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William J. Hale

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Sloss, Angel, "William J. Hale" (2020). *William J. Hale Collection*. 1.
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Dr. William Jasper Hale



Dr. William Jasper Hale (September 26, 1874- October 5, 1944) was born in Marion County (Hamlet of Retro) Tennessee to Harrison Hale and Jane Pope¹. William Jasper Hale was the oldest child among four boys and two girls in the family. The impoverished Hale went to work at an early age and managed to save enough money while working in Dayton, Tennessee, to enroll at biracial Maryville College. After attending for several terms, Hale accepted teaching positions in Coulterville and Retro before becoming the principal of Chattanooga's East First Street Grammar School.

When the Tennessee General Assembly authorized the construction of a normal school for African Americans, Dr. Hale led an effort to raise seventy-one thousand dollars to have the institution located in Chattanooga. Black leaders in Nashville won the bid for Davidson County, but Hale was selected as the principal of the new Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State Normal School for Negroes. He arrived in Nashville in January 1911 to supervise construction of the facilities and develop the school's curricula. Hale handpicked the thirteen faculty members from such notable institutions as Fisk, Atlanta, and Howard universities.

Tennessee A&I opened its doors on June 19, 1912, and two days later enrolled 247 students for the summer term. A shrewd but practical man, Dr. Hale expanded the school despite the limited resources provided by a reluctant general assembly and State Board of Education. In 1916 he

¹ Tennessee, Delayed Birth Records, 1869-1909, www.ancestry.com

received only 40 percent of the school's funds from the state, with the rest coming from federal sources, tuition, fees, and gifts from African Americans.

Dr. Hale staged annual visitations and dinners to persuade the all-white legislature to continue to vote appropriations and to allay misgivings about African American education. Faculty members loaned their cars to drive legislators to the campus, where they saw uniformed female students and men in dress shirts. Students engaged in manual labor, performed farm tasks, and cleaned dormitories under the watchful eyes of the visitors. Faculty members served as hosts at the dinner's legislators attended, standing around the room like waiters while their guests ate. At the end of the dinners, Dr. Hale presented each legislator with a freshly dressed turkey from the school's farm.

Dr. W.J. Hale garnered state and national recognition. He served as president of the Conference of the Negro Land Grant Colleges and was a founder and president of the Tennessee Inter-Racial League. He was also a member of the Nashville Board of Trade and a member of President Herbert Hoover's Negro Housing Committee. In 1930, Dr. Hale was awarded the Harmon Foundation Medal in recognition of his services to black education in the South²; however, his greatest impact was on black Tennesseans. Dr. Hale's school became an integral part of life for the black community.

He continued as the college's first president until his retirement in August 1943. Under his leadership, Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State College (now Tennessee State University) became a notable African American institution and one of Tennessee's best-known colleges. By 1944 the college had produced the third highest number of graduates among historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

Hale died on October 5, 1944, in New York City from cancer³. He was survived by his widow, Harriett Hodgkins-Hale and three children, William Jr., Gwendolyn, and Edward. Dr. W.J. Hale is interred at Allegheny Cemetery in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Bibliography

² Lamon, 2006, Oxford African American Studies Center.

³ The Tennessean, October 1944, www.newspapers.com.

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Further Readings

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