Who was the first African American student at Saint Mary's College of California?
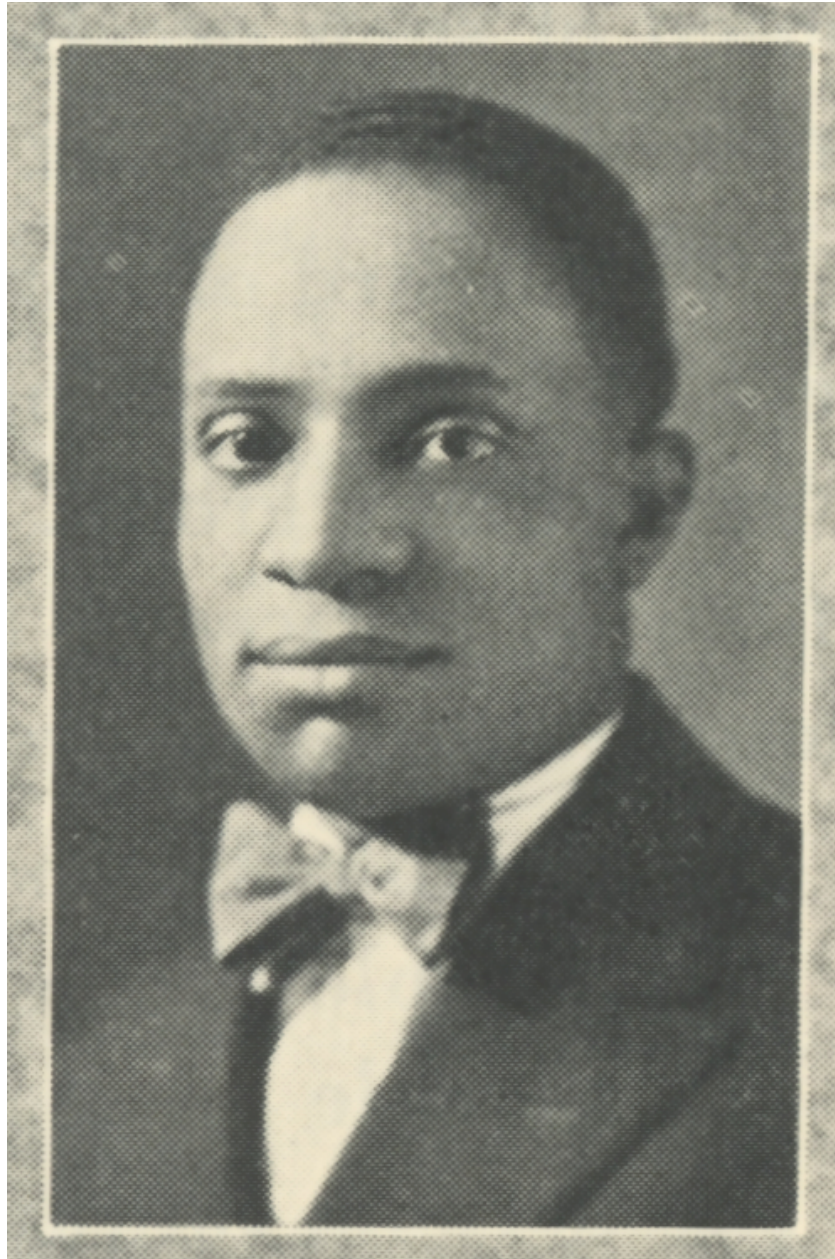
(The following is an excerpt from Professor Deane Lamont's forthcoming book *Sons of the Great Migration*)

Saint Mary's College was founded in San Francisco in 1863, relocated across the San Francisco Bay in 1889 to then semi-rural Oakland, and in 1928 occupied its current campus in a pastoral valley near the town of Moraga about a dozen miles inland from Oakland. Trying to identify the very first African American student at Saint Mary's College is a challenge. The institution's early written records are usually mute when it comes to race and ethnicity and yearbook photos are difficult to accurately interpret. However, a review of all available campus newspapers, yearbooks and other archive ephemera revealed the first clear evidence of a Black student at the college is not until 1925, when its campus was in Oakland.

Why, exactly, African American students were absent from Saint Mary's until well after World War I is an important and potentially revealing question. The Christian Brothers' core mission of providing an education to those of limited means was clearly powerful during the institution's early years in San Francisco. Fees were much more affordable than those charged by the two Jesuit colleges in the area and the school's records are full of Irish and Italian names of boys and young men from local working-class Catholic families. From student rolls and yearbooks, we also know that in San Francisco and Oakland the college did matriculate students of color -- Asians, Latinos, Pacific and even Caribbean Islanders -- but never employed African American faculty or administrators.

But where were the African American students? Perhaps they were being purposefully excluded from Saint Mary's? If this was the case, it would have fit the time and place. Race discrimination in higher education has been a broad practice in the United States. Whether a school was state funded, private, secular, or religiously affiliated seems to have made little difference. On the whole, faith-based institutions of higher learning did not distinguish themselves from their secular cousins in providing opportunity to Black students. Saint Mary's was certainly not alone among Catholic colleges in being without Black students in the early twentieth century. In 1910, in response to a W.E.B. Du Bois survey of Black students enrolled in and graduating from American colleges, an administrator at Fordham, a Jesuit college in New York City, declared that there had been no "applicants for admission from the black race" and noted that "What we should do were the applicants to come, I just cannot say."

Philip Gleason, professor of history at Notre Dame University, has noted that as late as World War II, at least 22 Catholic colleges (not all of which were in the South) still excluded African American students as a matter of deliberate policy. Not until 1944 was a Black American admitted to Notre Dame, arguably the nation's most famous Catholic college, thus breaking that institution's nearly 100-year-old color line. Notre Dame's southern alumni vigorously protested the racial integration of their *alma mater*. Georgetown University, founded in 1789, the nation's oldest Catholic college, did not admit an African American undergraduate student until 1963.

Black Americans were subjected to all types of prejudice, discrimination and intimidation in Northern California during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Saint Mary's campus was in Oakland from 1889 until 1928 and during that last decade the

city's Ku Klux Klan chapter had thousands of members. In 1925, 8,500 people participated in a Klan cross-burning ceremony inside the Oakland Civic Auditorium, now known as the Henry J. Kaiser Center for the Arts. Racism was common throughout the Bay Area during this era. Because the Oakland campus was small and meant limited enrollment capacity and was thus a threat to the institution's long-term economic health, by the early 1920s the Christian Brothers were in possession of 255 acres of land in San Leandro, a small city adjacent to Oakland. The plan was to build there a grand new campus including a 60,000-seat football stadium. However, not everyone was welcome in San Leandro. Before real estate developers in the city would agree to sell property, some required purchasers to sign documents that barred "any person" of "African descent" from occupying existing or new homes although an exception would be made should a Black individual live there while serving as a "household servant."

The first Black student to matriculate at Saint Mary's College of California was a "Mr. Vaughn." He was enrolled in a short-lived evening law program established in 1924. Mr. Vaughn was actually **George Robert Vaughns** (1900-1976), who served as a class officer for the law school's second cohort and graduated in the appointed three years. So, while Vaughns was the first African American student at Saint Mary's he was not a regular residential undergraduate.

Vaughns was born on May 26, 1900, in San Francisco to Malinda (Anderson) Vaughns, who was also born in San Francisco but in 1866. George's mother listed herself as mulatto in census records, she had nine children but only five survived infancy. George's father was William Wilson Vaughns, born in Virginia in 1860. George Vaughns was educated at Oakland's public schools. At 18, during World War I, he was working as a janitor in a department store and as a laborer at the Bethlehem Shipbuilding Company in Alameda. He graduated from Saint Mary's College of Law in 1928 and was admitted into practice in 1929. This was a significant accomplishment since it was only during the previous decade that an African American was first admitted to the bar in California and the American Bar Association would not accept Blacks until 1943. George married Hazel Jones of Dallas, Texas in 1946.

Vaughns began his legal career as a solo practitioner, but during the 1930s he shared an office at 1027 Adeline Street in Oakland with another Black lawyer, Frank M. Larche. While Vaughns' practice sustained him from early on, Larche initially made ends meet by working nights as a railroad dining car server. African Americans were denied work in many occupations at this time but dominated service jobs on the nation's railroads. By the 1940s, Larche had left behind his work on the tracks. He'd developed a successful law practice and was the General Chairman of the Dining Car Cooks and Waiters Union, where he represented the many Blacks still working on the railroads that he knew so well. After Larche's death, George led the firm Vaughns, Bussey and Berkley that had offices in Oakland and Berkeley.

George Vaughns was a prominent figure in the Bay Area's African American community. He was a mason, a member of A.M.E Church in Oakland and the N.A.A.C.P., on the Y.M.C.A.'s board of directors, and active in advancing civil rights. In

the early 1940s, his advocacy on behalf of the Boilermakers Union compelled Bay Area shipyards to comply with President Roosevelt's executive order prohibiting racial discrimination in war-related industries. Vaughns' work contributed to the subsequent employment of thousands of African Americans in the ship building industry during World War II and, by extension, changed the racial demographics of the San Francisco Bay Area.

As an attorney, Vaughns took the fight for civil rights to the courts. During the early 1950s, he represented Black Oaklanders suing the city's Mountain View Cemetery for refusing to inter the remains of a Black man in its whites-only mausoleum. In January 1955, the year Rosa Parks refused to take a seat at the back of a bus, the California Court of Appeal rejected his suit. Remarkably and telling of the time, the California court cited recent precedent in similar cases decided by the Illinois and Iowa supreme courts. In Illinois, it had been held to be legal for a cemetery near Chicago to refuse to bury a local Black woman in a white-only plot. Similarly, the Iowa State Supreme Court had upheld the right of a Sioux City cemetery to refuse to bury the remains of a U.S. Army sergeant killed in combat on active duty in Korea in its white-only section because he had 11/16 indigenous blood.

After the Oakland case, one of the presiding judges, though concurring, wrote: "I cannot believe that a man's mortal remains will disintegrate any less peaceably because of the close proximity of the body of a member of another race, and in that inevitable disintegration I am sure that the pigmentation of the skin cannot long endure. It strikes me that the carrying of racial discrimination into the burial grounds is a particularly stupid form of human arrogance and intolerance. If life does not do so, the universal fellowship of death should teach humility. The good people who insist on the racial segregation of what is mortal in man may be shocked to learn when their own lives end that God has reserved no racially exclusive position for them in the hereafter."

Vaughns served and led his local community in numerous other capacities. After World War II, he founded the Trans-Bay Federal Savings and Loan Association, one of the largest African American controlled savings and loan companies in the nation and in 1954 he was a founding member of Oakland's Men of Tomorrow, an African American civic and professional organization. In 1955, he was a founding member of the Charles Houston Bar Association, a groundbreaking and influential law club for Black attorneys in the Bay Area. He was the first African American commissioner on the Alameda County Planning Commission, a position he held from 1958-1973. Recognizing his importance in the Black legal community, a 1964 edition of the *Oakland Post* newspaper referred to him as "the dean of Negro lawyers" in the Bay Area.

George Vaughns died on March 7, 1976, and is buried in Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland.