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Hopkins History: In 1887, Kelly Miller, Son of a Slave, Became a JHU First

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A young man named Kelly Miller arrived at The Johns Hopkins University in 1887 to begin graduate studies in mathematics. Just 11 years after its founding, Hopkins had already acquired an excellent academic reputation, and Miller had been attracted to Hopkins by the eminent mathematician and faculty member Simon Newcomb. What made Kelly Miller noteworthy, then and now, is the fact that he was the first African-American student to enroll at Hopkins.



Mentored by mathematician Simon Newcomb, Kelly Miller did graduate work at Hopkins and then joined the faculty of Howard University.

Born in 1863 in South Carolina, Miller was one of 10 children; his father was a free man and his mother a slave. After the Civil War his family became tenant farmers in the South, and Miller received his early education from Northern teachers who had come south after the war. In later years, he referred to these teachers as "a band of heroes ... who sowed the seed of intelligence in the soil of ignorance." In 1878 Miller was admitted to the Fairfield Institute,

a secondary school founded by the Presbyterian Church, and two years later, with a train ticket and a scholarship provided by the New England Missionary Society, Miller arrived in Washington, D.C., to enroll at Howard University.

While a student at Howard, Miller obtained a part-time job with the government that provided an introduction to Simon Newcomb. Newcomb recognized the young man's ability and determination and recommended tutors to prepare Miller for advanced study. An African-American with a college degree did not have unlimited opportunities in the 1880s, and upon graduation in 1884, Miller worked at various jobs. He then became interested in Johns Hopkins and approached Newcomb, now a Hopkins faculty member, regarding admission. Newcomb agreed to broach the subject with President Daniel Coit Gilman, and, while there are no records to document the discussion, Gilman and the trustees apparently agreed that Miller represented an exceptional case. Miller later recalled learning that during the discussion one trustee had pointed to the founder's Quaker background and his stipulation that neither race nor color should bar anyone from admission to the hospital or the university.

In 1887, Miller enrolled at Hopkins as a graduate student. He later recalled being ushered into a meeting in the president's office, where Gilman reminded him that he was the first of his race to enroll at Hopkins and would therefore be subject to observation by the students, faculty and community. Gilman assured Miller that all facilities of the university were open to him and the outcome of his Hopkins experience remained in his hands. Miller later stated that his reception by the other students was one of "cool, calculated civility." While he met with no overt racism, neither was he welcomed into the camaraderie of his fellow students.

Miller remained at Hopkins for two years and left without earning a degree. The reason for his departure apparently had little to do with his acceptance in the community. Instead, it coincided with an economic crisis that forced Hopkins to raise tuition 25 percent (and embark on its first fund-raising campaign). Less than a year after his leaving Hopkins, Gilman and Newcomb recommended Miller for a faculty position at Howard. Miller returned to Howard and remained there for the rest of his career, as professor of mathematics and dean of arts and sciences. He became a tireless advocate of education for African-Americans, and he spent many

summers traveling the country urging young people to further their education. He wrote numerous books and articles, mostly on the black experience in America, including education, slavery, religion and vocation. He and his wife raised five children, all of whom went on to successful careers in various fields. Miller died in December 1939, at the age of 76.

For additional information on Kelly Miller, consult "Son of a Slave" in the June 1981 *Johns Hopkins Magazine*.

James Stimpert, of MSEL Special Collections, is Homewood archivist. This is part of an occasional series of historical pieces that will appear in the year leading up to the 125th anniversary of the founding of Johns Hopkins. Previous biographical sketches can be found at www.jhu.edu/125th/.
