

U.S.

Benjamin Payton, Transformative Leader of Tuskegee University, Dies at 83

By SAM ROBERTS OCT. 11, 2016

Benjamin F. Payton, a civil rights advocate who was instrumental in transforming the historically black Tuskegee Institute in Alabama into the more broadly encompassing Tuskegee University over nearly three decades as its president, died on Sept. 28 in Estero, Fla. He was 83.

His death was announced by the university, which was founded in a shanty in Tuskegee, Ala., in 1881 by Booker T. Washington.

Almost 100 years later, overcoming alumni objections and hoping to broaden its appeal, Dr. Payton enlarged the scope and the very identity of Tuskegee by pushing to give it university status.

His plan was adopted in 1985, and soon afterward he established Tuskegee's first doctoral program, created a College of Business and Information Science, the General Daniel "Chappie" James Center for Aerospace Science and Health Education, and the Continuing Education Program. He oversaw fund-raising campaigns that generated about \$240 million.

He also won an apology from the United States, delivered by President Bill Clinton in 1997, for the federal government's infamous four-decade "Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male." In the study, beginning in 1932, penicillin and other available treatments were deliberately withheld from more than 600

research subjects with venereal disease: poor black men from Macon County, whose county seat is Tuskegee.

The government, in association with the staff at Tuskegee, had enlisted the men under the guise of providing free health care. Dozens of men died, and many of their families were infected.

“People call it the Tuskegee experiment, but it wasn’t Tuskegee that did it — it was the United States Public Health Service, and it went on for 40 years,” Dr. Payton told *The Montgomery Advertiser* in 2010. “The apology was long overdue.”

Mr. Clinton also announced a \$200,000 grant to start a National Center for Bioethics in Research and Health Care at Tuskegee.

Dr. Payton’s tenure as Tuskegee’s fifth president, from 1981 to 2010, capped a lifelong religious commitment to racial justice. It began in the mid-1960s, when he was the director of the Office of Church and Race of the Protestant Council of the City of New York (now the Council of Churches of the City of New York) and then executive director of the National Council of Churches’ Commission on Religion and Race.

He helped organize the 1963 March on Washington for civil rights and economic justice. In 1965, he criticized a confidential federal report by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then an assistant secretary of labor and later a United States senator from New York, which said that instability in black families needed to be addressed if poverty among African-Americans was to be mitigated.

Dr. Payton and other critics argued that focusing on unwed mothers and their children debased blacks and blamed victims. Rather, they said, the government’s agenda should be integration, education and jobs.

Two years later, Dr. Payton urged Congress not to upend the will of Harlem voters by excluding their elected representative, the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Jr., over corruption allegations. Powell, he said, was “the one great symbol of power that Negroes have developed so painfully over the years.” Congress did exclude Powell, but he was elected again.

Dr. Payton served for five years, until 1972, as president of Benedict College in Columbia, S.C., a Baptist-affiliated black institution. Returning to New York, he became program officer for higher education and research at the Ford Foundation, a position he held for nearly a decade until his appointment at Tuskegee.

When Dr. Payton retired to Florida in 2010, leaving Tuskegee as president emeritus, Gov. Bob Riley of Alabama said he had “fostered innovation and academic excellence, playing a key role in Tuskegee University becoming the outstanding institution of higher learning that it is today.”

Benjamin Franklin Payton was born on Dec. 27, 1932, in Orangeburg, S.C., the second of nine children of the Rev. Leroy Ralph Payton, an impoverished minister, farmer and teacher, and the former Sarah Mack.

Despite their meager circumstances, the family had a passion for education; all of Dr. Payton’s siblings earned college degrees. Dr. Payton received four: a bachelor’s degree in sociology from South Carolina State University in 1955, a bachelor of divinity in philosophical theology from Harvard, a master’s in philosophy from Columbia University and a doctorate in ethics from Yale.

His wife, the former Thelma Plane, died in 2013. He is survived by their children, Mark and Deborah; four grandchildren; three brothers, Cecil Warren Payton, William Mack Payton and Bernard Simpson Payton; and three sisters, Mary Edith Padgett, Annette Dolores Thorpe and Gail Priscilla Floyd.

When Dr. Payton became president of Tuskegee, he affirmed the enduring value of historically black institutions, many of whose first students were former slaves or the sons of freed slaves.

“You end black colleges, and youngsters will end up as serious social misfits,” he told *The New York Times* in 1981. “It will cost far more to keep them in prison than to develop their competencies. If the American people understood better what we are talking about, they would see that it is less costly, more humane and contributes more to the welfare of society to educate people than to neglect them.”

Even as integrated colleges became more accessible, he said, “these students no longer want the kind of environment that places the burden of proof on them to demonstrate that they’re not there to meet someone’s affirmative action quota.”

In 1990, he reported progress: “We are beginning to see a collection of institutions, both black and white, that are helping black students understand again that the single most important route out of poverty is education,” he said.

By the time he had retired, Dr. Payton had been president of Tuskegee longer than every one of his predecessors except Booker T. Washington himself. “There was just so much to do,” he told The Montgomery Advertiser, “that I forgot about the time.”

Correction: October 19, 2016

An obituary last Wednesday about Benjamin F. Payton, the longtime president of Tuskegee University, misstated the action taken by the House of Representatives against the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Jr. in 1967, which Dr. Payton opposed. The House voted to exclude Powell — that is, not to allow him to take his seat in January after being re-elected; it did not vote to expel him.

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