

AAHN H15 Grant Award
Dr Kylie M. Smith

Nursing Mental Health at the Tuskegee Institute 1948-1972

For much of the 20th century there were very few programs for Black nurses who wanted to undertake psychiatric training. This was particularly the case for southern nurses, many of whom needed to travel to northern states to enroll in psychiatric and mental health programs. At least in part, this also reflected the lack of graduate degrees in psychiatric nursing until the late 1950s.

In my book *Talking Therapy: Knowledge and Power in American Psychiatric Nursing*, I touched on the experiences of some of these nurses like Mary Starke Harper, who graduated from the Tuskegee Institute in 1941 and then needed to travel north to the University of Minnesota and St. Louis University to earn her masters and doctoral degrees. Harper returned to Tuskegee for a time between degrees to run the nurse education program at the Veterans Administration Hospital.

Tracing Harper's career made me curious about the nature of psychiatric nursing education offered at Tuskegee, which in 1948 became the first nursing school in Alabama to offer a bachelor's degree. I was also curious about some items I had seen in the newsletter *Alabama Mental Health* about a mental hygiene clinic at Tuskegee. The existence of the clinic and its link to the VA which employed some of the nation's premier Black psychiatrists, suggested a potentially high level of theoretical and practical education for Tuskegee nurses, placing them well ahead many other nurses in the US at the time.

In November of 2019 I made my first trip to the Tuskegee Institute, which is now Tuskegee University. The archives for the institute, university and John A. Andrew Memorial hospital are housed in the same building as the National Center for Bioethics in Research and Health Care. I began my research looking at the *Tuskegee Institute Bulletins*, which set out all the courses offered at the institute. As early as 1944 the *Bulletins* noted that "since the establishment of the US Cadet Nurses Corps affiliation has been arranged with the US Veterans Administration in neuropsychiatric education for three months during the junior cadet period." Once Lillian Harvey became the Dean of the Nursing School, her papers show a concerted effort to bring that breadth of education to all students enrolled in the school. From 1945, students enrolled in the three-year diploma undertook a 3-month affiliation with the Tuskegee VA for their psychiatric education, but were also taught psychology, sociology and social problems as separate courses. Once the bachelor's degree was available, two courses were offered: Mental Hygiene and then Psychiatric Nursing through affiliation with the VA. The courses were taught by the VA's leading psychiatrists, Dr. George Branche and Dr. Prince Barker.

Due to continued segregation and racism in hospitals and universities across the South, Dean Harvey was often frustrated in her attempts to secure clinical placements for students beyond Tuskegee and the VA. In 1954 she was able to send some students north to Kings Park Hospital in Long Island, New York, but no public psychiatric hospital in Alabama would accept Black nurses either as trainees or regular staff until late in the 1960s.

I made many more trips to Tuskegee in late 2019 and early 2020 before the pandemic and was able to return again in March of 2021 once I was vaccinated. I expanded my research into the papers of Dr. Eugene Dibble, who was Medical Director of the John A. Andrew Memorial Hospital on site at Tuskegee. Dibble worked closely with the aforementioned psychiatrists at the Veterans Administration and supported the establishment of an outpatient mental hygiene clinic housed at the Institute using the VA staff. This clinic also employed a psychiatric social worker, where preferable a local woman who had graduated from Tuskegee. The clinic was also supported by the Tuskegee Mental Hygiene Society, whose secretary at the time was local legend B. B. Walcott, the first Black woman president of a Red Cross branch and supporter of initiatives for disabled children. The first social worker was Vera Chandler Foster, wife of Tuskegee Institute president, and in 1952 Naomi Perry, who had graduated from the masters of psychiatric nursing education degree at Teachers College was employed in the role, despite reservations from Dean Harvey.

This mental hygiene clinic, and the work of the psychiatrists and nurses at the VA, attracted the attention of leading psychiatrist Karl Menninger, whose family ran the Menninger Clinic and the Winter VA at Topeka Kansas. Menninger visited Tuskegee in 1954 and struck up a long friendship with Dr. Dibble. He was so impressed with the work of the VA and the Institute that he wrote to Admiral Joel Boone, Chief Medical Director of the Veterans Administration about “the most amazing phenomenon” he saw there, making recommendations for support and improvement that would also seek to break down some of the racial segregation in Alabama. Of course, Menninger could not undo what a century of white supremacy had done in the region, and it would not be until a Federal investigation in 1966 and court case in 1969 that any real change would come to Tuskegee. This process, and the amazing work of the Tuskegee VA and clinic, will form part of my new book called *Jim Crow in the Asylum: Psychiatry and Civil Rights in the American South* under contract with UNC Press and due for publication in 2023.