

Isaac Fisher

(2 November 1877–23 August 1957)

Of all the projects proposed by the fifteen members of the inaugural class of Fellows, that of Isaac Fisher might appear the least likely to produce a work of practical value: a study of “dangerous trends in world race relations, making constructive criticisms of the same.” But in the context of the time—with the existence of the Ku Klux Klan and lynchings, rise of the NAACP, and actual and ideological clashes between segregationists and desegregationists, among other polar opposite and polarizing movements—and more important, in the context of his lifelong dedication to interracial harmony, the Trustees’ faith in Isaac Fisher appears perfectly placed and perfectly in tune with the Guggenheims’ intentions.

In the decades following the Emancipation Proclamation, several factions developed within the black community: one was led by W. E. B. DuBois, a well-educated freeman raised in the North (he was the first African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard). DuBois wanted immediate full equality with white Americans and recognition by the white majority of that equality. He believed that an educated, culturally sophisticated “talented tenth” of African Americans should be developed to effect the securing of the rights already granted by the Fourteenth (1868) and Fifteenth (1870) amendments that were nevertheless widely denied to his race. DuBois was the founder of the radical Niagara Movement, which led to the creation of the NAACP, and the editor of *The Crisis*, a publication of the NAACP that gave voice to its political agenda.

The other viewpoint was embodied most famously by Booker T. Washington, a former slave, who, as he related in *Up From Slavery* (1901), was a self-made man, rising from working in salt mines after emancipation to receiving a practical education at the Hampton Institute to becoming the widely accepted spokesperson for his race and advisor to three American presidents on race relations. Washington believed that recognition and acceptance of black Americans could not be wrung from whites but would evolve as the former slaves, black freemen, and their descendants demonstrated their personal merit and their value to society through hard work, education, and righteous living. To that end, he founded the Tuskegee Institute, which offered both a general and “industrial” education, especially in agriculture, to ensure that his students, many of whom grew up on plantations, would be self-supporting, and emphasized Christian character development.

In “The Case of the Negro,” published in the *Atlantic Monthly* (November 1899), Washington argued that “the world never takes a race seriously, in its desire to share in the government of a nation, until a large number of individual members of that race have demonstrated beyond question their ability to control and develop their own business enterprises.” DuBois’ stance was that “it is utterly impossible, under modern competitive methods, for workingmen and property-owners to defend their rights and exist without the right of suffrage” (DuBois 68).

The followers of Washington considered themselves conciliators; their deriders labeled them appeasers, willing to sacrifice their right to suffrage and equal treatment in order to “get along” and advocating “an approach to social change that was almost glacial in its gradualism,” as Adam Fairclough phrased it in the *Journal of American History* (June 2000). DuBois and his supporters saw a need to hold a hard line to avoid the erosion of the rights they had been

guaranteed and to force the white majority to treat them as equals; others called them agitators, radicals, and antagonists.

The debate was more than an intellectual exercise; adherence to either side carried consequences, as Isaac Fisher would learn firsthand.

Born in 1877 on the Perry plantation in East Carroll Parish, Louisiana, Isaac Fisher was the last of the sixteen children of former slaves. On the death of his mother when he was eight, he was sent to live with an older sister in Vicksburg, Mississippi, where for a single year he had the chance to supplement his as yet scanty schooling before he had to begin work, as “a newsboy, bootblack, house boy, cake-baker’s assistant, and druggist’s errand boy, grieving always because [he] could not go to school.” While he was an employee of the W. H. Jones and Brother pharmacy, a “position that demanded some intelligence above the average,” the accommodating owner, seeing his great desire to learn and his love of reading, gave him any newspapers, magazines, and even drug journals that came to hand. Fisher “learned from [Mr. Jones’] actions that a white man could be kind and interested in a Negro—a fact which no amount of reasoning could have driven into [his] stubborn understanding previous to that time.”¹

Eventually Fisher heard of the Tuskegee Institute, which had what is known now as a work-study program, and on writing to the school was told he’d indeed be allowed to attend. But how to raise the money to get from Mississippi to the institute in Alabama? Ever enterprising, he arranged to give a lecture entitled “Will America Absorb the Negro?” He later claimed that although he may not have swayed his audience, he did resolve the question to his own youthful satisfaction—and earned sufficient train fare to boot.

While the sixteen-year-old Fisher was waiting for the train to Alabama, a stranger approached and asked where he was going. As he related in the *Southern Workman* (1915), “When I told him he said he had heard that Tuskegee was a place where they worked the students pretty hard and did not give them enough to eat. I told him that if any other students were there living under those conditions I would do the same.” His questioner turned out to be Booker T. Washington himself.

Fisher was indeed made to work hard to earn his education. He was at first assigned to help the resident physician, checking each day on the 600 students, taking the ill to the hospital, meals to those laid-up, providing fuel to heat the hospital, and more—then off to attend two hours of classes at night. In his second year, he finagled permission to apprentice at the Institute’s printing office, but fell so ill by the end of the year that he was removed from that post; once recovered he asked to be transferred to farmwork, overseen by John H. Washington, Booker’s brother. But Fisher remained undeterred in his determination to be educated, though penniless and with attire so shabby he was given “second-hand clothes and shoes sent from the North to the school for just such cases.” After all, as he later explained, “My father had been a man who did not know how to let go, and I was his son.”²

Fisher first drew Washington’s particular attention at a prayer meeting on campus. A discussion had arisen about Robert G. Ingersoll, a famed orator nicknamed “The Great Agnostic.” As Washington recalled years later in an article in *Everybody’s Magazine* (April 1915), he saw there

“a very small and rather poorly dressed boy stand up, and with diction that was almost perfect, manner intensely earnest, and ringing voice, declare: ‘I can not ever hope to match the logic of the gallant Colonel Ingersoll; but poor in reasoning power as I am, I can not accept his philosophy because he takes away my Bible, on which I have been taught to lean for guidance, and gives me nothing better in its place; and in spite of my ardent longing for life after death, tells me that the grave ends all, giving me nothing to quiet my soul’s unrest.’”

Very impressed, Washington became Fisher’s mentor and lifelong friend. Writing in the *Southern Workman* (1915), Emmett J. Scott, Washington’s right-hand man, quoted Washington’s assertion that “‘The only thing I ever had against Isaac Fisher was that, even when he was a student, he could always beat me making a speech.’”

But Washington’s patronage (of a sort) while Fisher was a student didn’t ease his responsibilities. Although in his third year he attended classes during the day and only was required to work one day a week and every other Saturday, he was determined to do all he could to earn some extra money.

At one time I worked eight days per month on the farm, sent notes of the school to 127 Negro newspapers, cleaned one laboratory every day, played in both the brass band and the orchestra, blew the bugle for the battalion, and taught two classes in the night-school, for each of which duties I received pay; and even though I broke down under the accumulated strain soon after my graduation, I carried my point and completed the course of study as I had planned.

His hard work earned him the princely sum of \$20 a month—and the \$25 Trinity Church (Boston) Prize for oratory, the Loughridge Book Prize for scholarship, and valedictorian honors at commencement in 1898.

The following four years or so were very busy for the new graduate. He went immediately to the Quaker-run Schofield School in South Carolina, where he not only taught but was tasked with organizing the farmers’ conferences that were among Washington’s principle means of achieving his objective of helping black farmers be self-sufficient. (In fact, George Washington Carver was a faculty member at Tuskegee, where he taught his innovative farming methods, such as crop rotation and switching from cotton to peanut cultivation, that were then disseminated, along with other agricultural improvements, through these conferences.) But at the end of the school year, Washington called on him to use his oratorical and persuasive powers as Tuskegee’s Assistant Northern Financial Agent—basically raising funds for the institute among interested philanthropists. And on 5 August 1901 he married Sallie McCann, a fellow Tuskegee graduate. (Their only child, Constance Clementine, was born the following year.)

Recommended by Washington as an emergency midyear replacement, he and his new wife next travelled to Alabama where he became principal of the Swayne Public School in Montgomery. At the end of that term, he went to New York City to study its public-school system, and although he was elected to continue as principal for the next full school year (principals were

subject to yearly reelections), he chose instead to move to Arkansas to be principal (sometimes referred to as president) of the State Branch Normal College at Pine Bluff (now the University of Arkansas, Pine Bluff), an all-black teacher-training school. The offer of that post had also been facilitated by Washington's recommendation, but in this case the seeming boon quickly turned sour for the twenty-five-year-old Fisher.³

His well-loved, highly educated predecessor, who was also black, had been unceremoniously dismissed (or not "reelected") after thirty years' service and in bitterness did his best to undermine his replacement; many of the black residents, as Fisher reported to Washington, were "raising a great hue and cry that they don't want their school brought down (?) to Tuskegee's level"⁴ by what they saw as Fisher's attempt to dilute the "white man's education" (liberal arts) with a heavy emphasis on industrial arts; and the white Board of Trustees and white treasurer of the school, supposedly a subordinate but paid more than Fisher, basically tied his hands in staffing and curriculum decisions. To a large extent he was the principal in name only. Making matters worse, critics unjustifiably maligned his abilities as an administrator and teacher, whispering campaigns questioned his character, and he even suffered threats of violence. To add injury to insult, the post-Reconstruction state legislature, which provided the majority of the school's funding, was continually trying, and often succeeding, in gutting the school's budget. The annual question of his election or termination was a terrible stressor as well. And at least early on, he and his family were largely ostracized, badly impacting his marriage and almost leading to a legal separation.

That is not to say that Fisher had no advocates. One board member in particular supported him as much as possible; state inspectors of the school were consistent in their praises of his administration and teaching; and his students loved him. In fact when in 1907 he submitted a formal resignation his students implored him to stay, which he did. Nevertheless, throughout his tenure he repeatedly wrote to Washington advising him of all the obstacles put in his way and asking for help in finding a different position, but was just as often told it was best to persevere.

Fisher did better than simply persevere. He consistently put the principles he had learned at Tuskegee into practice. Needing money for an organ for the music program, he led a contingent of the boys at the school to the fields to earn the money by picking cotton. Then, when an all-white section of town burnt to the ground he and his students instead donated that money to its rebuilding. Suitably impressed, in that instance the legislature recognized their generosity by giving the school money for an organ. The school was equally helpful when the town's lumberyard burnt. And when the most prominent black man in town, outraged that Fisher had disciplined his daughter, assaulted him, Fisher did not retaliate and urged his supporters to keep the peace.

Fisher was simultaneously making a name for himself nationally. As he had done and would continue to do for years, he entered numerous national "prize essay" contests—and often won them (surprising the sponsors when they learned his race)—on topics as varied as the uses of adding machines, the top ten reasons to go to Missouri, and "the rum question," earning purses ranging up to \$500. In boasting of the successes of this Tuskegee alumnus, both Washington and Emmett Scott were quick to point out that, as Scott phrased it, "there is not a drop of Caucasian blood in his veins [so] his accomplishments must be set down wholly and solely to the Negro

race.” Some indication of his rising reputation in both black and white communities came in 1910 when he received an honorary master’s degree from the Agricultural and Mechanical College for Negroes in Alabama as well as an invitation to speak as the sole African American representative at a memorial tribute to abolitionist Theodore Parker in Chicago. His oratory, which “stirred the banquet guests to burning enthusiasm,” according to Emmett Scott, won him wide acclaim.⁵

Except in Pine Bluff: a good portion of the white citizenry thought he was showing off and the town’s black population resented his success—and the situation would only have been worse if they had seen the headline in the *Chicago Examiner* noting that he had sat next to a white woman (Jane Addams) on the dais. Nevertheless, during his nine-year tenure he had gradually won over a large portion of the townsfolk and, perhaps most important, the editor of the local newspaper. Enrollment at the college swelled, and the annual commencement exercises he arranged became the social events of the year. But the political gamesmanship eventually grew unbearable and he resigned in 1911.

Following his resignation from Branch Normal College, Fisher remained in Pine Bluff for about two years, during which time he sold real estate and founded the Colored Young People’s Inspiration League in 1912, which didn’t survive his return to Tuskegee to be editor of its journal, *Negro Farmer*. When Booker T. Washington died in 1915, Fisher’s name was among those forwarded to replace him, but, as he explained when he declined to be considered, “the petty strivings, jealousies, and knife-thrusts” he suffered at Pine Bluff left him with no desire for any leadership position. He left Tuskegee in 1916 to become editor of the *Fisk University News* “and all documents of the university” as well as a teacher of argumentation and journalism there.

Even before Washington’s death, support for his philosophy had been on the wane, while that for DuBois’ social activism had been gaining ascendancy. That shift was felt not only in the political arena but also in academia. DuBois was a graduate of Fisk, so perhaps it was not surprising that the students and alumni at that university would be among his most vocal supporters; however, the university’s president, Fayette Avery McKenzie, was of the opposite persuasion and was forced by the virulent protests aimed at him to resign in 1925. (Interestingly, Constance Fisher earned a bachelor’s degree in sociology and physical education at Fisk the previous year.) Having stood during his nine years at Fisk staunchly behind McKenzie, Fisher knew that he would be among the next targeted, so, as he explained in his Fellowship application, he too had resigned his position:

Whatever mistakes [McKenzie] may have made, he believed in working to increase friendship between the Negroes and whites of the South. I HAVE BEEN GIVING THE BEST THAT WAS IN ME TO SUPPORT THAT SAME PHILOSOPHY OF GOOD WILL. Although I am certain that our Fisk Trustees are very friendly toward me, they are powerless to protect me from the hostility of the group which made such successful warfare on the president and who are not friendly to any race conciliation in the South. I was forced to conclude that warfare would next be directed against those who had been [his] friends.

His lack of employment was one urgent reason Fisher was applying for a 1925 Fellowship, rather than waiting for the start of regular annual competitions the following year. But as with all the major decisions thus far in his life, his motivations were far from self-serving. He was sure that the Guggenheim imprimatur “would be a valuable corrective in the thinking of the young colored people who feel that with the resignation of the president here the seal of disapproval has been emphatically put upon any person who dares espouse the cause of race conciliation. This is as much on my heart as the opportunity to do the work would be.”

Speaking for himself and the other men who were advising the Foundation on its first appointments, John Crowe Ransom assured Henry Allen Moe in his 18 May 1925 report that Fisher was “an exponent of the Tuskegee idea of solving the race problem in the United States [and our] Committee believes that probably there is no member of his race in a better position to become the leader of the more moderate opinion which seems to be decidedly in the minority at the present time.” The Trustees supported this recommendation: Fisher was informed of his twelve-month Fellowship appointment on the twenty-eighth of May.

Immediately, Fisher began planning his year’s work. In the process, he sought out the advice of Moe as well as Anson Phelps Stokes and Thomas Jesse Jones of the Phelps-Stokes Fund, who were well versed in conditions throughout Africa and necessities for travelers there. Together, they developed a three-pronged agenda. Fisher would first spend about three months in Washington, D.C., principally at the Library of Congress, to research what was currently known about the state of race relations in the countries he’d be visiting, the laws impacting those relations, and all other relevant data he could amass. Thus armed, he would be conversant in the issues facing each country he would visit and have a specific line of inquiry prepared. Then off to London (“for extended conferences with colonial and other officials”), Paris (where his wife and daughter would reside for the duration), Brussels, and Berlin—all countries with colonial holdings in Africa. Finally ready, he’d sail to the west coast of Africa, making a circuit through Senegal, Gambia, Sierra Leone, French Togoland, Gold Coast, Nigeria, Camerouns, Belgian Congo, and Angola to determine the “credits” and “debits” on the balance sheets of those colonized countries, and (at the especial request of Phelps Stokes) the self-governing country of Liberia. In addition, Fisher was careful to secure, through the intercession of the Foundation, letters from the U.S. Department of State to facilitate his travels and help him secure meetings with persons knowledgeable about race relations in the African countries on his itinerary.

That three months at the Library of Congress stretched, with Moe’s blessing, to about six. Given the length of his preparatory period, before he had even left for England Fisher requested, and on 20 February 1926, he was awarded, a one-year renewal of his Fellowship. After further consultations with Moe in New York City and the completion of travel arrangements and other logistical concerns, Isaac, Sallie, and Constance Fisher arrived in London in May. Writing Moe in June, Fisher assured him that “the British Colonial Office is opening doors for me, and I am being swamped with opportunities to see prominent colonial officials” and “when I have a lull in these I rush immediately to the British Museum to further buttress my store of information.”

Fisher and his family moved on to Paris in August, with the intention that he would travel on alone to Africa after attending the weeklong International Conference on the Christian Mission in Africa, to be held in Le Zoute, Belgium, beginning September 14.

It proved a profitable stopover. Delegates at the conference, well versed in the intricacies of travel to and within Africa, gave him valuable advice about securing all the credentials and letters of recommendation he could in an effort to forestall any difficulties in being given entry at the various African ports because of Marcus Garvey's movement in the United States to encourage a repatriation of all blacks to Africa and to end colonial control on that continent, which had created great unease among the colonial governments. Before he left Europe he had already determined, on the advice of the missionaries at Le Zoute, to abandon any hope of admittance to the Belgian and Portuguese colonies, so he focused on the British holdings only.

Even so, when he finally set sail for Africa, at almost every point of entry he was pulled aside for extra scrutiny in spite of having all the proper permits. As Fisher explained to Moe in a 13 November 1926 letter, "The outstanding situation which I meet is the very pronounced suspicion of any and every American Negro by European residents. . . . In every case, I was suspected of being a secret Marcus Garveyite or one of the Du Bois disciples who seeks to incite the natives to sedition." He found it particularly ironic that this mistrust should be directed at him since all his life he had worked for peaceful interracial relations. "I opposed [violence] to my disadvantage at Fisk—bringing down on my head the abuse of the colored 'intelligentsia' in New York in particular.⁶ . . . But the tragedy of it is not personal but international, for today European governments have bolted and barred the door in Africa against the best educated Negroes in the world, American Negroes, and the latter are begging to be admitted. How blind we are! How very blind we are!"

Largely because of such obstacles, Fisher visited only three colonies—Gold Coast, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone. But his time in the Republic of Liberia offered him no respite from suspicions; in fact, in his 22 January 1927 report, Fisher noted that its government was even more sensitive to "'tourists and writers' who spend a short while here and then write articles against Liberia"; in fact, the president was pushing for legislation to curb any maligning by foreigners. "And there I am," he concluded.

Having conducted as thorough a fact-finding tour as possible under the circumstances, he returned to Paris, and he and his family sailed from there on the *France*, arriving in New York on March 29.

Fisher spent the next months synthesizing his findings, writing articles and accepting speaking engagements to earn some money, and simply looking for permanent employment. In spite of all the demands on his time, by the technical expiration of his term—the first of August 1927—he submitted to the Foundation an outline of his findings entitled "'Clubs' and 'Spades' or 'Trumps'? A Study in World Race Relations." As its epigraph explained, "'Clubs' Signify Strife/'Spades' Are Emblems Of Untimely Graves/'Trumps' Are Superior to Each." And in December 1927 he submitted his findings in a completed manuscript to the Foundation.

With no substantial publication to show for the Foundation's support of Fisher's work, one of the Foundation's advisors opined that "the level of ability of our Guggenheim Fellows has risen over the last two years and that Fisher hardly measures up to our present day standard." But in a 20 February 1928 letter Moe rose to his defense:

Mr. Fisher, in my opinion, has great gifts. They are not the gifts of scholarship; he does not marshal facts and opinions gained from his reading with the sureness of a master. But let him talk to men, black and white, in the United States, Europe or Africa, let him observe events—and he understands them and knows their significance. Of such things he writes like a poet with a fine feeling for the substance of things. . . . [His research] is not the kind of material that yields to analysis; in the nature of things it can't give a complete picture. But when all of it has gone through the intellectual chemical processes of Mr. Fisher's mind it will be a fine compound, I'm sure. He may not write it; but give him a chance and he'll use it.

An article based on his findings, "Black and White in Certain Parts of West Africa," was published in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (November 1928) special issue entitled *The American Negro*, but as Moe intimated Fisher was most effective in direct interactions with people, a view Fisher himself seemed to endorse in a 20 February 1928 letter to Thomas Jesse Jones about his speaking to a white Sunday School group in Cleveland earlier that month:

[E]verywhere I go, I try to be friends with people and forget that they are white/or black. Again and again the attitude has given me what I have seen members of my own race fighting in vain to force other people to give. . . . It is all because I have no special racial message. I made a plea that the youth of Cleveland dedicate themselves to the "Lincoln" task of seeing that no group of men—Poles, Hungarians, Slov[acs,] Asiatics nor Africans should be chained by law and public opinion to impotence in achieving worthy ends in our American life. . . . I know I [did] as much for the colored people in that talk as if I had denounced every manifesta[tion] of prejudice which lives here; and yet I wonder if my method of approach is full[y] understood all down the line.

The Fisher family had settled in Cleveland on their return to the United States because Constance was working there with Cleveland Associated Charities. Isaac and Sallie had hoped to make their stay in that city permanent, but in 1929 he was persuaded by the Hampton Institute in Virginia to be General Secretary of its YMCA and a contributing editor to its journal, *Southern Workman*; in 1934 he was promoted, becoming the journal's publication secretary and editor. Two years later, however, he moved again, this time to Florida Agricultural & Mechanical College, where he served as Director of its Department of Research and Publications until advancing age and poor health forced him to retire in 1942.

At that time, Isaac and Sallie relocated to Minnesota to be near their daughter, who was then supervisor of Totem Town, a boys' farm in St. Paul. About six years earlier, Isaac had been ordained as a Baptist minister, so from time to time he was called to be a supply pastor in St. Paul; he also conducted a correspondence course entitled "Religion and Life Today" for the Hampton Institute.

Long after his Fellowship had ended, Fisher still marked his term as among the most momentous times of his life, as he made clear in his letter of condolence to the Foundation on the death of Senator Guggenheim in November 1941:

To me, “one of the least” of the citizens of the United States, the greatest vision of life at large was that which came when I, a Negro, unfettered and unrestrained, was given a Guggenheim Traveling Fellowship twice in succession, as part of the flowering of Mr. Guggenheim’s far-reaching gift to human education and human understanding. In my words spoken and written, I know I have been a more valuable exponent of human understanding because I had seen and better understood many races in many places of the world—as a result of the Fellowship which I received from the Foundation.

In submitting an update to the Guggenheim Foundation in August 1944, Fisher (writing in the third person) noted that “although he has published no book, this fellow has been in almost constant service in various parts of the United States, over a long period of years, interpreting his conclusions on race relations to a host of organizations and assemblies,” much as Moe had predicted he would.

Nevertheless, he had found his path in life long before the Foundation existed. Always quick to give credit where due, he penned the following tribute in about 1904 when he was still in his twenties, but it would have been no less true at the time of his death a half century later:⁷

In the book of my memory and in the secret chambers of my heart I have enshrined the two names which, with God and the parents now on the other side of the Great Divide, have shaped and given direction to my whole life—Tuskegee and Booker T. Washington.

¹ Isaac Fisher described his experiences leading up to and while at the Tuskegee Institute in “A College President’s Story” in Booker T. Washington’s *Tuskegee and Its People* (1905) (accessed through The Literature Network).

² *Southern Workman* (1915), p. 98.

³ For a thorough account of Fisher’s experiences at Pine Bluff, see Elizabeth L. Wheeler, “Isaac Fisher: The Frustrations of a Negro Educator at Branch Normal College, 1902–1911,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 30 (1971).

⁴ Quoted by Fon Louise Gordon in *Caste and Class: The Black Experience in Arkansas, 1880–1929* (p. 102).

⁵ Fisher’s address, entitled “Has the Negro Kept Faith with Theodore Parker and the Other Prophet Souls who Suffered for Freedom’s Sake?,” was published in *Theodore Parker: Anniversaries of Birth and Death* (Chicago: Unity Publishing Co., 1911).

⁶ In a similar vein, he responded on 15 June 1927 to Moe’s notifying him of the upcoming Pan-African Conference (which agitated for self-rule for colonies in Africa and the West Indies, among other concerns) to be held in New York City: “I shall, of course, ‘keep an eye’ on it, although my presence would be that of the proverbial ‘Bull in a china shop,’ and hence undesirable. Twice I have been invited but I suppose I was not enough enthusiastic about its founder [DuBois].”

⁷Fisher, “A College President’s Story.”