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Part II

The Implementation of Black Health Programs

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4. Good Intentions and Bad Blood in Alabama

From the Tuskegee Movable School to the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment

Throughout the history of the black health movement, black reformers tried to secure social services for the rural poor by turning to the federal government to circumvent the inequality of the Jim Crow South. They viewed the acquisition of federal assistance as a political victory because it was a way to bypass the restrictions of local white-only policies and states' rights justifications for systematically denying social welfare funds to African Americans. Yet, as the histories of the Tuskegee Movable School and the Tuskegee Syphilis Study illustrate, government involvement proved to have oppressive as well as progressive consequences for poor African Americans.

Black professionals risked little by linking their social welfare programs to federal initiatives, as long as they maintained control over their own agenda. For example, Booker T. Washington convinced the federal government to incorporate the Tuskegee Movable School, a black rural development program he directed, within the extension service work funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This action set a precedent for federal government support to black farmworkers and marked the beginning of organized black agricultural extension work in the United States. From 1906 to 1944 the Tuskegee Movable School provided adult education programs in agriculture, home economics, and health for rural African Americans throughout Alabama. This traveling school became a model for the creation of rural development programs in other states, such as Mississippi, and even other countries, such as India.[1]

Black professionals counted on the benefits of government involvement to outweigh the costs to the poor. In the case of the Tuskegee Movable School they were undoubtedly right, but as the history of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study shows, there were dire consequences when they were wrong. From 1932 to 1972 white physicians of the United States Public Health

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Service (USPHS) carried out a "study" on approximately 400 rural black men in Macon County, Alabama. The study, which historian James Jones has described as "the longest nontherapeutic experiment on human beings in medical history," was predicated on following the course of untreated syphilis until death.[2]

Black health workers and educators at Tuskegee Institute played a critical role in the government's syphilis experiment. Robert Moton, head of Tuskegee Institute, and Dr. Eugene Dibble, the medical director of Tuskegee's hospital, both lent their endorsement and institutional resources to the government study. However, no one was more vital to the experiment than Eunice Rivers (Laurie), a black public health nurse. Rivers worked in the public health field from 1923 until well after her retirement in 1965. She began her career with the Tuskegee Institute Movable School during the 1920s, and after a decade of service she became involved in the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Study. In her capacity as a public health nurse, Rivers acted as the liaison between the men in the study and the doctors of the USPHS. Indeed, Rivers was the key to maintaining subject interest in the experiment for forty years.[3] Paradoxically, it is a "tribute" to her years of hard work at developing relationships with people in the surrounding countryside through her public health work with the Tuskegee Movable School that the men in the Tuskegee Syphilis Study continued to cooperate year after year.

How could black professionals, including health workers dedicated to preserving life, participate in such a project? Historians have focused on the study as scientifically unjustifiable and as an unethical experiment that highlighted the racism of American medicine and the federal government. While affirming the validity of these assessments, I return to the troubling question of the role of Tuskegee Institute's black professionals. This chapter demonstrates that their participation can best be understood when set within the context of twentieth-century public health work. The histories of the Tuskegee Movable School and the Tuskegee Syphilis Study raise important questions about the gendered nature of public health work, the constraints on black middle-class reform efforts, and the costs and benefits to the poor.

Rural African Americans and the Tuskegee Community

The Tuskegee Movable School was unique among rural development programs by and for African Americans in that it drew on the extensive human

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resources and political connections of Tuskegee Institute, located in Macon County, Alabama. As we have seen, Tuskegee Institute served as headquarters for numerous reform efforts by black professionals who wanted to bring their vision of the benefits of the twentieth century to those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. Black educators, social workers, and health workers tried to bring enlightenment and a better standard of living to the rural black poor through the improvement of crops, houses, health, education, and morals. Washington relied on a solid network of black educators and former students to garner support for his various campaigns, and together with lucrative connections to wealthy white businessmen and government officials, Washington and his assistants carried out a number of programs for rural black Southerners. The Annual Tuskegee Negro Conference, National Negro Health Week, and the Tuskegee Movable School are examples of Tuskegee's racial uplift work for people in the surrounding countryside.[4]

In the spirit of Tuskegee Institute's educational philosophy, black extension agents from the Tuskegee Movable School tried to turn black tenant farmers into healthy, thrifty landowners. Although it is difficult to uncover the voices of rural African Americans who participated in extension service programs, and much of the following draws on the reports of a few extension service leaders, general patterns of interactions between the "students" and the instructors are discernable.

In their government reports, black extension workers sometimes appeared to deny the importance of deeper structural barriers, and they implied that black tenants could all be landowners if they just altered their behavior. It is difficult to know if such sentiments represented their assessments of the rural poor or their strategies with the white establishment, given that much of what we know about the work of the extension agents comes from statistical and narrative reports submitted to government officials. Agents no doubt censored themselves in an effort to tell officials what they wanted to hear and what would most likely benefit black programs.

Poor rural African Americans shared the vision that landownership was a key to black freedom from white control. They wanted to become independent landowners and homeowners instead of sharecroppers and tenant farmers working for white planters. Landownership among black Southerners actually increased between 1880 and World War I. By 1910, of the 850,000 African Americans who farmed land in the South, nearly 200,000 were landowners. However, most farms owned by African Americans in the early twentieth century were small and on poor soil. Further-

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more, as the history of lynching demonstrates, African Americans faced the danger of white retaliation for black economic success. It was not uncommon for white people to find legal and extralegal methods to force black people to lose their land or sell it at a loss.[5]

Although most African Americans lived in the rural South working in agriculture until well into the Great Depression, they were usually not landowners. For example, in Alabama as in other Deep South states, most African Americans worked on white-owned cotton plantations as tenant farmers. In 1925, 90 percent of the rural African Americans in Macon County were tenant farmers, while almost half of the white people in the county were landowners. As tenants, black people rented land from a landlord and paid rent either in cash or in a share (usually half) of the crop, known as sharecropping. Black sharecroppers were even more vulnerable to white exploitation than black landowners. For example, black tenants often paid higher rent and interest rates than white tenants. All these factors contributed to a situation in which many rural African Americans were trapped in a cycle of debt and poverty.[6]

In the early twentieth century, most rural African Americans lived in unhealthy surroundings with few modern amenities. They faced a range of health problems including malaria, typhoid fever, hookworm disease, pellagra, and venereal disease, along with malnutrition and high infant and maternal mortality rates. One black extension service agent for the Tuskegee Movable School, Thomas Monroe Campbell, wrote that in his work he encountered

> hundreds of squalid, ramshackled cabins, tenanted by forlorn, emaciated, poverty stricken Negroes who year after year struggled in cotton fields and disease-laden swamps, trying to eke out a miserable existence.[7]

Homes had few screens, window panes, or even windows, and few sanitary toilets. T. J. Woofter of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation reported that "it has been said of some of the houses that the school children can return home and study geology through the floor, botany through the sides, and astronomy through the roof."[8] In terms of material conditions, most rural African Americans barely had the essentials.

Black and White Extension Service Work

The federal government funded southern extension service work in order to improve agricultural production, create a contented labor force, and reduce

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migration out of rural areas.[9] Black and white extension agents struggled to fight the boll weevil, a beetle that destroyed cotton crops in every county in Alabama by 1916. However, black extension service work differed from white programs. White agricultural extension agents usually geared their crop improvement work toward helping landowners and promoted cash crops and commercial farming. Meanwhile, black agents focused on subsistence farming and the development of economic independence.[10]

There were far fewer black extension agents than white agents, despite the large number of black agricultural workers in the South. For example, in the 1910s across the nation there were only a few black agents; by World War I there were two hundred; and by the 1930s not quite four hundred black male and female agents. Many of these agents were graduates of Tuskegee Institute, Hampton Institute, and Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College.[11]

The salaries of extension service agents varied by both race and gender. For example, by World War I white male agents received about $135 per month compared to $75 for black men. White women received about $75 per month, much less than their male counterparts, but still more than the usual $60 received by black women. One state extension director admitted that when it came to salary, "we allowed these agents just as little as we thought they could possibly get along with," leading some white female agents in Alabama to complain that "the expense of doing the work was greater than the salary."[12]

The work of black and white extension service agents differed in some respects but it shared a gendered division of labor. While male farm agents focused on educating men about agriculture, female home demonstration agents focused on educating women about home economics and family care. Although some of the activities of the male extension agents had important health ramifications, most health work fell within the women's domain. In isolated rural areas, home demonstration agents and nurses disseminated vital health information about hygiene and sanitation to poor women who carried the burden of health care provisions.

A Farmer's College on Wheels: The Tuskegee Movable School

Washington referred to the Tuskegee Movable School as "A Farmer's College on Wheels." The first Movable School was a mule-drawn wagon built by students at Tuskegee Institute in 1906. It carried equipment and personnel, and it was known as the Jesup Agricultural Wagon in honor of the New

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Figure 4. From left to right: Home demonstration agent Luella C. Hanna, public health nurse Eunice Rivers, and unidentified farm agent, rural workers for the Tuskegee Institute Movable School, Alabama, 1923. Courtesy of the National Archives, Washington, D.C.

York banker Morris K. Jesup, who assisted with the expenses of building it. Washington also garnered endorsement and financial support from John D. Rockefeller's General Education Board.[13] In 1918 Tuskegee replaced the old cart and mules for an automobile called the Knapp Agricultural Truck, named after Seaman Knapp, who created farm demonstration work. This truck eased transportation difficulties tremendously while providing more space for equipment and personnel. Then in 1923, after it broke down, 30,000 black farmers and a few white people donated $5,000 to buy a new truck, which was called the Booker T. Washington Agricultural School on Wheels. Each of these vehicles served at one time as the Tuskegee Movable School (see Figure 4).[14]

Although the Tuskegee Movable School was initially set up by men for men, the personnel expanded over the years to include women. From 1906 until 1915 the school had only a few male farm agents, then in 1915 the

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school added a female home demonstration agent, and in 1920 the school added a public health nurse to the crew. Usually a total of three or four agents traveled together with the school.

The Farm Agent in the Field

The black male farm agent of the Movable School was in charge of addressing agricultural problems. Throughout the 1910s and 1920s black farm agents, whether with the Movable School or in other black extension service programs in the South, taught crop diversification (growing crops other than just cotton) as a way to limit the damage to agricultural production done by the boll weevil.[15] Agents taught how to use modern farm equipment, terrace land, prune fruit trees, raise pigs, build steps, measure and cut lumber, mix concrete, and make whitewash to use on houses and fences. Many of the projects had ramifications for the improvement of health, especially putting screens on windows to guard against flies and mosquitoes and installing sanitary toilets to prevent disease.[16]

Thomas Monroe Campbell (1883–1956), hired to work for the Movable School in 1906, became the first black farm agent of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and later the head of black extension work in the lower South. Campbell, who was born in Georgia on a white-owned farm, believed his own rural background assisted him in reaching poor black tenant farmers. When Campbell was about five years old, his mother convinced his father, who was a tenant farmer and Methodist preacher, to buy a small tract of land outside of town. Not long after, his mother died, leaving six children and a large doctor's bill. In order to pay the bill his father mortgaged the home and the land, and eventually lost both. Campbell remembered that "from that time on I worked with my father on various plantations until I was 15 years old, and then I decided definitely to get an education at any cost."[17] Campbell eventually attended Tuskegee Institute and graduated in 1906 with a diploma in agriculture. He assisted with the annual farmers' conferences and drove the carriage for Washington. After his graduation Washington hired him as a farm agent and then as head of the Movable School.

The Home Demonstration Agent: Promoting Good Housekeeping

The lessons of the home demonstration agent in home economics were as essential to rural development and the work of the Movable School as that of farm agents' sessions on agriculture. In several respects home demonstra-

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tion agents were to rural women what settlement house workers were to urban immigrant women, agents of modernization and advocates for the poor.[18] Despite women's work in the fields, extension programs for women focused exclusively on improving women's work in the home. Sociologist Monroe Work expressed the idealized role for women in 1910 when he wrote that

> the women are spending the greater portion of their time, not in working in the fields, but in attending to household duties. They are making their homes neat and comfortable. They have a place and a special time to eat. The food is properly prepared, placed upon a table, and served in suitable dishes.[19]

Home demonstration agents taught rural women how to increase food production and preservation. Canning programs and canning clubs were very popular among both black and white women, especially as part of the war effort during World War I.[20]

The Movable School hired its first home demonstration agent, N. Juanita Coleman, in 1915 with funding through the federal Smith-Lever Act. Coleman had entered Tuskegee Institute in 1904 after earning the entrance fee and railroad fare by running a kindergarten in her home state of Texas. She graduated in 1908, and Margaret Murray Washington subsequently sent her to teach school at the nearby Elizabeth Russell Settlement. After teaching there a while, Coleman moved to Texas, where she taught school for several years. Then she worked as a home demonstration agent with the Movable School for six years until she became Margaret Washington's secretary in the early 1920s. Finally, in 1923 Coleman opened a hospital in Demopolis, Alabama, which she operated with money raised from donations.[21]

Home demonstration agents during the 1910s and 1920s attempted to train women in proper housekeeping techniques. They provided lessons in the best way to cook, clean, sew, and make soap, handicrafts, and cotton mattresses for sale and personal use. They provided instructions in how to repair clothing and bed linen, make curtains and rugs, do laundry, and raise poultry. Sometimes agents ran an electric line from the Movable School into the house to demonstrate such appliances as a washing machine, cream separator, butter churn, and electric iron, technology completely out of the financial reach of most rural women.[22]

In addition to housekeeping, female extension workers focused on family care and, in the process, shaped the health component of rural de-

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velopment work. Home demonstration agents brought health education, especially information on nutrition, sanitation, and hygiene, directly to rural women. They promoted observances of National Negro Health Week, assisted with baby clinics, and provided information on birth control and personal hygiene, such as bathing, washing one's hair, and brushing one's teeth. From World War I to World War II home demonstration agents emphasized clean homes, clean bodies, appropriate food and clothing, and good health.[23]

Black professionals, including extension workers, did not question women's primary responsibility for family health and therefore directed the vast majority of their health programs toward women. The training started early with the 4-H agricultural movement—hand, head, heart, and health—in which extension agents taught boys to think as future farmers and girls as future homemakers who would one day be in charge of the health of their families.

The underlying philosophy of home demonstration work was that, even if poor rural women could not buy modern conveniences, they could still enjoy the appearance of modern consumer culture. Indeed, by twentieth-century urban standards these were the bare necessities. For example, the home demonstration agent was supposed to assist rural women who had little or no financial resources to make home furnishings. According to extension worker accounts, the home demonstration agent helped women use available materials like wooden crates to create many useful items, such as clothes closets, dressing tables, and wash stands. Even a kitchen sink with plumbing was not beyond reach. Through garden and poultry sales women were able to remodel their kitchens and "install simple water systems" that had "a barrel on the outside of the house with faucet and sink on the inside." After filling the barrel with fresh water each morning, the family had indoor plumbing.[24]

No doubt rural black women, like poor women in general, made a little go a long way well before lessons from extension agents. Many rural homes had "a little make-believe porch, wooden blinds for windows, [and] a block of wood or an old bucket turned upside down for steps," according Movable School home demonstration agent Laura Daly. Daly, who replaced Coleman in the 1920s, learned that most of the women had managed to cover exposed rafters and walls in their homes with newspapers, magazine covers, and circus posters. Pages from the Sears catalogue proved useful for blocking holes in the wall as well as for toilet paper. Daly saw

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women use lard buckets "to cook in, milk in, wash dishes in, and bathe in." Many women had to do their family's laundry down at the spring. Daly noted that

> usually there is an attempt at a flower yard, but it and the [vegetable] garden if there is one, have a hard struggle for existence during the work season, for there is no time to attend to either of them, the chickens or the children save Saturday afternoon.[25]

Rural women were constantly busy with some task, whether working in the cotton fields; tending to the gardens, chickens, and children; or cooking, cleaning, and nursing the sick. Daly reported that rural people had little leisure time or entertainment opportunities, although she observed that some homes had a phonograph, piano, or organ, even if in poor condition.[26]

One of the major concerns of the home demonstration agent was to teach nutrition and improve the rural diet, which featured "just one fried meal after another," according to Daly.[27] Luella C. Hanna, Alabama state home demonstration agent for black women, explained that "the busy farm women must prepare three meals a day and must prepare them in the quickest possible way—which is to fry breakfast, fry dinner, and fry supper." Rural people who lived and worked on plantations often ate mainly pork meat, corn bread, and molasses because these items were inexpensive and could be purchased at the plantation store.[28]

Home demonstration agents knew that despite dominant gender prescriptions, women did agricultural labor on top of household labor, so sometimes agents geared their educational programs toward helping women cope with their double burden. As one solution, agents encouraged women to serve their families at least one boiled meal each day. They taught them how to construct a fireless cooker, or slow cooker, out of a wooden lard tub, using shredded corn shucks as a liner for insulation, a kettle for holding the food, a zinc bucket in which to place the kettle, and a two-inch-thick flat rock placed in the bottom of the bucket. Women were shown how to prepare a balanced meal in the fireless cooker while they were out working in the fields.[29]

In families with some financial resources, rural women tried to negotiate with their husbands for farm and home improvements by invoking the authority of extension service agents. Campbell saw evidence to suggest that women were the ones who convinced their men to carry out the changes recommended by agents, such as repairing steps, whitewashing the house, and improving the outhouse. At least one woman, who like many

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cooked in iron pots and frying pans over the fire hearth, was able to purchase a stove.[30] Daly recalled:

> I like to think of how happy one woman was over her first stove. She had put off having the home demonstration club meeting at her house because she cooked on the fireplace. Finally the next meeting was appointed for her home. The husband, embarrassed, brought his wife to town on the Saturday previous to the meeting day and purchased their first stove. They had been married more than fifteen years.[31]

The resources of many families were so limited that even purchasing on credit was an impossibility, but there were some women who used extension work to achieve these victories.

Home demonstration agents did on occasion act as advocates for rural women's self-development. For example, Daly believed that women's heavy work burden was responsible for their poor health. She saw women working from early in the morning until late at night providing care for their families and labor in the fields. During National Negro Health Week one year, she tried to focus attention specifically on women's health issues, "to make the farm woman more conscious of her duty towards keeping herself well, especially emphasizing what she herself could do in that direction." Daly said the problem was that "mothers and wives are given to thinking only in terms of comfort and consideration for their husbands and children."[32] For this reason, women agents occasionally offered a critique of women's position within families.

Rural Education on the Road and the Plantation

The educational philosophy of the Tuskegee Movable School, like that of all agricultural extension work, was to teach by example to a mostly illiterate clientele. As Thomas Campbell, one of the most prolific writers on black extension work, explained: "We realized that many farmers could not read or write, and for that reason we adhered to methods that they could see and hear and understand."[33] Extension agents believed they were most successful at changing people's behavior when they were able to develop personal relationships with them. Campbell reported that:

> The workers get into the lives of the farmers, and their families, first of all, by gaining their confidence. They converse with them in their own language about their problems, real and imaginary; they encourage parents to send

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> their children to school; they often spend nights around the fireside with them and listen to interesting stories pertaining to the local history of their communities.[34]

Agents were not supposed to just hand out literature or to lecture. They were supposed to become involved in the life of rural communities and then involve the people in educational demonstrations.

In order to keep attendance high, the agents tried not to hold sessions during the planting and harvesting seasons. They held most sessions during the winter break, from December to February, before people planted their crops and during the summer break, from July to September, before people gathered their crops. In this way the Movable School reached hundreds of people in Alabama. For example, in 1915 the school traveled for six weeks in eight counties and made contacts with 5,000 African Americans. In 1922 the Movable School reached 1,885 people in four counties in only a few weeks. In 1928 the school held sessions in fifty-four communities and reached 4,600 people.[35]

Selecting School Sites

Initially the extension workers held teaching sessions in black community institutions such as churches, schools, and courthouses, but by 1920 they decided they would reach more people by going directly to their homes. According to Coleman, the agents learned that they had to go directly to the plantations and farms if they wanted to reach the poorest class of farmers, the sharecroppers and tenants. As Coleman explained:

> We noticed that the class of people who needed these instructions most, were not attending these meetings and we were not coming in contact with them, because this class went to church only when there was preaching; rarely went to the schoolhouse because in too many cases they didn't like the teacher and the last time they were at the courthouse they felt that they had not been given a fair chance or justice.[36]

Coleman found that attendance increased and she could demonstrate her lessons more easily when agents went to people's homes.

Agents usually selected one of the poorer homes for their extension service demonstrations, concluding that a tenant farmer could not match the farm and home improvements made by a landowning neighbor. Agents were supposed to select the homes of residents who were on good terms with the rest of the community in order to ensure that people would come to the demonstrations and to allay any feelings of favoritism regarding the

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selection of one home over another.[37] Because the tenants had little or no resources, the landowner was supposed to pay for the necessary materials in exchange for free labor from people in the community who carried out the various farm and home improvement lessons.

Black extension agents often encountered plantation owners who resisted participating in programs that might alter their present arrangement with tenants. They feared that rural extension work would "disturb the established plantation relationships." Campbell and others discovered that "most plantation owners were pretty well satisfied with the existent tenant system and therefore were not so enthusiastic in encouraging Negroes to try new methods of farming."[38] Yet black agents had to find ways to work with the white planters, who expected them to exhibit proper deference, in order to help black tenant farmers and to keep their own jobs.

Black agents did manage to obtain approval from some white landowners for black extension work once they convinced them that the educational programs and improvements would help to secure a stable labor force and "make the tenants more contented and appreciative of their surroundings." Sometimes white planters even appeared at sessions to offer "words of encouragement."[39] In 1922 C. A. Patillo, a white plantation owner with a large number of black tenants, urged his renters to attend the Movable School and agreed to pay for the cost of materials. He wrote to the white county agent that he thought the project would help tenants to "realize that they can make a great deal more net profit by improving their methods."[40] Clearly, it was easier for him to blame the poverty of tenant farmers on their "methods" rather than the labor system from which he benefited.

Convincing Clients to Come

One of the ways that agents convinced local people to participate in the Movable School, in addition to whatever pressure plantation owners brought to bear, was through contacting local black community leaders, especially preachers and schoolteachers.[41] Preachers were particularly important contacts because the church was generally the center of social activity for rural black communities. Preachers, many of whom performed agricultural labor themselves, could influence a community's response to the Movable School because of their respected social position. Uncooperative ministers could sabotage a program if they believed it interfered with their own work. Campbell remembered one time when a preacher told his congregation that the Tuskegee farm wagon was outside but that they

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"can't afford to engage in worldly affairs while we are busy engaged in saving souls, and I advise you not to take up any time with the wagon." With the preacher's closing warning about "silver tongued speakers," most of the people passed by the school.[42]

Other preachers lent their support to the educational program and led people in prayer during Movable School sessions. The extension agents tried to begin each session with "verses of scripture." One preacher offered his endorsement of the work of the school when he led those present in a prayer. According to Campbell's account, written to convey a southern black dialect, the preacher said: "O Lord, have mercy on this Removable School, may it pumernate [permeate] dis whole lan an country."[43]

No doubt some people rejected the idea of spending their spare time performing manual labor; however, for many the desire for education was so strong that they were drawn to the extension service programs. Agents documented numerous expressions of interest in the educational work of the Movable School. In Campbell's 1915 report he stated that a man spoke up one day after a Movable School demonstration and declared: "I aint no speaker but I jes wan'a tell you how much I has been steamilated [stimulated], this has been my two days in school."[44] In 1922 when agents held a demonstration on a large plantation they discovered that instead of teaching only one community, they had been teaching tenant farmers who had come from two areas where the school had just been. Many of the people had traveled ten to fifteen miles by foot and mule to attend the extra classes. A few years later Movable School nurse Eunice Rivers reported that she had met people who had already attended the school's classes but were coming again because "they were very anxious to hear the same lectures they had heard before."[45] The desire for entertainment as well as education may have motivated their return.

The rural black poor approached the arrival of extension agents in their communities with cautious interest. On the one hand, they were genuinely interested in education and improving their lot. On the other hand, they had reasons to be suspicious of outsiders, even those from the famous Tuskegee Institute. Based on previous experiences with local government and its history of upholding white supremacy, they were reluctant to participate in programs for fear of being exploited. They were also distrustful of the state and its representatives, given their mistreatment at the hands of landlords, courts, railroads, and law enforcement agents.[46]

Tenant farmers, and perhaps even the few black landowners, were wary of participating in programs that seemed to offer something for nothing,

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even when promoted by other black people. Campbell reported that some people doubted the truthfulness of agents' claims that the program was free, having been swindled too often by traveling salesmen.[47] Rural people were wary of outside interference, including that from government-sanctioned programs. "They would rather drink the worst kind of water than report to the state," observed home demonstration agent Laura Daly.[48] Once when Campbell was in Wilcox County talking to people to drum up support for a Movable School session, he raised the subject of the boll weevil. According to Campbell, a man in the audience rose and announced:

> Fesser, we sho enjoyed yo talk, but we naturally don't believe dere is any sich thing as a boll wesell. We bleve de store keepers and de fertilize fokes done paid you all to come out here and tell us bout dese bugs so as to make us work harder and buy more stuff fum dem.[49]

The rural poor may have had limited "book learning" but experience taught them to be on the lookout for exploitation.

Extension agents discovered that some of the rural people feared that agents were spying on them for white landowners. Possibly the greatest concern of tenant farmers and sharecroppers was to avoid injustice at the hands of white landlords. Many white plantation owners continued to treat the black people who worked for them as their own private property. Peonage, which was pervasive throughout the southern cotton belt in the early twentieth century, meant that some black farmworkers lived in what can only be called involuntary servitude. Landlords created peonage by using indebtedness to forbid sharecroppers to leave plantations, and they enforced it with the threat and reality of violence.[50]

Some farmworkers insisted that they would sign no formal agreements that might lock them into an oppressive relationship. Campbell remembered that after he had finished speaking at one meeting, a man from the audience stated:

> We is mighty glad to hab Dr. Washington to send you out to help us, but we don't see how he kin afford to give us free seed to plant our fields and pay you to come out here and see us once a month; so we thanks you fur your talk, but we can't sign no contract.[51]

The rural black poor had a realistic understanding of their situation and were not about to compound it by incurring additional expenses or obligations.

Black extension agents were very aware that they faced polite suspicion, if not always direct opposition, from rural black people wary of special

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schemes that promised much but frequently disappointed. One southern agricultural and mechanical school president warned those interested in black uplift work that "the underprivileged group for whom the program is planned must believe in it. Their suspicions of being exploited must be early allayed."[52] Black professionals knew that to reach black tenant farmers as well as the few landowners, they had to earn their trust.

The Limitations of Black Extension Service Work

Unable to alter the economic system in which rural black people lived, black professionals provided educational programs that offered advice on how to cope with the oppressive nature of the southern agricultural system. Yet, for black people who did not own their land or house, some of the instructions provided by the Movable School agents were impractical.[53] For many tenant farmers, perhaps most, there seemed little reason to fix up their homes because they had to move every year. Contemporary black sociologist Charles Johnson argued that changing residence, often within the same county, was tenant families' "one outstanding means of asserting freedom." Furthermore, some tenants found that landlords increased the rent after the tenants improved their place.[54]

The reports submitted by black extension agents with the Movable School indicated that they were aware of the limitations of their work. Born into tenant farm families themselves, they were not surprised by the living conditions they encountered; they presented shocking details of rural poverty to government officials in order to garner support. Campbell acknowledged that there was no use in painting a rosy picture of southern living to the rural black Southerner "who is constantly in debt, hungry, sick and cold, and without civil protection."[55] In 1922 George F. King observed that black reformers had to keep in mind the actual conditions of the people they wanted to assist:

> Many of the dilapidated shanties in which the Negroes live on plantations haven't windows . . . a mere space cut or made in the side of the house with shutters. . . . It is rather humorous to ask these poor people to sleep with their windows up without helping them to first make it possible to screen these openings. . . . We talk to the fellow out in the country who is up against conditions hard to describe at times about dieting or food values. Mighty good things to talk about, but thousands of these fellows are working under a system which keeps them from even raising a few collards — their gardens and pantries are the store of the owner of the plantation.[56]

It was difficult for black extension agents to alter systemic poverty through educational programs.

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Furthermore, rural African Americans encountered alternative strategies for black advancement, including Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), an international organization with millions of members in the early 1920s. This social movement, labeled a back-to-Africa movement, sought racial advancement through black separatism and an emphasis on black pride. Membership dues provided sickness and death benefits, and women created the Black Cross Nurses, a female auxiliary of the UNIA.[57] Often thought of as a northern, urban mass movement, the UNIA reached deep into the rural South.

Some white Southerners and government agricultural leaders feared that the black agricultural labor force would be attracted to the Garvey movement and leave the South for Africa. In 1923 the U.S. Department of Agriculture learned from a black extension agent's report that four farmers' clubs in his county in Alabama had folded and that

> this movement brought a great setback to these communities, as many of the farmers did nothing but walk around and talk about going to Africa and made no effort to progress as farmers. Not one of these farmers ever left, but they lost the year talking about it.[58]

For some African Americans the UNIA offered more attractive possibilities than the programs provided by extension service agents.

Black leaders, such as Campbell and Work, warned that poor health conditions, inadequate educational opportunities, and overall mistreatment were the primary causes of black migration and that until these improved, it would be difficult to slow the loss of black agricultural workers.[59] There was no mass exodus to Africa, but many black Southerners left the countryside.

Black extension agents had to negotiate a fine line between conforming to southern racial customs and advancing black rights. Despite his own belief that black people were entitled to programs, Campbell used white fear of black migration to argue for money to hire more black extension agents, suggesting that they were useful to stem black migration. In his public pronouncements, Campbell argued that black extension work benefited southern agriculture by making agricultural labor more profitable, productive, and pleasurable. He insisted that extension work improved race relations between black and white people "and above all, it is doing untold good towards gaining for the South an intelligent, peaceful and contented farm laborer."[60]

Even in statements that criticized poor living standards, black extension agents tried to illustrate the national significance of alleviating the

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distant poverty of the black sharecropper. For example, Campbell wrote that the shacks of rural black people "conveyed a generally bad impression of shiftlessness and backwardness." Yet he urged white America to take note of the living conditions of the black rural poor because "the squalor, filth, disease and dilapidation of their surroundings reflect not only upon them, but upon the whole South; and this condition constitutes not only a Negro problem, nor a Southern problem, but a national one."[61]

In 1921 the Extension Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture made a film entitled *Helping Negroes to Become Better Farmers and Homemakers* to encourage rural African Americans to stay on the farm. Campbell, the Movable School, and Tuskegee Institute all appeared in this thirty-minute silent film made by the federal government in Macon County. The film told a fictional story of Rube and Hannah Collins, black tenant farmers who learned that they could prosper in the South with the help of the Extension Service. When Rube detected a boll weevil in the cotton, he properly notified his landlord, who called in the white extension agent to get rid of it. The film also depicted the arrival of the Movable School and people arriving from miles around to attend sessions, including one by a home demonstration agent who taught Hannah the proper way to set a table and one from a public health nurse on home nursing.

Black agents showed this government film regularly at sessions of the Movable School around the state. An agent used a film projector in the Movable School truck and directed it at a sheet pinned up on a cabin's outside wall. The rural people apparently enjoyed watching the film for the novelty of it and because they recognized Campbell and Tuskegee Institute.[62]

This film encapsulates some of the constraints on black extension work, which could do little to alter the oppressive conditions under which black tenants lived, including a rigid racial hierarchy. The film concludes with a scene that was supposed to convey the image of "happy darkies," as black people ate watermelon, danced, and sang to the strains of "Swanee River" on the phonograph. Black extension agents knew this was a white fantasy, not black reality, yet they were forced to work within a system that insisted on these myths or they risked being fired.[63]

Ironically, there was a tension in the work of extension service agents between a desire to introduce rural African Americans to the benefits of modern living and the agents' knowledge that the kind of transformation they sought was unrealistic given the persistent poverty of black Southerners. Despite their understanding of the larger economic picture, black extension agents preached unrealistic messages that suggested that wanting

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a better life would make it so. Home demonstration agent Daly explained the goal:

> The demonstration agents try to inspire the rural people "to want," to want more convenient, livable homes, more beautiful surroundings, to want health, education and to want, to a more appreciable degree, to enjoy the civilization in which they live.[64]

Ironically, such messages of modernization and consumer culture were also assertions of black entitlement and may have inspired some rural African Americans to leave in search of a better life.

The Movable School and Health Promotion: The Public Health Nurse

Although extension agents, especially home demonstration agents, addressed health issues informally as part of their other duties, the addition of a public health nurse in 1920 marked the beginning of formal health work for the Movable School. Health concerns were integral to rural development work. Campbell hired Uva M. Hester, a Tuskegee graduate, to help members of the Movable School guard against disease, look after the health of the people who attended Movable School sessions, and inspect the sanitation of homes and farms. By 1923, after some lobbying, Tuskegee Institute began to receive $100 per month from the Alabama Department of Health to assist with the salary of a nurse for the Movable School. In the early 1920s federal matching grants from the Sheppard-Towner Act doubled the number of people who had access to nursing care in Alabama.[65]

Campbell recalled that he decided to hire a nurse because, as the school traveled from county to county, evidence mounted of pervasive ill-health among black people. Campbell wrote in his 1936 autobiography and history of the Movable School:

> The truth of the matter is, we seriously considered abandoning the practice of going into the homes because of the constant danger and exposure of our workers to diseases and unsanitary conditions which we found in these homes. Being, however, so thoroughly conversant with this standard of living and so recently emerged from a similar atmosphere, I felt confident that these people were susceptible to the practical teaching we were taking to them. Instead of quitting the homes and returning to the public meeting places to conduct the schools, I sought the appointment of a registered nurse as a member of the Movable School force.[66]

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Thus nursing came to the traveling school as protection for the extension workers, with the added benefit that they could visit rural clients.

Not everyone supported the inclusion of a nurse in the Movable School. Campbell reported that some physicians and nurses initially objected to the idea of a nurse traveling with the school and "predicted many difficulties and dangers that failed to develop."[67] They may have been concerned about the responses of local, mostly white, physicians who would have resisted encroachment on their private practice. To address this issue, Campbell suggested that the Alabama Department of Health explain to physicians the nature of the nurse's work with the school. He argued that

> if this nurse goes out and begins to give advice and the local doctor finds out and does not understand what it's all about he's going to raise a complaint. But if the State Health Department understands and passes the word to county units that this nurse is working for the State everything works fine.[68]

Like most public health nurses, Hester did not provide medical treatment but rather focused on health education, along with advice and care for the sick. She worked primarily with midwives and mothers, those in charge of family health care. She was supposed to instruct women in how to care for their children and sick family members, teach midwives how to ensure safe deliveries, and discourage the practice of folk medicine, such as using herbs and roots to treat illnesses.[69] Hester also distributed state health department literature, gave talks to parents about the care of children, and lectured schoolteachers on how to handle playground accidents.

Hester found the health conditions of rural families simply unbearable because of the unsanitary state of many homes. In her reports she indicated how appalled she was by the flies, the dirt, and the small rooms in the cabins she visited.[70] Her first week's report chronicled the inadequate health services available in rural Alabama:

> Tuesday: I visited a young woman who had been bedridden with tuberculosis for more than a year. There are two openings on her chest and one in the side from which pus constantly streams. In addition, there is a bedsore on the lower part of the back as large as one's hand. There were no sheets on her bed. . . . The sores had only a patch of cloth plastered over them. No effort was made to protect the patient from the flies that swarmed around her.[71]

These same themes of unhealthy conditions and inadequate bedside care recur frequently in Hester's reports from her travels throughout the county.

As a public health nurse, Hester was in an excellent position to assess

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the health needs of rural African Americans, but she could do little to provide medical treatment. Instead, she provided health education and comfort where she could. While traveling in Pickett Springs, for example, Hester saw a young girl with intestinal hemorrhages who needed medical attention. The house was dirty and there were no screens on the windows to stop the flies from coming in from the cow pen in the backyard. Hester reported:

> With my limited time there was little I could do to make her comfortable, however, I made a few suggestions as to diet, made her bed and tried to impress the importance of keeping out flies.[72]

In Capitol Heights, Hester discovered a seventeen-year-old girl who had undergone an operation in a hospital for abscesses on the chest and side. Hester explained:

> I found her lying in a bed of wheat straw, too filthy for description, with a profuse discharge of pus from these undressed wounds. The flies were over her in such numbers that I could hardly see her face, and she with a branch from a tree was making a feeble attempt to keep them off. There was an old cot on the little porch, so I suggested that we make it as comfortable as possible and put her on it. We did. I gave her a bath and while doing so I found she had a pressure sore on the sacral region of her back, the size of my hand, with backbone protruding. I dressed the wound with material from my first aid bag.[73]

The girl thanked Hester with tears in her eyes and told the nurse that, if she could, she would ask her grandmother to give Hester a pig for all her help.

Mary E. Williams from Virginia served as the next Movable School Nurse in early 1922 until she became head of the new Tuskegee Institute Health Center that September.[74] Williams inspected the sanitation of churches and schools and gave health lectures to children, including tooth-brushing drills. She taught women home nursing techniques, including how to prevent bed sores, provide bed baths, make mustard plasters and poultices, provide proper ventilation, and eliminate the dangers of flies and mosquitoes. In April 1922 Williams reported that "most of the homes visited are very humble and the people very appreciative."[75]

Then in January 1923, Campbell hired nurse Eunice Rivers to work with the Movable School. Rivers (1899–1986), like most who worked with the school, had attended Tuskegee Institute and graduated from the nursing school in 1922. Born in rural Georgia, she was the oldest of three

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daughters of a farming family. Rivers became a nurse because of parental encouragement. She remembered that, before her mother died when Rivers was only fifteen, her mother had told her to "get a good education, so that I wouldn't have to work in the fields so hard." Her father also promoted education for his daughters, working long hours in a sawmill to help finance it. Rivers eventually followed her father's advice to study nursing despite protesting, "but Papa, I don't want to be no nurse, I don't want folks dying on me."[76] Rivers secured the position with the Movable School after caring for Monroe Work's sick wife Florence.[77] Like Hester and Williams before her, Eunice Rivers traveled in the Movable School truck with the home demonstration agent and the farm agent.

Gender prescriptions influenced the shape of Rivers's public health work as she traveled from county to county. She directed most of her health education messages, including discussion of sanitation, ventilation, and cleanliness, to rural women. Rivers informed women about specific diseases, such as malaria and typhoid fever, and taught them how to make bandages from old clothes, care for bedridden patients, and take a temperature. Women often asked questions at these health meetings and seemed eager for information. In addition, Rivers gave dental hygiene lectures to children on how to brush their teeth, and she handed out tubes of Colgate toothpaste donated by the company. Her public health work with men focused on "social hygiene," which usually meant information about the dangers of venereal disease.[78]

Rural women incorporated the free services of the public health nurse into their existing informal health care system of midwives and home remedies. They increasingly turned to nurses for advice, even as nurses tried to convince people to use physicians more often. Black people were hesitant to call on rural doctors, most of whom were white, because the doctors often did not treat them with respect and because many required payment in cash.

Even when African-American health institutions and workers were available, at least some rural people were hesitant to use them. Home demonstration agent Laura Daly detected a fear of doctors and hospitals among rural women attending the 1930 commencement exercises at Tuskegee Institute. When asked to leave their babies with nurses in the hospital, "some expressed fear less the doctors use their babies for experiments or something like that, [while] others were made afraid by the idea of a hospital."[79]

In 1926 Rivers redirected some of the focus of her public health work toward reproductive health. The state transferred her from the Alabama Bureau of Child Welfare, in which she performed her Movable School

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work, to the Bureau of Vital Statistics. Her new mandate was to assist the state in creating a system of registration for births and deaths, as well as aid efforts to regulate lay midwifery and lower infant mortality rates. She continued to travel throughout Alabama with the Movable School, but she focused her attention on pregnant women and midwives.[80]

Rivers was well-liked, and the people apparently appreciated her visits. She reached many people through her Movable School position and worked in over twenty counties in her first year alone. She visited hundreds of people every month; during one particularly busy month she tended to 1,100 people. J. D. Barnes, a white extension agent in Greene County, reported to Tuskegee Institute in 1928 that rural women remembered Rivers's visits and the way she made people feel good in her company. He wrote, "one woman asked me when I was going to have that sweet little woman come back to the county again."[81] Despite contracting malaria one month while on her rounds, she maintained a steady pace of presenting public health programs and attending national conferences of public health nurses, extension service agents, and teachers.[82]

Rivers, who grew up with a class background similar to that of the people she treated, attributed her successful relationships with rural people to her attitude toward them. "As far as I was concerned," she explained, "every individual was an individual of his own. He didn't come in a lump sum." She remembered that sometimes people would ask her how she ever received entry into certain homes where visitors were not welcomed. Rivers would reply:

> Well, darling, I don't know. I was brought in there. They're people as far as I'm concerned. I don't go there dogging them about keeping the house clean. I go there and visit a while until I know when to make some suggestions. When I go to the house I accept the house as I find it. I bide my time.[83]

Her approach, she concluded, was nothing more than mutual respect between herself and those she assisted. The degree of trust and the close relationships that she developed with rural African Americans through her work with the Movable School proved to be a tremendous asset in her work for the USPHS.

Bad Blood in Alabama: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment

In 1932 Rivers, along with leaders of Tuskegee Institute, became involved with a study by the USPHS that appears to contradict her efforts to im-

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prove black health through the Tuskegee Movable School. Rivers's need for employment, as well as her interest in black health conditions, influenced her decision to accept employment with the USPHS. During the early 1930s, financial cutbacks caused by the onset of the Depression ended her job with the Movable School. Facing unemployment, she accepted a job as night supervisor at the John A. Andrew Memorial Hospital at Tuskegee Institute and worked there eight months until she learned of the position with the federal government. Campbell and Dr. Eugene Dibble recommended her for the job. When asked in later years why she went to work with the Syphilis Study she replied: "I was just interested. I mean I wanted to get into everything that I possibly could."[84] An equally compelling reason, no doubt, was her statement: "I was so glad to go off night duty that I would have done anything."[85] Thereafter, Rivers worked part-time for the USPHS and part-time in maternal and child health for Tuskegee's hospital and then later for the county health department.

Although historians have noted the key role that Rivers played in the experiment, they have presented her as a victim by virtue of her status as a woman, an African American, and a nurse. Groundbreaking work by James Jones, for example, interpreted much of Rivers's participation as driven by obedience to higher authority. A more satisfactory consideration of her role as an historical subject is in order; yet, examination of Rivers's role does not necessarily lead to an interpretation of her as an evil nurse. What does it mean, then, to talk about the historical agency of black women within racist and sexist social structures? Indeed, Rivers was neither a victim nor a villain but a complex figure who can only be understood within her historical context. She acted in ways she determined to be in her best interests and in the interests of promoting black health. Consistent with the responses of at least some black health professionals and educators at the time, Rivers did not question the experiment because she did not find it objectionable.

Venereal Disease Control and Black Communities

In the early twentieth century, private foundations and the federal government focused attention on controlling venereal disease. The USPHS first addressed the topic of venereal disease during World War I when the government became concerned about the results of tests of military recruits that showed that many men, black and white, were infected with syphilis. The USPHS formed the Division of Venereal Disease to promote health education in black and white communities.[86] In the late 1920s the Julius Rosenwald Fund, with its strong interest in health care for African Americans,

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assisted the USPHS in venereal disease control work. The foundation provided financial support to develop a demonstration control program for African Americans in the South. This project to detect and treat syphilis began in 1928 in Bolivar County, Mississippi, among thousands of black tenant farmers and sharecroppers, and it appeared to show that nearly 20 percent of the men and women had syphilis. The Rosenwald Fund next expanded the program from Mississippi to counties in other southern states, including Macon County in Alabama.[87] In 1932, when the Depression led the Rosenwald Fund to discontinue its financial support, leaders of the USPHS launched the Tuskegee Syphilis Study in Alabama. Initially, the study was to continue for about six to twelve months.

White assumptions about the health and sexuality of African Americans influenced the way medical authorities interpreted statistical data on venereal disease. Some black leaders criticized the high syphilitic rate always cited for African Americans as well as the expectation that syphilis was endemic to black populations because of sexual promiscuity. For example, Dr. Louis T. Wright, a leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), wrote that even if there were high rates "this is not due to lack of morals, but more directly to lack of money, since with adequate funds these diseases can be controlled easily."[88]

Confident that racial differences affected health and disease, white physicians of the USPHS expected the Tuskegee study to provide a useful racial comparison to an Oslo study that traced untreated syphilis in Norway. However, the Oslo study was a *retrospective* study examining previous case records of white people whose syphilis went untreated, unlike the Tuskegee study, which was designed to deliberately withhold available treatment from black people. Dr. Raymond Vonderlehr, an official at the USPHS, even proposed that they expand their investigation, suggesting that "similar studies of untreated syphilis in other racial groups might also be arranged." He proposed that they conduct a study of Native Americans with untreated syphilis.[89]

Black Professionals Strike a Bargain

Black leaders at Tuskegee Institute endorsed the government study, to the relief of the federal officials, in the belief that it would help the school in its work for African Americans. The government doctors selected Macon County because they had identified it as having the highest rate of syphilis of all the Rosenwald study groups, with a rate of about 35 percent, and because they rightly concluded that Tuskegee Institute could provide valuable

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assistance. Dibble, the medical director of Tuskegee's hospital, supported the experiment on the grounds that it might demonstrate that costly treatment was unnecessary for people who had latent or third-stage syphilis, echoing the justifications provided by the USPHS. More importantly, Dibble urged Moton to support the study because Tuskegee Institute "would get credit for this piece of research work," and the study would "add greatly to the educational advantages offered our interns and nurses as well as the added standing it will give the hospital." Moton agreed to allow the school's employees to examine the men in the study at Tuskegee's Andrew Hospital. Apparently, he believed that federal attention to the poor health conditions in the county would help the school get more funding for programs.[90]

Like the advantages of government aid to the Movable School, black educators and doctors at Tuskegee envisioned future financial benefits from cooperating with the federal government in the study. Such a belief grew out of Tuskegee's long history of lobbying the federal government for funding and assistance. Since the days of Booker T. Washington, black leaders at Tuskegee had witnessed evidence of at least limited government cooperation. For example, Washington and, later, Moton garnered government support for the Movable School and the National Negro Health Movement and succeeded in getting a black veterans' hospital located at Tuskegee, despite the absence of a black medical school.[91]

The experiment, officially known as "the Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male," was not a government secret, kept hidden from health professionals. It lasted for forty years and was publicized widely in the black and white medical community without evoking any protest. In the mid-1930s Dr. Roscoe C. Brown, as head of the Office of Negro Health Work at the USPHS, convinced the National Medical Association (NMA) to display an exhibit on the study provided by the government. Brown argued that it "would be an excellent opportunity for the use of this timely exhibit on one of our major health problems."[92] Members of the black medical establishment knew the subjects of the experiment were poor black men, but they did not see this as problematic. Not until 1973, after a journalist broke the story to the general public, did the black medical establishment denounce the study as morally, ethically, and scientifically unjustified. By then, a civil rights movement and a popular health movement critical of medicine resulted in an atmosphere of changed consciousness about rights and responsibilities.[93]

Why did black professionals, including Rivers, not challenge the study? Dr. Paul B. Cornely of Howard University, a black public health

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leader since the 1930s, remembered with regret that he knew about the experiment from the beginning. He understood the nature of the study and had followed it all along, never questioning it. He explained in retrospect: "I was there and I didn't say a word. I saw it as an academician. It shows you how we looked at human beings, especially blacks who were expendable." Cornely taught about the study in his classes at Howard University Medical School, a black college in Washington, D.C., yet no student ever raised a challenge to what he now sees as its racist premise. Cornely asked himself why he did not see the full ramifications of the project. "I have guilt feelings about it, as I view it now," he explained, "because I considered myself to be an activist. I used to get hot and bothered about injustice and inequity, yet here right under my nose something is happening and I'm blind."[94]

No doubt a number of factors contributed to the response of black professionals, including class consciousness and professional status within black America, and racial subordination in relation to white America. Historian Tom W. Shick argued that the black medical profession did not challenge the experiment because "black physicians were clearly subordinates, never co-equals, within the medical profession." Furthermore, he believed that the process of professionalization in medicine led them to defend the status quo. James Jones stated that class consciousness permitted black professionals to deny the racism of the experiment.[95]

Although subordinate status no doubt constrained the response of black professionals, they did not protest the syphilis study because they did not view it as unjust. Indeed, black educators and health professionals supported the study because they saw it directing federal attention toward black health problems — a primary goal of the black public health movement. As far as they were concerned, this was a study that focused the objective gaze of science on the health conditions of African Americans. It was one more way to increase the visibility of black needs to the federal government. Rivers shared the viewpoint of black health professionals and assisted with the experiment in the belief that the study was itself a sign of government interest in black health problems.

Black Tenant Farmers in Search of Health Care

Why, despite a history of well-founded suspicion of government, did black tenant farmers take part in the government study? The answer lies in the impact of the work performed in Macon County by Tuskegee Institute, the Movable School, and Rivers. The experiment began in October 1932 as Rivers assisted the USPHS in recruiting and testing rural black people in

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the county for syphilis so physicians could identify candidates for the study. Rivers was familiar with this work because she had assisted with the earlier syphilis treatment project sponsored by the Rosenwald Fund. Most likely her presence contributed to local interest in the clinics; Rivers and the government physicians were overwhelmed by the number of people who showed up at the sites to have their blood tested and receive treatments.[96] One man was even unhappy about his diagnosis: "They said my blood was good. You don't get no treatment if your blood is good, but sometimes I wish it was bad 'cause they gives away a salve up there and I wanted some of it so bad."[97]

Equal numbers of women and men appeared at the clinic sites, which proved to be a problem because the government doctors had decided to study only men. Dr. Joseph Earle Moore of Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine suggested the study focus on men because, he argued, women's symptoms of syphilis at the early stage were usually mild, and it was more difficult for physicians to examine internal organs.[98] Yet, as much as the doctors and Rivers tried to test only men, women showed up at the clinics too. Attempts to segregate the men led to new problems. According to Dr. Vonderlehr, "In trying to get a larger number of men in the primary surveys during December we were accused in one community of examining prospective recruits for the Army."[99] Rivers reported that some of the women, especially the wives of the men selected for the study, were mad that they were not included because "they were sick too." Some even told her, "Nurse Rivers, you just partial to the men."[100]

Jones cited Charles Johnson's 1934 investigation of African Americans in Macon County as evidence that poor African Americans participated in the study because of their tradition of dependence and obedience to authority.[101] Yet, Jones's own work suggests that poor African Americans in fact questioned authority, including that of white physicians. For example, Jones described one man who criticized the way a government doctor drew blood samples and recounted how "he lay our arm down like he guttin' a hog." The man reported: "I told him he hurt me. . . . He told me 'I'm the doctor.' I told him all right but this my arm."[102] Rivers remembered that sometimes the young white doctors would behave rudely toward the men and the men would ask her to intervene. A man told her once: "Mrs. Rivers, go in there and tell that white man to stop talking to us like that." So she went in and said: "Now, we don't talk to our patients like this. . . . They're human. You don't talk to them like that." The doctor even apologized.[103]

Rural African Americans cooperated not out of deference to white

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doctors but because they wanted medical attention and treatment for their ailments, and they had come to trust Rivers as someone who helped them. Even though the government doctors in the study changed over the years, Rivers provided the continuity. Without her assistance it is doubtful that the experiment would have been able to continue for so long with such cooperation from the subjects of the experiment. In addition, participating in the study gave these tenant farmers increased status as they gained an official association with both the prestigious Tuskegee Institute and the federal government, relationships typically unavailable to men of their class.

The men stayed with the study for forty years because they believed they received something worthwhile. Rivers found that the men who joined the study "had all kinds of complaints" about what ailed them, and they continued with the study in order to get free treatments. However, the men joined under false pretenses because the health workers never informed the men that they had syphilis or that they would not receive treatment. Instead, the men were told they would be treated for "bad blood," a vague term that referred to a range of ailments, including general malaise. The men were not told that they could spread the disease to their sexual partners or that they were part of an experiment predicated on nontreatment of syphilis until death. What the USPHS provided was annual physical examinations, aspirin, free hot meals on the day the government physicians visited, and financial support for burial expenses. In a rural community where there was almost no formal health care available, and if poor black people could locate it they could not afford it, these limited benefits were desirable and convinced the men to continue in the study.[104]

Nurse Eunice Rivers and Government Public Health Work

As for Eunice Rivers, what motivated her to work for the experiment for so many years? Historians have argued that Rivers participated because (1) she could not have understood the full ramifications of the study, and (2) as a black female nurse she was in no position to challenge the authority of white male physicians.[105] Evidence suggests, however, that Rivers had sufficient knowledge of the study to know that the men were systematically denied treatment. In fact, Rivers was one of the authors, listed first, of a follow-up paper about the study published in 1953 in *Public Health Reports*. Rivers had published on public health work before, in a 1926 report on her work with the Movable School in *Public Health Nurse*.[106]

However, even if Rivers herself did not write the report, which read like a tribute to her role in the study, her actions made clear that she was

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well aware of the terms of the experiment. After all, she was one of the people who helped to implement the policy, designed by the leaders of the USPHS, to prohibit the subjects of the study from receiving treatments for syphilis from anyone else. This meant denying the treatment available during the 1930s and the penicillin available after World War II. At the same time that Rivers assisted with the treatment of syphilis in other public health programs, she helped carry out the experiment's plan to bar the men in the government study from treatment.[107]

Finally, based upon how Rivers operated as a nurse, suggestions that she merely deferred to authority are not convincing. She no doubt knew how to tailor her comments and behavior to a given situation to preserve her position and dignity. However, despite the racial, gender, and medical hierarchies under which she operated, she saw herself as an advocate for her patients and acted accordingly. She did not hesitate to intervene on their behalf, even consulting one doctor when she questioned the procedures of another.

If ignorance and deference do not explain her behavior, what does? Her need for employment and the prestige of working for the federal government certainly contributed to her participation. She was proud of her work, and the federal government honored her for assistance in the experiment. For example, in 1958 she received an award from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare "for an outstanding contribution to health, through her participation in the long-term study of venereal disease control in Macon County, Alabama."[108]

Most importantly, Rivers considered her participation in the study merely a continuation of her previous public health work. Public health work was gendered to the extent that women, especially in their capacity as nurses, implemented health policy and had the most contact with people in the community. In Rivers's case, since the early 1920s her job had been to provide health education directly to people in the communities surrounding Tuskegee. Her duty as a nurse was to care for her clients, and she did. In her work with the experiment, she developed close relationships with the men. One of the government physicians even told her that she was too sympathetic with the men. As Rivers explained: "I was concerned about the patients 'cause I had to live here after he was gone." Indeed, she knew each man individually and, after he died, she attended the funeral service with the man's family. "I was expected to be there," she recalled, "they were part of my family."[109] In nominating Rivers for an award in 1972, Thelma P. Walker revealed that Rivers "has been my inspiration for entering public health. She made her own work so attractive because of her enthusiasm. . . .

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She inspired such confidence in her patients and they all seem so endeared to her." Walker discovered "how deeply loved she was by the men in her follow-up program. They felt that there just was no one like Mrs. Rivers."[110]

When the press exposed the study in 1972, it was confusing and heartbreaking for Rivers to hear the criticism after having received so much praise. Rivers responded by defending her actions. "A lot of things that have been written have been unfair," she insisted. "A lot of things."

First, Rivers argued that the effects of the experiment were benign. In her mind it was important that the study did not include people who had early syphilis because those with latent syphilis were potentially less infectious and would be less likely to transmit it to their sexual partners. As she explained, "syphilis had done its damage with most of the people."[111] Yet, as historian Allan Brandt noted, "every major textbook of syphilis at the time of the Tuskegee Study's inception strongly advocated treating syphilis even in its latent stages."[112]

Second, Rivers accounted for her participation by stating that the study had scientific merit. Even as she admitted, "I got with this syphilitic program that was sort of a hoodwink thing, I suppose," she offered justification. With great exaggeration, she depicted Macon County as "overrun with syphilis and gonorrhea. In fact, the rate of syphilis in the Negro was very, very high, something like eighty percent or something like this."[113] She recalled that the government doctors planned to compare the results of the study with one in Norway on white people and that "the doctors themselves have said that the study has proven that syphilis did not affect the Negro as it did the white man."[114]

Finally, based on the available health care resources, Rivers believed that the benefits of the study to the men outweighed the risks. Rivers knew the men received no treatment for syphilis, but she explained:

> Honestly, those people got all kinds of examinations and medical care that they never would have gotten. I've taken them over to the hospital and they'd have a GI series on them, the heart, the lung, just everything. It was just impossible for just an ordinary person to get that kind of examination.[115]

She continually asserted that the men received good medical care despite the fact that the men received mostly diagnostic, not curative, services. Yet she maintained

> they'd get all kinds of extra things, cardiograms and . . . some of the things that I had never heard of. This is the thing that really hurt me about the unfair publicity. Those people had been given better care than some of us who could afford it.[116]

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What bothered Rivers was not the plight of the men in the study but that of the women and men who came to her begging to be included, even leading her occasionally to sneak in some additional men. As for the men in the experiment, Rivers concluded that they received more, not less, than those around them: "They didn't get treatment for syphilis, but they got so much else."[117]

Conclusion

Racism, extreme poverty, and health care deprivation in rural Alabama, where so little medical attention could mean so much, contributed to a situation in which white doctors from the federal government could carry out such an experiment on African Americans with the assistance of black professionals. Rivers as well as health workers and educators from Tuskegee Institute, Howard University, and the NMA never challenged the study because they believed that it was an acceptable way to gather knowledge. It seems that Rivers and other black professionals shared the dominant vision of scientific research and medical practice and did not consider issues of informed consent. Perhaps professionalization and class consciousness blinded them to the high price paid by the poor, rural black men in the study.[118]

Furthermore, the gendered nature of public health work meant that the nurse, invariably a woman, was at the center of public provisions, both the good and the bad. Thus, the role of Eunice Rivers in the experiment has drawn particular attention. After public censure forced the halt of the experiment, Rivers declared her innocence in the face of criticism, not on the grounds that she was a victim who was uniformed about the true nature of the experiment but rather because she insisted that she had acted on her convictions. She emphasized:

> I don't have any regrets. You can't regret doing what you did when you knew you were doing right. I know from my personal feelings how I felt. I feel I did good in working with the people. I know I didn't mislead anyone.[119]

Rivers remained convinced that she had acted in the best interests of poor black people.

As the actions of Eunice Rivers show most starkly, the constraints on black health reform led black professionals to strike a risky bargain with the federal government in an attempt to advance black rights. Government in-

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volvement generally proved to be advantageous to black middle-class professionals, but not always to the poor. Class status affected the price paid by African Americans when the government proved to be an untrustworthy ally. In the Tuskegee Movable School, where Tuskegee Institute ran the program despite a degree of federal funding, the benefits outweighed the costs to the poor. However, in the Tuskegee Syphilis Study where the USPHS controlled the agenda, there were deadly consequences for the poor.

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