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U.S. President Barack Obama sent official greetings from the White House in Washington, D.C., to the Heidelberg Center for American Studies (HCA). Consul Jeanine Collins of the U.S. Consulate General in Frankfurt delivered his letter today at the HCA's Curt and Heidemarie Engelhorn Palais.

The president conveyed his greetings and his appreciation for the James W. C. Pennington Distinguished Fellowship, established by the HCA and the Faculty of Theology of Heidelberg University. It was introduced in a festive ceremony today on the occasion of "America Day," part of the university's 625th anniversary celebrations. The president thanked the HCA for this initiative, which, he said, reflected the strong alliance and enduring friendship between the United States and Germany.

The fellowship honors the American pastor and former slave James W. C. Pennington, who received an honorary doctorate from Heidelberg University in 1849. This was the first award of its kind bestowed by a European—and perhaps any—university upon an African American. According to President Obama, it is especially appropriate that this fellowship will enable scholars to conduct research on subjects that were important to Pennington: slavery and emancipation, peace, education, religion and inter-cultural understanding.

The president expressed his conviction that in honoring James W.C. Pennington's achievements, Heidelberg University will inspire future generations of Americans and Germans.

As part of its jubilee year celebrations, the Ruperto Carola is commemorating a pastor and scholar whose non-violent struggle for black freedom in the United States and beyond earned him fame within the international abolitionist movement. A former slave, Pennington was the first African American to attend classes at Yale University. He became a Presbyterian minister in 1838. During the 1849 Paris International Peace Congress, Pennington met Heidelberg scholar Friedrich Carové, who convinced the university's theological faculty to bestow an honorary doctorate upon Pennington in the same year.

Professor Detlef Junker, founding director of the HCA, was deeply moved by President Obama's words and thanked the president on behalf of the HCA's students and staff. Obama's letter, he emphasized, was a tremendous encouragement for the HCA to proceed on its chosen path.

Professor Junker also thanked Dr. h.c. Manfred Lautenschläger for his generosity in underwriting the initial fellowships in the new program. A first international call for applications will be released this summer. In his remarks, Lautenschläger, himself the recipient of an honorary doctorate from the Faculty of Theology and an Honorary Senator of Heidelberg University, stressed his foundation's goals of promoting understanding between peoples and cultures.

Heidelberg University's "America Day" paid tribute to the long and close relationship between the university and the United States. The event began at 3:00 p.m. with a panel of international scholars discussing the subject "The Obama Presidency: Will There Be a Second Term?" HCA political scientist Dr. Martin Thunert moderated the discussion. Following a musical interlude with Eva Myaerhofer and Christian Eckert, the Pennington fellowship was introduced at 7:00 p.m. Professor Manisha Sinha from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst gave the keynote speech, entitled "James W. C. Pennington and Trans-Atlantic Abolitionism."