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Short Stops

The Soul of Tuskegee

Booker T. Washington founded Tuskegee Institute to help students learn a trade. George Washington Carver helped it grow into so much more

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Two huge magnolias, trunks as thick as whiskey barrels and dark leaves glinting like jade, stand like sentinels outside the elegant three-story brick manse in Tuskegee, Alabama, that was once home to Booker T. Washington, one of the world's most innovative educators. The home, known as The Oaks -- though the skeletal trees it was named for are far less impressive this day than the towering magnolias -- is as unusual as the man who had it built.

It's an elegant home in a town full of once-fine antebellum homes, remnants of a more prosperous era, Queen Anne-style with numerous galleries, gables and ornate brick chimneys. The Oaks was constructed in 1899, 18 years after Washington had founded Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, which is across the road. He lived here until his death in 1915.

But his persona isn't contained only in the house. In the nearby museum -- where he shares honors with George Washington Carver -- his views are expressed liberally among the exhibits. Washington believed "We shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify labor and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life."

It was this conviction that prompted the educator -- born a slave in 1856 on a small tobacco farm in Virginia -- to establish the school. Originally it occupied a one-room clapboard church (African Methodist Episcopal Zion), but was soon expanded to include nearly two dozen buildings, now the "historic district" and a National Historic Site run by the National Park Service since 1974. The historic district is the heart of a major university with a student body of 3,500.

"Few schools," wrote Washington, "teach what you ought to know to make your way successfully in life." Tuskegee Institute was designed to provide just that: instruction and hands-on training in 30 trades, among them carpentry, printing, shoemaking, saw-milling, brick-making, horticulture and agriculture. Students, many of them the sons and daughters of former slaves, would graduate with a skill, prepared to earn a living in the difficult post-Reconstruction era.

Which brings us back to Washington's remarkable 15-room home that was built -- down to the shaping of the burgundy-colored bricks it's made from -- by Tuskegee students, according to Shirley Baxter, a park ranger, who leads tours at The Oaks and the historic district. Architect R.R. Taylor, a member of the Tuskegee faculty, who had been the first black graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, designed The Oaks (as well as most of the buildings in the historic district) and supervised construction.

The buildings of the historic district -- stately structures lining Campus Avenue -- are surprisingly fine even for a university. Among them are White Hall (built in 1910) with an imposing copper clock tower and red brick columns; Douglass Hall (1904); Huntington Hall (1900); and Tompkins Hall (1910), each built by students. The buildings are of red brick -- made on the grounds -- and white stone. White cornices are poured concrete and columns are of plaster, but all are designed to closely resemble cut stone.

We walked around the campus an hour or so, stopping near the front gate to admire the statue of Booker T. Washington. Dedicated in 1922, the bronze shows the educator standing over a crouched black man believed to have once been a slave. He sits on an anvil, next to a plow, holding an open book. "Booker T. Washington, 1856-1915" reads the carving in the statue's limestone base. "He lifted the veil of ignorance from his people and pointed the way to progress through education and industry."

While we photographed the statue, Patti Gullatte, a former Tuskegee student, now of Evansville, Indiana, happened by and we struck up a conversation. Gullatte told us Rosa Parks had been born in Tuskegee; in fact, the town is only about 40 miles east of Montgomery, where 50 years ago the bus boycott in honor of Parks was a seminal moment in the Civil Rights Movement. From

Photos: Guy Selbert

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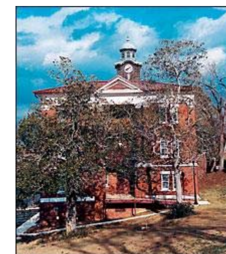
A bust of Carver (top) stands outside the George Washington Carver Museum (above).



A view across the Tuskegee campus.

For More Information

- Alabama Division of Tourism, (800) ALABAMA.
- Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site, (334) 724-0922.
- Tuskegee Institute National Historic Site, (334) 727-3200.
- Tuskegee University, (334) 727-8011.

Coach Camping

- Chewacla State Park, (334) 887-5621.
- Winddrift Campground Shorter, (334) 724-9428.

Driving Directions

Tuskegee is located about 40 miles due east of Montgomery. Follow Interstate 85 east to exit 32 (Pleasant Springs Road) and follow the signs to Tuskegee University.

Gullatte we also learned that Lionel Richie had gone to school here and had even formed his singing group, the Commodores, while studying at Tuskegee.

Then, nodding to the bronze statue, she said we'd learn a lot about the "two most famous Tuskegee gentlemen" -- Washington and Carver -- at the nearby George Washington Carver Museum, founded in 1938 and dedicated by Henry Ford, a great admirer, three years later.

Outside is a bronze bust of the professor-scientist; inside is one of the finest museums you'll find anywhere. A theater on the lower level offers 30-minute videos about the lives of both men. However, their lives are equally well-chronicled in hundreds of exhibits upstairs in the 6,000-square-foot museum.

As noted by the many displays, Booker Taliaferro Washington, 10 years old when the Civil War ended, moved with his family to Malden, West Virginia, where he went to work in the coal mines. He spent spare moments learning to read, and at 16 entered Hampton Institute, working his way through as a janitor. He graduated with honors in 1875, and after further study at Wayland Seminary in Washington, D.C., returned to Hampton in 1879 to teach Native American students.

His "great life's work" began two years later, when he came to Tuskegee, "pragmatic, optimistic and energetic, a man eminently in tune with his time," to establish the Institute. Due to Washington's "extraordinary ability to work within the system and maximize the possible," Tuskegee flourished to an extent "only dreamed about" when it opened with 30 students in the dilapidated church on July 4, 1881. Training teachers was always a primary objective, though the school was better known for developing skills to equip students for jobs in the trades and agriculture. Not only did students "make and lay bricks," an exhibit points out, they learned "progressive agricultural methods" through growing their own food on the school's farm.

Also, even traditional academic courses were geared toward helping students learn to solve practical problems. This "industrial education," Washington believed, would be the foundation on which "habits of thrift, a love of work, ownership of property, and bank accounts" could grow. Further, Tuskegee would be a "civilizing agent" in all aspects of a student's life. Washington insisted on cleanliness and high moral character for students, and no less for the faculty.

The school quickly outgrew the little church, and the year after it was founded it moved to 100 acres of abandoned farmland. By Washington's death, Tuskegee had become internationally famous; today, it includes more than 160 buildings on 268 acres.

As mentioned, half the exhibit space in this first-rate museum is devoted to George Washington Carver, who in 1896 had accepted Washington's invitation to join Tuskegee's faculty as head of the new Department of Agriculture.

Carver, born a slave just before the end of the Civil War and orphaned as a young child, had worked his way through school, eventually earning a master's degree in agriculture from Iowa Agricultural College (later Iowa State University). He was director of research in botany and bacteriology at the school, well on the way to a promising scientific career, when Washington's invitation came -- and he chose a less certain future at Tuskegee.

Scientist Carver was a professor, an exhibit notes, who "encouraged students to figure things out for themselves." His 47 years' research at the school was based on finding solutions to agricultural problems faced by poor Southern farmers. Seeking a way to improve soil depleted by cotton, Carver urged growers to raise peanuts, which revitalized the earth.

Then, answering the question of what to do with all the peanuts, he came up with more than 300 widely varied uses for the lowly legume, from coffee and sweet pickles, tapioca and after-dinner mints, to face cream and axle grease, glue and insecticide.

Carver wrote more than 40 research bulletins on such subjects as raising hogs, growing tomatoes and curing meat in hot weather; he conducted demonstrations at area farmhouses; and he was an unpaid consultant to growers about cultivation and treatment of plant diseases.

Carver was also an accomplished musician -- he played the fiddle, guitar and piano, and often gave recitals to raise money for Tuskegee -- and painter. Although many of his paintings were lost in a fire, about 70 remain, several of which are displayed at the museum. Examples of Carver's exquisite needlework are also here, as are specimens from his collection of minerals. Carver died in 1943 still earning the same salary, at his own request ($1,500 a year) that Washington had offered him in 1896.

However slight your knowledge of Washington and Carver when you enter this first-rate museum, you'll leave with deep admiration and respect, even affection for these remarkable gentlemen.

Mapquest directions

Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site
Three miles east of the Tuskegee Institute, at Moton Field near the edge of town, is a small but first-rate museum that tells the story of a not-well-known but heroic group of Americans, the Tuskegee Airmen.

The airmen, all African-Americans, were made up of 992 pilots and 14,000 other personnel including navigators, bombardiers, maintenance and support staff, instructors and others "who kept the planes in the air," an exhibit explains. All were part of the Army Air Corps' "Tuskegee Experiment," which shortly after World War II began was organized to train African-Americans to fly and maintain combat aircraft.

Exhibits in the 1,500-square-foot museum (which is scheduled to move to a permanent facility in spring 2007) are made up of panels with text, hundreds of photographs and paintings, artifacts and a 15-minute video. The field where the airmen trained became a National Historic Site in 1998.

In addition to the museum, the site includes an aircraft hangar, control tower and several other structures associated with the original 15-building complex. Eventually, explained a guide, a variety of historic aircraft and other vehicles will also be displayed here.

The program began on July 19, 1941, and the first class graduated on March 7, 1942. Tuskegee Institute, one of six black colleges given a contract by the government to train pilots under the Civilian Pilot Training Act of 1939, was chosen because of its "commitment to aeronautics," its available facilities, engineering and technical instructors, and also a climate where year-round flying was possible.

The successful training of the pilots, coupled with the United States' entry into World War II, led the military to expand its

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African-American aviation program, establishing the 99th Fighter Squadron and the 332nd Fighter Group. Plans were also begun to form the 477th Bombardment Group, a segregated medium-bomber unit.

In April 1943, the 99th was sent into combat duty in North Africa, distinguishing itself there and later in Italy. Once U.S. military leaders learned of their ability to fly in combat, they began including the airmen in more vital missions. By the end of the war, of the nearly 1,000 African-American pilots trained at Tuskegee, 450 had flown in combat.

The Tuskegee Airmen also earned the respect of numerous bomber crews, who "had begun to depend on their skillful air coverage, and dubbed them the Red-Tail Angels" (for the red markings on the planes' tails). During their hundreds of escort missions over North Africa and Europe, they never lost a bomber, a claim no other group in the Army Air Corps could make.

After the war ended, the black squadron was deactivated; by 1947, the Army Air Corps had become the U.S. Air Force. Integration in the military began in 1948 with President Truman's Executive Order 9981; some historians believe integration was the result of the performance records of the Tuskegee Airmen.