In the late 1890s, Booker T. Washington, Tuskegee Institute’s principal and a former slave, was one of the most recognized black men on the planet. His agenda for enabling jobs and education for post-Reconstruction black southerners also assuaged many white Americans’ anxieties about black economic competition and political empowerment. Another former slave turned educator shared Washington’s politics and vied with him for fame. The Rev. Peter Thomas Stanford, M.A., M.D., D.D., L.L.D., and PhD, was hailed by the Sept. 12, 1903, Richmond Planet as “the next best known man in the work of educating his people to Booker T. Washington.”
Both Stanford (c. 1858-1909) and Washington (c. 1856-1915) wrote and spoke as one against national suspicions about African American intellect, integrity, and respectability. So when pro-Washington newspapers questioned the legitimacy of Stanford’s numerous academic degrees, he had to push back. In our research of the Readex databases, we have uncovered a fascinating story of how he and his supporters retaliated against the papers’ smear campaign. To vindicate Stanford’s reputation, they linked him to the people, places, and events of the American antislavery movement. Their use of symbols and associates from that previous crusade gave credence to Stanford’s post-Reconstruction activism.

Two newspapers challenged Stanford’s character: the black-owned *New York Age*, whose celebrated editor Timothy Thomas Fortune advised and counseled Booker T. Washington, and Cleveland, Ohio’s *Plain Dealer*, which was not averse to racist reportage. In “Negro Institution,” a negative report about Baltimore’s Christ’s Medical and Theological College, also known as the Medico-Chirurgical College of Christ’s Institution, the *Age* questioned Stanford’s ethics. He had served on the college’s board of advisers to raise funds and recruit students, and he had edited one of the school’s catalogs. However, as the March 18, 1909, *Age* suggested, his
respectable service had camouflaged and abetted the college’s rampant corruption, perhaps willfully. In the absence of a rigorous curriculum and faculty, the Age suggested that the college had sold academic titles to students. After all, a state accreditor had fined the institution for conferring “paper degrees.” At the very least, its students may have been conferred degrees for dubious or mediocre effort.

**NEGRO INSTITUTION.**

*Dropped from Carnegie Pension List and Methods Scored.*

**Baltimore, Md., March 10.—In the third annual report of the president and treasurer of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, a Negro institution with alleged headquarters in Maryland, comes in for severe scoring.**

*The report excludes the Medico Chirurgical and Theological College of Christ’s Institution from the list, whose aged teacher receives the Carnegie pension. The report says:*

*“The District of Columbia has been prolific in paper colleges which scatter degrees far and wide, the distribution beginning usually with the members of their own faculties. “Among the colleges chartered by the State of Maryland in about 1900 is the “Medico-Chirurgical and Theological College of Christ’s Institution.” The charter gave the school the right to grant all kinds of degrees, and it is needless to say that the organizers a few weeks later were able to attach to their names many academic titles. The fifth annual catalogue contained the following on its first page: ‘Fifth Annual Announcement and Catalogue, edited by the Rev. Dr. P. Thomas Stanford, A.M., M.D., D.D., L L P., Ph.D., vice-president.’”*

The Age’s motives are not clear. Fortune may have meant to protect Washington’s status by purging his circle of suspected charlatans and frauds like Stanford. On
Valentine’s Day, Feb. 14, 1903, the *Plain Dealer*’s article titled “A Startling Contrast” more directly attacked Stanford. The newspaper reported about Stanford’s invitation to serve as pastor of Birmingham, England’s Wilberforce Memorial Church, after his earlier successful tenure at the city’s Hope Baptist Chapel. From a childhood as an enslaved person and an orphan, Stanford had climbed his profession and gained an appointment as the first black preacher of an all-white congregation in one of the busiest global centers of industry and invention. Yet, the *Plain Dealer* was dismissive of this achievement. It called him “a man of ‘inferior race’” and questioned the authenticity of his many diplomas. As the *Plain Dealer* jeered, “If they [the Birmingham congregation] have taken him on the strength of his string of affixes they are altogether likely to find that they have drawn a blank.”
A Startling Contrast.

It is announced that Rev. P. Thomas Stanford, A. M., M. D., D. D., LL. D., a Boston clergyman, has received a call to the pastorate of the Wilberforce Memorial church at Birmingham, England. It is somewhat humiliating to have to confess ignorance of the name and fame of a gentleman who seems to have taken all knowledge for his province and who has achieved such success in the fields of the liberal arts, medicine, divinity and jurisprudence, as this imposing array of academic titles would seem to indicate. It is passing strange that this light in which all the "four faculties" had a hand in kindling should have remained hidden so long under its bushel, even in Boston, where intellectual stairs of the first magnitude are supposed to be thick as fish-balls.

But the news dispatches tell a still more remarkable fact concerning this Admirable Crichton. It seems that he is a negro of unmixed blood, born a slave forty-three years ago and educated through the help and kindness of Henry Ward Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe and William E. Gladstone. The congregation which is to "sit under" him is composed exclusively of white people, residents of one of the most enlightened and progressive cities of the British isles.

Here is a refreshing and startling contrast. Of course the color line, as drawn more or less distinctly all over this country, is not known abroad and negro visitors to Europe have experienced none of the discrimination of which they are made the victims here, except in rare cases where concession has been made to the prejudice of American travelers or residents. Just at this time, when the race question is stirring the United States as not before since reconstruction days, this news is significant. It will be interesting to follow the relations between pastor and people in this case and to note whether this typically British congregation will long accept the spiritual guidance of a man of "inferior race." It is to be hoped, however, that they have been enlightened as to the actual value of American academic degrees. If they have taken him on the strength of his string of affixes they are altogether likely to find that they have drawn a blank.
When Frederick Douglass had escaped enslavement, he had selected Valentine’s Day to celebrate his birthday. Stanford greatly admired Douglass, and he had proudly reprinted Douglass’s photograph and a letter of praise from Douglass in his massive history textbook, *The Tragedy of the Negro* (1897, 1898, 1903). Because of its publication on Douglass’s birthday, perhaps the *Plain Dealer* intended to disparage both of these educated, activist African American men who had formerly been enslaved.

Stanford’s allies fought back against such jabs by aligning him with the antislavery movement. One example occurs in “An Historic Colored Church,” the Nov. 25, 1901, *Boston Herald*’s report on Stanford’s talk at Joy Street Baptist Church. Joy Street was located in the heart of Boston’s black community (it would later move and become
known as St. Paul’s Baptist Church). Such activists as William Lloyd Garrison, the *Liberator*'s editor; Edward G. Walker, whose father was the antislavery pamphleteer and martyr David Walker; and the black historian William Cooper Nell had rallied there to end slavery. The neighborhood surrounding Joy Street had been home to abolitionists such as Lewis Hayden, whose residence at 66 Phillips Street had been a shelter for fugitives escaping from slavery. When bounty hunters looking for William and Ellen Craft, the fugitive couple escaping from bondage in Georgia, threatened to raid his house, Hayden allegedly responded that he would blow them all to smithereens with gunpowder. Joy Street was thus sacred ground, a symbol of resistance to American slavery and racism. By attaching Stanford to Joy Street, the *Boston Herald* associated him with the courage and righteousness of an earlier generation of antislavery heroes and heroines.
AN HISTORIC COLORED CHURCH

St. Paul's Baptist Celebrates Its 98th Anniversary.


St. Paul's Baptist Church, at Tremont and Camden streets, the pioneer of the colored Baptist churches of New England, observed its 98th birthday yesterday, the anniversary sermon being preached by the Rev. Dr. P. Thomas Stanford of Cambridge.

At the afternoon service he dwelt particularly upon the history of the church and the good it had accomplished up to the beginning of the disemotions of the past few years, to which he alluded delicately. The old church was on Joy street, and the preacher said that, in that humble building, many whom God had appointed as prophets of glorious liberty in the dark days of slavery had been sheltered.

In 1839, said he, the church was the first to hold a meeting of rejoining over the emancipation of slaves in the West Indies, and a quarter of a century later a question of far more vital importance to the negro brought together under the roof of that building, William C. Nell, William Lloyd Garrison, Edwin G. Walker, Wendell Phillips, Charles Sumner, Robert Morris, Judge George L. Ruffin, Lewis Hayden, and last, but not least, Col. Robert G. Shaw. The men met to plead for the rights which we now enjoy. Yes, Joy Street Church is the rival of Faneuil Hall, for truly she was a cradle of liberty. She opened her doors and protected the fugitive when no other asylum was offered.

In conclusion Dr. Stanford said: "Officers and members of the grand old society, I call upon you today to remember that our church in days past stood for all that pointed to the uplifting of the negro, and now in these days of superior advantages for us to do less would mark us as being unworthy of the sacrifices, vigilis and toils of those who suffered and died for us."

As announced in The Herald yesterday, the Rev. Dr. Simon F. W. Drew of Long Island City has accepted a call to the pastorate of St. Paul's Church. He is known as an able pulpit speaker, and will assume his new duties next Sunday. The following day the ladies of the church will open a fair, which will be continued until Dec. 21, for the purpose of liquidating the church debt of $17,000. There will be concerts each evening, and the first four nights there will be addresses by clergymen.
Perhaps the penultimate example of how antislavery connections served to protect Stanford’s character was the *Boston Herald*’s Sept. 25, 1905, article, “Defends the Negro.” It notes the day when Charles Edward Stowe, a son of the famous Harriet Beecher Stowe, earned a college degree. None other than Stanford himself conferred this diploma on Stowe, in a ceremony that took place at the very same, allegedly spurious, Christ’s Medical and Theological College which the *New York Age* and the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* had disparaged. In presenting the degree to Stowe, Stanford condemned statements about the divine nature of white supremacy voiced by southern state officials. A black man’s conferral of a prestigious degree upon a white man undermined such southerner’s justifications of the former institution of slavery and demonstrated how cross-racial alliances had been crucial to dismantling chattel bondage.
Boston Herald readers would have found it hard to believe that someone whose mother was Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose best-selling book had championed those enslaved, would have sullied her respected name by patronizing a degree mill. By binding Stanford to the son of one of the first ladies of abolition, the Boston Herald helps to vindicate his character as well as defend the good name and reputation of his medical college.
We have been unable to confirm whether Stanford earned all the degrees he says he did. However, we can consider why preserving his “string of affixes” and clamping down on gossip about them meant so much to him and his allies. To post-Reconstruction African Americans, his degrees would have signaled potential and possibility. They would have represented how emancipated and born-free African Americans could and did strive to achieve the impossible through education, application, temerity, and discipline. As well as public glory, Stanford’s personal attainments were at stake. If deprived of the cachet of his degrees, he risked the loss of the hard-won social connections and political capital he had gained through his extensive travels, writings, teaching, and oratory. By inserting his work within the earlier history of antislavery activism, some American newspapers protected him against these hazards.
After such opposition, it is not surprising that Stanford eventually withdrew his support of Washington. Impatient with Washington’s cautious public pace towards black people’s political enfranchisement, Stanford changed heart and shifted allegiances to W. E. B. Du Bois. What his skirmish with newspapers leaves us is a story about the antislavery movement’s effectiveness in validating new black political and cultural activism after its old champions had died or receded from public life. Notably, in our current national moment of increased racial violence and white supremacy, treatments of the antislavery movement such as The Underground Railroad (2016), Twelve Years a Slave (2013), and The Birth of a Nation (2016) have entered American popular culture. Rumor and innuendo have served across time to consolidate the power and celebrity of some at the expense, and to the ruin, of others. Stanford’s story reminds us that pushing back against such falseness moves us closer to the justice, peace, and understanding which he and other early activists imagined and endeavored to make happen.

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