Historic marker honors early black theological education

by Christopher Pote
VTS Archivist, Bishop Payne Library

On March 29, 2014, St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, Petersburg, and the Virginia Department of Historic Resources unveiled the historical highway marker commemorating Bishop Payne Divinity School (BPDS). Led by the Rev. W. Pegram Johnson III, a 1965 graduate of Virginia Theological Seminary (VTS), the project served to honor the roughly 260 black men and women who graduated from BPDS, as well as the faculty, staff, trustees, and wardens who facilitated this unique opportunity for theological education. The inspiration for the marker did not come from a member of the BPDS family but from Johnson—a white son of Petersburg whose great, great grandfather was a slave owner.

In the late 2000s, while visiting family in Arlington, Johnson took the opportunity to visit his alma mater, VTS. Coincidentally, or perhaps divinely inspired, it was in Bishop Payne Library, while enjoying an exhibit commemorating the men and women of BPDS, that Johnson was moved to pursue a marker. He remembered the school from his youth and the odd juxtaposition of its existence in a former, major Confederate city, and he wanted to publicly exalt and memorialize its legacy. He was not the first to have this idea, but he knew the time and effort involved and the bureaucratic landmines to sidestep. He received the vital support and assistance of the Rev. Willis Foster Sr. (VTS 2010) and the congregation of St. Stephen’s, Petersburg, the founding institution for the school and where many of its wardens and graduates served. Johnson also procured the financial support of VTS with assistance from the Very Rev. Ian S. Markham, Ph.D., dean and president. “It was such an honor to participate in this undertaking,” said Dean Markham.

Johnson became interested in history at an early age as the echoes and odors of the Civil War still lingered in his hometown of Petersburg. The nine-month siege of Petersburg, its surrender, and the subsequent loss at nearby Five Forks were among the final gasps of the Confederate effort. Growing up one mile from Blandford Cemetery where the bodies of more than 30,000 Confederates are interred, and near the Crater, site of major conflicts during the siege, had an enduring effect on him. It was over these lands—Five Forks battlefield, his grandparents’ farm, the field near Lieutenants Run—where Johnson would roam and gather the physical remnants of the war. Buttons, cloth, bones, and even the occasional live shell were his bounty.

As a child, Johnson attended an all-white middle school only a few blocks from Bishop Payne Divinity School. He remembers driving by Emmanuel Chapel on West Street and seeing the black seminarians processing in their cassocks. Petersburg was still very much

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After his return, Johnson enrolled and
graduated from VTS and was subse-
quently ordained a priest in 1966. As an
Episcopal priest and educator, he would
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As the Rev. Canon Lloyd A. Lewis
Jr. (VTS 1972) attested in his sermon
during the marker dedication ceremony,
the legacy of BPDS and its graduates
still permeates the Episcopal Church.
Lewis recalled the great influence of
his mentors, the Rev. Dr. John C. Davis
(BPDS 1936) and the Rt. Rev. Richard
B. Martin (BPDS 1942), and spoke
about sharing that wisdom with current
and future generations of priests. The
BPDS lineage and significance are
enduring. Established in 1878 as part of the
theological department of St. Stephen’s
Normal and Industrial School and a
branch of Virginia Theological Semi-
nary, Bishop Payne Divinity School
was the only seminary for black men in
the Episcopal Church. Led by the Rev.
Giles B. Cooke, rector of St. Stephen’s,
and the Rev. Thomas Spencer (VTS
1876), BPDS was created in part to ad-
dress the increasing demand to prepare
black men in the Diocese of Virginia
for ministry in the Episcopal Church.
Among the original six men joining the
department in 1878 were George Free-
man Bragg, Thomas Cain, and James
Solomon Russell.
With success in the department and
increased enrollment in the ensuing
years, the institution was incorporated
in the state of Virginia and named the
Bishop Payne Divinity and Industrial
School in honor of the Rt. Rev. John M.
Payne (VTS 1836), the first Bishop of
Liberia. By 1886, the school moved out
of St. Stephen’s and, eventually, settled
on South West Street. It was renamed
Bishop Payne Divinity School in 1910
when it received the authority to confer
Bachelor of Divinity degrees. In 1945,
the department in Christian Education
for Women was created, twenty years
before VTS officially started to admit
women.
In 1953, after several years of de-
clining enrollment and financial insta-
bility, BPDS merged with VTS. As part
of that agreement, all remaining funds
of BPDS were turned into the Bishop
Payne Scholarship Fund which was to
be used to defray the cost of theologi-
cal education for black men. In 2007,
the VTS board of trustees voted that
the Scholarship Fund would provide
full tuition for any black Episcopalian
entering the Master of Divinity, Master
of Arts, and most other degree pro-
grams. In addition, to honor the Divin-
ity School, the seminary’s library was
renamed Bishop Payne Library several
years after the merger.
In total, BPDS graduated 256 men
and six women of African descent.

Right: Bishop Payne Divinity School
Alumni Association reunion circa 1949.
Note—Odel Greenleaf Harris and John
C. Davis, 8th and 10th from the left,
respectively. Below right: Graduating
class of 1936 with the Rt. Rev. Edward
D. Demby, back row, first black bishop
of the Episcopal Church in the U.S.
(second from left).

Left: Bishop Payne Divinity School
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Twenty-three went on to receive honor-
ary doctoral degrees, and 10 served as
military chaplains. Seven graduates
returned to the seminary as professors,
and 11 served as archdeacons.
Among these church leaders, seven
were elected to the episcopate, with
five accepting the call: Bravid Har-
is (BPDS 1922); Quintin E. Primo,
Jr. (BPDS 1941); Lemuel B. Shirley
(BPDS 1941); Richard B. Martin
(BPDS 1942); and Henry B. Hucles
(BPDS 1946). With this legacy, there
can be no doubt that the institution
deserved an historical marker.
Johnson was an unlikely advocate
for BPDS, just as he thought Peters-
burg seemed an unlikely home. He
did his part to ensure that the future
generations in Petersburg will know
of the pioneering divinity school. And
priests such as Lewis and Foster ensure
that the contributions and influence of
Bishop Payne Divinity School endure
in the Church. VTS is honored to be
part of that rich legacy.