

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF BLACK AMERICANS TO AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION AND RESEARCH*

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I have been asked to speak on “The Contributions of Black Americans to Agricultural Extension and Research” with emphasis on the period of 1860-1920. In conformity with this topic, I shall consider the contributions of black Americans to agricultural extension and research in terms of the agents themselves, the influence of the black land-grant colleges and Tuskegee Institute, and in terms of the clientele they served.

Any consideration of the contributions of black Americans to agricultural extension and research during this period, however, must begin with Justin Smith Morrill and the Land-Grant College Act, commonly known as the Morrill Act, signed by President Abraham Lincoln on July 2, 1862. This act, although supposedly extending agricultural extension and research to farmers throughout the country, made no provisions for the use of land-grant funds for blacks. Therefore, except for four states (Alabama, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Virginia) which allocated portions of their funds for use at black colleges in 1871, and the Hatch Act of 1887, it was not until the second Morrill Act of 1890, and the Smith-Lever Act of May 8, 1914, that blacks were officially incorporated into the system of cooperative extension and research.

History tells us, however, that blacks were involved in extension and research long before the Smith-Lever Act. As early as 1889 farmers' institutes and conferences were held in different states to provide black farmers with information related to the improvement of farm and home life. College experiment station personnel, physicians, and other specialists provided demonstrations and lectures to black farmers and homemakers in order to improve their health and happiness.

One major factor contributing to the success of black Americans in agricultural extension and research during the period, however, was the establishment of the black land-grant colleges. These institutions were created to provide instruction, extension education, and research

*Remarks presented in conjunction with the opening night reception and dinner.

in agriculture, home economics, and the mechanical arts. Their contribution to extension and research is, therefore, a success story of major proportion when put into proper perspective. An experiment station was established in Prairie View A&M of Texas in 1888 with Hatch Act Funds. This institution's faculty conducted experimental and demonstration projects to improve practices and techniques of farmers. Foremost in agricultural research during the period, however, was Tuskegee Institute. After the arrival of George Washington Carver and the establishment of the State Agricultural Experiment Station at Tuskegee in 1879, agricultural extension agents and farmers were privileged to have as a consultant on farming methods the most distinguished agricultural scientist in the United States. Both black and white farmers marveled at Carver's ability to make the land produce. Where they had been digging 37 bushels of sweet potatoes to the acre, he dug 266 bushels. Where the average southern farmer raised less than 200 pounds of cotton to the acre, Carver raised 500. In addition, the Tuskegee experiment station published pamphlets on "How to Grow the Peanut and 105 ways of Preparing It for Human Consumption", "How to Raise Pigs with Little Money", "When, What, and How to Can and Preserve Fruits and Vegetables in the Home", and "A New Prolific Variety of Cotton". Largely as a result of Tuskegee's efforts, more than 500 of the 3800 black farmers in Macon County, Ala., owned their farms by 1910, and more than 90 percent of the total were either owners or cash renters.

Moreover, Dr. Carver taught southern farmers to diversify their crops by planting soil-enriching peanuts and sweet potatoes instead of soil-exhausting cotton, and he sought new uses for surplus foodstuffs. In his laboratory he developed 300 synthetic products from peanuts, including milk, butter, cheese, flour, breakfast food, ink, dyes, soap, wood stain, and insulating board. From the sweet potato came 118 products, including tapioca, starch, vinegar, molasses, library paste, and rubber. Pecan nuts were used to produce 60 useful products. Soy beans, cotton, cow peas, and wild plums yielded valuable new products. Synthetic marble was produced from wood shavings; blue, red, and purple pigments were produced from Alabama clays; mats and carpets from okra fiber; and fertilizers from the muck of swamps. All of these inventions and discoveries ultimately enhanced the quality of life for farmers and urban workers throughout the United States and the world.

Carver gave his inventions freely to mankind, refusing large sums which were repeatedly offered for their commercial exploitation. Historians agree that Carver's scientific achievements were one of the vitally important factors in the economic and social progress of the South. The peanut industry of this country and around the world is indebted to Dr. Carver for demonstrating the commercial possibilities of peanuts and many of the products on the world market today. Similarly, his genius with the sweet potato was internationally proclaimed.

Given the enormous restraints under which black land-grant colleges were compelled to operate then, their contribution to agricultural extension and research was nothing less than phenomenal. Although often lacking funds for extension work and research, and having their mission and scope reduced to that of "Normal Schools," the 16 historically black land-grant colleges and Tuskegee contributed their fair share to agricultural extension and research. Their agriculture and home economics faculties were instrumental in equipping extension agents with the skills they needed to carry out extension programs and to provide rural people with knowledge and materials needed for the implementation of improved farm and home practices. In addition, their contributions were made through agents' conferences, farm and homemakers' short courses, farmers' workshops, 4-H short courses, and through extension courses for agents in the field.

The most significant factor in black Americans' contributions to agriculture extension and research, however, was the farm and home demonstration agents. They were, in the words of Sam Foss, the pioneer souls that blazed their paths where highways never ran, and lived by the side of the road and were great friends to man. They carried the torch of agricultural extension and research along the highways and byways of rural America, raising expectation, and improving their methods and techniques in farming and homemaking.

The initial step in the establishment of extension work among blacks is accredited to Booker T. Washington, the founder of Tuskegee Institute. In 1892, two years following the passage of the second Morrill Act, Washington sought to improve farm practices and living standards among blacks in Alabama by sponsoring farm conferences at his school. Later, he purchased a wagon and equipped it with farm implements and supplies and dispatched it, together with a teacher from Tuskegee's Agricultural Department, to farmers' homes to demonstrate better methods of farming and home life. The success of this experiment was almost immediate. After three months of operation, Washington presented Dr. Seaman A. Knapp, known as the father of extension, the idea of the moveable school, and urged him to appoint black extension agents to serve black farmers. At first, Knapp rejected the idea of using black extension agents. However, in 1906, Thomas M. Campbell was appointed extension agent in Macon County, Ala., and thus became the first black agricultural extension agent to be employed by the federal government. He was followed a few days later on Dec. 14, with the appointment of John B. Pierce of Hampton Institute, as the first black extension agent in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Pierce served in Gloucester County from 1906 to 1908 and went on to become district agent and eventually field agent for the lower South. By 1913, there were 36 such country agents serving in nine southern states and by 1920 black farm and home demonstration agents were making sizable in-roads in helping farmers improve their methods and home management. Farm and homemakers clubs were orga-

nized for the purpose of teaching practical agriculture and home economics; wives participated in needle work, cooking, preserving, and canning activities; farmers received demonstrations and instruction on the most advanced farming methods, crop production, soil conservation, cooperative buying and selling, home improvement, and on other subjects associated with the goals and objectives of extension service. The service rendered by these farm and home extension agents not only improved the quality of life for blacks in the rural areas, it also raised their expectations and gave them hope for a better tomorrow.

Black farm and home demonstration agents gave of themselves and they were committed to improving the living conditions of the people whom they served. They worked long hours and adjusted to adverse conditions by sometimes buying their own field equipment so they could conduct demonstrations; they paid most of their own travel expense to meetings and training sessions; they sought credit at markets so that 4-H members could be fed at camp; they used information from farm magazines when extension bulletins arrived months after they were requested; and they made it possible for many black boys and girls to attend camp, fairs, and short courses by themselves paying the youngsters' way.

Like extension agents everywhere, however, black farm and home demonstration agents often failed to accomplish all the goals and objectives which they set, but they left lasting impressions on the lives of the people whom they served. After 12 years of extension service, a former agent is recorded as having proclaimed that he achieved his greatest satisfaction when, after he had left the county and there was no agent there, the clubs that he organized continued to meet. "I had sharpened their skills in thinking systematically," he said. "I let them know that they could make a difference, and they went on working without me." Teaching black farmers to stand on their feet and to pull themselves up by their own boot straps was an essential element of extension service.

A former member of a 4-H club who learned of the teachings and benefits of extension work, said, "As a member of 4-H, my knowledge was broadened. I acquired self-confidence and learned to engage in healthful competition. I learned about the Cooperative Extension Service, the agents, and what they did. Consequently, all the time I was in college my mind was set on becoming an extension agent." Having viewed the more squalid conditions of rural life, another former agent recalled, "When I came to the county there were so many people on farms and maybe 17 or 18 to a household of three rooms. I just knew that something could be done about it. So I worked continuously until they finally got an agent."

These reactions and other like them imply that black farm and home extension agents understood the difficulties inherent in extension work.

They relied on black community leaders, notably ministers, teachers, principals, and local club leaders, to open doors for them so that they might carry out the extension process. As arms of the extension agents, these leaders reached out into the communities and won the confidence of those who distrusted the farm and home demonstration agents, and who, on occasions, would not open their doors to them. These leaders were also valuable in helping hold the interest of the people over a long period of time and they assisted the agents in formulating plans of action to fit particular circumstances. Ministers would travel around the county introducing the agent to farm families, announce meetings during church service, and permit agents to use the church to conduct meetings.

Black teachers and principals assisted by cooperating with agents to form 4-H clubs and making arrangements with the school board for the use of school facilities. With the cooperation of the various school faculties, farm and home demonstration agents identified children who had no shoes or clothes changes and consequently they set up clothing banks. In counties where children had no bath facilities, agents sometimes partitioned off a classroom, brought in tubs, and actually bathed children.

Agents also depended on black farmers' unions for much of their success. They donated awards for county and state fair competition, held grading and packing schools for farmers, and sponsored farmers' conferences. In addition, black physicians gave free physical examinations to 4-H members who were going to regional camps; black newspapers published extension announcements and news stories; and black businesses donated money toward scholarships, awards, and gifts for camps, short courses, and other achievement programs. Whites in the community often befriended the extension agent and intervened on his behalf. Moreover, sometimes white-owned businesses such as banks, insurance companies, department stores, and churches donated cash, scholarships, and farm supplies to help promote extension service in the black community.

With the help of the state and national agencies, leaders from the local black and white communities, and the people whom the black farm and home extension agents served, black Americans were able to make significant contributions to agricultural extension and research. The improved methods of farming and homemaking fostered by these agents and institutions were instrumental in causing many farmers to advance beyond basic necessities, and to evolve into prosperous farmers and homemakers. All of the contributions made by black Americans to agricultural extension and research, however, were not in the area of crop production, soil conservation, cooperative buying and selling, home improvement or in the commercial use of the peanut or sweet potato. Extension agents also helped to shape the lives of blacks in other directions. For instance, they persuaded thousands

of black youths who never considered attending college to do so. Black girls and boys who participated in vocational agriculture, 4-H clubs, homemakers clubs, and other organizations went on to become lawyers, doctors, nurses, teachers, ministers, social workers, government employees, extension agents, and researchers. Moreover, through the leadership and experience gained as active participants in farm and home clubs, adults gradually became more adventurous, self-confident, independent, and aggressive. They began to register, to vote, and to petition their local governments for better roads, streets, sewage systems, street lights, parks, playgrounds, community libraries, and community recreation centers.

Although they labored under severe obstacles, black farm and home extension agents accomplished extraordinary victories and left a lasting impression on the lives of their clientele. Theirs was not a story distinguished by immediate and successive achievements. Rather their efforts resulted in progress which came slowly and intermittently. When progress came, however, whether in form of a well, a tractor purchased cooperatively, a whitewashed fence, or an improved breed of livestock, it illuminated for thousands of black Americans a path for a journey into a better quality of living. Theirs was a difficult task, but nevertheless they did achieve.

In closing, I should like to leave the following thoughts with you. Black Americans' contributions to agricultural extension and research, I believe, may be best characterized by paraphrasing S. E. Kiser's poem entitled, "The Fighter." In their quest to carry improved methods and techniques of farming and homemaking to blacks in rural America, black extension agents and researchers:

"Had to fight a battle every day, against discouragement and fear;
Some foe stood always in their way, and the path ahead was never clear!

"They had to be forever on guard, against the doubts that skulked along, but got ahead by fighting hard and kept their spirit strong.

"They heard the croaking of despair, the dark predictions of the weak; But they found themselves pursued by care, no matter what the end they were seeking.

"Their victories were small and few, no matter how hard they strived; Each day the battle began anew, but fighting kept their hopes alive.

"Their dreams were spoiled by circumstances, their plans were wrecked by fate or luck; some hour, they thought, would bring their chance, but that great hour never struck. Their progress was slow and

hard, they had to climb and crawl and swim, fighting hard for every stubborn yard, but they have kept in fighting trim.

“They had to fight their doubts away, and be on guard against their fears; The feeble croakings of dismay were familiar through the years. Their dearest plans kept going wrong, and events combined to thwart their will; but fighting kept their spirits strong, and they are undefeated still!”

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