

**Remarks by William Ezra Allen, Ph.D.,
Chair Centennial Commencement Committee
Launch of UL Centennial Commencement Celebrations
March 11, 2019**

Dr. Ophelia Inez Weeks, President of the University of Liberia, Members of the Board of Trustees of the University of Liberia, the Honorable Speaker of the House of Representatives, members of the Legislature, officials of Government, members of the Diplomatic Corps, our honored guests, Dr. C. Nelson Oniyama, President, Monrovia Breweries Incorporated and Hon. Bill Teahway, Managing Director, National Port Authority; my fellow members of the Centennial Commencement Committee, fellow vice presidents, staff, faculty, students, members of the public, ladies and gentlemen: Welcome to the Launch of the Centennial Commencement Celebrations of the University of Liberia. President Weeks, on behalf of the Centennial Commencement Committee, I thank you for constituting the Committee to commemorate this important milestone in the life of the University of Liberia. Your role in this regard is hardly a surprise, because you have always demonstrated a keen interest in Liberian history.

According to the records of the University of Liberia, this forthcoming December 2019 commencement will be the 100th in the history of the institution. The first graduation took place in 1866, when the then Liberia College, now the University of Liberia, conferred the Bachelor of Arts degree on a lone candidate, Mr. James Henry Evans.¹ At the next commencement in 1967 the institution put out two graduates, namely, Anthony T. Ferguson and James Elijah Moore. Afterwards there were short and long periods when the fledgling Liberia College did not hold graduations, for example, 1868-69, 1874-1902, 1906, 1908, 1909, 1911, and beyond. Thus by 1951 the year that Liberia College was renamed University of Liberia, the institution had missed an estimated total of 46 commencements.

¹ The University of Liberia counts its graduations and the numbers are inscribed on the covers of the official Commencement programs. So, for example, the 2016 program is labeled “Ninety-Seventh Commencement”, the 2017, “Ninety-Eighth Commencement” and the 2018, “Ninety-Ninth Commencement”. The programs are available in the University of Liberia library.

Though the University held graduations far more regularly than Liberia College did, it too would witness years without the “marching black robes”. Accordingly, after 39 unbroken years of graduations beginning in 1951, the University hit the first non-convocation snag in the last decade of the century. Consequently, no graduations are recorded for 1990, 1991, and 1994. Convocations resumed in 1995 and continued into the new millennium, but were halted again in 2003 and more recently in 2014. As a result, from 1866 when James Henry Evans graduated to 2018, the extant record suggests that the institution missed a total of 51 commencements.² This number therefore proposes why this centenary is being celebrated in 2019 and not in 1965, counting the first commencement of 1866. Some of the reasons for the reported 51 non-convocations are obvious, why others not so obvious. For example, the 2014 non-graduation was due to the Ebola outbreak, which resulted in the closure of schools throughout Liberia. The four non-graduations during the Civil War years are definitely connected to chaos associated with this era of instability. Nine graduations were lost during World War I (1914-18) and in the immediate post-war years. Some, or perhaps all of these non-graduations, may have been connected to the debilitating impact of this global war. In time, we should be able to discern with greater certainty the reasons for the non-graduations.

The number of graduates fluctuated over the years. James Henry Evans was not the only single candidate at a commencement in this institution. There was one graduate in 1871, as well as in 1872, and finally in 1916. In fact, with the exception of 1905, Liberia College graduates remain in the single digits until 1948 when the school put out 12 graduates. In 2017, however, the University of Liberia conferred degrees on the 3, 448, the highest in the history of the institution.

The theme of this Centennial is “Memory, Preservation, and the Way Forward”. Essentially this Centennial is memorializing the past, preserving our presence, and connecting to the future. We intend to

² Figures on the non-commencement are still tentative. These were derived from *University of Liberia Register of Graduates, 1866-1978* (University of Liberia, 1980) and the annual graduation programs. See the University of Liberia library.

promote monthly intellectual and cultural activities throughout the year that will culminate in the 100th graduation in December. We will keep the public abreast of these activities. Please join us. And today, as part of the cultural event marking this historic occasion, our Honors Program will reenact the historic 1866 commencement. The Centennial Committee also intends to inaugurate a few major projects. Dr. Weeks will shed more light on these Centennial Commencement projects.

Finally, in consideration of our theme, the Centennial Commencement is preparing a concise history of the University of Liberia. These and other textual materials from this Centennial will constitute the bridge that connects us to next generation of the University family. In addition, we will create and bury a time capsule with important information of this Centennial Commencement. It is my fervent prayer that when the time capsule is opened a century from now, I will be there to welcome all of you again to celebrate the bicentennial commencement. Before I take my seat, may I ask your indulgence so that members of the Centennial Commencement Committee can be recognized. Members, please rise. (two members are absent: Dr. Emmet A. Dennis, 13th President Emeritus, University of Liberia and Dr. Al-Hassan Conteh, 12th. President, University of Liberia.) Madam President, distinguished guests, welcome to the 2019 Centennial Commencement celebrations.