He applied for and won admission to the Mississippi bar in the spring of 1875, passing the examination with "complimentary recommendations."⁴⁸ Whether he practiced in that state is not known. During the election campaign that fall Democrats vowed to gain certain state offices by any means. A report identified Vashon as "of Alcorn University" when he spoke at a Republican rally that proceeded peaceably even though disrupted by a band of armed Democrat horsemen.⁴⁹

After Governor Ames resigned in early 1876 under threat of impeachment, his successor reappointed Revels to the presidency of Alcorn University. The now-Democratic legislature reduced the

⁴⁷ GV was personally acquainted with Revels and Ames; both had endorsed GV's Apr. 28, 1870, application for a Treasury Department clerkship: General Records of the Treasury Dept., Record Group 56, NARS; "Alcorn University, Letter No. 1, June 18, 1875," *Daily Herald* (Jackson, Miss.?), n.d., and Report of Legislative Committee, *Mississippi Daily Pilot* (Jackson, Miss.), Feb. 26, 1875, clippings in family scrapbook of Hiram Rhodes Revels, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, N.Y.; Harris, *Carpet-bagger*, 350.

⁴⁸ GV, "who for two years has been Professor of Ancient and Modern Languages at Alcorn University, was yesterday admitted to the [bar of the] Supreme Court of Mississippi. He was examined by Col. Barksdale, Gen. Featherstone and Gen. Chalmers": *Daily Times* (Jackson, Miss.), quoted in *Oberlin Review* 2 (June 9, 1875): 95. At this time admission to the Mississippi bar was relatively easy; see Garner, *Reconstruction in Mississippi*, 303n., and Irvine C. Mollison, "Negro Lawyers in Mississippi," *Journal of Negro History* 15 (Jan. 1930): 43-44.

⁴⁹ U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Mississippi: Testimony as to Denial of Elective Franchise in Mississippi at the Elections of 1875 and 1876*, Misc. Doc. 45, 44th Cong., 2d sess., 1877, 830-31.

school's appropriation, so that its income totalled about \$11,000 a year. The university founded to stimulate black progress would be allowed to remain "quiet and almost unnoticed" through the rest of the century.⁵⁰

But that was not evident at the commencement of June 19, 1878. According to a newspaper report, the graduates "acquitted themselves with credit," demonstrating that the university was overcoming the "many disadvantages which have surrounded it since its organization." Vashon's eldest son John gave the valedictory, "No Excellence Without Great Labor." The newspaper account noted that Professor Vashon "will continue another session with President Revels."⁵¹

The next session had not yet started when the Deep South was overtaken by an epidemic of yellow fever. It has been said that Vashon died of that disease at Alcorn University on October 5, 1878. His unmarked grave is on its grounds.⁵²

Racial prejudice pervaded nineteenth-century American life. By denial of blacks' fundamental humanity and worth, racism imposed almost insurmountable barriers to black achievement. Vashon challenged prejudice by becoming a role model, known to contemporaries for his repeated demonstrations of worth and talent in literary, educational, and equal rights endeavors.

Ten of Vashon's poems and more than twenty essays have been located. He wrote in the style of his day, breaking no new ground. Nevertheless, nearly every piece contains passages of brilliance. The early long poem "Vincent Ogé," even with its faults, still deserves reading. Replete with classical allusion, the essays cover a wide variety

⁵⁰ Harris, *Carpetbagger*, 350; Wharton, *Negro in Mississippi*, 253-54.

⁵¹ Undated clipping, June 1878, Revels family scrapbook, Schomburg Center.

⁵² "Sketch of George B. Vashon," Daniel Murray Papers, stated that GV died of consumption, was buried in the university cemetery, and at the time of death was acting president of the university; Brawley, *Early Negro American Writers*, 261; Dyson, *Howard University*, 352; "History of Vashon High School, St. Louis, Mo.," in GV file, Onondaga Historical Association, Syracuse, N.Y.; *Oberlin Review* 6 (Nov. 20, 1878): 71; Sherman, *Invisible Poets*, 56, noted that the State of Mississippi has no record of GV's death; Albert A. Wright's Memorial of George B. Vashon read before the alumni June 1879 (GV file, Oberlin College Alumni Records Office) concluded: "Few particulars are known of his later years, but his best friends have feared that his convictions had been dulled by the use of the wine cup, and the indulgence of some similar appetites. We would fain forget his weaknesses, and dwell upon the many excellencies of character and attainment which he exhibited in all the walks of his life."

of subjects. Vashon strove, it seems, to fulfill Emerson's ideal of the American scholar, in possession of "a university of knowledge," using "heroic sentiments, noble biographies, melodious verse, and the conclusions of history" in order "to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them fact amid appearance."⁵³

The Southern proslavery statesman, John C. Calhoun, was reported to have said that, if he could find a black capable of parsing a Greek verb, he would then believe that the black was a human being and had a soul.⁵⁴ Many blacks took this sentiment seriously and undertook the learning of Greek and Latin. From such persons Vashon received instruction in these languages, then went on to master five or six others. For thirty years, sometimes in situations none too pleasant, he passed on his learning. In the classroom he tried to provide thorough training in languages and literature because he believed that only this discipline gave students "breadth of view . . . strength of character, and a comprehensive spirit."⁵⁵ He seems to have done everything in his power to foster high educational standards, most notably during his service as examiner in the District of Columbia public school system. But there were other, perhaps better, poets and teachers among nineteenth-century blacks.

Why was Vashon so greatly esteemed by contemporaries — and forgotten by later generations? While he won high respect for significant contributions to the struggle for equal rights, he was forgotten, in part, because the contributions were made almost anonymously. These were the memorials and addresses he prepared for the black conventions and the Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League. Separately issued or printed with minutes of the meetings, the memorials and addresses went forth in thousands of copies to legislators, editors, and opinion makers. Materials such as these were important tools used by the Radical Republicans to gain passage of the Civil Rights Amendments and the Civil Rights Act of 1866. Vashon was content to allow his writings to exert their influence without his name attached to them.

In several documents he stated his belief that the root of racial prejudice lay in the statutes upholding slavery and denying equality to free blacks. With overturn of these statutes, he insisted, blacks' condition would improve; they would find acceptance by their neighbors

⁵³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in D. J. Boorstin, ed., *An American Primer* (New York, 1968), 302-18.

⁵⁴ Bella Gross, "Freedom's Journal and the Rights of All," *Journal of Negro History* 17 (July 1932): 276, n. 109.

⁵⁵ W. W. Brown, *Black Man*, 224.

and take their rightful place in American life. Vashon gained his coveted citizenship when the Fourteenth Amendment was ratified. Just five years later, the Supreme Court's Slaughterhouse decisions eroded the amendment's guarantees; the nation's reluctance to honor them was made plain in the turmoil surrounding the 1875 and 1876 elections. Thereafter, to a great extent, blacks lost their political rights, and Vashon's learned eloquence and his forty years' work toward equality slipped into obscurity. ■

IN COMMEMORATION
GIFT
IN MEMORY OF
CHARLES MORSE STOTZ
FROM
Mr. and Mrs. Bertram Reilly
