

George Washington Owens' Impact on Ag Ed Opportunities for African Americans

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Introduction

Inclusion and representation of African Americans in secondary agricultural education has been a challenge since the inception of SBAE. Problems did not improve with the merger of the National FFA Organization and the New Farmers of America in 1965 (National FFA Archives, 2016). Members of the NFA believe that after the merger, there was a lack of black representation in the FFA, feelings that the merger was inevitable due to government and societal pushes, and a loss of identity among African Americans in FFA (Wakefield & Talbert, 2003). To this day, African Americans still represent underserved populations in agricultural, career, and technical education (Croom, Moore & Armbruster, 2005). To better understand the representation of African Americans engaged in agricultural education throughout history, research should be conducted on those events and individuals who have impacted cultural and racial inclusion in this field. One key figure is George Washington Owens.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research is aligned with the need to understand our agricultural history. The *AAAE National Research Agenda* outlines this need through Research Priority One, *Public and Policy Maker Understanding of Agriculture and Natural Resources* (Enns, Martin, Spielmaker, 2016). This effort includes sharing historic information as recommended by the National Research Council (1988) “an agriculturally literate person’s understanding of the food and fiber system would include its history...” (p.89). It is important we understand and appreciate our historical foundations as we work to make agricultural education more diverse and inclusive for all students.

Methodology

Historical research methods were used for this study starting with preliminary bibliographical references. Primary and secondary sources were found via online databases at Kansas State University, Virginia State University, Tuskegee University, the National FFA Archives, and the Historically Black Colleges and Universities Library Alliance. Primary sources of information were mostly from two handwritten autobiographies from Owens. Other primary sources included photographs, manuscripts, and proceedings from National New Farmers of America Conventions. Secondary sources consisted of newsletters, refereed journal articles, and historical information available from established institutions associated with Owens. Efforts were made to establish trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), resources were evaluated for both external and internal criticism and secondary and primary sources were compared to determine accuracy.

Findings

Owens was born January 21, 1875, on a rural Kansas livestock farm. He is the son of ex-slaves who emigrated to Kansas from Tennessee (Owens, 1976). In school, Owens “was considered very apt and ambitious, eager to learn...” (Owens, 1976, p.2). He enrolled at the Kansas State Agricultural College (KSAC), the predecessor to Kansas State University (Owens, 1976) for an

advanced degree. To his surprise, Owens was the only African American student at the college and become the first African American graduate from KSAC in 1899 (Owens, 1976).

Upon graduating from KSAC, Owens accepted a position as an assistant to George Washington Carver at the Tuskegee Institute (Kansas Industrialist, 1947). Owens left Tuskegee in 1908 to assist in starting the new Department of Agriculture at Virginia Normal and Industrial Institute (VNII), now Virginia State University. During Owens' time at VNII, he his colleagues "tried to develop favorable attention towards farming..." (Owens, 1976, p.11). He eventually built up the department, starting an official agriculture course of study in 1911, which brought in male and female students (Owens, 1976).

In 1918, Owens' focus shifted to work on the Smith-Hughes Act. Owens collaborated with the state agricultural education supervisor to "to consider the problem of organizing the work among the Negro Training Schools" (Owens, 1976, p.14). To learn how to prepare African Americans to teach agriculture, Owens attended summer school taught by H.O. Sargent (Owens, 1976). The VNII started training vocational agriculture teachers shortly after. Around 1919, Owens was promoted to State Agricultural Teacher Trainer and helped establish new agriculture programs at surrounding schools (Owens, 1976) and across Virginia.

Perhaps one of Owens' most noteworthy achievements was his connection to the New Farmers of America. In his autobiography (1976, p.25), he wrote "we developed [our students'] vocational interests and their vocational work on the farm, in the farm shop, and other educational activities, but also their social life and its connection with their work." In the winter of 1926-1927, upon the suggestions of national and state supervisors, specifically H.O. Sargent (NFA, 1963), he wrote a constitution and set of by-laws for such an organization (Owens, 1976). The organization, known as the New Farmers of Virginia, the direct predecessor to the NFA, held their first state meeting in 1927 (NFA, 1963).

Owens retired from his post as state teacher trainer on June 30, 1945 (Owens, 1976) and passed away in 1950 at age 75 (Kansas State University Libraries, 2015). He was seen as a "dynamic figure in the development of agricultural education throughout the South" (NFA, 1963, p.4).

Conclusions and Recommendations

George Washington Owens had a tremendous impact on the development of agricultural education for African American students, particularly in Virginia. He established opportunities for African American youth that did not previously exist. These opportunities exposed young African American students to agricultural education and jumpstarted educational programming for segregated schools in the southern United States. His reach extended throughout the country even more with his foundational ties to the NFA and the organization's subsequent spread across the South. More research should be conducted to fully understand his life and legacy. As the National FFA Organization and the New Farmers of America approach the centennials of their founding, work is needed to honor underrepresented minorities in agriculture and agricultural education.

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