

# News

## For Tuskegee Syphilis Study Descendants, Stigma Hasn't Faded

Survivors ponder what to do with unclaimed settlement money that still sits in court-controlled accounts

By **JAY REEVES**  
*Associated Press*

TUSKEGEE, Ala. — Decades later, it's still hard to grasp what the federal government did to hundreds of black men in rural Alabama — even if you're among their descendants, lighting candles in their memory.

For 40 years starting in 1932, medical workers in the segregated South withheld treatment for unsuspecting men infected with a sexually transmitted disease simply so doc-

ing linked to the experiment, commonly known today as the "Tuskegee Syphilis Study." For years they have met privately to share their pain and honor the victims.

And, amazingly, that class-action lawsuit filed by the men in 1973 has outlived them all. The litigation continues to this day, with a federal court currently considering a request that will help determine the study's final legacy.

A key, unanswered question: What should be done with unclaimed settlement money that

“After he found out about it he had to live with it. That could bring a person down if he wasn't strong. He was angry and he was upset

tors could track the ravages of the horrid illness and dissect their bodies afterward.

Finally exposed in 1972, the study ended and the men sued, resulting in a \$9 million settlement. Twenty years ago this May, President Bill Clinton apologized for the U.S. government. It seemed to mark the end of this ugly episode, once and for all.

Except it didn't. Relatives of the men still struggle with the stigma of be-

ing still sits in court-controlled accounts?

**“The Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male”**

Lille Tyson Head wants you to know that her father, Freddie Lee Tyson, wasn't just a man infected with syphilis.

Once a sharecropper in the fields of rural eastern Alabama, Tyson became a carpenter early in his marriage to Johnnie Mae Neal Tyson. He helped build Moton Field,



In this 1950's photo released by the National Archives, men included in a syphilis study pose for a photo in Tuskegee, Ala. For 40 years starting in 1932, medical workers in the segregated South withheld treatment for unsuspecting men infected with a sexually transmitted disease simply so doctors could track the ravages of the horrid illness and dissect their bodies afterward. It was finally exposed in 1972.

where the famed "Tuskegee Airmen" learned to fly during World War II, he later worked as a firefighter there, his daughter said. He also worked for the government after it established the Tuskegee National Forest in eastern Alabama. Around 1960, he moved the family out of the Jim Crow South to Connecticut, where he worked in a factory.

"He was a wise man, very gentle. He was a disciplined

man. Active in the church, loved his family and his extended family," said Head, of Wirtz, Virginia, one of the Tysons' eight children. "He was a good man. He had a sense of humor, he was a good dancer."

Though he displayed no symptoms, Tyson also was born with congenital syphilis inherited from his mother, Head said. And that is how he became a participant in "The Tuskegee Study of Untreated

Syphilis in the Negro Male."

Located about 40 miles east of the state capital of Montgomery, Macon County is one of the poorest places in a poor state. In the early 1900s, the majority black county was a hotbed for syphilis, which affected about 35 percent of its residents of reproductive age.

In 1929, government doctors working in conjunction with a philanthropic fund began treating syphilis patients in the county with bismuth and mercury. Few people were cured, according to a summary from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and some died.

Three years later, the U.S. Public Health Service, working with state and local health agencies, began what was supposed to be a short-lived program in Tuskegee to record the progression of the illness, which begins with a small sore and can progress to open wounds, blindness, deafness, mental illness and death.

Workers initially recruited 600 black men into a health program with the promise of free medical checks, free food, free transportation and burial insurance in a county where

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Nelson Stevens (American, born 1930), Spirit Sister, 2013, serigraph, 31 1/2 x 30 1/2 in. © Nelson Stevens. Licensed by the Exponential Printmaking Institute, Easton, PA.

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