History of Tuskegee University

Tuskegee University (www.tuskegee.edu) is a national, independent, and state-related university located in the rural east Alabama town of Tuskegee. It developed through the efforts of Lewis Adams, a former slave, and George W. Campbell, a former slave owner, who saw in the late 1870s a need for the education of African-Americans in rural Macon County, Alabama. Its founding principal and president, Booker T. Washington, saw the education of Tuskegee’s students through a three-tiered notion of a healthy “head, hand and heart.” More than 135 years later, this philosophy continues to permeate every aspect of the school’s teaching and training. Students should have a strong education within the context of hard work, built on a sturdy framework of morality, charity and earnestness.

Founded on July 4, 1881, with initial state funding for teachers’ salaries, then-Tuskegee Normal Institute for Teachers immediately grew to prominence under Washington’s leadership. As a contemporary historically black university, it is rooted in a history of successfully educating African-American men and women — and students of all cultural and ethnic backgrounds — to understand themselves against a background of a rich academic heritage and the promise of their individual and collective futures. Its mission remains preparing generations of students for effective professional and leadership roles in society.

In 1906, Paul Laurence Dunbar penned “The Tuskegee Song,” calling the school “the pride of the swift-growing South.” That is indeed what Tuskegee University continues to be. Its prominence in the history of the state and nation is obvious through the accomplishments of its students, staff and faculty. Washington set the standard by recruiting the best and brightest available within the black community. His choices included prolific inventor and researcher George Washington Carver (1860-1943) in 1896; architect Robert R. Taylor (1868-1942), the first African-American to graduate from the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology, as director of mechanical industries in 1882; and Monroe N. Work (1866-1945), author of the *Negro Year Book* and the university’s first archivist, as founder of the Department of Records and Research in 190). Other notable “firsts” include:

1. Thomas Monroe Campbell, a 1906 graduate and the U.S.’s first cooperative extension agent (1906).
2. Alabama’s first four-year bachelor’s degree in nursing, established in 1948.
3. Alice Coachman Davis, a 1946 graduate and the first African-American woman to win an Olympic gold medal in 1948.
4. Alabama’s first hospital for African-Americans, established 1892.
5. Daniel "Chappie" James, a 1943 graduate and nation’s first African-American four-star general (1975).
6. Ralph Ellison, who attended Tuskegee and whose book, *Invisible Man,* made him the first African-American author to win the National Book Award in 1953.
7. Currently, the number one producer of African-American aerospace science engineers in the nation.
8. Voting rights secured for African-Americans for the first time following the 1961 Supreme Court *Gomillion v. Lightfoot* decision in favor of Tuskegee professor Charles Gomillion, which led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
9. The only HBCU to house a fully accredited College of Veterinary Medicine established in 1946.
10. The only U.S. college or university to be designated a National Historic Site by the U.S. Congress, in 1974.

The campus has a rich history of development and growth. While Tuskegee rose to national prominence under Washington’s leadership from 1881 to 1915, its following seven presidents have continued the university’s rich historic, academic and societal legacy.

Robert R. Moton (1916-35) helped establish the Veteran's Administration Hospital, created on land donated by Tuskegee Institute, and committed the institute’s support making the Tuskegee Airmen possible. Dr. Frederick D. Patterson (1935-53) oversaw the founding of Tuskegee’s School of Veterinary Medicine, which today graduates nearly 75 percent of black U.S. veterinarians. Dr. Luther Foster (1953-81) led Tuskegee through the transformational years of the Civil Rights Movement. Under the leadership of Dr. Benjamin F. Payton (1981-2010), both the Tuskegee University National Center for Bioethics in Research and Health Care and the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site were launched, and the General Daniel "Chappie" James Center for Aerospace Science and Health Education was constructed. Dr. Lily D. McNair’s appointment as Tuskegee’s eighth president also broke gender barriers as the university’s first female president.

Moton spoke of the “Tuskegee Spirit” —an intangible idea that epitomized the students, faculty and staff, as well as their incentive to “hold their place in the sun” and to be “geared to the tempo of the times.” It is this “spirit” during the past century, and in the context of various social and historical changes, that has transformed Tuskegee into a comprehensive and diverse place of learning, research and outreach whose fundamental purpose is to develop leadership, knowledge, and service for a global society.