

# PHILIP G. HOFFMAN: BREAKING GROUND ON THE MODERN UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

By Megan R. Dagnall



*In his nineteen years of service to the University of Houston and the UH System, President Philip G. Hoffman oversaw critical reforms, most significantly the start of campus desegregation.*

Photo courtesy of *Houstonian*, 1975, Digital Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

As one of the most ethnically diverse major research universities in the United States, the University of Houston's identity is intertwined with its varied, multicultural student body.<sup>1</sup> With students from 137 different nations, the University of Houston (UH) is a melting pot of cultures and identities that reflect the city's community. Knowing that makes it hard to imagine that UH was an all-white institution until it admitted its first Black students in 1962. The university's leadership has made significant progress in the past sixty years to become a more progressive and inclusive institution committed to the value of diversity, equity, and inclusion, beginning with former president Philip G. Hoffman. As the fifth president of UH and first chancellor of the University of Houston System, Hoffman obtained state support, expanded enrollment and facilities, created

the University of Houston System (UHS), and opened the University of Houston to Black students. Known as the builder of modern UH, Hoffman initiated the processes that not only desegregated UH but also moved toward integrating it by making the campus a safe and accepting space for students and faculty of all backgrounds.

Philip Hoffman was born on August 6, 1915, in Kobe, Japan, to missionaries Benjamin Philip Hoffman and Florence Guthrie Hoffman. When Hoffman was five, the family moved to Oregon. He graduated with a business degree from Pacific Union College in 1938 and a master's degree in history from the University of Southern California in 1942. After serving his country in the Navy as an intelligence officer during World War II, Hoffman earned a doctorate in history at Ohio State University, where he lectured from 1948 until 1949. He subsequently taught at the University of Alabama, Oregon State System of Higher Education, and Oregon State University. In 1957, Hoffman came to the University of Houston as vice president, dean of faculties, and a history professor. When he began his tenure as president of UH in 1961, it was a segregated private institution facing financial troubles.<sup>2</sup>

In 1927 at the request of working students who wanted to further their education, Houston Independent School District (HISD) founded two segregated institutions,



*Members of UH's 1961-62 Student Government Association watch as President Hoffman (center right) dons his inaugural robe. This picture depicts the still-segregated nature of UH as Hoffman assumed the office of the presidency.*

Photo courtesy of *Houstonian*, 1962, Digital Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

Houston Colored Junior College for African American students and Houston Junior College for white students.<sup>3</sup> Both met in local high schools and transitioned to four-year institutions in 1934, becoming the Houston College for Negroes (now Texas Southern University, TSU) and the University of Houston. Like most higher education institutions in the Jim Crow South, UH did not accept African Americans based on the U.S. Supreme Court's "separate but equal" ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896).

In 1935, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) began challenging segregation in schools through a culmination of cases taken by the Supreme Court to challenge the separate but equal doctrine.<sup>4</sup> A critical case emerged from Houston in 1946, when Heman Marion Sweatt, a Black Houstonian, applied to The University of Texas at Austin (UT) law school. No law school in Texas admitted Black students at the time, and UT denied him admission based on his race. Sweatt, with the support of the NAACP, filed a suit against UT and the State of Texas. The U.S. Supreme Court heard the case in 1950 and ruled that the UT School of Law must admit Sweatt because the state had no equivalent institutions for Black students.<sup>5</sup> The decision marked an essential step in desegregating higher education, prefiguring the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in which the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that separate but equal is inherently unequal and began the long process of desegregating public education.

Despite Supreme Court rulings prohibiting segregation in educational institutions, many schools disregarded the decisions with a determination to remain segregated. Public sentiment across the South resisted desegregation as colleges slowly began to welcome non-white applicants. The official conversation around desegregation at UH began on August 31, 1955, when then president Andrew Davis (A. D.) Bruce formed a committee to evaluate admitting Black students. After the three-person panel recommended to continue UH's discriminatory practices, Bruce formed a more extensive committee about two months later, who advised the administration to desegregate immediately and quietly. Despite the report, UH remained segregated until Bruce resigned, and Hoffman accepted the presidency.<sup>6</sup>

President Hoffman understood the solution to the university's financial troubles began with state affiliation, which could not be accomplished if the university remained segregated. Discussing desegregation of the university on January 22, 1962, Hoffman remarked, "Effective September 1963, the UH will become a state institution, and at that time it will be mandatory as part of the normal pattern of responsibility to integrate." Hoffman, eager to desegregate, did not want to wait that long, saying, "I have been thinking a little bit about our voluntary and privately moving toward this integration without waiting until we are forced to do it legally... and thus proceed by slightly more than a year before we have to integrate."<sup>7</sup>

In 1962, UH admitted its first Black graduate student, Charles P. Rhinehart, to the music department. The same

year, the university hired its first Black professional employee, Charles D. Churchwell, as the associate library director.<sup>8</sup>

President Hoffman wanted to desegregate UH "because it made good sense politically and, more importantly, it was the right thing to do." Nevertheless, he knew he had to proceed carefully to prevent public backlash. Hoffman invited the heads of newspapers, and television and radio stations for cocktails at the Houston Club. He told them the plans for desegregating UH, saying, "We could either do it quietly or we could have something that resembled Mississippi or Alabama," referring to campus riots in those states started by white students against admitting African Americans. Hoffman affirmed, "My choice was that students would look around (one day) and say, 'we are integrated.'" This same strategy had worked with desegregating Houston lunch counters and other public spaces following student sit-ins in 1960.<sup>9</sup>

According to UH alumni Richard and Cora Bily, the media blackout worked, as students remained largely unaware of the integration. Cora attended the university between 1962 and 1965, while Richard attended between 1960 and 1964. Despite attending UH at the beginning of the desegregation



*President Hoffman, left, walks beside TSU President Granville M. Sawyer, right, at a commencement address in 1968. Though they remain separate institutions, UH and TSU continue to maintain a collaborative relationship.*

Photo courtesy of the UH Photographs Collection, Digital Collections, University of Houston Libraries, ark:/84475/doi136h166.

process, the couple did not recall seeing any African American students in their classes or on campus. Richard described the change as “a very slow process.”<sup>10</sup>

UH admitted the first African American undergraduate student in 1963; by March, the number had risen to twenty. The African American student body grew throughout the sixties, and Black students demanded more from the university. Hoffman led the way in changing policy, but changing attitudes proved more challenging. Fifty years after the admission of the first Black student, the University of Houston conducted a public symposium, “Revolution on Cullen,” moderated by Honors College professor Allison Leland, J.D., to discuss desegregation at UH and the personal struggles of two Black students, Don Chaney and Gene Locke. Chaney disclosed the initially isolating experience he had as one of UH’s first Black athletes when he arrived in 1964.<sup>11</sup>

UH made history in 1964 as the first major predominantly white southern school to desegregate intercollegiate athletics by recruiting Don Chaney and Elvin Hayes to play basketball and Warren McVea for football. The three highly talented athletes overcame racial barriers and ruthless media attention, which pushed the school’s integration forward and opened doors for Black athletes in the following seasons. UH athletics dominated in the South during the following decades with seventeen winning football seasons



*President Hoffman takes up the torch from senior John Mattern to light the 1966 Homecoming Bonfire. Hoffman happily spent time participating in student activities throughout his tenure.*

Photo courtesy of the *Houstonian*, 1966, Digital Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

under coach Bill Yeoman and five straight basketball seasons ranked in the top 20 with two NCAA Final Four appearances under coach Guy V. Lewis.<sup>12</sup>

Once the university began openly recruiting African American athletes, it attracted other African American students to apply as well. For example, Gene Locke recalled, “I was trying to make the decision on where to go to school. University of Houston had started to recruit African American athletes ... that little, small move by the U of H kind of sealed, for me, the decision

to come to Houston.” Locke enrolled in the political science department in 1965, which he called “the first year of a significant attendance of African Americans at the University of Houston.” Nevertheless, he felt like an outsider trying to fit into a predominately white campus. Locke described “the central contradiction that African Americans faced at University of Houston in 1965 and 1966 and 1967 was that the University had not readied itself to be integrated. The University was legally integrated, but it had not taken any steps ... to make it possible for there to be a smooth transition.”<sup>13</sup>

Influenced by the Black civil rights movement sweeping across America in the sixties, students identified institutional manifestations of racism at the university and called on UH to do more for Black students. In 1967, Gene Locke, Dwight Allen (now Omowale Luthuli-Allen), and Lynn Eusan, the first Black UH homecoming queen, formed the



*President Hoffman, right, and Coach Guy Lewis, left, celebrate the men’s basketball team’s 1977 National Invitational Tournament (NIT) semi-final victory at Madison Square Garden.*

Photo courtesy of Digital Collections, University of Houston Libraries, ark:/84475/d0703opt80k..



*AABL supporters gathered outside President Hoffman’s office during the 1968-69 school year. Although the university had begun to desegregate, students from all backgrounds echoed AABL’s sentiments in calling for change.*

Photo courtesy of *Houstonian*, 1969, Digital Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

Committee on Better Race Relations, which later became Afro-Americans for Black Liberation (AABL), to advocate for Black students. AABL presented Hoffman with ten demands on February 7, 1969, which called on the administration to create an African American studies program, hire additional Black faculty, increase wages for janitorial staff, provide adequate housing and financial aid for Black students, support Black athletes and hire a Black coach, create a committee to alleviate racist practices, and establish a Black Student Union. Hoffman took the demands seriously and responded on February 14, 1969, to each of the issues individually. Hoffman worked with AABL to establish the African American Studies program in May 1969, with history professor Robert Haynes as the first director.<sup>14</sup>

With integration, lower tuition rates as a state institution, excellent academics, and successful athletic programs, the University of Houston experienced significant growth, going from 12,187 to 29,297 students between 1961 and 1977. To accommodate the growing student body, Hoffman expanded the campus by constructing twenty-five buildings over a ten-year period. Notably, the university purchased Jeppesen



*President Hoffman, center right, Alfred Neumann, center left, and others celebrate the passage of Senate Bill 2 in 1973, which established revenue bonds for the creation of UH Clear Lake. Neumann served as the founding chancellor from 1972 to 1982.*

Photo courtesy of the UHCL General Photographs Collection, University of Houston-Clear Lake Archives and Special Collections, Houston, TX.



*President Hoffman discusses the football team's 1977 victory over Rice University with KPRC sportscaster and UH alumnus Bill Worrell. Athletic success helped unite the student body during Hoffman's long tenure as president.*

Photo courtesy of the *Houstonian*, 1977, Digital Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

Stadium from HISD, later renamed Corbin J. Robertson Stadium, in honor of Houston athletics' benefactor and grandson of Hugh Roy Cullen. At various times, the stadium hosted Cougar football, the American Football League Houston Oilers, and the Dynamo soccer team until the facility was replaced by TDECU Stadium in 2014.<sup>15</sup>

President Hoffman envisioned UH expanding further with the establishment of satellite campuses and the creation of the University of Houston System (UHS), becoming its first chancellor in 1977. Hoffman was instrumental in acquiring the land and facilities for the University of Houston Victoria Center, which opened in 1973 and became the University of

Houston Victoria (UHV) in 1977. Hoffman also worked to establish the University of Houston Downtown (UHD) in the heart of Houston's urban core. UH purchased South Texas Junior College and opened UHD as a four-year university, becoming an official part of UHS with approval from the Texas Legislature in 1974.<sup>16</sup> Since its founding, UHD has grown to meet the educational needs of the Bayou City offering bachelor's degrees in forty-six areas of study and eleven master's degrees.

Under President Hoffman, UH connected with the Johnson Space Center to establish the University of Houston Clear Lake (UHCL). When NASA's demand for qualified graduates increased, Robert Gilruth, the then Manned Spaceflight Center's (MSC) director, stated that "the availability of the best educational opportunities for our employees is vital to the accomplishment of our Center's mission objectives." Therefore, Gilruth requested "that the University of Houston give immediate consideration to the establishment of a permanent graduate and undergraduate educational facility in the Clear Lake area." Hoffman replied, "It would be difficult for us to be unresponsive to vital needs of the MSC and its staff." Hoffman indicated that a crucial element in establishing the new campus hinged on acquiring the land. The Humble Oil & Refining Company initially donated fifty acres of land in Clear Lake City to UH, and its subsidiary Friendswood Development Corporation donated 487 total acres to become the University of Houston at Clear Lake City in 1974.<sup>17</sup> The University's partnership with NASA helped connect students with jobs and train personnel needed to advance the country's space program.

Hoffman won many accolades for his achievements at UH and carried on successfully after leaving the university.

*In addition to boosting enrollment, President Hoffman oversaw the construction of numerous buildings. The new building on University Park off Cullen Boulevard, with its recognizable archway in the center, was dedicated as Philip G. Hoffman Hall on April 27, 1980.*

Photo courtesy of Digital Collections, University of Houston Libraries, ark:/84475/d092150j901.



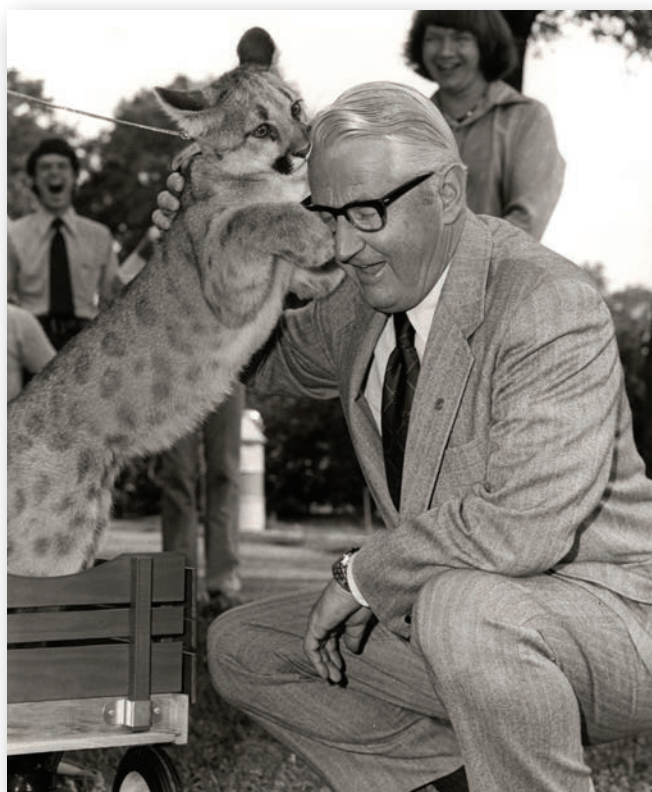
Hoffman earned the University of Houston President Emeritus Honorific, and in 1971, the school awarded him the Houston Alumni Organization's President's Award. When Hoffman retired as chancellor in 1979, UHS had an enrollment of over 29,000 students on four campuses.<sup>18</sup> Hoffman continued to serve the city, becoming president of the Texas Medical Center from 1981 to 1984.

Sadly for his family and the Houston community, Hoffman died in October 2008, at the age of ninety-three. In memory of the beloved former chancellor, the current president of the University of Houston and chancellor of the UH System, Renu Khator, proclaimed Monday,

November 3, 2008, as Philip G. Hoffman Day, stating, "Dr. Hoffman served the university with loyalty, vision, energy, and commitment. Under his watch, the landscape of the University of Houston was forever transformed. We have lost a true Cougar friend."<sup>19</sup>

Hoffman began the desegregation process to make UH a more accepting and inclusive campus in the 1960s; and, since that time, the student body has diversified to reflect Houston's multicultural identity. In 2017, *U.S. News & World Report* recognized the University of Houston as the second most diverse public research university in the nation. As of 2022, eighty percent of the student body claims an ethnicity of non-white, a much better reflection of Houston's overall diversity than in the university's early years.<sup>20</sup>

Hoffman is regarded by many as the builder of the modern University of Houston for the massive transformation he accomplished during his sixteen years at the helm. Hoffman integrated the campus, increased faculty and enrollment, launched fundraising campaigns that brought in millions of dollars, implemented the African American and Mexican American studies programs, and constructed or remodeled thirty-one buildings. He also brought jobs to Houston through the partnership with NASA and expanded educational opportunities with the establishment of UHD, UHCL, and UHV. Most significantly, he began the process of diversifying the campus to prepare students to work in a multicultural city and world. Dana Rooks, the former dean of UH libraries and friend and colleague of Hoffman, stated, "To many, Dr. Philip G. Hoffman is the University of Houston. His legacy to the citizens of Houston and the former and future students of the University of Houston is beyond measure. He is one of the great figures in Houston history whose contributions made this city what it is today."<sup>21</sup> **HH**



*President Hoffman gets some encouragement from young UH Cougar mascot Shasta IV in 1977.*

Photo courtesy of UH Photographs Collection, Digital Collections, University of Houston Libraries, ark:/84475/d060752h65g.

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