

Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



JAMES RAYMOND LAWSON (1915-1996)

James Raymond Lawson's accomplishments as both a pioneering physicist and alumnus university president are legendary. Long before he became the first alumnus president of his alma mater, Fisk University in 1967, a leading historically black university in Nashville, Tennessee, Lawson's research as the student of Elmer S. Imes and as mentor to a host of students had made him a pioneer in the study of infrared spectroscopy. Even so, his leadership of Fisk during the turbulent mid-1960s through mid-1970s, when student dissent grew stronger and white financial support grew faint was an equally if not more impressive feat.

Physicist, professor, and university president James Richmond Lawson was born on January 15, 1915, in Louisville, Kentucky, to Daniel LaMont and Daisy Harris Lawson. A dean of Louisville's Simmons College, the elder Lawson had attended Fisk University where he was a member of the world-renown Fisk Jubilee Singers. The younger Lawson followed his father's example, enrolling at Fisk in 1931. As a mathematics and physics major, Lawson sought the mentorship of Elmer S. Imes. A distinguished physicist, Imes had become the second African American to earn a doctorate in physics when he graduated from the University of Michigan in 1918. While at Michigan, Imes also became the first African American to write a scholarly research article before he returned to teach at Fisk, his alma mater, in 1930. At Fisk, Imes continued to pioneer in infrared spectroscopy, offering Lawson enviable opportunities as his student. Lawson did not disappoint his mentor, graduating Phi Beta Kappa in 1935 with a degree in physics, the first Fisk student to do so.

Lawson's successes were not however, limited to the classroom. An avid sportsman, he held both football and basketball letters and was also known to swing

a mean racquet. However, it was his leadership experience and intellectual promise that made Lawson an ideal candidate for graduate study. The close ties that Imes maintained with the University of Michigan made the college a natural choice for Lawson. As a Julius Rosenwald fellow, he began graduate work at Michigan in 1937, and earned his Ph.D. in physics in 1939.

Having begun his teaching career at St. Augustine College, while he was still a student, Lawson served as an assistant professor at Southern University in Louisiana from 1939 to 1940, then as associate professor of physics at Langston University in Oklahoma from 1940 to 1942. Lawson's mentor, Imes died unexpectedly that same year, prompting his return to Fisk as associate professor of physics and chairman of the department. Continuing the research begun by Imes, Lawson immediately began efforts to establish and develop a research program in infrared spectroscopy. Using his ties with his University of Michigan colleagues, he acquired an infrared spectrophotometer for Fisk, similar to a model that was being constructed for Michigan's departmental research.

By the time the cutting-edge equipment arrived on campus in 1948, Lawson had successfully recruited five Fisk seniors to pursue their masters of science degree at the university. As the physics majors conducted their theses research on the new equipment the infrared laboratory flourished. They were soon presenting their research at major scientific conferences including the American Physical and American Chemical societies, both of which they effectively integrated. Enabled by grants secured in 1948, 1949 and 1950, both student and faculty-research flourished. In 1950, co-directors, Lawson and Nelson Fuson established the Fisk Infrared Spectroscopy Institute.

Photograph courtesy of the author. This publication is a project of the 2008 Nashville Conference on African-American History and Culture. The author compiled the information. The Metropolitan Historical Commission edited and designed the materials.

After serving as chairman of the Physics Department at Tennessee A & I State University (another Nashville historically black university, later known as Tennessee State University) from 1955 to 1957, Lawson returned to Fisk as a full professor and department chair in 1957. In 1966, he became vice president of the university until 1967 when was selected as the university's eighth president, following his eighteen-month service as acting president subsequent to the resignation Stephen J. Wright, Jr.

As the university's first alumnus president, Lawson assumed the leadership of his historically black alma mater amid the social turmoil of the late 1960s. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King's nonviolent ethos was steadily eclipsed by the emergent Black Power Movement's popularization of the right to armed self-defense as well as its demands for stronger black cultural identity. Fisk students were no exception to the spirit of the age. Just as its students had been at the forefront of the nonviolent struggle with their sit-in and boycott campaigns in the spring of 1960, many Fisk students embraced the protest spirit of the "age of dissent."

Despite having transformed its Natural Science programs as a professor and administratively leading the institution to secure its largest-ever enrollment of 1,500 students, Lawson continued to face student protests throughout his seven-year presidency. The student's open dissent only further alienated the university's traditionally white philanthropist financial base, whose support had continued to wane since the beginning of Fisk's nonviolent student activism of the early 1960s. Internal student dissent, coupled with the external pressures of financial

supporters to conform student ideology that insisted on being "non-conformist" and "black" in identity, soon proved too much. With a dwindling endowment, Fisk experienced salary cuts of twenty percent and operational budget cuts of twenty-five percent that caused severe decreases in faculty, staff, and student enrollment. Lawson resigned as president of the university in 1975. Over the course of the decade that followed, he resided in Washington, D.C., where he worked for the Energy Research and Development Administration (a forerunner to the Department of Energy) as special assistant to the director of the office of university programs. Later, he served as head of NASA's University Affairs Office and Associate Director of the Institute for the Study of Educational Study at Howard University before a series of illnesses forced him into full retirement. Lawson returned to Nashville, where he later died on December 21, 1996.

A member of numerous professional organizations throughout his life, Lawson was a member of the American Physical Society, American Association of Physics Teachers, American Institute of Physics, Sigma Xi and a board member of the Oak Ridge Associated Universities as well as a member of the Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. Married to the former Lillian Arcaeneaux of Opelousas, Louisiana, Lawson had four children Ronald Raymond and James Edward Lawson, both Fiskites as well as daughters Daryl and Elizabeth Lawson.

--Crystal A. deGregory

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