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3 Tuskegee Institute and the Struggle for African American Voting Rights

The 13th Amendment freeing African Americans from bondage was ratified on December 6, 1865. No longer bound by the physical chains of enslavement, emancipated men and women began the long and arduous process of building their lives among their former oppressors.

In addition to the acquiring of land and reconnecting with loved ones who had been tragically sold away, newly emancipated African Americans desired education. The first Black institute of higher learning, the African Institute (now Cheyney University) was established in 1837 – nearly 30 years prior to Emancipation – just north of the Mason–Dixon line in Cheney, Pennsylvania. The majority of Freedmen schools would be established after Emancipation across the South, as far southeast as Florida Memorial University in Miami Gardens, Florida (founded in 1879) and as far west as St. Philips Normal and Industrial School College (now St. Philip's College, founded in 1898) in San Antonio, Texas.

Participating in the 'American Dream' also included the Freedmen becoming involved in the political system through voting. Along with the 13th Amendment eradicating slavery, Black citizenship informed ratification of the 14th Amendment, establishing equal protection under law and birthright citizenship, and the 15th Amendment, extending the right to vote free of denial or abridgment on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. Newly enfranchised African American men used their power to elect 16 Black congressmen, many of whom were born into slavery. Today's fight for voting rights did not occur in a vacuum—it was part of a seemingly omnipresent challenge to Black citizenship rights that began immediately after Emancipation. It is perhaps because of freed Blacks' commitment to first-time voting and to upward mobility based on new access to education and opportunities for economic advancement, that they were met by hardline obstructionism in exercising their new political and social rights. In Alabama, and across the South, hindrances such as poll taxes, literacy tests, closed registration offices, and the voucher system (a form of voter identification that required registrants to have the support of two voters registered in the county) greatly infringed upon the ability of African Americans to register and vote.

During the Second Reconstruction, which occurred after the Second World War, the right to vote was challenged in a larger environment of rights suppression. Civil rights were tested in the Supreme Court through cases like *Brown v Board of Education* in 1954, which outlawed racial segregation in the nation's pub-

lic schools, and *Loving v Virginia* in 1967, which upheld interracial marriage. There was also a series of civil rights acts that addressed discrimination in hiring, access to public accommodation, access to housing, and voting.

It is on the issue of voting that Tuskegee Institute (now known as Tuskegee University) has played a major role, not only in protecting the rights of the campus community and its Black citizens to vote in the face of democratic obstructionism, but also in creating new law that shaped the evolution of the right to vote, as discussed in chapter one of this book.

This chapter focuses on the extraordinary founding origins of Tuskegee Institute, the courageous civic actors connected with the institution of higher education, and how it shaped the community environs in which it is situated. The Tuskegee voting rights story is in some manner common in that it is a story of how an institution of higher education can serve as a space for active citizenship and democracy. However, as this chapter will reveal, the Tuskegee voting rights story is unique because of the way in which an informed and courageous African American academic community directly confronted disenfranchisement in an intense racial climate.

1 The Founding of Tuskegee University

Tuskegee University, originally Tuskegee Normal School for Colored Teachers,¹ was the eighth historically Black institution of higher education founded in the United States, and the first in the state of Alabama. It was founded in 1881 by an unlikely agreement between Lewis Adams, who was enslaved before becoming an entrepreneur; a banker and former slaveholder, George Washington Campbell; and a white Democratic state senator seeking re-election, W.F. Foster, who had previously been a Confederate officer. The Democratic party then was not what it is today. Just five years prior to the agreement, the Alabama Democratic Party was generally the white power party, contraposed to the bi-racial Republican Party which led Alabama politics during the initial years of the First Reconstruction.

How did this alliance between an enterprising former slave, an enterprising former slaveholder, and a Confederate soldier-turned-politician come to be? Adams was born into slavery in 1842 in Tuskegee, and although he received no for-

¹ 'Normal school' or 'normal college' was a teacher-training college which primarily prepared elementary-level teachers for public schools, hence, a place where 'norms' were imparted for the practice of teaching.

mal education, he could read, write, and speak different languages. After Emancipation, he opened a shop and school downtown where he taught trades like shoe-making and tin-smithing to young apprentices; at the family residence, his wife taught cooking and sewing to freed young women. A known community leader in Tuskegee, and deacon of the Butler Chapel A.M.E. Zion Church, Adams attempted to open a school at the A.M.E. Church for newly emancipated citizens to receive basic vocational education. However, he had difficulty attracting qualified teachers. And so, in 1879 when Foster ran for re-election and sought support from Adams to secure the African American vote, Adams asked that a 'colored college' be built in return for his assistance.

Foster won his bid for re-election and upheld his promise. He and fellow state senator Arthur L. Brooks co-sponsored House Bill 165 which appropriated \$2,000 (\$63,121 in 2025 dollars) to fund teachers' salaries. Students could attend the college tuition-free if they agreed to teach in Alabama's public schools for at least two years upon graduation. The bill required that the school hold classes, maintain at least 25 students, and that classes be held for at least nine months of the year—a key practical stipulation since youth were needed to support summer work in the fields. The bill was approved by the Alabama state legislature, and signed into law only two days later, with an effective date of July 4, 1881—the 105th anniversary of the ratification of the Declaration of Independence establishing the United States free from British rule.

The construction of the 'colored teachers' college' was not merely an act of magnanimity on the part of Alabama's white establishment, but a concession. Many whites were opposed to providing education to African Americans, but they realized that without African American labor the local farms and plantations might not survive. Fulfilling the African American desire for education, through the training of teachers, might influence them not to leave the county for opportunities elsewhere.² Normal schools were a part of the solution to stabilize free Blacks and assist them in becoming independent and economically self-reliant, although this process for racial uplift was also criticized as a form of racial accommodation.

The school was initially managed by a three-person Board of Commissioners consisting of Adams, Thomas B. Dryer, and M.B. Swanson, who was replaced early on by George Washington Campbell who had helped originally broker the plan. Campbell reached out to the then-president of Virginia's Hampton Normal and Industrial Institute (now Hampton University) in search of the school's first faculty

² Robert J. Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement and Tuskegee* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 13–14.

member and principal. General Samuel Chapman Armstrong was a natural contact in Campbell's search for Tuskegee's first leader. General Armstrong was grounded in an educational philosophy of moral training and practical, industrial education, having been raised as a missionary in Hawaii where his father was the minister of public instruction. Armstrong went on to command Black troops in the Civil War, and then establish Hampton Institute in 1868, the same year that the 14th Amendment was ratified. When he opened Hampton, it was with a simple declared purpose:

The thing to be done was clear: to train selected Negro youth who should go out and teach and lead their people first by example, by getting land and homes; to give them not a dollar that they could earn for themselves; to teach respect for labor; to replace stupid drudgery with skilled hands, and in this way to build up an industrial system for the sake not only of self-support and intelligent labor, but also for the sake of character.³

Armstrong recommended for the new Tuskegee role one of the best (if not *the* best) graduates of Hampton at the time: Booker T. Washington, who was only 25 years old. Washington had graduated from Hampton with honors in 1875, taught school in Virginia, and then returned to Hampton to teach in a program for Native American students. He was teaching at Hampton when Armstrong recommended him to serve as principal of Tuskegee—even though George Campbell, the banker/former slaveholder and co-founder of Tuskegee, specifically requested a white man.⁴

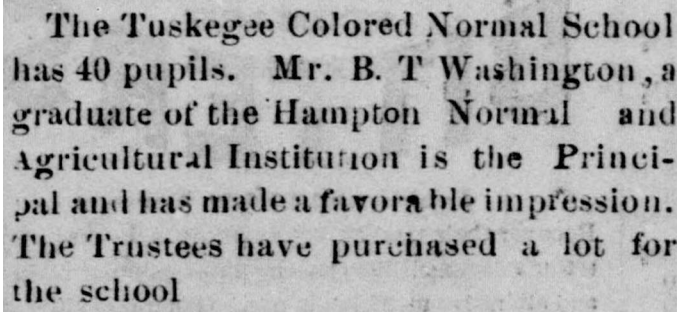
Washington arrived in Tuskegee in June of 1881. The school was a one-room shanty on a former plantation near Butler A.M.E. Zion Church. In approximately a month, Washington had made a “favorable impression” on the community and had purchased acreage on which to relocate the school, which students went on to construct and build, brick by brick.⁵ (Figure 1)

By the time of his death on November 15, 1915, Washington had transformed Tuskegee into a first-class institution that focused on hard work and self-reliance. A student could come to Tuskegee with little money or resources and work his or her way through college. Washington also held wide influence beyond Tuskegee. On October 16, 1901, he became the first African American to dine at the White

³ Hampton University, “History,” last modified June 27, 2022, <https://home.hamptonu.edu/about/history/>.

⁴ Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 15.

⁵ Manning Marable, interviewed by Shawn Wilson, October 5, 2005, *The HistoryMakers Digital Archive*, Session 2, tape 5, story 3, “Manning Marable describes the founding of Tuskegee Institute in 1881,” The HistoryMakers A2005.228, <https://da.thehistorymakers.org/story/579882>.



The Tuskegee Colored Normal School has 40 pupils. Mr. B. T Washington, a graduate of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institution is the Principal and has made a favorable impression. The Trustees have purchased a lot for the school

Figure 1: A weekly African American newspaper serving parts of Alabama announces the arrival of Booker T. Washington to the nascent Tuskegee Colored Normal School.

Source: “State News,” *Huntsville Gazette*, July 30, 1881, 3. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Library of Congress. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84020151/1881-07-30/ed-1/seq-3/>.

House. In addition, his home, The Oaks, which still stands on Tuskegee University’s campus, was the first home in the entire state of Alabama to have electricity.

Washington believed that the best way to earn acceptance in America—particularly the South—was through economics and industriousness. His iconic “Atlanta Compromise” speech at the 1895 Atlanta Cotton Exposition encouraged a mutually beneficial economic relationship between African Americans and whites for the progress of the south:

[O]ne-third of the population of the South is of the Negro race. No enterprise seeking the material, civil, or moral welfare of this section can disregard this element of our population and reach the highest success. ...

Ignorant and inexperienced, it is not strange that in the first years of our new life we began at the top instead of at the bottom; that a seat in Congress or the state legislature was more sought than real estate or industrial skill; that the political convention or stump speaking had more attractions than starting a dairy farm or a truck garden.

A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen a signal, “Water, water. We die of thirst.”

The answer from the friendly vessel at once came back, “Cast down your bucket where you are.” [...]

The captain of the distressed vessel, at last heeding the injunction cast down his bucket and it came up full of fresh, sparkling water from the mouth of the Amazon River.

To those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in a foreign land or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the southern white man who is their next-door neighbor, I would say, “Cast down your bucket where you are. Cast it down in making friends in every manly way out of the people of all races by whom you are surrounded.”

To those of the white race who look to the incoming of those of foreign birth and strange tongue and habits for the prosperity of the South, were I permitted I would repeat what I have said to my own race, “Cast down your bucket where you are. Cast it down among the eight million of Negroes whose habits you know, whose fidelity and love you have tested in days when to have proved treacherous meant the ruin of your firesides. Cast down your buckets among those people who have without strikes and labor wars tilled your fields, cleared your forests, builded your railroads and cities, and brought forth treasures from the bowels of the earth, and helped to make possible this magnificent representation of the progress of the South.”⁶

Washington encouraged whites to “cast down their buckets” among the African American entrepreneurs whose work they knew well from the era of enslavement. Further, Washington believed that “brains, property, and character for the Negro will settle the question of civil rights.”⁷ It is important to note that Washington held this sentiment in 1888 when African Americans were just one generation removed from enslavement. Having no blueprint for how to effectively liberate a once-enslaved population, he focused on the belief that once whites saw how industrious African Americans would live as free men and women to further southern progress, that their social concerns would be eliminated, as both races would be elevated.

Washington was criticized for accommodating whites, but he established the foundation that catapulted Tuskegee into one of the premier institutions of higher learning in the country—one which would go on to make immense contributions locally and nationally in a variety of ways, illustrating Black excellence.

Renowned graduates of Tuskegee include author Ralph Ellison, best known for his novel *Invisible Man*, which won the National Book Award in 1953; civil rights leader Amelia Boynton Robinson, who played a crucial leadership role in the march on Selma which would help to secure passage of the Voting Rights Act; and Herbert Carter, one of the original 33 members of the Tuskegee Airmen who flew 77 missions during World War II and retired from the United States Air Force as a lieutenant colonel, before serving as an associate dean for student services and associate dean for admission and recruitment at Tuskegee Institute. The Tuskegee Airmen, famed African American pilots of World War II, completed ground school at Tuskegee Institute, and the City of Tuskegee was home to

6 Booker T. Washington, *Atlanta Compromise Speech*, September 18, 1895. Text and audio available at U.S. Library of Congress, *Exhibitions: The Civil Rights Act of 1964*, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/civil-rights-act/multimedia/booker-t-washington.html>.

7 Booker T. Washington, “The Educational Outlook in the South,” July 16, 1884, *Teaching American History*, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/the-educational-outlook-in-the-south/>.

their two training sites: Tuskegee Army Airfield (the military base that has since been demolished) and Moton Field (now the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site), a unit of the National Park Service. The Tuskegee Airmen fought two wars, known as the ‘Double V Campaign’ for a double victory: “the first V for victory over our enemies from without, the second V for victory over our enemies from within.”⁸

Tuskegee residents were proud that the city was home to such an extraordinary group of men and women. Was this source of pride the very catalyst that influenced the residents of this small town in Alabama to have the ‘audacity’ to challenge local and state officials all the way up to the United States Supreme Court? Perhaps, but what is abundantly clear is that Tuskegee’s racial divide was always stark, and would have to be directly confronted.

2 Tuskegee Institute in the Civil Rights Era

By 1950, Macon County, where the City of Tuskegee is situated, had the highest concentration of African American residents of any county in the nation.⁹ Because of the presence of both the Tuskegee Institute and its associated Veterans Affairs (V.A.) Hospital, which was constructed to care for returning Black veterans in the apartheid south, the City of Tuskegee was home to an extraordinarily high concentration of African Americans with advanced degrees.

Tuskegee professor Charles Gomillion described in his 1959 doctoral dissertation the strength of an educated African American population in the South:

In some places in the South, the handicap of a high percentage of Negroes in the population has been weakened somewhat by the presence or operation of one or more other socio-cultural factors. For example, if the Negro population in a given community is better educated than usual, and utilizes more effectively its superior educational talents and resources, as well as its economic and political knowledge, resources and opportunities, it might cope successfully with the strong resistance of white citizens.¹⁰

Gomillion did not simply conduct research, he was an important civic actor. He taught and served as an administrator at Tuskegee for three decades before be-

⁸ Neil A. Wynn, *The African American Experience During World War II* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 40.

⁹ Charles G. Gomillion, “The Tuskegee Voting Story,” *Clinical Sociology Review* 6, no. 1 (1988): 22, <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1117&context=csr>.

¹⁰ Charles G. Gomillion, *Civic Democracy in the South* (Ohio State University, 1959), 91.

coming the lead plaintiff in a precedential voting rights lawsuit that centered around Tuskegee Institute.

2.1 Dr. Charles Goode Gomillion and the Tuskegee Civic Association

Dr. Charles Goode Gomillion was born in Johnston, South Carolina on April 1, 1900. When he was a child, his father killed a white man. The court ruled this incident as self-defense and from then on, his father limited his own and his children's interactions with whites.¹¹ Gomillion graduated from Paine College in Augusta, Georgia in 1928, studied sociology at Fisk University in 1933, and completed his Ph.D. in sociology from Ohio State University in 1959.

His doctoral dissertation, entitled "Civic Democracy in the South," offered a comprehensive sociological analysis of the state of civic democracy, involving the compilation of data from wide sources, coupled with survey responses from Black citizens in the South working closely with interracial professional and/or social action organizations.¹² He defined 'civic democracy' as:

That type of condition of society in which all citizens are entitled to a legal status and civic opportunities and services without limitation or restriction based on race, color, creed, or national origin. It embodies the idea of equality of opportunity and treatment in the courts of law, in government and politics, in public education and employment, and in the use of public facilities and services.¹³

Gomillion sought to analyze this exercise of civic democracy across 16 southern states, and identified socio-cultural factors for consideration alongside indicia of civic status and opportunities, such as the percentage of Black adults registered to vote; the extent that they hold office; the median school years completed by Black adults; the annual per capita income of the Black population; and the percentage of Black workers in industry, in the professions, and in clerical service. Using a ten-indicia scale of civic status and opportunities for Blacks, he found that Alabama ranked in the bottom-rung of the 16 southern states, followed by Georgia and Mississippi.¹⁴

¹¹ Jan M. Fritz, "Charles Gomillion, Educator-Community Activist," *Clinical Sociology Review* 6 (1988): 19.

¹² Gomillion, *Civic Democracy in the South*, 91.

¹³ Gomillion, *Civic Democracy in the South*, 3.

¹⁴ Gomillion, *Civic Democracy in the South*, 4–5, 206.

Gomillion was a member of the Tuskegee Institute's faculty from 1928 to 1971, first teaching in the high school department and then, upon his return from Fisk, at the college level. He served various roles at the Institute—professor, dean of students, dean of the School of Education, and dean of the College of Arts and Science. He later served as the chair of the Division of Social Sciences. The year after he began teaching at Tuskegee, in or around 1929, he also became a single father to his young daughters, Vernita and Mary Gwendolyn.

He was best known, however, for his work in the community through the Tuskegee Civic Association (TCA), particularly for his efforts concerning the right of African Americans to vote. Gomillion's activism in Tuskegee began in 1933, upon his return from Fisk, when he started to attend meetings with a small group of socially and civically minded Black citizens including Institute faculty. They believed that "political democracy is government of the people, for the people, and by the people," and that "the ballot is the citizen's best self-help tool."¹⁵ The group reformulated as the Tuskegee Men's Club in 1938, to which Gomillion was elected its first president.¹⁶ It comprised 30 educators and businessmen who sought to improve the physical environment and social welfare of Macon County's African American citizens. In the first ten years of community organizing, between 1930 and 1940, the number of registered Black voters in the county increased from 30 to 75.¹⁷

In 1941, the group again reconstituted as the TCA for the purpose of admitting women to membership. The name was derived from Gomillion's growing focus on civic democracy, and this local field focus went on to inform the development of his dissertation on the topic. The TCA's objective was "to promote through group action the civic well-being of the community" through a three-pronged approach: "intelligent study and interpretation of local and national trends and problems; the collection and dissemination of useful civic and political data; and intelligent and courageous civic action."¹⁸ Its primary supporters were entrepreneurs, V.A. employees, and Tuskegee Institute faculty and staff. These individuals were the most financially secure in the community, and, importantly, had the least likelihood of losing their employment in retaliation of their civic engagement. For example, V.A. workers were federal employees and thus insulated from local and

¹⁵ Gomillion, "Tuskegee Voting Story," 23.

¹⁶ Jessie Parkhurst Guzman, *Crusade for Civic Democracy: The Story of the Tuskegee Civic Association, 1941–1970* (Vantage Press, 1984), 9.

¹⁷ Gomillion, "Tuskegee Voting Story," 23.

¹⁸ "Crusade for Civic Democracy: First Anniversary Celebration," *Tuskegee Civic Association Magazine* (Tuskegee Institute, AL), June 24, 1958, <https://digital.tcl.sc.edu/digital/collection/p17173coll38/id/15181/rec/2>.

state pressure. Faculty and staff affiliated with the Institute were similarly insulated, since it was mostly funded through private, northern organizations.

In the TCA's first year, members intentionally prioritized unifying and educating the Black community, such as by sponsoring a Works Progress Administration school, a Boy Scout Troop, and the county National Negro Health Week.¹⁹ When those efforts proved limited due to the community's lack of political power, the TCA moved increasingly towards political engagement. At the end of the TCA's first year, Gomillion wrote, "Realizing the importance of participation in politics, the Association has encouraged its members and others to register, pay their poll taxes, and vote intelligently."²⁰ "They did not know then," wrote Robert Norrell in his book on the civil rights movement in Tuskegee, "that voting would become their overriding concern for the next twenty-five years."²¹

2.2 Voting in Tuskegee and the State of Alabama

The issue of voting had been contentious between Tuskegee's Black and white citizens since the Alabama state constitutional convention of 1901, which was assembled with the primary goal of disenfranchising African American citizens. Advocates of the new constitution claimed that "manipulation of the black vote corrupted the election process," so "political morality demanded Black disenfranchisement."²² Although African Americans exercised their vote in the last years of the nineteenth century, new state constitutional provisions sought their disenfranchisement in the form of literacy tests, grandfather clauses, and poll taxes. These tests and devices were intentionally discriminatory when passed, and discriminatorily applied. For example, literacy tests were administered by white registrars in Macon County who allowed illiterate whites to register with little hindrance but prevented the voter registration of the county's Black citizens, including those with Ph.Ds.²³

Among other requirements, Alabama's state law required that African Americans seeking to vote secure two registered voters to confirm their residency in the

¹⁹ Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 42.

²⁰ Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 42.

²¹ Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 42.

²² Alabama Judicial System, Alabama Constitutions: Alabama Constitution 1901, April 11, 2023, <https://judicial-alabama.libguides.com/alabamaconstitutions/alabamaconstitutionof1901>.

²³ Bernard Taper, *Gomillion Versus Lightfoot: The Right to Vote in Apartheid Alabama* (University of Alabama Press, 2003), 115.

county and vouch for their character. This was extremely difficult. In a 1985 interview with Professor William A. Elwood, Gomillion said,

There were a few of us who [were] persistent enough to urge more Negroes to begin to apply for registration to vote. But at that time in order for a Negro applicant to register, he had to secure two white persons to vouch for him or her, one of whom would have to go to the courthouse and sign the register saying that this applicant is in his or her opinion worthy of registration. Many Negroes were able to get the first person who only had to sign his name to become a voucher. That person did not have to go to the courthouse. But it was very difficult for them to get the second person who would have to go to the courthouse.²⁴

Gomillion himself experienced these difficulties. When he returned to Tuskegee from Fisk in 1934, he wanted to register to vote, but it would take another five years just to secure one white person to vouch for him. It was not until 1939, when a white contractor approached Gomillion about building a house, that he was able to register. Gomillion insisted that he would sign the contract for the house construction only if the contractor vouched for him before the Macon County Board of Registrars, the board responsible for registering voters. He then told the contractor that he would only sign the contract after the board approved his application, which they did at the contractor's bidding. Even then, Gomillion had to pay retroactive poll taxes of \$1.50 per year from 1928, the year he arrived in Tuskegee, to the year of registration, 1939.²⁵

In his various public education and advocacy endeavors, Gomillion repeatedly outlined several other techniques used to infringe upon the political participation of African Americans in Tuskegee, which he outlined in his 1988 *Clinical Sociology Review* article, entitled "The Tuskegee Voting Story."²⁶ These included:

1. Requiring Negroes and whites to register in separate rooms and in separate parts of the Macon County Courthouse.
2. Registrars frequently reporting for work late and leaving early, thus reducing the number of hours available to Negro applicants.
3. Permitting only two Negro applicants in the registration room at the same time.

²⁴ William A. Elwood, "An Interview with Charles Gomillion," *Callaloo* 40 (1989): 584, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2931304>.

²⁵ Gomillion had to pay the equivalent of 12 years of poll taxes, amounting to approximately \$400 in 2025 dollars. His second wife had to pay the equivalent of five years in poll taxes, amounting to approximately \$170 in 2025 dollars.

²⁶ Gomillion, "Tuskegee Voting Story," 24.

4. Requiring Negro applicants to read and transcribe articles from the Constitution of the United States, in addition to filling out the voter registration questionnaire.
5. Conversing with applicants as they write, which disturbs them, and stimulates making errors.
6. Permitting a Negro voter to vouch for only two applicants per year.
7. Preventing some Negroes from vouching for any applicant.
8. Failing to issue certificates of registration to Negroes immediately upon the successful completion of the requirements for registration.
9. Failing to inform unsuccessful applicants of their failures to fulfill the requirements for registration.
10. Failing to work on many registration days.
11. Resigning from the board in order not to register Negroes.
12. Refusing to appoint any Negro to serve on city or county government committees or agencies.
13. Enacting legislation which permits Board of Registrars to use 12 of their working days for clerical work only, and in even years to use up to 20 additional days in the precincts away from the courthouse.

These impediments made registration extremely difficult. According to the 1950 Census, of the 30,651 residents in Macon County, 27,384 (89.3%) were African American and 3,177 (10.4%) were white, yet data showed that in 1958 only 1,110 Blacks (4% of the Black population) were registered to vote while 3,016 whites (95% of the white population) were registered.²⁷

The voter registration challenges experienced by Tuskegee Blacks were on full display in the 1945 federal case *Mitchell v. Wright*, a case brought by William P. Mitchell, a former student of Gomillion's in the high school department of the Institute, against the Macon County Board of Registrars. Mitchell, a physical therapy technician at the V.A. Hospital in Tuskegee, went on to become Gomillion's trusted deputy as the executive secretary of the TCA. He was effectively the 'chief operating officer' to Gomillion's 'chairman of the board,' and kept "meticulous records of black voting applicants."²⁸ Although he deferred to Gomillion on strategy, Mitchell was, in the words of Norrell, "quick witted and well spoken" and "better at per-

27 *Hearings Before the United States Commission on Civil Rights: Voting*, First Session, "Eight-Year Summary of Registration Efforts of Negroes in Macon County: Reactions of the Macon County Boards of Registrars," held in Montgomery, Alabama, December 8 and 9, 1958, January 9, 1959 (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1959), 26.

28 Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 61.

sonal confrontation with whites than Gomillion.”²⁹ In 1945, his application to register to vote was rejected after neither of his two ‘vouchers’ appeared in person before the Board of Registrars. One of the vouchers, William Campbell, had gone to the site where the board convened, but was unable to get inside the board office because of long lines, and left without signing Mitchell’s application as required to effectuate the registration.³⁰

Mitchell first filed a suit which was eventually heard at the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Alabama in 1947.³¹ Mitchell was represented by Thurgood Marshall, the nation’s leading civil rights attorney who would go on to become a Supreme Court justice, and Arthur D. Shores, who would, in the following decade, serve as co-counsel in the *Gomillion v. Lightfoot* case which will be explored later in this chapter.

Mitchell alleged that the Macon County Board of Registrars failed to register him as a qualified voter because of his race. Judge Charles B. Kennamer ruled that while Mitchell “possesse[d] all the qualifications and none of the disqualifications necessary to be a qualified voter under the Constitution and laws of the State of Alabama,” the board was within its rights to reject his registration because he had not completed the prescribed process. The judge noted that despite the fact that there “was irregularity and indefiniteness in setting a time when a person given as a reference or voucher could appear before the Board and vouch for an applicant,” the decision was not discriminatory because the same voucher process was involved for “Negroes and whites alike.” Kennamer concluded that “In a county where the population is predominantly Negro, the fact that there are more white than Negro electors in the county is not of itself proof of racial discrimination by members of the Board of Registrars.”³²

Mitchell appealed to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, but during the appeals process it was ‘discovered’ that Mitchell had been registered in 1943 and that “had

29 Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 61.

30 The other person whom Mitchell said vouched for him was George Washington Albert Johnston, who had also vouched for him in his earlier registration attempts. Johnston was an African American purchasing agent at the Tuskegee Institute, and a favored nephew and confidant of Booker T. Washington. During the trial, under some pressure, Johnston testified that he had not actually vouched for Mitchell. The TCA remained suspicious of his motives due to his relationship with the defendant Caro Wright representing the Board of Registrars. See Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 66–67.

31 *Mitchell v. Wright*, 69 F. Supp. 698 (M.D. Ala. 1947), <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/69/698/2265832/>.

32 *Mitchell v. Wright*, 69 F. Supp. 698. See the testimony of William P. Mitchell, in *Hearings*, 11–29.

Mitchell paid his poll tax he could have been voting all along.”³³ With that, the case was dismissed, but this was just the start of the TCA’s litigation efforts.

Following the lawsuit, the Board of Registrars became inactive, and the TCA began appealing to Alabama governor James E. Folsom, who was eventually persuaded by an open letter by the TCA to state leaders, published by a Montgomery-based paper. Governor Folsom appointed a new board member, W.H. Bentley, who was of modest but comfortable means and a New Deal Democrat. In the 13 months following Bentley’s appointment in January 1949, 449 African Americans were registered—quadrupling their total in Macon County.³⁴ Progress was thereafter slowed after the other board members stopped attending meetings, preventing a quorum, and eventually Bentley was removed from his position in 1951 after Governor Folsom left office.³⁵ Nonetheless, the impact of having more Black registrants on the rolls was felt by the community. The number of Black voters in the county now comprised approximately 30% of the electorate—enough to influence outcomes.³⁶ The TCA was surprised, and pleased, when an incumbent sheriff politician unsuccessfully endeavored to court the organization and the Black vote in a competitive 1950 race for re-election.

The impact was also apparent in 1954 when a Black candidate for the Tuskegee Board of Education, Jessie P. Guzman (Tuskegee Institute’s director of the Department of Records and Research), secured more than 500 votes in her race. Although she lost by a wide margin, according to Gomillion, it “seemed to have intensified the fear and the belief on the part of whites that Negroes were trying ‘to take over’ the governments of Tuskegee and Macon County.”³⁷

2.3 The 1957 Gerrymander of Tuskegee: Act 140

With more African Americans registering to vote locally, and the national winds shifting to favor Black voter registration, the white establishment in Macon County looked to devise creative new schemes to preserve the status quo. In 1957, Al-

³³ Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 68.

³⁴ Craig Holloway, “Collared Men: Ethnographic Essays on Navigating Race and Status in Everyday Life” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2022), 88, Yale Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Dissertations, https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/gsas_dissertations/607. See also Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 74.

³⁵ Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 75.

³⁶ Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 75.

³⁷ Gomillion, “Tuskegee Voting Story,” 25. See also, *Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1959* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1959), 76, <http://bit.ly/usccr-1959>.

abama state senator Sam Engelhardt of nearby Shorter, Alabama, who was also the executive secretary for the white supremacist organization the White Citizens' Council for Alabama, introduced Senate Bill 291. This effectively redrew the boundaries of the City of Tuskegee from a rectangle to a 28-sided shape that resembled a sea dragon. (Figure 2) The municipal gerrymander excluded 99 % of Black voters from the City of Tuskegee, and the entirety of Tuskegee Institute itself, although not a single of its 600 white voters was removed.³⁸ The handful of African American residents who remained inside of the city boundary were exempted because they could not be removed without doing the same to a white resident; Engelhardt seemed to make sure that no whites would be disenfranchised. The gerrymandered Black voters would still be able to vote in county, state, and national elections (where their voting power was weaker) but not in local elections, where, it was feared, they would soon have the ability to outnumber whites. The bill passed unanimously and without debate, and was enacted as Act 140.³⁹

Outraged by the passage of Act 140, the TCA resisted, eventually launching the Crusade for Citizenship, involving a three-year boycott of Tuskegee's white-owned businesses. Gomillion summed up his views as follows: "We are going to buy goods and services from those who help us, from those who make no effort to hinder us, from those who recognize us as first-class citizens."⁴⁰ (Figure 3) The campaign, "Buy Wisely—Trade with your Friends," lasted from June 25, 1957 to February 1961. Messaging for the boycott was important, and it was formally called a 'selective buying campaign' to avoid a state law prohibiting boycotts. It received national attention.

An observer at the first meeting, Louise Washington, described the scene as follows:

38 Gomillion, "Tuskegee Voting Story," 24–25. See also Tondra L. Loder-Jackson, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Black Educators in the 'Militant Middle' of Alabama's Municipal Civil Rights Battlegrounds," in *Schooling the Movement: The*

Activism of Southern Black Educators from Reconstruction through the Civil Rights Era, ed. Derrick P. Alridge, Jon N. Hale, and Roland L. Freeman (University of South Carolina Press, 2023), citing Charles Johnson and Jared McWilliams, audio recording of *Mass Meeting of the Tuskegee Civic Association #2*, July 2, 1957, featuring K.J. Burford, Fred Shuttlesworth, Ralph David Abernathy, and Martin Luther King, Jr., Tuskegee University Archives; and Guzman, *Crusade for Civic Democracy*, 23.

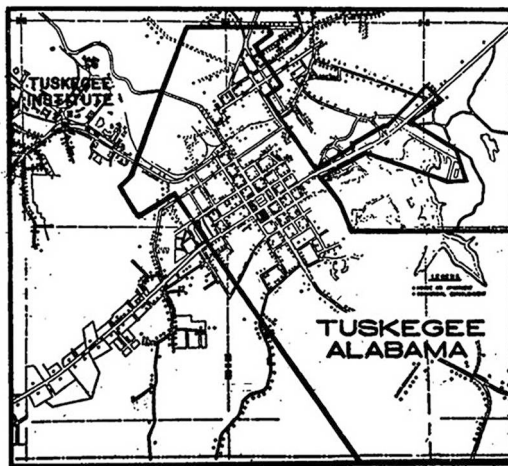
39 Taper, *Gomillion Versus Lightfoot*, 15.

40 "Black Citizens Boycott White Merchants for U.S. Voting Rights, Tuskegee, Alabama, 1957–1961," *Global Nonviolent Action Database*, <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/black-citizens-boycott-white-merchants-us-voting-rights-tuskegee-alabama-1957-1961>.

It was the most emotional experience I've ever had in my life. It just seemed to finally have awakened the people in the community. Dean Gomillion had tried in the past to organize 'little trade with your friends,' meaning trade with Negroes. We'd trade with our friends for about a month, and then it would sort of disintegrate. The new boycott to fight the gerrymander was the first time he really had massive and prolonged support. (We couldn't call it a boycott, of course, that was illegal. It had to be 'selective buying.') ... I dare say that our boycott wouldn't have been successful if it were not for the bus boycott in Montgomery. This was one of the rallying cries—"Aren't we going to do what the people in Montgomery did? Are we going to be less proud than the people in Montgomery?"⁴¹

APPENDIX TO OPINION OF THE COURT.

CHART SHOWING TUSKEGEE, ALABAMA, BEFORE AND AFTER ACT 140



(The entire area of the square comprised the City prior to Act 140. The irregular black-bordered figure within the square represents the post-enactment city.)

Figure 2: The July 1957 gerrymandering of Tuskegee's city limits that disenfranchised the Black vote.

Source: *Gomillion v. Lightfoot*, 364 U.S. 339 (1960).

To maintain the momentum and success of the campaign, African American citizens met weekly at various churches in the Tuskegee community. These meetings were fashioned after the Monday evening meetings of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Meetings normally consisted of a devotional period, announcements, a finan-

⁴¹ James Forman, *Sammy Younge, Jr.: The First Black College Student to Die in the Black Liberation Movement* (Open Hand Publishing, 1986), 40, <https://archive.org/details/sammyyoungejr/fir0000form/page/n7/mode/2up?q=louise+washington>.

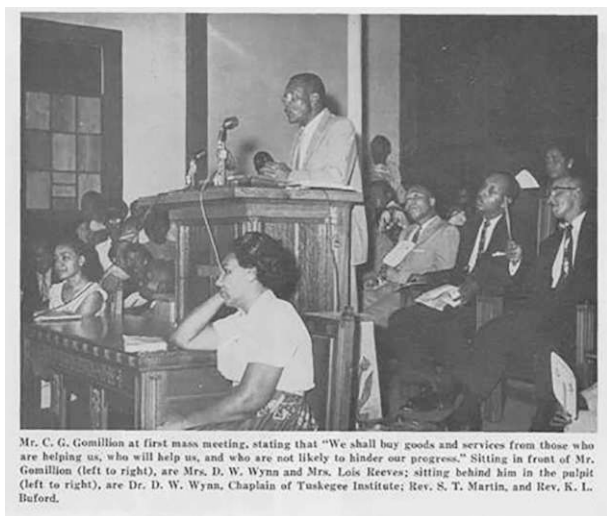


Figure 3: First mass meeting, Tuskegee Civic Association, June 25, 1957. Butler Chapel A.M.E. Zion Church, Tuskegee, Alabama.

Source: "Crusade for Civic Democracy," *Tuskegee Civic Association Magazine*, June 24, 1958.

cial appeal, congregational singing, the main speaker's presentation, remarks from the TCA president or a presiding officer, and a closing prayer.⁴² Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke at the TCA meeting following the launch of the boycott, declaring to a large gathering of 3,500 Black attendees and scores of out-of-town visitors at the historic A.M.E. Church: "You are not seeking to put the stores out of business but to put justice into business."⁴³ (Figure 4)

Two months after the boycott began, Alabama attorney general John Patterson (who would later be elected to the governorship) and assistant attorney general Gordon Madison sought an injunction against it, but they were ultimately unsuccessful. Circuit Court judge Will O. Walton ruled that citizens could not be forced to shop where they chose not to.

The boycott had a tremendous impact on the local economy. Less than a year after it began, by the spring of 1958, half of the city's white retail businesses shut down, and of those remaining, sales were down at least 40–65%, and most businesses were forced to terminate some of their workers to stay afloat.⁴⁴ Tuskegee

⁴² Guzman, *Crusade for Civic Democracy*, 25–26.

⁴³ Ronald Jones, "Negroes Refuse to Do Business, Theatres and Stores Closed," *Arizona Sun*, July 25, 1957, 1.

⁴⁴ Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 101; Jones, "Negroes Refuse to Do Business," 1.



Figure 4: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speaks at Tuskegee Civic Association mass meeting, July 2, 1957. Photograph by P.H. Polk. (Courtesy of Tuskegee University Archives, P. H. Polk Family Collection).

Source: “Tuskegee Civic Association Materials,” *Driving Through History: The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama*, <https://drivingthroughhistory.org/tca>.

Institute professors conducted a survey for a booklet entitled *Voting Rights and Economic Pressure, Field Reports on Desegregation in the South* that was published in 1958.⁴⁵ The ‘Crisis Study’ examined racial attitudes of 95 white Tuskegee residents. Forty percent of respondents said they had only recently become aware of a local racial conflict, and it was as a result of the boycott.⁴⁶

As summarized by Robert Norrell in his masterful historical analysis on the civil rights movement in Tuskegee, *Reaping the Whirlwind*:

The Crisis Study exposed the contours of white thinking more fully than had ever been done before. Racism pervaded the views of almost all whites; they could not conceive of dealing with the blacks on the same basis as whites. Most whites did not include blacks in their conception of democratic government. They imposed a double standard for political behavior: when whites pursued and used power to their own ends, they were merely protecting their interests, but when blacks did the same thing, they were obnoxiously aggressive and selfish. It must be noted, however, that a significant minority of whites recognized this hypocrisy and believed that blacks deserved political rights.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Lewis Jones and Stanley Smith, Tuskegee, Alabama: Voting Rights and Economic Pressure, Field Reports on Desegregation in the South (Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, 1958).

⁴⁶ Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 108.

⁴⁷ Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 107–8.

The Crisis Study also revealed a general fear of what increased Black political power would look like in actuality, and a presumption that the goal of Black civic participation was to take over and control local affairs, rather than to share in democratic decision-making.

In December 1957, 61% of voters statewide approved a statewide constitutional amendment that targeted Macon County—authorizing the establishment of a legislative committee tasked with developing a study and determining the feasibility of outright abolishing Macon County or reducing its area. The committee was to develop related legislation to effectuate its proposal. That the statewide vote for such a radical proposal secured such a strong majority illustrates that the white fear that the Crisis Study captured among Tuskegee residents had wider resonance.

In February 1958, Gomillion appeared before the Macon County Abolition Committee of the House of Representatives, where he advanced the cause of ‘democratic living.’ The committee was deliberating a proposal, which, like Act 140, was authored by state senator Sam Engelhardt, to divide Macon County into five or six parts for redistribution to the surrounding counties in such a manner as to avoid the possibility of a Black political majority. The *Jackson Advocate*, a Black-owned and -operated Mississippi publication, described Gomillion’s presentation before the committee as “one of the first direct efforts by a Negro to speak to a group of whites about so sensitive a problem in the Deep South.”⁴⁸ A “verbal sparring” resulted, beginning with a question posed to Gomillion by one of the legislators, who asked whether he was afraid that the boycott of white merchants, which whites believed was sponsored by the TCA, might lead to the cutting off of funds to Tuskegee Institute. Although private, the institution received \$350,000 annually from the state to guarantee the teaching of certain courses. Thus, the motivation of the proposal to abolish Macon County was revealed—the Black residents were getting too active and civically engaged, and their boycott would not be tolerated. The legislators continued to ask questions of Gomillion with great concern about whether the TCA’s goal was actually “race-mixing” in schools, which Gomillion answered in the affirmative. The *Jackson Advocate* summarized the meeting as one which “accomplished little” and “simply underscores ... that the lines are very sharply drawn on integration. Even when a Negro and a group of whites meet publicly, the whole affair is cut and dried, each saying what

48 “Tuskegee Negro Leader Confers with Legislators,” *Jackson Advocate*, March 15, 1958, 5, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn79000083/1958-03-15/ed-1/seq-1/>.

it believes and without any real discussion. This is one of the more discouraging aspects of the entire situation in the Deep South.”⁴⁹

Gomillion and the TCA's response to Act 140 was felt well beyond the state of Alabama, as it became clear that relief would have to be sought outside of the state. As Congress was readying to take up the first federal civil rights legislation, which would become the Civil Rights Act (CRA) of 1957, Gomillion appeared before the Senate Judiciary Committee in February of 1957 to discuss the numerous challenges to voting in Macon County. William Mitchell appeared in a press conference in Washington, D.C. a month after the boycott, with Senate advocates of the civil rights legislation, including Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota and Paul Douglass of Illinois, to discuss both of Englehardt's schemes: Act 140 to gerrymander Tuskegee Institute out of the city, and his latest proposal to dismantle Macon County altogether.⁵⁰ The boycott was also featured in leading publications like *Life*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*.⁵¹ *Life* and *Newsweek* put the gerrymander into the context of the civil rights bill, with *Newsweek* calling the Tuskegee situation “a timely—though perhaps extreme—example of what the civil rights argument in the Senate is about.”⁵² It would be an overstatement to claim that Tuskegee's experience was responsible for the passage of the CRA, but there is no doubt that telling the story of the egregious acts of Englehardt and others helped shape the narrative of the need for federal intervention.

The experiences of Tuskegee would only continue to inform that narrative as the United States Commission on Civil Rights, which was established by the CRA, began to report on the state of civil rights and civil society. The Commission's first public hearing took place in Montgomery, Alabama in December 1958, and its first three witnesses were from Tuskegee: William Mitchell; William Andrew Hunter, the dean of the Tuskegee Institute School of Education; and Reverend Dr. Daniel Webster Wynn, chaplain of Tuskegee Institute. Hunter had served in the U.S. Army and received his doctorate from Iowa State University. Wynn had voted in Massachusetts while studying at Harvard and then in Texas, but like many other African Americans remained unregistered in Alabama.⁵³

Mitchell offered the most detailed testimony, recounting his experience of attempting to register to vote. He provided documentation including copies of questionnaires which were used to disqualify African Americans seeking to register,

49 “Tuskegee Negro Leader Confers,” 5.

50 Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 111.

51 “RACES: Boycott in Tuskegee,” *TIME*, July 8, 1957, <https://time.com/archive/6887897/races-boy-cott-in-tuskegee/>.

52 Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 110.

53 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Hearings*, 1959; Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 112.

and meticulous data which he had collected on voter registration among Blacks and whites in Macon County. Mitchell's data would be incorporated into the U.S. Commission's future reports describing the plight of Black voter registration and the need for continued federal oversight. But each of the three told incriminatory stories about the Board of Registrars being closed or meeting secretly, forcing potential registrants to fill out questionnaires with ambiguous questions, and having to write out long tracts of the U. S. Constitution, all the while knowing that the smallest of errors would lead to disqualification for Black applicants for plainly arbitrary reasons. The U.S. Commissioners also heard how potential registrants were not notified if they had failed to register, thus making an appeal impossible.⁵⁴

From those first hearings held by the Commission in Montgomery, Alabama emerged a palpable sentiment favoring the compelling testimony offered by the approximately 30 Alabama Blacks personally impacted by voter discrimination. Their experiences unveiled repeated and systemic violations of the right to vote across the state, and stood in stark contraposition to the intransigence of the testifying Alabama southern officials, including those from Boards of Registrars. Commissioner John S. Battle forewarned at the end of the first day of the hearings: "The majority of members of the next Congress will not be sympathetic to the South, and preventative legislation may be passed, and this hearing may be used in advocacy of that legislation."⁵⁵ A former governor of Virginia, Battle was selected to serve on the Commission based on his strong southern sentiments, including his strong family roots in Alabama, where his father led the state's confederate army. He diplomatically pleaded with the southern officials that "enemies in Congress" would not take kindly to the South absent better cooperation from public officials appearing before the Commission who clearly endeavored, in the words of Battle, "to cover up their actions" and appeared "not willing to explain their conduct when requested to do so."⁵⁶ And, indeed, as history would reveal, the testimony and public records collected during these hearings went on to inform future amendments to the Civil Rights Act and eventually the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA).

⁵⁴ U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Hearings*, 1959; Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 112.

⁵⁵ U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Hearings*, 1959, 207.

⁵⁶ U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Hearings*, 1959, 207.

2.4 *Gomillion v. Lightfoot*

The TCA was eager to challenge the state legislation which enabled the sea dragon-shaped municipal gerrymander of the City of Tuskegee which removed the Institute from the municipality along with nearly all Black voters. The TCA retained Fred Gray to bring the legal challenge—he had difficulty securing co-counsel due to the risk involved. The Supreme Court had previously ruled in *Colegrove v. Green* that the courts should not engage in gerrymandering challenges due to their inherently political nature.⁵⁷ In other words, any challenge to gerrymandering would likely be unsuccessful.

Nonetheless, Gray believed in the merits of the case, as did the unflagging TCA. He recruited NAACP general counsel Robert L. Carter to join him as co-counsel, along with an esteemed Birmingham attorney, Arthur D. Shores. Act 140 was approved by the legislature and became law without the governor's approval on July 15, 1957. That year, Gray and his colleagues filed in federal court to challenge its constitutionality naming Tuskegee mayor Philip M. Lightfoot and other city officials as defendants. The federal district court and a divided federal appeals court panel outright rejected the merits of the claim, and Gray and Carter would go on to argue the case before the U.S. Supreme Court on October 18 and 19, 1960. Also presenting before the court was Philip Elman,⁵⁸ a white attorney who briefed the legal issue as well as the moral one, and likened the travesties in Tuskegee to apartheid.⁵⁹

The Supreme Court was in a precarious position, as precedent dictated that the judiciary was not to interfere with legislative acts of redistricting, but the court, particularly in the civil rights era, was committed to striking down discriminatory laws that deprived citizens of their full rights of citizenry, in particular constitutional rights to be free of discrimination based on race, color, or creed.⁶⁰ On November 14, 1960 the court ruled unanimously (after an unusually short period of 27 days) in favor of *Gomillion*, ruling that Act 140 violated Section I of the 15th Amendment which states that “the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”⁶¹

57 Fred Gray, *Bus Ride to Justice: The Life and Works of Fred Gray* (Black Belt Press, 1995), 114.

58 Philip Elman worked with Thurgood Marshall on the *Brown v. Board of Education* case (1954) and other civil rights cases held before the Supreme Court. In the *Gomillion v. Lightfoot* case, Elman represented the United States.

59 Taper, *Gomillion Versus Lightfoot*, 97.

60 Taper, *Gomillion Versus Lightfoot*, 81.

61 *Gomillion v. Lightfoot*, 364 U.S. 339 (1960).

The court further ruled that “Act 140 was not an ordinary geographic redistricting measure even with familiar abuses of gerrymandering” and that “the city’s legislation was solely concerned with segregating white and colored voters by fending Negro citizens out of town so as to deprive them of their preexisting municipal vote.”⁶² In a concurring opinion, Justice Frankfurter further stated that the decision should not rest on the 15th Amendment, but on the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment which states: “No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”

As explained further in chapter one, the Supreme Court therefore reversed the decision by the lower federal court and sent the matter back with instruction that the “mathematical demonstration” of the geographic redistricting is “tantalizing” to proof of racial voter discrimination. Gray filed a motion for summary judgment, which the federal district court judge granted on February 17, 1961, permanently enjoining the implementation of Act 140. The original voting boundaries of the City of Tuskegee were thereafter restored and the three and a half years of litigation in *Gomillion v. Lightfoot* came to an end. African American residents who had been deemed to live outside of the city were included within its territory. The City of Tuskegee’s election was held in September of 1960, before the court’s ruling, and consequently only whites were successfully sworn into office. It would not be until the next election, four years later in 1964, that any African Americans would be elected in Tuskegee.

The *Gomillion v. Lightfoot* case speaks to the strength and courage of a rural community just a few generations from enslavement and their ‘audacity’ to challenge racist laws and appeal directly to the highest court in the country. Their actions are almost unprecedented and when considering the time in which they lived, their actions are outright heroic. In the state of Alabama, the South, and in many parts of the north and west, African Americans’ upward mobility was hindered in the form of redlining, discrimination in housing, voter suppression, and almost every facet of social, political, and economic life. Without a blueprint to follow, Gomillion and his fellow activists effected change not only for themselves, but also prepared the paths for the generations of activists that would follow.

62 Taper, *Gomillion Versus Lightfoot*, 111, 112.

3 Other Civic Actors

While Gomillion received the greatest amount of attention for the TCA's activities and the boycott, there were other important activists associated with Tuskegee Institute.

3.1 Faculty and Administrators

3.1.1 Jessie Parkhurst Guzman

Jessie Parkhurst Guzman was born in 1898 in Savannah, Georgia. (Figures 5 and 6) She earned her B.A. degree from Howard University in 1919 and her M.A. from Columbia University in 1924. In 1923, she came to Tuskegee Institute as a research assistant to Monroe Work, Tuskegee Institute's director of records and research. Guzman served as Tuskegee Institute's dean of women from 1938 to 1944 and as the director of the Department of Records and Research until she retired in 1964. She compiled and edited two editions of the *Negro Year Book* in 1947 and 1952. She is also the author of *Crusade for Civic Democracy: The Story of the Tuskegee Civic Association, 1941-1970*.

As an active member of the TCA, Guzman held leadership and committee positions and delivered speeches at mass meetings. In February of 1954, she ran for the Macon County school board. In so doing, she was both the first African American to run for office in Macon County since Reconstruction and the first African American woman to seek office in Alabama.⁶³ She lost the election, but her candidacy seemed to have intensified the fear and the belief on the part of whites that African Americans were trying to take over the governments of Tuskegee and Macon County.

On August 6, 1957, she was a co-signatory of a letter published in *The Washington Post* to the U.S. Senate. The letter was entitled "An Open Letter from the South on Civil Rights"⁶⁴ and was also signed by dozens of activists including

⁶³ *Portrait of Jessie Parkhurst Guzman*, c. 1970, Tuskegee University Archives, featured in "Jessie Parkhurst Guzman," *Driving Through History*, <https://drivingthroughhistory.org/jessie-parkhurst-guzman>. *Driving Through History*.

⁶⁴ This letter was signed by 85 men and women from the South, southern border states, and the District of Columbia. The signatories contended that it would be better to pass no civil rights bill at all than to pass one that limited the enforcement power of the courts. Published in *The Washington Post* on August 6, 1957, the letter stated that African Americans would fare better under the existing legislation than if the proposed bill were passed.

Charles and Jennie Gomillion, E.D. Nixon (co-organizer of the Montgomery Bus Boycott), and Daisy Bates (strategist for the integration of Little Rock Central High School).



Figure 5: Portrait of Jessie Parkhurst Guzman, c. 1970.

Source: *Portrait of Jessie Parkhurst Guzman*, Tuskegee University Archives, in *Driving Through History*, <https://drivingthroughhistory.org/jessie-parkhurst-guzman>. Driving Through History.

3.1.2 Lewis Wade Jones

Dr. Lewis Wade Jones was born in Cuero, Texas on March 13, 1910. (Figure 7) He received his A.B. degree from Fisk University in 1931 and continued his education as a Social Science Research Council Fellow at the University of Chicago in 1931 and 1932. He was a Julius Rosenwald Foundation Fund Fellow at Columbia Univer-



Figure 6: Jessie Parkhurst Guzman and Charles Gomillion, c. 1950.

Source: Tuskegee University Archives, featured in “Tuskegee Civic Association (TCA),” *Driving Through History*, <https://drivingthroughhistory.org/tca>.

sity, where he earned an M.A. degree in 1939. He earned his Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1955. He pioneered studies of Black people in the rural south and hired white students from the University of Alabama to interview 95 white Tuskegee residents in the Crisis Study described above. Not surprisingly, the respondents shared their hatred of African Americans and their progress.⁶⁵ Together with Tuskegee professor Stanley Hugh Smith, he wrote an important report for the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, *Tuskegee, Alabama: Voting Rights*

⁶⁵ Derrick P. Alridge, Jon N. Hale, and Roland L. Freeman, eds., *Schooling the Movement: The Activism of Southern Black Educators from Reconstruction through the Civil Rights Era* (University of South Carolina Press, 2023), 175.

and Economic Pressure, part of a series of “Field Reports on Desegregation in the South” in 1958, helping to contextualize the challenges in Tuskegee and publicize them to a national audience. The report paid particular attention to white attitudes in Tuskegee and Macon County.⁶⁶ At the time of his death in September 1979, Jones was a full professor of sociology at Tuskegee Institute and the director of the Tuskegee Institute Rural Development Center.



Figure 7: Crusade for Civic Democracy First Anniversary Celebration, June 24, 1958.
Source: “Crusade for Civic Democracy,” *Tuskegee Civic Association Magazine*, June 24, 1958.

3.1.3 Frank Toland, Sr.

Frank Toland, Sr. was born in Helena, South Carolina on June 1, 1920. (Figure 8) He graduated from South Carolina State University with an undergraduate degree in History, Political Science, and English. He received his Master’s degree in History from the University of Pennsylvania and was the only African American student in the department. While in Philadelphia, he worked with the NAACP. He began teaching at Tuskegee Institute in 1949, and served as chair of the History Department from 1968 to 1984. In the 1960s, he also served as president of the TCA. He retired in 2009 after 60 years of service to Tuskegee University.

⁶⁶ Lewis W. Jones and Stanley Hugh Smith, *Tuskegee, Alabama: Voting Rights and Economic Pressure*, Field Reports on Desegregation in the South (Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, with the cooperation of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1958).



Figure 8: Jackie Robinson (second from the left), Professor Frank Toland (far right), and other supporters of the Tuskegee Civic Association at the organization's second anniversary (June 23, 1959). Robinson gave a speech in support of the TCA's crusade and praised the example that the Tuskegee movement was setting for the country. Photo Credit: P.H. Polk.

Source: Tuskegee University Archives, https://archive.tuskegee.edu/repository/digital-collection/tuskegee-civic-association-meetings-speeches-and-records/photographs/ss7731659_7731659_11926906/.

At the second anniversary of Crusade for Citizenship, Toland outlined some of the reasons for the campaign for civic democracy, namely that there had been no democracy in Macon County nor Alabama, nor in the South in the century. He further stated that citizens' petitions for redress of grievances remained ignored by white city, county, and state politicians, as African American citizens were mischaracterized as "troublemakers who endangered the good relations existing between the races, because we dare to exercise our constitutional rights to petition to redress grievances." Tolson charged that there had been "super-ordination of the white" and "sub-ordination of the Negro."⁶⁷

⁶⁷ "Frank Toland Speaks at TCA Meeting, 1959," *Tuskegee Civic Association Meetings, Speeches, and Records*, Tuskegee University Archives, <https://archive.tuskegee.edu/repository/digital-collec>

3.2 Tuskegee Institute Presidents

It is perhaps because of Booker T. Washington's influence that, as an institution, the Tuskegee Institute was less involved in political issues. Historically, Washington publicly represented the Tuskegee community, as did his successor, Robert R. Moton, during the first years of his presidency. Frederick Patterson assumed the presidency of Tuskegee in 1935 and did not attempt to be the 'community voice.' Though not president of the institution, Charles Gomillion filled that void.⁶⁸ The era of the *Gomillion v. Lightfoot* case marked the first time in its history that the institution was involved, even if not formally, in securing political rights for African American citizens.

While Gomillion worked at Tuskegee Institute, he was the public face of the TCA and served as the association's president three times for a total of seventeen years. The two Tuskegee presidents during this time period, Dr. Frederick Douglass Patterson (1935-1953) and Dr. Luther Foster (1953 to 1981), tacitly supported Gomillion's activities, though they insisted that he and other university employees separate their activism from their responsibilities at Tuskegee Institute.⁶⁹ Patterson defended Gomillion when his work came under attack by Alabama Governor Gordon Persons. Foster supported him even when the Highlander Folk Center, of which he was a board member, was accused of having Communist ties.⁷⁰ He was initially silent on the boycott, but due to the egregious nature of the gerrymander ultimately joined in. (Figure 9)

3.3 Tuskegee Institute Students

The Institute's leadership generally dissuaded students from engagement, fearing repercussions for the Institute's core mission. Indeed, this was not without cause: Engelhardt had threatened the institution's funding for Gomillion's work.⁷¹ Nonetheless, Tuskegee students spoke at meetings of the TCA, contributed to programming, and were involved as groups in the boycott.

tion/tuskegee-civic-association-meetings-speeches-and-records/meetings/frank-toland-speaks-at-tca-meeting-1959/. A two-minute audio excerpt of Gomillion's interview is available by the link.

68 Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 38.

69 "Tuskegee Frets Over Boycott Backed by Montgomery Leaders," *Jackson Advocate*, July 25, 1957, 1, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn79000083/1957-07-27/ed-1/seq-6/>.

70 Fritz, "Charles Gomillion, Educator-Community Activist," 17; Jones and Smith, *Tuskegee, Alabama: Voting Rights and Economic Pressure*, 76.

71 Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 96. In Engelhardt's view, Gomillion dominated Foster.



Figure 9: Highlander participants and workshop leaders at the school during its 25th anniversary on August 31, 1957. Pictured from left to right: Ralph Helstein, Myles Horton, Rosa Parks, an unidentified man, Septima Clark, an unidentified man, an unidentified man, Charles Gomillion and Bernice Robinson.

Source: NEH Fellowship Supports Slate's Research on Civil Rights," *Carnegie Mellon University News*, February 28, 2023, <https://www.cmu.edu/news/stories/archives/2023/february/neh-fellowship-supports-slates-research-on-civil-rights>.

A 1960 march by hundreds of students in response to the nationwide sit-ins created internal controversy. The students were led by young faculty member Charles B. Hamilton, who worked closely with Gomillion but whose approach had grown more confrontational. Foster had tried to dissuade students from participating, but later, at least publicly, described it as an effort of students "to express their earnest support of efforts by many other youth groups throughout the nation to help advance the cause of full democracy in America."⁷² However, months later Hamilton's position was not renewed, and he saw it as punishment.

It would not be until the mid-1960s that student activism in Tuskegee would come to the fore⁷³ with the tragic murder of Sammy Younge.

Sammy Younge grew up in Tuskegee and was a 21-year-old Navy veteran and Tuskegee Institute political science student and activist. He was a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Tuskegee Institute Advancement League, a student group formed in February 1965 to support the Selma movement, and had worked to register African American voters in Alabama and Mississippi.

⁷² Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 170.

⁷³ Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 170.

On the evening of January 3, 1966, Younger went into the ‘Whites Only’ bathroom at the Standard Oil gas station near Tuskegee Institute and was shot to death by a night watchman, Marvin Segrest. He was the first African American college student to be killed as a result of his participation in the civil rights movement.

Two days after he was murdered, 200 Tuskegee Institute students marched in the rain to the white downtown area of Tuskegee in protest. Speaking to those gathered, student body president Gwen Patton promised that the student body would “do all in its power to bring justice to Macon County.”⁷⁴

The murder of Sammy Younger had implications beyond Tuskegee and even beyond Alabama. SNCC and local Black leaders used Younger’s death, in combination with the VRA, to inspire a rise in Black political participation in the region. The same was the case for Tuskegee students, whose efforts related to voting, which were particularly focused on the registration of rural Black voters in Macon County, began after the passage of the VRA in 1965 and accelerated after Younger’s death, with 1,600 Black voters added to the county rolls in January 1966 when the efforts reached their peak. As Norrell wrote, “The students, with the help of the new federal guarantee of the right to vote, were completing work that Gomillion and the TCA had begun twenty-five years earlier.”⁷⁵

4 Conclusion

Tuskegee Institute has historically been considered a conservative institution, dating back to the time of its first president, Booker T. Washington, who, in the years following the bloody Civil War, prioritized securing self-reliance for Blacks, and racial accommodation for surety. The formidable institution he established and shepherded would soon eclipse his greatest expectations—having secured their self-reliance, skills, and financial independence, the geographically centered academic community sought their full political rights. Moreover, faculty leveraged their academic training to secure their right to vote free of racial discrimination, and in so doing shaped the nation. Their work documenting voter suppression and contributing to public education on the poor state of civic democracy in Alabama and the South, informed the work and perspective of the United States Commission on Civil Rights and ultimately Congress, ensuring added protections in the

⁷⁴ “Tuskegee: ‘Model City’ Erupts,” *The Movement*, February, 1966, <https://www.crmvet.org/docs/mvmt/6602mvmt.pdf>.

⁷⁵ Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 179.

Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act based on the experiences borne in Macon County. The persistence of faculty members such as Gomillion and colleagues secured, for the first time, the right to fair redistricting by the United States Supreme Court. The story of Tuskegee, then, and all of its accomplishments, illustrates the great measure that institutions of higher education can offer the nation when faculty engage in applied research, and work in the community to persist and advocate for political and social rights.

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