

# Review and reflection on apostles of self- help and independence book review

[Politics](#), [Civil Rights](#)



Ralph Reavis wrote *Apostles of Self-Help and Independence* as a history of the Virginia Seminary and College (since 1996 the Virginia University of Lynchburg) of which he has served as the current president since 2000. Like the majority of the university's past sixteen presidents, he is also one of its graduates. He has written works on Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement, and has taught at William and Mary and Howard Universities and the University of Richmond. Reavis defends the Seminary's tradition of autonomy and freedom from the control of white donors and institutions, which was a subject of major controversy during the institution's early years. During the period after the First Reconstruction, when the Seminary was founded in 1886, black civil rights and voting rights were being eliminated in the South and most blacks lived in extreme poverty. Given the segregated and highly unequal public educational system, few ever had the opportunity to graduate from high school, much less attend universities. Private schools and colleges for blacks were often funded by Northern churches and philanthropists, and if these groups had had their way, the Seminary would have been turned into another manual training school for blacks instead of offering courses to prepare black ministers and community leaders. President Gregory Hayes turned down a donation of a million dollars from the Home Mission society which would have turned the Seminary into a vocational school. Because of this, the Seminary was able to continue training ministers, as well as doctors, lawyers, teachers and other professionals, offering an education that was rated very highly and enrolling 300-400 students at any given time from the 1890s to the 1930s. It has continued this tradition of self-reliance and independence to the present, and

is regarded as one of the great pioneers of black higher education in U. S. history.

Reavis divides his book into chapters on the development of the self-help philosophy of the Seminary, followed by the controversies over its independence from white donors and churches from the 1880s to the 1920s, and then the involvement of many of its graduates in the civil rights movement and finally reflections on the role of the churches in an era of global capitalism. When it first offered classes in 1890 there were only about thirty students in one building, and very few blacks ever had the opportunity for higher education, not even one person in 5, 000. At the time, very few blacks even graduated from high school and the type of segregated education they obtained in the public schools was quite limited. Most whites simply thought that they were intellectual inferior and suited only for manual labor and agricultural tasks just as in the era of slavery. This was why after the end of slavery in 1865, blacks had been eager to establish their own schools and religious institutions, independent of white control for the first time in U. S., but this was extremely difficult given that they were overwhelmingly poor and had few economic resources. From the 1890s onward, though, the leaders of the Virginia Seminary chose to rely on donations from the black community rather than white churches, industrialists and philanthropists, and this gave them the autonomy to support civil rights struggles rather than accommodating to the status quo. Over the years, the seminary became one of the leading training grounds for leaders in the black church and community in Virginia, and indeed throughout the United States, without having to depend on wealthy,

conservative white ‘ benefactors’. Its leaders also believed that real social and political change would eventually have to come from below rather than simply waiting for it to happen as a result of gradualism from the elite level. During the period from the 1890s to the 1930s, black civil rights were at their nadir in the United States, and lynching, segregation and denial of the vote were the norm. Under pressure from the white donors who funded so many private black schools and universities at this time, many were forced to simply concentrate on training young blacks to own small businesses and farms, and to develop manual-technical skills. Many black leaders, including the founders of the Seminary, were unwilling to accommodate to a society in which blacks were denied basic citizenship. Like W. E. B. Du Bois they were strongly opposed to what really appeared to be an abject surrender to white supremacy. In this period after the first Reconstruction until the revival of the civil rights movement, however, the federal government was hardly an ally of blacks, who were therefore forced to develop various forms of self-help in the absence of any assistance from the larger society.

These events and controversies also affected the Virginia Seminary in the early decades, as its leaders sought independence and autonomy from white churches and philanthropic institutions. Its first president was Rev. Phillip F. Morris, who later became president of the National Baptist Convention. At the time when he first proposed the creation of a college to train black ministers, teachers and professionals at the Virginia Baptist State Convention in 1886, he was the minister at the Court Street Baptist Church in Lynchburg. At that time, the Convention appointed the attorney James Hayes to obtain a state charter, and two years later, authorized the establishment of the

college under the name of Lynchburg Baptist Seminary. Construction of the first building began in July 1888 and the first class was enrolled in January 1890. Although Morris had founded the Seminary, he was forced to resign as president in after the white-controlled American Baptist Home Mission Society demanded that he either give up the presidency or step down as pastor from his church in Lynchburg.

Under the presidency of Gregory Hayes in 1891-1906, white Northern donors demanded that the Seminary specialize mainly in technical and agricultural subjects. Hayes refused and gave back the funds to the philanthropists rather than surrender control of the school of compromise its independence as a college for ministers. Accommodationists and separatists carried the controversy into the National Baptist Convention, which split over the issue of the Seminary's future. In the end, though, it retained its independence and rejected white domination. Hayes remained president until his death in 1906, and firmly established the principles of self-help and independence from white donors and institutions that has continued to the present. Under the administration of his successor and student, Robert C. Woods, the College continued to adhere to this philosophy and added new buildings as well as doubling student enrollment to over 600.

Reavis is correct that the black struggle to develop autonomous and independent institutions of all kinds has been a long and difficult one, and that given their high levels of poverty they had to struggle greatly to maintain any colleges and universities to train their future leaders. Until fairly recent times few white institutions ever admitted black students and the entire education system was segregated. In black America, the churches

became the most important organizations that were not under the control of whites, and as the history of the Seminary indicates, even here Northern white 'philanthropists' attempted to take control of it and turn it into a school for mechanics and machine operators. This would have meant that it could never have become an important training ground for future black religious and political leaders who took part in the civil rights movement. It still has a mission today, only a more global one, given the widespread poverty and injustice that Africans still face, both in the Americas and overseas, while Africa is still being heavily exploited by the imperial powers and large corporate interests. For blacks in the U. S., it took over a century of struggle to gain even the most basic civil and voting rights, and they have not yet obtained equal opportunity in education and social and economic life. For these reasons, then, they most certainly need independent institutions like the Virginia Seminary which will not simply accommodate passively to the status quo.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Reavis, Ralph. *Apostles of Self-Help Independence: Chronicles of History.* African-American Publishers of Virginia, 1999.