

## Appendix D

# The Genesis of the National Society of Black Physicists\*

Ronald E. Mickens†

The following gives “my story” of the formation of what is now called the National Society of Black Physicists (NSBP). This chronology is based on my personal records/documents<sup>1</sup> and the first two newsletters of the Society of Black Physicists.<sup>2,3</sup>

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As a graduate student in physics at Vanderbilt University, I attended my first Southeastern Section Meeting of the American Physical Society in 1966 at Clemson University. There, I met Howard Foster, the Chair of the Physics Department at Alabama A and M University. We formed an immediate friendship which lasted up to his premature death in the early 1970's. For several years, Howard collected the names and other significant information on Blacks having degrees in physics: Roster of Blacks in Physics. After his death, I continued this activity for another decade.

I completed my doctorate in 1968 and with a National Science Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship spent the next two years at the Center for Theoretical Physics, MIT. One of the most interesting persons at the Center was James Young, then on leave from Los Alamos National Laboratory, who would soon become Professor of

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†Clark Atlanta University, Department of Physics, Atlanta, GA 30314 (rohrs@math.gatech.edu).

Physics at MIT. In addition to our friendship and mutual respect for each other's scientific accomplishments, our discussions would often turn to the senior physicists in the black college community who mentored several generations of students who then went on to achieve doctorates in physics. These "elders" served as role models, provided the required intellectual tools for success in graduate school, and gave (when needed) both emotional and financial support to their students. In early 1972, we decided to organize a gathering to honor three persons: Halson Eagleson (Howard University), Donald Edwards (North Carolina A and T College), and John Hunter (Virginia State College). All these individuals were well known in our community, were considered excellent teachers, and had trained large numbers of students who completed the requirements for advanced degrees in physics. Fisk University was selected as the site for this event. There were three reasons for this decision: first, by this time, I was a member of the Fisk physics faculty; second, Fisk had a long tradition in both physics education and research; and third, Nashville was a convenient location for travelers coming from both coasts of the country.

Jim Young and I asked Joseph Johnson III (Southern University) and Harry Morrison (on leave at Howard University from the University of California-Berkeley) to serve with us as an Awards Committee. However, it was understood that the detailed planning and related activities were to be done by me. A major time-saver in this effort was Howard Foster's Roster of Blacks in Physics. I wrote a letter explaining the purpose of the gathering in Nashville and requested a contribution of \$50.00 per person to cover expenses of the affair.

At 5:30 p.m., 9 December 1972, approximately sixty friends, colleagues, and former students of the three guests of honor met at the Fisk University Faculty Club House for a pre-dinner social hour. The three awardees were interviewed in a separate room by representatives of the local print and broadcast press. Excerpts of these discussions, along with comments from others in attendance, appeared that night on two local television stations; the next day each of the newspapers published short articles on the event.

The Master-of-Ceremonies for The Awards Dinner for the First National Physics Fellows was Rutherford Adkins (Fisk University).

After an excellent meal, historical perspectives were given by James Lawson (Fisk University), Warren Henry (Howard University), and Harry Morrison. This was followed by the presentation of each recipient's biographical sketch by a former student and individual remarks by each awardee. The three each received a plaque and a certified check for \$250.00. The citation text read as follows:

In recognition of distinguished service to physics and society, we the undersigned present to \_\_\_\_\_ the first National Physics Fellows Award. This Citation is gratefully awarded to the aforementioned by a group of his colleagues and friends who observe that the black experience in physics and science generally has been enriched by his gift and humanity. Presented by the Awards Committee, Nashville, Tennessee, 9 December 1972.

The Second National Physics Award Ceremony was held at Howard University on May 1, 1975. The planning committee consisted of Anna Coble and Arthur Thorpe, both of the Howard University Physics Department, and myself. It was decided that the Awards Dinner would be preceded by a full day of formal scientific lectures. The scientific program is listed below:

<b>Speaker</b>	<b>Title of Talk</b>
*Walter Massey	"The Surface of Quantum Liquids"
*William Jackson	"Laser Induced Photo-Luminescence Spectroscopy"
*William Lester	"Theoretical Studies of Low Energy Inelastic Molecular Scattering"
*Ernest Coleman	"Research Advances in High Energy Physics"
*James Young	"Interactions: Prognosis for the Future"
*Warren Henry	"Historical Perspective on Magnetism"

The three awardees were Herman Branson, Warren Henry, and James Lawson. The Awards Dinner ceremony followed closely the format established at Fisk University. In particular, each awardee was presented with a citation plaque and a certified check for \$250.00. Several hundred persons attended the Awards Dinner.

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The enthusiasm generated by the Fisk and Howard events led to a Day of Scientific Lectures and Seminars that was held the follow-

ing year (April 1, 1976) at Morehouse College. The prime organizers were Carl Spight and myself. At the end of the meeting, representatives from Morgan State University volunteered to put on a similar program in 1977. Another important feature of the Morehouse meeting was that many discussions took place on the possibility of establishing some type of national black physics organization. The following are some of the persons who made significant contributions, in the period 1976–77, to the plans for creating the proposed organization: James Davenport, Warren Henry, Walter Massey, Harry Morrison, Carl Spight, and James Young.

The statements now to be presented provide a concise summary of what took place at the Morgan State University meeting (April 28, 1977) and the following meeting, held again at Morehouse College (March 29–30, 1978). These statements are excerpted from reference<sup>2</sup>:

“... The Society was inaugurated on Thursday, April 28, 1977 at Morgan State University, Baltimore, Maryland with interim structures and officers. The general purpose of the Society is to promote the professional well-being of black physicists within the scientific community and within society at large, and to develop and support efforts to increase the opportunities for, and numbers of, Blacks in physics. The Society is not in conflict with either the goals or the mission of the A.P.S. or the A.A.P.T. or any other of the mainstream professional organizations and is not intended to supplant any of them. Rather, the Society expresses the need for an organization in which Blacks play a major role in creating and developing activities and programs themselves for themselves. ...”

“... The first business meeting of the Society of Black Physicists was held in the early afternoon of Friday, March 31, 1978 at Morehouse College, Atlanta, Georgia at the end of the Fifth Annual Day of Scientific Lectures. ... At the business meeting reports were given by Walter Massey and James Davenport who served ably on an interim basis as, respectively, Society president and secretary-treasurer. ...”

The Society then elected its first full-time officers:

President:	Carl Spight (Morehouse College),
Treasurer:	Walter Massey (Brown University),
Exec. Member:	James Davenport (VA State College).

These three individuals constituted the executive committee and were<sup>2</sup> “charged with the following short-term activities:

- a) Drafting of a formal statement of purpose and Bylaws of the Society ...
- b) Continuing the membership drive ...
- c) Continuing the compilation of the roster of black physicists (under the direct supervision of Ronald Mickens) ...
- d) Initiating a Society “newsletter” ...
- e) Establishing liaison with the Minorities Committee of the AAPT and APS ...
- f) Representing the Society to all meetings of the (newly formed) Council of Black Scientific and Technical Organizations ...
- g) Continuing the annual Day of Scientific Lectures and Banquet....”

Two important points should be noted. First, the original name of the organization was the Society of Black Physicists. Second, the 1978 meeting at Morehouse College was called the Fifth Annual Day of Scientific Lectures. There existed in the thoughts of many one major line of reasoning for using “fifth” in the title of this meeting. The new Society was about to involve itself with other national organizations on a variety of issues related to both minority science education and the full participation in the scientific affairs of this nation. It was felt that in the deliberations to come and in the search for funds to support Society projects, advantages would accrue from having an organization with a “history.” Consequently, starting with the first ceremony at Fisk and counting the Howard ceremony as second, it follows that the meetings at Morehouse (1976), Morgan (1977), and Morehouse (1978), would, respectively, be the third, fourth, and fifth Day of Scientific Lectures! Following this “logic,” the second meeting of the Society of Black Physicists was held at Knoxville College<sup>3</sup> along with the Sixth Annual Day of Scientific Lectures during 26–27 April 1979.

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**References**

1. R. E. Mickens, personal records.
2. C. Spight (Morehouse College), editor, *Society of Black Physicists Newsletter*, Volume 1, Number 1, June 1978.
3. C. Spight (Morehouse College), editor, *Society of Black Physicists Newsletter*, Volume 1, Number 2, April 1979.