



Nathan B. Young and the Struggle over Black Higher Education (MISSOURI BIOGRAPHY SERIES)

Antonio F. Holland

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At the turn of the twentieth century, African Americans eager to improve their lives through higher education were confronted with the divergent points of view of two great leaders: Booker T. Washington advocated vocational training, while W. E. B. Du Bois stressed the importance of the liberal arts. Into the fray stepped Nathan B. Young, who, as Antonio Holland now tells, left a lasting mark on that debate.

Born in slavery in Alabama, Young followed a love of learning to degrees from Talladega and Oberlin Colleges and a career in higher education. Employed by Booker T. Washington in 1892, he served at Tuskegee Institute until conflict with Washington's vocational orientation led him to move on. During a brief tenure at Georgia State Industrial College under Richard R. Wright, Sr., he became disillusioned by efforts of whites to limit black education to agriculture and the trades. Hired as president of Florida A&M in 1901, he fought for twenty years to balance agricultural/vocational education with the liberal arts, only to meet with opposition from state officials that led to his ouster.

This principled educator finally found his place as president of Lincoln University in Missouri in 1923. Here Young made a determined effort to establish the school as a standard institution of higher learning. Holland describes how he campaigned successfully to raise academic standards and gain accreditation for Lincoln's programs—successes made possible by the political and economic support of farsighted members of Missouri's black community.

Holland shows that the great debate over black higher education was carried on not only in the rhetoric of Washington and Du Bois but also on the campuses, as Young and others sought to prepare African American students to become thinkers and creators. In tracing Young's career, Holland presents a wealth of information on the nature of the education provided for former slaves and their descendents in four states—shedding new light on the educational environment at Oberlin and Tuskegee—and on the actions of racist white government officials to limit the curriculum of public education for blacks.

Although Young's efforts to improve the schools he served were often thwarted, Holland shows that he kept his vision alive in the black community. Holland's meticulous reconstruction of an eventful career provides an important look at the forces that shaped and confounded the development of black higher education during traumatic times.

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