

ABSTRACT

HISTORY

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George Alexander Towns: A Profile of His Atlanta University Experience, 1885-1929.

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Thesis Dated: December 1975

In his experience at Atlanta University, George Alexander Towns was present for much of the earlier history of the institution and continued as an active participant into the later period. This thesis will explore his part in this history and indicate the manner in which he assisted in the development of the University.

His experience will be explored from its start when he became a student at Atlanta University and its continuation after he had become a teacher at the institution. His extra-curricular activities in athletics, student affairs, school publications, and fund raising will be discussed as a part of this experience, as well as his private life. An assessment of Towns' contributions to the University will conclude this thesis.

The primary sources for this profile were the collection of Towns' personal papers available at the Trevor Arnett Library of Atlanta University and the University publications

made during his time there: The Bulletin of Atlanta University, the student newspaper, The Scroll, and the alumni newsletter, the Crimson and Gray. Many secondary works dealing with the University and with areas in which Towns was interested were also consulted.

GEORGE ALEXANDER TOWNS: A PROFILE OF HIS
ATLANTA UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE,
1885-1929

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

BY

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DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

ATLANTA GEORGIA

DECEMBER 1975

R-1 P-99

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

After the Civil War, the city of Atlanta was a smoking ruin, due to the decision of Sherman to teach the Confederates the true cost of war. The returning population of the city began to rebuild from these ashes, and by 1870 the city had grown to twice its prewar population. All of her citizens looked forward to continued growth.¹

Among those citizens were teachers who had come from the North to educate the newly freed Black population. One of these teachers was Edmund Asa Ware, a Yale graduate of 1863, who had been sent by the American Missionary Association (AMA), a primarily Congregational religious group that had long been working with the "Negro problem," and had now turned to education to help solve that problem. Soon after his work began, Ware decided that the Black population of the South needed not only basic education, but also educated black teachers. To provide these teachers, a training institution was needed. Through his efforts such an institution was incorporated on October 16, 1867 as "The Trustees of Atlanta University." These trustees immediately set about creating a school which opened on October 13, 1869, in a

¹Ivan Allen, Sr., Atlanta from the Ashes (Atlanta: Ruralist Press, 1929), pp. 7-9.

building called North Hall. By 1870, classes were in full operation at the University.²

Atlanta's growth continued after 1870 due primarily to the existence of a system of railroads that operated through the city. Through the efforts of Henry Grady, editor of the Atlanta Constitution, the South was moved to adopt industrialization in order to become as powerful as the rest of the country. The Cotton Exposition of 1881, which was held in Atlanta, marked the debut of this New South idea and of Atlanta as one of its centers.³

The development of the South aided the development of Atlanta. As a transportation center, it became the focus for many business activities, such as retail sales and light manufacturing. Because of this, the population of the city continued to increase as people came to work in the new businesses growing in the city. As the bankers of the North saw the growth of Atlanta, they encouraged more and more money to flow to further this growth. Because of this, by 1885, Atlanta was a busy, growing city ready to move into

²Clarence A. Bacote, The Story of Atlanta University: A Century of Service, 1865-1965 (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1969), pp. vii-viii, 5-8, 14-19; Copy of Charter of the Trustees of Atlanta University, George A. Towns Collection, A. U. Records. Trevor Arnett Library, Atlanta University.

³Franklin M. Garrett, Atlanta and Environs: A Chronicle of Its People and Events (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1954), I, 482-514.

the future with confidence.⁴

Atlanta University continued to grow also. Because of its location in Atlanta and because of the wide support that the AMA was able to gain for it, the University was able to grow in the face of opposition from the city. Northern philanthropists, seeing the success of the University, contributed money that helped maintain that success. During the presidency of E. A. Ware (1867-1885), the physical plant grew from the single North Hall, used as a women's dormitory, to include South Hall, a men's dormitory (1871), Stone Hall, a classroom building (1882), and Knowles Industrial Building for the mechanical arts (1884). It had courses on all levels from elementary school to college, and it provided agricultural and housekeeping work to allow the students to work for part of their tuition. By 1885, the University was a busy, growing institution ready to move forward.⁵

⁴Allen, Atlanta from the Ashes, pp. 14-21.

⁵Bacote, Story of Atlanta University, pp. 30-31, 33, 36; Allen, Atlanta from the Ashes, pp. 27-28; Catalogue of Atlanta University, 1900-01, pp. 22-24, hereinafter cited as Catalogue.

CHAPTER II

STUDENT LIFE

Most of the students at Atlanta University in its early days were almost totally untrained. While they definitely were intelligent, they had little experience in academic and social practices. The purpose of the University as envisioned by the founders was to provide these students with a type of education that would enable them to operate in society as confident, Christian people who could work their own way through life.¹

One of these was George Towns, born on March 5, 1870 in Albany, a small town in South Georgia. Towns' family claimed to be related to a Scottish-Irish family that had provided a governor of Georgia in 1847. His father had been sold from this family in the 1850's and had returned to Albany after the Civil War. He had come to Atlanta University after the death of his parents full of concern for his future.² Upon acquiring as much formal training as he could in Albany, Towns came to Atlanta in

¹Copy of Charter of the Trustees of Atlanta University.

²George Towns, reproduction of handwritten note, Towns Collection, MSS 6, Box 1, Biographical "Letters in Memory of Mrs. Lucy Case," Bulletin of Atlanta University, January 1915, p. 21, hereinafter cited as BAU.

1885 where he enrolled in Atlanta University. After having taken the entrance examinations, he was placed in the highest primary grade.³

As would be expected, his first concern was with scholarship. Atlanta University had a Grammar school program that was based on the assumption that many students would end their formal education at this level. It not only offered reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also geography, history, very basic science, music, and hygiene. This program of study took eight years to complete. Following the custom of some English schools, the Grammar grades at the University were numbered in reverse order. The eighth year class, into which Towns was admitted, was called First Grade.⁴ In this program, the students studied reading, composition, United States history, as well as a short course on temperance, and, in addition, all students, college, high school, and grammar, had weekly Bible study to further the Christian education felt necessary for true success in life.⁵

Every year during Commencement season, there were public oral examinations of the students. In 1886, the

³Catalogue, 1885-86, p. 14.

⁴Ibid., pp. 21-22.

⁵Ibid.

Grammar School examinations were given on June 7, 8, and 9. Towns in his last year as a Grammar School student, participated and apparently did well for he was promoted to the High School.⁶

At this time, the High School curriculum was definitely divided into two separate courses of study: (1) the Normal Course which prepared its graduates for Grammar School teaching; and (2) the College Preparatory Course which prepared students for college. The University provided both courses in its High School.⁷

Towns entered this division--the Junior Normal and Preparatory Class--in 1886 at the age of sixteen. In many ways, his studies, with the exception of two, were a continuation of the Grammar School course: composition, geography, reading, music, and grammar continued on an advanced level. The two new courses included Latin and wood-working.⁸

Between the Civil War and World War I, a great debate was being held about the proper nature of education: whether its focus should be classical or vocational. It is not necessary to have a long discussion of the various forms

⁶Ibid., p. 24; 1886-87, p. 13.

⁷Ibid., 1886-87, p. 12.

⁸Ibid., p. 21. The Normal and Preparatory Courses were graded: Junior, Middle, Senior. From 1885 to 1887 the lowest (Junior) level of both courses were combined (Junior Normal and Preparatory).

of the debate here, but it is necessary to state the position of the opposing sides. A classical education naturally included the classics, Greek and Latin, as well as algebra and other advanced mathematics, English literature, advanced science, history, philosophy and theology, and foreign languages. This course of study was to prepare students to be literate and gentlemanly. The point at issue was that many educators wanted to prepare students to earn a living. It was said that culture would not keep a person from starving. In some cases, those in favor of what was called the Mechanical Arts course wished to reduce the classical element to a minimum.⁹

Atlanta University compromised between classical and Mechanical Arts education. All male students were required to take 6½ hours a week of mechanical work in addition to regular course work. The Mechanical Arts course took three years and covered carpentry and basic blacksmithing. In addition, the opportunity was offered for students with the ability, and desire, to be trained in a mechanical trade.¹⁰ To this point the education offered at the University was co-educational. Instead of taking the mechanical course,

⁹August Meier, Negro Thought in America 1880-1915 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), pp. 85-98.

¹⁰Catalogue, 1886-87, pp. 22-23.

women students took sewing, homemaking, and cooking courses.¹¹

After finishing the Junior Course, Towns left Atlanta University; he is not listed in any class in the 1887-88 catalogue. His absence is unexplained, but a guess is possible. In many public statements, acting President Chase discussed the difficulty students had in raising money to pay for their education. He noted that many students had to drop out and work as teachers in the rural public school systems to earn money to return after a year.¹² Towns was accredited to teach in some counties in Georgia and had taught in the summer before time. There is an extant contract that calls for Towns to teach in the period February to April, 1888.¹³ Towns probably left school to earn money for his education. Board and tuition would have totaled about \$80.00 for the year. Towns earned the rather unusual amount of \$241.66 2/13 for teaching one session.¹⁴ A teacher who could room with one of the parents near his school could easily plan on saving enough out of a year's

¹¹Ibid.

¹²BAU, March 1893, p. 4.

¹³Contract with Dougherty County School System, Towns Collection, MSS 6, Box 1, Folder "Professional Records."

¹⁴Ibid. For teaching the equivalent of 40 18/65 pupils at \$6.00 each.

salary to provide for more than a year's schooling.¹⁵

The school year 1888-89 saw Towns back at the University in the Middle Course of the College Preparatory Department.¹⁶ In this and the Senior courses, Towns received his basic training. He studied bookkeeping, geometry, botany, physics, British Classics and Cicero's Orations, School Economy¹⁷ and primary methods, music, carpentry and metal-working. The Senior Preparatory class public examinations given on May 26, 27, and 28 were Towns' final High School activities. He was one of twelve boys given certificates of completion of the Preparatory course.¹⁸

During this time, the close association of Towns with Atlanta University started. Mention has been made of the fact that Towns was an orphan when he came to the University. After his arrival, he began to identify with the faculty of the University.

The founders of the University had decided that the young Black people who would be their students needed training in proper behavior as well as in academic subjects;

¹⁵Catalogue, 1887-88, p. 28. Board was \$9.00 per month; tuition, \$1.00 per month; school year October-May. BAU, March 1893, p. 4 for amounts saved.

¹⁶Catalogue, 1888-89, p. 11.

¹⁷School Economy dealt with methods of operating a small rural school.

¹⁸Catalogue, 1888-49, p. 22; 1889-90, pp. 10, 25, 27; BAU, June 1890, p. 4.

therefore, a rigid system of rules of conduct and of constant watchfulness over the students was in force at the University. Towns wholeheartedly accepted this outlook and the rules and watchfulness involved in enforcing it. His fondest memories were of two faculty members who were known for their strictness, Mrs. Lucy E. Case, the Matron in the South Hall Boys' Dormitory, and Rev. Cyrus W. Francis, Professor of Ethics and Christian Evidences, who acted as a watchdog over student conduct. Towns' attachment to Mrs. Case was so great that on her death, he said that he felt she had substituted for his mother in some ways.¹⁹

Despite the insistence on living by rules, there were many diversions that broke the routine. Towns always attended the many activities such as chapel programs which featured special types of entertainment for fund raising for the school; or those in which speakers and special exhibitions were offered. Among these was a chapel program that featured a demonstration of Thomas A. Edison's newly invented phonograph that caused much "wonder and amazement" among members of the audience. In addition, organizations such as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) often held socials for the benefit of the students.²⁰

¹⁹George A. Towns, "The Sources of Traditions of Atlanta University," Phylon, III (Second Quarter, 1942), 121-24; BAU, January 1915, p. 21.

²⁰BAU, April 1890, p. 5; May 1890, p. 3.

Another interest of Towns was baseball. This was one of the few sports that required little equipment and little coaching, which meant that it was inexpensive. Towns had already started playing in the informal games held by the students in their free time and he was developing into a good catcher.²¹

The other and perhaps more important talent that Towns was developing was his teaching. The previous discussion of his absence from Atlanta University in 1887-88 included some statements about public school teaching by Atlanta University students. These teaching jobs were made available by county school systems in Georgia which held Grammar schools for Black children during the summer months when Black student teachers would be available. Generally, a group of parents would petition the school board to hire a teacher, stating that they in turn would contribute some amount per week per student toward his pay. The school board would then certify the teacher and make its contribution toward his salary. Throughout the period 1886 to 1889, Towns was certified to teach at one of these schools.²²

²¹John B. Cade, "A Short History of Baseball at Atlanta University, "The Scroll, February-March 1920, p. 14.

²²Towns Collection, Box 1, Folder "Professional Records."

The University encouraged its students to teach in these summer schools. Certificates of membership and standing at the University were provided to aid students in gaining certification and students were permitted to leave before the end of the term in order to reach their schools when the Grammar term started.²³ Despite the problems caused by vacation teaching, it was the only way many students could pay for their education.²⁴

Finally, while a Senior in the College Preparatory Course, Towns met a student in the Middle Preparatory Course, just below him, named James William (Weldon) Johnson. Both of them entered the College department the next year and became fast friends, a friendship that lasted for life. In many ways, they were opposites. Johnson appreciated the University, but chafed under the rules and considered Rev. Mr. Francis more of an interfering busybody than anything else. But the differences did not change the friendship.²⁵

²³Catalogues, 1883-97 inclusive.

²⁴BAU, December 1896, p. 6.

²⁵James Weldon Johnson, Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson (New York: Viking Press, 1933), pp. 60-71. Johnson was named James William at birth. He changed his name in 1912 after the publication of Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man, because he did not want to be nicknamed "Jimmy Bi ly." See Miles Jackson, ed., "Letters to a Friend: Correspondence from James Weldon Johnson to Georgia A. Towns," Phylon, 29 (1968), 191.

The college that Towns and Johnson entered in October 1890 was small. There were 20 college students out of a total enrollment of 596 in all departments, College, Preparatory, Normal, and Grammar. The faculty totaled 30 with perhaps 20 solely devoted to teaching.²⁶ The College was made a more concentrated experience by this smallness with each student being more aware that he was part of a select few and being expected to act the part.

The College level course was classical for it did not include mechanical arts. The University was intended to produce graduates who had a broad understanding of the culture, and an ability to think, speak, and act in the proper manner. As a part of this preparation, the rules and behavior required of the High School students were still enforced on the college level. Towns appeared to react favorably to this continued enforcement, though many students, like James W. Johnson, felt that as college men, they should be permitted more self control.²⁷

The course of studies was based largely on Greek and Latin. For Freshmen and Sophomores these languages and mathematics were the only subjects studied. Science was limited to a year of chemistry with physics, astronomy, and geology compressed into a single year. Philosophy, including

²⁶Catalogue, 1890-91, pp. 4, 5, 20.

²⁷Johnson, Along This Way, p. 68.

theology and rhetoric, occupied much of the Junior and Senior years. A half year of German diverted the Juniors as History of Civilization did the Seniors. The course was rigidly outlined with no electives permitted.²⁸

In following this course of studies, Atlanta University was following the accepted form of higher education for its time. In process and content, Atlanta University's course was the equal of the leading white colleges.²⁹ In 1889, following the lead of colleges across the country, Atlanta University began to improve its curriculum and facilities. In that year, a separate laboratory was set up in Stone Hall for chemistry and physics. During Towns' attendance at the college, the scientific facilities were continually improved to include geologic equipment, lecture rooms, and physical science demonstration equipment. The scientific content of the college course also gradually expanded.³⁰

Towns moved without interruption through the college course. While attending his classes, he was heavily involved in extra curricular activities, some of which were a continuation of activities started in High School. One of his new interests was oratory. In 1890 the Quiz Club

²⁸Catalogue, 1890-91 to 1893-94 inclusive.

²⁹Henry A. Bullock, A History of Negro Education in the South from 1619 to the Present (New York: Praeger, 1970), p. 166.

³⁰Catalogue, 1890-91, p. 33; 1892-93, p. 31.

Contest, sponsored by "an association of Gentlemen from Boston, Mass.," provided funds for a prize competition in English Composition and oratory. The contestants would write a short (3000 - 3500 words) essay, which would be graded by a Harvard English professor, then give an oration based on the essay during Commencement week activities. The total score was a combination of the professor's grade and the score given by the oratorical judges. The competition was open to all College, Normal, and Preparatory men.³¹ Towns entered the competition every year between 1891 and 1894. He never placed lower than third out of five places. In 1891 his essay on "The progress of the South and of the country as dependent on the elevation of the Negro" won for him the \$10.00 third prize.³² In 1892, the year James W. Johnson won first place,³³ Towns placed third again, this time winning \$15.00, using as his subject "The best methods of removing the disabilities of caste from the Negro."³⁴ He moved up a notch to second place, and a \$20.00 prize, in 1893 with his essay "The protection of individual rights essential to

³¹Ibid., 1891-92, p. 33.

³²Ibid.

³³BAU, June 1892, pp. 1-2.

³⁴Ibid., June 1893, p. 3.

the perpetuity of the state."³⁵ In 1894, his graduation year, he won the coveted first prize with the subject "Do we require a greater proportion of College bred Men and Women in the Community?" The \$30.00 prize money for the first prize of 1894 was helpful to Towns, as the prize money had been every year, but perhaps just as helpful was the chance to develop his ideas. In discussing "the protection of individual rights essential to the perpetuity of the state," Towns stated:

Having set forth the primary functions of the State: having enumerated to some extent the most essential rights of the individual, and having observed the intimate relationship between the rights of the state and the rights of those that compose it, without the least hesitancy we may assert that the one prerequisite to the perpetuity of the state is the protection of individual rights. Indeed, our first idea of a State is a continued condition of order, intelligence and industry. And how can these things be unless the individuals collectively make them so?

When the State shall impartially administer justice; when every interest, every right of the individual shall be protected that he may attain unto the fulness of the estate of the ideal man, whose law is love, then it the State shall have discharged its ordained functions; then shall it affect its own perpetuity.³⁶

And on the subject of "the best method of removing the disability of caste from the Negro," Towns said:

As one of the best methods of removing the disabilities of caste from the Negro, education may be

³⁵Catalogue, 1894-95, p. 30.

³⁶BAU, June 1893, p. 4.

mentioned. But it is not meant that this education shall be applied only to the Negro; but that both the Negro and the Caucasian must be educated- educated!- and even tho' the intellectual part of the education of the Caucasian might be partially neglected with impunity-yet more than all he must be educated up to the full appreciation of and the actual performance of his duties to his fellowman. For notwithstanding all that the Negro may do, the disabilities of caste will yet continue to hover around him, unless the whites are so changed that they are willing to and do actually accord to him those civil and political rights which they receive for themselves and their children.³⁷

Perhaps these ideas are not very original and the thought behind them not very profound. Yet, they had more influence over Towns' life than any original idea has over most men's lives, because he acted on them and attempted to live by them. These thoughts can be recognized in Towns' activities and writings as at least some of the guideposts he used to live in the world.

From his early youth, Towns was keenly interested in athletics, especially baseball. He was a catcher. No written records of the games were kept until 1896, but testimony from Towns and others indicates that the Atlanta University team was defeated only once before 1897, by the Atlanta Baptist Seminary. This defeat started a rivalry that continued when the Seminary changed its name, first to the Atlanta Baptist College, and later to Morehouse College.³⁸

³⁷Ibid., May 1892, p. 2.

³⁸Cade, "A Short History of Baseball at A. U., " p. 14.

Towns further demonstrated that he was an "all-round Athlete" as a participant in Field Day exercises. These were somewhat more than informal gatherings, but not quite actual track meets. The first was held in 1892 on Thanksgiving Day. It was intended to be an annual event. At the second, in 1893, programs were printed and admission charged in hopes of raising money for a gymnasium. Towns was the star of this occasion by winning three of the seven events: the 100 yard dash, 50 yard hop, and tie for first in the pole vault.³⁹

Another contribution Towns made to University athletics was the suggestion of its schools colors. As Towns himself remembers the story, in 1892 Atlanta University was to play Atlanta Baptist Seminary. Three young teachers wanted to make pennants to encourage the team but found that the University had no school colors. They asked a group of A. U. men what colors they would like. Towns suggested crimson and steel gray. The reason was that he was considering becoming an architect and wanted to study at the Boston School of Technology (now M.I.T.). He had learned from the school's catalogue that its colors were crimson and gray and so he favored the combination. The teachers accepted this and made a crimson and gray pennant with A. U. embroidered on it in old English lettering. This was unusual, for few schools

³⁹Bacote, Story of Atlanta University, p. 226; BAU, December 1893, p. 8.

in those days had colors.⁴⁰

In 1893, Towns was one of a group of men from Atlanta University who was hired by the Columbian Rolling Chair Company to act as wheeled chair pushers at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. A series of letters written by James W. Johnson and published in the Bulletin of Atlanta University tells the story of the train trip from Atlanta to Chicago with a stop at Fisk University in Nashville on the way; about the work load and duties of the chairmen; of the lack of prejudice from the employers, including the firing of four whites who did not wish to work with Blacks; and lastly about the drop-off of business toward the end of the Exposition and the pay cuts that led to a chairman's strike in which the Atlanta men did not participate. Such an experience was considered to be helpful in developing independence and insight in a young man.⁴¹

In the last days of 1893 Towns participated in an important event in the life of the University: the reinterment of President Ware's remains. Ware had been buried in Westview Cemetery. On December 22, 1893, Ware's birthday, his remains were removed from the cemetery and brought back to the campus. The burial plot was 125 feet in front of Stone Hall. The remains were placed in the plot in a cere-

⁴⁰An interview with Dr. James R. Porter and Professor George A. Towns, October 26, 1954 by C. A. Bacote and L. D. Reddick. See also Crimson and Gray, February 1911, p. 4.

⁴¹BAU, May 1893, p. 3; November 1893, p. 7; April 1894, p. 6.

mony which included a procession from the school's gate in which all of the students participated and religious services held by Rev. Mr. Francis and President Thirkield of Gammon Theological Seminary. Towns was one of the pallbearers, a group that included President Bumstead of Atlanta University; A. E. Buck, a former trustee of the University (1877-88) and chairman of the Republican State Central Committee; President Richard R. Wright of the State College for Negroes at Savannah, Class of 1876 and a trustee; Professor William H. Crogman, Class of 1876; and Samuel A. Stripling, another college senior.⁴² To have been chosen to participate in this event, considered one of the important acts in the founding of the Atlanta University tradition, was an honor.

The climax, however, was graduation in 1894. Commencement week lasted from May 27 to 31. After the Public Examinations of the lower classes on the 28th and the graduation orations of the Normal class on the 29th, the members of the Senior College class gave their orations. At this time, the classes were so small that each student spoke. Towns' subject was "Dangers and Duties of Politics." In this oration he attacked the spoils system, the use of money in bribing public officials, and secret political organizations as dangers, and listed public revelation ("except in extreme cases which grow out of our varied foreign relations") re-

⁴²BAU, January 1893, pp. 4-5.

sistance of "demogogy," and the application of moral principles to political activities as duties.⁴³ After the orations, diplomas were given to the Normal and College graduates.⁴⁴

There is a picture of the seven members of the class of 1894 of Atlanta University. It shows a group of young men, bowler hatted and high-collared, sitting on the steps of Stone Hall. All but one of them gazed firmly and confidently at the camera. That one was George Towns. He was looking just as firmly and just as confidently at something off to the right of the group, yet he was within the group, a natural part of it.⁴⁵ Such a man could write, as Towns did later that same year, to praise Atlanta University for making him a Christian, educating him as a leader, giving him confidence, and providing him with training as a carpenter so he could always earn his living. In short, he said, "By the Grace of God and Atlanta University, I am what I am!"⁴⁶

But "God and Atlanta University" cannot take all of the credit for Towns' development. In 1898 he entered Harvard College as a freshman. Later that school year, he was made an advanced Junior, having been given credit for having done the equivalent of 2½ years of Harvard's level of work at

⁴⁴BAU, May 1894, pp. 6-7.

⁴⁵Bacote, Story of Atlanta University, pp. 148-49.

⁴⁶BAU, January 1896, pp. 3-4.

Atlanta University.⁴⁷ Between 1895 and 1898 Towns had been an instructor at Atlanta University, working primarily in the shop. There is a possibility that his attending Harvard was in hope of obtaining a promotion at Atlanta. While at Harvard, Towns was on the rank list five times in the year 1898-99 for receiving five B grades. He attempted to join the football team but was considered too light-weight. In 1900 he graduated with an A. B., cum laude.⁴⁸

Harvard's effect on Towns was secondary to that of Atlanta University. Because of his advanced standing, he was able to undertake some graduate level work while at Harvard and that was the least of Harvard's influences. What was perhaps the single most noticeable of the influences was on his teaching methods. Towns based his teaching on the style he had found at Harvard. His style has been described by Mrs. A. R. Hill, one of his ex-students, as interesting, humanistic, patient, yet offering discipline. He approached the subject in a way that made it appeal to his students.⁴⁹ Harvard's other important influence was on Towns' outlook on excellence. Everything that Towns or his students did would be compared to the way things were done at Harvard and they had to be just as good if not better. There was never in

⁴⁷Ibid., October 1902, p. 2.

⁴⁸Ibid., February 1900, p. 1; November 1900, p. 1.

⁴⁹Interviews with Mrs. H. H. Strong, May 24, 1975, Atlanta, Georgia; Mrs. A. R. Hill, June 18, 1975, Atlanta, Georgia.

this comparison the idea of driving toward an impossible goal, rather than anything that can be done well the first time can be done better the second. This Harvard legacy would stay with Towns for his entire career at Atlanta.⁵⁰

Towns cherished relationships and friendships that had been developed during his school days. He remained in contact with all of the members of his college class from Atlanta University and with many of the people who had been at the University when he was there. The same can be said of many of the people whom he had met at Harvard. He corresponded with many of these men in later years.⁵¹ But by far his strongest friendship was with James Weldon Johnson. The correspondence between the two was more extensive than with any other of Towns' friends. They exchanged views on all matters. Towns also saved many clippings of reviews and articles dealing with Johnson's work.⁵² By 1900, Towns had completed his life as a student. He had achieved a record indicating he had ability and could use it. Before the end of his student days, he had started using this ability as a teacher. This love for teaching remained with him for the rest of his life.

When Towns graduated in 1900, he had definitely decided

⁵⁰Mr. Brainard Burch, A. B., 1928, interview held at his home, Atlanta, Georgia, June 7, 1975.

⁵¹See Chap. VI.

⁵²Towns papers, Box "Correspondence J-S."

to devote his life to the classroom which, to the hundreds of students who sat at his feet at the University, was a fortunate decision.

CHAPTER III

TOWNS AS TEACHER

In the late 1890's, the primary means of employment open to the college educated Black person were school teaching and government service, mainly in the post office. The number of Black professional men such as doctors, lawyers, engineers and the like was few, because of the racial climate which limited opportunities.

The desire of Black parents to have their children educated was so great that in some areas of the South where there was no public education for Blacks they supported a system of private schools. Since segregation was the Southern way of life, a school with Black students, in most instances, required a Black teacher.

Towns began teaching as soon as he graduated from Atlanta University. In April 1895, he helped to establish a public school system for Blacks in his native Albany. Reporting this initial experience to his friends at the University, he said that he was surprised to receive respect from both races and recognized that college educated men were needed to aid in this work.¹

¹BAU, January 1896, p. 3.

Back in Atlanta some changes were taking place. As a part of a long-term struggle to achieve more control over their own education, Blacks were slowly gaining positions as teachers in private educational institutions that previously had had all white faculties. Atlanta University had been one of the first schools to have Black teachers (1881).² and three more Black teachers were brought into the University within two years of each other. They were William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1897), Mrs. Adrienne McNeil Herndon (1895), and George A. Towns, who came in 1895 as an assistant in the Mechanical and Scientific Departments.³

Towns returned to a department that had not altered its goals or methods since he had left the University. However, his new position changed his approach to the subjects and possibly broadened his understanding of them. Both departments were important to all of the students at the University, not just a few, and were treated as such by the administration.⁴

The Mechanical Arts Department then was the equivalent of today's vocational education. In the previous chapter there was a discussion of the controversy over the amount of mechanical arts education that should be given to students

²Bacote, The Story of Atlanta University, pp. 128-30. The first Black faculty member at Atlanta University was Charles Rice, A. B. Atlanta University, 1881, who was teacher of English Branches.

³Catalogue, 1895-96, p. 30.

⁴BAU, October 1897, p. 3.

and how the University solved the controversy by requiring all high school men to take extra work in mechanical arts. Therefore, an instructor in this department would deal with all male students in the high, College, Preparatory, and Normal divisions. The four-year program covered two years of wood working, one year of metal working, and one year of mechanical drawing.⁵

Towns had demonstrated unusual skill at wood working while a student, which enabled him to be the assistant in the shop, first under Frank J. Bryant, then R. Sanford Riley, and lastly Eugene A. Copeland, all graduates of Worcester Polytechnic Institution in Massachusetts.⁶ In this capacity, Towns aided the youngsters from the High School in sawing and nailing, making joints, learning to shape fancy decorations; he showed the advanced students how to actually build a room from stock plans which every good carpenter was expected to know.⁷

While the Scientific Department was always a part of the University, the scientific laboratories were new, having been added in 1889. It was not until 1896 that the physics laboratory was separated from the chemistry laboratory and

⁵Catalogue, 1895-96, pp. 25-26; 1896-97, p. 33.

⁶BAU, October 1895, p. 3; October 1896. p. 2; October 1897, p. 2.

⁷Ibid., January 1896, p. 3; Catalogue, 1895-96 through 1897-98, p. 4; BAU, October 1896, p. 2; April 1892, pp. 2-3.

given its own room on the top floor of Stone Hall. Two cabinets, one for geology and mineralogy, and the other for zoology, completed the laboratory facilities. Chemistry was taught during the junior year; all other subjects as well as some astronomy were offered in the senior year.⁸ Towns assisted Edgar A. Webster, Professor of Science, in teaching each of these "Physical Sciences." In these classes, Towns demonstrated to the college students the latest scientific discoveries and equipment.⁹

In addition to the above, Towns was involved in the many extra-curricular activities which were to become his trademark during the many years of service he was to give to the University. He was interested in athletics, including baseball, football, and track teams; he coached the debating teams; he acted as performer and then as manager on the Atlanta University Quartet's fund raising tours; he was alumni representative on the faculty; he aided in the production of most Atlanta University informational publications; and, finally, he began his activities as a fund raiser.¹⁰ All of these activities would be continued; some would be expanded; but in 1898 they all stopped while Towns attended Harvard University.

⁸Catalogue, 1896-97, pp. 2, 29.

⁹Scroll, November 1897, p. 5.

¹⁰See Chap. IV, Extra-Curricular Activities, for detailed treatment.

In 1900, after receiving the A. B. degree from Harvard, cum laude, Towns returned to Atlanta University as Professor of English and Pedagogy,¹¹ a position which he held for twenty-nine years. Despite the many activities listed above, his main duty was teaching.

Towns' areas of specialization were English and Pedagogy. Pedagogy was what is now called teacher education. Since teaching was one of the main fields open to educated Blacks, all university students were required to take at least one course in Pedagogy. English was required also; consequently, Towns came into contact with nearly all of the college level students as well as some high school students.¹²

Classes in Pedagogy in the early years of the twentieth century included much that is still considered necessary for teacher training, but in a less formal division of subjects than is used today. The students were taught methods of teaching, school management and organization, psychology, history of education, and methods of teaching for each subject--all in two courses, one Pedagogy and the other General Methods. The Oglethorpe School, a new building added to the University campus in 1904, was administered as

¹¹BAU, October 1900, p. 2; Scroll, November 1900, p. 9. On his return, Towns was given an M. A. degree by vote of the faculty of Atlanta University because his Harvard work was in addition to work done at Atlanta University. Towns Collection, A. U. Records, Folder "Faculty Minutes."

¹²Mrs. M. Nash, A. B., Atlanta University, 1913, interview held at her home, Atlanta, Georgia, May 17, 1975. Towns Collection, Box 1, File "Biographical."

a regular private school, but it was also used for practice teaching and observation of methods in grades kindergarten through the eighth.¹³

This program was not static, however. There was an increasing specialization of course work. Psychology was separated from methods of teaching and history of education was also given as a separate course. Also courses were added to deal with the special problems of kindergarten and high school teaching. As the interest in industrial education waned, a part of the Knowles Mechanical Arts building was re-equipped as the Knowles High School, which provided practice and observational experience on the upper levels. Gradually the University moved from single Pedagogy--the teaching of teachers--to Education--the organized study of the process of instructing children.

In 1919 Education was raised to the status of a department on the college level. It had become so important to the University that the Trustees decided only after much discussion not to change the name of the school to "The Atlanta University and Teacher Training College."¹⁴

Towns, as one of the senior professors in the Department of Education, taught Psychology and Methods of Teaching. He gradually became more and more involved in Education and

¹³BAU, April 1911, pp. 14-15, 23; Bacote, Story of Atlanta University, pp. 143-44.

¹⁴BAU, April 1922, pp. 12-24, Bacote, Story of Atlanta University, p. 158.

less and less in the work of the English Department.¹⁵

Eventually, this situation was recognized officially in 1922 with the employment of Miss Belle C. Morrill, a graduate of Mt. Holyoke College, as an instructor in English.

"The work in education has so largely developed that Professor Towns now gives to it practically all of his effort, and Miss Morrill takes the English."¹⁶ Towns still taught English classes on occasion, but now his main assignment was to Education.¹⁷

By this time, the Department of Education had developed a full range of observational and psychological courses. The operation of the Oglethorpe and Knowles Schools provided practice facilities for the teacher trainees of Atlanta University. Towns, as senior professor in the department, of necessity included assisting in the supervision of observation and practice teaching in his duties.¹⁸

During the second semester of 1921-22, the school year 1925-26 and from October 1928 to June 1929, Towns worked

¹⁵Ibid., November 1920, pp. 6 et seq; Mrs. Anne Ruth Hill, A. B. 1927, interview held at her home, Atlanta, Georgia, June 18, 1975.

¹⁶BAU, November 1922, p. 8.

¹⁷Mrs. Anne Ruth Hill, interview.

¹⁸BAU, April 1925, pp. 10-12.

in publicity. Most of this work was involved with fund raising projects and entailed much traveling at all times of the year. Despite this heavy schedule, Towns was able to continue some of his teaching duties because his primary concern at the University was his students' welfare.¹⁹

Along with his teaching, Towns was involved in training Black soldiers during World War I. Atlanta University was the site of several training programs for Blacks: the Summer Training Camp for Industrial Training of Negro Soldiers, the Student Army Training Corps (SATC), and the Army School for Mechanics. Towns was an instructor in each of these programs.

July to October 1918 were the dates for the Industrial Training Camp. It was intended to train skilled laborers for engineering duty. The Army School for Mechanics was to do much the same for auto mechanics. Both were for Blacks; both were staffed by regular army officers and Atlanta University faculty members. Towns was a carpentry instructor for both programs, training soldiers to build rough bridges and water tanks.²⁰

The SATC was an advanced program for college-age men. The plan was to prepare the students for non-commissioned

¹⁹Ibid., April 1922, p. 4; April 1926, p. 4; October 1928, p. 13; April 1929, p. 7; Brainard Burch, interview.

²⁰BAU, February 1919, p. 3; April 1919, p. 44; Harvard College Class of 1900, secretary's 14th Report 1965 (Copy), Towns Collection, Box 1, "Biographical."

ranks by adding extra instruction in special subjects to regular army training. Towns demonstrated his versatility in another way: he was an instructor of French for this program. The SATC was brought to an abrupt end by the Armistice of November 1918.²¹

Earlier, in 1901, Towns and Professor Edgar Webster of Atlanta University were two of "a number of teachers from the various institutions in Atlanta . . ." who worked to organize a summer school especially for teachers. Held at Clark University (now Clark College), from June 18 to July 31, the school operated at all three levels: college, preparatory and normal. This school was held for only two summers, 1901 and 1902. Towns' only other summer teaching experience came in 1923 at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina.²²

The records of classes taught, and schools at which employed, are dry and empty statistics which seldom reveal knowledge of the instructor. A teacher is known by the success of his students and his teaching is often evaluated by the degree to which his students are informed by what was taught. Towns was able to gain a relationship with his students in all of his classes that made them receptive to what he wanted to teach them. He was also capable of being helpful and friendly in extra-curricular activities.

²¹Scroll, April 1919, p. 4; BAU, April 1919, pp. 40-45.

²²BAU, April 1901, p. 2; March 1962, p. 2; April 1923, p. 13.

Towns' teaching relationship was based on what has been referred to in this paper as the Harvard Ideal. That is, Towns used the goals and performance he saw at Harvard as the standard to which the students and activities of Atlanta University were to be raised. As he himself put it in one of his reports at a Harvard class reunion: "I like to think of myself as helping to start a stream of Harvard influence that will do much to irrigate a desolate region, so to speak, and to bring forth good fruit here in Georgia."²³ Since this ideal would also apply to the teacher, Towns himself would have to be a very good teacher to uphold his end of the ideal.²⁴

Towns was remembered as a very good teacher. He was strict, insisting on discipline, but at the same time not dogmatic or dull. Sometimes he used the techniques of investigation and discussion in classes instead of just reading and lectures. In his English classes he could be romantic or analytical depending on the need of the class: appreciation of the beauty of a poem or knowledge of the date it was written. He was easy to understand and had definite opinions that he was willing to discuss.²⁵

²³Harvard College Class of 1900, 14th Report, Towns Collection, Box 1, MSS 6, Folder "Biographical."

²⁴See Chapter II for the influences of Harvard on Towns. Also Mrs. H. H. Strong, A. B. 1918, interview held at her home, Atlanta, Georgia, May 24, 1975.

²⁵Mrs. Anne Ruth Hill and Mrs. H. Nash, interviews.

The good relations that Towns developed inside the classroom continued after classes. Towns was in an unusual position in regard to both the faculty and students. When he returned to Atlanta University as a teacher, the older faculty members were all white, Puritanistic, New England missionaries, while most of the students were rural Southern Blacks. Towns helped the two groups understand each other, since he knew the students better than did his faculty colleagues and knew the teachers when the students did not. Towns tended to be a pacifying influence in student-faculty relationships. For example, Rev. Samuel Usher recalls the time that Jim Jenkins (a college student) was reported smoking by Dr. Du Bois at a time when Atlanta University students were forbidden to smoke by the rules. Although this incident took place in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania during a vacation period, Du Bois reported Jenkins who was threatened with a month's suspension. Towns interceded with the faculty, attempting to keep Jenkins from being suspended. In general, Towns was considered a humane man who attempted to have insight into other people's problems.²⁶

His relationship with the students is full of contradictions. A student who took his first class from Towns when Towns was thirty-six years old and he was fifteen could state that the students felt drawn to Towns as one who

²⁶Rev. Samuel Usher, A. B. 1912, interview held at his home, Atlanta, Georgia, June 13, 1975; Brainard Burch, interview.

was near their own age.²⁷ Towns was said to be one of the strictest teachers in the school, yet when a man named Calhoun who worked at the school's farm set a plowing record, Towns announced that he would give a prize to any one of the boys who could beat Calhoun plowing.²⁸ When he was master of ceremonies of the chapel programs, he could have one session in which a religious emphasis program was held, and another session in which he led the students in cheering President Ware after his address opening the school term.²⁹ These varied activities make it clear that Towns could react to the needs of the students with whatever action was appropriate.

Towns was also helpful to the students. He would take time from his own work to help students directly or refer them to another teacher who could. He assisted seniors in picking subjects and gathering information for senior recitals which were orations that they were required to give every Friday. He also recommended the poetry of his students to the editors of the Scroll, the student newspaper, who were glad to publish what he recommended.³⁰

²⁷Thomas Henry, A. B. 1913, interview held at his home, Atlanta, Georgia, May 28, 1975.

²⁸Scroll, April 1917, p. 8.

²⁹Ibid., January 1903, p. 41; November 1916, p. 4.

³⁰Mrs. H. Nash, Mrs. Anne Ruth Hill, Rev. Samuel Usher, interviews; Scroll, January 1913, p. 46.

Towns did not confine his helpfulness to relations between groups on campus. In several instances he acted to assist the University in its relations with groups in the city of Atlanta. In one instance, the Atlanta Transit Company had some disturbances on its trolley cars caused by Atlanta University people. The company called the University who sent Towns as its representative. He, in turn, reported some complaints that University people had about the behavior of some of the company's motormen and conductors, and threatened a city-wide boycott of the trolley cars if these men were not replaced. A compromise was reached whereby some of the transit company's men were replaced on the line to the University with better behaved ones.³¹

Another incident was involved with the Leo Frank case. Leo Frank was the Jewish manager of an Atlanta pencil factory who was accused of murdering Mary Phagan, a young white woman who worked in the factory. He was found guilty of the crime, but his death sentence was commuted by the then Governor Slaton because of obvious prejudice and irregularities at the trial. Three years later, in September 1915, Frank was lynched. This lynching was caused by an anti-Semitic press that kept public opinion inflamed against Frank, public opinion that could also be turned against other groups. At the time of the lynching, Towns got the

³¹Rev. Samuel Usher, interview.

student body together, with no white faculty members present, and advised the students not to talk about the lynching in order to avoid giving any reason for trouble to develop between them and the city people.³²

Towns was a teacher whose relationships with his students have been described as beautiful.³³ But the formal classroom and after class conference type relationships were not the only ones existing between Towns and his students. He was also involved in extra-curricular activities, such as athletics and debating. Most of these activities were continued from Towns' days as a student participant in them. Still, he brought to all of them an enthusiasm and energy which kept them fresh and interesting for his students.

³²Ibid. For details of the reaction to the Frank Case, see: Leonard Dinnerstein, The Leo Frank Case (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), especially pp. 30-36.

³³Mrs. Anne Ruth Hill, interview.

CHAPTER IV

EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

A great part of one's college experience is taken up by extra-curricular activities. These activities, while sometimes detracting from the regular academic program, can serve to enrich the total educational effort. This was particularly true in the early years of the twentieth century when such activities were considered in line with the college ideal of character development. Towns reflected this idea in his approach to extra-curricular activities. As a coach and organizer, he emphasized fair play and perfection.¹

Athletics became a very important aspect of Atlanta University's campus life. This was not always true, because for many years athletics was considered as little more than a distraction from book study. Around the turn of the century, however, this notion changed to the concept of athletics as part of training. Towns was a student at Atlanta University during the period when athletics began to develop into this new form.

From the start of his work as a teacher, he participated

¹Scroll, December 1902, p. 21.

in the University's athletic program.² Towns favored exercise for the students. He not only believed in the character building aspects of sports, but also in the need for a healthy body.

In the beginning, the University was faced with two deficiencies: lack of manpower and lack of space. The lack of manpower was caused by the small enrollment at the college level. In one recorded case the football team was made up primarily of the staff of the student newspaper, editors and printers.³ As the enrollment grew with passing years, this problem became less important, but another limitation was placed on participation in athletics: academic requirements.

In the 1890's collegiate athletics was largely unregulated. The Black schools of the Atlanta area reflected this state of affairs by permitting teachers and high school students to play on varsity teams and by using non-students as players in important games.⁴ There was much talk about this situation that eventually led to the drafting of rules for players and organizing leagues to enforce these rules. At Atlanta University a committee drew up the rules for the regulation

²Bacote, Story of Atlanta University, p. 130.

³Scroll, January 1897, p. 4.

⁴Ibid., December 1898, p. 5.

of athletics. Towns, as chairman of this committee, was instrumental in getting these rules accepted.⁵

These rules, accepted as in force on January 7, 1902, stated that a passing grade (an average of 60) was needed to remain on a team and that the teachers would report grades to the Dean every three weeks. Non-students and summertime professional players were prohibited from participation; every player had to be a bona fide student at the University, based on class attendance.⁶

The problem of equipment was also solved by time. Towns acted in a fund raising drive to get money to provide gymnasium facilities for the male students in South Hall. He also acted to include athletic fund raising in the regular funding effort.⁷

But the primary equipment problem was not so simply solved. The University had no regular playing field to the early 1900's. There was enough space on the campus for some intramural play, but formal intercollegiate games of football were played at Brisbane Park located in the city. In 1903, however, in keeping with the extreme racism of that period, the city government withdrew permission for the Black schools to use this park. Since there was no field of regulation

⁵Ibid., November 1902, p. 4.

⁶Ibid., January 1902, p. 37.

⁷Ibid., January 1898, p. 3.

size available for football, all future games were played in the existing field which was too short and too narrow.⁸

Ever since 1896, Towns had been presenting a plan for improving the University field to no avail. However, with the loss of Brisbane Park, he was given permission to proceed with his project using funds collected from the alumni and using student labor. He personally directed the erection of a fence around the field and the leveling of the playing surface. By the start of the 1904 baseball season, the athletic field was in use.⁹

From that time until the end of his association with Atlanta University, Towns was involved in the upkeep of the field. He encouraged additions to the facility, such as a proper track for racing, and in 1919 he suggested replacing the wooden fence around the field with a concrete one, a suggestion that was taken up and led to another alumni fund drive which was showing results by 1922.¹⁰

Towns was also in charge of athletic publicity. Many times this meant that he was the athletic fund raiser also. In the course of this activity, he arranged banquets and

⁸BAU, February 1904, p. 3; December 1903, p. 3.

⁹Scroll, February 22, 1896, p. 2; January 1904, pp. 44-45; BAU, March 1904, p. 3.

¹⁰BAU, February 1908, p. 3; Scroll, October 1919, p. 11; Crimson and Gray, March 1922, p. 8.

alumni meetings for the purpose of increasing the A. U. spirit.¹¹

In addition to his work in the administration of athletics, he was also a coach. His ability as a coach was first seen with the football team.

Football had been introduced to Atlanta University by two students, the Porter brothers, Joseph T. (A. B. 1899) and George F. (A. B. 1899) in 1893. When R. Sanford Riley arrived in 1896 as head of the Mechanic Arts Department, he also became football coach. The first intercollegiate football game played in the South between Black colleges was in Atlanta between Atlanta University and Tuskegee Institute on January 1, 1897. Atlanta won 10-0. Later, due to the death of a promising young man who was playing football for the University of Georgia, the Atlanta City Council passed an anti-football ordinance which caused Atlanta University some concern about the future of the game. But the University joined the chorus calling for repeal of this ban after rule changes had been adopted which made play safer. The law was repealed by 1900.¹²

Towns was at Atlanta University as both a student and teacher while this growth of interest in the game occurred.

¹¹Thomas J. Henry, interview held at his home, Atlanta, Georgia, May 28, 1975; Scroll, March 1897, p. 6; November 1907, p. 13.

¹²Bacote, Story of Atlanta University, pp. 226-27; Scroll, November 1896, p. 6; BAU, January 1897, p. 7; Scroll, December 1897, pp. 4, 8; January 1898, p. 11; February 1902, p. 52.

He attended some games and apparently became interested in football because he attempted to join the team at Harvard. He was too light weight to make the team, but the coach at Harvard let him observe practice sessions and take pictures showing the proper methods of blocking and tackling, and the other skills involved in the game. One of the players whom he observed was Percy Haughton, an All-American player, and later a famous coach at Harvard from 1908 to 1916. On the basis of his observations at Harvard, Towns was appointed football coach at Atlanta University on his return in 1900.¹³

After his appointment, the University had a golden period for the team. Between 1900 and 1902 the team played ten games and won them all, compiling 166 points to the opponents 18. By 1902 the University was calling itself the champion of the Southeast.¹⁴

The loss of Brisbane Park and the subsequent inconveniences this caused, combined with lack of money for travel to other fields, contributed partly to the end of the University's dominance. But more important, the higher academic standards for players adopted in 1903 handicapped the University because many of the schools it played did not enforce

¹³BAU, November 1897, p. 1; Scroll, November 1900, p. 7; Rev. Samuel C. Usher, interview.

¹⁴Scroll, November 1901, pp. 4-5; December 1900, pp. 5-6; November 1901, p. 2; BAU, December 1902, p. 3.

such standards. Towns continued as coach, but the team could not return to its old power. The fortunes of the team had sunk so low by 1906 that football was abolished at the University from 1906 to 1908. After 1908 the game was restored but the team was not any better. Towns still coached but he and his assistants, such as Rev. Theodore B. Lathrop, were not well prepared to coach the game as it was then being played. This situation was remedied in 1922 when Walter H. Aiken, a Hampton graduate and star athlete, arrived as coach. From then on the AU "Hurricanes," as the team was nicknamed, stormed back into championship form.¹⁵

Towns had better success as a baseball coach. He grew up as a baseball player and was considered one of Atlanta University's best catchers. When he first came to the University as a teacher in 1895, the institution was involved in the organization of an intercollegiate baseball league with the other Black schools in Atlanta. This league continued until 1900 when dissention over non-students and poor students playing led to the break-up of the league. The problem of player eligibility resulted in the finalization of the University's rules in 1902 which damaged the baseball team as much as it had the football team. The University was further hampered in its play by the fact that other colleges that

¹⁵BAU, November 1903, p. 3; Scroll, April 1907, p. 84; BAU, November 1908, p. 4; Scroll, November 1912, p. 9; Crimson and Gray, November 1923, p. 8.

had similar rules tended to ignore them. To combat this, the University suggested the formation of an intercollegiate Athletic Association to promote fair play in sporting events. In 1910, the Atlanta colleges started a league among themselves. Later, this league grew into a Southeastern Intercollegiate League which became the Southeastern Intercollegiate Athletic Association. Towns was involved in all of the University's work for control of baseball. He was credited with being the founder of the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Association by that organization.¹⁶

While working on the development of a league, Towns was also working on the development of the team. He served as coach of the baseball team for most of his tenure at the University. He was actively involved with his duties, sometimes too actively. Once during the late 1920's he was trying to get a man to swing the bat properly. The man would not do it correctly; so Towns stepped in to show him and called to the pitcher to put one in close to him. The pitcher put one in so close that the ball hit Towns in the eye.¹⁷

However dangerous such attention to coaching was, it was also successful. The University won championships in

¹⁶BAU, May 1896, pp. 3-4; Scroll, March 1902, pp. 55-56; January 1909, pp. 35-36; April 1910, pp. 83-84; the scroll presented to G. A. Towns, Founder, for work in Athletics, Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference, December 11, 1960, Towns Collection, MSS 6, Box 1, "Biographical."

¹⁷Brainard Burch, interview.

1912, 1919-20 and 1928, this last team being coached by Lawrence R. Harper, Professor of Science and Mathematics, who graduated from the University in 1919. Harper had been coached by Towns when the former was captain of the 1919 championship team.¹⁸

Track was attempted by Atlanta University, but did not reach the proportion of students that football or baseball did. Towns had been a track star in the 1890, 1892, and 1893 Thanksgiving field day program held by the University. In 1896 he was part of a group that attempted to revise the University's interest in field sports. This effort was not overwhelmingly successful, but in 1900 Towns moved to start field sports again, this time to aid in developing football athletes. This effort was more successful, especially when George Porter, one of the brothers who had introduced football and an alumnus of the University, gave a silver cup to serve as trophy for that year's winner. The interest in track was kept alive by a continuing use of a silver cup as trophy for the track man who gained the most points during the year.¹⁹

Interest was also raised by intercollegiate meets. In 1909 the Atlanta Baptist College (now Morehouse) held

¹⁸Scroll, April 1913, pp. 89-90; Crimson and Gray, July 1928, p. 10.

¹⁹Scroll, March 14, 1896, p. 1; November 1900, pp. 1-4; BAU, October 1901, p. 1; Scroll, December 1906, pp. 26-27.

the first track meet for the Black colleges of Atlanta, with the proceeds to go to the Gate City Free Kindergarten Association. The University team won the mile run, the broad jump, and first and second places in the relay race. In 1913 the University lost a dual meet to Morehouse College by a score of 42 to 39 despite some protests.²⁰

Towns' activities as fund raiser for the gymnasium has been mentioned. He also favored physical education for the women students of the University. To promote this, he helped raise money to provide another gymnasium in North Hall, and when Dean Myron Adams introduced lawn tennis in 1904, Towns assisted coaching the women in playing it.²¹

The other major extra-curricular activity that involved Towns was debating. Debating had a rich tradition at the University. Two societies for encouraging it existed, namely, the Ware Lyceum for Normal students, which gave a program on the birthday of President E. A. Ware and the Phi Kappa Society on the college level, which held its program on Emancipation Day. Soon the students felt the need for intercollegiate debate to go along with intercollegiate athletics. To further this, a debating union was formed which arranged a debate with Fisk University on March 10, 1905. Towns acted

²⁰BAU, May 1909, pp. 3-4; Scroll, May 1913, p. 105.

²¹Thomas J. Henry, interview; Scroll, February 1902, p. 62; December 1904, p. 26.

as coach of the Atlanta University team. The debate was held in Ware Memorial Chapel before a large and enthusiastic audience and was described as "lively and interesting." Atlanta won. In 1906 Fisk and Atlanta met in Nashville with Towns as coach again, and Atlanta University won again. At the next debate in 1908, Fisk won.²²

Because of the interest sparked by these three debates, the Triangle Debating Union of Atlanta, Fisk, and Howard Universities was formed in 1910 to encourage the students to develop literary and debating talents. The Union was continued until 1916, when Fisk dropped out even though it was to continue to debate with Atlanta University until 1918. Of the twelve debates with Fisk, Atlanta University won six.²³

The debates with Howard University continued until 1928. In the early years, Atlanta University was at a slight disadvantage because Howard used older law school students as debating team members. Nevertheless, by the time the series ended, the two schools were tied with fourteen victories each.²⁴ In 1929, a debate was held with Johnson C. Smith

²²Myron W. Adams, The History of Atlanta University 1865-1929 (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1930), p. 102; Scroll, April 1904, p. 93; January 1905, p. 3; BAU, April 1905, pp. 1, 4; Scroll, April 1906, pp. 105-107; May 1909, pp. 100-101, 104.

²³Crimson and Gray, May 1920, p. 2.

²⁴Ibid., February 1925, p. 10; December 1927, p. 16; July 1928, p. 5.

University, which was won by Atlanta. This event brought debating to what was felt to be a fitting end.²⁵

During his career as debating coach, the performance of Towns' teams was considered excellent. Their presentations were always forceful and well prepared even when the University lost. He aided the students in the preparation of their subjects and the practice of their speeches. Since he recruited from the Phi Kappa and the Ware Lyceum, his debators were all well trained.²⁶

While Towns was acting in these extra-curricular activities with the students, he also was active as a public speaker. The first reported engagement was in 1897 when he was the Emancipation Day speaker at Griffin, Georgia. His next important series of speeches grew out of his Harvard experience. The Phi Kappa literary society and the Ware Lyceum, in addition to their yearly programs, each held a program on the first and third Saturdays of each month. These programs usually featured debates on topics of interest and were well attended, but the second and fourth Saturdays were open. While at Harvard Towns had attended a program at which faculty members and others spoke to the students on subjects of interest. He suggested that Atlanta University

²⁵Ibid, July 1929, p. 16.

²⁶Thomas J. Henry, interview.

could use a similar program for its second and fourth Saturdays. The students picked up the suggestion and in 1900 the Saturday lectures started with President Bumstead talking about his vacation experiences. Towns followed with talk about student life at Harvard.²⁷

This series of talks proved to be a popular entertainment. Until the pressures of his regular work became too great, Towns was a regular speaker at these talks. He spoke on subjects such as "The Development of Trusts as Illustrated by the Growth of Railroads," "Lord Byron," "Wordsworth and His Poetry," and "Talkers and Doers."²⁸

Towns became a popular speaker for off-campus affairs also. In 1902, he was Commencement speaker for the Black public schools of Brunswick, Georgia; in 1903 at Rome, Georgia; and 1905 in Albany, Georgia at the Albany Normal School.²⁹ He was also called upon to speak at several Emancipation Day exercises;³⁰ and at memorial exercises for faculty members.³¹ Gradually, his other speaking engagements were dropped as

²⁷BAU, December 1900, p. 1; Mrs. H. H. Strong, interview.

²⁸Scroll, January 1897, p. 10; BAU, February 1901, p. 1; April 1903, p. 3; May 1904, p. 3; Scroll, January 1917, p. 5.

²⁹Scroll, May 1902, p. 94; BAU, June 1903, p. 3; June 1905, p. 3.

³⁰BAU, January 1907, p. 1.

³¹Scroll, November 1912, p. 4; Crimson and Gray, February 1920, p. 4.

he became more active as a fund raiser.³²

Another extra-curricular activity Towns participated in involved the University Quartet. After the Fisk Jubilee Singers started the trend, most Southern Black schools sent out entertainment groups in an attempt to raise money. Atlanta University did not send out its first quartet until 1894, when the country was still interested in hearing these groups.³³

Both Towns and James W. (Weldon) Johnson were members of this first quartet. In 1896, the University sent out two quartets named Pioneer and Rescue. Towns and Johnson were members of the Pioneer Quartet. Sending two quartets gained the University friends but not much wealth; hence, in 1897, a single quartet went out consisting of Towns and three students: Robert W. Gadsden (1897), Edward L. Simon (1900), and A. Sengstake (1901). Its trip was pleasant and fairly profitable, as was the 1898 tour.³⁴

Before 1900, Towns had been lead singer and guitar and banjo player in the quartet as well as manager, but after this year he served only as manager of the quartet and would escort students on the tour and serve as master of ceremonies at the performances. Sometimes, President Edward T. Ware managed

³²Rev. Samuel C. Usher, interview.

³³Adams, History of Atlanta University, p. 103.

³⁴BAU, November 1894, p. 1; Scroll, April 4, 1896, p. 1; BAU, October 1896, p. 1; June 1897, p. 1; October 1897, p. 1; January 1898, p. 1.

the quartet for half the trip, Towns taking the other half, as did the Northern Secretary (fund raiser), Augustus G. Dill, in 1909, or W. B. Matthews, Class of 1890, in 1907 and 1908. These quartet trips came to an end after the 1915 season. The efforts of the quartet in its years of existence were considered a success more for the moral support that it brought to the University than for the financial support, though both additions were welcome.³⁵

Not every extra-curricular effort involving Towns, however, was a success. The greatest failure was his attempt to import to the University another Harvard idea: a student society based on scholarship. When he returned to Atlanta University, he attempted to start such a society for the college students called the "Owls." The group did not keep its emphasis on scholarship, but changed to color (light) and financial status (not having to work their way through school). Towns broke with the group when it began to head in this direction.

Naturally, the darker, poorer college men resented this group and started their own organization, the "Wolves." This group had no color line and its members were students who had to work at the University to meet their obligations. It was only a short time before the Wolves became the larger

³⁵Bacote, Story of Atlanta University, p. 217; BAU, May 1907, p. 2; October 1908, p. 2; October 1919, p. 4; October 1915, p. 22.

group and began to dominate campus life.

Competition between the groups for the captaincy of the teams, football and baseball, was spirited, with the Wolves usually winning since they had more members. This situation came to a head in 1912 at a game between Atlanta University and Morris Brown University. A Wolf player broke his foot sliding into first base and the Wolf team captain, Fred S. Toomer, A. B. 1911, called on another Wolf as a substitute. The Owls on the team objected because the Wolf chosen was a very mediocre player. The Owls walked off the field in protest causing the game to be forfeited to Morris Brown.³⁶

In this case the good fruit that Towns wished to bring forth turned sour before harvest. The University was not only divided by the Owls-Wolves struggle while the clubs were in existence, but also a reputation was created that led the students to believe, as late as 1927, that the college students lived by a caste system that dated back to the Owls and Wolves and affected extra-curricular activities.³⁷

This failure of a project did not dampen Towns' enthusiasm because it was serious but not fatal to his efforts with the students. He more than made up for this failure with his work with publications.

³⁶Rev. Samuel Usher, interview. Rev. Usher was the Wolf who broke his foot, Bacote, Story of Atlanta University, p. 243.

³⁷Scroll, March 1927, p. 4.

CHAPTER V

EDITOR AND WRITER

Towns developed his writing style by preparing essays to be delivered as orations in class recitals and in contests such as the Quiz Club prizes. Because of this, he wrote in a fluid style, tending to sound as if he had transcribed a conversation. As an editor, he favored the same type of writing from his contributors, so the items he edited were also easily readable.¹ The best known University publication of which Towns was a part did not give him a chance to show his full talents, but his work on the Atlanta University Conferences and the publications that resulted from them was still significant.

When Tuskegee Institute began its series of conferences on the rural life of Blacks, President Bumstead felt that a series of conferences on the urban life of Blacks would also be of value, and that Atlanta would be the place to hold such conferences. In 1896, with the help of George G. Bradford of Boston, a trustee, the first Atlanta University Conference for the Investigation of City Problems was held during Commencement week of 1896 and at the same period each

¹Towns Collection, "Literary Works."

year thereafter. Soon the name was changed to the Conference for the Study of Negro Problems, and the scope of the investigations correspondingly broadened.

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois came to Atlanta University in time for the third conference in 1898 and was in charge of the conferences until he left the University to become editor of the Crisis in 1910. Augustus G. Dill, a student of Du Bois at Atlanta University and a Harvard graduate (1908), took over the conferences, with assistance from Du Bois. When Dill left in 1914, J. Alvin Bigham and Thomas I. Brown completed the series. Despite assistance from the Slater Fund, the conferences were ended after 1917 due to the heavy expense involved.

The purpose of the conferences was to take some important phase of the life of Blacks as an object of study, then to repeat the study every ten years. This plan was carried out to some extent. In addition to the conference director, students, alumni, and friends gathered the information presented. The conferences themselves were not exciting or interesting, as the Tuskegee conferences were, but the series of monographs, the Atlanta University Publications Nos. 1-20, which give the results of the conferences are classics of sociological study.²

²Adams, History of Atlanta University, pp. 92-95.

Towns worked on several of the early conferences as one of the recording secretaries. For the first conference, "Mortality among Negroes in Cities," he and his friend, James W. Johnson, were the secretaries. Towns also participated in the general discussions that led to the resolutions put forth by the conferences.³

Later in 1896, Towns wrote an article about the conference in the Bulletin of Atlanta University. In it, he justified the existence of the conference because the investigators were only seeking the truth in doing the study and would be accurate. It was his opinion that Blacks should study other Blacks, because the researcher could not be fooled and the subject would not be frightened. He wanted the study to lead to Black racial pride and self-regeneration.⁴

Towns was on the staff of the second and third conferences as secretary also. At the third conference, "Some Efforts of American Negroes for Their Own Social Betterment," in 1898, he gave a report on the occupations of Blacks compiled from the 1890 Census by a sociology class. After his return from Harvard, he gave a report to the sixth conference in

³BAU, June 1896, p. 1; Catalogue, 1896-97, Atlanta University Publications No. 1, Mortality among Negroes in Cities (Atlanta University Press, 1896; reprint ed. New York: Octagon Books, 1968, v. I (1896-1901), p. 51. Hereinafter referred to as: Atlanta University Publications, No. -- (Reprint).

⁴George Towns, "From an Investigator's Standpoint," BAU, December 1896, pp. 2-3.

1901 on "The Common School Teacher," as part of the subject, "The Negro Common School."⁵

Two subsequent conferences were held, which were not reported in the Atlanta University publications. These meetings had as their purpose the study of the Negro and the franchise. Towns was an investigator for these conferences as he had been for the first one, and he helped to draft the resolution, which he signed, for the 1918 conference.⁶

The contributions that Towns made to the Atlanta University publications were not spectacular, but were workman-like and necessary for the success of the series. He contributed to this success by his competence.

Towns not only helped write the formal reports of the University, he was also active in assisting with other items regularly published by the University. Among these was the student newspaper, the Scroll.

The Scroll started in 1895 as an organ of the Phi Kappa Society, a weekly intended to serve as medium of expression for the students. In 1896, it was used as an outlet by the Alumni Association and became a monthly newspaper which reported on campus and student life with college students

⁵Atlanta University Publications, No 2 (Reprint), p. 31; BAU, June 1898, p. 3; Atlanta University Publications, No. 3 (Reprint), p. 46; No. 6, p. i.

⁶BAU, July 1918, pp. 2-4; July 1919, pp. 6-9.

as editors and writers.⁷

Since only college students were involved in the paper, the high school classes were not very supportive of it. To remedy this, in 1901 a system was started that put the Scroll under the control of a board of publication composed of students from both the college and the high school.⁸ From then on, the Scroll was well supported.

Starting with the 1896 edition, Towns was alumni editor. In this capacity, he included statements about the important happenings in the lives of graduates and occasionally wrote at greater length on the life of some graduate of special distinction. By 1910 most of the detailed alumni information was gone from the Scroll.⁹ He not only encouraged his students to write for it, but also acted as advisor to the student editors and helped them in the actual setting up of the paper.¹⁰

The faculty had its organ too. The Bulletin of Atlanta University was started in 1883 to disseminate information about the University to its friends, alumni and former students. In 1888, the Bulletin started coming out regularly,

⁷BAU, February 1896, p. 2; Crimson and Gray, September 1926, p. 20.

⁸Scroll, November 1901, p. 1.

⁹*Ibid.*, December 1896, p. 8; February 1924, p. 36.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, January 1913, p. 46.

eight times a year, and began to discuss every aspect of Black education, with editorial comments, University news, and a wide range of comments on items of public interest.¹¹

From October 1910 the Bulletin was issued quarterly, and from October 1926, bi-monthly, but the range of topics was not reduced. It discussed the activities of students and faculty, new developments in education, research done in association with the school, and, always, the need for money.

Towns assisted in editing the Bulletin, particularly when he was working with publicity. Before this he had been a contributor to the Bulletin. As editor and writer, he worked to maintain the standards of the publication and to guarantee that the Bulletin would remain useful and interesting both for the University and for its friends.¹²

The alumni were not slighted in the list of University publications. In 1910, Towns reduced alumni news coverage in the Scroll due to the start of the Crimson and Gray, a newsletter published by the Alumni Association to spread news not only of the graduates, but of any person who had been a student at the University and was still interested in the school. When it began publication in November 1910, it was the only paper published by the alumni of a Black college,¹³ and Towns

¹¹BAU, June 1883, p. 1; December 1888, p. 2.

¹²Mrs. H. H. Strong, interview.

¹³Crimson and Gray, November 1912, p. 1.

served as editor-in-chief.

It was a special paper in its early years. Until it became a quarterly in 1915, Towns contributed most of the material himself. In his previous works, Towns had been a serious writer, but in the Crimson and Gray he became the humorous friend. In one issue he apologized for including a joke in the previous issue, but the entire series was light-hearted and interesting. Even though it became more sedate after 1915, the Crimson and Gray was always delightful to read.¹⁴

This style shows Towns' relations with the alumni of the University. The relationship that had started with his students in the classroom continued after graduation. Towns maintained correspondence with many of his students and encouraged them to write to him so that he could include information about them in the Scroll and the Crimson and Gray. He was credited with organizing the Alumni Association and used it to continue the return of information from alumni. Many times when he was traveling for the University, he would visit alumni.¹⁵

The expressed purpose of Towns' relations with alumni

¹⁴Ibid., December 1910, p. 2; November 1915, p. 1.

¹⁵Mrs. Anne Ruth Hill, Mrs. H. H. Strong, and Brainard Burch, interviews; Crimson and Gray, December 1911, p. 4.

was to build up "that old A. U. spirit." This spirit included fund raising and recruitment as a large part of its reason for existence, but it included more than this. It was the spirit that recognized that the shared experience of Atlanta University was really something worth remembering and that all of the students of the University were worth remembering because they had been there. The Crimson and Gray was Towns' attempt to put this spirit in visible form¹⁶

The work with the school publications did not exhaust Towns' creative efforts for he was the author of a version of a school song for the University. Towns had made several attempts to write a song that would express the school's spirit. He finally succeeded in capturing this spirit in "Hail to Dear Old Alma Mater," a song that was considered to be good poetry and very well related to the tune he had adopted. After the song had been in use for some years unofficially, an Alumni Association meeting was held to adopt an official school song. The other song suggested for use was not as pleasing as Towns' song. At the meeting, a student that Towns had once failed in a class led an effort to have Towns' song replaced by the other song, an effort that was successful. The less pleasing song is still in use

¹⁶Scroll, March 1923, p. 117; March 1927, p. 21; BAU, August 1928, p. 14.

by Atlanta University.¹⁷

Towns wrote other poems, most of which remained unpublished. These were sent privately to his friends to commemorate important events such as weddings. These poems contain the same easy flow and musicality that was said to characterize "Hail to Dear Old Alma Mater."¹⁸

Many of the articles by Towns in the University publications were on subjects other than alumni affairs or school history. Some of these were intended to act as lessons to the students, such as "Consistency," which praised the virtue of remaining steadfast and always carrying through; or, "Harping on One String," which advised the students to discuss other things besides the race problem.¹⁹ Whenever one of Towns' friends or ex-students produced literary work of merit, Towns would often review it for the University, as he did for Johnson's Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man and Walter F. White's Fire in the Flint.²⁰ In some few cases Towns would merely write on a subject of general interest,

¹⁷BAU, November 1897, p. 4; Scroll, December 1907, p. 27; "Hail to Dear Old Alma Mater," Towns Collection, Literary Works, A-L; Porter and Towns interview.

¹⁸Towns Collection, Literary Works, A-L, M-Z. Most of the preserved poems are undated but refer to events that happened after the period under study.

¹⁹Scroll, March 1903, p. 62; November 1919, p. 14.

²⁰Crimson and Gray, March 1913, p. 3; BAU, February 1925, p. 10.

as he did in his comparison of "Large and Small Colleges."²¹ All were written with the same care and interest that Towns showed in his literary work for the University itself.

Towns also wrote for publications beyond the Atlanta community. In 1898 the New York Tribune published an article by him entitled "The 'Fessah' in Georgia," which dealt with the life of a Black country school teacher. This article was reported as being well received.²² Towns was also a contributor to the Southern Workman, a magazine published by Hampton Institute that dealt with various aspects of life in the Southern states. His contributions to the Southern Workman were memorials or biographies of people connected with Atlanta University which helped to expand public knowledge of the work of the University on a national level.²³

This spreading of public knowledge became another of Towns' contributions to Atlanta University. This was not the indirect spreading caused by quartet tours or articles written for a magazine, but direct dissemination due to his fund raising activities. Towns was one of the more active fund raisers for the University, and much of his writing and editing was directed toward aiding the University in gaining

²¹Scroll, May 1902, p. 84.

²²BAU, April 1898, p. 1; Scroll, May 1898, p. 5.

²³Ibid., January 1920, p. 13.

support for its programs from the larger community. Towns acted as a fund raiser in a manner intended also to gain support.

CHAPTER VI

FUND RAISING AND OTHER ACTIVITIES

Mention has been made of Towns' efforts as a fund raiser for the University. The concern Towns showed for the monetary support of the University started before he was graduated. In a class meeting in May 1893, Towns and James W. (Weldon) Johnson were instrumental in gaining assent from the Class of 1894 to start a \$1,000.00 scholarship for the school to be raised by yearly contributions from the class members. The plan was carried through by the class, with Towns serving as collector.¹

The first serious financial activity that Towns undertook after graduation was during his stay at Harvard. In the summer of 1899, Towns went on the first of his many fund raising trips for the University. He carried letters of introduction from President Horace Bumstead of Atlanta University, and from President Charles W. Eliot of Harvard. This trip took him over many Northern states and ended with his collecting \$430.73 and gaining special mention in the

¹Minutes of Meeting, Class of 1894, May 26, 1893. Towns Collection, Atlanta University Records, Folder, "Minutes and Resolutions."

Financial Report as a star money collector.²

From this small beginning, Towns' efforts grew rapidly. With his return to teaching in 1900, Towns entered upon several projects that were intended to improve both the immediate and the general financial situation of the University. His first activity was with alumni. Starting in 1905, the Alumni Association of the University began a drive to raise funds to be invested in the University's endowment. With Towns as chairman, a committee sent out a form letter appealing to the alumni for support. The effort was considered enough of a success for it to be repeated the next year. By means of this appeal, the interest of the alumni in a regular program of gifts was raised.³

The effort to increase the University's endowment became a regular part of the fund drive in 1917. The alumni took an important role in this drive as representatives of the University in their respective sections of the country. Towns, as a part of his general attention to alumni affairs, served as cheerleader for the alumni in this effort, offering guidance in the proper manner of approaching and following up on

²Horace Bumstead to Whom It May Concern, July 1, 1899; Charles W. Eliot to Whom It May Concern, July 7, 1899, Towns Collection; Financial Statement of Atlanta University, II (1899-1900--1908-1909).

³Scroll, January 1905, p. 42; February 1906, p. 78.

contacts.⁴

Despite this encouragement, the endowment fund effort was not having overwhelming success. In 1927, Towns expanded the drive to include efforts of the undergraduates, trying to persuade them to give to the alumni fund drive. Some students took up the suggestion and started giving parties and holding social events to raise money. It was requested that a ban that had been placed on showing movies on campus, placed because modern movies were considered immoral, be lifted because movies were such a good money raiser.⁵

In 1928, a program of movies, stunt nights, frolics, and socials was in full swing. Each class, freshman through senior, competed with the other to see which could raise the most money. Finally, an actual contest was arranged by the junior class. Each class would select a co-ed and the class which raised the most money would have their representative declared the most popular in the school. This popularity contest ended in May 1928, with Miss Mary Lou Davis of the junior class judged the most popular, her class raising the most money.⁶

The last alumni fund raising idea Towns attempted was

⁴George Towns, "The Alumni and the Endowment Fund," BAU, November 1917, p. 3; Bacote, Story of Atlanta University, p. 164.

⁵BAU, October 1927, p. 7.

⁶Scroll, March 1928, pp. 3, 20; May 1928, p. 17.

the Dollar A Month Plan. He was the chairman of the committee that popularized the idea of each alumnus putting aside at least \$1.00 every month to be given to the local alumni chapter or mailed directly to the University. The hope was that every alumni would give the school at least \$12.00 a year, which would bring in enough money annually to guarantee the survival of the University.⁷ The program was continued after Towns left the University in 1929.

With his assignment to publicity in 1922, Towns began his greatest effort for the University. He began traveling almost full time as a fund raiser for the University. He also kept up his use of letters of introduction to aid him in approaching individuals who would be willing to make donations.⁸

Then a plan came to Towns. In 1924, he was approached for a donation for his Harvard Class' 25th year celebration; the class wanted to raise \$150,000.00 for Harvard's endowment. Towns thought it possible that his Harvard class might also be able to raise money for Atlanta University. Hence, the Harvard Class of 1900 Fund for Atlanta University was born.⁹

The idea behind the fund was that the combined resources of the Harvard Class of 1900 were so great that they could

⁷Crimson and Gray, January 1929, pp. 1, 10.

⁸Dean Sage to Whom It May Concern, March 22, 1922; Wellington E. Bull to Colonel William Haywood, March 8, 1922, Towns Collection, MTC S-Z.

⁹F. Otway Byrd to George Towns, April 16, 1924, Towns Collection, MTC A-C.

raise \$10,000.00 for Atlanta University indirectly. Towns would approach his classmates for help. If they wished to, they could give themselves; if not, they would be asked to write letters to people they knew or testimonial letters advising others to give. It was intended that the influence and knowledge of these men would serve to overcome indifference to education for Blacks present in some circles. Contributions would be made over a three-year period, and would be listed under the name of the donor.¹⁰

This fund was not greatly successful in monetary terms. The amounts brought in were equal to only one third of the designed total,¹¹ but during the 1925-26 school year, when Towns was working full-time on this project, knowledge about Atlanta University and its educational work was extended to many parts of the country. Among those who became interested were an assistant secretary in the War Department, an employee in the Department of State, and a member of the United States Canadian Legation.¹² Many inquiries came into the University for more information.¹³ An approach was made to Julius

¹⁰Towns Collection, Harvard Record, Folder "Harvard Class of 1900 Fund for Atlanta University."

¹¹Financial Reports, Donations, V. 3 (1909-10-1928-29), 1925-26, p. 14; 1926-27, p. 8; 1927-28, p. 8; 1928-29, p. 8.

¹²Towns Collection, Harvard Record, Folder "Harvard Class of 1900 Fund for Atlanta University."

¹³F. W. Burton to George Towns, August 26, 1925.

Rosenwald, arranged by one of Towns' classmates.¹⁴ One result of this interest was an increase in assistance from the Atlanta community.¹⁵

Towns continued his efforts after the initiation of the Harvard Class of 1900 Fund drive, still using letters of introduction from his classmates and acting as receiving agent for alumni money. He gradually began to be more involved in the planning and supervising of many area drives in concert with the President of Atlanta University.¹⁶ For most summers and mid-term vacations, he was traveling "in the interest of the School," speaking before church and social groups in order to interest them in making donations to the University.¹⁷

On these trips, Towns used the skills he demonstrated in the special fund raising projects. He often carried letters of introduction, both specific and general.¹⁸ Often, particularly when appealing to church or social clubs, Towns would

¹⁴Paul Sacks to George Towns, October 30, 1925; Henry S. Bowers to George Towns, November 5, December 1, 1925, January 7, 1926.

¹⁵Ivan Allen to George Towns, October 28, 1925, offering \$100.00 worth of office supplies and assistance in approaching other Atlanta businessmen.

¹⁶Murray Seasongood to Whom It May Concern, June 16, 1927; Mae C. Howes to George Towns, April 11, 1927; M. W. Adams to George Towns, July 12, 1927, February 11, 1928. Seasongood was mayor of Cincinnati and a classmate, Howes was an alumna making a \$100.00 contribution, President Adams and Towns were discussing the 1924 Pittsburgh drive and the 1928 alumni drive.

¹⁷BAU, October 1900, p. 2; November 1924, p. 18.

¹⁸Charles Eliot to Whom It May Concern, July 17, 1908, Towns Collection.

speak at the intermission of a program put on by University alumni. In one instance, in February, 1928 at Central Baptist Church in Hartford, Connecticut, the program included scenes from a pageant, "The Open Door," that had been written at the University to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the school, and a program of spirituals, complete with chorus.¹⁹

In many cases, the results of these trips would have been considered disappointing, since the only really successful appeal was to the alumni. The other appeals, such as the quartet trips and the special fund drives, did not bring in much money by themselves.²⁰

But these special trips and drives filled another important purpose. Many people in the North and West were disinterested in the problems of the education of Blacks. By making appeals and trips, Towns and the other fund raisers for the University let the people they approached know about the existence of Atlanta University and its needs in a manner to which they would listen. Towns' special work with the Harvard Class of 1900 spread the story of the University among a segment of the population that was potentially influential in its favor. This spreading of the story and problems of the University aided in bringing the attention

¹⁹BAU, March 1928, p. 14.

²⁰Ibid., December 1926, p. 18; Bacote, Story of Atlanta University, pp. 163-65; Crimson and Gray, July 1925, p. 4.

of the North to this part of Black education and it aided in making friends for the University, friends who would let it survive. Towns was doing what he had said he was going to attempt when he graduated--"spreading that old A. U. spirit."²¹

Fund raising, teaching and coaching were major activities in which Towns was involved. While these activities were not as important as the above, each was a contribution to the University.

Many activities that Towns entered into did not directly involve Atlanta University, but they were important as indicators of the range of his interests and the devotion to scholarship and assistance that he showed in his work.

In 1901, Towns and Du Bois were the University's representatives to the Tuskegee Institute Conference on Rural Problems. Du Bois had gathered some materials on Black farmers to be presented at the conference. It was perhaps at this conference that Towns expressed his reaction to Booker T. Washington's ideas. Towns himself remembered this incident, but without dating it.²²

In a meeting at which Washington was present, the

²¹James Mott Hollowell to George Towns, October 20, 1925, Towns Collection, MTC D-H; Crimson and Gray, November 1925, p. 2; BAU, January 1896, pp. 3-4.

²²BAU, March 1901, p. 2.

question was asked what would have to happen in order for Negroes to achieve success within the country. Several men rose and spoke of the need for self-help, training of Negroes, the necessity for staying out of social situations where they were not wanted, and other such matters. Washington appeared to be in agreement with all of these ideas. Then Towns rose and said, in no uncertain terms, that Negroes would never achieve anything until the burden of prejudice had been lifted from them. He caused a minor stir in the audience, some members agreeing with him, some not; but he had definitely displeased Washington. Washington then used his influence to keep Towns' remarks out of the records of the conference.²³

In December 1904 and December 1905, Towns was a delegate to the Annual Conference of the Association of Agricultural and Mechanical Colleges and Schools for Secondary and Higher Education. According to the reports he presented in the Bulletin, this organization was founded by President Richard R. Wright of the State College for Negro Youth in Georgia and a graduate of Atlanta University College in 1876. By 1906, it had been in existence for three years and had held meetings in Baltimore, Memphis, and Richmond, and members from all Southern states and four Northern states had attended.²⁴

Yet there is no mention by Towns of this organization

²³Porter and Towns, interview.

²⁴BAU, January 1906, p. 1.

after 1906. Perhaps it is because he had also reported that the delegates to the conferences were not sure of their reasons for organizing. They had no list of problems nor special areas of study. In was, in short, "very interesting but not unusual in interest or accomplishment."²⁵

In 1923, Towns represented President Myron Adams at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History held on the campuses of the city's Negro colleges. At the first meeting at Atlanta University, on October 24, Towns welcomed the Association in a speech that dealt with the importance of the study of Negro life and history and reminded it of the pioneer work done in this area by Du Bois in the Atlanta University publications.

The meeting was attended by several people who would be of continuing importance in the study of Negro life and history: Carter G. Woodson, the founder of the Association; E. Franklin Frazier, the distinguished sociologist; and Mary McLeod Bethune, the educator. The original schedule of the meeting called for the first day's meeting to be at Atlanta University, the second at Morehouse College, and third at Spelman College; however, there was an epidemic at Spelman and at the invitation of President John W. Simmons the last day's meetings was held at Clark University. Woodson made a side trip to Morris Brown University at the request of the

²⁵Ibid., January 1905, p. 1.

students, who used his The Negro in Our History in their Negro History course. The Association considered the meeting a success.²⁶

This participation in the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History meeting was not the only work Towns did to help in Black racial uplift. He was the Atlanta city chapter leader for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) just after the establishment of the organization, and helped to start chapters in other cities in Georgia.²⁷ Towns' interest in the NAACP was intensely personal as he had often felt the sting of prejudice. In one instance, he was out driving with his wife, who could pass for white, when he was arrested for being with a white woman.²⁸ The Atlanta Chapter of the NAACP grew steadily under Towns' leadership.

A protest activity often engaged in was the use of petitions. These petitions were intended to inform the appropriate authority of the feelings of the group sending them. Towns acted in this manner on an important issue of the time, school fund distribution. This was a plan by

²⁶BAU, November 1923, p. 6; "Proceedings of the Annual Conference," Journal of Negro History, IX (January 1924), 101-106.

²⁷Towns Collection, Box 1, MSS 6, Folder "Biographical."

²⁸Mary White Ovington, The Walls Come Tumbling Down (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1947), p. 53.

which the public school money of the state would have been divided between the races in proportion to the amount of taxes paid by each race. Since, for various reasons, Blacks did not own much property and, therefore, did not have to pay much tax, their share of the school money would have been inadequate.²⁹

In 1902, when the issue first arose, Towns was one of fourteen Atlanta University teachers who signed a memorial to the Legislature of Georgia denouncing the proposed Constitutional Amendment that would have made this system of distribution legal. In 1919, when the fight for this system was waning, Towns signed another memorial protesting the system. He also helped prepare a petition to be circulated addressed to Governor Hugh Dorsey, the State Board of Education, the Legislative Committee on Education, and the Legislature calling for more pay for Black teachers, longer terms and better buildings for Black students, and more cooperation between Black and white educators. This effort had some effect on the consideration of this system by the Legislature and served as a rallying point for opposition to the system.³⁰

Towns did not devote all of his time to serious activities. In 1899, he joined the Athenaeum, a social club

²⁹BAU, November 1901, p. 2.

³⁰Ibid., January 1902, pp. 2-3; Towns Collection, MSS 6, Box 1, Folder "Petitions."

in Atlanta composed of Black men who had achieved distinction in letters or in the professions. The intention of the members was to act as a focal point for efforts of the Black community's attempts at self-help by serving as a leadership group and as a source of data and planning for this self-help. Despite this plan, the Athenaeum began as a literary discussion group that reviewed various projects for self-help in the members' homes.³¹ There is no indication that the group ever undertook any major project or became known for its activities, but it was a good method for educated young men to become known to each other.

Later, in 1913, Towns helped to start an "A. U. Men's Club," which was primarily intended to be a social group based at the University. Men of good character would be accepted as members, not just Atlanta University alumni. Towns' name was given as one of those who could be contacted for details.³² The club had several social events, including an April Fool's Day party held that same year.³³

There were many minor duties connected with Towns' service at the University. In many instances, he acted as the leader of the chapel programs at the school. When special

³¹Scroll, May 1899, p. 15.

³²Printed letter of invitation to A. U. Men's Club Organizational Meeting, Towns Collection, Box A. U. Records, Folder "Examples of Printing."

³³Printed invitation to A. U. Men's Club April Fool's Day Party, Towns Collection, *ibid.*

presentations were to be made to the school, such as a portrait of President Ware, Towns often made them. At funerals, such as that of Mrs. Case in 1914, Towns was often on the program.³⁴

Towns was interested in most activities that affected the education of Southern Blacks and in all that affected Atlanta University. He moved in whatever direction he could to be involved in these things, and to influence them toward what he felt was a proper direction.

But Towns' life was not only full of public activity. His private life was as full as his public life. He was a family man who reared several children and kept a good home. He was an active churchman and extensive letter writer who corresponded with many people from many different places. Yet, even his private life was affected by his connection with Atlanta University.

³⁴Scroll, March 1927, p. 5; Crimson and Gray, July 1925, p. 2; BAU, October 1914, p. 11.

CHAPTER VII

PRIVATE LIFE

Many aspects of Towns private life were also connected with Atlanta University. In most cases, this connection was of benefit to both Towns and the University, in the nature of a mutual exchange of gifts that benefited each party.

One of the most lasting of these gifts was his wife, Miss Nellie Harriet McNair, a native of Atlanta, who entered the Normal Department in 1893 and graduated in 1897. While in the Normal course, she took physics, astronomy, geology, and mineralogy when Towns was a teacher in the Scientific Department. This was how they became acquainted. After graduation, Miss McNair taught in Covington and Columbus, Georgia and the Albany Normal Institute. In 1902, she moved back to Atlanta at which time she renewed her acquaintanceship with Professor Towns.¹

On September 17, 1902, they were married and went on a honeymoon trip to Boston, returning by way of Niagara Falls. In the course of this trip, other cities were visited. On their arrival back at the University, the newly married couple

¹Catalogue, 1893-94, 16; 1894-95, p. 17; 1905-96, pp. 17, 24; 1896-97, pp. 16, 26; Towns Collection MSS 6, Box 1, Folder "Biographical"; Box "Nellie (McNair) Towns (Mrs. George A)."

moved into rooms in the South Hall Boys' Dormitory. Mrs. Towns was soon involved in her husband's work. On October 10, she and her husband helped President Bumstead and Mrs. Lucy Case, now an honorary matron, welcome the new teachers for that year.²

Towns completed the development of his family life by building a home, and again the University influenced his actions. Atlanta University owned a large amount of land around its buildings, some of which was unused. In 1908, Towns purchased a portion of this across the street from the President's house and less than a block from Stone Hall. The University had a policy of selling land only to individuals who could serve as examples of conduct and success for the students. Towns and Alonzo F. Herndon, a successful Black businessman and founder of the Atlanta Life Insurance Company, who was also building across the street from Towns directly beside the President's house, were considered to fill the qualification perfectly.³

By October, 1908, work on the house was in progress. Towns was very involved in the construction both financially and personally, as he put his training in carpentry to work

²Towns Collection, MSS 6, Box 1, Folder "Biographical"; BAU, October 1902, p. 3; Scroll, December 1902, p. 23.

³Bacote, Story of Atlanta University, p. 132; E. T. Ware to George Towns, July 2, 1908; Towns Collection, MTC S-Z; BAU, October 1908, p. 2.

by assisting in the actual construction of the house. This assistance caused Towns and his family some grief when he fell from a scaffold while working and broke his arm. The injury, however, was not serious enough to really interfere with his activities. Soon after this, the house was finished.⁴

By then, the house was well needed for by this time the Towns family had grown too large to remain in South Hall. His first child, Helen Dorothy, was born in December, 1904, but by May, 1905, she became ill and died in July of that year. The entire school was saddened by this event, as Helen had been considered the baby of the campus.⁵ But in 1907 the school was cheered again when Grace was born on February 10. That April, the two-month-old baby was welcomed to the campus as the new baby. She was joined by two brothers, George Alexander, Jr., in March, 1909 and Myron Bumstead (who was named for a past president (Bumstead) and the then president (Myron W. Adams) of the University) in October, 1910, and in 1920, a sister, Harriet, was born.⁶ By 1913, Towns' brood was well ready for its own home.

Towns provided his children with the best schooling that was available at the time. By the time they had

⁴BAU, October 1908, p. 2; Thomas J. Henry, interview; Towns Collection, MSS 6, Box 1, Folder "Financial Records."

⁵Scroll, December 1904, p. 26; May 1905, p. 97; BAU, January 1905, p. 3; October 1905, p. 3.

⁶BAU, March 1907, p. 3; October 1910, p. 32; Scroll, April 1907, p. 86; March 1909, p. 75; December 1920, p. 5.

reached high-school age, a situation in Atlanta presented him with an easy solution. Until 1924, there was no public high school for Blacks in the city of Atlanta, only private schools. Towns, therefore, was presented with an excellent reason for sending his children to the high school of the University, as he had attended it. His eldest child, Grace, entered the first year Normal course of the Preparatory Division in 1919.⁷

The two boys entered the University high school in their turn, George Jr., entering in 1920, Myron in 1922. With the opening of the Booker T. Washington High School in 1924, the first public high school for Blacks in the city, the need for a high school at the University lessened; therefore, in 1925, the ninth grade was dropped, and a grade a year each year following. The Knowles High School was started in the Knowles Industrial Arts Building that same year to serve as a practice school for education majors, but that too was dropped in 1928 when arrangements were made with the city for practice teaching to take place in Washington High. The Towns children were among the last graduates of the old University High School and received the benefits of its experience.⁸

⁷BAU, April 1920, p. 40; Bacote, Story of Atlanta University, p. 169.

⁸BAU, April 1921, p. 39; April 1923, p. 38; Bacote, Story of Atlanta University, pp. 169-70.

In 1923, Grace Towns entered the University's college, still following in her father's footsteps. George followed in 1924, Myron in 1926. By this time, the college had adopted the modern system of offering courses to be chosen as electives, rather than a rigid program, though certain courses were still required for graduation. The students could take the courses that would prepare them for their planned careers. Towns was in English and education, still in a position to reach all of the University's students, as these subjects were among those required.⁹ Towns taught his children in his English and educational psychology classes.¹⁰

In 1927, Grace graduated from the University. George Jr. and Myron were both in the Junior class when the undergraduate school of Atlanta University closed in 1929. Because he had children in college, Towns' students felt that he was able to relate to them and their problems. To some extent Towns did use the experience he gained as a father in his relationships with his students.¹¹

His children continued the tradition Towns had started

⁹Ibid., April 1924, p. 31; April 1925, p. 33; April, 1927, p. 32; April 1926, pp. 10-16; Henry A. Bullock, History of Negro Education in the South, pp. 204-207.

¹⁰Mrs. Anne Ruth Hill, interview.

¹¹BAU, April 1928, p. 26; April 1929, p. 28; Mrs. Anne Ruth Hill, interview.

of being active in campus activities. Grace was the Atlanta University delegate to the YWCA biennial convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in April 1926. She was elected first Vice-President of the National YWCA. During the 1926-27 school year, she was editor of Scroll and a contributor to its columns. She continued to demonstrate her ability by earning a Master's degree from Ohio State University in December 1928.¹²

George Towns, Jr. left Atlanta University to enter Stamford University where he received a degree in accounting. Myron Towns reflected his father's wide range of interests and involvement in campus activities. He participated in rhetoricals that were held to give students experience in essay writing and oration; he sang in an informal quartet at campus socials; in 1928 he won first prize in the Herndon Public Speaking Contest, an oratorical contest much like the earlier Quiz Club Contest that was funded by Alonzo Herndon; and he participated in the final debate held by the University undergraduates with Johnson C. Smith College in 1930. He was an honor student during both the freshman and junior years

¹²BAU, July 1926, p. 3; December 1928, p. 12; Scroll, November 1926, p. 1; April 1927, p. 8.

and a speaker at his commencement as an honor's graduate.¹³ Myron was also a musician who appeared in several student recitals and presented a paper, "Contributions of the Negro to the World of Music," during Negro History Week in 1928.¹⁴ Later, Myron distinguished himself as a graduate student at the University of Michigan where he earned the M. A. and Ph. D degrees in Chemistry and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and Sigma Xi honorary societies.

Harriet, the youngest child, finished Spelman College since Atlanta University no longer offered undergraduate work. Later, she earned a B. S. degree in Nursing from Homer Phillips Hospital in St. Louis, Missouri.

Despite the interest that all members of the Towns family showed in the activities of the University, they maintained an active family life of their own. When his children were younger, Towns was known to be late for classes and occasionally to miss some because he was with his children.¹⁵

¹³BAU, February 1926, p. 11; April 1927, p. 17; March 1928, p. 11; June 1928, p. 14; Scroll, March 1928, pp. 8-9; Towns Collection, A. U. Records, Folder "Samples of Printing" for programs of debate and commencement.

¹⁴Towns Collection, A. U. Records, Folder "Sample of Printing"; BAU, March 1928, p. 11.

¹⁵Rev. Samuel C. Usher, interview.

Yet his family life was often joined by his students. When the Towns family was living in South Hall, they would spend Christmas and Thanksgiving with the boys living in the dormitory. During that period, only the actual day of the holiday was free; there were no long weekends or vacations, so the boys from out of town could not go home. The Towns family would spend the day helping the students celebrate; the children were particularly helpful in entertaining the students, and would eat dinner with the boys.¹⁶

After the Towns family moved into their new home, the students could still be found present. There would often be socials and teas in the home. One memorable occasion was the party given for the graduating class of 1917 in March. Entertainment was provided by Towns and several of the young ladies of the class who told folk tales, and by an indoor track meet. Refreshments were served and all present enjoyed themselves. A more sedate example of a student party given by Towns occurred in March, 1927, when he gave a tea for some of the boarding ladies in honor of Jean Paxton, a teacher, and Nell Hamilton and Georgia Lee Williams, two seniors who were leaving at the end of the year.¹⁷

The Towns' family relationships and his University

¹⁶Thomas J. Henry, interview.

¹⁷Scroll, March 1917, p. 9; March 1927, p. 8.

experience tended to blend into each other because of his close relationship to the University. The same was true of many other relationships that Towns developed, most of which came from his Atlanta University experiences.

The most enduring of these relationships was Towns' friendship with James Weldon Johnson. Towns and Johnson maintained a lively correspondence after their graduation. In many ways, Towns was Johnson's sounding board, helping him to talk through his ideas and review his accomplishments. Towns was also one of Johnson's most ardent fans, keeping a collection of reviews of Johnson's works and printed articles by him.¹⁸

Johnson's friendship with Towns was renewed when Johnson became a trustee of Atlanta University in 1924. Now they could be in each other's company again, if only at trustee board meetings. Their friendship lasted beyond this period, until Johnson's death in 1938 in an automobile accident.¹⁹

Towns formed other friendships while at Atlanta University, some of which lasted as long as did his with Johnson. Most of these were with men who had been his students. These included such distinguished persons as Walter F. White, 1916, who was a member of the debating team; Austen T.

¹⁸Towns Collection, MTC J-R, Folder "Johnson, James Weldon," clippings and reviews; letters.

¹⁹BAU, April 1924, p. 3; Towns Collection, MTC J-R, Folder, "Johnson, James Weldon" Memorials.

Walden, 1907, a star baseball player and later a distinguished lawyer. William H. Crogman, 1876, a scholar and author and first Negro president of Clark College, was a frequent correspondent.²⁰

Towns' best relationship was with the alumni in general. He acted as a clearinghouse for them to maintain contact with each other and as a helpful advisor as they set out on their future careers. His correspondence with the alumni, both as editor of the Crimson and Gray and as an individual, was full of interest and information that the alumni could use.

There were many other people whom Towns knew, but certainly his most colorful friendship was one that nearly cost him his position. It was with William Monroe Trotter.

Trotter was the militant publisher and editor of the Boston Guardian, a Black newspaper, and an outspoken foe of Booker T. Washington. In 1903, this opposition came to a head on July 30 when Trotter attempted to ask pointed questions about Washington's ideas at a meeting of the National Negro Business League in Boston. Trotter's interruptions almost led to the meeting being broken up by his friends fighting with Washington's friends. Trotter was arrested for disturbing the peace. Towns sent a letter of support to Trotter that was published in the Guardian.

²⁰Bacote, Story of Atlanta University, pp. 213, 226, 422-23; Mrs. H. Nash, interview.

The letter applauded Trotter for his stand.

The survival of Atlanta University depended on the goodwill of white philanthropists who supported Washington's ideas. After Towns' letter was printed, the philanthropists put pressure on the school, and President Bumstead put pressure on Towns. It was finally decided that Towns would have to write a letter explaining away his radical letter to Trotter. He wrote three letters before the President accepted his efforts and had the faculty present a statement accepting the latter and letting Towns off with a warning to be careful in the future. The letter of apology written by Towns was not made public, but the faculty's statement was, and the situation passed.²¹

Towns' family life and friendships all reacted to, and were reacted on, by his connection with Atlanta University. In many ways, he was totally involved in his work at the University. A question can be raised as to what this involvement resulted in: what was Towns' accomplishment at Atlanta University?

²¹Stephen R. Fox, The Guardian of Boston: William Monroe Trotter (New York: Athenaeum, 1971), pp. 49-52, 61-63; Horace Bumstead to George A. Towns, November 5, 14; December 5, 1903; Faculty Minutes, December 5, 1903; Towns Collection, MTC A-C. Towns' friendship continued with Trotter. In 1934, Trotter had a physical collapse and was worried about his paper's success during his illness. Trotter's sister, Maurice Trotter Steward, wrote to Towns and asked him to write to Trotter to try to help him "regain his normalcy." Towns Collection, MTC S-Z, Folder "Maurice Trotter."

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

In considering Towns' career at Atlanta University, there are several areas to be covered. He was a student, teacher, coach, writer, fund raiser, and scholar. These activities overlapped to some extent, but it is possible to create a portrait of Towns' career by considering them in order.

Towns' primary duty for most of his time at the University was teaching. He considered this his most important, surpassed only by the raising of his own children. He adopted a method of teaching that appealed to his students and encouraged them to strive while not putting burdens on them that would make them feel they could not succeed.¹

As an athletic coach, he was able to apply the same technique to preparing a team for a game. In baseball, he produced championship teams over the years and brought out the best in his players. In football, he was not so successful after his first seasons, but he kept up his interest in the games and insisted that his players put

¹Mrs. H. Nash, interview.

forth their best efforts on the field. In all of this, he insisted on sportsmanship and character from the players.²

The debating teams Towns coached were all considered to be of high caliber. They had a forceful delivery and a grasp of the subject under debate that always impressed the people who heard them. Many of the debaters Towns coached went on to become successful lawyers or businessmen who were able to utilize this oratorical training.³

As editor of the Bulletin of Atlanta University and the Crimson and Gray, he worked to maintain a high standard for the writing permitted in these publications. In the Bulletin, he was the careful recorder of the events at the University; while in the Crimson and Gray, he was the cheerful friend to all the graduates and ex-students. In both, he tried to suit the form to the purpose of the work. As faculty advisor to the student editors of the Scroll, the student paper, he tried to develop this editorial ability in the students.⁴

His writing reflected this same concern. A piece written to students on proper conduct would not sound the same as a piece written to inform the Bulletin's readers

²Scroll, December 1902, p. 21.

³Bacote, Story of Atlanta University, p. 213.

⁴Mrs. H. H. Strong, interview.

about a school association meeting. He could vary his style to suit his need, but still be literate and distinctive.⁵

The amount he raised for the University on his fund raising trips was not great. He did bring back something else. His attempts to raise funds from his Harvard classmates and their acquaintances helped to spread knowledge about Atlanta University and about the education of Blacks to an influential section of the population. He also aided the dissemination of this knowledge in the Black community by his work with the alumni.⁶

These were not Towns' only accomplishments. He sang in the quartet; he coached track and tennis; he presented papers at professional meetings; and, he was a husband and father.⁷

Towns' activities were so varied that Mrs. H. H. Strong, Bursar in the Business Office for many years and one of his students, remembers him as acting in many ways as an unofficial assistant to the presidents of Atlanta University. Some at the University considered him brilliant but too versatile, attempting to do too much; but others, particularly

⁵Towns Collection, Folder "Literary Works."

⁶Towns Collection, Harvard Record. Folder "Harvard Class of 1900 Fund for Atlanta University"; Crimson and Gray, January 1929, p. 10.

⁷Towns Collection, MSS 6, Box 1, Folder "Biographical."

his students, were thoroughly impressed with his ability.⁸

The comparison between Towns and his one-time colleague, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, has occurred to many who knew both men. As has been said Du Bois was at Atlanta University from 1897 to 1910, and was present when Towns returned from Harvard. He returned to the University after Towns had left it. Persons who knew both Towns and Du Bois say that Du Bois was somewhat like the New England Yankees who were the first teachers at the University--rigid and ready to put forth his views no matter what the occasion, primarily a scholar and researcher. In contrast, Towns is remembered as being quiet, working peacefully and tranquilly, and interested in the students and in developing the institution.⁹

Towns ended his career at Atlanta University due to the development of the institution, development that changed the entire course of the school. For many years, the Black colleges of Atlanta had been attempting to come together in some cooperative plan in order to make better use of their resources. A plan was finally agreed upon that would bring Atlanta University, Morehouse College, and Spelman College together in what was called the Atlanta University Affiliation.

⁸Mrs. H. H. Strong, Rev. Samuel C. Usher, Thomas J. Henry, interviews.

⁹Mrs. H. H. Strong, Rev. Samuel C. Usher, interviews. Du Bois returned to the University in 1934 and left for the last time in 1944, Bacote, Story of Atlanta University, p. 289.

Under this plan, Atlanta University would become a graduate and professional school solely. All University college students already enrolled would be permitted to graduate as Atlanta University students, but no new undergraduates would be admitted after September 1929.¹⁰

Many teachers left the University when the undergraduate program closed. Towns was one of them. At the Sixtieth Commencement in June 1929, most of the departing teachers were given silver vases. However, Professor Edgar H. Webster was presented with a special gift; and, Towns was given a gold medal bearing the seal of the University for his twenty-five years as a successful debating coach.¹¹

In 1930, Towns became the principal of the Fort Valley Normal and Industrial School, a state supported training school for Blacks. After his retirement from this position he returned to Atlanta to live, where he was active in civic, social, and religious affairs. He died on December 20, 1960. He is memorialized by an elementary school that was named in his honor in 1963 in Atlanta, and by having been chosen one of the top ten alumni of Atlanta University in its Centennial Year.¹²

¹⁰BAU, June 1929, pp. 1-4.

¹¹Towns Collection, MSS 6, Box 1, "Biographical"; BAU, June 1929, pp. 4-5; Bacote, Story of Atlanta University, pp. 407-408.

¹²Towns Collection; Bacote, Story of Atlanta University, pp. 407-408.

After speaking of the outstanding alumni of the University and their accomplishments, Professor Bacote, in his Story of Atlanta University, makes the point that:

But as is true of the alumni of other institutions of higher learning, the vast majority of graduates and former students of Atlanta University are not people with national and international reputations. Yet, as a result of the training received at the University, they have built better communities around them, and have made a lasting impression on the lives of many people.¹³

Towns was this type of graduate. His reputation extended no further than those who were his ex-students could take in their memories; however, in the number and range of these ex-students and in the positive effect his teaching and example had on them, Towns built both a better community through them and left a lasting impression on their lives.

¹³Bacote, Story of Atlanta University, p. 425.

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