

# Introduction

William Pickens was born in Anderson County, South Carolina, on January 15, 1881. When he was seven years of age, his parents moved to Arkansas, where he graduated from Union High School in Little Rock, in 1899, as the valedictorian of his class. Pickens then entered Talladega College in Alabama and finished the Bachelor of Arts course in 1902, after which he entered Yale University, where in 1904 he earned a B.A. in linguistics. At Yale, Pickens received the Phi Beta Kappa Key and was in the highest-ranking group of his class.

Upon completion of his degree, Pickens began teaching foreign languages and other subjects at Talladega College. After spending ten years there, he went to Wiley University in Texas, where he served as head of the departments of Greek and sociology for one year. In 1915, Pickens accepted the position of dean of Morgan College in Baltimore. He remained at Morgan for five years, serving as vice president in the last two years; although his tenure as dean was brief, he would be known for many years afterward as Dean Pickens.

While pursuing his career in academia, Pickens also received the following degrees: a diploma from the British Esperanto Association in 1906, a Master of Arts from Fisk University in 1908, a doctorate in literature from Selma University in 1915, and an LL.D. from Wiley College in 1918. Earlier, in 1905, he married Minnie Cooper McAlpine of Meridian, Mississippi, who had earned her B.A. from Tougaloo College. They subsequently had three children: William Jr., Harriet, and Ruby.

In 1913, Pickens made the first of many trips abroad to attend conferences and deliver lectures in England, Scotland, Germany, Poland, Russia, Switzerland, and Austria. An inveterate traveler throughout his life, he visited most of Europe, Central America, the West Indies, and Canada. It was also during this period that Pickens acquired a reputation as an author and lecturer. He wrote *The Heir of Slaves*, an autobiography; *The New Negro*, a collection of essays; *The Vengeance of the Gods*, short stories; *Bursting Bonds*, another autobiography; and *American Aesop*, after-dinner stories, among other works. He also wrote articles for leading periodicals and for twenty-five years was a contributing editor of the Associated Negro Press.

On February 1, 1920, abandoning the field of education, he became field secretary and then director of the branches for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.). Always intensely interested in the welfare and progress of black people, Pickens had been a member of the noted Niagara Movement, which antedated the N.A.A.C.P. He remained with the N.A.A.C.P. until 1942. During his tenure he successfully used his organizing and oratorical skills to raise funds and increase the membership. At this time he also served as a leader in the Federal Forums Project conducted by the U.S. Department of the Interior during 1937 and 1939. In addition, under appointment by Governor Herbert H. Lehman of New York, he served as a member of the Selective Service System on draft and appeals boards in New York City.

At the request of the U.S. Treasury Department, Pickens took a leave of absence from the N.A.A.C.P. in May 1941 and went to work for the Defense Savings Staff Section. He was designated chief of the Interracial Section, Savings Bond Division of the Treasury in 1942, when he formally severed his employment with the N.A.A.C.P. and became the first black affiliated with the Treasury Department in twenty-five years.

During World War II, Pickens led black bond buyers through eight successful drives—seven War loans and one Victory loan. When the war ended, rebuffed by N.A.A.C.P. executive

secretary Walter White in his attempt to return to that organization, Pickens continued to sell to blacks the idea of thrift through government securities. His duties took him all over the United States, and he traveled from 15,000 to 40,000 miles per year for the ten years he was with the Treasury Department. He gained prominence as one of this nation's top War and Savings Bond salesmen.

After his retirement from the Treasury Department at age seventy in 1951, Pickens, writing articles for various newspapers, traveled extensively throughout the world. He died aboard the S.S. *Mauritania* on April 6, 1954, off Kingston, Jamaica, while on a Caribbean cruise. At his wife's request, William Pickens was buried at sea.