

# A Historical Overview of African American Veterinarians in the United States: 1889–2000

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## ABSTRACT

The annals of veterinary medical history rarely mention the presence of African American veterinarians and other minorities. Between 1889 and 1948, records show, a meager 70 African Americans graduated from veterinary schools in the United States and Canada. It was not until the veterinary school at Tuskegee (Institute) University was established in 1945 that a significant increase in the number of African American veterinarians occurred in the United States, and over the ensuing years their participation in every facet of the profession has been striking. Their employment in various areas of the profession and their successful performance in the workforce have done much to dispel stereotypical perceptions about minorities. Despite demographic data indicating that the United States is moving rapidly toward a multicultural society, recruitment programs to increase the number of African American students and faculty at the 28 US veterinary colleges have not kept pace with the declared goals of ethnic diversity. If the needs of a changing culture are to be met, veterinary medical education must look toward more ethnic inclusion in the student body and faculty. To that end, the Iverson C. Bell Symposium has consistently advocated the adoption of new and creative methods for increasing minority student enrollment and expanding faculty opportunities in the nation's veterinary colleges.



**Figure 1: Frederick D. Patterson, Founder of the School of Veterinary Medicine and President of the Tuskegee Institute from 1935 to 1953**

## BACKGROUND

The history of African Americans and other ethnic groups in the veterinary medical profession is not well known or fully appreciated. The recent graduate is likely to conclude that the beginning of the minority presence in veterinary medicine is, in effect, determined by the date of his or her diploma or by the establishment of the veterinary school at Tuskegee (Institute) University. Even occasional journal articles on veterinary history rarely mention the presence of African American veterinarians. This omission of significant facts provides neither a continued interest nor the broad view necessary for a full appreciation of the impact, past and present, of minorities on the veterinary medical profession. Historical knowledge not only illuminates the present but is a distillation of the past and, as well, the best approach to understanding the need for cultural and ethnic diversity. Moreover, knowledge of the history of minorities

in veterinary medicine provides a valid basis to begin explaining the current difficulties encountered in the recruitment of minorities at the 27 US veterinary colleges.

This historical overview will focus on the few African Americans to graduate from the existing veterinary colleges between 1897 to 1948 and on the much larger number who have since graduated from the Tuskegee University School of Veterinary Medicine (TUSVM) and other US veterinary schools. This perspective clearly shows the contributions that African American veterinarians have made to the profession. A significant impression emerges from this overview that challenges the belief in the infallibility of presently available criteria used to select students for the health professions. The performance of minority graduates in all aspects of the veterinary medical profession offers irrefutable testimony that the human traits of determination, perseverance, and innate skills—all imponderable, immeasurable, and unpredictable—must be acknowledged as valid cognates of a successful learning experience. The number of African American veterinary medical graduates who have become eminently successful professionals is large enough to persuade the most skeptical of the desirability of equal opportunity. Because of the paucity of information available on Hispanic, Native American, and Asian graduates, the focus here will be largely on African Americans. Relevant information will also be provided on factors that appear to prevent or discourage minorities from entering one of the oldest healing arts.

## PIONEER AFRICAN AMERICAN VETERINARIANS: 1889–1948

It is interesting to note that from 1889 to 1948 (a period of 59 years), a total of only 70 African American veterinarians graduated from veterinary colleges in the United States and Canada<sup>1,2</sup> (see Table 1). It is noteworthy that Kansas State University led the way with 22 graduates, followed by Ohio State University with 14. Those graduates not identified by school are listed as “other” and include Drs. J.G. Slade and R.V. Canon, employed by the Bureau of Animal Industry, who were described as “qualified veterinarians” when their

applications were approved for membership in the American Veterinary Medical Association in 1920,<sup>3</sup> and Drs. E.L. Reid and J.E. Shaw, who were summoned to Tuskegee Institute due to hog cholera outbreaks in 1906 and 1908 respectively.<sup>4</sup> These men were pioneers who entered the profession during a time when the opportunities for African American veterinarians were very limited indeed. Over the past 50 years the situation has changed radically, for African Americans and other minorities now find themselves being solicited and recruited by veterinary colleges that once refused to consider their applications. However, recruitment efforts have been less than successful because little attention has been given to developing race-neutral policies that disproportionately benefit students of color, just as race-neutral policies of the past, such as requiring standardized tests, have disproportionately penalized these students. On the other hand, career opportunities for minorities have greatly expanded to include every aspect of the profession.

### CAREER CHOICES FOR PIONEER AFRICAN AMERICAN VETERINARIANS

Careers pursued by pioneer African American veterinarians were limited to three areas: private practice, employment in the federal meat inspection service, and serving as college veterinarians at certain historically black colleges. Private practice appears to have been an opportunity for these early graduates to apply their veterinary skills where race did not appear to be a major factor. The first African Americans to obtain professional degrees in veterinary medicine were Henry L. Stockton, Sr. (Harvard School of Veterinary Medicine, 1889)<sup>1</sup> and Augustus P. Lushington (University of Pennsylvania, 1897).<sup>2</sup> Upon graduation, both established successful practices, Dr. Stockton in Chelsea, MA, and Dr. Lushington initially in Philadelphia, PA, and later in Lynchburg, VA. Dr. F.D. Patterson (ISU '23), while serving as college veterinarian at Virginia State College, stated that "in Virginia I had a chance to see how wide open the field was for black people. In Petersburg I treated livestock most of which belonged to whites, without any feeling of animosity."<sup>5</sup> Even with this window of opportunity, most black veterinarians could not afford to enter practice because they were unable to obtain bank loans or to buy or rent properties in favored locations. They had little choice but to build their practices, usually a combination residence and hospital, in areas where blacks could live. Despite these obstacles, there were those who persevered and established very successful practices, among them Dr. George W. Cooper (CSU '18), who conducted an extensive large animal practice in Keenesburg, CO, for 25 years, and in 1945 joined the first faculty of the new veterinary school at Tuskegee Institute; Dr. Charles Robinson (Cornell '20), who established a small animal hospital in Paterson, NJ, where he practiced for over 30 years; and Dr. Thomas G. Perry (KSU '21), one of the first small animal practitioners in the state of Kansas, who conducted a very successful practice in Wichita for 25 years and joined the first Tuskegee Institute veterinary faculty in 1946. Special mention is due to Dr. Sylvanus Weathersby (OVC '20). After graduation from the Department of Agriculture at Tuskegee Institute in 1915, unable to gain admission to any of the US veterinary schools, he was admitted to the Ontario Veterinary College in Guelph, ON. Upon graduation he returned to his home in D'Lo, MS, where he prac-

ticed for 30 years. His two sons would matriculate much later at the new veterinary school at the Tuskegee Institute.<sup>6</sup> These early veterinarians were trailblazers during a very difficult period and were, by any yardstick, eminently successful.



**Figure 2: Edward B. Evans, first Dean of the School of Veterinary Medicine, Tuskegee Institute, 1946–1947**

Opportunities to serve as college veterinarians were limited to the historically black colleges with Departments of Agriculture. Early pioneers at these institutions were Dr. James H. Bias (OSU '10), who established the veterinary science program at Tuskegee Institute; Dr. L.C. Bolling (OSU '20), Southern University, Baton Rouge, LA; Dr. E.B. Evans (ISU '18), Prairie View College, TX; and Dr. F.D. Patterson (ISU '23), Virginia State College and Tuskegee Institute, AL. Both Dr. Evans and Dr. Patterson returned to Iowa State to earn Master of Science degrees (in 1923 and 1927 respectively). Dr. Patterson was also awarded a PhD from Cornell University in 1933 and would become Tuskegee Institute's third president in 1935. Dr. W.H. Waddell (Pennsylvania '35) would succeed Dr. Patterson as head of the Department of Veterinary Science and later became a member of the first faculty at Tuskegee's new veterinary school. These pioneers deserve credit for establishing veterinary science as an integral component of the agricultural curriculum at these colleges, introducing the clinical practice of veterinary medicine to the community, and creating a positive image of the veterinarian as a medical scientist. Dr. Patterson and Dr. Evans would further distinguish themselves by founding the School of Veterinary Medicine at the Tuskegee Institute in 1945. Dr. Evans, after serving as dean of the veterinary school for one year, returned to Prairie View State College and become its president in 1947.

The career option in which the majority of African American veterinarians found employment was the Federal Meat Inspection Service (FMIS) of the Bureau of Animal Industry (BAI). This was primarily because most of the large meat-packing plants were located in the midwest and in the north, where living conditions for black Americans were reasonably good. The first among many African Americans to enter the FMIS was Dr. C.V. Lowe (Pennsylvania '09), and, despite limited opportunities for advancement, the BAI would be the major employer for African American veterinarians for the next 50 years. This agency proved a favored

site for faculty recruitment for the new veterinary school at Tuskegee. It was stated that “such a job offered no great mobility or challenge, but in segregated America, trained black veterinarians found few other job opportunities.”<sup>5</sup>

These data serve to remind us of the great enthusiasm and determination of these pioneers and torchbearers, who succeeded during a very difficult period for minorities in this country. Difficulties were encountered in gaining entrance to established schools of veterinary medicine and, upon graduation, in being accepted as qualified professionals. Race may well have been a major reason for black Americans not being admitted to veterinary schools during this period. But other factors such as knowledge of career opportunities, role models, and academic backgrounds could also have been contributing factors. It is difficult, however, to explain their treatment as qualified professionals through any factor other than race. It is noteworthy that the larger society held no such view: 90% of the clients of these early black veterinary practitioners were Caucasian. Though few in number, and only a minuscule fraction of the potential pool, these men were able to make great achievements under very difficult circumstances.



**Figure 3: Theodore S. Williams, Dean of the School of Veterinary Medicine, Tuskegee Institute, 1947–1972**

### **A BOLD UNDERTAKING IN VETERINARY MEDICAL EDUCATION**

Following these pioneering efforts, the history of people of color entering the veterinary medical profession belongs largely to the establishment of a veterinary medical school at the Tuskegee Institute. The school, a dream of two pioneer African American veterinarians, Drs. F.D. Patterson and E.B. Evans, was founded in 1945. Critical to its birth was careful and deliberate planning with a view to future opportunities for black Americans. Its mission was to provide an opportunity for an ethnic minority largely denied admission to the existing veterinary schools. This venture took great courage; to fully understand the magnitude of the related problems, it must be cast in the tenor of the times. It would be the first veterinary college to be established in 25 years, during which time the veterinary college at the University of Georgia had closed because of low enrollment (1933) and Middlesex University's had closed due to its failure to obtain American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) accreditation (1948). This new school at Tuskegee would be located at a private, historically black

school in Alabama with a history of limited financial support; no physical facilities to house the new program had been constructed. Moreover, it was founded during an era marked by a rigidly segregated educational system: Alabama state law required that both faculty and students be restricted to African Americans. Faculty, then, must be recruited from the limited pool of African Americans who had graduated from northern schools. Many had never been south but were painfully aware of its apartheid social and educational realities. Recruiting an acceptable number of black students also presented a problem, since most were not aware of veterinary medicine as a career option and, in fact, many had never seen an African American veterinarian. For these and other reasons, achieving AVMA accreditation during this time seemed an awesome undertaking. Nevertheless, the Tuskegee Institute had amassed a creditable record of achievement and took pride in having pioneered programs that provided its graduates with new employment opportunities. The circumstances that set the stage for opening a veterinary school at Tuskegee were unique; at another time and in another place, it might well not have occurred. The year was 1945, and World War II was over. Hundreds of veterans would enter college under the G.I. Bill, and, more importantly, Dr. Patterson, a veterinarian and the president of the Tuskegee Institute, was convinced that the time was ripe to provide an opportunity for African Americans to pursue careers in veterinary medicine. Moreover, Tuskegee Institute had a reputation of opening new career opportunities for black Americans. Its most recent venture had been the eminently successful Tuskegee Airmen Program. Veterinary medicine seemed a likely candidate, since it was not considered as wide open to blacks as the other health professions. Another contributing factor in establishing the new school at Tuskegee was its tradition of constructing buildings with bricks and mortar made by students and faculty.

Records show that in the fall of 1945, a veterinary school opened at the Tuskegee Institute with a faculty of eight black veterinarians, none with prior experience in veterinary medical education. A four-year professional curriculum was in the process of being developed, and the courses for the first two years were in place. Thirty-nine students had been recruited—13 first-year students and 19 pre-veterinary students. There was an air of determination among faculty and staff to make what some cynics had called “a mistaken creation” a success. On May 25, 1954, the AVMA's Council on Education voted full accreditation for the school. This day was of tremendous significance for the administration and faculty. The development of the veterinary school had been such a successful undertaking that it was said at the time that “Tuskegee's achievement would have been monumental for any institution, but for a Negro institution in the deep South ... it was a fantastic accomplishment which amazed the veterinary medical community and the profession itself.”<sup>4</sup> The need to acknowledge the exceptional leadership provided during this critical period and the years thereafter cannot be overemphasized. Drs. Patterson and Evans, both graced with innovative and creative minds and the unusual ability to grasp new ideas and break new paths for others to follow, were years ahead of their time. Much credit is also due to Dr. Theodore S. Williams, who served as dean during the school's most difficult years (1947–1972), a time when a strong leader was needed, and

who through his own example could inspire others to a feeling of confidence, enthusiasm, and a will to succeed. He supplied these ingredients, and the school is in great debt to him. During his tenure, the faculty grew from eight to 25, strengthened by 18 DVM degrees, six MS degrees, and 12 MS/PhD degrees. The number of graduates had increased from five in the first class of 1949 to 319, and four buildings had been constructed to house a rapidly growing educational program. Subsequent deans Walter C. Bowie, James E. Ferguson, and Alfonza Atkinson have continued to provide a high level of leadership, resulting in a progressive growth that rivals any veterinary school in the nation. The further development and growth of TUSVM has been described elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 4: The first faculty of the School of Veterinary Medicine with President F.D. Patterson. Front row L-R: Drs. W.H. Waddell, E.B. Evans, F.D. Patterson, E.G. Trigg; back row L-R: Drs. G.W. Cooper, L.B. Mobley, T.G. Perry (not pictured: Drs. T.S. Williams and W.A. Ezell).**

#### **MOVING TOWARDS MORE DIVERSITY IN VETERINARY MEDICINE**

The twenty-first century will herald the coming of a truly multicultural society, and movement toward academic diversity has become a major consideration. Making America work for everyone is important because people of color are rapidly increasing in number. It has been predicted that by the year 2020, only 56% of school-age children in the United States will be white and non-Hispanic. This raises the real possibility that people of color will constitute 50% of the educated workforce.<sup>7</sup> These demographic data have far-reaching implications. A majority of veterinary clientele will be people of color. The very fabric of this country will be tried and tested. Health profession educators and those who

control the levers of access must rise, taking up the challenge to develop new metaphors of leadership that include creativity, healing, and inclusiveness. Recently, attention has been drawn to the need to achieve racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity in veterinary medical education.<sup>8-10</sup> Beginning with the recruitment and admissions processes, we must understand that neither qualifies as a science; rather, both are arts that cannot be reduced to multiple regressions of standardized test scores and grade point averages to determine success.<sup>11</sup>

**Table 1: African American Veterinary Graduates, 1889–1948**

School of Veterinary Medicine	Number of African American Graduates
Colorado	4
Cornell	7
Guelph	1
Harvard	1
Iowa	7
Kansas	22
Michigan	2
Ohio	14
Pennsylvania	7
Washington	1
Other schools	4
Total	70

During the last decade, the recruitment of minorities at US veterinary schools has hovered around 8%, a proportion much smaller than the 19.7% minority population.<sup>12</sup> A recent survey of minority recruitment practices at the 27 US veterinary colleges indicates that the issue of minority enrollment has not been clearly defined, and the result is a skewed distribution of minority students. Moreover, veterinary medical student recruitment lags behind similar programs designed for human medicine.<sup>11</sup> Those who promote diversity in veterinary medical education must chart a new and innovative course for a changing culture. Credit is due to the Iverson C. Bell Symposium for leadership in searching for new paradigms and solutions to address this difficult area.<sup>13</sup> Since the establishment of a veterinary school at Tuskegee (Institute) University in 1945, the change in minority representation in the veterinary profession has been spectacular, for an unexpected degree of diversity has been quietly accomplished. TUSVM leads the way in the ethnic diversity of its student body and faculty. Minority graduates have been produced who have found their way into every facet of the profession. We now have a glimpse of the potential that has hitherto been smothered, to the detriment of the profession. The barometer of any educational institution's effectiveness in fulfilling its stated mission is the quality of its graduates. At the turn of the twenty-first century there were approximately 2,000 African American veterinarians in the nation;<sup>8,14</sup> more than 70% of these men and women are graduates of TUSVM. They have aptly performed the special tasks for which they were educated, helped to establish the reputation of the school, and been partners in the birth of a broad spectrum of career opportu-

nities for African American veterinarians. Their performance in the workforce has done much to dispel stereotypical perceptions held by some about minorities. In a sense, they qualify as a second tier of pioneers. Building upon the limited success of the early pioneers beginning in the 1950s, African American graduates of the TUSVM and other veterinary colleges over the past 50 years have taken advantage of expanding opportunities in veterinary medicine. An increasing number can be found in academia, research, the armed forces, industry, state and federal regulatory agencies, and achieving eminence in practice, including zoo and marine animal practice. The various specialty boards have certified 45, 26 of whom have been certified as Diplomates of the American College of Veterinary Pathologists; 82 have earned PhD or equivalent degrees, and a sizeable number have added diversity to the faculty at many of the majority veterinary schools. Specific examples listed are necessarily limited to TUSVM alumni; nevertheless, minority graduates from other schools have accumulated similar records. A sampling of prominent positions held by minority veterinarians: Dean, University of Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine; Dean, TUSVM; Associate Dean, Mississippi State University College of Veterinary Medicine; Director, Diagnostic Center for Population and Animal Health, Michigan State University College of Veterinary Medicine; Deputy Administrator, Animal and Poultry Health Inspection Service, US Department of Agriculture; Chief Veterinary Officer, US Public Health Service; Assistant Surgeon General for Veterinary Services, US Public Health Service; Chief, US Army Veterinary Corps; President, American College of Veterinary Pathologists; and Vice President, Amgen, Inc. This significant increase in minority veterinarians and the dramatic expansion of job opportunities being filled by them make earlier reasons for denying this ethnic group access to a veterinary medical education ring hollow.

## CONCLUSIONS

History can be very important and intensely interesting, and it is not without practical value. It is a living reality that moves like a DNA chain from one generation to the next. Within the context of this historical perspective, strong evidence is presented of the determination of a people to hurdle obstacles created by circumstances beyond their control. Stellar contributions of representative African American veterinarians are also presented. It is understandable that the larger society may have concluded in prior years that African Americans and other minorities were not interested in careers in veterinary medicine. However, their visible and notable accomplishments over the past 50 years suggest that the future for veterinary scientists, regardless of ethnic origin or sex, is indeed bright. Veterinary medical education has had considerable success in recruiting women, but it has been slow to recruit and retain underrepresented minorities. The profession has fallen behind human medicine in the development of imaginative recruitment programs for minorities. Minority recruitment and admission programs at the various veterinary colleges might be greatly strengthened by including more recent information on the impact of African Americans and other minorities on the veterinary profession. Some attention should also be given to the presumed infallibility of the criteria used to select veterinary school applicants.

It appears that what diversity has been achieved in the veterinary medical profession has been largely limited to the

workforce and to graduate and post-doctoral programs; the professional educational programs in our US veterinary colleges have left much to be desired. Central to the total student experience are interventive measures that provide an array of educational experiences directing special attention to a heterogeneous society. Ideas about being more inclusive and non-judgmental—including motivating the learner and creating a safe and respectful learning environment—are not entirely new to a seasoned faculty. Demographic changes mandate that efforts in this direction not be delayed. However, it is only through innovative and creative leadership that increased diversity can be accomplished in veterinary medical education programs.

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