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## Albion Native Was University of Rochester's First African American Student

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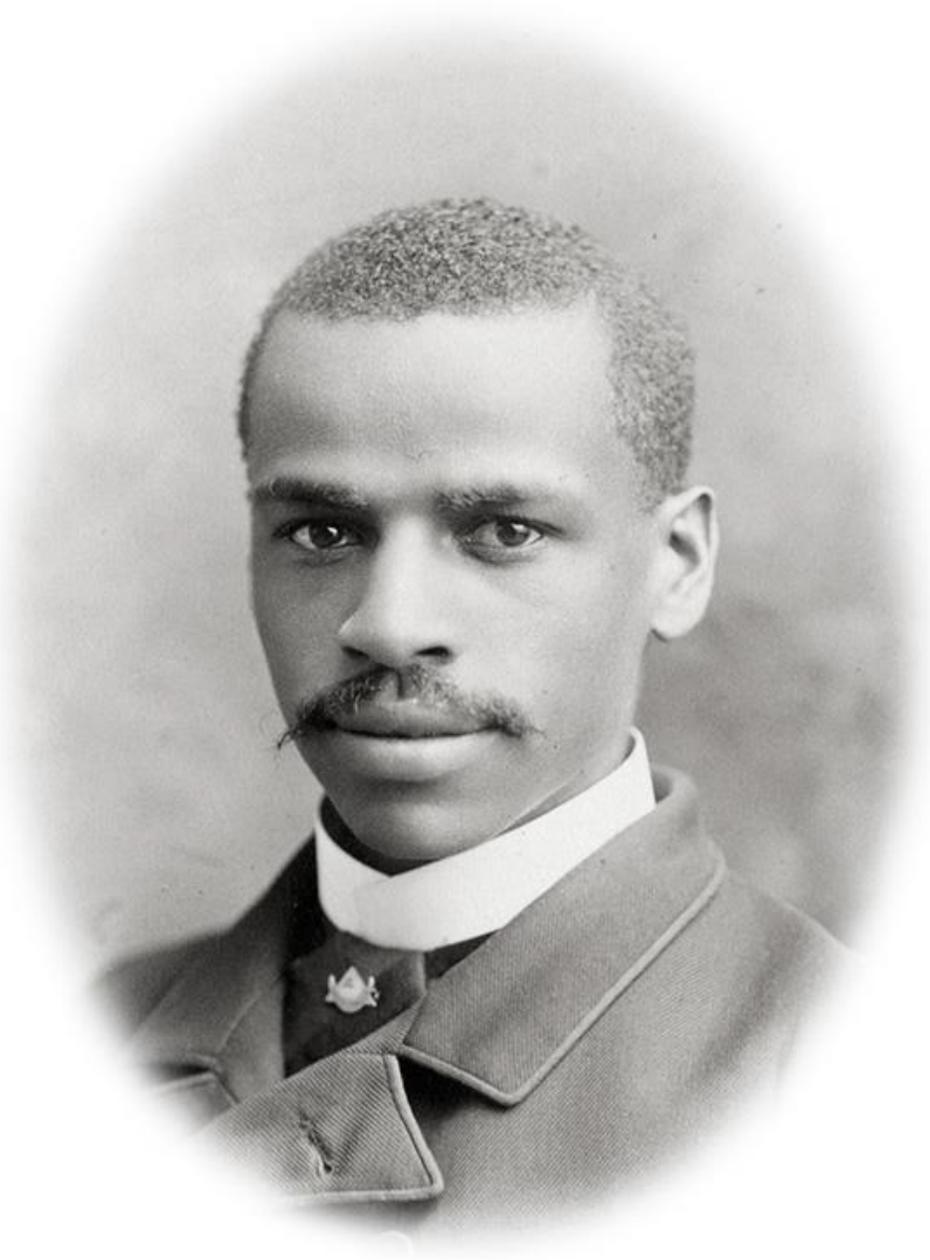
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## **Albion Native was University of Rochester's First African American Student**



*Photograph courtesy of the University of Rochester*

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The history of Orleans County's African American population in the earliest decades of our area is scarce and unknown in many aspects. Some residents may be familiar with the story of

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Richard Gordineer who, as an infant, was sold by his father to Joseph Grant; Grant eventually settled in the Shelby/Medina area. After New York abolished slavery in 1827, Gordineer became a free man and a well-respected citizen of Medina. Other stories involve families, like those of Henry Spencer and Jacob Carter, who came to Western New York with local Union army officers at the conclusion of the Civil War.

Spencer came to Orleans County with Lt. Hiram Sickels of the 17<sup>th</sup> New York Light Independent Artillery sometime around 1866. After earning enough money working for George Sickels, he brought his wife and children to this area. One of Spencer's sons, Henry Austin, spent the majority of his teenage years working for Asa and William Howard as an errand boy until he reached adulthood. While he worked, he made his best efforts to attend the local schools, which he attended for approximately three months out of the year. A biographical sketch of Spencer noted that he kept up with his fellow classmates by "burning the midnight oil."

He attended Miss Mabel Foster's boarding school in Philadelphia, becoming the first African American admitted to that institution where he quickly became one of the more popular students. Spencer then attended the Brockport Normal School, where he was one of the few African American students at an institution with several hundred students. The impressive young man graduated in 1880, about 10 years after Fannie Barrier Williams became the first African American student to graduate from the school. During commencement week, Spencer was selected as the Gamma Sigma orator, an honor that earned him a full scholarship to the University of Rochester shortly after. It was not the scholarship that was unprecedented, but Spencer's acceptance to the University, which marked the first time in the history of the institution that an African American was accepted into the institution.

Upon the conclusion of his schooling, he studied law under the Hon. George H. Smith of Rochester while working to support his family. Spencer was appointed to a position in Albany in the speaker's room thanks to a former University of Rochester classmate, Hon. James M. E. O'Grady. When S. Fred Nixon assumed the role as speaker of the State Assembly, Spencer was appointed as Nixon's confidential clerk, a position which he continued to hold through the tenure of the Hon. James Wadsworth, Jr.

Upon his retirement in 1929, he had served in government for over 30 years and worked for a period of time under Governor Alfred E. Smith and other prominent state officials. At the time of his death on September 25, 1935 in Rochester, he was one of the area's more prominent African American citizens. He was a past grand master of the New York State Colored Masons, an organization which consisted of over 2,000 members across New York.