The Tuskegee Revolt: Student Activism, Black Power, and the Legacy of Booker T. Washington

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THE TUSKEGEE REVOLT:
STUDENT ACTIVISM, BLACK POWER, AND THE LEGACY OF BOOKER T.
WASHINGTON

by

BRIAN P. JONES

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

The Tuskegee Revolt:
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By
Brian P. Jones

Advisor: Stephen Brier

“The Tuskegee Revolt: Student Activism, Black Power, and the Legacy of Booker T. Washington” is a historical study of a student movement that challenged prevailing educational and political ideas in the nation’s most ideologically important historically black university. The late 1960s student movement at Tuskegee Institute played a significant off-campus role in shaping local, regional, and national social movements and politics. In the process, these Tuskegee students turned their attention back on-campus, and attempted to radically revise their school’s educational framework. Founded by Booker T. Washington in 1881, Tuskegee Institute represents the origin of a particular (and recurring) political-educational-paradigm for black people: deferring aspirations for collective political and social transformation and instead emphasizing individual and personal change. Washington’s legacy has been debated exhaustively, but thus far has been represented as a debate between Washington and external figures (principally W.E.B. Du Bois). The student movement at Tuskegee Institute — which demonstrates a historic pattern of internal debate, dissent, and protest — has never been the subject of scholarly investigation. From the school’s founding in the late 19th century, Tuskegee students consistently questioned and at times openly challenged various aspects of Washington’s paradigm. The most significant student protests at the school erupted in the late 1960s, and
represent one of the most dynamic student movements in the South in these years. That movement provides a new vantage point from which to consider the legacy of Booker T. Washington. This study tells Tuskegee Institute’s history from the student perspective, explains the origins and dynamics of the 1960s movement, and attempts to understand the shifting political and educational ideas on the Tuskegee Institute campus in a historic moment of social conflict and change. For the first time, students at the institution Washington founded will have their say in the debate about his — and their school’s — legacy.
Acknowledgments

I took my first research trip to Tuskegee University in the spring of 2014 with my father. Since that time, I have racked up some debts. Many people have had a hand in helping me bring this phase of this project to completion. First, I need to thank the former Tuskegee students, teachers, and administrators who invited me into their homes and shared their stories with me. I hope this work brings greater awareness to their historic contributions.

I was fortunate to have the guidance of a stellar dissertation committee: Steve Brier, who read drafts of every chapter and generously gave his time and good humor and pushed me to write my own history of Tuskegee Institute; Ruth Wilson Gilmore, who taught me how to read generously and challenged me to think carefully; Ofelia Garcia, who supported this project from the beginning and stretched my thinking about what it means to “read the world”; and Barbara J. Fields, whose wit, wisdom, and precision are a constant source of inspiration.

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If I have omitted any names, please forgive me. That error, and all the rest to follow, is mine alone.
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Introduction

Three days after Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4, 1968, approximately three hundred members of the Alabama National Guard arrived at the gates of Tuskegee Institute, threatening to invade the campus. Their mission was to set free members of the Tuskegee board of trustees who were being held hostage by hundreds of students demanding curricular changes. In this standoff between students and soldiers, Tuskegee Institute joined the geography of global revolt in that incendiary year, 1968. Nearly fifty years later, however, few associate Tuskegee with these events, few remember the dramatic showdown on campus, or the dynamic years of student organizing on and off campus that preceded it. As an institution, Tuskegee has instead always been closely connected in public consciousness with the cautious politics of its founder, the nation’s most famous black educator, Booker T. Washington. After the defeat of Radical Reconstruction, when the prospects for black people to access formal education were bleak, Washington, then only 25, garnered support from wealthy and powerful white people— in the South and in the North — to create a Normal School for Colored Teachers in the town of Tuskegee, Alabama; the school opened its doors in 1881. The curriculum emphasized the morality and dignity of manual labor and deemphasized civil and democratic aspirations. Through the decades, Tuskegee grew in wealth and stature, and the modest teacher-training institute became a university.¹ In the 1960s, however, Tuskegee began to develop a reputation as a center of somewhat less than cautious political thought and action. By 1968, some of the most powerful white people in the state of Alabama openly loathed the school

¹ Tuskegee Institute had graduate programs in the 1960s, formally became “Tuskegee University” in 1984. I therefore use the historically accurate “Institute” designation, except when writing about the school in the present.
and feared that it was teaching “communism.” From the students’ perspective, they were trying to transform Tuskegee Institute from a “White” university to a “Black” one.

This dissertation, *The Tuskegee Revolt: Student Activism, Black Power and the Legacy of Booker T. Washington*, seeks to understand how and why the conflict between students, administrators, and ultimately, the state of Alabama, developed into such an extreme physical confrontation in April of 1968. Based on archival documents and interviews with former Tuskegee students, professors, and administrators, *The Tuskegee Revolt* also analyzes the meaning of this movement in relation to the political and educational legacy of the school’s founder. While some student activists imagined Washington as a forefather of their struggle, others saw their rapidly escalating movement and the ideas it produced as departures from his political-educational-paradigm. Following the murder of one their classmates by a white man off-campus two years earlier, Tuskegee student activists fought for change under the banner of “Black Power.” They insisted on the immediate and full exercise of democratic rights in their city and county. In the pages of the student newspaper, *Campus Digest*, Tuskegee activists interpreted their political work in terms of a new attitude toward blackness and explicitly debated the meaning of the word.

Their changing political views had pedagogical implications as well. Tuskegee students demanded the power to participate in shaping and reshaping their education. They wanted greater emphasis in the curriculum on African and Afro-American history and culture, and less emphasis on the dominant European and Euro-American history and culture. For some Tuskegee students, reconceiving their school’s purpose meant deprioritizing aspirations for individual advancement in white society in favor of larger collective visions for social change; for most students, I argue, making Tuskegee a “Black University” meant fusing the two. The content of their dissent reveals
the contradictory position of Tuskegee students in American society, particularly in the 1960s. As black students within the Jim Crow system, they were second-class citizens. They challenged manifestations of this status – inside and outside of the classroom – and aligned themselves accordingly with anticolonial revolts in Asia and Africa. As upwardly mobile students in a school with strong connections to centers of American wealth and power, however, they were offered significant opportunities for individual advancement. Like their postcolonial counterparts, Tuskegee student activists debated and discussed a wide range of answers to the question: How much has to change for us to be free?

By focusing on student activists The Tuskegee Revolt reveals a familiar and historically significant place – Tuskegee Institute – in a new light. From studying the student perspective, we learn that the campus was a site of greater political and educational contestation and a wider range of political and educational thought than is commonly understood. The Tuskegee Revolt thus contributes to scholarly research on Afro-American education history by showing that Booker T. Washington’s political and educational paradigms were not hegemonic – they were debated, contested, and challenged on the campus that he founded, from the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century. Located almost exactly in the middle of the region known as the “Black Belt” (named after the color of the soil and the folks who worked on it), students at Tuskegee Institute were well placed to make major contributions to both the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. The Tuskegee Revolt builds on historical scholarship that emphasizes the continuity between these movement phases, and recovers the role of Tuskegee students in both. I argue that “Black Power” effectively meant “democracy” in Macon County, Alabama, in the 1960s. Whereas previous scholarship has celebrated civil rights battles and denigrated the student movement, I show that the latter was an essential and important
continuation of the former. Tuskegee students had a significant yet little-appreciated impact off-campus, a process that politicized and radicalized them. Working to transform their world, student activists returned to their classrooms and found them intolerable. In the late 1960s, as the “Black University” reform concept spread across the nation’s historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), some of its first articulations came from Tuskegee. By making the bold choice in 1968 to confront the school’s trustees directly with their vision and demands, Tuskegee students gave us the clearest articulation of a long pattern of student dissent at an institution whose history is foundational for Afro-American history, education, and politics.

Literature

This dissertation is the first scholarly study of the Tuskegee student movement, but it builds most immediately on insights from two other closely related (yet very different) books. The only scholarly narrative of political activism at Tuskegee is Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee by Robert J. Norrell, first published in 1998 and republished with an updated conclusion in 2013.2 In many ways this dissertation takes Reaping as a jumping off point, particularly as a stylistic model of historical narrative. Norrell tells the story of the struggle for voting rights in Macon County in the 1940s and 1950s, led by Tuskegee’s faculty. The star of Reaping the Whirlwind is Tuskegee professor Charles Gomillion, who patiently and systematically collected evidence of disfranchisement, leading to a landmark 1960 US Supreme

Court case, *Gomillion vs. Lightfoot*. Norrell connects the faculty-led voting rights battle with Booker T. Washington’s philosophy. Washington was correct, Norrell argues, to think “that political rights would indeed follow from economic power,” and thus the “Washington philosophy was vindicated, at least in its place of birth.”³ By mid-century, Tuskegee was in fact a center of black prosperity, as Norrell demonstrates. It was home to perhaps the largest concentration of black professionals in the United States at that time. The disposable income of Tuskegee’s black middle class — a resource that was essential to the *Gomillion vs. Lightfoot* US Supreme Court victory — actually developed in ways that had little to do with Washington’s prescriptions, however. Washington emphasized land and small business ownership, but Tuskegee’s black middle class grew on the basis of academic salaries underwritten by northern philanthropy and medical professional salaries at the Veterans Hospital paid by the federal government. Thus, the relationship between Washington and the later political activism of faculty and students is more complex, I argue. Furthermore, although Norrell rightly celebrates the voting rights victory, he does so in a way that downplays the student movement that grew in its wake. Whereas professors like Gomillion were patient and careful, Norrell paints the student activists as impatient and careless. The younger generation “tended to believe that change had come easily,” he writes. “Gomillion knew it had not.”⁴ Norrell focuses on Tuskegee’s faculty and the voting rights struggle, while this dissertation shifts our attention to Tuskegee’s students and their movement for Black Power and for a Black University.

The second book on the Tuskegee movement is by Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leader James Forman. In the aftermath of the murder of Tuskegee student Sammy Younge, Jr. in 1966, Forman wrote *Sammy Younge, Jr.: the first black college student to

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³ Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, x.
⁴ Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 170.
He created the Tuskegee Institute Community Education Program (TICEP), which sent students into the surrounding Black Belt counties to work as literacy tutors, a program which radicalized many participants. Part of the reason the Tuskegee student movement was so dynamic, I argue, has to do with the ways in which faculty and administrators opened the door to its growth in its early phase. Although I have a different approach to some of these questions, my analysis here is made possible by Forman and Norrell’s works. They are both indispensable starting points for this study. They are also, unfortunately, the sum total of books on political activism at Tuskegee.

Tuskegee is not the only campus more or less absent from social movement historiography. We are nearly fifty years past the high point of radical black student uprisings in the United States, yet there has not been a single book-length study of this phenomenon on a southern campus. Recently historians have explored black student organizing on northern, predominantly white campuses, and have conducted regional and even national surveys of black student organizing; no southern campus has been the focus of historical inquiry, however. Four of the most useful of the recent monographs are by Joy Ann Williamson (now Joy Ann Williamson-Lott), Martha Biondi, Ibram Rogers (now Ibram X. Kendi) and Jeffrey Turner. While Williamson and Turner make regional analyses (of black student organizing in Mississippi and in the South, respectively), Biondi and Rogers write on the national scale. In various ways, all of these studies acknowledge the importance of filling in the gaps of scholarly knowledge about the immense contributions of black students to political and educational developments in the second half of the twentieth century.
Radicalizing the Ebony Tower is one of the most important contributions to this effort.6

Whereas previous studies acknowledged the role of black students in the Civil Rights Movement, Williamson was among the first to take black students seriously as students, highlighting the continuity between their contributions to political movements and to educational transformation on eight historically black college campuses in Mississippi. Surveying black student movements “in the heart of Dixie” Williamson describes how students co-opted institutional resources and battled conservative administrators (white and black alike) in order to organize on their campuses. Although they have not received as much attention as activists at predominantly white campuses such as UC Berkeley in the same years, for example, Williamson argues that students carrying out boycotts at Mississippi Vocational and Alcorn State University “were extremely radical, particularly since they attended institutions under the thumb of racist white legislators and trustees, and sanctions, expulsions, and death threats occurred regularly.”7 Williamson also carefully attends to the varying dynamics and responses to activism on private and public campuses. Challenging the “private” power of liberal philanthropists could often be as challenging as bucking the “public” power of segregationist legislators, she argues.8 Her examination of the ways that public and private status simultaneously offered both protections and vulnerabilities to movement activists is useful for thinking about Tuskegee Institute, which is a hybrid of the two.9

Turner’s 2010 book on the southern student movement, Sitting in and Speaking out: Student Movements in the American South, 1960-1970, is unique in its regional focus and the

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7 Williamson, Ebony Tower, 61.
8 Ibid., 112-3.
9 Tuskegee was both public and private from its beginning — relying primarily on philanthropy but also receiving an annual appropriation from the State of Alabama.
fact that it analyzes student movements on both predominantly white and black campuses.\textsuperscript{10} Turner identifies many broad patterns of black student organizing that are resonant with the events at Tuskegee Institute. Despite widespread use of the term “revolution” among student activists in the late 1960s, I find convincing Turner’s contention that the “thrust of southern student activism remained liberal in the sense that the activists pushed primarily for the reform rather than destruction of existing institutions.”\textsuperscript{11} He also suggests that many historically black campuses saw a great deal of unanimity between students and administrators in early years of off-campus Civil Rights activism, but tensions between the two groups tended to grow in the later part of the decade as students increasingly directed their energies at pursuing on-campus reforms. The story of the Tuskegee revolt certainly follows a similar pattern.

I challenge Turner’s assessment of the 1968 building takeover at Howard University (which preceded Tuskegee’s by a few weeks) as “the fullest development to date of a combined student rights and Black Power movement on a black campus.”\textsuperscript{12} The Tuskegee student movement was more deeply connected to the southern roots of Black Power and actually achieved a more impressive list of reforms in the town and on campus. Turner’s account of the events at Howard, however, is based on a single book chapter that is almost fifty years old.\textsuperscript{13} And, like Biondi and Rogers, when it comes to assessing the Tuskegee movement, Turner relies almost exclusively on Norrell and Forman. Essential as these two surveys are, we are overdue for original research on student movements at historically black colleges and universities.


\textsuperscript{11} Turner, Sitting in, 7.

\textsuperscript{12} Turner, Sitting in, 182.

In *The Black Revolution on Campus*, published in 2012, Biondi recovers the social and educational imagination of black students in the late 1960s and shows that their vision for transforming higher education was far more expansive and redistributive than the current nature and status of programs born from their struggles (such as affirmative action and Black Studies) would suggest. She delves into black student organizing in San Francisco, Chicago, and New York and spends two chapters summing up the ways their movement played out in HBCUs. “In contrast to their conservative image,” Biondi writes, “black colleges were important incubators of leadership in the Black student movement throughout the entire decade of the 1960s.” Biondi concludes that the black student movement opened greater space for subaltern discourses in higher education in general, including ethnic studies and women’s studies. Although popular consciousness often only recalls violent repression of white student activists in this period — particularly the murder of four white students by National Guardsmen at Kent State University in 1970 — Biondi tells several stories of state violence on black college campuses: the “full-scale” police assault on Texas Southern University in Houston in 1967; the murder of three students at South Carolina State University in Orangeburg in 1968; a “combined ground and air offensive” against students at North Carolina A&T in Greensboro in 1968; the murder of two students at Jackson State College in Jackson in 1970; and the murder of two students at Southern University in Baton Rouge in 1972. Accordingly, when the Alabama National Guard entered Tuskegee’s campus in April of 1968, it was not an unreasonable assumption that the resulting confrontation might have been fatal. State repression is a crucial part of the story of the Tuskegee revolt.

15 Biondi, *Black Revolution on Campus*, 6. Biondi mentions the Tuskegee student revolt in only one paragraph (pages 39-40), commenting, “Booker T. Washington might have rolled over in his grave if he knew what students were up to at the school he founded.”
16 Ibid: 31-33, 159, 161, and 163-164.
In 2012 — the same year Biondi’s *Black Revolution* appeared — Rogers published the most comprehensive study of the 1960s black student movement to date, *The Black Campus Movement: Black students and the racial reconstitution of higher education, 1965-1972.*

Attempting to summarize and describe a protest movement that covered perhaps one thousand campuses, Rogers’ account is full of fascinating details and insights. Following Jacqueline Dowd Hall’s reframing of the “long civil rights movement,” Rogers describes what he calls the “long Black student movement,” stretching back to the origins of higher education for black people at the end of the nineteenth century, but rising in strength in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s.

For Rogers (as for Hall), this move emphasizes the continuity of 1960s struggles with their earlier (and often, radical) antecedents. This genealogy of black student protest was essential to my own process of tracing the pattern of student activism across many decades at Tuskegee Institute. Rogers’s work also helped me to think about what was at stake in these battles. Biondi and Rogers summarize the goals of the 1960s black student movement as: increasing “Black” consciousness and exposing normalized “whiteness,” upgrading academic offerings and reducing paternalistic micromanagement of student behavior, and expanding student governance and power.

In many instances, they also challenged what Rogers calls “ladder altruism” — the belief that personal advancement was the path to collective advancement. This tension between individual aspirations and collective ones is at the heart of the story of the 1960s Tuskegee student revolt as well.

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19 Biondi, *Black Revolution on Campus*, 142; Rogers, *Black Campus Movement*, 4-5.

20 Rogers, *Black Campus Movement*, 5.
These historical surveys have given us a sense of general patterns, but there has been no original research on the Tuskegee student movement. Biondi, Rogers, and Turner all acknowledge Tuskegee student activism in the 1960s, but their assessments are based on articles in The New York Times (Biondi), or on Norrell and Forman (Rogers and Turner). Tuskegee’s student movement is worth a closer look not only to correct this elision, but because of the school’s role in black history. Tuskegee Institute has been a lightening rod for controversy ever since its founding, and throughout the twentieth century it was a symbol of the political and educational horizons of Afro-Americans. As both a self-described model for black education nationally and a political “answer” to the so-called “Negro question” the school that Washington built served as a kind of Capitol of Black America for much of the twentieth century. Understanding the relationship between political activism and educational paradigms at Tuskegee is essential, and is not possible without looking more closely at — and, to some extent, rewriting — its institutional history.

My interest in Tuskegee’s 1960s student movement actually grew out of my reading of the literature on the school’s origins. Perhaps more than any other single volume, James D. Anderson’s masterful Education of Blacks in the South: 1860-1935, is directly responsible for this study.21 Anderson presents overwhelming evidence that the “Hampton-Tuskegee” model of schooling “represented the ideological antithesis of the educational and social movement begun by ex-slaves.”22 Whereas the freed people had self-organized schools from their own meager resources and used them to promote political literacy and preparation for political and economic action, the northern philanthropists who created the Hampton Institute (and later backed the

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22 Ibid., 50.
Tuskegee Institute) intended to train black people to accept subordinate roles in southern economic and social life. From the founding of both institutions into the late 1920s, neither Hampton nor Tuskegee were actual trade schools, “nor academic schools worthy of the name,” Anderson writes, “but schools that attempted to train a corps of teachers with a particular social philosophy relevant to the political and economic reconstruction of the South.”

Samuel Armstrong, the founder of the Hampton Institute (and Washington’s mentor) stated the aim: “Let us make the teachers and we will make the people.” Although Anderson’s work focuses on the interests and motives of northern philanthropists, he also points out the resistance of students and parents within the “industrial” model. His description of the Hampton student strike in 1927 led me to search for evidence of similar actions at Tuskegee. Once I asked the question, I began seeing evidence of the long Tuskegee student movement sprinkled like breadcrumbs throughout the literature on Booker T. Washington. That evidence — including a Tuskegee student strike in 1903 — is discussed in detail in the first chapter of this dissertation.

The legacy of Booker T. Washington remains a topic of no small importance to scholars and commentators in the twenty-first century. While Washington’s critics are legion, Michael R. West’s recent book, a critical reassessment of Washington’s 1903 autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, represents a novel attempt to engage with Washington’s intellectual legacy.

Washington, according to West, is not exactly the inventor, but is the most famous proponent of

24 Ibid., 62.
a “race relations” theory of racism. This theory suggests that racism is better understood as a problem of “relations” between people, and that black people’s self-improvement efforts would result in better “relations” with white people. Shifting the burden of blame for inequality onto black people is a long pattern in American thought. By reframing an issue of democracy and inequality as a matter of “relations” (and avoiding anything that would lead to “bad relations”), West argues that Washington followed in that poisoned tradition. And far from laying a foundation for later civil rights victories, West argues that it was precisely Washington’s “race relations” framework that Dr. King and his comrades had to overthrow. All over the South, activists who grew bolder in challenging segregation laws had to answer the charge that it was they who were causing problems by disrupting “good relations” between the races.

A new trend in historiography shifts away from critique and attempts to exonerate Washington. The two-volume biography by Louis Harlan still represents the most well rounded assessment of Washington’s career to date, but salient among the new vindicationist literature is Norrell’s 2009 biography, Up From History: The Life of Booker T. Washington, in which he argues that Washington’s choices are explained by the political constraints of his era. If Washington advocated against open political agitation, Norrell shows that he carried on extensive civil rights advocacy behind closed doors — an approach I discuss further in the chapter one below. While West highlights Washington’s philosophical idealism, Norrell

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28 West, Education, 18.


emphasizes his philosophical materialism. When black people own banks, businesses, and are “manufacturing what the white man needs,” Washington wrote, “there will be no more lynchings in the South than in the North.”

To the extent that Washington preached political abstention, Norrell believes that he more or less navigated the only course possible. Emphasizing the constant threat of political danger surrounding Tuskegee and physical danger surrounding Washington personally (“A Pinkerton guard was with him at all times…”), Norrell’s account builds sympathy with Washington’s precarious position, but is less compelling as an explanation for his career. In Norrell’s text, Washington is a less powerful figure than many other educators of lesser stature around him, and it is their choices that constrain him. But arguably the opposite is true — Washington’s choices were, of course, constrained, but in turn helped to shape the broader political landscape in which all other black educators operated. As the world shifted, Washington did, too, in certain ways. Beginning in 1912, Norrell notes, he became more explicit and assertive about the need for civil and political rights for black people, a stance he maintained until his death in 1915.

This study is also deeply indebted to the work of the late historian Manning Marable. Marable’s scholarly writing about Washington and Tuskegee are all the more perceptive because of his intimate connections to the subjects. Marable’s parents grew up in Macon County, and he taught briefly at Tuskegee Institute in the 1970s. Two book chapters and two articles in particular have provided crucial guidance for thinking about Black Power in Tuskegee and the legacy of Booker T. Washington. In the two articles (both published in 1977, while he was still teaching at Tuskegee Institute) Marable catalogued the struggles over the meaning of Tuskegee Institute and

32 Quoted in Norrell, Up from History, 158.
33 Ibid., 333.
34 Ibid., 407.
the efforts of black elites in Macon County to follow in Washington’s footsteps after his death in 1915. In “Tuskegee Institute in the 1920s” Marable illustrated the contradictions of an institution clinging to nineteenth-century cultural and intellectual ideals in an era of growing militancy and cultural renaissance among black people.\textsuperscript{35} In a second article, “Tuskegee and the Politics of Illusion in the New South,” Marable argues that these contradictions came to a head in the 1970s because black people captured political office, but not genuine economic power. “Without an independent political party,” he wrote, “and devoid of a critical political perspective, the black petit bourgeoisie of Tuskegee finds itself in a position of municipal power which increasingly means very little.”\textsuperscript{36} Marable concludes by drawing a parallel between the economic decline of Tuskegee under “Black Power” and the bitter post-colonial legacy of African independence. As discussed in chapters four and five below, this analogy played a particularly significant role in the Tuskegee student movement.

Marable’s also brought his research on Washington and the Tuskegee Institute to bear on his analysis of the broad patterns of black political history and struggle. In two book chapters, from \textit{Black Leadership} and from \textit{How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy, and Society}, Marable’s class-conscious approach led him to pointed critiques of the efforts of the black elite to cultivate and develop political strategies rooted in their entrepreneurial aspirations.\textsuperscript{37} Whether or not their businesses succeed, the ultimate goal of political liberation of black people is destined to fail along these lines, he argued, because the

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\textsuperscript{36} Manning Marable, “Tuskegee and the Politics of Illusion in the New South,” \textit{The Black Scholar} 8, no. 7 (1977), 21.
\end{flushright}
imperatives of the market and of profit making are incompatible with genuine human freedom. Marable’s clarity in analyzing competing political and class tendencies in black thought has been an essential guide for this project.

That approach is particularly useful here because of the class nature of the story’s main characters. *The Tuskegee Revolt* is a narrative of the actions of a particular class – the black middle class. I use the term “middle class” to mean people who are neither the wage laborers who work as directed nor the owners of capital who set labor in motion, but are between the two. The middle class is composed of people who stand between capital and labor and share elements from both groups – small business owners, professionals, and managers who direct the labor of others, for example. In this sense, “middle class” is neither a subjective designation, nor a statement of absolute living standard, nor a moral approbation, but a way to label a very real and particular relationship to production and to society. In addition to Marable’s work, recent scholarship by N. B. D. Connolly and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor has helped me think about the unique attributes of the black middle class. As Kevin Gaines puts it, the black middle class has a “contradictory position as both an aspiring social class and a racially subordinate caste denied all political rights and protections, struggling to define themselves within a society founded on white dominance.” It is the concentration of black middle class people in Tuskegee, I argue, that explains the unique nature of the civil rights activism as it emerged there, led, in the first instance, by professors. When student activists came to the fore in the 1960s, they were both

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38 And because, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes, capitalism itself has “never not been racial.” Racism, or “group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” has been essential to its functioning from the beginning. See “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence.” In Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin, eds., *Futures of Black Radicalism* (New York: Verso, 2017).


propelled by the confidence, resources, and actions of their elders, and, at the same time, had to overcome the limitations of their cautious outlooks and methods.

Tuskegee’s middle class community was also uniquely placed geographically – in the middle of the Black Belt – and so Tuskegee student activists cut their teeth in the context of a dangerous battle for democracy there. Without a doubt the boldest organization working in the Black Belt was the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Through their experiences in the Deep South, SNCC activists radicalized quickly over the course of the decade. At least three Tuskegee students — Sammy Younge, Gwen Patton, and George Ware — played a leading role in SNCC’s history. Several important historical studies helped me contextualize the 1960s Tuskegee student movement. Howard Zinn and Clayborne Carson’s books remain important starting points for understanding SNCC’s origins in the sit-ins of 1960 and its political trajectory.41 SNCC leaders Stokely Carmichael and James Forman both spent considerable amounts of time in and around Tuskegee in those years, and their respective memoirs were consulted for this study.42 While these male figures captured many of the headlines, women were often playing less publicly acknowledged leadership roles in SNCC, as the personal accounts collected in a volume edited by Faith Holsaert, et al. attest.43 In a new book, Ashley Farmer develops a political genealogy of black radical women in the Black Power era — including SNCC — noting the ways in which they not only challenged sexism and patriarchy in black radical movements, but also theorized their oppression and expanded the meaning of radical

black politics over many decades.\textsuperscript{44} Gwen Patton’s long activist career — beginning at Tuskegee — is rightfully a prominent feature in both texts, a signal that her life and work is being taken seriously by a new generation of scholars.\textsuperscript{45}

Patton is one of the figures whose story highlights the connection between southern student activism and the Black Power movement. Patton is one of many Tuskegee students who stepped off-campus to get involved in political struggles in the wider Black Belt. Some students, for example, who began working in the adjacent rural counties as literacy tutors ended up campaigning for the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), the independent political party created by SNCC (and whose symbol was a black panther) to challenge the Democratic Party in the 1966 elections. Hasan Kwame Jeffries’s account of this electoral effort provided useful background for understanding the southern roots of Black Power.\textsuperscript{46} At the very end of 1965, two activists involved in the LCFO, Sammy Younge, Jr. and Stokely Carmichael, discussed bringing that model of independent political organizing to Macon County. That did not exactly come to pass, but ironically it was Younge’s murder just a week later that set Tuskegee students on a path to a different electoral project: campaigning to successfully propel to office the first black sheriff elected in the South since Reconstruction — Lucius Amerson — an event that reverberated nationwide. Contemporary readers will be forgiven for not recalling that, in the late 1960s, many observers looked at Tuskegee as a center of Black Power. We know that this


\textsuperscript{45} Patton shared with me one chapter of her memoir. Her family told me that she completed revising the manuscript for publication just before she died.

was so in part because when two leading figures in the movement — SNCC activists Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture) and former Tuskegee professor Charles Hamilton — sat down to co-author a definitive book on the subject, they devoted an entire chapter to this prospect.47 “Tuskegee, Alabama, could be the model of Black Power,” Carmichael and Hamilton wrote in 1967. “It could be the place where black people have amassed political power and used that power effectively.”48

The story of the Black Power era is both local and global. The explosive social movements in North America in these years were intimately connected to others in Asia, Latin America, and particularly, Africa. The powerful currents of anti-colonial African thought and action influenced Tuskegee students through a variety of means, not the least of which were African students at Tuskegee Institute, who introduced their classmates to the works of Frantz Fanon, Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah, and others. The concept of colonialism, for many Tuskegee student activists, was a compelling model for how to think about the situation facing black people in the United States. This tendency potentially represented a remarkable reversal of Tuskegee’s relationship to the world, given its historic collaborations with European colonialism, and the centrality of its relationship with the U.S. military to its identity at midcentury.49 As Manning Marable observed, however, many activists at the time read Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* but missed the part where he challenged the idea that African colonialism is a useful analogy for the problem of anti-black racism in the United States.50 Still, in the time and place in

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48 Ibid., 114.
question here — Macon County, Alabama in the late 1960s — the idea that black folks represented a colonized people held politically hostage by a colonizing white minority, resonated. Furthermore, student activists drew strength from the process of making closer personal and political connections with leading figures in the African anti colonial movements. They also drew heat from the association — although almost no Tuskegee student activists identified with the socialist movement to the extent that anti-colonial leaders abroad did — segregationists were all the more quick to report as “communist” any and all activism on and off of Tuskegee’s campus.51

Reading works by Marable, Robert Allen, Tony Cliff, Jack Bloom and Neil Davidson and Sónia Vaz Borges, I began thinking about yet another connection between the local and the global.52 Nearly all of the worldwide anti colonial leadership — from Amilcar Cabral and Ho Chi Minh to Gwen Patton and Sammy Younge — shared a particular location in the social hierarchy. They were not themselves the wretched of the earth; rather, they were the college set. They were well educated and their schooling was usually Eurocentric and colonial — they were the middle class of the Third World. Speaking perhaps to the danger of schooling in any form, these revolutionaries across the globe shared the dual identity of membership in an oppressed category and access to a resource — schooling — reserved for an upwardly mobile elite.53 Gwen Patton believed that Sammy Younge’s experience as a student in an elite New England boarding

51 Mary Dudziak writes about the ways in which Cold War anticommunism opened opportunities for democratic reform in the United States and at the same time, limited their scope, in Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).
school may have actually radicalized him.\textsuperscript{54} If true, it is unlikely, however, that the leadership of that school, Cornwall Academy, intended for Younge’s education there to have that effect.

Educational leaders have their own agendas when they organize schooling, and yet, the act of gathering students together regularly under the auspices of learning runs the risk that other agendas will take root. Schooling \textit{can} be a dangerous enterprise. My approach to the study of student activism at Tuskegee is informed by scholarship in the field of education that emphasizes the unique nature of schools as sites of political contestation and the potential for schools to be socially dangerous. The process of organizing among Tuskegee students was also an intellectual process, following Paolo Freire’s concept of literacy as a means of “reading the world.”\textsuperscript{55} Some of the ways Tuskegee student activists wanted to “read the world” were sharply at odds with the political and educational intentions of their professors and administrators.\textsuperscript{56} Looking at students’ intellectual processes, we see that the meaning of Tuskegee and the legacy of Booker T. Washington cannot be reduced to statements by Washington or by the school’s official leadership. Students, too, attempted to shape the institution, to varying degrees of success throughout its history. During Washington’s era as director, the volume of petitions, letters of dissent, student protests, and extensive disciplinary counter-measures is a record that demonstrates clearly that the Founder’s views did not necessarily represent a consensus on campus.

This historic pattern of internal contestation is not without limitations, however. The essential idea that Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis argue in their landmark 1976 text

\textsuperscript{56} Many of the practices that emerged in Tuskegee classrooms in the 1960s might be described today as “critical literacy.” See, for example: Ira Shor, “What is critical literacy?” \textit{Journal for Pedagogy, Pluralism & Practice} 4, no. 1 (1999): 1-26.
Schooling in Capitalist America is that even the most progressive schools essentially reproduce the social relations of capitalism.57 Many scholars since then have dismissed a straw-man version of this work as “deterministic,” arguing that it leaves no room for resistance and the agency of students. Bowles and Gintis’ actual argument, however, was far more dynamic — emphasizing schools as sites of conflict, while explaining that there were limits to how that conflict could be resolved on this side of capitalism.58 I find useful their observation that even the most repressive educational institutions, in the process of attempting to train conformists, also regularly produce “rebels and radicals.”59 Jean Anyon contributed to both of these strands of educational research — the reproductive work of schools and the potential for social contention to emerge within them. In her pathbreaking early studies, she showed how schools are specifically designed to train different classes of the population — work that very much resonates with the explicit political aims of the early trustees of “industrial education,” and then shifted in her later research to examine schools as potential centers of organizing among teachers, parents, and students seeking broader social change.60 Anyon’s scholarship has helped me think about how these dynamics existed side-by-side at Tuskegee.

This study also engages with literature on the unique role of literacy in Afro-American history. Black people have, perhaps more than any other group in this country, equated learning

59 Bowles and Gintis, Schooling, 29.
with liberation and pursued it intensively despite innumerable obstacles. This is a long and unmistakable pattern — a self-organized movement for learning and liberation, not black education as charity bequeathed by benevolent school marms and philanthropists — and is evident in the works of Booker T. Washington, Carter G. Woodson, W.E.B. DuBois, Herbert Gutman, Emilie Siddle Walker, Charles Payne and Carol Strickland, Heather Williams, Adam Fairclough and Ronald Butchart, among others. An emerging literature explores the lives of women who (often) led these educational movements. With each attempt, black people faced new challenges; the best path forward was not always clear, and there were frequently sharp disagreements and debates, not just between black people and their allies and/or enemies, but among black people.

In the last great upsurge of black people’s educational and political struggles — in the 1960s and 1970s — different tendencies of thought and action crystallized and tried to realize their respective visions. I have found useful typologies of these various political/educational schools of thought in books by Daniel Perlstein, Manning Marable, and Russell Rickford. Their

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studies show that there is not a singular “black” political or educational philosophy, but rather an array of sometimes complementary and sometimes contradictory responses to the conditions of anti-black racism in the United States. Perhaps the clearest commonality is that black educational movements have been, on the whole, progressive — politically and educationally committed to enlarging prospects for freedom, democracy, and equality. In general, when black-led movements for progressive social change have been thwarted, so too have their educational movements been thrown backwards. Black Studies in higher education, simultaneously an enduring and tenuous institutional legacy of the Black Power era, bears the scars of this process of social ebb and flow. I have tried to take these lessons to heart in the process of exploring the meaning of the “Black University” concept as it unfolded at Tuskegee in the late 1960s.

The Tuskegee student movement defies easy political categorization. Elements of Black Nationalism and Cultural Nationalism mixed frequently with fairly straightforward liberal reformism. Off-campus, “Black Power” essentially meant democracy in the Black Belt, I argue. On-campus, it was effectively a fusion of different trends and impulses. Taken together, however, the reforms proposed by students amounted to a revision of Tuskegee’s prevailing political-educational-paradigm. In the prevailing mid-century paradigm, Tuskegee Institute’s administrators sought to prepare students to take roles in the technocratic management of the machine- and increasingly, computer-age society, and to assume positions as leaders who could ensure a smooth and thoughtful transition from Jim Crow segregation to the integration of black

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65 I agree with Michael R. West that the term “conservative” doesn’t accurately capture the politics of Booker T. Washington, for example. Jack Daugherty also grapples with what unites apparently disparate educational movements led by black people in More than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
people into the American body politic.\textsuperscript{68} The new “Black” consciousness encouraged a far more assertive stance, less concerned with managing the reactions of white people, and more oriented on targeting the reigns of power. Black students insisted that their “Black” universities should share this new orientation.

Not every demand to upgrade academic offerings required such a revision of the underlying paradigm, however. Many calls for improving the quality of teaching, of textbooks, and of physical plant and infrastructure were well within the universities’ accepted self-conceptions. Therein lied the tension in the Tuskegee student demands. On the one hand, these students demanded a university fully equipped to help them compete in white society, and on the other hand, they demanded a new university, more oriented to collective social change than to the advancement of individual careers within the white-dominated world. Rather than ask their classmates to reject personal aspirations altogether, Tuskegee student activists organized collective actions around them. The explosive power of the student movement at Tuskegee in 1968 is explained in part by the ability of organizers to fuse these disparate impulses under the same banner: Black Power.

Sources and Methods

This study is based on interviews with twenty people: fifteen former Tuskegee students (Lena Agnew, Lucenia Dunn, George Geddis, Warren Hamilton, Chester Higgins, Jr., Ronald Hill, Caroline Hilton, Robert Jones, Cozetta Lamore, George Paris, Wendell Paris, Gwendolyn Patton, Arthur Pfister, Melvin Todd, and Michael Wright); two former Tuskegee administrators

\textsuperscript{68} See chapter 3 and Jessie P. Guzman, ed., \textit{The New South and Higher Education: What Are the Implications for Higher Education of the Changing Socio-Economic Conditions of the South?: A Symposium and Ceremonies Held in Connection with the Inauguration of Luther Hilton Foster Fourth President of Tuskegee Inst.} (Tuskegee: Tuskegee Institute, 1954).
(Bertrand Phillips and Richard Wasserstrom); one former Tuskegee professor (Maggie Magee); and two people who grew up in the town of Tuskegee (Kathleen Cleaver and Guy Trammel).

The interviews were conducted over three years — from 2015 to 2017. These participants were recruited through personal networks, internet and social media searches, and email exchanges. The interviews were open-ended, and mostly took place in person (often in respondents’ homes) although a few were done over the phone. My line of questioning generally began with how each person arrived at Tuskegee’s campus in the 1960s, their impressions of the campus and the town, their eventual involvement in the movement (to varying degrees and in different ways), graduation (or, in some cases, expulsion) and life after Tuskegee. Their trajectories at Tuskegee fall roughly into two temporal phases of activism: among the pre-1967 group are Gwen Patton, George and Wendell Paris, and Melvin Todd; whereas the 1967-1968 story features students such as Michael Wright, George Geddis, and Caroline Hilton more prominently. I tried to resist the impulse to gather “facts” from these interviews, but rather, to let each participant tell his/her story in their own way. I believe, as Alessandro Portelli argues, that oral historians should attend to the ways in which “faulty” memory enriches the historical record, revealing deeper levels of meaning for the memories in question.69

To provide but one small example already apparent before the interviews had been completed and before even the completed ones had been transcribed: the issue of who called out the Alabama National Guard in April of 1968 is revealing. Several participants recalled that the “last act on Earth” of Lurleen Wallace (wife of George, elected Governor in his stead in 1967 as his proxy when his term limits had expired; she died of cancer one year later) was to call out the National Guard on the Tuskegee students. However, in his memoir, Macon County sheriff

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Lucius Amerson, elected by the student activists, takes credit for calling out the National Guard. While people tend to remember that it was the white segregationist governor who was responsible (and ultimately, of course, she was the only one with jurisdiction to mobilize those troops and must have approved it), it may actually have been the newly elected black county sheriff who first made the call. Given the way white people tended to line up in opposition to black people’s demands in this story, participants may have been more likely to recall that the student movement was placed in mortal danger by an authority figure on the other side of the color line.

Two patterns were emerged in the interviews: first, the intense loyalty the participants feel towards Tuskegee University and the profound sense of loss from its stature in the 1960s to today; and second, the importance of understanding the class nature of the town of Tuskegee. Again and again, in their own ways, interviewees returned to either or both themes. Although the administration had tried to kick him out of school many times, Michael Wright told me that Tuskegee’s campus was “hallowed ground.” The former students describe Tuskegee as a kind of middle-class utopia, very much wrapped up in the ideals of upward mobility and acquiring the trappings of middle-class American life. Most students were middle class, themselves children of college-educated black people. Gwen Patton stressed, repeatedly, the importance of understanding “the class within the caste” — the middle-class black community in which she was rooted. Most of the activists were from a similar echelon, themselves the children of college-educated professionals. There were also some poorer students, the first to go to college, and some arrived without any money in their pockets. My father, Robert Jones, was the type of student who was unprepared for college-level work and found, in Tuskegee, sincere teachers.

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70 Lucius D. Amerson, Great courage : the autobiography of the first Black sheriff elected in the South since Reconstruction (Fort Washington: What’s Your Story, 2004).
who “bent over backwards” to meet his educational needs and make sure that he graduated.
Indigent students would (in a tradition that goes back to Washington’s day) be put to work on campus, and would often graduate in five or six years, instead of four.

The story presented here is also based on documents related to the Tuskegee student movement from three Alabama archives: The Tuskegee University Archives in Tuskegee; the Alabama Department of Archives and History in Montgomery; and the Gwendolyn Patton Collection in the Trenholm State Technical College Archives (also in Montgomery). These data include hundreds of pages from three newspapers: The Campus Digest, The Southern Courier, and The Tuskegee News.

The Campus Digest, written and edited by students, provides a window into prevailing attitudes on Tuskegee’s campus in the 1960s. I read hundreds of Digest pages dating from 1960 to 1970, although the bulk of my analysis is focused on articles from 1965 to 1969. I do not presume that any one article represents the view of all students. Rather, the pieces give a sense of the general range of opinion and debate on various issues on campus and beyond. There are, in fact, explicit debates in these pages about the extent to which the ideas and actions of the most politicized students have been embraced by the campus at large. Furthermore, the reported numbers from student actions and protests help to gauge the mood. At some points, it is clear that student activists are operating in relative isolation. At other points, nearly the entire campus empties to respond to a call to protest. The newspaper also contains advertisements from Fortune 500 companies aggressively (and quite creatively) trying to recruit Tuskegee graduates. Whereas today’s undergraduate students struggle to find jobs that will allow them to pay back mountains of college debt, the nature and stature of these firms and the intensity of their recruitment efforts help to paint a picture of a political and economic moment that is very different from our own.
The Southern Courier was a newspaper of the southern Civil Rights Movement. It is an aesthetically gorgeous newspaper, written and edited by activist/reporters, aiming to capture both the movement and the texture of everyday life of black people in the South. Flipping through its pages, it is truly remarkable how frequently they contain news, reports, and photographs about goings on at Tuskegee Institute. Reading this newspaper convinced me that Tuskegee was a center of the southern student movement. I read many hundreds of Courier articles spanning the years 1965 to 1968. In many cases, the reporting in these pages provides useful corroboration of and additional details about stories contained in The Campus Digest or gathered from participant interviews.

The Tuskegee News is a local newspaper from the town of Tuskegee. I read hundreds of its pages from 1965 to 1970. It was owned and operated entirely by white people and reflects the changing consensus among them in those years. From the mid-1960s onwards it became a bi-racial newspaper that reported in hopeful tones about the town’s political and economic prospects and helped to project Tuskegee’s image as a “model city.” The Tuskegee News treated Tuskegee Institute with reverence and respect, frequently celebrating achievements of its faculty and students. Like the governor, the editorial board supported large annual increases in the state budget for education and the expansion of school facilities for black and white students. And, like the governor, the paper staunchly opposed the student movement at Tuskegee, frequently singling out Stokely Carmichael as the source of the problem. As the student movement gained force, The Tuskegee News reflected the hope among Tuskegee’s white establishment that the administration would be able to reassert control in the interest of maintaining good “race relations.”
Another large amount of data comes from the papers of students and professors, including students Michael Wright, Sammy Younge, Chester Higgins and professor Erik Krystall. These names were identified through my reading of *The Campus Digest* and other sources, and they — unlike many other people identified — happened to have papers collected in Tuskegee’s archives. Michael Wright’s papers contain court documents and affidavits in relation to the University’s attempt to kick him out of school (Wright played a central role in taking the board of trustees hostage in 1968). Wright represents the radical wing of the student movement at Tuskegee. His papers also contain some of his political writings for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), including articles he wrote on the political economy of racism in the United States and some sketches of the history of the black freedom struggle. Sammy Younge’s papers, gathered posthumously after his murder in 1966, include autopsy reports and photographs, images of student protests of his murder and of the acquittal of the man who murdered him, and related newspaper clippings from around the United States. Erik Krystall was a professor at Tuskegee who co-authored many sociological studies of changing attitudes and opinions about racism, Black Power, segregation, etc. during the 1960s. These were mostly quantitative studies based on surveys conducted by Krystall’s students. They provide some evidence about prevailing attitudes among white people and black people in the town and on campus at different moments in the decade. Krystall’s papers also happen to include an 18-page sketch of the “Black University Concept” vision statement for Tuskegee, drafted by student activists and presented to the trustees being held hostage in April of 1968.

As the 1968 crisis played out, one student decided to record the events for posterity. Chester Higgins, Jr. (who later became a world-famous photographer) collected every leaflet, letter, memo, manifesto and other document produced by Tuskegee students, faculty and
administrators in the heat of the 1968 struggle. Higgins received assistance from a professor and the approval of the administration for the final product, which consists of typed versions of all of these documents, running to 166 pages. Tuskegee Institute published it as Student Unrest, Tuskegee Institute: A Chronology. Student Unrest is invaluable as a source of text from all parties involved in the 1968 conflict and as an authoritative timeline of events. It is, perhaps, a testament to the historical significance of the events in question that two people – Higgins and Forman – had the impulse to create an archive of them.

My aim is to understand these dramatic events not only from the grassroots perspective, but also “from above,” using archival sources to uncover the opinions and perspectives of trustees, the administration, and the governors of Alabama.71 Towards this end I was able to interview two former Tuskegee administrators: Bertrand Phillips and Richard Wasserstrom. The papers of Tuskegee president Luther Foster were unorganized and at the time of writing were unavailable. I have, however, read several letters, speeches, and memos by Foster, including his annual reports to the alumni from 1968 through 1970, and his remarks at a Tuskegee symposium, published in 1954, on the role of Tuskegee in the context of the economic changes taking place in the South. Foster’s approach to the student movement is also captured in his reports to the Board of Trustees. I read through a complete set of minutes from the meetings of that board from 1965 through 1970. The twenty-three trustees represented a powerful and well-connected liberal elite. Eighteen were white and five were black (only two were women). Six were businessmen, six were public officials, three were bankers, one was a major general in the US Army, and the rest were lawyers and philanthropists. The trustees alternated their biannual meetings between

71 I am mindful of Brian Kelly’s admonition that telling history from the “bottom up” requires understanding what people at the bottom were up against – usually, people on “top”? See the introduction to his book Race, Class, and Power in the Alabama Coalfields, 1908-21 (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001).
Tuskegee’s campus and the executive suites of Chase Bank in Manhattan. These minutes capture their collective responses to the student movement’s demands and their proposals for growing and developing Tuskegee Institute in the context of the political crisis of the late 1960s. One way that HBCU history is unique is the way in which administrators worked both to contain student protests and to protect them. Tuskegee students were threatened by armed forces three times – in 1923 by the Klan and in 1940 and 1968 by state troopers. All three times Tuskegee administrators put themselves between the invaders and the students, and all three times they were able to avoid bloodshed.\textsuperscript{72}

In the late 1960s, the state of Alabama threatened Tuskegee with guns and with money. Another large section of the data set (roughly 300 documents) comes from the papers of Alabama Governors George and Lurleen Wallace. This set contains letters, speeches, and other writings about Alabama’s economy, the role of education in general and about Tuskegee Institute in particular. George Wallace’s correspondence reveals the extent to which he saw the school as a center of radical organizing and was committed to withdrawing the state’s financial support from it. The data I found in Wallace’s files about the economic changes taking place in the state are dramatic — Alabama’s rapid industrialization is essential to understanding both the room for maneuver for civil rights activists and the governor’s expansive education agenda.\textsuperscript{73} Also included are several reports from the Commission to Preserve the Peace, a body set up by the state legislature to investigate radical organizers and organizations in the state of Alabama. Their

\textsuperscript{72} On the 1923 and 1940 invasions, see chapter 2. On the 1968 events, see chapter 6.
\textsuperscript{73} In our era of austerity, it is difficult to appreciate how arch-reactionaries like Wallace could fight for regular double-digit increases in education funding and teacher salaries. The distance between then and now is usefully delineated in Michael Fabricant and Stephen Brier, \textit{Austerity blues: Fighting for the soul of public higher education} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).
reports are hysterically anti-Communist and often wildly speculative, but provide a sense of the
social danger political elites felt student organizers posed, especially from Tuskegee’s campus.

I was fortunate to have SNCC veteran and former Tuskegee student government
president Dr. Gwendolyn Patton guide me through her own papers, stored at Trenholm State
Technical College in Montgomery. I reviewed hundreds of documents from the collection, which
include letters, speeches and writings tracing her activist trajectory from Tuskegee in the mid-
1960s (she helped to found the Tuskegee Institute Advancement League — TIAL — the student
activist wing of the civil rights movement at Tuskegee) to a veritable tour of the most radical
wing of the Black Power movement through the late 1960s and early 1970s — including the
Lowndes County Black Panther Party, the Black Panther Party initiated by Huey Newton and
Bobby Seale years later, the Revolutionary Union Movement in Detroit, and more. Patton claims
to have organized the first Black Power conference in the United States — at Tuskegee Institute
in February of 1967. She never actually made it to the conference, though, as she was badly
injured in a mysterious car accident en route. For the rest of her life, one of her legs was shorter
than the other. She lectured for a time at Brooklyn College, but eventually returned to Alabama
and remained a sought after public speaker on civil rights, Black Power, and the role of women
in activism. Patton’s archive contains several lengthy speeches and articles from the 1970s
assessing the prospects for broad social change — even socialism — and ideas about how
schooling, women’s rights, and the fight against racism fit into those perspectives. Patton is
probably the best-known activist to emerge from Tuskegee in the 1960s. When she died in the
spring of 2016, I attended her funeral, spent time with her family and friends in Montgomery,
and became further convinced that Patton deserves to be the object of her own study.
Chapters

The six main chapters of this dissertation are organized chronologically in two parts. In order to explore the connection between the 1960s student movement and the legacy of Washington, it was necessary to write a history of Tuskegee Institute. Part one analyzes eighty years of Tuskegee’s history, from its origins in 1881 to 1960. Part two examines events on campus during only eight years – from 1960 to 1968. After the first two, subsequent chapters cover smaller and smaller amounts of time. The events described in the final chapter take place during only one year: 1968. In this way, I emphasize telling the story of the late 1960s student movement, while also giving a sense of its origins in and continuity with much earlier events.

Part one is about the contradictions of Tuskegee’s long history, the compromises and political and educational choices that made its growth possible over the course of eight decades, and recurring controversy related to those choices. The first two chapters cover the first seventy years of the school’s existence, not as a comprehensive history, but focusing on the pattern of internal conflict on campus, and the pressures that altered the institution’s guiding political and educational paradigms throughout. My writing of this institutional history is based primarily on secondary sources and represents my assessment of the existing literature on Washington and Tuskegee. Chapter one (1881-1915) reframes the DuBois/Washington debate, emphasizing the extent to which Washington’s political-educational paradigm was the subject of internal debate on Tuskegee’s campus, specifically demonstrated by the pattern of student dissent. This reframing complicates Washington’s legacy, revealing the fact that many people who shared his background (poor, southern, black people in the post-Reconstruction U.S. South) had competing visions and aspirations for Tuskegee Institute – his political and pedagogical choices, in other words, were not the only ones possible or imaginable. The second chapter (1916-1950) picks up
the story after Washington’s death. I show how the political economy of Tuskegee Institute changed considerably. Following the regional decline in agriculture, Tuskegee’s leadership shifted away from Washington’s vision of promoting small businesses and land ownership. Rather, Tuskegee Institute’s leadership aligned itself increasingly with the federal government – particularly with the U.S. military. This relationship pulled the campus and its students into the contradictions of imperial policy and segregation in the armed forces, while at the same time opening up new career opportunities for graduates. In the third chapter (1950-1960), as I begin weaving my research into the narrative, I show that the prosperity of Tuskegee’s midcentury black middle class was based on academic salaries from northern philanthropy (for professors) and wages paid by the federal government (for medical professionals at the Veterans Hospital). I argue that as this class began to break with Washington’s cautious political strategy and push for voting rights, they opened the door to the student movement.

In part two, I slow the narrative down, in order to “zoom in” on the actions of students in just an eight-year period. The fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters are based on my original research on the 1960s Tuskegee student movement. In the fourth chapter (1960-1965) I “set the scene” of Tuskegee at midcentury, describing the middle-class students, their families, and the community. I proceed to recover the role of Tuskegee students in the southern Civil Rights movement, showing that their organizing efforts had a much wider influence than is thus far revealed in the literature. Tuskegee Institute was truly an organizational and intellectual center of the southern student movement, and Tuskegee students were instrumental in the fight for democracy in the surrounding Black Belt counties. In the fifth chapter (1966-1967), I explain the radicalization of the student movement and how Tuskegee came to be a national model of Black Power. After Tuskegee student Sammy Younge, Jr. was murdered in 1966 in an off-campus dispute over a
segregated restroom, his classmates turned their attention back to their school and decided that it, too, must change. Tuskegee students were among the first to publish systematic critiques of HBCUs and to imagine what a “Black University” might look like. In the sixth chapter (1968), I narrate the explosive events of 1968, including the days when students held the trustees hostage for two days until the Alabama National Guard arrived, threatening to invade the campus. The further development of the student movement was arrested when the president closed Tuskegee completely for two weeks, but activists still registered an impressive list of victories. I unpack the “Black University” concept and show that the demands students fought for represented a marriage of their desire for individual upward mobility with their aspirations for collective social change. In the seventh chapter I offer concluding thoughts about the history of Tuskegee’s student movement, the legacy of Booker T. Washington, and implications for the present and future of black education.

A Critical History

I have often reflected on a tension I perceived in the oral history interviews I conducted for this study: between loyalty and reverence for Tuskegee Institute and criticism of it. At a time when many HBCUs are struggling financially, many commentators naturally emphasize their historic strengths and their continuing importance. Tuskegee Institute graduates have many reasons to be proud. Their school remains celebrated and highly regarded, and continues to produce distinguished graduates in many fields. And yet, this dissertation focuses on the historic pattern of student criticism. What is the value in that? I think it is important to state that

the internal critics I write about in this dissertation always aspired to reform the institution, to improve it – and they did. More than forty years ago sociologist Daniel C. Thompson pointed out the irony in the fact that HBCUs trained most of the leading black activists and yet, were the institutions “most harassed by the racial revolution.”\(^7^5\) Thompson may not have known that the same pattern existed prior to the 1960s. “Oddly enough,” noted one white visitor to Tuskegee’s campus in 1930, “Tuskegee and its methods receive more criticisms from the Negroes themselves than from the Southern whites.”\(^7^6\) Those who bristle at the idea of a critical history may, as they read the stories contained here, find themselves in accordance with these student protesters. In the end, such internal critics succeeded in their aim: making Tuskegee Institute a better place.

In telling this story, I have endeavored to embrace the contradictions of Tuskegee Institute and not to flatten them. I am critical of Washington, but I also understand the power of his legacy as the founder of a black-led educational institution. I highlight student critics, but try to appreciate what we can learn from the fact that their school was a place that nurtured such critical voices. It was simultaneously confining, restrictive while also a “haven for activist people” as one former student described it.\(^7^7\) Tuskegee Institute has a proud military history that is also a controversial history. It was a military outpost that was nearly invaded by the military – twice. Tuskegee students in one era traveled abroad to collaborate with European colonialism in Africa, and in another era sought to learn from and imitate the process of African liberation from European control. In one decade students were hired by mine owners to convince black workers

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\(^7^7\) Ronald Hill, interview with the author, June 2017.
not to join unions, and in the next decade Tuskegee students ventured off campus to organize black workers into unions. The truth of Tuskegee Institute is that it has been a home to a wide range of political and educational ideals, many of which do not neatly fall within the ideals laid down by The Founder.

There is a broader significance to this history, I believe. Today, paradigms of black education are once again hotly debated – charter schools and school choice, for example – and black college students coast to coast are organizing to demand institutional change. There is no singular “black” perspective on these questions, but a range of responses by black people, including stances that conflict. Often, but not always, different classes of black people have different imaginations about what kinds of changes are possible or necessary. The radical history of student movements at historically black colleges and universities provides an opportunity to expand our contemporary political and educational imaginations. That history can also enrich our understanding of HBCUs. Too often our knowledge of institutions comes from the people at the top, not the people at the bottom. Understanding the perspective of student activists gives us a richer picture of the educational and political ideas in circulation at Tuskegee Institute. The legacy of Booker T. Washington has been examined for almost a century from every angle except this one: for the first time the students at the school he founded will have their say in the scholarly record. I sincerely hope that The Tuskegee Revolt does justice to their story.
Chapter 1: The Origins of Tuskegee Institute, 1881 to 1915

Tuskegee University is unique among American universities in its historical self-awareness. It is perhaps the only school that is so closely identified with its founder — Booker T. Washington, the most famous black educator in American history. Tuskegee is also unique in that, unlike its sister school, the Hampton Institute, it had a black leadership from the beginning. For almost a century, Tuskegee was a kind of “capital” of black America. For many of those years, whatever happened at Tuskegee reverberated throughout the nation — and at times, the world. For better and worse, the school’s name carried different connotations through the years — in one era, “progress,” in another, “heroism,” or in still another, “medical racism,” but most consistently, “Booker T. Washington.”¹ Washington’s strategy of black advancement through an embrace of capitalism, Protestant morality and self-help closely adhered to the beliefs of the black middle class. Throughout the school’s first eight decades, Tuskegee students both agreed with these beliefs and challenged them, particularly as they manifested in the curriculum. When Tuskegee’s students clashed with the administration in 1968, they most likely didn’t know that these same ideals had been a source of student protest and activism stretching all the way back to its founding. In the history of Tuskegee Institute, sketched below, the debate within the school community is a new vantage point from which to consider black educational history in general, and Booker T. Washington’s legacy in particular.

¹ After 1881, that is. In an even earlier era the word had yet another connotation. Macon County sits on an area that was controlled by the Creek people. In their language, Muskegon, the word “Taskigi” means “warrior.” See William Warren Rogers et al., Alabama: The History of a Deep South State (Tuscaloosa: University Alabama Press, 2010).
Industrial Education and Counter-Revolution

Tuskegee Institute was born in a counter-revolution. What was destined to become the nation’s most famous school for black people came into existence just as the self-organized movement of newly-freed black people after the Civil War to build and sustain their own schools was thwarted. The enigma of Booker T. Washington lies in the fact that he rose as his people fell. Washington became a figure of national and even international fame in the context of a counter-revolution in the South at the end of the nineteenth century. Undoing the work of the revolution was a tall order. In Black Reconstruction in America: 1860–1880, W.E.B. Du Bois portrayed the post-Civil War South as a world turned upside down. Du Bois called Reconstruction in its most radical phase a “dictatorship of labor,” a new society in which those who had been on the very bottom — slaves — were suddenly exercising political power at the top, at times in coalition with poor and working-class white people. Six hundred black people joined southern state legislatures, and sixteen were elected to the US Congress. In Macon County, future site of Tuskegee Institute, former slave James Alston was elected to the state legislature, representing, among his constituents, the man who had once owned him.

The freed people set to work immediately building schools. The U.S. army’s occupation of the South enabled the consolidation of the freed people’s schooling movement in a system of state-supported public schools. Alabama’s first public schools for black people were established in Huntsville in 1863 when the city was captured by federal troops. The armed military occupation of Alabama opened a political space in which freed people could create public schools for the first time in the South. Furthermore, Reconstruction, guided by Union generals,

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3 Norrell, Reaping the whirlwind, 3.
allowed black people to participate in forming new state constitutions, where they pushed for legislating public schools into existence. By 1870, every single southern state constitution contained specific language about the formation of a state-supported public school system.\textsuperscript{5}

Black people carried out this revolution through the Republican Party, where they were allied with some white people – northern liberal and radical politicians and some southern working class people. But the initiative for the creation of public schools came from black people. Long denied access to education in any form, they prioritized the formation of schools in the new South. “Public education for all, at public expense,” Du Bois wrote, “was, in the South, a Negro idea.”\textsuperscript{6}

Afro-Americans have, in general, always placed great value on literacy. As historian Herbert Gutman notes, the post-emancipation impulse to build schools did not spring from nothing, but rather from the fugitive literacy efforts that had already been developed in slavery.\textsuperscript{7}

During slavery, acquiring literacy had been a way to subvert slavery in secret and possibly to acquire the means to escape. “Because it most often happened in secret,” historian Heather Williams writes, “the very act of learning to read and write subverted the master-slave relationship and created a private life for those who were owned by others.”\textsuperscript{8} After the Civil War, literacy held tremendous promise for the freed people. Being able to read and write was a way to gain distance from the degraded status of slavery, and to seize more completely upon the opportunities presented by freedom. More than anyone else, newly emancipated black people equated learning with political liberation. “Literacy would permit them to negotiate the new

\textsuperscript{5} Anderson, \textit{Education of Blacks in the South}, 36.
\textsuperscript{6} Du Bois, \textit{Black Reconstruction}, 638.
\textsuperscript{8} Williams, \textit{Self-Taught}, 7.
relations of production and exchange,” writes historian Steven Hahn, enabling them to fight back against unprincipled employers, and “better equip them to exercise the new rights of citizenship.” And besides contracts and legal documents, it would empower them to personally engage with one of their most meaningful texts: the Bible.⁹

Different groups of white people took different approaches to the question of the education of black people. Elite white people in particular were divided on the issue by region and by industry. “The planters favored a labor-repressive system of agricultural production,” writes historian James Anderson. “They had little incentive to use education and technology to increase efficiency and productivity or to use schooling as a means to train and discipline a more efficient work force.”¹⁰ Northern elites, on the other hand, tended to believe in the power of education to improve society and to lubricate social tensions.¹¹ Education meant moral training, discipline, and socializing the labor force to the rigors and rhythms of wage labor.¹² After the Civil War, and much to the planters’ chagrin, missionaries and philanthropists poured resources into the South to build and promote schooling for the freed people — the origin of the first Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Later, when northern elites abandoned the defense of civil rights for black people, they ended the military occupation of the South and allowed the planters to restore a social system more conducive to profitable agriculture. Thus began the counter-revolutionary “redemption” of the South. A reign of terror swept the southern

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⁹ Steven Hahn, “To Build a New Jerusalem,” in Payne and Strickland, eds., Teach Freedom, 16.
¹⁰ Anderson, Education of Blacks, 42.
¹¹ In Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877 (1988; New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 169, Eric Foner argues that the northern elite were baffled that former slaves and former slaveowners couldn’t seem to appreciate that “the interests of capital and labor are identical.”
¹² This is a persistent pattern of education under capitalism, according to Bowles and Gintis. See Schooling in Capitalist America.
states. Schools for black people were systematically de-funded and destroyed.\textsuperscript{13} “The sight of blacks carrying books often had the same effect on whites as the sight of armed blacks,” writes historian Leon Litwack, “and many would have found no real distinction between the two threats.”\textsuperscript{14}

In Alabama’s Black Belt (a region so named for the uniquely rich soil and for the folks who worked on it), the counter-revolution swiftly ensured that most black people would be trapped in the same work they performed as slaves: growing and harvesting cotton. Before the war and after it, the labor of black people was essential to America’s standing in the world. It was cotton and the global market that developed around it that made the Industrial Revolution (which began with the production of cotton-based textiles) and put the United States on the map as a world power. Before the Civil War, raw cotton represented 61 percent of the value of all U.S. products shipped abroad.\textsuperscript{15} During the war, European factories were abruptly cut off from their southern suppliers for several years. However, once the planters’ rebellion was suppressed, northern and southern elites agreed that the most important question of the day was figuring out how to get black people back to work on the plantations. A British minister to Washington reported in 1865 that “everywhere measures are being taken to force the Negroes to work, and to teach them that freedom means working for wages instead of masters.”\textsuperscript{16}

Through violence, terror, and murder, the counter-revolutionaries largely succeeded in excluding black people from politics and confining them to a form of social and racial subordination (later known as “Jim Crow”). Since the ex-slaves never received reparations in the

\textsuperscript{13} “The last two decades of the nineteenth century,” writes Meyer Weinberg, “were an educational catastrophe for black children and their parents.” See \textit{A chance to learn: The history of race and education in the United States} (Long Beach: California State University Press, 1995), 47.
\textsuperscript{16} Beckert, \textit{Empire of Cotton}, 270.
form of land, they were essentially indigent and the planters retained an advantage in the struggle
to re-establish a new labor regime across the South. The freed people wanted to be independent
farmers and resisted becoming wage laborers, but through debt accumulation and harsh legal
repression and violence, a new social compromise emerged that placed most of them in the role
of sharecroppers — directing their own work day to day with little supervision on the one hand,
in Macon County were tenants, paying their rent in cash, cotton, or other produce. But since
white landlords kept all of the records of debt, controlled all of the courts (in which any disputes
might be settled), the typical tenant fell further in debt year after year.\footnote{Charles S. Johnson, \textit{Shadow of the Plantation} (Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, 1996), 19; 104; 109.}

In Alabama this counter-revolution dragged out over the last thirty years of the nineteenth
century. Despite widespread terror and fraud, Republicans held onto office in the 1870 elections.
Through violence and vote-stealing, the Democratic Party — the party of the planters and former
slave-owners — finally regained dominance in Alabama state government four years later.
Macon County’s two state representatives — both black — were convicted of felonies and
sentenced to chain gangs.\footnote{Norrell, \textit{Reaping}, 6; 10.} Nine out of every ten people lynched in the U.S. before the Civil War
were white; now the reverse was true.\footnote{Eugene D. Genovese, \textit{Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made} (New York: Vintage, 1976), 33.} More than two thousand black people were lynched in
the U.S. between 1882 and 1903. The planters, abetted by the outright terror of the KKK, used
fear of “Negro domination” to split the Republican coalition, and succeeded in driving black
people out of electoral politics, although this took three decades to fully accomplish. Black
people did not lose the right to vote in Alabama until 1901.\textsuperscript{21} There had been 181,000 black people registered to vote in the state in 1900, but only 3,000 were registered by 1902.\textsuperscript{22} Thus, with waning political influence and confined “in the shadow of the plantation” primarily to agricultural labor, black people found it extremely difficult to maintain or expand public schooling, or to do anything which would alter their social status.\textsuperscript{23}

The counter-revolution in the South that overthrew Reconstruction did not, as a rule, sweep away all schools for black people. The counter-revolutionaries (the so-called “Redeemers”) sought many mechanisms to defund black schools and to redirect public funding to white schools. However, in their attempt to erect and preserve a segregated social system, it was necessary to allow a small layer of black professionals to be trained to serve their segregated communities. Furthermore, the maintenance of a segregated schooling system required segregated teacher training institutions. Thus, for many years higher education for black people mainly took the form of teacher training institutions.\textsuperscript{24}

Between the push and pull of counter-revolution and the rising system of Jim Crow segregation, the magnitude of freed people’s achievements after the Civil War is remarkable. Despite the fact that less than 10 percent of black people were literate as of 1860, between 1865 and 1900 the freed people established more than 1,200 black-owned newspapers.\textsuperscript{25} As of 1890, Meyer Weinberg notes, of 15-18 year olds, “the college-going rate of black youth [18.76 percent] exceeded that of native white youth born of foreign parents [14.74 percent] and closely approached that of native white youth of native white parents [20.44 percent].” The figure for

\textsuperscript{21} Bond, \textit{Negro education}: 290; 102.  
\textsuperscript{22} Marable, \textit{Race, Reform, and Rebellion}, 9.  
\textsuperscript{23} Bond, \textit{Negro education}, 221.  
\textsuperscript{24} Weinberg, \textit{A chance to learn}, 267.  
\textsuperscript{25} Marable, \textit{Race, reform, and rebellion}, 8.
black youths is somewhat distorted, however, by the fact that most of those students attended Negro colleges where pre-collegiate coursework was more the rule than the exception, since high schools for black people were still rare before the 20th century.\textsuperscript{26} This first general of black college students went on to become educators, professionals, and to the extent possible, businessmen — the black middle class. There had always been different classes of black people in the United States, but the new opportunities afforded by emancipation widened the divide between the majority of black people stuck in agricultural labor, and a small, fragile, but increasingly confident black middle class.

\textbf{From Hampton to Tuskegee}

The man who would become the nation’s most famous black educator was born a slave. Booker Taliaferro came into the world in Virginia in 1856 and later gave himself the name Washington. Young Booker witnessed the transition from slavery to freedom, and caught the freed people’s collective, infectious thirst for literacy. “From the time that I can remember having any thoughts about anything,” he wrote in his autobiography, \textit{Up From Slavery}, “I recall that I had an intense longing to learn to read. I determined, when quite a small child, that, if I accomplished nothing else in life, I would in some way get enough education to enable me to read common books and newspapers.” After the Civil War, Washington worked in coal mines while pursuing education in his spare time. He learned of the existence of the Hampton Institute, a school for Negroes, and made his way there in 1872. Having no money for tuition and little education, his entrance exam consisted of how well he did sweeping a school room.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{26} Weinberg, \textit{A chance to learn}: 272; 267.
\textsuperscript{27} Washington, \textit{Up from slavery}: 19; 13; 25.
The Hampton Normal and Industrial Institute was founded by Samuel C. Armstrong, a white Civil War veteran who wanted to create schools to prepare black teachers (called “normal” schools, at the time). Hampton Institute intended to train black people to accept a subordinate role in southern economic and social life. Hampton was not a trade or academic school, Anderson argues, but a school “that attempted to train a corps of teachers with a particular social philosophy relevant to the political and economic reconstruction of the South.”28 Through long hours of work necessary for the maintenance of themselves and the school, students learned to “value” manual labor. “Hampton students initially spent half of their days working and only half in the classroom,” according to historian Adam Fairclough. But “[b]y 1879, with the establishment of the night school, in which pupils studied for two hours after having labored for ten, Hampton raised the proportion of the school year devoted to manual training to something like two-thirds.”29 Armstrong and the trustees were absolutely clear that the purpose of the school was to make possible a New South based on black laborers. In the aftermath of the defeat of Reconstruction, the “great problem,” said one Hampton trustee, was "to attach the Negro to the soil and prevent his exodus from the country to the city.” Teacher training that emphasized manual labor was the solution to this problem. “Let us make the teachers,” Armstrong said, “and we will make the people.”30

Before the counter-revolution was completed, however, young Booker T. Washington nurtured dreams born of Radical Reconstruction Although he would later disclaim civil rights activism and the “mistakes” of seeking political office during Reconstruction, Washington sought out both earlier in life. On one occasion this took the form of collective action on campus.

28 Anderson, Education of Blacks, 94.
29 Fairclough, A class of their own, 121.
30 Anderson, Education of Blacks: 106; 62.
Washington participated in at least one protest as a student at Hampton, signing a petition to demand the reinstatement of a student whom Armstrong had dismissed; the student was readmitted.\(^{31}\) After graduation, Washington’s first ambition was to be a lawyer and to ascend to elected public office. “Politics was another enthusiasm of the young Booker T. Washington,” notes his biographer, Louis Harlan.\(^{32}\) Washington studied law on his own and joined a local Republican Party organization.\(^{33}\) “The first extant piece of writing by Booker T. Washington,” Harlan writes, “was in his capacity as secretary of a local political gathering.”\(^{34}\) The counter-revolution ultimately foreclosed the possibility of satisfying his ambitions in law or public office — black people were driven out of those arenas by terror, violence, fraud and murder. It did not take long for Washington to find another path.

Tuskegee Institute was made possible by compromises rooted in political defeats. At the end of the 1870s, the Redemption had driven black people in Macon County from public office-holding, but had not yet taken their right to vote. Lewis Adams, a local black tinsmith, negotiated a deal with two prominent white men in town: black people would vote for the Democratic Party in return for a state-supported normal school located in Tuskegee. Both sides upheld the bargain and the Tuskegee Institute opened in July of 1881. Historian Robert J. Norrell argues that this may not have been a simple “quid pro quo” but rather part of a pattern of white planters supporting the establishment of limited schooling for black people at the end of the nineteenth century to prevent their exodus from the Black Belt. The mayor of Tuskegee wrote to Samuel

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\(^{31}\) Harlan, Black leader, 73. Harlan points out that the protest is even more significant given that all of the petition’s signers were born in slavery.

\(^{32}\) Harlan, Black leader, 49.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 95.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., Black leader, 51.
Armstrong asking for a white man he could recommend as principal of the new school.

Armstrong tapped a black man instead, his star pupil: Booker T. Washington.\(^{35}\)

Washington followed directly in his mentor’s footsteps — and also surpassed him. Black people needed moral education and manual skills, Washington now taught, not the traditional liberal arts education they — and he, earlier — sought. “No race can prosper,” he said, “till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top.”\(^{36}\) Washington personally oversaw the construction and expansion of the school’s facilities, most of which were built by the students themselves.

Washington forbade the introduction of liberal arts courses popular at other Black colleges, such as Greek or Latin. Instead, students focused on technical skills. Male students studied carpentry, printing, and agricultural techniques, while female students learned how to do laundry, sewing and “kitchen duties.” “We are not a college,” Washington told students in 1896, “and if there are any of you here who expect to get a college training, you will be disappointed.”\(^{37}\) Under Washington’s leadership, Tuskegee acquired land and erected impressive buildings on a sprawling, immaculate and handsome campus.

Tuskegee quickly became much more than a school, however, and attracted praise and criticism from black people and white people. As a wide range of scholars — from Du Bois to Michael R. West and others — have noted, Washington’s main legacy was in the realm of ideas and ideology; Tuskegee was “operated as a propaganda agency” Horace Mann Bond

\(^{35}\) Norrell, \textit{Reaping}, 12-13; 15.
\(^{36}\) Washington, \textit{Up from slavery}, 106.
\(^{37}\) Marable, \textit{Black leadership}, 27. West argues that Washington’s most significant legacy is in the realm of ideas, specifically the “race relations” theory, discussed further in the final chapter below. See West, \textit{Education of Booker T. Washington}. 
concluded.\textsuperscript{38} To black supporters, it was a symbol of pride, an impressive example of what an institution run by black people could achieve. To white supporters, it promised to teach black people to forgo political and social agitation in favor of the kind of humility and deference that would foster good “race relations.” To white detractors, any kind of schooling implied revolution: black people were attempting to rise above their assigned station. For the school’s black critics, the problem was the opposite — that the school trained black people to keep them in that place.

\textbf{The Gospel of Work and Money}

In \textit{The Souls of Black Folks}, Du Bois attempted to explain Washington’s incredible rise. “One hesitates,” he began cautiously, “to criticize a life which, beginning with so little, has done so much.” Du Bois identified the secret of Washington’s success as his ability to tap into the feeling of the era — “this very singleness of vision and thorough oneness with his age” — that while the radical dreams of Reconstruction were crushed, hope lay not in political change or in civil rights, but in embracing one’s chances in the marketplace. “Mr. Washington’s programme naturally takes an economic cast, becoming a gospel of Work and Money,” Du Bois wrote.\textsuperscript{39}

Washington came to national prominence after a famous speech in Atlanta in which he hopefully merged the subordinate social status of black people with the prospect of commercial progress in the New South. Washington delivered what has become known as the “Atlanta Compromise” address to the Cotton States and International Exposition in September of 1895. In his address, the “compromise” was that black people would forgo any challenge to the regime of

\textsuperscript{38} Bond, \textit{Negro education}, 217.

\textsuperscript{39} Du Bois, \textit{The souls of black folk}: 32; 36.
disenfranchisement and segregation, and, in exchange, white people would support schooling for black people and fair treatment in the marketplace.

Washington promised white people that they could count on black people to be productive and loyal. Black people, he told them, would “buy your surplus land, make blossom the waste places in your fields, and run your factories.” He assured white people that they could “be sure in the future, as in the past, that you and your families will be surrounded by the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people that the world has seen.” Washington pledged that, unlike immigrants from Europe, black people would not protest or strike: “[W]e shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach, ready to lay down our lives, if need be, in defense of yours, interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with yours in a way that shall make the interests of both races one.” In a well-known passage, he embraced segregation: “In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.”

Washington advised black people not to leave the South, but to stay and seek out the best “chance” in the marketplace. Washington called on black people to “Cast down your buckets where you are” — to develop marketable skills: “Cast it down in agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service, and in the professions.” When it comes to business “pure and simple,” he continued “it is in the South that the Negro is given a man’s chance in the commercial world.”

The speech brilliantly spun a negative into a positive. It was both a political surrender to the counter-revolution and an optimistic projection that black people would advance in freedom,

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40 Washington, Up from slavery, 107.
41 In the same speech, he also advised white people to “cast down their buckets” in the South, meaning to continue to invest in the South and its promise for the future.
42 Washington, Up from slavery, 106-7.
by returning to the well-established pattern of doing so modestly, within the boundaries set by white paternal guidance.\textsuperscript{43} For these reasons, the elite — northern and southern — were pleased. When Washington finished speaking, the former Governor of Georgia rushed up on stage to shake his hand. The \textit{Boston Transcript} wrote that the speech “seems to have dwarfed all the other proceedings and the Exposition itself. The sensation that it has caused in the press has never been equalled.”\textsuperscript{44} The \textit{Atlanta Constitution} called it “The beginning of a moral revolution in America,” and “The most remarkable address ever delivered by a colored man.” It continued: “The speech stamps Booker T. Washington as a wise counselor and a safe leader.”\textsuperscript{45}

David Jackson has argued that Washington’s speeches cannot be taken at face value. Washington had, in Jackson’s account, “perfected the art of wearing the mask” for white people. He claims that Washington borrowed from the slave tradition of using double meanings to conceal one’s true aims from white people. “Because of their shared experience,” Jackson writes, “blacks identified with and decoded Washington’s messages in ways virtually impossible for whites and others outside of their cultural experiences to understand.”\textsuperscript{46} Jackson is certainly correct that Washington was skillful at reading an audience, and adroit at putting forward messages that black or white audiences (and often black \textit{and} white audiences) would enjoy and accept. However, this argument implies a perfect connection between Washington’s ideas and those of the mass of black people, a proposition that leaves several questions unanswered. Two issues that are addressed directly below are Washington’s elaborate efforts to suppress criticism of his ideas in black newspapers (what would be the purpose of this if black audiences largely

\textsuperscript{43} Seeking out paternalistic protection from the “good” white people has been a long-standing strategy of survival for black people in the United States. See Genovese, \textit{Roll, Jordan, Roll}; Bond and \textit{Negro education}; Johnson, \textit{Shadow of the Plantation}.

\textsuperscript{44} Washington, \textit{Up from slavery}, 110.

\textsuperscript{45} Harlan, \textit{Black leader}, 222.

\textsuperscript{46} Jackson, \textit{Booker T. Washington and the Struggle against White Supremacy}, 46-7.
shared his views?) and the pattern of internal dissent and protest at his own institution (if he were merely tricking white people, were his own students not in on the joke?). Also of no small importance in this discussion, of course, is the role of the white men who lifted Washington up and made him a leader.

Whereas in his youth he hoped to rise on the shoulders of the enfranchised freed people, when that path was blocked by counter-revolution, Washington saw an opportunity to ascend with support from the richest and most powerful white men in the nation. In 1905, Washington shrewdly moved his northern headquarters from Boston to New York. New York had become the center of American philanthropy when the new class of “robber barons” — John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie in particular — built mansions there. Washington preached the right message at the right time to the right people. Among the arts that Washington perfected, was that of courting donors. However, more importantly, was the fact that Washington’s “industrial” philosophy coincided with the worldview of men like Carnegie and Rockefeller. Whereas Jackson sees Washington as a fox, tricking white people into giving him money for subversive ends, William H. Watkins and others see him as a proxy, a puppet manipulated by the rich. Closer to the truth is the fact that Washington believed in what he preached. Washington represented a class of black people — the middle class — who by and large embraced the acquisitive spirit of the age. In addition to preaching moral uplift and deploping agitation for civil rights, the Hampton/Tuskegee curriculum essentially taught a Protestant work ethic and the natural harmony of capital and labor. Carnegie was not tricked by Washington — rather,

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47 Harlan, Wizard Of Tuskegee, 128.
48 See, for example Watkins, The White Architects of Black Education and Spivey, Schooling for the New Slavery.
Carnegie correctly sized him up as a coreligionist. Furthermore, Washington practiced what he preached. Carnegie was so impressed with Washington’s cost-saving method of using student labor to erect campus buildings that he pledged in 1902 to begin donating $10,000 a year to Tuskegee. In 1903, however, he outdid himself, giving the school a lump sum of $600,000.

“Industrial education” did not easily coexist with other models of education for black people. Northern philanthropists sought to impose an “industrial” model of education as the only model. Washington was the black leader who, better than any white man, represented this policy to black people. By directing resources to “little Tuskegees” and away from schools with classical liberal arts offerings, philanthropists hoped to force all of black higher education in the South into one mold. For many years, they succeeded. Hampton and Tuskegee stood apart from all other colleges for black people. By 1915, Hampton had a $2.7 million endowment, and Tuskegee’s was $1.9 million. Together, these sums were greater than half of all of the private Black college endowments in the country combined. Wealth did not just provide greater educational resources; it also meant political resources. On the basis of this largesse Washington built a political mini-empire that was, arguably, more influential than his educational one.

50 In his final Sunday evening talk to the Tuskegee community before he died, Washington urged community members to adopt the following spirit: “I am not going to be responsible for any expense that might be cut off. I am going to put my thought and conscience into it and I am not going to be the cause of any extra expense being placed upon this institution even though it be to the amount of a half-cent.” Quoted in Arthur H. Chamberlain, “Solving a Serious Problem: Tuskegee — A Training Ground for Citizenship,” Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine, Vol 88, No 9, (Sept 1930), 4.
51 Harlan, Wizard, 134-5.
52 Anderson, Education of Blacks: 46; 89; 153.
The Tuskegee Machine

While Booker T. Washington advised black people to abstain from politics, he built up considerable political influence himself, all the way up the White House. If the historical axis of black politics is the tension between accommodation to racism and resistance to it, Washington’s political strategy contained elements of both. Washington was not merely a prisoner of the counter-revolutionary political terrain on which he operated; he also participated in shaping that terrain.

As C. Vann Woodward observed, very few white men wielded the influence that Washington did. “The man who abjured “social equality” in the South moved in circles of the elite in the North and aristocracy abroad that were open to extremely few Southern whites,” Woodward wrote. “The man who disparaged the importance of political power for his race,” he observed, “came to exercise political power such as few if any Southern white men of his time enjoyed.”54 A good word from Washington meant the favor of philanthropy and, potentially, of the president of the United States. A mark of Washington’s stature is that he was honored by a personal visit in Tuskegee from a sitting United States President, William McKinley, in 1898.55

Washington’s star rose when that of Alabama’s black people was falling. The 1901 state constitutional convention decided that the best way to end political feuding among different classes of white people was to disenfranchise black people altogether. 1901 was also the year that Washington was the first black man to be invited to dine as a guest of the White House.56 Thus began a political partnership between Booker T. Washington and Theodore Roosevelt, who wanted to use Washington’s knowledge of the politics of the South to reshape the Republican

55 Harlan, Wizard, 165.
56 Harlan, Black leader, 315.
Party in that region. Washington, on the other hand, by having the president’s ear on the matter of federal appointments, developed the power to reward his friends and punish his enemies — white and black. This strategy did not, however, translate into an enlargement of black political power more generally. In addition to the catastrophe of disenfranchisement, Roosevelt actually reduced the number of black federal appointees.

The “Tuskegee Machine” under Washington’s control wielded tremendous political influence in black America, often in ways that made civil rights activism more difficult. “Spies were planted in civil rights organizations,” notes Manning Marable, who grew up in Tuskegee and taught there in the 1970s, “and black colleges whose faculty or administrators opposed the Tuskegee philosophy were denied funds from white philanthropies and corporations.” The machine’s workings usually resulted in “much cruelty and disappointment for unconventional thinkers,” as one historian put it. Washington owned several black newspapers outright, and used his wealth and influence to buy off and cajole others. One of his agents successfully bribed the editor of an anti-Washington newspaper, the Washington Bee, in return for printing pro-Washington editorials. Washington sent a spy to the 1905 founding meeting of the protest organization, the Niagara Movement (the predecessor to the NAACP) -- and succeeded in a campaign to get black newspapers to ignore the event. The newspapermen, influenced by Washington’s “lieutenants in every major northern city,” fell in line. Washington, writes Harlan, “could not tolerate even one defection.” When the black magazine, The Voice of the Negro, came

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57 After his term of office, Roosevelt became a trustee of Tuskegee. See Anderson, Education of blacks, 289.
58 Harlan, Wizard, 5-7.
59 Marable, Black Leadership, 34.
under the influence of the Niagara Movement, Washington succeed in suppressing it, “his most devastating action” against Du Bois’s movement.62

At the same time, Washington has a tendency to confound historians because he was well-intentioned. He genuinely believed that the strength of his Tuskegee Machine was in the best interest of black people; and he was not necessarily wrong for thinking so. Washington did, in fact, use his influence to direct funds to some black schools. “[I]n one way or another,” notes Harlan, “Washington helped at least twenty-two black educational institutions applying for Carnegie libraries, other buildings, or operating funds.” Despite his rhetorical opposition to academic and literary education, Washington served as a trustee of liberal arts-oriented Howard and Fisk, and successfully steered philanthropic funds in their direction. Washington told students in 1895 that he supported their highest ambitions: “I am not now, nor have I ever been, opposed to any man or woman getting all the education they can,” he said.63 Later, Washington attempted to shift philanthropic attention to the condition of high schools for black youth.64

Washington also spent his resources in well-intentioned (if, at times, ill-fated) attempts to help black people of all classes. He launched, for example, several “extension” initiatives intended to improve the lives of Black people in Macon County and beyond. Tuskegee Institute sponsored regular conferences for black farmers to learn the latest scientific techniques and strategize about how to get out of debt. The school also hosted annual meetings of black businessmen from across the country. And, just before he died, Washington started a public health campaign initiative that later became National Negro Health Week. Getting black farmers out of debt, supporting black businesses and improving black people’s health were noble goals,

62 Harlan, Wizard, 94: 87; 104.
63 Quoted in Norrell, Up from History, 151.
64 Harlan, Wizard, 138; 175-85; 194-5.
but progress remained elusive. By the time Washington died in 1915, rapidly changing technology had made many of the vocations one could learn at Tuskegee irrelevant, and black people could not break into other trades without challenging Jim Crow. Despite the best efforts of the famed Tuskegee scientist George Washington Carver to spread his ideas about growing peanuts and other crops, few farmers in Macon County could afford to diversify; the rise and then fall of cotton prices bankrupted them by the thousands.\(^65\)

Furthermore, despite his very public acceptance of the Jim Crow system, behind the scenes Washington led and personally funded several attempts to challenge discrimination in voting, jury selection, railroad accommodations, and even debt peonage. Washington tried to use his connection with the railroad magnate William Baldwin to solicit assistance in overturning Georgia's 1900 decision to segregate railroad cars. When Baldwin's enthusiasm for the effort waned, Washington teamed up with Du Bois to devise a legal strategy.\(^66\) Washington supported property restrictions for voting rights, but thought they should be applied to black and white people equally. Still, he helped two Alabama suffrage cases that made it to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1903 and 1904.\(^67\) Washington also secretly funded and supported the case of a farmer from Montgomery County, Alabama, who was subjected to debt peonage, a case that also made its way up to the Supreme Court.\(^68\) Like his extension programs, these secret legal maneuvers usually did not succeed, and even when they did, their impact was limited. For most black people in the South, the noose of Jim Crow tightened in the early years of the twentieth century. Before he died in 1915, and perhaps sensing the futility of fighting Jim Crow in secret, Washington

\(^{65}\) Marable, *Black leadership*, 38.
\(^{68}\) Harlan, *Wizard*, 250.
broke with his own strategy and published an open attack on segregation, calling it “unjust” and “unnecessary.”

Washington’s influence extended beyond the borders of the United States. He had an impact on people in the African diaspora across the globe, many of whom attempted to translate his philosophy in ways that suited their aspirations for freedom from European colonization and oppression. Cubans of African descent paid close attention to Washington’s model of racial uplift. In Jamaica, a young Marcus Garvey was inspired by Washington’s emphasis on pride and self-reliance. Garvey struck up a correspondence with Washington and even hoped to create a Tuskegee-style school. Washington likewise had contact with aspiring black nationalists in South Africa. He communicated with the men who became the founders of the African National Congress, who more or less shared his accommodationism and orientation on entrepreneurial activity and philanthropy. “It is no accident that these early ANC elite leaders so vehemently denounced socialism and so vigorously defended black private enterprise,” Marable noted.

Washington’s support for African nationalists was never anti-colonial. In fact, Washington admired the colonial powers and, not unlike his approach to the situation facing American black people, he sought elite assistance in “civilizing” Africans. Washington consulted closely with two American presidents to arrange a financial bailout for Liberia and to preserve its status as a semi-colony of the United States. He teamed up with European colonial governments in Sudan, Congo and South Africa to assist them in development projects. Washington sent four men from Tuskegee to the German colonial government in Togo, for example, to help encourage the

Ewe people to grow cotton in large quantities for export. The effort came to grief, however, as the Tuskegee men, following Washington, assumed the purpose of the mission was to develop the Ewe people’s independent economic strength, while the German government really just wanted a cheap, reliable source of cotton for the German textile industry. Both the Tuskegee delegation and the German colonial administration assumed the inferiority of the Togolese people, who actively resisted both of their efforts.73

The widespread activities of the Tuskegee Machine demonstrate that Washington was neither all-powerful nor powerless. He was not in perfect control of his political and economic environment, nor was he a total prisoner of circumstance, just making the best of a bad situation. Washington chose to labor both privately and publicly and his scope was international. In other words, he chose to step out of his schoolhouse door and into the realm of politics. He was not forced by circumstance to build an educational-political mini-empire reaching across continents; he chose to do that. In doing so, Washington in turn shaped the terrain upon which other black people acted. By all accounts, Washington believed in what he was doing. The net effect of the “Tuskegee Machine” however, was that it opened some doors for black people, while helping to close others more firmly. The group it helped was primarily the fragile, but growing black middle class; the group it failed, the black working class. “[D]espite its failures to change society,” Marable wrote of Washington’s efforts in North America and Africa, “Washington's philosophy in both continents helped to create a nationalistic, proud and dynamic elite of black people.”74

Internal Critics

While Du Bois is often considered the antithesis of Washington, scholars have demonstrated that these two, in fact as noted above, both clashed and collaborated. Given the intensity of racism in the United States, this contradiction should not be surprising. Du Bois’s initial reaction to the “Atlanta Compromise” speech was to applaud it. Furthermore, their general outlook, as educators, shared a fundamental orientation: both men sought to educate an elite, a leadership (Du Bois’s “Talented Tenth”) that would carry black people out of their circumstance.75 In 1903, Washington offered Du Bois a teaching job at Tuskegee (Du Bois declined). Washington opposed Du Bois’s strategy of open protest against discrimination, even while privately supporting legal challenges to disenfranchisement and to segregation.76

As scholarship on Tuskegee and Washington focuses on external criticism (such as that from Du Bois of Washington), the criticism of students and parents within the “industrial” model remains mostly unexplored. Most of these internal protests were over the low level of training, since the schools emphasized the value of hard work and the morality of manual labor in order to prepare students to impart those lessons as teachers, not as craftspeople. Some students who were attracted to Hampton, for example, because of its printing press “commented bitterly” when they realized that the printing trade was not taught.77 One “distinguished” black visitor to campus complained that Hampton was "teaching the Negroes to be hewers of wood and drawers of water, and… servants to the white race.” It was the most beautiful campus he had ever seen, but

75 Although, historian August Meier argues that they each had a very different base of support. Opposition to Washington came from a black elite that lived in northern cities and socialized with white people, he claims, while Washington’s supporters tended to be rising black businessmen whose profits came from the segregated black market. See August Meier, “Negro Class Structure and Ideology in the Age of Booker T. Washington,” Phylon, Vol 23, no. 3 (September 1, 1962): 258–66.
76 Harlan, Black leader, 298-299; Wizard, 25.
77 Anderson, Education of Blacks, 75.
because of the restricted nature of intellectual pursuits, he said it was also a “literary penitentiary.”

Hampton’s emphasis on strict moral training angered students who felt insulted by the rules of behavior. The historical record indicates that this sentiment at times was expressed in the form of student strikes. A strike in 1889 actually involved the future president of Tuskegee, Robert Russa Moton. Male students were insulted when a Hampton matron stopped them from escorting female students home one evening after a school social function. Moton was reluctant to protest, but was pushed by his classmates into leading their ad-hoc organization. “I realized that I was facing four hundred very determined young men,” he recalled. Moton expressed his doubts, but the students decide to go on strike anyway. The students weren’t the only ones to express dissent. Increasingly, Hampton’s political stance came under fire within the broader school community. In 1889 alumni wrote a petition of protest against the school’s support of Jim Crow segregation on campus. Samuel Armstrong, Hampton’s founder, admitted that criticism of the school was “common in the negro papers.” This undercurrent of protest and internal critique of “industrial” education was no odd occurrence, but a sustained and permanent feature of life in Hampton.

At Tuskegee, the pattern was much the same. From its founding, through every decade of its existence, students, parents, and sometimes faculty protested against the conditions and the curriculum. Most colleges had a strong element of moral training in this period, but Washington took it to a new level, keeping every detail of student life under personal supervision. As his travel schedule strained his ability to maintain such close surveillance, students often took

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80 Anderson, *Education of Blacks*: 75; 78; 79.
advantage of Washington’s absence to launch their protests. In 1896, his clerk wrote to him as he travelled: “The students all struck here today because they were given nothing to eat. I think every thing has been settled peaceably; it was a sure enough strike.” Washington remained the director of Tuskegee Institute until his death in 1915, but he ran the school more as a dictator, argues historian Kevern Verney, than a school principal. The *Booker T. Washington Papers* are “peppered with complaints by Tuskegee staff and students about Washington’s authoritarian management,” Verney writes. “Moreover,” he concludes, “it is probable that recorded grievances represented but a small proportion of the discontent, for individuals who allowed their doubts to become public risked hurtful letters of rebuke from Washington.” In 1902 Washington suggested a slight relaxation of the Victorian rules, perhaps ”dancing might be permitted,” but the Dean of Women warned him that doing so would open Pandora's box.

Tuskegee’s alliance with the United States’ armed forces has been both a source of pride and protest in the school’s history. Washington’s influence with the White House created opportunities to align Tuskegee with the American military — a relationship that would be both financially rewarding and a source of protests for the next century. After the Spanish-American War, Washington, Harlan wrote, “in a partnership with American colonialism” agreed to take in black Cuban and Puerto Rican students. But Washington encountered great difficulties winning them over to the “industrial” model of schooling. The new students protested against their work duties so often that Washington eventually had a guard house built so he could put disruptive

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81 Harlan, *Black leader*, 282
82 Verney, *The Art of the Possible*, 43.
84 See discussion in chapter 2 about the role of Tuskegee in World War I and the contradictory history of the famous “Tuskegee Airmen” in World War II.
students in “jail” if necessary. Harlan describes the climax of one conflict with a student leader, Juan Gomez:

The Cubans refused to eat again and struck against their work. When a teacher and a student tried to put Gomez in jail, his compatriots jumped them, but they succeeded in making the arrest. Guns were flourished before order was restored.85

The central issue animating most of the protests throughout Tuskegee’s history was the school’s “industrial” emphasis. Most protesters were not from Cuba or Puerto Rico — they were black Americans — from Alabama and the surrounding southern states.86 Whatever initially drew them to Tuskegee, once they arrived, they frequently chafed at the emphasis on manual labor. In his memoir, Washington recalls that “Quite a number of letters came from parents protesting against their children engaging in labour while they were in the school.”87

Washington always insisted that Tuskegee was a secondary school, not a college; but by necessity (and somewhat ironically) he was compelled to hire black college-educated people to work as teachers. He hired the eccentric agricultural genius George Washington Carver in 1896.88 Although his work as a teacher and administrator may have left something to be desired, Carver’s discoveries became legendary and increased the association of Tuskegee with serious intellectual effort. Despite Washington’s fear that the faculty would catch the "Niagara spirit" and infect Tuskegee with it, he recruited Monroe Work, one of that movement’s founders, in 1908.89 Work founded Tuskegee’s Department of Records and Research, where he compiled statistics on the conditions of black life in the United States. His career at Tuskegee exemplifies the tensions on campus between academic work and industrial education, and between strategies

85 Harlan, Black leader, 283.
86 Tuskegee Institute had stabilized at around 1,000 students by the beginning of the twentieth century. Harlan, Wizard, 144.
87 Washington, Up From Slavery, 77.
88 Harlan, Wizard, 276.
of protest and accommodation. Initially enthusiastic about the opportunity to use Tuskegee’s resources to expand his research, Work was disappointed to find when he arrived and learned that he was expected to essentially serve as a propagandist for the Tuskegee Machine. He sufficiently impressed Washington, however, who gradually gave him more leeway. Work used the opportunity to gather evidence that would shatter myths about black people and expose the realities of segregation. In 1913, he published the first of what became an annual “Tuskegee Lynching Report,” making the school the nation’s premiere source for information on the topic.90

Tuskegee’s students, meanwhile, resorted to strikes and sit-ins to protest the emphasis on industrial education. In 1903, a group of students took the opportunity of another of the Founder’s sojourns to strike in favor of more academic instruction and less manual labor. Their protest was prompted by an administrative change in their schedules: a new division of time between academic and industrial work put more emphasis on the latter at the expense of the former. “About a week after Washington had left,” writes Harlan, “and after student petitions and complaints had been rejected, student dissatisfaction became so general that it was easy for a few leaders to bring about ‘an open rebellion.’” The male students marched from their breakfast hall to the chapel, “locked themselves in, and after some haranguing voted not to work or study until changes were made.”91 The board of directors wrote to Washington for advice; he responded simply: “No concessions.”92

Eventually, however, there were concessions. After the strike ended, the school’s governing council reduced the frequency of mandatory chapel attendance from every night to two nights a week. Tuskegee trustee and railroad magnate William H. Baldwin (no fan of

91 Harlan, Wizard, 146-7.
92 Spivey, Schooling for the New Slavery, 62.
strikes), investigated the student strike and concluded there was merit in the students’ complaint that “they were required to devote too much time to both industrial work and studies with too little time for preparation.” From an “efficiency” perspective, Baldwin thought Washington should reduce their burdens. However, rather than grant greater freedom from manual labor, Washington elected (against the protest of the academic faculty) to ease the students’ burden of time spent in preparation for their academic courses.93

The school’s disciplinary records tell us something about the climate on campus. For 1907, to take one year as an example, 41% of the students (676 out of 1,621) were subject to disciplinary actions (ranging from warnings to suspensions).94 If they couldn’t follow the rules, coursework allowed little reward, either. The vast majority of students never advanced beyond the lowest level classes, and most of those did not graduate. The few who did “survive” to graduate did in fact go on to college and joined the professions that defined the “Talented Tenth.”95 Others left to pursue higher education elsewhere. The celebrated poet Claude McKay was a student at Tuskegee in 1912; he described it as a “semi-military, machine-like existence.”96 McKay withdrew and transferred to a liberal arts college in Kansas.

There is conclusive evidence that criticism of Washington’s educational philosophy and methods emerged within Tuskegee, and was by no means confined to northerners like Du Bois. The story of internal criticism is not well known, a further testimony to the effectiveness of Washington’s machine. “There is not a scintilla of evidence that the officials here are overbearing,” wrote one visitor to Tuskegee in 1916, “that the discipline is unduly severe or that

93 Harlan, Wizard, 147-8. Meanwhile at Howard, in 1905 the president tried to introduce “industrial” education and was “ousted by a near-revolt of students and faculty.” See p. 177.
94 “Record of Warnings, Etc.” 1907, Tuskegee Institute Archives.
95 Harlan, Wizard, 144-5.
the students are discontented or depressed.” Whatever the intentions of this visitor, his report, published in a New England educational journal, begins with an unmistakably defensive tone, as if responding to very specific criticisms not referenced. As demonstrated above, there is more than a scintilla of evidence that students, parents, and sometimes faculty challenged the priorities and policies of the Founder. But the appearance of total control was an important part of the way the school advertised itself. In later years, Tuskegee’s apparent ability to maintain such complete control over its students made it an attractive partner to new employers who moved into the state of Alabama. The coal mine operators, for example, wanted Tuskegee’s help to make sure its black workers remained “patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful.”

From Cotton to Steel

As the nineteenth century waned so did the dominance of cotton in Alabama’s economy. The challenger, rising with the advent of the twentieth century, was steel. As Horace Mann Bond observed in his influential study of education in Alabama, it was impossible for such an enormous economic transformation to occur and leave the social status of black people untouched; with new status, came new approaches to their education. The boll weevil, the crisis in the cotton market, the decline of agricultural employment, and the rise of coal mining and iron and steel manufacturing industries all dramatically altered the position of southern black workers. Their new industrial employers had different attitudes toward education. Unlike planters, who benefitted from a social arrangement that required black people to be illiterate, innumerate, and socially ostracized, the industrialists saw an advantage in opening up skilled

98 Bond, Negro education.
positions to black workers, since they could be paid lower wages and were believed to have less experience with unions. This transformation of the working life of black people inevitably required a reworking of the “Atlanta Compromise” and of the governing philosophy of Tuskegee Institute.

The seeds of the decline of Alabama’s plantation agriculture were sown by the first two decades of the twentieth century. Monoculture cotton production had exhausted the soil, making it increasingly difficult to get the same yield per acre. And then, a small insect that feeds on cotton buds, the boll weevil, arrived in the Black Belt — to devastating effect. Cotton-growing acreage was reduced almost by half from 1912 to 1917 and the yield per acre was reduced by 31 percent. Increasing competition from foreign cotton growers only made a bad situation worse. More and more, black Alabamians decided not to “cast down” their buckets in the Black Belt. They picked them up, and headed for southern and northern cities. From 1900 to 1930 the percentage of black people living in rural areas dropped by 20 percent, and the number living in Alabama’s cities doubled. 99

The migrants were drawn north by the promise of better pay and a better life. Whereas cotton production was concentrated in the Black Belt running through the southern part of the state, coal and other mineral deposits were primarily found in the northern regions of Alabama. The first coal mine opened in Jefferson County in 1840. Coal production in Alabama did not really take off until after the Civil War, at which point it exploded. The state produced only 13,000 tons of coal in 1870, but more than 8 million tons by 1900. The coal operators considered black people an ideal workforce not only because they were cheaper, but also because they were

99 Bond, *Negro education*: 122; 226-7; 236.
thought to be more docile and less prone to striking. By 1923, 52.7 percent of all miners in the state of Alabama were black.\textsuperscript{100}

For a time black coal miners tried to advance, not through an alliance with elite white people, but through organizing trade unions alongside their white co-workers. Building on the legacy of Herbert Gutman, Stephen Brier, and other labor historians, Brian Kelly argues that interracial unionism in the Alabama mines at the beginning of the century contained a social dynamic that, at times, successfully ran counter to white supremacy.\textsuperscript{101} Although the coal operators brought them in as a cheap and “docile” labor force, black workers’ militancy in the struggle to establish unions shifted the views of white workers. A strike in 1920 provides a case in point. “The determined role that black unionists assumed in prosecuting the [1920] strike,” Kelly observes, “made it difficult to sustain racial generalizations about blacks’ proclivity for strikebreaking.”\textsuperscript{102} In extremely difficult conditions, the survival of unionism itself — let alone biracial unionism — was nearly impossible. Black and white miners frequently stood together opposing the practice of convict leasing and scabs in the mines. However, as the operators shifted to using black strikebreakers predominantly, the solidarity of the union was tested. The response of white unionists, Daniel Letwin writes, ranged from “defiant egalitarianism to bemused condescension to creative appeals to white supremacy.”\textsuperscript{103}

Tuskegee Institute was, in the first instance, a welcomed partner in the rise of the new industries. The mine operators systematically sought to forge an alliance with the black middle

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 125; 127; 232; 233.
\textsuperscript{102} Kelly, \textit{Race, Class}: 186; 188.
class in order to better control black laborers. Kelly argues that this was not the unified strategy of black people as a group, but a policy generally promoted by the fragile black middle class — professionals and small businesspeople. Middle class black people were often the ones to seek out alliances with the “better class” of white people in order to secure gains such as housing or schools in exchange for votes or labor peace or strikebreaking, while the results of such agreements were imposed on black workers, regardless of their views. It was the black “preachers, businessmen, newspaper editors, camp welfare workers, leaders of fraternal orders,” writes Kelly, “who were held up by employers as the natural spokesmen for black racial progress, and who were often materially supported by the coal operators.” Tuskegee graduates were often hired by the coal companies to convince black workers not to join unions. In Birmingham, operators set up company-run coal camps for black workers to live in and even provided schools modeled on Booker T. Washington’s “industrial” ideal. The purpose of these welfare programs was to ensure a reliable, cheap, and properly socialized work force for the mines. “Hampton and Tuskegee graduates played a prominent role in the various ‘negro welfare associations’ set up in the camps,” Kelly points out, and operators hired them to teach in and administer their Negro schools. [the De Bardeleben Coal Company] appointed the Tuskegee protégé Robert W. Taylor to oversee the education of black miner’s children, considering him a “good negro, smart,” who “knows his place.”

In exchange for successful supervision of black workers, the grateful coal company offered several scholarships to Tuskegee each year to its black employees.104

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104 Kelly, *Race, Class*: 81; 89; 142; 99; Marable, *Black leadership*, 33.
The embrace of this mixture of Victorian morality, Protestant work ethic, and white elite paternalism is not unique to Alabama, Booker T. Washington, or Tuskegee. In his study of black teachers in the segregated South, Fairclough notes that Black teachers were, generally speaking, from middle class families, and thus tended to look down on the rude, rough habits of their rural cousins. They preached hygiene, thrift, abstinence, temperance, industriousness, elocution, and “oversold” the extent to which these attributes could lead to personal success for their students. Nearly every college and university for black people operated on an “industrial” model to some extent, Fairclough observes. Rural people were often, but not always, deeply invested in such an education as a strategy of uplift. For many the economic reality of sharecropping meant that children could be more productive in the fields than in school. Even when they were involved in a school, they didn’t always agree with its methods. Some parents protested the use of corporal punishment by teachers and advocated for a higher level of instruction than was on offer in “industrial” models.105

The “industrial” label can sometimes be deceiving. Fairclough’s careful observation of the various meanings of “industrial” education demonstrates the point. In fact, he documents that many schools operated on a different basis from Tuskegee — they slapped the label “industrial” on their institutions in order to attract funding, but consciously promoted a liberal arts curriculum. Between the boll weevil, depressed cotton prices, and increasing opportunities in urban centers, “industrial” education aimed at training farmers and craftspeople (what had been the aspiration of the freed people) was increasingly antiquated by the early 20th century. New industrial leaders needed black workers educated at a higher level, and in some urban centers they pushed for (or even built themselves) better schools. Between the changing status of black

105 Fairclough, *Black teachers*: 277; 418; 140; 115; 244, 246, 305.
people, migration, and the shifting needs of industry, resistance to black education beyond the moral training of the “industrial” model broke down after Booker T. Washington’s death in 1915.\textsuperscript{106}

What those segregated schools and their teachers accomplished is not entirely contained within the ideals held by the teachers or stated in the curriculum, Fairclough argues. Although some teachers explicitly advocated for democracy, civil rights, and other subversive ideas in the segregated South, most did not. A generation of activists and thinkers who wrote boldly and took bold action were nurtured in these schools (such as Carter G. Woodson, Richard Wright, and Ida B. Wells), where, despite the emphasis on manners and morals, an implicit lesson was pride. “By and large eschewing revolutionary or left-wing doctrines, they espoused Christian values, middle-class virtues, and American ideals. In that sense, they were a conservative force,” Fairclough concludes, “Yet they resisted white efforts to place a ceiling upon black achievement and refused to indoctrinate black children into white supremacy.”\textsuperscript{107}

The changing economic position of black people had implications for their social status, and created new openings for them to pursue formal schooling. Industrial workers needed more literacy and industrial magnates tended to view schooling as an essential method of socializing the workforce — based on the success of this approach in northern states. Thus, raising black people from the role of agricultural peons to that of industrial wage laborers meant the opportunity to participate in formal schooling, and rising status. Although this new status — industrial wage laborer — was not particularly high, from the perspective of the planter any higher status was a threat to their social and economic system. Beyond the ideological implications, there was the issue of the declining number of people available for agriculture. The

\textsuperscript{106} Fairclough, \textit{Black teachers}: 208, 250; 146, 272; 207.

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.: 146; 419.
exodus of laborers from the rural counties to the cities (motivated by the new opportunities in industry) put the remaining agricultural workers in the Black Belt in an improved bargaining position. As they had in the past, black people used such leverage to negotiate for educational opportunities for themselves and their children. In these ways, the old order was unstable. The outcomes were not automatic, nor easy — everything came through social struggle and contestation — but the terrain on which that conflict occurred was shifting.

The philanthropists were slow to respond to these changes. They assumed that black people could be socialized into particular industrial occupations. Accordingly, they funded “industrial” education in order to promote social stability and productivity. Both social stability and productivity proved fragile in the 1920s, however, as the American economy contracted. Employers turned “black jobs” into “white jobs” and thus rendered many black workers superfluous, frustrating philanthropists’ plans. They eventually abandoned their commitment to “industrial” education and higher education and shifted their attention to elementary schools for black people. With Washington deceased and the economy changing rapidly, both Tuskegee and Hampton became liberal arts colleges. The “New Negro” of the 1920s would not accept anything less.

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108 Bond, *Negro education*: 224; 226-7; 142, 232, 244.
Chapter 2: Transformations of Tuskegee Institute, 1915-1945

The New Negro on Campus Fights Back

The dramatic global events that transformed the lives of black people in the United States in the first two decades of the twentieth century could hardly leave their colleges and universities untouched. Black soldiers traveled to Europe to fight in a world war and came home armed, literally and figuratively. Black people increased their migration to urban centers in the South and in the North, and the South industrialized. All of these dynamics shifted power away from the planters and gave force to calls for educational change. Industrial education in general, and at Hampton and Tuskegee in particular, did not survive the decade.

Black colleges in the 1920s faced extreme contradictions. Southern states raised teaching standards and expanded education, which placed greater pressure on colleges to raise academic standards as well. However, philanthropists and some black educators tried to hold on to the industrial model in the form of vocational education and continued to challenge the rise of academic curricula. The federal government, too, did its part to try to prevent change. The 1914 and 1917 Smith-Lever and Smith-Hughes Acts established a county bureaucracy that deployed agents to make sure black schools receiving federal funds did not stray from vocationalism. At

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2 Wolters, *The New Negro on Campus*, 13. I learned a great deal about black student protest movements in the 1920s from Wolters’ book, which was published in 1975. I find his support for racist pseudoscience repugnant, and I don’t profess to know when or how he became the sort of person who writes for white nationalist publications. In *The New Negro on Campus* he very much wrote from the standpoint of black college students, and I believe the information and ideas, quoted in this dissertation, hold up, and are corroborated by other sources quoted (especially in this chapter), such as Du Bois, Aptheker, Marable, Rogers, and others. For more on Wolters’ racism, see Nicole Hemmer, “The Renaissance of Intellectual Racism: How institutions gift a veneer of respectability to white nationalists who promote racist pseudoscience,” *U.S. News & World Report*, April 18, 2017. Accessed February 15,
the same time, black students became a force to be reckoned with. While the number of college students in the United States doubled in the 1920s, the number of black college students nearly quintupled. Only 400 received bachelor’s degrees in 1920, while 1,903 did so in 1929. 3 There were 2,132 black students nationwide in 1917 and 13,580 by 1927. These were no longer meek, grateful vocational students. Rather, they were often bitter, fearing that their aspirations had been traded for philanthropists’ money. 4 Black students fought back. Their protests, with growing support from their parents and communities, and in the context of changing political economy of the South, changed “institutes” into genuine colleges and universities.

Often, black students initiated protest movements in response to what they felt were antiquated Victorian rules governing their lives on campus. Strict moral codes of conduct on campus were traditional for all colleges in the United States, but whereas white schools started shedding these regulations in order to emphasize academics in the 1920s, black schools lagged behind. 5 Every minute of student’s lives at Hampton was scheduled: ”The ringing of a bell told them when to get up, go to class, go to meals, go to chapel, go to church and go to bed.” 6 Reviewing the records of the administrative board at Hampton, Edward Graham notes that, “at a time when civilization was so far advanced that man had invented the iron lung, flown the Atlantic, transmitted the first television image and sound, and designed a rocket-propelled plane -- two young ladies were put on probation for playing cards.” 7 When Hampton had younger students effectively taking courses at the high school level or lower, it was easier to impose such

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3 Aptheker, “The Negro College Student in the 1920s,” 152.
4 Wolters, The New Negro on Campus, 17.
5 Ibid., 13.
7 Graham and Meade, “Hampton Institute Strike,” 672.
regulations. But by the 1920s, “Hampton was no longer dealing with docile and half-grown elementary students, regimented to strict military discipline,” wrote Du Bois. Instead, “she had to deal with older college men who were thinking for themselves.”

Students also reacted to the humiliating imposition of Jim Crow rules on their own campuses. Although they tried to build up students’ pride and confidence, administrators at black colleges also attempted to maintain the norms of the segregated South, especially in the presence of funders, dignitaries, and other white visitors. After integrating faculty and dining rooms, Atlanta University was told it must give up “radicalism” in order to receive philanthropic support. The people holding the reins of power were part of the problem. The trustees of Hampton Institute believed in Jim Crow. They saw “complete separation” as the “only solution” to the “Negro problem” -- including segregation on campus. Some teachers apparently agreed; five white members of Hampton’s faculty marched in a Ku Klux Klan parade in support of segregation. Hampton’s leaders decided to ban the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) from campus. Fisk did the same, taking the extra precaution of removing NAACP literature from its library.

In response to low academic standards, enforced vocationalism and Jim Crow on campus, black students launched, in the 1920s, what one black newspaper called “an epidemic of student strikes.” At Fisk, in 1924, students demanded greater freedom, the right to form sororities and fraternities, and a student newspaper. In a flashpoint, students erupted, overturned chapel seats, smashed windows, shouting, “Du Bois! Du Bois!” The students went on strike, shutting down the campus for ten weeks, ultimately winning their demands. At Howard, student protests ended

9 Wolters, The New Negro on Campus: 26-7; 248-9; 34.
10 Rogers, The Black Campus Movement, 39.
mandatory chapel attendance in 1922. Two years later, Howard students threatened a strike and
won joint power — alongside the administration — in student disciplinary cases. In 1925,
Howard students struck against compulsory military participation in the Reserve Officer
Training Corps (ROTC), and succeeded in having the program reclassified as an optional way to
satisfy Howard’s physical education requirement. Students at Tuskegee would have to wait
fifty years to win comparable changes.12

Many observers saw the revolt of black students in the 1920s as part of a global
radicalization. “Youth the world over is undergoing a spiritual and an intellectual awakening,”
wrote the black poet Countee Cullen, “[and the youth] is looking with new eyes at old customs
and institutions, and is finding for them interpretations which its parents passed over.” President
McKenzie at Fisk said that the uprising of black students raised similar issues as the Russian
Revolution — particularly the issue of control: “This problem in the college is quite similar to
that occasionally presented, of recent years, by radicals everywhere. Shall the factory be turned
over to the workers and be run by the workingmen’s council? Shall the colleges be turned over to
the students and be run by undergraduate committees?”13 Visiting Tuskegee in July 1920, former
U.S. President Taft hopefully asserted that the legacy of Booker T. Washington would be the
answer to this global movement. Washington’s philosophy could, he said, “save us from anarchy
and Bolshevism.”14

The two black colleges with the largest endowments, Hampton and Tuskegee, were seen
as immune from the strike wave. According to one observer, “nobody considered the possibility

11 Wolters, The New Negro on Campus: 44; 45; 48; 51; 64; 74; 76; 113; 118.
12 For example, compulsory chapel attendance at Tuskegee wasn’t amended until 1967. See Campus Digest, March
11, 1967.
13 Aptheker, “The Negro College Student in the 1920s:” 164; 154.
that anything could happen at Hampton.”¹⁵ But something, did, in fact happen, and Hampton would not be the same afterwards. Students at Hampton went on strike in 1925 and then again in 1927 against the low level of instruction and against strict moral regulation. One student leader of the latter revolt said his fellow students had a “Du Bois ambition” that was not compatible with “a Booker Washington education.”³⁶ Another account summed up the students’ issues: “What gave students most concern was the quality of education that the college offered and the role of students in campus affairs.” The strike was broken when its leadership was identified and removed from campus. At least fourteen of those expelled students were “ranking scholars” on campus and several went on to earn degrees elsewhere, and then to distinguished careers in education and public service, among other fields, demonstrating that with “unerring accuracy the college singled out the backbone of its student leadership… probably one of the most talented groups ever to leave a college or university campus.”³⁷ There was victory in defeat, however: the strike successfully forced the school to reassess the issues raised, but the pace of change was slow. Discontent, grumbling and protest continued after the strike. One measure of creeping progress was that it took a whole year after the struggle, until 1928, for students to win the right to dance at a few major social activities.³⁸

Tuskegee, meanwhile, mostly avoided such clashes in the 1920s for three reasons, discussed further below: dissidents often decided to leave campus on their own; the administration moved quickly to upgrade the academic programming; and the school faced external challenges that united students, faculty and administrators. Following Booker T. Washington’s death in 1915, Dr. Robert Russa Moton was selected as the next leader of

¹⁷ Graham and Meade, “The Hampton Strike;” 674; 677. 
¹⁸ Wolters, The New Negro on Campus, 271.
Tuskegee. Dr. Moton successfully embraced and celebrated the educational philosophy of Booker T. Washington in words, while quietly abandoning many – but not all – aspects of it in practice. Moton inherited a college that was effectively a high school. After the state of Alabama initiated a policy of only hiring teachers with college degrees, Tuskegee graduates were unemployable in the state’s primary schools. Moton decided that he had “to advance the curriculum of Tuskegee Institute to the college level in order to meet this requirement.” In 1925, Moton initiated a major campaign to raise $5 million and ended up raising $10 million, proving that, while shifting course on the curriculum he was able to continue Washington’s legacy of courting wealthy donors.19

As in the past, the money came with strings. Student life was strictly regimented and surveilled in order to perpetually prove that Tuskegee was instilling the proper values in its students — including acceptance of Jim Crow segregation. “Male students were organized in quasi-military cadet regiments that drilled, performed guard duty, and policed the campus,” one historian wrote. Thus there were “continual rumors” of “student unrest” in the 1920s, and students found creative ways to “secretly” rebel. Tuskegee students were “divided” Marable wrote, “about the new racial consciousness of the twenties.” Some embraced the Eurocentric cultural norms on campus, while others wondered “[i]s it a humiliation to be identified with a race that has produced such men and women as Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Sojourner Truth, Phyllis Wheatley and many others of such character?”20 Some of the faculty considered the observance of Jim Crow rules on campus “obsequious.” Tuskegee attracted some of the best and brightest black scholars in the country, but they often bristled under the restrictions of the campus culture. The famous social scientist E. Franklin Frazier, for example,

19 Hughes and Patterson, Robert Russa Moton, 87-9.
20 Quoted in Marable, “Tuskegee in the 1920s,” 766.
recalled that when he began teaching at Tuskegee, he was summoned to the dean’s office and “admonished for carrying too many books on the campus.” Apparently, the dean “feared that whites ‘would get the impression that Tuskegee was training the Negro's intellect rather than his heart and hands.’”  

Although Moton moved to upgrade academic offerings, at the same time, Tuskegee experienced a rapidly revolving student body. Student attrition — following the pattern of the low graduation rates of the 19th century — helped reduce activism at Tuskegee. Moton himself admitted that “Too large a percentage of our students, for one reason or another, discontinue their studies before completing their courses.” Or, put another way: “…nonconformists generally removed themselves from Tuskegee.” As Claude McKay did a few years earlier, Nella Larson, another such non-conformist, worked at Tuskegee in 1915 and left in 1916. In her novel, Quicksand, the protagonist, a young teacher at a school clearly modeled on Tuskegee, becomes disillusioned with the “hypocrisy, cruelty, servility, and snobbishness,” and decides to leave. The departure of figures like Larson and McKay in the first few decades of the twentieth century, may explain why “the institute was free from the student and faculty protests that brought turmoil to other black colleges in the 1920s.”

The Tuskegee Veterans Hospital

Tuskegee Institute and its new leader, Dr. Moton, emerged from the first world war with political capital to spend. Most black leaders (including Du Bois) saw the war as an opportunity for black people to raise their status. Du Bois called for black people to “close ranks” and

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support the war effort, and even endorsed the formation of a segregated officers training camp for black people.  

Meanwhile, Moton offered Tuskegee’s resources to the U.S. military. The institute gave technical training to 1,229 men during the conflict. Moton also lent his personal prestige in black America to the government’s effort to manage black soldiers. There was “bitter criticism concerning the treatment of Negro soldiers and officers in France,” Du Bois wrote, “and there was widespread fear that when these soldiers returned they would be centers of disaffection and even revolt in the United States.” Moton traveled to France on behalf of the U.S. government, allegedly to investigate charges of sexual misconduct by black soldiers (he found no evidence). Others argue that Moton’s real mission was to encourage the troops “not to be arrogant upon their return.” As Du Bois put it, “the administration of President Woodrow Wilson depended on Moton to help dampen radical agitation among Negroes.”

The times were changing, however, and the necessity of cringing before white supremacy — however controversial or necessary in the past — was increasingly unacceptable to black people in all regions of the United States. Moton, too, was a man of his age — but the 1920s and 1930s was a different era from that of Washington’s. When Moton was invited to speak at the unveiling of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. in 1922 (the only black man to have that honor), he prepared a blistering speech. In it, he proclaimed that the memorial would be a “hollow mockery” and “a symbol of hypocrisy” unless the government took the steps necessary “to make real in our national life… the things for which [Lincoln] died.” All mention of mockery

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25 Moton, Finding a way out, 249.
and hypocrisy were edited from the speech in advance by the Lincoln Memorial Commission, however, and Moton delivered a much tamer version at the actual event.  

Moton’s willingness to accommodate the agenda of the White House and the U.S. Military paid dividends. For his loyalty and service, Moton and Tuskegee were rewarded with a Veterans Hospital. Interestingly, both black militants and white racists objected to the locating of a federal hospital for black veterans at Tuskegee. The NAACP argued that the hospital should be located in the North; placing it at Tuskegee, civil rights leaders worried, would further strengthen the school as a “capital” of black America. An Alabama state senator, meanwhile feared that a government hospital would put local black people beyond the control of state officials. “[A] bunch of negro officers,” senator R.H. Powell said, “with uniforms and big salaries and the protection of Uncle Sam -- negroes who are not responsible to our local laws and not regardful of local prejudice -- will quickly turn this little town into a place of riot.” Once it was decided that Tuskegee would in fact get the hospital, a struggle broke out over the racial composition of the staff, especially the professional positions for doctors and nurses.

In the process of fighting for an all-black professional staff, Moton retained the élan of a militant “New Negro” while developing a new financial base of support for Tuskegee: the federal government. At first, the government disagreed with Moton. The Department of Veterans Affairs thought that the staff should be all black, except for the professional positions — the nurses, doctors and the head of the hospital would be white. But, as one historian noted, in order to “avoid estranging Tuskegee Institute from a people that had passed beyond the

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accommodationism of Booker T. Washington, Moton had no choice but to demand that the government appoint Negroes to the professional staff."\(^{31}\)

The conflict illustrated the tortured logic of segregation. In the course of the struggle some white supremacists argued for an integrated staff and some integrationists argued for a segregated staff. White politicians demanded segregation, yet insisted that white professionals treat black patients (black nurse-maids were already made essential because Alabama law prohibited white nurses from touching black patients). State Senator Power feared having “any niggers in the state whom we cannot control” more than he feared an integrated hospital staff. President Harding, however, was “uncompromisingly against every suggestion of social equality” and thought that black people should “develop their own leaders capable of leading a separate Negro society,” and thus his segregationism led him to support Moton’s call for an all-black staff. The director of the Veterans Bureau, also a staunch segregationist, agreed with Harding. Even the integrationist NAACP came around to supporting an all-black staff, after originally protesting against what they argued would be a “segregated hospital.” The only major black publication to protest was the Messenger. Its editors wrote, “For the Negroes it is a dangerous precedent to demand a jim-crow government institution.”\(^{32}\)

Moton’s blend of accommodation and protest allowed him to avoid a direct confrontation with state or federal officials and at the same time present a militant posture in the conflict. At first, he actually acquiesced to the demand for white professionals in the hospital, arguing that a bi-racial staff was ideal, and calculating that black professionals could take over in time. When the hospital opened on May 20, 1923, the professional staff was entirely white. White nurses were assisted by black nurse-maids (earning one-third to one-fourth what white nurses made). In

\(^{31}\) Ibid.: 153; 156.
\(^{32}\) Wolters, The New Negro on Campus: 159; 163; 160; 172; 161-2; 162.
July, when the first black professional appeared, an accountant, the hospital’s director ordered the security guards to escort him out. Soon after, approximately one thousand local white people marched with the Ku Klux Klan directly through Tuskegee’s campus in a single file line that stretched two miles. Among the procession were at least twenty hospital employees. Moton struck a defiant pose. He was prepared to defend Tuskegee, ordering ROTC students to take up positions along the parade route, among campus buildings, and some reserves in the nearby countryside “ready to speed in if trouble broke out.”33 The NAACP's Walter White sat with Moton in his home during the Klan procession, and remembered: “He pointed to a rifle and a shotgun, well oiled and grimly businesslike, that stood in a corner... ‘I've got only one time to die. If I must die now to save Tuskegee Institute, I'm ready. I've been running long enough.’”34

Standing up to the Klan was not the same as defying the federal government. Regardless, Moton’s vacillations achieved his goal in the end. Soon after the Klan march, Moton did in fact concede to white supervision of the hospital, and local white leaders conceded the presence of some black professionals in the hospital. The NAACP and Du Bois opposed this compromise, but Moton stuck to it with the understanding that the federal government supported a gradual transition to an all-black staff. Fortunately, elite white opinion was far from united in opposition to an all-black staff. After conceding black professionals, it was a short step to conceding a black director. By July 1924, only one year after a black accountant had been physically removed from the hospital and the Klan had marched through campus, the Tuskegee Veterans Hospital had an all-black staff and, with no fuss or protest from white people, a black director. By the 1940s

33 Wolters, The New Negro on Campus: 171; 167; 172; 174; 175
medical residency programs were initiated in the hospital and by the 1970s, it had 1,200 all-black employees, including 37 physicians and dentists, and 136 nurses.\textsuperscript{35}

Moton is probably the major reason students and faculty at Tuskegee did not erupt in protest as they did at virtually every other black college in the 1920s. Transforming Tuskegee into a proper college, standing up to the Klan and fighting for an all-black staff at the Veterans Hospital, Moton seemed to many to have broken from the “servile deference” of the Washington years. As one historian concluded, “...it is doubtful that any considerable number of students and professors would have risen in rebellion against a militant principal who, at least in the mid-1920s, was seen as an embattled major leading a campaign for racial self-determination.”\textsuperscript{36} In 1929, Moton published \textit{What the Negro Thinks}, in which he forthrightly asserted that black people oppose segregation and discrimination and demand equality.\textsuperscript{37} Rather than stifling the new militancy, Moton appeared to many to have joined it.

Moton skillfully transformed Tuskegee while apparently preserving the legacy of Booker T. Washington. In reality, however, Moton abandoned much of Washington’s philosophy, of necessity, piece by piece. Washington insisted Tuskegee would never be a college; its primary function was teacher training. Moton introduced college courses in 1925; an emphasis on vocational training was all that survived of Washington’s “industrial” model. Washington tried to develop the ability of black people to be economically independent through owning land, and ironically, he was completely dependent on the resources of white philanthropists in spreading that message. Moton developed a black middle class in Tuskegee through a contract with the

\textsuperscript{36} Wolters, \textit{The New Negro on Campus}, 191.
U.S. government for wages at the hospital totaling roughly $75,000 a month, while his idea of breaking up the large plantations in Alabama to promote black landownership never got a serious hearing. As Washington’s model changed in practice, so too did the ideas guiding the school. Washington said that racism would attenuate to the degree that black people made themselves economically useful. In the case of the Veterans Hospital controversy, precisely the opposite happened. The idea of black doctors and nurses terrified some (but not all) white people. What remained was Washington’s alliance with wealthy and powerful white people — Moton preserved and developed both. Moton maintained Washington’s political stance — avoiding open confrontation while privately pushing elements of his agenda that powerful white people disapproved.

By departing from key elements of Washington’s formula, however, Moton all the more effectively preserved Washington’s institution. If many of Washington’s specific proscriptions were no longer useful, his legend certainly still was. Moton inaugurated “Founder’s Day” — an annual commemoration of Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee, and on one such day in 1922 he presided over the unveiling of the infamous statue — still standing — at the campus’ main entrance, depicting Booker T. Washington “lifting the veil” of ignorance from a slave.

Despite these profound shifts in the 1920s, the legacy of “industrial education” died hard. Across the South, schools struggled to get out from under the “industrial” idea. The president of Florida State Normal College, Nathan Young, worked to develop academic curricula, but twice changed the name of the school (to “Industrial College” and then to “Agricultural and Mechanical College”) just to preserve funding. It was a Tuskegee alumnus who discovered Young’s ruse and exposed it to the state authorities. Likewise, the president of the Georgia State

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39 Huhges and Patterson, Robert Russa Moton, 93.
Industrial School was forced to resign in the face of “Tuskegee-inspired demands” that he “cut this Latin out and teach these boys to farm.”

Meanwhile at Tuskegee itself, Moton successfully refashioned “industrial” education into vocational training. “By the end of the twenties,” Marable notes, “Tuskegee had matriculated hundreds of students every year who joined the thin ranks of the small but growing Negro petty bourgeoisie.” Graduates became clergy, teachers, principals, and social workers primarily; a few went elsewhere to study medicine and law. Despite the school’s best efforts, the Jim Crow system continued to tighten through the decade and lock black people out of many professions. For one million black people in the state of Alabama, for example, the 1930 census showed only 116 black surgeons, 45 dentists, and 4 lawyers.

**Morality, Sexuality, and Syphilis**

Tuskegee and its leaders took a particular interest in promoting good health. Just before he died, Booker T. Washington initiated what later became National Negro Health Week. In a region where medical care was scarce, Tuskegee’s campus had two hospitals — Andrews Hospital and the Veterans Hospital. But in 1932, a program began that would, four decades later, make the word “Tuskegee” synonymous with racism in medicine. It came to be known as the

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41 Marable, “Tuskegee in the 1920s,” 768.
43 Although, a medical assessment of both hospitals in 1931 found that neither had made a significant contribution to community health. See James H. Jones, *Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 64.
“Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment,” but is most accurately named the United States Public Health Service Study at Tuskegee.\textsuperscript{44}

The facts are known: white doctors from the U.S. Public Health Service found 400 black men in the Tuskegee area with late-stage syphilis; they gave them iron tonic and aspirin as a fake cure in exchange for permission to perform autopsies when they died and the promise of a decent burial, free of charge. Tuskegee Institute was a willing participant, and both of its hospitals lent resources to the effort. It was one of the school’s philanthropic backers — the Rosenwald Fund (and one of the pioneering foundations supporting the construction of schools for black people in the South) — that suggested to the United States Public Health Service (USPHS) that Tuskegee be the site of the study.\textsuperscript{45}

Tuskegee Institute’s leadership, like the medical profession generally, was deeply influenced by racist myths about black people’s sexuality. In the early twentieth century, the medical profession made great advances in understanding how diseases spread, and yet were still guided in their research by racist assumptions about black people. “No disease seemed more suited to blacks than syphilis,” historian James Jones wrote, “for physicians were certain that exaggerated libido and widespread sexual promiscuity had led to high incidence of the disease among blacks.”\textsuperscript{46} Once it was understood that syphilis could spread through sexual contact, long-standing myths about black people’s sexuality also came into play and the two were strongly associated. Tuskegee’s leadership knew this all too well. During the World War I, when Moton traveled to France, part of his charge was to report on the sexual morality of black soldiers. The association with syphilis had even haunted Booker T. Washington. In 1915 a NYC physician

\textsuperscript{45} Reverby, \textit{Examining Tuskegee}: 1; 2; 28.
\textsuperscript{46} Jones, \textit{Bad Blood}, 28.
said that “racial characteristics” were responsible for the breakdown of his health, which some supporters complained was code for syphilis.\textsuperscript{47} Black sexual myths were a double-edged sword for Washington. He suffered salacious headlines when he was accused of speaking suggestively to a white woman in Boston; her husband chased Washington down the street and beat him badly.\textsuperscript{48} But Washington also played into these fears when it suited him. In an attempt to undermine northern civil rights activists, he encouraged white newspapers to take photographs of an integrated activist dinner party in New York. The newspapers took the bait and printed articles about the event that suggested the activists were engaging in interracial sex.\textsuperscript{49}

The USPHS researchers were guided by racists assumptions and proceeded in a manner that was profoundly unethical, but their intent was not malicious. The syphilis study at Tuskegee did not involve injecting people with syphilis and was not aimed at “genocide,” as some later believed. Rather, it was an attempt to use manipulative and deceitful methods to understand the late stages of syphilis. The subjects were not informed of their condition, were offered treatments that were fake, and were not given genuine treatments as new ones were developed. Sadly, it was not uncommon at the time for the U.S. Public Health Service to conduct research without subjects’ consent. By 1936, researchers had demonstrated that late-stage syphilis caused neurological and cardiovascular damage, and still the study wasn’t stopped.\textsuperscript{50} By the 1940s researchers knew that penicillin could be an effective treatment, but it was not administered to the Tuskegee participants. In fact, the Public Health Service went out of its way to prevent the patients from knowing they had syphilis and from seeking any treatments.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{47} Reverby, \textit{Examining Tuskegee}: 18; 16-17.
\textsuperscript{48} Harlan, \textit{Wizard}, 379-82.
\textsuperscript{49} Harlan, “Secret Life,” 414-5.
\textsuperscript{50} Reverby, \textit{Examining Tuskegee}: 21; 54.
When an Associated Press reporter broke the story in 1972, the impact was tremendous.\(^52\) As the tale spread, so did outrage and misinformation, which, unfortunately made subsequent public health initiatives all the more difficult to implement. For example, when health officials tried to promote needle-exchange programs to prevent the spread of AIDS in African American communities in the 1980s, some black leaders responded with fear and suspicion, invoking the legacy of what happened at Tuskegee.\(^53\) False information about the study at Tuskegee persists in the 21st century and is widespread.\(^54\) In 1997, U.S. President Bill Clinton officially apologized for the Tuskegee syphilis experiment. Surrounded by family members of the study’s subjects, and eight survivors, the president announced, among other things, a planning grant for the establishment of a bioethics center at Tuskegee University.\(^55\) In 1999, the Tuskegee University National Center for Bioethics in Research and Health Care opened its doors.\(^56\)

When student protesters occupied Sherman Hall in 1968, they had no idea that such a study was in progress, or that for the next several decades, their school would be associated with medical racism. They were also most likely unaware that, at that very moment, Tuskegee had become associated — in the eyes of Alabama’s Governor George Wallace — with communism. Wallace was wrong, of course. Tuskegee was not a communist training ground. The grain of historical truth, however, was this: everywhere black people in the South were fighting against Jim Crow in the 1930s and 1940s, the Communist Party was an important part of that movement. The history of Tuskegee in those years is also part of the story.

\(^{52}\) Jones, Bad Blood, 1.
\(^{53}\) Fairchild and Bayer, “Uses and Abuses,” 919.
Depression, Bad Food, and Communism

The Great Depression shattered the lives of working people — black people in particular. Agriculture suffered more than other economic sectors, primarily because of cotton. The overproduction of cotton on the world market meant prices plummeted from 20 cents a bale in 1927, down to 4.6 cents in 1932. By 1933, 500,000 families were on public relief assistance in six southern states. Nearly 300,000 of those were in the cotton counties. In the cotton belt, black families survived on salted meat, corn, flour bread, syrup, and few vegetables. Sociologist Charles Johnson studied Macon County in the early 1930s and lamented the “dietary deficiencies everywhere so manifest.”

The federal government’s intervention in the economy during the Great Depression — the New Deal — reorganized the shattered economy and ushered in new ways of life. Wide-ranging federal regulations deepened the South’s integration into the national economy, reduced its dependency on cotton, and paved the way for industry. In the 1940s, 450,000 black men left agriculture and 500,000 jobs opened up for them in manufacturing. Booker T. Washington’s goal of promoting independent farmers and craftspeople was no longer relevant. Instead, hundreds of thousands of former sharecroppers and farmers became factory workers and soldiers. The planters no longer had the same power over their lives. Black people found opportunities with new employers, including the federal government. From 1926 to 1933 the number of black federal employees jumped from 50,000 to 200,000.

57 Bloom, Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement: 61; 62.
58 Johnson, Shadow of the Plantation: 104; 106.
59 Bloom, Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement: 65; 60.
60 Marable, Race, reform, and rebellion, 13.
With rising incomes, migration to urban centers, and newfound confidence, black people sent their children to college in record numbers and their expectations soared. Only 12,000 black college people were college students in 1928, but by 1941 there were 37,000, and that number more than doubled by 1950. In the 1930s black students continued to protest, reflecting the fact that campuses still did not rise to the level of their aspirations. Rogers notes that “at least” eight big demonstrations “rocked HBCUs” in 1936 alone, over poor food, racism of professors, and the push for student councils. A white visitor to the campus in 1930 noted that: “Tuskegee and its methods receive more criticisms from the Negroes themselves than from the Southern whites.”

One particularly eloquent testimony about Tuskegee in the 1930s comes from the novelist Ralph Ellison. Ellison was drawn to the campus in 1933 to study music under the famed black composer William Levi Dawson. Unable to pay tuition, Ellison was allowed to work in the school’s bakery, but didn’t earn enough for his musical instrument required uniforms, and boarding fees, and found himself quickly sinking into debt. He found solace in reading, and got a job at the library, but the “historic ethos of Tuskegee was a constant worship of practicality,” which left him feeling isolated from his peers. He also bristled at the strict regulation of student life and behavior. The student handbook was explicit: “Here, you will find every phase of your life systematically regulated and supervised for the purpose of aiding you in getting the most from your courses.” Even the students’ gait was a matter of scrutiny: “Pick up your feet when you walk… Never drag yourself along. Some people think that heavy feet indicate a light head.”

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62 Rogers, Black Campus Movement, 46.
The handbook reminded students that “Tuskegee is a vast workshop… work is the chief element awaiting you at every turn.”

In 1952 Ellison published his first novel, *Invisible Man*, in which the protagonist attends a Tuskegee-style college in the South. The portrait of the school — echoing *Quicksand* — is not flattering. Dr. Bledsoe, a thinly-veiled representation of Moton, was described as a man with not one but two Cadillacs, who knew just how to put on a mask for the white people who funded the school, and reveled in the power he wielded. “I’s big and black and I say ‘Yes, suh’ as loudly as any burrhead when it’s convenient, but I’m still the king down here,” Bledsoe tells the novel’s protagonist. Bledsoe continues:

I don’t care how much it appears otherwise. Power doesn’t have to show off. Power is confident, self-assuring, self-starting and self-stopping, self-warming and self-justifying. When you have it, you know it. Let the Negroes snicker and the crackers laugh! Those are the facts, son. The only ones I even pretend to please are big white folk, and even those I control more than they control me. This is a power set-up, son, and I’m at the controls. You think about that. When you buck against me, you’re bucking against power, rich white folk’s power, the nation’s power— which means government power.

Horace Mann Bond corresponded with Ellison in 1967, chiding him about this portrayal. “I thought you laid it on a little thick,” he concluded. But perhaps the most enduring aspect of this fictionalized Tuskegee-inspired narrative is the protagonist’s reaction to the statue of the Founder, portrayed as “lifting the veil of ignorance” from a slave. “I am standing puzzled,” he

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says, looking at the statue, “unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place; whether I am witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding.”

Like other HBCUs in the 1930s and 40s, Tuskegee provided a space where competing ideals were given open expression. Ellison, drawn towards the communist movement as a teenager, felt out of step with the culture of the campus as a whole. But he did find a few professors and other students who shared his love of literature. There were both strict rules and the possibility of protesting them. ”Students complained about Victorian codes of conduct,” writes Fairclough, perceptively, “but the very frequency of student protests suggests that black colleges were not nearly as autocratic as some critics charged.”

On campus, black students became exposed to ideas of collective protest and social change, while the administration remained, generally speaking, committed to middle-class personal advancement strategies and opposed collective bargaining and unions. The attitude of Tuskegee’s students, faculty, and administration towards two Southern-based Communist-led initiatives in the 1930s and 1940s — the Sharecroppers Union and the Southern Negro Youth Congress — demonstrates the depth of the communist movement’s influence in black America and the broad range of opinion, debate and action in play in these years at HBCUs.

Historians have, in the last few decades, taken a fresh look at the impact the communist movement on black America. The Communist Party (CP) was America’s first interracial movement to achieve a mass membership; at the end of the 1930s it had more than 50,000

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67 Ellison, Invisible man, 36.
68 Rampersad, Ellison, 68.
69 Fairclough, “Tuskegee’s Moton,” 103.
members, roughly 7,000 of whom were black.\textsuperscript{71} The party carried its militant approach to fighting racism into trade unions in the North, and into the fields and mines in the South. It was in large part due to the efforts of communists that black union membership rocketed from 150,000 in 1935 to 1.25 million by the end of the second world war.\textsuperscript{72} Likewise, in the South, the CP sent organizers into the Black Belt in the 1930s and recruited thousands of black farmers to its rural organizing project: the Sharecroppers Union.

The history of the Sharecroppers Union (SCU) suggests that the black middle class’s ideas about how to improve black peoples’ lives weren’t the only ones. Instead of rising up through market competition in allegiance with powerful white people, the Sharecroppers Union offered the possibility of progress through collective action and confrontation with powerful white people. Historian Robin D.G. Kelley writes that “through their own participation many black working people came to realize that a class-based, interracial politics-in which participants operated on a relatively equal plane and put basic rights for African-Americans at the center of their program was possible (though still improbable) in the Deep South.” Following Booker T. Washington’s stance toward trade unions, the leadership of Tuskegee in the 1930s actively opposed the Sharecroppers Union. Monroe Work conceded that the school’s “general policy… is to discourage the organization of Negro farmers.” At one point, when sharecroppers had an armed conflict with authorities in a nearby county, Moton hoped to “quell black unrest in the area” and so “dispatched representatives to Tallapoosa in a calculated move to turn blacks away from Communism.”\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{71} Naison, \textit{Communists in Harlem}; Solomon, \textit{The cry was unity}.
\textsuperscript{72} Marable, \textit{Race, reform, and rebellion}, 14.
\textsuperscript{73} Kelley, \textit{Hammer and Hoe}: 112; 51; 42.
In another incident, Moton and Tuskegee both lost credibility with some black people over this stance. Fifteen SCU members stood with weapons to defy the sheriff who came to seize the livestock of a sharecropper, Clifford James, who had fallen deeply in debt. The sheriff left and returned with reinforcements, and in the ensuing shootout James was wounded. Despite his injuries, James walked seventeen miles to Tuskegee’s hospital. But the Tuskegee staff handed him over to the sheriff. “After dressing James’s gunshot wounds, Dr. Eugene Dibble of Tuskegee contacted the Macon County sheriff,” writes Kelley, “who then removed James to a cold, damp cell at the Montgomery County jail.” When James and another SCU member, Milo Bentley, both died of untreated wounds while in jail, some black people criticized Tuskegee’s administration. The CP’s legal defense organization “held a very successful public meeting at the Old Pythian Temple on January 2, 1933,” notes Kelley, “to protest the arrests and to censure Robert Moton and staff members at Tuskegee Institute for their complicity in the deaths of James and Bentley.” Three thousand people, mostly black, marched a few days later in a mass funeral for the two sharecroppers. “Now, if you love your neighbor as yourself,” one local woman asked of Moton, “why did you not protect those two poor wounded negro farmers? Why did you let them die? A good enemy [sic] of all races I should say you be, in a time of real need.”

The Tuskegee-based elite came in for the most criticism when working class black people developed their own strategies for change. The communist-led SCU, like the organization of mineworkers in prior decades, represented alternative solutions to the problems of black Alabamians. In the 1930s it also presented perhaps the clearest indigenous critique of Washingtonism in the Black Belt. Ned Cobb, who lived in Tallapoosa, the adjacent county north of Macon, joined the Sharecroppers Union in 1931 and became one of its leading members, until

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74 Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 49-51. In an endnote, Kelley says that Moton claimed that James actually asked to be sent to the Macon County Jail. See p.253.
he was sentenced to twelve years in prison for participating in the armed defense of Clifford
James’ livestock. Cobb remembered traveling to Tuskegee’s commencement ceremonies in the
spring when he was young, but he remained critical of the school’s founder. Reflecting on
Washington, Cobb explains both his admiration for Washington, and his critique (and, perhaps
even obliquely alluding to Ellison’s line about the statue on campus). “I wouldn't boost Booker
Washington today up to everything that was industrious and right,” he said,

Why? He was a nigger of this state and well known and everything, but here's what his
trouble was, to a great extent: he didn't feel for and didn't respect his race of people
enough to rock bottom with em. He leaned too much to the white people that controlled
the money -- lookin out for what was his worth, that's what he was lookin for. He was a
big man, he had authority, he had pull in life, he had a political pull any way he turned
and he was pullin for Booker Washington. He wanted his people to do this, that, and the
other, but he never did get to the roots of our troubles. He had a lot of friends, he had a lot
of courage, but it was all his way. He had a lot of anything a man needed for hisself, but
the right main thing, he weren't down with that. Yet and still the veil was over the
nigger's eyes. Booker Washington didn't try to pull that veil away like he shoulda done.75

As the second world war approached, the Communist Party in the United States, on
orders from the Soviet Union, dropped its grassroots approach to revolutionism, and sought
alliances with middle-class protest organizations.76 This new strategic orientation, known as “the
Popular Front,” represented a move toward the center-left of the American political mainstream,
making it easier for communist-led and/or -initiated protest organizations to attract and retain
large memberships of black people. For example, the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC),
founded in 1937, was initiated by CP members, remained formally independent of the Party, and

75 Nate Shaw and Theodore Rosengarten, All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw (Chicago: University of
Chicago Press, 2000), 542-3. “Nate Shaw” was a pseudonym for Ned Cobb.
76 The twists and turns of the CPUSA are well-summarized in Paul D’Amato, “The Communist Party and Black
Liberation in the 1930’s,” International Socialist Review, 1, (Summer 1997), 1-11.
attracted a wide range of support. At its height, the SNYC claimed 11,000 black members in 10 southern states.  

The SNYC was able to take root in HBCUs because, however conservative in leadership, the nation’s black colleges were, in fact incubators of a generation of activists. As students pushed for greater academic offerings and more intellectual freedom in the 1930s and 1940s, they opened up a space for discussions about left-wing ideas, including communism and socialism. Students at Morehouse College could take a course on Karl Marx. And even in the Deep South’s state schools, notes Fairclough, “students could hear the likes of Paul Robeson, Langston Hughes, and W.E.B. Du Bois” — three of the nation’s most prominent black communists.  

Whereas Moton had tried to undermine the SCU, Frederick Patterson, Tuskegee’s third president (who began his tenure in 1935), could embrace the aims of the SNYC. The new organization represented the new mood of protest among young black people in the South, and its center-left politics also fit with the ideas of black leaders. In 1936, Edward Strong, a graduate student at Howard and a CP member, put out a call for a Southern Negro Youth Conference, noting that slavery ended three quarters of a century earlier, but “clouds of reaction and repression” still hung over black people. This conference, he wrote, would “strike out in a new and mightier drive to the goal that we are determined to achieve — Freedom, Equality, Opportunity.” Tuskegee President Fred Patterson was the chair of the SNYC’s adult advisory board (along with other leading black educators, including Du Bois and Alaine Locke).  

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77 Rogers, Black Campus Movement, 52; Kelley, Hammer and hoe, 197.  
78 Fairclough, “Tuskegee’s Moton,” 102; 103.  
Patterson’s niece, Thelma Dale, was elected as its vice-chairperson. At the SNYC’s fifth congress, held at Tuskegee in 1942, the most famous African-American communist, singer Paul Robeson, gave his first Deep South performance.

The SNYC’s program emphasized campaigns against disfranchisement and poll-taxes — increasingly the program of the mainstream liberal black leadership. In its Right to Vote campaign, SNYC members shared resources with NAACP leaders and the newly-organized Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Still, Kelley maintains that the SNYC represented “something more radical” than Popular Front liberalism. While the CPUSA turned away from shop floor union organizing during the Popular Front period, student leaders of the SNYC successfully carried out union drives among unorganized black workers. In Virginia in 1937, they came to the assistance of striking tobacco workers and helped them to form a new union and negotiate 10 to 20 percent pay increases and a forty-hour work week. After Hitler invaded Russia in 1941, however, SNYC leaders moved closer to mainstream black leaders. They immediately “dropped antiwar slogans” and became cheerleaders for the war “against Hitlerism.” Their call for “Freedom’s Children to Arms,” notes Kelley, “anticipated the Double V campaign [V for victory against fascism abroad and another V for victory against racism at home] national black leaders launched after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor.”

The Great Depression and the build up to the second world war shattered the old arrangements upon which Tuskegee had stood for the first fifty years of its existence. Between collapsing profit margins in the 1930s and “mounting taxation on private capital” in the 1940s,

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81 Rogers, *Black Campus Movement*, 52; Fairclough, “Tuskegee’s Moton,” 104.
83 Hughes, “We Demand Our Rights,” 44.
84 Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 218.
philanthropic donations to Tuskegee and other HBCUs plummeted.\textsuperscript{85} “[B]etween 1930 and 1943,” notes Marybeth Gasman, “the overall income of black colleges decreased by 15 percent and income from private gifts decreased 50 percent.”\textsuperscript{86} When Patterson took over the reins in 1935, Tuskegee was operating with a $50,000 annual deficit. By his own admission, Patterson was not the fundraiser that Moton or Washington had been. “I really had to strike out on my own to develop resources,” he wrote.\textsuperscript{87}

The sharp decline in funding may explain the wave of food strikes that swept black colleges in the 1940s. Students struck over the poor quality of food at Spelman in 1942, Clark Atlanta University in 1944, South Carolina's Benedict College in 1944 and 1947, North Carolina's Livingston College in 1946, Alabama A&M in 1947, and Alabama State in 1948. The “major campus protest” during Tuskegee’s 1940-41 school year was a food strike. As Rogers noted: “nearly half of the 1,400 students went on strike. Dozens were arrested, suspended, expelled, or battered by policemen in remonstration of ‘despicable’ food sometimes seasoned with flies, ants, roaches, and tacks.”\textsuperscript{88}

Patterson’s response to the protests was uniquely sympathetic. When the Tuskegee student strikers began interfering with delivery trucks entering the campus, state troopers showed up. “I had to prevail on the state troopers not to arrest the students who were blocking the entrance but to give us a chance to work things out,” Patterson recalled, “which they did. We had wonderful cooperation from the troopers, but they had the biggest guns I’d ever seen in my life. I said, ‘Don't touch these students.’ They responded, ‘We wouldn't do that, Dr. Patterson.’ I said,

\textsuperscript{88} Rogers, \textit{Black Campus Movement}, 58.
‘I think we can get this situation under control.’”89 Patterson did so with a clever deflection of the students’ energies. “When students at Tuskegee Institute went on strike in 1940 demanding better food,” writes Fairclough, “Patterson let them run the cafeteria. The students learned a valuable lesson in economics, gladly relinquishing control after a few days. But the strike also taught something to Patterson, who thereafter made a point of including students on college committees.”90 28 years later state troopers would threaten to invade the campus once again, this time in response to a student occupation of the trustees’ meeting; Frederick Patterson would be one of their hostages.

**Restructuring in the 1940s**

Such maneuvers could placate students for a while, but they couldn’t solve the underlying financial problem. With tuition at only $50 a year, raising fees would not be enough. Tuskegee still had a large endowment (roughly $7 million), but costs were rising faster than income. Instead, Patterson initiated a “Five Year Plan” for poorer students to save money through extending the amount of work they performed for the school. Students who couldn’t afford tuition would work more and study less, and graduate in five years instead of four. In his autobiography, Patterson claims that a $150,000 deficit quickly became a $300,000 surplus because of his Five Year Plan.91

This may be an overstatement, however, since he and the Board of Trustees pursued further restructuring. As a result, Patterson agreed to allow the state of Alabama the ability to appoint more trustees to the Board (from two up to six, out of 24 in total) in order to receive

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89 Patterson, *Chronicles of Faith*, 60.
90 Fairclough, “Tuskegee’s Moton,” 103.
91 Patterson, *Chronicles of Faith*: 45; 46; 57-8; 43.
more funding from the state. “There were six state-appointed men on the board,” Patterson recalled. “At least one had to be black, and one was the state secretary of education. The others were appointed at large by the governor.” In 1940, the state appropriation was still only $5,000. Patterson got it raised to $10,000 and then to $110,000. Since all of the black colleges were in the same bind, Patterson suggested they pool their collective fundraising resources. What started as the United College Drive Conference later became known as the United Negro College Fund.92 Thirteen college presidents met at Tuskegee on April 9, 1943 to begin planning the effort. Their goal was to spend roughly $100,000 collectively in order to raise $1 to 2 million. They fell slightly short of that goal, reaching $765,000 by 1944.93

The economic crisis mandated educational shifts, Patterson believed. To go forward, he decided to reach back to the ideas of Booker T. Washington. In 1941, a black newspaper, the New York Age, reported that, under Patterson’s leadership, Tuskegee would expand its emphasis on training students for “service occupations.” The Age quoted him saying that it was “imperative that we give renewed effort in the direction stressed by Booker T. Washington and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life.” And furthermore, Patterson warned, “unless some Negroes are trained in the capacity of specialists in technological areas, the Negro people as a whole shall remain outside of the main stream of American development… and fall far short of the balanced development essential for normal participation in American democracy.”94 Composer William Dawson saw the writing on the wall, and left Tuskegee; his famed music program was shuttered soon afterwards. Ellison also departed.95 Apropos of the

92 Ibid.: 83; 65.
93 Tucker, “Early Years:” 417; 418; 421.
95 Rampersad, Ellison, 74.
curtailment (and given the anachronism in the school’s original name, “normal” for teacher training), Patterson likewise shortened the school’s name to “Tuskegee Institute.”

True to his word, Patterson restructured Tuskegee to place greater emphasis on “the common occupations of life.” When he took over, the main college-level courses were in education and agriculture. Many graduates went on to become teachers or “ag men”—agricultural agents of the state and county. Patterson created four new programs at Tuskegee in fields that were “up and coming”: commercial food service, veterinary medicine, aviation, and engineering. In a sign of the changing times, Patterson felt criticized by black activists for perpetuating the color line in higher education. “I was loudly accused of promoting segregation,” when he initiated the veterinary school at Tuskegee, Patterson recalled. “In his own defense, however,” Fairclough notes, Patterson “pointed out that in 1944 it was the only veterinary school in the South open to blacks.”

**The Tuskegee Airmen**

Patterson would face criticism, too, for the formation of the now-famous Tuskegee airmen. Seeing aviation as an expanding industry, in 1939 he sought and was awarded a government contract for civilian pilot training. Once civilian pilot training had begun and an airfield built, it was a short step to considering Tuskegee as a site to train black pilots for the Army Air Force. As the build up to the second world war began, Frederick Patterson wrote to Robert Patterson (no relation), the Assistant Secretary of War: “Tuskegee Institute is available if

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96 Patterson, *Chronicles of Faith*, 56.
97 Patterson, *Chronicles of Faith*: 31; 66; Fairclough, “Tuskegee’s Moton,” 102
98 Patterson, *Chronicles of Faith*, 74.
flying is going to be offered on a segregated basis. We do not want it if there's a chance of immediate integration.” Segregation in the military was a sore point. In 1939 there were only 3,640 black soldiers were in uniform, but by the end of 1942, there were almost half a million. The idea of creating segregated training facilities, to many black people, seemed like a step backwards. Across the country, black newspapers criticized Patterson’s move. The *Cleveland Gazette* called it a “jim-crow school of aviation at Tuskegee.” Kansas City’s *Plain Dealer* headline read: “$80,000 for Tuskegee Jim Crow Air Unit.”

Patterson, like Tuskegee’s leaders before him, sought to collaborate with the American military for political and financial reasons. With help from the Rosenwald Fund, Tuskegee was awarded the government contract for the Army Air Forces pilot training program. Aviation requires a lot of non-flight staff, who also came to Tuskegee — bringing more well-paid professionals into the local economy. Enrollment in Tuskegee increased as students pursued aviation and related aero-engineering studies. As another symbol of continuity in the collaboration, Booker T. Washington III (grandson of the Founder), was appointed to oversee the development of the military aviation training school at Tuskegee. Altogether, from 1941 to 1946 some 1,000 airmen were trained at Tuskegee.

Although it is now legendary, the program was initially controversial. The NAACP complained to the military that “hundreds and hundreds” of young black people were enduring
long waits for pilot training because they were only eligible for enrollment at segregated bases. The organization requested that black soldiers be able to train wherever training was offered to white soldiers, and that segregated bases be abolished, because of the “discouragement, despair and cynicism which the limited segregated facilities at Tuskegee are spreading among Negro young men eligible for service in the Air Corps.”\textsuperscript{107} In 1943, William H. Hastie, former Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War, protested segregation at the Tuskegee training camp. “Even in the construction plans for the Tuskegee Air Base separate quarters and separate eating facilities were provided for white and colored officers,” Hastie wrote. “Similar separation was planned for white and colored enlisted men. I protested against these plans and the Air Force refused to change them.” Although the military claimed that black officers became qualified and were advanced according to their demonstrated ability, Hastie argued that white officers with less experience were regularly promoted over black candidates. There is nothing to explain the pattern, he said, “except racial discrimination.”\textsuperscript{108}

Once the second world war was underway, these charges carried more weight. As scholars have frequently noted, the treatment of black people in the United States harmed the American ruling class’s self-proclaimed image as the world’s preeminent democratic leader.\textsuperscript{109} Some black leaders (including the civil rights activists Walter White and Roy Wilkins) adopted the “double V” stance – in favor of both Victory over racism at home and Victory over imperial enemies abroad – attempting to use war propaganda for their own purposes. Charles Johnson argued that the United States could take its “rightful place” on “high moral ground among the

\textsuperscript{107} “Racial Quota System is Bottleneck in Training Fliers, NAACP Tells Stimson,” \textit{Plain Dealer}, August 21, 1942, 2.
\textsuperscript{108} “Hastie Says War Department Makes Wrong Statement,” \textit{Plain Dealer}, 1943.
\textsuperscript{109} Dudziak, \textit{Cold War Civil Rights}.

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nations of the world” only if it cleared its “conscience” on equal rights for its citizens.\textsuperscript{110} In this moment, the military was attempting to claims such high ground on the world stage and was particularly sensitive to charges of racism within its ranks.\textsuperscript{111} As pressure to desegregate the armed forces in general and controversy over the Tuskegee program in particular mounted, military leaders sought a détente with the black press. In September 1943, the military arranged for Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, commanding officer of the all-black 99th Pursuit Squadron to sit down and talk with a gathering of editors from twenty black newspapers. The Colonel’s efforts seemed to have an effect. Ludlow Werner, writing for the \textit{New York Age}, reported:

The thing which stood out in Col. Davis’ talk was the effect that the critical publicity on the segregation at Tuskegee Airfield had on the individual members of the 99th Pursuit Squadron. Talking about this, he said, “This publicity had a profound effect upon the individual member of the 99th. The eyes of the nation were on this organization. It was true that he felt hurt to find that his training station at Tuskegee Army Airfield was being regarded by some persons outside the military establishment as being a discriminatory group. However, he had the good sense to realize that the best means he had to defeat the end of supporters of philosophers who relegated him to a subsidiary role in the life of the United States was to do his job in such a way that the world would know that he was capable of performing a highly specialized and technical piece of work…”\textsuperscript{112}

The airmen themselves, however, saw no contradiction between proving their worth as pilots and challenging discrimination in the armed forces. After their training at Tuskegee, they were deployed to various bases around the United States and in the European theater. Nearly everywhere they went, they faced harassment and discrimination.

By merely attempting to use all-white facilities, Tuskegee airmen forced the US military to confront the long-standing practice of segregation at military bases, risking their military

\textsuperscript{111} Marable, \textit{Race, reform, and rebellion.}
\textsuperscript{112} “Experiment Successful,” \textit{The New York Age}, September 25, 1943, 6.
careers in the process. The airmen’s actions began with the Tuskegee base, which was also segregated. “On August 3, 1944,” writes F. Michael Higginbotham, “twelve black officers at the air field in Tuskegee, Alabama, decided to challenge the segregation policies practiced at the base restaurant.” There was some tension as they were seated and served, but the restaurant was thereafter desegregated (although white officers stopped eating there). Some Tuskegee airmen were sent for further training to Freeman Field in Indiana. Segregation on the base there was widespread and becoming more entrenched. Supervisors were white and trainees were black. Therefore the designation of certain facilities as “for supervisors only” was effectively a way to get around new nondiscrimination regulations that had been implemented on the base. In response, in 1945, thirty-six black officers entered the club for “supervisory” officers on April 5th and were quickly arrested. Undaunted, other black airmen followed their example and refused to abide by the “supervisory” distinction; ultimately, the military arrested 104 black airmen at the base. While the efforts of A. Philip Randolph and other activist civil rights leaders are often credited with applying pressure that resulted in the desegregation of the armed forces, “the Tuskegee Airmen's civil rights protests served more directly to pressure the military to begin desegregation efforts, even as World War II raged on,” writes F. Michael Higginbotham. “At the risk of their military standing and physical well-being, black soldiers integrated base facilities.”

The “double V” was, in fact, double-edged. On the one hand, the battle against Hitler discredited racism and gave new force to black people’s demands for an end to discrimination. On the other, a wide range of political leaders used the emerging Cold War with the Soviet Union to discredit and purge the Left from the American mainstream. People who spoke out

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against segregation were discredited with the “communist” label. In the face of government repression, the NAACP abandoned Du Bois, one of its founders.\textsuperscript{114} On college campuses, the SNYC was “red scared into oblivion” by 1949.\textsuperscript{115} Black colleges in the South faced reprisals when they showed even a hint of support for change, and many faculty members (and even some college presidents) were forced out of their jobs.\textsuperscript{116} These anti-communist purges stymied civil rights organizing and for a time, the movement was effectively retarded.\textsuperscript{117} When activists (at Tuskegee, as elsewhere) began to organize for civil rights in the 1950s, they had to overcome the legacy of fear, intimidation and the paralyzing anti-communist attacks.

The anti-communist witch-hunts of the 1940s – started by liberals and pursued aggressively by southern segregationists – retarded the black freedom struggle, but could not kill it. Through migration, two world wars, political organization, and as much as they could, formal schooling, black people transformed themselves and the nation. In the next decade, the 1950s, the ice cracked, and black people launched a new series of challenges to the racial status quo, north and south. As discussed in the next chapter, Tuskegee’s community was a part of that new uprising. Just as they had in decades past, students often took the lead. In the 1950s, it was Tuskegee’s faculty who opened the door to the student movement. In that decade, they broke with the school’s tradition and openly declared that they should be allowed to exercise a most basic democratic right: the vote.

\textsuperscript{114} Marable, \textit{Race, reform, and rebellion}, 27.
\textsuperscript{115} Rogers, \textit{Black Campus Movement}, Patterson, \textit{Chronicles of Faith}, 53.
\textsuperscript{116} This intensified in HBCUs in the 1950s and 60s. See, for example, Joy Ann Williamson, “‘This Has Been Quite a Year for Heads Falling’: Institutional Autonomy in the Civil Rights Era,” \textit{History of Education Quarterly} Vol 44, no. 4 (2004): 554–576.
\textsuperscript{117} Marable, \textit{Race, reform, and rebellion}, 17.
Chapter 3: The Struggle for Voting Rights in Tuskegee, Alabama, 1950 to 1960

Class and Race in Tuskegee, Alabama

The indignities of segregation in Alabama were countless, ranging from the profound to the mundane, from being barred from the voting booth to the humiliation of segregated shopping. For example, a white person could try on shoes in one of Montgomery’s downtown department stores, but a black person could not. Every rule, of course, had its exceptions. One day in the early 1960s, a handsome, blue-eyed scion of a well-to-do family widely considered Macon County “aristocracy” (and dating its time in the county back before a black college came into the picture) entered just such a department store, accompanied by a dark-skinned young man he introduced to the clerk as his servant. “I came in here to buy my boy some shoes,” the blue-eyed boy told the clerk. Here was one such loophole: a black person could try on shoes in a downtown department store if directed to do so by his white employer, the real customer in that case. “Those shoes fit you, boy?” the aristocrat barked. “Yes sir,” his companion replied meekly. “You like them?” “Yes sir.” He turned to the clerk with cash in hand. “All right, I want to buy this boy these shoes.”

The two young men left the store in fits of laughter. To people who knew him in and around Tuskegee, Sammy Younge, Jr. was a blue-eyed, fair-skinned son of a prominent black family, and his dark-skinned companion, Wendell Paris, was his best friend. What appeared to be strict adherence was, for them, a delicious resistance to the rules of segregation. Their joke on

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2 Sammy’s father was director of Macon County’s March of Dimes campaign. See “March of Dimes Gets Support of Schools,” Tuskegee News, January 7, 1965, 1.
the system was one they were uniquely capable of making. Most black people in Macon County did not have the complexion to pass for white. A dark-skinned Tuskegee professor, Charles Gomillion, had attempted to shop in one such store nearly forty years earlier, but walked out angrily when the clerk mistook him for a minister because he was wearing a suit; he vowed never to return.\(^3\) Even if they could “pass,” most Macon County residents were not college professors. They possessed neither the cars, clothes, money, nor the education and language to carry off such a prank. Sammy Younge had spent his high school years in one of New England’s finest boarding schools, Cornwall Academy. He and Wendell Paris were different from most black people in 1965, but they were not different from most black people they knew. Like many of the other young people who grew up in proximity to Tuskegee Institute, their parents had gone to college, had professional jobs, nice homes, cars, and a corresponding sense of confidence and entitlement.\(^4\)

There was a civil rights movement in Tuskegee, as in many other southern towns. Unlike other southern municipalities, however, the concentration of middle-class black people in the town of Tuskegee shaped the movement in unique ways. Tuskegee faculty and staff embraced elements of the militant ethos of the time, but in ways that did not violate their sense of propriety. They wanted change, but not too much, and not too fast. In the rapidly moving events of those years, today’s militants could quickly become tomorrow’s compromisers, however. Faculty led the earlier phase of struggle, but by 1965, students — like Sammy Younge, Jr. and Wendell Paris — were setting the pace of events. Whereas the faculty cherished their social position, the students explicitly challenged it. The trappings and outlooks of middle-class life

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\(^3\) Norrell, *Reaping the whirlwind*, 32.  
that faculty members saw as a weapon in their struggle for political equality, became a liability in the eyes of many members of the student movement.

**The Struggle for Voting Rights and Booker T. Washington**

Before the publication of Robert J. Norrell’s 1998 book, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee*, few people appreciated the role that Tuskegee University’s faculty and staff played in the struggle for voting rights nationwide. The lawsuit that Tuskegee plaintiffs eventually brought all the way to victory in the United States Supreme Court case, *Gomillion vs. Lightfoot*, in fact set an essential precedent for securing basic voting rights for black people across the country. It not widely remembered today, but at the time the battle over voting rights in Tuskegee was national news. One staff researcher at Tuskegee Institute collected over three thousand pamphlets, magazine and news articles about the conflict between 1957 and 1959.

The central organizer of the campaign to win voting rights, the lead plaintiff in the famous court case, Tuskegee professor Charles Gomillion, saw his work as a definitive break from Washington’s legacy. Gomillion is known to have said, “Booker T. Washington came to teach the Negroes how to make a living. I came to teach them how to live.” Norrell insists, however, on emphasizing continuity with Washington. “Gomillion and Washington agreed on one especially important point: change in Macon County was a slow process,” he wrote. “While

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5 Norrell, *Reaping*.
6 Woodrow W. Hall, *A Bibliography of the Tuskegee Gerrymander Protest: Pamphlets, Magazine and Newspaper Articles Chronologically Arranged* (Tuskegee: Department of Records and Research, Tuskegee Institute, 1960), i.
he was not nearly as patient as Washington, Gomillion was prepared for a long struggle.”8 The duality in Norrell’s account is more to the point: Gomillion both broke with Washington by pressing directly and openly for political equality and that he adhered to Washington’s formula by consciously attempting to contain that struggle within certain limits that he knew to be acceptable to white people (which was the reason for “going slow”). While “going slow,” Gomillion was willing to go further than the old leadership. In the 1960s, Tuskegee students wanted to go further still. They took up a more militant approach, pushed past the boundaries Gomillion had marked out, and began moving toward the ideas of Black Power.

Education, Civil Rights, and the Economic Boom

Tuskegee students did not build their movement from nothing; rather, they inherited a set of political and educational ideas about social change from adults who stepped forward in the 1950s to challenge their disfranchisement. Gomillion, like other black educators in that decade, found himself grappling with new opportunities and challenges. Foremost among rapid changes in Tuskegee in the second half of the twentieth century, were the dramatic economic transformations of the region. By 1950, the South was nearly one-half rural and one-half urban. In the preceding decades, the number of people employed in agriculture declined sharply, and the number employed in manufacturing, transportation, and services increased dramatically. What would these changes mean for black educators and black schools? At a 1954 Tuskegee symposium titled “The New South and Higher Education,” leading educators and businessmen from across the nation gathered to contemplate the meaning of the new situation. “The South is moving rapidly toward an industrial and commercial economy which is organized around cities

8 Norrell, Reaping, 43.
and metropolitan centers,” one participant, Donald J. Bogue, a sociologist from the University of Chicago, wrote in his prepared remarks. “Cotton, like many monarchs these days, is king in name only and lives in exile in California.”

The educators and businessmen gathered at Tuskegee agreed that better schooling was essential for black southerners to take full advantage of the new economic opportunities. School was increasingly to serve as an employment ladder. More people need to go to high school, Edward C. Ackerman, an executive of the Tennessee Valley Authority, said. “This increasingly will be, if it is not already, the door through which the worker must pass in order to get into a better job, a better paying job.”

“Workers will have to be better educated and more highly skilled,” said another, Benjamin U. Ratchford, a professor of economics at Duke University. “There will have to be more managers and supervisors and they will have to be better trained and more experienced.”

These leaders, however, also saw that the changing economy would open the door to political changes — namely, the end of Jim Crow. “It is a queer thing that this booming industrial South inherits, from its agricultural past,” George S. Mitchell, the executive director of the Southern Regional Council told the assembly, “a solid structure of political undemocracy,” an undemocracy built upon “Negro exclusion from the franchise.” Anticipating the clash over desegregation, Tuskegee’s administrators also saw themselves as providing “wise leadership” in

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10 Ackerman, “Discussion of Paper,” in The New South and Higher Education, 44.
12 Mitchell, “The Extension of Citizenship,” in The New South and Higher Education, 52; Pointing up the contradiction between black people’s educational progress and lack of political rights, Rufus Clement, the president of Atlanta University told a humorous story about a young Tuskegee graduate registering to vote. Asked to recite the US Constitution, he began, “Four score and seven years ago…” (Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address). When the graduate finished, the white registrar said, “Damn, I didn't know any black man knew the Constitution by heart.” Clement, “Discussion of Paper,” in The New South and Higher Education, 60-1.
the transition. Charles H. Thompson, Dean of the Graduate School at Howard University, said that he expected higher education to “develop a highly intelligent and socially responsible leadership, as well as highly trained technicians.” Black students in particular, Thompson argued, needed “to develop a dynamic and realistic philosophy of race relations.” Unfortunately, he concluded, most “college-bred Negroes” have learned, at school, to “accommodate themselves to the status quo, even beyond the call of legal necessity.”

The symposium concluded, on the second day, with the inauguration of Tuskegee’s new president, Luther H. Foster. Foster skillfully linked Tuskegee’s past and present, evoking the need for both continuity and change. Tuskegee could play the role of preparing students for full political participation, he said. “While focused on a core of vocational content,” Foster told the gathering, Tuskegee would also work to develop in each student “an appreciation for personal qualities associated with effective citizenship.” Building on Washington’s theory of “race relations,” Foster expanded Tuskegee’s charge to the improvement of “human relations” generally. “Tuskegee Institute must work to improve human relations,” Foster said. “People of goodwill applaud the current trend to judge individuals on their merit, and to have their rights, duties, and opportunities assigned accordingly.” In addition to these responsibilities, he concluded, Tuskegee had another: “There is the added institutional duty to speak out for truth and justice in the general society.” Over the next two decades, Tuskegee faculty and students would take these words to heart, and put them into action. In some cases, however, the imperative to retain good “relations” would come into conflict with the obligation to “speak out for truth and justice.”

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14 Foster, “Inaugural Statement” in *The New South and Higher Education*: 124; 127; 128.
By the time Foster took over the helm of Tuskegee, the town around it had grown into a uniquely prosperous village of several thousand black people. The anchors of the community were the approximately 1,800 black people employed either at the veterans hospital or at Tuskegee Institute. The percentage of black people in town with yearly income above $5,000 was higher than in any other county in the state of Alabama, Gomillion noted. When my father, Robert Jones, first arrived in Tuskegee in 1957 as an 18 year old from Inkster, Michigan, he recalled that the Institute “was one of the most beautiful sights I had ever seen.” Everywhere he looked, black people were in charge. “I had never seen institutions of this size that were operated by people of color,” he said. “You had physicians, attorneys, professors... these people lived well. I had never seen people of color live like that. I had never seen swimming pools in backyards.” The prosperity in Tuskegee did not necessarily flow to the rest of Macon County, however. A few short miles from Tuskegee’s neatly trimmed lawns and well-appointed homes, rural Black Belt dwellings often had dirt floors and lacked indoor plumbing. One observer of the county’s contradictions noted that “in this county, black hands daily perform the most intricate and delicate surgical operations known to medicine in the large veterans’ hospital while other black hands till the earth under conditions characterized by the most primitive superstition and backwardness.”

Tuskegee was in transition from an institute to a university. Robert Jones observed that, in the late 1950s, Tuskegee began de-emphasizing “industrial education” in the form of training in skills such as carpentry and shoe repair, and began transforming into a university. “I saw

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15 Hamilton, Minority Politics, 2.
17 Robert Jones, interview with the author, April 2014.
18 Lucenia Dunn, interview with the author, July 2015.
evidence that that was a dying era, that the school was transitioning to a liberal arts school with more emphasis on engineering and those kinds of disciplines.” And yet, some of the old ways of the Institute remained. Participation in the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) was still mandatory for male students, as was attendance at weekly chapel services. Students were required to attend chapel services twice on Sundays, in the morning and again in the evening, Jones remembered, “and there was also a service on Wednesday evenings. If you missed three church services they would send you home.” In the 1960s, mandatory chapel would become a target of student organizers. In the 1950s, however, there was a more subterranean mode of resistance. As they entered chapel three times a week, students dropped a ticket with their name on it into a collection box. “Of course,” Jones added, “there was a good side business of people dropping other people's tickets in the box.”

For the children of the 1,800 professionals employed at the university or the Veterans Hospital, life was cozy and sheltered. Lucenia Dunn, who later became the first female mayor of Tuskegee, remembers the sense of safety she had as a child. “The only rule that we had was: be home by dinner. We could ride our bicycles all over the place and do all kinds of things. We were so adventuresome, going out into the woods and picking plums and blackberries. Going into streams and swimming in ponds.” The resources of the campus were available to the town’s youngsters. “If we wanted to go swimming, we went swimming up on the campus at the pool. If we wanted to play basketball in a gymnasium, then we went to the gymnasium on the campus,” Wendell Paris recalled. “I'm saying it was just an idyllic place really if you look at it in terms of having black people in charge of everything but the local political apparatus,” he said.

20 Jones, interview; Caroline Hilton, who arrived as a freshman in 1965 told a similar story. Caroline Hilton, interview with the author, August 2015.
21 Dunn, interview.
“Sometimes we would go maybe a week or two without even seeing a white person.”

To Guy Trammell, it was a place to grow up without a sense of inferiority. “The only people that I knew could do anything ever, were black people,” he said. “All the stores were owned by blacks, all my teachers were black.”

Wendell’s older brother George recalled, with pride, that Tuskegee “was a totally independent African-American community.” “We had our own banks,” he noted. “We had two hospitals. We had the university. Everybody’s dad, mom, had a decent job. It was a black middle class community. We used to say that Tuskegee is surrounded by Alabama, not a part of Alabama, but surrounded by Alabama.”

Some young people experienced the class nature of the Tuskegee community as snobbery. Kathleen Neal (later known as Kathleen Cleaver, a leader of the Black Panther Party) grew up in Tuskegee, where her father was on the faculty. “If your kid hasn't gone to a white liberal prep school in Massachusetts a year or two,” she recalled, “then you're just nowhere.” She remembered that “middle class people” from the campus or the hospital didn’t associate with poorer black people at all, “except when the poor people are their maids and housekeepers and children-keepers,” she said. “The whole thing is a parody of white society.”

Melvin Todd grew up in a working-class family in Birmingham, but when he arrived at Tuskegee, he noticed class differences among black people, for the first time in his life. “When I went to Tuskegee, I thought I was middle class,” Todd said. “It was only when I got there and took sociology that I learned that I was poor,” he recalled with a laugh. Todd found Tuskegee students to be friendly, but there was a certain social distance. “A lot of them had kind of bourgeois attitudes during that

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22 W. Paris, interview.
23 Guy Trammell, interview with the author, July 2015.
24 G. Paris, interview.
25 Joseph Mosnier, “Kathleen Cleaver Interview.” Civil Rights History Project (blog), September 16, 2011; Quoted in Forman, Sammy Younge, Jr., 44-5.
time, too,” he said. “A lot of them appeared to kind of look down on people who were not from Tuskegee because they knew if you weren't from Tuskegee, that you didn't have the social graces, the social experiences, that they had had.”

The students came to expect a certain level of service on campus. “We didn't wash our own clothes. We didn't clean up our own rooms,” Gwen Patton remembered. There were staff members who would “come and pick up our laundry and return them,” she said. “How class conscious, how bourgie can you get?”

The middle-class culture of Tuskegee’s black professionals shaped the character of the struggle for voting rights, as it gathered force in the 1950s. However, in the swiftly moving events of the next decade, the middle-class children of Tuskegee’s black professional class would seize the initiative from their elders, and, in doing so, develop a critique of the society in which they were raised. What their parents had so carefully constructed seemed, in the new context, as if it were part of the problem. Above all, they sensed that change was, in fact, happening rapidly on a global scale. “Going slow” began to feel like going backward.

**On a Collision Course with Jim Crow**

If the growing economy of the South put black people on a collision course with Jim Crow segregation, the political environment retarded that collision. Activists struggled for equal rights and desegregation nationwide, but anti-communist witch-hunts pushed many black leaders to censor themselves for fear of attracting the “red” label. The NAACP and other organizations increasingly pursued change through the courts, and discouraged civil disobedience. This

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26 Melvin Todd, interview with the author, June 2016.
28 Marable argues that the black middle class’s “complete capitulation to anti-communism” delayed the emergence of the national civil rights movement by at least a decade. See *Race, reform, and rebellion*, 30-31.
approach bore fruit, however: notably the landmark U.S. Supreme Court’s landmark *Brown vs. Board of Ed* decision that segregated schooling was unconstitutional. In this context, the return of mass mobilization — the Montgomery bus boycott — just 30 miles away from Tuskegee, which began in December 1955, contributed to a profound re-shaping of the political landscape. The old compromises with Jim Crow upon which Tuskegee was founded began to crumble.

The Montgomery bus boycott was both a reflection of the changing status and consciousness of black people, and a struggle that in turn further transformed that consciousness. A boycott was an effective weapon because black people were now, increasingly because of their migration, an urban people. The black workers who rode the busses weren’t wealthy — the median annual income for a black worker in Montgomery in 1956 was under $1,000 — but they paid for the ride (unlike the local ministers who could afford to own private cars). The bus boycott was an indicator that black people had achieved a financial status that gave them greater confidence to assert themselves politically and socially. The boycott also changed their view of themselves. Rosa Parks was a frustrated activist for years who was convinced that “nothing would happen” in Montgomery, the cradle of the Confederacy, “because blacks wouldn’t stick together.” To everyone’s surprise, they did stick together and walked to work for over a year. “Our non-violent protest in Montgomery is important because it is demonstrating to the Negro, North and South,” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., commented, “that many of the stereotypes he has held about himself and other Negroes are not valid. Montgomery has broken the spell.”

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31 Quoted in Bloom, *Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement*, 144.
The Montgomery bus boycott also changed the dynamics of black leadership. For previous generations, leadership meant serving as a channel for white beneficence. Whatever resources could be gotten from white people were obtained this way, and therefore white elites effectively controlled (and often selected) black leaders. The Montgomery bus boycott produced a new leadership on an entirely new basis.

The struggle undermined black accommodationist leadership, Jack Bloom concludes. “In an era when most blacks’ backs were bent from stooping, their own bent backs were not out of place,” he wrote. “But when the whites drew back and in effect labeled all blacks alike, as dissenters, and would grant no concessions, the whites removed the basis of the old leadership's predominance in the black community.”32 This is precisely the dynamic that would play out in Tuskegee a few years later.

While the bus boycott made national and international headlines, a future Tuskegee student leader, Gwendolyn Patton, was there in Montgomery, as an adolescent, and got her first taste of organizing. Patton grew up in Detroit and Inkster but spent summers with her grandparents in Montgomery. Her grandmother owned a rental property that was used as a base for civil rights organizations. Through her grandparents, Patton became something of a junior aide to the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), the organization established to coordinate the boycott. Patton witnessed the planning and organization from the inside.33 At ten years old, she was assigned to gather donations to support the cause, specifically collecting shoes

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32 Bloom, Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement, 121; 133.
33 Patton, interview.
to replace those that people were wearing out by walking.\textsuperscript{34} She went to the MIA office, “all the time,” listened to organizing meetings, and would run errands for the adults.\textsuperscript{35}

Besides the organizational experience, Patton learned about what the struggle against segregation did — and did not — mean, to the people involved. Her grandmother taught her that the bus boycott wasn't about sitting next to white people. Patton recalled,

One time, there were no white people on the bus and so I went back there and said, “Mommy, why are you sitting in the back of the bus?” And she says, “Gwendolyn, it was not about sitting next to white people. It was about sitting anywhere you please. And I'm pleased to sit right here.” I had to get a whole other outlook on what is this Movement about. It ain't about sitting next to white folks.\textsuperscript{36}

Meanwhile, just a thirty-minute drive from Montgomery, a confrontation with white supremacy was brewing in Tuskegee. Black people in the town of Tuskegee had long outnumbered white people, roughly four to one by the late 1950s. By 1961, 84 percent of Macon County was black, the highest percentage in the United States.\textsuperscript{37} The Tuskegee political science professor Charles Hamilton counted nine black people for every white person in Macon County, yet no black person had every held public office since Reconstruction. “The smooth-working accommodation system conformed to the pattern many felt had been advocated by Booker T. Washington, the Negro founder of Tuskegee Institute,” Hamilton wrote. “Whether this is an accurate representation of Washington's position is not important. The central point is that many -- both Negroes and whites -- believed it to be.”\textsuperscript{38} The long-standing compromise, Hamilton later co-wrote with Stokely Carmichael (later Kwamé Ture), was a division of labor in which “the blacks would run Tuskegee Institute and the V.A. Hospital while the whites would provide
commercial services (banks and stores) and hold all political offices -- thus overseeing law-enforcement, the assessing and collecting of taxes, the public school system and so forth.”

It was through the smooth functioning of this system that Tuskegee enjoyed a reputation as a “model” of “good race relations” in the South. Many observers noted the absence of social tension in Tuskegee. In its place, was a culture of courtesy and formality in the way people related to each other. Bernard Taper, a journalist sent to cover the campaign for voting rights in Tuskegee for the New Yorker, observed that the difference between Macon County and other Black Belt counties that “continually impressed” him, “was the absence of menace from the atmosphere, and, more than that, the courtesy displayed in nearly all casual encounters between the races.”

Unlike other parts of the Black Belt, Hamilton and Carmichael wrote, “Macon County remained relatively free of overt acts of violence and intimidation during the forties and fifties.” This, they argued, “contributed to the façade of ‘good race relations’ in the county.”

The façade cracked when, for the first time since Reconstruction, a black person filed to run for public office. Mrs. Jessie P. Guzman, the director of Records and Research at Tuskegee Institute, ran for a seat on Macon County’s school board in 1954. Less than one thousand black people were registered to vote out of nearly 7,000 county residents, and the vote was split on racial lines. Guzman lost, but the election transformed Tuskegee’s image among the white people in Macon County. “For the white community, Mrs. Guzman's candidacy seems to have been a considerable shock,” Taper observed, noting that it coincided with court decisions in

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39 Hamilton and Ture, Black Power, 129.  
40 Bertrand Phillips, interview with the author, June 2016.  
42 Norrell, Reaping, 85.
favor of school desegregation, Montgomery’s bus boycott, and the advent of voting rights legislation moving through Congress.  

For the first time in its history, Tuskegee Institute was no longer a reliable partner in the maintenance of the status quo and white supremacy. Samuel M. Engelhardt, Jr., a Macon County farmer-merchant, entered politics specifically to challenge the threat of black political power. To him, Tuskegee was no longer an ally, but an enemy. His successful campaign for state senate featured ads that highlighted his opponent’s presence on Tuskegee’s board of trustees. Segregationists increasingly viewed Tuskegee as a source of disloyalty to the status quo. “One white citizen stated that the real trouble started in 1944,” Hamilton wrote, “when the college discontinued the practice of reserving special seats in the college chapel for the white townspeople.” By the end of the 1940s, white people hardened against black people’s demands. If Tuskegee would not accommodate to white supremacy, then white supremacy would no longer accommodate Tuskegee. “The accommodationist approach that leading [white] conservatives had taken at the time of the founding of Tuskegee Institute,” Norrell wrote, “had now been forsaken entirely.”

The number of black registered voters was small, but ticking upwards, making a confrontation inevitable. From 29 black voters in 1940, the number had risen to 855 by 1954: a “clear trend” Hamilton wrote, that could result in “political catastrophe” for white officials if it persisted. Whereas before black people in Tuskegee historically accepted political subordination, now, in light of the shifting regional context, doing so no longer seemed

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44 Norrell, Reaping, 85.  
45 Hamilton, Minority Politics, 1.  
46 Norrell, Reaping, 77.  
47 Hamilton, Minority Politics, 2.
acceptable or necessary. They began to feel that there was no need to “submit to the system of accommodation of an earlier time,” Hamilton wrote. “They could have economic security and political participation simultaneously, and they were beginning to believe that anything less was a denial of their dignity and self respect.” Otis Pinkard, who later became a plaintiff in the Supreme Court case spearheaded by Gomillion expressed the view of many black war veterans when he said, “After having been overseas fighting for democracy, I thought that when we got back here we should enjoy a little of it.” By 1959, there were more than one thousand black voters registered in Macon County.

Macon County’s board of registrars was the main line of defense. They perfected more than a dozen techniques to limit or prevent black people from participating in local politics. Registrars would fail to show up to their office on registration days, or arranged for registrations to take place at another location with no notice, or arrived late and left early, or worked slowly so the fewest possible people could register. If all else failed, they would resign. Gomillion recalled that, because of frequent resignations, “sometimes there would be no Board of Registrars from anywhere to three to eighteen months.” For those lucky few who actually made it inside the registrar’s office, the next hurdle was usually an elaborate literacy exam. In Tuskegee, the ridiculousness of such tests linked to voter registration was obvious. “I can understand why one must demonstrate his literacy,” a black potential voter said, while waiting to register. “But certainly it shouldn't have to take me an hour and a half or two hours of reading and writing to prove that I can cope with the English language,” he said. “It didn't take me that long to

48 Hamilton, Minority Politics, 28.
49 Quoted in Rogers, et. al., Alabama: The History of a Deep South, 539.
50 Hamilton, Minority Politics, 2.
demonstrate my competence in French -- and German as well, for that matter -- when I took my
Ph.D. exams at Boston University.\footnote{53}

Gomillion was indeed a patient and persistent activist, whose work spanned nearly three
decades. In 1928, Gomillion passed up an opportunity to sell life insurance for a living, opting
instead to accept a one-year position teaching history at Tuskegee Institute’s high school
program. He stayed for five years, until he was promoted to the college program, where he
stayed for the next several decades. In his 50s, Gomillion took a break from teaching, enrolled in
Fisk and earned a doctorate in 1959.\footnote{54} Long before he was “Dr. Gomillion,” in 1941 he
participated in re-organizing the Tuskegee Men’s Club into the Tuskegee Civic Association
(TCA), a political club that admitted women as members.\footnote{55} Gomillion was the President of the
Tuskegee Civic Association from 1941-45, then from 1951-68 and again in 1970.\footnote{56} In a moment
when historic changes were sweeping through the region, Gomillion stood in a middle ground
between the old and the new — a radical stance in the 1940s and even the 1950s, but one that
quickly came to be perceived as retrograde by the end of the decade.

**Gomillion and the Tuskegee Civic Association**

Professor Gomillion’s strategy for winning voting rights was both a break from
Washingtonism, and a reformulation of it. He broke with Washington by forthrightly and
publicly asserting black voting rights. He preserved elements of Washington’s “race relations”
concept by emphasizing the idea that black people had self-improvement work to do in

\footnote{53} Taper, “Gomillion versus Lightfoot,” 86.
\footnote{55} Gomillion, “The Tuskegee Voting Story,” 23.
\footnote{56} Fritz, “Charles Gomillion, Educator-Community Activist,” 16.
preparation for citizenship, and by carefully restraining black people’s demands within limits he thought would be acceptable to forward-thinking white people.

In a sense, Professor Gomillion’s strategy was to embrace what contemporary scholars and activists call “respectability politics.” This approach placed Gomillion squarely in the mainstream of civil rights activism in the 1950s. For most of the middle class leadership, pushing for civil rights was about asserting the desiringness of black people, highlighting their loyalty, patriotism, and law-abiding nature. As much as it aimed to win voting rights, the officers of the Tuskegee Civic Association began by emphasizing the shaping of the citizenry. They “considered their major responsibility to be that of the civic education of all citizens in the community, Negro and white,” Gomillion wrote, “and facilitation of intelligent civic action on the part of an increasing number of Negro citizens.”\(^57\) They wanted more black voters on the rolls, however. “But I was of the opinion that we needed not only voters, but knowledgeable voters,” Gomillion clarified, “and that was the reason for this so-called responsible citizenship course in political science.”\(^58\)

There was a powerful logic to this approach. The *Brown* decision signaled that black people had the nation’s laws *on their side* — the *segregationists*, not they, were the law-breakers. Under Gomillion’s leadership, the TCA aggressively and systematically organized attempts at voter registration, and then carefully documented the ways in which the law was violated to deny them the vote. When the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights was founded in 1957, the TCA began sending to it “a stream of petitions and meticulously documented complaints about the systematic denial of their suffrage rights -- more such complaints than there were from any other

\(^{58}\) Quoted in Elwood, “An interview with Charles G. Gomillion,” 597.
county in the United States.” Over seven long years the TCA compiled a detailed record of every single black person who attempted to register to vote in Macon County. Their records showed that from 1951 to 1958 precisely 1,585 black people had applied, but only 510 voter certificates were granted.

Like Washington, Gomillion was sensitive to dominant white opinions, and cultivated a message of moderation — the TCA did not want to “take over” city or county governance, Gomillion frequently asserted; rather, they wanted to “co-manage” alongside white people. “There is no good reason why white and Negro citizens in Macon cannot develop a community which would be a model of democratic living,” Gomillion told the Alabama House of Representatives in Montgomery in 1958. The TCA avoided any activity that would besmirch its upstanding image, even if that meant organizing with one hand tied behind its back. The TCA’s leading officers feared feeding stories to reporters because they “did not want to give the impression that the TCA was trying to solicit the aid of the press.” Whereas the activists in Montgomery had solicited funds from northern supporters, the TCA refused to do so, lest its character as an indigenous southern organization be questioned or it be perceived as a “money-grabbing organization.”

White elites were not assuaged by such moderation — those who ruled by excluding black people from politics were frightened by any deviation from the status quo, and decided to act. Those elites, led by state senator Sam Engelhardt, re-drew the city boundaries to remove the possibility of black voters gaining a majority. On July 13, 1957, as the number of black voters

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60 Hamilton, Minority Politics, 5.
61 Norrell, Reaping, 109.
63 Rogers et al., Alabama, 540.
approached the one thousand mark, Governor Patterson signed into law a bill to change the shape of Tuskegee’s city limits from a simple square to “a curious twenty-eight-sided figure resembling a stylized sea horse.” Nearly 3,500 black residents (out of a total of 5,000) and roughly 400 out of 410 black voters now found that they lived outside of Tuskegee’s city limits.  

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64 Taper, “Gomillion versus Lightfoot,” 38; 
The gerrymander was part of a regional pattern of “massive resistance” to desegregation and black voting rights. Gomillion and the TCA attempted to appeal to white liberalism just when this wave of resistance swept the South, stamping it out. In the late 1950s, “All over the South the lights of reason and tolerance and moderation began to go out,” C. Vann Woodward wrote. In the first three years after the Brown decision, 712 southern school districts were
desegregated; white resistance reduced that number to thirteen by 1958. Segregationists brooked no dissent. Moderate and progressive whites, to whom Gomillion and the TCA appealed, were silenced or driven from town by elite whites committed to white supremacy. In Tuskegee, Norrell notes that a “small group of wealthy men” were “determined not to relinquish control of Macon County to the blacks.” In 1958, a liberal circuit judge and former Tuskegee Institute trustee named George C. Wallace ran for governor of Alabama with the support of the black electorate and the NAACP. He lost to John Patterson, who campaigned as a staunch segregationist. Defeated, Wallace concluded, “no other son-of-a-bitch will ever out-nigger me again.”

The gerrymander utterly shocked Tuskegee’s black middle class. A Tuskegee student, Ernest Stephens, observed, “All the time, the intelligentsia in Tuskegee had had the impression that white people regarded them as different from the black folks who worked on farms and so forth. The white folks showed them that there was no difference.” Tuskegee’s black professionals felt that their degrees, manners and lifestyle separated them from the mass of black people in the Black Belt. “For decades, many Negroes believed that their problems stemmed from a handful of white politicians and that, when glaring injustices were exposed, all the ‘decent thinking white people’ in the South would protest,” Hamilton wrote: “most of the whites who were previously ‘friends’ were nowhere to be found… there was an intense feeling of betrayal.” The gerrymander threw cold water on their sense of status and forced them into a

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67 Norrell, Reaping, 102.
68 Wallace specifically asked to be on Tuskegee’s board and seemed to have a genuine, paternalistic interest in black education, writes Dan T. Carter in The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 76.
69 Marable, Race, reform, and rebellion, 41; Quoted in Carter, The Politics of Rage, 96.
70 Quoted in Forman, Sammy Younge, Jr., 44.
71 Hamilton, Minority Politics, 27.
coalition with their poorer rural cousins. Professor Stanley H. Smith, a Tuskegee sociologist conceded that “It was the gerrymander that brought us together.” He went on to argue

Before that, we professional people had the feeling that it was possible for us to go downtown and obtain special privileges. When this happened -- the gerrymander -- we discovered that the whites who ran things didn't regard us as different in any significant way from the most backward members of our race, and that historically this had always been so, and we had just never faced it. We were shocked into the realization that we were still Negroes, with all the disabilities attached thereto in the sovereign state of Alabama. The country people found our comeuppance rather amusing and, I think, subtly satisfying. They didn't rub it in, but there was some chortling. “Well now, join us” was their attitude at the first… meeting. “Welcome home.”

Tuskegee’s middle class professionals weren’t so easily defeated — they were a confident class — and one that possessed resources. Before the governor signed the gerrymander bill, the TCA responded to the proposal by calling for a “selective buying” campaign — essentially a boycott. This tactic was effective as a means of escalation because it was based on a source of strength — black middle-class incomes. Between 1940 and 1950 the number of black people in white-collar positions grew in Tuskegee by 172 percent, nearly doubling the town’s black middle class, and, Norrell noted, adding substantially to the human and financial resources at the TCA’s disposal. It was these employees who provided much of the funding necessary for legal action, because local city and state authorities had no ability to fire any of them. It was these “financially secure persons,” Gomillion said who made the TCA’s strategy possible.

At the June 25, 1957 meeting of the TCA, as the legislature considered a bill to re-draw the map of Tuskegee in order to exclude black voters from its boundaries, Gomillion told the assembly, “spend our money wisely, spend our money with those who would help us, not oppress us.”

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72 Taper, “Gomillion versus Lightfoot,” 57.
73 Norrell, Reaping, 61-2.
75 Hamilton, Minority Politics, 4.
The next month, as the gerrymander went into effect, so did the Tuskegee boycott, widening the social and psychological schism in town. Business receipts in town were cut by nearly seventy percent immediately and almost twenty businesses closed. The boycott had the effect of furthering the social separation of black and white people in town. “I remember early, early in my life, first grade, second grade, so forth, when we went downtown,” Dunn recalled. “Then when they did the gerrymandering we never went back downtown. In our community we had everything that we needed…” One white store clerk said he thought black people were moving too fast. Echoing Washington, he said they should instead focus on “uplifting the riff-raff among Negroes instead of trying to force them on us.” As Norrell observes, experiencing the total absence of black shoppers as a siege of black people was “a telling commentary on some whites’ perception of reality.”

By the end of the decade, some black people’s patience with Gomillion’s strategy was wearing thin. The boycott, and the careful documentation of legal violations dragged on for the next few years. Eager for further escalation, TCA members at various moments proposed marching or public demonstrations, but each time the leadership de-emphasized those ideas. In 1959, after several weeks of letter-writing and petitioning, a mass march on the state capitol was proposed at a TCA meeting and tabled. One female member of the TCA executive cabinet said, “Ours is not a mass action group. We just don't operate like that.” The idea surfaced again later, and this time the motion passed. The TCA agreed to march on February 15th -- the same date the US Senate would begin debating a civil rights bill. However, neither the executive nor the

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76 Taper, “Gomillion versus Lightfoot,” 40, 42.
77 Dunn, interview.
78 Norrell, Reaping, 106.
79 Hamilton, Minority Politics, 9.
80 Quoted in Hamilton, Minority Politics, 9.
general group ever discussed it formally in subsequent meetings. The fifteenth of February came and went without any march, and without any mention of it in further meetings. Gomillion’s personal hostility to the idea of marching was well known. “He was berated by some for this,” Hamilton wrote. When confronted by a student on this point, Gomillion replied, “Any dumbbell can march, no dumbbell can do what I’m doing.”

Gomillion was not alone. Tuskegee professors, despite their relative economic independence, were reluctant to associate themselves with “rabble rousers” — or even with the most prominent civil rights movement leaders. When Dr. King came to Tuskegee in the late 1950s, university officials did not allow him to speak on campus (apparently fearful of reprisals from the white community). King spoke at a nearby church instead. A Tuskegee student who attended the event noticed that there was not a single Tuskegee professor in attendance — except for Charles Hamilton. “At a time when many people (both black and white) saw King as an outsider whose methods of nonviolent protest would only stir up more trouble for black people,” the student, Wilbur C. Rich, recalled, “Hamilton stood on stage with King and even had his photograph taken with him.” In 1960, after frequent clashes with Gomillion and the TCA leadership, Hamilton’s contract with Tuskegee was not renewed.

No matter how carefully, cautiously, or patiently Gomillion proceeded, advocating for black voting rights made him a radical in the eyes of segregationists. Some attempted to pin the “red” label on him. Gomillion’s later involvement as a board member in other civil rights organizations — the Highlander Folk Center, The Southern Negro Youth Congress, and the

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81 Hamilton, Minority Politics, 24.
84 Norrell, Reaping, 171-2.
Southern Conference Educational Fund, drew suspicion because they had all been accused of being communist front groups. As the widely recognized leader of the TCA, Gomillion became a target. In 1958, he received an anonymous letter from a member of the White Citizens Council in Louisiana. The author claimed to have had several black friends, but given what the race “is trying to pull” the author’s views changed: “Now I hate all niggers.” The letter concluded by assuring Gomillion that “you and your associates are fighting a losing battle” and with a promise for “another civil war” if necessary, to preserve segregation. “You err when you say that my associates and I are ‘fighting.’ We are not ‘fighting,’” Gomillion replied in a polite, even-handed open letter. “We are simply working hard to be good, productive Americans.” Gomillion assured readers of the open letter, “We do not want to fight; we want to learn and earn. We do not want to shed blood; we want to maintain the peace.”

As months dragged on with little to show for their efforts and white opinion hardening against them, Gomillion and the TCA leadership continued to hold out an olive branch to Macon County’s white people. There was a growing debate within the TCA; one member described its methods as apologetic: “What was really done for a year and a half? Just letters and petitions.” Gomillion insisted that the TCA stood for bi-racial governance. “The idea that our people want to take over the government is simply not true,” he was quoted by the press as saying. “It’s just poppycock.” Gomillion told Taper that, by not fighting against white people, he was following in Washington’s footsteps. “We think it should have been possible to move peacefully and intelligently toward a new relationship -- one of true mutual respect and dignity,” he said, “not

88 Hamilton, Minority Politics, 31.
89 Ibid.
just the outer forms of these.” There was a “glorious opportunity” to do so in Tuskegee, Gomillion argued, specifically because of its middle-class nature. “With such a large pool of educated Negroes, Tuskegee could have become a model of partnership and cooperation -- if the whites had only been flexible enough, realistic enough, to perceive the possibilities.” Ideally, black people would get the vote without white people becoming “embittered and disillusioned in the process”.

In August 1958, Gomillion and eleven other members of the TCA sued the mayor of Tuskegee, Phillip Lightfoot. Their lawsuit, dubbed Gomillion vs. Lightfoot, traveled all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, and set an important national precedent in the voting rights struggle. Thousands of dollars in legal fees over two years were paid primarily by Tuskegee’s black middle class. On November 15, 1960, the court, citing “the inevitable effect” of excluding black voters with the gerrymandered city boundaries, ruled unanimously for Gomillion. The precedent it set, Norrell noted, was both for basing a decision on effects of discrimination, not intention, and a precedent for the Court’s power to negate a political boundary set by a state. The Supreme Court sent the case back to a federal district court, where Judge Frank M. Johnson ruled in February of 1961 that the old boundaries be restored. The next month Johnson issued a “sweeping decree” ordering the Macon County registrars, in very specific, detailed instructions aimed at removing any opportunity for obstruction, to begin registering black voters. As a result, by 1962, for the first time ever in Macon County, black

90 Taper, “Gomillion versus Lightfoot,” 54 (Emphasis original).
91 Norrell, Reaping, 118.
93 Norrell, Reaping, 124.
95 Norrell, Reaping, 125-6.
voters outnumbered white voters.96 Their success came too late for the 1960 elections, so the first black officials since Reconstruction were not elected in the county until 1964.97

Gomillion and the Tuskegee faculty had won an important victory, but it was not theirs alone. The willingness to carefully document violations of the law and pursue justice through a series of court cases was necessary to this legal breakthrough, but not sufficient. Reforms are never granted by elites without tremendous pressure, and in this case much of the pressure came from elsewhere. Gomillion believed in “slow change,” but actually reaped the work of activists pursuing “fast change” in other parts of the region. The nearby Montgomery Bus Boycott shifted the landscape of politics in Gomillion’s favor, adding to the pressure on the federal government and local authorities, and certainly gave Tuskegeans the confidence to launch a boycott of their own (even as they hesitated to associate themselves with an “outsider” like King). Because of the ferocity of the “massive resistance” to voting rights and desegregation, Gomillion’s legal victory, like others in the era, were rendered meaningless without a movement to make them a reality on the ground. After Montgomery, the southern civil rights movement did not re-emerge on a mass scale until black college students took action at the very top of the following decade. When their professors went into motion in the 1950s, Tuskegee students watched and learned. But in the 1960s, the students took action on their own, both building upon and rejecting aspects of their elders’ outlook. Like Gomillion, they would reckon with the legacy of Booker T. Washington in the process. Before the decade was out, the students would teach their teachers a thing or two about social change.

The victory of the voting rights struggle in Tuskegee coincided with profound shifts in global and domestic politics, which in turn set the stage for a truly mass movement of black college students in the United States. In 1960 alone, some seventeen African countries gained independence from European colonial powers. These newly liberated countries, their leaders — and the many pupils they sent to study at Tuskegee — would have a tremendous effect on the student body in the years to come. At the time, Alabama state senator Engelhardt articulated a direct connection between voting rights and decolonization. Given the TCA’s victory, the choice for local whites, he said, was either to leave the county, or “submit to Negro rule and await a situation comparable to the Congo, with local Lumumbas coming forward in ever increasing numbers.”

Engelhardt’s fears were misplaced, to say the least. Despite the legal victories, “massive resistance” by whites had successfully retarded desegregation. By 1960, six years after the Supreme Court’s Brown decision, only 17 southern school districts were desegregated. Nowhere had the success of the Montgomery bus boycott been replicated. “All of Africa will be free before we can get a lousy cup of coffee,” author James Baldwin lamented. While the movement overall stalled, black college attendance swelled. Between 1953 and 1965 the number of black students in four-year colleges nearly doubled (63,000 to 119,000). In growing numbers, they came to campus with raised expectations and confidence. “Their youth had been marked by

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1 Cooper, Africa in the World, 2.
2 Quoted in Norrell, Reaping, 126.
5 Weinberg, A Chance to Learn, 281.
sweeping changes in the economy, in demography, in national and international politics, and in American attitudes about race,” historian Harvard Sitkoff wrote. “All this had conspired to raise their aspirations, to fuel their hopes. But the promise of change far outran the reality.”

In February 1960, black college students initiated a new phase of the civil rights struggle, making it, for the first time, a genuine mass movement on a national scale. Bypassing the cautious, legalistic approach pioneered nationally by the NAACP and locally by the TCA, they shifted to mass direct action. Four students from a local college sat down at a segregated lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, on February 1, 1960, unwittingly launching the largest mass movement for civil rights in the twentieth century. By 1961, sit-ins swept one hundred southern cities, involving some 50,000 people. Roughly 20,000 activists were arrested between 1961 and 1963. By one estimate, nearly one out of every four black college students in the South participated in the sit-in movement during the years 1960-1961.

Future Tuskegee students Michael Wright and Gwen Patton were both energized as teenagers by the sit-ins. In 1960, Wright joined a picket line in New York City. “As a matter of fact, my first picket line was picketing Woolworth’s—a department store’s—headquarters in Harlem in order to support the student sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960,” he recalled. “I was thirteen years old.” Gwen Patton remembers that in 1960, “when I was sixteen, I wanted to go to Raleigh, North Carolina for the historic sit-ins, but I couldn’t.” However, the next year she came to Tuskegee and was able to join the movement there.

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6 Sitkoff, The Struggle, 70.
7 Marable, Race, reform, and rebellion, 67.
8 Weinberg, A Chance to Learn, 325. Thompson writes that by the summer of 1960, “over 70,000 students had taken an active part in disruptive civil rights demonstrations.” Thompson, Private Black Colleges, 16.
9 Michael Wright, interview with the author, July 2015.
10 Patton, interview.
At Tuskegee, young people leapt into action. Future Tuskegee student George Paris was inspired. The sit-in movement, he remembered, “just opened our eyes. Opened up a whole new world for us. There IS something we can do!” He and his friends began thinking of how to desegregate everything everywhere. “We can go to Montgomery and sit in at a lunch counter, you know and we can go to Auburn, go to the swimming pool.”11 At Tuskegee Institute, roughly 400 students decided to march off the campus, through downtown Tuskegee carrying placards calling for voting rights and civic equality.12 Robert Jones – a junior at Tuskegee – decided to join the protest. The administration worried about their safety, Jones thought. “Dr. Foster was very much opposed to this,” he said. “A few days later Dr. Foster had an assembly where the impression I got was that things were happening throughout the South and our business is academics and we should probably stay out of it for now.”13 No doubt Foster was aware that Alabama State College, under pressure from Governor Patterson, expelled nine students for their participation in similar protests happening at the same time.14

If Tuskegee administrators feared for the safety of their students, they shared with them a profound sense of optimism that the world was changing in their favor, for the better. President Foster’s 1960-1961 annual report to the alumni brimmed with optimism about the world, witnessing “miraculous breakthroughs in science” and the “abundant flow of material goods” which has “freed man for thought and action above the subsistence level.” In America, there “is more impressive involvement of Negroes in civic affairs and in political responsibility.

11 G. Paris, interview.
12 “400 Students Parade in Support of Civil Rights,” Campus Digest, March 1, 1960, 1.
13 Jones, interview.
Desegregation of public facilities and services is proceeding noticeably — slowly but surely — in many a Southern community.”

A similar sense of optimism pervaded the student movement. The sit-in activists decided to form a new national civil rights organization, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in April of 1960. Their founding statement affirmed their view that love would conquer hate: “Nonviolence as it grows from Judaic-Christian tradition seeks a social order of justice permeated by love,” they wrote. “Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear; love transforms hate. Acceptance dissipates prejudice; hope ends despair. Peace dominates war; faith reconciles doubt. Mutual regard cancels enmity. Justice for all overthrows injustice.” This confidence was not unfounded; nonviolent civil disobedience was, for the time being, a winning formula. By the end of 1961, the use of public accommodations in upper and border South states was transformed as almost two hundred cities began to desegregate.

No Tuskegee students were present at SNCC’s founding convention at Shaw University, but some immediately joined, and links with SNCC developed quickly over the next few years. Gwen Patton joined SNCC in 1962 and would continue working with the group for the next five years. At Tuskegee, students formed a new civil rights organization, the Tuskegee Institute Advancement League (TIAL, an organization that would fade and then re-organize itself two years later); through its auspices SNCC chairman John Lewis was invited to speak to the campus community.

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16 Quoted in Carson, In Struggle, 23-34.
17 Sitkoff, The Struggle, 81-2.
18 Patton, interview.
Some administrators saw an opportunity to develop programming on campus that would tap into the students’ desire to participate in social change. In the summer of 1963, Bertrand Phillips, a recent graduate from Columbia University’s Teachers College, was recruited by Foster to be the dean of students. When Phillips and his wife arrived in Macon County, they were struck by what they saw. “We drove around and saw a lot of poverty… we also saw a lot of people who were trying to help themselves,” he recalled. “It kind of inspired us.” In his second semester on campus, Phillips suggested to an assembly of students that they follow the examples of Booker W. Washington and George Washington Carver, who “didn't hide themselves on the campus. They reached out into the community, they made this institute a living part of Macon County and some of the surrounding counties.” Phillips issued a challenge: “To those students who really are interested and think that they can bring about some change, why don't you meet me in the morning and we'll talk about it in the gym,” he said. “I’d like you to be there at 5 in the morning.” Remarkably, at 5am the next day, Phillips met with 150 students in the gymnasium. They decided to call their mission a “domestic peace corps,” with the idea that students would “use our talents to help people repair their homes if they were trying to repair their homes, to grow their crops if that's what they were doing, to tutor the children who wanted to get further ahead in their schooling, to just relate to the needs of the community,” he said.\(^{20}\)

Venturing out into the surrounding communities, Phillips’s volunteers would find themselves again and again in the company of SNCC workers. SNCC quickly distinguished itself as the boldest of the civil rights organizations. It sent students (often, ex-students, actually) into the Deep South to challenge segregation and disfranchisement in the most dangerous contexts. Much of this work took place in the Black Belt. Given Tuskegee’s location in the center of that

\(^{20}\) Phillips, interview.
region, it is not surprising that Tuskegee students were involved in all of SNCC’s Black Belt campaigns. Like other SNCC workers, Tuskegee students were radicalized by the resilience of rural black people and the murderous southern regimes they braved in order to assert their rights. SNCC recruited a small number of Tuskegee students for their voter registration, freedom school, and community center projects in the Black Belt in the fall of 1964. Fourteen Tuskegee students worked in Mississippi on the mock election that propelled the SNCC-initiated Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party into open conflict with the national Democratic leadership at the party’s convention that year in Atlantic City. By this time, some SNCC members, guided by James Forman, had moved on from the ideas of Christian nonviolence and began organizing study groups on Marxism, the Cuban revolution, and African liberation struggles. As young people in SNCC explored increasingly radical ideas, the state of Alabama observed their movement with growing alarm.

The Alabama Legislative Commission to Preserve the Peace

Leading the charge against the “communist menace” was the newly elected governor of Alabama, George Wallace. Wallace rarely missed an opportunity to link civil rights, the federal government, and communism. In 1963 he appeared before the US Senate Committee on Commerce to voice his opposition to a bill to desegregate interstate public accommodations. He began by noting the recent push to desegregate all facilities on military bases. Whereas black civil rights leaders hoped to connect desegregation to military victory, Wallace made the opposite case. “Is the real purpose of this integration movement to disarm this country as the

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21 Peter Scott, II, “SNCC Representatives Seek Aid In ‘Black Belt Project,’” Campus Digest, October 18, 1964, 1.
23 Marable, Race, reform, and rebellion, 67.
Communists have planned?” he asked. In the next several pages of his prepared remarks he attempted to portray civil rights leaders as communists and to shame the federal government for bowing to them. “As a loyal American and as a loyal Southern Governor… I resent the fawning and pawing over such people as Martin Luther King and his pro-communist friends and associates,” he wrote. Furthermore, “I charge that Senate Bill 1732 constitutes the first step toward land reform — a long step in a socialistic scheme of government which will bring the total destruction of private property rights.” Interestingly, while a staunch segregationist, Wallace aggressively promoted expansive funding for public education. Again and again he emphasized his support for “up-lifting of the Negroes in Alabama,” through education. Wallace noted that during his first year in office, “we have increased the appropriation to Negro educational institutions 22 per cent,” he wrote. “We are building three new trade schools to train them for the jobs that we are making available to them by a fast growing industrial expansion in our state.”

Tuskegee’s practice of allowing radical (including communist) leaders to speak on campus provoked outrage among conservative white Alabamians. In 1961, Tuskegee sponsored a sixteen-day speaking tour by a black journalist, William Worthy, who traveled to several colleges to talk about his recent trip to Cuba, criticizing the Kennedy administration’s anti-communism, and the “hatchet job” the U.S. media was doing on Cuban leader Fidel Castro. In 1963, Tuskegee’s student government invited U.S. Communist Party leader Gus Hall to speak — but then rescinded the invitation under pressure from the campus administration. The Campus Digest printed President Foster’s defense of the reversal alongside a student rebuttal. Foster

claimed that communism was a worthy topic of intellectual discussion, but that it was better to hear about it from an expert, “rather than one whose presentation would… be oriented strongly to his political views and to the fulfillment in some significant way of his political purposes.”

The student respondent, O’Neal Smalls, called the cancellation an “infringement upon the right of academic freedom” and “not in line with democratic principles.” “I dissent from the belief that our students are intellectually incapable of debating these ideas when they are combined with such articulate personalities,” he wrote.26

Anticommunism became institutionalized in Alabama in the early 1960s. Following Wallace’s lead, the state legislature created the Alabama Legislative Commission to Preserve the Peace (ALCPP) in 1963 to investigate civil rights and campus activism in the state. The ALCPP’s purpose was to “study, investigate, analyze and interrogate persons, groups and organizations who may be engaged in activities of an unlawful nature against the sovereignty of the State of Alabama.” The new commission was charged with reporting to both houses of the legislature and to the governor.27 For the rest of the decade, the ALCPP wrote breathless, hysterical reports that attempted to confirm the connection between black activists and a global communist conspiracy. The ALCPP made a study of the political activity of churches in 1964 and distributed 25,000 copies to law enforcement agencies and political leaders around the country. The commission reported that SNCC “is extensively Communist dominated, and its leadership substantially follows the Communist Party line.” The ALCPP found “that SNCC is an agent for the Communist conspiracy and measures up to every definition of a Communist Party Front.” The CPUSA’s goal, the commission’s report alleges, is “using civil rights as a

27 “House Joint Resolution 5,” ALCPP, Reel #SG21073, 4.
Springboard [sic] to achieve a Soviet America.” The ALCPP noted that SNCC members, including John Lewis and James Forman had traveled to Africa and had met with communist leaders in Algeria. “The danger signal cannot be ignored,” the report warns. SNCC must be watched closely and “eventually it must be controlled by legal action,” or else “the State and nation will court major disaster.”

There are two important truths here. One is that anti-communism, while at times hysterically exaggerated, gained force in the South because it expressed anxiety about real changes in progress — primarily the decline of the old system of white supremacy. Historian Joy Ann Williamson-Lott is correct to conclude that the “southern brand of academic McCarthyism was informed by fear and anxiety about social change as much as concerns over communism.” She argues that anticommunism cannot be reduced to a simple “disguise” for racism. “Instead,” Williamson-Lott writes, “in the South fervent anticommunism and racism were inextricable.”

The Alabama legislators who created the ALCPP frankly acknowledged that their purpose was to criminalize dissent, to “hold a new club over race agitators.” The second conclusion is that the anti-communist hysterics, while exaggerated, contained a grain of truth — there was a radicalization among young people in the civil rights movement that did lead many of them to explore communist ideas. While the Governor and the ALCPP imagined that local people were mere dupes or puppets of an international conspiracy, the truth of the matter is that activists were inspired by global events and took cues from them, but they also developed ideas and acting on them in ways that were entirely resonant with their own experiences in the U.S. South.

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28 ALCPP, Reel #SG21073: 6; 10; 13; 14.
Radicalization On and Off Campus

At Tuskegee, the student movement did radicalize quite quickly, although it did so largely in the absence of any local communist organization or any “line” to follow. The generation of young black people who went to college in the 1960s confronted a contradiction between raised expectations, and a power structure (white and black) resistant to change. At Tuskegee, the largely middle-class students came to campus with high hopes that change was possible without any radical rupture with American ideals and structures. By the end of the calendar year, 1965, such a rupture seemed both inevitable and to some, desirable. For the first two months of the year, however, the future appeared bright.

At the start of 1965, Macon County was enjoying the fruits of the national and regional economic boom, which contributed significantly to the sense that progress was inevitable. In the summer of 1965, Governor Wallace boasted that $406 million worth of new industry came into Alabama. Businesses were seeking out Alabama, he said, because they “appreciate our stand for free enterprise and local government.”31 In 1965, the Department of Labor reported that 16 percent of county’s population was self-employed, as opposed to 13 percent in the state and 12 percent in the nation.32 Macon County’s residents’ household income in 1964 had increased, on average, by $500 from the year before. That was a 10 percent increase, higher than the average household increase in the state (8 percent) or in the nation (5 percent).33 Remarkably, 25 percent of that income was provided directly by the federal government in the form of salaries or

subsidies. By 1965, Macon County residents consumed a remarkable 34 percent more goods and services than they did just one year before. Nationwide, the number of black students continued to climb, contributing to a sense of possibility and change among young people and their families. In the mid-1960s, college enrollment for black people reached unprecedented heights — more than 100,000 — boosted by civil rights activism, the Civil Rights and Higher Education Acts of 1964 and 1965, and the growing availability of federal scholarships. Tuskegee enrolled a record-breaking 700 freshman in 1965. President Foster expressed the hope that Tuskegee would provide students with a unique opportunity for personal development. In February, at the mandatory weekly Sunday service at Tuskegee Institute’s chapel, Foster optimistically boasted that the “strength and happiness of Tuskegee is its people.” He said that the school would strive to “find the ways to encourage every student, faculty, and staff member to involve himself truly in this exciting educational enterprise which goes on here on this campus.”

One of the students in attendance was Melvin Todd, who had just started his career at Tuskegee in January. “The feeling that I got when I first went to campus was that I'm stepping into history,” he said. “There have been many, many great souls that have walked these sidewalks and these pathways, that I have to do well.”

By the start of 1965, however, many black college students’ optimism lay in their hopes for social change, not merely personal growth. Michael Wright, who also started as a freshman that year, was introduced to protest politics right away. In his first few days on campus, he saw a group of female nursing students on a picket line. He discovered that one of their classmates had

35 “34.4% Increase In Business Recorded for Macon County,” Tuskegee News, November 4, 1965, 1.
37 “Record Enrollment Expected At Tuskegee,” Tuskegee News, June 10, 1965, 1
39 Todd, interview.
been expelled for violating curfew. “I was the only guy on the picket line but it made perfect sense to me,” Wright said. The following day athletes were picketing on campus about not receiving financial aid, Wright recalled, and he supported them, too. Wright quickly fell in with students associated with SNCC, as well. Because of the campus’s location — a highway that traverses the Black Belt counties runs right through campus — SNCC activists in the Deep South frequently used the campus “as a place for rest and rehabilitation and socialization,” Wright recalled. In his first semester he joined the staff of the student newspaper (the Campus Digest) and became acquainted with SNCC people, including Sammy Younge, Jr. Sammy was one of the 211 Tuskegee students who marched peacefully in double-file lines through downtown Tuskegee in February in sympathy with the voting rights movement in Selma, Alabama, where activists had recently been attacked by police.

In addition to collaborating with SNCC, Tuskegee’s leading student activists wanted to create an organization of their own. In February 1965 the Tuskegee Institute Advancement League (TIAL) re-emerged. One of the first actions of the new TIAL was to lead a second march of 300 Tuskegee students into the downtown area, also in solidarity with the Selma activists. TIAL worked with and remained independent of SNCC. Patton in particular was wary of northern activists coming into the South through SNCC. “We didn't like people coming to liberate us,” Patton said, comparing the dynamic to a condescending benefactor who would come

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40 Wright, interview.
43 “Students Stage Sympathy March,” Campus Digest, February 13, 1965, 1.
in order to “civilize the noble savages,” as she put it. “It was insulting.”  

Instead TIAL members sought out a formal relationship with the TCA; the TCA declined the offer.  

While activists saw educational facilities as a resource for their agendas, governor Wallace also remained invested in education for his own reasons. Upgrading Alabama’s educational facilities was a top priority for the segregationist governor. By the end of 1964 Wallace had successfully pushed for the establishment of eleven new junior colleges and twenty-four trade schools. In February of 1965 Wallace drafted a speech for the Alabama legislature in which he would ask for dramatic increases in funding for schooling at all levels. In notes he prepared for the speech, he called for a 10 percent raise in teacher salaries across the board. Wallace also recommended a 20 percent increase for all colleges in the state, citing a 23 percent increase in enrollment. The Governor also called for a one-time capital outlay to purchase textbooks for every child, in order that education rise to meet the needs of the “surge of new industry coming to our State,” he wrote. Finally, he warned that this extensive state-sponsorship of textbooks was not to be confused with socialism. “I suppose that I have been spat upon by more socialists and have been threatened by more socialists and have had my automobile attempted turned over by more socialists than anybody in Alabama,” he said. The real threat, Wallace warned, is the federal government, which “goes beyond that which the communists authorize in the passage of the so-called Civil Rights Act,” and “has gone completely wild in  

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44 Quoted in Benson II, “Interview with Gwendolyn M. Patton,” 184.  
45 Patton, “Insurgent Memories.”  
setting regulations and saying that they will cut the funds off from the schools in this State unless they are signed.”

Not unlike the educators and businessmen who gathered at Tuskegee to mark the inauguration of Foster’s presidency, Wallace saw education as an essential vehicle for taking full advantage of Alabama’s industrial boom. He and they agreed that schooling should be a ladder that carried students into various technical, managerial, and supervisory professions essential to Alabama’s growing economy. Calling for double digit increases in salaries and budgets across the state, however, was an effective way to promise both upgraded educational facilities to black citizens and segregated facilities to white citizens. After all, increasing the budgets of black and white schools across the board would preserve the inequality between them. The state of Alabama’s overall appropriation for higher education for white students was roughly four times greater than for black students. Wallace’s speeches about black education notwithstanding, he would, in the years to come, develop a specific animosity toward Tuskegee. Beginning with the TCA boycott, and continuing through the school desegregation battle, and later, the Tuskegee student movement, Wallace came to see Tuskegee as a center of radicalism and disloyalty.

In the same month as Wallace’s speech to the legislature, and less than two weeks before he was assassinated in Harlem, Malcolm X spoke at Tuskegee, expressing ideas that challenged and inspired the three thousand students in attendance. “I remember when he was sitting in my office waiting to go to the auditorium to speak,” Phillips recalled. Malcolm said, “Well Dean, I want to tell you that people think I'm down here to try to incite some type of riot or something.

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48 James D. Anderson pointed this out to me. Personal communication with the author, April, 2016.
50 This remarkable reversal in Tuskegee’s standing in the halls of state power is explored in the next chapter.
I'm not, I'm just simply here to speak some truth to your students.”⁵¹ Having recently broken with the Nation of Islam (NOI), Malcolm was now committed to a program of social action and he challenged the students to get involved. When asked about his relationship to NOI leader Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm said, “Elijah believes that God is going to come and straighten things out. I believe that too. But whereas Elijah is willing to sit and wait, I’m not willing to sit and wait on God to come. If he doesn’t come soon, it will be too late. I believe in religion, but a religion that includes political, economic, and social action designed to eliminate some of these things and make a make a paradise here on earth while we’re waiting for the other.”⁵²

The hope in peaceful change that had animated SNCC’s first gathering was quickly transformed by bitter experience. Malcolm’s message resonated with that experience; in many speeches he was giving that month, he predicted that violence against the black movement would increase.⁵³ Melvin Todd remembers that Malcolm spoke about his life being in danger. “He said that if anything were to happen to him that it would not be done by white men,” Todd recalled.⁵⁴ Malcolm X was assassinated by members of the NOI on February 21, 1965. Five days later, the young activist Jimmy Lee Jackson was murdered by state troopers raiding a mass meeting for voting rights in Marion, Alabama.⁵⁵ The succession of bloodshed shook the optimism of Tuskegee students. James Farmer of the Congress of Racial Equality was the next guest speaker on campus. He suggested that, the movement was entering a new phase that would go beyond the issue of civil rights.⁵⁶ Citing Malcolm’s assassination, attacks on marchers in Selma, threats on

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⁵¹ Phillips, interview; Melvin Todd got to ask Malcolm a question, and recalls that he answered it in a “gracious manner.” Todd, interview.
⁵⁴ Todd, interview.
Dr. King’s life, and war in Vietnam, Tuskegee student Peter Scott, II wrote in the Campus Digest that “Malcolm X was right when he said that this would be the longest, hottest, bloodiest year ever.”

Marching on Montgomery

Tuskegee students would experience a small dose of this violence the next month. In March, they marched on the capital building in downtown Montgomery, and then tried to meet with the Governor; instead, they were attacked by police and some were briefly arrested. After Jimmy Lee Jackson’s murder, King and other civil rights leaders began planning a march from Selma to Montgomery. When marchers were beaten by state troopers in Selma on the Edmund Pettus Bridge (“Bloody Sunday”), TIAL started raising money from Tuskegee students to join the march in Montgomery. Sammy Younge even telephoned some of his former classmates at Cornwall Academy to ask for donations.

“This is a time for sober reflection,” The Tuskegee News editorialized after Bloody Sunday, “a time for learning from hard experience.” The paper didn’t hesitate to point out the difference between Tuskegee and Selma: “Tuskegee can be thankful that it has been spared the agony which has characterized voter registration efforts in Selma.”

The Tuskegee administration forbade students to go to Montgomery, “invoking the doctrine of in loco parentis,” and Dr. King balked at violating a federal judge’s injunction against the march, but a mass meeting of Tuskegee students decided to go to Montgomery.

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57 Peter Scott, II. “A Dying Warning,” Campus Digest, March 6, 1965, 3.
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anyway. Ruby Sales, a freshman, decided to go to the march because Gwen Patton came to her dorm to talk to students about it. In general, Tuskegee’s adults were concerned that the youth were moving too fast. George Paris remembers that they cautioned his classmates to “slow down.” The students were undaunted. “Yeah, we never listened to that,” Paris recalled. His peers’ attitude was, “we’re going to solve this problem, this afternoon.”


When they arrived, however, the city and state police blocked the entrance to the capitol and threatened to arrest anyone who didn't leave. The governor refused to meet with a student delegation, and troopers intervened in the ensuing standoff. They used horses to disperse parts of the crowd, and arrested two students (who were later released). After a while, about 500 left and roughly 300 stayed, refusing to leave the capitol, singing freedom songs. “A hard core of about 300 students vowed to sit-in in front of the Capitol until Governor Wallace decided to meet with them,” Patton later wrote that the incident radicalized Tuskegee students. “The pilgrimage had started out with naive, idealistic students marching for freedom. Fourteen hours later on a chilly March night, the 300 emerged as insurgents.” Police surrounded them. Anyone who left wouldn't be allowed to return, so those who remained were forced to relieve themselves on the spot. They did so in a circle blocked by picket signs, until a steady stream of urine ran down the capitol steps. “Thus did the great ‘pee-in at the Alabama Capital’ join the civil rights lore,”

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60 Patton, “Marching and Demonstrating,” 6; Forman, Sammy Younge, Jr., 80.
62 G. Paris, interview.
64 Barbara Donaldson, “Minute by Minute,” Campus Digest, March 20, 1965, 8; Forman, Sammy Younge, Jr., 87.
65 Patton, “Insurgent Memories.”
Patton wrote. Tuskegee student Ruby Sales remembered this as the first time she was “confronted with white terrorism,” and “the understanding that I was not my mother's daughter, — I mean that somebody would really hurt me.”

The march ended in frustration, which provoked a heated debate among the students. At 2am it was raining and they decided to seek shelter in the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Much to their surprise, the deacons wanted the students to leave. They cut off the heat and turned off the water. “They knew the terrorism of the south... they were terrified,” Sales surmised. Some students blamed SNCC leaders for prolonging the action in Montgomery. George Ware recalled that, in class, “instructors would say that TIAL was being manipulated by SNCC... that students should be very wary, first of SNCC and second of that little radical core in TIAL.”

Gwen Patton described the march as a breaking point. “After the march, a lot of people couldn't take Tuskegee anymore,” she said. “They had come to a realization within themselves; they had seen what their education was doing to them. But some of them weren't strong enough to deal with it -- defying their parents, defying the school, defying the whole society.”

At the same time Tuskegee students were questioning their upbringing and education, President Foster appealed to the governor in their defense. One week after the student march, the governor received a four-page memo from Foster, which he had prepared in preparation for an in-person meeting (which Wallace indefinitely postponed). Foster’s memo communicated that he and his colleagues at Tuskegee had been “deeply troubled… as we observed the slow progress in this State toward full democracy for all citizens.” Foster called on the Governor to ensure equal

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66 Patton, “Marching and Demonstrating,” 8; Forman, Sammy Younge, Jr., 89.
68 Barbara Donaldson, “Minute by Minute,” Campus Digest, March 20, 1965, 8; Forman, Sammy Younge, Jr., 92.
70 Athelal Pierce, “From an Exchange Student,” Campus Digest, March 20, 1965, 9; Quoted in Forman, Sammy Younge, Jr., 107.
71 Quoted in Forman, Sammy Younge, Jr., 109.
voting rights, appoint black people to positions in his administration, desegregate the schools, and speak out against police brutality. “We call on you urgently as the Governor of all the people of Alabama to speak out against injustice and to use every resource of your office to assure that this state moves forward,” Foster wrote. Wallace took the opportunity instead to publicly insist that the marchers were the real problem. “Any pre-conceived ‘march’ along the public highways of this state is not conducive to the orderly flow of traffic,” he wrote in a prepared public statement. “Such action would not be allowed on the part of any other group of citizens, or non-citizens, of the State of Alabama and will not be allowed in this instance.” Once again, he concluded by noting the importance of education in solving the problem. “These matters will be solved best by increased educational opportunities and by the growth of the economic standing of all of us. We have a concentrated program in Alabama to further the education of all our citizens and to provide jobs for them.”

The march was taken seriously by students, administrators, and the legislature’s anti-communist commission. “At last Tuskegee students are no longer apathetic to civil rights!” the Campus Digest Editor-in-Chief boasted. The Montgomery march produced a core of organizers. Some of Tuskegee’s marchers later became full-time SNCC workers, including Jimmy Rogers, Jennifer Lawson, George Ware, Simuel Schutz. Others remained active while still enrolled in school, including Gwen Patton, Wendell Paris, Warren Hamilton, and Sammy Younge, Jr. Despite his prior admonitions, even Foster had praise for the marchers. “I am impressed by the growing interest of students in this crucial current issue of civil rights,” he told

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72 L.H. Foster, “Statement Prepared By L.H. Foster, President of Tuskegee Institute, for Conference with Governor George C. Wallace,” March 16, 1965. Papers of the Governor, Box SG21957, Folder 12.
75 Forman, Sammy Younge, Jr., 110.
an all-Institute assembly. “You make us proud.”  

Some argued the march had larger results. Gwen Patton thought the student “march that wouldn’t turn around” helped to pressure King to complete the Selma to Montgomery march. To the governor’s anti-communist commission, the arrival of King and several thousand others in Montgomery symbolized the strength of the communist threat. The commission collaborated with local law enforcement officials to film the final march when it arrived on March 25th, and to analyze the footage in order to document the attendance of communists and “revolutionary forces” there. The commission noted James Forman’s presence. “He is a vicious revolutionary with a violent hatred for all whites,” the commission reported. “This feeling he makes known freely when talking with Negro groups, including our own agents.”

Despite the commission’s fears of Forman’s influence, the radicalization at Tuskegee that month had more to do at this point with questioning the Tuskegee administration’s rules and regulations. While Foster praised the student marchers, he also insisted on sending home a permission slip to all parents to allow (or prohibit) their children to participate in any further movement activity. “You have to understand that when I went to Tuskegee we [still] had parietals,” Sales recalled, referring to the strict in loco parentis rules that had long governed student life on campus. “You couldn't even have a man in the dormitory. You couldn't even go downtown without your parents' consent,” she said. “They had a curfew. If you were not in by 9 o'clock you could get expelled from school.” And yet suddenly, the old rules no longer seemed to apply. “To go from that [old system], to make the radical move to going to Montgomery, and also people going out into the county without any parental consent,” Sales said, “and then

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76 “Prexy Views Civil Rights Trend,” Campus Digest, April 10, 1965, 1.
77 Patton, interview.
78 ALCPP, Reel #SG21073: 8; 13.
79 Forman, Sammy Younge, Jr., 130.
coming into the lobby of the dormitory to make speeches, -- it really changed the social landscape at Tuskegee.\textsuperscript{80}

The change was intellectual and deeply emotional. Sales recalled, “I think something else is going on that is very significant here, you are being opened up and realizing how much you don't know, and how much you'd like to know.”\textsuperscript{81} Forman began spending more time working with Tuskegee student activists. Many of them, he wrote, “simply could not deal with the contradiction between Tuskegee Institute and the life for which it was preparing them, and the events which had taken place only thirty minutes away in Montgomery.” Tuskegee, as Forman put it, said to students “Get an education and you won’t be a nigger.” The movement, on the other hand, said to them “You’re a nigger no matter what you do.” In the process of trying to decide which was real, Forman reported, four students had nervous breakdowns that spring.\textsuperscript{82}

Red scaremongering threw students back on the defensive. The issue re-emerged when students invited the Marxist historian Herbert Aptheker to speak on campus on March 17, 1965. His topic was “Communism: Menace or Promise?”\textsuperscript{83} That same day, the ALCPP warned members of the Alabama’s House of Representatives that “Today is a day of rather unusual events.” The “unusual” in this case was Tuskegee students protesting on the steps of the state capitol, the President sending a voter registration bill to Congress, and Herbert Aptheker speaking at Tuskegee. The report quotes the CPUSA’s newspaper, The Daily Worker, which called Aptheker a “communist spokesman.”\textsuperscript{84} A Tuskegee resident sent a letter to the Campus Digest warning the students about the “strategies and tactics [communists] use in order to

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item Wiley and Hartford, “Oral History/Interview: Ruby Nell Sales;” \textit{In loco parentis} rules were in decline after the Dixon v. Alabama State Board of Education ruling that students had a right to due process proceedings in campus disciplinary cases. See Lee, “Dixon v. Alabama.”
\item Wiley and Hartford, “Oral History/Interview: Ruby Nell Sales.”
\item Forman, \textit{Sammy Younge, Jr.}, 130-1.
\item “Statement to House Members of Information on Point of Privilege,” ALCPP, Reel #SG21072.
\end{thebibliography}

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manipulate people, especially impressionable and uninformed minds.” George L. Knox, Jr., student chairman of the lecture series responded. “When the alarms are sounded and bells are rung, every time an ‘agent of the communist conspiracy’ is invited to speak on a college campus, there is one point… which seems constantly to be overlooked,” he wrote. “It is this. **We are not afraid of communism.** We have faith enough in the free enterprise system to believe that it can stand toe to toe with communism, exchange blows and emerge unscathed.”

In fact a minority of students — those working most closely with SNCC — were beginning to ask questions about the free enterprise system. Sales remembered when veteran SNCC activist Willie Peacock came to Tuskegee as a graduate student. “He was the first person that I ever knew who mentioned the word, ‘Capitalism,’” she said. “It was one of those ‘Aha!’ moments that just began to open the floodgates for me….“

**TICEP and TIAL**

For the rest of the semester, students explored various ways to channel their energies. In April, Gwen Patton ran for president of Tuskegee’s Student Government Association. She won with 75 percent of the vote, becoming its first female elected president. “She was a real fireball,” Melvin Todd recalled. “I was very impressed with her. She was a little short girl, very good speaker.” “I'd never seen a Black woman in a position that Gwen Patton was carrying out,” Ruby Sales remembered, “I mean she had some authority, — she had some real clout on campus.” Furthermore, “she had clout not because she was a beauty queen but because she was

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85 James D. Bales and George L. Knox, Jr., “John Doe And… Communism,” *Campus Digest*, May 8, 1965, 7 [emphasis in the original].
87 “Patton Wins Presidency,” *Campus Digest*, April 24, 1965; Patton, “Marching and Demonstrating,” 15.
88 Todd, interview.
talking about issues.” Melvin Todd took photographs for the main newspaper of the southern civil rights movement, the Southern Courier, and helped Caroline Hilton get work there as a freelancer, too. TIAL grew more ambitious — taking aim at the local economy and beyond. Student members picketed a local A&P market for four days, then halted their pickets when the manager conceded to hiring black people “on a non-discriminatory basis.” Meanwhile other TIAL members traveled to Lowndes County to participate in a “Freedom Day” voter registration drive alongside SNCC workers.

Several hundred Tuskegee students were also radicalized by their participation in Dean Phillips’ service program. In the summer of 1965, Tuskegee received a $500,000 federal anti-poverty grant to fund Phillips’ “domestic peace corps,” now called the Tuskegee Institute Community Education Program (TICEP). With that money, TICEP was able to pay 700 Tuskegee students to work as tutors in a dozen Black Belt counties. The tutoring was meant to supplement the public school education, but Phillips hoped it would raise the consciousness and expectations of people in the Black Belt. “Most importantly,” Phillips told an interviewer, “the program helped kids and their parents to become critical of the education they can get in Alabama now.” Most people, Phillips said, “had no idea before this summer that they should want or expect anything better.” Given the long history of Black Belt activism, this was certainly an overstatement.

For many Tuskegee students, the tutoring program took them out of their sheltered lives and put them in direct contact with people in the Black Belt. For Lucenia Dunn, it was a life-

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90 Hilton, interview.
changing experience. “I learned about the Black Belt and I learned about what it meant to be really poor,” she said. “You walk into a house and the dirt floor with children with the extended bellies and mucus running out of their noses. Just abjectly poor. I’ve never seen anything like that.” Working as a teacher had a profound effect on her. Teaching English one day, she heard one of her adult students shout, “Lord have mercy, lord have mercy! I can finally write my name!” She recalled that everything stopped “and chills just went up all over my arm.” The man no longer had to write “X” to sign his name. “That right there said something to me about what I had to do,” she said. “That cemented my commitment to black people.”

95 Tuskegee student Cozetta Lamore remembers that her students had “joyous smiles” and exuded confidence. As Phillips had hoped, the program raised their sense of expectations — for themselves and for their schools. Lamore remembers the attitude was “We’re finally doing something to get out of this.”

96 Through tutoring, Tuskegee students also learned about the bravery of rural people in the face of racist terror. In May of 1965 Todd joined the TICEP program. “I was deeply moved by the courage and passion and hospitality of the people that lived in the Whitehall community of Lowndes County,” he said. “They embraced us Tuskegee kids, and we did our best to plug gaps in the education of their children.” TICEP placed him in the middle of one of SNCC’s most radical projects -- building a political organization called the Black Panther Party. Todd was housed for part of the time with the Jackson family. Matthew Jackson, Sr. was one of the founding members of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, which later became the Black Panther Party. “Matthew Jackson, Sr. basically lost his life coming from a voter mass meeting

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92 Dunn, interview.
96 Cozetta Lamore, interview with the author, July 2016.
one night,” Todd recalled. “His truck ran off the road and they found him dead the next morning in his truck,” he said. “We assumed that was an accident.”

TICEP students learned about such “accidents” first hand. Dunn picked up a car full of children in her car to take them home from tutoring. When everyone stopped talking at one point, she recalled saying to herself, “Oh-oh.” She looked in the rearview mirror. “There was a truck full of white men,” she said, “it was right on my tail and they had guns.” She thought, “Oh god, I’m on a dirt road. Ain’t no houses, nothing around in case something happens.” The murder of Emmett Till flashed through her mind, and she stepped on the gas pedal. “I was shaking,” she said, “the children were shaking. That’s terror… I had never had that sense of terror and here are people who have it every day of their lives.”

A few months later, a white civil rights worker, Viola Liuzzo, was killed on the same road that Tuskegee students used to travel to their TICEP appointments in Lowndes County. On the way there, Melvin Todd recalls passing the spot where her car had come to rest. “The tire marks still looked fresh,” he said. “There was a fresh flower funeral wreath placed on the site.” All of the students in his van “became silent for the rest of the trip,” he said. “We were scared.”

For some students, the TICEP experience propelled them into direct action and confrontational protests, while for others, it cemented a commitment to providing direct service. Chester Higgins, Jr. was the business manager of the TICEP Journal. For a time, he viewed TICEP as basically fitting the agenda of the civil rights movement, “just like hand to a glove.” However, he concedes that the exposure to danger in the Black Belt had a radicalizing effect. “Perhaps,” he said, “this combination of civil rights mission and the activism of the students who

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97 Todd, interview.
98 Dunn, interview.
99 Todd, interview.
put their lives in sometimes precarious positions encouraged the questioning that later would lead to the confrontation between the students and the administration.”

Some students concluded that direct service, not protests, would be more effective at making change. Writing in the *Campus Digest*, student Edwina Hayes argued that protesting and “handing out pamphlets” wouldn’t accomplish much. The only way to promote genuine freedom, equality and democracy, she wrote, was through “the unselfish and relentless efforts of our students.” Echoing Phillips’ call for a “domestic peace corps,” (and perhaps speaking from her experience in TICEP) she suggested that the “agricultural majors could teach the farmers… Nursing majors could aid in the attending of the young unwed mothers of children… and sociology majors could meet with destitutes and alcoholics and try to point out hidden qualities of worth…”

In the spring and summer of 1965, a small but influential group of students turned their attention away from service and toward civil disobedience. In particular, they targeted the town of Tuskegee, and pushed for immediate and complete desegregation. Dr. King — who now, five year later, in a changed political moment, was welcomed on campus — no doubt contributed to their confidence when he spoke to Tuskegee’s graduating class that May. The civil rights struggle in Alabama, he said “has suffered not so much from the violence of bad people as from the silence and indifference of good people.” Echoing the students’ sense of urgency, he continued, “The timid will say, ‘Don’t push too hard. Let’s cool off awhile. Time will solve the problem.’ The forces of bad will have often used time better than the forces of good will.”

Tuskegee’s most militant students — mostly members of TIAL — adopted this perspective.

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100 Chester Higgins, Jr., interview with the author, August 2015.
102 “We Must Learn to Live Together As Brothers, King Tells Graduates,” *Tuskegee News*, June 3, 1965, 1.
Not unlike Patton’s grandmother, TIAL members were not concerned with “integration” as such. Rather, they sought desegregation — the removal of racial barriers proscribing the use of all community facilities. For them, desegregation protests were a means of peeling away Tuskegee’s façade, of “challenging racism in supposedly interracial Tuskegee,” Forman wrote. “They were a way of exposing the lie of ‘the model town.’” Yet Tuskegee’s middle-class leadership continued to cling to the façade and defend it. Boycotting the A&P for not hiring black people raised the ire of middle-class black people in town. To the black middle class, Forman wrote, TIAL activists “were just ‘wild,’ ‘irresponsible,’ dungaree-wearing ‘kids’ who threatened to rock the Model Town boat” and some community members even accused TIAL of being a communist group.103 “Folks didn't like the way we dressed,” Wendell Paris remembered, “and they would tell us that.”104 Undaunted by the opposition from elders, TIAL launched a series of protests over the summer that led them into conflict with Tuskegee’s black middle class leadership: Gomillion, the TCA, and the Tuskegee administration.

Sammy Younge, Jr. and other TIAL students decided to desegregate the city swimming pool at the end of May. When black students showed up to swim, all of the whites fled and the activists swam alone. The next day someone put a baby alligator in the pool. Soon after, students found glass shards sprinkled on the diving board, followed by manure and acid in the water. The city drained the pool on June 2 and refused to refill it. The next week a delegation of white people appeared at the city council asking for the pool to remain segregated.105 Younge directly confronted Gomillion in a public forum for not supporting the effort to desegregate the

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103 Forman, Sammy Younge, Jr.: 126; 129.
104 W. Paris, interview.
swimming pools. “Gomillion, you're supposed to be the leader of the Negro people. What are you doing?” Gomillion didn't respond.106

TIAL also clashed with the TCA and the Tuskegee administration on voter registration. So as not to frighten white people, Gomillion and the TCA wanted to "go slow" on voter registration. Despite their majority (in 1964, there were 3,733 black voters and 3,479 white voters) the TCA only supported running two black people for the city council (out of five available seats), and they sent limited numbers of people to register at any one time so as not to give the impression that they wanted to take over.107 “If it is evil to have all-white government,” Stanley Smith, a Tuskegee sociologist who was one of the two black people elected to the council said, “then it is also evil to have all-Negro government.”108 TIAL thought everyone who was eligible should register to vote immediately, and let the chips fall where they may. When TIAL heard that the TCA had agreed to bring no more than twelve people per day downtown to get registered to vote, Wendell thought, “What kind of craziness is this?” TIAL also came into conflict with the Tuskegee leadership. “Needless to say, we bumped heads with the administration on the campus a lot of times,” Wendell recalled. He understood that TIAL might be messing with Tuskegee’s image and ability to fundraise, and was of course concerned with student safety, “and so [Foster] really was kind of skeptical about Tuskegee students just leaving campus, going all over every which way to do voter registration when our parents thought that we were at school studying.”109

In the context of growing pressure from activists and from the federal government, some of Tuskegee’s white leaders decided to head off the growing civil rights movement in the town.

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106 Quoted in Forman, Sammy Younge, Jr., 153.
107 Hamilton and Ture, Black Power, 136.
108 Jeffries, Bloody Lowndes, 165.
109 W. Paris, interview.
and retain their “model city” image. Several local businesses began hiring black people ahead of the deadlines for the imposition of federal mandates. The Tuskegee Chamber of Commerce took out a full-page ad in the Tuskegee News stating that “in light of recent developments in ALABAMA,” the organization felt an obligation to proclaim “what it believes to be right.” “First,” the ad read “we believe in the full protection and opportunity under the law of all our citizens, both Negro and white.” Ever since Neil O. Davis, a white newspaperman known for racial liberalism, purchased the Tuskegee News in 1964, the paper repeatedly editorialized against Governor Wallace’s attempts to obstruct voting rights for black people and against his use of violence against protesters. These shifts demonstrate that the black movement successfully created a split among white southerners. Their struggle cracked the “solid South”—in Tuskegee, as in the region—but could not yet claim total victory.

As much as they denounced Tuskegee’s middle-class leadership, TIAL was itself led, predominantly, by middle-class youth. “Tuskegee's budding young adult-children came home from the New England prep schools,” Gwen Patton wrote of her newly-radicalizing peers. “It became abundantly clear that rubbing shoulders with upper-class white kids activated their thirst for Black freedom.” Forman described Sammy Younge, Jr.’s political trajectory as a process of “rejecting middle-class standards and affirming” his “identity with blackness.” The activists in TIAL gave themselves elaborate titles—Younge was Chairman of Voter Registration, Simuel Schutz was Chairman of Direct Action, Wendell Paris was Project Director—which, Wendell Paris conceded with a smile, “didn’t mean a whole lot,” but spoke of the

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111 “What We Believe and Where We Stand,” Tuskegee News, April 20, 1965.
113 Patton, “Insurgent Memories.”
114 Forman, Sammy Younge, Jr., 119.
activists’ sense of themselves. Melvin Todd joined some of TIAL's demonstrations, but felt the group was somewhat elitist. Todd said that the leadership “were mostly kids from Tuskegee, who were in that cluster of middle class Tuskegee families.” They had an “air,” he recalled with a laugh, “of being a little bit more advanced that the rest of us, you know, who came from other parts of town.” He included Younge in that characterization. He was not easy to get to know, Todd remembered. “He had an air about him that, you know, he had gone out, he had done a little time in the Navy, and I think he felt that he could do stuff and get away with it, that we couldn't do, the average guys couldn't do,” Todd said.

TIAL essentially was led by middle-class youth who were explicitly criticizing the class politics of their elders. In the pages of their newsletter, The Activist, George Ware wrote that TIAL had to “take to the streets” in order to get results, but the established leaders hesitated to do so because of their class position, he argued. “The middle class Negro views with disdain any fight for rights which occurs in the streets, however,” Ware wrote, “because he associates ‘the streets’ with rabble-rousing and believes that the correct way to obtain justice is through the courts.” But the court victories didn’t come out of thin air — rather, Ware asserted, they were movement victories. “We all know that this is a guise because the major decisions which have come from the courts are a result of outraged Negroes projecting issues into the public eye by taking the issues into the streets,” he wrote. TIAL member Patricia Bailey assumed a leadership role for middle-class black people, even if they were reluctant to accept the part. “The lower-class Negroes are waiting for the middle-class Negroes to lead the way for them,” she wrote, “but the middle-class Negroes do not like our methods of solving the problems in Macon

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115 W. Paris, interview.
116 Todd, interview.
117 Ware, “The Middle Class Negro in Tuskegee,” 17, 34.
County.” Wendell Paris further developed a class analysis by discussing the fact that the county contained poor people “of both races.” However, he argued, “Macon County is so busy trying to help the middle class Negro to enjoy total equality that it has forgotten its under-privileged brother.” Poor black people are “continuously exploited by the white man” and poor people “suffer humiliation from both races, by economic pressure from the white man and social pressures from the Negro.” The social pressure to conform to middle-class norms is part of what students rejected. Forman thought that Younge was drawn to SNCC because he found a group of people whose purpose was “real,” not like “the Tuskegee world with its concern for status and status quo.”

**Entering the House of God**

In the summer of 1965, no campaign was as effective at pricking Tuskegee’s self-image as TIAL’s effort to desegregate local churches. On June 27, twenty-two students and some faculty split up into groups to desegregate three churches in Tuskegee. Not one church even let them in the door; some faced mean shouts and taunts; others just had the doors shut and locked in their faces. At the First Methodist Church, an usher told the group that they would “break up the congregation” if they entered. “If as Christians you deny other Christians the right to enter the house of God,” George Ware replied, “then your congregation is already broken up.”

When the service was over at the Southern Presbyterian Church, Reverend Steve Bacon came out with another minister. “He seemed shocked to hear that we had been unable to come inside.

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120 Forman, *Sammy Younge, Jr.*, 119.
He came over and shook hands with us and said that he was truly sorry that we had not been able to worship, and that he hoped some day, we would be able to worship together. He then led us in prayer.” He did, however, concede that the lock-out represented “the will of some in the congregation.”

After the church demonstration, TIAL declared its aims in writing. That week, TIAL published its first issue of The Activist, and the Tuskegee News reported that the new group distributed 800 copies around the campus. “There is a strong, unyielding, but more important, fairly unconcerned white power structure in Macon County and throughout the South,” the opening editorial, written by Elizabeth Shields, stated. “TIAL intends to break this power structure in Macon County -- not because it is white, but because it does not represent the majority of the people.”

Shields pointed up the growing contradiction between American ideals and the reality for black people. “As Americans we learned to value and to expect certain hopes and dreams,” she wrote, “but as Negroes we learn that these dreams can never be realities... Hence, the present revolution.” The Activist declared TIAL to be non-violent. “But non-violence does not imply moderation,” Shields cautioned. “Our philosophy is based on action... We hope to mobilize Macon County's Negro population so that it can become an effective voice in this community and continue to be so on its own momentum.”

An article by Sammy Younge, Jr., titled (with intentional irony) “The Great Society,” highlighted what he saw as the contradictions in the town. “Tuskegee isn't what its [sic] published to be,” he wrote. “If Tuskegee is so great, why can't we go to church together? Why was the city pool closed? Why

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wasn't anyone prosecuted for throwing acid and rubbish in the city pool?"128 Through direct action and its newsletter, TIAL increased pressure on city leaders to move quickly – and they did. During the same week the newsletter appeared, Tuskegee’s City Council, following the “letter and spirit of the 1964 Civil Rights Act,” voted to create a special advisory committee to “facilitate further changes and improvement” in the city, especially the desegregation of public accommodations.129

The church desegregation campaign escalated quickly. The next Sunday, TIAL returned to the First Methodist Church with roughly 500 people and the media. They went early, so some of their people actually got inside, but were still thrown out violently.130 One white churchgoer who had been locked out along with the demonstrators commented, “These people have no interest in getting into church. It’s a communist conspiracy.”131 The next week, July 18, Sammy Younge, Wendell Paris, and Simuel Schutz were the main leaders of the third attempt at First Methodist.132 A mob of two-dozen white men was waiting for them. Several of the activists were beaten and some were hospitalized. Wendell was hit in the head with a Coke bottle and needed six stitches. Sammy and George were chased away by a man wielding a .32-caliber pistol.133 George and Wendell’s father swore, George recalled, that “a white man would never again harm a child of mine and live.” George Paris, who at this point had graduated and joined the military, returned from basic training in time to participate in the church protests. He remembers that on the Sunday he arrived, his father was standing on the corner near the church, “with his overcoat

130 Forman, Sammy Younge, Jr., 157.
132 Forman, Sammy Younge, Jr., 158.
133 Forman, Sammy Younge, Jr., 158; “Violence Breaks Out at Tuskegee Church During TIAL’s Third Integration Attempt,” Southern Courier, July 23, 1965, 1.
on, in August” — concealing a shotgun. This was no department store prank; Sammy and Wendell were now risking life and limb in open defiance of Tuskegee’s Jim Crow traditions.

The church desegregation campaign led TIAL directly into conflict with the school’s administration. “The administration asked us to ease some of our civil-rights activity,” Patton remembered. “White/Negro interaction was approaching model human relations, we were told.” Later Patton claimed that Dean Phillips threatened to expel any TICEP student who participated in the demonstration, on the grounds that by joining a federal program, they could not participate in protest activity. Phillips claims just the opposite — saying instead that he was, in discussions with President Foster, defending students’ right to participate in protests, as long as TICEP students didn’t do so “on the clock.” Patton wrote later that she was summoned to Foster’s office. Foster allegedly told her that she “was not to encourage nor to lead the next Sunday’s march to the churches.” Patton replied that “the march would go on with or without me, and that the administration had overestimated my control over students.” For safety, TIAL sought out assistance from an armed defense group, the Deacons for Defense and Justice from Bogalusa, Louisiana (it is unclear whether or not they actually came). The violence at the protest (and, perhaps the administration’s stance) cowed the students. Only seven TICEP students participated on the next Sunday.

The students were proved right — church desegregation hit a nerve, especially with the established black leadership. Patton recalled that on many occasions Sammy Younge, Jr. tried to appeal to older black leaders. “They couldn't understand Sammy and the others at all,” Patton

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134 G. Paris, interview.
135 Patton, “Insurgent Memories.”
137 Phillips, personal communication, July 2016.
138 Patton, “Insurgent Memories.”
said. “They began calling [TIAL] communists. Sammy was ostracized.” Forman later wrote that Sammy’s parents received death threats and that the Deacons for Defense came to guard his house for a few weeks.¹⁴⁰ The students may have alienated some black people, but Tuskegee’s white power structure felt pressure from TIAL. Remarkably, three white men identified from the church incidents were arrested and charged with assault and battery.¹⁴¹ TIAL succeeded in provoking a crisis, but never gained admission to white churches. The Tuskegee News issued a front-page editorial appealing for calm in July and admonished citizens “not to take the law into their own hands.”¹⁴² The Tuskegee News also printed letters from white citizens calling on fellow Christians to open their hearts. “How many children do you suppose watched the peregrinations of their parents and friends who ran from door to door at the Baptist Church in a concerted effort to see that no “niggers” gained entrance?” one letter from Mrs. Wilhelmina R. Jones asked. “How can they come to terms with God in churches filled with hate and injustice?”¹⁴³ One hundred demonstrators gathered at Tuskegee’s Methodist Church a week later for another attempt. With a large contingent of police looking on, they were told to “leave church property.” And they did.¹⁴⁴

The Campus Revolution is Here!

As the summer came to an end and the 1965 fall semester approached, American society continued to seethe. That August — in yet another confirmation of Malcolm X’s prognosis — black residents of Los Angeles took to the streets by the thousands for the largest urban rebellion

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in Ibid.: 165; 166-7.
to date. At the end of the month, Jonathan Daniels was murdered in Lowndes County, Alabama, as he and other civil rights workers were being released from jail. A Tuskegee senior, James Rodgers, reported that he had witnessed Tom Coleman shoot Daniels with a shotgun. A few minutes later, as Rodgers knelt over Daniels’ corpse, some white men approach him and said, “Nigger if you don’t leave here, the same thing will happen to you.”

That fall, the Tuskegee administration tried once again to embrace the students’ sense of urgency for social transformation. In September, Tuskegee welcomed its largest freshman class ever — more than 700. In an address to faculty and staff, president Foster warned that “this is no time to be timid, complacent or procrastinating,” but rather this is the time to embrace change. The Campus Digest published an op-ed by Foster entitled, “No Cliches, Just Facts.” Foster made the case for reimagining the role of Tuskegee in the context of America’s “crucial struggle within itself.” In some ways anticipating the sentiments of students who would hold him hostage in less than three year’s time, Foster argued for reimagining higher education as an instrument that could “reach into our big city slums and rural areas to bring distressingly vast numbers of ill-trained, socially rebellious, and negatively motivated young and middle-aged adults into a positive relationship with their society.” Two weeks later he emphasized to the arriving freshmen that “loyalty to self — a respect for one’s identity and an abiding insistence on personal integrity” were the key to understanding the complexities of life.

Students, however, increasingly felt that “change” wasn’t happening fast enough, especially on campus. In a strident editorial indicative of the new mood, Peter Scott, II argued

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147 “Foster Urges Tuskegee Staff To Be Ready For Much Change,” Tuskegee News, September 16, 1965, 1.
149 “Dr. Foster Cites Responsibility of Staff to Students,” Tuskegee News, September 30, 1965, 1.
that students needed to seize the opportunity to participate in transforming college life. “All students who are satisfied with ‘just going to college’ should stop and think!” he wrote. “All administrators who are bent on the fascist or dictatorial rule should stop and evaluate! The campus revolution is here!” Among other policies that were slow to change, students resented being mandated to attend religious services in the chapel. “I think that no administration should be given the right to make up a college student’s mind,” student Grace Gilmore told the *Campus Digest*, “I don’t believe in compulsory chapel.” The rule never made sense to Caroline Hilton. “I didn't see any reason why I should have to go there,” she said. And even though only a small minority of students had participated directly in the campaign, anger over TIAL activists being shut out of Tuskegee’s segregated churches lingered, too.

The barrier between on and off campus politics began to break down. That fall, Tuskegee students voted 3-2 against routing their homecoming parade through downtown Tuskegee, an old tradition that was stopped during the TCA boycott and had never been resumed. The mayor had hoped the parade could “contribute very much to a better understanding and unity of everyone.” But Peter Scott, a Tuskegee student responded that if the city wants to improve relations, “it can prosecute the men who beat Tuskegee students attempting to attend church services at the all-white First Methodist Church this summer.” Soon afterwards, the student assembly voted to present a series of demands to the administration, including the end of compulsory chapel, and the placement of students on curriculum, entertainment, and other committees, with voting

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152 Hilton, interview.
rights. As 1965 drew to a close, students’ expectations for change, in their town and in their classrooms, were rising.

Tutoring the Tutors

From 1960 to 1965 Tuskegee students began to take action, and, through a series of approximations, tried to break out of their comfortable middle-class “bubble” and come to terms with the reality of their society and their place within it. Some volunteered their time in Black Belt counties, hoping to effect change as tutors, and ended up being tutored by the rural families they met. All were bothered by big questions: What would it take to transform the conditions of the Black Belt? Why should black people in Tuskegee and beyond continue to submit to the humiliation of segregated public facilities? If American society needed to change, didn’t that mean Tuskegee Institute had to change, too? As Tuskegee students began to question Tuskegee Institute, they inevitably had to confront the legacy of Booker. T. Washington.

Not since the student strikes of 1903 and 1940 had Tuskegee Institute seen so much agitation among students. At the end of the fall 1965 semester, Tuskegee’s administration still held out hope that dialogue with students could smooth things over and reconcile the two parties. In December, two thousand Tuskegee students, faculty and administrators gathered at a forum entitled, “Student Unrest and Its Implications.” The event was prompted by a wave of protests over everything from bad food, to compulsory chapel, to teaching methods. In a single week, students dumped their food trays in the cafeteria, boycotted chapel, or walked out during the service, and some marched on the president’s residence. “We want to be involved in governing the campus,” student government president Gwen Patton said, admitting the administration’s

154 “Let Students Vote!” *Campus Digest*, November 20, 1965, 4.
refusal to let the Supremes sing on campus was “the straw that broke the camel’s back.” Professor Paul Puryear praised the students, and TIAL in particular, for their courage, and called on the administration to follow their example. Dean Phillips said mistakes had been made on both sides. “We’re a very good college on our way to greatness,” Phillips said. “But we won’t get there unless we change the climate on campus.” The “climate” was, at this point, comparable to well-publicized protest movements on other campuses nationwide. A photo essay in Tuskegee’s *Campus Digest* about the recent protests on campus was titled, “No Berkeley, But A Tuskegee.”

Tuskegee’s movement was not yet “on the map” as Berkeley’s was at the time. But this was about to change. As the calendar year 1965 drew to a close, two men who would play a large role in shaping the southern black student movement — and consequently, national and even global politics — met in Lowndes County, Alabama. When black people were evicted from their homes for trying to register to vote in that county, Sammy Younge, Jr. was one of many young activists who leapt into action, helping to set up tents as temporary housing, which became known as “tent city.” SNCC activist Stokely Carmichael was there, too; he was surprised to see Younge. Younge was failing his classes and had taken a break from the movement to try to get his grades up. “What's happening, baby?” Carmichael said, greeting him. “I can't kick it, man,” Younge replied. “I got to work with it,” he said, referring to the movement. “It's in me.” On New Year's Eve, Carmichael and Younge were together again, discussing Younge’s idea for building an independent political party in Macon County, modeled on the Black Panther Party SNCC had

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built in Lowndes County.\textsuperscript{158} Younge’s instinct was well-founded: the turn toward the ideas of Black Power was just around the corner, mere days away, accelerated by events in the first few weeks of 1966. Stokely and Sammy, in life and in death, would leave their mark on the next phase of the struggle.

\textsuperscript{158} Quoted in Forman, \textit{Sammy Younge, Jr.}, 183-4.
“We Will Fight Until We Die”

Running an errand for cigarettes during a late-night SNCC meeting on January 3, 1966, Sammy Younge, Jr. spied a Standard Oil service station near Tuskegee’s campus on Highway 80. Younge pulled his car into the station and asked the white attendant, 69-year old Marvin Segrest, if he could use the restroom. Segrest told him to use the one in back of the station. Younge said that he refused to use a segregated bathroom, and according to a bus driver eavesdropping from the depot next door, a shouting match ensued. Segrest brandished a pistol and chased Younge off the premises. Younge went to the police station on foot to report the incident and then returned to the Standard Oil station to retrieve his car. A second shouting match began, but this time Segrest fired a shot at Younge and missed. The bus driver approached Segrest to try to deescalate the situation, while Younge hid behind his car. Younge found a golf club near the bus station and approached Segrest a third time. Segrest fired another shot, at approximately 11:45pm, hitting Younge in the head and killing him instantly. ¹

When a cab driver discovered his body just after midnight, news of Younge’s death traveled swiftly on campus. “I was the one that was called at 2:00 in the morning to come down to the station, the gas station, and identify his body,” Bert Phillips recalled.² George Paris remembers his father getting an early morning call as well. Paris and his father “loaded for

2 Phillips, interview.
battle,” and went to the bus station, where they too saw Sammy’s body.3 “Sammy Younge's death really was a key turning point for us in terms of how we were going to move,” Wendell Paris said. “Simuel Schutz that same night said, ‘We will fight until we die. We will be fighting injustice in the United States and around the world until we die as a result of the death of Sammy Younge.’”4

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3 G. Paris, interview.
4 W. Paris, interview.
From Civil Rights to Black Power

Beginning with the murder of Sammy Younge, Jr., Tuskegee student activists began organizing under the banner of Black Power. Younge’s murder destroyed any veneer of progress in the town of Tuskegee and gave activists and the wider student body a sense that the need for greater change was urgent. Elsewhere, the rise of Black Power is often described as primarily a northern phenomenon that emerged as the result of frustration with the Great Migration and the limitations of civil rights legislation to transform life in the urban North. This chapter builds on recent scholarship on the southern roots of Black Power. Its story reveals three distinctive features of Black Power in the United States South. First, Black Power at Tuskegee was a movement for democracy, a demand for immediate and full participation in local political life that was resisted by municipal and, to some extent, by Tuskegee’s leadership. The school leaders’ hesitation further radicalized the students. Second, while the global context of decolonization and national liberation — especially in Africa — gave black students in all regions of the country inspiration, language, and tools of analysis to understand their situation, in the Deep South the colonial analogy was particularly apt, especially in Macon County, where black people outnumbered white people four to one. If black people could take over and run their own nations, why not the county? Third, given Tuskegee’s origins as a site of colonial educational practices with connections and influence in global colonial enterprises, the anti-colonial linkages made by Tuskegee students in this period represents quite a significant reversal of this aspect of Booker T. Washington’s legacy.

This is also a story about the ways in which a political movement can lead people towards new educational ideas. In the context of such global and regional changes, many

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5 In particular, Jeffries, Bloody Lowndes and Murch, Living for the City.
6 The colonial origins of “industrial education” and of Tuskegee Institute are discussed in chapter 1.
Tuskegee students began to feel that the “normal” operations of their school were oppressive and antiquated. Experiencing a newfound power to change the world, students eventually turned their attention to changing Tuskegee Institute. Beyond the cultural dimensions of self-love and affirmation, “Black Power” demands for self-determination and democracy applied to the campus meant greater student power to shape curriculum and instruction. For this reason, both Alabama segregationists and Tuskegee administrators found “Black Power” too frightening, too much, too fast. The issue for Tuskegee Institute’s leadership (as it had always been) was how much to accommodate (or “go slow”) because of the fears of powerful white people. The new slogan, “Black Power” communicated (more than the old slogan, “Freedom”) the idea that black people were no longer willing to wait for white people to accept their demands.

Reporting in three newspapers – Campus Digest, the Southern Courier, and the Tuskegee News – captures the changing ideas of Tuskegee students, administrators, faculty, and, to some extent, of Alabama’s governors, George Wallace and later, Lurleen Wallace, his wife who succeeded him in office (when his term limit expired), as the movement unfolded. Letters, memos, and other documents from Alabama’s state archives and from the Tuskegee archives help to fill out the picture of this rapidly changing political landscape. Tuskegee students Michael Wright, Gwen Patton, and Ernest Stephens in particular did the most in these years to record their views in newspapers and publications at the time and after the fact. Interviews with former Tuskegee students and with two former administrators provide greater insight into the meaning of these events.

This chapter covers only two years — 1966 and 1967 — but quite a lot happened in that relatively short period of time. These events, propelled largely by the January 1966 murder of Sammy Younge, reveal the political and educational ideals underlying the “Black Power” slogan
as it became manifest in the student movement at Tuskegee. Tuskegee students stepped off campus and transformed the political landscape of Macon County; returning to campus, they proposed the most radical revision of Tuskegee’s educational paradigm to date. “Tuskegee’s image as a ‘model community’ lay in ruins,” wrote Mary Ellen Gale, a journalist for the pre-eminent journal of the southern civil rights movement, the Southern Courier; “destroyed by the same bullet that ended Younge’s life.”

Institute professor Arnold Kaufman offered a similarly blunt assessment in the pages of The Nation: “Tuskegee has been living a lie.”

“Tuskegee Came Unglued”

The effect of Younge’s murder, Gwen Patton wrote years afterwards, was that “Tuskegee came unglued.” However, for the first few months, the tragedy seemed to bind the campus community closer together. Nearly 3,000 people marched downtown the day after he was shot, January 4th. The Campus Digest noted that this was “almost the entire Tuskegee Institute student body (2,700) and faculty, staff, and community persons.” Students who previously felt protected from the worst effects of racism experienced a sensation of vulnerability. “That really brought it close to home,” Caroline Hilton remembered. “We read about things and saw it on the news that things happened in other campuses, but that was Tuskegee, that could have been any one of us.” Cozetta Lamore called it a “wake up call.” She thought, “maybe we're not as

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9 Patton, “Insurgent Memories.”
10 “Tuskegee Student Slain,” Campus Digest, January 8, 1966, 1.
11 Hilton, interview.
insulated as we thought we were and this is not the Mayberry town that people might like to think.”

Tuskegee’s administration, led by President Luther H. Foster, and the students, led by Gwen Patton, each sought to take advantage of Younge’s death to accelerate the pace of change in town, although by different means. At the very moment Patton led the January 4th marchers to City Hall to demand an audience with the mayor and the City Council, Foster was already meeting with the city’s political leaders. Student activists felt that Foster was attempting to wind down their movement (by, among other things, inviting the already exhausted student leaders to long meetings with him), while they were trying to escalate it. At the steps of City Hall, Patton directed her words to the mayor. “You (the city and the press) have told us that this is a model city where white and Negroes get along together… you have told us how good the Tuskegee image is… you have invited us downtown for a homecoming football parade… yet,” she said, “you closed the city swimming pool and barred us from your churches… now, we want to know what you are going to do?” The Southern Courier quoted Patton as also saying, “The students at Tuskegee Institute will tear this town to bits, if justice is not sought.”

The widening gulf between Tuskegee students and the town’s white leadership was evident in parallel mid-January editorials in the Tuskegee News, controlled by white liberals, and the Campus Digest, controlled by Tuskegee students. The Tuskegee News lamented the tragedy of the shooting and called for calm and patience. “Progress cannot come… out of an

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12 Lamore, interview.  
13 “Tuskegee Student Slain,” Campus Digest, January 8, 1966, 1.  
14 Forman, Sammy Younge, 201-2.  
emotionally-charged atmosphere,” the editors cautioned. The *Campus Digest*, by contrast, encouraged a greater sense of urgency. “Will Tuskegee citizens wait on a city government that promotes a ‘phony image’ of race relations?” Peter Scott, II, *Campus Digest* editor-in-chief, asked in a lead editorial. Whereas the *Tuskegee News* regularly extolled the wisdom of the Tuskegee Civic Association (TCA), the *Campus Digest* suggested that the Tuskegee Institute Advancement League (TIAL) leadership was more fitting. “Or,” Scott continued, “will Tuskegee citizens support the ‘do-nothingism’ of the TCA and keep the idea of the city’s false image?” He added, “will Tuskegee’s citizens support an effort for honesty and action advocated by TIAL?” The *Digest* also claimed that the murder revealed Tuskegee’s class fault-line. “Negroes who profit from and enjoy the upper-middle class status that they have attained almost totally from the proximity of Tuskegee Institute and the Tuskegee Veterans Hospital, have neglected and blatantly refused to bring needed community issues to a head,” the editors wrote. “We believe that Tuskegee is a ‘model’ city — a model city of deception and inefficiency.”

Sammy’s life and death were an inspiration to activists to redouble their efforts and their commitments. “Sammy was a dedicated civil rights worker,” Michael Wright recalled, explaining that his death marked a moment of escalation. “At that point I never went back to class for a couple of years.” Instead, he began working with SNCC full-time doing voter registration work in Macon County and pushing for desegregation. Singer and activist Harry Belafonte praised Younge in a fundraising letter for SNCC. “Many Americans believe the battle for racial justice is won,” Belafonte wrote. “Sammy Younge’s death proves how far we still have

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18 The faculty-led struggle for voting rights, organized through the TCA, and the rise of a student-led civil rights organization organized through TIAL are described in chapter two.
20 “No More…,” *Campus Digest*, January 8, 1966, 6.
21 Wright, interview.
Activists searched for ways to “go” further. “Here is my bosom buddy killed,” Wendell Paris said. “What do you do? Do you just give up? Do you roll over? Do you do something foolish? Do you try to come forward with some constructive way of combatting, of addressing the issues that led to his death? I still wrestle with that. We knew we needed to defend ourselves. We just didn't plan to roll over and die.”

George and Wendell Paris were traumatized by the death of their close friend, but James Forman felt responsible for Younge’s murder, Wendell believed, since Forman had done so much to bring Younge into the movement and to work with him. “He really did feel the weight of the death of Sammy,” Paris said. Two years later Forman published a book-length tribute to his fallen comrade, *Sammy Younge, Jr.: The First Black College Student to Die in the Black Liberation Movement*. Walking from Sammy’s memorial service to his car, Forman wrote that he was “crying as I never cried before.” Forman wasn’t the only civil rights leader to feel the weight. While mourners gathered in Macon County, representatives from SNCC and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference gathered for a funeral service for Younge at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC.

For the next week several hundred Tuskegee students held a consistent schedule of protests. Funeral services at Tuskegee were held on January 5th and all classes were canceled. TIAL led 250 students on a January 6th march to City Hall where Patton presented a 14-point desegregation proposal to the mayor. On January 7th, 300 people marched against segregation.

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23 W. Paris, interview.
24 Ibid.
25 Forman, *Sammy Younge*.
26 Ibid., 23.
downtown. Wendell Paris spoke, rejecting Booker T. Washington’s policy of moderating black people’s demands. “We got this statue out here of that man who’s supposed to be lifting up the veil,” he told the crowd. “Man, he’s putting it back on!” On January 8th, 400 students started to march downtown but were stopped by police, so they sat-in to block the road. After an hour they were allowed to continue along their route. Students also picketed City Hall on January 10th and 11th. On January 12th TIAL held a teach-in in the town square on the city’s segregation practices. In Melvin Todd’s view, “the student body was like 100% unified. They were really behind the student leaders.”

The students were united among themselves, and felt, for a time, that they were united with Tuskegee Institute’s administration, too. In addition to the tensions that emerged on campus at the end of 1965, the murder of Sammy Younge, Jr. shifted Tuskegee’s leadership into a posture of pressing for immediate desegregation downtown. On January 6th, before nearly the entire school, President Foster reaffirmed the right and responsibility of Tuskegee Institute members to participate in civil rights activities. This statement was “an event of considerable symbolic significance” Tuskegee professor Arnold Kaufman wrote, for it “completed the break with the Booker T. Washington philosophy that had been in process since Rosa Parks decided to stay put in a Montgomery bus some 30 miles away and more than ten years ago.” A 14-point desegregation proposal was drawn up by an ad-hoc committee (led by President Foster) in collaboration with TIAL. It included: establish an open employment policy (especially in the public sector), prohibit segregation in public facilities, and desegregate public housing in

30 Todd, interview.
Tuskegee. “We… do not share the view that the killing of Samuel Younge was the isolated act of one individual,” Tuskegee professor Paul Puryear, a member of the committee, said. “It is our firm belief that Mr. Younge’s murder is symptomatic of much deeper and more pervasive evils in our community.”

The deeper evils were never far from sight. On Saturday, January 15th at another protest in the city square, a police officer tried to arrest a Tuskegee High School senior on an unrelated, previous charge. A crowd of Tuskegee students gathered around the officer as he began beating the high school student with a blackjack. Other officers arrived and shouted “Get back!” The Campus Digest reported that this “melee” (the Southern Courier called it a “riot”) lasted for about five minutes. Word traveled back to campus quickly, and 1,200 Tuskegee students immediately marched downtown. White men in unmarked cars with no license plates circled the protesters until students chased them away, hurling bricks and bottles. In the process, students broke windows in eleven downtown buildings.

In these volatile days the “glue” was strained, but held. The Campus Digest editors praised Foster for standing with students and not calling for a moratorium on protests, despite the fact that property damage put him in a “dubious position.” “Dr. Foster is closer to more students now than he has been for quite some time,” the Campus Digest editors wrote. “This is how it should be.” Seconding Foster and TIAL, the editors also called for students to “follow the principle of non-violence or decline to participate.” A Tuskegee faculty member wrote a letter to the Campus Digest praising the moderation of student leadership at the protests. “As long as

32 Geddis, et. al., “Week-Long Protests Continue,” 1, 3; and Luther Foster, Untitled Memo to Tuskegee Institute Community, Papers of Erik Krystall, Box 422.001, Folder 17, Tuskegee Institute Archives.
36 Editorial, Campus Digest, January 17, 1966, 2.
they show this type of deliberation, consideration, and responsible thinking,” he wrote, “we need not fear how and where this student leadership will go and act.” Meanwhile, *Tuskegee News* decried the violence of bottle-throwing students and called for a return of the “intelligent, dedicated” leadership of the TCA. “If Tuskegee is fortunate, the TCA leadership will exert itself again in these trying times,” the editors wrote. Some black citizens let it be known that they, too, thought the students were in the wrong. Decrying “SNCC-type” people who were coming in from “outside,” one woman wrote a letter to the *Tuskegee News* supporting “equality of opportunity,” and adding, pointedly, “but we are not radical street demonstrators.” Two weeks later the ad-hoc alliance of administrators, faculty and radical street demonstrators scored a victory: a desegregation ordinance passed the council by a five to one vote after a particularly stormy session.

**One Big Classroom**

For the next several months, Tuskegee student activists essentially sought to complete a program of similar reforms. Reforming the structure of power in town, however, did not yet imply a similar overhaul on campus. Joining “the movement” was considered primarily an off-campus calling, but the boundaries were blurring. On January 31st, a student-faculty round-table discussion debated whether or not civil rights activism interferes with academic goals. Gwen Patton was the only participant to challenge the terms of the discussion. “Civil rights is part of the educational process,” she said. “It can’t interfere with it. I have learned more from my civil

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41 “Debate Ends in Free-For-All,” *Campus Digest*, February 5, 1966, 1.
rights activities than in any class.”

The next month Jennifer Lawson dropped out of school to work for SNCC full time. “To me, this is just a big classroom right here in Alabama,” Lawson said. “In a classroom, you hear all about the great theory of democracy and you swear that it’s working,” she said. “Out here, you know it isn’t.”

By the end of the year, Patton and other Tuskegee students would extend Patton’s and Lawson’s argument further, no longer fearing “interference” with their present education, but increasingly finding its form intolerable.

As students and their allies racked up some victories in 1966, President Foster defended student activists, while the Governor’s ire grew. The appearance on campus of Communist Party leader Gus Hall in February spurred a heated correspondence between George Wallace and his supporters about what could be done to stop the spread of communism at Tuskegee.

Foster and his administration stood by the students. The university defended one of its student teachers who was not accepted in a field training assignment in a local school because of her civil rights activism.

In April President Foster presented a report to Tuskegee’s Board of Trustees, noting concern over “intra-group conflicts” and “students’ frustrations that result from racial barriers.” In his report to the trustees on civil rights activism in Tuskegee, Foster defended the school’s policy of allowing students to express themselves within the boundaries of law and democracy, and argued that the incidents involving property damage did not “reach truly riotous

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proportions.” To some extent, the Tuskegee community had successfully isolated the segregationists, and as desegregation proceeded, white and black leaders hoped student activism would wind down. In mid-July, twenty-five years of segregation at the city swimming pool ended quietly, the Southern Courier noted, “without a splash.”

**Taking Sides on Vietnam**

Among the ripple effects of Younge’s murder was increasing willingness of civil rights individuals and organizations to speak out against the war in Vietnam. For a long time, many civil rights organizations operated within the ideological limits of Cold War liberalism. Both the Congress of Racial Equality and the NAACP purged communists from their ranks to prove their loyalty to the United States in the war against communism. The NAACP’s president, Roy Wilkins, argued that “civil rights groups [do not] have enough information on Vietnam, or on foreign policy, to make it their cause.” The Urban League’s Whitney Young agreed. “Johnson needs a consensus,” Young said, “If we are not with him on Vietnam, then he is not going to be with us on civil rights.” For all its fiery rhetoric, even the Nation of Islam censured Malcolm X when he described the assassination of United States President John Kennedy as an example of America’s violence in Vietnam (“chickens”) reverberating domestically (“coming home to roost”). But as the war expanded, so did critical views of it. There were 25,000 United States troops in Vietnam at the start of 1965, rising to 184,000 the next year, and to more than half a million in the three years to follow. Black soldiers were only 10 percent of all of the armed forces.

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46 Board of Trustees of Tuskegee Institute, “Minutes of the Board of Trustees,” Tuskegee Institute, April 2, 1966, 6, 8-9.
forces, yet they were concentrated in front-line units that faced combat, such that they were 22 percent of all Army casualties by November 1966. SNCC members on the front lines of battles for democracy and human rights in the Deep South, were, by the mid-1960s, drawing connections between such domestic and international conflicts, and were breaking from the Cold War liberalism of their elders.

Tuskegee students were well acquainted with the war. At least twenty-two people from the town and campus combined were killed in Vietnam, including two TIAL members, Laurence Dudley and William Boone. Tuskegee’s long-standing mandatory ROTC program meant students were in a pipeline to Vietnam — as officers. George Paris graduated from Tuskegee in 1964 and went to Vietnam as a second lieutenant. For him, spending time in the military meant preparing for a global revolution. “I had 50 men, 5,000 pounds of ammunition, a set of mortars, two Jeeps, and full combat gear, on one C-141 Air Corps Troop Carrier,” he recalled. “That was one of the reasons that I went, and some more of my friends went. We were convinced that there was going to be a shooting revolution in the United States. Where best to learn how to fight than in the United States Army?” Whether from their experience in Vietnam, or fighting for democracy in the U.S. South, SNCC and TIAL activists’ skepticism about the war was quickly turning into outright opposition. Sammy Younge’s murder was, in George Paris’s view, “the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

In November of 1965 SNCC leaders agreed to make a statement on Vietnam, but nothing came of it until Younge’s murder. “Release of that declaration was triggered by the murder of

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51 Marable, Race, reform, and rebellion, 97-8.
52 Carson, In Struggle.
54 G. Paris, interview.
Sammy Younge, Jr.,” Forman wrote in his autobiography. “For myself, Sammy's murder marked the final end of any patience with nonviolence -- even as a tactic.”

The statement, released two days after Younge’s murder, marked the first time a civil rights organization spoke out against the Vietnam War. The SNCC declaration represented more than a break from Cold War liberalism. It was a reversal of its terms, expressing solidarity with the official enemy. SNCC positively identified its struggle with that of the Vietnamese, comparing it to the work of Sammy Younge. “The murder of Samuel Young [sic] in Tuskegee, Alabama, is no different than the murder of peasants in Vietnam,” the statement read, “for both Young [sic] and the Vietnamese sought, and are seeking, to secure the rights guaranteed them by law. In each case, the United States government bears a great part of the responsibility for these deaths.”

The ripples of Younge’s murder spread all the way to the halls of the United States Congress. One month earlier, in December 1965, the 26-year-old SNCC leader Julian Bond had been elected to Congress from Atlanta, Georgia. Since Bond, as SNCC Communications Director, was one of the principal authors of SNCC’s anti-war statement, Congress refused to seat him in January of the following year on the accusation of being disloyal and “un-American.” Bond took his case to federal court, and ultimately to the United States Supreme Court, which ruled in his favor, finally allowing him to take his seat nearly one full year after he was elected. Appearing at Tuskegee Institute soon after his court victory, Bond defended the

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rising militancy of southern activists. “Black means us,” he said. “Power is the ability to influence others toward your desires.”

What We’re Going to Start Saying is “Black Power!”

The linking of those two words, “Black” and “Power,” gathered force when newly-elected SNCC president Stokely Carmichael popularized the slogan in June of 1966 while continuing the march through the South that had been started by James Meredith (and halted, while he recovered from a gunshot injury). It struck a chord with young people nationwide, and became an enduring way of framing new developments in the student movement and beyond. “Black Power” marked a shift from self-description as “Negro” to “Black,” signaling a reversal of attitudes, refusing to accept the denigration of — and further, taking pride in — the very thing that had been stigmatized for so long: blackness. “Black” was no longer to be associated with degradation, but with a proud political and cultural stance. In this new, militant race consciousness, black identity itself was “the soul of a new radicalism.” The slogan has been associated with urban insurrections in the North and armed self-defense organizations in the West, although recent historical scholarship has broadened our understanding of the scope of

60 The phrase “Black Power” was not invented by Carmichael. Others used it long before him. See, for example: Richard Wright, Black power: a record of reactions in a land of pathos (New York: Perennial, 1954).
62 Biondi, Black Revolution on Campus, 26.
Black Power activities by including the work of women, school teachers, welfare rights organizers, health care activists, and more.\(^{64}\)

From the perspective of activists at Tuskegee Institute, the new attitude had already taken root before Carmichael raised it in Mississippi. “When you look at it,” Wendell Paris commented, “the death of Sammy Younge is what ushered in the Black Power movement.”\(^{65}\) Younge was dead less than a month when national civil rights leaders told *The New York Times* that they were “watching current racial unrest in Tuskegee” and interpreting it as a sign that “coalition” governments with white people may no longer work. The NAACP continued to defend the ideal of bi-racial political leadership, but SNCC leader John Lewis was quoted as saying that “it might be necessary to have all-Negro government before you can have a workable interracial government.”\(^{66}\)

By the time Stokely Carmichael shouted “Black Power” on a Mississippi highway, Sammy Younge had been dead for six months and some white people in Tuskegee were already bracing for escalating conflict. Two weeks earlier the *Tuskegee News* warned about the danger of Black Nationalism to “race relations” in Tuskegee. “The Negro leadership in Tuskegee has feared and fought against such a reactionary approach to the problem of equal rights,” the editors wrote.\(^{67}\) A new leadership, however, concentrated among Tuskegee students, was already embracing Black Power and debating its meaning. In the spring of 1966, Michael Wright wrote a letter challenging the idea that merely wearing an Afro constituted a significant political stand.\(^{68}\)

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\(^{64}\) On women’s activism and the state, see Sanders, *A Chance for Change*; on education and schooling, see Rickford, *We Are an African People*; and on health care activism, see Jenna M. Loyd, *Health Rights Are Civil Rights* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

\(^{65}\) W. Paris, interview.


\(^{68}\) Michael F. Wright, Letter to Editor, *Campus Digest*, April 30, 1966, 4.
turn toward Black Power. “I was definitely on the Black Power end of the spectrum,” He said. “I felt that we as Tuskegee students should be on the leading edge of reporting the news to our student body that would inspire them to do things for the uplift of the black community.”

Several leading activists described the goals of Black Power as essentially a realization of democracy and self-determination in the Black Belt. Michael Wright highlighted these themes in notes he drafted to explain the concept to Tuskegee students. “Black Power is simply a process whereby Black people can unite to control the resources, both politically and economically, in their areas and make the decisions upon matters which affect them,” he wrote. “Every other ethnic group has done this, so why not Blacks in America?” Gwen Patton felt that TIAL had “absolutely” sought Black Power all along. “If we want to control it, we're going to control everything,” she said. “The supermarkets. We want a theater downtown. If they had listened to us, they would have a thriving community. We didn't want to have to come in contact with white folks first and if we did, it would have to be on a fair basis, a fair basis of negotiation... That was the difference between TIAL and TCA.” The idea that Black Power might represent basic fairness was lost on most media accounts of the movement, but avoiding misunderstanding was no longer a priority. “For once, black people are going to use the words they want to use,” Carmichael wrote, “not just the words whites want to hear. And they will do this no matter how often the press tries to stop the use of the slogan by equating it with racism or separatism.”

For some students, words they wanted to use included “revolution,” causing significant alarm in the corridors of power. A Tuskegee student, Ernest Stephens, believed that the urban

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69 Todd, interview.
70 Michael Wright, “Black Power and the Press,” July, 1966 in The Papers of Michael Wright, Box 099.001, Tuskegee University Archives.
71 Patton, interview.
rebellions were a harbinger of a deeper social transformation. He argued that black students could form the leadership of a coming Black Revolution. In order for black students to “formulate a program of action on black campuses and implement the bread and butter fight of black Americans,” he wrote, they would have to “fight the administration, the faculty, and, yes, even the student body for the right to pursue this course.”73 Tuskegee students were spreading this militant attitude across the state, the governor’s anti-communist commission, the ALCPP, believed. In September, the group sent a confidential memo to George Wallace warning that several Alabama towns were “at a point where trouble of considerable proportions could erupt,” including Tuskegee. As the “rumblings grow louder,” the memo concluded that they seem “to eminate [sic] from Tuskegee campus.”74 In his fall 1966 convocation address to the Tuskegee Institute community, President Foster tried to quell the rumblings, arguing that violent revolution was outdated and that the nature of change going forward would be largely technocratic. “Problems of this day are essentially those of know-how,” he said, “and of the strategies and techniques required to make a better world society.”75

The technocratic ideal, however, was losing its grip on the political imagination of students. The Black Power movement also represented an intellectual awakening. Students — especially activist students — read, discussed, and debated widely, and mostly outside of class. Books and articles circulated among students in these years by Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, Stokely Carmichael, Sonia Sanchez, H. Rap Brown, Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, Martin Luther King, Jr., W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Kwame Nkrumah, and Malcolm X.76

“Everybody had a copy of The Autobiography of Malcolm X,” Wendell Paris recalled, “You just had that in your back pocket.”77 Some of the faculty encouraged the ferment among students. One Tuskegee professor, writing in the Campus Digest, argued that black people were more and more divided between assimilationists and revolutionists. The assimilationists (who were “usually educated, middle-class Negroes”) sought to enter white society and maintain the status quo. The revolutionists, on the other hand, “are tired of maintaining a system of near slavery,” he wrote. “They are Negroes with self respect and who wish to end the great white brainwash.”78

The message of self-respect and militancy was echoed repeatedly by a series of guest speakers who came to Tuskegee in the mid-1960s. Tuskegee students didn’t only read Martin Luther King, James Forman, or Malcolm X, they met them in person.79 Chester Higgins believes that Tuskegee’s status as a privately-funded school gave it more leeway to invite controversial speakers. “Politically, we were exposed to the kind of things that were not available at a publicly supported state school like the nearby Alabama State University,” he said.80 One of the biggest events on campus was the appearance of the young man perceived to be the national leader of the black student movement: Stokely Carmichael.

Carmichael’s arrival in the fall of 1966 was also an opportunity for Tuskegee student activists to address the campus as a whole. Two thousand students, faculty and staff packed into a hall to hear him. Wendell Paris, who had recently graduated and Oscar Sykes, a freshman, gave opening remarks.81 Sykes used the opportunity to speak out against mandatory chapel. “What gives Tuskegee the right to make students attend religious services when Jesus himself didn’t

77 W. Paris, interview.
78 Dr. G. W. Cooper, “Assimilationists and Revolutionists,” Campus Digest, October 8, 1966, 5.
79 Speeches at Tuskegee by King, Forman, and Malcolm X are discussed in chapter two.
80 Higgins, interview.
compel anyone to hear him?” he asked. Paris riled up the audience by comparing “good niggers” and “bad niggers” — the former being those who wait politely for change, the latter being those who “stand up to the white man and tell him he doesn’t care about him.” The Campus Digest reported that the audience “burst into applause,” adding: “Paris urged the students to ‘be a bad nigger.’”

Carmichael, the featured speaker, explored the personal, political, and educational implications of Black Power. “[I]n order for us to be free we must accept our blackness and force the white man to accept it,” he said. Carmichael had traveled to at least two dozen other colleges and universities that year, and made a point of addressing the connection between politics and education. 83 Carmichael challenged the idea that the purpose of education should be individual career advancement. Rather, he suggested that black people should stop trying to prove themselves by success in traditional professions, but instead should “go back to the ghettos and black communities where there is much work to be done,” he said. “What good is an education if you are going to use it as a ticket into white society?” Rather than asking for acceptance, Carmichael argued that black people must recognize the actual power relations of society and act accordingly. “This country is not run on love, brotherhood and non-violence but on power,” he said, “therefore the Negroes must overcome his fear, and he must stand up and fight for power.” 84

82 “Speakers Probe Problems,” Campus Digest, October 15, 1966, 1. The article misspelled his last name as “Parish.”
83 Rogers, Black Campus Movement, 78.
84 “Speakers Probe Problems,” Campus Digest, October 15, 1966, 1, 4; Advocating for the TICEP program, Dean Phillips gave speeches for a time right after Carmichael at many of the same Black Belt churches (not an easy act to follow!). Years later Phillips and Carmichael bumped into each other at an event at Howard University. Phillips remembers that Carmichael told him, “Well, Dean, I'll tell you, you know things have changed a little bit, but they still haven't changed too much since you and I used to be on that circuit talking at the churches.” Phillips, interview.
Figure 3. Stokely Carmichael speaks at Tuskegee Institute. Source: *Southern Courier*, October 22, 1966.
The Postcolonial Roadmap

Tuskegee Institute had always been concerned with power. In its origins, however, Tuskegee was bound up with another kind of power: that of European and North American colonialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Like many other black thinkers and educators in those years (including W. E. B. Du Bois), Booker T. Washington believed that bringing “civilization” to Africans would benefit them. The mid-twentieth century anti-colonial revolutions changed the way black Americans saw Africa. For some Tuskegee students in the 1960s, their view of who was civilizing whom transformed.

As national liberation in Africa became a tidal wave, it was inevitable that black people in the United States would not only draw inspiration from it, but also begin to see the transition from colonialism to independence as a roadmap for their own struggle. “The American Negro shares with colonial peoples many of the socio-economic factors which form the material basis for present day revolutionary nationalism,” the iconoclastic scholar Harold Cruse wrote in 1962. “From the beginning, the American Negro has existed as a colonial being.” In 1966, Stokely Carmichael went further, from “sharing factors” with colonized Africans to black neighborhoods being identical to colonized African nations. “The colonies of the United States—and this includes the black ghettos within its borders, north and south—must be liberated,” he wrote.

Tuskegee student activists began following national liberation struggles closely. Chester Higgins was drawn towards the African students on campus because of their study habits, and

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85 See chapter 1.
88 Carmichael, “What We Want.”
they exposed him to anti-colonial literature. Higgins’s African classmates showed him books by Nnamdi Azikiwe, the first president of Nigeria, and others by Kwame Nkrumah, the president of Ghana. “Then somebody turned me on to [Jomo] Kenyatta,” he recalled. “It’s not somebody that African-Americans would read, and want to be seen with a book with a funny name.”

Gwen Patton remembers that it was South African exiles teaching at Tuskegee who encouraged students to read Kenyatta’s book, Facing Mount Kenya and Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth. Melvin Todd got access to global literature through writing for the school newspaper. In the office of the Campus Digest “we would get newspapers from all over the world,” Todd recalled. “We would get papers from Cuba, from the Communist Party, everything that you can imagine,” he said. “I read everything that came because I wanted to be knowledgeable about the world.” Some student activists began writing about global politics. To spread an understanding of the connection between black people in the United States and African national liberation, Michael Wright drafted a series of in-depth essays for SNCC. He explained the historical origins of colonialism and capitalism, tracing the growth of major corporations, their investments — and consequent political commitments — in colonial and neocolonial regimes all over the world.

As they looked to anti-colonial, national liberation struggles for theoretical and practical guidance, some students were breaking from the outlook of one black middle class (in Tuskegee) and embracing the outlook of another black middle class (in Africa). In the 1960s, nationalist leaders in African and Asia came from the same milieu — middle class, college-educated students and young professionals. The Black Power movement in the United States drew its

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89 Higgins, interview.
91 Todd, interview.
92 Michael Wright, “Economics and Racism,” in The Papers of Michael Wright, Box 099.001, Tuskegee Institute Archives.
leadership from the same set.\textsuperscript{93} Che Guevara, Kwame Nkrumah and Frantz Fanon shared this class position with Gwen Patton, Samuel Younge and Michael Wright. The pattern was the same across black campuses in the United States. Although the ideas of Black Power were adopted by all classes of black students in the United States, Jeffery Turner notes that “Private campuses tended to foster the most militant versions of Black Power.” Elite black schools with wealthier students, he concludes, “were more likely to pursue separatism and educational goals influenced by black nationalism.”\textsuperscript{94}

Some of the new heads of state in the so-called “Third World” advocated for the ideas of socialism, but as they attempted to survive in a hostile capitalist world, this meant using the existing state apparatus to nationalize industry for the purpose of reform and development.\textsuperscript{95} The Black struggle in the United States shared similar impulses, as had global revolutions for more than a century.\textsuperscript{96} As Bloom pointed out, the American Civil Rights Movement was more or less fought under the slogans of the French Revolution.\textsuperscript{97} Middle classes are well positioned to lead these charges. Neil Davidson notes that in historic European revolutions, the middle class, standing outside of society’s central productive processes, was able to speak for the “nation” and articulate slogans and ideals that rallied different classes in the struggle against feudalism.\textsuperscript{98} Samuel Younge in the Black Belt and Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana were not unlike Maximilien Robespierre in France, who, two hundred years earlier, galvanized a coalition of classes against a recalcitrant old order. The ideas animating militant Black Nationalism were also not dissimilar from those involved in nation-building projects centuries earlier. The ideas of social revolution

\textsuperscript{93} Marable, \textit{Race, reform, and rebellion}, 108.
\textsuperscript{94} Turner, \textit{Sitting In}, 189.
\textsuperscript{95} See, for example, C.L.R. James’ 1966 analysis: “The Rise and Fall of Nkrumah,” In \textit{The CLR James Reader}, (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993), 354–361.
\textsuperscript{96} See, for example: Du Bois, \textit{Black Reconstruction}.
\textsuperscript{97} Bloom, \textit{Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement}, 218.
\textsuperscript{98} Davidson, \textit{We Cannot Escape History}, 212.
and anti-capitalism were “in the air,” but not translated into immediate strategies as Wallace and his advisors feared. More sympathetic observers understood that, under the banner of Black Power, insurgents in the US were most immediately fighting for democratic reforms.⁹⁹

From their perspective at Tuskegee in 1966, the meaning of the events in Africa was clear to Tuskegee students: black people were fighting the Europeans and winning. Wendell Paris’s local activism was inspired by events in Africa. “Black Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, now, is standing up,” he said, describing the time. “You needed to understand that folk were rising up, not only in your local community, but all over the country and all over the world.” Paris furthermore believed that these developments had urgent implications for Macon County. “It was necessary to have an international perspective, a global perspective,” he said, “but more importantly, you needed to understand what was going on in your local community and how you could impact what was happening there. That's how we spent the majority of our time just trying to bring our people to the point where they would move, in spite of their fears, to make constructive change.”¹⁰⁰

Working towards constructive change, however, frequently brought Tuskegee students face to face with armed agents of the status quo. Tuskegee activists working in the Black Belt reported being followed by FBI agents.¹⁰¹ Even the ostensibly non-political Tuskegee Institute Community Education Program (TICEP) volunteers found themselves subject to intimidation,

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⁹⁹ In 1967 George Wallace received a list of Black Power organizations, prefaced by a description that “these groups always oppose the capitalist system...” Papers of the Governor, Box SG19973, Folder 18, Alabama State Archives. For a more sympathetic reaction to Carmichael and the slogan, see: C. L. R. James, “Black Power” (1967) In The CLR James Reader, 365; also, historian Jeffrey Turner argues that the black student movement was essentially reformist because it aimed to alter, not destroy, higher education in Sitting In, 7; for further discussion, see chapter 6.

¹⁰⁰ W. Paris, interview.

¹⁰¹ Trammell, interview; Forman, Sammy Younge, 208.
followed by white men with guns, their cars run off the road. Melvin Todd admired SNCC workers because he saw that they were risking their lives to register people to vote. Stokely Carmichael introduced him to a rural family that housed him when he joined the campaign. Todd was impressed with the generosity of people in the Black Belt, but also came face to face with mortal danger. In Lowndes County, two black men approached him one day and asked him what he was doing. Assuming that, as black people, they would be sympathetic, Todd explained the voter registration drive. One of the men pulled out a revolver and put it to his head, saying, “Nigger, if you don't get out of here, I'll blow your head off.”

Intimidation, terror, the threat of violence, and violence — especially the murder of Tuskegee student Sammy Younge — drove home the idea that black people in Macon County were in a situation perhaps more than analogous to that of colonized Africans. In a county where black people outnumbered white people by nearly five to one, democratic voting could only mean the rise of black political power. In Macon, some black people began thinking that the problem of violence and power could be overturned together in one stroke: by electing a black sheriff.

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102 Dunn, interview; See chapter 4.
103 Todd, interview.
Military veteran Lucius Amerson attended Tuskegee on the G.I. Bill, and worked long hours in the housekeeping department at the school to support his growing family. One night the police hauled him to the Macon County jail on a domestic disturbance charge, where he had an epiphany. Noticing the disorganized, inefficient and cluttered atmosphere of the jail, Amerson had an idea: “If I was sheriff I could run this place 100 percent better.” Amerson thought of Sammy Younge’s “blood-soaked body lying on the ground in the rain,” and then, according to his memoir, he had “a revelation that I could run for the office of sheriff and win!”¹⁰⁵ Although he had no political experience and little law enforcement credentials to speak of, the Tuskegee student was correct — Younge’s murder did, in fact, propel Amerson into public office.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Amerson, Great Courage, 69.
¹⁰⁶ According to Amerson, his only law enforcement credential was the completion two courses on civil and criminal investigations while in the Army. “Scott Davis, Lucius Amerson, Candidates for Sheriff Post,” Tuskegee News, March 3, 1966, 1.
Amerson’s victory is evidence of a shift in political clout and leadership — from Tuskegee faculty assembled in the TCA to Tuskegee students affiliated with TIAL. Charles Gomillion believed that the office of sheriff should be the last one for black people to seek, given its power to arouse white fears. Meanwhile, students from TIAL and SNCC teamed up to campaign aggressively for Amerson.107 Hostility between Amerson and the TCA leadership came out into the open, Norrell noted, when students rigged a sound truck for Amerson and drove around Tuskegee decrying the failed leadership of “middle-class niggers.”108 With the help of student activists from Tuskegee, Amerson narrowly defeated his challenger in the Democratic Party primary in June 1966 and then prevailed in a landslide (3,868 to 2,002 votes) in the general election in November.109 The students reveled in their power. “We elected the first black sheriff in the South since Reconstruction,” Wendell Paris remembered with pride.110

Amerson’s election was widely recognized as a watershed event. “One chunk of Alabama soil is no longer the political province of the white man,” a New York Times Magazine article declared.111 The election echoed in headlines nationwide, reporters converged on Macon County, and Amerson received a congratulatory telegram from Vice President Hubert Humphrey and an invitation to the White House.112 In 1970, Hollywood released a feature film starring Jim Brown, based on Lucius Amerson’s story.113 As the news spread, others followed in Amerson’s footsteps. In the years immediately following his victory, black sheriffs were elected in several

107 W. Paris, Patton, and Wright, interviews.
108 Norrell, Reaping, 189.
110 W. Paris, interview.
113 tick...tick...tick..., Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1970; Amerson, Great Courage, 130-1.
other Black Belt counties.\textsuperscript{114} Thus, it is not surprising that Macon County in general and the city of Tuskegee in particular were on the minds of two activists who sat down to lay out a book-length explication of the meaning of Black Power.

“There Tuskegee, Alabama, could be the model of Black Power,” Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton wrote in what became one of the most influential books of the era, \textit{Black Power: Politics of Liberation in America}.\textsuperscript{115} Carmichael — who later changed his name to Kwame Ture — had plenty of opportunity to observe the political dynamics of Tuskegee in person. Carmichael had spent a great deal of time working with Tuskegee student activists and Charles Hamilton had been a Tuskegee professor.\textsuperscript{116} Seeing firsthand the acceleration of events after Sammy Younge’s murder, including the election of Lucius Amerson, the authors devoted an entire chapter in this short book to an analysis of Tuskegee’s potential as a center of Black Power. “It could be the place where black people have amassed political power and used that power effectively,” they wrote.\textsuperscript{117}

The Black Power movement is, in the popular imagination, associated with guns and incendiary rhetoric. The month before Amerson’s election, two community college students in Oakland, California, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, borrowed the symbol from the electoral campaign in Lowndes County, Alabama and founded the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. The vision laid out in \textit{Black Power}, however, had more to do with grabbing hold of ballots than bullets. Furthermore, recent historical research has unearthed a broad tapestry of Black Power

\textsuperscript{114} Sokol, \textit{There Goes}, 263.  
\textsuperscript{115} Hamilton and Ture, \textit{Black Power}.  
\textsuperscript{116} On Hamilton’s career at Tuskegee, see chapter 3.  
\textsuperscript{117} Hamilton and Ture, \textit{Black Power}, 144.
activism — including by the Oakland Panthers, and including electoral campaigns.\textsuperscript{118} Carmichael had discussed with Younge the week before his murder, the idea of creating a new political party in Macon County. “The black people of Tuskegee could play a major role in building an independent county political organization which would address itself to the needs of black residents along lines we have already indicated,” Hamilton and Carmichael wrote. Carmichael had tried to raise this idea with other civil rights activists but met with resistance.\textsuperscript{119} In Tuskegee, some student activists were ready to break from the Democratic Party, whose emblem in Alabama was the rooster and whose official slogan remained “white supremacy.”\textsuperscript{120} Wendell Paris spoke out at a forum on campus to say that black people should not “vote for the white rooster” anymore because “the whole thing is corrupt.”\textsuperscript{121} In Black Power, the authors stressed that figures such as Amerson alone could not make significant change without an independently organized party. “Such an independent force would give greater meaning to the election of Amerson by creating a genuine, organized base of power,” they argued, “not merely putting one black man, however valuable, into office.”\textsuperscript{122}

The expectations for what could be achieved in Tuskegee by electoral means were measured. “It would be naïve to expect that the operation of Black Power in Tuskegee could transform Alabama state politics,” Hamilton and Carmichael wrote, “But it could establish in that one area a viable government based on a new and different set of values -- on humaneness -- and serve as an example of what civilized government could be in this society.” In this way,


\textsuperscript{121} Mary Ellen Gale, “A Night of Speeches at Tuskegee,” Southern Courier, February 12, 1966, 2.

\textsuperscript{122} Hamilton and Ture, Black Power, 144.
“[p]ockets of Black Power” could become “illustrations of what legitimate government really is - - a phenomenon we have not experienced to date in this society.” But even these modest expectations immediately ran into resistance from white officials. Civil rights activists charged Tuskegee’s white mayor with deliberately demoting black police officers to open up space for more white officers in order to undermine Amerson. Amerson disputed the inadequate allocation of funds to his office by the Macon County Board of Revenue, alleging a pattern of discrimination. The newly elected Alabama governor, Lurleen Wallace, also apparently attempted to thwart the black sheriff by appointing white people as special constables in overlapping jurisdictions.

The independent power base that Hamilton and Carmichael imagined in Tuskegee did not come together, and Amerson did not see himself as accountable to the movement that put him in power. Amerson explicitly challenged the idea of building an independent political party. “[T]he Democratic Party has the best policy,” he said, “and I don’t think the other party will get very far.” Amerson had actually been clear with Tuskegee students from the beginning of his campaign that he was not a “Black Power candidate” and that he wanted them to help him as individuals, not as TIAL. Still, in the months and years to follow, the black students who supported him pointed proudly to the fact that Amerson arrested a white man accused of raping a young black woman, and in an even more spectacular reversal of the social order, arrested a

123 Hamilton and Ture, Black Power, 145.
128 Forman, Sammy Younge, 227.
police chief and a state trooper for threatening and brutalizing a black man.\textsuperscript{129} Wendell Paris believed that Amerson’s presence meant that “we have police powers here,” and that black citizens finally had cause to believe that “your voices have to be heard.”\textsuperscript{130}

The results of the movement in 1966 and 1967 were, at best, mixed across the Black Belt. While some black sheriffs were elected, they did not entirely end police brutality, as some had hoped. Even more modest efforts to desegregate Tuskegee stumbled and struggled. Tuskegee students and faculty continued Younge’s effort to desegregate Tuskegee’s white churches, but after three attempts in the summer of 1966, the doors remained shut to black worshippers.\textsuperscript{131} Under court order, Tuskegee high schools were set to be integrated in the fall of 1966, but the reality of student allocation remained predominantly segregated.\textsuperscript{132} In their strongest Black Power demonstration project to date, activists built popular support for an independent black-led political party in nearby Lowndes County, but widespread voter fraud, terror and intimidation explained why, in a county that was 81 percent black, their party failed to gain a single seat in the November elections.\textsuperscript{133}

The election of Lucius Amerson is a twist on the story of Black Power and the tradition of armed self-defense in the South. Given their overwhelming numbers in the county, Tuskegee student activists sought to seize control of the state apparatus — including its monopoly on “legitimate” violence — by electing a black sheriff. Black Power advocates in Oakland wielded


\textsuperscript{130} W. Paris, interview.

\textsuperscript{131} Mary Ellen Gale, “Church Doors Are Locked In Tuskegee Again…,” \textit{Southern Courier}, July 30, 1966, 1; “You’ll Have to Leave,” \textit{Southern Courier}, August 6, 1966, 2.


weapons openly to police the police, while in the Black Belt their counterparts wanted black men to become the police. While Tuskegee students saw his election as a step toward the kind of decolonization that was sweeping the African continent, Amerson saw himself as part of the mainstream of American law enforcement, not as a Black Power activist or agent of decolonization.\textsuperscript{134} In his memoir, Amerson claims that Stokely Carmichael once asked him how he would use his position to support the Black Power movement. “I am too busy performing my duties as sheriff to be concerned with black power,” Amerson replied.\textsuperscript{135} Before the twentieth century’s first black sheriff swore the oath of office, however, the legal system delivered another blow to the student movement at Tuskegee: a verdict for Younge’s murderer.

“\textit{To Hell With Alabama!}”

Like the defeat in Lowndes County, the trial of Marvin Segrest showed that Alabama’s white power structure was far from beaten. In November of 1966, Segrest’s lawyers successfully petitioned to have the trial moved to Opelika in the majority-white Lee County. The defense argued that protests had created a feeling of resentment against Segrest, and the judge agreed.\textsuperscript{136} “What the attorneys were really saying,” the \textit{Southern Courier} editorialized, “is that no white man accused of killing a Negro should have to face a jury of independent Negroes.”\textsuperscript{137} Indeed, Segrest stood before twelve white jurors who, in mid-December, found him not guilty of murder after only seventy minutes of deliberation.\textsuperscript{138} A SNCC member in the courtroom kicked the floor

\textsuperscript{134} Higgins, interview.
\textsuperscript{135} Amerson, \textit{Great Courage}, 116.
and stormed out, shouting, “to hell with Alabama!”\(^{139}\) “There is a rotten and foul branch of this community that must be uprooted before we can have a just society,” wrote one member of the Tuskegee Institute community in a letter to the \textit{Tuskegee News}. “We see roads paved, city limits extended, police integrated, more Negroes registered to vote and sitting on juries, even anti-segregation ordinances adopted, and all accompanied by something that looks like white benevolence and black accommodation,” he continued, adding: “But you can still get yourself a nigger in Tuskegee.”\(^{140}\) “Let us ask ourselves seriously,” Tuskegee student Ernest Stephens wrote in his self-published broadsheet, \textit{Black Thesis}, “is it against the law for white folks to kill niggers in this country?”\(^{141}\)

Little was left of Tuskegee Institute’s “glue” following the verdict. Three hundred students gathered in Logan Hall for an impromptu meeting.\(^{142}\) They decided to march into the town, and as they did, their numbers grew. The headline of the December 19th edition of the \textit{Campus Digest} read, “Slayer Goes Free; Students Riot” and the article reported that 1,500 students protested downtown.\(^{143}\) Students smashed windows of thirteen downtown businesses and mounted the statue of a confederate soldier in the town square, painting the face black. They put a yellow stripe down its back and wrote, “Black Power” and “Sam Younge” on its base.\(^{144}\) Dr. Foster immediately chastised the students, saying that “the struggle for human rights must go on,” but it is “serious” and won’t progress through “flippant discussion, careless planning, or precipitous action.”\(^{145}\) Following the protests, President Foster gathered the entire Institute community for a meeting. Activists were angered that he failed to say anything about the verdict,

\(^{141}\) Quoted in Forman, \textit{Sammy Younge}, 249.
\(^{142}\) Forman, \textit{Sammy Younge}, 250.
\(^{143}\) “Slayer Goes Free; Students Riot,” \textit{Campus Digest}, December 19, 1966, 1.
\(^{144}\) Forman, \textit{Sammy Younge}, 254.
directing his comments only to student actions. While the school administration did not oppose peaceful protest, Foster said, “Tuskegee Institute does very definitely oppose and counsel against any protest which grows out of careless planning, confusion as to purposes, and disregard of orderly processes.” Demonstrations and marches “had their place at times in the past,” Foster continued, but going forward more “sophisticated strategies” are needed, adding that Tuskegee is an educational institution, warning that it is “not a place for the professional civil rights advocate.” The Tuskegee News editors called it a “wise statement.”

Figure 5. A front page of the Campus Digest. Source: Campus Digest, December 19, 1966.

146 Forman, Sammy Younge, 257.
For a time, the legacy of Tuskegee’s founder and that of its fallen student martyr appeared to be in direct competition. To some, Younge’s murder gave urgency to the calls for Black Power and sweeping change, and the acquittal of his murderer revealed the true nature of White Power. To others, the militants had simply gone too far. An anonymous white Tuskegee merchant, invoking the proud legacy of Booker T. Washington, ridiculed Black Power as essentially a slogan of vandalism and burglary. “Are the officials of the Tuskegee Institute going to sit quietly by and thus show their approval of this Black Power jaunt?” he asked.\(^{148}\) The next month the bi-racial city council rejected a proposal from Tuskegee students for a permit for a downtown march to commemorate the first anniversary of Younge’s murder.\(^{149}\) The black sheriff who owed his office to the students agreed. Amerson let it be known that, in his opinion, “no worthwhile purpose is going to be served by continuing demonstrations and uproars in the city.”\(^{150}\) In truth, the uproars were just getting started.

A Black University? Or a White One?

The political transformation of many of Tuskegee’s young people during 1966 and 1967 led them to question the nature of their education. They were changed as people and as students. When Sammy Younge was murdered, they saw the school the school as culpable — Tuskegee’s historic policy of accommodating white supremacy had resulted in the murder of one of their

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\(^{149}\) “City Council Against Student March Here,” *Tuskegee News*, January 5, 1967, 1.

own, they believed. “Sammy was killed, and we blamed the school,” Patton said.\(^\text{151}\) Also, as students gained experience challenging and changing city and county politics, their expectations for change on campus grew as well. In the wake of Sammy Younge’s murder, students “started making much more demands on the administration to change some of those Neanderthal practices that were still in place,” Wendell Paris recalled, “people weren't accepting the old Tuskegee practices that we had.”\(^\text{152}\) Students simply stopped going to chapel, a trend that was later ratified by the administration: attendance ceased to be mandatory.\(^\text{153}\)

Sammy Younge’s murder coincided with a shift in black student activism nationwide. Historian Robert Cohen notes that, while black students were crucial to initiating, in 1960, the mass phase of the civil rights movement, they were slower than white students to take aim at their own campuses.\(^\text{154}\) It wasn’t until the spring of 1966 that Black student unions began to appear, for example.\(^\text{155}\) Tuskegee played a leading role in developing a conscious movement of students thinking about their role as students. In April of 1966, Tuskegee hosted the first annual Student Human Relations Conference, attended by students and professors from ten Alabama colleges. Featured speakers included Bettina Aptheker, Stokely Carmichael, William Kunstler, Howard Zinn and Gwen Patton, with performances from Joan Baez and Judy Collins. Attendees decried the state of black colleges, heavy-handed administration, and strategized about how to democratize higher education.\(^\text{156}\) The next semester Patton took her campus organzing skills on

\(^{151}\) Patton, interview.
\(^{152}\) W. Paris, interview.
\(^{153}\) “Compulsory Chapel Ends — Next Year,” Campus Digest, March 25, 1967.
\(^{154}\) See Robert Cohen, “Prophetic Minority versus Recalcitrant Minority,” in Rebellion in Black and White, 12.
\(^{155}\) Rogers, “The Black Campus Movement,” 173.
\(^{156}\) Eddie Cotton, “Student Conference Views Statewide Campus Problems,” Campus Digest, April 23, 1966, 2; and Program, Student Human Relations Conference, Papers of Erik Krystall, Box 422.001, Folder 14, Tuskegee Institute Archives.
the road, resigning from student government to accept a position as a “campus traveler” for the Human Relations project of the United States National Student Association.\(^{157}\)

Tuskegee was both ahead of the times and behind them. Tuskegee Institute had promoted change off campus but not on campus. Tuskegee faculty had led the charge for voting rights, and the administration signed off on the TICEP program, sending students into the Black Belt as tutors just as civil rights activism was heating up, but the educational experience in classes and on campus went unexamined.\(^{158}\) “Tuskegee was so backwards,” Michael Wright said, that “in 1966 there was only one ‘Negro history’ class in the entire college. And the students had to fight tooth-and-nail for that.”\(^{159}\) The kinds of ideas that flowed freely in the SNCC-sponsored Freedom Schools were, for the most part, not yet available in Tuskegee classrooms.\(^{160}\) In the summer of 1966, Wright addressed an “Open Letter to Black Youth,” to advertise what they would learn in Freedom Schools, especially the history of Africa. “We really have something beautiful to identify with,” he wrote, “and I ain’t talking about the white man’s history that we study in Social Studies in school.”\(^{161}\) In 1966 and 1967, students began expressing the desire for similar changes in Tuskegee’s classrooms.

In these years, students, faculty, and even trustees re-evaluated Tuskegee’s historic role in relation to white supremacy and to the larger society. “Is it our role to assume the qualities of the white educational structure, or must we direct our development along different lines?” Ernest

\(^{157}\) Valia Wallace, “Patton Resigns SGA,” *Campus Digest*, October 1, 1966, 2. It was later revealed that the NSA was funded by the Central Intelligence Agency. See: Louis Menand, “A Friend of the Devil,” *The New Yorker*, March 23, 2015.

\(^{158}\) The origins of the Tuskegee Institute Community Education Program (TICEP) and its effect on student participants are described in chapter two.

\(^{159}\) Wright, interview.

\(^{160}\) Lamore, interview.

\(^{161}\) Michael Wright, “An Open Letter to Black Youth,” July, 1966 in The Papers of Michael Wright, Box 099.001, Tuskegee Institute Archives.
Stephens asked in the *Campus Digest* in the fall of 1966. In their own way, the trustees were asking themselves the same question at the same time: How could Tuskegee prove itself invaluable to Southern society in a moment of turmoil and change? One white trustee suggested that Tuskegee Institute need to “show the South what it could do educationally and socially,” before tapping Southern donors. For many students, what Tuskegee “could do” was clear: it could help them to “make it” in society. Professor Arnold Kaufman thought most Tuskegee students were “apathetic” because “they fear that civil rights militancy could endanger their future career success.” At the end of 1966, Gwen Patton was part of a minority of students who wanted black colleges to focus more on social change and less on training students to climb the American ladder. In an op-ed for the *Southern Courier*, Patton argued that the future of black colleges was in doubt if they didn’t “wake up” and “starting thinking BLACK.”

By 1967, however, Patton’s sentiment had become an organized current. Seventy-five students, SNCC workers (including H. Rap Brown, Courtland Cox, and George Ware) and some faculty (Nathan Hare from Howard) and Tuskegee deans gathered for a National Student Association conference at Tuskegee in February to discuss the state of black colleges. Students debated whether black colleges were just “service stations for white society,” or whether white people needed to be “kicked out” in order to reorient the school towards teaching black people about their own interests. LeRoi Jones came to Tuskegee that month and told an audience that

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163 Quoted in Board of Trustees of Tuskegee Institute, “Minutes of the Board of Trustees,” Tuskegee Institute, October 28, 1966, 20.
college is “a freak factory” and that black colleges produce students who are “half white.”

Jones’s visit prompted protest in the pages of the Tuskegee News for his use of course language (“gutter talk”) when reading his poems about life in Newark. A Tuskegee student replied, poignantly, that it would make more sense to be “shocked at the fact of the obscene ghetto,” she wrote, “not at the words a poet might use to describe the experience of being caged there.”

The political state of Tuskegee’s student body in the spring of 1967 is probably best described as polarized. Warren Hamilton was elected student body president by a margin of only forty votes out of roughly one thousand cast, squeaking by an opponent who tried to hurt him by playing up Hamilton’s association with “outside” influences, especially SNCC. At the very moment that black students at Alabama State College were marching in large numbers, boycotting a new student center building, and presenting the administration with demands, some Tuskegee faculty and students complained of student apathy, that classmates “glide” through four years without becoming “excited” by Vietnam, the draft, or “tyrannical administrative policies.” A visiting student, Tony Mohr, reported that the atmosphere was neither academic nor radical, that there were “undercurrents” of Black Nationalism and civil rights activism present at Tuskegee, but that they were “buried in the frenzy of student government activities, parties, fraternities, sororities.” Mohr’s piece provoked a debate in the Campus Digest about Tuskegee and what it could or should be. One professor argued that the entire freshmen year should be “scrapped” and replaced with “Negro-African studies.”

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As similar ideas began spreading among black students nationally, one of the first comprehensive reformulations of the role of black colleges as educational institutions was published in the spring of 1967 in the civil rights journal, *Freedomways*, by a Tuskegee graduate student (and friend of Sammy Younge), Ernest Stephens. Stephens may have been inspired by a manifesto produced at Howard University that semester calling for the “overthrow of the Negro college” and its replacement by a “militant black university.” Thinking along similar lines, Stephens asked: “How long will it be before black leaders and educators take hold of Negro colleges and transform them from ‘training schools for Negroes’ into universities designed to fit the real needs of black people in this nation?”

The problem with black colleges, he argued, was that they “programmed” students “in white supremacy and self-hatred,” with “little or no emphasis” on a “realistic analysis of the Negro’s plight.” Furthermore, “Compulsory religious and military activities are examples of indoctrination, not education,” Stephens wrote. Black colleges suffer, he argued, from the fact that they are controlled by white-dominated Boards of Trustees. “[I]f the tone of education at Negro universities strays too far from white sanction,” he wrote, “the university will suffer financial loss.”

Stephens proposed an education that would help students to grapple with the realities of black life. “The black university should speak to the needs of the nation by speaking first to the needs of its oppressed black population,” he wrote. This meant re-thinking the curriculum to include three hundred and fifty years of oppression, since, as he put it, there “can be no realistic solutions to black oppression until the problems are clearly understood.” Trustees, administrators and faculty were not likely to push through this program, Stephens believed. “If these changes

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175 Trammell interview with Author, 2015; Rogers, “The Black Campus Movement,” 173.
are to become a reality in the black university, students themselves must initiate them.” Students should not be surprised, however, to find that their “struggle for liberation is suppressed within the very framework of our own black educational institutes.”

In the September issue of *Negro Digest* Tuskegee students could read another landmark proposal for revising the paradigm of black colleges, written by their former professor Charles Hamilton. Black students are not like other students, Hamilton argued. They have been shaped by their deliberate exclusion from the benefits and services of society. “In our haste and quest to make middle-class people out of black students,” he wrote, “we have probably overlooked the fact that those black people have insights that we should heed.” Hamilton laid out a proposal for a different type of college. “I propose a black college revolutionary in its purposes, revolutionary in its procedures, revolutionary in its goals.” Instead of a college oriented toward the technocratic, dominant white society, “I propose a black college that would quickly understand that Western technology is not the criterion of greatness.” Instead of a college mired in self-hatred, “I propose a black college that would deliberately strive to inculcate a sense of racial pride and anger and concern in its students.” Hamilton even suggested “one of the criteria for graduating summa cum laude would be the demonstrated militancy of the candidate.” Michael Wright endorsed Hamilton’s “Black University” idea in a letter he drafted to Tuskegee students, indicting Tuskegee as a symbol of the “sickness” that plagued higher education.

Students continued to debate the meaning of Black Power for Tuskegee University in the pages of the *Campus Digest*. “There is a revolution going on,” Digest editor James Norton, Jr.

182 Michael Wright, “Gentlemen,” (1967) in Papers of Michael Wright, Box 099.001, Tuskegee Institute Archives.
wrote in November of 1967. “This revolution is a change from a white-conscious environment to one which exemplifies black consciousness or consciousness of self.” Norton cited the tendency of black people to orient toward imitating white people. But now, that is changing, he wrote. “There is a growing awareness of Negro culture. Negroes are beginning to realize the greatness and beauty which surrounds their culture.” Norton concluded with a call to fashion: “So black brothers and sisters, wear your afros, African clothing and whatever that exemplifies the culture which we have been deprived of for so long a time.”

Thomas Schmidt wrote a letter the next week in reply, arguing that Norton only described the “external trappings” of the revolution. The deeper meaning of black culture, Schmidt argued, is to not separate intellectual and emotional elements of experience, but to unite them. In truth, this “revolution” did not yet involve a majority of students. The campus was described by one guest speaker from SNCC as “on a major scale dead,” and there may be some truth in that assessment. That fall the biggest social movement on campus was a boycott of the cafeteria to protest bad food and the lack of reimbursement for missed meals — the students’ demands were quickly met. But it may be that what was more important than the content of the demands was the willingness to make them. What some saw as a lack of “political” action others interpreted as an essential ingredient in a social movement: confidence in the power of collective action to make change.

In 1966 and 1967 there was, at the very least, an “undercurrent” of Black Power ideas circulating on Tuskegee’s campus, and some students began to take a hard look at teaching and learning on campus. Voting with their feet, students abolished many of Tuskegee’s antiquated
traditions — especially mandatory chapel attendance. With their newfound collective power, students lashed out at easy targets, such as the cafeteria food. While only a minority of students began rethinking the nature and purpose of their education, one Tuskegee student (Ernest Stephens) and one former Tuskegee professor (Charles Hamilton) authored two foundational texts of what became a movement to transform black colleges nationwide. For these activists, applying the ideas of Black Power to higher education meant rejecting the dominant “white” perspectives focused on individual advancement and encouraging educational forms that reinforced the collective goals of social change on a global scale. This radical internationalist perspective was an essential aspect of the black movement of the 1960s and 1970s. At Tuskegee, students who adopted this perspective clashed with the school’s longstanding tradition of collaboration with the military.

A Global Struggle

At the start of 1967, Sammy Younge, Jr. had been dead for one year and his murderer had recently been acquitted. Younge’s death prompted SNCC to come out against the Vietnam War and Tuskegee students successfully campaigned to elect the first black sheriff in the South since Reconstruction. As Black Power seemed to sweep across the continent of Africa, Tuskegee students had begun thinking about what a “postcolonial” society in Macon County would look like. As the year progressed however, the international perspectives of student activists collided

187 The global perspective of the 1960s and 1970s black radical movements is described by many historians. See, for example: Biondi, Black Revolution on Campus; Rickford, An African People, and Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party (Berkely: University of California Press, 2013).

188 See chapters 1 and 2.
with Tuskegee’s historic collaboration with the American government and its military. The war in Vietnam and the resistance to apartheid in South Africa both became central issues on campus.

Tuskegee retained its military training program in these years, but the “hearts and minds” of students and faculty were in doubt. In 1967 Tuskegee’s annual ROTC parade was interrupted by half a dozen student protesters — including Michael Wright and Chester Higgins, Jr. — who joined the crowd carrying signs that read “We Protest the Draft,” and “No Viet Cong Ever Called Me a Nigger” — the latter slogan a reference to Muhammad Ali’s famous defense of his own refusal to fight in Vietnam. As Higgins mingled with the ceremony crowd, two young women in attendance saw he was holding an anti-war petition and stopped to sign it. “For my brother,” one woman said, “he’s in Viet Nam.” The next month a full-page ad ran in the Campus Digest with a headline quoting Dr. King’s bombshell speech in Harlem calling the United States the “greatest purveyor of violence in the world today.” Amazingly, one hundred forty faculty and students signed their names to the ad, protesting the “oppressive” war in Vietnam and calling for a 10-minute silent vigil on campus.

Some Tuskegee student activists became directly connected to national and even international anti-war forums. Back in 1965, Gwendolyn Patton told the Digest that she did not know enough to comment on the Vietnam War. Just two years later she argued it was a “racist war,” and that black people should be on the side of the global revolution, the Vietnamese side,

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189 See “Muhammad Ali Speaks Out Against the War in Vietnam,” in Arnowe and Zinn, Voices, 431.
191 See Martin Luther King, Jr., “Beyond Vietnam,” in Arnoe and Zinn, Voices, 423-7.
192 “Greatest Purveyor. . . ,” Campus Digest, April 15, 1967, 3. In June a group of seventy-seven faculty and staff members signed a resolution to support the Johnson administration’s conduct of the war. See “Tuskegee Group Endorses U.S. Viet Nam Role,” Southern Courier, June 17, 1967, 2.
and that “[t]his country was built on racism and imperialism.” Patton later signed on as a full-
time worker for the Student Mobilization Committee (affiliated with the Young Socialist
Alliance) to organize students nationwide against the war. Patton wasn’t the only Tuskegee
student activist making such global connections. George Ware was one of two SNCC members
to travel to Havana with Stokely Carmichael to speak about Black Power and the Vietnam
War. The Tuskegee administration could not stop alumnae like Ware from speaking out, but
they could try to give equal time to pro-military voices on campus.

Anti-war activists and pro-war United States officials debated American policy in person
before audiences of Tuskegee students in 1967, particularly in reference to apartheid in South
Africa. South African activists spoke at Tuskegee that year on more than one occasion,
encouraging students to make connections between political situations an ocean apart, and
calling out the United States’ role in propping up the South African regime. Dennis Brutus, who
later shared a jail cell with Nelson Mandela, came to campus and indicted the government for
helping preserve apartheid. Reporting on a Tuskegee forum on Africa and Afro-Americans,
the Campus Digest editors summed up the connections: “Our causes are identical,” they wrote.
“We are united, united as one against a common oppressor.” They called for Tuskegee students
to “throw off the psychological veils of misconceptions,” and “see for ourselves what this
African heritage is about.” In late November, Forman led a symposium on South African

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politics attended by 300 Tuskegee students. Calling the United States’ policy toward South Africa "racist," a South African exile told the crowd that "Economic and political power… is the answer." "We’re not Americans, brother," Forman said, echoing the previous speaker. "We are victims of the U.S. force which has colonized black people all around the world." In a sign of shifting attitudes on campus, the State Department Representative G. Edward Clark, also an invited speaker at the forum, tried to defend the United States’ position, but received only boos from the audience. At no other point in Tuskegee’s history could such a response to white guest speakers have been conceivable.

The Governor’s Revenge

The radicalization of Tuskegee students over these two years did not go unnoticed or unopposed. In published accounts and interviews, some of the activists have stressed the role of the Tuskegee administration and of president Foster in trying to retard the student movement. Guy Trammell, Ernest Stephens’s brother, took a more sympathetic view. Foster excelled at finances and budgeting, Trammell said, but wasn’t as well-equipped to respond to the students’ requests for educational change on campus. He suggested the analogy of a child wearing a formal suit. "If you're thinking about keeping the same suit on junior and he's grown up," Trammell said, "it just doesn’t fit anymore." Indeed, although Foster had broken with tradition by supporting civil and voting rights activism on the part of faculty and students, he seemed determined to keep students from outgrowing that particular “suit.” However, there is evidence,

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200 Forman, *Sammy Younge*; Patton and Wright, interviews.

201 Trammell, interview.
presented above, that, in 1966 and 1967 Foster continued to work behind the scenes to defend students’ right to take part in protests. Foster’s management of students, trustees, and politicians meant that Tuskegee was not completely “unglued” in the years, and may explain the late emergence of a movement to transform the campus.

In 1966 and 1967 the most intense pushback came not from within Tuskegee but from without. In these years, in an historic reversal, Tuskegee Institute came to be perceived by the governor of the state of Alabama as an enemy of the status quo. George Wallace and his wife and successor, Lurleen, openly despised the school. Lurleen Wallace followed in her husband’s footsteps, staunchly opposing desegregation, creating greater tension with Tuskegee Institute, whose administration, faculty, and students were increasingly visible as desegregation advocates. The voting rights struggle described in chapter two was the first break between the state leadership and the school. School desegregation was the second. In March of 1967 a federal court ordered all Alabama schools to desegregate.202 Lurleen Wallace opposed the plan, while Tuskegee community members — including student Chester Higgins, and others — gave public testimony in favor.203 Two months later, in May of 1967, Governor Lurleen Wallace proposed a budget for the following year that did not include an appropriation for Tuskegee — rupturing an 86-year-old tradition of state support.204

Lurleen Wallace’s attitude did not necessarily reflect that of Alabama’s elite or that of other sections of the American ruling class, who continued to support Tuskegee University. George Wallace made a name for himself in national politics as a staunch segregationist, a position he clung to long after other southern leaders had decided that segregation was

expendable. On a personal level, Wallace was known for meting out harsh reprisals against anyone who crossed him.\(^{205}\) The Southern Courier editors believed that the move to defund Tuskegee was George Wallace’s way of seeking “revenge” because the school had broken away from its historic relationship with the state, allowing oppositional people and ideas on campus.\(^{206}\) The liberal Tuskegee News editors agreed that “Evidence of reprisal is clear” in the governor’s education budget.\(^{207}\) The appropriation in question was about $650,000, or 5 percent of Tuskegee’s $13 million budget.\(^{208}\) Foster estimated the state appropriation at 11.6 percent of Tuskegee’s total budget, claiming that it subsidized 53 percent of the student body.\(^{209}\) The Wallaces’ disapproval did not seem to be widespread among their class. Tuskegee continued to receive support elsewhere. In 1967 the Ford Foundation gave $300,000 to Tuskegee to advance scientific research on “race relations.”\(^{210}\) Southern elites had not yet abandoned hope in the school, either. The Wallaces were unable to convince Alabama’s politicians that Tuskegee was a threat. The Alabama State Senate voted almost unanimously (26-1) in early August of 1967 to restore $470,000 a year in funding to Tuskegee for two years.\(^{211}\) Governor Lurleen Wallace signed the bill, though she did succeed in stalling the payment for one month.\(^{212}\)

While Tuskegee Institute won a reprieve, the student movement faced new and challenging obstacles in the years ahead. The intellectual ferment of the movement was exciting, but the brutal reality of racist violence was chilling. Earlier on the same day that Sammy Younge died, a voter registration official in Macon County had pulled a knife and threatened that he

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\(^{205}\) Carter, The Politics of Rage, 235.


\(^{210}\) “Race Relations Grant of $300,000 Given TI,” Tuskegee News, May 25, 1967, 1.

\(^{211}\) “Senate Passes Measure Restoring Funds to TI,” Tuskegee News, August 10, 1967, 1.

would “spill [his] guts.” Younge’s friends promptly reported the incident to the FBI. *The New York Times* reported that FBI officials did enter Macon County soon afterwards — to investigate Younge’s murder.\(^{213}\) Student activists had fought continuously for local white people to comply with federal desegregation orders, but began to realize that federal agents might not be on their side. As they radicalized and made common cause with global revolutions, the students demanded democracy in the county and on campus. To carry out that struggle, one could not call upon the FBI, or even the black sheriff of Macon County. To truly make Macon County a center of Black Power, or to transform Tuskegee into a Black University, student radicals could only count on themselves.

In the middle of the spring semester at Tuskegee in 1968, Chester Higgins, Jr., sat down with Luther Foster for an interview that was published at the end of the month in *Campus Digest*. The exchange between these two men reveals the tension of the moment — Higgins represented a student body confidently insisting on change and Foster stood for an administration trying to end the conflict by any means necessary, and as quickly as possible. Higgins got right to the point. “There is a trend of thought among students on campus,” Higgins said, “that you are a smooth talker; that you pacify students with statements that really don’t say anything; that you are evasive.” Foster refused to take the bait. “They have a right to their views,” he demurred. The undergraduate challenged the college president on the disciplinary actions he had taken against students and on suspending the student-run judicial system. Foster asserted his right to take these actions “in an emergency” and insisted that he rescinded them because it appears the campus is “returning to normal.”¹ In truth, the new “normal” at Tuskegee was better summed up by the front page headline that appeared just above the interview: “Students’ Demands Met After Boycott.”²

**Making Demands**

Collective power, once successfully asserted in one domain, tends to stimulate the imagination: *if we won x, why not try for y?* At Tuskegee, protest movements emerged on a

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variety of fronts, taking up issues and involving actors that weren’t as central or visible on other campuses. After a fresh round of protests in the winter of 1968, Tuskegee students won the right to use meal card credits for missed meals, an improved selection of food, and a separate table dedicated only to seasonings — a victory that was no doubt as savory as it was sweet.\(^3\) And whereas most campus rebellions seem to originate (then and now) in humanities departments, the events of 1968 at Tuskegee were anchored among Engineering students. On December 12, 1967, Tuskegee’s Engineering students sent a five-page letter to the Dean of their department, laying out a series of complaints and recommendations (both in great detail) for improving their course of study. The letter discusses inadequate equipment and the need to upgrade facilities, but circles back again and again to one central problem: poor instruction.\(^4\)

The professors, the engineers wrote, were chronically underprepared, assigning textbooks that they did not use, and giving exams that did not match the material discussed in class. For some instructors, the failure rate was “unusually high” and often there was clear “lack of preparation” to teach.\(^5\) In a section called simply “Mandate” the students outlined “directives for immediate implementation,” including: removal of chronically ineffective instructors; deans should conduct classroom visitations; exams should be aligned with course material; and the department should make necessary equipment available to students. The students demanded an answer from the dean by December 14, 1967.\(^6\) That date, and many other deadlines, would come and go before the engineers decided to do more than write letters. In late January, Tuskegee Institute received a $78,000 donation for the purpose of upgrading its engineering facilities,

\(^3\) “Student Demands Met After Cafeteria Boycott,” *Campus Digest*, January 13, 1968, 1.
\(^4\) Higgins, Jr., *Student Unrest*, 4-9.
\(^5\) Ibid., 5-8.
\(^6\) Ibid., 8-9.
making it easier for the administration to come to terms with student demands in certain respects. The sticking point, however, for students and administrators alike, was the faculty.

Mandatory participation in the Reserve Officer Training Corps program for male students was another bone of contention. It was Tuskegee’s second president, Robert Russa Moton, who initiated the organization of ROTC on campus, beginning in 1919. The implementation of a fully funded program was part of a political battle for equal treatment of African Americans in the armed forces. Armed black student soldiers bearing the nation’s uniform were a provocative sight in those years, particularly in the southern states, to say the least. ROTC students were a proud part of Tuskegee’s legacy, and had even defended the campus from the Klan. Student soldiers remained quite visible in the 1960s — drilling in uniform on campus every Wednesday. “If you went to Tuskegee on a Wednesday,” Ronald Hill recalled, “you would think it was a military school.”

George Geddis, a senior, a leader of the protest movement in 1968, had hoped to advance to the Air Force through ROTC (the Air Force lost interest, he said, when he switched his major to English from Engineering). Warren Hamilton came to Tuskegee in 1964 from a black community that had rallied to introduce a Junior ROTC program to its high school. It was a basic question of fairness. “We didn’t have it and they had it at the white high school,” he said. That black students, just a few years later, protested against ROTC is a sign of how far they traveled, politically speaking.

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8 Hughes and Patterson, eds., Robert Russa Moton, 117.
10 See chapter 1.
11 Ronald Hill, interview with the author, June 2017.
12 George Geddis, interview with the author, June 2017.
As the war in Vietnam came under greater scrutiny, the mandatory nature of the ROTC program (not unlike the involuntary nature of the draft) made it fairly easy for opposition to spread quickly. Anecdotal evidence indicates that to some degree, ROTC instructors understood this dynamic and began bending the rules in response. Wendell Paris believes that the program was effectively no longer mandatory after Sammy Younge’s murder.\textsuperscript{14} Arthur Pfister felt singled out by his captain for being vocal about his opposition to mandatory ROTC. The captain called on him to lead the pledge of allegiance, and afterwards Pfister simply stopped attending the course. “[The captain] gave me a C anyway,” he said.\textsuperscript{15}

Like the nice captain, Tuskegee administrators mostly chose a soft touch, acknowledging and even welcoming the protesters and their messages. In a mid-semester speech, President Foster suggested that in the near future students should be encouraged to take greater control of their education, perhaps even designing and carrying out their own courses.\textsuperscript{16} Early in the year the faculty chimed in to support students, as well. The Tuskegee chapter of American Association of University Professors voted to strongly support student rights on campus, including rights to organize and protest.\textsuperscript{17} Emphasizing dialogue, freedom to hear all views, and intelligent compromise, Tuskegee’s administrators no doubt believed they could resolve the crisis without resorting to harsh punishments.

Still, the hard boot of discipline was never far behind, particularly when the armed forces of the state got involved. In January, the Department of the Army Training distributed a 90-page document to all fifty states, TC 19-3, “Control of Civil Disturbances,” a manual for how to

\textsuperscript{14} W. Paris, interview.
\textsuperscript{15} Arthur Pfister, interview with the author, July 2016.
\textsuperscript{17} “Faculty for Student Rights,” Campus Digest, January 27, 1968, 1.
handle urban rebellions.\textsuperscript{18} But as the saying goes, when there’s nothing left but force, there is nothing left. Far from winning “hearts and minds,” America’s armed forces were losing the wars both at home and abroad. At the end of the month, during the Tet holiday, North Vietnamese peasants who were presumed hobbled and overawed by American firepower, launched simultaneous attacks on more than one hundred southern Vietnamese cities, gaining control of several and exposing to the whole world the inability of the United States to defeat the national liberation movement.\textsuperscript{19} 1968 was to be a bloody year.

**Massacre in Orangeburg**

As in Tuskegee, Alabama, there was a large black middle class in Orangeburg, South Carolina, due to the presence of two historically black college campuses in town — South Carolina State University and Claflin College. At the start of the year, 1968, and after several years of bitter desegregation struggles, the only bowling alley in town (and the only one within a forty-mile radius) remained off-limits to black people. In late 1967 the “For White Only” sign was tactfully taken down and replaced with one neatly printed in the new lingo of segregation, “Privately Owned.” In early February students from South Carolina State University began protesting the establishment by entering, being denied service, and then repeatedly finding themselves ejected. During a week of protests beginning February sixth, police defended the owner’s decision to keep black people out, responded to the students in numbers and with violence, swinging clubs and sending several students to the hospital. Students retaliated by smashing windows at white-owned businesses and throwing bricks and bottles at police. One

\textsuperscript{18} Department of the Army, “Control of Civil Disturbances,” Files of Gov Wallace, Box SG027819, Alabama State Archives.

\textsuperscript{19} Joe Allen, *Vietnam: The (last) war the US lost* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), chapter 2.
student, Henry Smith, an advanced ROTC aspirant, called his mother to explain the violence.

“Sit tight on the campus,” his mother advised. “But if you have to go, pray.”

On the evening of Thursday, February eighth, hundreds of frustrated students built a large bonfire from wood scraps and hurled more insults at police than projectiles. More than one hundred state patrolmen and National Guard troops gathered nearby, some shouldering their weapons. The troops pushed the students back away from the bonfire, and one of them began to fire on the students, followed immediately by several others. In approximately ten seconds of shooting, bullets hit thirty students, three of whom would soon die of their injuries: Samuel Hammond, Delano Middleton, and Henry Smith. “Who’s laughing now?” one policeman said in passing to injured students in the hospital emergency room.

Although white officials insisted on calling it a “riot,” among black people the reaction was significantly different, including the immediate labeling of the event as “the Orangeburg Massacre.” In the aftermath, the presidents of five black colleges (Atlanta University, Clark College, Morehouse College, Morris Brown College, and Spelman College) and of the Interdenominational Theological Center sent an open letter to President Lyndon Johnson, the Attorney General, state governors and local police, calling on them to stop “storm troopers” from invading college campuses. The governor of South Carolina was burned in effigy on black college campuses in Virginia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. A Howard University campus demonstration of sympathy with Orangeburg victims drew almost five hundred

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21 Ibid: 61-65; 73.
22 Ibid., 89.
24 Ibid., 92.
students. SNCC decided to send members to Orangeburg from Tuskegee, who, for their own safety, traveled as representatives of their Student Government Association instead. Faculty and students raised $112 on campus to send the Tuskegee delegation, which included Melvin Todd, Michael Wright, and Warren Hamilton.

The trip both radicalized and terrorized the student delegation. “We were on the way to Orangeburg and we were on a two-lane road, driving kind of fast,” Melvin Todd recalled, “and a car comes behind us and pulls right up on the bumper and would not back off.” The students had a .38 pistol in the car for protection, and debated when or whether they might need to use it on the road. They wondered: “If he tries to pass, do we shoot at him before he can shoot us? If so,” Todd said, “which one of us is going to do it?” The delegation used Warren Hamilton’s parents’ home in Savannah as a place to lodge. When they arrived in Orangeburg, there were troops everywhere and armored personnel carriers in the streets. Hamilton saw small planes flying low over the Orangeburg campus; it seemed to him “like a military occupation.” He also told the *Southern Courier* that he had the opportunity to view the body of one of the slain students. “He had been shot in the chest and the back,” he said. “Another boy’s back was almost blown out.” Local students told him they heard someone shout “Shoot the Niggers” before the police opened fire and that local black people in Orangeburg believed the KKK controlled the State National Guard. Michael Wright recalled that the delegation decided to start a new campus organization — called “Unity” — when they returned from Orangeburg. “We realized

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27 Todd, interview.
28 Hamilton, interview.
29 Ibid.
that the same thing could happen at Tuskegee,” he said, “and we had to protect ourselves.”

Orangeburg “may well be the site of a future racial war” Melvin Todd wrote in a report for the
Campus Digest that was reprinted in other regional newspapers. The delegation’s reports were so
horrible that some Tuskegee students reacted with disbelief. After reading his Digest article, one
classmate asked Todd why he would print lies.

Still, other Tuskegee students were making connections between armed conflict abroad
and at home. In mid-February, several representatives of the Nation of Islam (NOI) came to
speak to what was reported as an “enthusiastic crowd” on campus. The Vietnam War heralded
the end for white rule, NOI Minister Louis Farrakhan told Tuskegee students. “The wars are not
going to stop until the white man’s power to rule is completely broken down,” he said.

Michael Wright and several other students decided to make this connection more concrete in an act of
theatrical solidarity a few weeks later. On February twenty-ninth, four officials from the U.S.
State Department came to Tuskegee to defend the Vietnam War in a campus forum. The first had
just begun to speak when Michael Wright rushed to the front of the hall with a sign and a brown
bag full of raw eggs. Several white professors called out from the audience accusations that the
panelists were “murderers.”

Wright shouted the words printed on his placard: “Inasmuch as our
Vietnamese brothers don't have adequate enough air force to do their bombing, we black brothers
will help them.” Four or five other students then helped him pelt the panelists with eggs before

32 Forman, Sammy Younge, Jr, 264.
33 Todd, interview.
dashing out of the room.\textsuperscript{36} The administration began proceedings to have Wright expelled, giving Unity its first call to action.\textsuperscript{37}

\textbf{Unrest}

In March, Tuskegee student grievances reached a boiling point that exceeded the student actions of 1903 and 1940.\textsuperscript{38} That month, the administration was unable to isolate the relatively small group of students who pushed the movement forward, primarily because those leaders wisely hewed close to the demands supported by the largest number of their peers: ending compulsory ROTC participation, granting athletic scholarships, increasing student power in governance, and supporting the engineering students. The “Black University” idea had traction, it seems, to the extent that it meant students would have the power to make the kind of changes that effectively upgraded Tuskegee’s offerings. That there needed to be more Afro-American- and African—oriented curricula rapidly became common sense among students, but the “Black University” concept had sway because organizers effectively merged that slogan with students’ most urgently-felt needs as students.

As administrators moved to take action against Michael Wright and his fellow protesters, Unity leaflets tacked between the language of politicized blackness and of defending students’ rights and student power. A March first leaflet (unsigned, but presumably issued by Unity), called administrators “indigenous uncle Toms” for attacking anti-war protesters as they challenged an attempt by the State Department to “brainwash” black students. The authors resolved, in the very masculine language of many Black Power activists in those years, that they

\textsuperscript{36} Higgins, Jr., \textit{Student Unrest}: 12, 153.
\textsuperscript{37} Forman, \textit{Sammy Younge, Jr.}, 264.
\textsuperscript{38} See chapters 1 and 2.
“as Black men” will “carry on the struggle for Liberation of all oppressed and exploited people,”
they wrote, asking students: “which side are you on?”39 Two days later another leaflet registered
a new approach, calling for students to specifically defend Michael Wright on the premise that
his case represented an assault on students’ rights. The authors acknowledge that “Many students
believe that the actions of Michael Wright (and possibly others) were wrong but don't justify
being expelled from school.” The administration’s charging of Wright and others with “conduct
unbecoming” of a Tuskegee student set a dangerous precedent by using such an “elastic”
criterion, the leaflet argued.40 This temporary strategic retreat from attacking the broader issue of
the war to the narrower issue of student expulsions was probably a wise move; it may reflect a
recognition that the February twenty-ninth egg-throwing action was a few steps ahead of what
“many students” were ready to support, and displays tactical savvy on the part of student
activists interested in building the broadest possible base for future actions.

No doubt sensing the gathering storm, on March seventh the administration arranged for
an all-Institute meeting where students would be allowed to air their grievances, provided they
submit them in writing in advance. Unity threatened an all-student boycott without “free-
flowing” dialogue, but called it off after the acting chair of Unity had the opportunity of
“conferring with the President.”41 The all-Institute meeting proceeded as planned, but there is no
record of the discussion. It is likely that no amount of talking could overcome the basic problem:
students wanted to move as quickly as possible and the administration tried to move as slowly as
possible. Each day student demands went unmet, the student movement’s resolve deepened and
strengthened. The underlying issue of power — who would decide the content and pace of

39 Higgins, Jr., Student Unrest, 13-14.
40 Ibid., 14-15.
41 Higgins, Jr., Student Unrest, 153-154.
reform at Tuskegee? — was just below the surface. And then Stokely Carmichael returned to campus.42

Bringing Carmichael to campus offered an opportunity to once again assert the connection between student power and the ideas of Black Power. Unable to successfully move the administration on other issues, student activists asserted their control in an area where they had greater autonomy — the selection of outside speakers. Carmichael, then at the height of his fame, naturally drew a flock of reporters. Student organizers, however, decided that Carmichael’s speech would be for black people only, and white people (in this case, all of the journalists who arrived) would not be permitted to enter. This decision immediately raised alarm bells -- white visitors had never been barred from Tuskegee’s campus in its entire history. A local television news program featured an on-camera editorial, “Monday Night’s Incident at Tuskegee,” claiming that reporters and photographers were “bodily ejected” by non-student SNCC members and that campus officials briefly got them in only to ask them to leave moments later fearing “the militant attitude of some SNCC leaders would lead to a confrontation,” the editorial stated. The broadcast attempted to frame the issue of power as originating in the presence of outside agitators: “The general impression of the reporters who were there was that SNCC,” television viewers heard, “and not the Student Government group or the Tuskegee Administration… was in control and running the show.”43 The editorial may have falsely posed the “outsider” issue, but the matter of control was very real.

In the second half of March, Foster continued to offer the carrot of understanding and reform, but then shifted to wielding the stick of suspension and expulsion. Immediately

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42 Carmichael spent a lot of time in the region, and got to know many Tuskegee activists well. The impact of his previous speaking engagements on campus is discussed in chapter 5.
43 Higgins, Jr., Student Unrest: 154; 15-16.
following the Carmichael incident, the administration first proposed more discussions — several weeks of discussions, in fact. On March fourteenth Foster released a schedule of upcoming All-Institute meetings on all of the most salient topics roiling the campus: faculty performance, the cafeteria, athletic scholarships, ROTC, and more.\footnote{Ibid., 16-18.} What the administrators viewed as a magnanimous gesture of reconciliation, students perceived as unnecessary stalling tactic. On March sixteenth Unity distributed a “Parent Day Fact Sheet” and Michael Wright tried to interject himself into the day’s program to make a speech, but was stopped.\footnote{Ibid., 154.} Three days later Foster switched tacks, issuing a written letter to all students about the “seriousness of the present situation” wherein a “relatively small fraction of the student body” is trying to “create confusion.” Foster warned that the administration would take over discipline from student judiciary if need be.\footnote{Ibid., 19-20.} Negative publicity, television editorials, and the persistence of student activists may have pushed Foster to take a harder stance.

March twentieth was a day of reckoning: Foster met with a delegation from the Ad-hoc Committee for the Advancement of the School of Engineering (ACASE), although the content of the discussion is unknown; separately, five students were placed on probation for participating in an “unauthorized meeting”; and roughly three hundred students marched to Foster’s home at the outskirts of campus and someone threw a projectile through his window.\footnote{Higgins, Jr., Student Unrest, 155.} The \textit{Campus Digest} and Unity leaflets both reported that student leaders Michael Wright and Warren Hamilton worked to prevent further “hot-headed” actions at Foster’s house by organizing students into discussion groups on the spot.\footnote{Ibid., 22-23; “Chronology of Protest,” \textit{Campus Digest}, March 23, 1968, 1.} Those groups voted to endorse five resolutions: ROTC should be
voluntary, no curfew for juniors and seniors, removal of restrictions on student living arrangements, improved health services, and the ability to make up lost time on work-study assignments. Meanwhile, another collection of students showed up at the faculty meeting that day and tried unsuccessfully to present a petition of clemency for students penalized for protesting. The students listened to faculty deliberations about how to deal with the student movement. One instructor was heard to say that the activism was the result of a “malignancy” in the student body. He warned that they needed to “take action now” to “get rid of the cancer.”

Foster apparently concurred. On March twenty-first he issued another stern missive to the entire Tuskegee community. Events are becoming “increasingly serious” and “threaten the continued operation of Tuskegee's program for the remainder of the year,” he wrote. Foster cited unauthorized meetings on campus and the projectile – a piece of concrete – thrown through his window. For the first time, he mentioned that he was thinking about closing the school entirely. Students were not unaware that the crisis was coming to a head. That morning, two students — Burns Machobane and Chester Higgins, Jr. — witnessed the swirl of protests: “students from the school of Engineering had placards raised high and were marching in front of Huntington Hall,” and “determined and adamant young ladies with ‘natural’ hairdos sat blocking the entrance in a manner that indicated there would be no classes that day.” Higgins decided to create an archive of the tumult by systematically collecting the daily flood of documents. The resulting 166-page documentary volume, *Student Unrest, Tuskegee Institute: A Chronology*, published in 1968, is

49 Higgins, Jr., *Student Unrest*, 21-22.
50 “Foster Holds Faculty Meet,” *Campus Digest*, March 23, 1968, 1.
51 Higgins, Jr., *Student Unrest*, 21.
the most comprehensive record of the textual evidence available: every memo, leaflet, letter and transcript he could find.\footnote{Ibid., Introduction. It may in fact be the most comprehensive documentary record compiled for any student movement in the United States.}

One thing that comes through quite clearly in \textit{Student Unrest} is the role of the Engineering students in pushing forward a cause that was widely perceived by the broader student body to be just: raising the standard of education. On March twenty-first — the day after they met with President Foster — ACASE issued a “to whom it may concern” letter essentially stating that they tried to go through “due process” and got nowhere. Now, the engineers declared, they were willing to boycott and picket classes, and contact the press.\footnote{Ibid., 24-25.} Interestingly, they insisted that their militancy was not to be confused with radicalism. On the same day, in a separate letter from ACASE to the faculty, the engineers emphasized that “we are not part of any other organization,” they wrote. “We do not follow any leaders except our own elected officers, we are not a subset of any Black Power organization.”\footnote{Higgins, Jr., \textit{Student Unrest}, 37.} Thus, the students essentially disavowed the context that gave their protest force. At the same time, their department’s leadership refused to concede any ground. The \textit{Campus Digest} reported that Dean Dybczak, head of the School of Engineering, appeared on a local TV show the following day (March 22) and claimed that the engineering students were led by outside agitators and were trying to “lower” the school’s standards.\footnote{Dock Anderson, “Engineers Take Over Building,” \textit{Campus Digest}, March 30, 1968, 1.}

Engineering students, if they received adequate preparation and actually graduated, had promising futures ahead of them. AT&T, General Electric, IBM, Xerox, Bell System, Ford, Western Electric, Pan American World Airways (Guided Missiles Range Division), and Pan...
American Petroleum Corp (division of Standard Oil), and more paid frequently for advertising space to recruit students.\textsuperscript{56} Whereas most black student activists were concentrated in humanities departments, Tuskegee’s engineering students – those who were, in a sense, following in the spirit of The Founder by pursuing a “practical” education – systematically escalated their actions in 1968, and provided an anchor for the broader student movement. The engineering students were not, in the first instance, motivated by broader social justice aims. Rather, they were fighting for Tuskegee to live up to the promises of its existing educational program. In the context of heavy corporate recruitment, this was a high-stakes struggle, and one that led them into coalition with leftward-moving students.

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Campus Digest}, various issues, 1966-1968.
Figure 6. A typical, full-page corporate recruitment advertisement aimed at Tuskegee students. Source: *Campus Digest*, October 19, 1968.
The “cancer” continued to spread over the next few days. Of course, there were “outside” agitators — from SNCC especially — but by the spring of 1968 their focus was mostly elsewhere; Tuskegee’s spring was a homegrown revolt. On March twenty-second the administration cancelled all classes to arrange more discussions. In the evening twenty-seven students and faculty members met to forge a consensus for common action. They agreed to focus on two issues: ROTC and athletic scholarships. No self-appointed leaders could stop other demands from circulating, however. In the context of an aroused student body, making demands and seeing some of them met, other students began thinking about what they would like to see changed, too. A student from the Electronics Division wrote to the Campus Digest complaining of the high student-faculty ratio, the scarcity of laboratory equipment, and generally dirty and “deplorable” conditions of the division. The piece was titled, “What About Us?” For the man who had always worked to reconcile the students’ right to protest with the priorities of the administration, the situation on campus became increasingly untenable. On March twenty-third, the student paper reported that Bert Phillips was resigning his post as Dean of Students. He was leaving, he said, “because of actions, inactions, and reactions of the students, faculty, and administrators over the past few weeks.” His resignation would take effect in two and a half weeks, on April tenth. In 1968, however, two and half weeks was a very long time.

The student movement gained strength day by day, transgressing beyond adult expectations of what was reasonable or necessary. On March twenty-fifth, activists were able to mobilize broader layers of the student body, one way or another. They called for a boycott of

57 Higgins, Jr., Student Unrest, 156.
58 Ibid., 37-39.
60 Bert Phillips was a very popular figure among students on campus. His resignation was a big deal because he was widely perceived as defending students and student activists in 1965-67. See chapter two.
classes and those students who were more reluctant to participate encountered picket lines blocking their entrance to at least three buildings.\footnote{Higgins, Jr., \textit{Student Unrest}, 157; “Students’ Demands Met After Boycott,” \textit{Campus Digest}, March 30, 1968, 1.} An unsigned leaflet explained that although “we appreciate the effort of Dr. Foster to suspend classes last Friday,” those discussions were insufficient, so “we will remain out of class until all problems are resolved.”\footnote{Higgins, Jr., \textit{Student Unrest}, 44.} A possibly apocryphal scene capturing the clash between faculty and students was relayed to visiting professor James Torrens, a white Jesuit who arrived at Tuskegee to teach in the fall. “Ada Peters was an elegant, brisk schoolmarm,” he wrote, describing one of his colleagues, a black woman from Maine. When Peters arrived to teach her class one spring day, she was blocked: “You can't go in there, Miz Peters,” one of the militants told her, “I'll lay right down here in front of the door.” “Lie!” she corrected him indignantly, and walked in.\footnote{James S. Torrens, “Tuskegee Years: What Father Arrupe Got Me Into,” \textit{Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits} 37, no. 3 (2005), 11.}

No class meant mass meetings in the open air, a show of force that got results. Warren Hamilton spoke to a crowd of 1,000 students who gathered in front of the administrative building: “We want our education to be relevant to us — that’s what this is all about,” he said. Foster was correct that the activists indeed were “a relatively small fraction,” but for a time they connected with a much larger group of students. Mary Ellen Gale reported for the \textit{Southern Courier} that Senior class president William Clark elicited “wild applause” from a crowd representing roughly one-third of the student body when he said, “Viet Nam [sic] is someone else’s war — our war is here!”\footnote{Mary Ellen Gale, “Revolution at Tuskegee,” \textit{Southern Courier}, March 30, 1968, 1, 6.} Foster was no doubt aware that he could not isolate the “fraction” and that further discussions were useless. By the end of the day he granted several concessions to the students, including: the immediate reinstatement of the student judicial
system; extended library hours; and all syllabi would be available at the beginning of each semester. Remaining issues were deferred to other bodies: Foster recommended that all departments consider whether faculty should be required to have research publications; he acknowledged that students would hold a referendum on athletic scholarships; and Foster said students should be invited to the April sixth meeting of the trustees to make a presentation on ROTC. ⁶⁶

With some victories under their belts, most students returned to class on March twenty sixth. ⁶⁷ That day a TV editorial agreed that Tuskegee student demands were valid, but only up to a point. It warned viewers of the danger that a “militant minority” might try to take over. ⁶⁸ In March, however, the most militant minority was not the students gathered around SNCC, but those enrolled in the Engineering department. On March twenty-seventh they boycotted all classes, physically barred faculty from entering the department building, and left the administration’s latest reply to their demands burning in a nearby trashcan. ⁶⁹ Their militant stance earned respect and support from their fellow students. Non-engineering students joined demonstrations outside of the building they occupied. The engineers drew praise and admiration for methodically pursuing their demands, at each step willing and able to escalate. “It is impossible,” James Norton, Jr, editorialized in the Campus Digest, “to not admire the cool, professional and dead-serious attitude that they have shown during the period of protest.” ⁷⁰

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⁶⁶ Higgins, Jr., Student Unrest, 40-42.  
⁶⁷ Ibid., 157.  
⁶⁸ Ibid., 49.  
⁶⁹ Ibid., 158; “Engineers Take Over,” 2.  
The Death of Nonviolence

In the first eight days of April 1968, the conflict between students and administrators on Tuskegee’s campus became a matter of life and death. Not since Sammy Younge’s murder two years earlier had the stakes seemed so high. On their own, the issues yet unresolved were not lethal. The call to make ROTC voluntary flowed from growing animosity towards the brutal war in Vietnam. Athletic scholarships would help to secure a place on campus for many students who otherwise would have difficulty affording tuition. Engineering students dug in their heels over the replacement of professors because without new ones they felt unable to succeed in courses, and consequently, in the field. Underlying these concerns was the question of who was in charge, the students or the administration? The students never proposed themselves as a replacement for the faculty or the administration, but they insisted on the power to insist on having a say in the matter of their education. The first eight days of April were the highest expression of this long-standing tension on Tuskegee’s campus, rivaled only by the student strikes of 1903 and 1940. The events at Tuskegee might not have been so dangerous, however, had it not been for the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King on the fourth day of April, 1968. His death, and the uprising of black people that followed in one hundred twenty-five American cities, meant that any collective action by black people in Alabama — even on a private college campus like Tuskegee — was treated by the state as a mortal threat. The students wanted reform, but the state of Alabama responded like it was revolution.

The very first day of April, 1968, began with threats and defiance. President Foster wrote a letter to the Engineering students expressing satisfaction that they were close to an agreement on all issues except one. In his view, the reasonable thing now was for classes to resume. He explained that he would conduct a referendum among Engineering students -- asking: Will you
come to class on Tuesday April second, yes or no? If no, he threatened to take steps to suspend the Engineering program for the rest of the year. The students replied the following day to say that they did not want their department closed, but rather wanted the issues resolved — particularly the problem of ineffective faculty. The engineers sought broader support, writing an open letter to their fellow students. They repeated Foster’s threat, and warned students should “[b]e aware of the fact that at any time he could decide to close your school too.” Engineers called for students to assemble outside of Moton Hall at 11:00 a.m. to show their support. 71

While the engineers rallied, a group of approximately thirty students gathered separately to plan next steps for the broader movement. “We weren’t getting anywhere with Foster,” George Geddis recalled, so the discussion shifted to what to do with the upcoming meeting with the trustees on April sixth. Geddis was the president of the student theater, so he was able to make that space available for “plotting” and as a “staging area” for the protest. 72 Michael Wright was there, and spent much of the time drafting what became known as the “Mandate” document, including its preface, outlining the Black University concept. The mandate was far from “revolutionary,” Wright recalls, but included reforms that the students felt were realistic. “They were concessions that we knew they could make without harming any of the operations,” Wright said. “It would just harm the reputation of the place of Tuskegee’s elite with the political class that runs this country,” he continued. “But that’s their problem.” 73 According to his handwritten affidavit, Michael stayed in the theater overnight in early April for several days. 74

71 Higgins, Jr., Student Unrest: 55-56 ; 61; 58.
72 Geddis, interview.
73 Wright, interview.
74 Wright, “Affidavit.”
The document that emerged from the theater — the “mandate” — was an eighteen-page catalog of proposals for reforming Tuskegee. Some were more far-reaching than others. As Wright indicated, many of the items were easily actionable. Other, more philosophical points raised in the “Black University Concept” in the first two pages would have required greater revision of Tuskegee’s political-educational paradigm. In fact, there is significant a political distance from pages one and two to pages three through eighteen. The first two were unsigned — although participants agree that they were written by Michael Wright. At the time he was probably the most politically active undergraduate student on campus, and the text expresses his vision of connecting the Tuskegee student movement to a broader struggle for democracy and justice. The remaining sixteen pages are also unsigned, and come across as less political and more like a wish list for students who have personal ambitions that go beyond the limitations of their school’s offerings. The meaning of “Black Power” and the idea of a “Black University” at Tuskegee in April of 1968 is contained in the merger of these two tendencies.

The Black University Concept, as Wright defined it in this document, meant a “re-direction of the goals” of Tuskegee such that, ideally, the school “benefits and carries on a perpetual reciprocal relationship with the entire Black community.” The purpose should be to speak from and to the black experience, not to “hand America a carbon copy of itself.” Wright contrasted “individual concerns” with a “collective ethos,” emphasizing that “Survival of the Black population is of primary concern.” The document continues by briefly outlining two types
of “mandates” addressed to “inter-Tuskegee” problems: policies regarding outside speakers and political activities on campus; and academic “revisions” to implement. The text indicates that students and faculty had voted to approve revised policy guidelines, but that “final official endorsement” by the administration was not yet forthcoming. The academic revisions are “major academic and programatic [sic] considerations” for which the students “demand immediate or as nearly feasible attention as possible.” These included a general emphasis on Afro-American history and culture, and specifically the addition of an Afro-American history course as a general requirement, as well as the addition of specific black-oriented tracks of study in sociology, psychology, and “all of the social sciences.” Wright also proposed a new African Studies Program, and mandatory Ibo and Swahili courses as foreign language requirements. In this way, some of the “mandates” were actually aimed not at administrators but at students — ROTC would be voluntary, but Ibo and Swahili would be mandatory!

As they gathered in the student theater on April second, perhaps taking turns at a typewriter, the twenty or thirty students assembled dreamed up their ideas for how to reform Tuskegee Institute. They came up with demands in thirteen domains: Faculty Research, Education, ROTC, School of Mechanical Industries, Engineering, Fine Arts, Music, Speech and Drama, John Andrews Hospital, Free Student Theater, Withdrawal from Courses, Checks and Balances, and [Assigning of Names to] Nameless Dormitories. Of these, only three were written up to express explicit connection to the “Black University” theme: Education, Free Student Theater, and Nameless Dormitories. Pages three through eighteen lack the philosophical flourish of the first two pages, but make up for it with often (but not always) greater levels of detail and specificity. The document overall feels like a collection of proposals drafted

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79 Student mandate document, 1-2.
80 Student mandate document, 3-18.
independently of each other. Most demands take up less than half of a page, yet then the next
demand begins at the top of the next page, suggesting that they were actually composed
separately and only later joined together. The document also reflects the pressures of the moment
— trying to maintain broad support among students and seize an opportunity to make substantive
changes.

At Tuskegee, in April of 1968, invoking the Black University Concept served to connect
local demands to the global context. With the Black University concept came the Black Power
movement and the global uprising of black people around the world. Thus the proposal to reform
the School of Education stated that professors need to “be aware of the special problems that are
peculiar to Black people, and to provide the essential proficiency in the techniques of dealing
with Black people.”\(^{81}\) The page explaining the call for a free student theater proclaims: “Since
the theater has chosen to address itself to the expression of Black needs, Black ideas, and Black
talent, and since the administration has not [seen] fit to provide us with these things, and has,
indeed, attempted to suppress such expression,” therefore what has been known as the “Little
Theater” should become a free student theater, they wrote.\(^ {82}\) Without the specific demands for
upgrading Tuskegee’s academic offerings (research requirements for faculty, improving the
departments of mechanical industries and engineering) and quality of student life (improved
service at the hospital, the ability to withdraw from a course at any time), the movement would
have lacked numbers on campus, but without the Black University concept, it would have lacked
the force of the global movement. Tuskegee’s students fought for reform under the banner of
revolution. Some of Tuskegee’s administrators and trustees came to understand this. The state of
Alabama did not particularly care to interpret the difference.

\(^{81}\) Ibid., 4.
\(^{82}\) Student mandate document, 15. Underlining original — BJ
By April third there was no going back. On that day, Foster offered to continue the student-initiated suspension of all Engineering classes pending a settlement of the outstanding issues and on one condition: the Engineering students must relinquish control of their department’s building. The students voted to turn down the offer, and maintain their occupation. In response, administrators cut off all power and telephones in the building, so the students resorted to using candles and walkie-talkies for light and communication. As the engineers plotted their next steps by candlelight, other students gathered in the Little Theater. They finished typing up their demands, but they prepared to confront the trustees with more than printed words on a page.

Unlike the black elite or the southern segregationists with whom Tuskegee student activists had largely clashed thus far, Tuskegee’s trustees were the liberal (and mostly northern) elite. Tuskegee had twenty-three trustees in 1968; five — president Luther Foster, former president Frederick Patterson, Dr. Montague Oliver, president of the board of education in Gary, Indiana, Federal Reserve member Andrew Brimmer, and millionaire businessmen and civil rights movement supporter A.G. Gaston — were black; only two — congresswoman Frances Bolton of Ohio and Donna Salk, advisor to California’s Fair Employment Practices Commission and wife of the famous scientist Jonas Salk — were female (and white). In exchange for partial funding from the state, Tuskegee Institute granted the governor the ability to appoint five trustees. In 1968 the most radical among them may have been Gaston, and the least was probably Walter Bouldin, president of the Alabama Power Company and member of the deeply

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84 Geddis, interview; Wright, interview.
conservative Alabama Chamber of Commerce.\textsuperscript{86} In total, six were businessmen, six were public officials, three were bankers, and the rest were mostly a collection of lawyers and philanthropists. One notable exception was a retired four-star general, Lucius Clay, who had commanded American forces in Europe during the Second World War.\textsuperscript{87} Gaston wasn’t the only one left-of-center on the board, however. Melvin Glasser was the director of the social security department of the United Auto Workers, a position he used to advocate for a national health care program.\textsuperscript{88} Investment bankers Richard Waddell and William Gridley had both financially supported civil rights activism and Alexander Aldrich, executive assistant to then-New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller, had marched with Dr. King.\textsuperscript{89} These, truly, were the country’s liberal elite.\textsuperscript{90}

This collection of powerful personalities could not have known that the mounting conflict on the nation’s most well known historically black campus was about to coincide with the assassination of the nation’s most well known black leader. When the trustees arrived on Tuskegee’s campus — “in Cadillacs” as Michael Wright recalled — the roughly twenty to thirty students assembled in Little Theater decided that they should be confronted with protests from the overwhelming majority of students.\textsuperscript{91} But the activists had a problem: how would they convince their classmates to come out in such numbers? It’s not clear who arrived at the idea, but

\textsuperscript{90} “Tuskegee Students Lock Up Trustees 13 Hours,” St. Petersburg Times, April 8, 1968, A1, A8.
\textsuperscript{91} Wright, interview.
somehow the activists decided that, by physically locking up classrooms and buildings, students would have no choice in the matter — they would have to gather outside.\textsuperscript{92} “That was my part, I had the locks,” Ronald Hill remembered. “I locked up all the buildings.”\textsuperscript{93} Michael Wright remembered that they were thoughtful about which buildings to lock and which not to lock. “We left the cafeteria open, obviously, and we left the recreation room untouched, obviously, because we did not want to alienate ‘the base,’” he recalled with a chuckle.\textsuperscript{94} Preparations continued into the night and the next day, April fourth. But that evening, the laughter stopped. “In the middle of that planning,” George Geddis said, “we were watching TV and the news came across: Martin Luther King had just been shot.”\textsuperscript{95}

It is difficult to overstate the impact of Dr. King’s assassination. King was murdered in Memphis, where he had traveled to support black sanitation workers who went on strike for union recognition. “African Americans everywhere recognized King’s death as a watershed moment that required a massive response,” historian Michael Honey wrote. “King’s death burst the dam of whatever patience held back the rage of Black America at Depression-level unemployment; job, housing, and school discrimination; pervasive police brutality; useless deaths of Black soldiers in Vietnam; and the plethora of ills that stalked the ghettos.”\textsuperscript{96} The state responded with an unprecedented mobilization of troops on domestic soil — the Army’s TC 19-3 document put into action. The Governor of Tennessee called four thousand National Guard troops to enter Memphis that night.\textsuperscript{97} President Johnson ordered the same number to guard the nation’s capital, and governor’s mobilized guardsmen in Chicago, Detroit, Boston, Jackson,

\textsuperscript{92} Geddis, interview.
\textsuperscript{93} Hill, interview.
\textsuperscript{94} Wright, interview.
\textsuperscript{95} Geddis, interview.
\textsuperscript{96} Michael K. Honey, \textit{Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Campaign}. (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2011), 444.
Mississippi, Raleigh, North Carolina, and Tallahassee, Florida to “stem disorders or guard against them.”98 It seemed that King’s murder spelled the end of nonviolence as a strategy. In D.C., Stokely Carmichael told reporters, “White America has declared war on Black America.” There was “no alternative to revolution,” and for black people, “the only way they will survive is by getting guns.”99

“We were in shock,” Michael Wright said of his reaction to the news of King’s assassination. “My girlfriend… loved Martin Luther King beyond any level of love, and honestly, I mean love.” She worried that Michael and the other student activists would be killed. “She had an existential meltdown,” he said. King’s death “entirely changed the tone” of the student movement, George Geddis thought. “We became much more sober and much more dedicated… After we got through crying, we focused on the anger and on the dedication to our goals.”100 Cozetta Lamore remembered that after Dr. King was murdered, “a small group took charge,” and made demands of Tuskegee’s administration. The attitude was, “Enough is enough; you killed our leader.”101 Polls published a few days later in the Campus Digest indicated the growing resolve: a majority of students agreed on the need to remove inadequate instructors, upgrade academic offerings, supported scholarships for athletes and stood in solidarity with the Unity movement.102

As they were after the murder of Sammy Younge, on April fifth Tuskegee administrators, faculty and students were united in grieving and at odds in action. In the morning, many Tuskegee students did not go to class. Michael Wright, Eugene Adams, and a few other activists

99 Quoted in Franklin, “Army Troops in Capital…”
100 Geddis, interview.
101 Cozetta Lamore, interview with the author, July 2016.
102 “Students Polled on 11 Questions,” Campus Digest, April 6, 1968, 2; “Vote Shows: Students Support Tuition Grants, Fee for Athletics,” Campus Digest, April 6, 1968, 7.
led flying pickets of roughly three hundred students combined that traveled around campus enforcing a boycott of classes. Students sat-in in all of the administrative buildings. Some students gathered at Dorothy Hall — the site of the trustees meeting — and demanded that the trustees act on the Mandate. “Basically, as we're going up the stairs and to the second floor where the meeting was, I was met by a bunch of people,” Geddis recalled, including Dean Phillips, who told them they had to leave. At some point during the day, a local court granted Tuskegee an injunction against student protesters. We know that some students did get through, however. The trustees recorded in the minutes of their meeting that they met with approximately thirty students that afternoon to discuss a “Mandate”; Foster was excused from the meeting to allow “freer student expression.” Ten trustees were absent that day, which meant only thirteen had arrived in the first place. With Foster out of the room, that left twelve trustees. Thirteen other Tuskegee officials were in the room, however, including lawyers, accountants, auditors, other officers of the university and two representative of the Carver Research Foundation. After listening to the students, the trustees argued that it was not fair to insist that they answer – as the students apparently demanded – in just four hours. The students replied that some items could be acted upon immediately, since they did not require additional funds. The trustees replied that they did not have a quorum and were therefore unable to vote. The meeting was adjourned at 7:15 p.m. That evening, the combatants temporarily united — nearly three thousand people in total — by gathering in Logan Hall for a memorial service for

103 Wright, “Affidavit.”
104 Geddis, interview.
105 Higgins, Jr., Student Unrest, 160.
Dr. King, featuring speeches and singing. The Reverend Raymond Harvey, who led the service, spoke about ongoing injustice in the state of Alabama, but made no mention of the student protests or demands.\footnote{Mary Ellen Gale, “Trouble At Tuskegee,” \textit{Southern Courier}, April 13, 1968, 6.}

Although unspoken the night before, student demands were at the front of everyone’s mind the next day. According to their minutes, the board of trustees reconvened the following morning, April sixth, at 10:00 a.m. They re-arranged their agenda in order to consider student grievances first and planned to hold further discussions with students that afternoon. Also, “by prior agreement,” twenty students joined the meeting at 11:15 a.m. Two students laid out three central issues that represented the will of the student body. Bennie James explained the grievances of the engineering students. Albert Joyner discussed ROTC and athletic scholarships. The trustees promised to respond by 3:30 p.m. that day. The Trustees reconvened at 2:00 p.m. and, at some point during their deliberations, they were informed that students had taken control of the telephones and switchboard and had locked the entrances to the building.\footnote{Trustees, “Minutes,” April 6, 1968: 3-5, 8-9.} “I don't recall how the decision got made,” Geddis said. “It was kind of one of those decisions. We decided that we weren't going to leave. We chained the doors to the guest house.” There were roughly one hundred students inside.\footnote{Geddis, interview.} Ronald Hill chalked it up to a failure of communication and a desire to say to students, “no, stay in your place.” As a result, “we just did what we had to do.”\footnote{Hill, interview.} When the students refused to reopen the switchboard or to leave the building, the trustees voted to call the sheriff. They adjourned at 5:00 p.m.\footnote{Trustees, “Minutes,” April 6, 1968, 9.}
Approximately three hundred students participated in the occupation of Dorothy Hall on April sixth. For students like Michael Wright, this was the confrontation they had been building towards. For others, the moment swept them up and carried them along like a wave.\(^\text{114}\) “I was always a quiet person,” Lena Agnew admitted. “I would see and watch, but I didn't get involved as much as most people did.”\(^\text{115}\) Agnew’s one and only participation in a protest during her years at Tuskegee was the April sixth sit-in at Dorothy Hall. Still, she understood the issues. “We heard that the trustees were coming for their annual meeting and we had some things that we wanted them to do,” she said. “We wanted better food, better dorms. There were a lot of issues we were confronted with, and we thought the only way to get their attention was to have a sit-in where they were staying.”\(^\text{116}\)

Inside the building, as students confronted the trustees directly, face to face, their hopes of persuading them fell. At one point, a trustee, Dr. Shilling, called student William Clark a “communist.”\(^\text{117}\) In his disciplinary hearing the following month, Clark recalled that this comment made him “furious.” “I told him we are not communists — every time a black man does something in this country,” he said, “we are called communists.”\(^\text{118}\) For George Geddis, it was “my first confrontation with real power,” he said. “I remember specifically, at that time, I spoke to one of the trustees, Melvin Glasser.” Geddis misremembered him as a representative of General Motors (not the UAW). He said to Glasser:

Do you understand what happens if these state troopers come onto a black campus? We are a bunch of ugly niggers. Somebody's going to get killed. He looked at me and said,

\(^{115}\) Lena Agnew, interview with the author, November 2016.
\(^{116}\) Agnew, interview.
\(^{118}\) Quoted in Mary Ellen Gale, “Tuskegee ‘Court’ Hears Senior Class President,” *Southern Courier*, May 4, 1968, 2.
“Well then, leave.” That's when I realized nothing's going to happen. These guys have all the power and we can't move them.\textsuperscript{119}

Figure 7. Outside of the occupation of Dorothy Hall in 1968. Photo by P.H. Polk. Source: Tuskegee Institute Archives.

Figure 8. Inside the occupation of Dorothy Hall. Photo by P.H. Polk. Source: Tuskegee Institute Archives.

\textsuperscript{119} Geddis, interview.
As some trustees engaged in dialogue with protesters, others, unbeknownst to the students, worked with administrators to end the standoff on their own terms. At some point, a local photographer, P.H. Polk, entered Dorothy Hall. He was not a professor or employee of Tuskegee Institute, but he was known to the students and trusted (it was Polk who first taught Chester Higgins, Jr. how to use a camera). Apparently no one complained as he began taking photographs of the occupation, and some may have even posed for them. Polk later turned the images over to the administrators, who used them to identify and prosecute student activists.120 The trustees also contacted the sheriff, Lucius Amerson. In the aftermath of the massacre in Orangeburg and the use of martial forces nationwide after Dr. King’s assassination, this was a perilous move. Amerson would, in turn, escalate matters further by calling in the Alabama National Guard. The students who had worked so hard to get him elected didn’t quickly forget, and referred to him as an “Uncle Tom” in the weeks and months that followed.121 Lastly, at 6:30 p.m., the trustees announced to students inside and outside the building that, for the first time in its history, Tuskegee Institute would close its doors for indefinite period of time.122

**Striking Back**

Major General Lucius Clay had a plane to catch. He explained his situation to the students, and they let him leave. Presumably Clay knew danger when he saw it, and in the occupation of Dorothy Hall, he didn’t see it. “This is simply a group of rebellious young students

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120 Higgins, Jr., interview.
122 Higgins, Jr., *Student Unrest*, 160.
who want to run the university,” he told Tuskegee News. “There was no threat of violence.”123 There actually was a threat of violence, but not from the students. With the Orangeburg massacre on his mind, Michael Wright suggested that the students protesting outside of Dorothy Hall should come inside for safety.124 “We had no intention of hurting anybody… but we were not going to just get shot down like the students at South Carolina,” he said.125

Day gave way to night, and morale gave way to hunger and exhaustion among the students, who struggled to maintain a unified stance on their aims and means. “It was a very emotional situation,” Michael Wright recalled. “To carry out a consensus meeting was becoming more and more difficult.”126 Between two and three o’clock in the morning, the committee of students leading the occupation decided to let the board of trustees go, conceding that their lack of quorum meant no decisions would be made on the spot. Wright disagreed with this decision, and a group of students continued to confront the trustees as they came downstairs to leave. Still another group refused to let Foster go, so the president stayed in the building and continued to respond to their questions. Michael Wright went into the bathroom and cried.127

Around 3:30 a.m., Sheriff Amerson led roughly three hundred National Guardsmen and seventy State Patrolmen to the gates of Tuskegee’s campus.128 As word of the troops’ presence reached Dorothy Hall, the bulk of the students still occupying the building “vanished.”129 Lena Agnew and her friends had to lie to their classmates who were blocking the exits — the young women claimed they needed to retrieve pillows so they could be more comfortable — and never

123 “Foster Closes Tuskegee Institute; Sheriff Calls In Guard, Troopers,” Tuskegee News, April 11, 1968, 1.
124 Wright, “Affidavit.”
125 Wright, interview.
126 Ibid.
127 Ibid.
128 “Foster Closes Tuskegee Institute; Sheriff Calls In Guard, Troopers,” Tuskegee News, April 11, 1968, 1.
129 Higgins, Jr., Student Unrest, 161.
came back. At one point Dean Phillips ran over to Michael Wright and told him: “If you’ve never listened to me in the past, listen to me now. Let the President and myself go out because the state troopers are coming.” The news also spread to the dorms, where Caroline Hilton remembers that some of her classmates braced themselves for battle. “I didn't realize how serious it was until the girls would say, ‘The National Guard's coming, the National Guard's coming,'” she recalled. “They took mattresses and put them across the doors in the dorm, and they all pulled out their guns. They were getting ready to shoot it out. I couldn't ... I said, ‘No, no, no, I have to get out of here.'”

Perhaps nothing illustrated the contradictory position of Tuskegee’s students – simultaneously recruited into the corridors of power and affluence as graduates and feared and punished as protesters – as much as this: Tuskegee Institute, itself a military training ground, was facing a military invasion. As they did 28 years earlier, troops gathered near Tuskegee’s gates, preparing to enter the campus. And just as Patterson did in 1940, Phillips (once again) acted to protect students. He approached the gates with some other campus officials, and noticed that the troops had bayonets affixed to their rifles. Phillips asked them not to cross the gates but the soldiers said they were coming anyway. One of them told Phillips: “Well, you know, you all at Tuskegee have been too uppity for a long time.” Somehow, the dean did convince the soldiers not to go to Dorothy Hall. Amerson, however, led troops to the Engineering Building, where he presented a copy of an injunction against their occupation and successfully persuaded the engineering students to leave in order to avoid being arrested. Fortunately, there were no

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130 Agnew, interview.
131 Wright, “Affidavit.”
132 Hilton, interview.
133 Phillips, interview.
134 “Foster Closes Tuskegee Institute; Sheriff Calls In Guard, Troopers,” Tuskegee News, April 11, 1968, 1.
injuries and no lives lost, but the armed forces of the state of Alabama had finally accomplished at gunpoint what neither the trustees nor the administrators could: dislodging the student movement and its leadership. This was a bitter ending, one that exposed divisions and tensions about who stood where and who was on whose side. For example, as they crossed the campus in the early morning hours, Sue Pendell, a professor, recognized some of her students among the National Guardsmen.135

The closing of the campus brought this phase of the student movement to an abrupt end. All students were ordered to leave campus and thus, physically removed from the school community, the activists were unable to organize. The bus and train stations were instantly jammed with suitcases and boxes.136 One Tuskegee student who owned a small private airplane — a Cessna — gave Caroline Hilton and some friends an airlift out of town.137 Meanwhile the administration took the opportunity to get more organized. Administrators successfully sought police warrants for disturbing the peace against sixteen students, including Ronald Hill and Michael Wright.138 They began making plans using the shutdown to permanently expel the main organizers of the movement. Parents were sent a letter explaining that all students were dismissed and would have to apply for readmission — an unprecedented step in the school’s history. “Tuskegee officials… hope to weed out the troublemakers by carefully screening the new applications,” a local television editorial segment reported. “These moves are drastic, but
they are necessary…”139 Two weeks later, on April twenty-second, Tuskegee Institute reopened with approximately ninety percent of the former students applying for readmission.140

For the rest of the semester, Tuskegee student activists — those who returned — spent most of their energy defending themselves and their comrades in court — on and off campus. Thirteen students took Tuskegee to federal court for not readmitting them. They claimed they were exercising their right to protest, and were trying to win “modern educational programs… rather than merely training Black students in obsolescent technical skills designed to keep the Black people relegated to second-class status.”141 Judge Frank M. Johnson, who had repeatedly ruled in favor of the Tuskegee faculty in their bid for voting rights, now ordered both parties (the students and the administrators) “cross-restrained,” meaning that the administration had to reinstate students who had been summarily expelled and at the same time those students were prohibited by the court from doing anything to “disrupt” the process of schooling at Tuskegee Institute.142 The judge ruled that students’ right to due process had been violated, so the administration organized on-campus trials for student activists. With perhaps unintended irony, and seeking a means to protest what they called “kangaroo courts,”143 student defendants wore chains with padlocks around their necks as they traveled on campus — evoking both the accusation that the administrators was serving as “overseers” on a “plantation,” and displaying the very tools they were accused of using to shut down the school.144

139 Higgins, Jr., Student Unrest, 94-95.
140 Forman, Sammy Younge, Jr., 278. As the Tuskegee student movement was brought to an abrupt halt, it continued to explode around the country. On the day after Tuskegee Institute reopened, April 23, students occupied five buildings at Columbia University. Police stormed the buildings seven days later.
141 Quoted in Mary Ellen Gale, “U.S. Judge Tells Tuskegee to Re-Admit All Students,” Southern Courier, April 27, 1968, 1.
142 Higgins, Jr., Student Unrest, 123-124.
143 Hill, interview.
144 Geddis, interview.
Student activists maintained a defiant stance, and their anger at the administration deepened. As the trials proceeded and some students began receiving suspensions, the *Campus Digest* shared their outrage. A familiar refrain was the idea that the administration was acting as servants of the white trustees. “The Administration is not Black; it is white,” a May eighteen editorial argued. “No matter what reasons are given, the only real reason that the Black brothers and sisters are being ‘executed’ by the Administration is that the students offended the Administration’s WHITE BROTHERS!” An accompanying cartoon portrayed a menacing figure in a white pointed hood labeled with the president’s initials, “LHF.”145 Dean Phillips, perhaps sensing his inability to reconcile the antagonists, abstained from the campus judicial process.146 The results of these trials are not clearly recorded, but there is evidence of a wide range of outcomes. Some, like Michael Wright, were expelled.147 It seems that many others, such as George Geddis, were permitted to return to campus.148 Still others, like Warren Hamilton, were allowed to graduate early. “I felt really hurt by that,” he said. “It was like they just got rid of me.”149

**Victory in Defeat**

Returning to campus after the shutdown, Caroline Hilton thought she had been through a “time warp,” as though the occupation of Dorothy Hall “wasn’t really real.” It seemed as though everything was back to “business as usual.”150 George Geddis felt the difference, though. The “tone” of the campus had changed. “There were more instructors doing African-American

145 “In Good Faith!” *Campus Digest*, May 18, 1968, 2.
146 Phillips, interview.
147 Wright, interview.
148 Geddis, interview.
149 Hamilton, interview.
150 Hilton, interview.
history,” which felt like an accomplishment. The *Campus Digest* remained an outlet for the angriest students, although the lack of by-lines suggests the anger was mixed with fear. One anonymous front-page editorial attacked the administration [alternating capitalization of “Black”]:

Your white National Guard allies didn’t have to pull the triggers of death on black students as they wanted to because your whitewashed minds had already and still are pulling the triggers of suspensions, suppression, and extermination of Black Souls, Minds and Bodies. Your whitewashed minds have already pulled the triggers which snuff out the lengths, breadths, and heights of Black students in a black institution. Forgive our whitewashed Black Judases for they know not what they do.

Something had changed on campus, but it was more diffuse and intangible than a well-organized movement of students might demand. The militants on campus now commanded few forces, if any. The ALCPP incorrectly predicted that Tuskegee would be the “head” of black student protest in the year to come. But everyone was aware that the global movement was gaining steam, which seemed to validate the militants. The day after Tuskegee Institute reopened, students occupied five buildings on Columbia University’s campus in New York City, only to be dislodged by a police attack a week later. The next month, a protest movement that had begun in Parisian college dormitories spread to workplaces; on May twenty-second, nine million people were on strike in France — the largest general strike in world history at that point. Undeniably, Tuskegee students had contributed to this great wave of global protest. Frederick Patterson, former Tuskegee Institute president and one of the trustees held hostage in the prior month, actually paid homage to the activists in his 1968 commencement speech to the campus. Patterson said that the student movement was part of a “larger context of rebellions

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151 Geddis, interview.
153 Edwin Strickland to Gov Albert Brewer, September 15, 1968, Files of ALCPP
involving college students all over the United States — and, in fact, over most of the world.” Revolution, he said, “is long overdue” in American society. He cautioned against separatism, however, arguing that Black people could get their fair share of America’s resources without going “off in a corner for blacks only to get it.” Patterson essentially outlined the administration’s new stance (now that the crisis had passed): they would praise the militants as forward-thinking, but draw the line at separatism.

When classes resumed in the fall — with a record enrollment — students turned to the pages of the *Campus Digest* to assess what, if anything, had been accomplished, and what the future held. In a letter to the incoming class of freshman, an anonymous student author warned: “If you are willing to walk the straight and narrow, and not do or say anything ‘unbecoming to a Tuskegee Student [sic],’ welcome to the right place.” Some students feared that Judge Johnson’s temporary injunction against student protests would continue as a tool for punishing future demonstrators. “At this moment, with the threat of reprisals for any, and every action hanging over our heads,” Caroline Hilton wrote, “we are not free people.” Confirming their worst fears, Judge Johnson did just that. He extended the injunction — making the temporary ban on protests a permanent one.

Radicalism was replaced with caution. Two elections — one on campus, one off — may be interpreted as a backlash, or at least a move away from a radical posture. In August,

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156 Tuskegee’s fall enrollment ticked upward to its highest level to date: 3,184 students. See Pernella Peavy, “Institute Increases Enrollment,” *Campus Digest*, October 26, 1968, 1.
Tuskegee’s first black candidate for mayor, Thomas Reed, failed in his bid. Although black people were more than eighty percent of Tuskegee’s registered voters, Reed captured less than half of the overall votes. A white man, C. M. Keever, was elected in a landslide. Keever speculated that his election represented the will of Tuskegee’s black citizens to not “control” or “segregate” the city.  

Likewise, some students decided to keep their “heads down” and focus on graduation. In mid-October, Lamont Isom was elected student body president, campaigning on a promise to improve “relations” between students and faculty. Caroline Hilton called Johnson’s injunction “a big issue” in the election.

But this was not a return to the past. The idea that Tuskegee had to change in some way persisted, particularly in the area of curriculum. For their part, the faculty openly debated the merits of black speech patterns and whether or not they should teach “standard” English. Professor Torrens was told that the English department, which had a high proportion of white professors, was the object of much faculty resentment in part because of its campaign “real or imagined, against Negro dialect,” Torrens wrote. One black faculty member referred to them as the “Foreign Language Department.”

Caroline Hilton, the new Campus Digest editor-in-chief, continued to defend the Black University concept. Lamenting that this aspect of the spring demands has been “lost in the mire,” she argued that “Our curriculum must be made relevant to the total black experience.” Hilton wasn’t alone. The “girls” of Rockefeller Hall sponsored a

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163 Geddis, interview.
165 Torrens, “Tuskegee Years”: 14; 23.
166 Caroline Hilton, “Afro-American Responsibility Begins In a Black Oriented University,” Campus Digest, October 19, 1968, 4.
talk by history professor Aubrie Labrie on the Black University concept. Labrie stressed the need for independence from the government or from any white people.167

The next week, Hilton argued that a “new breed” of black students were coming of age at Tuskegee. The philosophy of this new breed, she wrote, “is black: Black pride, black awareness, black self realization, and most of all, a black social consciousness.” Whereas at the height of their power activists on campus married individual and collective impulses, now they were counterposed. This group eschewed materialism and individualism, Hilton claimed: “Collective growth as a people must precede any and all personal aspirations.”168 This was a more radical stance, but in the last months of 1968, it inspired fewer followers.

From the pages of the Campus Digest, the most political students continued to imbue the concept of blackness with a radical critique of the status quo. Arthur Pfister published one of the most searing indictments of Tuskegee in a full page poem accompanied with photographs. In “Aint’ That Sad,” Pfister ridiculed the rituals of ROTC — marching, drilling, wearing military uniforms, etc. — as “white.” “Skegee is Mean, so big — so mighty/” the poem began, “But it still makes BLACK PEOPLE / into copies of whitey. / … ain’t that sad?”169 A chapter of the Student Organization for Black Unity (SOBU) was officially chartered at Tuskegee Institute in November of 1968. The purpose of the organization, according to an announcement in Campus Digest, was to “unify the black students of Tuskegee Institute with the black community and all Black Student Organizations across the country, which are pertinent to the struggle for Human Rights of the Black Man in America, and all the colored peoples of the world.” Through working in SOBU, a Tuskegee student would become “aware of his vanguard role in the liberation

167 Beatrice Berry, “Role of Black University Discussed by Labrie,” Campus Digest, October 19, 1968, 3.
struggle, a struggle for which many are called but few answer.” The founders were listed as nineteen students, including Cozetta Butts, Caroline Hilton, George Geddis, and Arthur Pfister, with Aubrie LaBrie serving as faculty advisor.  

Some students interpreted the presence of white professors at black schools as “inherently problematic.” Ironically, in many cases white faculty members were among the most enthusiastic supporters of black student protests. One student, Julia Ann Fuller, argued that all white professors should be removed from Tuskegee. “They are bringing white-oriented ideas on our campuses because they are white and those are the only ideas that they could possibly bring,” she wrote. Some, indeed, did leave. Caroline Hilton described Tuskegee as a campus “in turmoil” on the one hand, and yet also “a vanguard of revolutionary thinking among black colleges in the south.” The students gathered around the Campus Digest and SOBU had, in fact, played a vanguard role on campus, and although their organized forces were smaller, their influence was still felt. The official theme for the Homecoming festivities was “Mind Expansion Through Black Awareness.”

There were also those in the campus community who reacted against the more radical meanings of blackness. Professor E. B. Henderson defended the idea of Black Studies, as long as it was not “propaganda” for separatism. The newly-elected SGA president, Lamont Isom, articulated support for the Black University concept, while echoing the arguments of trustees that Tuskegee should “place great emphasis on Black ideas and Black culture,” but should not

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171 Turner, Sitting In, 168-9.
173 Dick Wasserstrom and Maggie Magee, interviews; Torrens, “Tuskegee Years,” 28.
prepare students for a “totally Black society.”\textsuperscript{176} Outgoing student president Warren Hamilton felt torn between the two groups. As he walked across campus one day, someone threw a large rock at his head. “I was too radical for some people and I was a Tom to other people, because, to the revolutionaries, I didn't go far enough.”\textsuperscript{177}

The list of victories the Tuskegee students won in 1968 is impressive. Late in the semester, the Campus Digest printed a full-page report from a Special Joint Committee, detailing its recommendations and the Tuskegee’s Educational Council’s actions on issues raised by students in the spring. The reforms resulting from student pressure included: student representation on all committees dealing with student affairs; abolition of the second year of compulsory ROTC; full scholarships for athletes; increased attention to black cultural and economic study — specifically fifty new course hours devoted to black culture and an African studies program; principle of publications as a requirement for faculty; revised guidelines on outside speakers; upgrades to the School of Education; improvements to the School of Mechanical Industries; student majority control of the Campus Digest; an independent student theatre; improvements in health services at John Andrews Hospital; students able to withdraw from courses at anytime; and buildings renamed after famous black people. The only outstanding issues were: the formation of a student-faculty committee to further deliberate on the issue of how to evaluate Engineering faculty; and formation of a committee to evaluate the system of checks and balances in Tuskegee’s administration and for status of Dean of Students.\textsuperscript{178} Winning such significant changes quickly – added to the frightening near-invasion of state troopers – meant that only a small number of students remained convinced by the fall of 1968 that the

\textsuperscript{176} Neal Jackson, “Isom States Reasons for Refusing to Attend Black Concept Meeting,” Campus Digest, October 26, 1968, 1.
\textsuperscript{177} Hamilton, interview.
\textsuperscript{178} “Special Joint Committee Report,” Campus Digest, November 2, 1968, 6.
movement hadn’t gone “far enough.” Whatever might be said of the hotheaded, rash, or impatient tendencies of student activists, all of these same qualities were essential ingredients for pushing through this sweeping reform agenda on Tuskegee’s campus.

Looking back at their former selves of half a century before, former Tuskegee student activists said that in 1968, Tuskegee was a “haven for activists.” Yet they conceded that the core of the movement constituted fewer than two dozen students, who, by the late 1960s (and unlike their predecessors), were relatively disconnected from the surrounding black communities, and that while its means were militant, the late 1960s student movement’s demands were not necessarily radical. Ironically, their assessment echoes that of their former antagonist, Tuskegee President Foster. In December, Foster published his annual President’s report, reflecting on the 1967-1968 school year. “There was a strong orientation of Tuskegee students to vital issues in today’s society,” he began. “It is a tribute to Tuskegee’s philosophy and program that this place has nurtured student views and their frank expression.” Faculty and students “were chagrined,” by the “breakdown in orderly processes” which were “led by a small cadre of militants bent on disruption” leading to the school’s closure. But learning from the experience will lead to greater unity in the community, he concluded, adding that an “examination of the Student Mandate of last spring, along with the philosophical stance of the Institute on most of the issues, revealed that we were closer together than might have appeared.”

Foster is correct in pointing out that the “Black University” concept as spelled out in the mandate document was winnable, although he neatly obscures what it took to make those

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179 Hill, interview.
180 Geddis, interview.
181 See Michael Wright’s assessment in Forman, Sammy Younge, Jr., 274.
182 Hilton and Lamore, interviews.
reforms a reality. Closer to the truth is that it took the threat of a revolutionary movement to win reform. By temporarily galvanizing the entire student body around a reform agenda and under the banner of Black Power, a small group of Tuskegee student activists successfully created a force that was able to forge a new consensus on campus.
Conclusion

The history of the Tuskegee student movement casts new light on old debates. It challenges us to reexamine the accommodation-or-protest dichotomy as a way to understand black history. The actors did not debate whether or not to accommodate or to resist in any given moment, but how much to do both. All social struggles concede certain aspects of the status quo in order to challenge others. Few of his students would blame Booker T. Washington for taking white people’s money to underwrite their education (Du Bois did the same to fund his own activities), but some did criticize him for conceding the struggle for political rights in the arena of public debate, or for over-working (and under-educating) them. The terms of accommodation and protest are not fixed and absolute, but are relative and shift over time. Yesterday’s audacious demand can be tomorrow’s shameful accommodation. A challenge in one era can be a concession in the next. Washington opposed instruction in Latin and Greek, while parents and students demanded it. Teaching these languages in the postbellum South was seen as a challenge to the status quo because it implied that black people and white people were intellectual equals. In later years, by contrast, teaching these same languages would be perceived by Black Power activists to be an accommodation to Eurocentric curricula — a concession to the white power structure.

There is always some element of challenge and some element of accommodation in every social action, especially when it comes to the attempt to develop and preserve an institution. No institution can be at war with the status quo in all ways all of the time and endure. Tuskegee Institute’s history is full of leaders willing to make compromises: Lewis Adams traded votes for
a school; Washington sacrificed civil rights for money; Moton acceded to injustice to secure a hospital; Patterson acceded to segregation in order to let black pilots learn to fly. The social boundaries shifted over time and, in general, students moved with the times faster than faculty and administrators. Washington promised a way “up” from slavery; but for some, it didn’t go “up” far enough. During World War I, the changes came fast and thick, but black college administrators were still bound to and by old arrangements. As mediators between the white power structure and the black students they served, black administrators sometimes developed conceptions of education that were different from those of powerful white people, but not always. The gap between students and administrators, between rising expectations and long-standing social accommodations on Tuskegee’s campus set the stage for the student protests and strikes in the 1890s and 1900s as well as in the 1960s.

A school is a unique kind of institution. Schools produce people and ideas, and neither are easily reconciled to the social status quo. School leaders can try to contain and limit a curriculum, but literacy is a power that has no natural boundaries. Learning can lead to thoughts and questions beyond a given curriculum. At the heart of the educational conflict in the postbellum South was the question of whether or not schooling – however modest in scope – would in fact raise black people’s social status or expectations or both. In this respect, white elites and black people of various classes more or less participated for opposite reasons in founding and supporting Tuskegee Institute.¹ The former wanted to use the school to keep black people in their place (to “make the people”), while the latter aimed to use it to change black people’s status. Arguably, this same dynamic is true for the education of all subordinate classes

¹ Anderson, _Education of blacks_.

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of people, although in the case of Afro-Americans it takes on unique dimensions and twists because of racism and the legacy of slavery.

Without appreciating the record of internal dissent and protest at Tuskegee Institute, some historians tend to conflate Washington’s interests and strategies with those of all black people. They make it seem as though Washington’s approach was the only possible path, and the collective resistance of black people is ignored. Students were not the only ones with a history of collective action. The black mineworkers and sharecroppers who tried to organize unions after 1900 in Alabama represented an alternative outlook and strategy for advancement, and one that Washington and his successors actively opposed and tried to suppress. Washington’s emphasis on self-help and entrepreneurialism was primarily the strategy of the black middle class. After the Civil War, this small but fragile class grew more self-conscious and, at times, clashed with the black working class as well as with the ambitions of Tuskegee students. Some argue that Washington “wore the mask” as black people have had to do since slavery. However true this may be, this interpretation misses the fact that black people did not all agree about how much of their views to mask and how much to forthrightly declare. And while recognizing the need for a certain amount of obliqueness, black people did not necessarily agree about what did or should lie behind such a mask.

The histories of the Alabama’s labor movement and of the Tuskegee student movement suggest that there were multiple constituencies of local black people who disagreed with Washington’s public presentation. Washington’s program was controversial in his own place and time. When we imagine (as August Meier did) that the sum total of opposition to Washington-ism came from elite northern black people such as Du Bois, we miss the ever-present and
significant current of critique of southern black people, including faculty members, students, and parents of Tuskegee Institute throughout the school’s history.²

**Washington and Washingtonism**

This record of criticism does not invalidate or diminish the legacy of Tuskegee Institute or of other historically black colleges. It does, however, suggest that they are the products of more than just a great leader’s great vision. Another way to view this history is that Washington made the institution possible, but once they entered it, the teachers, students, and parents of the school had to struggle in order to realize its (and their) greater potential. Instead of the “great leader” version of Tuskegee Institute’s past, this alternate history points to the role of parents, teachers, alumni, and administrators in defining and redefining the ways and means of the school. This push and pull between different actors within the campus community takes on greater significance given Tuskegee Institute’s standing as a “capital” of black America in the first half of twentieth century. The struggle over different strategies and expectations within the school, in some ways, is a microcosm of the conflict among black people as a whole, emerging from slavery, trying to carve out and define a measure of freedom for themselves in difficult circumstances.

The institution that Washington built endured. It not only survived his death in 1915, it thrived. By mid-twentieth century, Tuskegee, Alabama was home to a large black middle class, but not the kind that Washington imagined. Where he preached the value of tilling the soil, black people were more likely to be found mowing their lawns. Tuskegee’s black middle class was an intellectual and professional set, more equipped to interpret poetry than farmers’ almanacs.

Beginning with Washington’s immediate successor, Robert Russa Moton, Tuskegee Institute learned to revise Washingtonism to fit each new age, in words and in deeds. As Tuskegee Institute raised its sights, increased its offerings and became a university, it seemed logical to imagine that that had been what Washington had wanted all along. When Tuskegee professors respectfully and patiently asserted their right to vote, it was conceivable that they, too, were operating within Washington’s long-term plan of using economic strength to gain political power. When students began to adopt the ideas of “Black Power,” some, like Gwen Patton, tried to interpret this step, too, as an extension of Washingtonism. But when Tuskegee students boycotted classes and took the mostly white trustees hostage, it was no longer possible to make the square peg fit the round hole.

And yet, Washingtonism is still with us. Of course, we do have the option of admiring Washington and acknowledge his achievements without believing that his ideas are applicable to all times and places. But the impulse to apply his credits to the present and even to the future persists, perhaps because some of the same conditions that gave birth to Washingtonism persist. We have, since the 1970s, been living through a counter-revolution of sorts – a vicious counterattack that has worked to demoralize and demobilize the black-led insurgency of the 1960s. Not unlike the period after Radical Reconstruction, there has been a feeling for several decades that nothing great can be accomplished for black people without deference to elite priorities. In the field of education, desegregation and redistribution of resources have been shelved by policymakers and what new resources there are, are devoted almost entirely to the proliferation of charter schools and school “choice.” Washington would probably recognize the corresponding ideological landscape, such as calls for “personal responsibility” in today’s press.  

Aspirations for collective social change can be deferred, but they never die. In the right context, even elite schools – places where wealth and privilege are concentrated like Harvard or Columbia University – can and have become centers of opposition. When collective aspirations for change burst through to the surface, they challenge old assumptions and ideas. Tuskegee students experienced this in the 1960s as their upbringing and education increasingly collided with their experience in a social struggle. These students were in a unique location both socially and geographically. They were students in an elite school in a surging economy. They were in a middle-class community surrounded by deep poverty. They were also black students in the Jim Crow South. Their movement was shaped by these locations and is both recognizable as part of the larger trends in the region and the era, and is also distinctive. On no other black college campus in the 1960s did students come to radical consciousness in the shadow of such a prominent political and educational figure as Tuskegee students did. While some students rejected Washington, it should not be surprising that others tried to recruit him to their cause.

**Tuskegee Today**

Guy Trammel is a very busy man. He grew up in Tuskegee, Alabama, and although he did not attend Tuskegee Institute, his brother, Ernest Stephens did. Trammel did not have time to conduct a sit-down interview, but he was willing to talk if I was willing to do so on the road. I met him Tuskegee’s town square. I hopped into his van, turned on my recording device, and we zoomed off on a mission to pick up food from a statewide food bank distribution hub. Guy was following in the footsteps of his mother, an activist with the Congress of Racial Equality in Philadelphia who found work as a teacher in Macon County. She took Guy with her after school
and on the weekends, loading up the car with clothing and books to take to rural families in the nearby counties. “When I got older, she had me sit down and read with the children,” he said.

We paused the interview only to load up his van with non-perishable food, and later to unload it all at a community center back in Tuskegee. The difference between the town described in my interviews and the town as it is today is jarring. While Tuskegee University’s campus seems just as pristine, immaculate, and impressive as ever, one has only to cross the street to be in a different world. Working in the campus archives by day, I was warned to make sure to leave town by sundown, for safety purposes. It is no longer the case that Tuskegee Institute is surrounded by Alabama but not in Alabama, as George Paris said. Today it is more accurate to say that Tuskegee University is surrounded by Tuskegee, Alabama, but is not of it. Off campus, the official poverty rate in town is 27.6 percent.4 Macon County’s poverty rate, 32.2 percent, places it among the poorest counties in a poor state – only 7 of Alabama’s 67 counties have a higher poverty rate.5

On our return trip, Trammel took a detour to show me the large, well-maintained mansions around City Lake – owned mostly by people who work for the city government, Trammel said. Many people interviewed for this study explained the town’s economic woes in similar ways: the result of white flight and corruption in city government. City managers are widely believed to be corrupt – they brought millions of dollars into Tuskegee through the “Model Cities” program and other federal initiatives, maintaining their salaries and standards of living, but never seemed to translate that into sustainable economic development and wider

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opportunities for the population. Johnny Ford, a twenty-nine year old son of a VA hospital employee, was elected mayor in 1972, completing the capture of political power that had once been exclusively in the hands of white people. “Black Power” was, in a sense, achieved, but was not what many people expected.

In informal conversations with Alabamians, I frequently heard people connect the pattern of white flight to the events of 1968. This may explain why the dramatic story of the Tuskegee Revolt has gone untold thus far: for those who stuck around, it seemed to mark the end of the good years. Tuskegee University, for its part, understandably might hesitate to lift up a story about how its students became such harsh critics of their school and took such militant action that they were expelled en masse. Unlike the voting rights struggle, the Tuskegee airmen, or other chapters from Tuskegee Institute history that highlight the school’s contributions to proud national accomplishments, the student movement seems to have led nowhere – at least, nowhere good. But one lesson of this study is that the events at Tuskegee were central to the broader black movements in the South, and share many dynamics of the black movement nationwide, including its outcomes.

Tuskegee is not the only municipality where the ascension of black elected officials who rode a wave of social movement to power did not result in improved conditions for the majority of black people. What happened in Tuskegee, Alabama also happened in Newark, New Jersey and Chicago, Illinois. “Practically everywhere black Americans attempted to steer liberalism from the late 1960s onward,” N.B.D. Connolly writes, “they wound up trying to replace older

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6 Manning Marable, “Tuskegee and the Politics of Illusion in the New South,” The Black Scholar 8, no. 7 (May 1, 1977), 18.
7 Norrell, Reaping the Whirlwind, 201-202; Marable, “Politics of Illusion,” 18.
forms of white paternalism or political patronage with only a fraction of the public and private resources local governments once enjoyed.”\textsuperscript{9} The twin ironies, as Norrell likewise points out, are that white people fled the town in fear of intrusions by the federal government, just as the government started to shift towards conservatism in the 1970s and 1980s. At the same time, black people seized control of the local political machinery at the very moment that the local machinery was becoming less important.\textsuperscript{10} Thus, depending on your perspective, one could conclude either that the black movements in the 1960s “went too far” or, alternatively, that they “didn’t go far enough.” This study makes far more sense in the latter framework than the former.

The Students: Where Did They Go?

Many Tuskegee Institute activists tried to “go” farther after their student years. Wendell Paris contributed to the struggle to wrest control from segregationists of the farmers’ aid organization, the Agricultural Stabilization Conservation Service, and to use its resources to help Black Belt farmers. His brother George traveled to Zimbabwe to work with farmers as part of the nationalist movement there. George Paris still lives a short distance from the university and has a small farm that some students help him to tend. Ernest Stephens lived for a time in New York City with George Ware. When their childhood friend, Kathleen Neal came to stay with them, they spent countless evenings in intense political discussions and escorted her to her first demonstration. Ware – who had also traveled to Cuba with Stokely Carmichael – and Stephens were the first to introduce Kathleen Neal (later, Cleaver) to radical ideas and politics. Chester Higgins, Jr. took what P.H. Polk taught him about making photographs, and turned that into an

\textsuperscript{9} Connolly, \textit{A World More Concrete}, 285.
\textsuperscript{10} Norrell, \textit{Reaping the Whirlwind}, 217.
award-winning and globe-spanning career documenting the beauty, strength, and humanity of Afro-Americans and people of the global African diaspora. When he left Tuskegee, Michael Wright traveled throughout the state of Alabama organizing steel workers. Later he sought to combine the Marxism he learned in SNCC with liberation theology. In 2000, Lucenia Dunn was elected the first female mayor of Tuskegee. She still lives there and is working on developing the local food economy, hoping to make it beneficial to both residents and farmers. Arthur Pfister became a well-known figure in the black radical poetry scene. His 1972 book, *Beer Cans, Bullets, Things & Pieces* includes a forward by Amiri Baraka. Pfister is known today as “Professor Arturo” – he has taught on many college campuses and is particularly celebrated in his hometown, New Orleans, for his contribution to artistic responses to the political crisis that followed Hurricane Katrina.\(^{11}\)

\(^{11}\) W. Paris, G. Paris, Higgins, Jr., Wright, Dunn, Pfister, interviews.
Of all of the 1960s Tuskegee students, Gwen Patton’s post-graduation activist career is probably the most extensive. Apart from Sammy Younge, Jr., she is the most well-known Tuskegee student activist and certainly is the most widely cited. In part, this is because she, more than any of her classmates, continued to work closely with organizations of the broader American left. She worked with SNCC, with the Socialist Alliance, collaborated with both the Black Panther Party and with the Detroit Revolutionary Union Movement. She was a co-founder of both the National Black Antiwar Antidraft Union and the Black Women’s Liberation Committee, pursuing them as vehicles for her internationalist and anti-imperialist politics, historian Ashley Farmer notes.12 Her trajectory appears to be similar to that of other radicals as the movement ebbed. She was one of nine national delegates in Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition, a historic attempt to capture the Democratic Party with an insurgent electoral

12 Farmer, Remaking Black Power, 166.
campaign.\textsuperscript{13} She earned a doctorate and was a professor for a while before settling back in Montgomery. Patton is widely interviewed in Civil Rights and Black Feminist literature, but has never herself been the subject of a scholarly study.

**From Black Power to Black Studies**

In a new afterword for the 1992 edition of *Black Power*, co-author Charles Hamilton (by that time a professor at Columbia University), revised his ideas on Black Power somewhat. What he could see now, he wrote, was the rise of a conservative interpretation of Black Power as Black Capitalism. That strain of Black Nationalist thought, Hamilton noted, ran through Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, and the Nation of Islam. “People could ‘close ranks’ and still have vastly different views about how to proceed politically,” Hamilton wrote.\textsuperscript{14} Racial identity was “necessary” he concluded, but not “sufficient” for building a truly liberatory movement. There would have to be a political reckoning and a challenge to Black Capitalism. “The earlier edition of this book was not sufficiently attentive to this predictable dichotomy.”\textsuperscript{15}

These issues of identity and geography remain unresolved. Despite Fanon’s cautions, many Afro-American radicals embraced a less nuanced identification of their struggle with the global struggle of people in the Third World against colonialism. For a very long time, some black people in North America harbored dreams that there could be a territorial or geographic solution to the problem of anti-black racism. In the 1960s, it was widely believed that territorial sovereignty in the Black Belt and racial autonomy in higher education could mean genuine


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 210.
liberation in both. But nominal “independence” of an impoverished nation-state was actually not
the dream that all African revolutionaries dreamed – some saw it as a new kind of trap.¹⁶ Not
unlike the first wave of black politicians to capture political offices in the 1960s, African
activists who led newly “independent” nation-states in the same years faced similar dilemmas.
And even on a much smaller scale still, decolonizing the campus would likewise prove to be a
process full of pitfalls.

Attempts to institutionalize Afro-American Studies in the United States did not begin in
the 1960s; Du Bois, Hubert Harrison, Carter G. Woodson, Arturo Schomburg – and at Tuskegee
Institute, Monroe Work – are among the most successful progenitors of this effort.¹⁷ By the time
Tuskegee students got around to demanding a “Black University” in 1967 some of what they
wanted was unofficially in place – the time, space, and other resources provided by relatively
accessible and generous higher education systems were crucial to nurturing that generation of
young black activists; nearly every organization of black radicals in the 1960s and 1970s has its
origins on a college campus.¹⁸ Using the campus as a launch pad was one thing; overturning
racist curricula and institutionalizing Black Studies was another.

In a twenty-three-page assessment of the Black Studies struggle, published by Tuskegee
Institute in 1970, African Studies instructor James Preston argued that the effort rose and fell
with the student movement that brought it into being. Curiously, he alternates in the text between
calling it a “Black Studies” program and an “African Studies” one. After the student “revolution”
was squashed, the African Studies idea continued to circulate on campus, he writes, and was

¹⁶ Frederick Cooper, Africa in the World (Harvard University Press, 2014).
Studies Program” (Tuskegee Institute, July 30, 1970), Tuskegee Institute Archives, 3; Wayne Au, Anthony L.
Brown, and Dolores Calderón, Reclaiming the Multicultural Roots of US Curriculum: Communities of Color and
¹⁸ Joseph, The Black Power Movement, 273; Murch, Living for the City.
formally proposed and well-received by students, faculty and administrators just one month after the showdown at Dorothy Hall. In the fall of 1969 the program was officially announced and a leader was named, but the effort suffered from the start. The faculty who were qualified to teach the courses were already over-stretched and couldn’t dedicate time to it. The effort to recruit faculty was strained by a bitter debate over whether white faculty members with appropriate credentials should be allowed to teach some of the courses. Preston believed this was a “psychological hangup” on the part of students, which endangered the program. Such students “would rather win the battle and lose the war,” he wrote. The program required extra care and attention from administrators to make it successful, but none was forthcoming. “In the beginning of the struggle,” Preston concluded, “all the pressure had emanated from students; and without their constant prodding, the program had little chance of survival.” Fearing the degree would have no relevance after graduation, few signed up. By the spring of 1970, the program had only one student majoring in it.19

The impact of the Tuskegee student movement, however, has to be measured beyond the rise and fall of a single program in a single institution. As the vision of an insurgent movement, Black Studies was about transforming the entire school institution on the way to changing the whole society. As the Black Power movement ebbed in the 1970s and 1980s, however, higher education proved resilient to change, able to thwart Black Studies or to incorporate it into the framework of other academic disciplines.20 Since the society, too, was resilient, Black Studies as insurrection became untenable and unsustainable.

So what was the point, then? Knowing the outcome, it would be simple to read history backwards and therefore wonder what, if anything, had been accomplished. My purpose, in this study, is not to concede defeat in advance, but to recognize that in 1968, because of the high level of social contestation, many different futures became possible, not exclusively the one we ended up with. To the extent that Tuskegee students contributed to pushing the boundaries of our educational and political imaginations – even if they ultimately failed to achieve all of their larger aims – they remind us that we cannot reduce the ideals of “black education” to the plans and ideals of famous educational leaders, past or present. As they have historically, and as they are at the moment of this writing, it is likely that educational systems will continue to be challenged and changed by black students as they awaken to their collective powers.

Black Education, Past and Future

The educational and political struggles of black people in the United States are far from over. In the long view of history, Afro-Americans have made astounding educational strides. Black students graduate high school at nearly the rate of white students, and attend and graduate from college in higher proportions than ever before. These achievements are even more remarkable in light of the fact that steep barriers persist: black students are more likely to be suspended from school, more likely to attend segregated and underfunded schools, and are more likely to carry heavy debt burdens to fund their education. At a time when students are told that education is their “ticket” to changing their lives as individuals, the education system is staggering under the weight of austerity. These conditions make schools, at all levels, sites of extreme pressure and contradiction, places that are likely to continue to be social battlegrounds for the foreseeable future.
As economic inequality reaches new extremes in this country, a profound financial gap has opened up between the situation facing different classes of black people. There are still ways in which all black people, regardless of social class, are often lumped together in terms of social policy – encounters with the police in public places, for example. The growing prominence, wealth, and power of black elites has not attenuated racism. The rise of “black faces in high places” has been entirely compatible with both heightened inequality and with the growth of white supremacist organizations. Solutions that became part of the common sense among radicals in the 1960s – that college-educated, middle class leaders could liberate people of the global Third World by forging a new, assertive national sovereignty – are not likely to reappear in exactly the same form as a popular roadmap for social change.

The radicalism of the Tuskegee student movement is not to be found in terms of its demands, which, even at its height, amounted mostly to modest reforms. Many of the militants – the engineering students, especially – explicitly insisted that they were not “ideological.” The Tuskegee student movement was radical because it elevated students to the position of making demands. The rhetorical questions posed by the president of Fisk University – just before the Fisk student movement drove him from office – still resonate one hundred years later: Shall the factory be turned over to the workers and be run by the workingmen’s council? Shall the colleges be turned over to the students and be run by undergraduate committees? The Tuskegee student movement – fighting for democracy in the Black Belt and on campus – answered these questions in the affirmative.

The Tuskegee Revolt is part of a long pattern of black radical action in the center of empire, expressing the tensions of both sides of the hyphenated “Afro” and “American.” The contradictions of Tuskegee Institute’s history are bound up with the contradictions of black
history: the aspiration to reform the nation, and the imperative of forging the means of surviving it; the irrepressible need to fight for change, and the bitter necessity of reckoning with defeats. The Tuskegee student movement is a small part of the long Black Freedom Struggle, the battles of which have frequently taken place in (and for) schools. That experience of collective action, too, becomes a kind of school. In that school, students frequently become teachers and teachers become students. Its lessons belong to the future actors who step onto the stage of history and dare to speak.
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