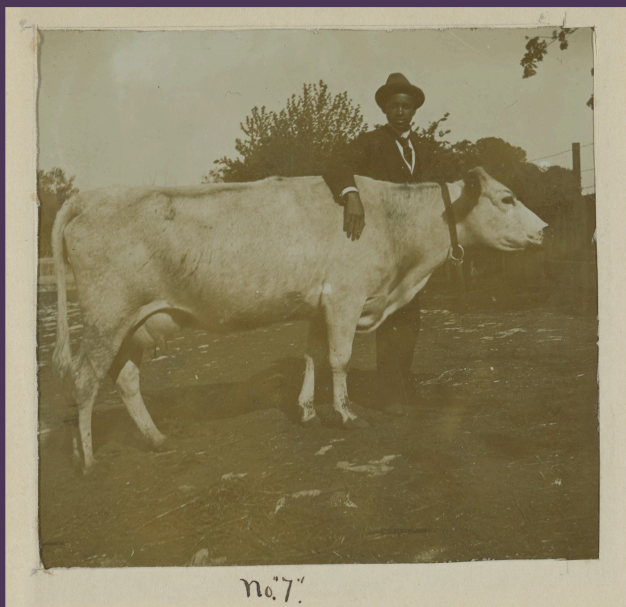


Autobiography of George Washington Owens: First
African American Graduate of Kansas State
University

**Autobiography of George Washington Owens:
First African American Graduate of Kansas State University**



*Owens, George Washington. "Dairy Form as an Index to Character." (senior thesis, Kansas State Agricultural College, 1899). Richard L.D. and Marjorie J. Morse
Department of Special Collections, Hale Library, Kansas State University*

Edited by Anthony R. Crawford



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AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
GEORGE WASHINGTON
OWENS: FIRST AFRICAN
AMERICAN GRADUATE OF
KANSAS STATE
UNIVERSITY

Introduction

In his unpublished autobiography, preserved in the Richard L. D. and Marjorie J. Morse Department of Special Collections at Kansas State University, George Washington Owens describes how the son of former slaves was raised and educated on the Kansas prairie in the late nineteenth century to play an important role in the agricultural program at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama under the direction of Booker T. Washington and the tutelage of George Washington Carver. From Tuskegee, Owens went to Virginia Normal and Industrial Institute (now Virginia State University) in 1908 where he worked for thirty-seven years to become a prominent leader in the field of agricultural education in the South.

After their emancipation, Owens's parents, Samuel F. and Anna M. (Gordon) Owens, left Tennessee by riverboat in the early 1870s and arrived at Westport Landing in Kansas City, Missouri. From there they traveled by covered wagon to Ft. Scott, Kansas. It was not long before their desire for free land led them to Wabaunsee County where they obtained a tract of public land approximately five miles northwest of Alma, Kansas. Their son, George Washington Owens, was born at that location in 1875.

According to the 1880 Kansas Census, George was the second of five children (Edward, age 8; George, 6; Linda, 3; Emma, 1, and Lizzie, 3 months) born to Samuel and Anna Owens in Kansas. By 1885, he had two additional brothers, Sam and Freddie. Samuel and Anna continued to live in Wabaunsee County where George's mother died of cancer in 1894 and his father of tuberculosis in 1907.

George attended District School #3 of Alma Township as the Owens' family farm was not far from the school. George graduated in the spring of 1890. Although larger cities maintained segregated elementary schools, his was integrated as Alma included a large number of African Americans, many of whom were Exodusters and

ex-slaves. However, at the time that George attended, he and his siblings were the only African American pupils enrolled.

After graduating from high school, Owens entered Kansas State Agricultural College (now Kansas State University) in January of 1896 at the age of 21. He did so at the urging of Charles Smith, a high school teacher in Manhattan who boarded on a farm near St. Marys where George worked one summer. When George discovered that he was the only African American among the approximately six hundred students at K-State, and a “colored student” had never graduated from the college, he “resolved to be the first.”



George Washington Owens, student at Kansas State Agricultural College, ca 1899. (George Washington Owens Papers, Morse Dept. of Special Collections, Kansas State University)



Owens in KSAC military uniform, ca 1899. (Owens Papers)

Owens was an accomplished student at K-State, and by all accounts, he was accepted as a peer and engaged in college activities. For example, as a member of the Webster Literary Society, Owens was one of seven students whose photographs and presentations at the organization's annual program in March 1899 were published in the college newspaper, *The Students' Herald*. The oration presented by Owens was entitled "The Right to be Understood."

Referring to the Civil War, Owens remarked, "While we regard the rebellion of the South a folly, we must not forget that the southern people also earnestly believed that they were right. A mutual understanding might have accomplished the emancipation reform peaceably." Although he struggled to work his way through college on the school's farm and as a janitor, Owens succeeded, earning a BS degree with high marks in June 1899. The title of his senior thesis was "Dairy Form as an Index to Character."



View of KSAC campus from the east: left, Library and Agricultural Sciences Hall (now Fairchild Hall); right, Main College Building (now Anderson Hall), 1895. (University Archives)



Ernest R. Nichols, president, KSAC, 1899-1909; ca 1899. (University Archives, Kansas State University)

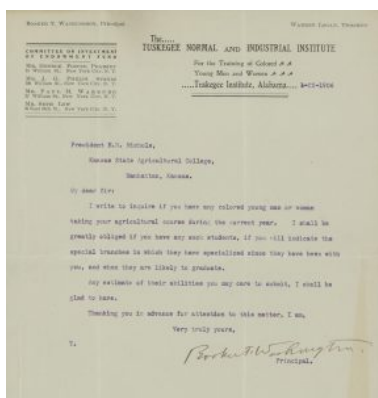
It is interesting to note that by the time he graduated there was at least one other African American student in attendance, Minnie Howell of Manhattan, who became the first African American female to graduate in 1901. Owens accomplished his goal of becoming

K-State's first African American graduate! At that time he received a letter from Booker T.

Washington, founder of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, offering him a position under George Washington Carver, head of the agriculture department. Owens accepted and arrived at the school during the fall of 1899. While at Tuskegee he implemented numerous improvements in the agricultural program, especially as head of the dairy herd. He also met and married Waddie L. Hill, a graduate of Clark University in Atlanta, and they started a family of four children, one of whom died shortly after birth.



Wedding photo of Waddie L and George Washington Owens, 1901. (Owens Papers)



Letter, Booker T. Washington to Ernest R. Nichols, January 1, 1906. (Nichols Papers, University Archives, Kansas State University)

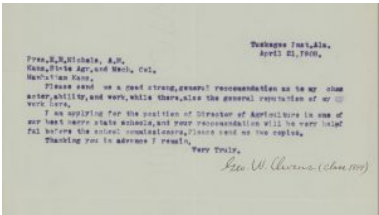
Owens made a very favorable impression on his superiors at Tuskegee, including Booker T. Washington. On occasion, Washington wrote Ernest R. Nichols, president of K-State, inquiring if there were any “colored” graduates he could recommend for employment at Tuskegee. Although replies from Nichols to Washington indicate that none were forthcoming, Washington hoped that there were others at K-State who could follow in Owens’s

footsteps.

His success at Tuskegee allowed Owens to obtain a position at Virginia Normal and Industrial Institute in Petersburg in 1908 to lead the agricultural program. Owens

used President Nichols as a reference to assist with obtaining the appointment. Nichols was professor of physics while Owens was at K-State. He took physics his senior year so it is safe to assume that Owens was a student in at least one of Nichols's classes. Nichols became acting president the month after Owens graduated and president in June 1900. VNII became Virginia State College for Negroes in 1930, Virginia State College in 1946, and Virginia State University in 1979.

In 1945–46, Owens wrote the remembrances of his childhood days in Kansas and his years at K-State, Tuskegee, and Virginia State. He passed away in 1950. The following is a verbatim transcription of his handwritten autobiography beginning with the arrival of his parents in Kansas through his years at Tuskegee. The manuscript, along with other documents and several photographs, was donated to the University Archives at Kansas State University in 1978 by Owens's daughter, Ana Elnora Owens.



Letter, Owens to Ernest R. Nichols, April 21, 1908. (Nichols Papers, University Archives)

Autobiography of George Washington Owens

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Biography of Geo. W. Owens

I was born Jan. 21, 1875 on a farm near the small town Alma Kansas some 40 miles west of Topeka the State Capital. Both of my parents were ex slaves and immigrants from central Tennessee and who came to Kansas by steam boats up the Tennessee river to the Ohio and down the Ohio to the Mississippi thence up that river and the Missouri to Westport Landing now Kansas City. From Westport Landing they went overland in covered wagons called prairie schooners to Fort Scott Kansas and settled for a while on the Marais des Cygnes River.

Later in search of free homestead they emmigrated by wagon train to Wabunsee County Kansas (named after a Pottowatmie Indian chief), and settled there with many other colored people from Tennessee. Here I was born and grew up on a western prairie farm.

When my father first emmigrated to Kansas like many other colored farmers with few or small funds he found it necessary to rent land and hence he looked around for public land to homestead. He finally secured 80 acres (school land 7 or 8 miles N.W. [approximately 5 miles] of Alma on some wild, hilly land with a rather clayey subsoil. Here he built a crude home of native stone and moved his family with the same. Here in the intense heat of summer and bitter cold of the western winters I spent my early years working on my fathers farm or hired to work by our neighbors, many of whom were foreign emigrants from Western Europe come to America to get homes and more freedom. In winter we attended the local district school (for some time the only colored pupils in that community). Living conditions were rather harsh and primitive

with cold winters and much snow and very hot in the open prairies in the summer. The annual rain fall along the 100th meridian (where we settled [*Alma is actually located at approximately the 96th meridian*]) was from 10 to 20 inches annually and most of this in winter snow. There were very few trees and these along the small creeks bottoms (these bottom lands were highly prized. Many of the settlers were veterans from the Union armies who took up homesteads and raised corn, wheat, horses beef cattle and hogs.

The colored children attended the district schools with the children of the white settlers. Many Germans, Danes, Swedes and other foreign immigrants from the Eastern States. We grew up together, played and worked together. We made fair

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records in the public schools, and I became to be quite a local celebrity on account of my ability as a winner in spelling contests all over that region. I was also very good in history of all kinds. I attended school whenever possible especially in winter. I attended school during the day in winter and worked on the farms caring for stock and crops after school hours. I was up very early in the morning and working after school. Finally I graduated from the common schools and worked for several years on a farm owned by some thrifty white settlers and during the time I had the good fortune to meet a young man (who boarded with the family) who was a teacher in the local high school and whose home was in Manhattan Kansas and where the Kansas State Agricultural College is situated. He was a graduate of same. He became interested in my desire to study and encouraged me to apply for permission to work my way through the college course.

Meanwhile I took the local examination for a teachers certificate (I was still working as a hired hand on a local farm) and passed with good grades, but I had no school to teach, in fact I had only seen one group of all colored children up to that time. I had never seen a colored doctor lawyer or other professional man until I went

south years later. There was a small school for colored pupils in Manhattan taught by a Mrs. De Priest. She was a niece of the Congressman afterwards from Chicago, but then lived in Salina Kansas.

As a boy I was very apt and ambitious eager to learn, ready to read any literature I could find even old books, newspapers or journals. I was particularly good at spelling and I won most of the spelling bees I participated in around the community. I also read all the histories I could secure, ancient, medieval or current.

Meanwhile I worked on a large stock ranch owned by a rancher named Miller near St. Marys Kansas and following the advice of my old friend (the teacher from Manhattan) Chas. Smith. I decided to try to enter and work my way through the Kansas State Agr College.

So in Jan 1-1896 I went to Manhattan (25 or 30 miles from my old home and enrolled as a student. I found to my surprise that I was the only colored student enrolled in the college, and that they had never had a colored graduate so I resolved to be the first. I finally succeeded, but suffered much hardship.

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I entered the Kans State Agr College in Jan 1896 and graduated in June 1899, completing the course in 3 1/4 years meanwhile working at various jobs at the college to pay my expenses, working on the school farm, in the dairy, and as a janitor during the school term and for two summers. Other summers were spent in labor on farms, railroads, shoveling coal and working in harvest. In the summer of 1899 I made a trip to Oklahoma as a laborer and worked in the harvest fields and with threshing crews. Later in August 1899 I spent 2 or 3 weeks in the creamery at the Iowa State College at Ames Iowa to take special work in butter making, cheese making and dairy management and organization before going to Tuskegee Inst, Tuskegee Ala to teach.

Early in 1899, I received a letter from Mr. Booker T. Washington Founder of Tuskegee Inst offering me a position as assistant to Prof. G. W. Carver, and I was also to have charge of the creamery at

Tuskegee Inst. I accepted the offer (\$48.00 per month and board). My journey to Tuskegee was full of interest as I had been raised in the plains or prairies and never seen so much fine wood lands and timber.

I arrived in Tuskegee in Sept 1899 and was very much pleased to meet Dr. Washington, Prof. Carver and others for whom I formed life time friendships. The next year I also took charge of the Dairy Herd and conducted same for 8 years. Having had much experience with cattle in my native state, I was able to introduce many new features in the management, feeding, and breeding of live stock. I figured out and used more balanced and economic feeding, also in the manufacture and utilization of dairy products. I also introduced and increased the use of ensilage as a dairy feed, cotton seed meal was used as a nitrogen base for concentrates.

When I began work at Tuskegee (some 46 years ago), I had never (except for a brief visit to Oklahoma) been in the South before. So everything was new and interesting, especially the differences in the physical conditions of the soil, trees, vegetation and crops. For instance after growing up on the wide open prairies of my native west, the great forests of pine and other trees in the lower South were a constant source of wonder, also the way in which wood, lumber and trees were wasted was painful to a Westerner who cherished even an individual tree.

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Also as stated above, the crops were new and interesting and to a person who had never heard much of cotton, rice, tobacco, and who had never seen such crops it was all new and interesting. The methods of planting, cultivation & harvesting and use were always interesting experience. Also the scarcity of gardens vegetables, and fruits in such a warm climate was a surprise and wonder.

As an Instructor in charge of the Dairy Herd we cared for and had the boys milk from 100 to 125 cows daily. There were several breeds of [milk] cows, such as Jerseys, Guernsey, Ayshire, etc. I endeavored to keep the different breeds separated and improve

each by breeding and management. We found that the chief source for protein for stock feed as well as nitrogen for crops in the South was cotton seed meal. Beef came of common or mixed ancestry were also raised by the school for butchering. During the 8 or 9 years I was in charge I tried hard to improve the herd by breeding up the best animals. As the soils in Alabama in Macon County were very poor it was difficult to raise the necessary corn, etc. for silage to feed the Dairy Herds. We learned by practical experience many helpful things about Southern Agriculture, use of legumes especially corn, peas and such crops. Also the value of such crops in the care of livestock. We had fair success in the development and use of siloes in the South.

During my earlier years at Tuskegee it was my good fortune to work under Dr. Geo. W. Carver as he was then Director of Agriculture. However as his scientific work increased he could not give the necessary time to the various technical operations on the school farm, but served as Advisor in all phases of the agr work. Dr. Carver also operated the experiment station and carried out many useful and helpful experiments on cotton, peanuts, corn and other crops. He also built up a splendid agricultural laboratory where he gradually increased his experiments with soils, sweet potatoes, peanuts, corn, and other products. Other professional men served as leaders in the technical operations of the large school farm among these was Prof. Atwell and Prof. Geo. R. Bridgforth as Director of Agr Dept. We will not attempt to write a history of the many successful experiments of Dr. Carver's work with soils and other farm products, as this data can be found in the history of his life and scientific research and achievements. We were very fond of him as a friend and fellow worker, one for whom we had the highest respect and admiration.

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At this point in our narration of some of the important events in my life, I will speak briefly of my marriage and domestic life at Tuskegee.

In the summer of 1900 I returned to my native west for a visit and in Sept 1900 I resumed my work at Tuskegee. That fall I had the good fortune to meet a very beautiful and accomplished young woman, a native of Georgia by the name of Miss. Waddie L. Hill. She was a graduate of Clarke University in Atlanta Georgia and a young woman of very pleasing personality and very attractive appearance. Her native home was La Grange Ga. After a very pleasant courtship we were married Aug 29, 1901, and enjoyed our married bliss until her death in Va in 1921. During our married life of over 20 years we were very happy and enjoyable, she was the ideal wife, mother and house keeper. Being a very intelligent woman of high spiritual ideals and character. By this union we had four children, one boy who died as a baby in 1902, my oldest daughter Emma (now Mrs. Moore) Supervisor of Fairfax Co Va. My son George A. Owens now in the U.S. Army since June 1941 now in New Guinea. He spent 20 months abroad in 1942-43 at Trinidad in the Greater Antilles (British possessions) with the 99th Coast Artillery Anti Air Corps Batteries. My youngest daughter Miss Elnora Owens is now a teacher of Home Economics at the Va State College. All my children are graduates of Va State College and my two daughters hold M.S. degrees from Iowa State College at Ames Iowa and Pa. University at Phila.

During the years of World War I there was a disease that was very prevalent known as the Spanish Influenza, that not only caused the illness and death of thousands of soldiers, but also civilians. In 1919-20 my wife had a severe attack which finally turned into T.B. On my return from Cornell in 1920 we sent her to the sanitarium in Brookville Va, where she remained from Aug 1920 to Apr 1921 and she seemed much improved. She returned home, and at first did very well in her recovery, but the disease gradually weakened her and finally in the fall of 1921 we decided to send her back to the sanitarium at Brookville, but the evening before she was to leave she passed away Nov 23-1921 leaving her family grief stricken & sad.

We will now go back and take up my career in an Agriculture education, and my change of position from Tuskegee Inst Ala to the

V. N. I. I. [*Virginia Normal and Industrial Institute*], Petersburg Va. I began my work at the V. N. I. I. in June 1908.

Conclusion

The remaining pages of Owens's autobiography address his experiences as a professor at the college in Virginia and his work in vocational agriculture. While most of his handwriting in the previous pages is legible, unfortunately, the latter pages contain many proper nouns that are difficult to read and identify therefore they are not included here. Owens's major accomplishments at Virginia State are summarized below.

With the passage of the National Vocational Educational Act in 1917, Owens's duties expanded to include that of state teacher-trainer in education. Owens became a prominent leader in the development of agricultural education in secondary schools and colleges throughout the South. He played a leading role in founding the New Farmers of Virginia in 1927, and he was credited with writing the original constitution and bylaws of the organization. The chapter held its first meeting at Virginia State College. The Virginia chapter was the first of eighteen state organizations that became the New Farmers of America, consisting of African American farm boys studying vocational agriculture in the public schools. State representatives of the NFA formed the National Organization of New Farmers of America in 1935. The New Farmers of America merged with the Future Farmers of America in 1965 after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.



Owens at Virginia State College, 1920
(Owens Papers)

During Owens's educational career his activities and successes were documented in *The Kansas Industrialist* and *The Students' Herald*, K-State newspapers. *The Students' Herald* published a letter on May 17, 1900 in which Owens described Tuskegee and his activities. In the 1940s, several articles in *The Industrialist* detailed his successes at Virginia State College and in the field of vocational agriculture.

In recognition of his service to Virginia State College and vocational agriculture in the South, a new agricultural building at the school was named in his honor in 1932. (In 1963, the name Owens Hall was transferred to the new School of Agriculture building.) Owens retired as chairman of the Department of Agriculture in 1945; he passed away in 1950 at age 75. By recording the accounts of his life, education, career, and work with young African Americans, Owens leaves an important historical record within the pages of his autobiography.

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About the Editor

Anthony R. Crawford retired in January 2015 as associate professor and curator of manuscripts in the Richard L. D. and Marjorie J. Morse Department of Special Collections, Hale Library, Kansas State University. He joined the department in 1983 as K-State's first professional university archivist. Crawford holds a BS degree in secondary education from Oklahoma State University and a MLS degree from the University of Oklahoma.