

April 2023

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Recommended Citation

Carney, Jane (2023) "Another Brick in the Wall: A Historiography of Black Education in the Reconstruction Era," *Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 3.
Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/lxl/vol9/iss1/3>

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Writing Process

This project involved several intermediate assignments, including a topic proposal and annotated bibliography. I also submitted a draft to my professor for review and attended a peer review session in class.

Course

ASI120

Semester

Spring

Instructor

Dr. Sayeh Meisami

Year

2022

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Jane Carney

The roots of state-sponsored education are found in Reconstruction reforms. This makes a thorough understanding of the topic vital for those of us living with systems born of Reconstruction. Specifically, the beginnings of black education in the South have profound impacts on today's dialogues on equal educational opportunity. In order to explore this topic, I have found eight sources, dating from 1916 to 2013, and grouped them into two categories of interpretation, according to the historian's perspective on the success (or lack thereof) of black educational efforts. On the one hand, some historians view black efforts at establishing schools to be a failure. They argue that majority-white state governments and populations held the power, and that black efforts were ultimately ineffective. On the other hand, some historians view Reconstruction educational advances as a resounding success and a key element in the former slaves' path to autonomy, choosing to emphasize the contributions of black leaders and communities, and their roles in the success of black schools during Reconstruction. This second category is more compelling, due to its recognition of the resilience and achievement of the black community and the acknowledgement of education as a tool for social change.

Black Dependence and the Failure of Black Schools

Among the earliest historians of Reconstruction, the interpretation that black educational efforts failed was popular. One source that argues for this view is an account of education written in 1916 by Edgar Knight. In this account, Knight focuses on the proceedings of the Virginia constitutional convention. He highlights two main themes of the convention that continue through the post-convention debate on the establishment of public schools. The first theme Knight emphasizes is the stubbornness and intractability of black representatives on the

issue of mixed schools. To prove this point, he brings up examples of proposed legislation that were soundly defeated.¹ The other element of school development Knight chooses to emphasize is that there was already a growing support for public school systems during the antebellum period. He asserts that the Virginian school system was a development from within and was controlled from the beginning by native Virginian conservatives.² He stresses that despite most school-related legislation having been passed during Reconstruction, it was not a product of Reconstruction, and that most of the specifically Black-focused, Northern-supported proposals were defeated. This source's interpretation is that black people were not central, active figures in education reform, and that legislation aimed at improved black education was almost always shot down, places it in this category.

Another historian who argues a similar point is R.R. Hollingsworth. Hollingsworth directly references Knight's book in his own article, so it is unsurprising that his interpretation is so similar. He opens with an account of the dire financial situation inherited by Reconstruction policy makers. He points out the difficulties cities had in raising funds through taxation for public schools, and stresses that the majority of school funding came from funds such as the Peabody Education Fund. Thus, the main decision-making power rested with those who controlled these funds. Hollingsworth claims that the situation was looking up in Georgia until the Civil Rights bill of 1871. This bill, with its intended provisions for mixed schools, essentially killed all public support for public schools, since many whites would rather have paid to send their children to private schools than allow them to attend an integrated public school. Furthermore, Hollingsworth argues, many freedmen didn't really want integrated schools either. Hollingsworth's main argument is that the legislative efforts of Congressional Reconstruction and of black state representatives only hampered the success of public schools.³ This source also serves as an example of the white-centric interpretation of education legislation, and the view that the South was on the path to establishing a public school system well before Reconstruction.

This interpretation seems to lose popularity over time. However, more modern authors have argued the same although with a slight twist. One of these modern authors, Paul Phillips, laments the failure of black educational efforts, unlike the two previous authors, who seemed to have a markedly racist tone. Nevertheless,

¹ Edgar Wallace Knight, *Reconstruction and Education in Virginia*, (Durham, NC: n.p. 1916), 9.

² Knight, "Reconstruction and Education," 34.

³ R. R. Hollingsworth, "Education and Reconstruction in Georgia. Part II," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1935): 239.

Phillips concludes that Reconstruction education efforts were still a failure. Phillips says that Reconstruction education efforts were plagued by financial difficulties, public opposition, and, most critically, a lack of competent teachers.⁴ People who had little education themselves could (and did) get hired as teachers, and the public opinion was that as long as the teacher was relatively more educated than the students, it was fine. Additionally, there was a lot of prejudice against Northern teachers among whites, and they were threatened, attacked, or chased out of town. Phillips' overall argument is that black schools were not doing very well. One example of this limited success is Tennessee's common school law, which hit the books early in Reconstruction, but was repealed in 1869. In addition, the numerous attacks on teachers and school buildings are used as evidence to support the interpretation that the many setbacks faced by black schools were evidence for the system's overall weakness, despite its noble intentions.

Black Independence: Education as a Means of Freedom

In a very different approach, other historians argue that black education was an ultimate success, despite many setbacks. These historians focus on the emancipatory effects of education. Our first source for this category, Roberta Alexander, argues that white Southerners supported black education, in a roundabout sort of way, although they never acted on this support. The reason for this support is that white Southerners wanted black education—for the purpose of teaching black people to be law-abiding and good laborers. However, Southern states were apprehensive about establishing public schools that might then be forced to integrate. Therefore, Southern whites took a more passive approach, without much formal opposition to black schools, but without any material support either.⁵ This allowed Northern aid societies to deal with the logistics (and financial burdens) of starting a school system. Therefore, most black schools were financially supported by Northern Protestant aid societies, in addition to financial contributions from black communities. Alexander's article examines the contributions and roles of many different groups and their competing interests, ultimately concluding that the government and the black schools chose to distance themselves from each other.

The next source, an article by James Smallwood, has a similar theme of black independence. Even more than Alexander, Smallwood chooses to emphasize the

⁴ Paul David Phillips, "Education of Blacks in Tennessee During Reconstruction, 1865-1870," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (1987): 102.

⁵ Roberta Sue Alexander, "Hostility and Hope: Black Education in North Carolina during Presidential Reconstruction, 1865-1867," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 53, no. 2 (1976): 117.

role of black communities and argues against the interpretation that whites, either Northern or Southern, were the primary drivers of educational efforts.⁶ He uses the example of Texas to argue that black education is due to black self-help and desire for learning rather than white, Northern imposition. Smallwood rejects the idea that the primary driver of black education was white Northerners who came in and established schools. He tells the story of several different schools in Texas that were established, managed, funded, and taught by black men and women from Texas. Smallwood says that freedmen generally did almost everything possible to run their schools, and that despite some support from the Freedmen's Bureau, the contributions of black action were much greater than the limited financial aid supplied by government agencies like the Bureau. He claims that black schools were doing pretty well—until they were absorbed into a newly-created state school system in 1871. Being fully controlled by the government was disastrous for the schools, reinforcing the black community's preference for independent control over their own affairs.⁷ This source is a good example of this category since it argues that black schools were better off on their own than under the state's wing.

Another history which brings black self-determination to the forefront is “Black Education in Civil War and Reconstruction Louisiana.” The author, Barry Crouch, follows the story of George Ruby, a black Republican leader, who served as an inspector of schools during Reconstruction and led the cause to further black education. Crouch points to the already strongly established system of education that urban black communities had in place before the Civil War as templates for Reconstruction policies regarding education in Louisiana. Crouch argues that, due to the already strong systems in place, freedman's schools were generally successful although somewhat hampered by financial difficulties.⁸ He uses the examples of many different black schools to support his interpretation, showing that while New Orleans and other urban areas with large educated black populations had great success in building schools, poorer, more rural areas struggled with fundraising and opposition from white neighbors. Crouch uses these examples as arguments for the interpretation that education was mostly dependent on the efforts of black people, with white aid being limited to some

⁶ James M. Smallwood, “Early ‘Freedom Schools’: Black Self-Help and Education in Reconstruction-Texas, a Case Study,” *Negro History Bulletin* 41, no. 1 (1978): 790.

⁷ Smallwood, “Early ‘Freedom Schools’” 792.

⁸ Barry A. Crouch, “Black Education in Civil War and Reconstruction Louisiana: George T. Ruby, the Army, and the Freedmen's Bureau,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 38, no. 3 (1997): 289-290.

financial help and some teachers.⁹ By choosing to focus on a black leader and arguing that Reconstruction schools were drawing on an already present system, Crouch emphasizes black autonomy and success in education.

Similarly to Crouch, George Thorp takes on the stereotype of the white teacher in his 2013 article, “The Beginnings of African American Education in Montgomery County.” Thorp looks at the history of education in Montgomery County, Virginia, between the end of slavery and the establishment of the Virginia public school system in 1870. Thorp focuses on the contributions of Northern Protestant aid societies, federal agencies such as the Freedmen’s Bureau, and the tireless efforts of black communities. Government efforts, including those by the Freedmen’s Bureau, were usually paternalistic. Overall, he concludes, education efforts were more successful and diversely run than the stereotype of a young white woman travelling from up North to teach the illiterate freedmen. Further, he argues that this interpretation comes from either misinterpretation of primary sources, or from flat-out inaccurate surveys done during Reconstruction.¹⁰ Thorp’s interpretation of education, at least in Montgomery County, seems to be that black education, despite many obstacles, was invaluable to black residents. Thorp’s emphasis on the diversity of contributors (especially the work of black teachers) and the long-lasting effects of education, both materially and psychologically, on black communities, place this article in this interpretive category.

Finally, W.E.B Du Bois wrote a history with a nuanced take on the success of black education. Within his much longer work on Reconstruction, Du Bois dedicates a chapter to the history of the public schools in the South and the necessity of black education. Du Bois claims that efforts to establish schools or expand previously existing systems were met with bitter opposition from white Southerners. However, through consistent effort, and a little help from the Freedmen’s Bureau, black education took off—bringing white education with it.¹¹ As a result of black endeavors to secure an education for their own children, many states ended up passing legislation that created a general public schooling system or invested greater funds and energy into education than ever before. Du Bois’ text serves as a valuable resource and unique interpretation since it claims that state school systems were created in response to the drive for black education. It

⁹ Crouch, “Black Education in Civil War and Reconstruction Louisiana,” 300.

¹⁰ Daniel B. Thorp, “The Beginnings of African American Education in Montgomery County,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 121, no. 4 (2013): 339.

¹¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*, (New York: Russell & Russell, 1935), 641.

also emphasizes the role of federal government agencies in creating a precedent for government involvement in education. And, perhaps most importantly, Du Bois stresses the long-term positive effects of even “failed” schools, claiming that the effects of schools for black children reach far beyond increased literacy; rather, education empowers black children and adults to invest in their communities and view themselves more positively as autonomous and dignified people.¹²

Conclusion

The most compelling interpretative category are those works classified under “Education as a Means of Freedom.” This category presents a fuller picture of the nuances of educational policy, presenting many slightly different angles of major players in the Reconstruction drama. Notably, the category that argues that black education was a failure is tinged with racist stereotypes, making its central arguments appear to be the bitter grumblings of an opponent rather than a fair interpretation. The “Means of Freedom” category acknowledges the persistence and successes of the black community as well as the real benefits that education provided, even if it had major flaws and shortcomings. The best representative of this category is Du Bois, whose nuanced take included the insight that, even in areas where Reconstruction “failed,” the education gained by black people was a valuable resource that couldn’t be taken away. This source offers the most complete and balanced judgement of the roles of multiple groups. But the key element that gives this history a needed dimension which the other sources lack is the proposition that “success” and “failure” are concepts that have multiple facets and cannot be used as a strict binary.

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