

## THE TUSKEGEE NEGRO CONFERENCE AS AN EDUCATIONAL FORCE

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Professor W. E. B. DuBois, who is recognized as an authority upon statistics pertaining to inquiries into the economic and educational conditions of the negro race in America, estimated as a result of a study which he made of the Tuskegee negro conference this year, that one session of the conference represented fully six thousand persons upon whom it would have a direct influence. The effect of the entire conference, then, would be felt, directly or indirectly, by a very much larger number.

The Tuskegee negro conference was established ten years ago by Booker T. Washington, principal of Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute. Mr. Washington sent out an invitation to the negro farmers living near Tuskegee to come to the Institute upon a certain day to spend a few hours in "talking over" the things which most interested them. Mr. Washington has said that he thought perhaps twenty-five or thirty might respond to the invitation. Somewhat to his surprise four hundred negro men and women, representing all classes and conditions, gathered at the Institute at the appointed day, and this number has increased with each successive year's sessions.

Mr. Washington has explained the reasons which led him to think of the possibility of such a gathering as this in these words: "Soon after the school at Tuskegee was established I became impressed with the idea that much good might be accomplished by some movement which would interest the older people and inspire them to work for their own elevation. I think I

first came to think of this when I had occasion to notice again and again the unusual amount of common sense displayed by what is termed the ignorant colored man of the South. In my opinion the uneducated black man in the South, especially the one living in the country districts, has more natural sense than the uneducated ignorant class of almost any race. This led me to the conclusion that any people who could see so clearly into their own condition, and could describe it so vividly as the common farming class of colored people in the South can, could be led to do a good deal to help themselves. As a result I called the first session of what has since come to be known as the Tuskegee negro conference."

The first sessions of the conference were held in what was then the school's chapel, the largest hall which any of the school buildings then afforded. Both school and conference soon outgrew this room, and a rude temporary structure was put up for their accommodation. This building was of rough boards, with no windows but wooden shutters. Its floor was the earth, and the seats were backless benches made by spiking planks on to posts driven into the ground. The bareness of the inside walls was somewhat softened by draping them with Spanish moss, over which flags were caught back here and there with palmetto leaves. The light in this broad low room was dull at best, and when the late-comers who could not get inside the building clustered around the doors and windows like bees around the mouth of a hive they made the dusky interior look still more dim. I saw the conference for the first time in this building five years ago, and I have seen every session since then. Now, the meetings are held in the institute chapel, a handsome brick building which will seat two thousand persons, and in which, at this year's session, many had to stand.

This chapel is the building in which President

McKinley spoke to the students when he visited Tuskegee two years ago with his cabinet. Like nearly all the buildings at the school, it was built by the students as a part of their industrial education. Classes of young men who expect to earn their living as brick-makers made the bricks of which it is constructed—1,200,000 in number—in the school's brick yard. Other young men who are learning brick-masonry laid the walls. The men in the carpentry classes did the wood work. The tinmiths covered the roof. The electric lighting fixtures and the steam heating apparatus were put in by students. The pews were made in the school's joiner shop after a model designed by one of the students. I mention these facts here not to show what the methods of the school are, and how practical its results, but to call attention to one of the many object-lessons which the men and women who come here to attend the conference get. They may not realize that they are coming to Tuskegee for anything but a "meeting," at which they are to hear speaking, and perhaps speak themselves; but from the minute they come in sight of the school grounds they are learning, even if unconsciously, by being obliged to see what people of their own race have done, what they and their sons and daughters may do if they will but try.

I speak of "women" and "daughters" in the preceding paragraph, and perhaps some one may say that the women who would attend the conference would not get the same benefit as the men from these object-lessons because they would not be engaged in the trades represented in the erection of the buildings. About one-third of the eleven hundred students at Tuskegee are young women. At each year's meeting of the conference the spacious vestibule of the chapel is transformed—under the direction of Mrs. Washington into

a suite of model living rooms, in which the teachers of industries for girls, with the help of some of their pupils, show how the students are taught housekeeping, sewing, dressmaking, millinery, cooking, laundry work, mattress making and upholstery, and dairying. In the yards outside they also see the young women learning poultry raising, bee-keeping, market gardening, and the care of lawns and flower beds. In all these ways, and in the school's barns and dairy, on its farm and in its gardens, in the shops, and, not least by any means, in the homes of its teachers and officers, the visitors to Tuskegee at conference time get instruction and inspiration.

An Alabama negro farmer who was born a slave and who cannot read or write recently gave \$10 towards the support of a newly-established school for white students in his state. At this year's session of the conference he gave the same sum towards the support of Tuskegee Institute for colored students. This man owns several hundred acres of land, and good live stock, all acquired by his own exertion and that of his wife. They ascribe all their thrift and prosperity to the inspiration and teachings of the Tuskegee conference, at which they have been regular attendants ever since it was established.

Mr. Washington presides at all of the sessions. The speakers at the first day's session are the farmers themselves and their wives. There are no officers and rules. The only formal feature is the adoption each year of a series of declarations setting forth the purposes and sentiment of the gathering. Nothing which I could write would give so good an idea of the practical nature of the subjects discussed as for me to quote this year's declarations:

1. We have reached the tenth annual session of the Tuskegee Negro Conference. During all the years since the conference was started, we

have clung steadily to its original purpose, viz., to encourage the buying of land, getting rid of the one-room cabin and the abuse of the mortgage system, the raising of food supplies, building better school houses, the lengthening of the school term and the securing of better teachers and preachers, the doing away with sectarian prejudice, the improvement of the moral condition of the masses and the encouragement of friendly relations between the races. In all these particulars we are convinced from careful investigation, that substantial progress is constantly being made by the masses throughout the South.

2. We would urge our people not to become discouraged while the race is passing from what was largely a political basis to an economic one, as a foundation for citizenship.

3. We urge, since the country school is the backbone of the intelligence of the masses, that no effort be spared to increase its efficiency. Any injury to the country schools brings discontent to the people and leads them to move to the cities.

4. Statistics show that crime, as a rule, is not committed by those who have received literary, moral and industrial training.

5. Regardless of how others may act, we urge upon our race a rigid observance of the law of the land, and that we bear in mind that lawlessness begets crime and hardens and deadens not only the conscience of the law-breaker, but also the conscience of the community.

6. The rapid rise in the price of land throughout the South makes it doubly important that we do not delay in buying homes, and the increased demand for skilled workmen of every kind makes it necessary that a larger proportion of our young people prepare themselves for trades and domestic employment before they are crowded out of these occupations.

7. Community and county fairs, as well as local conferences and farmers' institutes, should be organized as rapidly and widely as possible.

8. We call the attention of our women, especially, to the wealth there is for them in the garden, the cow, the pig and the poultry yard.

9. We note with pleasure that landlords are building better houses for their tenants. We feel sure that all such improvements are a paying investment from every point of view.

These declarations are plainly printed at the Institute's printing office before the conference adjourns, and copies are given to all of the delegates to take home, with the injunction that if they cannot read them themselves they find some one who can read them to them. On the back side of the same sheet, this year, was printed a suggestion that during the coming year

the people get some one to give simple talks before their local conferences upon the following named topics, or, if no local conference exists in their community, talk these matters over among themselves:

(1) How to raise pigs. (2) What crops pay best. (3) How to raise poultry. (4) How to plant a garden. (5) How to begin buying a home. (6) The value of a diversified crop. (7) How the wife can assist the husband. (8) How the husband can assist the wife. (9) The right kind of minister and teacher. (10) How to make the house and yard beautiful. (11) How to live at home instead of out of the store. (12) The importance of keeping the children busy in school and out of school.

The influence of the conference has been steadily broadening. Similar meetings are now held in nearly every southern state, and usually every southern state is represented at this central meeting here. This year there were representatives here from twenty states, and from Indian Territory and Oklahoma. For the last four years Tuskegee Institute has employed a man as conference agent, to extend the influence of the conference, primarily in the state of Alabama. There are now two hundred and fifty local conferences organized in this state. Most of these hold regular meetings—usually once a month—and report here. One of the most interesting and valuable features of this year's meeting was arranged by the conference agent. During his going about in the state he has collected photographs showing the wretched one-room cabins in which many of the farmers lived a few years ago. He has also secured photographs of the comfortable houses and fine live stock which some of these same men now own, very largely as a result of the teachings of the conference. A stereopticon exhibition was given of views made from these photographs, and the lessons which the contrasting pictures taught were more emphatic than any mere words would have been.

At times unfavorable reports were made, or unfavorable features brought out in a report which other-

wise was encouraging, but in general the tone of the gathering was hopeful and quite in contrast to the pessimistic opinions in regard to the negro's future which have been put forth in some quarters. Mr. Washington himself, in speaking to the delegates of the ten years' existence of the conference said that he thought the greatest good which had come from it had been the creation of a feeling of hopefulness among those who had attended—a spirit of faith in the future of the race.

The gathering of so many negro men and women here, and the frank discussion of their conditions, the difficulties which beset them and the ways in which some of these difficulties have been overcome, soon began to attract the attention of people of both races who are engaged in educational or philanthropic work, and they began to come to Tuskegee in large numbers each year for the purpose of watching and studying the conference in session. Observation led to discussion of what they saw, and to plans for future work, until there has been developed a second day's session, called the "workers' conference," attended by two or three hundred men and women of both races, many of them of national reputation. Among those present this year was Mr. Charles W. Chesnutt, who one evening in the chapel read aloud his Southern story, "Hot-foot Hannibal;" Professor DuBois, Bishop Turner, Bishop Grant, Bishop Tyree, Dr. I. B. Scott, at least ten college presidents, several well-known philanthropic workers, professional men, and a great number of teachers. The topic for this year's "workers' conference," around which the discussions centered, was: "The negro's part in the upbuilding of the South: as a farmer and a mechanic; as a professional man; as a moral and religious factor." Last year the topic was: "What have thirty-five years of freedom done for the negro?"

It was at the "workers' conference" that Professor DuBois made the report to which I have referred in the first paragraph of this article. Professor DuBois had prepared a series of questions which he asked of about two hundred farmers taken at random from the delegates to the first session of the conference. The 199 men whom the professor saw represent real estate as follows:

Own land. . . . .	57	Rent land . . . . .	142
Number of acres owned. . .	7048½	Number of acres rented. . .	6660½
Average . . . . .	123½	Average . . . . .	59

#### HOMES.

Number of rooms.	Owners.	Renters.
1	13	5
2	89	24
3	28	9
4	6	
5	3	
6	1	

In comparison with the average number of negro farmers in the South who own land, and of those who still live in one-room cabins, this report is significant and encouraging to those who have founded and promoted the Tuskegee negro conference.