

President Harry Clifton “Curley” Byrd: Biographical Notes

4 December 2015

The purpose of this brief document is to highlight the role played by President Byrd in the development of the University of Maryland at College Park and to summarize some of the most important issues relevant to reassessing his history and legacy, particularly in relationship to the question of integration. Extensive documentation is available on his presidency, and this document does not attempt to replicate all existing information but highlights some of the key aspects of his role in building and attempting to maintain a segregated institution.

President Byrd and the Naming of Byrd Stadium

Dr. Harry Clifton “Curley” Byrd (1889-1970) had a remarkable trajectory at the University of Maryland (UMD). He began at College Park as a student active in various sports (baseball, football, track), was a captain of the football team in 1907, and graduated from Maryland Agricultural College with a B.S. in Civil Engineering in 1908 (his doctorate was honorary, conferred by Washington College, Western Maryland College and Dickinson College in the mid-1930s). He became a football coach at UMD in the early 1910s, and a few years later became Athletic Director for the institution (as well as an Instructor in the College). In 1923, the Alumni Association recommended to then-university President Albert Woods that the existing (“old”) football stadium (located on Route 1) be named after “Curley” Byrd for his contribution to Maryland athletics. President Wood agreed, and he implemented this recommendation¹.

Dr. Byrd was named Assistant University President in 1918, Vice-President of the university in 1932, Acting President in 1935 and the official President in 1936. As President (1935-1954), Dr. Byrd oversaw a rapid expansion of the university—between 1935 and 1954, for example, student enrollment grew from 3,400 to 16,000—and the campus as a whole grew rapidly, particularly over the course and immediate aftermath of World War II. This was a period of tremendous growth for the institution, and President Byrd has been credited in the official university’s history for leading this expansion.

The university began construction of a new football stadium in the late 1940s, and the new facilities were to be inaugurated in 1950. In January 1950, with little recorded deliberation and despite Byrd’s demurrals², the Board of Regents of the University of Maryland at College Park proposed that the name of the older university stadium be transferred to the new, almost completed facilities. Byrd Stadium, now located near University Boulevard, was inaugurated a few months later.

Given his personal accomplishments and the considerable growth of the university under his leadership, the reasons for naming the stadium after President Byrd are clear. A detailed account of this presidency can be found in the 1966 book by History Emeritus Professor George Callcott, The University of Maryland A History (1966).³

President Byrd: Missing Elements in the Prevailing Narrative

Official histories of the university summarize many significant achievements of Byrd's presidency, but these prevailing narratives are noteworthy because they completely omit any reference to Byrd's active resistance to efforts at integration and his advocacy for continued segregation. While these additional biographical elements are broadly accepted and not generally challenged, they are absent from the existing accounts of our university's history that are readily available to the campus community.

We provide **three examples that illustrate the absence of easily available information, which would allow members of the UMD community to inform themselves and reflect upon the history of segregation, and President's Byrd's role in attempting to maintain it.**

ArchivesUM, summary statement on University of Maryland President Harry Clifton "Curley" Byrd

Harry Clifton Byrd (1889-1970), 1935-1954. A 1908 graduate of Maryland Agricultural College, Byrd began his career as the university's football coach and later served as an assistant to Pearson. Under his leadership, the University of Maryland became one of the largest universities in the country as a result of New Deal construction projects, wartime training programs, and the post-war enrollment boom. Byrd's major accomplishments included the development of an educational extension program that became University College and included a full academic curriculum, partially funded by the Army and Air Force, for overseas military personnel. Byrd also took a personal interest in developing an American Studies program. In 1935, Maryland became the first southern state university in the twentieth century to accept African-Americans and, in 1951, the first to accept African-American undergraduates. Finally, the athletic program grew significantly under Byrd's guidance, and the physical plant was greatly expanded. Byrd retired to run, unsuccessfully, for governor.

During Dr. Byrd's tenure at its helm, the University of Maryland accepted African-American students (for example, in the Law School in 1935 and the graduate programs in College Park in 1950), but only when ordered to do so by court orders. And when "Byrd retired to run, unsuccessfully, for governor," he did so partly on his record as an advocate for continued segregation on a "separate but equal" basis.

UMD Website [www.umd.edu], About: History and Mission, Past Presidents
Harry Clifton "Curley" Byrd (1889-1970) was president of the University from 1935 to 1954.

A 1908 graduate of the Maryland Agricultural College with a B.S. in engineering, Byrd began his 43-year career at the University of Maryland with a temporary two-week stint coaching football in 1911. He taught English and history, was athletic director, and served as an assistant to Raymond Pearson before becoming president.

Under his tenure as president, the University of Maryland became one of the largest universities in the country as a result of New Deal construction projects, wartime training programs, and the post-war enrollment boom. Byrd's major accomplishments included the development of an educational extension program that became University College and included a full academic program, partially funded by the Army and Air Force, for overseas military personnel. Byrd also took a personal interest in developing an American Studies program.

An accomplished athlete and former Terrapin football star player, Byrd never lost interest in the game of football. As president, he found the football team's success an effective means of lobbying for dollars from state legislators. The athletic program thus grew significantly under Byrd's guidance. Byrd used university funds to build a new football stadium, which opened in 1950 with a win over Navy. Capital One Field at Byrd Stadium now stands as a reminder of his impact on athletics and the university.

In 1954, Byrd retired to run, unsuccessfully, for governor against Theodore McKeldin. He was honored posthumously in 1995 as an inductee to the University of Maryland Alumni Hall of Fame [<http://www.president.umd.edu/pastpres/byrd/>].

While this particular portrayal does not make the earlier cited linkage between integration and President Byrd's tenure in office, there is also little mention of his efforts to maintain segregation at the University of Maryland during his presidency.

UMD Website [www.umd.edu], About: History and Mission, Timeline
 1935-1954

H. C. "Curley" Byrd is appointed acting university president on June 28, 1935; on Feb. 21, 1936, he is named president. A 1908 graduate of the Maryland Agricultural College with a B.S. in engineering, Byrd began his 43-year career at the University of Maryland with a temporary two-week stint coaching football in 1911. He taught English and history, was athletic director, and served as an assistant to Raymond Pearson before becoming president.

1951

First African-American graduate student enrolls at College Park.

1951

First African-American undergraduate student, Hiram Whittle, enrolls at College Park.

1952

Parren Mitchell, first African-American graduate student to take all of his classes at College Park, graduates [<http://www.umd.edu/timeline/>]

Finally, the link to "University Archives" under "About: History and Mission" in the university website does lead to a page on "**University of Maryland History Links**" [<http://www.lib.umd.edu/univarchives/history-links>], but this page contains no obvious documentation on segregation at the University of Maryland in the 1930s-1950s period.

President Byrd and Segregation at University of Maryland, College Park

What does the available historical record suggest about the relationship between President Byrd and segregation at the University of Maryland in College Park?

The University Archives contain hundreds of boxes filled with folders containing an extraordinary number of documents, including detailed letters, informed speeches and long reports on almost any possible subject relevant to an expanding university, documenting Byrd's administrative legacy. Within this very extensive written record, the materials that can be easily identified as pertaining to the topic of segregation, integration and the education of African-Americans represent, in physical volume, a small portion of the documentation. Nevertheless, the existing materials on university policies regarding African-American education provide important and relevant information highlighting some of the major features of the evolving policies adopted under President Byrd regarding African-American education.⁴

After facing initial court decisions against segregation in the mid-1930s (when the university received a writ of mandamus to admit Donald Gaines Murray into its School of Law), President Byrd advocated for the development of "separate but equal" institutions, whereby African-Americans would be given access to educational opportunities at its facilities (on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, the precursor of UMES) and/or Morgan State College. This strategy included repeated efforts to maintain or bring these institutions under the direction of the University of Maryland president.

For academic fields and/or disciplines in which neither the Princess Anne facilities nor Morgan State College were suitable (e.g., most graduate school programs), **President Byrd, for the most part promoted making fellowships available that would allow African-American students to attend integrated institutions in the North of the United States. Towards the late 1940's, President Byrd also called for the development of parallel but segregated programs of study in Baltimore to avoid integration at College Park. In some documents,⁵ President Byrd suggested if all these efforts at maintaining segregation failed, the University of Maryland should consider becoming a private institution, so as to avoid the mandates for integration it could face as a public university.**

There are a number of **additional materials** available for a more in-depth review of Byrd's efforts to resist integration.

- Mark Tosso's Honors Thesis written in 2001 for the History Department entitled "H.C. 'Curley' Byrd and Opposition to Desegregation at the University of Maryland, 1933-1954," **provides a detailed account of Byrd's efforts to maintain segregation at College Park and his inability to keep pace, on these matters, with changing opinion in the State⁶.**
- Historian Amy Slaton's 2010 essay "Engineering Segregation: The University of Maryland in the Twilight of Jim Crow," **documents Byrd's specific actions in shaping segregated engineering education during the 1940s and 1950s by seeking enhancements in resources and facilities at University of Maryland's Eastern Shore campus as a strategy to keep African-Americans student out of College Park.⁷**

These materials along with accounts in Richard Kluger's definitive history of *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Simple Justice* (1976) corroborate **President Byrd was active in resisting efforts at desegregation and advocating for continued segregation at the University of Maryland in College Park.**

The historical record also indicates from early on **Dr. Byrd was a national leader in coordinating with administrators from other state institutions to construct and develop a coherent strategy to block integration.** As Vice-President of the university (1932-1935 – a period in which nine African-Americans applied and were denied admission to the University of Maryland Law School on the basis of race⁸) - Byrd writes many letters to presidents of other universities to inquire whether they are facing challenges to segregation (or “demands for social equality of the races”), how their institutions are responding to these challenges, and whether his colleagues feel racial agitation is being provoked by “outside direction” (which in Byrd's view might include “‘Liberal’ or ‘Socialist’ clubs,” “organizations with communistic tendencies,” and even “the Y.M.C.A. or the Y.M.A.[sic]”⁹). In part, these letters are significant because in subsequent decades, **President Byrd would often depict demands for racial integration as a product of the agitation of outsiders.** By the late 1940s and early 1950s, while he continued to express suspicion about the influence of Communists, he often referred to demands by the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) as “these people in New York,” while generally portraying “the races” in Maryland as content with existing, segregated arrangements.

The files indicate Byrd received some public support for his efforts in maintaining segregation, even after other officials in the State saw that opposition was futile and urged integration. In his various administrative roles at the University of Maryland, Byrd receives letters praising his efforts to maintain segregation and urging him to uphold his position¹⁰. These letters sometimes express extreme racial intolerance and prejudice. As far as can be told from a cursory assessment of the written record, President Byrd did not deploy the same kind of racially bigoted language. Nonetheless, **as the key figure in developing the state and university's policies on Negro education, he emphasized that segregation should aim at the development of ‘separate but equal’ educational facilities and his arguments in support of resources for building up the Negro branch of the university (University of Maryland, Princess Anne that later became UMES) played on racial stereotypes. For example, he is quoted as saying: “If we don't do something about Princess Anne, we're going to have to accept Negroes at College Park, where our girls are”¹¹.** The letters, therefore, provide some insights into the social climate of the time and some of the public emotions that might have strengthened Byrd's anti-integration resolve and supported his decisions and statements.

President Byrd framed many of his arguments as an effort to preserve state's rights in the face of federal intrusion. For example, he made a detailed statement opposing a federal Anti-Lynching Bill, arguing that states are best positioned to address this crime.¹²

Certainly in the more formal challenges to segregation at the University of Maryland President Byrd was perceived as actively and personally engaged in preserving segregation. These include some of the challenges raised by the NAACP (represented by Thurgood Marshall) in the late 1930s. Yet, advocates of integration (such as the eighteen organizations testifying

before Maryland Governor's Commission on Negro Education on 11/22/1949) increasingly argued: "any segregated facility, by the fact of its segregation, is unequal:"¹³ an argument that ultimately succeeded.

President Harry C. "Curley" Byrd did not openly defy the courts in order to maintain segregation. Neither did he provide leadership to facilitate the experience of attending the University of Maryland, College Park for Negro students. The record clearly demonstrates that until forced to integrate, he worked assiduously to maintain segregation at the University of Maryland, exploiting racial anxieties and animosities of the Jim Crow era in support of that position.

¹ Personal communication from Anne Turkos, University Archivist.

² The following quotation is taken from the Board of Regents Minutes, January 10, 1950. "Dr. Byrd stated that he appreciated very much the attitude of the Chairman of the Board and others relative to so honoring him, but that it might be embarrassing to him and to the Board, inasmuch as he had worked hard for three years to bring about development of the Stadium project. The President stated he did not wish it to seem that he had been trying to build a monument to himself. Without regard to the President's view, the Board proceeded to take formal action in accordance with the Chairman's suggestion."

³ George H. Calcott, *The University of Maryland at College Park, A History*, (Noble House, 2005), Chapter 13. This historical account of the Byrd Presidency continues to echo through most of the materials on the era available on the UMD campus.

⁴ UM Archives: UM & Higher Education for Negroes 1947-1951(folder 1 of 2), Office of the President's Records, Series 8, Box 123, provides a good example of the stated policies.

⁵ Same record as cited immediately above.

⁶ Mark D. Tosso, "H.C. 'Curley' Byrd and Opposition To Desegregation at The University Of Maryland 1933-1954." Thesis submitted to the Department of History of the College of Arts and Humanities, University of Maryland, May 2001, (Rev. August 2002).

⁷ Amy E. Slaton, "Engineering Education: The University of Maryland in the Twilight of Jim Crow", OAH Magazine of History, 24:3 (July 2010), pgs. 15-23.

⁸ Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice*, (Knopf, 1976)

⁹ UM Archives: Negro Education, 1933-1935; Papers of Harry C. Byrd, Series I, Box 8. "YMCA" refers to Young Men's Christian Association. A reference for "YMA" was not located.

¹⁰ UM Archives: Negro Education I: March 14, 1923 – Mar 31, 1937 (2 of 3): Records of the President's Office, Series 8, Box 85.

¹¹ Calcott, *Ibid.* p. 351.

¹² UM Archives: Speeches & Statements, Byrd, 1954 and [undated]; Papers of Harry C. Byrd Series 2

¹³ UM Archives: Negro Education I: March 14, 1923 – Mar 31, 1937 (1 of 3): Records of the President's Office, Series 8, Box 85.