This Day in History… June 8, 1868

Birth of Robert R. Taylor

Robert Robinson Taylor was born on June 8, 1868, in Wilmington, North Carolina. He was the first African American student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the first fully accredited African American architect in the US.

The son of emancipated slaves, Taylor left home in 1888 to study architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). He was the first African American student enrolled at the school. While there, he met Booker T. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Institute. Washington focused on education to fight discrimination in the post-Civil War South. He was impressed with Taylor, and while he was still a student, Washington approached Taylor about developing the institute's industrial program and designing buildings for the campus. When he graduated in 1892, Taylor became the first fully accredited African American architect in America.

Taylor was the 38th honoree in the Black Heritage Series.

Imperforate Taylor Stamp

Taylor joined the staff at Tuskegee in late 1892. As the drafting instructor and architect to the Tuskegee Institute, Taylor was dedicated to promoting Washington's self-help philosophy. His architectural debut, Science Hall, was constructed entirely by the students, right down to the bricks. But Taylor's second project, the Tuskegee Chapel, was his proudest accomplishment. Washington once referred to it as the most imposing building on campus. Taylor's designs and structures were said to epitomize the institute's standards of excellence. Taylor spent the majority of his career at Tuskegee. He became a model of achievement through his many contributions – a symbol of pride for the Tuskegee Institute and the nation.

Between 1899 and 1902, Taylor returned to Cleveland, Ohio to join Charles W. Hopkinson's architectural firm. In 1920, he founded one of the first Black-owned architecture firms with Louis H. Persely. Taylor designed several buildings outside of Tuskegee, including the Carnegie libraries at Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, and Livingstone College in Salisbury, North Carolina. He also designed several buildings on the Selma University campus in Selma, Alabama, as well as the Colored Masonic Temple in Birmingham, Alabama.

Taylor worked with Washington to design new buildings for the Tuskegee Institute campus.

In 1929, Taylor traveled to Kakata, Liberia, to plan the construction of the Booker Washington Institute, dubbed "the Tuskegee of Africa." He was also tasked with developing the school's industrial training program. Additionally, President Herbert Hoover appointed him to the Mississippi Valley Flood Relief Commission and he served as chairman of the American Red Cross's Tuskegee chapter.

Taylor retired from Tuskegee in 1935 and returned to Wilmington, North Carolina. There, the governor placed him on the board of trustees for Fayetteville State University. By 1942, his health declined and he died on December 13, 1942, at a church service at his beloved Tuskegee Chapel. Tuskegee named its school of architecture and construction science after Taylor.

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