

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

African-American Veterinary Students at Kansas State University (1910-1950)

By Dr. Donald F. Smith and Dr. Howard H. Erickson
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Kansas State University was one of the most important veterinary colleges to educate African American veterinarians before Tuskegee Institute (now University) established a veterinary college in 1945. Of the 70 Blacks who received DVM degrees before Tuskegee opened, about a third of them were graduates of Kansas State University. Moreover, unlike Cornell and the University of Pennsylvania, where the majority of the Black students studied during the early decades of the 20th century, Kansas State's Black veterinary graduates were distributed evenly between 1910 and 1950.

The development of the meat packing industry may have been one of the contributing factors to the leadership role that Kansas State played in the education of African American veterinarians. The Kansas City stockyards were built in 1871, and the growth of the meat packing industry followed. Former slaves migrated north and more than 50,000 southern Blacks arrived in Kansas during the 1870s. Unable to procure land for farming as they had hoped, they settled in Kansas City in a community that bordered on what would become the meat packing district.

By 1905, 25% of the meat packing employees in Kansas City were African American. Some of the best positions for veterinarians at that time were in the Bureau of Animal Industry, which was the meat inspection service of the Federal government. Perhaps black workers in the packing plants observed the veterinarian as a respected and successful professional and they encouraged their children to study veterinary medicine.

The college administration also had an impact on the fact that 22 African American veterinarians studied at Kansas State. Dr. Ralph Dykstra, who served as dean of veterinary medicine from 1919-1948, may have been more receptive to accepting Black students than were leaders of other colleges.

There are reports that previous administrators and the college from the beginning were also supportive of diversifying the student body. Kevin Olson, author of *Frontier Manhattan*,¹ notes that when Kansas State Agricultural College (KSAC) opened on September 2, 1863, an equal number of men and women (26 each) were admitted. It was the first agricultural college and only the second fully coeducational public college anywhere in the United States. The college was also open to African American students from its beginning.²



John William Brown, DVM 1912, Kansas State University
(Photo provided by Kansas State University)

John William Brown entered KSAC at age 16 and became the first Black student to receive his DVM from Kansas State. After graduating in 1912, he worked at Tuskegee then served in WWI before practicing in Fort Scott, Kansas. He eventually worked in the BAI where he finished his career engaged in meat inspection in Cleveland, Ohio.

Thomas G. Perry received his DVM in 1921 and established the first small animal hospital in Wichita, Kansas. He was one of the inaugural veterinary faculty at Tuskegee Institute when it opened, and would become head of the Department of Small Animal Medicine and Surgery.³

Monroe Balton (1935) first worked with Perry and later established his own practice in Wichita. He cared for the polo ponies at the Wichita Country Club, but because of his color could not be a member. He also treated collies for aviation magnate Olive Ann Beach.

Theodore Williams (1935) and Walter C. Bowie (1947) each became deans at Tuskegee— together, they served from 1947-90—and Eugene Adams (1944) became associate dean and university vice provost. In later life, he helped establish a veterinary college in Nigeria.⁴

Alfred N. Poindexter (1945) served for over 50 years on the faculty at Prairie View A&M in Texas, another 1890 land grant college. He was one of the first two black members of the Texas Veterinary Medical Association and was recipient of numerous awards and honors for lifetime achievement.⁵

Donald E. Jackson (1951) was in the last group of Tuskegee Airmen, Class 45H in 1944. However, with the war ending, he was put on extended leave and allowed to attend college, graduating from Kansas State College in 1951. He first worked for George Bronson (1924) in Wichita and later established All Pets Clinic in Wichita.

Twenty-two African American veterinary graduates may not seem like a very large number. However, during a period when becoming a veterinarian was almost never considered a possibility by the African American community; Kansas State provided an important beacon of hope. Whether in the meat inspection service or in clinical practice, Black veterinarians served as role models to other young African Americans. The greater impact, however, was the education of those young men who became deans, department chairs and faculty members at Tuskegee's veterinary college during its formative years.

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Dr. Howard H. Erickson with Maggie
(Photo provided by Dr. Erickson)

¹ Olson, Kevin G.W. *Frontier Manhattan: Yankee Settlement to Kansas Town, 1854-1894*. University Press of Kansas, 2012.

² The first African American did not graduate from the agricultural school until George Washington Owens earned a diploma in 1899.

³ Adams, Eugene W. *The Legacy: a History of the Tuskegee University School of Veterinary Medicine*. Media Center Press, Tuskegee, Alabama, 1995; 24-25.

⁴ Dr. Adams is also known as the author of the definitive history of Tuskegee's School of Veterinary Medicine. See reference iii above.

⁵ Among his honors were Outstanding Black Agriculturalist (1992), Texas heritage Hall of Honor (1996), and the George Washington Carver Award for Public Service from Tuskegee (1996).

KEYWORDS:

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Bureau of Animal Industry
Howard H. Erickson
Ralph Dykstra
Kevin Olson
John William Brown
Theodore Williams
Walter C. Bowie
Thomas G. Perry
Alfred N. Poindexter
Donald E. Jackson
George Bronson
Tuskegee Airmen

TOPICS:

African American Veterinarians
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ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the

National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.

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