

CHARLES HARRIS WESLEY

Charles Harris Wesley was born on December 2, 1891, the only child of a middle-class family in Louisville, Kentucky, where he attended the public schools. Forward-looking and of a serious turn of mind from his early teens, he received a B.A. degree from Fisk University in 1911, followed two years later by a master's degree from Yale. In 1925 he became the third Afro-American to be awarded a Harvard University Ph.D. in history. His Harvard-trained black predecessors were an illustrious duo—W.E.B. Du-Bois, who helped found the American Negro Academy and the NAACP, and Carter G. Woodson, founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and editor of its journal *The Journal of Negro History*. Both were prominent in black academic circles when Wesley came upon the scene, and he came to know them well.

A major portion of Wesley's career centered around colleges and universities. In 1913, he joined the faculty of Howard University as an instructor, advancing over the next thirty years to professor of history, chairman of the department, dean of the college, and dean of the graduate school. In 1942, he became president of Wilberforce University in Wilberforce, Ohio, and five years later was elected to the presidency of Central State College, also located in Wilberforce, serving there until he retired in 1965. During his twenty-three years in Ohio, Wesley served as president of the Ohio College Presidents and Deans, chairman of the Inter-University Council of the State of Ohio, and a member of the Governor's Committee on Community Colleges.

Wesley's teaching and administrative responsibilities by no means exhausted his energies or his multiple interests. In 1927 he voiced his unhappiness at the impending demise of the American Negro Academy. Able, willing, and the personification of the concept of the United States as a nation of joiners, he was active in a number of organizations, generally in a leadership role. He was

encouraging of his co-workers and subordinates and was quick to publicly and generously commend them for their second-mile efforts.

Wesley's off-campus activities included the domain of organized religion. He was ordained a minister in 1919, and while at Howard University, he was pastor successively to three African Methodist Episcopal churches in Washington. He brought to the pulpit a strong singing voice, as might be expected of one who had been a member of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and director of the Howard University Men's Glee Club. Wesley was an authority on the slave-born founder of the AME Church, Richard Allen; his biography of Allen, *Richard Allen: Apostle of Freedom*, was published in 1935. But Wesley's religious interests also cut across denominational lines, as indicated by his article 'The Religious Attitudes of Negro Youth—A Preliminary Study of Opinion in an Urban and a Rural Community' (1936).

Wesley's broad social outlook and concern led him into secular black organizations as well. Among these were the Alpha Phi Fraternity, which had its undergraduate chapters, and the more selective Sigma Pi Phi. Prominent in both, Wesley served as Grand Historian of the latter, producing in 1954 its fiftieth-anniversary edition, *History of Sigma Pi Phi: First of the Negro-American Greek-Letter Fraternities*. He served as general president of Alpha Phi Alpha and wrote *The History of Alpha Phi Alpha: A Development in Negro College Life* (1929).

Wesley's outreach included active membership in organizations open to the common man that sought to promote fellowship and racial progress. An Elk, he regularly spoke at the national Grand Lodge sessions, highlighted by his address at the Centennial Grand Lodge in 1948. Seven years later, at the request of the Grand Exalted Ruler, he produced the official *History of the Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the World, 1898-1954*. Wesley was also a member of the first black order of Masons in the United States and wrote the official biography of its major founding figure, *Prince Hall: Life and Legacy* (1977). Earlier, he had

written the official account of the Ohio black Masons, *The History of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of the Free and Accepted Masons of the State of Ohio, 1849-1960* (1961). Wesley was also a member of the largest of the Negro secret lodges, The Grand Order of Odd Fellows in America.

While still based in Ohio, Wesley was an influential figure in the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (in 1976, the word 'Negro' in the Association's title was officially replaced by the term 'Afro-American'). Upon the death of founder Woodson in 1950, Wesley became the dominant figure in its operations, serving as president and then as executive director. Despite his advancing years, he brought vigor to his office, augmented by the corps of promising assistants he recruited.

Personable and with a ready sense of humor, Wesley had wide public appeal, and he excelled at public address. The numerous privately run organizations to which he belonged vied for his service as speaker, and general audiences were impressed by his earnestness and by his friendly manner. Wesley's stirring speeches and, to a far greater extent, the huge bulk of his writings, focused on a single theme—the nature and uses of black history.

In his annual Association report in 1969, executive editor Wesley observed that 'publishers are no longer refusing manuscripts on the Negro. They are now seeking them.' Wesley himself had been an important contributor to this development. He was regarded as 'a tireless worker for the Negro history movement.' By 1969, in his affiliation with the Association alone, he had written twenty-two articles in its *Journal of Negro History*. One of his three book reviews in the journal, a review of *The Evolution of the Negro Colleges*, by D. O. W. Holmes, won the award for the best review to appear in that quarterly for the year 1935. Wesley inaugurated and was editor-in-chief of the *International Library of Negro Life and History*, a comprehensive ten-volume reference work. He wrote two of its volumes, *In Freedom's Footsteps: From the African Background to the Civil War*, and *The Quest for Equality: From Civil War to Civil Rights*.

Wesley's readers could have little doubt that basically he was a message writer, unapologetically mission-minded. 'The teachings of history can lead Americans to the realization that the variety and heterogeneity of its peoples are its strength,' he wrote, adding that the blending of its 'racial, religious and national cultures will constitute in the present and future a cultural fabric of beauty for the nations as it points out the pathway of peace for all the world.'

Wesley also endeavored to let his white readers know of the shabby way in which the Negro had been treated in the textbooks used in high schools and colleges and by teachers who followed suit by down-playing or ignoring the Negro's true role in history. As early as 1935 Wesley admonished such readers and teachers that 'history should be reconstructed so that Africa shall have its proper place,' adding that 'history's reconstruction will make the way clearer for the advancement of the Negro in American life.' When President Roosevelt issued his 'Four Freedoms' in 1941, Wesley responded with a thoughtful essay, 'The Negro Has Always Wanted the Four Freedoms.' Reexamining Roosevelt's globally designed freedoms in terms of the lives of blacks, Wesley argued that while these wants were 'not necessarily new,' they were 'the tests of democracy.'

Wesley's approach to his black readers was two-fold, namely, to give them a rightful perspective on the black past and to exhort and challenge them to be, like their illustrious forebears, history-making movers and shakers. The veil of ignorance about black history was not confined to whites, as Wesley well knew. Some blacks, too, shared the belief that Afro-American history was inglorious, if not ignominious, and the least said about it the better. In his book on the Sigma Pi Phi, he opened with the quoted exhortation: 'I believe that one of the greatest functions of history is to create inspiration, to inspire us to do greater things than have been done.' In a 1966 Negro History Week address, he pointed out, 'There is a need for Negroes to believe in themselves as members of an ethnic group which has made worthwhile contributions to the ongoing of society and civilization.' In his Prince Hall

biography, Wesley noted that his subject had been an achiever even though 'oppressed by the injustices of life,' and he urged the readers of the work to 'take example from him' and recreate his spirit in their lives.

Taken as a whole, Wesley's writings are not outdated. His overriding aim was to set the record straight about blacks, but this goal did not come at the expense of scholarship and equanimity. His advocacy bore no prejudice. Hence his perspectives on the past were marked by their humanistic tones.

Wesley was elected to membership in the American Antiquarian Society in April 1977. No stranger to the Society, he had previously made use of its collections in his research on Prince Hall. In October 1982, having vainly sought to procure Wesley's book on the Ohio Masons for the Society, Marcus McCorison asked Wesley for a copy of the book. McCorison's explanation was brief but whole-hearted: 'I would like to have the book not only for its subject but also because of the author.'

Wesley's long career came to a not-unexpected end on August 16, 1987. Memorial services were held a week later at the Metropolitan A.M.E. Church in Washington, one of those of which he had been minister. He is survived by Charlotte Wesley Holloman, a daughter by his late first wife, and by his second wife, Dorothy Burnett Porter, also an AAS member and the foremost authority on the ever-broadening field of Afro-American bibliography.

Benjamin Quarles

JACOB ISRAEL ZEITLIN

Jacob Israel Zeitlin died on August 30, 1987, having devoted sixty of his eighty-four years to selling rare books, manuscripts, and art in several colorful and congenial bookstores of Los Angeles. Like Los Angeles, his business grew, prospered, and sprawled until it

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