

Celebrating Our First Black Graduates

33rd in the Keepsakes series, originally published February 23, 2012

This Keepsake features the lives and accomplishments of K-State's first black graduates, George Washington Owens, Class of 1899, and Minnie Howell, Class of 1901. Both endured difficult times but through determination and hard work accomplished what no other African Americans had done since K-State was established in 1863, obtain a degree from the college!



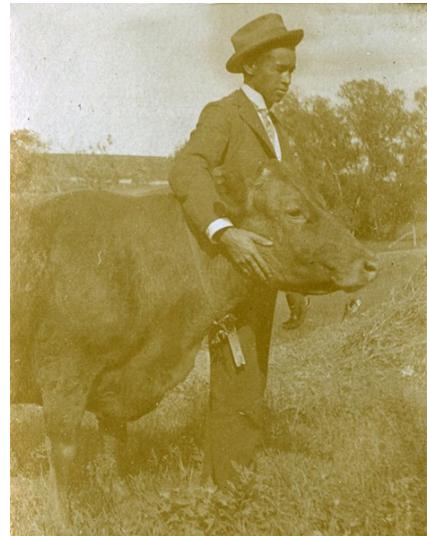
G.W. Owens, KSAC, 1899

Owens was born on a farm near Alma, Kansas in January 1875. Both of his parents were former slaves who came to Kansas, first to the Fort Scott area before settling in Wabaunsee County where they obtained 50 acres of free public land. He graduated from District School #3 in the Alma township and, on the advice of a high school teacher from Manhattan, decided to enroll at Kansas State Agricultural College.

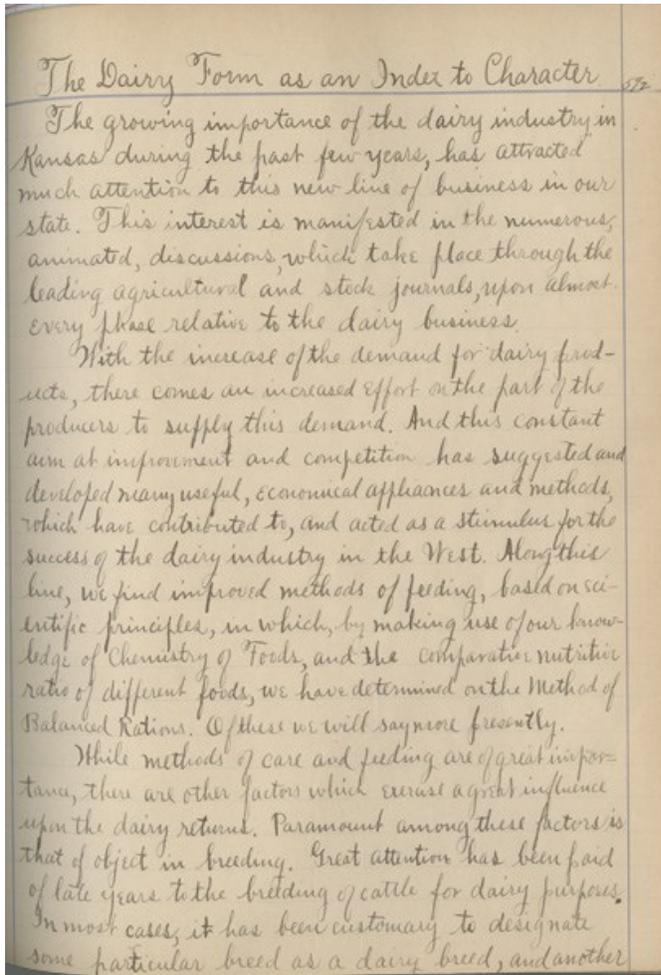
Owens wrote in his autobiography, "So in Jan 1-1896 I went to Manhattan...and enrolled as a student. I found to my surprise that I was the only colored student enrolled in the college, and that they had never had a colored graduate so I resolved to be the first. I finally succeeded but suffered much hardship."

Owens was an accomplished student and by all accounts he was accepted as a peer and engaged in numerous college activities.

For example, as a member of the Webster Literary Society, Owens was one of seven students whose photographs and presentations at the organization's annual program in March 1899 were published in the college newspaper, the *Students' Herald*. The oration presented by Owens was entitled, "The Right to be Understood." Referring to the Civil War, Owens remarked, "While we regard the rebellion of the South a folly, we must not forget that the southern people also earnestly believed that they were right. A mutual understanding might have accomplished the emancipation reform peaceably." Although he struggled to work his way through college on the school's farm and as a janitor, Owens succeeded earning a B.S. degree in the "General Course" (June 1899), thus becoming the school's first Black graduate! His senior thesis was devoted to "The Dairy Farm as an Index to Character."



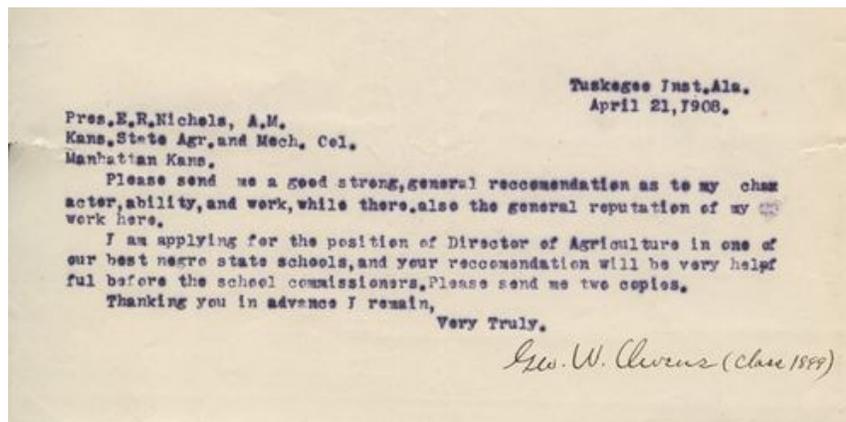
Owens's education and accomplishments did not go unnoticed. In the fall of 1899, he received a



Owens senior thesis

letter from Booker T. Washington, founder of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, offering him a position under George Washington Carver, head of the agriculture department. He accepted and head of the dairy herd was one of his responsibilities. While at Tuskegee he married Waddie L. Hill, a graduate of Clark University in Atlanta. His success at Tuskegee allowed Owens to obtain a position as head of the agricultural program at the Virginia Normal and Industrial Institute (now Virginia State University) in 1908. He used a reference from Earnest Nichols, president of K-State, to assist him with obtaining the appointment.

He also became a prominent leader in vocational agriculture in Virginia and the South. In recognition of his service, a new agricultural building at the school was named in his honor in 1932 Owens retired as chairman of the Department of Agriculture in 1945 before passing away five years later at the age of 75.



G.W. Owens letter to E.R. Nichols, 1908

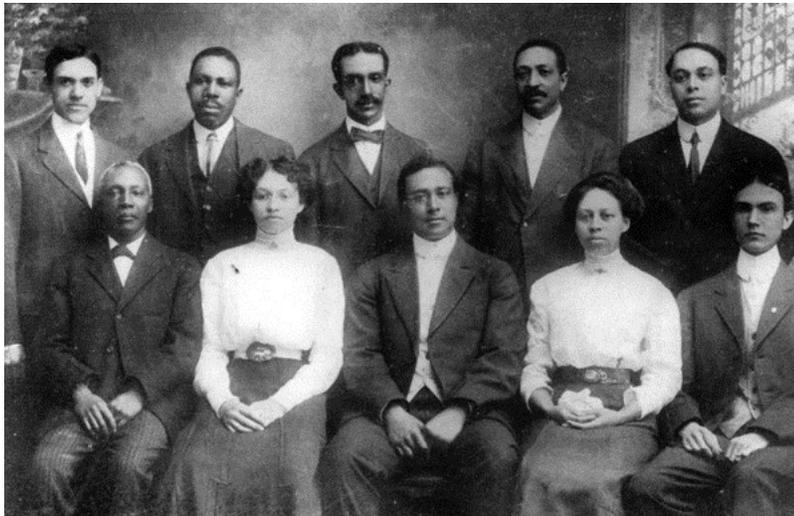
It is interesting that K-State's first Black female graduate, Minnie Howell, who obtained a domestic science degree in 1901, must have known Owens because their years in Manhattan overlapped for a period. She was born in 1878 in Tennessee and moved to Manhattan with her family in 1886. After graduating from the Manhattan school system in 1896, she entered K-State that September, the same year as Owens! While at the college her father died of typhoid fever and she also was away because of illness, thus delaying her graduation.

Howell was active at K-State. She was a member of the Ionian Literary Society and served as editor of its newsletter and corresponding secretary. On numerous occasions, articles in the *Students' Herald* noted piano solos and orations by Howell that were well attended. Her senior thesis was "Healthful Homes."

Howell pursued a career in education and from 1901-1905 she taught domestic science and English grammar at the Topeka Industrial Institute. She returned to Manhattan where she taught in the school system for one year before teaching domestic science and art at Sumner High School in Kansas City (KS) from 1906-1914.



**Minnie Howell, Sumner H.S.,
1911 (Spencer Library, Univ.
of Kansas)**



Minnie Howell and Sumner High School faculty, 1911

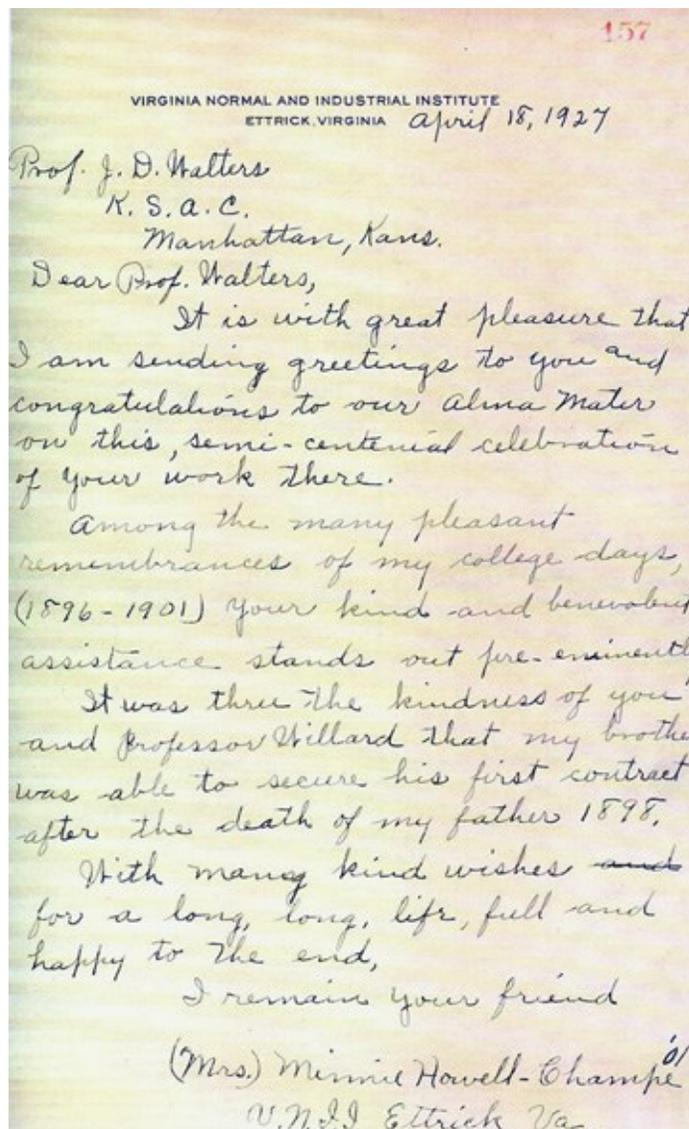
In 1912, Howell married E.J. Champe. They had one daughter, Francis.

It is interesting to note that from 1925-1928 she taught high school home economics on the campus of Virginia State College where Owens was employed. Their paths crossed again making one speculate if they were acquaintances once more? During this period, Howell sent J.D. Walters,

professor in industrial art and design, a letter thanking him for all the support he gave her and her brother while she was at the college.

From 1931-1938, Howell served as head of the Home Economics Department at Southern University, Negro A&M in Louisiana. By January 1946 she was directing the Douglas Community Center in Manhattan. She was also a member of the Douglas USO board during World War II and the League of Women Voters, as well as other organizations.

Don Slater, long-time resident of Manhattan, remembers Howell, "I called her the 'Cookie Lady' because we would walk by her home as a kid and she would be sitting on the front porch of her home and she'd give us kids cookies. She was frail, but had a sharp wit." Howell died in 1948 at age 70 after a long illness and was buried in Sunset Cemetery, Manhattan.



Minnie Howell to J.D. Walters, 1927



**How K-State looked when Owens & Howell enrolled;
view from the southeast where Aggieville is now located**

These abbreviated accounts of Owens and Howell, K-State's first Black graduates, illustrate how they distinguished themselves as K-Staters. During Black History Month, we celebrate the accomplishments of two of K-State's most outstanding alumni, George Washington Owens and Minnie Howell Champe!

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*University Archives sources: [George Washington Owens Papers](#); Ernest Nichols Papers; Photograph Collection; [on-line exhibit "Minnie Howell"](#); Vertical File "Champe, Minnie Howell" contains extensive documentation on Howell compiled by staff members Pat Patton and Cindy Von Elling; Lindemuth, Tim. "Stumbling onto History" [Minnie Howell]. *K-Stater* (May 2001), p. 58; "The Black Graduate" [G.W. Owens]. *K-Stater* (June 1977), pp. 2-4; K-State senior theses collection, 1901.*