

A Guide to the
JAMES DALLAS BURRUS COLLECTION, 1827- 1929
Fisk University Archives

Processed by Uzoma Miller, Archival Assistant
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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Born sometime in 1846 near Murfreesboro, Tennessee of a slave mother and her master, James Dallas Burrus was the oldest of three children from this union that also produced John and Preston Burrus. Immediately prior to the Civil War, the Burrus boys' father died, and their status along with their mother's as slaves was to change because of contents found in the father's will that granted his entire estate to his "slave wife." However, a Murfreesboro court did not recognize the claims, and the mother and her children became the property of their paternal uncle. As the war commenced, the boys worked within the Confederate ranks as personal body guards, while their mother served as cook. They traveled throughout Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas, and experienced first-hand the impact of Confederate activity, while maintaining Union sentiment as slaves themselves. Notwithstanding, as the war concluded, the family ended up back in the Murfreesboro area, and settled in the Nashville area as the Reconstruction era began.

The mother of the Burrus boys would prove to have a major impact on the future of Fisk. While cooking in local Nashville boarding homes, she also took underprivileged youth under her wing as her sons worked as waiters to save money to attend school. James Burrus also taught in primary and secondary schools for African- Americans in Goodlettsville, Tennessee, and parts of Arkansas to supplement his income. Ultimately, James and John Burrus, along with Virginia Eliza Walker and America Robinson, graduated in the first university class of Fisk in 1875, making them the first blacks to graduate from a liberal arts college south of the Mason and Dixon line. It is also important to note that Susan Harris Love, a former homeless child taken under the wing of the mother of the Burrus boys, graduated in the first Normal Department class of Fisk. Moreover, James Burrus secured a M.A. in mathematics from Dartmouth College, 1879, becoming the first African- American to receive a Master of Arts degree from an accredited institution in America. Accordingly, he also became the first African-American faculty member at Fisk in 1875, where he taught mathematics both before, and after completion of his M.A. requirements. He secured the rank of full professor in 1881.

Burrus' educational talents and commitment to higher education of the newly emancipated and former slaves in America led him to take a leadership post with the mathematics department at Alcorn Agricultural & Mechanical College, Rodney, Mississippi, approximately thirty miles from the famous river city of Vicksburg in 1882. Along with his brother John, who served as Alcorn president from 1883- 1891, the Burrus brothers for nearly a decade provided critical leadership in steering this institution, guided significantly from the valued lessons experienced at Fisk. Realizing the great demand for wealth acquisition in African- American's quest for quality education, James Burrus joined brothers John, and Preston back in Nashville, and until his death engaged in entrepreneurial work. Initially they established a drug store on Cedar St. before investing further into the real estate field. From savings generated through such endeavors, James Dallas Burrus left his \$120, 000 estate to Fisk when he died on December 5, 1928.

SCOPE AND CONTENT

The James Dallas Burrus Collection makes up two boxes, and consists of eight series: **Biographical Material; Artifacts; Correspondence; Photographs; Publications; Receipts; Recommendations; and Miscellaneous.** The **Artifacts** series is divided into six subseries: **Billfold; Business Cards; Buttons; Currency; Eyeglasses; and Plant Stems.** The **Correspondence** series is comprised of two subseries: **Burrus, James Dallas** and one of his two brothers, **Burrus, John Houston.** The **Photographs** are comprised of nine subseries: **Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College; Bunyan, John; Burrus Brothers; Fisk, Clinton B.; Hayward, Claudius; Jubilee Singers; Types of Dress; Von Seutter, E.V.; and Unidentified.** The **Publications** series is comprised of five subseries: **Clippings; Informational Bulletins; Journals; Marketing Calendar, and Musical Scores.** In addition, the **Recommendations** series consists of two subseries: **Chamberlin, Mary E., and Ogden, John.**

Series I: Biographical Material

The **Biographical Material** contained consists of a hand- written "A Reminiscence of James Dallas Burrus," by M.W. Adams, a copy of his obituary written by his brother Preston Burrus, and an unidentified partial clipping documenting Burrus' tutelage under dean Adam K. Spence while a student at Fisk.

Series II: Artifacts

The collection is rich in **Artifacts**, both physical remains and in paper form. They are arranged alphabetically, and contain a leather **Billfold; Business Cards** of the Burrus Brothers, James, John, and Preston; Confederate States of America **Buttons**; paper and coin forms of **Currency** from various foreign countries including Haiti, Ireland, and Spain, as well as inside the country with examples from the Southern United States, and the Confederate States of America during the Civil War. In addition, the series holds a pair of wire rimmed **Eye Glasses**, and **Plant Stems** identified from the Battlefield of Culloden, the last military battle fought on British soil between Irish highlanders, referred to as Jacobites, and the British Army on April 16, 1746.

Series III: Correspondence

The **Correspondence** contains two subseries; **Burrus, James Dallas,** and **Burrus, John Houston.** The series is arranged alphabetically, and documents important interaction between Burrus and such important historical personas as Stanley Pope, president of the American Missionary Association, and Hiram Rhoads Revels, the first African- American senator in United States history, 1870- 1871, and president of Alcorn Agricultural & Mechanical College, 1871- 1874, 1876- 1882, the immediate predecessor of Burrus' brother John who assumed the vacant Alcorn presidency in 1882. Researchers interested in the context of Historically Black Colleges in the United States, and the dynamics that contributed to shaping them will find this **Correspondence** useful.

Series IV: Photographs

Any research conducted on the establishment of Alcorn Agricultural & Mechanical College in 1871, and its subsequent evolution into the 1880s, will find the **Photographs** most valuable because of their documentation of buildings, faculty, and students. Also documented in the **Photographs** are images of historical figures, and relics, including seventeenth century English religious writer John Bunyan's cottage and monument in Bedford, Massachusetts; Clinton B. Fisk, co-founder of Fisk University; and the Jubilee Singers, preservers of the Negro Spirituals as an art form in the 1870s. Images of John and James Burrus appear as well, whereas additional unidentified ones provide possible clues into potential family members, and friends.

Series V: Publications

Useful documents are found in the **Publications** series. They are arranged by medium, and function. Unidentified copies of a newspaper announcement by president Revels of the opening dates for Alcorn's 1882 academic year, and the musical score *Elijah: An Oratorio*, by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy; a 1929 copy of *The Amistad: A Journal of Good News*; and promotional material from Fisk, 1904, and under the Thomas Elsa Jones administration, respectively, all appear. *The Amistad* contains substantial evidential value regarding African- American Congregational Churches, and educational institutions of American Missionary Association origin, as well as informational value that relates to the historically African- American district of Auburn Avenue, Atlanta, Georgia, where it was published.

Series VI: Receipts

Two financial records of publication orders are found in the **Receipts** series. A 1917 subscription of the N.A.A.C.P., and W.E.B. DuBois edited *Crisis*, and book orders from Texas Agricultural & Mechanical College, document Burrus' partial sources of information, and his interplay with white land grant institutions while teaching mathematics at Alcorn.

Series VII: Recommendations

First and second grade evaluations of two students, and evaluations from 1868 and 1869 of James Burrus by John Ogden, co-founder of Fisk, and first principal, are documented in the **Recommendations** series. They are arranged alphabetically by instructor's name.

Series VIII: Miscellaneous

Documents that did not thematically fit within the previous series are found in the **Miscellaneous** series. Such records include an Alcorn Agricultural & Mechanical College stationary envelope, and scratch notes including ones regarding letters to Jubilee Singers director George L. White.

BOX LIST

Box Folder

Series I: Biographical Material

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|---|---|--|
| 1 | 1 | "A Reminiscence of James Dallas Burrus," by M.W. Adams, n.d. |
| | 2 | "Obituary," by Preston Burrus, n.d. |
| | 3 | Unidentified |

Series II: Artifacts

Subseries I: Billfold

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|---|------|
| 4 | 1875 |
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Subseries II: Business Cards

- | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| 5 | Burrus Brothers, C.H. Tumey, n.d. |
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Subseries III: Buttons

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| 6 | Confederate States of America, n.d. |
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Subseries IV: Currency

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| 7 | Canadian, n.d. |
| 8 | Confederate States of America, 1861- 1865 |
| 9 | Foreign Countries Unidentified, 1877; 1878; 1879; 1881; 1884; 1888; n.d. |
| 10 | Haitian, 1827 |
| 11 | Ireland, n.d. |
| 12 | Southern United States, 1850's, n.d. |
| 13 | Spanish, n.d. |

Subseries V: Eyeglasses

- | | |
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| 14 | n.d. |
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Subseries VI: Plant Stems

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| 15 | From Battle Field of Culloden, n.d. |
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Series III: Correspondence

Subseries I: Burrus, James Dallas

- | | |
|----|------------------------------|
| 16 | Hayward, Silvans, 1882 |
| 17 | Hoffman, J.W., 1889 |
| 18 | Holmes, B.M., 1874 |
| 19 | Mc Adams, J.O., 1893, 1894 |
| 20 | Montgomery, M.J., 1882, 1883 |
| 21 | Pope, Stanley, 1882 |

- 22 Revels, Hiram Rhoads, 1882
- 23 Steward, A., 1875
- 24 Unidentified

Subseries II: Burrus, John Houston

- 25 Burrus, James Dallas, 1894
- 26 St. Taphorn, H., 1894
- 27 Williams, W., 1885

Series IV: Photographs

Subseries I: Alcorn Agricultural & Mechanical College

- 28 Chapel, Dormitories, Faculty, President's Home, Senior Class, n.d.

Subseries II: Bunyan, John

- 29 Cottage, Monument, n.d.

Subseries III: Burrus Brothers

- 30 n.d.

Subseries IV: Fisk, Clinton B.

- 31 n.d.

Subseries V: Hayward, Claudius

- 32 Home, Self-Portrait, 1877, n.d.

Subseries VI: Jubilee Singers

- 33 n.d.

Subseries VII: Types of Dress

- 34 South Holland, Undertaker, n.d.

Subseries VIII: Von Seutter, E.V. (Photographer of Collection Photographs)

- 35 Ivy Cottage Residence, n.d.

Subseries IX: Unidentified

- 36 n.d.

Series V: Publications

Subseries I: Clippings

- 2 1 "The Next Session of Alcorn A & M College Will Commence Wednesday September 13, 1882," Unidentified

Subseries II: Informational Bulletins

2 "Fisk and the Race's Future," by Thomas Elsa Jones, n.d.

Subseries III: Journals

3 *The Amistad: A Journal of Good News*, Vol. VI, No. 5, May 1929

Subseries IV: Marketing Calendar

4 "Fisk University 1904," Unidentified

Subseries V: Musical Scores

5 *Elijah: An Oratorio*, by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, n.d.

Series VI: Receipts

6 *Crisis* Subscription, 1917

7 Texas State Agricultural & Mechanical College Book Purchases,
1891, 1892

Series VII: Recommendations

Subseries I: Chamberlin, Mary E.

8 n.d.

Subseries II: Ogden, John

9 1868, 1869

Series VIII: Miscellaneous

10 Alcorn Stationary, Scratch Notes, n.d.