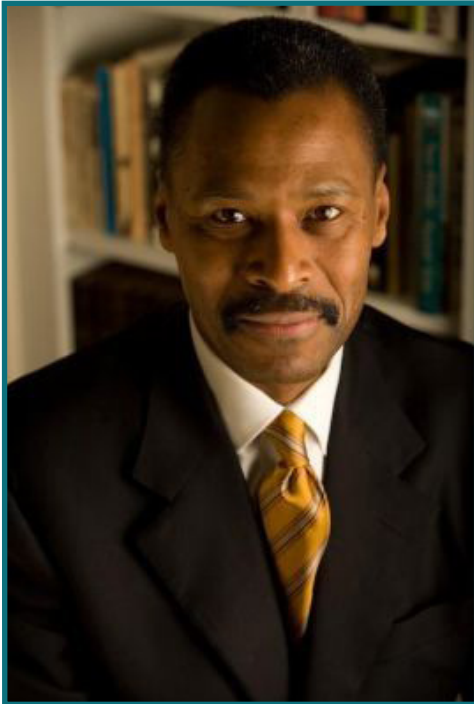


## MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTIONS ORAL HISTORIES PROJECT

### JOHN SILVANUS WILSON JR.

By Kelly Lewis



On March 2, 2018, I arrived at a table to greet a tall, slender African-American man. I was surprised to discover he was wearing a sweatshirt, in comparison to the suit I have often seen him wearing in photographs. He was kind, and soft-spoken; he talked with conviction. He possessed a positive spirit –saintly even– and when I started asking him questions about his past, his eyes lit up as he recalled fond memories. He thinks of his family, church, and the abundance of ways God has facilitated inspirational experiences that have led him to become the person—the leader– he is today.

John Silvanus Wilson Jr. was born in 1957 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. As the son of a preacher and a teacher, he and his three siblings had what he would call “...the life of the mind and the life of the spirit.” Education and faith were important aspects of his upbringing. His grandfather had a doctorate, and both of his parents attended HBCUs –his father was, a Virginia Union University alumnus, and his mother, a Morgan State University alumna; at the same time, his “Dad ... Granddad, great-granddad were all preachers... So, I had the preacher-teacher combination. That combination really shaped me.” As he continued to discuss his upbringing, his face fell and became a bit more serious.

“When I was eight years old... we moved out to the suburbs and uh, my parents divorced.” During this time, suburban schools were attempting to diversify their population, so they were offering higher paying jobs. While the experience was beneficial for the family, it was rough on young John. “Whereas before I was in Philadelphia, where it was diverse, it was not, when we moved to the suburbs. So, I had some issues in education, but my mom wasn’t having it.” No matter how obvious or covert racism was at the time, his grandmother and mother emphasized that “it was a challenge, but it was never an excuse.” He chuckles as he remembers all of the things he would hear “...I don’t care what you’re hearing, what they’re saying, ...when you go to school, you better get an A. Know you better handle your business; the way you fight back against whatever they’re doing is to outperform.” He proudly states, “I heard, I heard that... and that’s what I was doing. Very privately and didn’t brag about it...most of them didn’t know I was doing well.” Though John was excelling, he needed relief from a hostile environment and to experience another form of education that did not have the “presumption of inability and the presumption of inferiority” associated with Black people. Unbeknownst to him, this was the Lord’s first step in leading him into his purpose.

John’s mother ensured her children had a strong spiritual connection with the Lord. His family were members of a church led by a Morehouse graduate. The pastor’s passion for his alma mater led to a “disproportionate” number of young men in the church going to Morehouse. “ He talked about Morehouse in the pulpit as much as he talked about Jesus. You’d thought Jesus went to Morehouse.” Still, this wasn’t enough for John to be interested in Morehouse College.

John had his sights on Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. Although he had an uncle who attended and went on to be a successful graduate of Howard Law School, it was his visit that sealed the deal. “The homecoming at Lincoln was... in the fall of my senior year in high school. Me and my buddy from high school decided to go out there...and I was sold. They had had Gil Scott-Heron in concert...and Kool and the Gang.” Following the remarkable visit during Lincoln’s Homecoming, he applied to the school in spite of his pastor’s advice.

In late July of 1957, John realized. “I mean this is at a point where I had the key to my dorm room. I had my roommate’s name. Everything, I was set and don’t know what happened, but ... I went to my mom, said ‘I think I want to go to Morehouse.’” John’s mother was surprisingly supportive. She drove him to the church to discuss his decision with the pastor. The pastor readily picked up the phone to call the president of Morehouse on John’s behalf. By the next Tuesday, he was on his way to Atlanta, Georgia to join the ranks of the Morehouse men.

Mark Twain describes the two most important days of a person’s life as the day you’re born and the day you figure out why. For John, Morehouse was his “second day.” During John’s sophomore year, he had the opportunity to meet Benjamin Elijah Mays, former president of Morehouse. With a smile on this face, he remembers discussing the inefficiencies of Morehouse and the response from Mays. He says “...I love it here, but I don’t actually like it... we have to wait in line for an hour to eat. I don’t understand why it takes two to three days to register for classes. It was inefficient...this place was not well run. And so, he looked me in my eyes and he said, ‘Young man, I want you to finish. Stay at Morehouse, I want you to finish Morehouse, get more education; more experience and I want you to come back here and make a difference.’” For John, this was a direct call from God—something he knew he should do.

Accordingly, John went on to acquire more knowledge. From 1979 to 1985, he would go on to receive three degrees from Harvard University: Master of Theological Studies, Master of Education, and Doctor of Education concentrating on the fiscal conditions of small Black and White colleges. John’s post-graduation path was illuminated after receiving a profound signal from his grandmother.

“My grandmother was [a]... race woman. She was all about elevating Black folks, doing for Black folk. She had high expectations that we would spend our lives in service to our people, elevating our people because she said it’s the most essential thing we can do. It’s why we are here.” John’s grandmother knew he had the academic ability and passion to become an HBCU president. She told him, “...you need to go over there and be the president of Lincoln University.” Her conviction was rooted in the belief that efforts centering on HBCUs were “the kind of work that will get you in heaven.”

Respecting the wishes of his grandmother, John continued to center his work on HBCUs. John started George Washington University (GWU) as an assistant professor, teaching courses that emphasized HBCU transformation. At the same time, he had learned a lot about the financial conditions of HBCUs and began to write a book on Black colleges and their futures. As his tenure at GWU was coming to an end, John contemplated going into HBCU consulting. He contends, however, that God had another opportunity prepared.

John’s passion, personal mission, and research centered on HBCUs orchestrated the opportunity to become the Executive Director of the White House Initiative on HBCUs. Serendipitously, two weeks before he found out about the role, John began to write out a vision statement and action steps for HBCUs. These were later used as a tool to assess his capabilities for the position. Within 48 hours he was offered the job. John describes this experience as a “providence of God.” Beaming with joy, he asserts, “I don’t know why that happened the way it did, but that was God.”

Just shy of four years in his role at the White House, John was appointed as Morehouse College’s 11th president. John was committed to fulfilling the promises to Dr. Benjamin Mays and his grandmother. Despite the fact the board voted not to renew his contract, he knew the Lord had other things planned.

Today, John Silvanus Wilson Jr. is working at Harvard University, advising students and writing a new book. Even though he misses the role as president, he enjoys the break from managing an HBCU. He plans on transitioning into a new career but hasn't quite figured out what, yet. What he does know is, "it's all going to be...spirit based and prayer driven. I'm going to do what the spirit tells me to do."

## Minority Serving Institutions Oral History Project

*The MSI Oral History Project shares a glimpse into the lives of prominent scholars and leaders across the MSI landscape. This initiative was born out of a class titled "Understanding Minority Serving Institutions," in which students interviewed key figures in higher education who have led Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), work to advocate for MSI inclusion in larger discussion within higher education, or conduct MSI-related research. These important individuals range from faculty in higher education to MSI presidents to those working within nonprofit organizations that support MSIs.*