Tennessee State University at the Centennial (1912-2012)

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William Jasper Hale (1874-1944) of Chattanooga was chosen at the school's first principal; he oversaw the initial construction of the campus buildings, and hand-selected the faculty from graduates of Atlanta, Fisk, and Howard. Although an outsider, he married a local woman, Hattie Hodgkins, in 1913 and quickly gained acceptance among Nashville's elite African-American community. Hale was a shrewd advocate for Tennessee A&I, promoting the school's manual, agricultural, and industrial education programs among white politicians and patrons. The school's motto "Enter to Learn; Go Forth to Serve" and the words on the school's seal "Think, Work, Serve" were interpreted differently by white patrons and black students and faculty. For example, Hale and the faculty developed a course called "Industrial Education with emphasis on Negro Problems," which in actuality was the college's first African-American history class. Hale served as president for the first three decades of the school's history, a time of great expansion in the school's student body, physical plant, and academic offerings. By 1927, the size of the campus had doubled, with the construction of a library, a science building, a social science building, and new dormitories; enrollment had increased from 247 in 1912 to almost 2000 students enrolled in 1927-28. Additional campus buildings were constructed in 1932, and athletic facilities including a football field, field house, and tennis courts were added in 1935 under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration. The school's name was changed to Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial College in 1935. Hale's children were all distinguished graduates of Tennessee A&I: William Jasper,
Jr. (1931), Gwendolyn Claire (1939), and Edward Harned (1941). By Hale’s resignation year of 1943, A&I added a graduate school and had awarded its first master’s degree. Hale resigned under pressure from white state officials in 1943, and he died in New York the next year.

Tennessee A&I initially offered elementary and secondary education courses and a high school diploma, in a state where African-American students rarely finished sixth grade. With the publicly-funded school, suddenly education at all levels was much more readily available for the state’s African-American students, and enrollment quickly grew. Students paid approximately $100 a year for books, room, board, and fees, and students also worked a required two hours a day on campus. Simultaneously to the growth of A&I, the Anna T. Jeannes Fund and the Julius Rosenwald Fund was working throughout the state to improve education for African-American children, and Tennessee A&I was able to end its elementary and high school divisions in the 1930s.

Walter S. Davis (1905-1979) succeeded William Hale as president of the school in 1943, and presided over the next twenty-five years of growth and success at Tennessee A&I. A 1931 graduate of Tennessee A&I, Davis had served as the school’s first football coach in the 1930s, and on the agricultural faculty prior to his appointment as president. In September 1951, the school received university accreditation, and the name was changed to Tennessee A&I State University. During Davis’s presidency, the school’s enrollment grew to over 6,000, and the faculty to some 250. Several other campus buildings were added, including the Graduate Building, Clay Hall, Lawson Hall, Home Economics, and new dormitories. Also during Davis’s presidency, the school’s athletic achievements became legendary: the basketball team won the NAIA championship in three consecutive years; the football team won the Grantland Rice Bowl Classic four times, and the women’s track team, the Tigerbelles, achieved international recognition under Coach Ed Temple, who led the US Olympic Track Teams in 1960 and 1964. In 1968, the year of Davis’s retirement, the school’s name was once again changed, to Tennessee State University.

As at the neighboring schools of American Baptist, Fisk, and Meharry, TSU students participated in the nonviolent activism in the struggle for civil rights. Nashville students organized and participated in a wide-spread campaign of civil disobedience, both in Nashville and throughout the south. Fourteen TSU students who participated in the Freedom Rides of 1961 were expelled from the university. In recognition of their leadership and sacrifice, TSU awarded them honorary doctoral degrees in 2008.

In recent decades, Tennessee State University has continued to grow. As the result of a landmark desegregation case, TSU merged with the University of Tennessee’s Nashville campus in 1979, and renamed that campus the Avon Williams Campus. New campus buildings added in the 1970s and 1980s included the Gentry Physical Education Complex, the School of Business, a new library, and an engineering building. By 2000, the student enrollment had reached over 8,600 students, and the alumni of TSU have come from fifty-one nations and forty states. TSU is the sixth largest historically African-American university. A list of notable TSU alumni reads like a Who’s Who among the sports, entertainment, science, and educational worlds, and includes television personality Oprah Winfrey; artist Gregory Ridley, actor Moses Gunn; football players Joe Gilliam and Richard Dent; Olympic track and field coach Ed Temple and numerous Olympians, including Wilma Rudolph, Ralph Boston, and Chandra Cheeseborough; gospel music great Bobby Jones; communications pioneer Jesse Russell; and surgeons Dr. Levi Watkins and Dr. Edith Peterson-Mitchell.

Revised and expanded by Tara Mitchell Mielnik, from the 1984 Profile by Lois McDougald and Bobby Lovett

Bibliography:


