The Fis School: A Tuskegee for Texas?

Paul Sturdevant

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj
Part of the United States History Commons
Tell us how this article helped you.

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol47/iss1/10

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in East Texas Historical Journal by an authorized administrator of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu.
"I think that I should spend the summer at this work lecturing, distributing literature, and organizing, and in the fall I should throw myself with all the energy of my being into the work of founding a Little Tuskegee at Oakland." Thus wrote Robert Lloyd Smith to Booker T. Washington in June of 1897. It would be another ten years and many miles from Oakland, Texas before Smith’s dream became reality. Located on the rich Blackland Prairies of Northeast Texas between Ladonia and Wolfe City, Farmer’s Improvement Society School (FIS), also called Farmer’s Improvement College, would be focused on agricultural education with regular academic courses available. Smith, who regularly corresponded with Washington, and was a disciple of his educational and political philosophy, intended his school to be Texas’ answer to Washington’s Tuskegee Institute.

Born a free black in Charleston, South Carolina in 1861, Robert Lloyd Smith was educated in that state and then graduated from Atlanta College. He then moved to Texas in the 1880s, settling in Oakland, Colorado County, in southeast Texas to begin teaching school. In addition to teaching, Smith also helped local black farmers develop cooperative organizations, which reduced their reliance on outside businessmen who often cheated ex-slave farmers.

In 1889-90, amid the growing Populist Movement, Smith founded the Farmer’s Improvement Society of Texas, an organization similar to the Farmer’s Alliance and colored farmer’s alliance. It consisted primarily of black farmers, though not exclusively so, and focused on self-reliance, reduction and elimination of debt, cooperative organization, and education of the farmer and his family. It was during this time Smith began his long, close association with Booker T. Washington, acting as Washington’s agent in Texas. By the early twentieth century, the organization had over twenty thousand members in Texas and the surrounding states.

Using his popularity among the voters of Colorado County and contacts within the FIS organization, Smith served two terms in the Texas Legislature from 1894 to 1898. Concurrently, whites in Texas worked to implement disfranchisement laws against the state’s black voters. As a consequence, Smith was the last black Texas legislator for over sixty years.

As FIS grew, so did its interests. Not only did it support and found various cooperative farm groups, but the organization also founded a bank, an insurance company, a cemetery, a printing company, sponsored and participated in agricultural fairs, and, in 1906, fulfilling Smith’s dream, it founded a school.

The school was modeled after Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute. Through their association and correspondence, Smith and Washington kept the other apprised of current events pertinent to their educational, social, and

Paul Sturdevant teaches at Paris Junior College – Greenville Campus.
political interests. Washington adhered to the accommodationist philosophy that the best way for uplifting the blacks was through the establishment and support of schools such as Tuskegee. A constant stream of unselfish, wise Christian leaders with academic and industrial training would flow from these schools, and subsequently show others what could be done to improve their community and its people.2

Smith's school followed the same philosophy. He stated his school's purposes in an article for Work Magazine in 1908: to give the student correct training in practical farming methods, to train a student's minds through a fair course of instruction extending through high school, and to teach him the habits of true family life where order, system, and thoroughness prevail.3

Education and vocational training, according to Smith's vision, would allow FIS's graduates to become leaders in their communities. Both Smith and Washington intended to create hard working, independent black men and women who would be models to help others develop positive feelings for blacks in a white dominated society. The brochure cover Smith used to advertise his school summarized such goals by stating, "We Train for Leadership in a Rural Life."4

With $1,200.00 collected from FIS members, Smith purchased fifty-eight acres in 1905 in southern Fannin County near Ladonia. The land was sandy and somewhat poor, but as Smith stated, "Twenty dollars an acre for poor land seems fabulous but, while the tract was sandy, it was in the famous black lands of North Texas and this was before the cotton boll weevil had invaded that country and good land was selling at from forty to one hundred dollars an acre."5 Once the land was purchased, another drive focused on raising funds to build the school. Smith had raised $1700.00 by the fall of 1906, but the buildings cost $3800.00. Smith personally advanced the balance, which allowed the school to open debt-free in 1908, reflecting one of the FIS organization's basic concepts – to avoid credit as much as possible. Smith saw credit as one of the methods whites used to limit the development of the Negro.

Several African American farmers from the area became active in helping found and support the school. Among these were Dennis Pollard, Gufford and Henry Dickerson, Barney Simmons, Brandon Pruitt, James L. Gilmore, Al Crumby, Albert Locke, and Will Dickerson. Simmons had once held some of the school's original land; James Gilmore became the vice-president of the school, and his daughter Olivia, valedictorian in 1922, began her long and distinguished teaching career there.6 Others who supported the school included many white residents from Wolfe City and Ladonia. Two of them, Mr. Myrick of Wolfe City and Dr. Nelson of Ladonia, served as trustees.7 Others listed may have served as trustees or school board members in the school's early years, but there is not information available to confirm their activity.

The school opened in 1908 as a boarding school for students in grades seven through twelve, later expanding to include sixth grade and students from the surrounding area who lived at home. While the brochure states the student body consisted of sixth or seventh grade through high school, Robert Carroll's
thesis from Baylor University on the FIS organization indicated the school had students in all twelve grades. Mrs Arvelia McBeth, the daughter of Al Crumby, said only the upper grades were there. She attended while living at home and graduated in 1937 in a class of eight students.

The fact that the state considered grades six, seven, and eight to be upper-primary might account for the differences in the two sources. Students in these grades would have been counted as primary students attending the school, not as high school or upper level students. Such different enumeration methods could account for Carroll’s documentation indicating the school included the primary grades.

While elementary education was available to black children in many communities, higher education was not. High schools were few and far between for all students in those early years, but there were only three high schools for blacks in Northeast Texas – one in Marshall, one in Texarkana, and the other in Dallas. With tuition at $75.00 to $80.00 a year, the school probably limited itself to the upper grades, depending on community-based schools to educate younger children.

Even though tuition might seem high, some black parents managed the cost to gain the fuller education for their children rather than accept the known inequities of the black community schools. If after the eighth grade a student’s labor was more important at home, he still had a primary education, including some instruction in agricultural studies. If the student could continue in school, that was all the better.

The school year was eight months, beginning the first Wednesday after the first Monday in October. This was later changed to the first Monday in October to the end of May. The dates surely coincided with the growing season, as many of the students were from farm families and their labor was important to the family economy.

In addition to being able to pay the tuition and matriculation fee of $6.00, students had to meet certain standards. According to school materials they had to be of good moral character and be free of contagious disease. Boarding students were required to bring two sheets, two pillow slips, two quilts, and three towels. Students also had to purchase their own books. Students who were self-boarding had to furnish various provisions which were used for their benefit during the school terms: one sack of flour, two sacks of meal, one gallon of syrup, and ten pounds of bacon. Promotional brochures suggested prospective students plant two to three acres of cotton of their own and save the proceeds until they were ready to enter. relieving their parents of the financial burden. This also prepared the student for the work at school and helped build self-reliance, however the suggestion might not have been as realistic as it looked on paper.

Once FIS accepted the student, there were several courses of study from which to choose. The school offered departments in normal training (for those who wished to become teachers), regular academics, agriculture, domestic sci-
ence, domestic art, and music. Since the school focused upon agricultural learning, all students were expected to take courses in an area of that department, choosing from horticulture, floriculture, dairy farming, animal husbandry, poultry raising, and trucking and canning. It is likely the male students would have concentrated on horticulture, dairy farming, and animal husbandry, and the female students steered toward floriculture and poultry raising. Most likely, both male and female students would have been involved in the trucking and canning area. Carroll states female students could meet this requirement through courses in domestic science and domestic arts.\textsuperscript{14} Mrs. McBeth stated that she took a regular academic program and did not take courses in the other areas. When asked about this, she stated that the boys were the main ones taking such classes, while the girls were interested in academics. She also stated that the school did not offer most of the domestic sciences and domestic arts courses by the times she was enrolled.\textsuperscript{15}

Besides working in the school fields and animal barns, students also worked at various jobs to keep the school operational, which included working in the kitchen, janitorial work, and other maintenance labor. The school considered work part of the learning process. The work in the fields and animal barns was part of the curriculum and took place on alternate days when the students were not in the classroom. Smith believed students learned best by practical experience and example; he expected teachers to work in the fields and barns as well. With everyone working and using the products from the fields, the school expanded from the original fifty-eight acres to ninety-two acres.

Students also had the usual range of academic studies, which included the basic reading, writing, and arithmetic courses, likely adapted somewhat to agricultural and rural leadership. Social studies, composition, music, and speaking were also important parts of the educational process. The school encouraged students to use the well-stocked library and it also included a laboratory for soil testing and other chemical experiments. They were required to study individually or in groups at least two hours each evening and encouraged to keep diaries of their school life and experiences.

The school farmer was particularly important. He lived on the school grounds throughout the year and kept the farm operational. The school did allow him to do his own farming, as long as his groups remained separate from those of the school. School cook was another vital position, filled for many years by Jewell Cooksie. The cook’s salary was $12.00 a month during the school year and she and her helpers were the only ones exempted from fieldwork.\textsuperscript{16}

The school’s growing reputation attracted teaching applications from Fisk University and Prairie View College graduates. Most of these letters were addressed to Smith, but some came to school principal W.H. McClellen (also known as U.S. McClellen). McClellen held the position of principal from 1914 until 1933, and Smith, as founder of the school and its most prominent faculty member, remained with the school until he passed away in 1942.\textsuperscript{17}
Funds for the school were a continuous concern. Part of the student’s educational experience was to look for ways to earn money for the school implement some of their ideas. School plays and choir concerts became regular features at the school as well as revenue streams. The FIS College Players performed *Trial of Old King Credit* by Mrs. R.L. Smith and Walter Ben Hare’s *A Poor Married Man*. The *Wolfe City Sun* advertised tickets to the play at five to twenty-five cents and a full house brought additional funding to the school. The community, both white and black, supported the cultural efforts. One advertisement reflected the racial relationship of the times by specifying there would be “plenty of separate seating for our white friends.”

The Farmer’s Improvement Society also directly help fund the school. The Society assessed each member or family a given amount for school operations. A 1918 assessment raised almost $300.00. Sermon rallies at annual membership gatherings, regional meetings, and special fundraising drives were also used to keep the school open and operational. Rallies in 1925 brought in over $2,100.00 for the school.

The school also used prominent African Americans such as John B. Rayner to raise money for the school. Rayner probably appeared at sermon rallies and membership gathering to ask for funds for the school. Funds specifically for African American education also became sources of revenue. The school received money from both the Slater and Jeannes Fund, both of which specifically promoted African American education. Mrs. Jeannes willed a million dollars to Booker T. Washington to help schools such as Tuskegee and eventually FIS, and both Smith and Washington served on the Jeannes Fund board of directors. The Slater fund contributed $150 to the school each quarter from 1922 until 1942. Tuskegee also made donations periodically. Carroll references a Tuskegee donation of $1,000.00, but he states that no record of such a deposit could be found. It is only speculation, but it may be that a donation for $100.00 was mistakenly recorded as $1,000.00 in the records. But even with help from all these sources, funding was always a concern; assessments and rallies seldom met expectations and donations never seemed enough to cover all the costs of maintaining and operating the school.

Despite the constant financial struggles, the school continued. One year’s balance sheet, 1931, showed a profit of $499.43. It is laudable but not surprising that the school ended the year with a surplus, since remaining debt-free as much as possible was one of the Farmer’s Improvement Society’s and Smith’s major principles. However, ending a year without a debt was rare and would become more isolated as the Great Depression deepened.

Enrollment fluctuated with the fortunes of the FIS members and the students’ families. When the school opened in 1908, it enrolled one hundred students and quickly became overcrowded. The student body grew to more than three hundred by 1911. In addition to Smith and a secretary, there were ten teachers, as well as other staff. While the school handled overcrowding through additional buildings for dorms and classrooms, funding limitations slowed such efforts.
Enrollment began to decline after 1912. The number of students dropped to seventy-one by 1914, but it did rebound to one hundred fourteen in 1918. However, enrollment fell to just over one hundred in 1921. The numbers began to decline more precipitously during the Great Depression. There were only fifty-nine students attending the school in 1933.23

The school continued despite the drop in enrollment, primarily due to the sacrifice of its employees. Smith, along with many of the teachers, took pay cuts. Smith's last paid salary as president was in 1930. Teachers received little or no salary for long stretches since very often their pay was based on enrollment. In the 1920s and the early 1930s, the school conditions forced the school to borrow $4,000 from the FIS Bank in Waco and $5,306 from Lyon-Gray Lumber Company in Dallas just to pay teacher salaries and repair or build new structures. The Lyon-Gray loans were repaid, but the bank loans were apparently written off when the bank failed in 1930.24

Beginning in the 1930s and continuing until his death in 1942, Smith attempted to have the state take over at least part of the school operations: he hoped the FIS School would become another state-supported school for African Americans such as Prairie View. A Wolfe City Sun article in 1940 outlined his plans and cited strong support from the area.25 But the state declined, a decision that may have foretold the future of the school.

On July 10, 1942, the school suffered a major blow when founder Robert L. Smith passed away. Much of the energy and drive to keep the school open died with him. Supporters revived efforts to have the state take over the school, but once again the State of Texas rebuffed the efforts. Mr. Lockett became the school president, and he tried to keep the school open during the war years. According to Mrs. McBeth, he did not have the drive or leadership qualities of Smith, and the school struggled even more because of his weaker leadership.26 By the end of World War II, continually diminishing enrollment and increasing expenses guaranteed the school's demise. The FIS School closed at the end of the 1947 term.

The FIS School lived up to its goal of providing a place for young African Americans to be educated in ways and subjects that many would have been denied otherwise. While many saw the accommodationist principles of the school as demeaning, a great many more of both races accepted then as being the way to gain acceptance for the African Americans. The rural, agricultural location helped in its formative years, but may have been perceived as remote and isolated in later years. Such a situation would make it easy to dismiss and not take seriously its impact - out of sight, out of mind - especially by whites. But, the school had good relations and interactions with its neighbors, including whites, as evidenced by donations and support from area whites, the presence of white trustees, and the positive front-page attention in area newspapers. Yet its relative invisibility to the larger communities may have thwarted its financial support and state aid. Smith did not have the national stature of Booker T. Washington, and this may have hurt the school's chances at obtaining greater support and funding. Its location was this both a blessing and a curse.
When the school closed, Leroy Harris, a graduate of the school, bought the land and buildings, and his family still owns the land. All the buildings, including the president’s house, are now gone; only the foundations remain. The structures, however, were not the legacy of Smith’s dream to provide quality education to young African American children of Northeast Texas. The real legacy is in the students who attended and graduated, going on to “Provide Leadership for a Rural Life.” The graduates became the farmers, teachers, and leaders of their communities. They and the people their lives touched are the enduring part of Smith’s dream that will continue for untold years to come.

NOTES

2Max Bennett Thrasher, Tuskegee (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1900), p. xvi.
4The brochure, done by Smith Printing Company, outlined much of the school’s program and the requirements students were expected to meet.
6John W. Duncan, From Tall Grass to High Cotton. (Wolf City: Wolfe City Chamber of Commerce, 1999), p. 95.
7Wolfe City Sun, Wolfe City (Texas), 13 September, 1940, p. 1.
11From brochure on the school.
12Smith Papers in Texas Collection at Baylor University, school operations.
13Smith Papers promotional brochure. Provision in kind was also widely used in the Depression as a way to reduce costs for families.
15Arvelia Crumby McBeth, interview by author.
16Smith Papers; Interview with Arvelia Crumby McBeth.
17Robert Carroll, “Robert Lloyd Smith and the FIS,” p. 92; Smith Papers. In some places McClellen’s initials show as W.H. and in others U.S., although they appear to refer to the same person.
18Wolfe City Sun, 30 January 1931, p. 1.
19Smith Papers
21Smith Papers
22Smith Papers.


Arvelia Crumby McBeth Interview.