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A Royal Band, the Chosen Few: The Birth of Tennessee State University

Crystal A. deGregory

In the shadow of the Civil War, delegates to the 1871 State Colored Men's Convention met in Nashville to discuss the most pressing issues black Tennesseans faced. Convention delegates reported that outrages by Ku Klux Klan outlaws, to both white and colored teachers in colored schools were so great that they had broken up nearly all schools outside of large Tennessee cities.¹ The more than thirty-year "native school" tradition of independently owned and operated black schools operating in the city prior to the Civil War was displaced by the arrival of white northern missionaries.² Delegates were satisfied with the work of Nashville's private black schools Fisk University and Central Tennessee College (forerunner to Meharry Medical College). Still worried about the education of most of the state's black children, the committee on education lamented: "[W]e can see no hope for the general education of the children of our race in Tennessee." They issued a challenge to the government to keep its promise to afford equal political rights to all and in a resolution, called for "the Congress of the United States to order the doors of such College or Institution [that] shall receive all pupils irrespective of color, and that they be admitted on equal terms."³

Yet, by the turn of the twentieth century, and almost fifty years after the founding of Fisk, Nashville's first black college, in 1866, Tennessee had yet to build a single public center for black higher education. As the first of its kind, the 1912 creation of Agricultural and Industrial State Normal School for Negroes was due in no small measure to the multifarious and several decades-long efforts of countless black Tennesseans to secure the financial, political and community support critical to the school's birth and growth. This truly remarkable story of the school's founding is one of resilience. By tracing the organizing efforts of black Nashville from the

¹ See *Proceedings of the Colored State Convention*. Held in Nashville, February 22, 23, 24 & 25th. 1871; The delegates represented Davidson, Shelby, Williamson, Montgomery, Tipton, Giles, Maury, Robertson, Cheatham, Sumner, Rutherford, Marshall, Henry and Obion counties.

² See Crystal A. deGregory, "Before Black Athens: Black Education in Antebellum Nashville," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 69, No. 2 (Summer 2010), 124-145.

³ *Ibid.*, 3-13.

nineteenth century demands Colored Men's Conventions of the 1870s to the ideological momentum offered by city's Negro Business League and Booker T. Washington's Tennessee Tour of 1909, and finally to fundraising successes of the Normal Agricultural and Mechanical Association, this paper offers a more representative history of the long process by which the school was founded. In doing so, it not only reveals the formidable acumen and resilience of the school's earliest leaders, it affirms the black community's collective institutional power to effect transformative change in the lives of its constituents.

Named for its sponsor, Vermont Senator Justin Smith Morrill and signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln, the Morrill Act of 1862 authorized the establishment of colleges in the new western states, signaling the beginning of the federal government's entanglement in public higher education. Almost seven years after its passage, the Tennessee legislature agreed to the conditions of the act, but decided to use the funding to support the pre-existing East Tennessee University (formerly Blount College and later The University of Tennessee) instead of establishing a new college.⁴ Located in Knoxville, the college created agricultural, engineering and military science course offerings but did offer educational opportunities to black Tennesseans. The 1869 Tennessee legislation that outlined the guidelines for the land-grant college funding, while requiring that "no citizen of this State, otherwise qualified, shall be excluded from the privileges of said University, by reason of his race or color," gave responsibility to the "trustees of said University" to provide "separate accommodation or instruction" to qualified black applicants.⁵

The earnestness of this pronouncement would not be tested until more than a decade later in 1881, when the first known blacks applied for admission to East Tennessee University, which had changed its name to The University of Tennessee. Predictably, some university officials hastily voiced fears that actual black

⁴ "Chapter XII," *Public Acts of the General Assembly of State of Tennessee, 1868-1869* (Nashville: S.C. Mercer, 1869), 12-14; Stanley Folmsbee, *Tennessee Establishes a State University: First Years of The University of Tennessee, 1879-1887* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1961), 1.

⁵ "Chapter XII," *Public Acts of the General Assembly of State of Tennessee, 1868-1869*, 12.

deGregory: A Royal Band, the Chosen Few: The Birth of Tennessee State University enrollment would be “fatal to the university,” and newly elected black legislators rushed to work out an amicable agreement that would allow the state to pay to send the black students to Fisk.⁶ However, it was not long before officials from other black colleges challenged the agreement, which led to the state’s termination of its agreement with Fisk and the beginning of its contract with Knoxville College, a black school founded in 1875 by the Board of Freedmen's Mission of the United Presbyterian Church.

By 1890, the passage of the Second Morrill Act cemented Tennessee’s commitment to the provision of “equitable” provisions for black Tennesseans at Knoxville College. The agreement however, was far from ideal. While it was hardly expected that the school receive equal funding, black students did not receive equity in course offerings or educational standards either. Meanwhile, The University of Tennessee was increasingly abandoning its vocational programs, leading Samuel H. Shannon to conclude that the differences between the college’s foci “serve[d] as an illustration of the larger differences in orientation between the preponderant body of white land-grant colleges and the growing quantity of Negro vocational and land-grant institutions functioning at the turn of the century.”⁷ Although dissatisfied with what they perceived as the lack of focus on manual training at Knoxville College, white legislators, begun to freely offer state-subsidized support via the Peabody Fund to the all-white teacher-college Peabody Normal College in 1881.⁸

More than two decades later, there were no similar provisions for any Tennessee black college. By 1907, black Tennesseans began publicly voicing their dissatisfaction of with the unwillingness of the legislature to fund black education beyond the secondary level.⁹ In an educational campaign led by Henry Allen Boyd¹⁰,

⁶ Folmsbee, *Tennessee Establishes a State University*, 37.

⁷ Samuel Shannon. “Agricultural and Industrial Education at Tennessee State University During the Normal School Phase, 1912-1922: A Case Study,” (PhD. diss., George Peabody College for Teachers, 1974), 81.

⁸ “Alabama makes large donations to Tuskegee and A. and M. College at Normal; Mississippi puts her money for the Negro youths as Alcorn; Kentucky gave liberally to Berea, and the State University; Texas supports the great Prairie View State Normal; North Carolina has her normals; the others do as much, but the proud Volunteer State will not let Walden, Fisk, Roger Williams, Nelson Merry, Turner Normal or the Knoxville College have one dime of the Peabody Fund.” See *Nashville Globe*, 18 January 1907.

⁹ *Ibid.*

the publisher and editor of the *Nashville Globe*, black Nashvillians charged, “The University of Tennessee does not admit Negroes as students, and, as a consequence, the colored people of the state have benefitted very little by an appropriation that was made primarily in their interest.” At Boyd’s behest, newspaper boys placed copies of the paper on the desks of legislators at the state capitol which included the charge, “It is hoped, now that officials of the University of Tennessee have recognized their duty to deal justly with the children of all races in the state, that the question of erecting a school where black children can profit from the money appropriated by the state and federal governments, will be pushed to a speedy conclusion.”¹¹

In February 1909, in a *Nashville Globe* editorial entitled “Lest We Forget,” the Normal, Agricultural and Mechanical College Association announced the organization’s founding for the purpose of “memorializing of the legislature to establish a state college or school, where the youth of the colored people can receive that training and instruction which will best prepare them for industrial pursuits.” Noting that “[n]o lukewarm or half-hearted effort will materialize anything,” the writer further contended: “Spasmodic efforts do not count for much; it is the untied, steady and continued pull that moves things or brings them to pass.”¹² Organized by *Globe* publisher Henry Allen Boyd along with businessman and lawyer James Carroll Napier¹³ and led by its Chairman Ben Carr, the association’s membership must have been discouraged when the legislature passed an education bill in March 1909 which appropriated \$17,000 to the establishment of a state agricultural,

¹⁰ Henry Allen Boyd (1876-1959) The son of National Baptist Publishing Board founder Richard Henry Boyd, the younger Boyd co-founded the *Nashville Globe* in 1906. The black daily featured the entrepreneurial strivings of black Nashvillians, exposed incidences of racism and helped galvanize protests against Jim Crow practices.

¹¹ Interview with Dr. George W. Gore, Nashville, Tennessee, March 10, 1972. Quoted in “Agricultural and Industrial Education at Tennessee State University During the Normal School Phase,” 94; *Nashville Globe*, 6 March 1908.

¹² *Nashville Globe*, 26 February 1909.

¹³ James Carroll Napier (1845-1940) Born in Nashville to free parents, he graduated from Howard University Law School where he was the mentee of slave-turned-Republican congressman John Mercer Langston. A prominent figure in local and state politics, he, along with his wife Nettie Langston, the daughter of his mentor, led black Nashville’s elite circle for more than a half century. With his local influence secured through the passage of legislation that created opportunities for black professionals ranging from black teachers to black firemen, Napier used his personal savings to help establish the Nashville One-Cent Savings Bank, one of the nation’s first black-owned and operated banks. Shortly after the turn of the century, Napier’s influence reached national prominence when he served as Secretary of Treasury under President Taft.

deGregory: A Royal Band, the Chosen Few: The Birth of Tennessee State University mechanical and industrial school for blacks, just one seventh of the entire appropriation for education.¹⁴ Dubbing the amount “measly” and “paltry” a *Globe* writer lamented: “[T]here seems to be a great injustice or, in other words, travesty upon the rights of decency and fair play, or a closing of the door of hope.”¹⁵ The appropriation was especially small when compared the appropriation for white education which received a “million-dollar endowment from the Peabody Fund, supplemented with a large donation by the state, Davidson County and the city of Nashville.”¹⁶

On April 23, 1909, the headline of *Globe* read, “A Great Victory Achieved; General Education Bill Passes Senate; Carries Appropriation for Negro School.”¹⁷ The bill called for the establishment of “one normal school for the education and professional training of white teachers...in each Grand Division of the State” and “one Agricultural and Industrial Normal School for the industrial education of [N]egroes and for preparing [N]egro teachers for the common schools.”¹⁸ Unlike its white counterparts, the location for the black school was not specified. And because it was not, the Normal, Agricultural and Mechanical College Association began its statewide survey of blacks in order to decide where the school should be built. It soon became obvious however, that the committee was partial toward the establishment of the school in Middle Tennessee. By November 1909, the *Globe* reported that after “close and careful investigation into the educational affairs of the state,” the association had concluded it was the “unanimous opinion of the cities and citizens from Bristol to Memphis that this school should by an[y] means be located in Middle Tennessee.” The association’s leaders argued that because of travel considerations, a central location would “get an advantage either way” and that the school “ought to be placed as near as possible under the supervision of the state officials” proximate to the capital.¹⁹

¹⁴ *Nashville Globe*, 26 March 1909.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16 April 1909.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 23 June 1909.

¹⁸ See “Chapter 264: House Bill No. 242,” *Acts of the State of Tennessee Passed by the Fifty-sixth General Assembly 1909* (Nashville: McQuiddy, 1909), 912-915.

¹⁹ *Nashville Globe*, 12 November 1909.

Their efforts were undoubtedly strengthened by the Napier's orchestration of a "tour of the Volunteer State" by race leader Booker T. Washington in the fall of 1909. Having majestically toured Mississippi the previous year, Washington quickly realized that by demonstrating the progress of black people, the tour and others like it, could serve as combatants against white supremacy and also reinforce his primacy as the leader of black America.²⁰ Napier and his cohorts, as the black business leaders of "Athens of the South," felt that they too had accomplishments worthy of the national exposure a tour by Washington could afford. Organized "in the interest of Negro education and of racial peace," the tour began in Bristol, Tennessee on November 18, 1909. When the private Pullman car departed the station, a colorful cast of characters that represented the state's most successful black businessmen and professionals accompanied Washington.²¹

Three days later, a crowd of seven to ten thousand (the vast majority of whom were black) flooded the Ryman Auditorium in anticipation of Washington's keynote address. Despite the presence of several white city and state officials including Nashville Mayor Hilary Howse and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Robert L. Jones, Washington was undoubtedly the main attraction as his entrance was met with a thunderous applause that lasted several minutes.²² Convinced that "every Negro in the South has a white friend, and [that] every white man has a Negro friend," Washington challenged that while "many honest Southerners are still unconvinced that the Negro is able to profit by education, it is the business of the people of my race to convince these men by the results of our education that every time a Negro boy or girl is educated he becomes a better and more useful citizen."²³

²⁰ David H. Jackson, Jr., *Booker T. Washington and the Struggle against White Supremacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 75.

²¹ *Nashville Globe*, 19 November 1909; "Principal Washington's Campaign," *The Springfield Republican*, *The Booker T. Washington Papers* 10, 226; Jackson, *Booker T. Washington and the Struggle against White Supremacy*, 80, 82; Having "worked their way up to positions and influence among colored people in their communities," the entourage of twenty-five to fifty bankers, businessmen, doctors, teachers, preachers and other professionals changed over the course of the eight-day tour. The list included several of Nashville's most prominent black citizens: minister and businessman R.H. Boyd, physician Charles V. Roman, surgeon R. F. Boyd as well as white college administrators George W. Hubbard, physician and dean of Meharry Medical College and George Gates, president of Fisk University.

²² *Nashville Globe*, 26 November 1909.

²³ "Account of Washington's Tour of Tennessee," *The Booker T. Washington Papers* 10, 229.

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Some blacks received Washington's message as a "call for equality of opportunity;" observed David H. Jackson, "while some whites would hear that blacks needed to learn the "dignity of labor," which they assumed meant blacks working for them or in menial capacities."²⁴ Despite varying interpretations of his philosophy, Washington's tour had provided more than enough visibility to the cause of industrial education (as well as the absence of it in the state), challenging Tennessee's white political leadership to demonstrate their supposed commitment to the vocational instruction of blacks.

Even the black community would be required to prove the earnestness of its support. Shortly after the close of Washington's tour, the *Globe* ran an editorial which read "The Negroes of this state have not shown the proper interest in this school. Especially is this true of the Negroes in Nashville." The school, it contended, "should arouse every Negro in Tennessee to alertness... We ought to have a desire to see our school the equal of any in the South."²⁵ Even so, the editors of the *Globe* had to acknowledge that blacks in cities across the state were "absorbed" in the debate over where the school should be built. Some maintained that it should be "located in a section of the state where it can be of the most benefit to the most people." It was their desire to have the school be "[i]deal one in every sense of the word...and it will be," it claimed, "if the Negroes from every section of our commonwealth will for once make a united push."²⁶

Black Tennesseans from outside of Middle Tennessee must have found this challenge at least a little disingenuous, as the *Globe* continued to campaign for the school to be built locally. In order to help sway public opinion, the committee of more than 100 black Nashvillians began a campaign to raise \$25,000 for the school's founding. One speaker even reasoned that if each black Nashvillian donated just \$1 to the campaign, that the black community could easily rise over \$30,000.²⁷ Led by Napier, Carr and Boyd, the campaign grew steadily through the spring of 1910, when

²⁴ Jackson, *Booker T. Washington and the Struggle against White Supremacy*, 90.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 26 November 1909.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10 December 1909.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 31 December 1909.

the trio presented their case before the Davidson County Quarterly Court on April 4, in order to secure an initial appropriation of \$60,000 bonds from the court. Speaking first, Napier reminded the court that blacks had recently supported an appropriation of \$300,000 bonds for a new white high school. "We knew it wasn't for our race, but we realized that every educated person was an added asset to any community, whether white or colored." Napier proclaimed, "We want to go out in Davidson County and build you a Tuskegee." Similarly, Carr and Boyd's addresses focused on the school's role in training blacks as farmers, cooks, laundresses, mechanics, printers, book binders and pressmen.²⁸

While the trio was not unaware of the benefit the school would afford in the training of black teachers, the men were probably careful to avoid calling attention to such a benefit. As seasoned leaders of the local black community "they may have anticipated greater resistance from the Quarterly Court if teacher-training was stressed," suggesting their plausible "sensitivity to the potential persuasive effect which an agricultural and industrial emphasis would create."²⁹ Their restraint paid-off, as the court approved the \$60,000 bonds. They did so, however, in part because Chattanooga had already granted \$50,000.³⁰

Less than 150 miles south east of Nashville, Chattanooga had launched its own campaign for the black normal school to be located there. Leading their movement was William Jasper Hale, the principal of the city's St. Elmo High School. Born in Marion County on September 26, 1874, he rose from humble beginnings. The family was poor and as the eldest of seven siblings, young Hale attended local public schools but began working at an early age. He paid his own way through school and into Maryville College. Established in 1819, the college's founders became abolitionists and as such, had done much to encourage Unionism in East Tennessee during the Civil War. After several terms, Hale began teaching stints in Coulterville

²⁸ *Davidson County Quarterly Record*, 4 April 1910; *Ibid.*, 5 April 1910; *Nashville Globe*, 8 April 1910; *Nashville Tennessean*, 6 April 1910.

²⁹ Shannon, "Agricultural and Industrial Education at Tennessee State University During the Normal School Phase," 105.

³⁰ *Nashville Globe*, 8 April 1910.

deGregory: A Royal Band, the Chosen Few: The Birth of Tennessee State University and Retro before becoming principal of Chattanooga's East First Street Grammar School and later St. Elmo.³¹

It was in part due to the success of the Hale-led campaign that black Nashvillians intensified their push to secure funding for the establishment of the school in Middle Tennessee. In November 1910, the *Globe* printed "An Appeal: To the White Voters of Davidson County," in which white Nashvillians were asked to further support the bond issue of \$25,000 for the normal school for blacks with the hope that it be established in the city. "We want our people to train the hand as well as the head...We hope that in helping our people the white voters in the city and county do so for common justice as well as for the uplift of our Greater Nashville."³² Supporters were undoubtedly disappointed when Nashvillians voted nearly two-to-one against the bond issue on the 8th of November.³³ Even so, association Chairman Ben Carr was still working for the establishment of the school in Nashville in December. Not only was "Nashville in the very heart of the Negro population," Carr contended:

The city "affords other special advantages...It is the location of prominent Negro universities and schools...In Nashville also are the largest publishing houses and interests conducted by colored people in the country...As the normal school is to be a permanent establishment, and the only institution of the kind contemplated for Negroes, it is of especial importance that no mistake should be made in its location, and as Nashville is the central point and more closely in touch with the population affected, the location of the school should not be a question of favor to any city or locality, but one of promoting the best usefulness of the institution. And as the three white state normal schools have been located, there should be no further delay in locating the colored school."³⁴

³¹ "William Jasper Hale," *The Journal of Negro History* 30, No.1 (January 1945), 111-112; Ayeni, *Yearbook of Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State College, 1942* (Nashville: The Hemphill Press, 1942), 3.

³² *Nashville Globe*, 4 November 1910.

³³ *Ibid*, 11 November 1910.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 16 December 1910.

Even so, it was not Carr's arguments but rather the \$20,000 raised privately by Nashville's black citizens that shifted the balance of power in the city's favor. When the State Board of education met in January 1911, it provisionally agreed to award Nashville the contract to build the school, provided the Quarterly Court's approval of an additional \$20,000 bonds. The *Nashville Globe* pronounced: "It has been a long drawn-out contest in which Chattanooga, the city located by the side of Lookout Mountain, gave the capital city the closest race and hardest fight ever known." Due to the "herculean work of Mr. Ben Carr...the bringing of this school to Middle Tennessee gives Nashville a final hold on the claim that she is the "Athens of the South."³⁵

When the court approved the request the following month, Nashville officially became the location for the Nashville Agricultural and Industrial State Normal School for Negroes.³⁶ At first glance, it may appear that Nashville won the fight, but not without making concessions to Chattanooga. Even before Nashville received the additional appropriation rumors that Chattanooga principal-turned-campaign leader Hale had been elected as the school's president had begun to circulate.³⁷ Hailed as "one of the best known educators in the state," it would seem that Hale, despite being largely self-taught, was a qualified applicant. His work at Chattanooga had not gone unnoticed by R.L. Jones, the superintendent of Chattanooga schools; coincidentally, Jones had been promoted to State Superintendent of Public Instruction and was responsible for recommending a candidate for the headship of the school. Unsurprisingly, Jones nominated Hale. In addition to his educational and administrative experience, Hale's leadership of Chattanooga's nearly successful bid to have the school built there demonstrated his keen political acumen.³⁸

When thirty-seven year old Hale was extended the offer to assume the leadership of the Nashville-based black normal school he must have known that his appointment was probably not without political considerations. Chattanoogaans, who acutely felt

³⁵ Ibid, 13 January 1911.

³⁶ Ibid, 17 February 1911; Ibid, 13 January 1911.

³⁷ Ibid, January 13, 1911.

³⁸ Ibid; R. Grann Lloyd, *Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State University 1912-1962* (Nashville: n.p., 1962), 7.

deGregory: A Royal Band, the Chosen Few: The Birth of Tennessee State University the loss of their campaign to have the school established in their city, could feel a tremendous sense of pride that even though the school was to be located in Middle Tennessee, it was going to be lead by one of their city's most capable sons. The white Chattanooga newspaper *Daily Times* reported, "Prof. Hale stands high not only as an educator but as a man of sterling worth, a genuine friend of his race and a safe leader." On the "problem of the races," the editorial contended, "He avoids much of the difficulty by counseling caution, meantime educating and preparing by manual and technical training the young Negro for usefulness in his present station in life."³⁹

The white Chattanooga community's perception of Hale's commitment to industrial education, while definite, was probably inaccurate. Fisk graduate Edna Hankal, one of the Chattanooga teachers under Hales' supervision at the time of his state appointment, later pointed out that the manual and vocational training was not a part of Chattanooga's East Fifth Street School's curriculum under Hale's headship.⁴⁰ Whether or not Hale intentionally gave whites the impression that he supported black industrial education, the belief that he was committed to Washington's pedagogical philosophy surely helped him win the appointment. White Tennesseans did not know however, that Hale, like Washington, was not above using white paternalism to advance black self-determination. As a part of his responsibility to help devise a pedagogical plan for the black normal school at Nashville, Hale had the opportunity to visit a number of black industrial schools, including both Hampton and Tuskegee. The success of those schools was undeniable. To white outsiders, the schools represented models of black efforts to "dignify labor [and] to create respect for those occupations which have generally been regarded as most menial."⁴¹ But to someone like Hale, the schools' ability to provide both teacher-training and vocational instruction could not have gone unnoticed. The tour probably only served to confirm what Hale already knew, as the leader of Tennessee's only black normal school, he

³⁹ *Chattanooga Daily Times*, 10 January 1911. Quoted in Shannon, "Agricultural and Industrial Education at Tennessee State University During the Normal School Phase," 117.

⁴⁰ Hankal referenced in Shannon, "Agricultural and Industrial Education at Tennessee State University During the Normal School Phase," 117.

⁴¹ *Nashville Globe*, 23 February 1912.

would have to appear “safe” to whites in order to carry out the educational agenda of black Tennesseans.

Hale may have looked like a “white” man, but the soft-spoken, wavy brown haired leader of the Agricultural and Industrial State Normal School was determined that the black school succeed. From its perch on 165-acres between Centennial Boulevard and Jefferson Street, the school opened its first summer session June 19, 1912. Situated on “high ground, commanding magnificent views,” the buildings were “of brick with stone trimmings, substantial in structure, heated by steam, lighted by electricity and supplied with other modern conveniences.” Right from the start, it was clear that under Hale’s direction, the school would focus on training teachers. The chief aim of the session was “to strengthen teachers as useful and helpful members of the community in which they live and work.” The school boasted a “superior faculty of trained men and women, specialists in educational work and deeply interested in the teachers and schools of the state” including graduates from Fisk, Atlanta, Howard and Tuskegee, some of the nation’s best-known black colleges.⁴²

When the school was dedicated on January 16, 1913, both Governor B. W. Hooper and Mayor H.E. Howse were among the distinguished attendees. Described as an occasion that “will go down in history as one of the grandest exercises ever held in the State of Tennessee,” it was the keynote address by the Honorable Samuel H. Thompson that received the most attention in the local black press. On the front page of the *Nashville Globe* under the heading “Stay Out Of Politics,” Thompson’s address reportedly “startled his audience when he made a strong plea to the Negro men to stay out of politics.” Reprinted in its entirety, Thompson’s speech opened with the caution, “I do not propose taking you into the clouds, dropping you into the abyss or spiriting you across the chasm, but I do hope to say something of practical worth, come after us or investigate the work this state and school are going not only for the Negro race but for the white race as well.” Advising his black listeners to

⁴² Ibid, 21 June 1912; Ibid, 19 June 1912; Ibid., 20 June 1912; Shannon, “Agricultural and Industrial Education at Tennessee State University During the Normal School Phase,” 20; Also included were the alumni of leading white colleges Amherst, Columbia, Oberlin, The Ohio State and Western Reserve.

deGregory: A Royal Band, the Chosen Few: The Birth of Tennessee State University “cast your vote for the best man on the ticket regardless of the politics,” he told them to “return to your place of business and work industriously until the next election day at which time you should repeat the performance. You know as well as I do that it is not for the best interests of either race for you to hold office in this country under the present conditions,” claimed Thompson, “therefore your way to preferment is over the sometimes hard but entirely safe road of industry and economy.”⁴³

Even so, the most significant aspect of the occasion, he said, was that it “dawns a new era for the Negro in Tennessee. Under the magnificent leadership of your President William J. Hale, you could not fail if you wanted to...It is our hope that this school will in time be for Tennessee what Hampton and Tuskegee are to the [n]ation.”⁴⁴ Whether or not Thompson was sincere in his praise for Hale, his assessment of Hale’s leadership capabilities would indeed prove true. Immediately, Hale went to work building the normal school into one black Tennesseans could be proud of. Praised as “apostles of better living” in one of the school’s earliest *Bulletins*, the faculty had initially included Ben Carr but his inability to yield to Hale’s leadership lead to his sudden dismissal in May 1913.⁴⁵

With his departure, Hale’s all-black faculty initially provided instruction on the elementary, high school and normal levels. Along with industrial instruction, the general curriculum included reading, language, geography, history, arithmetic, art and music. As a part of the industrial program, students at Nashville Normal, much like students at other black industrial schools, helped to maintain the schools’ facilities. Virtually all black industrial programs widely encouraged “self-help,” and Nashville normal promoted a tradition of “one hour of work per day” for both its teachers and students. Females often contributed in the school’s kitchen, sewing and laundry responsibilities, while males did construction, electrical and plumbing work as well as other odd jobs around the campus.⁴⁶ Some of these duties served even

⁴³ *Nashville Globe*, 24 January 1913.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State Normal School, *Bulletin*, Catalogue 1914-1915, Vol. 3., No. 8 (August 1914), 11; See Shannon, “Agricultural and Industrial Education at Tennessee State University During the Normal School Phase,” 143-145.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 28

more practical purposes than character-building and campus up-keep. Student jobs were often designed to help defer the financial burdens on students, many of whom were “extremely economically deprived.”⁴⁷

Dubbed “a royal band, the chosen few,” early students of the normal school were guided by Hale’s firm, keen and resolute leadership. Not only were students expected to work hard, they were required to be circumspect in their deportment, to observe the school’s strict moral code and were also encouraged to contribute to their community. Within the first decade of its existence, the college steadily grew and as it did, so did Hale’s vision for the school. The “‘vision’ and ‘force’ of the President contributed to the generation of forces external to himself that called for an expansion of the school,” observed Fancher.⁴⁸ Secured largely by the will of its black administrators, the school’s growing college curriculum earned it the distinction of being the first college with an all-black faculty and student body to be admitted to the American Association of Teachers Colleges in February 1933.⁴⁹

In some ways, the story of Tennessee A & I correlated with that of Hale. As an editorial in the *Tennessean* observed, “The story of this boy who fought hatred, adversity, and the prejudice of his race is the story of Moses, the story of Napoleon, of Lincoln, of Franklin, and the notable characters of history.”⁵⁰ Even when the State Board of Education “relieved” Hale of the school’s presidency on August 27, 1943, his influence loomed like a large shadow over his successor.⁵¹ Just twelve years earlier, Walter Strother Davis became an A & I graduate. As the college’s first alumnus president, Davis, was also one of the thousands of students who attended the school while it was under Hale’s leadership. He knew all too well that Hale’s pioneering efforts set high expectations for him. White Tennesseans may have intended that school restrict its programs to vocational instruction, but like Hale, Davis and his faculty would through their resilience, carry out the long-observed

⁴⁷ Evelyn P. Fancher, “Tennessee State University (1912 – 1974): A History of an Institution with Implications for the Future,” (Ph.D. diss., George Peabody College for Teachers, 1975), 41.

⁴⁸ Fancher, “Tennessee State University (1912 – 1974),” 33.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 39; Lloyd, *Tennessee State Agricultural and State University*, 47.

⁵⁰ Fancher, “Tennessee State University (1912-1974),” 42; *Nashville Tennessean*, 19 February 1930.

⁵¹ For more information on Hale’s release see *Nashville Banner*, 25 October 1944; *Nashville Globe and Independent*, 27 October 1944.

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black teacher tradition of educating the mind, hands and heart. In doing so, they
enabled the school's graduates to improve themselves and their communities and
prepared them to affect positive changes in the corporate fate of the black race.