

ABSTRACT

DUNCAN, ERIC THOMAS. "Make the Letters Big and Plain" : A History of Black Education in North Carolina. (Under the direction of Dr. Susanna Lee).

This paper traces the history of black education in North Carolina from the antebellum era through Reconstruction. During the antebellum period, this paper examines how slaves, through largely individual efforts, used education as a tool of resistance. In the second chapter, this paper explores how the Civil War and subsequent emancipation changed the nature of black education from a largely individual struggle to an area of community activism. The third chapter and epilogue explore how blacks used their newfound political power in the post-Civil War era to advocate public schools in North Carolina.

“Make the Letters Big and Plain” : A History of Black Education in North Carolina

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DEDICATION

To my mother and father, for their unconditional love and support.

BIOGRAPHY

Eric Duncan was born and raised in Sarasota, Florida. In 2007, he received a bachelor's degree in history from the Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida. Eric moved to North Carolina shortly afterward and began a career in education while working toward a master's degree in history from North Carolina State University. In 2011, Eric moved from North Carolina to the New England area to further his educational pursuits.

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Introduction

Inspired by the historical agency of African Americans in shaping U.S. history, this study began with one question; how did North Carolina's blacks regard and utilize education in both slavery and freedom? Although the question is relatively simple, discovering the truth was a difficult process. The process begins with an examination of the curious relationship between slaves and education during the antebellum period. Following the antebellum period, this thesis also examines how blacks viewed education in addition to how they used it to advance their own interests.

To explore the subjects of black education and black resistance in North Carolina, this thesis stands on the shoulders of a strong collection of secondary sources. Without the excellent research of historians in both fields of education and resistance, it would have been impossible to frame an understanding of black education in North Carolina. First, this thesis carries on in the tradition of modern scholarship on black education starting with the antebellum period, continuing with the Civil War and ending with Reconstruction. Secondly, this thesis also relies upon scholarship on black resistance in the antebellum, bellum and postbellum era.

Although antebellum black education had a long tradition, a historical focus on the issue is relatively new. Indeed, historiographical schools of the early 20th century gave little agency to slaves and thus largely ignored the importance of education on the institution of slavery. Of course W.E.B. DuBois's early scholarship that highlighted black agency in education provided an excellent basis for later historians and this thesis. Nevertheless, his

work went largely unrecognized by his contemporaries.¹

By 1980, historians finally began to recognize the importance of slave education during the antebellum period. Historians, such as Thomas Weber, posited that slaves possessed agency in shaping their education. In addition to viewing slaves as key figures in their own education, historians also detailed the inspiration that fueled black education. In *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*, Heather Williams writes that a slave's educational motivation "were often pragmatic" and ranged from a desire to read the bible to denote a child's birth.²

Just as the subject of slave education underwent a drastic shift with time, so too did the issue of black education during the Civil War. The earliest historical works on the Civil War concentrated on explaining Confederate defeat by focusing on the accomplishment of generals and the Union Army. In contrast, topics like black education went largely ignored. Although a firm understanding of Civil War battles and leaders is essential to understanding the conflict, wholly ignoring the contributions of blacks and the role of education in this assistance to the Union cause leaves a gaping hole in the story. Over the course of the 20th century the older Civil War scholarship was complemented by revisionists that examined black education during the conflict. These new scholars reexamined the primary documents from the Civil War and came to the conclusion that blacks used the war to further their

¹ W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860 – 1880* (New York: Atheneum, 1935), 664.

² Thomas Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community, 1831 – 1865* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), xii, 251; Heather Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005), 13, 41.

educational opportunities. Scholars noted black agency when slaves utilized their education to escape to Union lines. Furthermore, historians have also noted when black soldiers urged the Union Army to supply them with books.³

Lastly, the historical understanding of black education during Reconstruction has also undergone significant change. One of the first schools of thought on the issue was the Dunning School of Columbia University. The Dunningites ignored black activism in postwar education and instead focused on the work of northern missionaries. In addition, the school trashed the work of northern missionaries involved with black education by stating that their efforts represented a second “invasion of the South.” Fortunately a recent trend of scholarships examines a wider array of primary evidence to conclude that blacks, not missionary societies, were the greatest agents in their own education. To prove this assertion, historians highlight the various methods that blacks took during Reconstruction to organize schools and establish funding for said ventures. In addition to actively organizing schools, newer scholarship also details how African Americans organized politically and stressed their education not as a privilege, but as a right.⁴

³ Bruce Catton, *America Goes to War* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1958); James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom, The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Judkin Browning. “Visions of Freedom and Civilization Opening before Them. African Americans Search for Autonomy during Military Occupation in North Carolina,” in *North Carolinians in the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction*, ed. Paul D. Escott, 69 – 100. (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2008), 89; Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*, 13.

⁴ William A. Dunning. *Reconstruction, Political and Economic, 1865 – 1877* (New York: Harpers and Brothers, 1907); Edgar W. Knight, “The Messianic Invasion of the South After 1865,” *School and Society*, June 5, 1943, 647; Williams. *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*, 13; Ronald E. Butchart. *Schooling the Freedpeople*

Although education is the foremost theme of this thesis, black education cannot be fully understood unless there is also a thorough conversation on black resistance. The earliest historiography on black resistance gave little historical agency to slaves. Stanley Elkins of Northampton University posited that slaves were infantilized in much the same way as prisoners of Nazi concentration camps. First published in 1959, Elkins's *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* served as the authoritative stance on slavery for decades.⁵

Over the following decades, serious challenges to Elkin's thesis emerged from historians that gave slaves greater historical agency and thus took the idea of slave resistance more seriously. John Blassingame's *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* did not completely disagree with Elkin's seminal works but the historian did note that a slave "controlled important aspects of his own life." Around the same period Eugene Genovese's masterful *Roll, Jordan, Roll* claimed that slaves were not infantilized by slavery but were rather prime actors in a system of paternalism between master and slave. Blassingame and Genovese's assertion that slaves possessed agency in resisting their oppression has even been carried into a study of how slaves resisted the horrors of the auction block.⁶

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 1; Steven Hahn. *A Nation Under Our Feet* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1.

⁵ Elkins's response to critical historians of his work can be found in the third edition of Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

⁶ John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974); Walter Johnson. *Soul By Soul: Life*

A similar trend in Civil War historiography also began with no mention of slave agency and ended with a full recognition of the role African Americans held during the conflict. Indeed, the earliest school of thought on the Civil War was completely focused on the battles and generals that shaped the war and left no room for a discussion about black agency. In fact in the majority of early Civil War histories, blacks are only mentioned in the context of their status as contraband or recipients of the Emancipation Proclamation. In short, history turned on the action of “great” men and battles and no need existed to emphasize the contribution of others.

The current school of thought on slave resistance during the Civil War is much more accurate. The process began with a fair treatment of black soldiers in the Union Army that noted how black contributions to the war effort eventually shaped the Civil War’s outcome. Furthermore, more recent scholarship also examines the contributions of slaves in the effort to destroy the Confederacy. Pulitzer Prize winning author Steven Hahn even noted that individual acts of slave resistance during the war collectively add up to the largest slave rebellion in U.S. history.⁷

Inside the Antebellum Slave Markets (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). To learn more about the role of psychology in the debate over the agency of slaves, please see Henry Stack Sullivan, *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1953).

⁷ Judkin Browning. “Visions of Freedom and Civilization Opening before Them. African Americans Search for Autonomy during Military Occupation in North Carolina,” in *North Carolinians in the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction*, ed. Paul D. Escott, 69 – 100. (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2008), 89; James McPherson, *The Negro’s Civil War* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1991); Steven Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.), 55.

Following the Civil War, the final period of black resistance examined in this thesis is the period of Reconstruction. Unlike the antebellum period and the Civil War, the earliest histories on Reconstruction do not ignore blacks but rather cover them as the pawns of Radical Republican politics. Almost every history on Reconstruction during the early 20th century reads like a script from D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. Led once again by the Dunning School, historians of the period "rested ... on the assumption of "negro incapacity"" and thus denied black agency.⁸

Once again the earliest school of historical thought failed and required replacement by a new generation of scholars. Current scholarship on black resistance during Reconstruction is led by historians such as Eric Foner, Steven Hahn and Heather Williams. Such historians point to acts of black resistance when blacks politically organized or stressed the importance of their rights. Indeed, many current historians now view blacks in the post-war period as actively engaged in resisting their oppression.⁹

This thesis carries on in the tradition of recent scholarship that emphasized the agency of slaves to resist their oppression and further their own interests. It stands in direct opposition to the inaccurate notion that African Americans were infantilized by the institution of slavery and thus held no agency in shaping history. Furthermore, this thesis rejects the notion that blacks were passive bystanders in the political upheaval of

⁸ Eric Foner. *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction* (New York: Knopf, 2005), xiii.

⁹ Eric Foner. *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction*, xiii. Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South From Slavery to the Great Migration*, 11; Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*, 2; Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861 – 1876*, 1.

Reconstruction. African Americans organized and resisted their oppression in both slavery and freedom.

Merging recent historiography on both black education and black resistance, the overarching argument of this thesis is that North Carolina's black population used education as an instrument to resist their oppression in both slavery and freedom. In the antebellum period, slaves individually resisted their oppression by pursuing an education. Slaves such as George Moses Horton or Thomas Jones, understood education to be a largely solitary exercise. However, during the Civil War and Reconstruction, the nature of black education shifted from an individual experience to a method of collective resistance. Indeed, whole communities organized to learn and influence the establishment of public schools.

In contrast to other studies on black education that concern the entire American South, this thesis examines the development of black education within North Carolina for two reasons. First, black education in North Carolina possesses a long history that stretches back into the 18th century with such notable African Americans as George Moses Horton. Thus, North Carolina provided centuries of the black educational experience necessary to draw up a sound and cogent historical thesis. Secondly, the educational struggle of North Carolina's freedpeople during Reconstruction is a remarkable story that required further historical research and analysis. Hopefully this thesis gives freedpeople the credit they deserve for furthering public education and developing the idea of education as a right.

The first of three chapters in this thesis begins with the individual efforts of slaves to obtain an education, despite the horrors of slavery. To obtain an education most slaves needed to step past the resistance established both by the master in addition to the legal

roadblocks passed by the General Assembly. In contrast, a minority of slaves received educational opportunities due to the paternalistic impulse of their master or mistress.

Whatever the route that slaves took to obtain an education they share a common bond in how they used their education to resist enslavement.¹⁰

The second chapter examines how blacks collectively used education during the Civil War and Presidential Reconstruction, not to resist their enslavement but to reject their subjugated status. Since the Civil War and Presidential Reconstruction were two simultaneous developments in North Carolina they are treated as such in this paper. For African Americans the war and its immediate aftermath were a turbulent period where questions of citizenship and education were strongly contested. Nevertheless, freedpeople did not stop their quest for education during such hardships. Instead they organized for education as a means to resist their lowly status.¹¹

The third and final chapter concerns the collective action of the black community to further their education during Congressional Reconstruction. Armed with citizenship and greater rights, North Carolina's black population organized politically to influence their educational prospects. During this period the incredible agency of African Americans is evident in the construction of schools, the establishment of their own curriculum, and the

¹⁰ North Carolina General Assembly, "*A Bill to Prevent All Persons from Teaching Slaves to Read or Write, the Use of Figures Excepted (1830)*": *Legislative Papers, 1830-31 Session of the General Assembly*, 1.

¹¹ Judkin Browning, "Visions of Freedom and Civilization Opening before Them. African Americans Search for Autonomy during Military Occupation in North Carolina," in *North Carolinians in the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction*, ed. Paul D. Escott, 69 – 100. (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2008), 89; Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South From Slavery to the Great Migration*, 15.

christening of a political leadership that set educational rights into the new state constitution. Despite overwhelming opposition from white southerners, blacks continued to value education to resist the inferior status placed on them by society.¹²

The epilogue deals with white resistance to black education in North Carolina throughout the late 19th and early 20th century. During this period, legal challenges such as the Goldsboro Provision of 1880 established separate tax bases for white and black schools. By 1883, the Goldsboro Provision was adopted by many local school districts in North Carolina, leading to severe differences in funding between white and black students. By 1909, African Americans comprised 33.3% of the school population, but only accounted for 13.3% of expenditures. Although the generations of leadership in the black community had achieved great successes for education, the Goldsboro Provision and entrenched opposition to black education still remained in the way.¹³

¹² John L. Bell, "Samuel Stanford Ashley, Carpetbagger and Educator." *The North Carolina Historical Review*, Volume LXXI, no. 4 (1995), 456-461; Philip Foner, ed. *Proceedings of the Black National and State Conventions, 1865 – 1900* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 180.

¹³ Charles Coon. *Public Taxation and Negro Schools* (Cheney, PA: Committee of Twelve for the Advancement of the Negro Race, 1909), 657; James Leloudis. *Schooling in the New South: Pedagogy, Self and Society in North Carolina, 1880 – 1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

Chapter One: Individual Resistance through Education, An Antebellum History of Slave Education in North Carolina

One of slavery's greatest peculiarities was that unlike other property, a slave was never a mere extension of a master's will. Slaves possessed independent thoughts and dreams that could not be silenced by the whip or other means of coercion. Of all the desires kept from the master's gaze, education was among the foremost. In the spare moments gleaned from days filled with backbreaking labor, African Americans, largely in an individual manner, evidenced their desire for education in a variety of ways. Many of North Carolina's enslaved population viewed education as a means to resist their enslavement.

Understanding slave education, an illegal, often secretive venture, is a complicated undertaking. Despite the difficulties involved with this study, a remarkable host of historians provide a firm understanding on slave education. One school of thought broadly defines slave education as values and "a set of unique cultural themes" passed down from generation to generation. On the contrary, other historians narrow the definition of education to emphasize themes of religion and literacy that often dominated a slave's education. The general experience of North Carolina's enslaved population is more aligned with the latter of the two arguments.¹⁴

Despite the differences in historical thought, nearly all primary and secondary material on antebellum North Carolina points to slave education as an important front in the "perpetual struggle for control" with the master. In the struggle, slaves took incredible risks

¹⁴ Wilma King. *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998) 13; Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community, 1831 – 1865*, xii, 251.

and used their education in a variety of means to resist their enslavement. Furthermore, the majority of slaves that struggled for an education did so as an individual act of resistance. To some slaves education meant assistance in running away or even publicly protesting their enslavement through the printed word. Regardless of how a slave obtained his or her intellectual development, slave education served as a powerful tool of resistance against white oppression.¹⁵

Although slave education was largely an individual effort, rare examples of education for slave communities are present in North Carolina's history. Two excellent examples of black communal education in antebellum North Carolina share commonalities. First, most of the educational opportunities available to enslaved communities were deeply religious in nature. Secondly, many of the opportunities existed prior to the anti-literacy laws of 1830. Finally, even in a communal setting under white authority, slaves utilized their education as a tool of resistance against their enslavement.

A slave chapel in the current city of Winston-Salem and a Quaker school in the same area highlight both the deeply religious nature of communal slave education before the anti-literacy law of 1830. In Winston Salem, slaves attended a chapel built in 1823 with funding from a female auxiliary of the local white Moravian Church. Reserved only for black participation, the relative secretiveness of the church was an anomaly throughout the South that guarded against any secret assembly of slaves for fear of the spread of education or undesirable religious instruction. Nevertheless, a white minister involved with the chapel

¹⁵ Peter Kolchin. *American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 290; Williams. *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*, 13.

developed a favorable understanding of the secretive meetings for he wrote of the Winston-Salem congregation, “In the private meetings of the little Negro flock, and particularly and the holy communion, the peace of God is powerfully perceptible.”¹⁶

The private chapel where blacks could explore religion and education outside of the master’s view lasted nearly a decade before new laws restricted slave education. Almost as soon as the chapel was built the “hopeful project was ... painfully interrupted by the law which passed the legislature of North Carolina, forbidding any school instruction to be imparted to the Negroes.” The laws resulted “very injuriously on their [slave and free black] attendance at the meeting” noted one white minister.¹⁷

Nearby Winston-Salem, in the tiny community of New Garden of Guilford County, Levi Coffin organized a community of slaves for religious instruction. Coffin’s story began in the summer of 1821 when he traveled to North Carolina on the suggestion of his cousin with the purpose of teaching illiterate slaves. Coffin established himself in the Quaker community of New Garden where he had extensive family ties. Coffin established his school with the firm conviction that the local elite slaveholders “were lenient and would have no objection to our teaching their slaves to read the Bible.” On Sunday the slaves of the Caldwell and Doke families gathered in astonishment of “the new and unexpected privilege which had been accorded them.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Charles Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States* (Savannah, GA: Thomas Purse, 1842), 67- 75.

¹⁷ Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States*, 46, 67- 75.

¹⁸ Levi Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, The Reputed President of the Underground Railroad* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke and Company, 1880.), 69, 70.

How did African Americans use such open educational opportunities to resist their enslavement? In Winston-Salem, free blacks that once attended the chapel built by the Moravian Church moved from North Carolina to Liberia with a heavy heart due to the privileges that had been taken from them. As for the remaining slaves, “a little flock” of 17 adult members continued in attendance, regardless of the legal or social repercussions. In hindsight, the white minister responsible for the project noted that education was gradually “discouraged” in states “containing a large population of them [slaves], and whose policy it was to perpetuate the system of slavery.”¹⁹

In Levi Coffin’s case, slaves resisted slavery through education by envisioning a relaxed, more humane enslavement. Evidence of these hopes was reflected through a slave named Uncle Frank. A preacher in his community, Frank’s desire to read was based on his hope for a lighter form of slavery. In Frank’s prayer before one of Coffin’s meetings he prayed

I pray dat de good massa Lord will put it into de niggers’ hearts to larn to read de good book. Oh, Lord, make de letters in our spellin’ books big and plain, and make out eyes bright and shinin’, and make our hearts big and strong for to larn ... touch our massas’ hearts and make ‘em tender, so dey will not lay de whips to our bare backs, and you, great Massa, shall have all de glory and praise. Amen.

Although Frank’s desired to live in a less restrictive form of slavery, the surrounding slaveholders in Guilford County responded in the opposite way and strongly protested

¹⁹ Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, The Reputed President of the Underground Railroad*, 46, 67.

Coffin's venture. The neighboring slaveholders told Coffin that education "made their slaves discontented and uneasy, and created a desire for the privileges others had."²⁰

"Slavery and Quakerism could not prosper together" wrote Coffin, yet the larger truth in North Carolina after 1830 was that any communal slave education and slavery could not prosper together. In fact, the peculiar institution could not coexist with any type of opposition perceived to endanger slavery. To perpetuate the institution of slavery, numerous educators and those sympathetic to black education were expelled from the antebellum South.²¹

Of course opportunities for corporate education were rare for slaves in North Carolina. It was more likely that a slave faced incredible opposition when he or she attempted to obtain an education. The first source of opposition came from the law, which by 1830 had already codified laws against slave literacy. Secondly, a slave often faced incredible opposition from his or her master on the issue of education. Thus, to fully understand black education, it is imperative to examine the mountain of opposition that slaves faced in the antebellum South.

In North Carolina, the legal challenge to black education emerged from the legislative branch of the General Assembly. From 1777 to 1818, the Assembly debated restrictions on slave education but failed to pass any restrictions on black education. In 1818, an introduced bill attempted to criminalize the teaching any slave, "to read or write, the use of figures excepted." Nevertheless, this bill failed upon the first reading. In 1830, a series of events in

²⁰ Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, The Reputed President of the Underground Railroad*, 71.

²¹ Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, The Reputed President of the Underground Railroad*, 76; William Freehling, *The Road to Disunion, Vol. 2: Secessionists Triumphant* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 222.

the burgeoning seaport of Wilmington, North Carolina caused alarm that social restrictions against slave education were not stringent enough. The alarm developed over the rumor that Wilmington's black population possessed and distributed copies of David Walker's *The Appeal*. In *The Appeal* the abolitionist Walker not only called for an end to slavery, he also stated that the act of sending free blacks back to Africa was immoral. Soon the entire state was in an uproar that such dangerous information was disseminated among slaves.²²

Spurred by the uproar in Wilmington, the North Carolina General Assembly tightened the controls on slave education. In 1830, through a bill aptly titled "A Bill to Prevent All Persons from Teaching Slaves to Read or Write, the Use of Figures Excepted," the General Assembly outlawed any "attempt to teach any Slave to read or write." Lawmakers justified their restrictions by noting that education possessed "a tendency to excite dissatisfaction in their [slaves] minds and to produce insurrection and rebellion." Any master that desired a literate slave to assist with the plantation, or any mistress that felt the benevolent impulse to educate slaves had to put their interest on hold, for the General Assembly declared that a slave's education could only bring about the "injury of the citizens of the state." Although the state lacked the infrastructure to thoroughly enforce the law, the law set the tone that masters could be expected to follow on the plantation.²³

²² Charles Coon, *The Beginnings of Public Education in North Carolina* (Raleigh, NC: Edwards and Broughton Printing Company, 1908.), 178; Peter Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park, PA: The University of Pennsylvania State, 1997), 137.

²³ North Carolina General Assembly, "A Bill to Prevent All Persons from Teaching Slaves to Read or Write, the Use of Figures Excepted (1830)" 1.

Two fascinating aspects of the anti-slave education law are that it not only codified increasing reservations about black education, and the law also speaks volumes in detailing the punishments doled out to violators. For whites, the first violation of distributing literature that “excite[d] dissatisfaction” in slaves resulted in a fine or imprisonment. Nevertheless, no corporal punishments were doled out to whites found guilty of educating slaves.²⁴

In contrast, free blacks and slaves found guilty of educating other slaves faced corporal punishment. A “free person of colour” could expect between twenty and thirty nine lashes for teaching slaves. Of course the worst punishment for educating slaves was reserved for slaves themselves. Any slave found guilty of educating other slaves could expect “thirty nine lashes on his or her bare back.”²⁵

No sooner had the Walker crisis been averted than Nat Turner’s rebellion in the nearby Virginia county of Southampton reminded North Carolina legislators yet again of the inherent threat of black education. Literate with a deep understanding of scripture, Nat Turner proved himself a difficult slave to manage. Perhaps the violent imagery in the Old Testament, or the prophetic voice of Revelation inspired Turner, yet whatever the inspiration by the time the dust had settled on the frenzy of blood-spilling in Virginia, Turner’s

²⁴ North Carolina General Assembly, “*A Bill to Prevent All Persons from Teaching Slaves*” 1.

²⁵ North Carolina General Assembly, “*A Bill to Prevent All Persons from Teaching Slaves*” 1.

Rebellion claimed the lives of up to 200 slaves and sixty whites. In the end, his resistance turned out to be the most deadly slave revolt in United States history.²⁶

Southerners' horrified response to the Turner Rebellion led to even further restrictions on slave education in 1831. In 1831, the General Assembly restricted black education by the few methods that blacks used to obtain an education. Indeed, the legislative committee responsible for the bill believed that the "insurrectionary disposition" from Virginia could make its way to North Carolina through a host of different avenues, the most dangerous of which were the circulation of inflammatory pamphlets and the ministry of black preachers. The state restricted black educational opportunities by making it a crime for any African American "to officiate as a preacher or teacher in any prayer meeting or other association for worship."²⁷

For the legislators gathered in the General Assembly, the new statute served to stifle any Nat Turner imitators in North Carolina. However, for the enslaved community the law cut to the heart of their culture. For slaves, Christian religion and basic education were often two social opportunities that tied heavily into one another. The 1831 law that criminalized black preaching and teaching showed the depths of fear that legislators reserved for black education. Due to this fear, the quiet, reserved places where reading and writing were taught outside of the master's glance were now condemned by the state.²⁸

²⁶ William Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 174 – 195; Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 295.

²⁷ Charles Coon, ed, *The Beginnings of Public Education in Documentary History* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1864), 503-505.

²⁸ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World Slaves Made*, 162, 281.

Despite laws that outlawed slave education, the final decision regarding a slave's education depended largely on the general attitude of the master and/or mistress towards education. After all, most plantations or small farms were self-regulated communities in an era where the size of state government was limited, to say the least. Some masters regulated the slave community by checking slave cabins for books, pamphlets or other reading material. Lizzie Baker, a slave from Duplin County, recalled the invasive searches of masters into the slave cabins in search of reading material. Even in adulthood Baker still recalled, "Pap and mamy tole me marster and missus did not 'low any of de slaves to have a book in deir house. Dat if dey caught a slave wid a book in deir house dey whupped 'em." These measures were part and parcel of a larger effort to stifle black education, or as Baker put more succinctly, "Dey [the master and mistress] were keerful not let 'em learn readin' and writin'." ²⁹

Baker's community resembled many other plantations that did not need the law's influence to be a place of extreme restrictions on black education. Often the master played the part of judge and jury, and fixed his own punishment upon a slave striving for education. The punishments for trying to obtain an education were often so stringent that many of the former slaves in North Carolina could still recall the penalties that accompanied the possession of a book. Charity Austin of Kinston recalled, "you better not be caught tryin' to do somethin' wid a book. Dey would teach you wid a stick or switch." ³⁰

²⁹ The Federal Writers' Project, *North Carolina Slave Narratives* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 2006), 19.

³⁰ The Federal Writers' Project, *North Carolina Slave Narratives*, 4. There is a danger in utilizing WPA publications as primary sources on slave experience. Nevertheless, the wide

In other cases slaves equated the punishment of possessing a book with being separated from family and friends. To the slaves, this threat of being sold seemed distinctly possible as many slaves were being sold out west to the burgeoning Deep South states of Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. Even worse was the great possibility that being sold accompanied time in the brutal slave pens that Walter Johnson vividly describes in his *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*. Decades after emancipation, Louisa Adams of Richmond County distinctly remembered the severity of book possession when she recalled, “Lawd, you better not be caught wid a book in yor han’. If you did, you were sold.”³¹

While many masters and mistresses linked punishment with black education, other masters wholeheartedly supported black education for a variety of reasons. One use of education was as a means to control slave behavior and mold it to white expectations. A former slave, Mary Anngady recalled part of her education was based upon her socialization with her mistresses’ children. “They [the mistresses’s white children] drilled me in etiquette of the times and also in courtesy and respect to my superiors.” The etiquette training was so often repeated that it wasn’t long before Anngady noted, “it was perfectly natural for me to be polite.” Other masters, such as shopowner David Cogdell of Wilmington, shared

variety of educational opportunities recalled in the WPA interviews is reflective of the different experiences of slaves throughout North Carolina. Without other interviews or primary sources concerning each slave’s experience, we can only take the former slave at his or her word.

³¹ The Federal Writers’ Project, *North Carolina Slave Narratives*, 4, 62; Johnson, *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Markets*, 5.

education with his slaves in order to have a second hand in keeping record and creating store invoices.³²

Anngady's experience with moral education as a means to force her compliance to her master and mistress highlights the meaning attributed to education by both blacks and whites. Whereas blacks viewed education as an instrument to resist the barbarity of slavery, some whites believed that education would result in a slave's docility. For some masters this meant a heavy dose of religious instruction, especially upon scripture such as 1 Peter 2:18 that implores a slave's subservience to the master. In Anngady's case, whites employed education as a tool to mold slave behavior.³³

The same masters and mistresses that used education to mold slave behavior also assisted slaves in their education out of paternalistic benevolence as well. Indeed, some masters even scoffed at legal restrictions or community pressures against slave education in order to have a literate field hand to assist with the running of the plantation. Some masters believed that literate slaves would be more apt to follow biblical law and Christianity morality. In addition, many women were driven by a paternalistic benevolence that drove them to play school with "their" slaves as a sign of the mistresses' charity.³⁴

In an antebellum South that attempted to limit black education, how did these opportunities exist? In part, educational opportunities emerged from a hierarchical form of racism where a well-structured, well-enforced racial order guided social interaction, such as education, between whites and blacks. Of course, events such as the Nat Turner rebellion or

³² The Federal Writers' Project, *North Carolina Slave Narratives*, 34.

³³ 1 Pet 2:18 (English Standard Version)

³⁴ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World Slaves Made*, 561 – 566.

the Wilmington could disrupt the hierarchical relationship but over the long run masters were largely free to educate their slaves should they so desire.³⁵

Growing up under the weight of both chattel slavery and the benevolent impulses of her master, Mary Anngady's education provides a striking example of hierarchical racism in antebellum North Carolina. Although Anngady detested the numbing workload, she did hark back to her education as a bright period of her enslavement. Anngady noted that her mistresses' daughter, Sallie, "taught me my A B C's in Webster's Blue Back Spelling Book. When I learned to Spell B-a-k-e-r, Baker, I thought that was something." Her love of spelling did not go unnoticed for soon her mistresses bought her a blue back spelling book for her own.³⁶

Beside the opportunities offered by missionaries or benevolent mistresses, it was common for slaves to gain some semblance of an education by close association with white children. As a slave child from the tiny town of Chowan, North Carolina, Allen Parker's first learning opportunity was sparked just outside the physical boundaries of the county schoolhouse. Parker's sole responsibility rested on bringing lunch to the white children at noon, yet in the time between lunch and the end of school, the boy was afforded a slight educational opportunity. The young slave boy kept a keen ear out for the teacher's lesson and

³⁵ Richard H. King, *Race, Culture and the Intellectuals, 1940 – 1970* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 113.

³⁶ The Federal Writers' Project, *North Carolina Slave Narratives*, 33.

later recalled, “I would get there before school was out and would hear them singing their geography lessons, and it was not long before I knew some of these lessons by heart.”³⁷

All slaves faced challenges to their education and some slaves received assistance in their struggles from paternalistic masters, but what about those slaves that pursued an education despite violent repercussions? Thomas Jones, a slave, of New Hanover County began with the common conditions experienced by North Carolina slaves: deplorable living conditions, a cruel master, and the inevitable dread of the “wretchedness before us [slave children.]” Of all the intolerable aspects of slavery, the lack of education for black children weighed most heavily on him. Indeed, once upon reflection about the future of black children, Jones was most bothered by the “thought of ignorance . . . which they must endure as slaves.” Such thoughts remained the inspiration in using his education as a tool of resistance.³⁸

Like so many other slaves that used education to resist their condition, Jones’ first educational opportunity developed under the directive of a relatively kind master. No longer subject to the abuses of his former master, Jones appreciated the kind benevolence of a new master, storekeeper David Cogdell. Under Cogdell’s direction, Jones “enjoyed a *gleam* of happiness” by watching the store clerk’s dedication to reading and writing in the quiet periods between customers. Acting on his fascination, Jones approached his new master and

³⁷ Allen Parker, *Recollections of Slavery Times* (Worcester, MA: Charles W. Burbank & Co., 1895), 37.

³⁸ Anonymous, *The Experience of Rev. Thomas H. Jones* (New Bedford, MA: E. Anthony & Sons, Printers, 1885.), 6.

inquired about the benefits of literacy to which Cogdell “answered very kindly many questions which I asked him about books and schools and learning.”³⁹

Jones’ atypical experience as a slave in Wilmington offered him greater experience at education, and thus a means of resistance that would eventually set him free. The urban environment of Wilmington meant a greater exposure to educated free blacks, although Jones does not make mention of free blacks in his educational development. More importantly Jones’s relationship with storeowner Cogdell certainly had implications for his educational development. First, Cogdell and Jones worked closely together and thus Jones was able to witness the benefits of education first hand. Of course, African Americans enslaved in the cotton and tobacco fields did not live in such close quarters and thus did not experience similar circumstances. Furthermore, many masters held no interest in slave education, regarding slave education as an instrument of resistance to their authority.⁴⁰

Regardless of Cogdell’s interests, Jones sought out an education with the intention of “new thoughts, purposes and new hopes, a new life, in fact.” For his “new thoughts,” Jones envisioned a mind centered on his newly acquired knowledge and not the master’s projected beliefs. As for his “purposes and new hopes,” Jones believed that education opened doors to new opportunities. Finally, Jones’ final act of resistance came through his firm belief that his education could lead to “a new life,” perhaps one free from the burdens of slavery.⁴¹

Jones’s own individual effort evidenced great agency in his own education, yet how Jones used his education to resist his enslavement is the most important aspect of the

³⁹ Anonymous, *The Experience of Rev. Thomas H. Jones*, 13.

⁴⁰ Anonymous, *The Experience of Rev. Thomas H. Jones*, 15.

⁴¹ Anonymous, *The Experience of Rev. Thomas A. Jones*, 16.

experience. Jones used his particular education as a tool of resistance by corresponding with his wife in New York and planning his eventual escape. Through his literacy, Jones was able to craft communication to his wife that would have been nearly impossible otherwise. In the year of his escape, Jones demanded that his wife write a letter to his master expressing dislike of a free life in New York in order to mask his intent to escape. “Dear wife, I want you to make out that you don't like New York. When you write to me you must say so. Do mind how you write,” wrote Jones one month before his departure in the hold of a ship.⁴²

Not only did Jones use his correspondence with his wife to mask his intention of escape, he also used the letters to convey crucial information before his escape. In one correspondence that took place right before Jones’s escape, he expressed to his wife that his escape would inevitably leave his children behind. Thus in resisting his enslavement, Jones used his education to communicate the necessary information that needed to precede his arrival. To his wife in New York, Jones wrote, “Edward [Jones’s son] is sold to Owen Holmes; but I think Mr. Josh. Wright will get him from H ... Don't think of coming back here, for I will come to you or die.”⁴³

Despite Jones’s brave tale of escape, leaving was not an option for most slaves. Therefore how else did slaves utilize their education to resist their enslavement? George Moses Horton provides us with the answer. Born into slavery and filled with a deep love of

⁴² Anonymous, *The Experience of Rev. Thomas H. Jones*, 39.

⁴³ Horton published three books of poetry in his life, all of which were published by local presses. Horton’s links to college professors and Caroline Lee Hentz, a wife of a professor, served as his greatest contacts in establishing his publications. For more of Horton’s poetry see George Moses Horton, *The Poetical Works of George M. Horton, the Colored Bard of North Carolina to which is Prefixed the Life of the Author, Written by Himself* (Hillsborough, North Carolina: Heart Publishers, 1845.), 45.

education, George Moses Horton shared many similarities with Thomas Jones. From the rich agricultural lands of Chatham County, Horton skillfully developed poems he committed to memory while at the same time teaching himself how to read and write. Indeed, Horton described his individual study over the fireplace where he read despite “sweating and smoking over my incompetent bark or brush light.” If Horton could not be found squinting near the fireplace, he could be found reading in “the pleasant umbrage” of Chatham County’s piney woods.⁴⁴

Horton did not encounter the same resistance that led Thomas Jones to mask his educational interests. At the state college at Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Horton developed a profitable business dealing in fruit and the spoken word. At first, students played jokes on Horton and mocked his orations. Nevertheless, in time the students came around and demanded Horton’s poetry in exchange for cash. “Somehow or other they discovered a spark of genius in me” wrote Horton of the college students that keenly listened to the slave’s spoken poetry.⁴⁵

By mid-life, Horton developed a sizeable following among college students for his poetry. Although he enjoyed the meager financial support for his poetry, he dreamed of one-day reaching a popularity that would free him from his chains. Slowly but surely, Horton compiled a host of poems that earned him anywhere from 25 cents apiece to the “extremely generous” gentlemen that purchased a poem at 75 cents. Horton’s unique abilities eventually

⁴⁴ Horton, *The Poetical Works of George M. Horton, the Colored Bard of North Carolina to which is Prefixed the Life of the Author, Written by Himself*, v, vi.

⁴⁵ Horton, *The Poetical Works of George M. Horton, the Colored Bard of North Carolina to which is Prefixed the Life of the Author, Written by Himself*, xiv.

led to a collection of his poems released under the title of *The Hope of Liberty* published by a Raleigh printer in 1829.⁴⁶

In *The Hope of Liberty*, an anonymous author noted that the thirty-two year old Horton “knows how to read, and is now learning to write.” Horton’s inability to write most likely meant that he dictated his poems to his sizeable group of customers. Secondly, the anonymous author notes the purpose of the book to raise “a sum sufficient for his emancipation, upon the condition of his going in the vessel which shall first afterwards sail for Liberia.” Thus, Horton intended to use his education to legally break the chains of his enslavement.⁴⁷

Horton’s poem “On Liberty and Slavery” indignantly rages upon the institution of slavery with the full force of an individual who cannot escape his chains. While the individual nature of the poem points to the same individual struggle that George Moses Horton undertook to garner his education, the more important aspect of the poem is Horton’s language to resist his enslavement. Horton used the words oppression, tyrant and barbarism to describe the same enslavement that whites viewed beneficial to African Americans.

*Say unto foul oppression, Cease:
Ye tyrants rage no more
And let the joyful trump of peace
Now bid the vassal soar*

⁴⁶ Horton, *The Poetical Works of George M. Horton, the Colored Bard of North Carolina to which is Prefixed the Life of the Author, Written by Himself*, 7. George Moses Horton, *The Hope of Liberty* (Raleigh, North Carolina: J. Gales & Sons, 1829), 3.

⁴⁷ Horton, *The Hope of Liberty*, 3.

Unfortunately, Horton's dreams for freedom were not realized until the end of the Civil War.⁴⁸

Expulsion never existed as an option for the North Carolina slaves that desired an education. Mired in an inhumane system that relied on violence to suppress their desires, many of North Carolina's enslaved population still succeeded in obtaining an education. Sometimes slaves went about obtaining their education in a piecemeal fashion, relying on relatively benevolent whites or by taking part in group education. In contrast, the majority of slaves in North Carolina garnered an education in a largely individual effort. Slaves used their education to redefine the institution of slavery, escape, or even publicly protest their enslavement through the printed words. Regardless of the method in which slaves protested slavery, the overarching commonality is that slaves utilized their education as a tool of resistance against white oppression.

⁴⁸ Horton, *The Hope of Liberty*, 8; Horton, *The Poetical Works of George M. Horton, the Colored Bard of North Carolina to which is Prefixed the Life of the Author, Written by Himself*, 9.

Chapter Two: Collective Action and Public Schools, Black Education during the Civil War and Presidential Reconstruction

The Civil War and subsequent emancipation for North Carolina's enslaved population changed the face of black education in North Carolina. In the midst of war, blacks used their educational abilities to escape and to aid the Union cause. With freedom, blacks gathered in political meetings, community gatherings and outside the door of school officials to influence the educational future of their children. Although blacks were now free, education during Presidential Reconstruction remained a tool of opposition against oppression. Through education blacks articulated their demand for both equality through public education and greater independence.

Although the history of the black community's pursuit of education in North Carolina has not received proper attention, this research continues in the tradition of historians that trace the black community's acts of resistance during the Civil War and Presidential Reconstruction. W.E.B. DuBois is one of the first scholars to correctly point to the agency of African Americans in shaping Reconstruction. As for modern historians, Steven Hahn, author of the Pulitzer Prize winning *A Nation Under Our Feet*, stands out as well. Hahn posits that the black community during Reconstruction worked together to achieve their political, social and economic goals. The author's understanding of a "collective and institutional form" to the black community is also evident in North Carolina's reconstruction as African-Americans organized for their children's education.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South From Slavery to the Great Migration*, 1; DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860 – 1880*, 664.

Drawing upon Hahn's arguments, the following chapter highlights the black community's activism for education. During the Civil War blacks used literacy to escape to Union lines and aid in the war effort. During wartime and Presidential Reconstruction, African Americans laid claim to education's importance and argued fully that education was necessary for both self and communal elevation. Despite freedpeople's lowly status, they acted powerfully within missionary associations and the Freedmen's Bureau to ensure some sort of control over their own education. Furthermore, they argued for a restoration of the antebellum school system that collapsed during the Civil War. Most importantly, the impulse behind such measures remained in the use of education by African Americans as a tool of resistance against their subjugated status.

With the first shots of the Civil War in 1861, the prospects for black education in North Carolina changed rapidly yet the purpose of education, as a tool of opposition, remained the same. In four remarkable years, blacks used education to escape enslavement and aid the Union cause. Even though there is a paucity of historical evidence on the issue, enough remains to answer two essential questions concerning the period: How did blacks use the war to further their educational prospects? How did literacy play a part in slave escapes to Union lines?

One excellent example in the use of education as a tool of resistance is evident in the experience of Robert A. Morrow, a slave of Confederate general James Johnson Pettigrew. Morrow's major act of resistance took place in his escape from New Bern at the Battle of New Bern in March of 1862. With literacy skills and apparent air of persuasiveness, Morrow served as a Union recruiter to convince skeptical African Americans of the need to fight in

the war. During the down time in recruiting, Morrow also founded a school for freedpeople and thus showed a concern not only for the current generation of soldiers needed for the war, but also the future generations that required education for the conflict ahead.⁵⁰

After escaping to Union lines, blacks utilized the opportunities afforded by war to further their education and use their newfound understanding as a tool of resistance against oppression. For some African Americans, the pursuit of education in wartime was often as difficult as it had been beforehand. Blacks employed in the Union lines had little precious time to read and write outside of the low-level jobs. African Americans fortunate enough to not man the common labor jobs of the Union Army often found northern missionary schools to be very paternalistic.⁵¹

Although many slaves could not escape during the war, some continued to capitalize upon their literacy to strike a blow against the Confederacy and with it, slavery. George Moses Horton, a literate and published slave, stayed on the grounds of the Horton plantation near Pittsboro until the surrender of the area to the Union Army. Nevertheless, one year into his newfound freed status Horton released *Naked Genius* where he used his poetical skills to celebrate the epic fortitude of General U.S. Grant. Although he did not aid the army during wartime, he certainly furthered the memory of the Union in peacetime.⁵²

⁵⁰ Richard Reid, *Freedom for Themselves: North Carolina's Black Soldiers in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 203.

⁵¹ Judkin Browning, "Visions of Freedom and Civilization Opening before Them. African Americans Search for Autonomy during Military Occupation in North Carolina," in *North Carolinians in the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction*, ed. Paul D. Escott, 69 – 100. (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2008), 89.

⁵² George Moses Horton, *Naked Genius* (Raleigh, NC: WM. B. Smith & Company, 1865), 13.

Despite the differences in ways that blacks achieved freedom during the Civil War, most came into contact with northern missionaries. The northern missionary influence over education and aid arrived as early as 1862, when much of North Carolina's coastal region was occupied by the Union. As the war progressed, groups such as the American Missionary Association (AMA), founded in 1846 to promote abolitionism and black education, followed in the wake of Union occupation throughout North Carolina. By the war's end, the influence of northern missionary associations could be felt throughout the state. Most importantly for education, the level of assistance that missionary associations provided was crucial to black achievement. Nevertheless, the blatant discrimination and overt paternalism left the association's contributions with a mixed legacy.⁵³

To lead the AMA's extensive set of free schools, the association chose Samuel Stanford Ashley, an ordained minister from Oberlin College with previous missionary work at Fortress Monroe, Virginia. In April of 1865, Ashley left Virginia and took the position as superintendent of AMA schools in North Carolina. Now the former minister would be responsible for the minds of 1,500 freedpeople divided into eight schools. The task was by no means an easy one. After all, the superintendent position only opened after the failure and subsequent dismissal of Ashley's predecessor.⁵⁴

Under the strain of incredible circumstances, S.S. Ashley struggled with the demands of the job of superintendent. Ashley noted, "Before I rise in the morning, black people are at the door waiting for me, and they are there until dark." Although Ashley's quote is

⁵³ Bell, "Samuel Stanford Ashley, Carpetbagger and Educator," 456-461.

⁵⁴ Bell, "Samuel Stanford Ashley, Carpetbagger and Educator," 456-461.

significant as an indicator of the stress he faced, his words are of greater importance in signifying the community activism of the black community over their children's education.⁵⁵

Another educational issue troubling North Carolina was the collapse of public education during the Civil War. Indeed, the heavy expenses of war drove the state government to divert money from the Literary Fund to more pressing needs. Even the state university, in place a half century before the public school system, struggled to keep its doors open as funding waned and students joined the war effort. For a large stretch of the Piedmont and almost the entirety of western North Carolina public education suffered through the war's four-year stretch. On April 26, 1865, the Confederate surrender at Bennett Place in Durham effectively opened all of the state to Union occupation.⁵⁶

As the war ended, blacks attempted to resuscitate the public school system, but what was the opportunity that the public school system would be reestablished? In North Carolina, the desire for public schools ran as old as the country itself. In 1776, the drafters of the state constitution include a provision for public education in Article XLI. The article noted the necessity of "convenient instruction" for the state's youth in addition to public funding that allowed teachers to "instruct at a low price." In the four decades that followed, the Age of Enlightenment gave way to an era of reality as North Carolina failed to provide "convenient instruction" for many of North Carolina's children.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Bell, "Samuel Stanford Ashley, Carpetbagger and Educator," 466.

⁵⁶ William D. Snider, *Light on the Hill: A History of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 29, 35.

⁵⁷ Guion Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina: A Social History*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1937); Francis Thorpe, ed., *The Federal and State Constitutions, Colonial Charters and Other Organic Laws of the States, Territories, and*

The real foundation for public education in North Carolina was laid in a series of executive initiatives in the early 19th century. In 1816, Judge Archibald D. Murphey “the father of common schools” developed a workable framework for education in North Carolina. Murphey called for superintendents to be appointed to all of North Carolina’s then 62 counties. In a time when the closest government body to most Carolinians was the post office, the radical plan for educational development seemed like a sweeping expanse of government power. The General Assembly responded in kind and provided that funding for education come from taxes on the ever-expanding trade of navigation companies to the ever-constant sale of liquor. The combination of these taxes with discretionary funding from the General Assembly was known as the Literary Fund, a viable financial backing for North Carolina’s schools. Although the General Assembly quickly provided the financial basis for public schools, the task of producing tangible results developed much later. Indeed, more than twenty years after Governor Miller’s original request, the Legislature finally set the public school system in motion. The first tangible growth is evident in the Census of 1850 that reported 2,657 schools and 2,730 teachers serving the needs of 104,905 students. Most unexpectedly, this total also included 217 free blacks.⁵⁸

Colonies Now or Heretofore Forming the United States of America (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1909), 3760.

⁵⁸ Commissioner of Education. *Report of the Commissioner of Education for the Year 1896-97* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1898), 1402.; Smith, *The History of Education in North Carolina*, 164; United States Census Bureau, *Seventh Census of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1853), 315; John H. Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 169.

In an antebellum world strongly divided by race, why did North Carolina assume responsibility for the education of free blacks? Furthermore, what implications did this have on post-war North Carolina? First, free blacks attended North Carolina's public educational institutions not because of any positive law to sponsor their education, but because of the lack of any negative laws to curtail their freedom. Indeed, the two statutes passed by the General Assembly did not curtail the education of free blacks but of slaves instead.

Of all the significant changes brought by the war, the issue of emancipation by far served as the greatest roadblock to the reinstitution of public schools. State officials denied the possibility of including freed black children in the Common Schools. One common complaint of officials is that incorporation of black children presented a serious strain to the Literary Fund. Superintendent Sidney M. Finger recalled, "The problem then was how the five-eighths [whites], owning all the lands, but essentially nothing but the lands, could educate themselves and also the three-eighths of paupers [blacks] recently made citizens."⁵⁹

Despite Finger's contention that logistics hampered freedpeoples' education, the true obstacle to public education remained the fear of integration. After all, emancipation and the redrawn racial boundaries came as an overwhelming shock to most white North Carolinians. Although the war served as a significant vehicle for change, many white southerners wished to restore their former society and thus resist changes to public education. Furthermore, many

⁵⁹ Smith, *The History of Education*, 170.

whites did not desire to send their children to an integrated or “mixed” school, much less have their child taught by an African American.⁶⁰

In response to these fears, the same government that once sponsored the antebellum development of public schools now dragged its feet on public education.

Across the state, freedpeople met to discuss the necessity of education, and many others protested the decline of public education. From clergy to farmers, missionary to teachers, many North Carolinians developed a sharp critique of the state’s educational policy in the immediate post-war years. Although the proponents of public education often differed on the purpose of education, nearly all saw the value of revitalizing the dying Literary Fund.

The first black political organization in North Carolina to show an interest in education emerged in an uncertain period in both the state and the nation’s history. In the first of two years following the war, former Confederates had been offered a lenient readmission program from both President Lincoln and President Johnson. Furthermore, African Americans during Presidential Reconstruction did not possess suffrage and thus held little political influence in North Carolina. In turn, elections from across the South sent former Confederate leaders to high positions in national authority. The strongly Republican 39th Congress refused to seat the Southern delegates in Congress.⁶¹

In North Carolina, the pool of political uncertainty circled around the state capitol in Raleigh where lawmakers gathered to construct a new state Constitution in agreement with

⁶⁰ Ward McAfee, *Religion, Race and Reconstruction* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1988), 99.

⁶¹ Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction, 1863 - 1877* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Press, 1990), 109.

President Johnson's plans for Reconstruction. To be in compliance, the North Carolina Constitutional Convention needed only to repudiate the war debt and outlaw slavery. The delegates could have reestablished North Carolina's strong system of public education, although educational reform remained only a possibility and not a requirement for reentering the Union.

A few city blocks away, African Americans organized with the fervent plea that the state convention recognize black equality before the law. The Freedmen's Convention of 1865 met in a small African Methodist Episcopal Church, known as the "Lincoln Church" for a statue of the Great Emancipator and a quote over the church entrance from the fallen president's last inaugural address. A newspaper's description of the event as "novel to white people" was not without merit for many of the same men that assembled to discuss the black community's future had only months earlier been someone's property.⁶²

Inside the safe confines of the Lincoln Church, the roughly 150 freedmen struggled to address the issue of their citizenship in an unreconstructed state. From the most educated northern ministers to the newly freed slave, all were cognizant that a State Constitutional convention was soon to meet with the purpose of rewriting North Carolina's founding document. In response, the resolutions passed by the freedmens' convention firmly addressed pertinent issues of citizenship with an optimistic faith that the Constitutional convention delegates would serve their interests.⁶³

The overriding concern to address crucial issues of legal equality left education as a

⁶² Foner, ed. *Proceedings of the Black National and State Conventions, 1865 – 1900*, 180; *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, October 14, 1865, 1.

⁶³ Foner, ed. *Proceedings of the Black National and State Conventions, 1865 – 1900*, 180.

secondary issue at the freedmens' convention. In point of fact, education received no attention in an early morning address by convention president James W. Hood. As a supplement to Hood's address, the Business Committee did not push for public education but instead issued a precise request to the black community on education. "Advising the colored people to educate themselves and their children," stated the Committee, "not alone in book learning but in a high-moral energy, self-respect, and in a virtuous, Christian, and dignified life."⁶⁴

With a heavy dose of self-responsibility and moral instruction, Hood's understanding of black education, as more of a moral than intellectual pursuit, was a belief largely shaped by his immediate environment. After all, freedpeople in 1866 were hampered both by social restrictions and the inability to exercise political power through the ballot box. Thus, the Freedmen's Convention could not apply pressure on white politicians that gathered in the General Assembly. Instead, they could only appeal to them on education. During Congressional Reconstruction, black leaders established greater political power. Only then did their stance on education become more apparent.

Of course Hood, with his understanding of black education as more of a moral than intellectual pursuit, was not alone in his conciliatory approach to the white delegates assembled at the Constitutional Convention. Hood made little mention of suffrage, much less of public education. Beyond Hood's declaration on black education, only two resolutions in the remaining proceedings touched on education. The first of two resolutions on education utilized language to celebrate, rather than advocate for the cause of black education.

⁶⁴ Foner, ed. *Proceedings of the Black National and State Conventions, 1865 – 1900*, 180.

Conscious of their word choice the assembled freedmen expressed their pride upon “the part of our young men,” most likely teachers and students, for their role in furthering black education.⁶⁵

The failure to pass a stronger resolution on black education did not negate the importance of the issue. Indeed on the final day of the convention, a delegate caused a stir with a failed second resolution to all black teachers and preachers to be actively involved in black education. In return, opponents of the bill feared “another wall between blacks and whites” and were successful in weakening the resolution’s language. The final resolution issued no call to black teachers and preachers to educate but rather thanked the Freedmen’s Bureau for their educational assistance.⁶⁶

The resolution calling upon black teachers and preachers was ultimately rejected because the convention’s leadership understood their precarious existence in post-war North Carolina. Although the 13th Amendment put an end to slavery, the U.S. Constitution still did not delineate the boundaries for citizenship, nor establish legal rights for African Americans. Thus, instead of calling for the aid of black teachers, the committee chose not to anger white authority. A year later, in the Freedmen’s Convention of 1866, the black leadership was less hesitant to stress advocacy over reconciliation.

In response to the freedmen’s convention, North Carolina’s white population fired back at African Americans through local newspapers. In various editorials, the purpose of black education was assumed only to reinforce African-Americans place in society as menial

⁶⁵ Foner, ed. *Proceedings of the Black National and State Conventions, 1865 – 1900*, 180.

⁶⁶ Roberta Sue Alexander, *North Carolina Faces the Freedmen* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1985), 29.

laborers. Indeed, one contributor noted the importance of northern missionaries and the Freedmen's Bureau, "to teach the Freedmen their true status," in much the same ways that masters desired education to make a slave obedient. Any individual that altered the true intent for black education was singled out as a foreign agitator attempting to stir up North Carolina's black population. The *Raleigh Sentinel*, a conservative paper edited by Josiah Turner, targeted James H. Harris, a black educator from Wake County and key leader of the 1865 convention. The *Sentinel* targeted Harris for his northern education and interest in a spreading a "fanatical abolition paper," in the "hopes to obtain much profit." but certainly not for black educational gains.⁶⁷

Although the Freedmen's Convention of 1865 gave short shrift to education, the freedmen's larger focus on political equality rather than educational opportunity is the result of circumstances in which the convention met. Heather Williams's study of freedpeople's conventions in the immediacy of the post-war era highlights two common trends of freedmen's conventions. First, as Williams notes "blacks needed white southerners to agree to black legal equality" and thus the language and demands of freedpeople are largely conciliatory in nature. This is evident in the relatively reserved language used to both advocate and celebrate black education among leaders of the 1865 Freedmens' Convention.

⁶⁷ "Josiah Turner," *New York Times*, October 27, 1901, 7; *Raleigh Sentinel*, September 28, 1865, 2; *Raleigh Sentinel*, October 2, 1865, 2; Eric Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers, A Directory of Black Officeholders during Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 96, 97.

In addition, North Carolina's freedpeople believed that illiteracy should not keep blacks from participation in the political sphere.⁶⁸

The North Carolina Freedmen's Convention of 1865 ended with insufficient mention of education, yet a final address issued by black political leaders in the *Raleigh Sentinel* after the convention provides a clearer picture of their thoughts on education. Buried on page four, the freedmen's proclamation, signed by James Harris, served as a remarkable contrast with the conciliatory language of the convention. The address' opening line noted, "We desire education for our children, that they may be made useful in all relations of life." Yet, what was the nature of this education? Would black children be taught moral instruction or guided in intellectual pursuits as well? Should the state be responsible in funding black education?⁶⁹

Up against a mountain of opposition, the possibility of public funding for black education seemed doomed during Presidential Reconstruction. Spurred by fears of racial integration and troubled by the cost and burden of educating the newly freed population, the General Assembly refused to restore the Literary Fund to its former greatness. Nevertheless, important whites argued for a restoration of the Literary Fund without paying regard to the fears of integration. One educator in particular was C.H. Wiley, a once superintendent of North Carolina's common schools and former convention leader of Confederate teachers in the early Civil War. Wiley wrote an open letter to Governor William Woods Holden, a political chameleon that at one point or another opposed secession, supported the

⁶⁸ Williams, *Self-Taught: African Americans in Slavery and Freedom*, 79.

⁶⁹ "To the Constitutional Convention of North Carolina and Legislature to assemble thereafter," *Raleigh Sentinel*, October 4, 1865, 4

Confederacy and urged for peace with the Union. Governor Holden was appointed to his position by the equally wily President Andrew Johnson.⁷⁰

In an open letter to Governor Holden, Wiley laid his case for the Common Schools. Wiley cut straight to the issue in his letter by boldly arguing that the closing of the public schools in North Carolina could only, “but add to and aggravate the evils always incident to war.” Writing from the perfect vision of hindsight, Wiley stated, “I felt sure that if any part of the resources of the Literary Fund were once diverted from their proper and original purpose, the whole Fund would soon be wasted.” Wiley noted that God favored his position and that the almighty had placed him in a position to monitor the progress of education in North Carolina and “defend the interests of a great moral agency effecting the character and welfare of the whole State.”⁷¹

As the Fund’s defender, Wiley issued a cogent argument in favor of education to Governor Holden and other delegates to the state Constitutional Convention. Wiley wrote that public schools are, “as important in war as well as in peace [and] were to be kept open as long as there were children to be taught and teachers to instruct them.” Wiley also provided an eloquent rejection of the notion that lack of funding stifled schooling, “Can it be admitted

⁷⁰ Convention of Teachers of the Confederate States, *Proceedings of the Convention of Teachers of the Confederate States* (Macon, GA: Burke, Boykin & Co. Steam Book and Job Printers, 1863), 16. William Harris, *William Woods Holden: Firebrand of North Carolina Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 160. For an excellent history of C.H. Wiley see Geoffrey Harris, “Toward a New Whig Interpretation of History: Common Schools in Burke County, North Carolina, from 1853 to 1861” (master’s thesis, North Carolina State University, 2008), 1.

⁷¹ C.H. Wiley, “Common Schools – Communication from Rev. C.H. Wiley to His Excellency, W.W. Holden, Provisional Governor of North Carolina,” *The Raleigh Sentinel*, October 3, 1865, 4.

that any people is too poor to preserve the means of civilization?” Finally he asked, “Can a community continue civilized and not educate its children?”⁷²

Of course, Wiley’s heartfelt argument could be expected of any school official that desired the continuation of common school system. Nevertheless, Wiley’s last argument to Governor Holden offered a solution to the issue of educational need. Offering a progressive view of education that stood miles above most other arguments on the issue, Wiley wrote, “When the burden of educating children of the State is thrown equally on all according to their means it is comparatively light to each individual.”⁷³

Even with the hopes of the Freedmen’s Convention and the warnings of Wiley bearing down on them, the 1865 Constitutional Convention made absolutely no progress on public education. In fact, over the six-month period that the convention met, the only mention of education came in relation to a \$5 fine assessed to any individual that illegally shot a spotted brook trout. Whereas education once received steady funding from a trade and alcohol tax, now school funding depended upon the illegal poaching of a mountain stream fish. Of course, the pressing matters of outlawing slavery and repudiating the state debt took a great deal of the convention’s energy. Nevertheless, the convention’s delegates did possess the time to tackle other pertinent issues, including the installation of water closets in the state capitol.⁷⁴

Five months after the Constitutional Convention failed to take any initiative on

⁷² C.H. Wiley, “Common Schools,” *The Raleigh Sentinel*, 4.

⁷³ C.H. Wiley, “Common Schools” *The Raleigh Sentinel*, 4.

⁷⁴ North Carolina General Assembly, *Journal of the Convention of the State of North Carolina at its Session of 1865* (Raleigh: Cannon & Holden, 1865), 45, 79.

education, the General Assembly ignored the pleas of Rev. Wiley and the freedmen's convention and provided a deathblow to the common school system. Introduced to the floor was a bill that while not calling for the abolishment of public schools did call for terminating the state superintendent position. Many of the state legislators understood the negative implications of a leaderless common school system already financially disabled. In fact, the notion that Common Schools would survive without the superintendent was deemed "ridiculous" by one Assembly member.⁷⁵

One of the more cogent arguments in favor of keeping the existing educational structure came from a Jones W. Burton of Rockingham County, who noted the Common School's relatively low costs. Specifically, Burton noted that funding for county superintendent pay only consisted of "2 1/2 per cent, upon the amount expended for school purposes." At the state level, Burton also noted that the \$1500 yearly pay for the Superintendent was an agreeable amount. If at any point the Superintendent's pay exceeded what was deemed to be proper, Burton would, "vote to decrease it, but he was opposed to abolishing the office."⁷⁶

Although financial straits coupled with entrenched racism cast the survival of the common schools in doubt, Burton was not alone in his calls for continuing public education. One of the more fascinating statements came from a Luke Blackmer who noted that many of the public school system's greatest enemies pretended to be its proponents. Blackmer compared the enemies of public schooling with traitors to the Confederacy and noted that the

⁷⁵ *Raleigh Sentinel*, March 12, 1866, 2.

⁷⁶ "House of Commons," *Raleigh Sentinel*, March 12, 1866; *The Southeastern Reporter: Volume 12* (St. Paul, Minnesota: West Publishing Co., 1891), 834.

men attempting to “throttle the [school] system” were the same men, “who during the war, professed great attachment to the Confederacy, [yet] refused food to its soldiers.” Blackmer ended his comments by noting that it was the obligation of every good man to support the Common Schools headed by a superintendent that, “whatever his faults ... made a good officer.”⁷⁷

As the Friday evening session stretched into the night, legislators in opposition to the Common Schools gained the upper hand. One lawmaker targeted the half-century tradition of a school superintendent as an “unnecessary expense to the State.” Another attack, led by one Mr. McAden, vehemently protested that “A salary of \$1500 had been paid for years to the [superintendent] for doing nothing.” Furthermore McAden noted with an anti-intellectual streak that “He [the superintendent] had been of no use on God’s Almighty’s earth and the State unable to pay such a salary to a man who merely wrote long essays, and drew interminable bills.”⁷⁸

As the debate waned and voting neared, it was evident that the Superintendent position, and thus the future of public education, was in great jeopardy. Cognizant of this possibility, a Mr. Hutchinson attempted to add \$50,000 in Common School funding yet found his proposal quickly rejected by his colleagues. Of course, the denial of Hutchinson’s \$50,000 proposal seemed likely when prominent delegates targeted the Superintendent’s paltry \$1,500 salary. By the end of the night, the Superintendent’s opponents had succeeded in eliminating his position and delivered a fatal blow to North Carolina’s public schools. The

⁷⁷ *The Weekly North-Carolina Standard*, March 21, 1866, 2.

⁷⁸ *Raleigh Sentinel*, March 12, 1866, 2.

opposition's achievement, Act 122 "to abolish the offices of the Superintendent of Common Schools, Treasurer of the Library Fund, and for other purposes" passed the Assembly 62-15.⁷⁹

In the wake of the General Assembly's action, it did not take long for an organized public reaction to develop. "No state interest is dearer to the people than the education of her children" wrote one protestor, one day after Act 122 passed. The anonymous author continued that even though the Literary Fund suffered from a severe shortage of funding, no reasonable argument existed to disband the fund altogether. Finally, the enraged citizen offered a warning shot to state legislators that would soon "scarcely bear the displeasure and condemnation of the people, which will be aroused."⁸⁰

How did the heated political debate on Common Schools concern the future of black education? Perhaps the most important aspect of the debate is that the pleas for the Common Schools provided African Americans with the political language they needed to argue for black public education. Although white defenders of the Common Schools most likely understood "the people" as whites, African Americans used this same political language to defend Common Schools for black and whites alike. For African Americans, "the people" possessed an interest in education since 1776 when the original state constitution made specific provisions for education. Indeed, how could the future of "the people" and the Common Schools be put on hold over the fear of integration?

The displeasure of "the people" over education manifested itself in early October

⁷⁹ "House of Commons," *Raleigh Sentinel*, March 12, 1866; *Raleigh Sentinel*, March 13, 1866, 4.

⁸⁰ "Common Schools," *Raleigh Sentinel*, March 12, 1866.

1866, as North Carolina's freedmen met again in the shadows of the state capitol. In the year that had passed since the 1865 convention, the assembled freedmen had gathered more experience in political organizing and became more cognizant of education's plight. The convention that would transpire in the little A.M.E. church named for the Great Emancipator would demand rights, among them the right for greater education.

At first the 1866 Freedmen's Convention appeared as innocuous as the previous year's convention. "We must learn to rely upon ourselves" noted the convention's leadership at the onset of the convention. The freedmen moved from the issue of self-reliance to define education as a useful tool in the development of citizenship for "the world is looking for us a demonstration of our capacity to perform the part of useful, intelligent citizens." In short, as citizens, blacks declared they were part of "the people," a necessary step in claiming membership in public education.⁸¹

The views expressed at the 1866 Freedmen's Convention were also mirrored in the national sphere, as the debate raged between Republicans and Democrats over the future of public schools. Ward McAfee writes that the Republican Party, at the helm of the federal executive and legislative branch, "promoted the public school as *the* [emphasis added] means to educate the recently freed blacks, elevating them to be worth of the responsibilities of citizenship and suffrage." Although blacks already viewed themselves as competent citizens, government assistance from the Freedmen's Bureau, and private assistance from missionary

⁸¹ "To the Colored People of North Carolina! Convention, 1866," *Tri Weekly Standard*, October 2, 1866, 4; *Minutes of the Freedmen's Convention, Held in the City of Raleigh, on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th of October 1866* (Raleigh, N.C.: Standard Book and Job Office, 1866), 9, 10.

groups certainly furthered their plans for education.⁸²

To match the convention's strong desire for education, the freedmen elected leaders that differed significantly from previous leadership. Indeed, the president of the convention was James Henry Harris, a teacher targeted at the previous convention by a press that noted his northern education and ties to a radical abolitionist paper. Underneath his leadership, education dominated much of the debate and served as the basis for the creation of an independent, black educational association known as "The Educational Association of the Colored People of North Carolina." Most importantly, the various speeches and debates over education reflect a great deal of what the freedmen thought about the disintegration of North Carolina's Common Schools.⁸³

Even in the midst of political organizing for civil rights, education played a large role in black resistance to oppression. In short, literacy and political leadership were closely aligned in the Freedmen's Convention of 1866. In *North Carolina Faces the Freedmen*, Roberta Sue Alexander utilizes the 1870 census to argue that 60% of identified convention attendees were literate. In contrast, seven of the convention attendees could neither read nor write and thus probably served minor political roles.⁸⁴

The first day of the 1866 convention opened smoothly enough. Most of the time was spent announcing various positions of leadership and establishing a seven-person

⁸² McAfee, *Religion, Race and Reconstruction*, 99. Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863 – 1877* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 1988), 146.

⁸³ *Minutes of the Freedmen's Convention, Held in the City of Raleigh, on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th of October 1866*, 12.

⁸⁴ Alexander, *North Carolina Faces the Freedmen*, 84, 85. James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 17.

Business Committee that would be instrumental in educational initiatives. Interspersed with the execution of committee business, a Dr. Brown of Hertford County briefly addressed the audience on “education and equality before the law.” Unfortunately nothing further was recorded on Dr. Brown’s “eloquent” speech.⁸⁵

In contrast to Dr. Brown’s speech, a second letter arrived from former governor William Alexander Graham that lectured the freedmen on the true purpose of black education. Eerily similar to Blackmer’s claims that the public education opponents often feigned support, Graham reported that he was, “pleased ... of your efforts to educate your people” but noted that the freedmen should avoid the complexities of higher branches of learning in favor of primary schools. The governor noted that black primary schools, “are most useful and necessary in carrying on the ordinary business of life.”⁸⁶

Graham continued his paternalistic assault on black education by noting that the most “necessary part” of education “is not obtained in schools.” Instead, “how to do work well ... is the most useful knowledge to people who must live by labor.” Going further, the antebellum governor’s hopes read like a list of common complaints that white employers held towards blacks, including the need to “be faithful in contracts and promises.” Furthermore, Graham believed that African American parents needed to instruct their children to be “sober, honest and truthful.”⁸⁷

⁸⁵ *Minutes of the Freedmen’s Convention, Held in the City of Raleigh on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th of October, 1866*, 9.

⁸⁶ *Minutes of the Freedmen’s Convention, Held in the City of Raleigh on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th of October, 1866*, 10.

⁸⁷ *Minutes of the Freedmen’s Convention, Held in the City of Raleigh on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th of October, 1866*, 10.

With said characteristics in mind, Graham foresaw the black community acquiring the material means to build their own schools. Of course, such calls for self-sufficiency did not include mention of the pre-war Literary Fund that drew on alcohol and commercial taxes for steady educational funding. Instead, in the post-war era, Graham called upon African Americans to be successful without the state's assistance. Indeed, in his parting words to the freedmen's convention, the former governor noted that self-elevation was the only means to "become independent in their circumstances."⁸⁸

Therefore the contest over education during Presidential Reconstruction dealt with different definitions of *what* an education meant. For the freedpeople congregated in political conventions, education was openly defined as an endeavor to make an individual "useful in all relations of life." The definition of "useful" was often left to individual black schools across the country. Some schools chose to make students "useful" in a religious education, while some schools chose to make students "useful" through occupational training. Such a definition essentially covered the distance between servants and doctors, sharecroppers and lawyers. Nevertheless, all servants and doctors, sharecroppers and lawyers were citizens and through education each individual could resist the notions that held them as inferior.⁸⁹

After listening patiently to the paternalistic assertions on education, the freedmen's convention took decisive action around midday of the second day's session, On October 3, 1866. President Harris, the Wake County teacher, put forth a Constitution "governing an

⁸⁸ *Minutes of the Freedmen's Convention, Held in the City of Raleigh on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th of October 1866*, 10.

⁸⁹ Congregational Home Missionary Society, *The American Missionary Association* Vol. 14 (1870): 241; Bell, "Samuel Stanford Ashley, Carpetbagger and Educator," 467.

Educational Association.” Known as the Educational Association of the Colored People of North Carolina, its purpose was to assist in the education of the state’s children and thus negate the ill effects of recent legislation. Most importantly, Harris’s organization highlighted the freedmen’s educational beliefs and served as a crowning achievement of the convention.⁹⁰

The constitution’s second resolution noted that the association’s purpose was to “aid in the establishment of schools” and deny no child access to education “on account of race or color.” Although these provisions indicate the openness of the association to educate blacks and whites alike, the final clause of the resolution to “encourage unsectarian education in this State” hinted at religious bias. Indeed, in *Religion, Race and Reconstruction*, Ward McAfee details the Protestant opposition to the “sectarian” Catholic influence in public schools. Although the protest of Catholic influence on a Protestant-tinged public education did not come into the national forefront until the early 1870’s.⁹¹

Harris noted that the purpose of the association was to “aid in the establishment of schools,” but in light of woeful economic circumstances, how exactly did he propose to do so? One objective for the new association would be to “assist educational associations in counties, [and] towns ... to obtain teachers.” Since the purpose of the association was to promote education “especially among the freedmen”, Harris knew it was no small task to find competent educators up for the task. In North Carolina there existed a severe lack of

⁹⁰ *Minutes of the Freedmen’s Convention, Held in the City of Raleigh on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th of October 1866*, (Raleigh: Standard Book and Job Office, 1866), 9.

⁹¹ McAfee, *Religion, Race and Reconstruction*, 58; *Minutes of the Freedmen’s Convention, Held in the City of Raleigh on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th of October* (Raleigh: Standard Book and Job Office, 1866), 12.

qualified black teachers for the expansive population of freedpeople. On the other hand, few northern white teachers taught for any extensive time, as most were often the targets of white hostility.⁹²

Whereas the first two resolutions established the purpose of the organization, Harris utilized the rest of the constitution to form the guidelines for membership and the organization's leadership. Harris was mindful of the fact that many of the convention's delegates were freedmen, and thus membership in the association was given to anyone that "contribut[ed] one dollar at the beginning of each year." This was a fairly reasonable sum for the majority of agricultural workers in North Carolina.⁹³

A clear gap in participation and leadership was noticeable in the new educational association since a much larger donation of \$50 allowed an individual to be held as a "director for life ... entitled to attend and vote at all regular meetings of the board of managers." The constitution established that managers "shall have full authority to conduct the affairs of the Association," with the specific duty to "invite the co-operation of benevolent individuals and associations in the work of education." One can assume that the noticeable gap in requirements for membership and leadership discouraged the poorer

⁹² *Minutes of the Freedmen's Convention, Held in the City of Raleigh on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th of October* (Raleigh: Standard Book and Job Office, 1866), 12; Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877*, 145. Peter Irons, *Jim Crow's Children: The Broken Promise of the Brown Decision* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 7.

⁹³ *Minutes of the Freedmen's Convention, Held in the City of Raleigh on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th of October* (Raleigh: Standard Book and Job Office, 1866), 9.12; Alexander, *North Carolina Faces the Freedmen*, 106.

delegates from aspiring to a leadership post.⁹⁴

After the new educational association garnered the approval of the delegates, the convention moved on to other matters of social and political equality. No proposal was made urging the state to extend assistance to black education, for the destruction of the Literary Fund and superintendent position made the lack of government assistance a foregone conclusion. The freedmen understood the limited avenues for success and promoted Harris's association as a means for educational self-sufficiency.

Of course, educational self-sufficiency was not only reserved for African Americans, but for the entire state of North Carolina. The overriding fear of responsibility to educate freedmen, in addition to a paucity of educational funding, led the state to gradually reduce the once strong Literary Fund. In response freed men and women gathered in political opposition to the declining fortunes of public education and formed associations to ensure their children's future.

The greatest importance of this period is the emergence of a black community that collectively agitated for education. In the antebellum period, the suicidal act of resistance to slavery made education a dangerous venture. It took the courage of individuals like George Moses Horton and Mary Ann gady to garner literacy and writing. Emancipation changed the nature of education for African Americans and opened the door for blacks to pursue education together, as a community act of defiance against white fears.

⁹⁴ *Minutes of the Freedmen's Convention, Held in the City of Raleigh on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th of October* (Raleigh: Standard Book and Job Office, 1866),12.

Chapter Three: Black Advocacy for Education During Congressional Reconstruction

Following the tumultuous and uncertain years of Presidential Reconstruction, the period of Congressional Reconstruction marked the zenith of black education. To influence the future of their education, freedpeople again gathered in the shadows of the state capitol and advocated to powerful officials in the AMA, the Freedmen's Bureau and state government. More importantly, enfranchised freedmen choose political leaders who reaffirmed North Carolina's commitment to the Common Schools. The collective result of such advocacy, noted W.E.B. DuBois, "the effective force for the establishment of public schools."⁹⁵

The black community's activism for education from 1867 to 1870 is the subject of excellent secondary sources, especially on the influence of northern missionaries upon black education. One of the two outstanding sources on educational development in North Carolina is John Bell's article on AMA superintendent "Samuel Stanford Ashley, Carpetbagger and Educator." The other significant article is Maxine Jones's "The American Missionary Association and the Beaufort, North Carolina School Controversy." The two historians' respective focus on AMA leadership and the black community's conflict with the AMA on education, provide remarkable insight on black education during Reconstruction. More

⁹⁵ DuBois. *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860 – 1880*, 657.

importantly, the two historians' understanding of the AMA as an overall beneficial, yet overly paternalistic, organization frames much of the proceeding argument.⁹⁶

Whereas Bell and Jones focus on educational policy and community activism in post-war North Carolina, a host of other strong secondary materials address larger trends in both the public school debate and black education. As for the public school debate, Heather Williams's *Self-Taught* examines the larger context of black education during Reconstruction and posits that black activism served as a greater force for black education than the AMA or Freedmen's Bureau could accomplish on its own. Ward McAfee in *Religion, Race and Reconstruction* implicitly disagrees with Jones by pointing to the state of national politics in defining black education in the South. Indeed, McAfee places the Freedmen's Bureau at the center of black education in the South. He notes that the eventual collapse of the Bureau was brought about by a successful Democratic attack on the size and scope of the federal government's influence in education. For the sake of freedpeoples' educational experience in North Carolina, Williams' focus on black agency in education is the more appropriate method.⁹⁷

In North Carolina, the period from 1867 to 1870 marked the final step in the establishment of community organizing for black education. Freedpeople during Congressional Reconstruction created educational associations and political organizations. Furthermore, they learned together in ways that were unimaginable prior to the Civil War.

⁹⁶ Bell, "Samuel Stanford Ashley, Carpetbagger and Educator," 461; Maxine Jones, "The American Missionary Association and the Beaufort, North Carolina School Controversy, 1866 – 1867." *Phylon* 48 (1987): 107.

⁹⁷ McAfee, *Religion, Race and Reconstruction: The Public School in the Politics of the 1870s*, 1. Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*, 45.

Together freedmen also collectively used their newfound political power to elect politicians that furthered the interests of black public education.

Despite the significant changes in the nature of black education, one constant remained, Blacks in the antebellum, Civil War and post-war period utilized education as a tool of resistance against oppression. In daily life, freedpeople used their education to expand their political power in the state government. More importantly, blacks in North Carolina constructed their own purpose and meaning for their education and thus resisted dominant notions that black education should be largely occupational in nature.

To understand the flowering of black education during Congressional Reconstruction, it is imperative to understand that the roots reached into the ever-changing soil of national politics in the late 1860s. After challenging President Andrew Johnson's approach to Reconstruction, the Radical Republicans bolted into Congressional power with the midterm elections in 1866. To check the power of President Johnson, Congress enacted Constitutional amendments with far-reaching consequences for American government. Whereas the Thirteenth Amendment brought about a final ending to slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment expanded citizenship to all persons born or naturalized in the United States. Furthermore, the 15th Amendment virtually guaranteed suffrage to African American males and thus strongly influenced the political makeup of the South.⁹⁸

The establishment of political rights for African Americans furthered community organization and enabled African Americans to challenge dominant notions of black

⁹⁸ Garrett Epps. *Democracy Reborn: The Fourteenth Amendment and the Fight for Equality* (New York: Macmillan, 2007), 134.

education. As mentioned in the previous chapter, African Americans looked from the outside into political power and thus largely avoided confrontation with whites on black education before 1867. Indeed, the 1865 Freedmen's Convention timidly celebrated education as "the pursuit of all honorably industry" and refused to endorse a stronger resolution for fear of building "another wall between blacks and whites." Congressional Reconstruction amendments and the altered balance of political power in North Carolina, blacks stood in a firmer position to advocate for education.⁹⁹

With greater political power and rights, North Carolina's black population went about constructing schools with the assistance of northern missionaries and the Freedmen's Bureau. W.E.B. DuBois gathered that during the peak of black education in North Carolina, the Freedmen's Bureau spent \$3.5 million and private societies contributed a further \$1.6 million within the state. In addition, African Americans dipped into their meager pockets to furnish what the federal government and private charities failed to provide. Unfortunately an accurate estimate of black financial contributions towards education does not exist. All together, community, private and federal funding gave rise to 287 African American schools in North Carolina with a total enrollment of 15,467, or nearly 54 students per school. Indeed, the AMA Superintendent for North Carolina schools placed black student population at 25,000, raising the average to nearly 84 students per school. The large gap between the two accounts of the black student population highlights the difficult task of establishing the exact numbers of black pupils in North Carolina. Indeed, the black student population at any given

⁹⁹ Foner, ed. *Proceedings of the Black National and State Conventions, 1865 – 1900*, 180.

school often shifted dramatically depending upon the farming season, or the movement of African Americans within the state.¹⁰⁰

Whereas the aggregate numbers on black education provide an expansive view of developments in North Carolina, local reports from both blacks and whites provide a more intimate understanding of black efforts. In Wilmington, the school conditions endured by African Americans highlights the lengths blacks would go to defy white opposition. Black schools in the city were often overcrowded, and it was not uncommon to hear of an “overflowing” school with students “seated around the door” in the blazing summer heat. Samuel Stanford Ashley reported that one struggling school of three hundred students possessed, “not desks, not even a table.” The lack of proper material in the classroom prodded teachers to call upon the AMA, especially a school official who begged that if reading books “are useful at the North ... they are indispensable here.”¹⁰¹

To combat the problems of overcrowding, private organizations and the black community labored throughout the state to construct new school houses. In Wilmington, a private black schoolhouse of “two stories high and seventy feet long by thirty-five feet wide” even attracted the interest of the white press. Nevertheless, as soon as many schools opened they were flooded with prospective students. Indeed, overcrowding would remain an insolvable issue for private organizations and the Freedmen’s Bureau.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ DuBois. *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860 – 1880*, 657.

¹⁰¹ Congregational Home Missionary Society, *The American Missionary Association* Vol. 14 (1870).

¹⁰² “A Peep at the New School House,” *The Morning Star*, July 9, 1868, 3.

Despite overcrowded conditions, African Americans gathered throughout North Carolina to learn a variety of subjects and skills. The variety of subjects and skills learned by African Americans during Reconstruction underscored larger fault lines among African Americans on the best methods to further their interests. Was the purpose of education largely vocational, or a preparation for largely menial work that would lift the community? Or was education to further the intellectual advancement of a people that deserved immediate equality?

The two sides of the debate are clearly evident in the type of classes that black schools offered. On the largely vocational side, an eastern North Carolina school stressed an education in nursery and needlework. In contrast, 450 black pupils at the Beaufort School in Raleigh furthered their intellect through a more academic coursework. Indeed, an advertisement for the school noted that students were engrossed in the studies of “Arithmetics, Geography, Grammar, Physiology, [and] Hygiene.”¹⁰³

Whereas intellectual and vocational education represented two different avenues for black education, they both shared a moral and religious interest pushed by northern missionaries. At one particular school, students that walked seven miles were “greatly interested in the temperance and anti-tobacco movement.” Of course it’s more likely that black students walked seven miles to school for an education in reading and writing.

¹⁰³ Bell, “Samuel Stanford Ashley, Carpetbagger and Educator,” 467; Congregational Home Missionary Society, *The American Missionary Association* Vol. 14 (1870); Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*, 140.

Nevertheless, stressing the moral aspect of black education certainly filled the coffers of northern missionary associations.¹⁰⁴

Although blacks pursued a variety of intellectual and moral subjects, few southern whites sponsored any of said ventures. Historian Wilma King notes that white opposition to black education in the postwar period stemmed from “continued denial to equal rights and disdain for the curriculum that went beyond the three R’s.” Furthermore, in North Carolina whites had witnessed the complete desolation of public education during the Civil War and enviously watched in the post-war period as black education advanced and white education remained stagnant. One example of white opposition to black education is evident following the construction of a black school in Wilmington. After the construction of the school house a conservative newspaper related, “We thought this [black school] was intended for the county school-house.” Even though the school house remained opened to all races and ethnicities, whites could not be expected to send their children to study at the new school and thus have their children “study from the same books with the little black and tans.”¹⁰⁵

Having refused to send their children to school with “the little black and tans”, whites developed complete fabrications of black education that played on racial fears. Without divulging the source, the conservative press alerted the white population of Wilmington that instructors at the new school “will teach the young . . . how to shoot.” Thus, black schools in the white imagination were not centers for vocational training or intellectual advancement

¹⁰⁴ Congregational Home Missionary Society, *The American Missionary Association* Vol. 14 (1870): 241; Bell, “Samuel Stanford Ashley, Carpetbagger and Educator,” 467.

¹⁰⁵ “A Peep at the New School House.” *The Morning Star*, July 9, 1868, 3; King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth Century America*, 164.

but institutions for militant training that threatened the social order. Often these fabrications would serve as a pretext for violence.¹⁰⁶

Although black education faced a mountain of opposition from white southerners, northern missionaries and blacks did possess political power to advance their interests. Black political power was in full strength by 1868 and blacks could use this power to rewrite the state constitution in order to fit the demands of the Radical Republican Congress. Here stood the chance to establish a strong foundation for public education that would incorporate all children in North Carolina. Here lay the opportunity to create an organized, effective system for black education and not the haphazard, overcrowded schools offered by the Freedmen's Bureau and the American Missionary Association.

To incorporate such hopes into the state constitution required the dedicated leadership of three particular men of deeply varied backgrounds. The first of the three was the black Connecticut missionary James Walker Hood. Like so many other leaders in the African American community, Hood was called to the pulpit as a Methodist preacher. In the crowning achievement of his early life, he convinced a community of "Hard-Shell" Baptists in Massachusetts to abandon their doctrines and adopt Methodist beliefs. Hood followed the Union Army into the coastal regions of North Carolina. He then worked his way up the AMA until he was appointed the Assistant Superintendent of North Carolina schools. As a representative for Cumberland County in the 1868 Constitutional Convention, he utilized the

¹⁰⁶ "A Peep at the New School House." *The Morning Star*, July 9, 1868, 3

same persuasive skills to promote public education to an assembly perhaps more set in their ways than the Hard-Shell Baptists.¹⁰⁷

Hood's persuasive ability was complemented by his fellow representative James Henry Harris, a manumitted North Carolina slave and graduate of Oberlin College. Just as his intellect and beliefs had been shaped at one of the foremost progressive schools in the nation, so too was his determination and courage shaped as a Union soldier during the war. After the war, Harris settled in Wake County and found work as a teacher. Although Harris was not officially involved in state politics, his occupation did serve as excellent training for his future political leadership. Indeed, historian Heather Williams notes that during Reconstruction, "teaching amounted to a political act for African Americans." At the 1865 Freedmen's Convention when black political leadership was in its beginning stages, Harris was singled out by northern reporters as the one of the most able political leaders. Three years later in the 1868 convention, he represented Wake County in the push for public education.¹⁰⁸

The third and final leader in the push for universal public education was S.S. Ashley, the former superintendent of AMA schools. Indeed, few white men were as deeply acquainted with the educational plight of African Americans as Ashley. A Radical

¹⁰⁷ J.W. Hood, *One Hundred Years of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church* (New York: A.M.E. Zion Book Concern, 1895), 185; Bell, "Samuel Stanford Ashley, Carpetbagger and Educator," 474.

¹⁰⁸ *New England Freedmen's Aid Society*, 31 August 1865, James H. Harris Papers, North Carolina State Archive.; Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*, 96. North Carolina, *Journal of the Constitutional Convention of the State of North Carolina* (Raleigh: J.W. Holden Printer, 1868), 5.; "From North Carolina: Freedmen Convention – The State Convention – Letter of Advice," *The New York Times*, October 7, 1865, 1.

Republican, Ashley hinted at a vision of integrated schools that sparked a deep mistrust in the native white population. In the Constitutional Convention of 1868, Ashley represented the heavily African American New Hanover County. At the convention he represented his electorate as chairman of the Committee of Education.¹⁰⁹

Together Hood, Harris and Ashley would serve at the forefront for universal public education in the North Carolina Constitutional Convention of 1868. Backed by the most favorable electorate towards public education that North Carolina had known, the possibilities for advancement seemed remarkable. Nevertheless, hard questions remained to be solved. What would be done to the original provision for education in the 1776 State Constitution? How did the delegates understand their movement in relation to the U.S. Constitution? Would constitutional provisions be enacted to further the education of white and black alike? How would public education be funded?

First, the original provisions for education in the 1776 state constitution served as a remarkable argument for those in favor of public education. Indeed, the leaders of the black community posited the right to an education not upon the legal protections extended by the Civil War Amendments but by the older traditions established by the American Revolution. A report by the Education Committee, chaired by S.S. Ashley and staffed by J.W. Hood, stated that the original constitution, “framed by our ancestors in 1776, recognized the value of education.” Although the 1776 constitution made provisions for education, the framers lived in a radically different world, owned slaves and could not have imagined black political

¹⁰⁹ Edgar W. Knight, *The Influence of Reconstruction on Education in the South* (New York: Columbian University Press, 1915), 367. North Carolina, *Journal of the Constitutional Convention of the State of North Carolina*, 5.

participation. Nevertheless, the committee leaned upon the framers for historical justification for their radically divergent view of education.¹¹⁰

The argument of education as a right was not unique to the black delegates of the North Carolina Constitutional Convention of 1868. Historian Steven Hahn noted similar beliefs among freedpeople in *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South*. One particular individual to make such a connection between education and rights was Henry Adams, a Louisiana freedman. Adams noted that the whites violated freedpeoples' "rights guaranteed to us by the Constitution." When pressed about what these rights entailed, Adams first noted, "the right to vote [,] hold office and ... of education without molestation."¹¹¹

In addition to viewing education as a value of the Revolution, the delegates also understood education to be a right for all citizens. Before the assembly on February 15, 1868, S.S. Ashley noted that, "The people have a right to the privileges of education." Furthermore, Ashley noted that it was not the responsibility of missionary associations or the Freedmen's Bureau to protect the right to education. Instead, Ashley noted that when it came to education, "[I]t is the duty of the State to guard and maintain that right."¹¹²

Although rights and the revolution stood as two firm reasons for public education, the delegates understood a thriving public school system required funding. To fund public education, a variety of resolutions emerged to highlight divergent thoughts on education.

¹¹⁰ North Carolina, *Journal of the Constitutional Convention of the State of North Carolina*, 486.

¹¹¹ Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 320.

¹¹² North Carolina, *Journal of the Constitutional Convention of the State of North Carolina*, 215.

Representative J.H. Duckworth called for a poll tax that was submitted to the Committee on Education. As a regressive tax it seems patently obvious that Duckworth's proposal was to limit the political influence of a largely poor base of African American voters. Moreover Duckworth's source of revenue for public education differed remarkably from the original revenue of taxation upon the growing transport and commercial activity in North Carolina. To combat Duckworth's proposal, James H. Harris offered resolutions on revenue sources for education, although few details remain as to the exact nature of his resolution.¹¹³

The Constitutional delegates congratulated themselves on their cogent appeals for public education by noting that "so noble an effort [education] needs no vindication." Nevertheless, as the convention proceeded from education to discuss other issues, a firestorm of controversy raged outside. The controversy centered not on the need for public education but upon overwhelming fears of integration. White southerners understood that the Civil War brought many changes in the economic and political spheres. Nevertheless, the thought that white children would receive an education in the same classrooms as blacks was unimaginable to many white southerners.

The historical scholarship on racial integration during Congressional Reconstruction provides an excellent background to specific developments in North Carolina. Ward McAfee's *Religion, Race and Reconstruction* takes an unusual approach in blaming the failure of integration upon the shoulders of Radical Republican Charles Sumner for pushing

¹¹³ North Carolina, *Journal of the Constitutional Convention of the State of North Carolina*, 6, 46, 55.

the envelope too far. Other historians such as William P. Vaughn note the failure of Reconstruction is the responsibility of more moderate Republicans like Barnas Sears, director of the Peabody Fund, for not tying integration to the great deal of funding that the Peabody Fund provided to southern schools.¹¹⁴

In the final draft, the North Carolina Constitution of 1868 provided “for free public schools for all the children of the State” that provided each child “an opportunity to develop the fullest extent, all his intellectual gifts.” Unfortunately the Constitution did not provide the state with a great deal of power to guide public education. Instead the majority of the power over public education was left to local governments that treated education as in the words historian Edgar Knight as a, “discretionary rather than an imperative duty.” In time the fallout from devolving this power would have a remarkable burden on public education.¹¹⁵

Furthermore, the Constitution did little to ensure that public education would ensure the success of all children. First, the constitution’s weakness is evident than in the weak regulations for mandatory attendance. Specifically, the constitution stated that students “between the ages of six and eighteen years” must attend public school “for a term of not less than sixteen months.” In a state of white and blacks alike from low socio-economic backgrounds, desperately needed as labor and of short means to travel to the nearest school

¹¹⁴ William Preston Vaughn, *Schools For All: The Blacks and Public Education in the South, 1865 – 1877* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1974), ix.; McAfee, *Religion, Race and Reconstruction: The Public School in the Politics of the 1870s*, 171.

¹¹⁵ North Carolina, *Journal of the Constitutional Convention of the State of North Carolina*, 487. Edgar W. Knight, *Public School Education in North Carolina* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1916), 149.

house, the sixteen-month minimum requirement meant that few would invest much in education.¹¹⁶

Although the idea that Sumner and Sears influenced the majority of segregationists, it is far from the reality that occurred in North Carolina. Even without Sumner or Sears, North Carolina whites understood that education offered blacks a tool to resist white oppression. Of course, blacks were permitted the right to be educated in the struggling schoolhouses of the AMA or the Freedmen's Bureau. Nevertheless, many white southerners could not accept blacks in public schools.

Antipathy toward black education was often fanned into flames by conservative newspapers throughout the state. Although the Constitution made no specific reference to integration, many white southerners viewed the document as simply one step on a road to racial amalgamation. To white men, the obligation to stand against black education equated to a "duty." In fact, one advertisement that attempted inspire the opposition to black education noted, "If you fail to do your duty, you are unworthy of your race." Failure to defeat the proposed constitution could lead to a variety of educational arrangements, including integrated schools in which "the negro must describe a circle on the same *black-board* with the white student."¹¹⁷

If black leaders in the community favored integration, they remained largely quiet on the issue. Instead, supporters of universal public education took to the press to assure voters

¹¹⁶ North Carolina, *Journal of the Constitutional Convention of the State of North Carolina*, 33.; Edgar Wallace Knight, *The Influence of Reconstruction on Education in the South* (New York: Columbian University Press, 1915), 23.

¹¹⁷ *The Morning Star*, April 7, 1868, 2. *The Morning Star*, April 26, 1868, 2.

that integration was not a possibility. In the white, Republican edited *North Carolina Standard*, an anonymous supporter noted, “The schools will be as nearly alike as possible. There will be white teachers for white children, and colored teachers for colored children.” To cover all the bases, the author also noted that both communities would receive the same funding for separate schools in order that “the two races will not be required to go to school together.”¹¹⁸

In addition to the “separate but equal” doctrine accepted by blacks, the defenders of public education also pointed to the segregated North as a model for how North Carolina schools would function. After all, segregation was a common feature in northern schools and thus “it [segregation] will be so here.” Speaking anonymously on behalf of the entire constitutional convention, the same individual also noted that each delegate desired segregation. Although the veracity of such a claim is doubtful, the claim remained important as delegates who favored integration remained silent.¹¹⁹

Desperately defending the advancement of education for blacks and whites alike, supporters of public education devised two innovative justifications both much more complex than the “integration can never happen here” argument. The first argument is that the controversy over education was not a racial conflict but a class conflict. In a piece entitled *Address to the White Working Men of North Carolina*, an anonymous individual argued, “From time immemorial all the colleges and places of learning have been in the hands of purse-proud aristocrats.” The author continued that without the assistance of public

¹¹⁸ “Keep It Before the People,” *The North Carolina Standard*, April 4, 1868, 3.

¹¹⁹ *The Weekly Standard*, February 26, 1868, 3.

education, the rich would continue to conspire to keep “you chained in the dungeons of ignorance.”¹²⁰

The second of two innovative arguments was detailed in the same *Address to the White Working Men of North Carolina*. In this argument, the author took a bold step in favor of universal education by arguing that public schools would ameliorate poor literacy rates for whites and blacks alike. The anonymous author noted, “Over one-half of the white population and nine-tenths of the colored people of our state can neither read nor write.” Although the author mentions nothing about the need for black public education, the individual did see it prudent to discuss illiteracy as an issue that trouble both whites and blacks alike.¹²¹

In the struggle to win acceptance for black public education from southern whites, some even ignored black education as a tool of resistance. Instead, they claimed that black education was a necessity that did not pose a threat to the racial hierarchy. One anonymous author in favor of public education noted that “society in a measure regulates itself” and thus the racial order in the South would prevail. Why then should whites support universal education? With a cogent response the individual emphasized that blacks “have nursed your children, taken care of your homes, served by your side day by day, and never presumed upon it.” Southern society was not fragmented along racial lines but rather a harmonious

¹²⁰ “Address to the White Working Men of North Carolina,” *The Weekly Standard*, April 1, 1868, 4.

¹²¹ “Address to the White Working Men of North Carolina,” *The Weekly Standard*, April 1, 1868, 4.

whole of clearly defined roles. If whites wished to see the advancement of the entire society, they needed to support education.¹²²

In April of 1868, voters went to the polls and pushed through a narrow victory for the state constitution by a vote of 93,086 to 74,016. Together the work of Ashley, Harris and Hood produced Article IX on Education. The Article established “a general and uniform system of Public Schools ... free of charge to all the children of the State between the ages of six and twenty-one years.” Furthermore, the new constitution corrected the weakness of the defunct Literary Fund and established that all funds were “sacredly preserved as an irreducible educational fund.” With the voice of the people finally registered, the public school system now incorporated all children.¹²³

Despite the elevated rhetoric and reason of the public school supporters and the limited success of the 1868 Convention, black education by 1870 was already reaching its apex. The AMA remained positive on black education by noting that North Carolina possessed a “brighter” outlook than the dark worries that surrounded the state. In addition, S.S. Ashley noted that private organizations and the Freedmen’s Bureau maintained a rising black student population. Nevertheless, S.S. Ashley witnessed the rise of the Conservative Party and the opposition to universal education as dark clouds on the horizon. In fact only one year remained until their eventual ascendancy.¹²⁴

¹²² “Taxation,” *The North Carolina Standard*, April 4, 1868, 4.

¹²³ North Carolina, *Journal of the Constitutional Convention of the State of North Carolina*, 33.

¹²⁴ Bell, “Samuel Stanford Ashley, Carpetbagger and Educator,” 478.

In large part, in the two years after the convention the enthusiasm for education tapered in the gridlock of the legislative branch. Ignoring the provisions of the constitution to provide a steadfast source of revenue for education, the Republican General Assembly failed to draft any comprehensive tax system for public schools. In addition, the General Assembly refused to extend the school year beyond a scant four months and insisted that students provide their own textbooks. Finally, the legislative branch defied the 1868 Constitution by failing to enforce constitutional provisions for compulsory attendance, leaving the constitution a toothless document.¹²⁵

Eighteen Seventy-One marked a negative turning point for black education in North Carolina. Despite encouraging news that black school attendance rose from 49,000 to 65,301, the individuals that supported black education struggled against the rise of the Democratic Party. In November of 1871, S.S. Ashley resigned as Superintendent of North Carolina Public Schools. Although his replacement would be named the following year, his leadership and advocacy for black education would not be matched.¹²⁶

Emerging from the turbulent period of the Civil War and Presidential Reconstruction, blacks in North Carolina established a foundation for education during Congressional Reconstruction and in doing so resisted their oppression. With the assistance of the Freedmen's Bureau and the AMA, African Americans obtained an education through a wide variety of studies ranging from Geometry to Hygiene. Blacks in North Carolina not only pursued learning, they also organized politically to ensure the success of universal

¹²⁵ Bell, "Samuel Stanford Ashley, Carpetbagger and Educator," 478.

¹²⁶ Bell, "Samuel Stanford Ashley, Carpetbagger and Educator," 478.

education. Together they took their action not only in building a future but also in molding political arguments that stressed a renewed interest in schooling for all children.

Epilogue

In 1871, although much work remained to overturn the entrenched resistance to black schools, North Carolina's black population could still admire the activism it took to achieve their current station. Although far removed from the period when the first slaves settled North Carolina, African Americans continued to build on their traditional use of education as a tool of resistance. Black ideas about education, as both a tool of resistance and an opportunity to voice a unique set of hopes and desires, was a tradition passed down through the generations. Indeed, every opened primer book and mathematic lesson served to underscore an act of resistance or hope for the future.

In the antebellum period, individual slaves pursued education in order to resist the brutality of slavery and voice a different hope for life despite remarkable opposition. The first source of opposition emerged from the law, in particular North Carolina's General Assembly. Frightened by the alleged spread of David Walker's anti-slavery literature, the General Assembly passed laws restricting the flow of written material to slaves. Shortly after, Nat Turner's slave revolt brought further restrictions, this time bringing an end to the services of black preachers and thus black religious education.

In addition to the law's numerous restrictions on slave education, another great arbiter of a slave's education was the slave's master. Decades removed from slavery, many slaves could still recall their master's harsh threats for even the mere possession of a book. Nevertheless, slaves braved the threats of violence and obtained an education only to use it

resist aspects of their enslavement. In fact, Thomas Jones of Wilmington braved the violent threats and pursued an education, particularly in literacy, that aided his escape.¹²⁷

Although the vast majority of slaves lived with restrictions on their education, the few slaves that received instruction provide the greatest evidence about how slaves used education as a tool of opposition. As a young slave, Mary Ann gady used her education to resist the monotony of enslaved work. Frank, a slave under the tutelage of a secret abolitionist near Greensboro, hoped that his education could be used to resist the cruel heart of his master. Indeed, George Moses Horton, a published slave poet from Chatham County, utilized his education to resist his enslavement through the printed word.¹²⁸

With the advancement of the Civil War and Presidential Reconstruction, African Americans continued to use education as a tool of resistance. During this period the nature of black education changed from a largely individual pursuit to an area of community activism. Nonetheless the use of education as a tool of resistance to oppression continued as education aided in one's escape to Union lines or when black soldiers petitioned the Army for books. For those not fortunate enough to escape, education could even be used to resist their enslavement by lionizing the Union Army through the printed word.

As the dust of the war settled, the freedpeople looked to education to raise them from a destitute condition. Indeed, during Presidential Reconstruction, freedpeople strongly resisted the idea that black education only served to reinforce their menial status. Together,

¹²⁷ Anonymous, *The Experience of Rev. Thomas H. Jones*, 39.

¹²⁸ The Federal Writers' Project, *North Carolina Slave Narratives*, 33; Horton, *The Poetical Works of George M. Horton, the Colored Bard of North Carolina to which is Prefixed the Life of the Author, Written by Himself*, 45; Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, The Reputed President of the Underground Railroad*. 69. 70.

African Americans witnessed the collapse of a once thriving public education system in North Carolina. As a whole, they denied countless arguments as to why blacks could not be educated and in turn formulated their own political language stressing public education as a right.

Despite the collapse of public educational opportunities, African Americans held fast to the educational assistance provided by the Freedmen's Bureau and northern missionary societies. Although North Carolina's freedpeople appreciated the assistance, they did not remain passive recipients of what the Freedmen's Bureau and the AMA offered. On the contrary, African Americans served as activists inside these organizations. Furthermore, individuals like James Harris established the Educational Association in order to gain influence over the future of his own community's education. Through their activism blacks used education as an instrument of opposition.

Nowhere were these sets of hopes and desires more evident than in the political conventions of the freedpeople. Held in Raleigh, the Freedmen's Convention of 1865 and 1866 served as the mouthpiece for a community in desperate want of education. At the 1865 convention, the delegates called upon freedpeople to educate each other and thus build up self-reliance within the black community. Any mention of public education or equality of opportunity was nixed in favor of a largely conciliatory mood.¹²⁹

Overtime, the largely conciliatory mood found at the Freedmen's Conventions buckled under the weight of African American's newfound political power.

¹²⁹ *Minutes of the Freedmen's Convention, Held in the City of Raleigh, on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th of October, 5.*

Protected by the 14th and 15th Amendment and emboldened by Congressional Reconstruction, freedpeople used their political power to push for a public education system that educated all students. Indeed, W.E.B. DuBois noted in his survey of African Americans that blacks were the “effective force for the establishment of public schools.” North Carolina remained no exception to the rule.

During the period of Congressional Reconstruction, black schools like the Beaufort School in Raleigh offered the skills needed for students to resist their oppression and articulate their hopes for the future. Throughout the state, 287 black schools served anywhere from 15,467 to 25,000 students at nearly all ages. The schools taught a variety of subjects from purely vocational training to the more academically based pursuits. Despite the wide variety of subjects taught, the influence of northern missionary societies in addition to the Christian impulse of the black community assured that nearly all the schools were bathed in moral and religious instruction.¹³⁰

Most importantly, the genesis of black political power on North Carolina aligned with an opportunity to rewrite the state constitution. In the North Carolina state constitutional convention of 1868, black political leaders and former leaders of northern missionary societies established a public school system in the State Constitution to educate *all* children of North Carolina. Against their noble endeavor a backlash of opposition emerged to spread fear about integration in public schools as reckless editorials even claimed that one day white children would, “study from the same books with the little black and tans.” Furthermore, the

¹³⁰ Congregational Home Missionary Society, *The American Missionary Association* Vol. 14 (1870); DuBois. *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860 – 1880*, 657.

failure to safeguard the constitution against the later tricks to defund black public education remained a serious issue after Reconstruction.¹³¹

Despite serious deficiencies inherent in the public school system, the Constitutional Convention offered a prime example of black education as a tool to resist oppression and articulate black hopes and desires. Blacks resisted their subjugated status in the convention to stress their equality and equal claim to the benefits of public education. In asserting their equality in education, black leadership looked upon the sacred Revolutionary era for political language, despite the fact that slavery was alive in well during the War for Independence. Nevertheless, freedpeople stressed that the original state constitution's focus on education be applied to all citizens of North Carolina. With grace, freedpeople emphasized the best nature of the Revolution in their attempts to create a new, fairer world for their children.

During Reconstruction, the clouds of white opposition always hung over the progress of black education in North Carolina. Unfortunately by the 1870s the first drops of rain could be felt as the Ku Klux Klan's terrorist activities influenced state elections. In the election of 1870, support declined for political leaders that backed public education. In their place, a

¹³¹ "A Peep at the New School House." *The Morning Star*, July 9, 1868, 3; North Carolina, *Journal of the Constitutional Convention of the State of North Carolina*, 1.

host of conservative counterparts began to slowly disassemble the framework for public education.¹³²

Just as the period from 1865 to 1871 marked a rise in black education, the six following years from 1871 to 1877 marked a rapid decline in educational prospects. In addition to Ashley's retirement, the following year marked the ascendancy of the Democratic Party. Now occupying the majority in the General Assembly, the Democratic Party began devising methods to undercut public education.¹³³

Emboldened by the Compromise of 1877 and the subsequent withdrawal of federal troops from the occupied South, the Democratic Party unveiled its plan in the early 1880s to undercut black education. Ironically, the most effective manner at undercutting black education did not emerge in Raleigh but rather in the small town of Goldsboro, Wayne County. In Goldsboro, an established provision in 1880 allowed separate funding for black and white schools based on taxes received from both communities. Known as "The Goldsboro Provision", the law cut school funding and assured that the educational disparity between white and black children was entrenched for the foreseeable future. The popularity of the Goldsboro Provision spread like wildfire across the state of North Carolina until about 1883 when nearly all counties adopted the law.¹³⁴

In addition to the Goldsboro Provision, the end of Reconstruction also brought the transfer of missionary schools to the hands of local governments. Now blacks had to worry

¹³² DuBois. *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860 – 1880*, 650 – 657.

¹³³ DuBois. *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860 – 1880*, 657.

¹³⁴ James Leloudis. *Schooling the New South: Pedagogy, Self and Society in North Carolina, 1880 – 1920*, 122.

about both a paucity of funding and the overall indifference of a local government in charge of their education. One observer noted accurately that the transfer was like, “the difference between a wanted and an unwanted baby.” Thus, black education in North Carolina approached the 20th century both under-funded and unwanted.¹³⁵

The continuation of under-funded and unwanted black education persisted as it furthered disparities between whites and blacks. In 1908, the first generation of children to be educated as freedpeople were now reaching into their mid-40s. Despite their former hopes and aspirations for black education, a significantly different picture served as reality. At the dawn of the 20st century, a report noted that although African Americans constituted 33.3% of the school population, they only accounted for 13.3% of expenditures. Despite a host of new primary and secondary schools to educate North Carolina’s black population, the early 20th century remained a dark valley of white repression against black educational aspirations.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Fred Brownlee. *New Day Ascending*. (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1946), 119.

¹³⁶ Coon. *Public Taxation and Negro Schools*, 657.

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