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Daniel Alexander Payne Historical Marker

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Daniel Alexander Payne Historical Marker

Description

Racial oppression marked the nineteenth century in American history. People of color were seen as inferior and had a hard time bettering their lives through education or employment. However some men were able to rise above oppression. Daniel Alexander Payne was one such individual who was able to better his life. He served as a pioneer in the advancement of African Americans long before the NAACP or the Civil Rights Movement. Through his hard work and faith in God, he made inroads that would lead to equality for all people. Most people probably ignore or do not see Daniel Payne's marker, but those who do probably wonder who he is, not realizing the greatness he achieved in his lifetime. [*excerpt*]

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- Course Instructor: Dr. Michael J. Birkner '72

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Keywords

Gettysburg College, Civil Right Movement, NAACP, African American, Daniel Alexander Payne, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Samuel Simon Schmucker

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Hidden in Plain Sight:
Daniel Alexander Payne Historical Marker

History 300

Historical Methods

Dr. Michael Birkner

By

James Judge

Spring 2006

Racial oppression marked the nineteenth century in American history. People of color were seen as inferior and had a hard time bettering their lives through education or employment. However some men were able to rise above oppression. Daniel Alexander Payne was one such individual who was able to better his life. He served as a pioneer in the advancement of African Americans long before the NAACP or the Civil Rights Movement. Through his hard work and faith in God, he made inroads that would lead to equality for all people. Most people probably ignore or do not see Daniel Payne's marker, but those who do probably wonder who he is, not realizing the greatness he achieved in his lifetime.

Payne's earliest memories of childhood are of his father signing Christian hymns, and teaching him the alphabet.¹ Payne was orphaned at nine, when his mother died, five years after his father. Payne's aunt took responsibility of raising him, but received help from the Minor Society, which dedicated itself to housing and educating orphans. He became a carpenter until the age of fifteen.² At the age of eighteen, the young Daniel Payne attended a revival, held by the Methodist Episcopal Church. At this revival, he converted and "instantly felt that peace which passeth all understanding and that joy which is unspeakable and full of glory." Weeks later, while praying, he heard a voice from within say "I have set thee apart to educate thyself in order that thou mayest be an educator to thy people."³

After this experience, Payne set out to educate his fellow African Americans. Unfortunately, Payne had limited formal education up until this point. Undaunted, he

¹Daniel Alexander Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1968), 11-12.

²Geneva C. Turner, "For Whom is Your School Named?" *The Negro History Bulletin* 18 (March 1955): 141.

³Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, 17.

educated himself, and mastered course texts that he would use to teach. He set up a school in his hometown of Charleston, and began to teach slaves. Making three dollars a week, Payne probably would have starved to death fulfilling God's will, had it not been for a slave woman, who was able to steal him food. Unfortunately for Payne and his students, racial oppression forced the closure of his school in 1834, when the South Carolina legislator passed a law making it illegal to educate slaves.⁴ Distraught, bitter and angry with God, he began to doubt his faith, and if there was a just God, how could he let one race oppress and enslave another. However his attitude changed, and once again he had, what he believed as a spiritual experience. Sleeping one night, he had a dream where he was flying from the South to the North, wearing his robe that he wears when he is teaching. Before long, this dream became a reality.⁵

Traveling to New York after the closure of his school, he was interested in a theological education. While there, he met a student of the Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary, and learned of the Seminary's desire for educating African Americans. Upon learning about Dr. Samuel Schmucker and his views on slavery, Payne accepted a scholarship to the institution. So in 1835, Daniel Payne became a student at the Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary.⁶

While at the Lutheran Seminary, Payne made good use of his time studying German, Hebrew, Greek, ecclesiastical history, mental philosophy, archaeology and systematic theology. Payne worked hard, working from the early morning, to well past the last light of dusk. He became close with the head of the Seminary, Dr. Schmucker,

⁴Josephus R. Coan, "Daniel Payne: Christian Educator," *The Missionary Review of the World* 59 (June: 1936), 305.

⁵Charles Killian, "Wilberforce: Reality of Bishop Payne's Dream," *Negro History Bulletin* 34 (April 1971), 83.

⁶Douglas C. Stange, "A Note on Daniel A. Payne," *The Negro History Bulletin* (October 1964), 9.

who became a father figure to him. Payne also worked hard to educate the local community. While at Gettysburg, he was given permission to use one of the college's buildings for teaching members of the African American community from the town. Meeting on Sundays, Payne gave the youth of the community instruction on religion, but also had religious meetings and revivals. Payne approached all events with great enthusiasm, and when later reminiscing on one such event, he recalled, "At one of the religious meetings, and under the influence of more zeal than knowledge, I injured myself speaking three hours before I stopped. For more than three week after I could not speak above a whisper."⁷

Unfortunately, Payne would not graduate from the Seminary. After two years he was forced to leave because of health issues with his eyes. Payne was reading while lying down. The work he was reading was "The Use of the Eyes," and the author tells of the health issues that can be caused by reading while lying down. As he read this section, he began to feel a sharp pain in his eye that would last for a year. He was given glasses, and before leaving he looked for guidance from Dr. Schmucker. Uncertain if he should work with the Lutheran or the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E), Dr. Schmucker advised him to join the A.M.E. Church because he could be of greater significance to that congregation over the Lutheran Church. Around this time, as Payne was reflecting on the condition of his eye, he made the firm commitment to devote his life to the teaching of the Gospel. His time in Gettysburg came to a close, but the education he received while in Gettysburg allowed him to achieve greatness elsewhere.⁸

⁷Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, 59.

⁸Ibid., 60-62.

At the persistence of Dr. Schmucker, Payne joined the A.M.E. Church. However, he soon learned that most preachers were not educated, and looked down upon education. According to Stange, “it was a common thing to have their preachers introduce their sermons by declaring that they had not rubbed heads against college walls. They would profoundly preach that they had not studied Greek and Hebrew and their congregations would respond: “Amen!” and “Glory be to God”⁹ As a result, Payne looked elsewhere to preach. He went to Rensselaer Country in New York, looking to become a pastor. During the trip, Payne took a steamboat up the Hudson River towards Albany. While on the boat, Payne fell victim of racial discrimination. He was forced to sleep outside on the deck, and was not allowed to receive food or use any other luxury inside the ship. This experience taught Payne that racism was not a problem unique to South, but rather existed throughout the country. Despite this unfortunate incident, Payne reached his destination, and became only the second African American to be ordained a minister in the Lutheran Church in the United States. Payne served in Troy, but was never assigned a parish because there were no black congregations. After two years were lost, Payne headed south to Philadelphia where he would once again unite with the A.M.E. Church.¹⁰

Payne found his enthusiasm for the A.M.E. Church growing as he became more and more involved in the Church. Trying to combat the lack and almost disdain for education in the Church, he opened a school in Philadelphia, during the winter season of 1839-1840, and became a preacher for the A.M.E. However, he was forced to give up his post, and transfer to Washington, D.C., much against his will.¹¹

⁹Douglas C. Stange, “ Note on Daniel Payne,” 10.

¹⁰Stange, “Note on Daniel Payne,” 10.

¹¹Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, 72-74.

Payne's pleas for better education among preachers did not fall on deaf ears. In 1856 the Methodist Episcopal Church opened Wilberforce University, named after the English abolitionist William Wilberforce. Working closely with the A.M.E, the Methodist Episcopal Church admitted two hundred and seven African Americans. Many of those brought in to study at the newly found college were slaves who had no prior education, but left having studied classics, mathematics, French and theology. However the school suffered with hard economic times at the outbreak of the Civil War. Many of those who had supported the college with economic funding were Southern slave owners, and as a result of war, the college lost this source of revenue and was forced to close in 1862.¹²

African Americans had a hard time being accepted into universities throughout the United States in the mid nineteenth century. When Wilberforce University accepted over two hundred African Americans, an opportunity was provided that would have not been available to many of them. Knowing this, The Methodist Episcopal Church pressured the A.M.E to buy the university. Payne, with no money to his name, bought the university for ten thousand dollars. Payne prayed that the Conferences would accept the purchase and support it financially. To Payne's delight, the A.M.E. supported his purchase of the university. Funds began to pour in and within a year seventy-five thousand dollars helped to pay the debt.¹³

The university opened in 1863, and its student body numbered in twelve students. Payne was made the president of the university, becoming the first African American to be president of a university in the United States. As president he enforced a strict moral

¹²Killian, "Wilberforce University," 84-85.

¹³Killian, "Wilberforce University," 85.

code. Students were expected to observe the Sabbath and maintain an active prayer life. Students were not allowed to drink alcohol, use tobacco, gamble, socialize during study hours, and each student needed a faculty member's permission to socialize with women. Under Payne the curriculum grew and so did the university's size, and when he retired in 1876, there were over one hundred and fifty students. The school started on shaky ground and in debt, but through Payne's hard work and dedication the university grew and still stands today, one hundred and thirty years since he left.¹⁴

In Douglas Stange's article "A Note on Daniel A. Payne," he says this about Payne's education at Gettysburg, "The action taken by the students at Gettysburg Seminary in June of 1835 to support the education of a young man of color was an important event for the American Christian Church. It provided for Payne both the training and an avenue by which he could exercise his talents for the furthering of the Church of Christ."¹⁵ As a man who had accomplished so much, and with his roots in the Gettysburg town and college, it is fitting to have his plaque on campus. Dean Harry Bradshaw Matthews, director of the Intercultural Resource Center at Gettysburg College in 1990, submitted the proposal for a historical marker celebrating Daniel Alexander Payne's life and achievement. The proposal asks, "What is the historical significance of the person, event, or site?" Dean Matthews responds to the question by stating how Payne was able to use one of Gettysburg College's buildings to teach African Americans from the town, and how Payne received an education from the college. Payne used his education to become a bishop in the A.M.E. Church, and eventually the first African American president of a university when he bought Wilberforce University. This plaque

¹⁴Ibid, 85-86.

¹⁵Stange, "Note on Daniel Payne," 10.

would also show the significance of Gettysburg College at being in the forefront of the education of African Americans, in a time when they were seen as inferior and enslaved by whites. The last fact that Dean Matthews points out is that in 1890 the periodical *Freeman* surveyed eight thousand readers, and they placed Payne in the top ten of most important African Americans who had ever lived.¹⁶

Upon submitting a request to the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, there are certain guidelines the request must go through in order to be approved by the Commission. The first guideline is that the person, place or event has to have some sort of meaningful significance to the state or the country. Other guidelines include that the event must be history, not current events, the person who the plaque would recognize must be dead, and the person or event has to have received minimal attention from the program in the past. Other guidelines deal with the jurisdiction that other organizations may have, for instance a military graveyard would go to the Director of Military Affairs. When a suggested plaque meets these requirements and passes the review of the commission board, the marker is approved; plans are made to erect the marker.¹⁷

On March 1, 1991, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission released a press statement informing the public of the dedication of the historical marker for Daniel Alexander Payne. A general invitation was given out to all who desired to attend the dedication mass held at Gettysburg College's Christ Chapel, scheduled for March 10. Payne's marker became the thirty-seventh in Adams County, and one of over

¹⁶Harry Bradshaw Matthews, "Historical Marker Suggestion Form: Daniel Alexander Payne," (Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission Archives, 1990).

¹⁷Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, "Guidelines for Approval of Historical Markers," <http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/DOH/guidelines.asp?secid=31>.

fifteen hundred in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The press release continues by briefly describing Payne's accomplishments, from attending the Lutheran Seminary and teaching African Americans at the college, to his appointment to the position of bishop in the A.M.E. Church, to the purchasing of Wilberforce University. The press release shows what the marker reads, and it goes as follows:

DANIEL ALEXANDER PAYNE

Born a Free African American. He taught the colored people at this college, 1837, while a student at the Lutheran Seminary. A historian, he was elected bishop of the A.M.E. Church, 1852, and was president of Wilberforce University, 1863-76.¹⁸

The Daniel Payne marker that stands outside the Intercultural Resource Center (IRC) as a testament to the accomplishments he made throughout his life. Having had a chance to talk to Sylvia Asante, the Assistant Director of (IRC), I was able to get some insight as to the continual role the marker plays for Gettysburg College and the community as a whole. She felt it was important to know the legacy of Gettysburg's leadership in diversity. At a time when African Americans were enslaved, and certain parts of the country it was illegal for them to be educated, Gettysburg Seminary allowed Payne to get an education, and the college allowed him to teach Sunday school to African American children from the town. The marker also shows the capabilities of Payne. Few alumni accomplish as great of a feat as establishing a college. When one takes in account the racial prejudices of the time the full magnitude of Payne's achievements can be appreciated. The marker serves the public because it lets people know who Payne was. Ms. Asante believes that the marker serves as a catalyst of interest, because she has seen many people, Gettysburg residents and tourist, come into the IRC office to enquire about

¹⁸Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, "State Historical Marker to Honor Daniel Alexander Payne in Adam County," *Newsletter* (March 1, 1991).

who Payne. Ms. Asante believes that Payne compares to the twentieth century civil rights activists, such as Dr. Martin Luther King, because he was a “visionary” and a testament to his vision and hard work is the A.M.E. Church in Gettysburg and Wilberforce University still exist to this day. At the end of the interview, Ms. Asante expressed her desire to see the Intercultural Resource Center to be named after Daniel Payne.¹⁹ After reflecting on her wish, one can see how well it would fit to name a building after Payne, which would be across the street from the building named after his mentor and close friend while at Gettysburg, Schmucker Hall.

Daniel Alexander Payne was able to overcome racial oppression in order to spread God’s word and advance the African race in America. Like “the voice of one crying in the wilderness,”²⁰ Payne was able to prepare the way for those African Americans who were to follow by setting up schools indifferent cities throughout the country to give them a chance of education. That is why we celebrate this man and we do it here because all of this would not have been possible had he not been educated at Gettysburg.

¹⁹Sylvia Asante, interviewed by author, transcribed, Gettysburg, PA., 27 February 2006.

²⁰Is. 40:3