

IT HAPPENED HERE **NEW JERSEY**

Paul Robeson: Civil Rights Activist

Target Age: Elementary School/Middle School

Time Period: 20th Century

Featured County: Mercer

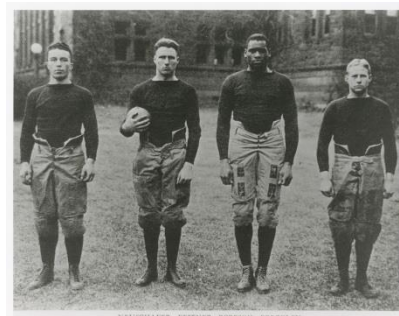
NJ 350th Theme: Diversity

NJ Common Core Standards:

Social Studies: 6.1.4.A.1, 6.1.4.A.3,
6.1.4.A.9

Social Studies Skills: Critical Thinking

Language Arts Literacy: 3.1 Reading



Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives,
Rutgers University Libraries

ESSENTIAL QUESTION: What are civil rights and how are they protected?

BACKGROUND:

Paul Robeson was one of the best-known African American actors and Civil Rights activists of the early twentieth century. But questions about race confronted him much earlier in his career. Born in 1898, Robeson grew up in Princeton, New Jersey. His father had escaped slavery and become a Presbyterian minister, while his mother came from a prominent Philadelphia family. At seventeen, he received a scholarship to Rutgers University, where he participated in almost all varsity sports teams, graduated with honors in four years, and was his class valedictorian. He went on to Columbia University Law School, and, in the early 1920s, began working at a New York law firm. Unfortunately racial strife at the firm ended Robeson's legal career, but he soon found another avenue for his talents. Returning to his love of public speaking, Robeson found work as an actor and singer, and performed benefits throughout the world for causes of social justice. More than any other performer of his time, he believed that the famous have a responsibility to fight for justice and peace.

During the 1940s, Robeson's activism caught the attention of Senator Joseph McCarthy. Despite his contributions as an entertainer to the Allied forces during World War II, Robeson was singled out as a threat to American democracy. Every attempt was made to silence him, and in 1950 his passport was revoked. He could no longer travel abroad to perform, and his ability to work was badly hampered. It took eight years before his passport was reinstated, and his career never fully recovered.

ACTIVITY:

Ask students if they have ever been prohibited from doing something they wanted to do. Under what circumstances did these things happen and how did they feel about their experience? Did they do

something against the rules? Were they being punished? If so, was it a just punishment? If it was not punishment, why were they left out and did they think it was fair?

Distribute the athletic photographs listed below (you may divide the class into small groups and give each group an image, or show them to the class as a whole through PowerPoint). Tell students what time period this is (the late 1920s). Ask them what they notice about the photographs.

Have students read two letters, the first written by a former student at Rutgers University about an upcoming football game against Washington & Lee University. The second was written by the Rutgers University President in response. What problem does the first letter identify? How does the college President respond? Ask students what they think of this answer.

FOLLOW-UP:

For homework, instruct students to find current (within the last year) articles from newspapers, magazines, the Internet, TV news reports, etc. that provide examples of where civil rights are being protected or challenged. Display these on a bulletin board.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Places You Can Visit

Paul Robeson Historic House, Philadelphia, PA: <http://paulrobesonhouse.org/>

Special Collections and University Archives at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ
<http://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/rul/libs/scua/scua.shtml>

Additional Teaching Resources

PBS, "Paul Robeson: The Renaissance Man" (focuses on Paul Robeson's artistic career and social activism; designed for middle school, but can be easily adapted for high school students):
<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/lessons/paul-robeson-the-renaissance-man/lesson-overview/128/>

New Jersey Digital Highway, Rutgers University, "Paul Robeson's Othello" (combines an excerpt from one of Paul Robeson's most famous stage roles, as well as a brief two minute audio clip of Robeson's voice during the performance; designed for middle school students):
http://www.njdigitalhighway.org/enj/lessons/paul_robeson/?part=monologue&print=1

National Archives, "The Many Faces of Paul Robeson" (combines several primary documents to enable students to trace the variety of roles Paul Robeson played as an athlete, an artist, and an activist throughout his life; designed for high school students):
<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/robeson/>

For More Information:

The State of New Jersey, "Black History in New Jersey":

http://www.state.nj.us/nj/home/features/spot_black_history.html

The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (New York Public Library):

<http://schomburgcenter.tumblr.com/post/20779375742/remembering-paul-robeson>

Howard University: <http://www.howard.edu/library/assist/guides/robeson.htm>

WHYY "Paul Robeson's Philadelphia Story": <http://www.whyy.org/community/robeson.html>

Rutgers Football Team



Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries

Rutgers Baseball Team



Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries



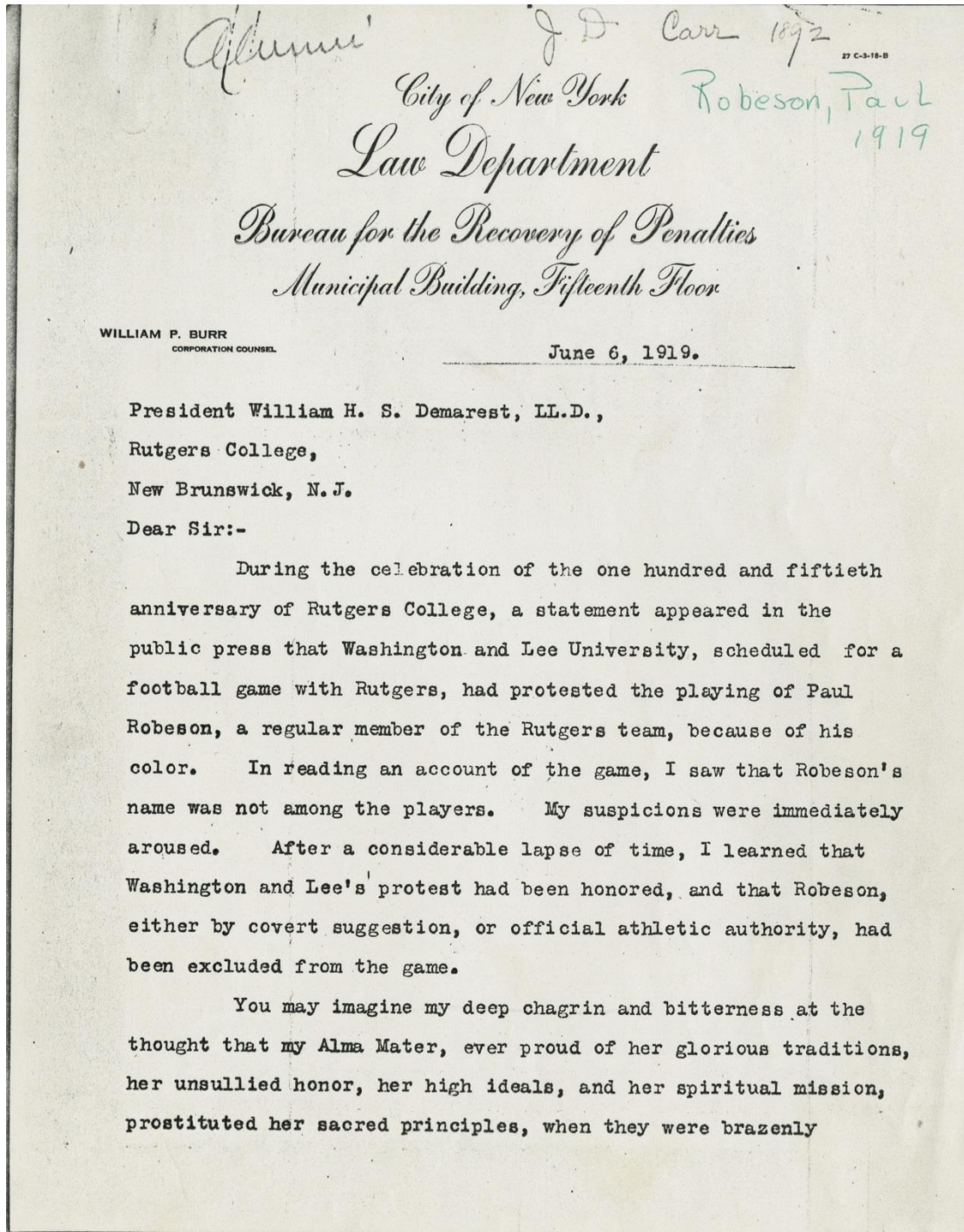
**Rutgers
Basketball
Team**

Rutgers Track Team



Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries

Carr, James. James Carr, Alumni to William H.S. Demarest, President of Rutgers University, June 6, 1919. Letter.



June 6, 1919.

challenged, and laid her convictions upon the altar of compromise.

Is it possible that the honor of Rutgers is virile only when untested and unchallenged? Shall men, whose progenitors tried to destroy this Union, be permitted to make a mockery of our democratic ideals by robbing a youth, whose progenitors helped to save the Union, of that equality of opportunity and privilege that should be the crowning glory of our institutions of learning?

I am deeply moved at the injustice done to a student of Rutgers, in good and regular standing, of good moral character and splendid mental equipment, - one of the best athletes ever developed at Rutgers, - who, because guilty of a skin not colored as their own, was excluded from the honorable field of athletic encounter, as one inferior, and from those lists in which so many competitors for glory were engaged, in which he had formerly been, and into which, with a humiliating tardiness, he was afterwards admitted. He was robbed of the honor and glory of contending in an athletic contest for his college before an assembled multitude composed of representative men and women, of various avocations, from all the corners of the earth. Not only he, individually, but his race as well, was deprived of the opportunity of showing its athletic ability, and, perhaps, its athletic superiority. His achievements on that day may have been handed down as traditions not only to honor his Alma Mater, but, also, to honor himself, individually, and his race, collectively. What an awful spectacle, one of Rutgers' premier athletes on the side lines because of his color! Can you imagine his thoughts and feelings when, in contemplative mood, he reflects in the years to come that his Alma Mater faltered and

June 6, 1919.

quailed when the test came, and that she preferred the holding of an athletic contest to the maintenance of her honor and her principles?

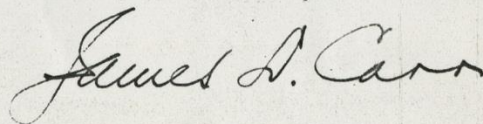
I am provoked to this protest by a similar action of the University of Pennsylvania, heralded in the public press less than two weeks ago. Annapolis protested the playing of the Captain of one of the athletic teams of the University of Pennsylvania, a

Colored man. Almost unanimously his fellow athletes decided to withdraw from the field and cancel the contest. In this, however, they were overruled by the athletic manager, who ordered the games to proceed. One of the University's premier athletes on the side lines because of his color! Such prostitution of principle must cease, or the hypocrisy must be exposed.

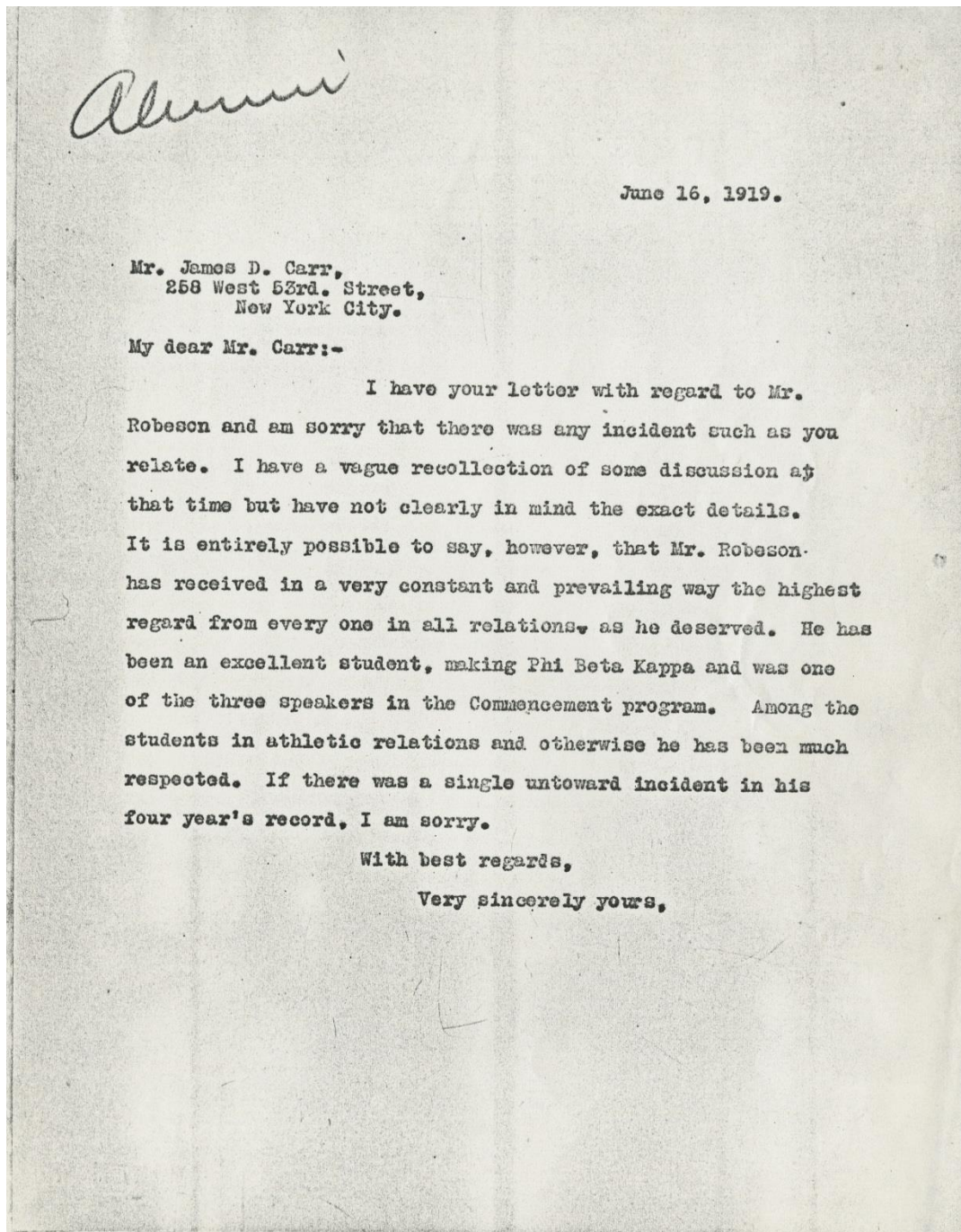
The Trustees and Faculty of Rutgers College should disavow the action of an athletic manager who dishonored her ancient traditions by denying to one of her students, solely on account of his color, equality of opportunity and privilege. If they consider an athletic contest more than the maintenance of a principle, then they should disavow the ideals, the spiritual mission and the lofty purposes which the sons of Rutgers have ever believed that they cherished as the crowning glory of her existence. May we ever fervently pray that the Sun of Righteousness may shine upon our beloved Alma Mater, now growing and blossoming into the full fruition of her hopes.

Very respectfully yours,

Rutgers '92.



Demarest, William H.S. William H.S. Demarest, President of Rutgers University to James Carr,
Alumni. June 16, 1919



Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries

CREDIT INFORMATION:

Pg. 1: Robeson with teammates. Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries.

Pg. 3: Football team. Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries.

Pg. 4: Baseball team. Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries.

Pg. 5 (top): Basketball team. Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries.

Pg. 5 (bottom): Track team. Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries.

Pg. 6-8: Carr, James. James Carr, Alumni to President William H.S. Demarest, President of Rutgers University, June 6, 1919. Letter. Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries.

Pg. 9: Demarest, William H.S. William H.S. Demarest, President of Rutgers University to James Carr, Alumni. June 16, 1919. Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries.

It Happened Here: New Jersey is a program of the New Jersey Historical Commission made possible by a grant from the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in the program do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities or the New Jersey Council for the Humanities. To access more teaching resources created for this program visit www.officialnj350.com.

