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JAMES LEONARD FARMER
TEXAS' FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN Ph.D.

by Gail K Beil

James Leonard Farmer, father of civil rights leader James Farmer, was Texas' first African American Ph.D.

He was a strong force in black education from 1919, when he arrived, to 1956, when he left Texas for the last time. His contributions focused on Wiley College in Marshall and Samuel Huston, later Huston-Tillotson, in Austin, both affiliated with the Methodist Church.

Farmer might have been numbered among the black intellectual giants had he remained among his contemporaries in Boston, Chicago, or New York; instead he chose the backwater of rural Texas as the vineyard in which he would toil, and is largely forgotten late in the twentieth century.

James Leonard Farmer, earned his Ph.D.¹ from Boston University in 1918, pastored churches in Texarkana, Marshall, and Galveston, and taught at Wiley College in Marshall from 1919 to 1920 and from 1934 to 1939, and Samuel Huston (later Huston-Tillotson) in Austin from 1925 to 1930 and from 1946 to 1956. He also taught at Gammon Theological Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia, from 1930 to 1933, Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi, from 1920 to 1925, and at Washington, D.C.'s Howard University in the School of Religion from 1939 to 1946. Following his retirement, he returned to Washington, D.C., where he reviewed books and wrote articles for Howard University's School of Religion.

Catalogues of Wiley, Rust, and Samuel Huston suggest that Farmer had more than a professorial role, particularly at Rust, where he was academic dean, and at Samuel Huston, where he was registrar during both periods he was on that faculty.²

Farmer, who normally used the name "J. Leonard Farmer" on all of his publications, was born in Kingstree, South Carolina, on June 12, 1886. Some sources give his birth date as 1885.³ His parents, former slaves, were Carolina and Lorena Wilson Farmer. His son, civil rights leader James Leonard Farmer, Jr., founder of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), wrote extensively of his father in his own *Lay Bare The Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement*, "Daddy's family was poor. He told me that when he was in the first grade he would run home from school and sit on his mother's lap and suck at her breast. In that way food for one would feed two."⁴

The grade school from which he made that daily trip home was in Pearson, Georgia. According to his son, there was no high school for blacks in Georgia, but Farmer was able to continue his education by acquiring a working scholarship from Mary McCloud Bethune to the Cookman Institute, the school she had founded in Daytona Beach, Florida.

A straight-A student, Farmer was accepted into Boston University in

Gail K Beil lives in Marshall, Texas.

Boston, Massachusetts, and began his studies in 1909.⁵ He received four \$100 scholarships to the university, according to Dr. Matthew Winfred Dogan, Wiley College president from 1896 to 1942,⁶ writing for a book, *The New Progress of a Race* in 1925.

"He walked to Boston," Farmer's son said. "There was no money for transportation and nothing to hitch a ride with except an occasional horse and wagon. [He slept] en route in the barns of kind farmers."⁷

While at Boston University, Farmer earned his bachelor's degree in 1913, his Bachelor of Sacred Theology in 1916, and his Ph.D. in 1918.⁸ Farmer said his father worked full time as a valet and "carriage boy" for a wealthy white woman, sending money home to support his impoverished parents.

Because Boston University required two years of residency to earn a Ph.D., Farmer, who had completed the course work and written his dissertation in a year, crossed the Charles River to Harvard University in 1918 to do graduate study.

The title of his 300-page dissertation was "The Origin and Development of the Messianic Hope in Israel with Special References to Analogous Beliefs Among Other Peoples." A copy of the dissertation, with its authenticity affirmed by Farmer in 1956, is housed at Boston University. In 1917, he was ordained deacon, the first step toward becoming a Methodist minister, and married Pearl Marion Houston, whom he had met at Cookman Institute.⁹ It is possible that Farmer made his first trip to Texas in 1917. Methodist Church Texas Annual Conference Journals contain the following note under Farmer's name; "served at Marshall Ebenezer, from September to Conference session 1917." At that time The Texas Annual Conference met in December. No records at Marshall's Ebenezer United Methodist verify that Farmer was pastor then, but Ebenezer's records are sketchy. The Texas Annual Conference Journal also indicates Farmer joined the Texas Annual Conference in 1917.¹⁰ His son said he has no knowledge as to whether his father was in Marshall prior to 1919, nor does he know the place where his father and mother were married. By 1917, train service from Boston to Marshall or from Florida to Marshall was available and heavily used, so it would have been possible to make the trip with no difficulty.

Farmer was a candidate for a year's study abroad in 1918, and was to have gone to the University of Basel, Switzerland. But the United States' entry into World War I made it impossible for him to travel, and he lost the opportunity.¹¹

In 1919, Farmer was ordained an elder in the Texas Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and he remained a part of the Texas Conference until his death.¹²

According to the July-August 1930 issue of *The Foundation*, the publication of Gammon Theological Seminary, following Farmer's graduation he joined the Texas Conference and was assigned by Methodist bishops to churches in Texarkana, Texas, where his first child, Helen Louise, was born in 1918, Galveston, and Ebenezer in Marshall.

By 1919, Farmer was assigned to Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, where conference records say he was a professor of philosophy. Wiley College catalogues indicate that he taught Latin, religion, and psychology as well as philosophy. He was head of the department of philosophy.

His son, James Leonard Farmer, Jr., destined to become one of leaders of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, was born in Marshall on January 12, 1920, though no birth certificate was filed in the City of Marshall or the Harrison County Clerk's office. Older women of Ebenezer (United) Methodist Church, where the Farmers had been members and Farmer may have once been pastor, remembered the birth and attested to the fact in 1986, as did his Aunt Sadie Wilson, so Farmer was able to acquire an amended birth certificate, now on file in Harrison County.¹³

At Wiley in 1920, in addition to his teaching, Farmer also preached regularly in the Wiley College chapel. Elderly people in Marshall who had been students of Farmer agreed with his son's description of the learned professor. "Students benefited from his extracurricular assistance, too. Several septuagenarians who had studied under dad tell me they would go to him with problems in physics or analytical geometry or calculus. (They thought he knew everything.) He would sit at his desk chair, feet crossed at the ankles, picking hairs from his prematurely balding head, as he always did when deep in thought. Moments later, with a flourish, he would write the correct answer and his method of arriving at it."¹⁴

Years later when Farmer returned to Wiley, whites were equally impressed with his mind and preaching eloquence – remarkable for a small Southern town. One of them was Inez Hughes, who taught English in Marshall from the 1920s until 1964, and married East Texas Baptist College religion professor Solon Hughes in the 1930s. Mrs. Hughes met Farmer, Jr. for the first time on June 11, 1987, when he was in Marshall to speak and to autograph his book. She told him, "I know people think you're a great man, but in my opinion, your father was greater. Solon and I used to go out to Wiley College every Sunday afternoon to hear his sermonettes."

"He was a great intellectual," Farmer, Jr. replied.

"He was the most intellectual man I ever met," Mrs. Hughes said. "If times had been different, I think Solon and he would have been great friends."

The most contemporary accounts of Farmer's career are *Progress of a Race*, (1925) and the much more extensive biographical account in Gammon Theological Seminary's *The Foundation* (1930). The theological seminary in Atlanta conferred an honorary doctor of divinity on Farmer in 1929, who taught there from 1930 to 1933. *The Foundation* article said Farmer entered the Texas Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1917. He left Wiley College to become the academic dean at Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi, at the end of the school year in 1920, and remained there until 1925 when he accepted a position at Samuel Huston College.

The Foundation describes Farmer's important efforts at Samuel Huston

College, which "was preparing to make its final effort for state recognition as a senior college."

This year (1925) President Brooks secured his service as a professor of social sciences in which capacity he has served until the present. In 1928 he was elected registrar, and in 1930 registrar and acting dean of the college. . . . When he took over the [Samuel Huston] registrar's office in 1928 he found it in such a condition as greatly embarrassed and endangered the standing of the college with the state. But, as a result of his self-sacrificing industry, the state inspector declared last winter that the condition of the registrar's office has improved 700 percent, that the records would be a credit to any institution, and they placed Samuel Huston College in the front rank of educational institutions in the state.

Another member of the State Board of Examiners later commended his service by saying, 'You're doing pioneer work.' and during a visit last spring the Educational Director of the Institutions of the Methodist Episcopal Church of Negroes declared that Dr. Farmer has been 'the savior of Samuel Huston this year.'

According to the same source, Farmer was a prolific writer, "having contributed numerous articles on sociological subjects to newspapers and magazines and having written the Sunday School Lessons for the *Southwestern Christian Advocate* for 11 years [1919- 1929]."

Catalogues from Samuel Huston do not list the courses taught by individual professors, but they did list degrees - Farmer had the only Ph.D. - and faculty committees. Among the committees on which Farmer served during his first tenure at Huston were Admissions and Credits, Student Organizations, and Public Worship, where he was chair.¹⁵

Farmer had been writing Sunday School lessons for the *Southwestern Christian Advocate* since 1919, when he was in Galveston.¹⁶ In 1925, Dogan wrote that Farmer was the editor of the Sunday School department of the *Southwestern Christian Advocate*.¹⁷ "My daddy used to write all the time," said Jim Farmer in an interview in April 1996. "He would hide himself in his study and type with two fingers - both index fingers - with his legs crossed at the ankles."

Sometime before 1932 Farmer became the dean and principal teacher of the Gulfside School of Ministerial Training located near Gulfport, Mississippi. This institution, established in 1920 by Methodist Episcopal Bishop Robert E. Jones, trained black ministers who were either seeking continuing education or who could not attend seminary on a full-time basis. Farmer returned every summer until he retired in 1956.¹⁸

Jones and Dr. Farmer were friends, according to Farmer's son. Methodist Church records show Jones the bishop of the Texas Conference at the time of Farmer's first appointment in 1917, and chairman of the board of trustees at Samuel Huston College from 1924 to 1929.¹⁹

Farmer returned to Wiley College in 1933. He again served as professor of religion, philosophy, and psychology, teaching multiple courses in all three disciplines.²⁰ Once again he enthralled both white and black audiences with his

Sunday afternoon preaching at the Wiley College Chapel. He also wrote articles for the college publication, *Wiley Reporter*, and probably continued to write for other journals. Unfortunately, none of his writings, other than his regular lessons in the *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, have been found.²¹

In 1938, when he was dean of Howard University's School of Religion, Benjamin Mays made a trip to Texas to recruit Farmer to teach at Howard.²² He accepted the position at the end of the school year and became the second Ph.D. on the faculty of the School of Religion. The other was Mays, who had earned his from the University of Chicago in 1935. Although Farmer was an Old Testament scholar, his son said Mays hired Farmer to teach New Testament.²³

Some of Farmer's writing and copies of his lectures from this period are preserved at Howard University. In 1943 he wrote *The Coming of Peace and the Prince of Peace*. He also wrote *John and Jesus in Their Day and Ours*, which appears to be a compilation of some of his lectures, and *The Rediscovery of Deutero-Isaiah*, possibly based on his doctoral dissertation. *John and Jesus* is still extant, but no copies of *Rediscovery* are known to exist. In 1939, Farmer also contributed sermons to a book titled *Pulpit Eloquence*, but this book seems to be lost as well.²⁴

While at Howard University, Farmer wrote regularly for the *A.M.E. Zion Quarterly Review*. Copies of articles from 1943 to 1945 are housed at Howard. Titles of Farmer's articles and printed sermons include: "Was Jesus Violent in Cleansing the Temple?" and "Idealistic Christians in a Realistic World."

Farmer lectured at Fisk University at the 17th Annual Session of the Interdenominational Institute, May 22-24, 1944. His four lectures, published later, were titled, "St. Paul's Gospel of Salvation in the Epistle to the Romans."

Farmer returned to Samuel Huston in 1946, where he again served as registrar and professor of philosophy. He was also chairman of the social science division. He was the only Ph.D. there until 1949 when a visiting professor of education, Ellsworth Lowery, joined the faculty for a year.²⁵

In 1956, Farmer retired from teaching and returned to Washington, D.C. There he reviewed books on religious subjects and theology for the *Journal of Religious Thought*, a publication of the School of Religion at Howard University. His reviews can be found in publications in issues for 1953, 1956 and 1958.

Jim Farmer's description of his father's death in 1961 is most dramatic. Farmer's Congress Of Racial Equality was making headlines as thirteen CORE members departed from Washington, D.C., for New Orleans on two buses, one a Trailways and the other a Greyhound. Farmer was on one of the buses. His father lay in a bed in Freedman's Hospital in Washington D.C., dying from the complications of cancer and diabetes. The younger Farmer had left a copy of his itinerary with his parents. On the night of May 14, the day before the Freedom Riders were to enter Alabama, he got a call that his father had died, and he returned to Washington.

"Mother emphatically stated that daddy had willed the timing of his

death, which he knew to be inevitable, in order to bring me back before the trip through Alabama," Farmer wrote. "Each day he would unfold the itinerary and squint at it, saying, 'Well let me see where Junior is today.'"

"Mother said he nodded with satisfaction until the fatal day and hung tenaciously to life and consciousness. When the itinerary told him the next day I would head into Alabama, he said, 'Oh!' Then he released his grip on life, she said, and slipped away. She believed until her death that dad had consciously done that in an effort to save me."²⁶

The Greyhound bus was burned outside Anniston, and several of the riders suffered smoke inhalation and other injuries and were hospitalized. The Trailways bus, after the Freedom Riders were beaten badly at the Alabama state line, made it to Birmingham. There, with Police Chief Bull Conner's approval, the police allowed a mob to attack the Freedom Riders for several minutes before intervening. One man was left for dead, another suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and spent the rest of his life in a wheelchair. Farmer, who had been on the Trailways bus, could have been killed.

James Leonard Farmer, Sr., was buried two days later in Washington, D.C.²⁷

Several theories have been advanced to explain why Dr. Farmer, who appears so early in the flowering of Texas black colleges, is almost unknown in the last decade of the twentieth century.

Most, if not all, of Farmer's writings are in the area of religion. Alwyn Barr, professor of history at Texas Tech University, says that little research has been done on African American religious leaders and not enough on educators in black colleges and universities.²⁸

M.J. "Andy" Anderson, who taught history next door to Dr. Farmer's classroom at Samuel Huston, said that as a scholar and an intellectual, Farmer was "over most everyone's head" and considered "somewhere out in left field."²⁹

James L. Farmer, Jr., and Dr. Raymond Hall, sociology professor at Dartmouth, also African American, from Marshall and particularly knowledgeable about James Farmer, Jr.'s activities, believe that Farmer was forgotten because the professor was not an activist, as were the African-American intellectuals who made it into the pages of history. Farmer called his father old fashioned. "He believed that equality would be achieved if one simply waited for whites to do the right thing."

In a paper written in 1943³⁰ titled "Plain Talk to the Negro By One of His Kind," Farmer wrote that there was a good deal of talk about black soldiers coming home after World War II and continuing the fight for freedom on American soil begun in the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific:

Much has been heard about the new Negro after this war. During the First World War much was said and written about the new Negro after that war. But, except for such development as would naturally have taken place. One's eyes have failed while he as waited and looked for this new Negro to make his debut. The age group that was then to have constituted that new

Negro should now be contributing to the rank and file of Negro leaders. But from the standpoint of what was meant by the "new Negro" except as would naturally accompany a greater intelligence, one cannot discern any very marked change in leadership. If anything, Negro weeklies have become less vitriolic and inflammatory... Meanwhile all sections of the country have been becoming more and more alike in unfriendly attitudes toward the Negro.

Advocating compromise with what he called "the ruling group," Farmer said to do otherwise in any "conflict of the races with ... this ruling group could force the liquidation of all Negro institutions and businesses; it could rescind every freedom which he now employs; it could expel or annihilate him; while the most he could do would be to curse and pray, but writhe and bear it. Men who make the laws were not made for the laws."

The only recourse Farmer suggested for equality was to abide by Christian principles. "*As a minority group the Negro must learn to get along with the dominant group while maintaining his self respect.*"³¹ "Perhaps the Negro's progress in salvation would be more rapid if his Christian principles should always be made in the true Christian spirit."

Farmer never advocated the concept of using non-violent civil disobedience to gain equality, but this writing came a generation before the non-violent approach to civil disobedience propounded and practiced by Mahatma Gandhi, and two generations before his son and Martin Luther King, Jr., adapted Gandhi's methods to Christian concepts of non-violence.

In his writing, particularly, Farmer stayed firmly in his chosen discipline of religion. Finally, he took the position of compromise instead of confrontation in the struggle for racial equality. These life decisions show his great strength of character, but they may well have cost him the recognition he deserves.

NOTES

¹According to statistics in *The Negro College Graduate*, written by Charles S. Johnson of Fisk University, the first African American earned a Ph.D. in 1876. By 1919, when Farmer began his teaching career in Texas, there had been only twenty-five Ph.D.'s granted to African Americans in the entire United States. Dr. Matthew Dogan, Wiley College president from 1895 to 1942, was granted an honorary Ph.D. from Walden University, Nashville, Tennessee, in 1904. Farmer earned his degree from Boston University in 1918. In *Private Black Colleges in Texas*, pp. 99 and 100, Michael Heintze states that at Wiley College in 1915, "Dogan alone had a doctorate" and "in 1933 the faculty included two doctoral ... degrees" without naming the other, who was Farmer.

²The *National Cyclopedia of American Biography*, p. 581, and Farmer, James Leonard, Jr., *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1985), various pages. James Farmer, Jr. is the chief source of autobiographical material on his father.

³The 1886 date is from Farmer's son. *The New Progress of a Race* (Naperville, Illinois, 1925), and the *National Cyclopedia of American Biography* (New York, 1965), list it as 1885.

⁴Farmer, p. 35.

⁵July-August 1930. *The Foundation*. Publication of Gammon Theological Institute, Atlanta, Georgia, p. 2.

⁶*Wiley College Catalogue*, 1896 and following.

⁷Farmer, p. 35.

⁸*National Cyclopedia of American Biography*, p. 582.

⁹Farmer, p. 35.

¹⁰Texas Annual Conference Journal, 1961, p. 102. The journal is at Lon Morris College, Jacksonville, in the Texas Conference archives. The 1917 date also appears in entry on Farmer (p. 226) in a book, *Who's Who in Methodism*, published in 1952. Notes in the text indicate that all entries have been verified for accuracy - presumably in this case by Farmer himself since he was alive and still teaching in 1952 when the book was published.

¹¹*The Foundation*; also J.L. Nichols, *The New Progress of a Race*, p. 372.

¹²*The Foundation*, p. 35.

¹³The author, who lives in Marshall, was asked by Farmer, Jr. to obtain any documentation available to authenticate his birth for Social Security purposes. Mrs. Aurer Gaines, then in her eighties, a graduate of Wiley and member of Ebenezer, provided the necessary information.

¹⁴Farmer, p. 36.

¹⁵Samuel Huston College Catalogues 1923 through 1929. Samuel Huston attained its "Class A" rating in 1928, according to the catalogue.

¹⁶*Southwestern Christian Advocate*, published in New Orleans, Louisiana, with Bishop Robert E. Jones as editor. Copy at Lon Morris College, Jacksonville.

¹⁷Nichols, p. 372.

¹⁸*National Cyclopedia*, XLVIII, p. 582.

¹⁹Huston, p. 2 of each catalogue from 1924 to 1929.

²⁰Wiley College catalogues, 1933-1938. As many as six courses in all three subjects are listed as classes taught by Farmer. He shared psychology department duties with Professor E.H. Crump.

²¹One article in the *Wiley Reporter* (January 1937) and located in the archives of the Moorland-Spingarn Research Library on the campus of Howard University. The article, entitled "The Teacher, The Teaching, The Taught," could have been written in 1996. It concludes, "Do what we will or may, some of us will never be able to achieve that degree of mental ability which is supposed to represent the educated man of college rank. But hardly less pardonable than is the sin against ourselves and our God-given intellectual endowment is wasting our time and talents in folly so that we might become intellectual runts when we might have become intellectual giants."

²²Farmer, Jr., remembers Mays coming to Marshall late in 1938 or early 1939 on the recruiting trip. James Farmer said his father left Howard to return to Texas to ensure his Methodist church-related retirement. He had to serve so many years in the Texas Conference in order to qualify. Thus he left Howard in 1946 for Samuel Huston, where he stayed ten years, returning to Washington D.C., at age seventy-one.

²³Howard University archives, various catalogues from 1939 to 1946. Now at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

²⁴*National Cyclopedia*, XLVIII, p. 582.

²⁵*National Cyclopedia*, also Huston.

²⁶Farmer, p. 201.

²⁷Farmer, p. 201.

²⁸Telephone conversation with Barr, August, 5, 1996. Barr is the author of *Black Texans: A Study of Negroes in Texas 1528-1971*, written in 1973, and with Robert Calvert he edited *Black Leaders: Texans for Their Times* in 1981.

²⁹Interview with M.J. Anderson in Austin, Texas, July 29, 1996.

³⁰September-October, 1943. *The Foundation*. Publication of Gammon Theological Institute, pp. 5, 6, 10.

³¹The emphasis was Farmer's.