



William J. Hale

was president of Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial College from its founding date (1912) until his retirement in August 1943. Under his leadership Tennessee A&I

State College became a notable African American institution and one of Tennessee's best known

colleges. By 1944 the college produced the third highest number of graduates among historically

African American universities.

Hale was born in Marion County on September 26, 1874, the oldest child of four boys and two

girls. The impoverished Hale went to work at an early age but managed to save enough money

while working in Dayton, Tennessee, to enroll at biracial Maryville College. After attending for

several terms, Hale accepted teaching positions in Coulterville and Retro before becoming the

principal of Chattanooga's East First Street Grammar School.

When the Tennessee General Assembly authorized the construction of a normal school for

African Americans, Hale led an effort to raise seventy-one thousand dollars to have the

institution located in Chattanooga. Black leaders in Nashville won the bid for Davidson County,

but Hale was selected as the principal of the new Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State

Normal School for Negroes. He arrived in Nashville in January 1911 to supervise construction of

the facilities and develop the school's curricula. Hale handpicked the thirteen faculty members from such notable institutions as Fisk, Atlanta, and Howard Universities. Tennessee A&I opened its doors on June 19, 1912, and two days later enrolled 247 students for the summer term. A shrewd but practical man, Hale expanded the school despite the limited resources provided by a reluctant general assembly and State Board of Education. In 1916 he received only 40 percent of the school's funds from the state, with the rest coming from federal sources, tuition, fees, and gifts from African Americans. Hale staged annual visitations and dinners to persuade the allwhite legislature to continue to vote appropriations and to allay misgivings about African American education. Faculty members loaned their cars to drive legislators to the campus, where they saw uniformed female students and men in dress shirts. Students engaged in manual labor, performed farm tasks, and cleaned dormitories under the watchful eyes of the visitors. Faculty members served as hosts at the dinners legislators attended, standing around the room like waiters while their guests ate. At the end of the dinners, Hale presented each legislator with a freshly dressed turkey from the school's farm.