

## Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

# A Tribute to Tuskegee

By Dr. Donald F. Smith, with assistance from Cheryl Davis

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Let us not let Martin Luther King, Jr. Day pass by without a tribute to Tuskegee. The Institute (later to become a university) was established in 1881 by former slave, Booker T. Washington.

When I visited Tuskegee as chair of the Council on Education review team for the veterinary college a little over a decade ago, I was deeply moved by the majestic statue of Washington embracing a slave child. The statue is fittingly and lovingly called, "Lifting the Veil", a tribute to Washington's commitment to exchanging the cover of ignorance with the transforming power of education. You almost feel like you are walking on hallowed ground when you tread on the grass around the statue, and approach the nearby chapel and cemetery where Washington's body rests.



*"Lifting the Veil", A statue in honor of Booker T. Washington*

(Photo provided by Dr. Cheryl Davis, Tuskegee University)

The veterinary program was founded by another great leader, Dr. Frederick Douglass Patterson shortly after he was appointed as the Institute's third president. Orphaned as an infant and raised by his sister who insisted that he become educated, Patterson received his DVM and MS at Iowa State University in the 1920s, and a PhD from Cornell University in the early thirties.

A few miles down the road from campus is Moton Field<sup>1</sup> where the Tuskegee Airmen trained. That program was fostered by Dr. Patterson while he was president. Dr. Charles Robinson, a 1944 Cornell graduate had told me years earlier that Patterson was so committed to the airmen

program that he took up flying to encourage the young pilots. “It didn’t last long,” though, he told me. “He was a terrible pilot and he kept trying to kill himself so he decided he’s better stay on the ground.”<sup>2</sup>

Tuskegee was one of seven veterinary colleges that opened at the end of World War II (an eighth, Purdue, opened in 1957). The initial faculty—who, like the students, had to be Black because of segregation—were selected from the 70 US African-American veterinarians at the time. The inaugural dean was Dr. E. B. Evans from Prairie View, Texas. He stayed just a short time, however, leaving President Patterson to fill the post himself until the legendary Dr. T. S. Williams began his long and transformational tenure as dean.<sup>3</sup>

Kansas State University was critical to the success of the new college because it was from their African-American alumni that many of their new faculty arose. Cornell entered the picture a decade or two later by providing graduate education for several of the key faculty. This was facilitated by the warm relationship between Cornell’s Dean William A. Hagan and Tuskegee’s Dean T. S. Williams, who had both received their DVM degrees from Kansas State. Hagan eventually served as the chair of the AVMA’s first institutional review team that, in 1954, recommended the full accreditation of Tuskegee. This was a critical milestone in the development of the new college.<sup>4</sup>

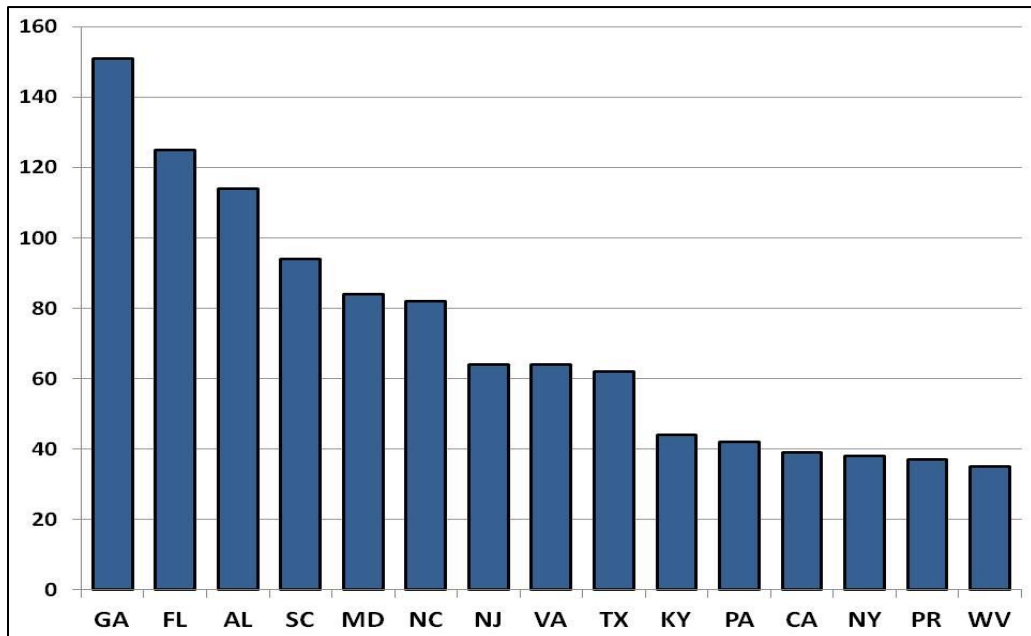
### **Tuskegee in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Though the DVM class size is the smallest in the US (typically graduating about 60-65 students per year) it is made up of approximately 50% African-American, 12% Hispanic and 28% Caucasian students. This distribution of African-American, Hispanic and Caucasian students has not changed appreciably since the year 2000.

Even more diversity is evident in the geographic distribution of their entering students. Whereas Auburn University, located just 15 miles from Tuskegee, draws two-thirds of its student population from Alabama and Kentucky (where it has contracts), Tuskegee typically has 25% or fewer of its students from those two states. Another 30% of the students come from other states in the southeast, especially Georgia and the Carolinas. This profile has not changed appreciably in the last decade either.

As shown in the following graph, Tuskegee alumni are widely spread across the country, though the majority are in the south and middle Atlantic states. Almost 20% of Puerto Rican AVMA-member veterinarians, and 8% of the 120 veterinarians in the District of Columbia, graduated from Tuskegee.

Many wonderful things have happened to Tuskegee in the last 75 years, yet at its core, it remains the same institution. It offers a unique educational experience to the most diverse group of veterinary students in the country, and is committed to graduating students with a sense of commitment to leadership and the greater good.



*Fifteen states (including Puerto Rico) with the largest number of Tuskegee veterinary graduates (AVMA data, January 2014)*

In terms of career choices, Tuskegee graduates are more likely to serve in government (6.3%) than the AVMA membership at large (3.2%). Two notable examples of leadership in the public sphere are Rear Admiral Dr. Roscoe Moore, former assistant surgeon general of the United States. A world-renowned epidemiologist with a PhD from Johns Hopkins and a MPH (Master of Public Health) from the University of Michigan, Dr. Moore was the principal liaison between the Department of Health and Human Services and the ministries of health for 53 countries in Africa. As Rear Admiral, he is also the highest ranking veterinarian in all of the uniformed services.<sup>5</sup>

Two percent of Tuskegee alumni hold the MPH degree, twice the proportion in the total AVMA-member population. There is also a disproportionately high number of AVMA-member alumni who are board certified by the American College of Laboratory Animal Medicine and the American College of Veterinary Pathologists.

More Tuskegee alumni are employed in academia (7.8% compared to 6.3%) than in the general veterinary population. Among those is Dr. Michael Blackwell, who served as chief of staff in the office of the surgeon general before becoming veterinary dean at the University of Tennessee (2000 – 2008). Two current deans of veterinary medicine are Tuskegee graduates: Drs. Willie Reed at Purdue University and Phillip Nelson at Western University of the Health Sciences.

While many Tuskegee graduates in leadership positions are African-Americans, Caucasians have also made their mark in organized veterinary medicine. Dr. Linda Jacobson is past president of

the New York State Veterinary Medical Society and also the North American Veterinary Conference. Dr. Theodore (Ted) Cohn will be the first Tuskegee graduate to serve as AVMA president when he is inaugurated at the 2014 meeting in Denver.

Dr. Smith thanks Tuskegee's Associate Dean Dr. Cheryl Davis for her help and guidance in preparing this story.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Moton was Tuskegee's second president. Veterinarian Frederick Douglass Patterson, the third president, married Moton's daughter. The airfield of the Tuskegee airmen is named after President Moton.

<sup>2</sup> Robinson, Charles (Cornell 1944, retired living in Scottsdale, Arizona). Interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University). May 29, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Adams, Eugene W. *The Legacy. A History of the Tuskegee School of Veterinary Medicine.* The Media Center Press, Tuskegee University, Tuskegee, Alabama. 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, Donald F. *Tuskegee and Cornell's Shared Legacy in Graduate Education. Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine.* August 20, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Roscoe M. Moore Jr., U.S. Assistant Surgeon General (Retired), Appointed to Cannabis Science Scientific Advisory Board. Reuters, June 7, 2012.

**KEYWORDS:**

History of Veterinary Medicine  
African-American Veterinarians  
Tuskegee University  
Theodore Cohn  
Linda Jacobson  
Willie Reed  
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Michael Blackwell  
Roscoe Moore  
Charles Robinson  
Kansas State University  
Frederick Douglass Patterson  
Booker T. Washington  
Iowa State University

**TOPIC:**

African-American veterinarians

**LEADING QUESTION:**

Did you know that Tuskegee DVM graduates are more likely to acquire an MPH degree than graduates of most veterinary colleges?

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

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.