

**“Frederick Scott:
Johns Hopkins University’s First Black Undergraduate”**

by

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completed as part of the
African-Americans at the Johns Hopkins University Project
14 May 2005

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(Special thanks to Tricia Quartey, Class of 2003, whose early work on this project helped inform this research)

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EARLY YEARS

Raised on Franklin Street, only a few miles away from the institution whose history he would change forever, Frederick Isadore Scott was born on October 27, 1927 in Baltimore, Maryland to Frederick I. Scott, Sr. and Rebecca E. Scott. Mr. Scott’s family was characteristic of other hardworking families in Baltimore. His mother was employed as a schoolteacher. His father worked as a postman, delivering mail for nearly 41 years. One of four children, Mr. Scott is the eldest child. His brother, David I. Scott, is two years younger, and his sisters, Rachel E. Scott and Patricia Waddy are six and nineteen years younger than Mr. Scott. Mr. Scott characterizes his early family life as supportive, but not extraordinarily close. “We all were there for each other, but we were independent too. We just did our own thing,” he recalled.

EARLY EDUCATION

This family environment encouraged Mr. Scott’s intellectual curiosity. In his youth, Mr. Scott describes himself as a rebel who was kicked out of kindergarten for disobeying his teacher. His challenges to authority and existing structures would continue into his time at Douglass High School, where he joined several political groups which dealt with interracial issues. He attended labor meetings and organized letter-writing campaigns to raise awareness and demand an end to segregation. In addition to his political work, Mr. Scott read voraciously. He recalls spending much of his time at the

Enoch Pratt Free Library, answering any and all questions he had about the world around him by reading others' perceptions of their own environments. Mr. Scott says he concentrated on reading books about the philosophical importance of power, peace, justice, and truth, and used those concepts to understand better his hometown, the city of Baltimore, as well as the importance of his political activities.

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY'S FIRST BLACK UNDERGRADUATE

Frederick Scott's presence at Johns Hopkins seemed to be an instance of chance. Dared to apply by his friends, Mr. Scott had already been accepted to Pennsylvania State University and had been looking forward to attending that institution rather than one down the street from his Franklin Street home. Though he had enlisted in the army in 1944 to attend the Armed Services Reserve Training Program, Mr. Scott was intrigued by a University that everyone thought would reject him on the basis of his race. Thus he applied to Johns Hopkins University on a whim in 1945. As Mr. Scott recalled, his friends dared him to apply "on a lark." "It was very lighthearted," he says. And Mr. Scott took them up on their challenge. Inquisitive by nature, he first approached administration at Hopkins by asking, in his characteristically forthcoming way, if they "accepted Negroes in here." Replying that they hadn't had any applications from Negroes, the Registrar sent him an application and told him to try his luck. After successfully completing the application process and scoring high on the entrance exam, Mr. Scott entered Johns Hopkins as an undergraduate freshman on February 1, 1945, the day after he graduated from Baltimore's Douglass High School.

Transitioning from an all-Black environment to an all-white one was particularly memorable for Mr. Scott, who called his first day at Johns Hopkins nothing less than an immediate “culture shock” in which there was a “complete change of atmosphere, relationships, and comfort level”. The shock never entirely disappeared. The weight of being the only African-American at the University and the pressure to succeed remained extraordinarily intimidating. As Mr. Scott put it, the realization that “ain’t nobody here but you” put an inordinate amount of pressure on him to succeed.

Mr. Scott says that growing up in Baltimore prepared him for the “baloney about equality,” and thus was not entirely unprepared for the difference in culture at his new institution: his expectations of the level of brotherhood and interaction with his peers was not unrealistic, as he puts it, and was actually preferable to what he puts as the current situation of “integration and this, that, and the other.” Compared to a high school in which he was immersed in an extraordinarily supportive environment, the atmosphere at Hopkins encouraged more self-sufficiency and provided little hand-holding, particularly to the young, trailblazing Mr. Scott. He maintains that the pressure, though at times daunting because there “wasn’t anybody you could talk to [about the experience],” was worth it for its lesson of learning to thrive on one’s own.

The Johns Hopkins University which Mr. Scott encountered in 1945 was vastly different than the contemporary campus: the all-male Hopkins in 1945 was intensely focused on the war effort, with 25% of Hopkins faculty kept busy with war-related government work and a multitude of research projects conducted on various scientific innovations necessary for the war. In short, the campus overwhelmingly had its efforts focused on the external war effort, with seemingly few resources left to attend to its

changing internal demographic. Issues of the *News-Letter* from the time period as well as the *Hullabaloo*, the school's yearbook, discussed the war and Hopkins' place in the war effort rather than mentioning any controversy regarding racial tensions in Baltimore city or surrounding the campus. Scott's enrollment, however, changed that static image of Johns Hopkins. As Dave Taliaferro, a chaplain at Levering once told him, "Hopkins has as much to gain from you as you do from them."

Though Mr. Scott refrains from describing his college life as "activist," his curiosity about his environment and its workings are not only characteristic of an activist but of an aspiring, young engineering professional as well. Active in the community during high school, Mr. Scott recounts tales of singing at union meetings and participating in interracial groups which allowed him insights into not only his community, but also into the interaction between Baltimore's white and black communities. This interaction "helped...when [he] was going to Hopkins in terms of understanding and recognizing the different ways." His thirst for knowledge was fueled by long hours at the Enoch Pratt library, where he pored over Bertrand Russell, Bertrand de Juvenale, and Nietzsche, was Mr. Scott's driving force and his inspiration. As Mr. Scott recalled, he wanted to figure out "Why is this going on, why is this world like it is, what do you do about it and how do you get involved?" To that end, Mr. Scott explored organizations at Hopkins to find his place in the university as well.

As one of the founding fathers of Beta Sigma Tau (BST), the first interracial fraternity and the first to forbid any form of hazing in Baltimore, Mr. Scott sought to incorporate members from Loyola College, Morgan State University, and Johns Hopkins in an organization that precluded race as a basis of collectivity and fraternity. Pledges

were required to perform research or community service acts in order to be admitted. And although Mr. Scott could not recall if any white men ever pledged the fraternity, it was by their choice, not because of any racially exclusionary policies.

Mr. Scott says the fraternity was just “something to occupy time,” and created it after hearing of the idea from a high school friend. But in fact this was much more. Although the idea of an interracial fraternity did not strike Mr. Scott as being terribly radical, as he had often attended integrated meetings and organizations as an activist in high school, the importance of a diverse fraternity on an otherwise homogenous campus was revolutionary for its time and made an impact on the extracurricular landscape of the University. Scott does note, however, that the idea was not universally popular on campus. There was difficulty in recruiting new brothers, and rush events at Hopkins were less than successful as there just “didn’t seem to be an interest in it.” A chapter still exists, as the only one in the country, though the national chapter merged with another all African-American group. Today, Mr. Scott remains active with fundraising and mentoring the chapter as he says that it was an instance of his “striving to make things different and better”. Aside from his involvement in BST, however, Mr. Scott states that his activism waned while at Hopkins.

BST was not the only extracurricular which occupied Mr. Scott’s time at Johns Hopkins. He participated in activities with the YMCA and the student chapter of the American Institute of Chemical Engineers. Mr. Scott also participated in the Honor Commission at Johns Hopkins, in which he adjudicated honor rule infractions of other students. The commission, established in 1947, responded to administration concerns that the honor system was not effectively being respected by students. Four men from student

council and four prominent men from the general student body were selected, including Mr. Scott. Being selected for the committee was a great honor, and Mr. Scott says the position was one of the most fascinating of his time at Hopkins. The only instance in which Scott recalls a sense of discrimination was when he tried out for the Barnstormers. The Barnstormers were the only theater group on campus, and as Mr. Scott had enjoyed acting in plays in high school, he thought to try theater in college. After attending a casting call, Mr. Scott was told that “[The Barnstormers] don’t have anything for you.” It was clear that his race was the primary issue, and they refused to accommodate a black actor in their plays. Beyond that, however, Scott says he “never had any complaints” of direct racial prejudice.

Mr. Scott’s friends who urged him to apply to the Johns Hopkins in the first place, were not a mainstay in his Hopkins life. Their respective college lives consumed them most of their time. And, as Mr. Scott recalled, his own interactions with others on campus were also severely limited outside of schoolwork because he was prevented from living on campus, as interracial dormitories were not yet permitted. As Mr. Scott put it, life was “rather strict...no fraternity parties or anything like that.” Instead, Mr. Scott formed his own fascinating social group, with whom Mr. Scott says he had his best experiences at Hopkins. In the group was a Chinese man, a Scotsman, another Chinese man from South Africa, a man from Detroit receiving his doctoral degree, and another engineer from Alabama. Over lengthy games of bridge in Levering Hall, the six would bond by discussing politics, friends, and other trappings of everyday life at Hopkins. Segregation prevented the inter-racial group from attending restaurants or movie theaters together, so playing bridge was their only recourse for integrated entertainment. Though Mr. Scott

said they discussed “nothing out of the ordinary,” it was these everyday conversations and friendship that provided him with the social life and support that he needed through his time at school. Their daily bridge games provided a refuge and enhanced the camaraderie between a group of “distant people,” none of whom fit with the longstanding demographic of Hopkins’ student body – which remained largely white, male and northeastern through the 1970s. Though Mr. Scott commuted from home, he does not note his parents as a source of particular support. Instead, he characterizes their approach as being more along the lines of “okay, there’s your next challenge, go do it” -- an attitude which characterized his own approach to the challenge of attending the University as the only African-American there at the time.

Mr. Scott also faced a series of other challenges. To help defray a small part of the cost of attending Hopkins, Mr. Scott earned a Maryland State scholarship. The scholarship provided a nominal sum for school supplies purchased at the campus bookstore, and the monies were made available via a card that was mailed to the student with the set amount marked on it. For many weeks after he entered Hopkins, Mr. Scott went to the bookstore to try to redeem the amount on the card only to be told that approval had not been received for it. Finally it did come through. But when it did, it was marked “Trustee Scholarship” not “State Scholarship” as he had originally expected. “I have no explanation except possibly this,” Mr. Scott recalls. “After the award of the scholarship, the state senator of the student must approve it. My mother and I visited with and were interviewed by our state senator. My speculation is that he never signed the scholarship papers and the university chose to record it as a trustee scholarship. Irene Davis was the registrar at the time. I never explored it at all and only told my mother

about it not long before she passed away.” Mr. Scott never did get an explanation for what happened with the scholarship. But he certainly was grateful when it came through.

Although Mr. Scott recalled little overt racial discrimination, his time at Hopkins was overwhelmingly characterized by an intense workload that prevented him from becoming more active on the extracurricular scene. Entering as a mechanical engineering major, Scott was fascinated by science as “the only discipline to come to power without the use of violence.” His philosophical approach to academics drew him close to his mentor and advisor Dr. Fowler in the Department of Engineering, who provided academic support to Scott as he made the transition from mechanical engineering to chemical engineering. Though Mr. Scott thoroughly enjoyed courses in liberal arts, he selected engineering as a major because he “figured the numbers [and] the hard facts engineers deal with would have less discrimination” in the field and be “easier to make a living”. Despite his concerns about racial discrimination, Mr. Scott recalls cordial relationships with most of his teachers, although little outright support given to him by anyone but his mentor, Mr. Fowler. Mr. Scott was enrolled in 35 credit hours per semester during his first spring semester, and then continued his studies through the summer and fall until he was called to active duty in the United States Army in February 1946 after just over a year in college.

RETURNING AFTER WORLD WAR II: GRADUATION, CAREER AND FAMILY

To go to war meant another opportunity for learning for the ever-curious Mr. Scott. He says the biggest lesson he learned from the military was that of discipline, a tool vital for success in the rigors of academic life. Returning in 1947 after a 15-month

hiatus, however, meant that Mr. Scott's friends and acquaintances had, for the most part, graduated and moved on, both on campus and those friends from the community with whom he had kept some contact. Mr. Scott said that he essentially had to "re-start college" after his return. His social network gone, Mr. Scott chose to immerse himself in his studies and in work, eventually getting too busy to even maintain ties to Beta Sigma Tau. Competition in the field of engineering was growing increasingly fierce, so Mr. Scott continued to concentrate on work and school instead of extracurricular activities. How Mr. Scott met his wife reaffirms the importance he places on the role of fate in shaping his life. Insisting that they "were ordained" to be together," Mr. Scott first met Ms. Viola Fowlkes on a chance encounter. While studying in a local pub, a friend of Mr. Scott's stopped by to say hello. Accompanying him was Viola, who was taking care of the friend's children because their mother had recently died. The meeting was clearly a success. Mr. Scott and Ms. Fowlkes hit it off and began dating. They were married in 1949.

After getting married, Mr. Scott spent his senior year of college in an apartment building with his wife, commuting to school and work. As graduation approached in 1950, the 23-year-old Mr. Scott began to prepare for finding a job among the nation's biggest graduating class of engineers. Even during graduation week brought its own adventures. During graduation week that year, the senior class celebrated with a weeklong series of events and outings. One of these included a trip to Carlins Park, an amusement park near Liberty Heights and Druid Park Drive in Baltimore, across from the campus of Baltimore City Community College. Mr. and Mrs. Scott went to join the festivities, accompanied by another African American couple they had invited. "When

we reached the gate, however, we were denied admission because of our race until someone went to the JHU committee who sent someone to the gate to authorize our admission,” Mr. Scott recalls.

As the Johns Hopkins University’s first African-American graduate, Mr. Scott was very introspective at the time. In his words, he was “unbelieving that it had happened after all of the challenges.” After graduation, Mr. Scott moved to New Jersey to work for RCA as an engineer for \$75 dollars a week, an improvement from the \$70 dollars a week he had been receiving while working as an engineer for Signal Depot Grinding. At RCA, Mr. Scott appeased his curiosity for how things function in an industrial setting, calling the job a “fantastic little university inside a vacuum tube.” In his view, learning “how to work [things] is what counts” in this world – a quote which underscores Mr. Scott’s phenomenal fascination with the functioning of everyday mechanisms. Working at RCA for eight years, Mr. Scott says the experience was one so important that “everybody ought to have” an experience like his, because of its applicability to so many other fields. Though appreciative of his RCA job, Mr. Scott wanted to return to an academic, cutting-edge investigation of the way things worked, and to that end transitioned into publishing and editing for scientific and trade journals. Mr. Scott spent the 1960s and 1970s working for several journals, including American Laboratory. American Laboratory was the first trade journal to deal with “instrumentation for instrumentation’s sake,” Manufacturers and inventors wrote often in the magazine, and as Mr. Scott was editing the journal, he had the opportunity to really pursue the intricacies of these mechanisms. Mr. Scott’s editing work eventually led him to health-specific processes and commentary. Though his interests have varied widely, the passion with which Mr. Scott approaches all of his

different projects remains a common thread. More recently, Mr. Scott has fascinated himself with the workings of the college admissions process, addressing his curiosity about engineering and instrumentation through reading rather than editing and writing.

Mr. Scott's impact on the Johns Hopkins community has not ceased in the years since his graduation. Mr. Scott remains involved with recruiting and alumni issues, encouraging those students who desire an academically rigorous challenge as well as an environment encouraging self-sufficiency to attend the Johns Hopkins University. Mr. Scott's influence has also made him a popular speaker to alumni and student groups. He even has an alumni group named in his honor the Frederick Scott Brigade. He was bestowed with this honor after lecturing an alumni group on the necessity of contributing constructively to racially tense environments, and the role of dedication, skill, debate and discussion in doing so. The group had been formed to address racial tension, and found difficulty in elucidating exactly how to proceed in addressing such a nebulous challenge. Mr. Scott's observing and philosophical manner influenced the group enough to change their name in his honor.

REFLECTION: FREDERICK SCOTT'S LASTING IMPACT ON THE HOPKINS COMMUNITY

Interviewing Frederick Scott was an exercise in philosophy, introspection, and analysis. Like a good engineer, Mr. Scott carefully assesses the causes and forces that shape everyday interactions. He looks to comprehend why and what makes things work in the manner that they do - be it technology, education systems, community interaction, or even interactions between people. At the time of Mr. Scott's entrance, Johns Hopkins University was not a particularly welcoming place. As a largely white institution, which

prided itself on tradition and focused almost exclusively on research, the faculty did not exude an atmosphere of assistance or hand-holding. Furthermore, the university was focused to a large extent on the war effort abroad, rather than more internal, introspective or community-based issues like segregation and integration. In short, the university was busy helping assert the United States' role in the world rather than addressing Johns Hopkins University's role in Baltimore.

The University's location within the city of Baltimore is particularly important to understanding Mr. Scott's accomplishments as an inquisitive, curious, philosophical activist. Mr. Scott describes Baltimore as a "strange city" -- one which, in his view, occupies itself more with complaining and inaction than with direct engagement with social and economic problems. Particularly in the area of race relations, the idea of taking charge and asserting oneself in not only one's own community but in the larger city community is dear to Mr. Scott's heart. Perhaps on some level, his decision to accept the dare to attend Johns Hopkins University was an act to assert himself and transcend traditional boundaries established between the polarized "Black" city and the "White" city. His statements about just "taking charge" because "[we] deserve something" underscore his belief that the city of Baltimore is divided along racial lines into an "us" versus "them" dichotomy. Given Mr. Scott's own formative experience being raised under segregation this is not surprising. But it does make Mr. Scott's successes all the more remarkable. In a city where he could not do something as routine as attend movies with his lighter-skinned peers, Mr. Scott was nonetheless allowed to sit in the same classrooms as they did, and excelled to a point where he was able to adjudicate their behavior on an honor commission. Mr. Scott's belief that "you had it, you just had to do

it” is also fascinating when one realizes the racial boundaries he had to transcend in order to attend and graduate from the University. Yet rather than painting himself as an activist, Mr. Scott sees his actions as the logical course of action. He simply did what he had to do in order to address the need for systemic change in the city. And this is this humility that makes him all the more heroic.

Though Mr. Scott refuses to call himself as an activist in college, Mr. Scott’s Beta Sigma Tau fraternity was a powerful and groundbreaking organization. By founding one of the first inter-racial organization not just on campus, but in the city, this forced Johns Hopkins to face not just the question of race, but also the idea of interracial coexistence represented by an interracial fraternity promoting friendship, cooperation, and most astonishingly, brotherhood between all races. For an interracial fraternity to exist on what was, just a few years before, a racially homogenous campus, shows just how big an impact Mr. Scott left on the university community. The fact that this organization thrived and remains, testifies to the longstanding impact of Mr. Scott’s pioneering efforts as well. Despite the challenges he faced, Mr. Scott continued to serve his domestically divided country World War Two, never questioning the idea that he was giving his life for a country which would not allow him to sit next to his classmates in a restaurant. Mr. Scott’s humility also downplays the revolutionary impact of his campus actions. As the first African-American undergraduate at Johns Hopkins, Mr. Scott attributes his success in all avenues of his life to fate, chance, and happenstance. His accomplishments, however, testify to the particular combination of curiosity and adaptability Mr. Scott embodies. His curiosity initially spurred him to take his friends up on their dare to apply to Johns Hopkins, and continued as he enrolled in his engineering classes and sought to

make a difference on campus through the institution of a diversity fraternity. Later in his life, it would be his curiosity which fascinated him at RCA. His adaptability allowed him to channel his passion for understanding into editing and publishing.

Interestingly, Scott notes few instances of discrimination at any point in his college or professional career. Even when he was placed in positions of power such as the Honor Commission or when he engaged in revolutionary acts like starting an interracial fraternity, Mr. Scott recalls no significant incidences of racism. It is undoubtedly his loquacious, philosophical, and engaging personality which allowed him to fend off instances of difficulty that could have or may have arisen as a result of a novel and unsettling situation for many fellow University students.

Though Johns Hopkins certainly benefited significantly from Mr. Scott's presence, he makes clear that he too has benefited from his time on campus. The emphasis Johns Hopkins places on self-sufficiency coupled with the isolating experience of being the only African-American at University, taught him to rely on his own skills to succeed throughout his later pursuits. In essence, the University became a place where his curiosity and adaptability were enhanced by a sense of self-sufficiency and need for hard work, creating a particular combination of traits which allowed him to effectively succeed throughout the rest of his career. His lasting efforts continue to inspire and effect change even after his graduation through the ongoing events of the eponymous Frederick Scott Brigade. Just as the University left a lasting impression on him, Frederick Scott changed the Johns Hopkins University forever and we today enjoy the benefits of his pioneering actions.

