

# 'We have come this far by faith,' Founder's Day speaker tells ECSU

photo by Jamie Jordan

Using a down-home gospel-inspired style, Benjamin Ruffin, guest speaker for the Founder's Day Ceremony, charmed, beguiled and entertained the University family on March 3 in Moore Hall.

Ruffin, Vice President for Corporate Relations for RJ Reynolds/Nabisco, said his daughter would have suggested he use some rap lyrics to draw inspiration for his speech. "But I had to go the fountain that never runs dry," Ruffin added. "The richest book of all."

Ruffin quoted the 46th verse of John in which Nathan asks Phillip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Ruffin drew a parallel between this biblical skepticism and the attitude that ECSU founder Hugh Cale faced when he "stood up in the general assembly of North Carolina to just ask for a pittance," \$900 to start a school in eastern North Carolina, with two staff members and 23 students," this in a place where black people "had to go around to the back door" to get served.

"I can imagine some of them in the back row," said Ruffin. "They didn't even want him there in the first place. They were thinking why should we give him money when we know nothing good is going to come out of it?"

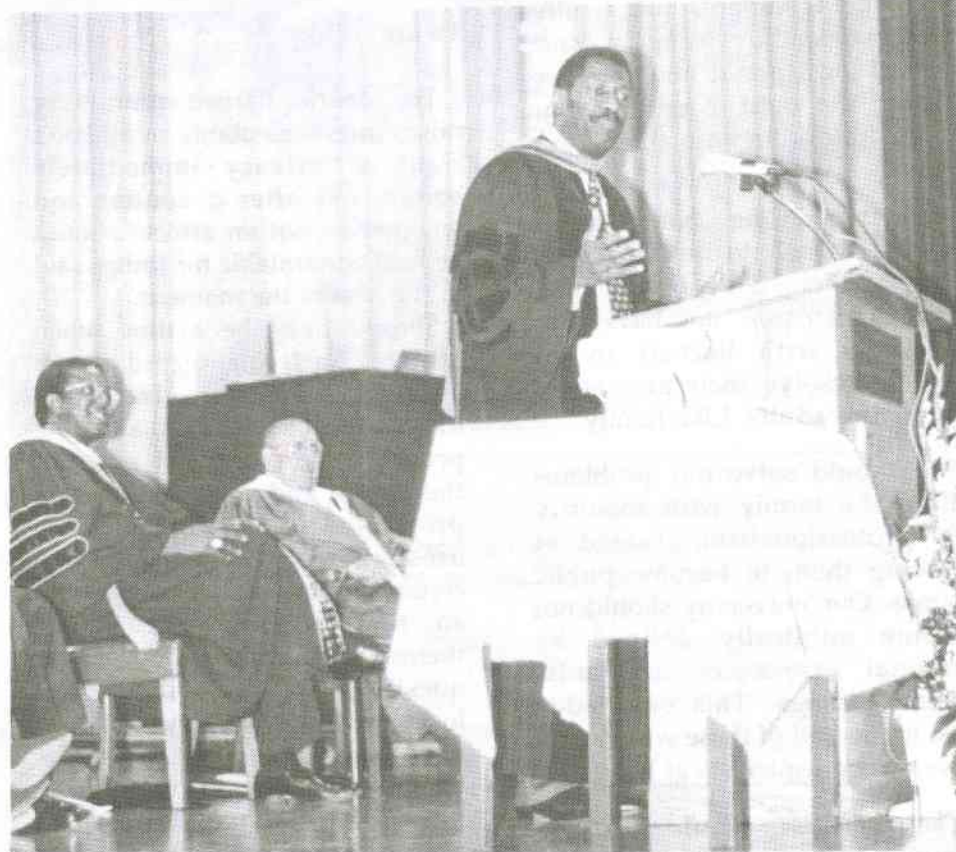
Pointing out how far the University has come since its founding Ruffin added "I just wish that general assembly could be here today.

"This is a beautiful university, but it just doesn't happen," Ruffin declared. "There were trials and tribulations...but there was a determination deep down in our souls" to succeed.

Pointing out that ECSU had educated thousands of teachers and civic leaders over the years, Ruffin added, "Come go with me to look at what this University has become, a modern, integrated facility with 125 faculty members, more than 2,000 students and a budget in excess of \$28 million.

"We have come this far by faith," said Ruffin, his voice cracking with emotion, "depending on the Lord and he has never failed us yet."

Ruffin decried racism and black-on-black crime in America, pointing out that last year in Mecklenburg



Benjamin Ruffin, guest speaker for the March 3 Founder's Day Ceremony, praised the founders of the University and called on ECSU's faculty to rededicate themselves to their mission. At left Dr. Jimmy Jenkins, Chancellor of ECSU, and E.V. Wilkins, Chairman of the University's Board of Trustees, look on.

County 97 out of 123 homicides were black-on-black crime.

"That's a shame and a disgrace," said Ruffin.

Ruffin also criticized the lifestyle of many young people today, focusing on those who "drop their britches down on their hips and wear their hats turned backwards, thinking they're cool but looking like fools."

Added Ruffin, "Reading the history of this school I didn't read in brother Hugh Cale's resume where he went in for the interview with the alphabet carved in his head."

ECSU's graduates have proven, said Ruffin, "That you don't have to use a gun to shoot people. You can use a pencil and paper to get some knowledge and make your light shine."

Ruffin warned his listeners that if changes aren't made in the black community "we are going to forfeit the rights we have fought and bled and died for, after all of this rich history.

"We have a special challenge," he continued. "We have a special duty not to stop where we are. We must remind our children to look where He brought us from. We didn't come alone. We came

through grace and mercy."

Ruffin offered his personal testimonial to to an individual's power to overcome obstacles. He said that he grew up in a three-room house in Durham, the son of a domestic and an alcoholic.

"People told us we couldn't be anything, but you can do it if you're determined."

Ruffin called on ECSU's faculty to rededicate themselves to their mission.

"It's God's gift to work with these minds, to mold them and push them in the right way. If you don't give these young people what they need, they'll come back in five years and say, 'You let me down.'"

Ruffin also challenged the students "to serve the present age."

During Ruffin's speech, a group of ECSU students protesting the suspension of former Viking team member Maurice Barnett walked out of the ceremony; however, Ruffin seemed unaffected by the disturbance.

Earlier in the program, E.V. Wilkins, Chairman of ECSU's Board of Trustees, told the University family, "We are here to celebrate our history. A people without a knowledge of their history is like a tree without

roots."

Wilkins' statement summed up the mood of this special day on which the University family, alumni and friends pay tribute to the school's founders.

"If those founders could see us now they would say the seeds were planted and now the fruit is being harvested," said ECSU Chancellor Dr. Jimmy Jenkins. "We are the true benefactors of their struggle. To our founding fathers, we say 'thank you for your vision.'"

Jenkins also announced several large donation to the University's Capital Campaign: a \$50,000 donation from C.D. Spangler, president of the University of North Carolina System, a first installment check from ECSU alumnus Gil Berry on a pledge of \$250,000, a \$25,000 donation from ECSU alumnus Argyle Whitfield to establish a scholarship in the name of his son, and a \$1,000 contribution from ECSU's Retiree's Association.

Jenkins also announced he had received \$50,000 from R.J. Reynolds Nabisco as part of a "\$750,000 proposal." Jenkins said the first installment would be applied toward the purchase of computers and an electron microscope.

"This will be a major corporate gift and a major commitment to education," Jenkins said. The Chancellor praised Benjamin Ruffin, Vice President for R.J. Reynolds, for his role in the gift.

Ruffin, guest speaker for the event, donated \$2,000 to the University's Capital Campaign.

The program included performances by the University Concert Choir, directed by Billy C. Hines, and by the University Concert Band, directed by Dr. Gary Callahan.

Dr. Winfred Simpson and Leonard Ballou performed a musical tribute in memory of Dr. Earl Butts, a professor in the Department of Sociology who died March 1. Butts was praised by Chancellor Jenkins as a dedicated member of the University family who worked hard and cared about his students.

Following the ceremony, members of the ECSU family went on a pilgrimage to Oak Grove cemetery where wreaths were placed on the graves of Hugh Cale, Dr. Peter Moore, and Dr. John Henry Bias, all founding fathers of the school.