

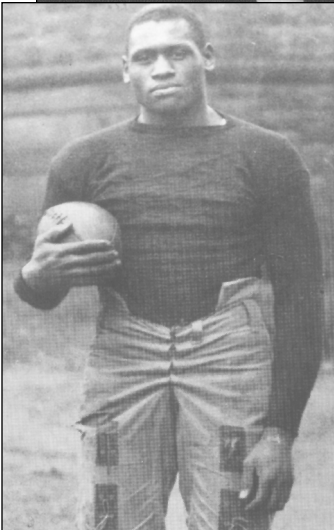
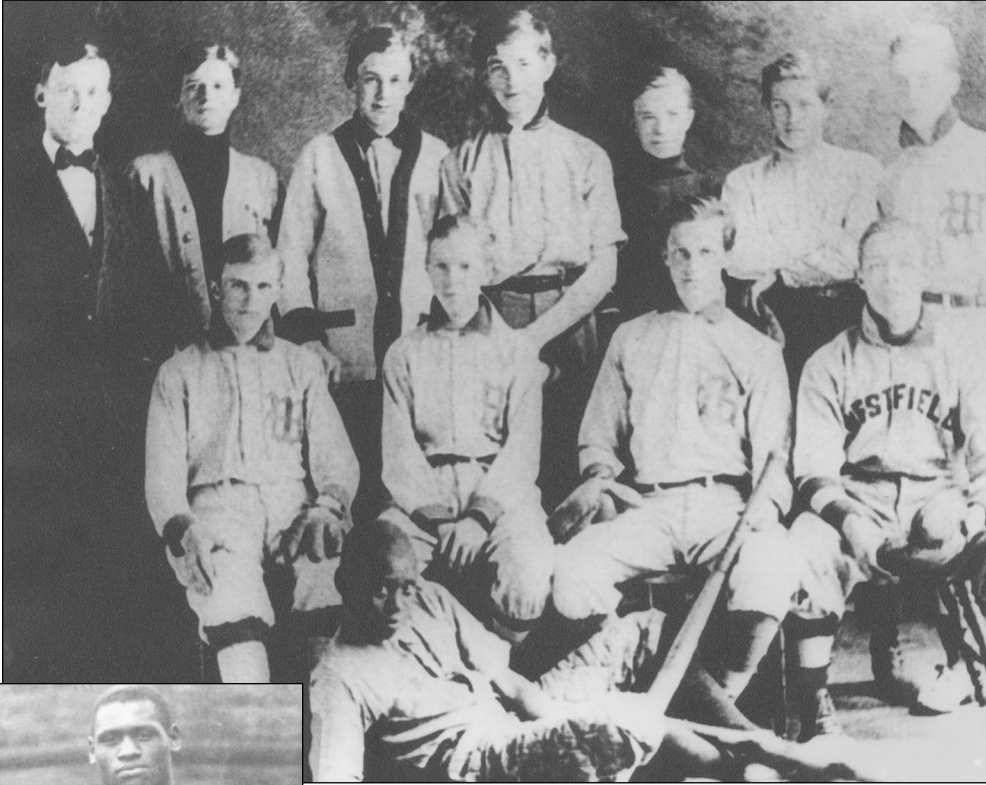
Title: The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: An Artist's Journey, 1898–1939

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I MOTHERLESS CHILD

(1898–1919)



(Above) Paul Robeson at age twelve (reclining in the bottom foreground), shortstop of the Westfield High School baseball team, although he was still in the seventh grade at Westfield Junior High. *From the personal collection of Paul Robeson, Jr.*

(Below) At Rutgers College, 1917. *Courtesy of Rutgers University.*

I
THE PREACHER'S SON

(1898–1915)

Paul Leroy Robeson's soul as an artist was formed in a journey through life that began on April 9, 1898. His father, the Reverend William Drew Robeson, vigorous at fifty-four, had been pastor of the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church in Princeton, New Jersey, for nineteen years. Paul's mother, Maria Louisa Bustill Robeson, was forty-five, partially blind from cataracts and suffering from disabling asthma.

Paul was the last of the seven Robeson children, two of whom had died in infancy.¹ His oldest surviving sibling, William Drew Jr. ("Bill"), born in 1881, was seventeen and attending high school; John Bunyan Reeve ("Reed") was twelve; Benjamin ("Ben") was six; and Marian was four. Now that Maria Louisa could no longer teach and tutor, the family lived more frugally than they had before. Paul's late arrival, though welcomed unreservedly, must have added to William Drew's burdens. But he believed that God would provide.

A dark-skinned man descended from the Ibo tribe of Nigeria, Reverend Robeson was of medium height with broad shoulders, and had an air of surpassing dignity. His calm manner was reinforced by a straight bearing and a penetrating look. Early on, Paul developed a complex bond with this devout paragon of personal discipline.

My father was always extremely reluctant to talk to me about his father's personality, as if some painful memories were associated with such recollections. Reverend Robeson was often silent and remote at home, rarely dispensing praise and unlikely to demonstrate affection. Though he was a devoted family man who was respected and loved by all the Robeson children, he was also feared. Quick to anger and

short on humor, he could not have failed to demand excellence from each of them.

Distant and determinedly private, Reverend Robeson rarely talked to his children about his early years as a slave, or about his parents, Benjamin and Sabra. He expected his children to rise in the world.

Freedom was life's blood to Reverend Robeson. In 1858, as a fifteen-year-old field slave on the Roberson Plantation in Robersonville in eastern North Carolina, he had escaped with his older brother, Ezekiel, on the Underground Railroad to Pennsylvania.² There William Drew, as he was known, worked as a farmhand, earning enough money to aid his parents, whom he returned to visit twice during the next two years despite extreme hazards. When the Civil War began in April 1861, William Drew and Ezekiel joined a Union Army labor battalion that ultimately accompanied the advancing Union troops in 1864. According to family legend, the two brothers took up arms, along with others in the battalion, to repel a surprise attack by the Confederate general George Pickett on the Union-occupied city of New Bern, North Carolina.³ At the end of the war, Ezekiel returned to North Carolina to work as a farmhand with his parents.

William Drew remained in Pennsylvania, went to a Freedmen's School, and in 1867 managed to enter the one-year preparatory class of Lincoln University, a pioneer black college. He eventually completed Lincoln's four-year bachelor of arts program. In 1876, he was awarded the degrees of master of arts and bachelor of sacred theology.⁴

During his studies at Lincoln, William Drew met Maria Louisa Bustill, a young Philadelphia teacher, who frequently visited her uncle's house in the nearby town of Lincoln. On July 11, 1878, she married the earnest divinity student who excelled in ancient languages. Maria Louisa was tall and handsome. She was known for her gentle, compassionate, sunny disposition. One day she would serve as William Drew's intellectual companion, help him compose his sermons, and act as his right hand in his community work.

The social gulf between the runaway son of North Carolina field slaves and the elder daughter of the Bustills of Philadelphia was enormous. The Bustills, a family of mixed African, English Quaker, and Leni-Lenape Indian stock, could trace their American ancestry as far back as 1608 and had produced many outstanding men and

women. Cyrus Bustill, Maria Louisa's great-grandfather, who was born a slave in Burlington, New Jersey, in 1732, became apprenticed to a local baker, learned the trade, and soon bought his freedom. He went on to become a baker with a thriving business that extended far beyond his local customers. During the Revolutionary War, he baked bread for George Washington's troops, and in 1787 he was one of the founders of the Free African Society, the first mutual aid organization of African-Americans.

Through the years, the Bustills became teachers, artists, business-people, and pioneers in many professions. Prior to the Civil War, members of the family played key roles in running and maintaining the Underground Railroad. Maria Louisa's uncle Joseph had been one of the organizers of the Underground Railroad terminal in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. After the war, the Bustills helped lead the fight for black rights.⁵ Paul would grow up to be both proud and conflicted about his mother's distinguished family, who looked down on his father's kin living nearby in Princeton.

By the time of Paul's birth, the Robesons had become pillars of Princeton's sizable, tightly knit black community. As pastor, William Drew had developed Witherspoon Church into a center of civic and social activity. He had also become an effective defender of the community's interests, and was universally respected. However, his occasional outspokenness provoked certain high-ranking members of Princeton's white elite.

When Paul was two, his brother Bill tried to enroll at Princeton University, but he was rebuffed. Refusing as usual to compromise on matters of principle, William Drew appealed in person to Woodrow Wilson, then president of Princeton, for Bill's enrollment. Reverend Robeson refused to accept any of Wilson's repeated and forceful attempts to avoid a direct response, compelling the future president of the United States to declare angrily that Princeton did not accept "colored."⁶ It was long rumored in Princeton's black community that this defiance cost William Drew his pastorate.

A wealthy white Presbyterian church had built Witherspoon for its black members after having accommodated them in balcony seats for decades. But ultimate control remained with the white authorities, and one day they took William Drew's pastorate from him on a spurious pretext. Despite his well-argued statement of defense at his hearing and the near-unanimous support of his congregation, the

decision to remove him from his pastorate (which he had appealed) was announced as final on November 17, 1900.

Paul was probably in the audience sitting with his mother, brothers, and sister when Reverend Robeson preached his last sermon at Witherspoon Church on January 27, 1901. Well known throughout the region for his dramatic power and inspiring messages, the reverend filled the sanctuary with his deep, melodious bass voice. Paul would always recall it as the greatest speaking voice he ever heard. On that day, William Drew made no direct mention of his dismissal. But he did intimate that his departure stemmed from his refusal to curtail his determined criticism of social injustice.⁷

On January 29, 1901, two days after William Drew had preached his farewell sermon at Witherspoon Church, George C. White, of William Drew's home state of North Carolina and the nation's sole remaining black congressman, defiantly addressed the U.S. House of Representatives. His term was coming to an end, he said, and the electoral rigging legitimized by the U.S. Supreme Court in the service of white rule had denied him any hope of reelection. His departure, he noted, was "perhaps the Negroes' temporary farewell to the American Congress; but we say, Phoenix-like he will rise up some day to come again."⁸ So too would William Drew rise again.

The Robeson family had to leave the comfortable Witherspoon Street parsonage and move to a smaller house on Green Street around the corner. Bill boarded at Lincoln University and two years later enrolled in the University of Pennsylvania Medical School. William Drew gave himself to making a living. Paul would write about this period later in his autobiography:

He was still the dignified Reverend Robeson to the community, and no man carried himself with greater pride. Not once did I hear him complain of the poverty and misfortune of those years. Serene and undaunted, he struggled to earn a livelihood and see to our education. He got a horse and wagon, and began to earn his living hauling ashes. This was his work at the time I first remember him, and I recall the growing mound of ashes dumped in our backyard. A fond memory remains of our horse, a mare named Bess, whom I grew to love and who loved me. My father also went into the hack

business and as a coachman drove students around town and on trips to the seashore.

Mostly I played. There were the vacant lots for ball games, and the wonderful moments when Bill [then in his mid-twenties], vacationing from college where he played on the team, would teach me how to play football. He was my first coach, and over and over again on a weed-grown lot he would put me through the paces—how to tackle a man so he stayed tackled, how to run with the ball.⁹

Paul chose not to mention that the meager rations of the Robesons in Princeton had to be supplemented by relatives in North Carolina who sent up “cornmeal, greens, yams, peanuts and other goodies in bags.” From that time on, he relished a good meal in a way that those who have always been well fed do not.¹⁰

On the morning of January 19, 1904, Reverend Robeson went to Trenton on business. He told twelve-year-old Ben to stay home from school to help Maria Louisa, by now nearly blind, to clean the living room. All the other children except Paul, who was still at home, were away at school. According to Ben and Marian:

[Maria Louisa] decided first to take up the carpet, but the stove was in the way; she and Ben conferred about it, and decided she would lift the stove while he pulled away the carpet underneath. The stove had a sliding front door which opened as she raised the front legs, and a hot coal fell out. It set fire to her dress, but neither of them saw it until the blaze had caught on well and she felt it burn her feet and legs. She tried to beat it out with her hands which were terribly burned. Ben tried frantically to help her, but her full skirts were a dreadful hindrance. When he realized the task was beyond him, he rushed out of the house terrified, screaming for help. A neighbor who was passing came to his mother's aid, put out the flames, tore off her hot clothing, sent Ben for a doctor, and did what he could to ease her pain. The doctor found that her skirts had partially smothered the flames close to her body and that her feet, legs and hands were horribly burned; part of her hair was burned off, and she had even swallowed some of the flame. He used quarts and quarts of linseed oil to try to alleviate her suffering, but she lay in dreadful agony. “This is the way I am to go,” she said courageously, “and because God intended it I am content.”¹¹

She survived long enough to say farewell to her heartbroken husband that evening. Then the doctors gave her a heavy dose of opiates, she lapsed into unconsciousness, and she died.

This tragedy engulfed Paul, leaving an emotional wound that may have never healed fully. So thoroughly would he block the events of that day out of his memory that he would never recall where he was at the time. Long afterward Paul wrote that he could not remember her, or the accident, though his recollection of other things went back to times before it. He remembered only “her lying in her coffin, the funeral, and the relatives who came.”¹²

Ben recalled that Paul might well have been in the house: “Paul just suddenly showed up in the midst of all the confusion. I hadn’t seen him earlier, and no one, including Paul himself, could remember where he had been. If he’d been out playing or at a neighbor’s house, someone would have remembered it. It’s something he never talked about, and we didn’t bring it up.” Contrary to myth, Paul may have been present, seen his mother burning, and been so terrified that he ran and hid.¹³

A residue of fear, guilt, self-doubt, and discomfort with intimacy would have burdened a sensitive child for a lifetime. Reverend Robeson tried to ease his six-year-old son’s trauma. “Pop,” as Paul came to call him, was reliable, predictable, and available—a secure home base.

The affluent and light-skinned Bustills distanced themselves from the dark-skinned and poor William Drew. Only the Robeson relatives helped him through the hard days ahead with whatever they could spare. In Paul’s autobiography, he wrote with tenderness about his feelings of deep attachment to the people who provided nourishment and comfort to his father. And significantly, those feelings are inextricably interwoven with his first awareness of music. Infused virtually from the cradle with African-American culture, he recognized its powerful emotional expression in diverse types of music.

Hard-working people, and poor, most of them, in worldly goods—but how rich in compassion! There was the honest joy of laughter in these homes, folk-wit and story, hearty appetites for life as for the nourishing greens and black-eyed peas and cornmeal bread they shared with me. Here in this little hemmed-in world where home must be theater and concert hall and social center, there was a

warmth of song. Songs of love and longing, songs of trials and triumphs, deep-flowing rivers and rollicking brooks, hymn-song and ragtime ballad, gospels and blues, and the healing comfort to be found in the illimitable sorrow of the spirituals.

Yes, I heard my people singing!—in the glow of the parlor coal-stove and on summer porches sweet with lilac air, from choir loft and Sunday morning pews—and my soul was filled with their harmonies.¹⁴

At the time and for years to come, the spirituals were a source of consolation and self-expression for Paul. In his mature years, he would say that singing them released a flood of deep feelings and, on occasion, a transcendence that could be called a state of grace.

Photographs of Paul as late as 1913 reveal a haunting sadness in his eyes.¹⁵ There was no denying it—Paul was often alone, left to his thoughts. Nevertheless, in later years he underplayed this loneliness. “There must have been moments when I felt the sorrows of a motherless child,” he wrote in his autobiography.

Paul’s older brothers and sister were back and forth from school: Reed and Bill were at universities, and Marian was at the Scotia boarding school in North Carolina. Only Ben, who was six years older than Paul, stayed behind until 1906 to look after him, and then Ben left for prep school in North Carolina.

William Drew, now sixty-two, remained a friend and companion to his eight-year-old son, taking him along on visits to his former parishioners and drawing him into church life in the hope that ultimately he might enter the ministry. “How proudly, as a boy, I walked at his side, my hand in his,” Paul recalled. The two of them also shared a love for checkers, and they spent many a winter evening in the parlor engrossed in play. They didn’t speak much but were “wonderfully happy together.” The terrible memory of Maria Louisa’s death dimmed. Paul grew accustomed to his father supervising his schoolwork on a day-to-day basis as a stern, uncompromising taskmaster.

To satisfy William Drew, high grades were not enough: the goal was always *perfect* grades. At the Princeton elementary school that Paul attended—for black students only, in accordance with the town’s rigid segregation—the principal, Abraham Denny, a classmate

of Reverend Robeson's at Lincoln University, loved his students and created a lively learning environment. Paul flourished academically as William Drew tested him on his lessons, oversaw his reading, and trained him to recite lines of classic poetry and prose. It was to this intensive guidance that Paul would later credit his phenomenal powers of concentration.¹⁶

Through daily interaction with his father, Paul began to absorb, mostly by example, the credo that was to last a lifetime. First was the importance of living up to his individual potential, rather than worrying about winning for its own sake. Next came the strong belief in his ability to achieve. Then there was the concept that all people must be respected and that the entire human race is a single, though diverse, family of equals. Paul also noticed that William Drew was a model of compassion for others. Paul observed his dedication and accountability to the community, not merely to the pursuit of wealth and influence, but to his commitment to principle as well, even at the cost of personal sacrifice.¹⁷

With the experience of slavery deep in his bones, William Drew began explicitly to teach Paul the techniques of survival in a viciously racist climate. He insisted that Paul must never appear to be challenging the claim of white superiority. "Climb up if you can," he would say, "but always show that you are grateful. . . . Above all, do nothing to give them cause to fear you." However, while he counseled the show of humility, Reverend Robeson manifested not even a hint of servility. Somehow, he managed to convey this dignity without any overt show of anger or resistance. Paul learned this lesson well and added his own twist—he had an affable, smiling demeanor, combined with an irresistible empathy for his peers.¹⁸

Paul was insulated from white Princeton by his almost exclusive confinement to the fairly large local black community and his attendance at an all-black school. He was not old enough to work for white people and had very little connection with them. There were some white children among his playmates, including a boy about his age, whose father owned a grocery a few doors from the Robeson house.¹⁹ But Paul belonged to a cohesive community where his identity was both powerful and strongly reinforced.

Many members of Witherspoon recognized something extraordinary in their former preacher's motherless son. They regarded him as a child of destiny. He wrote in his autobiography:

I early became conscious—I don't quite know how—of a special feeling of the Negro community for me. I was no different from the other kids of the neighborhood, and yet the people claimed to see something special about me. Whatever it was, and no one really said, they felt I was destined for great things to come. Somehow they were sure of it. I wondered at times about this notion that my future would be linked with the longed-for better days to come, but I didn't worry about it. Being grown up was a million years ahead. Now was the time for play.²⁰

The Robeson family moved away from Princeton in 1907, when Paul was nine. Reverend Robeson had finally given up on the Presbyterian Church and switched to the African Methodist Episcopal Zion denomination. Assigned a minor pastorate in Westfield, New Jersey, with no church building, he had a small potential congregation. Though far fewer African-Americans lived in Westfield than in Princeton, the predominantly working-class white population was more accepting of blacks than Princeton's elite.

William Drew started building a small church from the ground up. Paul helped his father carry bricks to the bricklayers. Meanwhile, they lived in the attic over a grocery store where William Drew worked, and they washed up in a shacklike extension at the rear of the store. It was a difficult transition for Paul. His close relatives, who had lived just around the corner from him in Princeton, were now thirty miles away; the black community was far smaller than Princeton's; and his closest brother, Ben, had gone away to prep school. Visiting Princeton's black community still meant "being at home."²¹ Nevertheless, Paul gradually adjusted, and William Drew achieved a near miracle by finishing his construction of the small St. Luke African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church on Downer Street, complete with a parsonage, in a little more than a year.

In the three years he lived in Westfield, Paul expanded his horizons in a seamless progression of busy days. He came to know more white people, frequently visiting the homes of his working-class schoolmates and always receiving a friendly welcome. Still, he felt the subtle difference between his unquestioned belonging to the black community and his qualified acceptance by whites. Fifty years later, he would comment, "I wasn't conscious of it at the time, but

now I realize that my easy moving between the two racial communities was rather exceptional. For one thing, I was the respected preacher's son, and then, too, I was popular with the other boys and girls because of my skill at sports and studies."²²

Paul's popularity with his peers was probably due far more to his athletic skills than to his proficiency at his studies. Practicing sports and playing games stood him in good stead in escaping his grief over his mother's death. Some days he would finish his homework early, practice by himself, and then play with his schoolmates until darkness fell.

Since Westfield had too few black children for a segregated school system—unlike Princeton—Paul attended fifth and sixth grades in Westfield's integrated elementary school and then entered seventh grade in the integrated junior high school. Tall and gangly at twelve, but wiry strong, fast, and exceedingly agile, he was already capable of competing at the high school level. Ben, who by this time was attending Biddle University,²³ had taken over from Bill as Paul's baseball and football coach with stellar results: when Paul was still in seventh grade, the Westfield High School baseball team recruited him to play shortstop as a regular.²⁴

At about the time of William Drew's move to Westfield, Paul's brother Reed—hotheaded and aggressively independent at twenty-one—suddenly turned up as a dropout from Lincoln University at the start of his senior year. Paul was overjoyed by his older brother's return, but Reverend Robeson was deeply aggrieved by Reed's failure to complete his college education and by his cavalier refusal to offer any explanation or apology for such an affront to Robeson family values. Nevertheless, despite the sacrifices he had made to send Reed to college, William Drew swallowed his anger. He even helped Reed to acquire a horse and carriage so that he could go into the hack business.

It was an uneasy peace. Many years later, Paul described its unraveling:

My father was sorely disappointed in this son and disapproved of his carefree and undisciplined ways. Yet I admired this rough older brother, and I learned from him a quick militancy against racial

insults and abuse. Many was the time that Reed, resenting some remark by a Southern gentleman-student, would leap down from his coachman's seat, drag out the offender and punish him with his fists. He always carried for protection a bag of small, jagged rocks—a weapon he used with reckless abandon whenever the occasion called for action.

Inevitably there were brushes with the Law, and then my father, troubled in heart, would don his grave [formal] frock-coat and go to get Reed out of trouble again. But this happened once too often, and one day I stood sadly and silently as Pop told Reed he would have to leave—he must live his life elsewhere because his example was a dangerous one for his young brother Paul.

I remember Reed with love. “Don't ever take low,” was the lesson he taught me. “Stand up and hit them harder than they hit you!” When the many have learned that lesson, everything will be different.²⁵

Paul could not help feeling responsible when Reed left around 1909, ultimately settling down in Detroit, where he had a minor career in the hotel business.

In 1910, William Drew posed for a formal photographic portrait. Looking heavier but composed, his thoughts seemed to be elsewhere. He had, rather abruptly, regained much of his former high status. The church hierarchy assigned Reverend Robeson to pastor the St. Thomas A.M.E. Zion Church in Somerville, New Jersey, about halfway between Westfield and Princeton. Once again, the black community of Somerville was not nearly as large as Princeton's, but the church was a substantial one serving a fairly large parish in the surrounding area. The Robesons were again “somebodies” by the time Paul graduated from eighth grade at Somerville's small “colored school.” At the closing ceremonies in June 1911, he gave a rousing oration that included Patrick Henry's cry, “Give me liberty, or give me death,” undoubtedly thinking of Reed.

Arriving at Somerville High School, Paul had to stand tall to carry the day. There were only a dozen blacks in a student body of two hundred. And the principal, Dr. Ackerman, was consistently hostile, relishing any opportunity to demean him. When Paul joined the glee club, Miss Vosseler, the music teacher, had to overcome the principal's angry opposition to having Paul as the soloist.²⁶ But Paul

was already aware that he had an unusual singing voice and a natural talent for using it. One day, he and brothers Bill and Ben had been hanging out together, and Bill had suggested they sing a few tunes. As Ben told the story more than twenty years later:

We started off with gusto. We were making one of those minors known only to home-loving groups; Paul was bearing down on it with boyish glee; in fact, all of us were. Out of all the discord, Bill yelled: "Wait a minute, hit that note again, Paul." Paul hit out of the lot, and Bill said: "Paul, you can sing, but just to be sure that we have no accident, I want you to sing 'Annie Laurie.' If you satisfy me, the Robeson manse will issue its first musical diploma." Paul had to satisfy him to have any peace. Bill listened as he warbled, and concluded: "Paul, you *can* sing."

For years, Paul had been singing mainly for himself. Blessed with perfect relative pitch, he could comfortably sing a capella, readily shifting keys to suit his adolescent voice. But after his experience with Bill and Ben, Paul became more conscious of his voice as an instrument for entertaining others; when called upon to perform, he sang rather than recited. The emerging self-awareness of his singing talent—as well as of his other abilities—became a source of comfort and assurance in a difficult social climate. In his autobiography he remembered wryly:

Miss Vosseler, the music teacher who directed our glee club, took a special interest in training my voice. Anna Milner, English teacher, paid close attention to my development as a speaker and debater; and it was she who first introduced me to Shakespeare's works. Miss Vandever, who taught Latin, seemed to have no taint of racial prejudice; and Miss Bagg, instructor in chemistry and physics, made every effort to make me feel at ease in the school's social life of which she was in charge. Miss Bagg urged me to attend the various parties and dances, and when I did so, it was she who was the first to dance with me. But despite her encouragement, I shied away from most of these social affairs. There was always the feeling that—well, something unpleasant might happen; for the two worlds of white and Negro were nowhere more separate than in social life.²⁷

William Drew kept close track of Paul's studies, placing special emphasis on Latin and classic literature, but it was Bill who took

charge of cultivating Paul's lively mind during frequent visits home. The perpetual student, Bill had been nicknamed "Deep Stuff" by those with whom he worked. Years later, Paul would recall that Bill was the smartest member of the family:

For me Bill was the principal source of learning how to study. During my high school years in Somerville, Bill was often at home, between colleges and railroad runs, and he spent much time directing my studies. He was never satisfied when I came up with a correct answer. "Yes, but *why?*" he would insist sharply. What was the relation of one fact to another? What was the system, the framework, of a given study? When I couldn't explain, Bill would quickly and clearly demonstrate the mystery to me; and to my constant amazement, he could do that, after a very short inquiry, even in subjects he had not previously studied.

Paul admired Bill's analytical mind and dogged ambition. When Bill dropped out of the University of Pennsylvania Medical School for lack of funds, he supported himself for years afterward by working on the railroads as a Pullman porter and as a redcap at train stations. Some years later, he enrolled in another medical college (Paul recalled that it was in Boston), from which he graduated only to find out that the college was not properly accredited. Ultimately, he would obtain his M.D. degree in 1921 from Howard University College of Medicine in Washington, D.C., at the age of forty.²⁸

Sister Marian also remained close to Paul, taking care of him even though she was not at home as much as Ben or Bill. She brought to the Robeson household "the blessing of laughter," and although she did the cooking when she was home, she left the dishes for him.²⁹

Self-esteem and mutual respect were cornerstones of Paul's relationship with his family. All of the internal tensions he felt at school and at home, he learned to curb. So it was rarely apparent to anyone that he suppressed a violent temper.

Playing pool in the local pool hall one afternoon with some black friends, Paul encountered an older black youth who picked a fight with him and hit him with a pool cue. Paul grabbed one of the solid ivory pool balls, backed away, and shot it at his assailant's head with all his might. The ball barely missed its target, but the force behind it was so great that it blasted a hole through a paneled wood wall. On the spot, Paul resolved never again to let the disturbing power of

his anger spin out of control: he knew he would probably kill someone if he did.

From then on, when he felt emotional pressures that were too great to redirect, he withdrew into his inner world in solitude for a respite. This became a lifetime pattern that he used with consistent success. Now he adopted an exceedingly quiet, nonresentful posture.

He preferred to avoid confrontation, but he seldom ran from it. If cornered, he made clear to would-be assailants that he would not submit willingly. Almost always, potential opponents sensed the resolve behind his placid manner, and as they hesitated, he would politely and graciously move past them—winning the conflict without actually having to engage in it. This discipline was self-imposed. His father had relentlessly demanded courtesy and restraint, and Paul had internalized the lessons.

However, things were different on the athletic field, where he could legitimately respond in a physical manner. By his senior year in high school, Paul was over six feet tall and weighed 190 pounds. He achieved such dominance in football that state officials changed the rules to neutralize him. Double-team and triple-team blocking were legalized, but still he couldn't be stopped. On offense, he played fullback. But it was on defense, where he backed up the line, that he truly found an outlet. He gained a statewide reputation as a deadly tackler who could hit with unparalleled ferocity.

Paul paid a heavy price for his aggressiveness. In a late-season 1914 game against Phillipsburg, rated the best team in New Jersey at the time, the officials looked the other way as the entire Phillipsburg team constantly piled up on him every time he carried the ball. Even so, he scored three touchdowns in a 24–18 loss that many called the greatest high school football game ever played in New Jersey. Finally, he was forced to the sidelines with a broken nose and a broken collarbone. The lack of intervention by the officials, and even by his teammates and coaches, left him deeply embittered. It became linked in his mind with mob violence against blacks. William Drew, who attended almost all of Paul's games, had undoubtedly watched in horror and prayed for his son's survival.³⁰

True, the young Paul was a gifted athlete. In baseball he also played the position of catcher, and in basketball he played guard.³¹ Ben continued to be his coach, and, since the professional level of the Somerville High School coaches was relatively low, Ben's instruc-

tion, based on actual play at the college level, was invaluable to Paul's development. But that day in Phillipsburg, it was the depth of Paul's fiery spirit that was tested more profoundly than his physical prowess. He passed the test, but his rage at the brutalization to which he was subjected with such impunity never dissipated.

The A.M.E. Zion religious faith ran deep, connecting the Robeson men. Paul sang solo in the senior choir at this point and often taught Sunday school classes. Occasionally he even preached a sermon from the pulpit when his father was called away. Ben had decided to follow his father into the ministry, and William Drew hoped that Paul would ultimately do the same. He didn't push his son in this direction, but he continued to guide him toward oratory, giving him suggestions for classic pieces to recite and maintaining close supervision of his diction. Even in those years, there were many who remarked about the perfection of Paul's enunciation and his mellifluous speaking voice. On occasion, Paul continued to accompany his father on his rounds visiting parishioners. To William Drew, it seemed that Paul was ideally suited to be a minister. But Paul had no vocation in mind, and he wrestled with the decision, hoping it could wait until he was in college.³²

As ambivalent as Paul was about being groomed to succeed Reverend Robeson in the ministry, he had always assumed he would follow his father and brother Bill to Lincoln University, where he would be free from the necessity of coping daily with the racial prejudice at a white college. However, in his senior year, he heard about a competitive examination open to all New Jersey high school students. The prize was a four-year scholarship to Rutgers College, then an exclusive private school with a student body of 500 white males. A full scholarship would relieve Reverend Robeson of the burden of paying tuition.

William Drew liked the idea. In truth, he had wanted one of his sons to attend an esteemed white university ever since Bill had been refused entry to Princeton. He felt strongly that at least one of his sons should have such a broadening experience—one to which he himself could never have aspired. Besides, Rutgers was only fifteen miles away in New Brunswick, so Paul could remain close to family and friends.

William Drew convinced Paul to enter the scholarship contest, and together they threw themselves into preparing for it. They soon realized that the high school principal, Dr. Ackerman, had deliberately failed to notify Paul about a preliminary test covering the subjects studied in the first three years of high school that he could have taken at the end of his junior year. Consequently, Paul was faced with an examination that embraced the entire four-year course in the same three-hour period in which the other competitors would be tested only on the senior year's work. However, this handicap served only to intensify his resolve to win.

He worked intensively but also systematically. Bill's academic coaching had trained him well in applying his critical reasoning skills and in sorting out the essential from the superfluous detail. It was, according to Paul, "a decisive point" in his life—it was not just that he won the scholarship to Rutgers; he had proven to himself beyond any doubt that he was not inferior to anyone.³³

In the late spring of 1915, Paul also entered a statewide oratorical contest. His text was Wendell Phillips's famous abolitionist oration on the great black liberator of Haiti, Toussaint L'Ouverture:

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 har-
vests, tear up the roads with cannon, poison the wells, show the
white man the hell he comes to make!

The audience apparently suspended its wariness. Despite the symbolism involved in the black youth's passionate recital of these incendiary lines, they gave Paul an unreserved ovation. The judges only awarded him third place, but Paul would long remember the sound of the audience affirming his victory.³⁴

Soon after, Paul packed his suitcase and headed for the Imperial resort hotel in Narragansett Pier, Rhode Island, where he joined Ben for the second year. The first year he had worked there as a lowly kitchen boy, but now he advanced to dining room busboy, while Ben returned to his waiter's job. Many other young blacks, including a number of star football players from black colleges, were employed at that hotel and at others in town. Forty-three years later, Paul wrote about his relationship with Ben as if it were almost magical, despite the demeaning drudgery that was associated with it:

Closer to me in age than my other brothers, Ben was my favorite. It was he who first took me out into the world beyond our small-town life. When I was in high school, Ben got a job for the summer in Narragansett Pier, in Rhode Island, where many Negro students found vacation-time employment in the resorts of the rich. I went along with Ben to serve as kitchen boy. My work—and I'm sure I have never again in all my life worked quite so hard—began at 4:00 A.M., and it was late evening before I emerged from the mountains of pots and pans I scrubbed, the potatoes I peeled, [and] the endless tasks ordered by the chef, the second cooks and helpers. But always there was the comforting presence of brother Ben, around somewhere, keeping [an] eye out for the kid brother.

This year, Paul and Ben devoted their free time at Narragansett to playing touch football on the beaches and playing baseball for the hotel team. Under Ben's watchful eye, Paul ran through special workouts to prepare for the Rutgers football team tryouts, determined to be ready, both physically and mentally.³⁵