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The Tuskegee Voting Story

C. G. Gomillion

The story of voting in Tuskegee, Alabama, is a long and complex one, but only selected aspects will be told here. In recent years, the story consists mainly of the political beliefs, aspirations, and activities of the members and supporters of the Tuskegee Civic Association, a civic education organization in Macon County.

Tuskegee, a town of approximately 6,000 citizens, is the county seat of Macon County in east central Alabama, about 44 miles southwest of Columbus, Georgia, and approximately 38 miles east of Montgomery, the capitol of Alabama, sometimes known as "The Cradle of the Confederacy." In 1960, the total population of the County was 26,717, of which 22,287 (83.4%) were Negroes. In 1950, Macon County had a higher percentage of Negroes in its population than any other county in the Nation. In the town of Tuskegee in 1961, following the restoration of the city limits which existed prior to the gerrymander in 1957, Negroes outnumbered whites about three to one.

Macon County is somewhat atypical of counties in the rural South in that a higher percentage of gainfully employed Negroes is found in the professions and clerical occupations than is true in other rural counties. Most of these professional and clerical workers are employed by Tuskegee Institute, the United States Veterans Administration Hospital, and the Macon County Public School System. The percentage of Negroes with annual incomes above \$5,000 is higher than is true of other counties in the State. The percentage engaged in business and in manufacturing is low. Because a high percentage of the gainfully occupied rural Negroes is engaged in cotton farming, the median income of the total Negro population in the County is low.

Negroes have been voting in Macon County since the Reconstruction Era, but until 1950 the numbers and percentages had been small. Just prior to 1881, when Tuskegee Institute was founded, Negro voters in Macon County promised to support a white candidate for the Alabama Legislature if he would seek an

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appropriation for the establishment in the County of a normal school for the "training of Negro teachers." The candidate was elected, the appropriation was made, and Tuskegee Institute was founded. Although Negroes continued to vote during the last years of the nineteenth century, the provisions of the Alabama Constitutional Convention (1901) virtually disfranchised most Negroes. In 1930, there were only 30 Negro voters in the County. During the decade following, stimulated by the Roosevelt New Deal, a few Macon County Negroes began to encourage their fellow citizens to become more civic-minded and politically active. By 1940, the number of Negro voters had risen to 75. Most of the leadership in this ten-year effort was provided by persons in the Tuskegee Men's Club, composed of approximately 30 men who were interested in community welfare.

Race relations in Macon County and in the Tuskegee Community throughout the years following the emancipation of the slaves had been quite similar to those existing in the majority of Southern communities. There was segregation of the races, followed or accompanied by discrimination on account of race or color. This resulted in a superordinate status for whites and a subordinate status for Negroes, and differential civic opportunities favoring the whites. The nature of race relations in Macon County is revealed somewhat in a statement by a white public official who said to a white citizen from a Northern state in 1940 that "Sometimes some of the rural Negroes and some of the colored professors at the Institute think that we don't treat them fairly, but in general we manage to keep them pacified." Briefly put, the relationship between the races has been characterized by domination and exploitation by one group and submission by the other.

During the 1930s there arose in the County a small group of Negroes who believed that "political democracy is government of the people, for the people, and by the people," that "voting intelligently is a civic responsibility," that "the ballot is the citizen's best self-help tool," and that one "who is without the ballot is politically disarmed." There was the further belief that through intelligent political actions Negroes would be able to improve their other civic opportunities.

Accordingly, in 1941, this group succeeded in reorganizing the Tuskegee Men's Club into the Tuskegee Civic Association, and admitted women to membership. The specified objectives of the Association are (1) intelligent study and interpretation of local and national civic and political issues and trends, (2) collection and dissemination of useful civic and political data, and (3) intelligent and courageous civic and political action.

The officers of the TCA have considered their major responsibility to be that of the civic education of all citizens in the community, Negro and white, and facilitation of intelligent civic action on the part of an increasing number of Negro citizens. Civic education meetings have been held regularly, weekly

for three years, and semi-monthly at the present time. As a result, the number of Negroes manifesting interest in political affairs has been steadily increasing. As the political interest and action increased, the resistance of the members of the County Boards of Registrars increased.

Varied techniques have been employed to limit or prevent the participation of Negroes in local politics, the most obvious of which have been the following:

1. Requiring Negroes and whites to register in separate rooms and in separate parts of the Macon County Courthouse.
2. Registrars frequently reporting for work late and leaving early, thus reducing the number of hours available to Negro applicants.
3. Permitting only two Negro applicants in the registration room at the same time.
4. Requiring Negro applicants to read and transcribe articles from the Constitution of the United States, in addition to filling out the voter-registration questionnaire.
5. Conversing with applicants as they write, which disturbs them, and stimulates making errors.
6. Permitting a Negro voter to vouch for *only two* applicants per year.
7. Preventing some Negroes from vouching for any applicant.
8. Failing to issue certificates of registration to Negroes immediately upon the successful completion of the requirements for registration.
9. Failing to inform unsuccessful applicants of their failures to fulfill the requirements for registration.
10. Failing to work on many registration days.
11. Resigning from the Board in order not to register Negroes.
12. Refusing to appoint any Negro to serve on city or county government committees or agencies.
13. Enacting legislation which permits Board of Registrars to use twelve of their working days for clerical work only, and in even years to use up to twenty additional days in the precincts away from the courthouse.
14. Gerrymandering the city of Tuskegee in such a manner as to eliminate from residence in the city 400 of its 410 Negro voters. (Not a single white voter was removed from the city.)

Between 1940 and 1942, the political conflict between white and Negro citizens was almost continuous. Negroes worked in a variety of ways to increase the number of Negroes registered to vote. They complained about the discriminatory behavior of the Boards of Registrars. Open letters were published in daily and weekly newspapers; letters and petitions were sent to Governors and to other members of the State Board which appointed the County Board of Registrars; letters and telegrams were sent to selected members of the United States Congress, and to the U. S. Attorney General; legal suits against Boards of Registrars

were threatened or filed. In 1943, a threat to sue resulted in the Board's repealing its rule that only white voters could vouch for Negro applicants to register. In 1945, William P. Mitchell sued the Board for a certificate of registration which he declared was due him. The case was carried to the U. S. Supreme Court, and was the Fifth U. S. Circuit Court of Appeals, on its way back to the Supreme Court, in 1947, when Mitchell was informed by public officials that he had been legally a registered voter "since January 29, 1943." According to a public official, Mitchell "just had not been notified."

In spite of the numerous difficulties experienced by Negroes in their efforts to become voters, there was a two-year period (1949-50) during which one Board of Registrars certified as voters approximately 700 applicants. This success was followed by greater resistance. Another suit was filed in 1953. In 1954, Mrs. Jessie P. Guzman, a Negro, was a candidate for membership on the County Board of Education. Although more than 500 votes were cast for her, she was not elected. This event seemed to have intensified the fear and the belief on the part of whites that Negroes were trying "to take over" the governments of Tuskegee and Macon County.

As the number of Negro voters approached 1,000, bills were introduced in the Alabama Legislature (1957) to gerrymander Tuskegee and to abolish Macon County. On July 13, 1957, Senate Bill No. 291 became law without the signature of Governor Folsom, thus gerrymandering Tuskegee so as to put outside of the city limits approximately 3,500 of 5,000 Negro residents, and approximately 400 of the 410 Negro voters.

The reaction of Negro citizens was immediately aggressive. When their pleas to local and state officials were not honored, Negroes publicized their plight through national news media. They urged Congress to enact the Civil Rights Bill, and they drafted a bill providing for Federal Registrars, which was submitted to a Congressional Committee. When local white merchants refused to speak out against the proposed gerrymander, many Negro citizens withdrew their patronage from them. (During a period of two years, 26 businesses operated by whites ceased to operate in the community. One moved to another town.) The Alabama Attorney General retaliated by securing a temporary injunction against the TCA and its "followers," and on January 21-22, 1958, sought in court to prove that the TCA was violating Alabama's Antiboycott statute. On June 21, 1958, the judge ruled that the Attorney General had not proved his charges and dissolved the injunction.

On August 4, 1958, 12 Negroes filed suit in a Federal Court, seeking to enjoin local and state officials from enforcing the gerrymandering legislation. The case was taken to the U.S. Supreme Court, which sent it back to the District Court for trial. On February 17, 1961, Federal Judge Frank M. Johnson enjoined Alabama public officials from enforcing the act, and ordered restored the

boundaries of Tuskegee which existed at the time of the gerrymander. The 400 Negro voters were again residents within the boundaries of Tuskegee, but they had missed the September, 1960, Municipal election.

In 1959, following numerous complaints of Macon County Negroes to the U. S. Department of Justice, the Department filed a suit against the Macon County Board of Registrars, charging it with discriminating against Negroes applying to register. On February 20-23, 1961, Judge Frank M. Johnson heard witnesses in the case, and on March 17, 1961, ordered Alabama officials to cease their discrimination practices against Negroes.

The following listing reveals the increase in the number of Negroes registered to vote in Macon County between 1954 and 1962, inclusive:

1954-857; 1956-953; 1958-1,030; 1960-1,095; 1962-2,434. In the County, there are approximately 3,200 white voters, but in the town of Tuskegee, as of 1962, Negro voters exceed white voters.

The civic education program of the TCA has been relatively successful. Many local Negro citizens are well-informed on local and state politics, and some of them seriously study political issues and the records of public officials and of candidates for public office. Members of the TCA are very active in the Alabama State Coordinating Committee on Registration and Voting, are helping to organize civic or political clubs in other counties, and are serving as consultants. During the past five years, Tuskegee Negroes have used to advantage the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960, the U. S. Civil Rights Commission, and personnel in the U. S. Department of Justice. The struggle for the ballot in Tuskegee and Macon County is almost won; the major task now is to educate for its intelligent use.