Anachronisms or Rising Stars:  
The Black Land-Grant College System

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Perhaps black agricultural education is best approached historically, as a result of the Union battlefield victory of our Civil War. Without that victory, there would have been no Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862, which established "agriculture and the mechanic arts" to be studied with the tools of modern science at a college in every state. This Act assured white Americans or the "laboring masses," as Senator Justin Morrill referred to them, the first bonafide opportunity for higher education since we had become a nation. Heretofore, that privilege had been virtually the exclusive purview of the Ivy League. Morrill himself wanted to bring democracy, practicality, and science into higher education. Black Americans would have to wait another generation for the official sanction to filter down to them.

The legislation per se did not create black land-grant education. Two historically significant Union officers, both serving at Gettysburg, accomplished that. One was Oliver O. Howard, head of the Freedmen's Bureau; the other was Samuel Chapman Armstrong who had broken Pickett's charge. Howard recruited Armstrong after the war to direct educational efforts in the Tidewater areas of Virginia. The son of missionary parents, Armstrong developed a sympathy for blacks he commanded during the war and established Hampton Institute two years later as a personal expression of that concern. It was basically a manual labor institution with a day and night school for blacks and for native Americans. It possessed a college farm, instruction in agriculture and in pedagogy plus "moral education."

Nevertheless, Hampton began training future black farmers and homemakers, including its most illustrious pupil, Booker T. Washington, a former slave from Malden, West Virginia, who had journeyed and experienced the humiliation of passage. A good Christian soldier, Armstrong gave the rest of his active life to promoting the Institute and to the moral "uplift" of his pupils. He sent the Hampton model into the Black Belt in 1881 when requested to do so by the town fathers of Tuskegee in Macon County Alabama. Initially, they requested from Armstrong a black administrator to operate a school for Negroes. Armstrong choose Washington.

Washington first took his students into the field, "because we wanted something to eat." None of the romance which had colored the writing of Thomas Jefferson or nostalgia associated with rural life motivated him. A tenacious drive for survival sustained black agricultural education; Washington knew that the future of Tuskegee Institute was inextricably bound up with the lives of millions of black tenant farmers concentrated in the South.

The evolution of Tuskegee has been in large
measure the development of agricultural instruction, outreach and research — initiated before the well-known triad of land-grant education had become established as a federal project. Before 1910, Tuskegee possessed Farmer's institutes, a movable school for demonstration and organizational purposes, Dr. George Washington Carver to head its small agricultural experimental station, and, of course, resident and summer instruction in agriculture and home economics. Thus Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes were among the pioneering institutions decades before the amended Morrill Act of 1890. Further, these institutions were to furnish the professional staff which would administer black land-grant institutions once they had been designated formally.

The academic emphasis at Hampton and Tuskegee was altered with the vicissitudes of political power and the impact of popular prejudice, frequently hostile to Negro education. During the period of readjuster and populist revolt, for example, during the 1880s and 1890s, the educational philosophy reflected a sense of opportunity in using the agricultural and trade aspects of the curriculum as a stepping stone to the liberal arts and humanities, and, eventually, to the professions. With the defeat of populism, disfranchisement, and the triumph of white supremacy after the turn of the century, the liberal arts side became stepping stones to the agriculture and trade aspects of the program.

The night of segregation would have its deadening effects. These also can be measured in lack of funds and facilities which the 1890 institutions were compelled to endure for most of the twentieth century. It is impossible to measure the indirect effects which were even more profound, such as the costs of needless rural poverty, misery and disease and to the spiritual agony of those Americans who loved and worked diligently for democratic ideals.

By 1914, the land-grant triad was in place in every state; resident instruction derived from the Morrill Act of 1862 and 1890 for blacks; research derived from the Hatch Act of 1887, and outreach came from the Smith Lever Act of 1914. The legislation is also significant in revealing what parts of the triad blacks would receive, as well as the manner by which they were cheated in land-grant education.

To begin with the Hatch Act, this legislation created the research capability that has brought subsequently enormous sums and benefits to the 1862 institutions. Because it was passed before 1890, almost all of the black land-grant schools went without these necessary funds for research. Instead, they were compelled to rely upon printed findings for many years; nor could they initiate research geared to the specific needs of their clientele for many years.

The Morrill Amendment of 1890 insisted upon the designation of a recipient institution within any given state which was not allowing blacks to attend the 1862 college. Furthermore, it required that an "equitable" distribution of the fund be made between the two institutions and provided suitable enforcement mechanisms to ensure for this. A challenge immediately arose in South Carolina. Governor "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman insisted upon having the fund divided equally between Clemson College, which he had established for whites only, and Claflin College, the black 1890 school. Since the ratio of black to white educables in that state was 2 to 1 black, the equal distribution was inequitable. Secretary of the Interior Noble refused to release Morrill funds for two years to South Carolina. But in 1892, Tillman's brother, George, was elected to Congress and put through an appropriation to pay South Carolina the funds "over the objections of the Secretary of the Interior." This being an election year, President Harrison signed the Tillman bill, and the Morrill enforcement mechanism had been blunted.

Yet the memory of the controversy continued to trouble southerners. When the Smith-Lever bill was debated some twenty-three years later, one of its sponsors, Hoke Smith of Georgia, stated unequivocally that Georgia would have nothing to do with the extension funds, if provision was made for an equitable distribution. This time Smith prevailed from the start. The equitability provision was killed, and the Act was signed into law over the public objection of the NAACP and its spokesman, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois.

Hence, blacks would obtain some Morrill funds, little or none for research, and the new federal extension service would be administered by the white state organization usually located at the 1862 college. Frequently, the black agents would be housed at the 1890 institution, but no formal relationship would exist between the two. Again, it was a question of receiving whatever crumbs would be cast to them from the white Service. With minor exceptions and changes, this system functioned into the 1960s.

Black land-grant education progressed despite these handicaps. By 1930, these institutions provided a general college level course leading to a BS degree in agriculture and home economics. Their focus became the small farmer and his family; their program, the "Live-at-Home" Program of Extension. Scant resources made it impossible to go beyond that. A few in-