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A Student Without Peer: The Undergraduate College Years of Paul Robeson

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PART I

In recent years an ever increasing number of black students have become conscious of the plight of their people. This conscientiousness has been accompanied by a commitment to social change which has involved young Blacks, men and women from somewhat affluent as well as poor backgrounds, residing in Northern urban centers and Southern rural regions. For example, students are as eager to know the scholastic and academic achievements of men like Arthur Ashe, Tommy Smith, Bill Russell, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Jim Brown, O. J. Simpson, Muhammad Ali, Roberto Clemente, and Curt Flood as they are to praise their superior sportsmanship. Many black people today are as familiar with the socio-political positions these men have taken and their subsequent influence on the black community as they are with their outstanding athletic accomplishments.

Over fifty years ago, another black student, Paul Robeson, began championing the cause of his people. At the turn of the century, the victimization of the black man was no less apparent than it is today. However, the forms of that exploitation were manifested differently than they are today. Consequently, the attack on racism (to some degree a function of how African Americans defined the problem of race relations) took a different approach from the methods used by today's students. It reflected the thought and beliefs of the black men of the age. For many Blacks, the idea prevailed that they must demonstrate in every way possible that they were human beings worthy of respect and equality. The belief that a black man had to be literally ten times better than a white man, when he acquired a position usually reserved for whites, was based more on the reality of contemporary race relations than on the myth of "equal opportunity." It is in this context that we must look at the early years of this young black student, trying

* I wish to thank Mr. William Miller, Director of the Archives, the Rutgers University Library and Mr. Richard Earl of the Alumni Association, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey for their open and generous assistance in making available material necessary in researching this topic. A note of appreciation goes to Mr. Michael Martin, Director of Special Services, Hunter College Harlem Education Center, and Ms. Esther Silver of The Black Economic Research Center, New York, for their careful reading of the paper and helpful suggestions. I am also indebted to Mrs. Gladys Hartman for her typing assistance in the preparation of this article.

as best he could to confront the world that surrounded him. This episode remains a remarkable and brilliant accomplishment unduplicated in the history of Rutgers University.

The earliest signs of Paul Leroy Robeson's political expression began when he was a student. Throughout primary and secondary school he had excelled scholastically and displayed singular athletic promise. Graduating from high school in Somerville, New Jersey, he received an academic scholarship to Rutgers, the State University. Like Princeton, which barred all black admission, Rutgers tried very hard to discourage Blacks from coming to the school.² Until 1915, only two Afro-Americans had ever attended Rutgers. Paul was the third to enter the University, and he would be the only black student there between 1915–1919.

Paul's father, William Robeson, taught him to understand that everything he did (or anything any black man did for that matter) would reflect on the image of the black community. Therefore, Paul was counseled to do his best in all his work. Paul's contribution as a college student to the struggle for black rights would be made in two ways. First, his sportsmanship on the athletic field and his scholarship in the lecture halls would be his own direct confrontation with those who practiced racism. Second, the example and performance of Paul himself would threaten, if but briefly, the credibility of stereotypes so often used by whites as excuses for keeping black people down.

The legendary career of Paul Robeson in college sports is perhaps one of the most widely related episodes of his early life. Some highlights are worth recalling because it is on the athletic field that he displayed remarkable superiority over white players—and this in spite of every discouragement.³ His father had raised him well, giving him a sense of quiet self-confidence which, bereft of cockiness or arrogance, he would retain long after leaving college and gaining international fame. He did not fear whites, and he lacked much of that somewhat intuitive, yet too often, justified suspicion which leads most Blacks to distrust and expect only the worst at all times from whites. He was a big, healthy, physically fit fellow who treated others kindly and always tried to think the best of everyone. In fact, one finds it difficult to believe that Paul could maintain such a kind, charitable disposition toward people who, as we shall see, were so blatant in their attempts to hurt and maim him.

From the very outset, racist Rutgers students showed brutal opposition to him. No matter what kind of fellow Paul was or how talented he might be, they did not want a "nigger" on their "lily white" team. So they intimidated him and fought hard to prevent him from joining the team. Robeson would later relate at least one incident which vividly exposed the type of harassment he encountered and fought.

² Rutgers was founded by the Dutch Reformed Church, a church which is today the State religion of the Republic of South Africa. This church still exercised a great deal of influence over Rutgers during Robeson's student days.

³ George Fishman, "Paul Robeson's Student Days and the Fight Against Racism at Rutgers," *Freedomways*, IX (Summer 1969), 221-229.

I was 17 years old when that happened and had gone down from Princeton, where I grew up, to Rutgers. I was a freshman trying to make the football team. Rutgers had a great team that year, but the boys—well—they didn't want a Negro on their team, they just didn't want me on it.

Later, they became my friends, but every word of this is true, and though they are my friends I think they won't mind me telling it. On the first day of scrimmage they set about making sure that I wouldn't get on their team. One boy slugged me in the face and smashed my nose, just smashed it. That's been a trouble to me as a singer everyday since. And then when I was down, flat on my back, another boy got me with his knee, just came over and fell on me. He managed to dislocate my right shoulder.

Well, that night I was a very, very sorry boy. Broken nose, shoulder thrown out, and plenty of other cuts and bruises. I didn't know whether I could take any more. Seventeen years old, it was tough going for that age. But my father—my father was born in slavery in 1843 (sic) down in North Carolina, no education and all his life he'd worked hard—was a good man, and a strong man. He had impressed upon me that when I was out on a football field or in a classroom or anywhere else I wasn't there just on my own. I was the representative of a lot of Negro boys who wanted to play football and wanted to go to college, and, as their representative, I had to show that I could take whatever was handed out.

Well, I didn't know, my brother came to see me, and he said "kid, I know what it is, I went through it at Pennsylvania. If you want to quit school go ahead, but I wouldn't like to think, and our father wouldn't like to think that our family had a quitter in it."

So I stayed. I had ten days in bed, a few days at the training table and then out for another scrimmage. I made a tackle and was on the ground, my right hand palm down on the ground. A boy came over and stepped, hard, on my hand. He meant to break the bones. The bones held but his cleats took every single one of the finger nails off my right hand! That's when I knew rage!

The next play came around my end, the whole first string back-field came at me. I swept out my arms—like this—and the three men running interference went down, they first went down. The ball carrier was a first-class back named Kelly. I wanted to kill him, and I meant to kill him. It wasn't just a feeling, to kill. I got Kelly in my two hands and I was going to smash him so hard to the ground that I'd break him right in two, and I could have done it. But just then the coach yelled, the first thing came to his mind, he yelled: "Robey you're on the varsity!"⁴

Thus, Robeson made it clear from the outset that he was not going to be pushed around. He had a purpose and had refused to be deterred from it.

Paul believed in and practiced fair play. Harboring no grudges, he wrestled with himself to view men solely on their individual merits. His father imbued him with

⁴ Robert Van Gelder, "Robeson Remembers, 'An Interview with the Star of Othello,' Partly about His Past," *New York Times*, January 16, 1944, Sec. 2, p. 1. Also see Eslanda Robeson's *Paul Robeson Negro*, pp. 36-38, for an account of this incident and the *Rutgers Alumni Monthly*, November 1930, p. 44.

an optimism about the nature of man which permitted no unforgiving vengeance toward anyone. There would be times when he had to straighten out people and deal forcefully with their racism. At the same time Paul enjoyed living, loved life and the people in it. Perhaps this somewhat explains his magnanimous attitude towards teammates who, years later, he would call his friends. Naively, this young man thought they were initially antagonistic toward him personally because he was a newcomer, not just because he was Black. He was determined to make them accept him.⁵

In spite of the opposition, Paul played exceptional football. The school press said, "This was the beginning of an athletic career without equal."⁶ From the very outset his playing on the team undoubtedly put Rutgers in the winners' column.⁷ Although sports accounts generally, and especially in school newspapers, tend to exaggerate athletic events, it can be accurately stated that Robeson, as much as any sports figure, lived up to his press notices. Typical of the comments of sports writers covering his performances in a game was one which stated that, "The only medium resulting in any substantial gain was forward passing engineered by Kelly and received by Robeson."⁸ After being placed on Rutgers Football Honor Roll, citations for him declared:

Robeson is the first of all ends. . . . He not only met all the requirements of a first rate end, but also he proved a most valuable asset to the team as a defensive back⁹

In a short time Robeson probably became the major element transforming Rutgers into a formidable foe in collegiate athletics.¹⁰

Being the most valuable asset on the team, Robeson encouraged cooperation and instilled confidence in all his fellow teammates. He, with the assistance of another colleague, once saved the life of a third teammate who, chasing a football, fell over the edge of a fifty foot cliff into the Raritan River.¹¹

Nevertheless, discrimination against Robeson continued. The height of insults occurred when Rutgers played Washington and Lee University at Rutgers. Washington and Lee refused to have black players on its team and declined to play

⁵ Jerome Beatty, "America's No. 1 Negro," *The American Magazine*, CXXX-VII (May, 1944), 29.

⁶ *Rutgers Daily Targum* (hereafter cited as *Targum*), L (June, 1919), 566.

⁷ "Robeson Carried the Ball 10 Yards," *The New Brunswick Daily Home News* (hereafter cited as *Daily Home News*), October 30, 1916, p. 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, September 15, 1916, p. 12.

⁹ *Targum*, December 19, 1917, p. 282.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 273. Also see *Targum*, December 19, 1917, p. 276, for further accounts.

¹¹ "Of People and Things," *New Brunswick, Sunday Home News*, (hereafter cited as *Sunday Times*) October 16, 1966, Rutgers University Archives, uncatalogued Robeson file. The story is about James M. Burke, then editor and publisher of the *New Jersey Legislative News*, Trenton. "Burke was given up for dead when he plunged off the bank of the Raritan Canal and landed unconscious in the stream 50 feet below. . . . He was on his way to Neilson Field from the dressing quarters in Baltimore Gym when the accident happened and if it hadn't been for Paul Robeson and Cleff Baker. Rutgers teammates, he would surely have perished. . . . 'Big Robey raced down in football gear, plunged into the water and hauled me out. Baker was at his side and they quickly revived me. I had been given up for a goner by others who had witnessed my plunge from the cliff. . . . I always said I owe my life to Robey and Baker,' Burke often declared."

any teams having black players. The decision soon arose as to whether Rutgers would comply and play Washington and Lee as scheduled, or would they bench Robeson for this game and play the Maryland school without him. Coach Sandord of Rutgers elected to follow the latter alternative, and “good old” Rutgers remained faithful to the racist tradition. Robeson was sacrificed. Without Robeson the team failed to win. The best they could do was settle for a 13–13 tie. It seemed as though fate intervened to serve the team well.

Being benched was a humiliating blow to the black athlete who had made almost all the season’s victories possible for the team. Only a few Rutgers people seemed more than mildly upset at this event. But Afro-Americans were outraged.

One infuriated Black was James Carr, the first black graduate of Rutgers, class of 1892. Carr, an attorney for the city of New York Law Department, Bureau for the Recovery of Penalties, upon hearing about this event nearly two years after it occurred, wrote the President of Rutgers a heated letter denouncing the attitude of official authority for not allowing Robeson to play. Carr contended that Rutgers had “prostituted her sacred principles—when they were brazenly challenged, and laid her convictions upon the altar of compromise.”¹² He went on to ask, “Shall men, whose progenitors tried to destroy this Union, be permitted to make a mockery of our democratic ideals by robbing a youth, whose progenitors helped to save the Union, of that equality of opportunity and privilege that should be the crowning glory of our institutions of learning?”¹³ Being “deeply moved at this injustice done,” Carr asserted, “Not only he, individually, but his race as well, was deprived of the opportunity of showing its atheletic ability, and, perhaps, its athletic superiority.”¹⁴

Paul went on to become the greatest athlete in Rutgers’ history and one of the finest super stars ever to play in collegiate athletics. Through his unequalled sportsmanship alone, he did more for Rutgers than the school would ever be able to repay in return. In time, he would be described as the “one who has carried the name of Rutgers to the heights.”¹⁵

Of the four sports in which he participated (football, basketball, baseball, track and field), he loved football the most, and it is here that his superiority went unchallenged. In his junior year (1917–1918 season) Robeson was applauded by Walter Camp, the famous sports writer, often referred to as the “Dean” if not the “Father” of American football, and named to the All-American Football team.¹⁶ It is ironic that, although the first college football game ever played was held at Rutgers in 1869, Rutgers had never produced an All-American in football. It would take Robeson to bring them this national recognition, a singular distinction indeed,

¹² Letter, James D. Carr to President William H. S. Demarest, of Rutgers University, June 6, 1919, pp. 1, 2, Rutgers University, Archives, uncatalogued Robeson files.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Targum, November 9, 1935, p. 4.

¹⁶ Peter M. Bergman, *The Chronological History of the Negro in America* (New York: Harper & Row Pub., 1969), p. 384.

for Robeson was the first player ever to be named All-American in any sport at Rutgers.

Rutgers had a good team during the 1917 season, but Robeson's performance was phenomenal. Walter Camp, time and again, seemed to single out Robeson in his football columns. Describing the game against Pittsburgh he wrote, "I believe MacLaren (the star player at Pitt) would gain for a time, but I also believe that Robeson would get him a bit and that MacLaren could carry the work required of him a long game against Sanford's line with the backing up of Robeson."¹⁷

There was recorded a big game, pitting Rutgers against the Naval Reserve at Ebbets Field. The Reserves had demolished everyone they played for example, Maine 39-0 and Brown 35-0. Their success lay in the fact that it was a team composed of experienced all-stars from football powerhouses across the nation for example: Barrett of Cornell, Gerrish of Dartmouth, Callahan of Yale, Schlachter of Syracuse, and others. They were All-Americans, and they were coached by the famous Dr. Bull of Yale.¹⁸ On this occasion the Naval Reserves experienced a sampling of the many spectacular performances Robeson would give throughout his athletic career.

One cause of Newport's undoing lay in the giant Robeson, at Rutgers left end. If this gentleman had only been content to confine himself to the extreme wing of Sanford's line, much of Newport's troubles would have been materially modified. But he wandered incontinently all over the field until the Newport team began to believe that there were, at least, eleven Robesons, and their horizon was obscured by him. . . . When Newport had the ball, Robeson's secondary defense in backing up in time smeared the whole Newport attack even when it seemed to have a chance.¹⁹

It was said that spectators could not believe what they had witnessed. Paul had demonstrated, with a doubt, his All-American ability. Needless to say, Rutgers won the game, 14-0.²⁰

The graduating class yearbook of 1918 seemed to have more to say honoring Robeson, who was just a junior, than about anyone else in the school.

For the first time in the history of athletics at Rutgers, this year there were three "four 'R' men"—Wittpenn, Robeson, and Breckley. All three have won the coveted "R" in football, basketball, track and baseball. . . . 'Robey' has yet another year in which to play on Rutgers' teams. Last season he was the center of interest in football circles, being ranked on many All American teams.²¹

¹⁷ Targum, December 19, 1917, p. 279.

¹⁸ Rutgers Athletic News, October 4, 1969, p. 12. Also see Paul L. Robeson, "Review of the 1917 Football Season," Rutgers Alumni Quarterly, IV (January 1918), 71-72. This article was later reprinted in George J. Lukac (ed.), *Aloud to Alma Mater* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1966), pp. 121-127.

¹⁹ Targum, December 19, 1917, p. 278.

²⁰ Rutgers Athletic News, October 4, 1969, p. 12.

²¹ Targum, June 1918, p. 729.

When Rutgers whipped the hardhitting formerly undefeated Fordham team 28-0, Paul had one of his best games. The *Rutgers Athletic News* stated that, "He didn't score but his defensive play at left end demolished the Fordham attack."²² Against Navy similar feats were recorded. "And as a thorn in her flesh, the tall, towering Robeson commanding Rutgers secondary, dived under and spilled her wide oblique angle runs, turned back her line plunges and carried the burden of the defense so splendidly that in 44 minutes those Ex-All American backs, who are fixed luminaries in the mythology of the gridiron, made precisely two first downs."²³

Robeson starred in three other sports and excelled in all of them. By the time he graduated he had amassed eleven varsity letters. On the track team, he participated in field events. A meet against Swarthmore yielded:

In this contest he hurdled the javelin 137 feet 5 inches, 12 feet better than his nearest competitor. The strange part is that this throw was made against a fairly strong wind. What would have happened to the javelin if "Robey" had been throwing with the wind?²⁴

In the same meet he won the discus throw, with a toss of 114 feet 10 inches. During the 1919 track season he was the third highest point getter for the team.²⁵ Playing the catcher position on the baseball squad, he directed the team to many victories. He had helped to engineer perhaps the most sought after prize by Rutgers' teams, the long awaited victory over Princeton on the evening of his graduation. In basketball he demonstrated natural talent and played every position as the necessity arose.²⁶ His broad shouldered six foot three inch frame enabled him to practically dominate the game. The school newspaper praised him as "one of the leading guards in the east, being a powerful force in defense and a mighty aid when on the offense."²⁷

Singlehandedly, Paul Robeson seemed to have destroyed the myth of black physical and athletic inferiority—at least around the banks of the old Raritan. Yet with praise constantly being bestowed upon him, the young man remained unassuming. At the end of his third year, he was asked to give an account of the 1917-18 football season and the strong undefeated Rutgers' team, which registered impressive victories against such competition as the great Eddie Mahan's Marines at Philadelphia, mighty Syracuse, and Fordham.²⁸ His candid description provided some insights into the success of the team during the first of his two All-American years, but his modesty in not mentioning his own contribution to the team did not give a true picture of what really took place. Clearly Paul Robeson was the most important factor bringing success to the team. In Walter Camp's words, he

²² *Rutgers Athletic News*, October 4, 1969, p. 12.

²³ *The Scarlet Letter*, Rutgers University Yearbook, 1919, p. 167.

²⁴ *Targum*, June 1919, p. 573.

²⁵ *Rutgers Alumni Quarterly*, V (July 1919), 329.

²⁶ *Targum*, June 1919, p. 566.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, June 1918, p. 729.

²⁸ Paul Robeson, "Review of the 1917 Football Season," pp. 69-75.

was "the greatest defensive back ever to trod the gridiron."²⁹ Many heaped praises on him. Fellow schoolmates cheered his name in poetry and song.³⁰

Because he was outstanding in everything he did, he was a hot news item. The local school and New Brunswick paper could not write enough about him.³¹ Being their very own celebrity, the papers jumped at every opportunity to monopolize all news pertaining to him. Anticipating some new feat everytime he competed, the reports followed him everywhere. Sport fans throughout the country raved over this heralded black star who seemed to be only able to win. "Paul LeRoy Robeson became a Rutgers institution."³²

At the conclusion of his college career the *New York Times* wrote:

One of the greatest all around athletes developed in recent years will be lost to collegiate sports when Paul Robeson, the giant Negro, closes his term at Rutgers this month.

Throughout the years spent at Rutgers, Robeson has been a star among college athletes. For the past two years he has been, perhaps, the greatest player in collegiate football, while he has won his points with the weights consistently, a match for the best in basketball and a real Varsity man in baseball.³³

Even with all these accolades, he remained modest. His only public comments would resemble the one made sometime later:

My friends said a lot of silly things. . . . You know this business of Negro prejudice has two sides. When people hate you they go crazy. But when they like you they sometimes go a little crazy too. In football days I got more praise than any white player. And I was credited with a lot of plays I never made. . . . So it is with many white folks when they first "discover" a Negro.³⁴

Later, when Paul was voted one of the "All Time All American College Elevens," the praise lavished on him in earlier years proved to be, by no measure over generous.³⁵

PART II

Although Paul Robeson's sportsmanship was a masterful demonstration of superior athletic prowess, unparalleled by any student yet to attend Rutgers, his scholarship was equally, if not more, impressive. There were three other seniors who achieved four varsity letters in 1919, but Paul was the only one ever to do this and at the same time be a member of the prestigious Phi Beta Kappa Honor

²⁹ Targum, October 30, 1935, p. 1 and Edward Lawson, "Robey Comes Home," *The Anthologist*, Rutgers University, January 1932, p. 23.

³⁰ *Scarlet Letter*, 1919, p. 83.

³¹ Targum, December 19, 1917, p. 285.

³² Lawson, "Robey Comes Home," p. 7.

³³ *New York Times*, June 15, 1919, Sec. 2, p. 4.

³⁴ Edwin R. Embree, *13 Against the Odds* (New York: Viking Press, 1944), p. 253. Also see *Sunday Times*, May 22, 1932, p. 17 on Robeson's modesty.

³⁵ *The New York Sun*, April 8, 1927, p. 39.

Society.³⁶ His school work always took precedence over his sports activities, and the scholastic average he compiled was one of the highest in the class. The philosophy explaining why he worked hard to achieve the highest grades possible in all his courses can be found in a statement Robeson would make some years later:

The pressing need of the American Negro is an ability to set his own standards. At school, at university, at law school, it didn't matter to me whether white students passed me or I passed them. What mattered was if I got 85 marks, *why didn't I get 100?* If I got 99, *why didn't I get 100?* "To thine own self be true" is a sentiment sneered at, today as merely Victorian—but upon its observance may well depend the future nations and peoples.³⁷

Manifesting an insatiable intellectual appetite, he easily devoured material some believe boring or others found too painfully difficult to deal with. There was no surprise when he became a member of "Cap and Skull," the pre-eminent exclusive honor society for Rutgers' seniors.

Paul loved forensics and debating, and he was a master in elocution contests. He relished public speaking because it was a way in which he could present in open forum those too often disregarded political views of the black community. Here people had to listen to the views and problems of his people about which he spoke. Debating was especially exciting because here he met some of the best minds from other schools. Everyone could see him pit his ideas from a black perspective against the views of others. Knowing that the success of the debater did not necessarily validate the debater's ideas, he nevertheless understood that winning in debate competition gave a great deal of credibility to the debater's views. If he was a successful debater, he might be able to change men's minds and perhaps influence their actions. It was through persuasion that he felt he could get white men to stop brutalizing black men. Even if he lost in competition, his ideas had been voiced and his opponents' argument challenged. His ideas, he hoped, would encourage other college students and their professors to seek to oppose America's racism.

Interest in oratory went back to the influence of his father, who was an eloquent minister. Paul was a prize debater in his high school, and in the spring of his senior year he participated in a statewide oratorical contest. This is perhaps one of the first known occasions in which Paul attempted publicly to present a political message. He delivered Wendell Phillips' well-known oration on Toussaint L'Ouverture, which was originally made in the first year of the Civil War, before Northern white audiences. In it Phillips made a vitriolic attack on white supremacy, which Paul elocuted forcefully and passionately:

Here was the fiery Toussaint speaking to the blacks whom he had led in a victorious rebellion and against whom Napoleon was sending General Leclerc

³⁶ *Rutgers Alumni Quarterly*, V (April 1919), 230-31. Although he had been named the previous year, Robeson's induction ceremony, which took place April 22, 1919, also marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Alpha Chapter at Rutgers.

³⁷ Paul Robeson, "I Want To Be African," in E. G. Cousins (ed.), *What I Want From Life* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd. Pub., 1934), p. 76.

with 30,000 troops: "My children, France comes to make us slaves. God gave us liberty; France has no right to take it away. Burn the cities, destroy the harvests, tear up the roads with lannon, poison the wells, show the white man the hell he comes to make!"³⁸

The predominantly white audience seemed unprepared for so meaningful a presentation from a sixteen-year-old. Having been placed last among the three contestants, Paul felt that he was being discriminated against.

Success in oratorical contests depends on how well the speaker can execute his material. Paul may have had difficulties in high school, but he seldom lost in college. During his four years at Rutgers he astounded the university by winning every major elocution contest he entered. "He is an orator of exceptional ability, having won first prize in every speaking competition at college for which he was eligible."³⁹ He won the Freshman Prize in oratory and a First in the sophomore extemporaneous competition.⁴⁰ The speech on "Loyalty and the American Negro," in which Robeson expounded upon the part Afro-Americans played in past wars, held his audience spellbound. This won him first prize in third year extemporaneous speaking.⁴¹ When he delivered "The War's Effect on American Manhood," the topic of the following year's speech, he walked away with first place in the highly valued, very competitive, senior Ann Van Nest Bussing Prize in extempore speaking.⁴²

As Rutgers' prize debater he led the team to numerous victories. Paul took time and care in selecting his topics, researching diligently for material that would provide evidence of social and political impediments to Afro-American advancement. College debating was an expression of his student activism, which manifested itself in a continuous barrage of reasons why white society should discontinue abusing black people. The themes in all his speeches stressed positive social change. Early in life he was politically committed to human improvement and progress for all people and was not afraid to speak about the justice due black people or peace in the world.

By the time he graduated, more had been written in local news about Robeson than perhaps about any other contemporary black student.⁴³

³⁸ Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand*, pp. 33-34.

³⁹ *Christian Intelligencer*, the Official Organ of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America. (A pamphlet honoring Robeson, March 12, 1919); Archives, Rutgers University, Robeson Files).

⁴⁰ *Somerset Messenger*, June 1, 1916, Alumni Records, Robeson File records: "Paul LeRoy Robeson of Somerville, won the first prize . . . in the contest for oratorical honors of the freshman class in Rutgers College. . . . Robeson had won high oration honors previously, and a year ago won the scholastic championship in the contest for high school entrants held by Rutgers." Also see *Daily Home News*, June 1, 1916, p. 11.

⁴¹ *Daily Home News*, May 21, 1918, p. 7.

⁴² Targum, April 30, 1919, p. 515, "In winning this contest Robeson completes his record of four consecutive victories in public speaking contest, Freshman, Sophomore, Junior and Senior." Targum, June 1919, p. 555. *The Scarlet Letter*, 1920, p. 44.

⁴³ *Alumni Quarterly*, July, 1919, pp. 311, 313. *Daily Home News*, June 16, 1919, p. 10. The black community paid tribute to him in "The Year in Negro Education," *The Crisis*, XVIII (July 1919), 133, 150, 151. Fritz Pollard, who attended Brown University, was another outstanding student widely heralded during these years.

In addition to being a member of the Philoclean Literary Society and the Student Council, he did social work and actively involved himself in the issues of the local black community. He once reminisced, "The Young Men's Christian Association gave me an opportunity for self-expression and service through its high school clubs and college conferences. I was always active in the College Association."⁴⁴ Before he left the Rutgers' campus a local civic organization held a banquet for him. "To show their appreciation by the presentation of a purse and to express their regrets at the departure after four years' association, of one so well loved and respected, a farewell reception and dinner was tended Paul Robeson . . . at the YMCA by the Union Civic League. . . ."⁴⁵ After speeches were made by Rev. Lee, Messrs. Pierson, Preston, and Dr. Carrington, in acceptance Paul reaffirmed his life's purpose to the group, saying "he hoped his life work could be a memorial to his father's training and that his work was not for his own self but that he might help the race to a higher life."⁴⁶

After leaving Rutgers, Robeson would often return to the New Brunswick YMCA and speak about social problems. To one such audience he spoke on "The Future of the Negro in America and What Shall His Place Be in American Life." ". . . He first stated that a comparison of the progress of the Negro with that of the white American during the past fifty years was unjust, for not only did the Negro have to concede a head start of centuries to the white, but was also forced to progress under great difficulties."⁴⁷ He went on to list the lack of educational facilities and unjust treatment visited upon Black folk. He pointed out that black people in spite of tremendous handicaps showed their capability and willingness to sacrifice and serve the United States dutifully in both the Civil War and World War I. He suggested that a possible solution to the racial problem in America was close cooperation between the races, "both working for the good of both."⁴⁸

The early speeches delivered by the student Robeson seemed mild in political tone in comparison to today's students' rhetoric. Nevertheless, one must be reminded that during the First World War such statements were very threatening to the status quo. Then, too, for the majority of black adults, with the memory of slavery still vividly impressed in their minds and the daily mistreatment of Blacks abounding, Robeson was expressing a youthful militancy which demanded that all black people be given their rights. In so far as "closer cooperation between white and black" is concerned, if whites could help Blacks secure some of the power whites already had, then this assistance should not be shunned. Deeply loving his race and passionately hating the prejudice Blacks had to bear, he sought all possibilities that would relieve their condition and rejected no offers of help aimed at improving the black condition. He made it a rule for himself that accepting white help did not imply a compromising of goals or a cessation of demands, but that

⁴⁴ Frank B. Lenz, "When Robeson Sings," *Association Men* (July 1927), p. 496.

⁴⁵ *Daily Home News*, June 5, 1919, p. 2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* Paul's father had died the year before on May 17, 1918.

⁴⁷ Targum, October 21, 1919, p. 1. *Daily Home News*, October 16, 1919, p. 7.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

one had to seize everything offered while at the same time continuing to strive for complete black freedom.

Paul never lost touch with his people. From time to time throughout his stay in New Brunswick, he traveled back to Somerville where the family lived and revitalized his spirit with the feelings and philosophy of his people.⁴⁹ A church sister later recalled “. . . He used to come back and sing for us at the church concerts. He was always the same Paul everytime you met him, too. Learnin’ didn’t go to his head.”⁵⁰

In the small New Jersey churches, where his father was known and respected, he often sang and talked with the people. The local folk loved him and “felt that he was ‘one of them.’”⁵¹

The prophecy of the class of 1919 projected that one day Paul would be the “governor of New Jersey. He has dimmed the fame of Booker T. Washington and is the leader of the colored race in America.”⁵² Aside from the many other smaller articles about Robeson, the school newspaper devoted an entire page honoring his illustrious career.

With the departure of the Class of 1919 the Rutgers’ undergraduate body loses a man who has been for four years an active factor in its life. While on the campus, Paul Robeson made a name and a record equaled by none, and now as he fares forth into the world we wish him the same success.⁵³

Yet during Robeson’s college years, race relations in America continued to deteriorate unabated. Nothing essential had changed for the better for black people. To black people, life in America continued to be as brutal and smothering as it had ever been. By this time even the few skilled Blacks had been systematically excluded from labor unions. In 1915, the film, “Birth of a Nation” made its debut in motion picture houses across the country and further nourished anti-black sentiment in the minds of the white American public.⁵⁴ The year 1919 witnessed at least twenty-five major race riots break out in cities across the country. Afro-Americans fought valiantly to “keep the world safe for democracy” and were lynched by the thousands at home. In 1917, according to *The Crisis*, at least 224 persons alone were lynched and killed by mob violence in the United States.⁵⁵ The local New Brunswick papers carried articles about the mistreatment accorded Blacks.⁵⁶ New Jersey itself was not foreign to Ku Klux Klan gatherings.⁵⁷ Intolerance of people’s racial or political differences could be found everywhere. In the

⁴⁹ *Herald Tribune*, October 17, 1926, Sec. 6, p. 2. *The Newark Sunday Call*, January 30, 1944, pp. 6-7.

⁵⁰ *New York Tribune*, June 29, 1930, Sec. XI, p. 2.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Targum, June 1919, p. 563.

⁵³ Targum, June 1919, p. 566.

⁵⁴ An interesting article in Thomas R. Cripps’s “The Reaction of the Negro to the Motion Picture ‘Birth of a Nation,’ *The Historian*, XXV (May 1963), 344-62.

⁵⁵ *The Crisis*, XV (February 1919), pp. 193-4. Also see Vol. 16, No. 1, May 1918, p. 20; and Vol. 18, No. 2, June 1919, p. 92 gives an account of the Anti-Lynching Conference held.

⁵⁶ *Daily Home News*, September 2, 3, 7, 1915, all on p. 1 of each paper.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, July 9, 1924, p. 1 carried the story of a national KKK meeting held in the state.

spring of 1918, one Rutgers' student was stripped naked, coated with molasses, covered with feathers, and run out of town by his fellow classmates.⁵⁸ This ruffianism was an outrageous example of the cruelty pervading white society.

Recognizing very well what he was up against, the young Robeson continued to fight against the prevailing attitudes. His senior thesis, "The Fourteenth Amendment, the Sleeping Giant of the American Constituion" was one of the few papers submitted (out of 70) which treated a socio-political topic; most of the others dealt with the natural or biological sciences.⁵⁹

Hoping to achieve political change within the system, Robeson developed an interesting and well reasoned legal position. He sought, through his explanation of the amendment, to reaffirm the established constitutional right of citizenship for black people. His object was to justify, thereby, the basis of the claim for equal rights demanded by African Americans. The work started with a brief history of the amendment. Next came the main body of the paper, which treated the constitution and interpretation of the amendment's first section defining citizenship, the question of jurisdiction, and the due process clause. It concluded with an interpretation of equal protection of the laws.

Recalling "the ware of the rebellion" and that citizenship was conferred on Afro-Americans by the Constitution of the United States, Robeson suggested a re-examination of the possibility of acquiring greater justice through the Constitution. He declared, "Of all the forces that have acted in strengthening the bonds of our Union, in protecting our civil rights from invasion, in assuring the perpetuity of our institutions and making us truly a nation, the Fourteenth Amendment is the greatest."⁶⁰ Indicating a comprehensive understanding of due process he maintained that:

The general scope of the provision is to secure to every person, whether citizen or alien those fundamental and inalienable (sic) rights of life, liberty, and property, which are inherent in every man, and to protect all against the arbitrary exercise of governmental powers in violation and disregard of established principles of distributive justice. This protection is the object and essence of free government, and without it true liberty cannot exist.⁶¹

Believing that social change was still possible, he reasserted a belief that "So long as the constitution of the United States continues to be observed as the political creed, as the embodiment of the conscience of the nation, we are safe."⁶² But the young Paul, being well aware of the political realities of his time and witnessing

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, April 24, 1918, pp. 1, 2 and April 29, 1918, p. 1, carried the story of Samuel Chovenson, who, refusing to give a speech on the Liberty Loan of World War I in class, aroused the indignation of his fellow classmates, "a group of patriotic young men who tarred and feathered him."

⁵⁹ Paul Robeson, "The Fourteenth Amendment, the Sleeping Giant of the American Constitution," May 29, 1919, Rutgers University, Archives, *Graduating Theses Class of 1919*, Vol. 4, pp. 1-23.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

the disregard for black rights in the judicial system, went on to comment that state constitutions were "being continually changed to meet the expediency, the prejudice, the passions of the hour."⁶³ If equality of opportunity were to be possible for black American citizens, the law had to apply to all, protecting everyone's individual rights, while at the same time "comprehending the whole community." "This Amendment is a vital part of American Constitutional Law and we hardly know its sphere, but its provisions must be duly observed and conscientiously interpreted so that through it, the 'Sleeping Giant of our Constitution,' the American people shall develop a higher sense of constitutional morality."⁶⁴

Paul's student thesis foreshadowed a very progressive strategy, given his youth and the prevailing intellectual climate, for almost forty years would pass before the Fourteenth Amendment would be used as a somewhat effective device in securing temporary civil rights for black Americans.

On June 10, 1919, Rutgers held its 153rd commencement exercises. It was a warm, sunny Tuesday. A few minutes past twelve noon, Paul Robeson lifted his large bright eyes above the podium and began to deliver the graduating class Oration.⁶⁵ Speaking before the auspicious throng of students, parents, friends and faculty gathered in the First Reformed Church, he integrated a compendium of themes, all stressing the American ideals of liberty and freedom. His "The New Idealism" also sought "a greater willingness to try new lines of advancement, a greater desire to do the right things, and to serve social ends." He spoke for national unity and the sacrifice necessary for the development of everyone. Presenting this view against the larger panorama of the First World War, he declared that his generation must struggle for peace, fight against poverty, prejudice, and the demoralization of the human spirit. Suffice to say, the oration speech was the most acclaimed presentation of the day, and it was a fitting way for this young black student to end his college career.⁶⁶ "He spoke from his heart and his friends understood that he was going to give his life to the uplifting of his people."⁶⁷

In retrospect, one can say that Paul Robeson, demonstrating that he was not just equal to, but in fact superior to the vast majority of whites, athletically and academically, attacked the prevailing myth of white superiority. With this he singlehandedly demonstrated the absurdity of the belief in black inferiority. Subsequently, his trailblazing somewhat eroded white resistance to black students attending white colleges. Unfortunately, his impact did little to lessen the restraints imposed on black students in those years. Nevertheless, Robeson's performance stimulated inter-collegiate athletics, brought new life to the games, and helped to foster a new understanding among some black and white students.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Targum, June 1919, pp. 570-71 has the full text of the speech.

⁶⁶ "The applause that followed the young orator's speech about 'Our New Idealism' was so very tremendous. . . . Some declared that no commencement orator in all the tradition of old Queens has received such long applause for an oration." From the *Sunday Times*, June 8, 1930, p. 12.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Then, too, Robeson undoubtedly gave something more essential and yet subtly profound to America, especially to white people in general. In challenging their ethnocentric image of themselves, he perhaps brought a few of them somewhat nearer to a more realistic understanding and appraisal of who they were. By hammering away at their inflated, to the point of dangerous, self-esteem, it is likely that he brought some, who knew him well, a little closer to a correct regard for different people, which in turn may have broadened their humanity.

To Afro-Americans he was a sort of personal hero. Black people across the country had in Robeson someone from whom they could draw inspiration and point to with pride. Here was a man whose successes provided temporary relief from the oppressive climate of savage American racism; vicarious perhaps but nevertheless a source of inspiration. Crowds formed in his presence, and they glowed as they encountered him. His black admirers wished him well because they knew he was doing much to help them. They knew he was fighting with them and for them.

In spite of all the praise, Paul Robeson remained as unpretentious as ever, always gracious about praise which would have destroyed a lesser man. He had fought racism and championed the rights of black people in this first round of his personal contest. Paul Robeson manifested a consistent belief in the possibility of improved social relations and, above all else, in the potential of his own people. Moreover, he had demonstrated responsibility to the black community. His interest in social justice was the basis for his commitment to the cause of his people. Thus, Paul Robeson was aptly described, after his undergraduate college career had ended, as "the perfect type of college man."⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Targum, October 30, 1935, p. 1.