

## **Booker T. Washington, William Pittman and the Drexel Institute**

By: Kevin Martin, Drexel University Archivist

In 1895, Drexel's first president James MacAlister attended the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta. The exposition was one of many such events in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century held to promote American technology and innovation

That MacAlister even attended the exposition in Atlanta might have been lost if not for a set of three letters in his collection of papers kept in the Drexel University Archives. MacAlister's attendance at a thoroughly modern event is not surprising considering his prominent role as administrator of Drexel, a cutting edge and thoroughly modern institution for its time. But it was the recipient of those three letters that provide us with a connection that links MacAlister to the prominent event in Atlanta and a prominent individual in American history.

Among the brittle pages of correspondence remaining from the early days of the first Drexel president are three letters addressed to none other than Booker T. Washington, the head of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and one of the most widely respected African Americans of his day. Washington stood as a spokesperson for many of his race in an era that witnessed egregious examples of racism carried out across the nation. The letters provide evidence of a bridge between two men whose roles as educators overrode any division that might have been caused by their race.

In examining the letters in the Drexel archives, there are limitations that must be filled by conjecture. The letters include no correspondence from Washington, so the conversation is one sided. The MacAlister letters make reference to Washington's letters, but those authored by Washington have been lost. In the two letters from 1901, MacAlister offers his apologies for not responding to Washington's request for information and gives Washington some advice concerning the Tuskegee Institute. In the second of these letters, MacAlister offers his candid opinion about Washington's Tuskegee Institute

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based on a visit he made there. The final letter, written in 1902, also hints at the frankness that seems to have existed between the two men. In that letter, MacAlister appears to be responding to a request from Washington to recommend an African American for a vacant teaching position at Tuskegee. In response, MacAlister wrote that in the north “colored men are excluded” from establishments that would provide such teacher training. This correspondence reveals both the candor of their relationship as well as the unfortunate racial bigotry that existed in early twentieth century Philadelphia. MacAlister’s letter also proves, however, that not all institutions abided by the dominant practice of segregation, writing, “I think I have already suggested to you that we should be glad to give a free scholarship in the Drexel Institute to anyone you might send here.”

While only three letters exist between the two men, other pieces of evidence tell us more of their relationship. It appears that James MacAlister’s visit to the Atlanta exposition would mark the first meeting between the two. In the published correspondence of Booker T. Washington, he writes in an 1895 letter, “For weeks I have been associated on the Jury of Award with Dr. MacAlister and have learned to appreciate him very much. He and I worked much together in Atlanta.” The date puts both Washington and MacAlister in Atlanta during the exposition. In the same letter, Washington also thanks the recipient for his “kind words of congratulation regarding my Atlanta remarks.” The “remarks” delivered at the Atlanta exposition came to be known as the “Compromise Speech” and set one side of the argument in the debate over segregation. Washington’s speech, while praised by many at the time would eventually become a symbol for everything men like W.E.B. DuBois and, later, Martin Luther King would come to reject.

James MacAlister crossed paths with Booker T. Washington just as he made his way onto the national stage with his speech in Atlanta. While Washington would go on to dine with President Roosevelt and become a major spokesperson for many of his race, he appears to have held Drexel in high esteem in the years following his meeting MacAlister in Atlanta. In an article written for the *Southern Workman* written in 1903, he called the Drexel Institute one of the “foremost industrial schools in the country.” His high words of praise were backed by his actions in sending students from Tuskegee to attend Drexel.

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One of these Tuskegee men, William Pittman, received a scholarship to study in the architecture department at Drexel according to a record book in the university archives. Pittman taught at the Tuskegee Institute after graduating from Drexel in 1900 and then went on to start his own architectural firm in Washington DC. While in Washington, he designed the 12<sup>th</sup> Street YMCA Building, a segregated facility for African Americans. The cornerstone ceremony that took place in 1908 was attended by President Roosevelt who called the Y “a monument to the advancement of the city of Washington.” When Pittman designed the Negro Building for the Jamestown Exposition in 1907, he became the first African American architect to be awarded a federal contract. Booker T. Washington spoke to a segregated crowd of nearly 10,000 in front of the Negro Building on the day of its opening. That same year, William Pittman married Booker T. Washington’s daughter, Portia, in a ceremony at Tuskegee.

James MacAlister left his position as president of Drexel in 1913 and died a few months after his retirement. Booker T. Washington died in 1915. Their relationship produced at least one student who went on to prove wrong many of those who restricted opportunities based on race. Others remain to be discovered among the records and documents of the Drexel University Archives and other institutions that preserve the significant stories of the past.

Sources:

James MacAlister Papers, Drexel University Archives

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*African American Architects: A Biographical Dictionary*, edited Dreck Spurlock Wilson

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<http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Home.jsp> Search: Atlanta Cotton Expositions

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