

Atlanta HBCUs

A Center of Black Higher Education in the Deep South



Graves Hall at Morehouse College
Credit: Wikimedia Commons

In Atlanta, Historically Black Colleges and Universities – or HBCUs – date back to the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. Beginning in 1865, Christian missionaries and other religious groups came to the South with the goal of educating freed Black residents. In the more than one and one half centuries since, HBCUs have called Atlanta home.

Two organizations loom especially large in the story of HBCUs in Atlanta. The first is Friendship Baptist Church and its founding pastor, Reverend Frank Quarles. A congregation that originated years before the Civil War with a group of enslaved men and women, Friendship served as a first Atlanta home to a trio of HBCUs: the schools that would become Atlanta University, Morehouse College, and Spelman College.

The other organization that has become a key part of Atlanta’s HBCUs is the Atlanta University Center, or AUC. By the turn of the twentieth century, five colleges for Black students called Atlanta home. Each school operated separately, with its own campus, administration, and faculty. But, they were all located near one another, allowing for the possibility of sharing some services and programs. The resulting partnership - the AUC – initially included Atlanta University, Morehouse and Spelman Colleges. Today, it is known as the AUC Consortium and includes: Clark Atlanta University, Morehouse College, Spelman College, and Morehouse School of Medicine.

Atlanta University

Founded in 1865, Atlanta University is not only the oldest of Atlanta’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities, it is the oldest in the South. Initially, Atlanta University served as a graduate school, though its offerings expanded to where it was conferring Bachelor’s degrees and preparing Black teachers and school librarians for future employment. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the University continued to add new academic programs.

In 1897, W.E.B Du Bois was hired by Atlanta University to build its sociology program. Over the next 13 years, while working in Atlanta, Du Bois researched conditions for Black residents of Georgia. In 1903, he also published *The Souls of Black Folk*, his seminal collection of writings on race and society. Du Bois initially left Atlanta University in 1910 to work with the NAACP in New York. Du Bois would return to Atlanta University in 1934 for a decade-long tenure as sociology department chair.



Fountain Hall
Credit: National Park Service

Clark College

In 1988, Atlanta University consolidated with another historic Atlanta institution, Clark College, and the new school became known as Clark Atlanta University. The Freedman's Aid Society of what was then the Methodist Episcopal Church – now the United Methodist Church – founded Clark College in a Summerhill area church in 1869.

Originally known as Clark University, the school eventually moved to the West End area in 1939. By that time, like Atlanta University, it had joined the Atlanta University Center.

In 1883, Clark's theological department became the Gammon School of Theology. The School was established to train Black students for careers as ministers and other religious workers. Gammon continued as an independent school for more than 75 years until, in 1959, it became part of the group of African American-centric religious training center known as the Interdenominational Theological Center.

Clark Atlanta University

In 1988, the school then known as Clark College and Atlanta University joined together to form Clark Atlanta University. The newest of Atlanta's HBCUs is also its largest, with an enrollment of more than 4,000 students, as of 2021. In addition to granting Bachelor's degrees, Clark Atlanta also has the distinction of being the only one of the colleges to offer graduate degrees.



*Bust of W.E.B. Du Bois
Clark Atlanta University
hildabast/Wikimedia
Commons*

Morehouse College

Established in Augusta, Georgia, in 1867 as the Augusta Institute, the school that became Morehouse College came to Atlanta in 1879. After finding its first home at Friendship Baptist Church, the school eventually built a campus in the West End area of Atlanta.

Morehouse was one of the founding members of the Atlanta University Center, joining in 1929.

Morris Brown College



*Morris Brown College sign
Credit: Wikimedia Commons*

Established by members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1881, Morris Brown is Georgia's only higher education institution created by and for African Americans. The school grew rapidly, from an enrollment of just over 100 at its 1885 opening to almost 1,000 students just over two decades later.

In 1941, Morris Brown College joined its neighboring HBCUs in the Atlanta University Center. It briefly left the AUC in the early 1970s in protest of a planned reorganization. But, the facilities and other benefits of AUC membership soon proved crucial and Morris Brown was readmitted to the organization.

In 1999, Morris Brown was again facing mounting debts. Attempts to pay off the debt – and the ensuing scandal – led to Morris Brown losing its accreditation. Enrollment plummeted from over 2,500 students to less than 100, and most of the faculty left the school. It would be 2022 before the College would again be fully accredited.

Spelman College

The third of the three schools that once located at Friendship Baptist Church home, Spelman College is America's oldest HBCU for women. Founded as the Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary in 1881, it was originally led by two New England missionaries. Through the generosity of John D. Rockefeller, the Seminary was able to establish a more permanent presence in Atlanta. In gratitude, the school took the name of the Spelmans, Rockefeller's anti-slavery activist in-laws. In the years to come, Spelman would educate high school and teaching students and later begin awarding Bachelor's degrees.



Spelman Seminary graduates
Credit: Wikimedia Commons

The Interdenominational Theological Center

In 1958, a quartet of religion schools and seminaries, representing the Baptist, Methodist, AME, and Christian Methodist Episcopal denominations, came together to under the umbrella of one organization. The four schools - Morehouse School of Religion, Gammon Theological Seminary, Turner Theological Seminary, and Phillips Theological Seminary – together were known as The Interdenominational Theological Center. In the 1960's and 1970's, Johnson C. Smith School of Theology and Charles H. Mason Seminary – representing the Presbyterian and Church of God in Christ denominations, respectively - joined the Center, though Johnson withdrew in 2014.

- Takeaways:**
1. Atlanta as a center of Black higher education in the South
 2. By turn of twentieth century, there were 5 HBCU's in the city.
 3. All five institutions are still in operation, in one form or another.

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