ABSTRACT

HARRIS, GEOFFREY SHIELDS. Toward a New Whig Interpretation of History: Common Schools in Burke County, North Carolina, from 1853 to 1861. (Under the direction of Dr. James Crisp.)

This thesis will examine both the history and historiography of the common school movement in western North Carolina in the last decades of the antebellum period. In particular, it will focus on common schools in Burke County during the years of school board chairman James Avery’s tenure (1853-1861).

The attendance records James Avery kept during his tenure as chairman of the county board of common schools (now located in his personal papers at the Southern Historical Collection) provide a wealth of previously unexamined data relating to the operation of common schools at the county level. A detailed examination of these records yields new insights into common schools in antebellum North Carolina.

These insights have both specific and general application. First, and most specifically, an analysis of Avery’s records fills a historical gap in our understanding of common schools in Burke County (a county whose official antebellum records on education have largely been destroyed). Second, and more generally, it provides a reliable measure of popular support for and participation in an institution that historians have alternately described as a tool of elite social control and an expression of yeoman democracy. By shifting the focus of the common school narrative from the state superintendent’s office to the county level, this study challenges several entrenched features of North Carolina common school historiography and provides a new window into the rhetoric and reality of class and sectional identity in antebellum North Carolina.
DEDICATION

To Beth and Sam. Thank you…then, Bimp!
BIOGRAPHY

Geoff Harris received his B.A in History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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Introduction

This thesis will examine both the history and historiography of the common school movement in western North Carolina in the last decades of the antebellum period. In particular, it will focus on common schools in Burke County during the years of school board chairman James Avery’s tenure (1853-1861). This narrow focus requires a few words of explanation.

Attendance records for common schools in the antebellum period in the South in general and North Carolina in particular have been hard to obtain. Without detailed records documenting the number of days students attended school, historians of the common school movement have been forced to rely on the cruder measure of enrollment. While helpful in determining broad trends, enrollment data does not reveal who attended school or for how long. Enrollment data is either/or -- there is no distinguishing between the ten-year-old son of a wealthy planter who attends every day of a 60-day school term and a fifteen-year-old day laborer who only shows up for the first day. As a result, attempts to gauge popular support and participation in common schools based on enrollment data have been largely a matter of extrapolation and speculation.

The attendance records James Avery kept during his tenure as chairman of the county board of common schools (now located in his personal papers at the Southern Historical Collection) provide a wealth of previously unexamined data relating to the operation of common schools at the county level. For several years during the last decade of the antebellum period, Avery received attendance records from the teachers and committeemen
of the various common school districts in Burke County. A detailed examination of these records yields new insights into common schools in antebellum North Carolina.

These insights have both specific and general application. First, and most specifically, an analysis of Avery’s records fills a historical gap in our understanding of common schools in Burke County (a county whose official antebellum records on education have largely been destroyed). Second, and more generally, it provides a reliable measure of popular support for and participation in an institution that historians have alternately described as a tool of elite social control and an expression of yeoman democracy. By shifting the focus of the common school narrative from the state superintendent’s office to the county level, this study challenges several entrenched features of North Carolina common school historiography and provides a new window into the rhetoric and reality of class and sectional identity in antebellum North Carolina.
Historiography

In the relatively obscure field of southern antebellum educational history, North Carolina has long held a place as a fascinating footnote. Historians often single out North Carolina as the only southern state to develop a centrally administered statewide system of public education in the antebellum period.\(^1\) While public education flourished in New England under the guidance of reformers such as Horace Mann, the states below the Mason-Dixon line lagged behind, preferring their system of private academies and subscription schools to the democratic experiments of their northern neighbors. North Carolina’s history of educational progress was an anomaly in a region not known for progressive reform of any kind.

Historians have been quick to identify the South’s slow progress on the educational front as yet another example of Southern exceptionalism. As one educational historian noted, histories of antebellum reform movements in the United States always seem to contain the proviso, “except in the South.”\(^2\) Historians attempting to explain the success of common schools in North Carolina have faced an interesting challenge: how to explain the state as an exception to Southern exceptionalism.

Over the years, historians’ attempts to answer this question have gradually coalesced into a generally accepted narrative. North Carolina’s success in common schools was

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primarily a function of: 1) her democratic nature and 2) the heroic efforts of her first state superintendent of common schools – Calvin Wiley. The former argument rests on the assumption that schools reflect political economy and express popular will. Egalitarian polities inspire democratic educational arrangements, while aristocracies produce elitist school systems. According to this line of reasoning, North Carolina’s schools succeeded because North Carolina was a democratic state – perhaps not as democratic as Mann’s Massachusetts, but certainly more so than its southern neighbors. Meanwhile, the apotheosis of superintendent Wiley is a testament not only to his pivotal role in the North Carolina schools, but also to his role as first historian of the common school movement.

In 1881, former North Carolina State Superintendent of Public Instruction Calvin H. Wiley wrote a serialized history of common schools in *The North Carolina Educational Journal*. In his “History of Common Schools in North Carolina,” he quickly disavowed any desire for self-promotion, claiming:

> he would much prefer that some other and competent person should undertake the task which circumstances have forced on him; and here, once for all, he wishes it to be distinctly known that while he may seem to say much of his own exertions he writes with diffidence and tries to refer to the principle actor as little as loyalty to the truth and justice to his subject will permit.³

But from the first installment, it was clear that Wiley was setting himself up to be the hero of his story. He began with the dramatic declaration “there were more difficulties in the way of the successful establishment of a general system of Public Schools in North Carolina

than in any other state of the Union.” According to Wiley, “more than any other people in the Union we were ignorant of our own history and resources, and as a result we were deficient in that State pride essential to enterprise and hopefulness.” In addition to public ignorance and malaise, North Carolina was beset by sectional tensions -- “The east and west regarded each other as remote and rival, and it might be said, as hostile communities, and sectional prejudice and alienations shed a baneful influence on our legislation.” Prior to his appointment as state superintendent, the situation was dire indeed: “There was a continual drain of our people to the West and South-West, and we became but a nursery from which to transplant a sturdy yeomanry to other regions.”

Fortunately, a savior was waiting in the wings with pen at the ready:

A desire, almost born with the writer, and growing with his growth was to see applied the remedies for this sad state of things – and with his intense yearning for a system of popular education, was the hope, at first but a pleasant dream, of seeing a manly self-respect infused into the heart of the State, and pushing it in the paths of honorable ambition. The first efforts of his pen were in this direction, and in 1852 he published, at his own expense, “The N.C. Reader,” a popular history and description of the State…The work became a standard in our schools of all classes ‘til the close of the war between the States, and it is a fact of history that it exerted a quiet and immense influence in the creation and fostering of a new spirit among the masses of our people. The author denied himself a handsome pecuniary return, but he lived to see accomplished an end which he had more at heart. The entire rising generation became more familiar with the history and resources of N.C.

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4 Wiley, June 1881
5 Wiley, March 1882.
6 Wiley, March 1882.
7 Wiley, March 1882..
That writer was, of course, Calvin Wiley. And without reproducing the entire contents of his serialized history of common schools, it suffices to say that his sense of "loyalty to the truth and justice of his subject" often required him to praise the heroic efforts of the state’s first superintendent of common schools. This is not to say that Wiley’s history is entirely myth. Though he emphasizes his own role, he is generally faithful to the facts and careful to discuss the importance of previous legislative efforts, particularly the allocation of the federal treasury surplus of 1836 to the Literary Fund. Not surprisingly, the first professional historians of the common school movement turned to Wiley’s history as a valuable primary source (perhaps, as we shall see, a bit too much).

Seven years later after the publication of Wiley’s history, native North Carolinian and Johns Hopkins trained historian Charles Lee Smith wrote a monograph on common schools in North Carolina for the United States Bureau of Education. Drawing heavily on Wiley’s own history, Smith concluded that “public-school system had reached its highest efficiency at the outbreak” of the Civil War. Writing a decade later for an official Bureau of Education publication, North Carolina historian Stephen Beauregard Weeks explained his biographical approach to the history of common schools in antebellum North Carolina: “The great leader in the development of North Carolina common schools – primary and secondary schools organized and supported by the State – was Calvin Henderson Wiley (1819-1887), their first and only superintendent before the war. Hence this chapter in the history of Southern

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8 Wiley, August 1881.
education has taken, to a certain extent, the form of a biography.” Early on, then, the key features of the North Carolina common school narrative were in place. The first and most obvious feature was the theme of the heroic reformer. The focus on Wiley was ubiquitous and repetitive. In his 1916 study *Public School Education in North Carolina*, University of North Carolina historian Edgar Wallace Knight proclaimed, “the history of public education in the State from 1853 to the war is in the main his biography and the history of his noteworthy educational achievements.” Three years later, Trinity College (later Duke University) history professor William K. Boyd asserted “from his assumption of the state superintendency on January 1, 1853, to the close of the Civil War, the common schools are as much a part of Mr. Wiley’s biography as a chapter in the state’s history. His constant appeals to the public, his patience, self-denial, and sense of moral responsibility made him a veritable missionary.” That these early historians would claim that the history of common schools during the last decade of the antebellum period was Wiley’s biography is not surprising when we consider that his autobiography was their primary source.

The heroism of Wiley was not the only theme to emerge from Wiley’s serialized history of common schools. Wiley constantly referred to the rise of the common schools as an expression of popular will (prodded, of course, by his leadership and his “North Carolina Reader.”) Revealingly, he entitled the chapter on the inception of common schools “The

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birth of a new spirit in the State.” Subsequent historians quickly took up this theme of common schools as a manifestation of a rising tide of democracy and progress. They quickly located this upswing in a common narrative of North Carolina political history – “the rise of the west.”

Looking back over North Carolina’s history in the years prior to the Civil War, these historians saw the correspondence of education with the expansion of the vote and the rise of the common man. Specifically, they identified it with the realignment of state power along regional lines. For years, eastern slaveholders had dominated North Carolina’s legislature. The planter oligarchy consistently opposed progressive measures like internal improvements and common schools. This changed when the balance of power shifted toward the western part of the state around 1835. The shift, according to these historians, explained the common school movement. As R.D.W Connor wrote in 1923, “the social life of the West was more democratic than that of the East. Out of this democratic social system arose the first demand for a system of public schools in North Carolina.”

Connor’s contrast between the eastern and western sections of the State was a common theme in North Carolina history. While the east stood for the aristocratic planter, the West represented the democratic yeoman. For historians like Knight, who set out to “trace the development of the democratic principles of education this correspondence between the rise of democracy and education in North Carolina seemed natural.”

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13 Wiley, March 1882...
The first histories of American public education coincided with the rise of the education profession in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The authors of these histories were both historians and “professional advocates.” Often educators themselves, these men made education reformers and administrators the heroes and heroines of their progressive narratives. In their accounts, education was a reflection of an increasingly democratic, egalitarian, and modern society. Though led by middle class and elite humanitarians, the common school movement benefited all classes. Thus, the tendency of early educational historians to deify Wiley and tout the democratic and progressive nature of the early common school movement was not merely a function of their use of Wiley as a historical source. The narratives they wrote reflected perspectives and biases embedded into their profession.

Towards the middle of the twentieth century, as a new generation of historians began to look at the common school movement, the generally positive account of the rise of common schools predictably came under attack. Rejecting their predecessors’ positive portrayals of educational reform, historians such as Michael Katz focused on the ways in which education was used by elites as an instrument of control. Moreover, these revisionist education historians emphasized how school systems reflected fundamental societal inequalities. Other historians challenging the prevailing paradigm, such as Bernard Bailyn, took educational historians to task for their narrow focus on educational institutions. Meanwhile, economist Albert Fishlow challenged historians of education to take a more

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critical look at census and attendance data. Most of these studies focused on New England. However, their theoretical approach informed new studies of southern school reform.\textsuperscript{17}

This paradigm shift in educational history inevitably filtered down to the study of North Carolina common schools in the antebellum period. This is not to say that every account of North Carolina common school history published to prior to 1950 can be indiscriminately lumped in the category of “professional advocacy.” For example, the measured judgment of Guion Griffis Johnson’s 1937 work \textit{Antebellum North Carolina: A Social History} -- “the ante-bellum period opened and closed with the majority of the people in the State indifferent to education; some, yeomen and gentry alike, were actually opposed to the principle of public education” stands in contrast to the hyperbolic boosterism of some of her peers.\textsuperscript{18} Likewise, the meticulous scholarship of M.C.S Noble’s history of common schools outshines the hagiography of R.D.W Connor. In short, all early studies of common schools in North Carolina were not created equal. Nevertheless, all of them exhibit the tendency toward the teleological. In their accounts, the history of common schools unfolded as yet another example of the inexorable march of progress and democracy. In the latter half of the twentieth century, a new group of historians challenged these generally progressive early narratives.


Calvin Wiley, the hero of the progress narrative, was a natural target of these revisionist historians. Howard Braverman’s 1951 dissertation offered considerable qualification to the glowing praise of early historians. Meanwhile, in his 1960 dissertation, Paul Ford criticized Wiley as an optimistic but fuzzy thinker, noting: “the difficulty involved in Wiley’s optimism was that he never defined explicitly, in political, social, and economic terms, what these ends of society --- success and prosperity – were. Wiley visualized the common schools as the means by which men could be trained for their respective tasks in achieving this destiny of success and prosperity. But since these terms were but vaguely defined, so too were the goals and methods of the common schools.”  

Though certainly more critical of Wiley than hagiographers like Connor, both Ford and Braverman still assessed his tenure in generally positive terms. For example, Braverman noted that Wiley “gave impetus to the development of North Carolina’s self-awareness and particularly that he infused life into an educational system which had been previously dormant.”

The attacks became sharper as the years progressed. In her 1977 study of southern common school reformers, Kathryn Pippin challenged the established narrative of southern exceptionalism in the field of education. According to Pippin, Wiley and his southern peers were part of an emerging professional class intent on challenging the conservative planter elite and improving their own lot. Meanwhile, John Weaver’s 1975 study of Wiley’s proslavery writings called the “rise of democracy” narrative into question, emphasizing

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Wiley’s role as an apologist for slavery.\textsuperscript{21} By 1980, both the “rise of the west” and the heroic reformer features of the North Carolina Common school narrative had been subject to considerable revision. No longer the champion of the common man, Wiley had been recast as a slaveholding bourgeoisie protecting his own interests. Meanwhile, in the fields of political and social history, historians such as Mark Kruman and Gail O’Brien had effectively challenged and complicated the simplistic portrait of progressivism implicit in the “rise of the west” narrative.\textsuperscript{22}

In 1995, Keith Whitescarver provided the most convincing challenge to this traditional narrative in his dissertation \textit{Political Economy, Schooling, and Literacy in the South: a Comparison of Plantation and Yeoman communities in North Carolina, 1840-1880}. The first to make extensive use of common school enrollment data from the federal census population manuscripts, Whitescarver employed sophisticated statistical methods to gauge popular support for common schools. As we will see, Whitescarver’s groundbreaking study turned the common narrative of heroic reform, progressivism, and North Carolina’s exceptionalism in the antebellum period on its head.

Despite these attacks, the traditional narrative of North Carolina as a bastion progressive exceptionalism has shown remarkable resilience. For example, a recent and


authoritative overview of common school history singled out North Carolina for its exceptional antebellum common school system. According to the author, common schools in the South drew their strongest support from “middling-status southerners, small farmers and professionals in the upcountry, many of whom opposed the extension of slavery, who were hostile to the slaveholding aristocracy, and who favored more democratic political institutions.” North Carolina’s schools succeeded because “North Carolinians had long displayed more moderate attitudes about slavery, class, and education.” In his 1996 article, “Education in the Forming of the American South,” John Hardin Best argued that formal public education was largely irrelevant in the antebellum South. Still, he was careful to note the establishment of common schools “throughout the entire state of North Carolina due to the tireless efforts of a Calvin Wiley.”

The persistence of the “Whig” interpretation of North Carolina common school history makes some historical sense. Historical evidence plays an important role. In many respects, the narrative has withstood some of the revisionist onslaughts because North Carolina was exceptional. Wiley did work hard and, of course, there is no denying that North Carolina was the only state with a centrally administered common school system prior to the Civil War. More to the point, the numbers don’t lie. Enrollment statistics suggest that common schools flourished in western North Carolina under Wiley. For example, in a 2003

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24 Eric Foner and Carl Kaestle. 211.
article in *The North Carolina Historical Review*, historian Timothy Lockley cited data from Wiley’s annual reports showing that nearly 75% of eligible white children were enrolled in Buncombe County to argue that common schools played an important role in bolstering white unity across class lines in western North Carolina.²⁶ My analysis of attendance data in Burke County suggests that previous historians’ faith in numbers might be misplaced.

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Antecedents

In 1961, Robert L. Patton published “A Brief History of Burke County Schools.” To date, it remains the most comprehensive work on education in Burke County. Patton’s service as superintendent of county schools from 1924 to 1963 afforded him intimate knowledge of the county and its schools and his study remains an invaluable resource for any historian of Burke County education. Despite its merits, Patton’s work fails to shed much light on the nature of schools in the antebellum period. Patton attributed this shortcoming to the dearth of sources, noting that “since there are no official minutes of the Board of Education prior to 1885 one cannot be sure of exactly what took place in the schools of Burke County. Snatches of information by word of mouth and some other sources give us some idea of conditions in this county.”

27 R.L. Patton. A Brief History of Burke County Schools. ([Burke County, NC?] 1971), 1. Patton’s assessment of the availability of official board of education minutes is mostly accurate. He did overlook the County Court of Pleas and Quarter (P&Q) Sessions as a potential source. Prior to an 1844 act requiring a separate book for Board of Superintendent of Schools proceedings, most counties kept their records in the P&Q Sessions. (Charles Crittenden and Dan Lacy, eds., The County Records, Alamance through Columbus, Vol. 1 of The Historical Records of North Carolina (Raleigh: The North Carolina Historical Commission, 1938), 118.) Unfortunately, Burke County’s P&Q records are spotty; sadly, their coverage gaps coincide with two critical periods in common school history. Common schools were established in North Carolina in 1839. In the first year or two after the act first passed, counties divided their counties into school districts, often recording the boundaries in the P&Q minutes. However, there are no Burke County P&Q records between 1835 and 1840. P&Q records are available from 1841-1849. A review of them reveals the names of the common school board, but not much else. Records are again unavailable from 1850 to the end of the antebellum period. For a detailed account of the availability of antebellum records in Burke county, I thank Gale Benfield, curator of the NC Room of Morganton Library, for pointing me to the following resources: Pittman, Betsy Dodd. “What Happened to Burke County Count Records?” Burke Journal (August 1998): 4-5. Burke County Geneaoligical Society “Where Are the Early Burke County Records?” (Pamphlet available in NC Room in Morganton, NC Public Library.)
Of course, prior to the establishment of common schools in North Carolina in 1839, non-government sources remain our only source of information. Though this study is focused on the period between 1853 and 1861, it is important to understand the period that preceded Avery’s tenure. The common schools did not spontaneously generate, but rather grew out of existing educational arrangements. Prior to the advent of common schools, there were two major educational avenues for residents of the South in general and Burke County in particular – the subscription or “old field” school and the academy. Both subscription schools and academies existed in Burke County before and during the common school period.

Subscription schools were usually established by a prominent man on land unfit for cultivation (hence the name old-field) for his children and neighbors. There was a subscription fee for each student to attend which paid for the teacher’s salary. Sometimes the subscription of poor students would be paid by wealthy neighbors or state funds. Though they had their supporters, subscription schools did not generally enjoy a good academic reputation. Contemporary critics pointed to their rudimentary curriculum and indifferent and often immoral instructors as reasons for educational reform.

Indeed, the theme of the corrupting influence of the unqualified “old field” school master became a common battle cry of common school advocates intent on improving

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30 Knight,151.
teacher standards. Writing in 1855, Calvin Wiley lamented “the lazy, the lame, the eccentric, were but too often the “old field teachers.”” Despite the apparently poor quality of instruction and rudimentary curriculum, many people still tried to get an education out of these schools. Unfortunately, the subscription fee made this difficult for poor families. As Wiley observed,

The schools were generally limited to a quarter of three months during the coldest part of the winter, and as families with two or six children would subscribe half a scholar, the house would often be jammed with sixty students and as often hold fifteen or twenty. Half a scholar! Why, can’t we remember when five children would biennially get the benefit of the teaching due half a scholar for three months; that is, when one and half months schooling every year, or every two years, would be divided among three to five children making six to ten days or more apiece?

James Murphy Kincaid (born in 1819 to a farming family of relatively modest means) attended a subscription school in the Linville River Area in Burke County during the 1820s and 1830s. His recollections confirm Wiley’s critique of the “old-field” school. Consider his first experience under one Mr. Presswood: “Well, Presswood would just sleep and sleep during school time, and roast turnip peelings, and we often went out and played when he was asleep. I think I got through the A,B,C’s.” Later, Kincaid received instruction from Mr. Bragg, a man apparently given to bouts of binge drinking:

My father and Uncle, and a few others, hired him by the year and supported him and his small family. They kept him for three years and took in all the scholars they could get. Well, my reader, he, I mean Bragg, would sometimes get on a big drunk, and then they would stop him for a while. As I said, I went in the winter – bad house; no

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31 Knight, 151.
32 Knight, 153.
33 James M. Kincaid. History of the Kincaid Family. (La Veta, CO: Joe K. Kincaid, 1918), 30.
Kincaid’s experience in the subscription schools was not entirely negative. He singled out “Dr. Harvey Perkins, a good scholar and a fair teacher.” (Kincaid, 33) Nevertheless, he conveyed the general impression that the education he received was a function not of the quality of the instruction he received in the “old-field” schools, but his own desire: “I even went to one school after I was a married man. I had a great desire to be a good scholar and I applied myself all that was in my power, but the most of my teachers were sorry English grammarians.”

Had Kincaid’s family been wealthier, he might have been able to receive a better education at one of Burke County’s academies. Though the quality of academies available in the antebellum South varied, they were generally considered to be superior to subscription schools in both range of curriculum and quality of instruction. The son of a wealthy planter might attend an “old field” school to learn his three Rs. Indeed, James Kincaid recalled getting in a fight with wealthy Burke County resident future governor of North Carolina Tod R. Caldwell at one of the various subscription schools he attended. However, anyone seeking to advance to the highest levels of society – to manage a plantation or become a lawyer – would want to continue his education at an academy.

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34 Kincaid, 31.
35 Kincaid, 33.
36 Knight, 54.
37 Kincaid, 32.
In the antebellum period, Burke had several academies. The oldest and most respected was the Morganton Academy. First chartered in 1783, Morganton Academy offered elite natives of Western Carolina an advanced education.\textsuperscript{38} An advertisement from the June 11, 1822, edition of the \textit{Carolina Watchman}, a newspaper printed in Salisbury, touted the academy’s virtues, noting “the mode of instruction pursued is the result of much attention and experience, and eminently calculated to fit young gentlemen and ladies for the active duties of life, and to prepare students successfully to pursue their collegiate studies.” Morganton Academy offered its students an advanced curriculum of “Language, History, Rhetoric, or Moral, Intellectual, Natural or Political Philosophy.” Of course, its 20-dollar annual tuition and additional fees for board put such an education out of reach of all but the wealthiest North Carolinians.

Renewing its charter in 1823 and again in 1844, Morganton Academy kept its doors open through most of the antebellum period.\textsuperscript{39} In addition to Morganton Academy, several other small academies offered education to Burke County elites. W.W. Avery received his education at a classical school held near Quaker Meadows in Burke County. Meanwhile, there is an account of Tod R. Caldwell, apparently quite a troublemaker in his youth, being lashed by the teacher of Stoney Hill Academy in the mid 1830s.\textsuperscript{40}

Interestingly, one of the teachers of Morganton Academy would go on to become a fixture of the free schools. Thomas Washington Scott, a Burke County native, taught at the

\textsuperscript{38} R.L. Patton. \textit{A Brief History of Burke County Schools.} ([Burke County, NC?]: 1971), 2.
\textsuperscript{39} Patton, 2.
\textsuperscript{40} Patton, 2.
academy in 1835. Ten years later, he “became the head of probably the first free school in Morganton.” Of course, the academy was not the exclusive domain of future governors. Like subscription schools, academies ranged widely in type and quality of education offered. The overwhelming majority of academy students never went on to matriculate at a university, a privilege reserved for a minute percentage of antebellum North Carolinians. The experience of Virgil Lusk, a resident of nearby Buncombe County, suggests a common educational experience for ambitious students in the antebellum period. Like James Kincaid, Lusk came from modest circumstances. Born in 1836, he started school in 1842, just as common schools were getting their start in the County.

The common school could only take Lusk so far. Eager to learn more, he enrolled in an academy, paying his way by working as a farm laborer. Lusk was careful to note the improvements brought about by the common school. But the reality was that the common school was essentially a state subsidized subscription school. The schoolhouse remained inadequate and the curriculum rudimentary. The common school represented an improvement on the “old-field” school insofar as it brought standardization and regulation. However, it did not obviate the problem of access that Wiley alluded to in his “half scholar” lament. Students still had to pay for their own books and there was, of course, the problem of geographical isolation.

41 Patton, 2.
42 Virgil S. Lusk Papers. North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.
A review of the early history of common schools in Burke County suggests that they built on the foundation of both the academy and the subscription school – more enhancing what was already there rather than providing something that was entirely new.

While men like Virgil Lusk and James Kincaid may have come from modest circumstances compared with wealthy slave-owners, they were still far better off than the many Burke County residents who had no money or land. The system of providing Burke County’s least fortunate with an education had its roots in England and the colonial period. Of course, most of the poor received no education at all. But rudimentary education was often a part of the conditions of apprenticeship to learn a trade. The church played an important role in providing education to the poor in the antebellum South. Many early educational historians have emphasized the important roles that Sunday Schools played in promoting literacy among the poor and laying the groundwork for public education in the antebellum South. Members of the church certainly played a role in providing education to Burke County citizens throughout the antebellum period. However, they were generally directly involved as teachers of academies and subscription. Indeed, churches often doubled as schoolhouses. As the Buncombe County Marshall noted in the social statistics schedule of the 1850 census: “The scarcity of churches may in a great measure be attributed among other things to the fact of there being in the county 57 common schoolhouses the doors of which

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are always cheerfully thrown for religious service.” There is no evidence to suggest that the church played a major role as educator of the poor or indigent in antebellum Burke County.\(^{45}\)

In summary, the educational institutions that preceded the advent of common schools in Burke County laid the foundation for the common schools. It is quite possible that many students never knew that they were attending public schools. In genealogical sources, we find that the schools of the common school era are still referred to as subscription schools. Consider the following account from 1981 Burke County Heritage’s section on the Hodge Family: “George, Jr. attended the subscription school at Snow Hill Church and sent all his children to school there, too. His son and his three daughters all loved to read and all had beautiful handwriting. George, Jr. saw to it that his children mastered Noah Webster’s American Speller later known as the Blue Back Speller.”\(^{46}\)

According to this source, George Hodge, Jr. was born in 1815 and lived in the western part of Burke County. The 1850 census for Burke County listed him as a farmer with 1000 dollars of property and 2 children, Robert (age 6) and Martha (age 2). An 1856 class roster for Common School District 28 lists both Hodge children. Out of a possible 88 days, Martha attended school 87 days, while Robert attended 84.\(^{47}\)

The educational experiences of George’s children in the church doubling as a school were probably not much different from those of their father. They may have even used the


\(^{46}\) Burke County Historical Society. *The Heritage of Burke County* (Morganton, NC: Burke County Historical Society, 1981), 238.

\(^{47}\) Attendance Roster, 1856. James Avery Papers. Southern Historical Collection. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.
same schoolbook. The common schools built on an existing foundation. Before describing how the common schools built upon this foundation, it is necessary to look at the origins of the statewide movement.
The Rise of the West

Common schools did not magically appear as a result of a revolution of popular will. Nevertheless, the emergence of common schools was tied to political developments in the state. Three decades into the nineteenth century, North Carolina’s revolution-era constitution remained unchanged. Increasingly, its method of apportioning representation in the state Senate and House of Commons was running up against a new demographic reality. Under the 1776 constitution, each county received one senator and two members of the House of the Commons. Both offices had property requirements. Senators were required to own 300 acres of land, while House of Commons members were required to own at least 100 acres. The eastern part of the state had been settled earlier than the piedmont and mountains to the west. Until 1810, the eastern part of the state remained more populous than the west. However, as settlers moved both southward down the “Great Wagon Road” into the northern piedmont and northward up from South Carolina into the southern piedmont, the population in the western part of the state outstripped that of the previously settled east. Easterners limited western power by limiting the number of western counties. In this way, the county system resulted in disproportionate representation in the state assembly for the eastern part of the state. Those living west of Raleigh grew increasingly dissatisfied with their lack of proportional representation. By early 1835, these westerners teamed up with urban easterners unhappy with the legislature’s unwillingness to help promote commercial

development and called for a statewide referendum on a constitutional convention. Since most of the state’s population lived west of Raleigh, the convention was called.\textsuperscript{49}

In the “rise of the west” narratives of certain early educational historians, this convention became the defining moment in state politics in which the pendulum power swung westward forever. Generally, the western part of the state was associated with the Whig party while the east (except for the northeast corner of the state where transportation and access to markets was limited) was associated with the Democratic Party. However, as the alliance required to call the 1835 referendum suggests, the lines were not strictly regional. Issues of economic development and market access were actually more important in determining party allegiances. As it happened, the geography of the state dictated that this resulted in a power shift largely along an east/west axis. And so, North Carolina in the antebellum period was a political anomaly in the South—a state with its Whig power centered in the piedmont and the west. However, as we will see, the unusual phenomenon of having a Whig party’s power base centered in a largely nonslaveholding region made for interesting politics—particularly when it came to the support of common schools.

Far from representing the unqualified “rise of the west,” the convention of 1835 in many ways heralded the west’s fragmentation. First, the Convention of 1835 represented a compromise in which some power shifted west, but much was still retained by the eastern counties. Representation in the Senate was now based on taxes paid. This allowed the

\textsuperscript{49} Kruman, 12.
wealthier eastern counties to retain disproportionate representation in the senate. Meanwhile, representation in the House of Commons was now based on federal population numbers (which counted each slave as three-fifths of a person for purposes of representation). Again, this gave the east representation out of proportion to their white population. Even with this provision, the overwhelming population majority of western counties allowed them to gain the house. Later, the federal basis of representation would become a divisive issue within the “west” and the Whig party. Piedmont and western counties with relatively large slave populations would favor its continuance while overwhelmingly non-slaveholding counties lobbied for its overturn as the basis of representation and school fund distribution. The constitution was also amended to limit taxes on slaves (another concession to eastern interests). Property qualifications on office holding and senatorial electors were retained. The governorship was made a popularly elected, if politically impotent office.  

Though designed to ease sectional tensions, these amendments would in the words of Marc W. Kruman provide “ample grist for the future partisan mill.” This is not surprising. It was certainly tempting for an ambitious politician to resurrect the issue of free suffrage in a state where nearly all males could vote for the governor, but only half could vote for state senator. Likewise, proposing the removal of a constitutional limitation on slave taxation was a potential vote Swinger when nearly 70% of white families did not own slaves. Finally, as we shall see, the federal basis for representation would serve as a future source of

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50 Kruman, 12.
51 Kruman, 13.
controversy. The Constitutional Convention of 1835 did not create the common schools, but helped lay the groundwork for their creation. Actually, there had been a movement for public education for some time. In his history of common schools of North Carolina, M.C.S Noble does an excellent job of outlining some of the early efforts to promote public education. It was not until 1825 that the legislature responded financially to these movements in any meaningful way.

On January 4th, 1826 the senate passed “An Act to Create a Fund for the Establishment of Common Schools.” This act, commonly referred to as the Literary Fund Act of 1825, set aside funds from bank dividends, license and retailers’ tax entry of vacant lands. A controlling board, called the “President and Directors of the Literary Fund” and consisting of the “governor, chief justice of supreme court, speakers of House and Senate, and state treasurer were authorized to dispense the funds for educational purposes as they saw fit. The years following the creation of the Literary Fund saw it nearly depleted. However, by November of 1836, it had grown to roughly 242,000 dollars.

In 1836, an Act of the United States Congress directed a federal treasury surplus to be distributed to the states on the basis of their federal representation. This resulted in a distribution of approximately 1.4 million dollars to North Carolina. The legislature decided the money should go to the literary fund and directed the president and directors of the literary fund to report on the best way to use this money to establish common schools.

52 Kruman, 13.
54 Noble, 49.
The resulting report, read to the House of Commons, in December of 1838 stated that literary fund moneys alone would not be sufficient and recommended a system headed by superintendent supported by public taxation. On January 8, 1839, North Carolina had its first common school law. The law called for a vote in each county for or against a tax to support common schools (at the rate of one dollar for every two dollars furnished from the Literary Fund.) On August 8, 1839, the school tax carried in all but 7 counties. Those counties that levied and collected tax sufficient to give 20 dollars for each school district would receive 40 dollars form the literary fund for each school district. According to the provisions of the first law, districts were to be no smaller than six miles square in each county.

A February 16, 1839, editorial in the Salisbury Whig newspaper *Carolina Watchman* is indicative of the cautious optimism of the act’s supporters:

COMMON SCHOOLS -- We fear that the members of the late General Assembly, (by whom this act was passed almost unanimously) have not taken sufficient pains to explain and impress its importance upon the public mind. It is true, that it is but the beginning of a large experiment on a small scale, but it must succeed; and the counties that go into the system first, will soonest realize its advantages. They who are obliged to spend eight or ten dollars yearly, can by adopting this measure secure by paying a few cents a better teacher than they have usually had. We say a better teacher; for by this law, no one is to be employed in this capacity, whose qualifications (moral and literary) are not passed upon by they Superintendents and

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55 Noble, 56-57.  
56 Noble, 59.  
57 Noble, 68.  
58 Noble, 60.
School Committee men. It is true, the sums now offered, will not be sufficient to
establish Schools for the whole year. But a winter school for a few months will
certainly do much good; Probably in the present state of things, a school for a longer
time would not be generally patronized. For the second year it is thought, that the
income of the Literary Fund will enable the Legislature to double the sums afforded
in the first year. Afterwards, it is believed, they will be able to contribute more
largely. The establishment of good school houses in every six miles square will
achieve much. The sanction of the school officers to a set of teachers, will afford a
passport to employment for the meritorious, while it will go far to protect the public
from worthless, immoral and ignorant pretenders. It will stimulate many to merit
such a recommendation who have never thought of preparing for the business. In
every point of view it must do much good for the country. We hope that the Clergy
in particular will take up this matter. There is surely no greater obstacle to the
success of their efforts than ignorance. Literature is the hand-maid to Religion. The
votaries at the one, ought surely to help the other all they can.

Without the changes of the Constitutional Convention of 1835, it is unlikely that an
eastern controlled legislature would have voted to distribute the federal treasury surplus to
the literary fund or require each county to raise taxes to support common schools. However,
as we have seen, the Convention did not mark an absolute transfer of power to the west. In
January of 1841, the General Assembly repealed the Common School Law of 1839 and
passed “An act for the establishment and better regulation of the Common Schools.” This act
made local taxation optional and made federal population the basis of literary fund
distribution to the counties, thus dashing the hopes of many western and Whig supporters of
common schools. The response to the act in the January 16, 1841, edition of the Carolina
Watchman frames the act in familiar terms of a sectional struggle:

59 Laws of the State of North Carolina Passed by the General Assembly at the Session of 1840-41:
Published Agreeably to Act of Assembly, Laws of N.C. 1840-41. (Raleigh, 1841), 11-16.
It is understood that the school districts are to be formed according to Federal population, which is perhaps the only practicable plan that could be adopted under present circumstances. The old case of cross question, East against West and West against East has been revived and argued with no other result than an increase of cost and irritation: we supposed that this matter was compromised and finally settled by the amendment of the Constitution in 1835, that these sectional interests had all been merged in the general interest and jealousy forever buried, but it seems that after five years rest it has suddenly resussitated, and re-enacts the farce of the dog in the manger.

Of course, the rise of common schools was not simply an issue of east vs. west or Whig vs. Democrat. Both parties and sections generally supported a system of common schools. Instead, disagreements centered over how to implement the system – whether the state should appoint a superintendent of schools and whether counties needed to raise taxes to match state distribution of funds. For example, “when the state Senate in 1848-1849 debated a new requirement for county taxes to support local schools, 69.6 percent of the Whigs voted for such legislation, while 80 percent of the Democrats opposed it.”

Each party and section liked to paint itself as the champion of the common man and white equality and the rhetoric surrounding debates over political issues of the day is redolent of class and racial rhetoric. On the one hand, Whigs had made opposition to public education politically inexpedient for Democrats by framing it as an enterprise on behalf of the common man. Of course, the Democrats gave as good as they got. For example, in the gubernatorial campaign of 1848, the Democrats effectively used the issue of free suffrage to paint the Whigs as the party of aristocracy. In 1852, the issue of distribution of the common school

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60 Kruman, 59.
61 Kruman, 59.
62 Kruman, 102.
fund on the basis of federal population became a central issue of the gubernatorial race. This put the Whig party in a tight spot. As they had learned in the election of 1848, they could not afford to be seen as hostile to the interests of the common man. On one hand, the issue seemed like a no-brainer. However, important slaveholding piedmont Whig counties could lose power as a result.\textsuperscript{63}

Each Whig candidate attempted to walk a political tight rope within his own party – opposing change in the basis in piedmont counties while supporting it in the west proved fatal to any candidacy against a democratic party united on the issue of free suffrage and popular election.\textsuperscript{64} The resulting equivocation alienated the predominantly nonslaveholding areas of Whig support in western North Carolina.

The idea, then, that the appointment of a state superintendent of common schools in 1852 represents the culmination of the “rise of the west,” coming as it does under a Democratic governor and in the wake of a gubernatorial campaign that highlighted division within the “west” and the Whig party, seems untenable. More likely, it is the result of the emergence of a “bipartisan consensus endorsing active state involvement in the economy.” Consider, for example, the house vote for the appointment of the state superintendent in

\textsuperscript{63} Kruman, 98.  
\textsuperscript{64} Kruman, 98.
1852. In both the senate and house, substantial minorities of democrats voted in favor of the measure.⁶⁵

An analysis of legislation and political battles surrounding the common schools from the Constitutional Convention of 1835 to the appointment of Calvin Wiley as a state superintendent in 1852 reveals that Wiley’s appointment hardly represents the triumph of a yeoman west. Though contemporaries and subsequent historians have often framed the movement in terms of sectional and class antagonisms, the reality was much more complex. The image of the western yeoman made for effective political rhetoric, but we must not conflate a region with a class of people or mistake rhetoric for reality.

⁶⁵ Kruman, 83. Senate – 39.3% (Democrat) 95.2 % (Whig) House 45.1% (D) 67.8% (W). Of course, as Thomas Jeffrey suggests, there may also have been a more personal factor at work in this particular vote. Appointed state superintendent of common schools in 1852, Calvin Wiley’s position was in jeopardy from attacks by Conservative Democrats. In 1854, the Democrats won control of both houses of the General Assembly and “conservatives within the party made a strenuous effort to repeal the act of 1852.” Thomas E. Jeffrey. "‘Our Remarkable Friendship’: The Secret Collaboration of Calvin H. Wiley and John W. Cuningham.” North Carolina Historical Review 67 (1990): 36. Correspondence between Wiley, a Whig, and prominent Democrat John W. Cuningham, who had been friends since their days as roommates at the University of North Carolina, suggests that Wiley ghost wrote Cuningham’s addresses that were so influential in saving Wiley’s office.
Common Schools Come to Burke County

The county organizational structure for common schools was first established in the school act of 1839. For those counties that voted approved the act, no less than five and no more than ten superintendents of common schools were to be elected at the first county court session of 1840. These superintendents were to elect their own chairman. The first job of the county superintendents was to divide the county into districts not more than six miles square “provided that no greater number of districts should be laid off in any county than shall be equal to one for every six miles square of inhabited territory in said county.” Once they had established the districts, the superintendents were to appoint at least three but no more than six committeemen in each district “in all matters relating to the establishment of schools for their respective districts.”

As we have seen, subscription schools and academies existed in Burke County prior to the advent of common schools. There is no record of how districts were divided; however, it is reasonable to assume that they were built around existing communities and schools. Very few counties had the resources or inclination to conduct a formal survey of school districts. More common was the process of dividing the county up by natural boundaries. Illustrative of this process is the following description of school district 9 in Jackson County:

No. 9 Beginning at the mouth of Camp Creek & runs up the creek to the line of the old Gibson Tract. Thence with line of sd. Tract around its western boundary to the line of the Moody Russel tract thence with western boundery of that tract to the

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summit of the ridge on the Northwest of Camp Creek. Thence with the ridge to a high point above E. G Hyatts, then down with the sloop of a ridge to the branch at the lower end of E.G Hyatts farm, thence down the branch to the Nathan Hyatt stables. Thence a straight line to the Echota Mission, thence with the mountains an easterly & southeasterly direction above L.H. Enloe, J.K. Sherrill, Sarah Gibson, Jasper Dills & C. Cooper & on with the mountains to the river at the upper end of D. Raby’s farm known as Cane Field, thence down the river to the Beginning. Bad house on private property far removed from the center. Jason Hughes, S. W. Gibson Sr., E.G. Hyatt, Committee.  

Writing in response to an 1854 inquiry as to whether the school districts had been laid out by survey, Chairman of county superintendents of common schools James Avery replied, “No Sir, This in a mountainous county would not do.” Likewise, in mountainous Haywood County, the county school board Chairman noted that districts were divided “by natural boundrays.”

Proponents of common schools had long advertised their potential to benefit all classes of people. Dividing a county into school districts could very well have been the first step in shaking up existing power arrangements and reconfiguring social structures. However, common schools were not imposed on a blank slate. The following scenario proposed by the author of the Early History of Haywood County may have occurred in some areas:

We can imagine what a great and exciting day that was in 1841 (August probably) when the children of this county had their first day in school. Hurrying out from the

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67 August 11, 1858, Jackson County Common School Records, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, NC. Special thanks to George Frizzell at Western Carolina Special Collections for pointing this source out to me.
68 Burke County 1854 Survey Response. Calvin Wiley Papers, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.
69 Haywood County 1854 Survey Response, Calvin Wiley Papers, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.
secluded mountain settlement in little gangs, along deeply-wooded trails, they came – boys and girls, the small and the large, hurrying off to the little newly-built log school houses – wondering just what school would be like, anyway! 70

However, it is equally likely that many children in counties like Burke or Haywood did not encounter a novel experience in newly-built schoolhouses. Rather, they attended school in the same place they always had, but now their education was partially subsidized by the state. This is not to suggest that the advent of common schools did not bring education to places where it had not existed before, but rather to suggest that common schools were often absorbed fairly seamlessly into existing local arrangements.

In the following sections, we will examine some of the most neglected actors in the history of the common schools; the county superintendents, the committeemen, the teachers, and the students. Although these people implemented the common schools at the local level, they have been largely overlooked in previous studies. To some extent, this neglect is understandable. Poor school children obviously left behind fewer written records than Calvin Wiley. However, county superintendents were usually literate men of considerable wealth.

Since their job required only that they submit reports and correspond with the state superintendent, many of the county superintendents’ letters can be found in the official state education records. Indeed, the standard histories of common school are full of snippets of their correspondence. However, they are typically mentioned only to illustrate a particular point about a law or a general school condition. For example, both Calvin Wiley and Edgar

Knight cite James Avery’s account of his 1857 tour of schoolhouses in Burke County. The generally positive report Avery gives is yet another illustration of the steady progress of common schools under Wiley’s leadership.

To hear them tell it, common schools improved and changed under the leadership of James Avery and Calvin Wiley. Just because they were bragging doesn’t mean they were wrong. However, their accounts of increased enrollment and improved conditions must be weighed against those who have remained nameless and voiceless in the story of North Carolina common schools – the students, teachers, and committeemen. Early historians of the common school movement often described the movement as a “bottom-up” phenomenon – the “rise of the west” and the triumph of popular will. Yet, their historical approach, with its heavy reliance on the correspondences and reports of men like Calvin Wiley, has remained decidedly “top-down.” Perhaps it is only appropriate that the process for recovering these lost voices proceeds from top to bottom. From Wiley’s we learn of county superintendents like Avery. And from Avery’s reports we can, if we look carefully, learn about those “common” people and their educational experiences.
**Superintendents**

As a group, the county superintendents left behind the largest written record. They appear in standard accounts of North Carolina common school history, but usually only as correspondents with state superintendent Wiley. Though these correspondence excerpts give us insight into their views on common schools, they usually do not tell us much about the worldview or social standing of the author. In the following section, I will examine two county superintendent chairmen -- James Avery of Burke County and Joseph Cathey of Haywood County.

On his tour of the western part of North Carolina to promote common schools in 1853, state superintendent Calvin Wiley was impressed with Haywood County Chairman Joseph Cathey. In his journal, Wiley notes “(an excellent officer – papers all regular – made annual report – knows conditions of things in each district).”\(^{71}\) Cathey’s organization stands in marked contrast to that some of his western counterparts. However, it is also likely that Wiley saw something of himself in Cathey. Both men were Whigs. Wiley had recently served in the House, while Cathey represented Haywood in the Constitutional Convention of 1835 and served a term in the state in 1842.\(^{72}\) Both men were religious. Wiley would become an ordained minister in 1855, while Cathey was active in the Methodist church. Both men were of the upper class and owned several slaves, but both had to work for their money. Cathey ran a general merchandise store in Haywood while Wiley collected a 1500 dollar

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\(^{71}\) Calvin Wiley Journal, 1853, Calvin Wiley Papers, Duke University, Durham, NC.  
annual salary in his current post.\textsuperscript{73} James Avery of Burke County also fit the profile. Born the son of an Episcopalian Minister in Warwick County, Virginia in 1792, James Avery was sent to Burke County to live with his uncle Waighstill Avery in Burke County in 1799.

Waighstill Avery was a prominent citizen in Burke County. A graduate of Princeton and owner of the large plantation Swan Ponds, Waighstill played a crucial role in the writing of the state’s first constitution and was named its first attorney general. Waighstill is perhaps most famous for his 1788 duel with Andrew Jackson.\textsuperscript{74} As a young man, Avery was a schoolmaster. Later in life, he established his own plantation “Canoe Hill” overlooking Canoe Creek west of county seat Morganton. A justice of the peace and slaveholder, James assumed the role of Chairman of the County Board of Common Schools in 1853. It is thanks to his meticulous record keeping that we have a window into the world of common schools in the antebellum period.\textsuperscript{75} He carried a subscription to the North Carolina Whig.\textsuperscript{76}

Given their backgrounds, one would hardly expect these men to be advocates of a progressive movement or advocates of the common man. In truth, they were not. Though they were dedicated advocates of the common schools, they were ambivalent about its potential leveling influence. Consider Avery’s 1854 assessment of the reason for the challenges facing the common schools:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{73} Col. Joseph Cathey Papers and Calvin Wiley Papers, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.
\textsuperscript{74} Burke County Historical Society. \textit{The Heritage of Burke County} (Morganton, NC: Burke County Historical Society, 1981), 86.
\textsuperscript{75} Burke County Historical Society, 83.
\textsuperscript{76} Subscription stub, 1855, James Avery Papers. Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.
\end{quote}
The greatest difficulty in the way of success in our Common School system in my Opinion is the Apathy and indifference manifested by the Upper Classes who do not send their children much to Common Schools. It is strange, very strange, that any man whatever maybe his wealth or position in Society, should think that the success of the Common Schools would be no advantage to him! And whilst they are raising Heaven & earth to make Rail Roads & Plank Roads & in other respects improving the physical condition of the State; they seem to think that no improvement in the intellectual condition of the State is necessary except that which is derived from the University. I am clearly of the opinion that the Success of Common Schools in North Carolina would be laying the foundation of great Physical & Moral improvement.  

In this passage, Avery castigated the “upper classes” as if he were not one of them.

Throughout Avery’s correspondences, there is an undercurrent of resentment for these “upper classes” that seems unusual for a man from one of Burke County’s preeminent families with 10 slaves and assets totaling 17,000 dollars.  

In his 1856 report to Superintendent Wiley, Avery complains about,

R.C. Peirson Esq the most prominent gentleman of the Financial Committee is now in N. York, the others only one now being in in the county. I have had to get the Clerk to settle with me and certify as above. I frequently have much trouble in hunting up the Committee of Finance when they are in the County and the Clk is very often out of the County. The law ought to be amended and make it the duty of the Committee of Finance to give the Chairman a written notice to attend at the Court House as in case of other officers. And that too under a penalty.

In subsequent reports, Avery complained about his “kind friends” in the Finance Committee failing to certify the report correctly. While it’s possible that Avery’s comments signified nothing more than a personal dislike of Pearson, they take on new meaning when we consider

77 Burke County 1854 Survey Response, Calvin Wiley Papers, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.
78 U.S Census Bureau, 1860 Manuscript Population Schedule, Burke County.
79 Burke County Enrollment Report, 1856, Department of Public Instruction Records, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.
the socioeconomic background of Finance Committee chairman R.C. Pearson. According to the 1860 census, Pearson was an extremely wealthy man. He had over 100,000 dollars worth of real estate and personal property and 57 slaves. He was also a Democrat.  

To express his displeasure with Pearson and others who may not have shared his zeal for common school reform, Avery employed class rhetoric. This is not to say that there were not real economic and social differences between men like Avery and Pearson. However, it is important to recognize that these were differences between slaveholders.

Tod R. Caldwell, Burke County resident and future governor, illustrated this tendency in a letter to Joseph Cathey complaining about Democrat Thomas Clingman: “tho’ others write the bragging articles you see in the democratic papers declaiming his invincibility no one can doubt that Clingman himself is the man who advises them to it, hoping thereby to secure the votes of that Class of citizens who dislike the idea of “losing their vote.” Caldwell expressed his hope that the Whigs “demonstrate to the world and the “rest of mankind” that Mr. Clingman is not the ‘Lord Baltimore’ of the United States of America & especially that the freemen of the Mountain Districts of North Carolina are not his manacled slaves bound to do his bidding under pain and penalty of his most severe displeasure.”

Interestingly, Caldwell was one of the wealthiest slaveholders in Burke County. In a letter

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80 Burke County Enrollment Report, 1858-1859, Department of Public Instruction Records, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC
expressing contempt for “that class of citizens,” he vows to stand for “freemen” who would not be made “slaves.”

Likewise, though he adopted the tone of the common man’s champion against his opponents, Avery was in fact resented by “that class of citizens.” The following letter from John Dorsey, a nonslaveholding farmer in the Silver Creek section of the county to Calvin Wiley reveals bitterness over Avery’s recent election:

to cut the matter short he beet me one vote, he is one of those men that never could be elected for any thing scarily, he has devided two districts sense the allecttion, and know comes one question that he is suffering men to come before the borg, requesting that the borg should suffer him to remove across the district line And be attached to the one on the other side and have his children numbered in a different district of that which he lives in.\(^{83}\)

Dorsey was particularly galled by Avery’s refusal to distribute school funds to all districts:

“but mr Avery that is our present charmon was opposed to this masuer…it remind me of an old saying that I hierd when I was a boy, that the ox would not eate the hay that was give him nor would he let others eat it.”\(^{84}\) Avery’s reply is revealing. He remarked, “I have no small children to send to common schools, one daughter at F. Academy at Salem.”\(^{85}\) Wedged between some of Avery’s attendance records, we find the bill for Salem Female Academy. For a three-month term, he pays $105.55 for his daughter Laura. This amount of money would easily pay the salaries of two common school teachers in Burke County for three

\(^{83}\) John Dorsey to Calvin Wiley, March 2, 1854, Calvin Wiley Papers, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.

\(^{84}\) John Dorsey to Calvin Wiley, March 2, 1854, Calvin Wiley Papers, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.

\(^{85}\) James Avery to Calvin Wiley, November 10, 1854, Calvin Wiley Papers, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.
months. Yet Avery seems unconcerned about delaying the distribution of funds to school districts.86

Avery’s meticulous reports and record keeping reveal a man dedicated to good management and administration. But he is hardly an advocate of the common man.

Consider the letter Avery wrote to Wiley upon retiring as county chairman in 1861:

I have but little hope that my successor will do as much in the cause as I have done, but I have promised him to attend his meetings and assist him until he becomes some little acquainted with the business – He is a very honest man & very poor. Col. Gaither & myself has at last succeeded in getting an appropriation for a good Bridge across the Catawba near Morganton – The court levied the Tax (1500$) very cheerfully. My earnest prayer is that the State may long have your services, and that they may prove a blessing to the poor children of the State.87

According to the 1860 census, his successor, Martin Kebler, was a blacksmith with personal property valuing $850. To Avery, Martin Kebler was simply poor.88

86 Salem Academy to James Avery, 1855, James Avery Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.
87 James Avery to Calvin Wiley, April, 1861, James Avery Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.
88 U.S Census Bureau, 1860 Manuscript Population Schedule, Burke County.
Teachers

One wonders what Avery would have thought of the common school teacher. Consider the following excerpt from University of North Carolina president Joseph Caldwell’s address on public education: “is a man constitutionally and habitually indolent, a burden upon all from whom he can extract a support? Then there is one way of shaking him off; let us make a schoolmaster.”89 On the antebellum social scale, the school teacher stood low indeed. This negative view found some support in students’ recollections of Burke County’s subscription schools. The reasons were not far to seek, as Calvin Wiley noted in an 1854 address to school examining committees: “we cannot expect men to teach Common Schools for $15 per month, if, by an expensive education, family influence, &c, they are in a situation to apply themselves more profitably to other callings.”90 Teachers’ salaries did not attract the best and the brightest.

This concerned Wiley. Like Caldwell, he was concerned with the potentially corrupting influence of the wayward teacher. To this end, he vigorously promoted teacher certification standards with an emphasis on moral character. As Wiley noted in his remarks to examining committees:

proper allowances are to be made for want of mental culture, and for the sphere in which it is to operate, no allowance can be made for the want of moral character. The office of School Teacher, however considered by some, is the next in honor and importance to that of Pastor; and an immoral, profligate, or sensual man, in such a position, is a wolf among lambs, and sure to do mischief, however watched.91

90 Col. Joseph Cathey Papers, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.
91 Cathey Papers, Raleigh, NC.
Wiley was willing to overlook “want of mental culture” because his new cadre of common school teachers was to come from the lowest ranks of society. Recognizing that teachers’ salaries would not attract those from the upper class, Wiley observed,

there is however, a class, a numerous class, who are hired out to field labor, and many of these, if properly awakened, could become excellent teachers, and make more than twice as much as by their present occupations. If induced to go to school – to attend the free schools till they are able to teach new beginners, they could then get a certificate, with the proceeds of a few schools, they could go to higher schools, &c, &c, and soon become thriving men, making the best teachers, the best citizens, and the most enterprising members of society, with their eyes always steadily upwards. Thousands of such teachers could be made by a little friendly advice and care on the part of their more fortunate neighbors; and one young man, thus rescued from an unhappy lot and started on an upward course, honorable and profitable to himself, and useful to the public, will create a spirit of education in the right place, will open the eyes of the blind, show ignorant people what can be made by education, thus making a circle in the waters which will continue to widen to an indefinite extent.  

Nor was Wiley’s ambition limited to men. In his 1854 annual report he held similar hope for the “helpless female, who cannot push her fortune in the world, and yet is born dependent on the labor of her own hands”:

There is another road open to such a one, leading from want and social inferiority, to independence, to respect, and to usefulness and happiness--and it lies through our Common Schools…Set such an example in one neighborhood--the example of a girl, without any help from others except good advice, rising from the lowest social depths, becoming an ornament to society, commanding comparatively high wages for ladylike employment, living independently or forming high matrimonial alliances, and there is accomplished a great revolution in that whole region of country.

In his account of his tenure as state superintendent of common schools, Wiley counted the transformation of the teaching profession as one of his proudest

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92 Cathey Papers, Raleigh, NC.
93 Cathey Papers, Raleigh, NC.
accomplishments. In his annual report for 1856, Wiley claimed that male teachers in North Carolina received an average of 21 dollars a month while female teachers averaged $18 a month, putting North Carolina ahead of northeastern states like New Hampshire and Connecticut.\textsuperscript{94} By 1859, North Carolina teachers received an average salary of 28 dollars a month, second only to Massachusetts.\textsuperscript{95} While the experience of common school teachers in Burke County and its neighboring counties suggest that western North Carolina had its fair share of young teachers, it’s not clear that they partook in the financial windfall or social revolution that Wiley envisioned.

Virgil Lusk, a product of Buncombe County’s common schools, had put himself through an academy through day labor. Unfortunately, educational opportunities in the area were not commensurate with his ambition: “the School at Sand Hill closed before I had completed the course…meanwhile, a similar institution opened at Brass Rock in Madison County, known as TransMontain College. I remained there as a student two sessions. The curriculum was not satisfactory and so I withdrew and obtained employment as a teacher in common school.”\textsuperscript{96}

The annual report of the Buncombe County Superintendents of Common Schools confirms Lusk’s account. In 1858 he passed the teacher certification test and in 1859 he taught a three-month school term for $60.50.\textsuperscript{97} If teaching common school was a turning

\textsuperscript{95} Knight, 180.
\textsuperscript{96} Virgil S. Lusk Papers, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.
\textsuperscript{97} Buncombe County Enrollment Return, 1859, Department of Public Instruction Records, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.
point in his life, Lusk does not indicate it. For a man who devoted a page recalling his experiences in the common schools and academies, his brevity is revealing: “I had made up my mind to quit the school teaching business and adopt the law as a vocation and the first thing I did was on the 31 day of December 1859 to get married to Miss Mary J. Candler daughter of Geo. W. Candler, a well-known attorney of this county.” It seems that marrying up was a more effective path to advancement than teaching in Wiley’s common schools.98

School teaching was not a viable long-term means of support. The high salaries that Wiley boasted of in his annual reports had not filtered their way down to Burke County. The average monthly salary in 1856 was 15 dollars (6 dollars below the state average Wiley gave in his annual report). And it was generally understood that teaching was not a fulltime profession. For example, only six of the 34 common school teachers I identified in the attendance returns of 1856 listed teaching as their profession in the subsequent federal census. This was not surprising when school terms averaged only 3 months (or approximately 60 days a year).99

Many of the common school teachers fit the profile of Basil Armstrong Thomasson, a young farmer who lived in Iredell County. The first shared trait was youth. In 1856, 18 of 28 male Burke County common school teachers were thirty or younger and had not been listed as the head of household in the 1850 federal census. To call Thomasson typical is a bit misleading – he was, after all, one of the few antebellum small farmers (the 1860 census

98 Virgil S. Lusk Papers, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.
99 Department of Public Instruction Records, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC; James Avery Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.
shows him residing in Iredell County with 200 dollars worth of real estate and 175 dollars worth of personal property) who kept a detailed diary that has survived to the present day. Of particular interest are his entries describing his experiences as a common school teacher. Thomasson evinced a genuine interest in education and his diaries chronicle his constant efforts to improve himself and others. But the salary of teacher alone is not enough to support him and his growing family. In 1856, Iredell contracts to teach in school district No. 30 in Iredell for $16 per month. Like his students, Thomasson’s life revolved around the agricultural season – he had to shut down the school to fodder like everyone else.

Thomasson was attuned to the economic disparities inherent in the common school hierarchy. Consider his journal entry from October 15th, 1856:

North Carolina has a large family of boys and girls, and she has them divided off in lots. As she can not see after them all her self, she has appointed a great many overseers, to attend to the bringing up of her sons and daughters. One she gives $1500 a year; others 2 ½ per cent of all the money that passes thro’ their hands; but the majority get nothing but the honor of the office; so they don’t attend to the lots assigned to their care – they don’t keep the fountain heads of the stream open, so it loses a vast deal of its strength among rubbish.

Thomasson was venting his frustration at the unpaid and apparently apathetic committeemen of his district while pointing out the handsome financial rewards paid the superintendent (1500 dollars) and chairman of county common school superintendents. His critique had

merit. For all Wiley’s rhetoric about the financial opportunities that teaching offered, the practice left much to be desired.

At the beginning of Wiley’s term, state law required that teachers submit complete attendance reports for the entire term before receiving payment. This presented problems for those that depended on their teacher’s salary being paid in a timely fashion. Indeed, Thomas W. Scott, one of Burke’s counties best teachers from the pre-Wiley era, had to submit an attendance report every month just to make ends meet.102

Men like Scott remind us that Wiley’s plan for common school teacher uplift was not imposed on a blank slate in Burke County. Joseph R. Denton fit Wiley’s profile of the young poor common school teacher. A laborer in 1850, Denton received the worst examination scores in the county in 1856. He taught in Rich Mountain District – one of the county’s poorest – for a salary of 10 dollars a month. Here was a man who needed uplift. But other teachers did not fit the Thomasson or Denton profile. Men like Thomas Scott had been academy or “old-field” schoolteachers. Meanwhile, wealthy young men like D.W Hennessee may have been engaged as tutors to wealthy families.103

Unfortunately, we have no equivalent of Basil Armstrong Thomasson for Burke County. However, Thomasson’s experience provides valuable insights into to the life of the common school teacher. It also reminds us of the continuities between the period preceding

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102 Attendance Returns, 1856. James Avery Papers. Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.
103 U.S Census Bureau, 1860 Manuscript Population Schedule, Burke County; Attendance Returns, 1856. James Avery Papers. Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC. Burke County only had three female teachers in 1856. None of these seemed to fit Wiley’s profile. All were young daughters of well-off families.
Wiley’s administration and after his supposedly sweeping changes. As we have seen, the salary levels did not rise in Burke as dramatically as claimed. Meanwhile, the supposedly reprobate teachers of the “old-field” days persisted into the common school era. Assigned with the awesome responsibility of uplifting “all classes” of white children, these teachers were the targets of an uplift program themselves. However, as the sentiments of men like Lusk and Thomasson indicate, the rhetorical promise of this campaign exceeded its practical measures.
Committeemen

The responsibilities of committeemen were substantially less onerous than those of the superintendent – and they were paid accordingly. In this honorary capacity, they were required to contract with a teacher and submit attendance and enrollment records for their district. In addition to this, they were to make arrangements for the schoolhouse. Consequently, the written record they left behind relating to their common school experience consisted almost entirely of paystubs, election records, and attendance rosters. An examination of 55 committeemen representing 25 different school districts in Burke County provides some insight into their standing within each district. Generally speaking, school committeemen were prominent men within their own communities. 54 out of 55 were landowners and 21 out of 55 owned slaves. ¹⁰⁴

During his tenure as chairman of county common school superintendents, James Avery constantly railed against the practice of electing committeemen. Noting that only eight of the 42 school districts in Burke County provided election returns for committeemen, he complained that the elections were “some labour to Chairman & expense to the State and no good has ever been done by giving the election to the people. It is a refinement upon Republicanism. The people do not attend the Elections. Candour requires that I should say

¹⁰⁴ U.S Census Bureau, 1860 Manuscript Population Schedule, Burke County; Attendance Returns, 1855-1856. James Avery Papers. Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC
that I recommend the change.” In this complaint, Avery was not alone. Numerous school board chairmen in the western counties complained of the election process.¹⁰⁵

Perhaps these superintendents were nostalgic for the old days. The common school law of 1839 put the power to appoint school committeemen in the hands of the county superintendents. The same legislation that repealed the mandatory local common school tax required by the law of 1839, gave the vote to the people.¹⁰⁶ The controversy over local school board elections was the classic “class” conflict of the political parties writ small. For example, the Democrats painted themselves as champions of the common man by advocating free suffrage while opposing representation based on white population. Likewise, they opposed taxes supporting common schools while advocating district elections. Meanwhile, Whigs supported school taxes while generally opposing district elections. And so, the method of selecting district committeemen bounced back and forth throughout the common school era. In 1848, the power went back to the superintendents. In 1850, it went back to elections.¹⁰⁷

The constant change was no doubt confusing on a county level. Combine confusion with apathy and it is no surprise that election turnout was so low. In Burke County, another explanation for the low turnout is the fact that many schools were already established in Burke County prior to the common school era. County districts were generally drawn to

¹⁰⁷ Noble, 86.
conform to existing communities. These established communities did not need elections to
determine their leaders. Whatever elections were held in these areas were often mere
formalities.  

Indeed, an examination shows that the most contested and attended elections were
often held in poor districts, with no tradition of schools. The most striking evidence,
however, that we have of the participation of “honorary” committeemen is an 1856 petition
to the Rich Mountain District. Filed among Avery’s 1856 attendance returns is a letter
signed by 33 men that reads as follows:

We your humble petitioners pray you to consider us as being destitute of any chance
of having Schools, and the Rich Mountain District being Entirely too large renders it
necessary to divide it…Beginning at the Mill Creek at the River thence to James M
Smiths thence to Jeremiah Smiths thence to Simms Hill thence on to the Spice hill
thence to the Hickory Nut the Mince hob thence to the high? thence to the River and
with it to the Beginning these boundries making a middle district affixes the bounds
of Stacy’s District of Zechariah District the Rich Mountain District and Middle
District. These Districts being thus established will give a general satisfaction
throughout all of them.  

The back of the letter simply says, “not granted”  -- suggesting that Avery dismissed the
request out of hand. In reality, the issue is more complex. Tucked away in an
“undated/miscellaneous” folder in the Avery collection is a scrap of paper with a map of
school districts drawn on it. (See Figure) A closer examination of this map reveals that it

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108 Election Returns, 1853-1861, James Avery Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.

109 Petition to Burke County Superintendents, 1856, James Avery Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.
corresponds to the petition. The names and locations match. It is clearly located in Burke County’s South Mountain Range, a remote part of the county described in a 1958 geographical study of North Carolina as follows; “the South Mountains are comprised of a broad belt of ridges and peaks and knobs. They have been timbered over again and again, and few people live in them. At one time, it was a favorite haunt of distillers, and some whiskey is still made.”

This was an isolated area of the county – an area much like the Shelton Laurel community in Madison County that Philip Paludan describes in Victims. According to Paludan, the inhabitants of these areas were generally poor and isolated from centers of power. 28 of the 33 petitioners appear in the federal census. Of these 28 matches, none owned slaves. Only 13 owned land in excess of the 100 value minimum required to appear on the agricultural schedule. It is an indication of the poverty of the area that James Madison Smith, a man owning land valued at 800 dollars in the 1860 census is described as “a large land owner and influential man.”

Not surprisingly, the school attendance in this area was poor. A glance at the statistics from Avery’s 1856 report to Wiley reveals that only 15% of the eligible children in this district actually went to school. A review of the attendance roster shows that the 15% of children that did make it to school attended, on average, only 32% of the days in the one-

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111 U.S Census Bureau, 1860 Manuscript Population Schedule, Burke County; Petition to Burke County Superintendents,1856. James Avery Papers. Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC; Burke County Historical Society. The Heritage of Burke County (Morganton, NC: Burke County Historical Society, 1981), 398.
month term.\textsuperscript{112} It is impossible to know why so many don’t go. Paludan offers a speculative explanation for the holler-dwellers of Madison County:

To the rural people, school was a place to go to when other matters did not press. Sometimes their children went, and sometimes they did not. They learned what the teacher told them as well as they could, but their lives would go on pretty much as before even if they did not learn. They were courteous and well behaved in the classroom, but everyone, teachers as well as classmates, understood that things outside the classroom were what really mattered. There were things that the mountains taught and that the season, the animals, and the need to help out at home taught them to be of abiding importance. The only book that truly mattered was the Bible and God still spoke to them even if they could not read it.\textsuperscript{113}

This may be true. However, the petition suggests that the reason for non-attendance went beyond their harmonious relationship with nature. The numbers scrawled on the map suggest that those reviewing their request considered the best way to serve the most children in dividing up the district. And the roughness of the terrain certainly made it difficult to bring the benefits of common school to everyone.

\textsuperscript{112} Burke County Enrollment Return, 1856. Department of Public Instruction Records. North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.

Students: Attendance and a Note on Methodology

To say that Wiley and early southern educational historians overstated the importance of administrative reform in North Carolina common school movement is not an original position. Over the years, historians and economists have illustrated that Wiley’s reforms were not so miraculous as initially supposed. Enrollment rates and popular support as a result of Wiley’s intervention have also been called into question. This examination of attendance in the 1850s is not intended to knock down an old straw man once again.\(^\text{114}\)

Viewed in isolation, attendance or enrollment data are a crude tool for analyzing popular response. For this reason, I have supplemented the attendance returns available from Burke County with other available data. Cross-referencing the names from the rosters with available census data was necessary to establish an economic profile for each student.\(^\text{115}\)

\(^\text{114}\) This strawman seems to be remarkably persistent, perhaps because the definitive texts on the common school movement come from the early twentieth century and the field is relatively obscure. \(^\text{115}\) A note on methodology: The process of matching students with a household in the federal census is extremely time-consuming. There is inevitably some guesswork involved. There are the unavoidable problems of illegible handwriting, transient residents, and duplicate names. At best, the class rosters provide students’ first and last names, their gender, and the number of days they attended school. Sometimes a name yields multiple matches. In this case it becomes necessary to apply some common sense rules and to enhance the search with available local genealogical resources. This is not an exact science. The best I can do is illustrate my process by way of example (see below).

Wherever possible, I have tried to obtain real and personal property values for the students’ head of household from the 1860 census. Since I also analyze data by slaveholding and landholding categories, I have also collected data from the 1860 agricultural and slave schedules. In many cases, data was unavailable and I’ve had to rely on 1850 data. In rare cases, the family lived in a neighboring county and I’ve had to use relevant census data from these counties. (See Frederick A. Bode and Donald E. Ginter, “A Critique of Landholding Variables in the 1860 Census and the Parker-Gallman Sample” Journal of Interdisciplinary History 15 (Autumn, 1984): 277-295. I have obtained household wealth numbers by adding real and personal property values. In the above article, Bode and Ginter make a convincing case for this method. For those cases where this data is missing, I have had to use the less preferable method of combining census and agricultural schedule data.)
In December 1855, Burke County school district number 5 submitted their yearly attendance data for the term running from August to November. Two girls (O. Moore and E. Moore) and one boy (T. Moore) had nearly perfect attendance, showing up 65 out of 66 days. Given their identical attendance records, I immediately assumed that the Moore children were siblings (or at least relatives). However, there were no matches for the Moore children in the 1850 or 1860 census in Burke County.

Having already matched many of the other students on the attendance roster, I began to look for information about heads of households in genealogical sources about Burke County. This allowed me to establish the approximate location of the district – in Western Burke County, near McDowell County. Once I had completed this process for each district and entered the information into my database, I went back over each district to look for the names I had not been able to match. In these cases, the census net was widened to encompass the entire state. In addition to the broadened census search, I checked Burke County genealogical sources for information by surname.

In the case of the Moores, I came across a story of a Charles Moore, son of Burke County residents Thomas and Elizabeth Moore. According to family research, their youngest son Charles Moore (birth date unknown) had followed his older brothers Thomas and Austin to Mississippi in the 1830s. Charles died in Mississippi, leaving behind three children. Charles’ older brother Barnett Moore, a slaveholder in Burke County, brought the children back to Burke County to be raised. The genealogical source only mentions two of the childrens’ names – Oma (Neoma) and N(ancy) Elizabeth.
This story seemed plausible – the first initials of the two girls matched those in the attendance roster. From another source, I knew that Barnett Moore lived in Western Burke County. I checked the 1850 census and found Oma, Thomas, and Nancy Elizabeth Moore living in Coahoma, Mississippi with their Uncle Thomas Moore. This allowed me to place the children in Burke County School District Number 5 in the winter of 1855. Fortunately, the process of matching names with heads of households and locations was not always so arduous.116

James Avery assumed chairmanship of the common school board in 1853. His election (by other board members) coincided roughly with beginning of Calvin Wiley’s tenure as state superintendent of common schools. As chairman, Avery was responsible for disbursing state funds to schools and providing Wiley with enrollment data. Avery and Wiley were of like mind regarding the importance of accurate reporting. Just as Wiley dutifully prepared his annual reports, Avery religiously submitted his reports to Wiley. Just as the statistics section of Wiley’s report was derived from individual county board chairmen, so was Avery’s report a compilation of reports submitted to him by teachers and local committeemen.

Ideally, the local committeemen for each district were supposed to submit reports to the chairman on state provided attendance sheets. In reality, the first years of Avery’s administration saw a hodgepodge of methods for reporting attendance. According to state law, the committeemen were supposed to provide a list of all eligible white children between

5 and 21 as well as a list of those who attended and the number of days each attended.

Again, the practice was variable – some districts dutifully provided all the information on one official sheet. Other districts provided information on outdated forms or loose paper. Still others provided numbers only.

This variable practice was to be expected. A new system was being put in place. After a few years, the majority of districts in Burke County were submitting names and numbers of days attended in regular fashion. Of course, by the time they did this, the requirements changed. 1856 represents the apex of reporting – the most districts providing detailed information on their students. By the end of the decade, most districts were only submitting numbers of students, dates of terms, and salary rates. Consequently, my attendance data set is drawn from 1856.

In an 1857 report to Superintendent, Avery gave an overwhelmingly positive appraisal of school conditions, noting:

in submitting this report to the board of superintendents and to the state superintendent, it gives me great pleasure to state that I found the houses much better than I expected, and the manner in which the schools are conducted far better than I ever expected to find them in my lifetime. There appeared everywhere throughout the county a good spirit among all classes.\footnote{Edgar Wallace Knight. \textit{Public School Education in North Carolina}. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1922), 203.}

This report is of a piece with most of Avery’s missives to Wiley. In his 1854 report to Wiley, Avery explained how he was spreading the common school gospel. Though concerned with the law requiring that money be divided evenly among districts, Avery observed, “this will not vary it much with us as we have since I became Chairman made our
Districts smaller the much better for us: so that common school education can be carried
much nearer to each scholar.” Meanwhile, in 1856 Avery noted, “more schools now going on
in our county than has ever been & better filled with good teachers. The people are much
pleased with your last annual reports.”

Both Avery and Wiley accomplished a great deal in their respective tenures. Neither
was afraid to advertise his accomplishments. But the historian must go beyond their reports
and correspondences to sense how everyday people were responding to common school
reform. Avery touted his role in creating new school districts and thus bringing education to
the people.

A brief look at his reports tells the tale. When Avery took office there were 32 school
districts in Burke County. By 1860 there were 42 districts – only 3 without schools. Both
the number of schools and school enrollment increased under Avery. Looking at Avery’s
correspondences and the official reports, one might get the impression that Burke under
Avery and Wiley was really bringing education to the people.

However, a closer look reveals that the people most in need of common school
education were not necessarily benefiting from the improvements. Take, for example, the
following two descriptions of schoolhouses in Avery’s 1857 report to Wiley. District # 3,
Avery’s own school district, located in the affluent Canoe Creek area, is described as
follows: “an excellent house with rock chimney and glass windows. Taught by Miss

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118 Burke County Enrollment Report, 1854-1856. Department of Public Instruction Records, North
Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.
Fulwood, five grammar and geography scholars. She governs well because she governs by affection.”

Meanwhile, here is Avery’s assessment of one of the more isolated districts in the South Mountains of Burke County: “No. 22. Rich Mountain district. Tolerable good house. All right. Teacher has been teaching but stopped his school for a while.”

This sounds reasonable. But it is one of the most negative descriptions in Avery’s glowing report. A glance at the statistics from Avery’s report reveals that only 15% of the eligible children in this district actually go to school. A review of the attendance roster shows that the 15% of children that do make it to school attend, on average, only 32% of the days in the 1-month term. Meanwhile, in District 3, over 2/3 of eligible students attended over 50% of the 3 month school term. Moreover, Miss Fulwood, the district 3 teacher, earned 2 dollars more a month than her male counterpart in District 22. On a salary of 10 dollars a month, it’s no wonder he stopped his school – he needed to earn a living.

Or compare the Rich Mountain district with the District number 9, located by John’s River, North of Morganton, near the border with Caldwell County. Though District 9 had only a 46% enrollment rate, its attendance rate of 75% was the highest in the county. An examination of the attendance roster shows why. Most students in attendance were the children of two well-off slaveholding families. Indeed, the children of these slaveholders

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120 Knight, 202.
alone show an attendance rate of nearly 93%. This is not surprising – their fathers were wealthy, literate, and on the school committee.\textsuperscript{121}

Though Avery claimed that his schools districts have nearly reached equal footing, it’s clear that there’s a substantial disparity in the common school experience in Rich’s Mountain and John’s River. As previously noted, the initial districting of Burke County did little to change existing communities or patterns of access to wealth or power. In his landmark study of antebellum communities, Kenzer observed the same phenomenon in Orange County: “even after the beginning of a common school system in 1839, the pattern of local isolation was unbroken. School district borders were drawn to prevent children from facing the dangers of crossing creeks or rivers, which were quite often already the borders of neighborhoods.”\textsuperscript{122}

Geography plays an important part in determining history. This was certainly evident in Burke. Founded in 1777, Burke County once encompassed much of western North Carolina. By 1842, it had attained its approximate present-day boundaries. In Burke County, the hills of the Piedmont intersect with the Appalachian Mountains. Approximately three fifths of the county is in the piedmont plateau, with an average elevation of 1200 feet. Mountains cover the rest of the county. The Catawba River, flowing east, bisects the county.

\textsuperscript{121} Attendance Returns, 1856, James Avery Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC; U.S Census Bureau, 1860 Manuscript Population Schedule, Burke County.

Tributaries to this river create a herringbone pattern as the flow down from the mountain ranges from the north and south.

With an average elevation of over 3000 feet and several peaks exceeding 4000 feet, the blue ridge mountains of the northern part of the county are higher than the South Mountains. Consequently, the streams flowing from the Northern Mountains into the Catawba are larger and more numerous, creating a greater watershed. The lower South Mountains (average elevation 2000 feet) drained into streams that flow east into the South Fork of the Catawba River in Catawba County.\(^\text{123}\)

It comes as no surprise, then, that the best farming land in Burke County was in the creek mouths of the North. The wealthiest landowners could be found in these sections. Meanwhile, the poor farmers of Burke could be found in the South Mountain ranges.

Burke’s soil and topography were not conducive to extensive farming and production of market crops like cotton and tobacco. Nevertheless, Burke remained an agrarian society. Morganton was the only township in the antebellum period and the county remained the lowest level of political organization. Naturally, the school districts reflected this structure. As we have seen, the poorest school districts with the lowest attendance rates were located in the South Mountains.

Of course, each school district contained a range of wealth. Not all inhabitants of John’s River district were wealthy. It is worth looking at school attendance data at a county level as well. Avery asserted that common schools faced the problem of a lack of support

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from the upper classes. Meanwhile, in his study of Buncombe County, Timothy Lockley asserted that school attendance grew as a result of the attendance of poor students in the 1850. However, without class rosters, his claim is speculative.

A detailed examination of the attendance rosters in Burke County allows us to test Lockley’s assumptions. In 1856, Burke County students enrolled in schools attended school 49.5% of the time. Assuming an average school term of 60 days (three months), this means the average student went to school 30 days a year. Attendance was closely associated with wealth. Children of slaveholders attended an average of 60.3% of the time. Meanwhile, children of families with no land attend 39% of the time.

And what of those who didn’t make it to school at all? Due to reporting irregularities, we do not have a complete picture of non-enrollers. However, a district-by-district look is illuminating. For example, in district number 37, 8 children do not enroll in school. Not one of these children comes from a family with land or wealth over 40 dollars. Overall, the attendance data in Burke County suggest that poor children were less likely to enroll in school and, once there, less likely to show up on a regular basis. Meanwhile, wealthy children were more likely to enroll in school and attend on a regular basis.

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124 Data was collected for 28 districts. Out of 1060 names, there were 862 census matches. Due to different forms and instructions circulating, some districts reported the names of all the students – those who did not enroll and those who did. I have removed these names when calculating attendance data. This leaves 731 census matches of students who attended at least one day.

125 Attendance Returns, 1856, James Avery Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC; U.S Census Bureau, 1860 Manuscript Population Schedule, Burke County.
For Whites Only

As the attendance figures for Burke County suggest, poor white children were less likely to attend school than their rich counterparts. Unfortunately, the voice of the ‘common’ white has been conspicuously absent in most accounts of the common school. The following story of Leah and Margaret Upright indicates an even more obscure voice in the common school story – that of the free black.

Samuel Upright was born in 1760 in what is now Germany or Holland and died in 1834 in Rowan County, North Carolina, leaving behind an estate of 3,000 dollars. His property was divided among six of his 12 children. Though Samuel’s wife Elizabeth was still alive, his three youngest children Tena, Leah, and Joshua were placed under male guardianship. Little is known about Samuel’s three youngest children. Tena, who never married, died in 1841. The youngest son Joshua, born in 1824, died in September of 1850. The fate of Leah Upright, born in 1819, is even more uncertain. Her family’s official genealogist summarized it in a sentence: “she moved to Burke County and we have no information on her.”

In the 1850 United States census, a 32 year-old Leah Upright resides in Burke County with eight year old Margaret Upright, seventy three year old Elizabeth Hodge and Jane, Alex, and Elizabeth Metcalf, aged 33, eight, and, six years old respectively. Six years later, Margaret Upright’s name appears on the class roster for the fourth common school district in Bridgewater, in western Burke County. The teacher, Miss Elizabeth C.

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Fullwood, marked Margaret present for 12 of the 80 days in the school term that spanned from October 1855 to March 1856.

Neither Margaret nor Leah Upright appears on any records until they appear in the federal census of 1860. On June 26th, 1860, Assistant Marshal J.R. Kincaid recorded 41 year-old Leah and Margaret, now 18, living together in Burke County. No longer with Elizabeth Hodge and the Metcalfs, the Uprights had no personal property or real estate of any value listed. Both are listed as “colored.”

This 1860 census entry is the last record of Leah or Margaret Upright. Their designation as “colored” offers a mysterious coda to their documented lives. In 1860, census enumerators were instructed to record color in the sixth column as “White, black, or mulatto.” The census enumerator for Burke County followed these instructions – leaving the column blank for white inhabitants and designating free blacks as “B” or “M.” However, J. R. Kincaid marked “Co.” in the sixth column for both Uprights. This was clearly not a mistake or stray marking and the tabulation data at the bottom of the page confirms that both women were counted as colored females.127

It is unlikely that we will ever know the series of events that led to Leah and Margaret Upright living by themselves in Burke County in 1860. Nor can we know with certainty why the census enumerator designated them as “Co.” instead of the customary “B” or “M.” Trying to establish a plausible scenario for their circumstances is an interesting exercise in historical fiction. What is Leah’s relationship to Margaret? The date of Margaret’s birth

127 U.S Census Bureau, 1860 Manuscript Population Schedule, Burke County.
coincides roughly with the death of Leah’s sister Tena. Perhaps Tena died in childbirth and Leah took care of her sister’s daughter. More probably, Margaret was Leah’s daughter. Given that they share the same last name, she was probably illegitimate. In any event, by the time she shows up in the 1850 census in Burke County, Leah Upright is without husband and taking care of a young girl.

What of the Uprights’ color? The only indication that Leah and Margaret are non-white is in the 1860 census. It is possible that this was a mistake. If not, the “Co.” racial designation presents several interesting possibilities. One is that Leah had a child out of wedlock with a non-white man in Rowan County and moved west to escape the censure of her relatives. This assumes that Leah herself was white. But she is designated as “Co.” in the 1860 census. Perhaps Leah and her sister Tena were bi-racial. Margaret, whether born of Leah or Tena, would naturally be bi-racial as well.128

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128 It is also possible that the Uprights had Indian ancestry. A complete review of the 1860 population manuscript schedule for Burke County reveals that enumerators used nonstandard notation in column six in several other instances. However, in only one other case is there a corresponding mark for “free colored” at the tabulation section at the bottom of the page as there is with the Uprights. I was able to track this other case – an Elmina Cox designated “C” and 5 years old (putting her date of birth around 1855) – beyond the 1860 census. The 1870 federal census finds a 15 year-old Elmina Cox living in the Upper Creek area of Burke County. She is working as a Domestic Servant for a Wright family and has attended school within the past year. She is also listed as white. In 1880, a 24 year-old Elmina Cox is still in Upper Creek. She is a single white woman unable to read or write and living with her white son and daughter and a mulatto nephew. The 1900 census shows forty six year old Elmina Cox – single and apparently incapable of reading or writing -- living in Burke County in Upper Creek. She is living with 5 children, all born after 1880. She has 7 children still living. However, now she and her entire family are listed as Black. Though the census enumerators record her race differently over the decades, this is the same Elmina Cox.
If Leah and Margaret were non-white, were they attempting to pass as white in their new home? Margaret’s brief spell in common schools suggests that she was able to do so successfully for a time. Or perhaps Margaret never attempted to pass and her teacher and classmates were accepting of or unconcerned by her racial status.

This last possibility seems unlikely given the prevailing racial sentiment in antebellum North Carolina. Common schools were designated as “whites only” from their inception. The language in state legislation and official correspondence regarding common schools constantly refer to “white children.” Lest teachers or local committeemen forget, a state-issued attendance roster reminded them to list all the names of the “white children in the District.” Viewed one way, this was yet another indication of the increasing hostility to free blacks in North Carolina in the late antebellum period.

As John Hope Franklin illustrates in his definitive study of free blacks in antebellum North Carolina, the decade preceding the establishment of common schools saw an unprecedented assault on the rights of enslaved and free blacks. Many of the laws restricting blacks’ freedoms centered on education. For example, the 1830-31 session of the North Carolina legislature had passed a law restricting “all persons from teaching slaves to read and write, the use of figures excepted.” Whites violating this law were subject to a fine, while free Negroes who breached it could be “fined, imprisoned, or whipped, at the discretion of the court, not exceeding thirty-nine lashes, nor less than twenty lashes.”

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The landmark legislative session of 1834-35 that heralded a shift in power to the western part of the state and laid the groundwork for North Carolina common schools also witnessed the loss of the franchise for free blacks. Burke County was one of seven western counties that voted for disfranchisement. Adding insult to injury, a bill was introduced in 1835 to prohibit free blacks from obtaining education of any kind. This did not pass.

Despite these formidable legal obstacles, both free and enslaved blacks in North Carolina continued to learn to read and write. The 1850 federal census showed that 5,191 (43 percent) of North Carolina’s free blacks were literate. Some blacks both free and enslaved received their education from a benevolent master or through the church. Particularly in the early antebellum period, the Presbyterian and Methodist churches were “actively engaged in the education of the slaves and free blacks of western North Carolina.” However, the apprenticeship system of binding white and black children out to masters was primarily responsible for the large number of literate free blacks in the 1850 census. Indeed, despite an 1838 law relieving masters of their legal obligation to teach free black apprentices to read and write, the practice continued to the end of the antebellum period.

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130 Franklin, 113.
131 Franklin, 168.
132 Franklin, 166.
133 Franklin, 165. John Hope Franklin bases this assertion upon a study of the guardian and pleas and quarter session records of Craven County – an area with a large free black population. Burke County had a small free black population. For example, the 1850 census shows a total population of 7772. Of these, 2132 are enslaved, but only 163 are free blacks. Moreover, the pleas and quarter session records for the antebellum period are incomplete. There were only 7 free black apprentices in Burke County in 1860. (John Hope Franklin. *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 227) I have been unable to find instances in the extant records of free black apprentices taught to read and write.
There is little documentary evidence to suggest that enslaved or free blacks in the antebellum county were receiving an education of any kind. Compared to eastern counties like Craven or Cumberland with large free black populations, Burke County had a small free black population. In comparison with its western neighbors, however, Burke’s free black population was relatively large. Consider the following from the May 11, 1854 edition of the Asheville News attacking Whig gubernatorial candidate General Alfred Dockery for his 1835 vote against free black disfranchisement: “the General, on this negro equality platform would run well in Burke and McDowell, for there are a great many worthless and trifling free negroes there who would stick to him like a brother, on account of his friendship for them in the convention.”

In such an environment, it seems impossible that a free black would ever attempt to attend common schools. Yet a letter from S.S Pulliam of Stokes County and State Superintendent of Common Schools in 1859 provides at least one instance of such a seemingly improbable occurrence. For its inimitable incoherence, the letter is worth reproducing in full:

I read your letter and in reply to your request concerning whither the committee is willing for the persons in dispute to extend the Dist school one of committee and I Saw the other ones & wrote them a Line Stating your request to know if they were willing for them to go to school they will not give me and answer Bu I hear they are willing for them to attend. Said school I was committee in the years 1853, 54,55,55+ six in the latter part of 1856 this man of mixed blood got up & certified to turn no committee out for not numbering his children I their Saw W. A Mitchell our chairmain and requested of him

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134 Franklin, 119.
some plan to turn them out and he said let come before the Board and he demanded he then notified them when they brought a free negro from caswell co to prove their blood so people who has moved from caswell tells me that he is certainly A Negro and as to this mean being proud. A Negro in Winston Superior Court there is no mistake about that Which the Record will Show in Forsyth Co the one committee that I saw wants to know who will have the cost of the suit to pay there will be some cost anyhow though he thinks there will be none on any suit if they may bring Against the committee of the District there in answer to your letter one of the committee is Against the people thare in question a going to school and the other two are in favor of it on the grounds that free negroes augt to be taught in school is what I think thir please is the one committee I Saw this morning and he thinks four fifth of the people of Dist. Are Against them going if We just could get it to a Vote of our District for a Majority to Rule We Will be Satisfied. I was at the School house this morning the Mistress says that she Does not think she is to Blame for teaching them when the committee are in favor of the going to school when they first starting in the fall she sent them home without any hesitation but those two committee who are in favor of them going told her to teach them that the board of the county had decided that they should go when I went to WA Mitchell to know if there was no way to get shed of them he told me for us to hold an election and if a Majority was Against them they should be stopped. But John F. Poindexter said it was not law So that Died I am sorry to inform you that Wm A Mitchell is not fit for A Chairman no way it can be fixed. When you have business with mr. Mitchell You are not so apt to find him no where as in the Whiskey Shop although when sober A fin men these people of color has got being rude at school of late anyhow they make the Little Children call them master [?] to the Mistress you know it makes no matter how mean any body is they have some person to back them up and you know there are some men all over the world to uphold negroes too much so for own good and for the good of the county you will please answer this as soon as it comes to hand and state how the case was disposed of that came to your knowledge from Hyde(?) co. and in what way you think proper for 1 of us to pursue to get rid of those negroes from our schools in So doing you will much oblige me and many others.135

It’s hard to follow much of Mr. Pulliam’s argument. However, it’s clear that the issue of free black attendance in “whites only” common school is not necessarily an open and shut case. Moreover, the “people of color” clearly have the support of some community inhabitants.

We’ll never know if Margaret Upright attended school as a free black in Burke County. This uncertainty is emblematic of our larger uncertainty about the role of non-whites in antebellum common schools in North Carolina. On one level, it seems obvious that non-whites would be peripheral to an institution so unabashedly “whites only.” Indeed, a thorough examination of the 1850 and 1860 population manuscript schedules for Burke County designates no free black child attending school (nor for that matter does the 1860 Stokes county census). But how many children escaped the official categorization of the census? Creating a publicly funded school to serve all classes of white North Carolinians was not as black and white an endeavor as its architects might have wished.
Conclusion

This thesis has examined how rhetoric about a supposedly democratic and progressive movement that broke from the past has obscured the persistence of institutions and inequalities that predated the common school movement. Advocates of common school reform in the antebellum period in Burke County spoke of uplifting the common man, but they were able to implement this apparently radical reform with little change to existing social arrangements.

Western Whigs like James Avery identified with the common man on a rhetorical level in political skirmishes with Democrats. However, their identification with the common man did not make them lower-case ‘d’ democrats. The perception that western North Carolina experienced an educational awakening among the masses, long buttressed by enrollment data, must be reevaluated in light of school attendance data in Burke County.

Proponents of common schools had to constantly be reminded that this was a bold new movement for white (and not black) children of all classes (not just the poor) for a reason. On the ground, below the lofty rhetoric of official reports and correspondences, public education in western North Carolina looked less like a radical break from the past than slightly improved version of it. The ‘Whig’ interpretation that has dominated the historiography of North Carolina common schools is not entirely wrong. However, a careful examination of the oft-overlooked actors at the local level – county superintendents, committeemen, teachers, and students – suggests that there was more historical continuity and less progress than previously imagined.
Figure 1: Map of Burke County Common School Districts corresponding with petition request. James Avery Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC. Reprinted with permission of Manuscripts Department, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
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