

# Chapter Fifteen: William James Edwards

## Alabama, 1869

**\*\*Chapter Fifteen: William James Edwards | Alabama, 1869, The Small and the Mighty\*\***

William James Edwards was born at the end of the Civil War in Snow Hill, Alabama, soon after his family had been emancipated from enslavement. Originally named Ulysses Grant Edwards, his name was changed to William by his grandmother after the death of his mother. Following a serious illness in childhood that caused parts of his bones to die, William struggled with mobility, often crawling around due to his incapacity. Left to fend for himself after the passing of his grandmother and financially strained living with his aunt Rina, he spent hours alone at home, teaching himself reading and arithmetic.

Rina's desperate efforts to care for William led her to beg for medical assistance in the community. Observing the adults discussing William's fate one Sunday, he overheard sentiments suggesting he should be sent to a poorhouse, which led him to despair. This week-long period of hopelessness ended as mysteriously as it began; instead of death, he found renewed vigor. With Rina's diligence, she managed to earn enough money to take him to Dr. George Keyser for treatment.

Under Dr. Keyser's care, who noted the extent of William's medical issues, William endured several operations that would eventually allow him to walk again. Over four years, he persevered, saving money through cotton picking to afford further medical care and eventually funding his education at the Tuskegee Institute, where he became a teacher and developed plans to establish his own school.

During outreach for Tuskegee, he met Anna Jeanes, whose interest in his story and educational vision prompted generous financial support for building a school in Snow Hill. Over time, Anna financially supported the education of rural Black children through the Jeanes Fund, which she established, advocating for mixed-race governance to decide how funds would benefit their communities.

As struggles over segregation and integration began to deeply affect education for African Americans, the Jeanes teachers worked tirelessly in the South, facing systemic racism while striving to uplift their communities. Even in perilous conditions, including threats from the KKK and the challenges posed by the Civil Rights Movement, these educators remained steadfast, embodying hope and resilience.

William Edwards' and Anna Jeanes' legacies live on, illuminating the power of education as a pathway to progress amidst struggle, reflecting a commitment that each generation must carry forward to ensure equality and opportunity for all .