After completing a very successful Mississippi tour, Washington realized even more the value of these educational endeavors. The Mississippi tour certainly set the standard other states tried to exceed. It also benefited members of the Mississippi League who were invited the next year to put on a “Mississippi Day” at the general convention of the NNBL to showcase to the nation what Washington observed during his visit—the progress African Americans were making in the Magnolia State. Flattered by the invitation, Banks orchestrated a very memorable exhibit and presentation at the August 1909 meeting held in Louisville, Kentucky, just a few months before Washington toured Tennessee. At the start of the NNBL program, Washington turned the chair over to Banks, who introduced the Mississippi delegation. They discussed farming, merchandizing, banking, pharmacies, managing a cottonseed oil mill, fraternal insurance, and blacks in the professions. At one point during the program, at least fifty Mississippians “occupied a section facing the rostrum.”

This type of fanfare encouraged other state leagues to perform and certainly raised the stakes among the groups. One such league was the Tennessee State Negro Business League (TSNBL). James C. Napier cofounded the Nashville branch of the NNBL in 1902. Napier served as president of the Executive Committee of the NNBL and became perhaps second or third in command behind Washington in the organization. Napier and Washington were close friends and had met in 1891. Napier attended Wilberforce College and Oberlin and later earned a law degree from Howard University. After moving to Nashville, he worked as a lawyer and cofounded the One Cent Savings Bank of Nashville, serving as cashier. He also helped lobby for the creation of Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State School in Nashville (now Tennessee State University), and served as Register of
the United States Treasury beginning in 1911, the highest appointed position held by any African American at that time. Napier became one of the most prominent black leaders in Tennessee, becoming Washington’s chief lieutenant for the state, and succeeded Washington as president of the NNBL upon the latter’s death.²

James Napier, Richard Boyd, and others founded the Nashville chapter of the NNBL to “arouse business interests among Negroes by advocating the support of industries and business houses already established and encouraging the establishment of new ones and such other manufacturing enterprises that will enable the world and ourselves, as well, to know of our possibilities as business men,” Bobby Lovett recorded. The next year in 1903, Nashville hosted the NNBL’s annual meeting where Washington spoke and interacted with numerous black Tennessee businessmen, along with others, who agreed with his philosophy of racial uplift.³

Napier extended an invitation to Washington to visit the Volunteer State some time after the Mississippi trip in 1908. After Washington agreed, members of the TSNBL began making arrangements in the cities he would visit, establishing host committees, arranging transportation, and securing funding for the trip. Just like the Mississippi tour, Washington wanted to make sure a representative number of African Americans along with whites heard his talks. “As you know, I have spoken to the colored people there a good many times,” Washington wrote Napier during the early planning of the trip. “What I am especially anxious to accomplish when I speak in the Auditorium is to get before a large and representative class of Nashville white men and white women. I shall expect the colored people to be present also, but the colored people know my views pretty well,” he said. “I hope you can get hold of the white institutions of learning in a way to secure the attendance of both the professors and students.”⁴

Having whites in attendance at his speeches and “the best whites” participating in programs in some form or fashion became a strategy Washington employed to win the support of not only Southern but also Northern whites. Moreover, the Tuskegee leader understood that by gaining the endorsement of influential whites, he would be able to win over other blacks too, some of whom looked to whites for approval and validation for who their leaders should be. He also recognized the value of displaying to the best whites the progress African Americans were making because that group could help advance progress and fairness in ways that common whites could not. No doubt, Washington clearly calculated the value of having white support and whites in