

# Luther Foster of Tuskegee



Luther H. Foster, president of Tuskegee, with Miss Lilnial Jackson of Atlanta, a freshman student who helps out in Dr. Foster's office under Tuskegee's work-scholarship plan.

By JOHN SCANLON

**I**T WAS less than six months after Luther Hilton Foster took office as president of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama that the United States Supreme Court handed down its historic decision of May 17, 1954. Ever since that day, he has made it his business to see that Tuskegee keeps pace with the tremendous changes, challenges, and opportunities brought about by that decision.

To Tuskegee and the other Southern institutions of higher education attended largely by Negroes, the court decision meant an abrupt break with the past and a future filled with promise but clouded in uncertainty. The court, with one stroke of its judicial pen, abolished the traditional concept of the "Negro" college as a symbol of separate and unequal education, but in so doing it also created some problems.

What did desegregation hold in store for the Negro colleges? Would it mean, for example, that they would be shunned by Negro students who now had access to the previously all-white state colleges and universities of the South? Would it mean that some of the Negro colleges would fail the harsh test of survival of the fittest? By and large, the small private Negro colleges were not as adequately financed as the white institutions and their academic standards were not as high; how, therefore,

could they compete with white colleges in the new "one standard" era ushered in by the Court decision?

Luther Foster was one of the Negro educators who perceived immediately that desegregation would bring about profound changes in the nature and pattern of higher education for Negroes. He knew that for Tuskegee this meant a need to critically re-examine the Institute's traditional program of vocational and professional education. He therefore proposed, and the Trustees approved, an intensive self-study designed to pinpoint Tuskegee's strengths and weaknesses and to chart a course for the future. The study took two years, and out of it came several important changes.

Chief among them was the establishment of a College of Arts and Sciences, with two principal functions. The first was to provide the vast majority of Tuskegee students with a common course of study and a common set of intellectual experiences. (Many of the departments of the new college were previously dispersed among the Institute's technical and professional schools.) The second function of the college was to offer a full four-year program in the liberal arts. This reflected Dr. Foster's firm belief that in the new "one standard" world of higher education Tuskegee's liberal arts program should be not only the academic foundation of the professional courses of

study, but also a program of learning in its own right.

Also as a result of the self-study, intensive efforts were made to strengthen the professional programs in the Schools of Nursing, Veterinary Medicine, Education, and Engineering, and gradually to phase out subcollegiate programs for which demand had about run its course at Tuskegee. Special attention was focused on Tuskegee's continuing concern with meeting the needs of students who arrive on campus with inadequate preparation for college work.

Although the changes made at Tuskegee under Dr. Foster's administration make an impressive record, he maintains that their real significance lies in their reflection of a revolution in rising aspirations among current Negro students. "Tuskegee," he points out, "was founded with a very clear purpose—to provide a basic education for young people who aspired to lead lives of maximum usefulness, a goal which they and their parents were convinced depended mightily upon education. That basic purpose remains today, but the aspiration levels of our students have risen, and so has the level of intellectual development needed to realize the new aspirations."

Dr. Foster's own aspirations as a college student were for just such a career as the one he has pursued. He was born in Lawrenceville, Virginia, and raised on the campus of Virginia State College in Petersburg, where he attended the college's experimental school. His father was business manager, and later president of Virginia State; young Foster decided early in life to emulate his father. He studied at Virginia State, receiving his Bachelor of Science degree in 1932. From there he went to Hampton Institute, working in the business office and taking courses in business, his major interest. After Hampton, he went to Harvard and won a master's degree in business administration in 1936.

Then he worked for four years as budget officer at Howard University. "By this time," he says, "I was convinced that I wanted to be a college business officer, but I felt the need for additional training, so I went to the University of Chicago to take some courses in educational administration." He stayed there a year, married Miss Vera Chandler, a social worker, and then, in the fall of 1941, went to Tuskegee as business manager. He has been at Tuskegee ever since, with the exception of a year's leave of absence in 1951 to finish his work for a Ph.D. in educational administration at Chicago.

As president of Tuskegee, he has done his job with quiet effectiveness. He is a calm, soft-spoken man who speaks matter-of-factly even when dis-

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# MANHATTAN

## PRINCIPAL

### AT WORK

By LEWIS W. GILLENSON, *Editor and Publisher of Esquire Books.*

**T**HE schools of a large city must inevitably deal with the problems that rack the city as a whole. The vast differences of income and of ethnic and social background create paradoxes and injustices difficult to control. Changes are swift and tensions are high. Rapid shifts of population can transform stable neighborhoods into slum areas almost overnight. With this deterioration come housing shortages, unemployment problems, petty crime, broken families, *de facto* segregation, language barriers, and general hostility. At the center of this upheaval, of course, are the neighborhood schools.

Can a school survive as a vital institution under these conditions? It can if it has a principal like Henry T. Hillson. As head of George Washington High School, the largest secondary school on Manhattan Island, Hillson has proved that the school can not only survive but prevail. With dedication and massive energy he has brought discipline and pride to both faculty and students. With the help of the Board of Education's Demonstration Guidance Project, he has raised academic standards, curbed the dropout rate, and taught the community at large of the dignity of the school.

Until the Forties, George Washington exuded the opulently middle class tone of the upper tip of Manhattan. Eighty per cent of its graduates moved on to higher learning. Seldom overcrowded, mostly homogeneous, it was considered a lush high school for student and administrator.

After the war, however, the area erupted with jarring suddenness. Negro Harlem crept northward, the middle class departed the area in great waves, many foreign-born moved in. By the time Hillson arrived in 1954, the pat-



—Photos by Thecla.

Principal Henry T. Hillson of George Washington High School.

tern was set. George Washington had become an integrated school, and the flight of many whites, anticipating depressed standards or simply prejudiced, began. Many students who could pass the exams commuted to advanced-level schools; others went to specialized schools. Still, a hard-core nucleus remained enrolled at George Washington.

Fresh in his new appointment, his first as a principal, Hillson recognized the insidiousness of the trend and set out to contain it. He spoke before synagogues, churches, parents' groups, civic organizations, anyone who would listen, and urged them to keep their children in George Washington—that it was basically a sound school. "I promised that we would lift the quality of education as high as possible, that their children would get a good education in a stable school environment. But they had to help keep it stable," he said.

He buttressed his campaign with a vigorous recruiting drive for the Parents' Association. At that time, the PTA rolls showed an anemic membership of about twenty. Today, under a barrage of leaflets, pamphlets, bulletins, and exhortations before civic groups, 1,800 members now belong to the Parents' Asso-

ciation. A turnout of 300 to a meeting is not unusual; sometimes it hits 700.

At every meeting, the lanky figure of the fifty-five-year-old principal, with his deceptively youthful ruddiness and frank manner, keeps reselling his goal of quality. His evangelism fanned a spark of interest among parents and faculty with only an occasional exception. A subtle revolving door operated for those teachers who made racial slurs, refused to check absenteeism, and were otherwise recalcitrant. Today, Hillson's faculty, over-all, shares his sense of mission.

A principal's job in most large cities is complicated by a virtue held sacred by almost all in education—the tenure system. It provides security and a mathematical kind of equality. But it makes no provision for skill.

"Not being able to reward excellence makes you grit your teeth," says Hillson. "We have no control over a teacher's willingness to do extra-curricular work. We can pay coaches extra and throw a few dollars to people who handle the newspaper and the yearbook—\$475 a year—but nothing for people running clubs. And more than 25 per cent of our faculty handle extra-curricular activities. They're here after hours; many take