LeMoyne College

LeMoyne College traces its origin to a school founded by the American Missionary Association in 1862. Lucinda Humphrey was a teaching missionary, commissioned by the AMA. In 1862 she was sent to Camp Shiloh near Memphis shortly after the city surrendered to Union forces. There she established an elementary school for the "contraband" blacks and "freedmen" who were leaving plantations in the surrounding states and arriving in large numbers in Memphis. She began her lessons with choice passages of scripture printed in large letters on sheets of paper. Her pupils were of all ages; sometimes a whole family would come together to learn to read and write.

In 1863 this school moved to Memphis and became known as the Lincoln Chapel School. In the race riots that followed withdrawal of federal troops in 1866, the Lincoln Chapel School was destroyed by fire. The AMA immediately sent $10,000 to rebuild it, and the School reopened in January, 1867, in a two story building with four classrooms. Two years later it had 2,000 pupils in spaces designed for 150.

By the end of the war, there were over 300 AMA teachers scattered in every state of the former Confederacy. They taught in barracks, churches and warehouses. As the AMA moved forward with the education of former slaves, they realized that they could reach more students if they focused on the training of teachers. Thus many of these early schools became normal schools, dedicated to training teachers, including what became LeMoyne College.

After the war, the AMA cooperated with government authorities in providing support to the schools of the Freedman's Bureau, contributing $325,000 between 1864 and 1869. Col. John Eaton, a former Union Army Chaplain under Grant and a Dartmouth graduate, became head of the Freedman's Bureau in West Tennessee. He organized several schools for African Americans but they were not supported by local taxes and had to charge a small tuition. Despite their poverty, freedmen managed to scrape together $1.33 a month to pay for their education and that of their children.

In 1867, the Reconstruction government compelled the city to take over support of these Freedmen's Bureau schools. J.H. Barnum, who served under Eaton, served as superintendent of Freemen's schools in Memphis until he and his wife were dismissed by the local school board in 1870. The AMA then appointed him as Principal of the Lincoln Chapel School.

By 1869 the School's financial problems were severe. It was then that Dr. Francis Julius LeMoyne of Washington, Pennsylvania, a life member of the American Missionary Association and prominent physician, came to the school's aid. Dr. LeMoyne had been a generous supporter of the AMA and had planned to leave a large bequest to the organization when he died. However, when he heard of the desperate situation in Memphis, he decided to act immediately and in 1870 sent $20,000 to support the school.

With this gift, the Lincoln Chapel School was reorganized and renamed the LeMoyne Normal and Commercial School. A campus was established on Orleans Street near Beale Street. J.H. Barnum remained Principal and Mrs. Barnum and the Reverend and Mrs. W.W. Mallory served
as the school's teachers. 110 pupils were enrolled, with another 75 in Sabbath School. The next year the enrollment was 291. The normal school course to prepare teachers was to be four years. Students were to be admitted to the normal school at 14, but the demand for African-American teachers was so great that many left to take jobs before completing the full four years, and began teaching in their mid-teens. Classes were taught in three divisions: the normal school, the commercial department, and the music department. Principal Barnum reported that during the School's first week, $136 was taken in from the day school and $45 from evening classes.

The next few years were difficult for the new school. The Yellow Fever epidemic of 1873 took the lives of the then Principal, D.E. Cortle, his wife, and another teacher at the school. Andrew Jackson Steele, then teaching at Tougaloo College in Mississippi, was asked to become Principal. In 1873 he began a remarkable 35 years as the School's head.

In 1901 the curriculum was broadened to include a regular high school. LeMoyne College moved to its present site in 1914 when Steele Hall was built on Walker Avenue. It became a junior college in 1924 and, finally, was chartered by the State of Tennessee as a four-year, degree-granting institution in 1934.

In 1943 Dr. Hollis Price because the first African American President of the College and served in this capacity for 27 years. Dr. Price was active in the civic, religious, and educational affairs in Memphis and the nation. He was also the first African American moderator of the United Church of Christ, into which the American Missionary Association had been absorbed. He received many honorary degrees and other honors during his long and illustrious career.

In 1946 the founding of Owen College was first discussed. The Tennessee Baptist Missionary and Educational Convention contracted for the purchase of property on Vance Avenue in Memphis for the purpose of building a Baptist junior college. A board of trustees was organized in 1953, and the School opened in 1954 as S.A. Owen Junior College, named in honor of the Reverend S.A. Owen, a prominent religious and civic leader. Later that year the name was shortened to Owen College. The first class was graduated in 1956, and the college was accredited in 1958.

In 1967, negotiations to merge LeMoyne and Owen Colleges began and the merger was accomplished in the fall of 1968. Each College brought to the merger a heritage of providing higher education to African American youth and the strong religious tradition of the United Church of Christ and the Baptist Church.

LeMoyne-Owen College has produced leaders in education, business, and public service. Most notable are Dr. W.W. Herenton, '63, Mayor of the City of Memphis; Dr. Benjamin Hooks, '45, former Executive Director of the NAACP; Dr. Gloria Wade-Gayles, '59, Professor of English and author, Dillard University; Dr. C. Eric Lincoln, '47, Professor of Religion, Duke University; and Dr. Theodore McLemore, '21, Trustee and longest serving official of any college or university in the country.