

**A Hollow Inheritance:
The Legacies of the Tuskegee Civic Association
and the Crusade for Civic Democracy in Alabama**

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines and analyzes the Tuskegee Civic Association's "Crusade for Citizenship" in Alabama. In 1957 the Crusade encouraged black citizens to boycott businesses owned and operated by segregationist whites in response to a recent gerrymander bill enacted by the all-white state legislature aimed at neutralizing black voter strength. Tuskegee's blacks, unlike those in many other communities, did not depend nearly as heavily on whites for employment or income. Many were faculty members at Tuskegee Institute and trained physicians and nurses at the nearby Veterans Administration Hospital.

As the boycott continued into 1958, blacks exerted their own economic dominance over the community, forcing many of the segregationist merchants and likeminded white citizens to flee to nearby towns. Despite their success in establishing an early Civil Rights foothold, African Americans' fight to challenge Jim Crow in Tuskegee had unforeseen consequences.

This thesis also examines the rise and decline of the Tuskegee Civic Association. As a grass-roots civil rights organization, the TCA worked tirelessly for decades to challenge Jim Crow segregation. However, the rise of a new and younger generation of civil rights workers and organizations in 1965 marked the beginning of a more radical and turbulent period for Civil Rights in Alabama.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Introduction: Tuskegee, the Pride of the Swift Growing South.....	1
Chapter 1: From Crisis to Crusade.....	16
Citizens Without a City.....	20
Like Jesus Coming out of Nazareth.....	35
The TCA Grows Up.....	38
The Crusade Begins.....	42
The Hands of the Few.....	51
Who Will Come to the Table.....	55
Lincoln Freed Us, Washington Educated Us, Engelhardt Put Us Together.....	57
Chapter 2: The Tuskegee Crisis Study: Black and White Voices from the Grass-Roots.....	65
Chapter 3: Nothing Beside Remains: The Eclipsing of the TCA.....	111
Old Town, New Challenges.....	113
The Uncle Toms Among Us.....	115
The 1964 Election.....	119
The Puryear Challenge.....	126
Young, Gifted, and Invisible.....	128
The Great Pee-In of 1965.....	129

The Blackening of White Spaces.....	132
An Unworthy Fight.....	135
Coming Around in Their Own Way.....	136
January 3, 1966.....	138
A Long, Useful, and Profitable Life.....	142
Conclusion: The Inches Not Given and the Hollow Inheritance.....	149
Bibliography.....	154

Introduction: “Tuskegee, the Pride of the Swift Growing South”

On September 24, 2009, a cover story in the *Tuskegee News* described what was initially a groundbreaking announcement from the Macon County Commission. Almost two hundred acres of undeveloped land had been purchased by the Commission at an estimated cost of \$460,000. The land would be transformed into an industrial park to attract businesses to Tuskegee’s neck of the Interstate 85 corridor. Along with additional funds to be divided among Tuskegee’s four city districts, this money was refinanced from two bonds issued in 2007 and 2008 that were initially purposed to finance the Macon County Detention Center totaling \$3,000,000. After decades of economic stagnation, it appeared Tuskegee was moving in promising economic directions.¹

Optimism about a more dynamic approach to economic development proved short-lived. As of 2016, seven years later, the Tuskegee Commerce Park houses exactly one business. Fiblast Inc., a fiberglass manufacturing company, entered Tuskegee shortly after the park’s completion in 2011. Greenwood Global Inc., a recycling company announced that its state of the art recovery and manufacturing facility would open in Spring 2015 bringing with it, 200 “green” jobs encompassing 45 call center jobs, 100 sales representatives, and 20 upper management positions with six figure earning potential.

The company’s CEO Warren Crawley announced at a 2013 Tuskegee City Council meeting, “We expect to increase the percentage of jobs in Tuskegee with the expansion of its glass and plastic manufacturing plant later this year. Alabama will no longer be known as a red or blue state but a GREEN state for its growing sustainability

¹ Jacqueline Carlisle, “Commission Approves Purchase of Land for Industrial Park,” *The Tuskegee News*, September 24, 2009, 1.

efforts.” Hundreds of Tuskegee and Macon County residents, some of whom commuted to work, were ecstatic about the chance to actually work in Tuskegee again. Before Greenwood Global, the only other large-scale employer in the county was VictoryLand, a casino and dog racing track that was closed by the Attorney General’s office for violating Alabama’s gaming laws. “I am so ready to go back to work,” exclaimed Tonya Bell, a Macon County resident and former VictoryLand employee who hoped to gain one of the new jobs with Greenwood Global. Bell had been forced to quit her job after giving birth to a child, “my son was having complications and I had to take him to and from Birmingham for care, now that he is better I am ready for a job again, and I am so happy to be able to apply for a job in Tuskegee.”² Vanessa Jones applied for a truck driving job with Greenwood and sounded the theme of economic boosterism when she related to a local reporter, “I have driven trucks before, and I am willing to drive again. I am just grateful to be able to apply for a job in Tuskegee. This is a great opportunity for the future, and the CEO is making it possible for other companies to look at Tuskegee to bring jobs here. He must be a man of God to have faith and trust that this company will do well and take a risk of bringing it to Tuskegee. This is good for Tuskegee and surrounding areas.”³

As of Spring 2016, however, despite overwhelmingly positive cooperation from the city government, “some delays” have obstructed Greenwood’s entry into the Tuskegee community. Green Grease, the actual operating arm of Greenwood Global that would have worked the plant is no longer operational, greatly delaying Greenwood’s

² Jacqueline Carlisle, “Prospective Employees Line up to Apply for Tuskegee jobs with Greenwood Global,” *The Tuskegee News*, March 5, 2015, 1.

³ Ibid.

entry into Tuskegee. As it currently stands, there are no other businesses slated to enter Tuskegee's Commerce Park. Alabama remains just as much of a red or blue state as ever, and Tuskegee is still without its promised 200 new green jobs. Tuskegee built its own commercial field of dreams, yet hardly anyone came.

The road to sustainable economic growth in the small Black Belt town of Tuskegee has been a long and rocky one, and there is no visible end in sight. Today, Tuskegee is very much the same town it was over a half century ago in 1960, when the landmark Supreme Court case, *Gomillion v Lightfoot* (1960) reversed an unconstitutional racial gerrymander of black citizens that redrew political boundaries to exclude nearly all of Tuskegee's black citizens. The state legislature's gerrymander bill represented the extreme measures segregationists would take to keep political power out of the hands of blacks. In response to it blacks boycotted all of the downtown white businesses that they believed had supported the gerrymander. The boycott officially lasted from 1957 to 1960. When the gerrymander was overturned and the boycott officially ended, however, blacks began to wonder whether they had won a Pyrrhic victory, for their actions had significantly altered the economic state of the town. While *Gomillion v Lightfoot* (1960) may have reversed the gerrymander, the black boycott and white resistance to black citizenship had severely compromised Tuskegee's economic future.

When the Tuskegee Gerrymander bill was passed in 1957, African Americans in Macon County did not seek the outside assistance of organizations and individuals like the NAACP, Dr. Martin Luther King or the Montgomery-based minister's newly formed Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Instead the people of Tuskegee looked within their own ranks to take action. They were their own frontline troops and

cavalry. The Tuskegee Civic Association emerged as the local grassroots organization that could unite black citizens. The boycott response to the gerrymander was suggested by the TCA at a mass meeting shortly after the gerrymander became Alabama state law. The TCA was not a new organization in the community, having challenged Jim Crow in the court system since the early 1940s. The gerrymander, however, presented a significantly larger challenge for both the organization and the town's black community, for it affected nearly every black citizen. The TCA was now tasked with both uniting them and providing the means to fight back effectively and non-violently.

The Tuskegee Civic Association was a fundamentally different organization than more familiar groups in the civil rights era. Its members did not march, sing, or sit-in. They sued in court, educated citizens on their constitutional rights, and used their combined economic strength of the organization's members to help bring about the changes they wanted to see. The TCA patterned at least some of its responses to the actions of white segregationists on the Montgomery Bus Boycott movement which had won a landmark victory for black Montgomery citizens and utilized economics as an agent of change in what amounted to a selective patronage withdrawal campaign in the state's capital city in 1955 and 1956. Unlike later movements led by Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Council that hoped to appeal to the better nature of whites, the TCA chose legal and economic weapons to fight their battles. The success of the TCA's boycott movement can be traced to the individual and collective decisions of black citizens affected by the gerrymander; they united to fight it using their most valuable resource, their dollars.

Segregationist whites in Tuskegee fought desperately to hold on to their already-contested control over the largely black town. Aside from fighting discrimination and racism, civically engaged blacks also found themselves battling old fears and prejudices from the Reconstruction era in their efforts to prove that they could be equal partners in governing Tuskegee. The TCA envisioned an interracial government and did not seek to rule or dominate whites or anyone else. Segregationists, however, did not believe that blacks could hold power without seeking revenge for the past mistreatment they had endured under both slavery and Jim Crow. When whites enacted the gerrymander to block African American political advancement, the TCA responded with the Crusade for Citizenship. The Crusade was a boycott in action, but the TCA carefully labeled its actions as a “trade with your friends” campaign to avoid violating Alabama’s Anti-Boycott law of 1921.⁴

The Crusade for Citizenship was extraordinarily effective, shaking the very economic foundations of Tuskegee and creating unintended consequences that would have a decisive impact on the futures of the town’s citizens, African Americans and whites alike. The Crusaders were ultimately successful in accomplishing their goal to exert immense economic pressure on the whites who had supported the forced political exile of Tuskegee’s black citizens through the gerrymander. A nearly one hundred percent drop in black patronage forced many of the segregationist merchants whose stores ringed the town’s Confederate Square out of business. Many of these individuals also left Tuskegee entirely once their businesses failed, part of a pattern of unintended consequences brought about by the boycott.

⁴ Alabama’s Anti-Boycott Law of 1921 was initially passed in response to a mining strike but was most notably used in 1956 to arrest leaders of the Montgomery Bus Boycott included was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

During the gerrymander and blacks' boycott in response to it, the interplay between the black Crusaders and white segregationists in Tuskegee choked the town's economy and severely undercut its prospects for future growth. Opinion surveys administered in August of 1957 and discussed at length in the second chapter of this thesis reveal that some of those unintended economic consequences might have been avoided. Many whites in the town were evidently unaware of the plans of a small group of whites to enact a racial gerrymander and did not learn of it until it had already passed the Alabama State House and Senate in June of 1957. While many whites in the town felt that the gerrymander was necessary, public opinion data suggest that they were not as universally culpable as many blacks in Tuskegee initially assumed.

Black Tuskegee citizens were convinced in 1957 that much of the white community had called for the gerrymander as a punitive response to the increased registration of blacks since 1950, and that these whites fully supported it once it became law. Many whites and blacks both agreed that the racial tension heightened by the gerrymander and boycott was inevitable, yet some believed that dialogue between the races could have possibly prevented the catastrophic economic collapse that followed.⁵

In 1958, a stalemate settled on the city as the Crusaders refused to patronize white-owned businesses on Confederate Square. For their part, segregationist merchants pledged to weather the storm, confident that the TCA-organized boycott would be short-lived and that its imminent failure would force blacks to return downtown and resume their patronage. As days became weeks, however, whites keenly felt the withdrawal of black-earned dollars that had pumped an estimated \$150,000 weekly into the downtown

⁵ Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondent #52, #74, #66. For a discussion of the Tuskegee Crisis Study see Chapter Two below.

district's economy and were now being spent elsewhere. Confederate Square merchants who had taken black patronage for granted were now painfully aware of how central that revenue stream had been. They had failed to value their bread and butter, and now it was completely gone.

Before the boycott, black citizens often regarded black-owned businesses as second class and favored many of the white businesses downtown. Black businesses often charged higher prices for many of the same products found in white stores. However, many of these black businesses found new life during the Crusade as they were now the recipients of the black community members' dollars. Once the boycott period passed, however, even these African American merchants could not fill the ever-expanding void left by departed white owned businesses were ill-equipped to provide affordable goods and services to Tuskegee's sizable black community permanently.

The economic void left by segregationist whites also presented challenges for Tuskegee's political future. The city government in Tuskegee gradually evolved from segregationist control through a short-lived interracial government to what ultimately became a black-dominated government that the TCA had hoped to avoid. Whites' massive resistance to black assertion ironically led to the realization of their Reconstruction-fueled nightmares of "Negro domination"; their refusal to make a place for African Americans at the table in the end resulted in them having no place to sit either.

A generational changing of the guard occurred within the civil rights movement in and after 1965 as a younger generation began to challenge Gomillion and the TCA. These more militant Civil Rights workers deemed the TCA's methods of patience and

pragmatism as ineffective and out of date, as they raised their younger, brasher, and more frustrated voices in favor of change they largely drowned out Gomillion's voice of pragmatism in the community. Instead of challenging the younger generation of Civil Rights activists, Gomillion and the TCA chose to "Let the Children Lead,"⁶ and willingly relinquished their leadership of the community. The TCA's prominence diminished in the community, membership declined, and its many Civil and Voting Rights accomplishments were seemingly forgotten. The interracial government the TCA had envisioned of both whites and blacks working together for the good of Tuskegee was also largely abandoned as a goal.

In the years after after *Gomillion v Lightfoot* (1960) overturned the gerrymander and the undiluted voting rights of black citizens were restored, several TCA leaders ran successfully for elected office. With help from an expanding black electorate, Frank Toland, Charles Gomillion, Reverend K.L. Buford, and Stanley Smith all successfully won seats on the Macon County School Board and Tuskegee's City Council in a hotly contested 1964 election. For School Board Member Gomillion specifically, the desegregation of Macon County's schools became his top priority.

Gomillion learned a tough lesson however when despite his efforts to unite the board in pushing for desegregation, white flight and massive resistance proved that Macon County was not yet ready for the changes he and many blacks had hoped for. His self-described failure was magnified by constant and public criticism by younger and more radical civil rights workers that were now convinced that he had become more

⁶ In Tuskegee, "Let the Children Lead" became a slogan that expressed faith in the younger student movement. Student leaders such as Sammy Younge (see Chapter Three below) were born and raised in Tuskegee and had grown up as part of the TCA. The expectation was that they would continue on the work of the TCA in a new age.

partial to whites than blacks now that he was an elected official. The generational rift between Gomillion's generation of civil rights leaders and workers divided Tuskegee's black community. While older TCA members continued to look to Gomillion to be the voice of reason and pragmatic leadership, the younger generation of Tuskegee Institute students found a fresh alternative in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leaders such as James Forman, Stokeley Carmichael, and local activist Sammy Younge whose militant vision involved aggressively pursuing the immediate and complete integration of Tuskegee.

For decades, the TCA battled segregationists for equal rights. Now it appeared, the younger generation not only fiercely opposed segregationist whites, they also were impatient with their elders, ridiculing older civil rights methods and alienating more established leaders in the process. Both the older and younger generations worked tirelessly toward the same ultimate goal of transferring power from segregationist into the hands of Tuskegee's blacks. In the end the generational differences were perhaps more about means than ends. Gomillion and the TCA worked for interracial government where blacks and whites could work together for the benefit of everyone. Sammy Younge, Gwen Patton, George Ware, and other local student leaders worked towards a government that represented black Tuskegee and could aid its large black population especially the poor.

The transfer of power was finally completed in 1972 when with the help from the newly ratified 26th constitutional amendment the voting age was lowered to eighteen, allowing Tuskegee Institute students to vote for the first time. These students voted in

bloc for Johnny Ford, making him the city's first black mayor.⁷ Despite the TCA's professed goal of an interracial government, its members sacrifices and victories had paved the way for Ford's election and the transition to black political dominance

As African Americans moved into positions as elected officials, the Movement in Tuskegee had at long last accomplished a great victory for their community, themselves, and the larger national movement. But with few exceptions historians have failed to appreciate the full significance of Tuskegee's Movement.

Historians of modern United States history and the civil rights movement have often viewed the Movement from a top-down perspective, placing much of the emphasis on leadership figures such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and on prominent civil rights organizations such as the SCLC, NAACP, SNCC, and CORE. Scholars have devoted thousands of pages to exploring the significant role played by presidents (notably Kennedy and Johnson), Congress, and the Courts (especially the federal courts) in responding to the civil rights movement. For the past twenty years, historians have expanded the vista and carved out an important place for the foot-soldiers of the movement, resulting in a transformed narrative of social change. Unlike figures such as Dr. King who could travel from location to location, the foot-soldiers of the movement often permanently lived in these communities and endured the daily consequences of challenging Jim Crow segregation and racism. The historiographical shift using the stories of local individuals has radically reoriented the history of the civil rights movements to the point where many argue it is best understood from the grassroots perspective.

⁷ The 26th Amendment was ratified in Alabama on June 30, 1971.

Robert Norrell's *Reaping the Whirlwind* and William Chafe's *Civilities and Civil Rights* are two of the earliest in-depth civil rights movement community studies that illustrate the embattled New South in transition.⁸ These two works were among the first to show that individual local voices and personalities matter and play a very unique role in the expanding historiography of the Civil Rights movement. Norrell and Chafe remind readers that events and movements do not simply happen, that they are historically grounded, influenced by local circumstances, and that the consequences they unleash are far from predictable and certainly not inevitable. Norrell's *Reaping the Whirlwind*, currently the definitive study of the civil rights movement in Tuskegee, focuses most of its analysis on the 1960s, although its overall narrative sweep reaches back to episodes of violence against black voters in the 1870s and continues forward until the elections of black politicians nearly a hundred years later. Chafe's *Civilities and Civil Rights* roots an investigation of the outbreak of the famous Greensboro sit-ins of 1960 in an in-depth community case study, situating the origins of the student-led protests in the 1940s and the increased significance of black efforts to reclaim voting rights in the 1950s. Chafe's approach uses nearly twenty years of context to explain the evolution of the Greensboro community and what this evolution looked like through the eyes of black citizens with his introduction of black primary source materials.

Both scholars masterfully use individual voices to narrate the changing of communities, movements, and people over time. The hallmark of Chafe's work is his introduction of previously unheard black oral history sources to complete the narrative of what happened in Greensboro. Norrell is also successful in introducing an expansive cast

⁸ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985); William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

of historical characters, but not necessarily all the voices necessary to offer a complete narrative of what transpired in civil rights era Tuskegee. Norrell's study used a set of public opinion questionnaires to explore the contours of white thinking in Tuskegee, and he was an early example of a new wave of scholarship that recognized that whites in Tuskegee and elsewhere around and beyond the South often harbored differing and inconsistent opinions on segregation, at least in private.⁹ This source enabled him to reveal that Tuskegee's whites often held differing opinions on segregation, at least in private.

Although Norrell's *Whirlwind* is the most extensive treatment of the Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee, it also stands as one of the vanguards of the historiography of grassroots movements in Alabama. Works such as Jesse Guzman's *Crusade for Civic Democracy*, Frye Gaillard's *Cradle of Freedom*, Bernard Taper's *Gomillion versus Lightfoot*, and Fred Gray's *Bus Ride to Justice* examine the movement in Tuskegee as an early and significant civil rights victory.¹⁰ Other works, such as Glen Eskew's *But for Birmingham*, Jonathan Bass's *Blessed Are the Peacemakers*, and Diane McWhorter's *Carry Me Home*, primarily examine Birmingham with some minor mention of events in Tuskegee.¹¹ And J. Mills Thornton, III, offers an early and important attempt to compare

⁹ For a compelling recent study of the broad spectrum of white attitudes during the civil rights era see Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

¹⁰ Jesse Guzman, *The Crusade for Civic Democracy: The Story of the Tuskegee Civic Association 1941-1970* (New York: Vantage Press, 1984); Frye Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom: Alabama and the Movement that Changed America* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004); Bernard Taper, *Gomillion versus Lightfoot: The Tuskegee Gerrymander Case* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1963); Fred Gray, *Bus Ride to Justice: Changing the System by the System: The Life and Works of Fred D. Gray, Preacher, Attorney, Politician* (Montgomery: Black Belt Press, 1995).

¹¹ Glen Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Jonathan Bass, *Blessed are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the "Letter from Birmingham Jail"* (Baton

communities gripped by civil rights protests in *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma*.¹² Each of these authors builds on the assertion by Norrell and Chafe that local movements influenced the national one, and a host of civil rights monographs, biographies, and other studies mount a compelling case that Alabama is America's civil rights crucible, or as Gaillard puts it, a "cradle of freedom."

To truly understand the significance of what happened in Tuskegee in the 1950s and 1960s, careful examinations of previously unused and unseen black primary source data is required. Examining the biographical significance of important individuals such as Charles Gomillion and the institutional role of the Tuskegee Civic Association, provides valuable insight into the making of a grassroots movement, and building on the existing literature further establishes Tuskegee's uniqueness as the site of an early but not fully appreciated landmark victory for civil rights. Examining Gomillion and the TCA also complements the expanding Civil Rights scholarship of homegrown grassroots movements in Alabama and elsewhere, and is even more illuminating because of the notable absence of traditionally heroic figures such Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and because with few exceptions Tuskegee did not attract the sort of national scrutiny and presidential and Congressional involvement that has arguably warped our historical understanding of social change in communities like Birmingham and Selma.

Careful examination of previously lost black primary source data from movement leaders and members underscores the connection between this local grassroots movement

Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001); Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama The Climatic Battle of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

¹² J. Mills Thornton, III *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002).

and the evolution of the larger national movement. By introducing several new sources from the Tuskegee movement, this thesis helps historians better address the uniqueness and significance of Tuskegee. Most importantly this thesis foregrounds the responses of blacks to the Tuskegee Crisis Study, a valuable source previously unavailable to Robert Norrell and other scholars due to those responses having been lost. This source is crucial. Whereas Norrell could only reveal the contours of white thinking, there now exists the opportunity to compare and contrast the thinking of *both* blacks *and* whites. Survey data from both sides of the color line, moreover, creates a more complete portrait of race and class in both racial communities in Tuskegee. Two additional sources this thesis introduces are recently discovered audio recordings from several TCA mass meetings from 1957, along with an unfinished autobiography of TCA President Charles Gomillion. Built upon both new and previously-examined evidence, the analysis that follows provides a glimpse in to the complexities of race, class, and resistance, along with the contours of political and economic power as revealed in Tuskegee's struggle for racial equality.

The chapters that follow tell the story of a people and their movement, the Crusade for Citizenship, relating their victories and defeats along the way. Long-forgotten civil rights actors now have an opportunity to be heard with the hope that the inhabitants of the better world they hoped to build will come to know of their sacrifice. The movement started by the TCA and its most prominent leader Charles Gomillion helped to fan the flames of the modern Civil Rights movement and influenced Civil Rights debates in congress. The Supreme Court case *Gomillion v Lightfoot* (1960) became an endearing legal landmark marking the significance of the legacy of the

Tuskegee movement. Yet there are no monuments or national holidays for Gomillion or the TCA. The future envisioned by the TCA and Gomillion for Tuskegee never came to pass, and the boycott ultimately caused irreparable damage to the town's economic health. All that remains now, is a hollow inheritance for a city with little to show for its immense sacrifices in a not so distant past.

Chapter One: From Crisis to Crusade

In December of 1957, Tuskegee Alabama witnessed what was described as a “mysterious \$80,000 fire.”¹ In the period immediately preceding the blaze, E.M. Miller, a black grocer and merchant in Tuskegee, had experienced tremendous growth and increased patronage as a result of his position as one of the city’s leading black grocers. A citywide boycott² of white businesses in Tuskegee made Miller’s store the unofficial center of black commerce in Tuskegee, leaving the mostly white-owned businesses on Confederate Square³ practically deserted in late 1957. Black Tuskegeesans traveled to nearby Alabama cities such as Montgomery, Opelika, and Auburn to purchase many of the goods they had once bought from white merchants in Tuskegee. Certain perishable grocery items however, could not make these extended trips sometimes up to fifty miles away, and Miller’s store provided these and other items right in Tuskegee, albeit at slightly higher prices.⁴

E.M. Miller was a highly respected figure within the black community but had also earned respect from his white business counterparts as an active member of the city’s nearly all-white Chamber of Commerce. His small store, directly across the street from the Lincoln Gates and Dorothy Hall on the Tuskegee Institute campus was where

¹ "80,000 in Damages for Negro Merchant" *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 8, 1957.

² In this thesis I refer to the action of black citizens in Tuskegee as a boycott because that is what it was in action. The citizens themselves, referred to what they were doing as a Crusade for Civic Democracy and a Selective Buying Campaign where they pledged to only trade with and buy from their friends. Simply put they pledged to not patronize white businesses downtown because they had supported a Senate Bill that gerrymandered African Americans out of the limits of the city of Tuskegee.

³ Confederate Square is the name black citizens gave to the downtown square in Tuskegee. The square features a monument of a Confederate Soldier, honoring all CSA veterans of Macon County.

⁴ Black Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondents often briefly described their shopping habits during the boycott period. Many of them complimented the services of black merchants during the boycott but often shared a minor complaint/suggestion in regards to the slightly higher prices black merchants charged compared to the boycotted white merchants.

Institute faculty, staff, and students would normally purchase items like a coke, cigarettes, shoe polish, stationery, etc. The much larger, adjoining building to Miller's store was Faculty Hall, which housed a barbershop, a small eatery, and single occupancy apartments for Institute professors.⁵ Miller's was highly popular among Institute faculty before the boycott, but it was during the Crusade for Citizenship's early stages that Miller's store emerged as a leader on Tuskegee's black business scene.⁶ Blacks that had once went downtown to do their shopping in white-owned and staffed stores, were now taking their business to Miller and several other rising black merchants. This shift in the small town's pecking order likely did not come as a welcome sight for Confederate Square merchants that now found themselves struggling to keep their businesses afloat.

Any respect Miller might have earned from his white business peers likely turned into scorn very quickly as his store grew from an afterthought in the community to now thriving entirely at their expense. "No one knows how the fire started," a newspaper article in the African American daily, *The Pittsburgh Courier* noted. "The blaze was not discovered until after it had been burning for about two hours. Mr. Miller stated that Tuskegee's fire department did yeoman work in trying to fight the flames."⁷ Miller's store was reduced to ash and rubble on the eve of the busiest shopping period of the year, the two most profitable weeks leading up to Christmas.

⁵ Frank Toland, Interviewed by Alphonso T. Smith, Alabama Committee on Higher Education Oral History Project Transcripts Volume 3. (All A.C.H.E. Oral History Transcripts are available Courtesy of the Tuskegee University Archives, Tuskegee Alabama). Professor Toland stayed in Faculty Hall after initially arriving in Tuskegee, before meeting his wife in Tuskegee.

⁶ Jessie P. Guzman, Interviewed by Alphonso T. Smith, Alabama Committee on Higher Education Oral History Project Transcripts. Volume 2.
Both Faculty Hall and Miller's Grocer no longer stand. Miller's store burned down in 1957 while Faculty Hall was later demolished by Tuskegee University along with several other buildings during the Presidential tenure of Benjamin F. Payton in the mid-1980s early-1990s.

⁷ 1957. "80,000 in Damages for Negro Merchant" *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 8.

For Miller and the rest of the black community this coincidence in timing made the circumstances of the blaze highly suspicious, but for segregationist merchants and business rivals the result of the fire could not have been more perfect, seeming to promise an economic windfall. Ideally the segregationist merchants would reclaim some of the African American business that upstarts like Miller had taken from them. For many Confederate Square merchants in dire straits, the hope was that this 1957 Christmas holiday would be just what they needed to revive what was left of their businesses. Some of the Confederate Square businesses had already closed down for good, the rest were holding on with the hope that the Christmas shopping season might shore up their faltering bottom line. Remaining Confederate Square merchants hoped the fire might drive blacks back to their stores and end the boycott. When that happened, the Square's merchants would be there with open arms to receive and forgive them as they had in the past after similar less successful boycott attempts.⁸

Much to their surprise and chagrin, their businesses remained just as empty and profitless as if Miller's Store had never been touched. While the exact cause of the fire was never discovered (or disclosed), for Miller and the rest of Tuskegee's black citizens there was no mistaking it for what it was, an act of arson. Miller's success was no longer tolerable by Confederate Square merchants, and they wanted to create a situation where blacks were forced to resume their old buying habits downtown. Miller's store was a smaller adjoining building to the significantly larger Faculty Hall and only a few short steps away from Miller's private home going in the opposite direction. Miller's store was the only structure to burn while the others were untouched. If indeed it was a

⁸ Several boycotts had been attempted in the city of Tuskegee as responses to unfair treatment and discrimination of blacks by whites. These previous attempts often resulted in failure, with blacks returning to their old buying habits downtown with the whites.

deliberately-set fire, in addition to wiping out Miller's growing success, the act of arson also sent a powerful message to the black community of Tuskegee, specifically the venerable Tuskegee Civic Association. In addition to its location directly across the street from Tuskegee Institute, Miller's Grocery was located close to the TCA headquarters, which stood squarely in front of the Lincoln Gates. The fire's proximity to all of these landmarks of African American assertion and success made it all the more disconcerting. Messages from Tuskegee's segregationist population came infrequently but when they did, they came as burning crosses on the town's square in sight of the courthouse where many African Americans had attempted to register to vote. Even more intimidating than the racist pyrotechnics the KKK had been famous for since its rebirth in 1915, caravans of hooded Klansmen would drive slowly around the town's square or near the Tuskegee Institute and VA Hospital grounds.⁹ Arson may have represented a tactical escalation, but it seemed to fit neatly along the spectrum of white acts of intimidation, and it clearly telegraphed how bitterly some white merchants and white segregationists more generally felt about African Americans' withdrawal of their patronage from once profitable white-owned businesses.

Tuskegee's black citizens had seen these types of signs before and refused to take the bait, continuing to boycott the Confederate Square businesses and refusing to be intimidated by whatever message the whites had hoped to impart. The TCA collected several offerings over the next few weeks and contributed \$500 to assist Miller in his preparations to build a newer and bigger store.¹⁰ The TCA-led black community pressed

⁹ Robert R. Moton, *Finding a Way Out* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1920) ,75.

¹⁰ Miller commented to the Pittsburg Courier that he fully intended to rebuild a new store, contracting with the A.C. Bulls Contracting company, one of Tuskegee's larger black owned business establishments. The

on with their movement unfazed, and segregationist merchants on Confederate Square settled back into the waiting game, determined to hold out until the next opportunity to save their businesses. To understand how Tuskegee had become such a deeply embattled community by the end of 1957 one need only return to the summer, when a local State Senator's highly controversial bill became the unjust law of the land.

Citizens Without a City

Six months earlier on June 22, 1957 the legislative log of the *Montgomery Advertiser* listed that the major action of the day in the Alabama State House was that State Senator Sam Engelhardt's Senate Bill No. 291 had passed unanimously. The log read: Passed by vote of 81-0 and sent to governor for signature; a local bill which excludes virtually all Negroes from within the city limits of Tuskegee."¹¹ All-white members of the Alabama House and Senate adopted Senate Bill No. 291 without debate. Because the bill had passed both houses unanimously, it would become law anyway despite the objection of Alabama Governor Jim Folsom, who refused to sign it. The column in the paper where the legislative item was located, could have easily missed by the *Advertiser's* readers due to its small size in proportion to several other miscellaneous articles and advertisements. But despite the newspaper's having buried the item, the bill's passage sparked a series of events that would eventually lead to catastrophic damage to the already delicate racial balance in the city of Tuskegee.

descendants of A.C. Bulls are still active in the community with one owning a bail bonds company, and his son serving as a defense attorney in Tuskegee.

¹¹ "Legislative Log." *Montgomery Advertiser Clipping*, June 22, 1957.

Blacks in Tuskegee and elsewhere were not unaccustomed to discrimination; encountering the daily indignities of white supremacy and racism was part of “growing up Jim Crow” in the American South. Compared to many southern Black Belt communities, however blacks and whites in Tuskegee had found a way to coexist with minimal violence and few overt clashes. It appeared that in Tuskegee, Booker T. Washington’s suggestion that blacks and whites could be as “separate as the fingers but one as the fist”¹² had been executed almost to perfection in Tuskegee. Washington worked hard to realize the ideal community he envisioned in Tuskegee, the site of the beloved Tuskegee Institute he helped found in 1881.¹³ Blacks and whites lived relatively peacefully on opposite sides of the community, when interaction was necessary African Americans encountered less overt racial humiliation and discrimination than they endured elsewhere. It was only when blacks in Tuskegee attempted to register to vote and push for a greater measure of inclusion in the community’s governance that deep seated racial tensions rose to the surface.

Six months earlier and forty-five miles to the west in Montgomery, a bus boycott by black citizens had ended in a signal victory when the Supreme Court in December 1956 ruled in favor of the Montgomery Improvement Association. The success of the boycott of segregated city buses represented a glaring black eye for segregationists in Alabama. For Alabama politicians in Montgomery, Tuskegee provided an opportunity to reassert their dominance for the sake of white voters while repairing a chink in Alabama’s wall of segregation.

¹² Booker T Washington, *Atlanta Compromise Speech 1895*, Cotton States and International Exposition. Atlanta, Georgia.

¹³ Raymond Smock, *Booker T. Washington: Black Leadership in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Ivan R. Dee, 2009), 65-67.

The origins of the gerrymander bill itself are primarily tied to increased black determination to demand the right to vote. Black Tuskegeens were doing more than asking for this right, they were suing for it. Black citizens under the auspices of the Tuskegee Civic Association had made several attempts to sue the Boards of Registrars that had intentionally and unfairly denied their applications. Of these cases, Mitchell v Wright was the only one that resulted in a ruling in the TCA's favor.

Like many blacks in Tuskegee, William Mitchell had attempted to register to vote multiple times; he had made three efforts and was denied each time. For a black person to vote in Macon County, two white Macon County citizens were required to vouch for the black applicant. When Mitchell, a physical therapist at Tuskegee's VA hospital, first attempted to register, he remembered that the number of registered black voters in the early 1940s stood at "45 or 50...hand-picked black persons who had been vouched for. So called 'good negroes'." In Macon County blacks were becoming more interested in voting particularly around the 1940s, leading to a steady rise in black applicants, and a resulting effort on the part of whites to enact more roadblocks to prevent them from voting such as the implementation of the voucher rule. Mitchell's voter registration was greenlighted with the signatures of two Tuskegee whites named J.D. Reed and W.A. Campbell.¹⁴ An additional part of the voucher rule was that one of the white vouchers was required to appear at the Macon County Courthouse at the request of the applicant to vouch for his or her character. Mitchell successfully satisfied both requirements and appeared before the board of registrars on July 5, 1945.

¹⁴ William P. Mitchell, Interviewed by Alphonso T. Smith, Alabama Committee on Higher Education Oral History Project Transcripts Volume 3.

The chairman of the Macon County Board of Registrars and defendant was a white woman with the last name Wright. Despite satisfying all of the registration requirements, securing adequate vouchers, Mitchell still did not receive his certificate. This denial along with twenty-five similar denials convinced Tuskegee Faculty member and budding voting rights activist Charles Gomillion and the TCA that legal action should be taken to challenge the Board of Registrars. Initially the TCA would bring these suits to the State Courts and the Alabama Supreme Court, however they deemed that given the state's track records on voting rights and civil rights, this would be a disappointing waste of the TCA's volunteered funds.¹⁵

The TCA determined that Tuskegee blacks stood a better chance in federal district court in Montgomery. Mitchell was chosen to be the case's plaintiff because "TCA leaders believed, he could withstand any pressure put on him by whites." Their faith in the VA hospital employee was rewarded, as his resolve to register had only intensified with each denial since the late 1930s. Mitchell enjoyed his work as a physical therapist but his work as the TCA's executive secretary proved to be the challenge that he welcomed the most. Another reason for the TCA placing so much faith in Mitchell when selecting a plaintiff is that in high school at Tuskegee he had been a top student in one of Charles Gomillion's World History classes.¹⁶

On the plaintiff's second appearance at the appellate court, the white registrar Wright unexpectedly claimed that she remembered registering Mitchell; "she pulled out

¹⁵ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 60-62.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 63. In court, despite Mitchell's mental toughness and ability to withstand pressure inside the courtroom and threats outside of the court, Mitchell vs Wright dragged on for three years in the legal system.

and produced one of the three applications I had filled out, and she presented it to the court and the court declared the question mute,”¹⁷ bringing the trial to an end. Mitchell only had to wait two weeks and pay a \$22.50 poll tax to become a *bona fide* registered Alabama voter. Despite Mitchell finally becoming a registered voter, this action from the TCA forced white segregationists in Macon County to find more effective ways to deny the vote. State Senator Sam Engelhardt’s Senate Bill No. 291 promised to be a dramatically more effective means of suppressing African Americans political activism in Tuskegee.

Senate Bill No. 291’s effortless passage through the state house and state senate sent a clear message to the black citizens of Tuskegee: voting was the rough line in the sand Tuskegee’s segregationists had drawn and nearly one thousand registered black voters had crossed it.¹⁸ The Tuskegee gerrymander bill was by far the most drastic white response to black demands for expanded participation in Tuskegee until that point. The range of responses from Tuskegee’s black citizens encompassed anger, disgust, shock, and disbelief at what their neighbors had done to them. Wilbur Robinson a retired Air Force Captain and Purchasing Agent for Tuskegee Institute recalled, “We were just disgusted and angry for one thing. Most of us didn’t know they could do such a thing. We were angry initially but the TCA gave us an opportunity to do something about it.”¹⁹ This disgust at the depths segregationists on a statewide basis were willing to descend to exclude them was especially prevalent in much of the community, but Tuskegee’s blacks

¹⁷ William P. Mitchell, Interviewed by Alphonso T. Smith, Alabama Committee on Higher Education Oral History Project Transcripts Volume 3.

¹⁸ Charles G. Gomillion, “The Tuskegee Voting Story,” *Freedomways*, 2 (1962): 231.

¹⁹ Wilbur Robinson, Interviewed by Alphonso T. Smith, Alabama Committee on Higher Education Oral History Project Transcripts Volume 3.

felt the strongest anger towards local white segregationist leaders. As local activist Wilbur Robinson recalled, “Although the gerrymander came from the state legislature, we knew that it had to be requested by local whites, people we knew, and we held them responsible. We knew if they could get it done then they could have it undone. The idea of the boycott was to bring pressure to bear on them with the idea in mind that they’d go back and see the wrongness of their methods and change them.”²⁰

The TCA had made significant headway in its efforts to ensure that every eligible black citizen could vote responsibly if they desired to. An indirect but known byproduct of this ambitious initiative to register was that black voters were well on their way to overtaking their white neighbors as the voting majority in the town given Tuskegee’s Black Belt demographics.²¹ Although blacks were not actively hoping to eclipse their white neighbors, it was no secret that they outnumbered Tuskegee’s whites several times over. Charles Gomillion and the Tuskegee Civic Association helped to make black Tuskegee citizens more aware of the potential political power they could wield if they continued to register. With this political strength, civic-minded blacks hoped to share power with whites in governing the city, white segregationists, however, had other ideas about what blacks hoped to do with this new power.²²

Major demographic shifts between 1940 and 1950 were largely responsible for the increased awareness of the black population majority. According to the 1940 census Macon County’s total population was 27,654, of those 4,728 (17.9%) were white and

²⁰ Charles G. Gomillion, “The Tuskegee Voting Story,” *Freedomways*, 2 (1962): 232-233.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 233.

²² Charles G. Gomillion, “The Tuskegee Voting Story,” *Freedomways*, 2 (1962): 233-234.

22,926 (82.1%) were black. The number of white age-eligible voters was 3,124 and the number of age-eligible blacks was 13,734.²³ By 1950, a decade later, the total population of Macon County had risen to 30,561, and the percentage of African Americans had risen two points to 84%. As Gomillion noted at the time “in relation to the other 66 counties of Alabama, Macon County ranks sixth in total Negro population and first in proportion of the population that is Negro.”²⁴ Twenty-five hundred of those blacks lived in Tuskegee and were employed by the Institute or VA hospital. Blacks occupying white collar positions increased by 172 percent by 1950 compared to a decade earlier.²⁵ Black Tuskegeans in skilled positions more than doubled, and blacks filled just under fifteen hundred new and middle-income jobs. The explosive growth in skilled jobs was largely attributable to the VA where the hospital staff grew rapidly to accommodate the influx of disabled black veterans from World War Two. Across the way, Tuskegee Institute also expanded its staff to accommodate returning servicemen exercising G.I. Bill benefits. The Institute was growing rapidly, launching several new graduate programs including a new vet school. These increases not only doubled the size of the black middle class in Tuskegee, it also greatly bolstered the potential ranks of the Tuskegee Civic Association. The VA Hospital’s estimated fifteen hundred employees by 1950 became crucial because aside from providing financial support and manpower to the TCA, because they were federal employees with black supervisors they could participate without the fear of being

²³ *The Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Census of the Population, Alabama; The Seventeenth Census of the United States: 1950, Census of the Population, Alabama.*

²⁴ Charles Gomillion “Social Progress in Tuskegee, Alabama: Population Characteristics.” Charles Goode Gomillion Papers, Courtesy of the Tuskegee University Archives.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

fired by local whites unlike blacks in so many other communities across the Jim Crow South overwhelming percentages of whom were beholden to white employers.

Whites in Tuskegee had mixed reactions to this influx of new black middle class professionals. On one hand, these black professionals brought opportunities for white merchants and businesses to expand in order to accommodate the significantly increased demand. On the other hand, this surge in population of black middle class and white collar workers eclipsed Tuskegee's white middle class. As of 1940, the number of whites in middle class and white collar positions was slightly higher than blacks, but by 1950 blacks now accounted for 68% more of these positions than whites, a dramatic shift in a single decade. The population of whites had not decreased, but the population of blacks was skyrocketing, sending shockwaves through the local economy and power structure. Robert Norrell estimates that nine of every ten new citizens to Tuskegee between 1940-1950 were black. "The presence of more blacks--especially when so many of them were well-to-do, only exacerbated the insecurity that white residents already had about their ability to control Tuskegee" the historian noted in *Reaping the Whirlwind*.²⁶ In Tuskegee, the white population lost ground to these newer, more educated, and better paid blacks.

As the population of African Americans in Tuskegee grew, so did the number of black voters. The number of registered black registered voters had reached one thousand by the time the gerrymander bill became law. The lines of black Tuskegeans waiting to register to vote at the Macon County Courthouse in Tuskegee regularly extended outside and at times into the town's square outside.²⁷ These images undoubtedly unsettled

²⁶ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 62.

²⁷ Bernard Taper, *Gomillion versus Lightfoot* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1972), 25-29.

Tuskegee's segregationists, especially those already in power since these long lines would only put blacks that much closer to surpassing whites and taking the majority.

Since the end of World War II, "the number of registered and voting Negroes approached the number of registered white voters which had reached its full potential."²⁸ In Tuskegee the number of registered whites had reached a little over 600 in total since 1900, registered black voters grew from 100 to over 400 since 1941.²⁹ White segregationists watched as black registered voter numbers soared with little evidence that the pace of registration would slow. Fear of losing this majority to blacks backed the town's white elites into a corner, causing them to seek new ways to restore and secure segregationist control of the town. Tuskegee's wealthy segregationist elites placed their faith in the state legislature, hoping to permanently silence black demands for more participation in city government.

The plan initially appeared to have worked flawlessly, unanimous passage of the bill sent a resounding signal that in Alabama the law fully supported segregation and white dominance. Not only was the law at that time on the side of segregationists, it threatened to have far more sweeping implications beyond Tuskegee and Macon County. Charles Gomillion speculated that the all-white legislators were, "conducting an experiment in politics, if the bill could pass both houses and become the law, legislators throughout the state and perhaps the country, would attempt to recreate the bill in their

²⁸ Lewis Jones and Stanley Smith, *Field Report on Desegregation in the South* (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1958), 6.

²⁹ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 65-67.

home districts and constituencies with the reassurance that they could get away with it.”³⁰ Blacks that had been registered to vote were now neutralized since by the bill’s provisions they were no longer citizens of Tuskegee; blacks that had tried for months and sometimes years to register now had no chance of becoming registered because of arbitrary legislation that stripped them of residency in the town.

This was not the first time that voting rights for African Americans in Macon County presented a potential challenge to white political dominance. In the years following Reconstruction, African Americans in Macon County found themselves in the driver’s seat of their political destiny armed with a sizeable voter majority over whites, and a significant political voice that could no longer be ignored by white politicians. Almost a generation later in the 1950s, African Americans in Tuskegee and Macon County once again found themselves at a pivotal moment where they had the power to dictate their political destinies. A primary cause for both pivotal moments in time for both generations of Tuskegee, the introduction of new black citizens into Macon County. After Reconstruction, these new black citizens were introduced into the county as a result of the end of slavery. In 1957 however, the introduction of new black citizens to Tuskegee can be greatly attributed to the Great Migration and the pursuit of better opportunities.

Over six million African Americans participated in a mass exodus from the South between the years 1916-1970.³¹ The Great Migration as it would later be called was a

³⁰ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 115.

³¹ Isabelle Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration* (New York: Vintage, 2011), 34-44.

period when African Americans fled the South in hopes of finding better employment opportunities than the typical menial and subservient jobs they had often held in the states of the former Confederacy.³² In the South blacks were largely in unskilled labor positions, and even in the North the overwhelming majority of blacks held jobs that while more diverse were not quite as concentrated in the professional trades or middle class as was true for many of Tuskegee's African Americans. The city of Tuskegee was an atypical southern town, in that with a handful of exceptions the most affluent members of the community were black. Despite being the county seat of a desperately poor rural Macon County, Tuskegee from its location in the Black Belt boasted one of the highest concentrated areas of African Americans that could be classified as "professionals" or "middle class status."³³

White Tuskegee residents did not have a corresponding labor class of professionals comparable to blacks in Tuskegee. The 1950 U.S. Census listed that only fifty white persons fit the role of middle class in the entire county. As a result of Tuskegee Institute and the VA Hospital being primarily black-serving institutions, the vast majority of whites were left in agriculture and farm operating positions. Because of the Institute and Hospital, many blacks were able to escape some of these same agricultural positions in favor of skilled labor positions.³⁴

³² Ibid.

³³ Lewis Jones and Stanley Smith, *Field Report on Desegregation in the South* (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1958), 7.

³⁴ Charles G. Gomillion, "Social Progress in Tuskegee, Alabama: Population Characteristics." Gomillion was an accomplished Sociologist and wrote several reports like these for several conferences, publications, and to report at TCA weekly mass meetings.

Despite the unusual inversion of the South's typical socioeconomic demographics, members of Tuskegee's professional class were still restricted from registering to vote in the same manner as every other black person affected by the 1957 gerrymander. Black PhD's at Tuskegee Institute and Black M.D.'s at the Veterans Affairs Hospital were reduced in status in the eyes of the law. In Tuskegee, as one local resident remembered, "Negroes were just as capable of registering to vote as an illiterate field hand that may not have spent an hour in a classroom their entire lives."³⁵ The few black professionals that had already been registered to vote and had voted previously were now unable to exercise this right and have an impact on municipal politics once the gerrymander removed them from Tuskegee.

Of the four hundred and twenty registered black voters, only nine were not affected by the gerrymander. The nine that were left within city limits likely were undisturbed because of their proximity to white residences.³⁶ Removing them would have required even greater geographic contortions. Each of the four hundred and eleven ex-Tuskegee voters, "saw their homes jig-sawed out of the city limits by the state legislature."³⁷ Among the ex-citizens and voters were University professors like Charles Gomillion and Lewis Jones and Dr. Luther Foster, the President of Tuskegee Institute. The gerrymander affected nearly every African American citizen in Tuskegee. After

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ William P. Mitchell, Interviewed by Alphonso T. Smith, Alabama Committee on Higher Education Oral History Project Transcripts Volume 3. According to Mitchell, the gerrymander was drawn in such a way that blacks that lived on one side of the street were gerrymandered while whites on the opposite side of the street were still within Tuskegee's boundaries.

³⁷ "Death of a Town," *Time Magazine* November 25 1957.

discovering that they were no longer citizens, blacks looked to the Tuskegee Civic Association and its leader Charles Gomillion for guidance.

The TCA was originally known as the Tuskegee Men's Club but the name was changed "in order to include several women who shared its interests and had the ability to further its purposes."³⁸ Charles Gomillion derived the new name from his commitment to the idea of "civic democracy" which he defined as a "way of life in which all citizens have the opportunity to participate in societal affairs, and benefit from or enjoy public services, in keeping with their interests, abilities, and needs, without limitation or restriction based on race, color, creed, or national origin."³⁹ Part of the mission of the Tuskegee Civic Association under Professor Gomillion was "civic education, the process of teaching the black community how civic democracy worked in both theory and practice."⁴⁰ For years the TCA worked exclusively towards general community improvement but over time it evolved to include political involvement in its activities. Charles Gomillion discussed the TCA's evolution before one of the first crowded weekly mass meetings, "Realizing the importance of participation in politics, the Association has encouraged its members and others to register, pay their poll taxes, and vote intelligently."⁴¹ The poll tax was later abolished, but the TCA encouraged its members to satisfy this requirement to vote before it became illegal. The TCA was not a radical

³⁸ Charles Gomillion, Interviewed by Alphonso T. Smith, Alabama Committee on Higher Education Oral History Project Transcripts Volume 2.

³⁹ *Tuskegee News*, April 17, 1941; Gomillion to "Citizen" December 9, 1941, Tuskegee Civic Association Files, TCA office, Tuskegee, Alabama; Gomillion, "The Responsibilities of Social Scientists as Citizens in the Crusade for Civic Democracy in the South," TCAF.

⁴⁰ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 42.

⁴¹ Tuskegee Civic Association Weekly Mass Meeting at Butler Chapel in Tuskegee, Alabama. Circa 1957.

organization by today's standards, choosing to work within the system to be responsible voters and citizens.

The TCA's primary opposition early on was the Macon County Board of Registrars. The same zeal and energy blacks put into learning about their constitutional rights and registering to vote was duplicated two-fold by a rotating door of all-white segregationist boards of registrars who were, equally determined to block the registration attempts of African Americans. Board members went to excessive lengths to prevent blacks from voting at all costs. Acts as simple as "losing" registration documents, leaving work early, having blacks read and interpret passages of the Alabama state constitution were just a few of many measures taken to block registration.⁴² If a black registrant could read the constitution, he or she would be made to interpret it to the "satisfaction" of the board member. These efforts would usually be for naught, because even if the application would make it to the final stage of being approved or denied, it would somehow disappear never to be approved anyway.⁴³

The board would also be closed and not reconvene for months at a time, sitting on hundreds of voter registration applications with the intention of discouraging the black potential applicants. During these periods, the board would sometimes convene for secret meetings to register white citizens. At other times the board would simply disband in the face of legal action from the TCA. The TCA found little success in bringing lawsuits against the members of the board for violating the voting rights of blacks in Tuskegee and Macon County because board members would be out of office before the suit could

⁴² Charles G. Gomillion, "The Challenge of the Present Crisis in Macon County" *delivered at TCA Mass Meeting, Washington Chapel A.M.E. Church, Tuskegee, Alabama, Tuesday evening, July 30, 1957.

⁴³ Ibid.

reach the courts. With the board disbanded, applications already submitted by blacks languished, and new applications could not be made. The greatest enemy of the TCA early on was the inactivity of the board, if the board was meeting regularly the TCA at least had a chance to get blacks registered. The TCA could not fight a board that was not currently in session. More importantly, TCA members simply could and sometimes did lose interest and grow tired of waiting for a new board. This often sapped any positive momentum the board might have built up over a stretch of a few months.⁴⁴

To prevent this and more importantly get things moving again, the TCA resorted to petitioning select whites to volunteer to serve on the board. The TCA anticipated that anyone that would respond to this petition would more than likely be another segregationist intent on slowing the growth of black voters in Tuskegee as much as possible. This was a possibility the TCA often had to accept, rationalizing that a board with active members is better than no board at all. On December 16, 1948, Gomillion penned a heartfelt and patriotic petition entitled “An Open Letter to the Citizens of Macon County” in the *Tuskegee News*. Gomillion ended the letter with, “Our political democracy is based on the principle that all law abiding citizens who meet the qualifications of electors have the right, and should have the opportunity, to participate in self-government.” The next day a very similar open letter was placed in the *Montgomery Advertiser*, this time addressed directly to Governor Jim Folsom, informing him that the TCA had already asked its fellow (white) citizens to serve. Gomillion wrote, “We hope that the principles of democracy and the spirit and teachings of Christ will so permeate

⁴⁴ Charles G. Gomillion, “The Challenge of the Present Crisis in Macon County” *delivered at TCA Mass Meeting, Washington Chapel A.M.E. Church, Tuskegee, Alabama, Tuesday evening, July 30, 1957. Alphonso T. Smith Interview with Charles Gomillion 1973.

and motivate their minds and hearts that some might even volunteer to serve.” Gomillion concluded with a direct question, passively challenging the governor; “May we count on you to help relieve us of the embarrassment we are now experiencing and the political disfranchisement we are now suffering?” The TCA leader’s petitions did not fall on deaf ears, and they successfully found three white local merchants that volunteered to be on the board. Three merchants from Tuskegee volunteered although only two of them would actually get to serve. Governor Folsom heard Gomillion and the TCA, and had one man in mind for the Chairman position.

Like Jesus, Coming Out of Nazareth

In *Dixiecrats and Democrats*, William Barnard refers to Governor Jim “Kissing” Folsom as a “radical democrat” whose political idol was Andrew Jackson.⁴⁵ In some ways Gomillion’s request “struck the chord that the Governor could not resist.”⁴⁶ Folsom’s affinity for Jackson, led him to view the situation in Macon County in a Jacksonian context, and he was determined to let his democratic faith and the wisdom of the people guide his response to this problem. Folsom leaned on an old friend from Notasulga that he deemed perfect for the vacant chairmanship on the Macon County Board of Registrars.

Folsom called his old friend Herman Bentley, a farmer from Notasulga who had proven his usefulness to Folsom in a 1938 Congressional campaign and later in 1946

⁴⁵ William Barnard, *Dixiecrats and Democrats; Alabama Politics 1942-1950* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1974), 32.

⁴⁶ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 73.

when Folsom ran for Governor. It was Folsom's first encounter with Bentley in 1938 that made the farmer, "a Jim Folsom man."⁴⁷ Folsom impressed Bentley in 1938 when he unexpectedly visited Bentley at his home. The aspiring candidate had initially planned to speak with Bentley about the race and ask for his support, but when he arrived Bentley and his son Robert were in the process of cleaning their hog-pen. Rather than return later, the towering Folsom removed his size fourteen shoes and jumped into the hog-pen to help the Bentley's with their chores. Folsom's humility in pitching in with the greatly impressed Bentley, earning his much needed support in the county. Bentley never asked for any titles or positions after aiding Folsom's successful campaigns. When Folsom finally asked Bentley to serve on the board, Bentley accepted, fully aware that this position would bring far more notoriety than glory.⁴⁸ Bentley, a man of principle and his strong Methodist faith, decided that he could live with that.

Notasulga at that time was the antithesis of Tuskegee. Unlike Tuskegee, Notasulga's population was mostly white and closely tied to agriculture. Accordingly, the TCA leaders initially had very low expectations for this white farmer from Notasulga. Daniel Beasley, a TCA member with deep family roots in Macon County recalled, "I didn't know a good man could come out of Notasulga."⁴⁹ These feelings were common among many blacks that had always known whites from Notasulga as some of the most racist people in the county. Subverting these low expectations Bentley would prove

⁴⁷ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 73.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁴⁹ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 74.

himself as an invaluable ally to the TCA's cause of ensuring that every person that was eligible would be registered.

The number of black registered voters quadrupled during Bentley's tenure. In total Bentley approved four hundred and forty-nine black applications raising the number of registered blacks from less than one hundred to a little over five hundred.⁵⁰ Unlike his predecessors, he "freely accepted blacks as vouchers and allowed Gomillion," along with other TCA staff, "to correct minor mistakes on black applications, knowing that any error would give one of the other registrars cause to reject an application."⁵¹ Bentley offered a disarmingly straightforward rationale for his unusual actions, "Them folks out there (in Tuskegee) got more sense than I got. How can I fail to register them?"⁵² Bentley attributed his racial attitudes to his study of scripture and his belief that all men were created equal. TCA member Daniel Beasley later said of the Notasulgan, "Herman Bentley was like Jesus coming out of Nazareth."⁵³ Bentley served from 1949 to 1951 on the board of registrars, but in the last year of his tenure his fellow white registrars Jack Rodgers and W.D. Tommie choked his productivity by habitually failing to appear for meetings. Alabama law required that for applications to be accepted, at least two registrars had to be present.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 74-75.

⁵⁴ Procedures for Holding Elections in Mayor-Council Municipalities Handbook: An Alabama League of Municipalities Special Report. 2015 Alabama League of Municipalities. Bentley could appear for a meeting but not be legally able to approve applications single-handedly. To not completely waste days like this Bentley would revise submitted applications and recommend corrections. Robert Bentley "Interview by Robert Norrell," Tallassee, Alabama, August 10, 1978.

During Bentley's final year as chairman of the board he helped approve sixty-four successful black applications, down significantly from the roughly 200 he averaged per year in his first two years on the board. Despite this, Bentley's years on the board leveled the playing field for Macon County politics. More importantly, Bentley's work on the board allowed the TCA to focus on educating and helping citizens register to vote as opposed to fighting uphill battles with the Board as they had been doing.

The TCA Grows Up

The dramatic expansion of African American voting potential in this period although brief, allowed the TCA to grow in prominence and find its footing as the leadership organization within Tuskegee's black community with Charles Gomillion at its head. Black Tuskegee citizen interactions with civil rights organizations were limited to the NAACP and TCA primarily. Some community members were affiliated with both organizations, primarily Tuskegee Institute faculty like Professor Frank Toland, who had migrated to Tuskegee. Toland had worked with the NAACP in Philadelphia during his time at the University of Pennsylvania and with the local Tuskegee chapter. Toland and other Institute faculty like Charles Gomillion were prominent members of the TCA and or the NAACP. Their involvement with civil rights activities never drew rebuke from the administration of Tuskegee Institute. "The administration of Tuskegee Institute deserves continuing commendation" recalled Toland. "We performed our activities as faculty members, being as careful as we could not to follow the admonitions of the former president that we separate our outside activities from our activities at the institute and

tried to do it.”⁵⁵ The Institute administration largely turned a blind eye to the activities of its faculty, while the VA’s official policy was to allow its employees to be engaged in civil rights activity without fear of retaliation from their supervisors.⁵⁶ While the two largest African American-controlled institutions in the county did not object to the activism of their employees, the white community’s response was a wildcard. Blacks carefully scrutinized the white middle class and the wealthy elites to whom they often deferred to see how they would react to African Americans’ increasing assertiveness “As long as the NAACP and TCA conducted their activities in civic education nature, there were no strong reactions from the white community rather an ignoring of the presence of our organizations,” Toland explained. However, “the attack came at the state level against the NAACP.”⁵⁷

The case against the NAACP was tried in Judge Walter Jones’ court and one of the attorneys for the NAACP was Robert Carter.⁵⁸ Before the trial began the NAACP made a bold but perfectly legal request of the trial officiant. “Judge Jones was asked by the NAACP to recuse himself from the case because of prejudicial statements that he had made during his own political campaign for reelection,” recalled Toland. Jones “had

⁵⁵ Frank Toland Interviewed by Alphonso T. Smith, Alabama Committee on Higher Education Oral History Project Transcripts Volume 2.

The university administrations Toland is mostly referring to is Frederick Douglass Patterson and Luther Foster, whose administrations spanned much of the Civil Rights movement.

⁵⁶ Enacted in 1939, the Hatch ACT (5 U.S.C.A. 7324) curbs the political activities of employees in federal, state, and local governments. The law’s goal is to enforce political neutrality among civil servants: the act prohibits them from holding public office, influencing elections, participating in or managing political campaigns, and exerting undue influence on government hiring.

⁵⁷ Frank Toland Interviewed by Alphonso T. Smith, Alabama Committee on Higher Education Oral History Project Transcripts Volume 2.

⁵⁸ Robert Carter served as general counsel to the NAACP and later teamed up with Fred Gray in *Gomillion v Lightfoot*. See Fred Gray, *Bus Ride to Justice*, 110-111.

written a column ‘I speak for the white man,’ that appeared in the *Montgomery Advertiser*, and had publicly declared that it would be his aim to drive the NAACP from the state, and he refused to recuse himself from the case.”⁵⁹ Toland recalled this day in court vividly: “we had a brief recess and the judge walked up and down the hall at the courthouse and when he finally returned to bring court back into session, he pulled from someplace this legalized sheet, in which he had already written his opinion before the motion was made.”⁶⁰ With the opinion already written which would bar the NAACP from operating in the state, and the venerable civil rights organization already setting up the regional office in Atlanta, the TCA found itself “picking up the operations that were necessary which were no longer being conducted, because the NAACP had been driven out of the state.”⁶¹ The TCA began to speed up its evolution from an organization primarily concerned with voter education to one focuses on voter action and legal initiatives, absorbing actions usually spearheaded by the NAACP. With this transition the TCA now drew a heightened level of scrutiny from the state.⁶² The political education-minded TCA had been seen by whites as a small but persistent annoyance, but a TCA actively engaged in political action suggested a full-scale assault on segregation and voter discrimination in the state of Alabama; the stakes could not have been higher for both antagonists in the struggle.

⁵⁹ Frank Toland Interviewed by Alphonso T. Smith, Alabama Committee on Higher Education Oral History Project Transcripts Volume 2.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Jessie Guzman, *The Crusade for Civic Democracy: The Story of the Tuskegee Civic Association* (New York: Vantage Press, 1984), 71-72.

In Tuskegee, whites and blacks normally stayed in their respective areas of town. Like most communities, there were some blacks that were dependent on whites for income, such as maids, cooks, nannies, and gardeners. Most of the white population lived outside of the downtown area on farms and plantations due to Tuskegee's rich agrarian culture.

Black citizens situated themselves and their families closer to Tuskegee Institute and the VA Hospital where most of them worked. The Institute and the Hospital stood in close proximity as a result of the VA Hospital having at one time served as an East campus for Tuskegee Institute before its conversion into a Hospital.⁶³ The Greenwood community, where many prominent community members including Gomillion and President Luther Foster lived. Was the most affluent black neighborhood in the county.⁶⁴ The distance between the Tuskegee Institute/VA Hospital campus area and Confederate Square is just shy of 1.5 miles. The Greenwood community is about a half mile away from Tuskegee Institute going in the opposite direction of the downtown square. Some blacks lived closer to downtown Tuskegee but for middle class blacks the ideal real estate was as close to Greenwood and the Institute as possible.

Before the boycott, blacks regularly went downtown to trade with white merchants and to pay their bills. Once the boycott began in June of 1957, contact between blacks and whites occurred less often. Careful to avoid formally labeling their action a "boycott" blacks had chosen to "trade with their friends" in Tuskegee and with merchants elsewhere. The gerrymander made it painstakingly clear that the whites that they had

⁶³ Robert Moton, *Finding a Way Out* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday and Page, 1920), 47-50.

⁶⁴ Jessie Guzman, *The Crusade for Civic Democracy: The Story of the Tuskegee Civic Association* (New York: Vantage Press, 1984), 71-72.

regularly given their hard-earned dollars and business to, were not their friends. Black residents took their business to Columbus, Montgomery, and Opelika, Auburn and other nearby towns, determined to no longer patronize the businesses of those that had betrayed them.

The Crusade Begins

The *Birmingham World*, *Jet Magazine*, and other publications ran stories describing white merchants as feeling the “pinch.” The estimated \$150,000⁶⁵ worth of trade and business blacks contributed to the downtown business economy per week felt like more than a pinch to those whites whose primary customer base had disappeared overnight. Tuskegee’s white merchants were watching their livelihoods withered with every passing day. Whites that had initially viewed the boycott as a temporary hindrance that would be over once the blacks came to their senses were now forced to accept that they could no longer compensate for the boycott extending for much longer. As the boycott continued to wreak havoc on the local white business economy, more and more white merchants became that the clock was running out.

The *Chicago Crusader* reported that “the situation is growing more critical hourly with such stores as those of the Great Atlantic and Pacific Chain, Piggly Wiggly and another chain store which reportedly was forced to destroy 1,500 pounds of spoiled meats recently as a result of no trade. None of these stores and several more are not receiving a cent of the \$150,000 usually spent in this area every week; Merchants are quoted as saying: ‘If this lasts another week... we are ruined,’ however blacks admit that despite

⁶⁵ “Negro Boycott in Tuskegee Hurts Whites” *Birmingham World* News clipping. 1957.

these alarming statements from white merchants, ‘they would rather sacrifice their businesses than be reasonable about this whole thing.’”⁶⁶

The absence of the familiar black faces and their wallets in downtown Tuskegee took a severe and effective toll on the small downtown business district. *Time* magazine reported that “the Macon Theater was the first major business to close its doors-to both its ‘separate but equal wings’.”⁶⁷ The TCA documented the businesses that crumbled under the pressure of their boycott with reports compiling the name of the business and the date on which its owners closed. The boycott’s official start date was June 26, 1957, which is also the start date for the first report of business closure.⁶⁸ Only four days after the start of the boycott, on June 30, 1957 David Lee’s Department Store closed its business. A month later, on July 31, 1957 Fortunes Fish Market Bowens Home Furnishing, and Royal Furniture Store all went out of business on the same day.⁶⁹

Businesses on the town’s square also took a hit with Cooper’s Food Store following suit the next day.⁷⁰ The Texaco service station off (what is now Martin Luther King Drive) closed its doors shortly afterwards. Patterson’s Refrigeration Service and Tucker’s Fashion and Style Shop both closed sometime between August 1, 1957 and

⁶⁶ “Negro Boycott in Tuskegee Hurts Whites” *Birmingham World* News clipping, 1957.

⁶⁷ “Death of a Town” *Time Magazine* November 25, 1957.

⁶⁸ “Business Operations that have gone out of Business Since June 26, 1957 to date.” This report is the only one that was available within the TCA Files in the Tuskegee University Archives. It is my belief that this particular report’s dates range from June 26, 1957 to June 26, 1958 and likely read at the one-year anniversary mass meeting in which the citizens elected to continue the boycott for the calendar year 1958-1959.

⁶⁹ Fortunes Fish Market is located directly behind the building that now houses Attorney Fred Gray’s Tuskegee Law Firm, which is ironically located on what used to be Confederate Square next door to the Macon County Courthouse.

⁷⁰ Tuskegee Civic Association Files: Business Operations that have gone out of Business since June 26, 1957 to date.

December 1, 1957.⁷¹ On September 1, 1957 the Tuskegee Tire Company was shuttered. Almost two months later O.K. Rubber Welders was out of business on October 31, 1957. December 1, 1957 saw both Hills Shoe Store (later reopened) and Edward's Home Furnishings shut down. Businesses fought to hold on through the new year but to little avail as Dixie Auto Store and American Finance Co. both walked away on January 31, 1958. The final store to call it quits in Tuskegee for this particular period was Stone's Clothing Store on March 1, 1958. With the boycott seemingly one hundred percent effective and blacks' resolve showing no sign of wavering, whites in Tuskegee could no longer ignore the issue at hand.

The Christmas and New Year shopping season was especially hard for white merchants, having fallen right in the middle of the boycott's first year which was also a time where business closure began to happen much more rapidly. *Jet Magazine* reported on November 28, 1957 that six businesses had failed to date, leading to grim prospects for the upcoming Christmas season. Merchants made preparations to transition their signage for the changing shopping seasons. However, the brightly colored "Merry Christmas-Happy New Year signs they readied for hoisting seemed more a mocking salute to each other than a greeting to potential customers.";⁷² their stores continued to remain almost empty.⁷² The four-month old boycott and the quickening pace of business closings did not inspire confidence for the 1957 Christmas cycle. Businesses such as Hill's Shoe Store had closed but attempted a reopening, hoping to use a liquidation sale

⁷¹ Dates left blank, possibly went out of business initially and reopened later only to be closed once again between years 1957-1960.

⁷²*Jet Magazine* Clipping, November 28, 1957.

to jumpstart its business and lure blacks back through its doors.⁷³ Even the Christmas spirit could not change the boycotters' minds.

The *Baltimore Afro-American* reported on April 19, 1958, that "21 Merchants no Longer Operate" in Tuskegee.⁷⁴ With the last closed business on the TCA list being dated as March 1, 1958 this shows that four businesses closed between March 1 and the publication of the *Afro-American* article, easily the highest concentration of failed businesses within the span of little over a month. These businesses included D&S Motor Co., Bowen Cartwright's Grocery, Pure Oil Service Station, and the Tuskegee Bus Line.⁷⁵ While the closures of these and other white Tuskegee businesses represented significant milestones in the TCA's movement, it was also gratifying when whites from Tuskegee and the surrounding county were then forced to patronize black businessmen in the absence of now closed white ones.

With the closing of American Finance Co., "colored shoppers and many whites wishing installment buying must be cleared by the Credit Rating Bureau, which is operated by colored business man, B.B. Blakeman."⁷⁶ The *Afro American* also reported that "Roughly, 12 or 15 colored operated new stores and services have been opened since the boycott began. Practically all of the older colored services and stores have expanded floor space, and enlarged stock and services, replacing those lost when shoppers left

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ John H. McCray, "21 Merchants No Longer Operate," *The Baltimore Afro-American*, April 19, 1958.

⁷⁵ Ibid. Tuskegee Bus Lines was eventually purchased by Greyhound Bus Lines, located off what is now Martin Luther King Blvd fairly close to the downtown square.

⁷⁶ John H. McCray, "21 Merchants No Longer Operate," *The Baltimore Afro-American*, April 19, 1958.

white stores.”⁷⁷ Gomillion and the TCA had anticipated that current black businesses would thrive during the boycott, but were pleasantly surprised by the opening of so many new black businesses to help shoulder the burden.

In addition to the already existing black businesses, the *Baltimore Afro* also reported the near completion on construction for the Carver-Plaza Shopping Center which would be slated to house a supermarket, drugstore and a hardware store with its more than 6,000 square feet and projected 1.5 million dollars of annual business.⁷⁸ The intended customer demographic was not explicitly targeted at blacks but with the shopping center being built near Tuskegee Institute and the V.A. Hospital, the construction was being done exclusively by the black-owned Bulls Realty Co. There was a clear expectation of a strong primarily African American base of patronage.⁷⁹

The closing of a white merchant’s business was devastating to the merchant who had worked considerably hard to keep his business afloat, and had a devastating ripple effect in terms of displaced white employees. The *Baltimore Afro-American* asked supporters of the TCA about the displaced whites; “This was the answer, given with hearty chuckling: ‘Oh they’re working, just like colored folks.’” The unidentified TCA member, also a self-identified minister and businessman, continued to explain that “white women out of store jobs in town are now working as domestics, generally replacing

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ The Bulls Family in Tuskegee is comparable to a black elite family much like the white elite families. As they did during this period, the Bulls’ have a number of businesses ranging from construction to bail bonds. A.C. Bulls, the patriarch of the family worked for Booker T. Washington as a young man and grew up in Tuskegee. He was a life member of the TCA.

colored employees in these menial jobs.”⁸⁰ The expansion of new black businesses in Tuskegee encouraged some of the black workers that worked as domestics to leave their white employers to work for black ones.⁸¹

Despite the rising tide of business failures, some whites were steadfast in their determination to outlast the boycott. Joe Braswell, a Chevrolet franchisee who had reduced his staff and overhead to a bare minimum (himself and two others), confidently told a reporter from *Jet Magazine* that he was “prepared to wait this thing out-if it takes 12 to 15 months.”⁸² Some business owners shared Braswell’s enthusiasm and zeal while others had already begun to await the inevitable closing of their business.

The list of failed businesses continued to grow as the boycott persisted. White merchants were running out of time, while blacks knew they had all of the time in the world. This homegrown grassroots boycott was working even better than many had initially expected. The driving force of the movement’s success was the virtually 100% participation of the community. Faculty and staff from the Institute along with V.A. hospital employees had fully committed themselves to the movement. According to historian Robert Norrell, “rural blacks apparently participated less fully at first, but they fell into step soon after a merchant told a reporter that the ‘country nigger customers’ still shopped at his store.”⁸³ Rural blacks were also initially hesitant to back the boycott

⁸⁰ John McCray, “Displaced Workers Now On Menial Jobs,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, April 19, 1958.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² “Boycott Hurts Tuskegee Whites: Six Businesses Have Failed Others Are Near Collapse,” *Jet Magazine* Clipping February 16 1957.

⁸³ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 96.

because they relied heavily on credit extended by white merchants. Rural and less educated blacks were well aware that in the minds of most whites and possibly some blacks, they were ignorant and dumb. Disgusted by the complete disregard for the loyalty they had shown the white merchants during this especially tough time black farmers transferred their credit from white creditors to black businesses.

As they began to realize that blacks were far from giving in anytime soon, white merchants attempted to lure business into their door by other means. The Confederate Square merchants began to look outside of Tuskegee and sometimes outside of Macon County for help. They began writing and distributing pamphlets urging whites from throughout the state to come trade with white merchants in Tuskegee. The pamphlet covers read, "A Message from the Business and Professional People of Tuskegee to You the Citizens of Macon County." One of these pamphlets entitled, "A Message with a Lesson" begins with a parable whose aim is meant to illustrate that "there is strength in unity." The particular unity implied but not explicitly stated is exclusively white unity in the face of an impregnable wall of black economic resistance. The merchants hoped that they would be able to counter the 100% participation of black well-paid Tuskegeans with 100% participation and patronage of white rural Macon County residents. "In order for Tuskegee to provide the goods and services needed by the people of its trade area we must have your unified support," the pamphlet's authors explained. "With this support Tuskegee will be able to continue to provide convenient and close-by goods and services for you-such as medical facilities, merchandise, professional and banking facilities,

supplies and materials, and other necessary requirements. Without your support these conveniences may be lost to you and to us.”⁸⁴

The writers hoped that this would be enough of a motivator for their neighbors in other Macon County towns to come to their aid, but for further insurance they continued by explaining how Macon County whites could help. “Come to Tuskegee and trade with us. You will find our people appreciative, cooperative, and courteous...our prices are in line, and we have large stocks of good merchandise to choose from. A progressive and growing County Seat is a protection to the value of your property in Macon County. Trade, bank, and use the professional services offered in Tuskegee. Think it over friends, and thank you.”⁸⁵ The pamphlets evidently struck a chord, as white Macon County residents and Alabamians from nearby Notasulga, Shorter, Franklin and even Montgomery would form caravans on Saturdays and patronize Tuskegee’s dwindling white merchant class in hopes of breaking the boycott. This idea of enlisting neighboring sympathetic whites to come to Tuskegee’s aid stood little chance of having any lasting success given the demographics of the town, however.

2500 of those blacks lived in Tuskegee and were employed by the institute or hospital, meaning their income was not affected by the threat of a bad harvest or yield for a particular year. These regular black shoppers were salaried employees of a well-endowed university and a federal government installation. Blacks in Tuskegee and

⁸⁴ Tuskegee Civic Association Files: “Message from the business and professional people of Tuskegee to the Citizens of Macon County.”

⁸⁵ Ibid.

Macon County had a much larger buying presence than their white neighbors. Of the 30,651 persons in Macon County, 25,600 were black.⁸⁶

Whites in Macon County dominated agricultural work but were constantly at the mercy of the harvest and weather. These people would have to somehow recreate the economic impact of 4,500 regularly paid black professionals and laborers that regularly shopped downtown, plus the spending of roughly 21,000 more rural blacks. It is also worth noting, that these caravans to save white Tuskegee's merchants were sporadic and confined to one day a week (if they could make it at all) to carry out their rescue of white Tuskegee.⁸⁷

On typical Saturdays before the boycott the downtown square in Tuskegee had been a scene of bustling blacks going in and out of stores purchasing goods and services. During the boycott the Confederate Square was a ghost town. The numbers on Saturdays where neighboring whites from the County actually could come to Tuskegee paled in comparison to the pre-boycott numbers of blacks who had been the backbone of the white merchant economy. As the white caravan trips to Tuskegee dwindled as the boycott wore on, so too did the white merchants' hopes of saving their businesses.⁸⁸

Blacks in Tuskegee were well past any sympathy for the Confederate Square merchants. TCA member William Mitchell explained to a northern newspaper, "They didn't leave us a trace of dignity, I think people just said that, if Tuskegee didn't want us, we didn't want Tuskegee." An elderly black woman also explained "We used to go down

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ "Boycott Hurts Tuskegee Whites: Six Businesses Have Failed Others Are Near Collapse," *Jet Magazine* Clipping February 16 1957.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

to the square...I thought of myself as having friends there...Then, all together, they threw us out of their town [with the gerrymander]...I'd feel like a fool creeping back to those stores with my money. I can't ever go back."⁸⁹ Many black Tuskegeeseans held similar positions and never resumed their patronage of remaining white Tuskegee merchants even after the boycott officially ended.

The Hands of the Few

True power in Tuskegee was concentrated in the hands of a small group of white conservative elites with deep family roots in the community. Aside from Senator Engelhardt and Probate Judge William Varner, Tuskegee's circle of wealthy elites wielded political power over the small town. Edward Cobb Laslie was the grandson of James Edward Cobb, a firm supporter of disfranchisement at the 1901 Alabama Constitutional convention and instrumental in the removal of black Republican officeholders throughout the state.⁹⁰ Laslie was a highly influential member of the community, having served as the Chairman of the Macon County Board of Revenue, and later as the president/owner of several banks in Tuskegee. His influence can be best seen here as this created significant "leverage over the behavior of merchants, many of whom depended on Laslie's banks for the money to stock their stores, by controlling their access to credit."⁹¹

⁸⁹ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 102.

⁹⁰ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 101-102.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 102-103.

Ernest Bridges, a former Tuskegee City Council member was a successful cotton broker. His older brother, Forrest was a state senator that had attempted on several occasions to pressure Tuskegee Institute President Frederick Douglass Patterson to reign in Gomillion's civil rights activities.⁹² Green B. Edwards Jr. and his brother Joe were also significant players in the city, as sons of a former mayor and owners of prominent businesses and real estate. Green and Sam Engelhardt were close friends, and Joe was largely responsible for aiding in the removal of Herman Bentley from his post at the Board of Registrars in 1951. Engelhardt asked Governor Gordon Persons to remove Bentley after Folsom left office. After Persons refused initially, Engelhardt asked Joe Edwards, a former college classmate to convince him. After some arm-twisting, Persons agreed to fire Bentley. Edwards was a loyal campaigner for Persons and had also raised much needed campaign funds for Person's gubernatorial campaign.⁹³

Probate Judge William Varner, a man Gomillion and the TCA "regarded as the major opponent of black voting...he held the most powerful office in the county; his duties included keeping the voting roll and overseeing all county elections."⁹⁴ Varner was one of the most respected (white) members of the community having served previously as state legislator and Mayor. Varner was known for his politeness towards all who entered his probate office, even blacks. Varner was also in real estate, and sold many homes near Tuskegee Institute to black citizens.⁹⁵ Despite his natural politeness towards

⁹² Ibid.,101-102.

⁹³ Ibid., 103.

⁹⁴ Bernard Taper, *Gomillion v Lightfoot*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1973), 40.

⁹⁵ Charles Gomillion, Interviewed by Alphonso T. Smith, Alabama Committee on Higher Education Oral History Project, Part 2, Volume 3.

blacks, Varner opposed black voting in part to protect his own political standing. Norrell concluded that a combination of Varner's political interests and personal experiences fueled his opposition to black voting despite never publicly coming out against it. "As a young man he probably inherited a residue of anxiety, left over from the 1870s and 180s, about whether conservatives could keep control of Macon County. He certainly remembered the veterans hospital controversy in 1923, as mayor, he had worked to bring the hospital to Tuskegee and the vulnerability that it exposed in the white conservative position."⁹⁶ As early as 1940 when blacks began migrating to Tuskegee Varner realized that "more than a thousand people at the institute and hospital were better qualified to vote than the average white voter in the county."⁹⁷ As an incumbent and life-long politician, Varner likely realized that these new voters posed a threat to his own political standing. Like most white Tuskegee politicians, he feared that black any increase in black voters today could eventually lead to black candidates and black bloc voting tomorrow.

The last member of Tuskegee's white elite was Senator Sam Engelhardt; the proponent and face of the gerrymander bill. Engelhardt was a farmer, merchant, and cotton-gin owner in Shorter, a small town situated between Montgomery and Tuskegee but still within Macon County. Engelhardt spoke candidly about his initial reason for entering politics "That was my angle-to protect ourselves. Not only me, but my family. My aunts, uncles, and cousin owned land. If you have a nigger tax assessor," he rhetorically asked a journalist in 1956, "what would he do to you?"⁹⁸ In his mind and the

⁹⁶ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 41.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* pg. 80/ Bernard Taper, *Gomillion vs. Lightfoot* pg. 49.

minds of many other whites in power, black political candidates would seek revenge once elected to any position of power in Macon County. As a state representative candidate, Engelhardt centered his campaign on establishing himself as the candidate that would protect white conservatism from encroaching blacks.

These wealthy elites owned businesses that were completely independent of black patronage. The next group in the hierarchy was made up of smaller businessmen and merchants that operated businesses in downtown Tuskegee. Unlike those above them in the hierarchy, their businesses were far more dependent on black patrons. These businessmen were elites but not on the same level as the wealthier ones. This class of merchant elites were not consulted in decision-making behind the gerrymander bill but were still informed.

Of all of the groups in Tuskegee, these merchants were the most adversely affected because their businesses were the ones that were available to blacks. Blacks could not boycott Engelhard's cotton gin, or Varner's lots, or even the Edwards' brothers' real estate because their customer bases were whites throughout the state not only in Tuskegee. The businesses and livelihoods of Tuskegee's white elite were in every sense off limits to blacks. The gerrymander bill, although credited to Sam Engelhardt, was not his invention alone. The elites along with Tuskegee Mayor Phillip Lightfoot were also active in the bill's creation and life as a law.

The primary architect of the bill itself was Engelhardt, however the retrieval of data from surveying and mapping the city of Tuskegee and the breakdown of where blacks and whites lived fell to Mayor Lightfoot and other city government employees.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ William P. Mitchell, Interviewed by Alphonso T. Smith, Alabama Committee on Higher Education Oral History Interview Project. Volume 2.

Aside from granting their approval of the bill during the planning stages, the other members of the elites were primarily responsible for gathering support from the community and reassuring merchants that black retaliation (boycott) would be unsustainable and eventually die out as previous attempts. Merchants came to their superiors with their complaints once the boycott was underway, the wealthier elites would reassure them that, “Everything is going to be alright...Just sit tight and we’ll work things out.”¹⁰⁰ A merchant that expressed apprehension and uncertainty about if whether the gerrymander response would harm their business were usually corralled with the question of, “Do you want to live in a Nigger town?”¹⁰¹ One thing is certain, regardless of class and status “changes in race relations worried them the most...and threatened their comfortable provincial existence.” As Gomillion reflected in an interview, whites “liked their little town the way it was.”¹⁰²

Who Will Come to the Table

Whites in Tuskegee were not a monolithic group ideologically. Some white citizens were not wholly unreasonable, believing that the entire crisis could be resolved with dialogue between leaders of both sides. A meeting between white leaders and “reasonable and educated”¹⁰³ black leaders handpicked by whites, was viewed by some

¹⁰⁰ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 103-104.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁰² Charles Gomillion, Interviewed by Alphonso T. Smith, Alabama Committee on Higher Education Oral History Project, Volume 2.

¹⁰³ Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondent #39-41.

whites as the only way things could eventually return to normal. As the boycott wore on, white merchants even began to welcome the idea but tempered expectations with an inconvenient reality. The odds of this meeting between the races ever taking place was far from likely.

Charles Gomillion wrote Sam Engelhardt several letters requesting an audience, with hopes of convincing the Senator to lift the gerrymander. Every request and petition was either ignored or denied. At one of the TCA's weekly mass meetings, Rev. S.T. Martin sarcastically lamented, "Our beloved Senator just won't listen to President Gomillion and the poor little black folks of Tuskegee. I thought the Senator was everyone's friend."¹⁰⁴ Engelhardt had no intention of meeting with Charles Gomillion or any black leader affiliated with the TCA under any circumstances. In Engelhardt's mind (and many white residents) Gomillion, the TCA, and institute faculty involved with the movement were "outside agitators"—Engelhardt and others even went so far as to suspect them of being "communists" – who had come to Tuskegee and had riled up the town's community of otherwise reasonable and agreeable blacks.

In addition to the hyperbolic accusations that Gomillion and the TCA had ties to communism, whites viewed the crisis they faced as a test of wills. This was a staring contest they could not afford to lose. "Negroes run the Institute and the Hospital and we don't bother them; we are going to run the town and they ought to realize that" one white told a reporter from the *Atlanta Constitution*.¹⁰⁵ Blacks had no plausible reason to be discontent, why would they be? The two largest facilities and employers in the county

¹⁰⁴ TCA Weekly Mass Meeting Tape, Rev. S.T. Martin Greenwood Church circa 1957.

¹⁰⁵ 1957. Jack Nelson, "Tuskegee Economy Suffering as Negroes Continue Boycott" *The Atlanta Constitution* October 13.

belonged to them. This was power, so they thought, but not the power blacks were particularly aiming for. Blacks were just as committed to not losing ground to whites in this struggle because they had come so far, and were striking while the iron was hot. They were not only realizing their own strength as a community, they were winning significant victories with this movement they had built with their own hands, hearts, and their hard-earned dollars.

Lincoln Freed Us, Booker T Washington Educated Us, Sam Engelhardt put us Together

The gerrymander put all black citizens together in a town that was dominated by “town vs. gown” divisions seen in many HBCU communities.¹⁰⁶ For the same reasons Tuskegee was an atypical community, Tuskegee’s black community reflected the same division between professional/middle class and rural. This community split brought upon by economic and educational differences was in many ways being gradually healed by the gerrymander and boycott. The gerrymander shocked middle class blacks “into the realization that we were still Negroes, with all the disabilities attached thereto in the sovereign state of Alabama.”¹⁰⁷ Tuskegee Institute faculty member and sociologist Dr. Stanley Smith believed that for rural and poor Tuskegee blacks, this revelation by middle class blacks like Smith was long overdue. “The country people found our comeuppance rather amusing and, I think subtly satisfying, they didn’t rub it in, but there was some chortling. ‘Well now, join us’ was their attitude at the first Crusade meeting. Welcome

¹⁰⁶ Grandison, Kenrick Ian. 1999. “Negotiated Space: The Black College Campus as a Cultural Record of Postbellum America”. *American Quarterly* 51 (3). Johns Hopkins University Press: 529–79.

¹⁰⁷ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 99

Home!¹⁰⁸ The gerrymander and boycott united blacks from very different walks of life, however motivating them to continue the movement presented a slightly different challenge for the TCA. Luckily they received help from the same men they were opposing.

Sam Engelhardt's gerrymander inadvertently strengthened TCA resolve to see the boycott through for as long as possible. The movement needed to not only have 100% black community participation, it also needed fuel to continue its push forward. Senator Engelhardt, Attorney General John Patterson, and the legislation telling them they were less than citizens provided much needed motivation for the members of this grassroots movement. The media's curiosity and coverage of the Tuskegee situation also furthered added to their resolve to continue the boycott as long as possible. Not only were their protests being reported nationally, the press was doing an exceptional job of humiliating Tuskegee's whites on a national scale.

At the one-year anniversary of the original TCA mass meeting at Butler Chapel on June 26, 1958 Gomillion and a number of speakers paraded the victories to date, tallying black businesses opened, white businesses closed, along with reading copies of former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt's "My Day" newspaper columns shaming the actions of Engelhardt and white Alabamians in power for what they were attempting to do to everyone crammed into Butler. Gomillion, well aware of what response he would get, asked "After one year of this Crusade for Civic Democracy, we have seen many things change in our city. Will we continue with this selective buying? Will we continue to Trade with our Friends and those that wish to help us and not to hinder or hurt us?" to

¹⁰⁸ TCA Weekly Meeting/ One Year Anniversary Celebration of the Crusade for Civic Democracy, Greenwood Church June 25, 1958.

a unanimous chorus of “Yes, Yes Sir, and Amens” that filled the church for nearly a minute and a half.¹⁰⁹

Most of Tuskegee’s white merchants were equally committed to continuing with their resistance to the TCA’s Crusade for Citizenship. One Confederate Square merchant explained, “This is a matter of self-preservation, of survival, we couldn’t have stayed around here if more and more nigger registration had taken place, would you want to live in a nigger town?” Before the reporter could answer, he abruptly answered his own question with “No Sir!” Another merchant explained that he was perfectly fine with sacrificing his business to stop the TCA’s Crusade, “Sure I realize I’ll go broke, but if that’s what it takes to show em’ we mean business then I’m prepared to do just that. They’ve pushed as far as they’re going to...I’m ready to show’em.”¹¹⁰

Not all white merchants shared this enthusiasm, and some even found themselves sympathizing with the blacks who were actively boycotting them. By the end of the spring in 1958, over half of Tuskegee’s white-owned businesses had failed, and those that had managed to survive that long were not far behind their failed colleagues. One white merchant appeared to understand where the blacks were coming from, “If I’d been a *nigra* and told I wasn’t wanted, I’d have been mighty sore too, I know that.” Another merchant believed that the time had come for Tuskegee’s whites to wake up; “It is time

¹⁰⁹ Charles Gomillion, Interviewed by Alphonso T. Smith, Alabama Committee on Higher Education. Oral History Project Transcripts Volume 2.

¹¹⁰ *Montgomery Advertiser*, Nov 14, 1957; *The Reporter*, October 31, 1957.

that the white people realized that the days of slavery are over. The Negroes here are well educated and they pay their taxes. They should have a voice in how things are run.”¹¹¹

Each of these men along with other whites that could also feel a change coming to Tuskegee gave these testimonies off the record. These admissions to newspapers were granted always under the cover of anonymity. The pressure to keep in step with the rest of Tuskegee’s conformity to segregation weighed heavily on the less conservative merchants. Fear of being ridiculed and ostracized by other community members, leaders, and Sam Engelhardt himself, kept these merchants publicly in step with Tuskegee’s white conservatives. Engelhardt was a dangerous enemy for a white merchant to have in Tuskegee, “The most blatant pressure came from Engelhardt himself, who invoked what Wilbur J. Cash called ‘the savage ideal,’ the southern impulse toward conformity of thought against any political opponent.”¹¹² To Engelhardt and other savage idealists, one was either with him and the segregationists or one was and to be against them was the worst form of treason. This thinking permeated throughout most of white Tuskegee, going against the grain of this thinking would make the white Tuskegee community even smaller for dissenters.

At the end of the boycott’s first full year, several things became evident in Tuskegee. Whites and blacks were both absolute in their determination to see their side through the boycott. The struggle in Tuskegee evolved from a boycott in a small rural town to a test of wills in a community well beyond its breaking point where neither side

¹¹¹(Clippings) *Baltimore Afro American*, April 19, 1958; *Birmingham News*, January 22, 1958; *Atlanta Constitution*, October 15, 1957; *The Reporter*, October 31, 1957; *Atlanta Constitution*, October 14, 1957; *Montgomery Advertiser*, November 14, 1957.

¹¹² Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 102.

felt it could afford to cave to the other. Blacks and whites had once co-existed in a version of racial harmony common throughout the South where blacks passively accepted white domination to avoid violence and confrontation.¹¹³ In Tuskegee, this approach to being an American was no longer enough. Booker T. Washington's counsel for blacks, advising patience and making oneself useful to earn the respect of whites was no longer an acceptable approach for blacks. In Tuskegee, more than any other American community, Washington's vision was accomplished to perfection by blacks. Not only had they educated themselves and proved themselves useful, they surpassed Washington's goals for them. They had not only learned to survive as the good harmless negro neighbor to Southern whites, in Tuskegee they had surpassed them in nearly every way. Yet even that was not enough and blacks were hardly closer to complete first class citizenship than they had been in Booker T. Washington's lifetime.¹¹⁴

Even during the boycott whites attempted to remind blacks (and each other) of how generous they had been to blacks, hoping that black boycotters would come to their senses and realize that they were harming their white "friends." The boycotters would not be won over so easily, they had accepted that times were different and that they could and would not go back to being second class citizens in their own town. Whites and blacks both emerged from the first year of the boycott united by similar commitment to racial solidarity. According to one report at the time, African Americans "say that it took the leader of the White Citizens Council, Sam Engelhardt, to bring Negroes together and put

¹¹³ David Goldfield, *Black White and Southern: Race Relations and Southern Culture, 1940 to the Present* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 36.

¹¹⁴ Raymond Smock, *Booker T. Washington: Black Leadership in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Ivan R. Dee, 2009), 65-67.

differences aside among them. Whites say that the boycott is the only thing that ever brought the white people in Tuskegee to unity.”¹¹⁵ The boycotters and the TCA were not radicals, simply unrelenting advocates for fairness.

The struggle for civic democracy and citizenship in Tuskegee simultaneously devastated the segregationist business community, while significantly influencing the civil rights struggles to come in Alabama and throughout the South. In Tuskegee black boycotters left their mark on the civil rights movement in similar fashion to the bus boycotters in Montgomery. Tuskegee served as a testing ground not only for white legislators hoping to implement legislative replicas of Engelhardt’s gerrymander in their own legislative districts, it was also a testing ground for blacks nationwide learning to fight back non-violently against Jim Crow and racism.

Blacks in Tuskegee ultimately triumphed over Jim Crow and second class citizenship, however this victory and all that came with it led to unforeseen adverse consequences. Black citizens’ refusal to trade in town, coupled with whites’ adamant refusal to rethink their defense of segregation (even at the very real risk of losing their businesses) significantly contributed to the gradual death of the town’s economy and pointed towards a bleak and uncertain economic future.

This period of stagnation within the city would continue until the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling in *Gomillion v Lightfoot* (1960) overturned the gerrymander, eventually leading to the election of several black candidates, but history shows that even this was not enough to undo the damage that had been done. This particular battle for voting rights, self-respect, and inclusion ended on a significantly high note, however Voting

¹¹⁵ Lewis Jones and Stanley Smith, *Field Report on Desegregation in the South* (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B’Nai B’rith, 1958), 13.

Rights was only the beginning of Tuskegee's turbulent civil rights era. More wars between blacks in Tuskegee and Jim Crow would come, over school desegregation, voting rights for illiterate and poor Tuskegeans, and eventually generational clashes in civil rights leadership.

These future battles would require different approaches and measures that ran counter to the TCA's disciplined gradualist nature. This commitment to gradualism created a sense of urgency and a need for accelerated progress, leading to younger more aggressive movements led by a younger generation of activists who would ultimately eclipse the TCA as the primary engine for civic and political change in Tuskegee. Despite the birth of younger movements in Tuskegee, this particular battle with Confederate Square belonged solely to the TCA. Their victory over the gerrymander and the segregationists became their great victory and triumph nearly twenty years in the making. After obtaining the equality and justice they had toiled and sacrificed for, future victories became gradually more bittersweet and empty.

Following the Crusade for Citizenship, clear-cut victories for the TCA and African Americans in Tuskegee were few and far between for Gomillion and the TCA leadership. The stark moral clarity afforded by the gerrymander – a clear-cut battle over segregation – dissolved into shades of gray. Gradualist leaders such as Gomillion were challenged and accused by younger leaders of being outdated and too willing to acquiesce to whites. Internal strife and clashes would plague the TCA going forward into an uncertain future. However, it was the TCA-led victory over voting discrimination and Jim Crow that paved the way for future successes elsewhere. At the end of the Crusade for Citizenship, the world had just begun to change for Tuskegee's African Americans

and these changes were not always for the better. Their actions had unintended and unforeseen consequences that would become gradually more apparent over extended periods time. As one Tuskegee Crisis Study respondent reflected in the aftermath of the boycott Tuskegee was forever changed and would be “never again normal.”¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondent #111.

Chapter 2: The Tuskegee Crisis Study,

On September 8, 1958, the newly founded Commission on Civil Rights received its first group of sworn complaints from African Americans alleging that their right to vote had been denied because of their race.¹ TCA Secretary William Mitchell mailed fourteen affidavits, submitted by several teachers, housewives, students, farmers, and Tuskegee VA hospital employees. Mitchell was registered to vote, however like the affidavit individuals, he had experienced his own share of obstacles before earning the ballot. Mitchell's journey included "three visits to the Macon County Board of Registrars, two appearances before a Federal trial court, two appeals to the Fifth Circuit Court, and one petition to the Supreme Court of the United States. His efforts extended over three years."²

The Commission, a hearing body made up of several university presidents and former legislators, unanimously decided to initiate an investigation. Democratic Governor-Elect and former Attorney General John Patterson was promptly notified that the commission's investigation was now underway in parts of Alabama. The preliminary investigation in Tuskegee was held at the Macon County Courthouse in downtown Tuskegee from September 25-28. The Commission's investigators were strictly prohibited from soliciting voter complaints from citizens once in Macon County, however they quickly realized that they would not have to. Thirteen black Tuskegee residents learned of the investigation team's whereabouts and sought them out to discuss their unsuccessful efforts to register and the discrimination they encountered in the

¹ Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights 1959, US Government Printing Office 1959, 69.

² Hearings before the United States Commission on Civil Rights. Voting (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1959), 1-30.

process. The investigators warned each of the volunteers of the strong likelihood that the Commission would ask them to testify under oath at its official hearing in Montgomery. One volunteer was asked if the group “would be likely to lose their nerve at the last minute?” The complainant emphatically reassured the investigators, “These people would gladly tell their stories on the courthouse steps!”³

William Mitchell, the initial sender of the affidavits provided the investigators with copies of the TCA’s detailed records (many of which he compiled) of registration practices in Macon County since 1951 and other conclusive evidence of systematic voter discrimination in Tuskegee. Mitchell also included a map of Tuskegee that clearly defined the black belt town’s boundaries before and after the gerrymander.⁴ These documents from Tuskegee paired with testimony and similar documents from across the state indicated that voter discrimination was prevalent throughout the state and not a series of isolated incidents. The Commission soon learned that discrimination at the polls and with the registrars extended far beyond Tuskegee and Macon County because in several counties such as Wilcox and Lowndes, no blacks were registered at all. Further investigative efforts showed that barriers to voting were nearly as severe in other counties such as Bullock, Barbour, and Dallas where Selma is located. The Commission set the date of its hearing for December 8, 1958 in Montgomery, at the capital’s Federal Courthouse.⁵

³ Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights 1959, US Government Printing Office 1959, 70.

⁴ This is the same map Mitchell gave to attorney Fred Gray to use during the *Gomillion v Lightfoot* (1960) proceedings. The map was displayed throughout Gray’s presentation for the Justices who referred to it often during the question and answer period.

⁵ Frye Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom: Alabama and the Movement that Changed America* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 114.

Early on the morning of December 8, television cameras, reporters, photographers, witnesses, lawyers, state and federal officials, and even Senator Sam Engelhardt piled into the fourth floor courtroom.⁶ Three northerners and three southerners made up the non-partisan Commission. The northerners were: Chairman John Hannah, also the President of Michigan State University; Father Theodore Hesburgh, the president of Notre Dame University; and J. Ernest Wilkins, former Assistant Secretary of Labor and the commission's only African American. The southerners were former Virginia Governor John Battle; former governor Doyle Carlton of Florida; and Robert Storey, the dean of the Southern Methodist University Law School.⁷ Once seated, the hearing promptly began calling to the TCA's dutiful secretary to the stand first.

William Mitchell's testimony aligned seamlessly with the statistical data that the Commission's preliminary research team had compiled in addition to the files he provided them when they were in Tuskegee. Mitchell explained that as of 1950 Macon County had a population of 30,561 and of that number 25,784 were non-white and 4,777 were white. Mitchell also confirmed that Macon County ranked first in the state of Alabama in its percentage of blacks with at least a high school education and blacks with college degrees. Despite this, only 1,218 blacks were registered to vote versus 3,102 whites. Mitchell explained, "The increasing demands on the part of Negroes to exercise

⁶ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1958), 112.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 112-113.

their constitutional guarantees as American citizens have been met with accelerated determination to deny Negroes the opportunity to vote.”⁸

Thirty-three black witnesses testified at the hearing: of them ten were college graduates, six of whom held advanced and doctorate degrees, and seven of the witnesses had not completed high school but were still literate. All of these individuals were taxpayers and were property owners, some had voted in other states before migrating to Alabama. Among the witness group were several decorated war veterans, two of whom were decorated with multiple Bronze Battle Stars. This small sampling of Alabama’s blacks consisted mostly of twenty-seven black Tuskegee/Macon County citizens, with the rest representing other Alabama counties. This otherwise impressive gathering of black potential voters all had one shared disqualifying factor which was articulated best by a Macon County farmer with only a sixth grade education.⁹

Hosea Guice, a black Notasulgan that had spent the 1920s and 1930s as a sharecropper, often dreamed of a life away from the cotton-fields. “I just thought I ought to be beyond sharecropping, I always had the desire to buy me some land, a home. I just wanted my life to accumulate that much.”¹⁰ After purchasing a 120-acre farm situated between Tuskegee and Shorter, it appeared that Guice had accomplished this dream. As a landowner, Guice was highly successful and finally had the independence he dreamed of as a sharecropper. Guice refused to settle however, and once again desired something greater, Guice wanted to vote. He made his first attempt in 1954 but did not receive any

⁸ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1958), 112-113.

⁹ Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights 1959, US Government Printing Office 1959, 80.

¹⁰ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 113.

notification of his status; Guice recalled, “I didn’t go back to nurse it.”¹¹ Two years later in January of 1956, Guice made a second attempt but had overlooked one question. Herman Bentley, the fair-minded white Chairman of the Board of Registrars, encouraged Guice to come back and “Try again next month.”¹²

Guice went back a few months later to find that Bentley was no longer on the board. Bentley believed in fairness and had registered any and everyone that was qualified with no regard to their race. He had been replaced with a segregationist who resumed the pattern of systematically blocking black voter registration in the town. Commission Member Robert Storey plainly asked Guice “Why do you want to vote?” Guice explained, “Well, I have never been arrested and always has been a law-abiding citizen; to the best of my opinion has no mental deficiency, and my mind couldn’t fall on nothing but only, since I come up to these other requirements, that I was just a Negro... That’s all.”¹³ Thousands of other even more qualified black voter applicants had all made similar repeated attempts to register to vote, only to be denied. Like Hosea Guice, these denied black applicants reached the same disappointing conclusion, that despite all of their qualifications, education, salaries and efforts they were still just Negroes.

In Tuskegee and elsewhere, blacks were denied the right to vote not because they were uneducated or unqualified. They were denied the right to vote explicitly to maintain white dominance throughout the Jim Crow South. As African Americans in Tuskegee

¹¹ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1958), 112.

¹² Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 113.

¹³ Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights 1959, US Government Printing Office 1959, 80.

continued to push for the ballot, segregationists continued to seek out more ways to deny it to blacks. In Tuskegee, the threat of black political power materialized into the gerrymander bill that sought to permanently halt black advances. In turn, African Americans used their collective economic strength as a weapon choosing to not patronize the segregationist merchants on white Confederate Square merchants placing immense economic pressure on Tuskegee's economy. Tuskegee's citizens found themselves in a struggle where once manageable issues of race, power, and class converged to create a conflict that would alter Tuskegee forever. A sociologist and black citizen of Tuskegee conducted a study that he hoped would help him and the rest of the nation understand this conflict better. This study is utilized primarily in this chapter to also assist today's historian in understanding Tuskegee's voting rights crisis.

Dr. Jones, a Tuskegee Institute professor, organized a public opinion questionnaire that aimed to explore the contours of black and white thinking in Tuskegee. Jones not only examined who could (and could not) vote but also how they felt about the voting rights struggle that had seized their community. The questionnaires were given to gerrymandered black citizens and registered white voters a few months after the TCA's boycott began. The opinions captured in the study represent a sample of the Tuskegee population of that time, featuring the responses of one hundred black men and women along with ninety-six white men and women. Like Gomillion, Jones had also studied Sociology at Nashville's Fisk University under Dr. Charles Johnson. Both were now reunited in the Tuskegee Institute Sociology Department as colleagues and had undoubtedly discussed the Crisis Study Jones hoped to conduct. Jones "sought a better understanding of white thinking about the Tuskegee situation for a booklet he was

writing for the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith.”¹⁴ Since blacks and whites were to be interviewed, the question of who would interview the respondents became an early cause for concern during the planning stages. Jones and Gomillion likely revisited their past shared sociological field experience to resolve this issue.

As young sociologists at Fisk, Jones and Gomillion were two members of a three-person research team along with a black female colleague. The team traveled throughout Mississippi, Texas, and Tennessee to interview white “tenant farmers, plantation landlords, and business people such as grocers, who had connections to agriculture.”¹⁵ Gomillion initially declined the opportunity after reports of several blacks being lynched in one of the counties on their itinerary. The team’s advisor, Dr. Charles Johnson, convinced him to stay with the team and advised Gomillion to leave all of the talking to the other team members both of whom were significantly lighter-skinned than Gomillion:

Let Edmonia be Miss Ann, the other guy (Jones) will be the chauffeur, and you be the nigger boy in the back of the car.¹⁶

Jones’ and Edmonia’s lighter complexions afforded them greater liberty to maneuver within the white dominated areas on the schedule. Edmonia’s complexion and sex made her the obvious choice as the primary interviewer. As a lighter-skinned woman with the ability to pass for white, the team believed her presence in interviews might be the most disarming to more elite white interviewees. Jones interviewed blacks and other whites that were much closer to each other in the social and economic hierarchies of the

¹⁴ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 104.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Charles Gomillion, Interviewed by Alphonso T. Smith, Alabama Committee on Higher Education Oral History Project Transcripts Volume 2.

communities they visited. Gomillion's targets were exclusively blacks that were normally sharecroppers and descendants of slaves. The team successfully completed their interviews and contributed their research and experiences to their future sociological publications.

Dr. Jones drew from the success of this past experience to solve his present challenge, and hired "white graduate students from the University of Alabama to interview white respondents" while several black Tuskegee Institute students interviewed black respondents.¹⁷ Dr. Jones' decision to hire whites to interview whites and blacks to interview other blacks was a measure to not only make the interviewee as comfortable as possible, it also could be seen as a way to secure the most accurate and candid responses to the surveys.

The questionnaire probes responses to thirty racially neutral questions that ask respondents to provide their opinions on a range of topics including the gerrymander itself and how long the city had been in racial turmoil; respondents were even asked to propose possible solutions to resolve the gerrymander/boycott racial standoff the city was in. Aside from the valuable opinion data, the questionnaires also ask for background demographics for each respondent listing various pieces of information. These questions range from the respondent's sex, age group, occupation, church membership, level of education, years lived in Tuskegee, previous place of residence, what types of magazines

¹⁷ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 104.

and newspapers they regularly read, television channels they watched, and their shopping habits during the boycott.¹⁸

One of the first questions blacks and whites were asked pertained to how long they had known that there was a disagreement between the races in Tuskegee. Fifty-two white and fifty-nine black respondents all answered that the disagreement between the races stretched back for years and was not spurred by recent events like the boycott. Forty-one whites and forty-one blacks all replied that they had not noticed the local disagreement until recently. Three whites did not respond to this particular question, while all blacks provided a yes or no answer to the question.

Both black and white responses to this question present several interesting points about race relations in Tuskegee. White respondents that acknowledged that the racial disagreement was much older than the gerrymander and boycott contradicted the publicly-held positions of some prominent white community members like Mayor Phillip Lightfoot and Senator Sam Engelhardt who were often approached by the press. When asked about the boycott in its early stages, Lightfoot commented that it was, “quite distressing to me personally because I like to work with everyone and hate to see anyone not liking his neighbor.”¹⁹ Several unnamed white merchants also chimed in claiming that they were, “shocked, surprised and hurt” by their former black patrons.²⁰ E.C. Howard, a local dry cleaner operator believed the boycott to be, “certainly directed at

¹⁸ Unlike white respondents, black respondents were asked a separate question that does not appear on the questionnaires. This question asks of their opinion of the black merchants that had shouldered more responsibility and more demand due to the boycott’s restrictions on white owned merchants. Aside from this there is little to no variation in the general structure of the questionnaires themselves.

¹⁹ Claude Barnett, “Tuskegee Boycott Makes Mayor, Merchants Sad.” *Associated Negro Press*. Newspaper clipping courtesy of Tuskegee University Archives. Circa 1957.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

innocent groups of people who have helped to build this town into a respectable and enjoyable place to live.”²¹ These types of responses demonstrate that to whites in Tuskegee, the boycott by blacks was not only an overreaction but more importantly, it came initially as a surprise to most whites outside of Tuskegee’s small circle of wealthy elites.²² Some white respondents placed blame for Tuskegee’s failing race relations at the feet of the administration of Tuskegee Institute whose administrators often served as the community’s peacekeepers.

“There has been a gradual trend toward friction with the past two Institute presidents,” one female respondent recalled, referring to Dr. Frederick Patterson and Dr. Luther Foster.²³ Patterson and Foster respectively were the next two college presidents following Booker Washington and Robert Moton’s respective tenures. Patterson and Foster both represented a very different type of black leader from what whites and blacks had grown accustomed to under Washington and Moton. Patterson’s tenure largely abandoned the practice of his predecessors by deciding that his role was not to serve as an arbiter between the black and white Tuskegee. Both Washington and Moton filled this unofficial role as the unofficial head of Tuskegee’s black community and designated peacemaker and disciplinarian. An unexpected byproduct of this role came in the form of respect from much of the white community.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Most white Tuskegee citizens existed outside of the small ring of wealth and power within the town and learned about the gerrymander in the newspapers and on television just like blacks did. Although they were surprised, many supported the measure. Blacks on the other hand were also in the dark believing that the whites in Tuskegee were aware of the measure before it became law.

²³ Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondent #36.

Albert Bulls, a Tuskegee native and entrepreneur worked for Washington as a teenager and recalled, “Ain’t no white folks in all of Tuskegee town would see him on his horse riding through town and didn’t take off his hat to him.”²⁴ This respect from whites came from the fact that leaders like Washington and Moton visibly seemed more concerned with maintaining segregation in Tuskegee and not actively encouraging blacks to rise above second class citizenship. As they always do, times and faces changed in Tuskegee after Washington’s death in 1915 and Moton’s retirement in 1935. Whites in Tuskegee felt the “absence of a fatherly Institute president” in some ways more than blacks because the black harness that helped hold Tuskegee’s white dominance firmly in place was no longer present leading whites to often diagnose the changing of the guard “as the root of their current problems.”²⁵

This was still Tuskegee where, Washington had once urged blacks and whites to be separate as the fingers in social things but one as a fist in the rebuilding of the south. Whites in Tuskegee and across the region responded very positively to this idea, while some blacks viewed Washington’s deal as an acceptance of inferiority and political deferment to whites. This system of race relations – Subsequently referred to as accomodationism – became the unspoken law of the land.²⁶ Washington corralled the students to the campus of his beloved Tuskegee Institute, and held the line of race relations in Tuskegee by limiting interactions between blacks and white and interceding

²⁴ Albert Bulls, Interviewed by Alphonso T. Smith, Alabama Committee for Higher Education Oral History Project Transcript Volume 3.

²⁵ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 106.

²⁶ David R. Goldfield *Black, White, and Southern: Race Relations and Southern Culture 1940 to the Present* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 1990), 11.

when necessary. President Moton a disciple of Washington clung to this system but gradually relinquished this role as Tuskegee's black father and peacemaker.

Presidents Patterson and Foster both cast Washington's paternalist system aside entirely, placing the mission of the school and the advancement of blacks at the forefront of their administrations.²⁷ Patterson's in-office accomplishments included launching Tuskegee's School of Veterinary Medicine and securing federal government contracts to house the segregated flight training program that later became famous for producing the legendary Tuskegee Airmen of World War II.²⁸ Foster's major accomplishment rests in the launching of Tuskegee's engineering programs and the organization of the university's college of arts and sciences. Both presidents' styles of leadership were heavily criticized and blamed because they both allowed Charles Gomillion, Lewis Jones, and other Institute faculty the freedom to pursue civil rights and community activism without fear of termination or chastisement as long as they continued to be productive faculty members and further the University's mission.²⁹ Many whites in Tuskegee and in the state capitol perceived the expanded autonomy of Institute professors as a weaknesses of Patterson and responsible for what they saw as Tuskegee's downward spiral in race relations.

²⁷ Frederick D. Patterson, Martia G. Goodson, Harry V. Richardson, *Chronicles of Faith: The Autobiography of Frederick Douglass Patterson* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991), 78.

²⁸ Patterson took heavy criticism for the Tuskegee Airmen project because unlike other locations vying for the contract he offered to allow the military installation and unit to remain segregated at a time where the national black press largely criticized the armed forces for confining black servicemen to segregated units often in support roles.

²⁹ Frederick D. Patterson, Martia G. Goodson, Harry V. Richardson, *Chronicles of Faith: The Autobiography of Frederick Douglass Patterson* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991), 78. Gomillion and Jones both published in sociological journals throughout the boycott years, Gomillion was even permitted to complete his PhD Dissertation at Ohio State in 1959.

Blacks had more tangible experiences to support their acknowledgement of the racial disagreement being much older than Senator Engelhardt's gerrymander bill. As in many other locations throughout the South, blacks had faced extraordinary difficulty in successfully getting registered to vote. Those that were able to successfully register before the gerrymander represented a small minority within Tuskegee's black community. The Macon County Courthouse halls would often be lined with African Americans waiting for the opportunity to register to vote. This line would sometimes extend out into the second floor hallway, down the stairs onto the first floor and into Confederate Square just outside.

Many of these individuals knew they would not be registered or even seen on the particular day they decided to wait. Dr. Stanley Smith, a Sociology faculty member and colleague of Jones and Gomillion often reschedule his day classes for the evening in order to perform his weekly ritual of waiting to be seen by the registrar only to be told that he would not be seen. On these days, Smith always remembered to wear his Phi Beta Kappa pin on his neatly pressed blue suit. Smith recalled that he wore this pin fully aware that the white registrars assigned to judge his eligibility and intelligence to vote more than likely did not understand its significance.³⁰ Smith and many other blacks continued to make this journey downtown, fully aware of the obstruction and denial they would face when they arrived. They did not care, they wanted to vote, they wanted to be and to be treated with the dignity they believed they had earned and were owed.

Tuskegee's civil rights movement did not start in these extended lines at the county courthouse, it stretched back to the post-Reconstruction era. Black political power

³⁰ Bernard Taper, *Gomillion versus Lightfoot* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1972), 10-12.

during the post-Reconstruction era was short-lived: due to violence and intimidation from segregationists, African Americans' power was snatched away just as quickly as it had come. However, it was after World War II, when black citizens in Tuskegee appeared determined to reclaim the political power stripped from their forbearers.³¹ This resurgence of the desire to vote came from an innate sense of patriotism and newly realized ideals of citizenship and the birthrights rights they had fought for both at home and abroad.³² While blacks rekindled their hope in the ballot, segregationists resurrected old fears from Reconstruction of the dangers of civically-engaged blacks representing a dangerous threat to ongoing white dominance of the community.

The Crisis Study respondents placed several key events and themes as their first indication of their current racial disagreement. Nearly all respondents touch on one of the following themes: Redrawing of the city limits; Negro voting and politics; Agitation by Negroes; White prejudice; Other; or they simply did not know. Side by side examinations of black and white responses reveal that blacks and whites had very different reference points for the origins of Tuskegee's racial decline. Thirty whites answered that learning of the "Redrawing of city limits" in the newspaper in late June of 1957 was their first introduction to the disagreement compared to five similar black responses. Twenty-eight whites responded that "Negro voting and politics" first made them aware, compared to seventy-five black respondents that said the same. Most black respondents answered this way because many of them had or still were directly challenging for voting and political power. Twenty-five whites responded that "Agitation by Negroes" was the cause of the

³¹ Ibid., 13. (Taper's note) "Before the war, there were less than one hundred Negroes registered as voters out of the twenty-two thousand living in Macon county."

³² The Double V Campaign was popularized by the black press, urging blacks to fight racism and fascism at home and abroad.

current conflict compared to one surprising black respondent that agreed with them.³³

Four whites and six blacks answered that “White Prejudice” was their introduction to the conflict at hand. Five black respondents simply responded that they could not pinpoint an exact moment when they noticed the racial conflict in the town possibly implying that it had existed for as long as they could remember.

Dr. Lewis Jones provided an explanation for the range of responses given, “When cause of disagreement was sought, six times as many whites as Negroes regarded the cause to have been the recent change in the city limits and the second largest number saw the issue of Negro voting to be the cause. Three-fourths of the Negro respondents gave Negro voting as the cause. Apparently, a considerable number of whites had not been aware of the longstanding Negro effort to secure the ballot.”³⁴ Black respondents showed very little variation in their responses, with many focusing on themes related to their denial of the right to vote. Blacks were highly unified in this type of response, likely owing to the fact that many of the respondents faced the same resistance and obstruction when they attempted to register to vote.³⁵

White respondents also acknowledged the denial of the right to vote as a cause for the conflict however from a very different perspective than the black respondents.

Several white responses reflect the tone of what most of Tuskegee’s segregationists thought of blacks pushing for the ballot:

³³ The context of respondent #43’s response leads me to believe that he said “Agitation by Negroes” to mean the rise of civically engaged blacks, not necessarily him referring to agitation in an accusatory and troublemaker context in the same way a segregationist white respondent might.

³⁴ Lewis Jones and Stanley Smith, *Field Report on Desegregation in the South* (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B’Nai B’rith, 1958), 39.

³⁵ “Voting: 1961 United States Commission on Civil Rights Report” Courtesy of University of Maryland Law School. pg. 44.

The Negroes were planning on taking over city and county government and making other demands—more votes, integration of schools, churches, etc.

For years the Negroes have been trying to dominate us, and that is what they are trying to do now. They want to control everything.

The nigger started acting big-shot; they wanted what we had.³⁶

These responses not only demonstrate segregationist thinking in Tuskegee, it also exposes the paranoia and fear that drove actions such as the gerrymander and the efforts to block black voting. These segregationist responses could not have been further from the truth as Charles Gomillion and other TCA leaders repeated often that blacks in Tuskegee only desired to share power. Gomillion even appeared before a meeting of the Macon County Abolition Committee of the Alabama House of Representatives at the state capitol on February 14, 1958. Gomillion spoke mostly about why the committee should not consider the Macon County abolition bill Senator Engelhardt had introduced as a follow up to the gerrymander bill. Engelhardt was also present at this meeting and likely noticed that Gomillion's concluding words were aimed directly at him, "There is no good reason why white and Negro citizens in Macon cannot develop a community which would be a model of democratic living, you gentlemen will want history to record that you helped to build Macon County."³⁷

The only significant variation of some white responses on the topic of voting rights placed the blame on other whites: "There were a few white leaders trying for a

³⁶ Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondents #61, #63, #71.

³⁷ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 109.

political climb and using this for publicity.”³⁸ “The work of a group of misguided, prejudiced, ignorant, selfish politicians.”³⁹ The first response represents sentiments from some white citizens that viewed Tuskegee’s racial situation differently than their segregationist neighbors. These individuals undoubtedly viewed Attorney General John Patterson as an outside agitator that was using the press of challenging the TCA and standing up for white Alabamians as fuel for his upcoming gubernatorial run. Whites in Tuskegee were not wrong as Patterson candidly admitted years later, that his involvement in Tuskegee was solely to bolster his support with Alabama’s white conservatives and segregationists.⁴⁰

The second responses represent an even smaller minority within the white Tuskegee community that placed the blame on the wealthy elite class and segregationist politicians such as Senator Engelhardt and Mayor Lightfoot. This invisible minority within the white community appeared in several newspaper articles relating to the boycott. These dissenters were often white merchants directly affected by the boycott, and they would only provide their candid thoughts about which white leaders were at fault only if the reporter would guarantee that their names would remain anonymous. These dissenters represent a very interesting and significant part of Tuskegee’s white thinking because they help dismantle the myth that whites were monolithic in their thinking when it came to segregation.

³⁸ Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondent #32.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, #30.

⁴⁰ John Patterson, Interviewed by Alphonso T. Smith, Alabama Committee on Higher Education Oral History Project Transcripts Volume 3.

Tuskegee was a small town, but could get even smaller for a white dissenter. These types of criticisms would undoubtedly reverberate throughout their small community. Those being criticized would certainly hear about it, and often knew the complainer personally. This anonymous criticism also came from some merchants, “the merchants who opposed what Engelhardt had done by one report, they numbered about twelve—felt great pressure to stay in step with the conservatives.”⁴¹ Any white man, from a local sharecropper to the governor of the state of Alabama would become the subject of Engelhardt’s scathing racial criticisms. Governor Jim Folsom became a victim of this when he publicly denounced Engelhardt’s gerrymander bill and informed the State House that he would not sign the bill, Engelhardt responded that, “we wouldn’t be having the trouble we’re having in Macon County if we had a governor who made noises like a white man.”⁴²

Engelhardt like many other white political contemporaries, built his political career on a type of racialized McCarthyism, presenting himself as the champion and defender of racial conservatism and traditional values, bullying opponents with similar language to publicly challenge their commitment to preserving white supremacy. White Tuskegee citizens were very familiar with Engelhardt’s very public treatment of dissenters and knew it could easily be directed towards them. One merchant explained to a northern reporter, “Some of us don’t dare speak our piece, the situation is pretty deplorable when you are against something but can’t say so, yet that’s our position.”⁴³

⁴¹ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 102.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Respondent #79, a white businessman that had been living in Tuskegee for five years but was originally from nearby Notasulga, identified that blacks were the agitators of the present situation in Tuskegee. The interviewer recalls that, “When asked to specify these individuals he ‘would rather not say’ and would not comment at all in reference to white side, claiming his occupation would not permit such statements.” When asked about what he thinks are the respective race’s motives for the conflict, he answers that black and white agitators were both motivated by an “Effort to gain political control.”⁴⁴

Respondent #81, a service station owner who grew up in Macon County and had moved to Tuskegee fourteen years earlier held similar feelings as Respondent #79. He indicated that blacks and whites were both to blame, and volunteers a list of culpable blacks such as “King (MLK), Gomillion, and the NAACP.” However, when asked to provide names of culpable whites his response was simply, “Some local retailers,” and refused to name them. He also believed that black motives for the agitation were “To get business” and for whites it was, “To help hold of business.”⁴⁵

For a businessman and service station owner that were both members of the Chamber of Commerce, to not be at liberty to disclose names of fellow white businessmen can be a direct reflection of the type of pressure they were under to remain in step with Tuskegee’s conservative white conservatism. It could also be indicative of their place within Tuskegee’s power structure. It is important to remember that in Tuskegee, white merchants were middle class elites; however, the true wielders of real power belonged to the much smaller group of wealthy elites that were significantly less dependent on black patronage than Confederate Square merchants. These wealthy elites

⁴⁴ Ibid., Respondent #79.

⁴⁵ Ibid., Respondent #81.

were largely untouchable by black boycotters. Confederate Square merchants however were not included in the wealthy elite class and did not have a hand in the decision to gerrymander African Americans. Survey data uncovers a little-known truth of the crisis period, while many whites supported the gerrymander, they were initially caught just as off guard as many black citizens when the gerrymander bill became state law.⁴⁶

Very few African Americans acknowledged both blacks and whites as agitators to Tuskegee's current crisis however many respondents did not hesitate to identify whites, specifically Senator Engelhardt. Respondent #103 a Tuskegee native and nursing assistant named Engelhardt as the primary white agitator. When asked about black agitators, he does not name any and explains that blacks collectively agitated the situation when they "stopped trading downtown." This respondent describes that black motives behind the agitation were, "to show the whites that since we [African Americans] are not a part of the city, we will just stay out." When asked about what white motives were, he explained that they were "To keep the negroes from exercising any authority."⁴⁷

Many segregationist white respondents identified black motives for the conflict along the same lines. Stopping black political advancement was crucial to protecting whites' way of life and dominance of Tuskegee. When asked about if the agitation had occurred prior to the TCA boycott, Respondent #103 answered, "Board of registrars," referencing the gradually increasing agitation over the years because of the board's history of refusing to register black applicants. In addition to providing their opinions on

⁴⁶ William Goldfield, *Black, White, and Southern: Race Relations and Southern Culture, 1940 to the Present* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 54-55.

⁴⁷ Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondent #103.

the origins of the disagreement and motivating factors for blacks and whites, respondents were also asked to discuss if they believed the disagreement could have been avoided.

Fifty-two whites believed that the present trouble could have been avoided while twenty-eight did not. Eleven whites were unsure and five declined to answer. Blacks were much more united in their responses, with ninety believing that the disagreement could have been prevented. Five did not believe the situation could be avoided, four did not know and only one declined to answer.

Respondent #86, a black male food service worker believed the present trouble could have been avoided simply “If everything had been left as it was.” Respondent #88, a black male telephone operator suggested the crisis could have been avoided by “leaving the city and county as it was. By giving the Negroes our right to vote and treating us as first class citizens.” A black female teacher from North Carolina answered, “If the whites would not have taken steps to deprive the Negroes of their rights” the crisis might have been prevented.⁴⁸ The “overwhelming number of black respondents who expressed the opinion that the present situation could have been avoided did not themselves accept responsibility for its existence.”⁴⁹ Most black responses like the ones above reflect a common theme that in their minds, whites were the sole instigators of the current situation. Had Tuskegee’s whites not tampered with the town’s boundaries or prevented blacks from voting, the crisis would have been avoided altogether. African Americans did not view their civil rights activity or growing demand for political involvement as part of the problem. In Tuskegee, survey data reveals that whites did not believe their resistance

⁴⁸ Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondents: #86, #88, #89.

⁴⁹ Lewis Jones and Stanley Smith, *Field Report on Desegregation in the South* (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B’Nai B’rith, 1958), 40.

to black political inclusion drove blacks to push harder. By the same token, African Americans also did not believe their political advances had adversely affected the city. Both sides viewed themselves as victims of the other side's belligerent trampling on their rights, ensuring the inevitability of the crisis they now faced.

White respondents that agreed that the situation could have been avoided held a diverse range of views. Some segregationist whites provided responses that identified what could have been done to prevent the crisis, "Complete segregation without hope of any other status. Otherwise, the trouble was unavoidable." Another white respondent answered, "By both sides continuing to function as they have in the past."⁵⁰ Some black and white respondents recalled that the crisis they now faced was more of a question of when it would happen rather than if it would happen.⁵¹ A black respondent declared, "No it had to come sooner or later. Negroes have been still too long."⁵² A white respondent offered, "No it has been boiling for a good many years and finally just boiled over. The only way it could have been prevented would have been for one of sides to just give in completely."⁵³ Another black respondent explained, "No indeed, sometime or other it

⁵⁰ Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondents: #68, #74, #75.

⁵¹ Respondents agreed that the crisis was unavoidable, but from very different perspectives and vantage points. Blacks and Whites in Tuskegee had unique ways of looking at the situation that often loosely brought them to the same conclusions. At times black and white respondents were much more alike than they realized.

⁵² Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondent #57.

⁵³ Lewis Jones and Stanley Smith, *Field Report on Desegregation in the South* (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'Nai B'rith, 1958), 41.

would have had to start. We have wanted to work together but some of us are ‘Big I and Little You’”⁵⁴

Several black female respondents provided answers that explained the crisis’ inevitability while also tapping into some of the frustration blacks had harbored against the segregationists’ unwillingness to share power. Respondent #466, a Baptist housewife from Tuskegee answered, “No, it had to come. They wanted it this way. The colored is just tired of so much pushing around.” Respondent #463, also a Baptist housewife from Tuskegee shared #466’s sentiments, “No. Just had to come some time, you see the New Negroes are here to stay.” #462, a seamstress from Montgomery, provided a more politically inspired answer, remembering the unsuccessful yet historic campaign of Ms. Jessie P. Guzman for a seat on the Macon County Schoolboard, “Yes, when Mrs. Guzman ran for office. This led them to do something to prevent us from becoming eligible to get in to any office.”⁵⁵

If Guzman had won, she would have been the first black elected official in the county since Reconstruction. When she attempted this run for office in 1954, the numbers of black registered voters were still significantly lower than whites in Macon County. Whites in Macon County and Tuskegee were well aware of this and came out in full force to hand Guzman a landslide defeat. Guzman ran a clean campaign and had even secured the full endorsement of the Macon County Democratic Club, an organization created by the TCA to endorse candidates best suited to move Tuskegee and Macon County closer to

⁵⁴ Ibid. I believe this respondent is referring to his perception that whites thought they were innately better than blacks, and placed their interests ahead of blacks, causing potential dialogue and cooperation to be impossible despite numerous attempts by blacks to work with Tuskegee’s whites.

⁵⁵ Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondent #463, #466, and #462. (The methodology of Dr. Jones’ numbering of the respondents is unclear, the respondents do not simply go from #1-#196, some respondents are numbered as high as #478 for reasons not currently known).

its desired goals of becoming a model interracial government. Guzman, the TCA, and the Democratic Club believed (naively) that she had just as much of a chance as anyone in the 1954 election. It did not become clear to Gomillion, the TCA, the Club and even Guzman herself until after the election that her candidacy was of far greater significance to Tuskegee's whites than they previously imagined.⁵⁶

Guzman, hardly a physically imposing figure only stood five foot one and a fair complexion that highlighted her mixed lineage, was the living and breathing embodiment of the nightmares of Tuskegee's white political office holders and wealthy elites. In many ways "Guzman contradicted completely the conservatives' stereotyped image handed down as part of the Reconstruction myth of the ignorant but ambitious black politician."⁵⁷

Guzman's candidacy was unexpected not only because she was black but more importantly, she was unexpected because she was a woman. Guzman was the exact opposite of what white politicians had expected, having held degrees from Clark, Howard, and Columbia; she was also the Dean of Women and University Archivist at Tuskegee Institute.⁵⁸

Guzman's run for an otherwise harmless seat on the School Board represented the first real indication to Tuskegee's whites that their black neighbors were seriously interested in ascending to political power in the town and county. Not only did Guzman's blackness pose a serious threat to the segregationist political landscape of Tuskegee of

⁵⁶ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 85-87.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁵⁸ Clark College merged with Atlanta University, forming what is now Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia. It is part of the Atlanta University Consortium, a close quartered network of HBCUs that include Morehouse College, Spelman College, Morris Brown College and Clark Atlanta University near downtown Atlanta, Georgia.

that time, it also inspired more blacks to register to vote. With more black citizens attempting to enter the political process in Tuskegee, the need for Engelhardt's gerrymander became much more apparent to those at the top Tuskegee's white power structure. The gerrymander in turn, created the need for the TCA's boycott which greatly leveled the playing field for blacks hoping to participate in local politics. The impact of the boycott was felt immediately by each of the white merchants downtown and largely changed the way they viewed the black boycotters. Many whites thought Tuskegee's black citizens were not justified in their boycott however a surprising number of whites felt very differently about the boycott including several merchants.

As one might expect, sixty-one whites believed that Tuskegee's African Americans were not justified in their boycott of Confederate Square. Surprisingly, twenty-five white respondents however believed that the black citizens were justified in their boycott response. The white responses reflect the contours of white thinking on the issue at the time quite explicitly. The majority of whites in Tuskegee viewed the boycott as an unnecessary overreaction to their efforts to retain political dominance. The minority which included some merchants could at the very least understand and empathize with the frustration and current plight of their black neighbors.

A white merchant that had been living in Tuskegee for 20 years believed the boycott was unjustified and recalled, "No. The merchants have been their friends and weren't responsible for changing the city limits."⁵⁹ Respondent #77, another merchant that had lived in Tuskegee for 64 years commented, "No. Because merchants didn't have

⁵⁹ Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondent #60.

anything to do with it.”⁶⁰ Respondent #82 an attorney that was originally from Florida simply commented, “No. It is Illegal.”⁶¹ Another similar response came from Respondent #83 an insurance salesman, “No. Two wrongs do not make a right and they would have howled to high heaven if it [a similar boycott] had happened to Negroes.”⁶²

When asked if the boycott was justifiable respondent #99, a retired merchant admitted, “I don’t like it, but I understand. I’d be pretty sore about the situation too if I was just kicked out like they were.”⁶³ A Methodist housewife from Birmingham also empathized with Tuskegee’s black citizens, “I think they are absolutely right, I’ve never seen a more direct display of meanness and hate than I’ve seen towards Tuskegee’s Negroes.”⁶⁴ Whites were evidently divided on the issue, however these divisions were rarely discussed openly which adds to the uniqueness and significance of the Crisis Study which seems to have been one of the few outlets for white Tuskegee’s most candid opinions on Tuskegee’s crisis. The Florida born attorney above was correct in stating that the “Boycott” was in fact illegal according to Alabama’s boycott law. Blacks in Tuskegee were also well aware of the illegality of boycotts in Alabama and prove this with their responses in a highly peculiar way.

On each of the black respondent questionnaires, the question of whether or not they were justified in their boycott received a slight alteration. The word “boycott” is deliberately crossed out, and replaced with “Crusading for Citizenship,” “Trading with

⁶⁰ Ibid., Respondent #77.

⁶¹ Ibid., Respondent #82.

⁶² Ibid., Respondent #83.

⁶³ Ibid., Respondent #99.

⁶⁴ Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondent #23.

our/my Friends,” and other phrases used by the TCA. These other terms were used as a hedge of protection from officially violating Alabama’s boycott law which Attorney General John Patterson sought to use to derail the movement in Tuskegee. Gomillion and the TCA leadership correctly predicted that their movement would undoubtedly be viewed as an illegal boycott in the eyes of the law. These phrases first put forth by Gomillion at the first TCA mass meeting, would prove to be the movement’s saving grace once the Alabama Attorney General opened his unsuccessful investigation into the TCA and moved for an injunction against the group.

At the weekly TCA meetings, Gomillion and other TCA leaders never used the word “boycott,” instead they used many of the same terms black respondents chose to use on the questionnaires. Copies of talks and speeches given at the weekly meetings and newly found recordings of several early meetings do not indicate that Gomillion or any other leader ever fully explained the organizations caution to avoid violating the anti-boycott law. Gomillion’s first mention of the Crusade’s selective buying program came at the TCA’s first mass meeting on June 25, 1957 where he declared, “We are going to buy goods and services from those who help us, from those who make no effort to hinder us, and from those who recognize us as first class citizens.”⁶⁵ It could be argued that blacks in Tuskegee were aware of the consequences of making the mistake of calling their action a boycott. It could also be argued that blacks were also aware that they risked passively confirming the existence of the boycott by not correcting the questionnaire. Either scenario confirms the exceptional cohesiveness of the TCA, its leadership, and its members as a sophisticated engine of change in Tuskegee.

⁶⁵ TCA Mass Meeting Recording June 25, 1957 at Butler Chapel in Tuskegee, Alabama.

As a TCA member it is possible that Dr. Lewis Jones instructed interviewers to cross out the word “boycott” is unknown. Many of the black respondents’ occupations are in education and healthcare related fields which points to the very real possibility that they were TCA members employed by Tuskegee Institute or the VA Hospital. Two things can be said of this seemingly small gesture of crossing out a single word. If TCA leaders instructed for the word “boycott” to be removed, it illustrates a sophisticated understanding of the law and how to stay within it while challenging Jim Crow. If the scribbles were made solely by the respondents themselves, this further demonstrates just how cohesive and united the members of this movement was in being sure to keep their movement out of legal trouble. Either way, both scenarios point to just how in-sync and sophisticated this unique grassroots movement truly was. The TCA’s boycott succeeded as a result of this type of cohesiveness and more importantly black citizens strongly believing in their homegrown movement. This sense of belief also translated into how black citizens felt about how long their homegrown grassroots movement would last.

African Americans in Tuskegee did not particularly view the length of their boycott in chronological terms and time frames. Unlike most white respondents that provided time frame driven answers such as days, weeks, months, and years; blacks provided far less tangible answers. Respondent #87, a lab assistant and Tuskegee native answered, “Until some final decisions [are made] to allow the Negroes to vote.”⁶⁶ Another lab assistant from North Carolina answered, “Until some results are secured for the rights of the negroes.”⁶⁷ Other black respondents approached the question with some

⁶⁶ Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondent #87.

⁶⁷ Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondent #92.

initial uncertainty like Respondent #89 who admitted, “I did not feel they would stay away long and a few would go back like before.”⁶⁸ Other black respondents recalled that they felt the boycott would last “indefinitely,” “two weeks,” or simply “I don’t know.”⁶⁹ These varying answers are indicative of a major element to the Tuskegee movement. The coming together of the black community in Tuskegee against this injustice was not guaranteed or inevitable. Just as the crisis study revealed that whites in Tuskegee were not monolithic, the crisis study also revealed that blacks in Tuskegee were also on different wavelengths and frequencies in regards to the Crisis. The synergy between the TCA and Tuskegee’s African Americans did not come together overnight but was built and negotiated over the course of several decades. By this time the TCA had grown into the one civil rights organization, working tirelessly for the benefit of blacks in Tuskegee, having replaced the void left by then-exiled Alabama NAACP. Despite this void, the TCA and its Crusade rapidly expanded and found itself still working to earn the trust of the black citizens of Tuskegee. Like many whites, there were some blacks in the community that also believed the TCA boycott would eventually fail. These white and black doubters had strong evidence from past events to influence this pessimism.

Many Whites approached the TCA’s boycott with an air of smugness. Their overconfidence in the Confederate Square businesses and their chances of outlasting the black boycott were on full display in many Crisis Study responses. History was on their side; this was not the TCA’s first attempt to boycott Confederate Square. Past attempts quickly failed due to fragmentation and long-standing class divisions within Tuskegee’s black community. Black unity in Tuskegee took time to develop, and these early boycott

⁶⁸ Ibid., Respondent #89.

⁶⁹ Ibid., Respondents #94, 95, 96.

attempts were necessary growing pains. Failed boycott attempts in the past led white respondents to estimate this latest attempt would last anywhere from “a week to two months.”⁷⁰ The major difference between the Crusade for Citizenship and the boycotts of the past was that nearly every black citizen was affected by the gerrymander in the same way regardless of their class and status. However, blacks and whites learned that this time was different and would not go away so easily.

Two months into the boycott, white businesses were failing and closing at an accelerated rate. Businesses closings fluctuated greatly in 1957-1958, during many stretches at least one to two businesses were closing seemingly on a weekly basis. At times several would close within the same week, at other times several would close within the same day. The boycott unveiled a new haunting reality within Tuskegee, that hit whites and blacks hard but in very different ways. For white respondents, smugness gave way to pessimism as they watched business after business close permanently. Walking the streets of downtown Tuskegee undoubtedly became a constant reminder of the crisis and their central role in creating it. Merchants that had once greeted them, welcomed them into their stores, or shared a brief conversation with them were now either no longer there or counting the days until they would also have to close up shop for good.

Many whites that had guessed the boycott would last within a couple of weeks to possibly two-month found themselves having to change their previously smug tones. Many now answered “Indefinitely” or “I don’t know.”⁷¹ The dominant answer, for many

⁷⁰ Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondents: #68, #66, #65.

⁷¹ Ibid., Respondents #75, #66, #65, #72.

of the white respondents reflected their pessimism for the future of the city and more importantly their place in it. Respondent #72 lamented, “Indefinitely, I feel that with the agitation from both sides there is little hope of settling the issue in the near future.”⁷² Other respondents placed the blame for the situation squarely on the shoulders of leaders like Gomillion and Engelhardt and away from the merchants that were directly targeted and now suffering under the boycott’s immense pressure. A white landowner answered that the crisis would continue “as long as the leaders assist and agitate it.”⁷³ This same respondent answered the previous question with an emphasis on the leadership claiming that the boycott would last “for a longer period of time by the leaders but for a shorter period by others” likely assuming that the leadership, TCA members, and few others would continue to boycott long after the boycott ended, while most black citizens would eventually resume their trading habits downtown. This respondent identifies himself as between the ages of 40-49 and having lived in Tuskegee for 18 years which would mean he was in town for and remembered previous unsuccessful boycott attempts by the TCA.

Other respondents were far more direct with their cynicism claiming that things in Tuskegee would “Never be the same,” “All of it will never be over,” and others simply responded that the boycott would last “Forever.”⁷⁴ Some respondents tried to salvage some optimism, one such optimist answered, “It will gradually lessen in effectiveness but some of it will go on from now on.” A retired merchant estimated that the boycott would last exactly sixty days but later responded, “Twenty-five percent hard core will

⁷² Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondent #72.

⁷³ Ibid., Respondent #75.

⁷⁴ Ibid., Respondents #68, #66, 65.

continue...the rest will eventually come back.⁷⁵ An insurance salesman from Florida was more optimistic than most, having predicted the boycott would last 6 months in question thirteen, and responding to question fourteen with, “gradually ending now”⁷⁶ A service station owner, believed “It will never come back but will build back to some extent.”⁷⁷

On the other side of the spectrum, many blacks also answered with similar answers as their white counterparts but for very different reasons. Many white respondents responded to the question about how long they thought the boycott would last two months into the crisis with answers such as “Indefinitely” out of exhaustion and frustration. There was no foreseeable end to the boycott, no indications of its intensity decreasing, and no signs that blacks were as exhausted with it as whites were.

Blacks on the other hand replied “Indefinitely” because of their willingness to continue forward and not stop until their goals had been reached and satisfied. 1957-1958, the Crusade’s first calendar year, saw the most businesses close, the most newspaper coverage from national and African American papers, and the largest surges in TCA membership. Once the first year ended, blacks and whites in Tuskegee had reached a stalemate. Blacks were becoming more and more convinced that they could outlast the white merchants; white merchants likewise convinced themselves they were prepared to outlast the black boycotters that threatened to close their businesses. Other downtown merchants could only wait for the day where their business would be added to the TCA’s running list of closed Confederate Square businesses. For both sides, giving up was not an option because everything that had been gained up until that point would

⁷⁵ Ibid., Respondent #60, 78.

⁷⁶ Ibid., Respondent #80.

⁷⁷ Ibid., Respondent #81.

be lost. For blacks, ending the boycott would allow voter discrimination and violations of their rights to continue indefinitely. For whites, going back on the gerrymander would open the doors to the long feared black political takeover of Tuskegee and ultimately revenge politics by African Americans.

A black housewife from Tuskegee guessed that the boycott would last, “Forever, or until satisfied one way or another.” A black nurse responded, “Forever, never the same anymore.” A black nurse aide guessed that “Some will never go back. Maybe some will. Nothing is the same.”⁷⁸ She was more correct than she likely realized. Many black citizens vowed to never patronize white businesses again. Many blacks would not entertain the idea of returning to Confederate Square merchant-owned businesses. For some, this decision was rooted in the treatment they had received for years from segregationists but cemented by the gerrymander. Other African Americans made this decision based on the fact that their patronage of Tuskegee’s black merchants had permanently replaced their dependence on Confederate Square merchants. Some blacks suggested that the only way they might return to Confederate Square was if segregationists would simply “Allow Negroes to vote.”⁷⁹ A seamstress from Montgomery suggested that she would return only when whites would, “Give the negro all the rights.

⁷⁸ Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondents, #466, #470. An interesting dynamic arises when examining these responses from blacks in Tuskegee, many of those who answered “indefinitely” and were less expressive with their answers were men, while many of those that chose to elaborate and express more in their answers were black women, some employed by the VA and others housewives, nurses, among other professions. A separate investigation could possibly examine the job security of black men and women in this community. While black men and women were both employed by the VA Hospital and Tuskegee Institute, what does the willingness to be more candid suggest about job security or jobs in general? Many male respondents have professions listed as nurse/nurse aide, etc. Sources that might establish a correlation between male employment in the city of Tuskegee at the VA Hospital do not currently exist or at least have not been found yet.

⁷⁹ Ibid., Respondent #97.

Let him vote and hold office if he is eligible.”⁸⁰ Some blacks would not be won over so easily, as a housewife from Tuskegee declared, “Child! They can’t do nothing to get me back, see I trade with my relatives.”⁸¹ Some African Americans were not as sure about what exactly could be done to make things go back to normal.

Some African Americans expressed their apprehension to go back to Confederate Square, a respondent explained, “I don’t know, they have treated us so badly. They have hurt and abused the Negro by throwing him out of their city. Let him be to do something for his self.”⁸² Another respondent guessed, “I don’t know, only by letting the Negroes vote seems like the only way at this point.”⁸³ A nurse aide responded, “Give the negroes their rights, but I am still not sure all of us will go back even then.”⁸⁴ Many black citizens were not as conflicted, and knew exactly what they were going to do. Many African Americans abandoned the prospect of ever resuming their trading with Confederate Square businesses by simply responding with, “Nothing at all.”⁸⁵ For these individuals there was nothing more to talk about, nothing more to do. These individuals made up their minds that their dollars would never be used to strengthen those that only meant to dominate them.

White respondents also had suggestions on what could be done to convince blacks to return downtown. An insurance salesman provided two answers, “1. Concede the town

⁸⁰ Ibid., Respondent #462.

⁸¹ Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondent #463.

⁸² Ibid., Respondent #466.

⁸³ Ibid., Respondent #468.

⁸⁴ Ibid., Respondent #470.

⁸⁵ Ibid., Respondent #471.

to them. 2. Frank discussion indicating no axe to grind and fair treatment plus protection of Negroes wishing to trade. Primarily with rural and 'humble' Negroes who are afraid and are led and coerced by Gomillion et.al."⁸⁶ The salesman clarified that his first answer was not a solution he supported but frankly his opinion of what Tuskegee's black citizens wanted. His second answer represents his actual opinion on what should be done to bring back black business to Confederate Square. Other white respondents were not as diplomatic as the salesman, providing a rare view into their own racially-motivated paranoia and fear of a complete black takeover of Tuskegee.⁸⁷

Segregationists still feared that blacks would take revenge if allowed to participate in voting and government. A retired businessman suggested that the only way blacks would resume trading with white Tuskegee was, "A complete surrender of the whites might."⁸⁸ A laborer that had lived in Tuskegee his entire life believed that whites just needed to "Treat the Negro like he is a Negro and let them know we don't care whether he trades or not"⁸⁹ suggesting that whites should simply wait out the boycott. This response ignores the fact that black earned dollars was the lifeblood to the heart of Confederate Square and without it, Tuskegee's economy would not survive.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Ibid., Respondent #80.

⁸⁷ William Goldfield, *Black, White, and Southern: Race Relations and Southern Culture, 1940 to the Present* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 63-65.

⁸⁸ Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondent #84.

⁸⁹ Ibid., Respondent # 85.

⁹⁰ Several respondents including several retired businessmen and a newspaper publisher refused to comment on this particular question. Their lack of comment is ironic considering on nearly every other open ended question they waxed eloquently about their opinions. For the newly retired businessmen it is possible that their longwinded answers stem from their wanting to explain any and everything they could about the boycott that had possibly put them out of business.

In Tuskegee African Americans and whites had long memories, allowing past racial struggles and conflicts to influence how they would address present and future conflicts. Whites and blacks alike, learned from the past in very different ways. Whites observed past challenges of segregation and discrimination from blacks as they were happening, and used their outcomes to influence how they would address the current boycott. In their minds, they simply needed to allow black Tuskegee residents to vent their frustration, suffer through a productive but brief boycott, and wait for black citizens to grow weary of the inconveniences of carpooling to nearby cities and towns, and eventually “come to their senses” as many whites viewed it, and finally return to Tuskegee.⁹¹

Contrary to what many whites were thinking, Tuskegee’s blacks actually had come to their senses although in very different ways. The gerrymander represented the first time that blacks in Tuskegee were all united and of the same mind on one particular issue. Nearly all of Tuskegee’s blacks were affected by the gerrymander. Before the gerrymander, Tuskegee’s black community struggled with fierce class divisions that obstructed black unity in past boycott attempts. This class division was greatest among rural blacks that were more than likely born and raised in Tuskegee and transplanted employees of Tuskegee Institute and the VA Hospital. Once the gerrymander became law, things that had once been important in Tuskegee such as class, education, status, and employment were all suddenly not as important as before. The gerrymander affected all but ten black Tuskegee citizens. Tuskegee’s new boundaries were drawn with no regard for class, titles, jobs, or education. Race was the only criteria that was taken into account.

⁹¹ Bernard Taper, *Gomillion versus Lightfoot: The Tuskegee Gerrymander Case* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1962), 100-102.

Every black person in Tuskegee came to the same realization as Hosea Guice did at the Civil Rights Commission hearing, they were all just Negroes.

Tuskegee Institute professors that were holders of Phi Beta Kappa keys and pioneers in their fields were just Negroes. Hospital physicians and surgeons that had possibly saved lives miraculously often with out of date tools and equipment, were still just Negroes. Just as whites remembered the boycotts of the past, blacks too remembered their past episodes of discrimination and the complete disregard for their citizenship and humanity. They remembered being denied the right to register to vote at the Board of Registrars. Those old enough to remember, remembered the sporadic appearances from the Ku Klux Klan riding around Confederate Square, burning crosses in plain sight of the courthouse where blacks often spent hours waiting for the chance to have their voter applications denied. These common experiences united Tuskegee's blacks, and these experiences were not exclusive to class or education like the gerrymander was. These shared experiences in Tuskegee were invaluable to the success of the movement as a result of them revealing to the town's black citizens that despite their status and societal roles, they could all come together to challenge Jim Crow and segregationist dominance over their town and their lives. While the boycott united blacks in Tuskegee, survey response data indicates that it did nearly the opposite for whites.

When white respondents were asked if their friends and associates agreed with their positions on the gerrymander, #86 explained that, "Some thought it was the only thing that could be done. Some thought they (wealthy white elites) exceeded their authority. Should have been done after a free discussion."⁹² While they likely disagreed

⁹² Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondent #86.

in private, the crisis study allowed everyday white Tuskegee citizens the opportunity to tell a very different story from the ones the national newspapers were writing about them. Many of the newspapers at the time, painted Tuskegee's white community as a monolith of intolerance and racism. The crisis study paints a different picture of them, while there were many respondents that remained true to form with the media's interpretation of segregationist whites in rural Alabama, some respondents demonstrated that they were empathetic enough to realize that the treatment of Tuskegee's black citizens was not only unconstitutional but morally wrong. The majority of white respondents however seemed to live up to the media's caricature of them when asked about racial unity in Tuskegee.

When respondents were asked about if racial groups should maintain a united front during a controversy or crisis like the current boycott 98% of black respondents agreed that a racial front such as the one they had developed was necessary. White responses typically conveyed that they fully supported whites uniting along racial lines, but were adamantly against blacks doing the same. Respondent #81 believed that these united fronts were necessary, answering "Yes. So that they can carry out points that are right. The whites should but I don't know about the coloreds."⁹³ Respondent #84 however responded "No. Breeds dictatorship. No individual expressions."⁹⁴ Another respondent answered, "No. That's the trouble now. If you make a division on race there is little chance to negotiate and agree."⁹⁵ White respondents tended to frame their negative ideas of a racially united front solely from a black perspective, viewing the TCA and their

⁹³ Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondent #81.

⁹⁴ Ibid., Respondent #84.

⁹⁵ Ibid., Respondent #88.

movement as a perfect example of why this type of unity was wrong. The white respondents that answered positively viewed a racially united group only through a white perspective, often using words such as “we” and “us” in their answers. Respondent #90 believed, “Yes. We can accomplish more united than we can divided if we are united in an effort to serve a purpose and could accomplish that purpose.”⁹⁶

Some “No” response explanations reveal that some whites genuinely thought racially united groups were counterproductive. Respondent #91 explained, “Well if both sides are solid with each other they can’t get together and settle it. I’d rather not say but if Negroes stay with just Negroes and whites with whites how can they settle it?”⁹⁷ Respondent #80 answered, “No. Nothing should be done this way. Smacks of communism, phrases like United Front” and respondent #93 simply called it “Contrary to democratic principle.”⁹⁸

Unlike whites, blacks reacted to this question by not looking at whites to shape their answer; they looked at themselves and the movement they had built. They looked at the newfound racial unity and pride they had found during the first few months of the boycott. They answered from experience and not out of fear of other racial groups, as their white counterparts had done. Several respondents answered along the lines of, “Yes. Unity leads to progress.” A housewife from Tuskegee answered, “We should pull together in order to get the best of that which is for us!”⁹⁹ A nurse from South Carolina

⁹⁶ Ibid., Respondent #90.

⁹⁷ Ibid., Respondent #77.

⁹⁸ Ibid., Respondents #80, #90.

⁹⁹ Ibid., Respondents #261, #258.

responded, “Yes. When a racial group sticks together, their actions are easily accomplished.”¹⁰⁰

Some of the respondents took their answers a step further than racial unity by discussing racial pride and the good of the race. A student and housewife answered, “Yes. They should stick together for the benefit of the race” a dietician from Birmingham responded, “I think that race pride should be foremost on issues of this kind.”¹⁰¹ A technician from Mississippi described the TCA’s boycott movement perfectly perhaps unintentionally, “Yes. One cannot accomplish much as a race or group without the cooperation of all people.”¹⁰² The same cooperation and racial unity the technician had described was pivotal to the overall success of the boycott. Black Tuskegee citizens were more united than ever, having a cause that everyone could get behind, shopping with black businesses, supporting one another during the boycott all led to a belief that they were taking back their dignity and creating a better world. For years, blacks had tried to fight back against Jim Crow, but often failed without the unity they had achieved by trading with their friends. Despite an energized and united black front, this did not stop some whites from attempting to change the minds of some blacks.

A black male nurse aide at the VA Hospital recalled that some whites had “tried to show me how white people have helped us.”¹⁰³ The Nurse Aide indicated that he also attempted to change the minds of the same whites that tried to change his, “by trying to show them that Negroes should continue to help each other.”

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., Respondent #264.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., Respondents #265, #259.

¹⁰² Ibid., Respondent #261.

¹⁰³ Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondent #101.

A housewife originally from Opelika provided a very detailed account of her confrontation with a merchant. She reported that no one had tried to change her opinion and she likewise did not try to change anyone else's opinion either. When asked what white persons she had spoken to about the situation she recalled that, "The gas man asked why I don't get much gas from him anymore? I told him I wasn't doing much traveling as I had been. He said I did not have to get mad about something. I did not ask what he was talking about..."¹⁰⁴ and got in her car and left. While it would be extremely helpful for respondent #461 to have remembered exactly what the gas man was referring to, a valuable takeaway from this exchange is that these types of public and frustrated confrontations were happening. They might not have been frequent but interactions like this one can demonstrate how desperate and frustrated the boycott had made Confederate Square merchants.

A nurse from Georgia had a less confrontational experience when she reported that no one had tried to change her opinion and she also had not attempted to change anyone else's mind. The white person that she answered had spoken with her about the boycott more than likely took her by surprise. She answered, "A white man from Atlanta Georgia said we were right to stop our trading in town with the whites."¹⁰⁵ This man likely followed the boycott's progress through the constant coverage by the *Atlanta Constitution*, one of the many national and regional papers that were covering the boycott more closely than either of the actual Tuskegee-based newspapers.

¹⁰⁴ Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondent #461.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., Respondent #464.

Locally, *The Tuskegee News* and *The Tuskegee Herald* were the town's two primary newspapers. *The Tuskegee News* was aimed primarily at the town's whites and the *Tuskegee Herald* was aimed exclusively at the black community. Although the *Herald* was absorbed by the *Tuskegee News* in 1958, very little had changed in regards to content. Both papers actively avoided reporting on the boycott, featured many of the same advertisements, and comics.¹⁰⁶ The ownership of the two papers in Tuskegee clearly did not want the boycott to be reported on in Tuskegee. At TCA meetings, Gomillion or another TCA leader would often read articles about the Crusade for Citizenship from national newspapers in part to remind members that their struggles were not in vain or ignored. The press coverage the TCA received during its first full year not only enforced black resolve and solidarity, it showed everyday members that their movement was making a significant difference. Papers such as the *Atlanta Constitution*, *Birmingham World*, *Chicago Defender*, *Baltimore Afro American*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, and many others carried the story of Tuskegee's foot soldiers all across the country. The stories of Tuskegee's black citizens challenging Jim Crow non-violently and economically undoubtedly inspired grassroots civil rights activity nationwide, just as the Montgomery bus boycotters had done for them. These stories introduced many unnamed faces to audiences around the country. Between the masses of black boycotters discussed in articles and whites commenting off-record to provide glimpses into Tuskegee's deteriorating race relations, national readers had very few public faces and names to associate with the movement in Tuskegee. However, two men that appeared in almost

¹⁰⁶ Bound collections of volumes from the 1930s-1970s are available in the Tuskegee University Archives for both papers. Both papers are virtually identical in structure and layout. Writers for both papers are exclusively white.

every article about the Tuskegee boycotts were the movement's most adversarial figures, TCA President Charles Gomillion and State Senator Sam Engelhardt.

Blacks and whites believed that dialogue between the two races would help lift Tuskegee out of the crisis. Many from both races also believed that the two individuals that would need to be involved in that dialogue were Engelhardt and Gomillion. While many understood that these two very different men would have to be the ones to facilitate this dialogue for reconciliation, they also understood that such a meeting would be virtually impossible. A Nurse Aide named "growing resentment between the races"¹⁰⁷ as the biggest problem in Tuskegee. From whites, this resentment came from blacks attempting to usurp their authority over Tuskegee. From blacks, this resentment came from generations of abuse, exploitation, and discrimination. This resentment continued to fester over the duration of the boycott and beyond. The boycott's prolonged economic inactivity in Confederate Square would eventually pass, but blacks and whites were then confronted with the realization that their town would never again be the same. This realization did not stop blacks and whites from presenting their ideas on how they could save their town.

Blacks most often answered that they would have liked to see the city limits returned to their rightful places before the gerrymander and to be able to enjoy their voting rights as American citizens like anyone else. 90% of all black respondents replied with these answers or some version of it. Some respondents took a more politically assertive tone mentioning that the time had come for blacks to begin to seriously consider running for city government positions. Once the city limits and voting rights were restored, these candidates would be ready to run immediately so that blacks could have

¹⁰⁷ Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondents, #65, #69, #121, #139.

some representation in their city government. Black respondents went into further detail, outlining which positions should be prioritized. These individuals suggested that at least one seat on the City Council, Board of Registrars, and Macon County school board should be filled by qualified blacks. These suggestions were more than fair in the minds of blacks however for segregationists in Tuskegee even these marginal positions were threatening to their dominance of the town.¹⁰⁸ These same strategic positions are the same ones that Charles Gomillion personally suggested at several TCA meetings.¹⁰⁹

Proposed solutions from different whites took on a variety of tones that reflected how divided White Tuskegee was over this situation. Some simply responded that they “can’t hardly say” or “I don’t know” while others provided very specific and thoughtful instructions. A white insurance salesman laid out his suggestion, “1. Some Negroes (rural) could be reasoned with and protected in trade. 2. Get rid of Gomillion (fire him). 3. Place some white Southerners on Board of Trustees at the Institute.”¹¹⁰ Respondent #82 also viewed the University as the epicenter of the town’s recent troubles answering, “Remove politics from Hospital and Institute. Remove Gomillion from Institute.”¹¹¹ Respondent #83 another white male that worked in Insurance and farming responded, “At least three outside, top level, outstanding citizens to call a meeting of 3 whites and 3 Negroes (local) of like standing for a conference.”¹¹² A slightly different approach was

¹⁰⁸ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 181. These same strategic positions are the same ones that Charles Gomillion personally suggested at several TCA meetings.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondent #80.

¹¹¹ Ibid., Respondent #82.

¹¹² Ibid., Respondent #83.

suggested by Respondent #84, calling for “The government [to] move white residents of the town including our cemetery.”¹¹³ These answers among many others reflect a common belief among whites of their fear of the northern/outside agitator. Not only were these outsiders corrupting the good Negroes of their community they were also now running the hospital and the Institute and wished to use these two pillars of the black community as operating bases for their eventual coup of the small Alabama town. Despite the TCA’s repeated disavowals of this claim of outside agitation and a siege of Tuskegee’s government and the town itself, segregationists remained unconvinced.¹¹⁴

Other whites in Tuskegee felt that resolving the present situation would require older solutions that had worked in the past. Respondent #88 answered, “1. Stop newspaper discussion. 2. The best thing without drastic measures is to let it die out but that might take a long time.”¹¹⁵ Respondent #91 suggested that to fix the problem would require, “As little publicity as possible.”¹¹⁶ These respondents were convinced that this current boycott was similar to the boycott attempts of the past where time, disunity, and convenience often brought black patrons back downtown to shop at white stores.

Respondent #88 at least acknowledged the uniqueness of this most recent boycott by adding that it “might take a long time” before the boycott would die out.¹¹⁷ He couldn’t have possibly known just how telling his prediction was. He was right because

¹¹³ Ibid., Respondent #84. This respondent’s cemetery comment is extremely interesting. Not only were whites in Tuskegee concerned with being segregated from blacks, they also wanted to be segregated in death.

¹¹⁴ TCA Weekly Mass Meeting Recording Circa 1957. K.L. Buford and Charles Gomillion emphasized this point often. Gomillion also told several newspapers that blacks did not want to rule anyone.

¹¹⁵ Tuskegee Crisis Study Respondent #88.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., Respondent #91.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., Respondent #88.

this boycott was unique and it would take a long time to resolve. However, he was wrong because this boycott placed black Tuskegee citizens in the driver's seat, even if whites had not fully accepted it. Black citizens had withheld their dollars, their trade, their patronage, and had adapted well to their new environment. Blacks took great pride in shopping with black merchants. Many blacks in Tuskegee decided that they would never go back to trading with segregationist merchants downtown even if the boycott was called off. By the same token, segregationist white merchants decided that their businesses were necessary casualties in this battle for political control. What neither side quite anticipated, however, was that not only political power hung in the balance of this struggle. In fact, Tuskegee's long-term economic future was also at stake. And ultimately, that would be the battle that both the Crusaders and the Segregationists lost.

Chapter 3: Nothing Beside Remains: the Eclipsing of the TCA

“What about this fellow...Gomillion?” Governor Persons asked, failing to mask his frustration and annoyance. “Well, Governor, he’s simply exercising his duties as a citizen. He’s not acting officially for Tuskegee Institute,” Dr. Frederick Douglass Patterson calmly explained. Persons replied, “Yes, I understand that, but you and I know there isn’t any difference. He can’t act as a citizen and be an employee of Tuskegee without Tuskegee’s influence being a part of what he’s doing. I’m not going to ask you to do anything about it. I am just pointing that out to you.”¹

Gordon Persons was a former Alabama Transportation Commissioner and newly elected governor of Alabama.² Dr. Patterson had previous experience with Commissioner Persons as a member of a committee of prominent black leaders that met with the Governor monthly. Among this group of leaders included grassroots civil rights leader, E.D. Nixon of the Montgomery Improvement Association.³ This group met with Persons to appeal his decision to allow segregation to continue on Pullman railroad cars in Alabama, despite standing federal regulations that prevented this type of discrimination. Persons rose to the governorship in 1951, following Jim Folsom’s first stint as governor. Folsom became governor again when Persons would later resign in 1955. However once Persons reached the Governor’s office, news of Gomillion and the TCA’s aggressive campaign for the ballot in Macon County met him there. Gomillion and the TCA were

¹ Frederick D. Patterson, Martia G. Goodson, Harry V. Richardson, *Chronicles of Faith: The Autobiography of Frederick Douglass Patterson* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991), 108.

² Anne Permaloff and Carl Grafton, *Political Power in Alabama: The More Things Change* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 140.

³ The Montgomery Improvement Association was formed shortly after Rosa Parks’ arrest for refusing to give up her seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. among other national civil rights movement leaders emerged from this organization that played a key role in the desegregation of Montgomery, Alabama.

becoming a problem for segregationists in Alabama and Persons hoped to fix it with Dr. Patterson's help.

Dr. Patterson understood the Governor's meaning and left with some relief. Once Gomillion became the topic of conversation, Patterson fully expected that the new Governor would ask him to suspend or even fire Gomillion who was currently serving as Tuskegee Institute's Dean of Students. Much to his surprise, Persons did not ask him to do this. Patterson admitted later,

I was glad he didn't because I wasn't going to do anything about Gomillion...I gave as much encouragement as I could to Gomillion and the others when the Civic Association began. The only time I ever attempted to restrain Gomillion was when he sent some notices for the association out on Tuskegee stationery. I told him, 'Don't do that. I don't object to what you are doing but don't identify your movement officially with Tuskegee Institute, because Tuskegee Institute isn't a civil rights movement, it's an educational institution.'⁴

Despite Persons' warning, Gomillion and the TCA continued their aggressive push for voting rights in Tuskegee, and Patterson continued to support the TCA.⁵ Persons' threat would become a reality during the governorship of Lurleen Wallace who, at the urging of her husband George Wallace, cut the state's annual appropriation to Tuskegee Institute. After her term in office ended, her husband succeeded her, and later restored Tuskegee's state appropriations. Frank Toland, a colleague and friend of Gomillion's, believed the Wallaces had made the cut in appropriations to the Institute as "part of a racially motivated, vindictive effort to punish Tuskegee because Gomillion and

⁴ Frederick D. Patterson, Martia G. Goodson, Harry V. Richardson, *Chronicles of Faith: The Autobiography of Frederick Douglass Patterson* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991), 109-110.

⁵ TCA Weekly Meeting, Announcements Circa 1957. Charles Gomillion's role as President normally required him to keep track of donations of this sort. Gomillion and William Mitchell's exceptional record keeping kept track of every cent donated to the TCA to cover legal costs.

other blacks in Tuskegee were pushing for the ballot.”⁶ Charles Gomillion was later asked if he had any knowledge that he might have been the reason for the cut in appropriations years later, and admitted, “I don’t know, I’m sorry.”⁷

As Dr. Lewis Wade Jones remembered, “There was one period when it seemed that if the state was going to make the appropriation [to Tuskegee Institute], that they would have to get rid of Charles Gomillion. Gomillion at that time was the Dean of the School of Education. In one of these moves at the end of the year, Gomillion was relieved of the deanship, and after the legislature had made the appropriation and dispersed, he was reappointed as the Dean of Students.”⁸ Gomillion did not seem to object to this, he had requested to be relieved of his deanship duties with the School of Education earlier in the term due to his preference for classroom instruction over administrative duties.⁹ Little did he know that this change in administrative duty and several others like it throughout his tenure at Tuskegee was a strategy the administration needed to use in order to keep desperately-needed state appropriations flowing into Tuskegee Institute. For the administration of Tuskegee Institute this was the price of passively supporting the TCA’s push for voting rights and its association with the troublemaker Charles Gomillion.

Old Town, New Challenges

By 1960, Gomillion had been President of the Tuskegee Civic Association for nearly two decades. During this time, Gomillion led the TCA through an unlawful

⁶ Frank Toland, Interview with Alphonso T Smith , ACHE Oral History Project, Volume 3.

⁷ Alphonso T Smith, Interview with Charles Gomillion, A.C.H.E. Oral History project, Volume 2

⁸ Alphonso T Smith, Interview with Dr. Lewis Wade Jones, A.C.H.E. Oral History Project, Volume 4.

⁹ Charles Gomillion Letter to President Luther Foster 1/25/1960. Charles Gomillion Papers.

gerrymander, a citywide boycott of Confederate Square, and several courtcases including the landmark *Gomillion vs. Lightfoot (1960)* undoubtedly the TCA's crowning achievement. For Gomillion and the TCA, 1960 signalled the beginning of the most turbulent period in the association's history. In the late 1950s, African Americans battled Jim Crow in the Supreme Court and won forcing their gerrymandered borders to be restored. Most importantly this victory allowed African Americans to register to vote once again after nearly three years of disenfranchisement. That was the fifties however, the sixties had now come, and with it new challenges for the TCA and its dutiful president. These new challenges proved to be very different from what they had faced in the previous decade.

While Tuskegee's segregationists reeled from the effects of the TCA's boycott and the now-overturned gerrymander, their hopes of holding on to their control and power were injured but still very much alive. These still-potent embers of white resistance did not come as a surprise to the TCA in the slightest. What did surprise them, however, was the rise of new challengers from within their own ranks. Tuskegee Institute students, many of whom had possibly taken Professor Toland for History or Gomillion and or Lewis Jones for Sociology, gradually pulled away from what they believed was the TCA's older and much slower approach to civil rights work. The newest threat to the TCA's movement was not a white Tuskegeean or the Governor or even a segregationist State Senator. For these faculty and TCA members their newest opposition was much closer to home as students began to challenge the old guard in Tuskegee. For Gomillion the first generational rifts and challenges came in the form of Charles V. Hamilton, a fellow TCA member that would later become involved with the Black Power Movement.

The Uncle Toms Among Us

Charles V. Hamilton, a young political scientist not even thirty years old, arrived in Tuskegee in 1958. Hamilton came to Tuskegee to teach but viewed the opportunity to work with his personal hero Gomillion as an added bonus. Hamilton recalled, “He was the epitome of everything I wanted to be, he had all the virtues; civility, intelligence, and he was a scholar.”¹⁰ Hamilton admired Gomillion the scholar but also found that despite Gomillion’s reservedness and professionalism, he possessed a “simmering rage somewhere at his core, and regarded segregation as some kind of deeply personal affront.”¹¹ The condescension of whites towards him and black people in general was for a proud man like Gomillion “an insult that cut all the way to his heart.”¹² Like Gomillion, Hamilton also hated segregation, Jim Crow, and racism and fit right in when he joined the TCA shortly after arriving in Tuskegee. Hamilton quickly found a place in the TCA, serving as William Mitchell’s assistant in managing the association’s day-to-day operations. Hamilton impressed the organization’s leaders, Gomillion especially, when he drafted a version of the voting rights bill that the TCA submitted to the U.S. Congress in 1959. Hamilton was younger than most of the TCA’s leadership, but he established himself early on as a capable worker that was fully committed to the TCA’s mission to improve Tuskegee for all citizens. Hamilton was excited to work with Gomillion, but found himself at odds with the TCA’s gradualist approaches.

¹⁰ Frye Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom: Alabama and the Movement that Changed America* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 54.

Charles Hamilton Interviewed by Robert Norrell October 26, 1982.

¹¹ Charles Hamilton Interviewed by Robert Norrell, October 26, 1982
Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power and the Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Grove, 1967), 125-127.

¹² Ibid.

For Hamilton, the TCA's gradualist approach to civil rights work was too cautious and too slow. Hamilton even "gave talks at TCA meetings on the limitations of the gradualist styles," much to the dismay of the older leadership. Charlotte Lewis, a young lawyer and new TCA member shared Hamilton's doubts about the TCA's gradualist approach and publicly "charged that the TCA leadership was bourgeois and out of touch with the grass roots."¹³ Lewis and Hamilton both advocated that protest marches and more direct action strategies be implemented in order to speed up the rate of change and progress in Tuskegee. The TCA leaders, did not perceive Lewis' criticism as constructive in the slightest and were deeply offended. The TCA leadership viewed their tactics of gradualism as the best policy for Tuskegee despite the quickening pace of the larger national movement. Frankly, "Gomillion wanted no part of direct confrontation with whites, and most TCA members shared that feeling, though many had engaged in a kind of direct-action protest at the Board of Registrars over the years"¹⁴ while attempting to register to vote. The TCA leadership called a vote to remove Hamilton from the TCA's executive committee. The leadership voted unanimously to remove Hamilton who now found himself on the outside looking into the black community's inner circle of power. Gomillion explained later, "that Hamilton had disobeyed an organizational directive on how to vote on a policy matter before a regional meeting of voting rights activists." Hamilton believed his ousting was for much simpler reasons: "Hamilton believed it was his advocacy of a more aggressive approach that had been his undoing at the TCA."¹⁵

¹³ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 171.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 171-173 .

Hamilton still attended TCA meetings, but his influence as a member was far less significant and he could no longer address the membership body like before. He was not fully out of the TCA, however, the leadership's trust in him was now severely compromised. Hamilton's next action in Tuskegee, however, completed his ostracization from the community despite his noble intentions.

In April of 1960, students at Tuskegee and Alabama State University held marches in Tuskegee and Montgomery respectively, to show solidarity with the growing sit-in movement. Students from North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro, began a campaign to force integrate Woolworth's Diner and similar establishments on February 1, 1960. They entered the diner completely untrained and unaware of what awaited them at the lunch counters, sparking a new beginning for the black student movement. Historian Frye Gaillard writes, "It was a moment so filled with purity and drama that the movement quickly spread to other cities in the South."¹⁶ This movement in Greensboro began on February 1, and continued into the spring spreading across southern communities. Tuskegee was one of these communities. Hamilton led "a march of several hundred students from the campus to downtown Tuskegee in a response to the sit-in movement just then beginning to sweep the South."¹⁷ The march was silent and peaceful with one exception where a local white man provoked a student marcher. Not only did this march draw the ire of Gomillion and the TCA for directly violating their gradualist approach, Hamilton also managed to land himself in hot water with the Institute

¹⁶ Frye Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom: Alabama and the Movement that Changed America* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama, 2004), 71.

¹⁷ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 171.

administration. Luther Foster initially discouraged the demonstration, but afterward described the students' action as "an effort 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."¹⁸ Foster and the Institute were highly sympathetic and embracing of the actions of their students, very much unlike Alabama State University's president Councill Trenholm.

Alabama State University is located in the heart of Montgomery in walking distance of the state Capitol. Several ASU students attempted a sit in at the Capitol's cafeteria. The students were denied service and left collectively as a group and returned to campus. Governor John Patterson was enraged at the boldness of the students declaring, "The Citizens of this state do not intend to spend their tax money to educate law violators and race agitators, and if you do not put a stop to it, you might well find yourself out of public funds." Alabama State, very much a public state-funded school could not risk this threat, and President Trenholm sadly replied, "I have no choice, but to comply" before expelling the students.¹⁹ Foster's understanding towards the student marchers did not extend to Hamilton.

Unlike Gomillion, Frank Toland, Lewis Jones, and many others that were able to separate their civil rights activities and their duties as Institute faculty members, Hamilton merged the two by directly engaging students in civil rights activity. Hamilton had violated former Institute President Frederick Patterson's rule to shield faculty members that separated their political and professional lives seemingly in the most

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Frye Gaillard *Cradle of Freedom: Alabama and the Movement that Changed America* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 71.

grandiose and public way possible. For this, Hamilton was terminated when his contract was not renewed for the next academic school year. Gomillion, Hamilton's department chair, signed the form acknowledging that Hamilton would not be retained by the Institute. Hamilton was aware of the Institute's unspoken policy which had stood since 1953 and was continued by Foster, however the context of it might have been unclear.

Hamilton was unaware of the difficulty Gomillion's own involvement had once brought down on the institute. Hamilton could not fully grasp how his actions could have posed serious problems for the school and the politics of state appropriations at that time. When Hamilton confronted Gomillion about his termination, Gomillion frankly mentioned that the march had "figured in" part to the decision not to renew his contract. Luther Foster denied that Hamilton's termination was related to the march, however the students that marched with Hamilton were not convinced.

Gomillion and Patterson's front lawns were riddled with lawn signs asking, "Are There Uncle Toms Among Us?" The only recompense Hamilton received came in the form of his salary for the next three months after an appeal of his dismissal. He would not be the last to oppose the TCA or challenge Gomillion's leadership. That would come later, but for the moment the TCA and Gomillion turned their attention to 1964, a watershed year for both the TCA and the community's future.

The 1964 Election

1964 came to Tuskegee, bringing with it a buzz of excitement over the black community. For many, not only was this an important election year, it would be the first time many citizens would cast ballots. Since the overturning of Engelhardt's gerrymander

in 1960 by *Gomillion v Lightfoot* (1960), black citizens were finally going to have the opportunity to utilize the right they had fought hard to reclaim. In case voting for the first time did not provide enough excitement, 1964 also became the first election to feature black political candidates. The 1964 election also proved to become the town's most important election in over a century. African Americans in Tuskegee approached the election with a sense of purpose and the history behind the moment before them.

At the controls and behind the scenes of this election was Gomillion and the TCA to ensure that African Americans would fully take advantage on this moment they had more than earned. The Association's presence could be felt in nearly every component of the election and the campaign season. For Gomillion and the TCA, there could be no mistakes here, this election was the culmination of over thirty years of work, sacrifice, and preparation, failure was not an option. To ensure a smooth election the TCA took an active role in the execution of the campaign season and the election itself. One of the measures was the re-activation of the long dormant Macon County Democratic Club, an organization formed by Gomillion and the TCA ten years before.²⁰ The club sponsored several forums and town-halls for black and white candidates to speak to the black community and explain their positions and how they hoped to move Tuskegee forward. The club also organized the black community into precincts and asked members to staff polling places during the election to ensure that voters were not discriminated against by segregationists and feel comfortable voting for the candidates of their choice. The TCA and the Democratic Club felt that thirty years of preparation had made them ready for virtually anything the 1964 county and city elections could throw at them.

²⁰ Charles Gomillion Interviewed by Alphonso T. Smith, A.C.H.E. Oral History Project Transcripts Volume 3. Charles Hamilton Interviewed by Robert Norrell October 26, 1982.

Early on in the campaign season, the Democratic Club endorsed a slate of seven candidates for the pending city and county elections. In keeping with Gomillion's goals of establishing an interracial government in Tuskegee, the slate included both blacks and whites. The club "recommended three whites, including Sheriff Hornsby, who was running for the now vacant probate judgeship left due to William Varner's failing health, and candidates for positions on the county commission and the county school board. The club supported four blacks: William C. Allen, the proprietor of a general store, and William J. Childs, the owner of a service station, received endorsements for justice of the peace, the lowest level of county magistrate; V.A. Edwards, a retired religion professor at the Institute for a second seat open on the county commission; and Gomillion for a second position on the Board of Education."²¹ Gomillion and the TCA had preached gradualist politics for nearly thirty years and now had a chance to finally implement it in Tuskegee.

Gomillion envisioned that the political work he and the TCA had done in Tuskegee could serve as an example for the rest of the state of Alabama and possibly even the rest of the south. If gradualism could work in Tuskegee, it could show Alabama's segregationists that blacks could be trusted to govern as equal partners. Gradualism in Tuskegee could prove once and for all across the state that not only would blacks not seek revenge against them but even "encourage whites elsewhere to be willing to appoint or elect qualified Negroes, even in places where Negroes were less numerous

²¹ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 164-165.

than in Macon County.”²² Through the TCA’s gradualist approach, African Americans would follow the same “principles that we had accused the white power structure of failing to honor in the past... We were not interested in replacing white demagoguery with black demagoguery.”²³ Gomillion believed gradualism as the best way forward in the long run for Alabama’s black citizens, however he also had less theoretical reasons for this approach, “The truth is we are just beginners at this, by virtue of having been kept on the sidelines so long, and we do have much to learn.”²⁴ Patience and caution was the most practical course for black Tuskegee’s political participation. Most of black Macon County agreed with him, electing each of the Democratic Club’s seven county election candidates. Blacks still heavily outnumbered whites in the county, and the recommendation of the TCA and Gomillion still held much weight in the minds of most black county voters.

The county elections were expected victories for the Democratic Club and their interracial slate of candidates. It was the city election that would prove to be the real test for Gomillion’s interracial government idea. Gomillion anticipated that the TCA and the Democratic Club candidates would run into the usual resistance from segregationists whites. The TCA and the Democratic Club were prepared for this, what they had not initially taken into account was the rise of yet another challenger to the TCA and its gradualist approach. Once again this resistance would come from within Tuskegee’s once-united black community. This new wave had fought alongside the TCA and

²² Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskege* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 165.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

participated in the Crusade for Citizenship. Now that black political power and autonomy was finally within reach, they feared that the gradualists would continue to obstruct their rise to power as the segregationists had.

Since *Gomillion v Lightfoot* (1960), African Americans had caught up in voter numbers but were still nearly a hundred registered voters shy of eclipsing whites. The Democratic Club endorsed, “incumbent white councilmen L.M. Gregg and John Sides, who had proved to be friendly and cooperative with black Tuskegee. It endorsed Allan Parker for another council position and Emory Taylor, a white grocer for mayor. The club gave its strongest support to two black council candidates: Rev. Kenneth L. Buford and Dr. Stanley Smith. Smith was a young sociologist who had also been active in the TCA.”²⁵ Each candidate carried the black votes with the exception of Taylor the recommended Mayoral candidate. Taylor lost to Charles Keever, “a local white businessman and political liberal who had campaigned vigorously among blacks.”²⁶ Buford and Smith both found themselves entering run-off elections for separate districts in Tuskegee. They both faced other independent black candidates also hoping to enter Tuskegee’s political arena.

These candidates were supported by the Non-Partisan Voters League, an organization created in opposition to the Democratic Club. Dr. Paul Puryear, a political scientist at the Insitute started the group in early 1964 to oppose Gomillion’s gradualist Democratic Club. Anthony “Detroit” Lee, the lead plaintiff in Tuskegee’s school desegregation case, *Lee v Macon County Board of Education*, approached the Democratic

²⁵ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 164.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 165-166.

Club about running for Varner's vacant Probate Judgeship and was immediately rebuffed. "Don't rock the boat, Mr. Lee" he was told by Beulah Johnson, a long time TCA member that anticipated that Gomillion would not have approved of this candidacy for this particular election. Lee replied dryly, "I may just turn the damn boat over."²⁷

The probate judgeship for the county did not fit the Democratic Club's firm commitment to gradualist politics. Lee later approached Puryear about forming a counter-organization that sought a more aggressive approach to black political participation. While the Democratic Club focused on informing voters, the Non-Partisan League drafted a very specific platform demanding, "better city services, more low-income housing, vocational education for the unemployed, and more federal assistance to city government." Lower-income black citizens were the priority despite the League candidates all representing Tuskegee's educated black middle class.²⁸

The city council runoffs represented the final hurdle in installing Tuskegee's interracial government. After learning of Puryear's Non-Partisan League and its threat to the Democratic League's chances, Gomillion decided to uncharacteristically leave the blanket of the TCA and the Democratic League to enter the fray to remind Tuskegee of what was at stake. Gomillion penned an appeal to Tuskegee's black and white voters to elect K.L. Buford and Stanley Smith in their respective runoffs. In a letter to the *Tuskegee News*, Gomillion wrote, "even among the most liberal white citizens there is not now the readiness to act courageously in moving toward more responsible civic behavior. If white citizens do not cooperate with Negro citizens on September 15 in the election of Rev.

²⁷ Ibid., 166. Paul Puryear Interviewed by Robert Norrell, May 19, 1983.

²⁸ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 166-167.

Buford and Dr. Smith, in view of what Negro voters did on August 11, white officials and white citizens might as well expect on September 16 the beginning of an all-out effort to take over the government of the city and the county, in which Negroes are now demonstrating they are willing to share.”²⁹

Gomillion’s warning was unmistakable for whites especially. For them, not voting in the all black runoffs was not an option and would have a significant impact on the community at large. They were asked to lend their support to Buford and Smith ahead of their anticipated divided black contests. Gomillion urged blacks to vote a straight democratic party ticket which included both Buford and Smith. Gomillion then stressed, “The important issue here is whether or not we want to continue to act and be treated as Negroes, or move into the larger area of politics and act as Democrats who happen to be Negroes...The club did not refrain from endorsing the Independents because they were Negroes, but because they are Independents...Lets [sic] show Alabama and the Democratic National Committee that Macon County Negro voters are loyal Democrats.”³⁰ Many African Americans took Gomillion’s words to heart and came out strongly for both Buford and Smith. Tuskegee’s whites also accepted Gomillion’s appeal and voted for Buford and Smith. Gomillion helped them to realize that that electing Paul Puryear or any of the other Non-Partisan League candidates would only ensure the coming of the black revenge fueled political takeover that had driven their fears and

²⁹ Charles Gomillion Interviewed by Alphonso T. Smith, A.C.H.E. Oral History Project Transcripts Volume 3.

³⁰ Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Grove, 1967), 138.

actions during the Crusade for Citizenship. Whites received the message of what their non-participation could cost them, and helped elect the Democratic Club candidates.³¹

The Puryear Challenge

Paul Puryear and the Non-Partisan League were overwhelmingly defeated. However the sting of defeat paled in comparison to their disappointment in Gomillion and the TCA. Gomillion's lack of vision intentionally preempted the black political power and respect they believed they now deserved. Puryear wrote to the *Montgomery Advertiser* to express the league's thoughts on their missed opportunity: "While many in the nation were exercising discriminating judgment by voting for the candidates deemed most fit, the Negro leaders of Macon County continued to adhere slavishly to the notion that the viability of the Alabama Democratic Party must be maintained at all cost." Puryear accused the TCA of forstalling the progress of Tuskegee's black citizens and ensuring the "pace of social change in Tuskegee remains unconscionably slow."³² Puryear despised the TCA's unwillingness to part with the "politics of deference" that had been perpetuated in the community since the days of Booker T Washington. Puryear understood but mocked the TCA's insistence on focusing much of their platforms and programs on the "notion that black people had to prove themselves to white people."³³

Puryear's criticisms did not stop there, he had spoken largely of the TCA as a whole but shifted his focus on Gomillion specifically. "Everybody has been so busy

³¹ Ibid., 136. Paul Puryear Interviewed by Robert Norrell, May 19, 1983.

³² Ibid., 169.

³³ Ibid., 124-125.

obtaining the right to vote that we've all neglected to notice that time and again the drive for freedom has resulted in the establishment of a black oligarchy, a narrow leadership that presumes to speak for the mass of Negroes and to treat with the white power structure in the manner of an ambassador." The final blow came when he referred to Gomillion's leadership as having "become sterile and limited in its approach, and perhaps satisfied that it knows all the answers."³⁴ To Puryear and the Independent League, the TCA's city election victory was nothing to celebrate. All Gomillion and the TCA had managed to accomplish was enabling Tuskegee's "racially deferential society" to linger in Tuskegee just a little longer. Despite his scathing criticisms of Gomillion and the TCA, it is possible that other less political factors factored into Puryear's clash with Gomillion and the older generation.

Puryear respected Gomillion for the work he had done in the past, however deep down Puryear possibly held some contempt for Gomillion's leadership in such a pivotal moment. Puryear was twenty-seven years younger than Gomillion. Very much like Gomillion, Puryear arrived in Tuskegee as a young man hoping to positively impact the community as Gomillion once did. Also very Gomillion-like, Puryear believed black political participation would allow blacks to begin the process of realizing their full potential as Americans and build a stronger community. Where Gomillion and Puryear differed the most could be attributed to the times in which they had matured. Gomillion, "had matured during the 1920s and 1930s, a time of relatively little progress for blacks...Puryear had matured during the 1950s, when blacks had much higher

³⁴ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 170.

expectations, and realizations, of change.”³⁵ The pace of Gomillion’s work was slow because the times in which he lived were equally slow and required much more time to adjust to new civil rights demands. Puryear on the other hand matured primarily in the 1950s and witnessed the fruition of the painstaking work of Gomillion generation of movement workers. Puryear’s generation witnessed the passage of evolving civil rights legislation, the overturning of *Plessy v Ferguson* ending “separate but equal” facilities, and they had also witnessed significant strides in black voting with *Gomillion v Lightfoot* (1960). For Gomillion’s generation, 1964 was the receipt for their many years of trusting the TCA, however it now seemed to many of them that their labors were now being taken for granted by the younger generation. The younger generation matched the disappointment of their elders, with some of their own.

Young, Gifted, and Invisible

Gwen Patton articulated this criticism perfectly. As a freshman at Tuskegee, she read Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and could not help but identify similarities between Ellison’s invisible protagonist and her own experiences at Tuskegee. Patton found herself riveted by the harrowing yet poignant portrait of what it meant to be black, not only in America but at Tuskegee Institute. “Because you were black, she said, your humanity was invisible to the white world around you, and because you were young, Charles Gomillion and the other civil rights leaders in Tuskegee were clearly skeptical of your value to the movement.”³⁶ Patton recalled, “We respected Dr. Gomillion, but he also

³⁵ William Mitchell Interviewed by Alphonso T Smith, A.C.H.E. Oral History Project Transcripts Volume 3.

³⁶ Frye Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom: Alabama and the Movement that Changed America* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 254.

wanted to make us invisible.”³⁷ Seemingly on cue, young charismatic SNCC leaders entered Tuskegee in the winter months of 1964-1965, bringing with them dangerous and exciting ideas of liberation and freedom with them. SNCC leaders Bob Mants, Stokely Carmichael and others came to Tuskegee with the hopes of recruiting Tuskegee students for their voter registration drives in Selma. Voting rights had replaced integration as SNCC’s primary goal and through their recruiting efforts in Tuskegee, they found some help in accomplishing that goal.³⁸

“The Great Pee-In of 1965”

In February of 1965, SNCC recruiters oversaw the formation of the Tuskegee Institute Advancement League, an organization composed of Tuskegee students in support of the movement in Selma. Their first operation as an organization was a scheduled march to the Alabama State Capitol to deliver a “petition protesting the denial of voting rights to black people.”³⁹ Less than a month after their founding on March 7, marchers from Selma were beaten and brutalized by Alabama State Troopers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The marchers from Selma also had planned to reach the Alabama State Capitol but were stopped by the State Troopers at the order of Dallas County’s fierce segregationist Sheriff Jim Clark. After the beatings, and a temporary restraining order against more marches, “King sent a telegram to the Tuskegee Institute campus asking the students to postpone their Montgomery protest. Institute administrators put a

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Jeffrey Turner, *Sitting In and Sitting Out: Student Movements in the American South 1960-1970* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 172.

³⁹ Ibid., 172.

copy of King's telegram at each student's place in the dining hall the night before the march was to take place."⁴⁰ King's words fell on deaf ears as students, "began a rhythmic tapping on the dining hall tables as they read the telegram. "March, march, march," they chanted in response" to this command from King. They did not owe their obedience or loyalty to King, their loyalty was to SNCC and the disfranchised African Americans in Selma.

Seven hundred students and faculty members travelled to Montgomery by bus with the assistance of "underground" Tuskegee Institute faculty that privately supported their cause. They viewed themselves as the Selma to Montgomery March's "left flank" due to Tuskegee and Selma both being roughly 40-50 miles in either direction from the capitol. Selma was the right flank, and Tuskegee was the left flank of the same formation. This profound solidarity with the people of Selma however, did not prepare them for what they faced once the bus stopped.⁴¹

George Ware, a T.I. graduate student and SNCC's strongest Tuskegee supporter, set a tone of intense militancy once the marchers arrived. Ware and several local Montgomery pastors were initially stuck in a debate about who would lead the march. After about thirty minutes of arguing, Ware finally declared "This is a student protest, and students will lead it."⁴² After this brief exchange with the pastors, the protest began as Ware started to read the petition in front of the capitol building. Standing between the capitol and the protesters were roughly one hundred armed state troopers and capitol

⁴⁰ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 173.

⁴¹ Gwen Patton Interviewed by Robert Norrell May 14, 1982.

⁴² Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 173.

policemen. Immediately after Ware began reading the petition he was arrested by a Montgomery policeman. The remaining students not ready to give up their effort just yet, just sat down in the spots where they stood directly at the foot of the Capitol steps.

Once the students were mostly seated, the police formed a perimeter around them. Some students expected the notoriously brutal Montgomery police force to beat them just as the police in Selma had beaten their brothers and sisters on Bloody Sunday. To their surprise, however, the police did not attack even allowing students to leave if they desired. However, once these students left the circle they were not permitted reentry by the officers. Students gradually got up and left the circle over the course of the day, those that stayed found themselves faced with the very human problem of having to urinate. “When the urge was simply too strong to resist, they began to urinate in the middle of the circle, ‘as modestly as possible’ according to one protester’s account, and the demonstration went down in the annals of SNCC as ‘the great pee-in’ on the steps” of the Alabama State Capitol.⁴³

The students eventually gave up the march by nightfall and rested in Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, only a few steps away from the Capitol and this setback. SNCC leader James Forman called Tuskegee Institute Advancement League’s (TIAL) Montgomery attempt a “crash course in civil rights.”⁴⁴ Nearly every student experienced their first taste of white supremacy on the Capitol steps and many found themselves forced to grow up a little. Gwen Patton recalled, “After the march, a lot of people

⁴³ Frye Gaillard *Cradle of Freedom: Alabama and the Movement that Changed America* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 255-256.

⁴⁴ Jeffrey A. Turner *Sitting in and Speaking Out: Student Movements in the American South 1960-1970* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 172.

couldn't take Tuskegee any more." She was initially skeptical about SNCC but joined after the Montgomery march attempt. For Patton and many other students the experience forced them to confront some hard truths about themselves. "What are my present goals as a black student? Is it enough for me just to get an education so that I can join (or remain in) the professional middle class? Does the administration of my school stand for progress or the status quo? Where do I stand in relation to that administration? What is the function of a student organization, and how do I relate to it? How far am I willing to go in order to end the oppression of black people? Who, to put it most basically, am I, and what is the meaning of my life as a black person in white America?"⁴⁵ Patton and several Institute students with Tuskegee family roots all came to the conclusion that they were no longer going to support older black middle class gradualist ideals. The students were done subjecting themselves to what they viewed as self-loathing deference to earn the approval of segregationists whites that would never accept them anyway.

"The Blackening of White Spaces"

Forman like many of his SNCC counterparts abandoned the passive non-violent strategies of Martin Luther King and the SCLC in favor of more militancy and direct confrontation. Forman's strategy simply put was, "If we can't sit at the table of democracy, then we'll knock the fucking legs off."⁴⁶ To this new brand of civil rights worker, Gomillion and the TCA were relics and warriors from a different time worthy of their due respect, yet no longer effective enough to

⁴⁵ Gwen Patton Interviewed by Robert Norrell May 14, 1982.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 175

secure the pace of radical change they felt was required. Students were not interested in suing in courts or meeting in churches and boycotting businesses. Their newer and more direct strategies of executing the movement's work included picketing local white businesses for jobs, marching, and even integrating the Tuskegee community pool.

Black students rushed the town's pool on May 31, causing all of the whites in the pool to immediately exit the water. "The next day fifty students swam in the pool," without incident. The next day, the pool was filled with floating garbage obviously dumped by white vandals. "Acid and a baby alligator were thrown into the pool on subsequent days" to keep everyone out of the pool. The segregationists were not ready to swim with African Americans no matter how bold they were. Foster invited Patton to his office to ask her to reconsider their confrontational protests and tactics because the town was very near "model race relations." Foster left the meeting feeling he had won the young Junior as an ally. Foster's appeal backfired horribly as Patton would not be won over by a trip to the President's office.

Patton repeated everything that was said to her by the President to George Ware who questioned, "If this is such a model city, if blacks and whites get along so well, then lets go to their churches."⁴⁷ This set off an aggressive sequence of attempts to integrate the segregated white churches. William Mitchell recalled, "To many whites, the churches were now the only institutions that blacks

⁴⁷ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985) 175-176.

had not yet invaded.”⁴⁸ After all of the ground whites had been forced to surrender to blacks in Tuskegee, the church represented the one institution in the town where whites could feel safe from integration. This would not be true for much longer, the church was the last bastion of white supremacy and power in the town in a town growing increasingly smaller because of integration. This last sacred space for whites would now be threatened by blacks, seemingly just like everything else in Tuskegee.

Several integration attempts resulted in whites literally fighting back against the black students. Some white fighters would simply be neighbors or passerbys that recognized the magnitude of these potential breaches into the most sacred spaces of white life. Each week in the month in June brought more and more black students to integrate the Methodist Church on North Main Street. In response more and more white bystanders would gather outside of the church anticipating a brawl and the opportunity to fight the black students. Whites were ready to fight back to defend the church, however Gomillion believed, “some likely were more concerned with taking back some of their pride and salvaging some dignity and whiteness, rather than defending a church they might not have even attended.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 174-175.

An Unworthy Fight

Gomillion lent his voice to the chorus of disapproval for a series of church integrations, urging patience. Gomillion disagreed with these and other conflicts caused by the students, but did not attempt to stop them. In 1965, “many black adults in Tuskegee believed that they ought to ‘Let the children lead.’”⁵⁰ Some of the most vocal leaders of the student movement were homegrown Tuskegee natives, Gomillion knew many of their families on some level or another. In the mid 1960s, Gomillion started to recognize, “that younger men and women had more energy and enthusiasm towards leadership. Gomillion also felt in some ways that he should not have to fight to retain his power” after all he had done.⁵¹ He would rather step aside than feel he was lingering in a struggle that no longer needed him. This realization became crystal clear during a city council meeting in the fall of 1965. At this meeting, Sammy Younge one of SNCC and TIAL’s top student leaders in Tuskegee, directed several questions about the progress made by blacks at Gomillion. Gomillion refused to answer, primarily because he was not a City Council member and felt it was not his place to speak officially at this forum. Younge interpreted Gomillion’s silence as blatant disregard for his concerns. Younge, “angered by Gomillion’s refusal to acknowledge his questions, began to shout “Gomillion, you’re suppose to be the leader of the Negro people! What are you doing!?”⁵²

⁵⁰ James Forman, *Sammy Younge, Jr.: The First Black College Student to Die in the Black Liberation Movement* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 39. Gwen Patton Interviewed by Robert Norrell April 18, 1983.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 54-56.

⁵² *Ibid.*

This outburst from Younge showed Gomillion several things. First was what might happen if he publicly denounced the students. Second, he learned that this new movement was the opposite of everything he and the TCA had attempted to build. Their goals were similar in nature, however, Gomillion viewed their brash and aggressive methods as highly problematic because they alienated individuals that should have been allies, specifically the administration of Tuskegee Institute. The students marched on President Luther Foster's home, walked out of mandatory chapel meetings, and executed a "turn over your plate campaign" in the cafeteria.⁵³ The students felt that lack of public support from the Institute made them just as much a part of the problem as the segregationists that still resisted complete integration.

Coming Around In Their Own Way

Despite their seemingly aggressively anti-authority methods and rhetoric, the students shifted their focus from complete integration to voting rights after the winter of 1965. The students specifically targeted rural blacks outside of the city armed with the 1965 Voting Rights Act provision which provided the right to vote to illiterate citizens. Robert Norrell writes, "Instead of the grueling examination before harsh white registrars intent on embarrassing them, rural blacks now had to

⁵³ "Student Unrest Indicated Over Administration Policy" Nov 20 1965; "No Berkeley, But a Tuskegee" *Tuskegee Institute Campus Digest*, Dec 4 1965. Students protested mandatory chapel meetings known as Vespers because students had virtually no input as to who was to come speak. The "Turn Over Your Plate" campaign was a form of protest where students would dump full plates of cafeteria food onto their trays, specifically at times when they knew Tuskegee Institute President Luther Foster would be present with guests and visitors to the Institute.

answer only a few questions which they could do orally if they were illiterate.”⁵⁴

Without even realizing it, the students were finishing the work that Gomillion and the TCA had started by adding over sixteen hundred new black voters to the voter rolls.

The students made significant progress in their efforts to integrate more of Tuskegee, register rural black voter, and even in convincing the Tuskegee Institute administration to treat them more like adults instead of children.

Gomillion believed some of their actions to be “distasteful, immature, and counter-productive” at times but even he admitted, “they were succeeding in their minds, they were doing things differently than I would have advised, but the progress they made mattered a great deal to them.”⁵⁵ They had given all that they could give, they had laid the foundation for the younger generation, and conquered all of the worlds they were meant to conquer. Gomillion still disagreed with their brashness and departure from the TCA’s methods of precision and prudence, but he could not argue with the results and decided he would not actively attempt to hinder their work. The strides and progress they had made in only a matter of a few months in registering new voters and toning down some of their more aggressive desegregation campaigns all seemed to amount to nothing shortly after the new year began. The new year brought with it a watershed event that once again forever altered what could have been Tuskegee’s great destiny as a model community.

⁵⁴ Robert Norell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 179.

⁵⁵ Gomillion Autobiography Draft pg. 119. Charles Goode Gomillion Papers, Courtesy of Tuskegee University Archives.

January 3, 1966

The murder of Sammy Younge Jr sent shockwaves throughout the Tuskegee community. Not only was he one of the more popular young SNCC/TIAL leaders, he was a current Tuskegee Institute student and the son of one of Tuskegee's prominent black middle class families. He was as much a part of the Tuskegee Institute community as the iconic "Lifting the Veil" statue of Booker T. Washington on the campus. Younge was slain in a confrontation with Marvin Segrest, a white gas station attendant at the Standard Oil gas station which doubled as the Greyhound station in downtown Tuskegee.

Younge had left a party the night before, slightly impaired after one too many alcoholic drinks. Younge stopped at the gas station to use the restroom, where the cashier, Marvin Segrest "directed Younge to the rear of the station. Apparently believing he was being sent to the Jim Crow toilet, Younge swore at Segrest and demanded to use the public restroom. Segrest then drew a gun and ordered Younge off the service station property."⁵⁶ Segrest later testified that Younge grabbed a golf club from the golf bag of a student waiting to depart from the adjoining Greyhound station and proceeded to rush Segrest. Joseph Morris, the young golfer, testified that Younge ran away from Segrest after a shot was fired. Younge ran across the street to where Morris was and told him, "Don't leave...I want you to witness this." Younge then darted back across the street to the bus station and stepped on and off an empty parked Greyhound bus. He ran around the bus into the open, still holding the golf club, when Segrest fired

⁵⁶ Robert Norell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 179.

another shot. Segrest claimed that Younge had rushed him, however Morris testified unequivocally that Younge had been moving away from Segrest.”⁵⁷ The evidence in the trial would later point to a very different reality from Segrest’s retelling of the last seconds of Younge’s short life.

Sammy Younge’s body was discovered in an alleyway on the right side of the Greyhound station away from the Standard Oil. Segrest is believed to have been much more stationary during the shootout not going more than a few steps from the Standard Oil entrance. Segrest had only fired two shots, the first missing as Younge darted across the street to Morris, the second and final shot was a direct hit to the back of Younge’s head. Younge was dead before he hit the ground. The headshot caused him to collapse where he stood, falling directly into the alley facing East towards the backroad to Auburn and away from both the Greyhound station and Standard Oil.

On January 4 the very next day, 3000 students faculty and community members marched on downtown Tuskegee demanding answers and that Segrest be brought to justice.⁵⁸ Gwen Patton, now the president of Tuskegee’s student government and other leaders demanded to see Mayor Keever and the city council. The politicians emerged from city hall to face the large mostly sobbing crowd. Patton also in tears began, “You have told us this is a model city where whites and Negroes get along together, You have told us how good the Tuskegee image is...you have invited us downtown for a homecoming football parade...Yet

⁵⁷ Ibid., 179-180.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 181. *Tuskegee Institute Campus Digest* Clipping, “3000 March on Confederate Square”, Saturday January 8, 1965. Gwen Patton Interview with Robert Norrell April 18, 1983.

you closed the city swimming pool and barred us from your churches...now, we want to know what you are going to do!”⁵⁹ The mayor and councilmembers joined the students in prayer, standing in the pouring rain singing “We Shall Overcome.” The students returned to campus, but continued to lead marches back downtown and to Confederate Square, singing, marching, obstructing traffic and peacefully protesting for the rest of the week. January 15, is when the otherwise peaceful protests turned into violence between the police and the marchers. According to the Campus Digest, William Scott, a Tuskegee Institute High School senior struck a police officer who was attempting to arrest him.

The demonstration initially had less than one hundred picketers on Confederate Square, where a blue 1962 Ford Sedan with no bumpers or a license plate been circling the square and harassing the picketers. Students chased and eventually surrounded the car, throwing rocks and bottles at the six white men inside. Police poured out of the Macon County Courthouse and in their squad cars to intervene using their blackjacks and pepper spray. Word reached the campus that TIAL members were being beaten downtown. It was then that some 1200 students marched to the city square.”⁶⁰ In the midst of the chaos “some eleven buildings, including one owned by Negroes, had either cracked or broken windows as a result of the outbreak.”⁶¹

⁵⁹ Robert Norell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 181; James Forman, *Sammy Younge: The First Black College Student to Die in the Black Liberation Movement* (New York: Grove, 1967), 109-127, 174-177; *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 24, 1966.

⁶⁰ “1200 Students Join Protest” *Tuskegee Institute Campus Digest*, Saturday January 8 1966.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* Gwen Patton Interviewed by Robert Norrell, April 18, 1983.

The aftermath of Younger's death troubled Tuskegee's remaining racially liberal whites and many of the older black TCA members. White Tuskegeans were subject to even more pressure and anti-white sentiments from the student movement than before. The TCA harshly condemned the actions of the students, Beulah Johnson told the news, "Those of us who live here and love this community have much at stake. The SNCC type from outside and the handful who are persuaded to act outside the law do not understand this."⁶² City Councilman and TCA Vice President Rev. K.L. Buford was just as critical; "An idiotic climate has been created in this community by mob activities of college students and their associates which, from a behavioral point of view cannot be differentiated from those same activities by misguided hoodlums, color notwithstanding."⁶³ Another TCA affiliate summed up the general feeling of the seasoned organization, "the students are downtown destroying things we worked years to get. They're emotional and immature. They don't know what they're doing."⁶⁴

The students were emotional; they had lost their brother, friend, and one of their own. Their emotions erupted into rage when Marvin Segrest, Younger's killer, was acquitted of all charges. An all-white jury heard Segrest's case of self-defense from Younger, whom he thought also had a gun, and acquitted him.

⁶² Robert Norell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 184.

⁶³ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 184; James Forman, *Sammy Younger: The First Black College Student to Die in the Black Liberation Movement* (New York: Grove, 1967), 68.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 184-185.

Fifteen hundred Tuskegee students and black citizens descended on Confederate Square. Chaos ensued, the trial concluded nearly a full year after Younger's murder, so a full year's worth of rage was unleashed on Confederate Square. One student, "climbed up the Confederate statue, painted the soldier's face black, and put a yellow stripe down his back. Inscribed on the base of the statue were 'Black Power' and Sam Younger.'"⁶⁵ Tuskegee's liquor store, also located in the square was broken into, and several fires were started on the town square. The outpouring of anger, sadness, and unfiltered rage continued into the night, and finally stopped at 4:00 A.M. the next morning. Rocks and other objects were thrown into the windows of businesses and even the Macon County Courthouse on North Main Street as the students made their way back to the campus.⁶⁶

A Long Useful and Profitable Life

The TCA along with older blacks and whites were alarmed by the student's reaction to Younger's death. As they had done for twenty-five years, the TCA deferred to Gomillion. Gomillion's refusal to compete with the student movement for the leadership of black Tuskegee left him publicly silent for much of 1965 and January of 1966. Backlash from the slaying of Younger in January and heightened tensions between the TCA and the students compelled Gomillion to emerge from his self-imposed cone of silence. In a statement given on February

⁶⁵ Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 192.

⁶⁶ James Forman, *Sammy Younger Jr.: The First Black College Student to Die in the Black Liberation Movement* (New York: Grove, 1968), 72-75.

13, Gomillion began discussing how the TCA as an organization had tried to refrain from telling other groups what they should and should not do, implying that he hoped that the courtesy would be returned. “Our way is not the only way, but we have been able to accomplish many of our goals.” In response to Gwen Patton’s accusation of the TCA and City Government’s claim that Tuskegee was a model community, he denied that the TCA had ever made such a claim. “I have said it could become one. I still think it could. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have stayed here.” He ended the statement discussing and defending the TCA’s method of Civil Rights work, “Maybe our goals haven’t been high enough or comprehensive enough. But there are many of us who believe that by working together, by making necessary compromises, we can make Tuskegee a better place to live.”⁶⁷

Gomillion’s call for unity and cooperation was ignored and he and other older leaders became political fodder and regular targets for some black grassroots politicians hoping to build their careers on the anti-white hopes of the student movement.⁶⁸ Constant criticism of Gomillion’s goals of an interracial government in Tuskegee made resigning from his post on the school board and as a faculty member at Tuskegee relatively easy. Gomillion’s resignation is not surprising, it can be seen as a testament to his consistency and discipline as an individual. Since his early stints as a Dean of various departments at Tuskegee, he regularly reminded each of the Institute Presidents he served, that he would resign from his posts the moment he felt that he was ineffective. Gomillion believed that

⁶⁷ Charles Gomillion Interviewed by Charles G. Gomillion.

⁶⁸ Robert Norell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 185.

the criticism he received made him a distraction. Gomillion also was disappointed with the initial failure of school desegregation. The interracial community he envisioned took a devastating blow in the fall of 1966, when whites at Tuskegee High were withdrawn and enrolled at Macon Academy and other equally expensive all-white private schools. White parents in Tuskegee, “would not allow their children to become the minority at school”⁶⁹ At Notasulga High, integration worked and white students stayed in school only because whites would continue to stay in the majority. Gomillion read a brief statement that brought his public career in Tuskegee to a close; “I have enjoyed serving on the board, but regret that I have not been able to serve effectively.”⁷⁰ He retired from Tuskegee Institute a year later, convinced that the time to separate himself from Tuskegee had finally come.⁷¹

Gomillion later left Tuskegee, Alabama, the TCA and rising black leaders behind. His official reasons for leaving Tuskegee for Washington D.C. was health and family concerns. These official reasons were all true, but in many ways his departure was exclusively tied to the shifting political climate in Tuskegee. The younger generation of Tuskegee asked him to step aside with their actions and with their votes, he did exactly that. He did not wish ill will on the city’s future, the youth that had opposed him, and the emerging black politicians he personally did not care for. Gomillion still believed and hoped that Tuskegee

⁶⁹ Ibid., 195.

⁷⁰ Charles Gomillion Interviewed by Alphonso T. Smith A.C.H.E. Oral History Project Transcripts Volume 2.

⁷¹ Charles Gomillion Resignation Letter to President Luther Foster February 1968. Courtesy of the Charles Gomillion Papers (Tuskegee University Archives)

could become the model community he had always believed it could be. However he reached a place where he realized that he could not be a part of whatever Tuskegee was to become. Gomillion worked towards a new world for blacks and hoped that the work that he could do and be a part of had helped to create this world. What that world would look like would have to be up to the current and future generations to determine.⁷²

Nearly all of Gomillion's adult life was devoted to his work in Tuskegee. The final chapter would be devoted to his children who had all grown up and moved to Washington to start their families. Gomillion decided that spending time with his grandchildren was a far more practical use of his remaining time than wasting any more time with contentious and opportunistic black politicians. However before leaving Tuskegee for good, Gomillion was able to witness one more watershed moment in Tuskegee politics that he and his generation directly and indirectly made possible.

In 1972, Frank Toland was considered an early favorite to unseat Mayor Keever and become the first black mayor of Tuskegee. Keever was still liked by blacks in Tuskegee, having been elected by many of them in 1964, however Toland's candidacy excited many of these blacks now. Toland was a capable administrator, was backed by the Macon County Democratic Club and had been a widely respected leader in the Tuskegee for years. To many, he seemed like the man to beat.

⁷² Charles Gomillion Interviewed by Alphonso T. Smith A.C.H.E. Oral History Project Transcripts Volume 2.

The underdog and eventual winner of the election was a twenty-nine year-old Johnny Ford, a homegrown Tuskegee native and son of VA Hospital employees. Ford had worked for Senator Robert Kennedy in New York and for Hubert H. Humphrey's 1968 Presidential campaign. When Ford returned home to Tuskegee, he leaned heavily on his connections to these nationally-known politicians. Much of his campaign emphasized to voters that only he had the right Washington connections necessary to get more federal funds flowing into Tuskegee to help the poor and middle class, which played perfectly to young voters. Young voters delivered Ford the victory; he campaigned frequently and aggressively on Tuskegee Institute's campus over the summer and personally led the charge to register students seemingly the moment they returned from summer vacation.

Ford took the oath of office downtown on Confederate Square to become Tuskegee's first black Mayor in the fall of 1972. Surrounded by many of the students that had voted for him were in attendance looking on with pride at what their votes had accomplished. The right to vote came to blacks in Tuskegee at different points throughout its history. The right to vote and the struggle that often came with it brought unique victories and equally unique challenges to the black people of Tuskegee. Nearly a hundred years before in the 1880s, blacks wielded immense political power in Tuskegee. "A former Confederate Colonel, W.F. Foster, was running for the state legislature on the Democratic ticket. Obviously needing black votes he went to the local black leader, a Republican named Lewis Adams, and made a deal: if Adams would persuade the blacks to vote for him, he

would once elected, push for state appropriation to establish a school for black people in the county.” Adams delivered the votes, and Foster helped him establish Tuskegee Institute.⁷³

Once again, in the 1950s, blacks now threatened to wield much of the political power in Tuskegee once more. This time, it was taken away by a Democratic State Senator’s gerrymander bill. Blacks in Tuskegee fought for their dignity and their rights as citizens. This struggle although initially successful, brought unforeseen and harmful consequences to the city’s future. “Black people are able to vote in places where this privilege was previously denied” Charles Hamilton later wrote. Not only could black people vote, they could also run for offices like Ford, and win. Yet, “everywhere in the country there are worsening problems of bad housing, poor health, and violent crime.”⁷⁴ Each of these issues exist in Tuskegee, and places like it.

For Tuskegee, the civil rights movement came and went and organizations like the TCA and men like Gomillion rose and fell, however it is the memory of all that was done that must replace their hollow inheritance. The memory of sacrifice and the new world Gomillion and the TCA helped to bring to Tuskegeans and the larger world must be their monuments and memorials. Charles Hamilton believed, “The war for human freedom, which had its roots in the past, would continue its ebb and flow for generations.”⁷⁵ However important

⁷³ Stokely Carmichael and Charles V Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 125.

⁷⁴ Frye Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom: Alabama and the Movement that Changed America* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 348.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

battles in places like Tuskege did happen, and did its part to try to create a better, more peaceful, and more understanding world. In Tuskegee, despite the challenges, ordinary people found their courage, and did what they could to leave behind a better world, a better life, and a brighter future for all that would come after them.

Conclusion: The Inches Not Given and the Hollow Inheritance

“Johnny Ford 2016” yard signs and stickers have started to appear in front of Tuskegee homes and businesses in the early spring. The signs have crimson backgrounds, with old gold letters, the school colors of Tuskegee University. Mayor Ford, as he is affectionately called, even during stretches when he was not holding that office, is a very aggressive campaigner. In 2012, I campaigned with Mayor Ford driving a small white 1992 Mazda Miata. We blasted campaign music asking citizens to “Get on the Ford Train” mixed over the iconic O’Jays hit, “Love Train.” If the mayor was not riding in the car with me, he was either walking ahead going door to door, or in his personal golf cart adorned with American flags and Johnny Ford stickers. At all times, signs encouraging citizens to vote “Johnny Ford for Mayor/Barack Obama for President,”³³⁸ were stocked in both vehicles and readily available to any Tuskegee citizens who permitted Ford or me to personally place the sign in their yard.

Ford’s incumbent opponent in 2012, Omar Neal, had defeated him in the previous election in 2008. The day before voting was to begin in 2012, Mr. Neal attempted to do some campaigning on Tuskegee University’s campus. Neal had undoubtedly seen me before and knew I was affiliated with the Ford campaign but still took the time to make his case for reelection. As he explained, “I have nothing against Mayor Ford, I respect Mayor Ford, I love Mayor Ford. But he’s been Mayor probably longer than you’ve been alive. I’ve only had four years; you can’t really do much with four years versus his twenty-eight.” He was right, but I voted for Ford anyway.

³³⁸ The signs bore the headshots of both Ford and Obama side by side, essentially instructing Tuskegee voters to vote for Ford locally and Obama nationally. Ford also served as an Alabama/Macon County delegate for Obama at the 2012 DNC convention.

This feeling is shared by many in Tuskegee. We vote for Ford because he is Johnny Ford, and he is the mayor of Tuskegee, even when he is not. The people of Tuskegee have been in a long rut of voting for familiar names and faces despite their political history and track record in office. Ford has spent parts of his career as mayor identified with both the Democrat and Republican parties, returning to the Democrats as recently as 2010. Since Ford was first elected in 1972, the town of Tuskegee has been in a downward spiral, due to lack of tourism attractions outside of Tuskegee University, an expensive industrial park with no industries, and a downtown business district that is very much in the same shape it was in in 1960 when the TCA boycott ended. In Tuskegee, local entrepreneurs with big dreams and small businesses come and go. They share the same vision of providing services for the community but ironically find themselves in a position not entirely unlike that of the white merchants during the boycott who fought to keep their businesses on Confederate Square afloat.

Historically, Tuskegee Institute professors and VA employees represented the demographic that had the most disposable income. They were the lifeblood of the white-owned businesses downtown. Today the average Tuskegee University student holds that distinction. Just as boycotters from Tuskegee Institute and the VA refused to support white-owned businesses during the Crusade, Tuskegee University students today generally avoid black businesses in the town. They spend their dollars in nearby communities, including Auburn, Opelika, and Montgomery, more often than with black businesses in Tuskegee. These students take their dollars outside of the community and out of the hands of black-owned businesses, and attribute their shopping habits to their impression that Tuskegee merchants offer lesser quality goods and poor customer service.

Tuskegee students share a general sense that small black businesses are innately inferior to larger, whiter, chain brands and stores.³³⁹ At the onset of the boycott in Tuskegee, the TCA had also struggled to convince black citizens that black businesses were just as capable as white businesses. “White is not necessarily right, and black does not mean lack,” Rev. S.T. Martin declared in an address to the TCA. This same message was also printed on several “Trade with Your Friends” fliers that were heavily distributed by the TCA at the beginning of the boycott in 1957.³⁴⁰

The civil rights movement changed Tuskegee. Some of the most pressing racial and political challenges from the latter half of the twentieth century in Tuskegee were resolved but not without a steep price. These challenges altered the destiny of the model community that Booker T. Washington and Charles Gomillion both envisioned. The rewards of the better world Gomillion’s generation attempted remake appeared to have passed Tuskegee by. Unlike Birmingham and Montgomery, Tuskegee’s gains and accomplishments were significantly less tangible and easy to see. Tuskegee is still very much the same town it was in the late sixties and early seventies with little hope for significant improvement. Very much unlike Birmingham and Montgomery, Tuskegee’s civil rights legacy is largely forgotten outside of the city despite its many sacrifices.

The struggle for freedom in Tuskegee represents a perfect historical illustration of the complex realities of the lesser-known grassroots civil rights movement. In Tuskegee like so many other places, localized issues and conflicts opened doors for localized

³³⁹ Brian Ellis, Jazlyn Fuller, and Nia Hicks, *The Tuskegee Project: Group Economics* September 2014. This short documentary interviews several Tuskegee University Professors, current Tuskegee University students, and several business owners in the community. The documentary aims to address problems that are the outgrowths of Tuskegee’s boycott of white businesses.

³⁴⁰ TCA Weekly Mass Meeting Recordings circa 1957. Initially some black citizens were reluctant to participate in the boycott; gradually blacks joined the movement and committed themselves to the boycott.

responses such as the Crusade for Citizenship. The actions of local people not only transformed the community in which African Americans struggled, but also influenced movements on both the state and national scale. Although Tuskegee's movement started as a very local movement, leaders such as Gomillion quickly identified that their success could have a ripple effect for the larger civil rights world around them.

Tuskegee's grassroots struggle also provides a case study of the internal conflict that gripped gradualist movements such as the TCA. In Tuskegee and other areas, gradualist integrationists came to blows with younger, more aggressive integrationists. The victories of the older generation's movements often took years and sometimes decades to accomplish. Younger movement workers came of age as these victories were finally being won, and in some ways the pace of the breakthroughs in the 1950s and 1960s may have caused them to take the work of their elders for granted. In the 1950s blacks in Tuskegee succeeded in fighting to obtain the vote, but by the 1960s blacks were widely divided on what to do with their regained political power. The TCA hoped to prove that African Americans could not only govern alongside whites, and TCA leaders worked hard to prove to segregationists that their fears of black political power were unfounded and false. Through their involvement in SNCC, TIAL, and the Non Partisan League, younger blacks perceived that the opportunity to liberate themselves from what they saw as a deferential mode of, given the demographics of Tuskegee and Macon County these blacks believed their time was at hand and power was finally theirs for the taking. Although blacks in Tuskegee looked within their own ranks to overcome disenfranchisement, it was the rise of generational rifts and clashes that snatched Tuskegee's defeat from the jaws of its hard-earned victory.

Tuskegee affords a rare opportunity to examine the sometimes inconvenient, complex, and heroic parts of a single grassroots movement. Its story is at once local and universal. Better-known cities such as Selma, Montgomery, Birmingham, and others have their victories and monuments. They also have their share of defeats, setbacks, and hardships that are all part of the complex legacy of civil and human rights in America. Tuskegee's story provides one more chapter to the story of the Movement and its powerful victories and sometimes equally powerful unintended consequences.

In the years that followed, the Crusade for Citizenship and the generational clashes of the 1960s, the legacy of the struggle for freedom in Tuskegee continues to be contested as organizations like the TCA and individuals like Charles Gomillion, and the nameless and once voiceless civil rights foot soldiers from that time fade from collective memory, particularly for younger African Americans in the area. A version of the war still rages on in Tuskegee, only this time it is not against segregationist white elites or radical young people armed with ideals of black liberation and freedom. Today's Tuskegee continues to suffer the legacies of a civil rights movement that seemed to create more empty victories than incontrovertible gains. The painful truth is that for Tuskegee, the struggle continues. Today's Tuskegees are left with a hollow inheritance from men and women that believed they could build a better world for those that would come after them, "the children comin' on."

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