

THE 1895 – 2009 COMMENCEMENT HISTORY OF SAVANNAH STATE UNIVERSITY
AS DOCUMENTED FROM ITS ARCHIVES AND THE BOOK *RICHARD R. WRIGHT, SR.,*
AT GSIC, 1891 – 1921

Although there were no graduates from Georgia State Industrial College until 1895, President Wright held a commencement week of activities each June beginning in 1892. In June, 1895, the first actual commencement took place when five young men, including Richard R. Wright, Jr., were awarded the first normal diplomas in the college's brief history. The young men were awarded their diplomas by W. Y. Atkinson, Governor of Georgia. In June, 1898, the college awarded its first baccalaureate degree to Richard R. Wright, Jr., the only member of the baccalaureate degree class of 1898. From 1898 – 1902, many famous educators and leaders spoke to the faculty and students at GSIC. Some of these luminaries included Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, Lucy Craft Laney; President Bumstead, Atlanta University; Chancellor Walter B. Hill, University of Georgia; William S. Scarborough, president, Wilberforce University; and William Pickens, professor, Talladega College. What follows below is a documented record of Savannah State University's commencement speakers from archival records to include original commencement programs and books.

- June, 1902 – Chancellor Walter B. Hill, University of Georgia delivered the commencement address.
- June 7, 1905 – Booker T. Washington delivered the commencement address.
- June, 1909 – Mary Church Terrell delivered the commencement address.
- May 29, 1912 – Dr. Kelly Miller, eminent sociologist, and dean, Howard University, Washington, D. C. – delivered the commencement address.
- June, 1919 – Dr. R. R. Moton, president, Tuskegee Institute, delivered the commencement address.
- June, 1920 – Mary McLeod Bethune delivered the commencement address.
- June 13, 1923 – Dr. Decatur C. Suggs, president, Livingstone College, Salisbury, North Carolina, delivered the commencement address. Suggs served as vice – president at GSIC during the administration of President Richard R. Wright, Sr.
- May 27, 1931 – Major Richard R. Wright, Sr., L.L. D. – president, Citizens and Southern Bank and Trust Company – Philadelphia, PA delivered the commencement address ten years after he left the presidency of GSIC.
- June 7, 1950 – Dr. George W. Gore, president, Florida A&M University delivered the commencement address.
- June 6, 1951 – Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, president, Morehouse College, delivered the commencement address.
- August 15, 1951 – Dr. Albert W. Dent, president, Dillard University, New Orleans, delivered the commencement address.

- June 4, 1952 – Bishop Bertram Wilbur Doyle, A.B., M.A., Ph.D., D.D., presiding bishop, Seventh Episcopal District, C.M.E. Church; Nashville, Tennessee, delivered the June commencement address.
- August 13, 1952 – Benner C. Turner, A.B., LL.B., president, State Agricultural and Mechanical College, Orangeburg, South Carolina, delivered the August Commencement address.
- August 12, 1953 – H. Councill Trenholm, A.B., A.M., LL.D., president, Alabama State College for Negroes, Montgomery, Alabama, delivered the commencement address.
- June 2, 1954 – Dr. Reavis Claton Sproull, Ph.D., director, Herty Foundation, Savannah, Georgia, delivered the commencement address.
- August 18, 1954 – J. A. Bacoats, A.B., M.A., D.D., president, Benedict College, Columbia, South Carolina, delivered the August Commencement address.
- June 1, 1955 – Dr. J. Curtis Dixon, A.B., A.M., D.Ed., vice – president and executive director, Southern Education Foundation, Atlanta, Georgia.
- August 16, 1955 – Lieutenant General Alvan G. Gillem, Jr., Armed Forces Liaison Officer, National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, Atlanta, Georgia.
- June 4, 1956 – T. M. Alexander, A.B., president and founder, Alexander and Company, Atlanta, Georgia.
- August 15, 1956 – William H. Dennis, president, Albany State College, Albany, Georgia.
- June 3, 1959 – Dr. Howard Thurman, dean, Marsh Chapel, Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts.
- June 8, 1960 – Rufus S. Clement, A.B., LL.D., B.D., A.M., Ph.D., D.C.L., LL.D., president, Atlanta University, Atlanta, Georgia.
- August 17, 1960 – Walter W. Ridley, A.B., A.M., Ed.D., president, Elizabeth City State Teachers College, Elizabeth City, North Carolina.
- June 6, 1961 – Dr. Samuel M. Nabrit, president, Texas Southern University, Houston, Texas, delivered the commencement address.
- August 16, 1961 – Dr. Wesley J. Lyda, A.B., A.M., Ph.D., Dean, Graduate School, Fort Valley State College, Fort Valley, Georgia.
- June 5, 1962 – Dr. Arthur D. Gray, A.B., B.D., D.D., president, Talladega College, Talladega, Alabama, delivered the commencement address.
- August 15, 1962 – Dr. Samuel P. Massie, Ph.D., National Science Foundation, Washington, D.C., delivered the commencement address.
- June 4, 1963 – Anton Solms, Jr., attorney, Regent – University System of Georgia, Savannah, Georgia, delivered the commencement address.
- August 14, 1963 – Dr. Howard E. Wright, president, Allen University, Columbia, South Carolina, delivered the commencement address.
- June 2, 1964 – Dr. Stephen J. Wright, president, Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, delivered the commencement address.

- August 9, 1964 – Dr. Patricia R. Harris, professor, School of Law, Howard University, Washington, D.C., delivered the commencement address.
- June 6, 1965 – Honorable Raymond Pace Alexander, Judge, Court of Common Pleas – City of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA, delivered the commencement address.
- June 5, 1966 – Dr. Charles H. Wesley, president and executive director, Association for the Study of Negro Life and History – Washington, D.C., delivered the commencement address.
- June 4, 1967 – Dr. Felton G. Clark, president, Southern University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, delivered the commencement address.
- August 18, 1967 – Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, president emeritus, Morehouse College, delivered the commencement address.
- June 2, 1968 – Dr. Raymond Suggs, personnel director – urban affairs – personnel relations department – American Telephone and Telegraph Company, New York, New York.
- August 9, 1968 – Dr. Vivian Henderson, president, Clark College, Atlanta, Georgia, delivered the commencement address.
- June 1, 1969 – the Honorable Maynard Jackson, attorney – at – law, Atlanta, Georgia, delivered the commencement address.
- August 16, 1969 – Senator Leroy R. Johnson, Georgia General Assembly, delivered the commencement address. Senator Johnson was the first black man since Reconstruction in Georgia to serve as a senator in the Georgia state legislature.
- June 7, 1970 – Dr. Samuel Proctor, professor of education, graduate school of education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, delivered the commencement address.
- June 6, 1971 – The Honorable Bobby Lee Hill, J.D., Georgia House of Representatives, Ninety – Fourth District (Chatham County), delivered the commencement address. Attorney Hill graduated in the class of 1963 at Savannah State College, and was the first black man in Savannah/Chatham County to serve in the Georgia State Legislature since 1871 when Ulysses Houston, James Merilus Simms, and James Porter were the first black men to serve in the Georgia General Assembly after the Civil War during Reconstruction in the South and in Savannah/Chatham County, Georgia.
- August 13, 1971 – Walter J. Leonard, J.D., special assistant to the president, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, delivered the commencement address.
- June 4, 1972 – The Honorable Julian Bond, LL.D., D.C.L., Georgia House of Representatives, District 111, delivered the commencement address.
- August 10, 1972 – Herman J. Smith, Jr., Ph.D., Director, National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges, Washington, D.C., delivered the commencement address.
- June 3, 1973 – The Honorable Richard G. Hatcher, J.D., Mayor, The City of Gary, Indiana, delivered the commencement address.
- June 2, 1974 – Rear Admiral Samuel L. Gravely, U. S. Navy Commander, Cruiser Destroyer Group Two, delivered the commencement address.
- August 8, 1974 – The Honorable Howard N. Lee, LL.D, Mayor, The City of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, delivered the commencement address.

- June 1, 1975 – The Reverend Jesse L. Jackson, B.S., D.D., L.H.D., D.A., LL.D., Founder and National President, People United to Save Humanity (PUSH), delivered the commencement address.
- August 10, 1975 – The Honorable Benjamin Brown, J. D., Georgia State Representative, District 34, Chairman – Georgia Legislative Black Caucus, delivered the commencement address.
- June 5, 1976 – The Honorable Sidney A. Jones, Jr., B.A., J.D., judge of the circuit court of Cook County, Illinois, Chicago, Illinois, delivered the commencement address.
- August 15, 1976 – Leonard H. Spearman, Ph.D., Associate commissioner for Student Assistance – U.S. Department of HEW, Office of Education, Washington, D.C., delivered the commencement address.
- June 5, 1977 – Mrs. Lillian P. Benbow, B.A., Housing Director of the Preventive Services Division, Department of Civil Rights, Detroit, Michigan, delivered the commencement address.
- August 14, 1977 – Walter J. Leonard, J.D., president, Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, delivered the commencement address.
- June 4, 1978 – Albert N. Thompson, J.D., Georgia State Representative, Columbus, Georgia, delivered the commencement address.
- August 16, 1978 – Roy L. Jackson, Alderman, City of Savannah, Georgia, delivered the commencement address.
- June 3, 1979 – Benjamin Hooks, J. D., executive director, NAACP, delivered the commencement address.
- August 10, 1979 – The Honorable Eugene H. Gadsden, J.D. (Class of 1934), Judge of Superior Court (first black men elected to be a Superior Court Judge in Chatham County), Savannah, Georgia, delivered the commencement address.
- June 1, 1980 – Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, Sr., A.B., B. D., D.D., pastor, First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill and assistant dean of the Divinity School, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, delivered the commencement address.
- August 18, 1980 – Elridge W. McMillan, L. H. D., Fifth District Regent – University System of Georgia, and Executive Director, Southern Education Foundation, delivered the commencement address.
- August 12, 1981 – Commander Royal Logan, Jr., executive officer, Savannah State College Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps (NROTC), delivered the commencement address.
- June 13, 1982 – Darwin N. Davis – Vice – President – Marketing Sector of Agency Operations – Equitable Life Assurance Society of the United States – New York, New York.
- August 20, 1982 – Henderson F. Formey, acting superintendent, Chatham/Savannah Board of Public Education, delivered the commencement address.
- August 22, 1983 – Dr. Margaret C. Robinson, dean, School of Sciences and Technology, Savannah State College, delivered the commencement address.
- June 10, 1984 – William A. Butts, director, Postsecondary Relations Staff – Department of Education, Washington, D. C., delivered the commencement address.

- June 9, 1985 – Clarence Thomas, chairman, United States Equal Opportunity Commission, Washington, DC, delivered the commencement address.
- June 8, 1986 – The Honorable Joe Frank Harris, Governor of Georgia, delivered the commencement address.
- June 5, 1988 – H. Dean Propst, chancellor, University System of Georgia, delivered the commencement address.
- June 4, 1989 – Dr. Julius S. Scott, president, Paine College, Augusta, Georgia, delivered the commencement address.
- June 3, 1990 – Dr. Robert L. Williams, distinguished professor of psychology, Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri, delivered the commencement address.
- August 20, 1990 – no commencement speaker but the charge to the graduates was delivered by – Victor Lomax, acting dean, School of Business; Ja A. Jahannes, dean, School of Humanities and Social Sciences; Dr. Margaret C. Robinson, School of Sciences and Technology; and William E. Gardner, Jr., president, Savannah State College.
- June 9, 1991 – The Honorable Lindsey Thomas, member of Congress, Washington, D. C., delivered the commencement address.
- August 11, 1991 – no commencement speaker but the charge to the graduates as delivered by – Dr. Andrew Honeycutt, dean, School of Business; Dr. Ja A. Jahannes, dean, School of Humanities and Social Sciences; Dr. Margaret C. Robinson, dean, School of Sciences and Technology; and Dr. Annette K. Brock, acting president, Savannah State University.
- June 7, 1992 – The Honorable Zell Miller, Governor of Georgia, delivered the commencement address.
- June 6, 1993 – Dr. James A. Hefner, president, Tennessee State University, Nashville, Tennessee, delivered the commencement address.
- June 12, 1994 – The Honorable Catherine W. LeBlanc – executive director – White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges, Washington, D. C., delivered the commencement address.
- August 7, 1994 – The Honorable Gwendolyn P. Goodman, Alderman, City of Savannah, District 2, delivered the commencement address.
- June 11, 1995 – Dr. Arthur N. Dunning, senior vice – chancellor of human and external resources/acting deputy, Board of Regents, University System of Georgia, delivered the commencement address.
- December 8, 1995 – Dr. Adam J. Richardson, Jr., pastor, Bethel A.M.E. Church, Tallahassee, Florida, delivered the commencement address.
- June 9, 1996 – Mrs. Juanita Baranco – chair – Board of Regents – University System of Georgia, delivered the commencement address.
- December 7, 1996 – Dr. Frederick S. Humphries, president, Florida A&M University, delivered the commencement address.
- June 8, 1997 – Justice Leah Sears, Supreme Court of Georgia, delivered the commencement address.

- December 6, 1997 – Elridge McMillan, regent, Board of Regents, University System of Georgia, delivered the commencement address.
- June 7, 1998 - Dr. John Hope Franklin, Advisory Board Chair – The President’s Initiative on Race, Washington, D. C., delivered the commencement address.
- August 5, 1998 – H. Dean Propst, chancellor, University System of Georgia, delivered the commencement address.
- May 9, 1999 – The Honorable Roy Barnes, Governor of Georgia, delivered the commencement address.
- December 11, 1999 – M. O. LaVelle Bond – vice – president – Global Diversity and the HR Center of Excellence – The Proctor and Gamble Company, delivered the commencement address.
- May 7, 2000 – Attorney Patricia Russell – McCloud, president, Russell – McCloud Associates, delivered the commencement address.
- December 9, 2000 – The Honorable James E. Clyburn, member, US House of Representatives – South Carolina and chair – Congressional Black Caucus (Clyburn is now the Majority Whip in the US House of Representatives), delivered the commencement address.
- May 6, 2001 – Thomas W. Dortch, Jr., national chairman of the board, 100 Black Men of America, delivered the commencement address.
- December 8, 2001 – The Honorable Elijah E. Cummings – 7th Congressional District of Maryland – United States House of Representatives, delivered the commencement address.
- May 5, 2002 – Ms. Romona Gray, research chemist, Merck and Company, delivered the commencement address.
- December 14, 2002 – The Honorable Barbara Mobley (Class of 1969), State Representative, Georgia House – District 69, delivered the commencement address.
- May 10, 2003 – The Honorable William E. Gary, attorney and chairman/ceo of the Major Broadcasting Network (MBC), delivered the commencement address.
- December 13, 2003 – The Honorable Shirley Franklin, mayor of Atlanta, Georgia, delivered the commencement address.
- May 4, 2004 – The Honorable Alcee L. Hastings – US House of Representatives, District 23, Florida, delivered the commencement address.
- December 11, 2004 – Dr. N. Joyce Payne – director – Human Resources and Minority Programs for the Association of State Universities and Land – Grant Colleges, delivered the commencement address.
- December 10, 2005 – Ms. Corlis P. Cummings, interim chancellor, Board of Regents, University System of Georgia, delivered the commencement address.
- December 9, 2006 – Dr. Carlton E. Brown, president, Savannah State University, delivered the commencement address. He was introduced by Dr. Jane M. Gates, interim vice – president for academic affairs.

- May 12, 2007 – Michael L. Thurmond, commissioner, Georgia Department of Labor, delivered the commencement address.
- May 9, 2009 – Captain Donnie R. Cochran, US Navy (ret.), delivered the commencement address. Captain Cochran – Class of 1974 – was the first African American to fly with the “Blue Angels” precision flying team of the United States Navy.