



Letter to Prof. David Demarest from Islay Walden (ca. 1845-1884) of the NBTS class of 1879, one of the first two African American graduates of the school.

[Source: Reformed Church in America Archives.]

“Having heard that you are a member of Herzog Hall committee, I wish you would do me the kindness to represent a matter to said committee which weighs heavily upon my mind. I am in debt to Hertzog Hall for room rent some twenty dollars which would have been paid in the spring had not my reading & copying of Lectures cost me some thirty five dollars, of which I now owe some eight.

“It is true I have equal advantages in the seminary to other students and ought to do as well. But having been born afflicted in my eyes is a great disadvantage under which I labor. As we have no colored churches it is hardly natural for me to take my turn in preaching on the Sabbath which is a great advantage to those engaged but my work is more arduous than all of theirs as during the past eleven months I have established what is called the students’ mission which consists of 60 odd scholars most of which were gathered from the streets, some of which were so poor and destitute that we were not only compelled to fix them up but in many cases I had to buy soap that the peculiar scavengers might be removed. Some two thirds of these were drunkards’ children. With this point in view and the fact that the colored people here have no social nor intellectual advantages so I soon found that the Sabbath school is not enough. Instead of preaching Temperance to these inveterate drunkards I have organized the boys and girls into Temperance societies and sent them forth into every household carrying the idea of temperance. Some parents have entirely reformed. There was but one colored girl in this city able to play an organ four months ago. We have a musical class consisting of some seven or eight under Miss Lizzie Tenbroeck. She is also giving vocal instructions. This class is doing finely. Mr. Colyn had a singing school of some twenty scholars during last winter. We have a sewing circle etc.

“There is another evil we are trying to remedy, when there is a sickness or death among this people they are nearly all compelled to solicit aid. Now this is the remedy[:] to organize a benevolent society making it beneficial at once instead of delaying six or eight months as most societies do. We are to have no initiation fee but twenty five cents month tuition in case of sickness. Each member is taxed 5 cents a week and 50 cents at the death of a member. Any member fallen sick who is in the rear he receives 1 cent less from each member for each month that he is behind and such receives 10 cents less from each member for the number of months in the rear. At the end of five months such receive nothing. This is simple and can be done if there are two in the society but the more the merrier.

“But you will never know the labor, the persuasion, the walking over the commons, that this mission has cost me. God only knows, for this people seem to be very forgetful, a people of excuses, with all the characteristics of a discouraged people. But the worst struggle has been to overcome the overwhelming prejudice against the mission but this has been done to a great extent by solid steady march, turning neither to the right or left and whatever men have thought of this mission, those that have had courage enough to visit it have gone away commending the work, giving up and unreasonable and senseless prejudice based upon this fact that it has been reported that five or six of these scholars have left other schools. But these were of age and exercised their own judgment. But our school like all others has some Teachers and scholars who at some time did belong to other schools. Our most trouble came from the hand of a missionary which resulted in a news paper fight, for he with no knowledge of this school went around telling the benevolent people that this school was a nuisance and an expense that ought not to be and as he was not a competent judge, I did what any other man would in the defense, of an institute which he represents. The wealthy Presbyterians have never turned their back on me though this missionary belongs to that church.

“I merely speak of this because I believe that this school [should come] under [sponsorship of] the [RCA]board of domestic missions as it can be run on a very small scale and be the means of helping needy students in the future, and why not [?] Have not the Princeton students care of their Sunday School [?] And are not the Yale students alive in the colored congregational Sabbath school of new Haven, and do not their labor[s] tell on the colored citizens of those communities and why not [?] Have we not as fine a class of students and as much love for humanity, and are we not equally responsible as to the welfare of our fellow beings? Suppose this one question was asked our institution in the day of Judgment—were there any colored people in New Brunswick and what was their condition[?] And what did you do to improve that condition [?] Many would be speechless but our present professors and students could answer as the faithful for some have given money, some advice, and others have given their time as teachers and leaders. There have been as high as a dozen students in our Friday evening prayer meetings, and this is why I labor more than my companions because I have to do something every day as the mission is naturally assuming new features.

“But coming back to the point in view, I do not see how I shall pay my room and gas bill of last year as my reading and writing will cost even more than last year and knowing that these bills must be settled at the close of this year or I cannot be recommended to the classis for license I thought it well therefore to submit this matter to you as perhaps you can shape a way whereby I may prosecute my studies with no fear in this respect – how as our Sunday school has outgrown its rooms and we feel compelled to get another place I would like to borrow those chairs upstairs in Suydam Hall for school purposes and I will be responsible that they shall be taken care of, kept in good order and returned at the time and place.

“Respectfully, Islay Walden.”