

Drew Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow: In Honor of Clarence E. Harrison

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In the fall of 1930, Brothers College, now the Undergraduate College of Liberal Arts, welcomed its first Black student after two years of being open for enrollment. This student was Clarence Harrison, who would become the first Black Undergraduate student to graduate from Drew University in 1935. In honor of the continued celebration of Black History Month, this week's article will be dedicated to Harrison and his amazing accomplishments at Drew University nearly a century ago.

Harrison is originally from Sea Cliff, a village on Long Island in New York, according to the 1934 edition of "The Oak Leaves." Harrison arrived at Drew in 1930. His chosen majors included English and Philosophy. According to peers writing about Harrison in the 1935 edition of "The Oak Leaves," he "was one of Dr. Aldrich's best students in English Literature and was at the same time a leader in many clubs and societies on campus."

In his first year on campus Harrison was involved in both extracurriculars and athletics, including the Fencing team. In an Acorn article from October of 1931, Harrison was described by his peers as a vital part of "the nucleus of an effective organization." In March of 1933, another Acorn article described Harrison and his teammate Van Gilder as "the stars for

Drew.” In his freshman year, he also saw involvement in classical orchestra and was a founding member of the French Club, serving as vice president. In Harrison’s second and third years at Drew, he also explored clubs such as the International Relations Club and served as president in his senior year.

In his junior and senior years, Harrison was elected to positions on the Student Council by his classmates. His reasons for coming and going from the organizations he was a part of are not documented, but it may be speculated his busy class and extracurriculars may have needed to be consolidated at some point.

Harrison explored a variety of interests while at Drew but also directed much of his focus toward English-related endeavors, possibly to gain skills related to the degree he was pursuing. Harrison was a member of The Acorn for all of his time at Drew. He served as a reporter and was featured in Acorn editions throughout his time on staff. Sadly, due to publication practices of the past, Harrison’s name is not tied to any specific articles.



Harrison’s Photo, 1935.
Image courtesy of Oak Leaves, 1935.



Drew University fencing team, circa 1932.
Image courtesy of The Oak Leaves, 1932.

He also served as a literary editor for “The Oak Leaves” in his junior year. He wrote and performed speeches at various oratorical contests, one of them being “The Aspirations of the American Negro,” which drew on his own experiences and emotions as a Black man in America. While the speech did not win first place in an April 1932 contest, it was described by his peers writing for The Acorn as “one of the best orations.”

Harrison was considered to be a wonderful leader by his peers. “His personal example, as well as his influence as an active member of the extra-curricular affairs on the campus have marked Clarence as a man of unusual abilities,” wrote a member of the Acorn the year that Harrison graduated. Students of today balancing classes, athletics and clubs may also marvel at Harrison’s ability to do it all.

At the time of his graduation, colleges and universities across the country remained segregated. Yet at Drew, Harrison was able to get a quality education as well as leadership experience. It is impossible to know how Harrison truly felt about Drew in his time here without access to personal records, yet his involvement outside the classroom suggests that he felt as if he was a welcomed and valued member of the community. Documents regarding what Harrison was able to accomplish later in life were not discovered in this research and were unavailable online. But, based on the passion that he shared with the Drew community it is not unreasonable to assume that he brought his amazing leadership skills with him into the world.

Students on campus can take inspiration from this amazing role model. Harrison successfully balanced his life both inside and outside the classroom and made the most of the experiences that Drew University has to offer. While it has been nearly 90 years since his graduation, hopefully, Harrison can be remembered for his influence on the Drew community while facing the strange experience of being the first Black undergraduate to graduate from Drew. There is no doubt that he served as a pioneer for future Black students and he should be remembered for his contributions to Drew’s history. Harrison accomplished so much and should be rightfully celebrated as an exceptional member of the Drew community.

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Featured image courtesy by The Oak Leaves, 1935.

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