

The ‘A’ in FAMU: born of segregation, built on agriculture, preserving an identity

By Starr Mckay | Staff Writer



TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — At Florida A&M University, the letter A stands for agriculture, a legacy rooted in the university’s founding as a land grant institution under the Second Morrill Act of 1890.

The federal law required segregated states to create separate land grant institutions for black students who were barred from predominantly white colleges. At Florida A&M University, that mandate established a mission centered on agriculture and mechanical arts, designed to expand education and opportunity.

More than a century later, agriculture remains part of the university’s identity, even as students pursue degrees in health care, business, journalism and other fields.

For some students, that history is still central to how they understand the university.

“I think people do not always realize how intentional the founding of this university was,” said Xavier Rivers, a junior political science major from Texas. “Agriculture was not just farming. It was about access and independence when black students were excluded from most institutions.”

Rivers said the history changes how he views the university.

“It shows that FAMU was built with a purpose,” he said. “Agriculture is part of that foundation.”

Other students say the legacy still influences their academic interests.

“I chose agriculture because it connects science with real world impact,” said Aaliyah Johnson, a freshman agricultural science major from Orlando, Florida. “It is not just farming. It is food systems, sustainability and environmental science.”

Johnson said studying agriculture at Florida A&M University adds meaning to her coursework.

“You are learning in a place where agriculture is part of the university identity,” she said.

University records show Florida A&M University remains one of the nation’s 1890 Historically Black Land Grant Universities, created to expand agricultural education for Black students during segregation.

The College of Agriculture and Food Sciences continues to focus on research, extension work and community outreach tied to that mission.

At the federal level, the United States Department of Agriculture supports 1890 institutions through programs such as the National Scholars Program, which provides scholarships for agriculture related study. The program was temporarily suspended in 2024 before being reinstated after criticism from education advocates.

The pause renewed discussion about support for agricultural education at historically Black institutions and the pipeline of students entering the field.

At Florida A&M University, agriculture shows up in everyday student life.

At the dining hall, sophomore biology major Jordan Bennett from New Jersey said a simple meal changed how she thought about agriculture.

“I was eating a salad and we started talking about where the lettuce and tomatoes actually come from,” Bennett said. “You realize that every ingredient starts somewhere in agriculture. The food on our trays is connected to soil, research, farmers and science.”

For Bennett, the moment reframed the university’s mission.

“Agriculture is connected to biology, health and environmental systems,” she said. “Once you start thinking about it, you realize the A in FAMU is still shaping what we study and how we live.”

Students say these realizations often lead to broader conversations on campus about the university’s identity.

Even as academic programs expand, agriculture remains a defining part of Florida A&M University's history and present.

"You cannot separate Florida A&M University from agriculture," Bennett said. "It is literally in the name."