



Armour Mission and Main Building, Armour Institute of Technology, Chicago, Illinois, ca. 1900. Photographer unknown. Source: C.V. Smith photographs, Illinois Institute of Technology.

Project 1890

When we go to class in different buildings on campus every day, we don't always think about what buildings were originally there, despite decades of history sitting right under the buildings we occupy every day. At URJ-IIT, we feel that is our responsibility to recognize the history of the land that our University currently sits on. That is why we started Project 1890: a collection of writing, images, and stories about the history of IIT. IIT undoubtedly occupies a unique part of history on the South Side—the South Side is the oldest part of the city, and in 1889 the southernmost limit of the city was 39th street.

The land that became our campus was a backdrop to many historical events in the late 19th and 20th centuries. It is first important to recognize the events that led to a high African-American population on the south side. The Chicago economy had been relying on European immigrants as a source of labor, however, after 1914 young men were not allowed to leave their European home countries because of the war. African Americans then filled that labor need in Chicago, largely because of advertising in the Southern United States that led them to migrate to the North: this was the First Great Migration (1910-1930). The Second World War created a Second Great Migration (1940-1970) that more people are familiar with.

Many groups of people have come in and out of Chicago as “temporary” laborers. So when Black Americans did not return to the South after the First World War, many Whites in Chicago were displeased, and blamed economic downturn on Black Americans which triggered the 1919 Race Riots.

The Stroll and The Classic Era of Bronzeville

The Stroll was a jazz district right next to IIT that spanned from 31st to 35th street. Of particular note for IIT students is the Grand Theatre on 3110 South State Street. It opened in 1911 and became a home for Jazz and eventually motion pictures in the 1920s and 30s as those became more popular forms of entertainment. What is important for us now is that the Grand Theatre is on the exact spot where the Robert A. Pritzker Science Center is today. The Grand Theatre was bought by IIT and demolished to make room for the building.

During its peak, The Stroll was visited by several famous musicians including Jelly Roll Morton, Tony Jackson, Louis Armstrong, Joe “King” Oliver, Lillian Hardin, Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, and Duke Ellington. In 1962, Duke Ellington returned to Chicago to perform at IIT in Hermann Hall.

The Vendome, The Mecca Flats, and The Grand Theatre were all torn down to make space for IIT to expand.



The Vendome Theatre at 3145 South State Street. Left image date unknown, Right image circa 1948-9. Images: cinematreasures.org



The Grand Theatre at 3110 South State Street. Image credit goes to cinema treasures.org.



IIT Buildings and Grounds. Photographed by Mildred Mead in 1962. University of Chicago Photographic Archive, [apf2-10020], Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.



From 32nd and Wabash to Michigan Avenue, Illinois Institute of Technology dormitory. Photographed by Mildred Mead, 09/26/1951. University of Chicago Photographic Archive, [apf2-01576], Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

Influential Alumni

IIT is lucky enough to have so many influential alumni in the areas of science, technology, engineering, journalism, architecture, and even politics. However, we would like to highlight noteworthy African American alumni.

Gloria Ray Karlmark

Gloria Ray Karlmark received a Bachelor's degree in Chemistry and Mathematics from IIT in 1965. When she was 15 she was part of the "Little Rock 9", a group of students who were the first to integrate the all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1959. She proceeded to have a very successful career as a patent attorney for technology companies in Sweden and The Netherlands, while also being the founder and editor-in-chief of the journal *Computers in Industry*.



Image Credit: Zbigniew Bzdak/Chicago Tribune

Charles Warner Pierce

Born in 1876, Charles W. Pierce was the first African American to receive a degree in chemical engineering in the United States. He received his degree in 1901 and went on to teach at Tuskegee Normal College (Tuskegee University) and The State Agricultural and Mechanical College (North Carolina A&T State University), before returning to Chicago to teach physics at Wendell Phillips High School in 1921. In 1935 he moved to DuSable High School where he taught physics and science until he retired in 1941 before passing away in 1947.



Image credit: Illinois Institute of Technology

Otis Frank Boykin



Image Credit: Unknown

Otis F. Boykin was a native of Dallas, Texas where he was born in 1920. Boykin went on to attend Fisk University to earn his Bachelor's degree in 1941. He then took a job at Majestic Radio & TV in Chicago, only to leave that job in 1944 to become a researcher engineer at PJ Nilsen Research Labs. He attended IIT from 1946-7 while working for Nilsen, but did not receive a formal degree here. Boykin had over 20 patents including electronic control devices that were used for the first pacemakers, guided missiles, as well as small component thick film resistors that were used for IBM computers. Boykin had offices for his own independent research company in the US and France, and worked there until his death in 1982.

Neal Ferdinand Simeon

Born in Chicago on May 30, 1916, Neal F. Simeon was a prolific educator, athlete, and Navy veteran. He attended IIT where he competed in track and boxing, and graduated with his Bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering in 1938. He briefly worked in aviation and taught aviation mechanics at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. He joined the Navy in 1945 and was a seaman for two years, while also being a Golden Gloves boxer. In 1950, he received a Masters in Education from Northwestern University. He began teaching at Wendell Phillips Evening High School, and later became the Director of Vocational Education at Dunbar Vocational High School. He was asked by President John F. Kennedy in 1962 to represent the United States at the International Trade Fair in Lagos Nigeria. Simeon was dedicated to vocational training for young people in Chicago, and The Simeon Career Academy now bears his name. Unfortunately Mr. Simeon passed away at the age of 46 in 1963.



Image Credit: Simeon Career Academy

Ida Platt



Image Credit: Unknown

Ida Platt, born in 1863, was the first African American woman to be licensed to practice law in Illinois, and only the third in the entire country. She graduated from the Chicago-Kent College of Law in 1894, where she was the first African American woman to graduate. She started her career working for Joseph Washington Errant, where she focused on probate and real estate law, where she was popular with foreign clients because she was fluent in English, German, and French. She eventually opened her own law office on Van Buren Street, and continued to practice law until marrying and moving to England in 1928. She passed away in 1939 at the age of 76.

Robert Sengstacke Abbott

Robert S. Abbott was born on December 24, 1868 on St. Simons island in Georgia. The child of freed slaves, Abbott went on to study printmaking at the Hampton Institute (now Hampton University) in Virginia, and received a law degree from the Kent College of Law in 1898. Due to prejudice and harassment, he was unable to set up a law office, despite trying in Gary, Indiana, Topeka, Kansas, and Chicago. He then moved into the newspaper business and founded *The Chicago Defender* in 1905. It became the most widely circulated Black newspaper in the country and its popularity made Abbott one of the first African American self-made millionaires. Abbott also started the Bud Billiken Parade and Picnic in 1929 as a way to celebrate African-American life and culture. It is now one of the largest parades in the country and occurs annually on the second Saturday of August.



Image Credit: Unknown

The Black Student Movement in the United States

The following is an essay written by Alisha Khan regarding the Black Student movement in America, and how that movement manifested at IIT.

The Black student movement took place in America during the 1960s and early 1970s. I will begin by discussing the causes which were a catalyst for this movement. The article “Black Students and the ‘Impossible Revolution’” was written by Dr. Vincent Harding and was published by Ebony Magazine in August 1969. Dr. Harding goes into detail about the mindsets in society. Before increased demands from Black students and the sense of Blackness were very visible in society, White people expected Black people who had the opportunity for education to see education as an escape from Blackness. They thought that being accepted and molded into white society was “freedom”. “As northern schools... opened their doors to more than the traditional token numbers of Black students... They expected from Black students hymns of praise and songs of hosanna for the opportunity to enter the ‘mainstream’ of American society” . Instead, the unexpected happened: Black students did not fulfill the expectations for white people. They did not mold into white society. “They were wrong, very wrong-partly because they did not understand the significance of our newest urge toward Blackness” . This shows the effect of Blackness on the mindset of people. There was an increased sense of pride of being Black and I believe that this powered the activist movement of Black Students and in extension, Black nationalism.

In this next section, I will discuss the essence of this movement and how this movement was implemented by students. The article “Black Students and their Changing Perspective” was written by James Turner and was published in Ebony Magazine in August 1969. Turner writes about how the “political socialization of Black students is undergoing a dramatic transformation” 3 Black students are determined to change the system. They plan on focusing on issues “including questions of campus and social inequities, relevant education for service to the Black community, and university expansion which takes the adjacent land and homes of neighboring Black families. For example, the University of Chicago... and the Illinois Institute of Technology has similar expansion plans into the surrounding Black community on the South Side of Chicago⁴”.

The article “Black Students and the ‘Impossible Revolution’” written by Dr. Vincent Harding talks about the demands made by Black students. One of the demands was that “the years of wasted Black talent, be overcome with a speed and a disrespect for ‘traditional ⁵procedures’” . Another demand is for “a total

reassessment of the curriculum, especially those⁶ studies dealing with man and society and the nature of the culture” . The article then talks about the foundations of America, “The ‘Founding Fathers’ must then be viewed also as the masters of our Black forefathers; the Constitution must be understood as condoning our slavery when it was⁷ written” . The following section of the article named “The Black and Bright Star” discusses the sense of Blackness. An excerpt that I found very insightful and moving states, “Black students have learned that the eyes of Blackness are the eyes of the majority of the peoples of the earth. They are the eyes of the colonized, the eyes of the oppressed and the humiliated, the eyes of ⁸those who search for a new coming of their deepest powers” . In the following section of the article titled “Black, N****, or Almost White?” pointed out an interesting contradiction: Even in Black schools, there were demands for Black studies and more Black faculty. The reason why demands were being made even at Black schools is because “ the majority of Black schools had become frightening carbon copies of some of the worse curriculum practices of the ‘great⁹ universities’ of the North” . This shows that there is a problem in education that must be fixed, and Black students plan to solve this through their revolution. This article ends with a quite impelling statement: “Perhaps there are no dreams yet dreamed, no plans yet planned, no possibilities yet defined which will bring us through the racial hell created by white America and its forebears. So Black students on the campuses take the only realistic step: they demand the¹⁰ impossible” .

In September 1969, Part II of this article was released. It is titled “Black Students and the ‘Impossible Revolution’ Part II”. Dr. Harding states the main components of the movement by Black students, “That movement of Black students has been a series of calls, cries and demands and actions. The call has been for the right to organize unashamedly as Blacks; the demand has been for the transformation of normal admissions procedures to allow the ‘impossible’ numbers of Black young people to enter the campus...At its heart, the challenge of Black students on campus is a challenge not only to the educational structures, but to the core of American society”¹¹. To make these changes students believe that whites are unable to make these “after so many years of discriminatory decision-making concerning Blacks”¹² this implies that Black people should be involved in decision making so these demands are enacted. This is a big change in society, “For white America-and, sadly, for most Blacks-this is surely the impossible thought, to believe that radical, life-affirming change in America may have to follow Black leadership, Black directions”¹³. I interpret this as a satirical statement as it shows that the old structures of whites ruling everything will end. In the following section, the article discusses the dangers that arise as a result of this movement. One danger is the contradictory feelings Black people may have towards America. Another is viewing education as “the true

pathway to liberation, to assume that its institutions, if radically transformed, will bring justice”¹⁴. Dr. Harding then states that integration may be the most immediate danger, “They will come from America’s sudden love affair with ‘integration’—defined nowadays as anything which prevents the building of Black solidarity and a new Black sense of direction”¹⁵. The article with a motivational statement supporting the movement by Black students “The only time we have is now. So now we must demand the impossible....Only then will our children-and our fathers-be free. Right on brothers. Right on”¹⁶. These sources from the Ebony magazine give a clear insight into what the Black student movement consists of. In the next section, I will discuss this movement concerning the Illinois Institute of Technology with sources from Tech News.

The earliest articles I found about the Black student association at Illinois Tech were published on May 10, 1968. One of them is titled “Black Student Group Expresses Grievances to IIT Administration”. This article states that the list of grievances must be satisfied if “this university is not only to become a genuinely free intellectual community, but also to survive”¹⁷. The article goes on to talk about how “IIT cannot exist indefinitely as a white island surrounded by a hostile Black sea”¹⁸. Following this, there is a list of grievances made. I will put them in brief terms: Police harassment must end. There should be strict rules governing IIT police action and where the police can act. The disciplinary board meetings must be open hearings and transcripts should be available to the parties involved. Students have to be included on this board. All barricades and fences must be removed between IIT and the surrounding community. Distinctions regarding the use of campus facilities that are open to non-IIT students must end.

There should be a first come first serve basis of the facilities regardless of the socio-economic origins of the individuals and groups.

Rooms must be opened every day to cultural and civic groups in the surrounding neighborhood. There should be an accelerated recruitment program for high schools located in the neighborhood. This must begin immediately.

25% Black students.

In September 1968, a Black Studies Department will be established.

There will be a policy to recruit Black faculty members throughout the institution.

There will be a jazz concert on campus and it will be open to all students, faculty, and the surrounding neighborhood. It will also be free¹⁹.

In the next column of the same issue of Tech News, the administration reaction is provided. It states that Dr. Rettaliata, the president of IIT, appointed a

community from the IIT administration to meet with the students that presented this petition. There is also a statement from Dr. Rettaliata: "IIT has never practiced racism and allows no racial restrictions in its employment, admissions, or housing policies...The university is willing to engage in constructive discussions but will not be responsive to ultimatums, threats, or intimidations"²⁰.

On the next page of the same issue, there is an article called "What Goal Does Black Student Action Seek". It says that in the last few days, the student body has seen many efforts by Black students to improve their situation on campuses and in communities. These actions have been taking place all around the US as well as IIT. These efforts have shown. Non-Black students have participated in these events as well. The article then goes on to ask specific questions such as the following: "What will be the effect that some of these demands... have upon integration?"²¹ "Will not some of these points and proposals produce a more segregated society? Or will they, in attempting to promote a segregated situation, really show the failing of such a social system and in turn produce a society which feels individually compelled to living interracially related lives"²², "Specifically, will the demand for separate, all-Black housing actually help foster integration? Or will it propagate the already hates 'equal but separate' approach to equality?"²³, will the desire to teach Black culture as opposed to Black history, life, socio-economic situation promote understanding between the races or will it serve to build pride and will this pride separate the races? "If these actions turn to separating the races, will this separation solve the social problems that are challenging us today?"²⁴. The author answers the last question by stating they disagree and believe that "it might guide all Americans into the path that has faced other racially-oriented societies, that is, the path of decline"²⁵. The article is concluded by stating that the ideas the author has listed benefits all and does not serve to harm others. These ideas should be important to someone who wants to "better the lives of all persons who have suffered, in the pasts and present, under prejudice"²⁶.

Right below the previous article, there is another article titled, "ITSA President Comments on Black Student Petition". It is stated in the article that there are serious questions concerning the University's responsibility to the surrounding community"²⁷ and that the answers need to be found in discussions with all parties involved. These discussions haven't taken place yet but it is hoped that they will soon. The article goes on to say that "any attempt to interfere with the operations of the university, therefore, cannot be tolerated"²⁸. The article concludes by saying that everyone should work together to solve mutual problems and "not respond to divisive forces, whatever their source"²⁹.

On May 17, 1968, an article titled “Black Students, Concerned Whites, and Administrative Committee Begin Discussions of List of Grievances” was published. The IIT administration replies to the demands in the hope to start a discussion. Dr. Brophy states that “IIT is not a racist institution”³⁰. This is about possible accusations regarding discrimination in “admissions, housing, or employment”³¹. However, members of the alliance countered by citing numerous instances of racist practices which have gone unnoticed and unpunished. Included were instances such as police bullying, asking Black students for identification, and not white students, promoting a white employee rather than a Black employee who deserved the promotion due to qualifications. In response to this, the administration said that such practices are “absolutely contrary”³² to IIT administrative policy. Dean Barnett promised the alliance that a statement regarding such practices being not allowed will be issued. He also asked that all racist activities be reported to him. Regarding the removal of physical barriers between IIT and the surrounding community, “administration officials refuse to ‘take the risk’ of removing the fences”³³. The alliance replied to this by saying that “the fences is a powerful symbol indicating to community residents that they are not wanted at IIT”³⁴. There was no progressive discussion after this point. The groups met again that morning.

In the same issue of Tech News, the reaction of racist white students to the demands of Black students can be seen. This is in the Letters to the Editor-in-Chief section. A student named Andrew Gale wrote the following:

BLACK STUDIES DEPARTMENT			
Department	Language	Course Number	Course Title
		105	Growth Of Reefers In Black Society
		201	Impact Of Black Cowboy On The Birth-Control Program Of The American Indian
			Economics
		101	Cadillac Buying
		102	Avoidance Of Cadillac Repossession
			Looting Science
		101	Principles Of Rapid Sniper Fire
		102	Black Sniperism In A White Society
		201	Advanced Fifth Floor Sniping
		202-A	(Special) The Natural Look
		203	Basic Brick Throwing
		204	Store Entry
		301	Roach Breeding In Upper Class Ghettoes
		302	Depreciating A White Neighborhood
			Afro-Culture
		101	Basic Cannibalism
		103	Intermediate Cannibalism
		313	(Upon Request) Missionary Dissecting
		401	Elephant Ivory Stripping
			Afro-History
		101	The Modern Funky: As Performed In Ancient Watusi Culture
		102	Early Lip Plate Making
		103	Pre-Koogamoogah
		104-B	(Special Students Only!) Koogamoogah
		104-C	Return Of Koogamoogah

There has been nothing written on this topic for 6 months until October 25, 1968. An article called "List of Resolutions Presents Demands of Black Students". There was a second attempt of the Black Student Organization to submit a list of resolutions to IIT. It was submitted on October 14, 1968. The new list of resolutions was very similar to the list from May 1968. The article states that "Dr. James Brophy, academic vice president of IIT, to whom the list was presented, declined to comment on the matter until he could meet with the organization's co-presidents"³⁵. A meeting was held but "no significant agreement was reached between the two groups"³⁶. The organization leaders wanted to evaluate "IIT's past efforts to communicated with people of the Near South Side"³⁷. There has been an agreement to "allow the use of IT facilities for the educational program proposed by the Black students"³⁸. Later in the article, the Black student organization "accused IIT of trying to create its private white suburb within the middle of the urban Black community"³⁹. In the end, Brophy hoped to have more meetings with the organization. On the other hand, Thomas didn't see many of these meetings happening in the future.

The history of the Black student movement at the Illinois Institute of Technology shows the specific demands made and the responses to those demands. It can be seen that the responses were not satisfactory and very little change was made. The following section gives an international viewpoint on the movement and shows how the movement has spread internationally.

The article "Black Man in Search of Power"⁶ was published in the Times of London in March 1968. The article begins with a quote from "Racial Discrimination in England", "Coloured people will, themselves, increasingly come to accept the inferior role that is allotted to them in society, until the gap between Black and white, the disparity between national social equality and hard reality, becomes so great that the main outlet for the talents of able colored people is the leadership of revolt"⁴⁰. The author states that this is already happening in England. "Coloured people are becoming the new working class, but unlike the white poor of Disraeli's⁴¹ nineteenth century they are hindered by the colour of their skin and from scrambling from their position at the bottom of the pile. Not only do they find difficulty in obtaining housing and jobs, but the difficulties of communication and poor contact with white authority are turning them towards bitter introspection and throwing them upon their own resources"⁴². This is a mirror image of the beginning quote as the Black civilians in England are relying on themselves to create a revolution. The article then discusses the difference between the situation in Britain and the situation in America: British police are not armed; colored people in Britain make up 2% of the population compared to 11% in America. The author believes that "the danger is, however, that the pattern forming in America will, like so much else in the way of the fashion exported here,

encourage imitation”⁴³. The essay then talks about the movements which politically aware Black militants in Britain are part of. These movements involve student power with Black nationalism. “They are protesting against big, distant, centralized, anonymous authority, whether nationalized, private enterprise, trade union, Government, or educationak”⁴⁴. The next section is called “Parties split”⁴⁵. It states that American society has already been divided into Black and white, and Britain is in danger of doing the same. “The simple truth is that in Africa, America, and Britain, Black people are protesting against entrenched white privileges. Their voices are beginning to sound similar...The American Black Power creed is being exported to Britain”⁴⁶. This shows how the Black movement of America is starting in Britain as well. It shows the influence that big movements have even internationally.

In February 1969 an article title “What British Universities Can Learn From America” by Brian MacArthur was published. The article starts out by stating what student issues are going on in American universities. Student issues in the US are concentrated “in the demand for Black and Brown power on the campus”⁴⁷. The author suggests that the issues that are happening in the US will also occur in Britain. MacArthur then discusses that a serious problem in Britain “has been the lack of educated Blacks to offer not only university teaching but also leadership in the community”⁴⁸. The author hopes that “if and when a Black student union is set up in Britain, universities will not be disfigured by the violence that is now erupting on and outside American campuses”⁴⁹. The author then states certain acts of violence that have taken place at American universities: two students in Los Angeles were shot dead. A building was gutted in Berkeley. In San Francisco, students were striking and 500 got arrested. The author wishes that Britain learns from what is happening in America so that this violence does not repeat itself in Britain. The article goes on to discuss the educational differences in British and American universities such as food on campus, disciplinary practices, and how hard the work is (apparently in American universities students are worked harder). The author talked to Dr. Byron Atkinson, the Dean of Students at UCLA. Dr. Atkinson felt that a system of “rigidity and traditionalism...has now been replaced by an utter willingness to listen to students and to attempt to meet them half-way instead of head-on”⁵⁰. This change in the system can be seen by encouraging student evaluations of courses and the “validity of student complaints about undergraduate teaching”⁵¹. The article ends with a touching statement from a dean’s decalogue such as “a student is not dependent on me I am dependent on him...A student is not an interruption of my work he is the purpose of it...A student is the life blood of my campus”⁵². This article shows what issues are arising in American universities, the effect of the student movements, and how Britain should learn from what is happening in America at the time.

This history is important because it shows the impacts of systemic racism on the education of Black students. Black students rose up to fight against this and it became a national movement which even spread globally. This knowledge is useful because it shows the impact that students can have if they are organized and persistent.

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Conclusion and Acknowledgments

Our goal of creating Project 1890 is to help change the narrative of Black history and IIT. It is important to acknowledge a painful past in order to move forward, and we hope that others reading this will reflect on our University's role in the surrounding community.

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