

April 2023

School Is Now In Session: African American Education During Reconstruction

Kathryn C. Finrock
University of Dayton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/lxl>

Recommended Citation

Finrock, Kathryn C. (2023) "School Is Now In Session: African American Education During Reconstruction," *Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 4. Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/lxl/vol9/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlangen1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

School Is Now In Session: African American Education During Reconstruction

Writing Process

Editor's note: This article is the recipient of the issue's award for Excellence in Historiography.

I began writing my ASI 120 historiography paper by selecting the topic of African American education during Reconstruction. I spent several weeks researching how the historiography of African American education during Reconstruction has changed over time and creating an annotated bibliography of my nine sources. While creating my annotated bibliography, I grouped my nine sources into three interpretive categories based on how each author choose to interpret the history of African American education during Reconstruction. Finally, I used my annotated bibliography to create my historiography paper. In my historiography paper, I compared the three interpretive categories to determine which of the categories was, in my opinion, the best using a select criteria of requirements.

Course

ASI120

Semester

Spring

Instructor

Dr. William Trollinger

Year

2022

School Is Now in Session: African American Education During Reconstruction

Kathryn C. Finfrock

Historians agree that the public education system in the South began during Reconstruction as an effort to educate the freedmen who were barred from receiving an education as slaves. However, many historians' interpretations disagree about the identity of the individuals responsible for the establishment of the public education system in the South. This education system has current and historical significance because it laid the foundation for the segregated public education system of the twentieth century as well as the current public school system employed in the South. Three interpretations, including White Southerners' Public Education System, Northern Missionaries' Public Education System, and Freedmen's Independent and Public Education System, have emerged from the research conducted for this paper. Each of these interpretations acknowledges that the newly liberated freedmen established schools in the South at the beginning of Reconstruction. However, they differ in their analysis of the quality of the freedmen's schools. Likewise, White Southerners' Public Education System asserts that white Southern missionaries used federal and state funding to restructure and repair the freedmen's impoverished education system as they believed that African American education would benefit the Southern economy. Their restructured education system became the basis for the South's new public school system. Northern Missionaries' Public Education System claims that Northern Missionaries established a religious and privately funded education system for the freedmen that was folded into the South's public school system at the end of Reconstruction. Finally, the Freedmen's Independent and Public Education System found that the freedmen established a superb, independent public school system through monetary aid from the Freedmen's Bureau and Northern missionaries. Later, African American legislators in the Southern state legislatures developed the freedmen's education system into the South's public

school system. Over the last 150 years, historians have told the story of African American education during Reconstruction in three different ways; Southern missionaries established a public education system to replace the freedmen's impoverished schools (White Southerners' Public Education System), the South's public school system emerged from the Northern missionaries' private school system (Northern Missionaries' Public Education System), and the freedmen independently established a public school system in the South using the state legislature, federal funding, and charitable donations (Freedmen's Independent and Public Education System). The final interpretation is the best because it is the only interpretation that acknowledges the efforts of both the African American and white American communities in establishing a public education system in the South and the violent Southern opposition against freedmen education.

White Southerners' Public Education System

The first category of historical interpretation of African American education during Reconstruction attributes the success of the public education system to white Southerners. These historians, including Harriet Beecher Stowe, claimed that the efforts of the freedmen to establish their own schools were admirable, but the crude conditions and lack of highly qualified teachers prevented the freedmen from obtaining a quality education. In her 1879 article, Beecher Stowe argues that Southern white missionaries and teachers advocated for federal and state government assistance in funding African American schools and creating a public education system because they believed that public education, specifically for the illiterate freedmen, would revitalize the Southern economy.¹ However, she argues that some white Southerners opposed the creation of a tax-funded school system because they believed that it was not financially feasible given the impoverished state of the Southern economy. Beecher Stowe is unique in her argument that Southern whites faced opposition from Northern whites, who were opposed to African American education because Northern whites believed that African Americans were incapable of being educated and they passed laws in their states to ban freedmen from attending Northern schools.

While Beecher Stowe acknowledges the achievements of white Southerners in the creation of the public school system in the South, she fails to mention the efforts made by the African American community in creating a public school system for the freedmen. She also fails to mention white Southerners' violent opposition against freedmen education. These factual omissions hinder her audience from receiving a complete history of African American education.

¹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, "The Education of Freedmen," *The North American Review* 128, no. 271 (June 1879): 605-615, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25100763>

In her 1940 article, historian Ellis Knox expands on Beecher Stowe's argument that white Southerners created a public school system in the South to repair the Southern economy.² Like Beecher Stowe, Knox's article claims that Southern whites supported the idea of a tax-funded secondary school system in the South because they saw it as a way of rejuvenating the economy by providing better access to educational opportunities for both African Americans and poor whites. However, she argues that this new school system was created by a corrupt legislature, which was ruled by carpetbaggers, scalawags, and African Americans. This view was highly controversial because it threatened the South's conservative views and means of improving their impoverished economy. After regaining control of the Southern legislature, Knox argues that Southern whites saved the public school system in the South by reorganizing it to teach content that was based in the Southern values of white superiority.

Knox, like Beecher Stowe, fails to testify to the violence that Southern whites used against the supporters of African American education. Instead, she, like Beecher Stowe, claimed that white Southerners were peaceful in their opposition to the public school system. Additionally, Knox and Beecher Stowe differ on the Northern whites' involvement in the peaceful opposition to the public school system. Beecher Stowe believes that the Northern whites were involved while Knox remains silent on the issue and only mentions Southern whites' opposition to the public education system. Ultimately, both historians' interpretations are consistent in their claims that Southern whites created the public school system in the South and they both fail to acknowledge white Southerner's violent opposition to African American education.

Henry Bullock's 1967 book furthers Knox and Beecher Stowe's interpretation that Southern whites established the public school system in the South.³ However, Bullock diverges from Knox and Beecher Stowe's interpretations by arguing that the Southern state governments, which were led by white Southerners, established a permanent, tax-funded public school system in their states to receive reentry into the Union and that this school system was quickly accepted by both white Southerners and freedmen. Bullock argues that the freedmen favored a public school system because the freedmen believed that, by having greater access to educational opportunities, they could achieve economic independence and moral maturity. Many Southern whites were accepting of African American education because they believed that it would teach the

² Ellis O. Knox, "A Historical Sketch of Secondary Education for Negroes," *The Journal of Negro Education* 9, no. 3 (July 1940): 440-453, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2292616>.

³ Henry Allen Bullock, *A History of Negro Education in the South: From 1619 to the Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967; ACLS Humanities eBook, 2022), <https://hdl-handle-net.libproxy.udayton.edu/2027/heb.00625>.

freedmen to be good laborers and maintain Southern culture. Still, Bullock asserts that a few white Southerners were violently opposed to the freedmen receiving instruction from Northern teachers, whom they believed would educate the freedmen in Northern values, like social equality. He claims that the white planter's class opposed a public school system in the South because they did not believe that white or African American laborers needed an education. Bullock maintains that it was only a minority of white Southerners that used violence against supporters of freedmen education. Bullock fails to acknowledge the contributions of African Americans in establishing a public education system in the South. He only concedes that the freedmen supported the establishment of a public school system.

Beecher Stowe, Knox, and Bullock's interpretations agree that Southern whites established a public school system in the South to repair the Southern economy, maintain Southern culture, and fix the freedmen's impoverished school system. Knox's article differs from Beecher Stowe and Bullock's historical views by acknowledging the highly controversial contributions of African American legislators in the creation of a public school system in the South. Beecher Stowe and Knox differ from Bullock by maintaining that Southern whites were peacefully opposed to the implementation of a tax-funded school system and the teaching of Northern values to the freedmen. Bullock contends that some Southern whites violently opposed African American education and the creation of a tax-funded school system in the South. Overall, these sources are helpful in analyzing the establishment of a public school system in the South, but their analysis fails to provide a complete history of African American education during Reconstruction.

Northern Missionaries' Public Education System

The second category of historical interpretation of African American education during Reconstruction attributes the success of the public school system in the South to Northern missionaries and the Freedmen's Bureau. It argues that the Northern missionaries and the Freedmen's Bureau took control of the freedmen's independent schools and expanded them into a privately-funded school system. This school system was later developed by Southern legislatures into the South's public school system.

In her 1976 article, Roberta Sue Alexander argues that the Freedmen's Bureau and Northern missionary societies established schools in North Carolina to teach

the grateful and excited freedmen.⁴ She asserts that these schools and their faculty faced violent opposition from white North Carolinians, who believed that the Northern teachers were disrupting the Southern social structure of white superiority by instructing the freedmen in Northern values of integration and social equality. However, she claims that the Freedmen's Bureau and the Northern missionaries were able to overcome white North Carolinians' violent opposition and expand their private school system into a state-wide public school system that served both African American and white students.

While Alexander acknowledges the achievements of white Northerners in the creation of the public school system in the South, she fails to mention the involvement of African Americans in the creation of the school system. Alexander's version does include descriptions of white Southerners' violent opposition to African American education but insists that their violence was solely directed at Northern educators for teaching Northern values to the freedmen. As a result, Alexander's interpretation is incomplete because it fails to include the violence that white Southerners inflicted on African American students during Reconstruction.

In his 1980 book, Ronald Butchart continues Alexander's argument that Northern missionary societies and the Freedmen's Bureau established the public school system in the South with the goal of using the freedmen's public school system to restructure the South in the North's image.⁵ He argues that the Northern missionaries and the Freedmen's Bureau chose to focus on African American education because they believed that it was beneficial to the Southern economy to have an educated and disciplined labor force and essential for the wellbeing of the American democracy to have a voting population that was literate and well-informed on important political issues. He argues that the Northern missionaries' work was essential to the education of the freedmen because, given the Southern whites' violent opposition of African American education, it was highly unlikely that the Southern whites would establish schools for the freedmen without Northern intervention. Finally, Butchart claims that the Northern missionaries and the Freedmen's Bureau's school system was used by the Southern governments to establish an integrated public school system.

Both Butchart and Alexander assert that Northern missionaries and the Freedmen's Bureau established an integrated public school system in the South

⁴ Roberta Sue Alexander, "Hostility and Hope: Black Education in North Carolina during Presidential Reconstruction, 1865-1867," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 53, no. 2 (April 1976): 113-132, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23529614>.

⁵ Ronald E Butchart, *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction: Freedmen's Education, 1862-1875* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980).

while facing violent opposition from white Southerners. However, they disagree in their understanding of why the white Southerners violently opposed African American education with Butchart claiming that white Southerners were completely against freedmen education and Alexander arguing that they supported the education of the freedmen but were against the Northern values of integration and social equality being taught to them. Finally, both Butchart and Alexander's interpretations fail to acknowledge the contributions of African Americans in the creation of the public school system in the South or the violence that was inflicted on African American students and teachers.

In his 2011 book, Charles Glenn describes the efforts that Northern missionaries and the Freedmen's Bureau undertook to establish a public school system in the South.⁶ At the beginning of Reconstruction, Glenn states that the freedmen churches established schools for African American children, but due to the lack of funding from the impoverished freedmen community, the freedmen churches were forced to relinquish operational control to the Freedmen's Bureau and Northern religious societies. He argues that the Northern missionaries and the Freedmen's Bureau transformed the freedmen's struggling schools into the South's public school system. Like Alexander, Glenn contends that the Northern missionaries faced violent opposition from Southern whites for providing instruction to the freedmen using Northern, liberal values because these values contradicted the South's culture of white superiority. However, unlike Butchart and Alexander, Glenn claims that Northern and Southern whites' opposition to integration prevented the Northern missionaries and the Freedmen's Bureau from establishing an integrated public school system in the South.

Alexander, Butchart, and Glenn argue that Northern missionaries and the Freedmen's Bureau established a public school system in the South. However, Butchart and Alexander claim that this school system was integrated, but Glenn asserts that it was segregated. Additionally, all three historians agree that white Southerners violently opposed these schools because they believed that educating the freedmen in Northern values would disrupt the established Southern culture of white supremacy. However, they agree that the target of the white Southerners' aggression was Northern educators and not their African American students. Overall, these three sources are beneficial in analyzing the role that white Northerners played in the creation of the public school system in the South and white Southerners' violent opposition of Northern educators. However, their interpretations fail to include descriptions of the roles that African Americans

⁶ Charles Leslie Glenn, *African American/Afro-Canadian Schooling: From the Colonial Period to the Present* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).

played in the creation of the public school system and the violence that was inflicted on them by white Southerners.

Freedmen's Independent and Public Education System

The third category of historical interpretation credits the freedmen with the creation of the South's public school system. The historians that set forth this interpretation argue that the first African American schools were established by freedmen to educate themselves and quickly developed into a public school system through the assistance of the Freedmen's Bureau and Northern missionaries.

In his 1910 article "Reconstruction and its Benefits," Du Bois asserts that African American education during Reconstruction was dependent on the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment because, to establish a free public school system in the South, African Americans needed political power in the state legislatures to prevent white Southerners, who were violently opposed to freedmen education, from outlawing African American education when they regained power.⁷ Overall, Du Bois' interpretation acknowledges white Southerners violent opposition of freedmen education and provides insight into how African Americans, with the help of white Northerners, created the public school system in the South.

In his 1988 book on education during Reconstruction, James Anderson argues that African American education was funded and control by freedmen communities with minimal assistance from the Northern charities and the Freedmen's Bureau.⁸ He asserts that the education system faced violent opposition from the Southern planters' class, who believed that the state did not have the authority to establish a public education system and that literate African Americans would result in the planter's class' loss of control over the Southern economy and social hierarchy. Despite this opposition, the freedmen, as Anderson describes, used the Fifteenth Amendment to gain leadership roles in the state governments and amend the Southern state's new constitutions to include an integrated public education system because they viewed education as the pathway to freedom, citizenship, and the ability to participate in democratic society. Once the Southern whites regained power, Anderson claims that they were forced to maintain the freedmen's public education system because it was mandated in their state's constitution.

⁷ W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, "Reconstruction and its Benefits," *The American Historical Review* 15, no. 4 (July 1910): 781-799, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/1836858>.

⁸ James D Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

Both Du Bois and Anderson argue that African Americans created the South's public school system using federal funds, Northern missionaries' charitable donations, and their roles in the Southern state legislatures. They both agree that the Fifteenth Amendment was essential for the creation of the public school system in the South because it allowed for African Americans to gain elected positions in the Southern state legislatures and amend each state's constitution to establish and fund a public school system for all children. Finally, both historians describe the white Southerner's violent opposition to African American education.

Heather Andrea Williams expands on Du Bois' and Anderson's interpretations that African Americans used their political positions in the Southern states legislatures and donations from Northern white missionaries to establish a public school system in the South. In her 2005 book, Williams claims that the freedmen independently established and maintained schools for their children. At the same time, they fought the Northern missionaries for administrative control of the schools, because the latter believed in Northern white superiority and viewed African American educators and school administrators as inferior and uncivilized.⁹ Additionally, she asserts that African Americans and their white supporters faced violent opposition from white Southerners, who believed that African American education threatened the Southern social hierarchy of white superiority. Finally, Williams argues that African Americans used the Fifteenth Amendment to gain elected positions in Southern state legislatures with the goal of establishing an integrated public school system in the South.

Du Bois, Anderson, and Williams argue that African Americans established an integrated public school system in the South using the Southern state legislatures, federal funding, and donations from Northern missionaries. Likewise, all three sources claim that the freedmen used the Fifteenth Amendment to gain elected positions in the Southern state legislatures to authorize the creation of a public school system. Additionally, all three historians assert that white Southerners violently opposed the creation of a public school system in the South and the education of the freedmen because they believed that it was a threat to the Southern social hierarchy of white supremacy. However, Williams is the only historian in this interpretation to argue that the freedmen faced opposition from

⁹ Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

white Northern missionaries, who believed that African Americans were uncivilized and could not be trusted to manage schools.

Conclusion

Over the course of history, there have been many historical interpretations of African American education during Reconstruction. However, only historians that understand the role freedmen played in forming their own education system give comprehensive analyses of African American education during Reconstruction. The historians that utilize this interpretation acknowledge the efforts of both the African American and white American communities in the establishment of the public school system in the South and the white Southerners' violent opposition against freedmen education. Du Bois, Anderson, and Williams argue that African Americans established an integrated public education system in the South using financial aid from white Northern missionaries and the Freedmen's Bureau. Likewise, each source acknowledges white Southerner's violent opposition to the education of the freedmen and states that their violence was directed towards African American students and their white supporters. Overall, "Freedmen's Independent and Public Education System" is the best interpretation because it provides a complete historical account of African American education during Reconstruction.

Bibliography

- Alexander, Roberta Sue. "Hostility and Hope: Black Education in North Carolina during Presidential Reconstruction, 1865-1867." *The North Carolina Historical Review* 53, no. 2, April 1976: 113-132.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23529614>.
- Anderson, James D. *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988.
- Beecher Stowe, Harriet. "The Education of Freedmen." *The North American Review* 128, no. 271, June 1879: 605-615.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25100763>.
- Butchart, Ronald E. *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction: Freedmen's Education, 1862-1875*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980.
- Bullock, Henry Allen. *A History of Negro Education in the South: From 1619 to the Present*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967. ACLS Humanities eBook, 2022.

Du Bois, W. E. Burghardt. "Reconstruction and its Benefits." *The American Historical Review* 15, no. 4, July 1910: 781-799.

<http://www.jstor.com/stable/1836858>.

Glenn, Charles Leslie. *African American/Afro-Canadian Schooling: From the Colonial Period to the Present*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011.

Knox, Ellis O. "A Historical Sketch of Secondary Education for Negroes." *The Journal of Negro Education* 9, no. 3, July 1940: 440-453.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2292616>.

Williams, Heather Andrea. *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.