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For the final day of Black History Month, I bring you an African American first: William Sanders Scarborough (1852-1926), the first African American professional Classicist and first African American member of the MLA.

Scarborough was born into slavery in Macon, GA, in February of 1852. He was secretly taught to read. After the Civil War, he earned a degree from Atlanta University and then took an MA in Classics at Oberlin. In 1877 he began teaching at Wilberforce University. From 1897 to 1908, he was vice president of Wilberforce, and then president from 1908-1920.

In 1881 he published *First Lessons in Greek*, which became a standard college textbook. This accomplishment resoundingly answered Senator John C. Calhoun (SC), who had said that "if he could find a Negro who knew the Greek syntax, he would then believe that the Negro was a human being and should be treated as a man."

Scarborough tirelessly advocated for liberal arts education for all people but especially for black people. Some in Scarborough's day sought to burn down classical study, on the grounds that it was "superficial learning," the study of ancient Greek "a positive educational wrong," especially in a "utilitarian and scientific age," when "the living" ought "not forever be sacrificed to the dead" (so Charles Francis Adams, Jr., grandson of President John Quincy Adams and great-grandson of President John Adams, in 1883).

Scarborough rejoined over the course of his career:

"Without in the least undervaluing the sphere and influence of industrial training, we may affirm that higher education is, after all, to be the most powerful lever in the Negro's development and in the ultimate perfection of humanity at large" (1902).

"The Negro who has [...] advantages of culture must be alert to see that higher aspirations toward learning are not laughed down; scorned, ignored, crushed" (1908).

"The higher education...must be counted upon to teach [students] how to live better lives, how to get the most and the best out of life" (1903).

"We are here to see that [...] young people rise above the idea of being mere wage earner. [...] The automobile and aeroplane experiments, the great tunnel and bridge building, the business and the money getting—all are sending forth a siren call to hurry out into the world and do something at once, forgetting that there should be time given to culture getting, if the world as a whole, is to find the broad paths to human progress" (1909).

In 1882, Scarborough was the third African American to join the American Philological Association (APA), now the Society for Classical Studies (SCS). (Edward Wilmot Blyden had been the first black member of the APA in 1880, Richard T. Greener, the first black graduate of Harvard University, had been the second.)

From 1884 to 1907, Scarborough published over twenty articles in the professional journal of American Classics, *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (TAPA). He also wrote prolifically for popular journals: "I wrote quite continuously for the *Voice of the Negro* and *Howard's Magazine* on various subjects intended to be helpful in many ways."

He was also the first African American member of the Modern Language Association (MLA), and a member of the American Dialect Society, the American Folklore Society, the American Social Science Association, the American Academy of Political and Social Science, the American Negro Academy, the Archaeological Institute of America, the Egyptian

Exploration Fund, and the Royal Society of Arts, London. He was also on the General Committee of the NAACP in its earliest years.

In 1907, he was received with other APA members by President Theodore Roosevelt at the White House. And in 1921, he represented the APA at Cambridge University, as an international delegate to a session of the Classical Association.

As Michele Ronnick, an eminent Scarborough scholar, wrote 20 years ago, in words that echo with renewed relevance today:

"Through his dedication to African American education, he...confounded all those who thought that his learning was a form of whitewashed Uncle Tomism."

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/463573>

See further:

William Sanders Scarborough; Michele Ronnick (ed.). (2004). *The Autobiography of William Sanders Scarborough: An American Journey from Slavery to Scholarship*. Wayne State University Press.

Michele Ronnick (ed.). (2006). *The Works of William Sanders Scarborough: Black Classicist and Race Leader*. Oxford University Press.