

The Oaks

Booker T. Washington's Presidential Dwelling And Its Continuing Legacy



By: Sheryl Buchanan

When you need a house for a President, "The Oaks" will certainly do. Built in 1899, "The Oaks" became the family home of Booker T. Washington, the founder of what is now Tuskegee Institute. The Queen Anne style home was designed by Robert R. Taylor, the first African-American to graduate from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the designer of many of Tuskegee University's early buildings. As it was with most of those buildings, Tuskegee's students played a significant part in the construction of the Oaks. It was the first building in Macon County to have electricity. The nearly half a



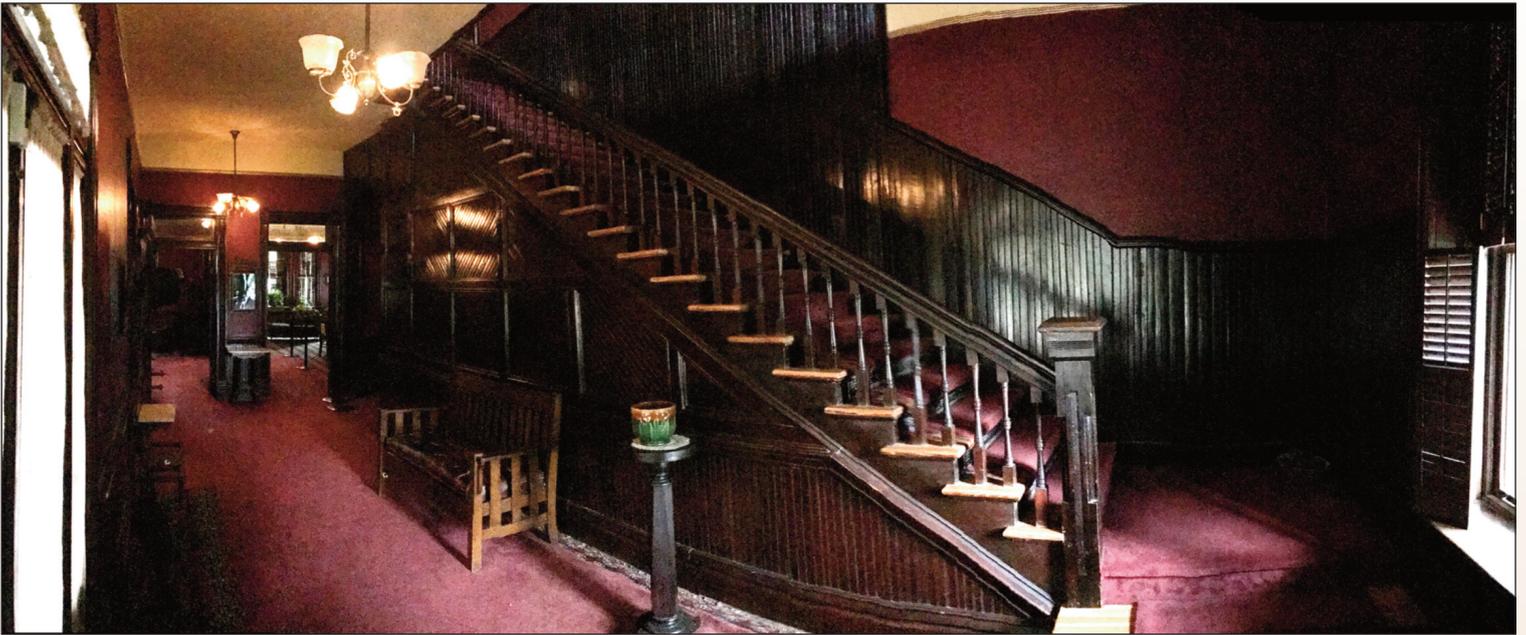
million bricks used to build "The Oaks" were made by students at the Institute and put into place by student masons. The tall oak trees surrounding the house, and the oak wood used while building, gave the house its name. The outside landscaping was primarily done by Cornell University graduate David Williston

who is considered to be the first African-American landscape artist.

So how much has changed at "The Oaks" in the past hundred or so years? For one thing, it's no longer a personal residence. It's now a part of Tuskegee Institute National Historic Site and visitors can tour the former home of the university's first



Booker T. Washington's downstairs Parlor



Downstairs showing long hallway and stairs leading to upstairs office and bedrooms



president. When visitors enter the mansion, they will find the first floor looks very much like it did in Washington's time. Although the furniture on the first floor is not original, it is from the time period. Photographs taken while the family lived in the home have allowed curators to arrange furniture and present the rooms as they appeared in the 1920's. An original mural depicting scenes from Europe and painted by Edward Wesley Borman between 1908 and 1909, surrounds the picture molding in the parlor, study, and dining room. Booker T. Washington commissioned it after spending three months in Europe. The walls are painted in a dark maroon color typical of the Victorian time period.

On the second floor are the family bedrooms. In total, there are 15 rooms and five bathrooms in the house. The four large bedrooms are not currently furnished but all feature fireplaces and closets and all have access to a bathroom. Washington's study is also on the second floor and is the only room in the house with original furnishings. Dominating the room are two ornate desks with chairs, a gift from a Japanese family whose son attended Tuskegee Institute. There are other smaller furnishings in the room that belonged to Washington and the walls in the study are lined with pictures. These help tell the story of the man, Tuskegee Institute, and the legacy of this magnificent house.



Above middle: Oaks dining room, bottom: Booker T. Washington's study with his original desk

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON QUOTES

"Racial battles are to be won by marching forward, not by holding back."

"The greatest thing you can learn is the lesson of brotherly love, of usefulness, and of charity."