

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: "THE VERY MESSENGERS OF GOD": THE
TEACHERS OF ALABAMA'S FREEDPEOPLE, 1865-
1870

Sylvia Alyssa Jordan, Master of Arts, 2017

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Using Freedmen's Bureau records, the papers of the American Missionary Association, and other materials, the author identified 585 individuals who taught ex-slaves in Alabama between 1865 and 1870. The thesis describes their sex, race, and geographical origins, their motives for teaching, the high rate of turnover, and a growing number of black teachers. It examines the teachers' work in the classroom and the many challenges they faced. It argues that the schools survived only because of the ex-slaves' own commitment to education and the lengths to which the teachers went in order to keep their schools in operation. Finally, the thesis explores the teachers' interactions with their surrounding communities. While some white Alabamians were supportive, others expressed hostility through social ostracism, physical assault, arson, and even murder. Especially in the face of such white opposition, the teachers relied heavily upon freedpeople to help build, maintain, and protect the schools.

“THE VERY MESSENGERS OF GOD”:
THE TEACHERS OF ALABAMA’S FREEDPEOPLE, 1865-1870

by

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To Janet Heard

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Abbreviations Used in Footnotes

AMA	American Missionary Association Archives (microfilm, McKeldin Library, University of Maryland, College Park)
FSSP	Freedmen and Southern Society Project, University of Maryland, College Park (followed by the project's document control number)
NARA	National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC
RG 105	Record Group 105: Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands



Source: "State of Alabama, October 2nd, 1866," Library of Congress, accessed April 3, 2017, <http://www.loc.gov/item/98688440/>.

Introduction

“Yankee schoolma’am.” “Modern Gideon’s Band.” “Horsefaced, bespectacled, and spare of frame.” “Soldiers of light and love.” “The very messengers of God.”¹

These are but some of the terms that have been used to describe the men and women who taught the ex-slaves in the wake of emancipation. The variety is indicative of the diversity that characterized the teaching corps. In Alabama, as elsewhere in the South, teachers of ex-slaves were white and black, male and female, religious and secular. They came from almost every region of the country and sometimes from abroad. Among the black teachers, some had been born free, while others, newly emancipated, stepped to the front of the classroom with learning acquired when it was illegal to teach black people to read and write.

In the more than 150 years since schools for ex-slaves were established across the South, many scholars have described the men and women who taught them. In the opening decades of the twentieth century, historians of the Dunning School, named for the influential Professor William A. Dunning at Columbia University, wrote interpretations of Reconstruction that dominated both historical scholarship and popular understandings for decades. In works marked with overt racism, they portrayed white Southerners as initially having been ready to accept military defeat and treat the ex-slaves with justice. With the imposition of Radical Reconstruction, however, their goodwill ran out. In the words of Eric Foner, the Dunning historians portrayed this period as “an era

¹ For “Yankee schoolma’am” and “horsefaced, bespectacled, and spare of frame,” see W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (1941; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 137. For “a modern Gideon’s Band,” see Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 452. For “Soldiers of light and love,” see Jacqueline Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980). For “The very messengers of God,” see Elliot Whipple to Rev. E. P. Smith, 17 June 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 58.

of corruption presided over by unscrupulous ‘carpetbaggers’ from the North, unprincipled Southern white ‘scalawags,’ and ignorant freedmen.” The Dunningites charged that Reconstruction was marked by “negro rule” and that the former slaves “were unprepared for freedom and incapable of properly exercising the political rights Northerners had thrust upon them.” White Southerners’ fierce reactions to Northern military occupation and black suffrage were therefore understandable, and they were justified in overthrowing Reconstruction and restoring “home rule,” which Foner describes as “a euphemism for white supremacy.”²

Walter L. Fleming, one of Dunning’s students, wrote a book-length study of the Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama. In its brief discussion of freedpeople’s schooling, Fleming contended that white Alabamians had been willing to educate the ex-slaves until Northern teachers invaded the state and taught racial equality in their classrooms. Freedmen’s schools were sometimes the targets of arson, Fleming acknowledged, but not because of opposition to black education. “As a rule,” he claimed, “the schoolhouses (and churches also) were burned because they were the headquarters of the Union League and the general meeting places for Radical politicians, or because of the character of the teacher and the results of his or her teachings.” In effect, Fleming charged, Northern teachers turned the schools into “a political nursery of race prejudice.” The freedpeople themselves, he argued, showed little enthusiasm for schools, and black education in the state more or less ended after 1868, when “the interest of the negro in

² Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, updated ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 2014), xvii-xviii.

education was no longer strong enough to induce him to pay for it.”³

As late as the 1940s, such interpretations were still prevalent. Henry Lee Swint, who wrote the first book-length study of Northern teachers in the South during Reconstruction, argued that many of them came to the South because they believed the region must be “renovated by Northern principles,” as one American Missionary Association (AMA) officer put it. While acknowledging that Northerners decided to teach the freedpeople for a variety of reasons, Swint cited abolitionism and religious fervor as the chief motivations. Some of the teachers were no doubt good men and women, he conceded, but their ideas about the South were often ill-informed and unrealistic. The teachers were contemptuous of white Southerners and sympathetic to the freedpeople, whom he portrayed as dishonest, thieving, and initially interested in education, only to lose interest a few years later. Like Fleming four decades before him, Swint suggested that Southern whites would gladly have provided freedpeople with at least a rudimentary education, but could not tolerate the Yankee teachers who stirred up trouble with their radical ideas and their goal of controlling the black vote.⁴

Even as the Dunning interpretation reigned supreme, a handful of historians challenged its premises. Most notable among the challengers was W. E. B. Du Bois, whose 1935 study, *Black Reconstruction*, writes Eric Foner, “portrayed Reconstruction as an idealistic effort to construct a democratic, interracial political order from the ashes of slavery.” One chapter of Du Bois’s book addressed education. Unlike the Dunning

³ Walter L. Fleming, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama* (1905; repr., New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), chaps. 11 and 19 (quotations on 463, 628, 630-631).

⁴ Henry Lee Swint, *The Northern Teacher in the South, 1862-1870* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1941), chaps. 3-5 (quotation on 36).

historians, who accused the ex-slaves of being unprepared for or uninterested in education, Du Bois showed that black Southerners were eager to establish schools. He credited the freedpeople themselves with laying the groundwork for schools and praised the Freedmen's Bureau, Northern philanthropists, and missionary teachers for bolstering the endeavor. Du Bois also argued that white Southerners not only opposed black schooling, but also sought to bring about its end once they returned to power.⁵

George Bentley's 1954 study of the Freedmen's Bureau in some ways signaled a forthcoming shift in Reconstruction scholarship. With respect to education, he reiterated the Dunningite view that "an influential class of white southerners" had supported education, but he also asserted that most whites "would have been hostile to Negro education regardless of almost anything the Freedmen's Bureau might have done" and whether or not the schools were taught by Northern teachers. Even so, Bentley acknowledged that Yankee educators were sometimes to blame for white Southerners' outrage because they taught radical ideas and spread Republicanism among the freedpeople. Bentley concluded that, although the schools could have achieved more than they did during the post-emancipation years, the Freedmen's Bureau provided crucial support to black schools when they were most vulnerable, and thereby did a great service to the ex-slaves.⁶

In the 1960s, revisionist historians like Kenneth Stampp and John Hope Franklin painted a more favorable portrait of Reconstruction and cast familiar characters in a new

⁵ W. E. Burghardt 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* (1935; repr., New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), chap. 15; Foner, *Reconstruction*, xix.

⁶ George R. Bentley, *A History of the Freedmen's Bureau* (1955; repr., New York: Octagon Books, 1970), chap. 12 (quotations on 178).

light. Recognizing that the accounts of the Dunning historians were colored by their inability to “conceive [of] Negroes as men,” as Du Bois had charged in 1935, the revisionists debunked the idea that the ex-slaves were unprepared for citizenship and became little more than the political pawns of white Radical Republicans. Instead, the revisionists argued that freedpeople were active participants in Reconstruction who sought to maximize the benefits of their newly won freedom. Most notably, the revisionists refuted claims that Reconstruction was marred by widespread corruption and “Negro rule” and lauded it as a time of positive changes that included, in the words of Eric Foner, “[t]he establishment of public school systems, the granting of equal citizenship to blacks,” and efforts to “revitalize the devastated Southern economy.” The revisionists concluded that Reconstruction was a time of great progress for the ex-slaves.⁷

The earliest revisionists, who were primarily interested in political developments, generally devoted only modest attention to education. Franklin portrayed the freedpeople as eager to receive an education and argued that their enthusiasm “combined with other factors after 1867 to produce a system of public education in the Southern states.” Among those “other factors” were the Freedmen’s Bureau, as well as Northerners who not only assisted the freedpeople in their pursuit of education, but also desired to establish a system of universal public education in the former Confederacy that mirrored its Northern counterpart. White Southerners were openly hostile toward the Northern teachers, Franklin asserted, because they believed their presence and activities threatened

⁷ John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction after the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966); Foner, *Reconstruction*, xx. For the quotation by Du Bois, see *Black Reconstruction*, 726.

white supremacy.⁸

Later revisionists refuted the Dunningites' claim that the schools established for ex-slaves during the early years of Reconstruction had been a failure. In a study of Alabama, Peter Kolchin, for example, reported that the number of black students in January 1868 represented one-ninth of the state's black school-age population. He also pointed out that, owing to "a considerable turnover of students from 1865 to 1869," the total number who received schooling during the period was greater than one-ninth. Kolchin also sustained Du Bois's assertion that the schools for ex-slaves gave birth to public education systems that reached students well beyond the Reconstruction era. William Preston Vaughn even suggested not only that the transition to the state system was smooth, but also that the new public schools were superior to those in existence before the Civil War. With respect to the teachers, Robert Morris contended that instead of preaching social equality or radical Republican politics in the classroom, they were more interested in teaching morality and good citizenship. Both in the lessons they taught inside the classroom and their interactions outside of it, Morris found that teachers were pragmatic in their dealings with white Southerners and, in order to keep the schools open, aimed not to antagonize them.⁹

By the 1970s and 1980s, post-revisionists had joined the revisionists in upending longstanding Dunningite portrayals of freedpeople's teachers as politically-motivated, religious zealots. At the same time, the post-revisionists charged that the revisionists had

⁸ Franklin, *Reconstruction after the Civil War*, 38, 52, 107-109 (quotation on 108-109).

⁹ Peter Kolchin, *First Freedom: The Responses of Alabama's Blacks to Emancipation and Reconstruction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972), chap. 4 (quotation on 98-99); William Preston Vaughn, *Schools for All: The Blacks and Public Education in the South, 1865-1877* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974), 158; Robert C. Morris, *Reading, 'Riting, and Reconstruction: The Education of Freedmen in the South, 1861-1870* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

been too optimistic about Reconstruction. “Persistent racism, these post-revisionist scholars argued, had negated efforts to extend justice to blacks,” writes Eric Foner, “and the failure to distribute land prevented the freedmen from achieving true autonomy and made their civil and political rights all but meaningless.” The post-revisionists also “portrayed the army and Freedmen’s Bureau as working hand in glove with former slaveowners to thwart the freedmen’s aspirations and force them to return to plantation labor.” In the eyes of the post-revisionists, Reconstruction was not radical at all, but rather too conservative.¹⁰

The post-revisionists were often critical of the teachers of freedpeople’s schools. Even the most well-meaning educators and especially the Northern white missionaries, they argued, were guilty of condescension and paternalism toward the former slaves. Leon Litwack contended that it was crucial for freedpeople to carve out their own institutions, since both native whites and Northern missionaries often had other goals in mind and viewed the freedpeople as their wards, rather than as capable citizens. “Even as they advised blacks to depend more on their own efforts and sought to inculcate black children with the virtues of self-help and self-reliance,” Litwack wrote of the Northern white teachers, “these same ‘friends’ might withhold their support or fail to encourage independent black efforts, question the wisdom and expediency of such efforts, or oppose them outright if they threatened to undermine their own authority.” Ronald Butchart also cited condescending behavior on the part of white Northerners and the resulting friction with black Southerners who were determined to establish separate institutions in order to

¹⁰ Foner, *Reconstruction*, xx-xxi.

free themselves from the grip of white control.¹¹

Both Butchart and Robert Sherer posited that the attempt of white Northerners and white Southerners to oversee the content of instruction in black schools limited what the schools could achieve. Northern white missionaries “were more concerned with stability and the rationalization of control and discipline than with extending the boundaries of black freedom,” Butchart claimed. Meanwhile, the goals of white Southerners were more sinister, argued both Sherer and Butchart, for they wanted to oversee black education as a means of subordinating the former slaves. In this regard, Butchart held white Northerners complicit in stifling what black schools could have achieved, because they assumed that white Southerners “would benevolently maintain the humane orientation these northerners strove for.” As the Freedmen’s Bureau and Northern freedmen’s aid societies began to withdraw and cede control over education to Southern whites, they created “[a] double irony: expecting education to provide a meaningful substitute for power and then putting that education in the hands of the enemies of the powerless.”¹²

Butchart contended that education was not the panacea Northern whites believed it would be. “The more education failed to alter conditions in the South,” he argued, “the more education was called upon to alter the conditions and the less likely were the [Northern aid] societies to suggest other or additional modes of reaching their ends.” As a result of such shortsightedness, the schools failed to secure freedom and equal

¹¹ Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, chap. 9 (quotation on 500); Ronald E. Butchart, *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction: Freedmen’s Education, 1862-1875* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 173-175 .

¹² Butchart, *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks*, chaps. 3, 10, and 11 (quotations on 52 and 207); Robert G. Sherer, *Subordination or Liberation? The Development and Conflicting Theories of Black Education in Nineteenth Century Alabama* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1977), 2.

citizenship for the ex-slaves and instead paved the way for further oppression. Schooling alone was insufficient to protect black citizenship, Butchart argued. “The freedmen needed access to political and economic power, literacy, acquaintance with law and government, land and capital, full protection in the right of self-defense, and all other forms of power necessary to guarantee the systematically oppressed their full personhood.”¹³

Historians of freedpeople’s education writing in the 1980s and 1990s drew from both revisionist and post-revisionist perspectives. According to Jacqueline Jones, the Northern women who taught in Georgia were oftentimes condescending or paternalistic toward the freedpeople, but nevertheless ahead of most nineteenth-century Americans in their commitment to racial equality. The teachers’ refusal to abandon the notion that “black character reform would lead to a more just society” amounted to “ideological stubbornness,” Jones wrote. Even so, she described the teachers as women who “turned their backs on racial prejudice and cast off the cloak of female domesticity to don the armor of freedmen’s work.” In her study of missionary women in Reconstruction Alabama, Harriet Doss concurred with Jones and added that the teachers braved opposition, ostracism, and hardship at the hands of white Southerners. For all their flaws, she wrote, they “often were the first whites to take special interest in [freedpeople’s] welfare.”¹⁴

Herbert Gutman and James Anderson sought to discredit the implicit (and

¹³ Butchart, *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks*, 206-208 (quotations on 206-207).

¹⁴ Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love*, chap. 1 and epilogue (quotations on 207-208); Harriet E. Amos Doss, “White and Black Female Missionaries to Former Slaves during Reconstruction,” in *Stepping out of the Shadows: Alabama Women, 1819-1990*, ed. Mary Martha Thomas (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 43-56 (quotation on 56).

sometimes explicit) assumption that the freedpeople were passive bystanders who waited for Northerners to educate them. Gutman argued that black Southerners “played the central role in building, financing, and operating these schools.” While he recognized the contributions of Northern aid societies and the Freedmen’s Bureau as critical in making black schools a reality, Gutman credited the freedpeople with spearheading the endeavor. James Anderson noted that, upon arriving in the South, Northern missionaries “were astonished . . . to discover that many ex-slaves had established their own educational collectives and associations, staffed schools entirely with black teachers, and were unwilling to allow their educational movement to be controlled by the ‘civilized’ Yankees.” “For the freedmen,” Anderson argued, “universal schooling was a matter of personal liberation and a necessary function of a free society.” They therefore “played a central role in etching the idea of universal public education into southern state constitutional law.”¹⁵

In an award-winning 1988 volume, Eric Foner synthesized nearly three decades of revisionist and post-revisionist scholarship on Reconstruction with extensive research of his own. He described education as “[a] typical nineteenth-century amalgam of benevolent uplift and social control” that “aimed simultaneously to equip the freedmen to take full advantage of citizenship, and to remake the culture blacks had inherited from slavery.” Northern teachers were often guilty of paternalism, which could generate friction with the black communities they served. Like Gutman and Anderson, Foner

¹⁵ Herbert G. Gutman, “Schools for Freedom: The Post-Emancipation Origins of Afro-American Education,” in *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*, ed. Ira Berlin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 260-297 (quotation on 260); James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), chap. 1 (quotations on 6, 18, 19).

argued that the educational endeavor originated with the ex-slaves and that they played a central role in establishing schools and keeping them in operation. Although the schools sponsored by the Freedmen's Bureau were "[p]lagued by financial difficulties and inadequate facilities, and more successful in reaching black youngsters in towns and cities than in rural areas," Foner suggested that "[e]ducation probably represented the agency's greatest success in the postwar South."¹⁶

More recent scholarship has also portrayed the freedpeople as central to establishing black schools in the South. Heather Andrea Williams's 2005 study traces black Southerners' zeal for education both during slavery and after emancipation. She argues that freedpeople's efforts were crucial to establishing the post-emancipation schools. Williams also takes post-revisionist historians to task for their pessimistic portrayals of black education during Reconstruction. "Butchart's argument that the decision by northern whites to provide education was not in the best interest of freedpeople did not ring true to me," she writes. Ex-slaves valued schooling as much as other means of securing their freedom, she argues, and "freedpeople plac[ed] education on a short list of priorities that included land ownership, fair contracts, suffrage, and equal treatment in legal proceedings." In support of education, the ex-slaves gave of their money, labor, time, and other resources. Unlike scholars before her, Williams highlights the role of black teachers in freedpeople's schools and the significance of their presence in classrooms throughout the South. African-American teachers' work amounted to a political act, she contends, while "their public presence proclaimed that African Americans were free, that some of them were educated, and that many more would soon

¹⁶ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 97-99, 144-148 (quotations on 144 and 146).

be.”¹⁷

In his 2009 study of freedmen’s education in Mississippi, Christopher Span corroborates Williams’s argument about the role of ex-slaves in establishing schools for themselves. Furthermore, he “questions the general acceptance in the historiography that former slaves, from the onset of emancipation, were to some extent destined to endure a life of subjugated second-class citizenship in the segregated South.” Span instead contends that the efforts of Mississippi’s ex-slaves to open and maintain schools demonstrated that they were not only dedicated to education, but also believed they would experience the full benefits of freedom in the classroom, in politics, and in the economy.¹⁸

Hilary Green’s 2016 study of African-American schools in Richmond, Virginia, and Mobile, Alabama, from 1865 to 1890 argues that urban freedpeople “successfully embedded African American education as a state right of citizenship, increased educational access for future generations of African American children, and established educators as middle-class leaders essential for turn-of-the-century activism.” Her chapter on post-emancipation Mobile shows that immediately following the Confederate surrender, freedpeople in the city set out to establish schools and within a few years had built a thriving educational network. From the outset, however, the schools were targets of white opposition and violent attack, including arson. In order to protect their nascent schools from destruction at the hands of local whites, black Mobilians allied with the

¹⁷ Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African-American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), introduction and chap. 6 (quotations on 4, 125).

¹⁸ Christopher M. Span, *From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse: African American Education in Mississippi, 1862-1875* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), introduction (quotation on 18).

city's Creoles of color, with whom they had previously been at odds, as well as with Freedmen's Bureau officials and Northern aid societies. With the passage of the Reconstruction Acts, the ex-slaves embarked on a successful campaign to establish publicly-funded education as a right for all Alabamians. Although a stand-off between competing school boards threatened the new public schools, Green contends that the resilient, persistent, and collaborative efforts of Mobile's freedpeople allowed the schools to survive the crisis and to continue in the decades that followed.¹⁹

Perhaps more than any other work, this thesis is most influenced by Ronald Butchart's 2010 study of freedpeople's education, *Schooling the Freed People*, which seeks to paint a more complete picture of the men and women who taught the ex-slaves. Butchart spent fifteen years identifying more than 11,600 teachers from AMA letters, Freedmen's Bureau records, and a variety of other sources. His findings shift the focus away from the white Northerners who have dominated the historiography and instead shed light on the black teachers and white Southern teachers who outnumbered the white Northerners. Butchart explores how the teachers' race and geographical origin influenced what they believed education should achieve. Some Southern white teachers, for example, taught in order to maintain white supremacy. Northern white missionary teachers, on the other hand, frequently sought to win converts to the church or to fulfill a religious obligation, rather than "to design a curriculum that made race, society, and power the central subjects of legitimate and sustained inquiry and action." Unlike historians before him, Butchart uncovers the overwhelming presence of a black teaching corps. These teachers, some of whom had been slaves themselves, understood what

¹⁹ Hilary Green, *Educational Reconstruction: African-American Schools in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), introduction, chap. 2 (quotation on 9).

freedpeople expected to gain from education and thus taught in order to achieve those ends.²⁰

This thesis builds upon Butchart's recent work and, in so doing, aims to enrich current understandings of the earliest years of education for ex-slaves in Alabama, which have received little scholarly attention. Walter Fleming's account is outdated and laced with racial bias. Peter Kolchin's study of how freedpeople in Alabama experienced emancipation is invaluable, but it addresses education only briefly. Although Robert Sherer's book was the first full-length study of mid and late nineteenth-century black education in the state, he devoted little space to the years before the emergence of secondary and collegiate black schools. Harriet Doss's essay is limited to Northern female missionaries, who comprised only a portion of the state's teaching corps.²¹ These works yield little in the way of discussing Alabama's first schools for ex-slaves and do not say much about the men and women who taught in them. This thesis aims to fill that gap. It explores teachers' experiences both inside and outside the classroom as they pioneered in the work of educating Alabama's ex-slaves. It asks who the teachers were, how their schools operated, and how they interacted with their surrounding communities.

Butchart's insistence that a clearer picture of who taught the freedpeople broadens understanding of freedpeople's education as a whole has held true in this study. The more the teachers came into full relief in the research, the more the other actors in the drama also came into clearer view. For example, this thesis corroborates Heather

²⁰ Ronald E. Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861-1876* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), introduction (quotation on 119).

²¹ Fleming, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama*, chaps. 11 and 19; Kolchin, *First Freedom*, chap. 4; Sherer, *Subordination or Liberation*, 1-9, 32-34, 79-80, 114-117, 119-121, chap. 12; Doss, "White and Black Female Missionaries to Former Slaves during Reconstruction," 43-56.

Williams's finding that ex-slaves went to extraordinary lengths to support their schools. Some of Alabama's freedpeople raised funds for schools, while others donated materials or built schoolhouses. Her assertion that black Southerners' desire for education was continuous from slavery to freedom proved to be true in Alabama, where a number of men and women who became literate as slaves later established schools as freedmen. Like the freedpeople in neighboring Mississippi whom Christopher Span describes, Alabama's ex-slaves valued education and immediately set about establishing schools. In a contraband camp near Huntsville, the schoolhouse, which was one of the first in the state, was reported to be "the only tidy-looking building on the place."²²

In addition to exploring the teachers' experiences inside and outside the classroom, the thesis considers the realm of possibilities for the teachers. Previous scholars of freedpeople's education have argued that black schools and those who taught them either were or were not successful in various aspects of education. Their assessments are incomplete, however, when they fail to consider the teachers' point of view. Although many teachers likely entered into educational work in Alabama with the highest of hopes, the obstacles they encountered forced them to do the best they could under the circumstances. Because historians have evaluated teachers' work in hindsight, their conclusions about what teachers did or did not achieve do not consider what was reasonable to expect from teachers who endured immense difficulties in their classrooms and in the surrounding communities.

This thesis argues that an assessment of the schools is valuable only when situated in the context of what was realistically possible for any given teacher. A teacher who

²² For the quotation, see Capt. Richard J. Hinton to Capt. T. W. Clarke, 31 July 1865, H-47 1865, Registered Letters Received, ser. 3379, Tenn. Subasst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-6135].

worked in an overcrowded and underfunded classroom while also battling social ostracism and the distinct likelihood of hostility or violence was not likely to dwell upon long-term goals. Teachers often lived from day to day. Many of them worked from dawn until dusk, juggled myriad auxiliary tasks in the schoolhouse and in the community, and battled irregular pay, disease, and hostile white sentiment. While teachers no doubt entered the field with ideas about what black education could and should accomplish, they often faced harsh realities that forced them to come to terms with what was achievable in the present.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1, “The Teachers,” considers the geographical origins of the men and women who taught in Alabama’s first schools for ex-slaves, describes their motives for teaching, explores the high rate of turnover, and identifies a gradual increase in the number of black teachers. The 585 teachers known to have taught in the state during the first six years of Reconstruction, it shows, did not conform to the “Yankee schoolmarm” stereotype, nor were they motivated solely by religious zeal or political opportunism. Rather, they hailed from a variety of backgrounds and drew upon multiple sources of motivation. Although the vast majority taught for only one or two years, a small dedicated corps remained in the field for four or more years.

Chapter 2, “In the Classroom,” asks what was required of teachers in order to operate a school. Most teachers taught dozens of students in crowded and dilapidated classrooms with rudimentary furnishings and insufficient textbooks. Despite such disadvantages, they introduced their students to literacy and numeracy, and sometimes covered more advanced subjects as well. They opened day, night, and sabbath schools to

accommodate the freedpeople's demand for education and adjusted their schedules to squeeze schooling into the winter and spring months before the hot Alabama summers and the fall cotton harvest. After they finished their final lessons for the day, teachers prepared reports, solicited funds from the Freedmen's Bureau and Northern aid societies, coordinated repairs for their schoolhouses, and accounted for the funds they received and expended. The men and women who pioneered Alabama's schools for ex-slaves managed underfunded, overcrowded, and ill-equipped schools, and they performed myriad extracurricular tasks. The chapter argues that freedpeople's education in Alabama survived and succeeded not only because of teachers' lessons inside the classroom, but also because of the lengths to which they went in order to keep their schools operational.

The final chapter, "Beyond the Classroom," seeks to understand teachers' interactions with white and black Alabamians. It contends that evaluating local citizens' responses to black education, as well as the ways they sustained or impeded the schools, further illuminates the complexities of being a teacher. In addition to their work inside the classroom, teachers had to learn to navigate a complex web of social relations outside of it. In some places, local whites were cordial or even supported freedpeople's schools, while in others, the very idea of educating ex-slaves incited opposition and sometimes violence. Between 1865 and 1870, white Alabamians expressed their hostility toward the teachers in a variety of ways that ranged from social ostracism to physical assault, arson, or even murder. Especially in the face of such white resistance, the teachers relied heavily upon freedpeople to help build and maintain schools. When their resources permitted, ex-slaves contributed money or their labor to the schools. They also allowed

their church buildings to be used as schools, protected the teachers from violent attacks, and, in some cases, assisted in the classroom. Teachers, in turn, served the freedpeople by doing religious, educational, or charitable work in the community, and by serving as their advocates with local officials and federal authorities. Teachers, in short, were not confined solely to their classrooms. Whether welcomed or despised, temporary or long-term, they were members of the community whose work inevitably took them beyond the walls of their schools.

Although the thesis emphasizes the challenges teachers faced, it does not claim that they always succeeded in meeting them. Some teachers were overzealous when they arrived, but soon became discouraged and lost enthusiasm, which contributed to high rates of turnover. Others lacked common sense or exhibited an air of superiority and condescension. Some teachers, white as well as black, had minimal education themselves and were but a few lessons ahead of their students. The teachers who pioneered freedpeople's schools in Alabama had numerous personal and professional shortcomings. Even so, they carved out educational opportunities for Alabama's ex-slaves where there once had been none.

The men and women who taught Alabama's ex-slaves between 1865 and 1870 not only established the first schools for freedpeople, but also laid the foundation for a public school system that has survived into the present day. While historians of freedpeople's education should continue to be critical of the men and women who pioneered the effort, they must also consider the circumstances in which they worked and evaluate the range of possibilities in any given community. Teachers faced numerous obstacles in the

classroom and in the community, and with this in mind, their accomplishments, although not without blemish, become all the more remarkable.

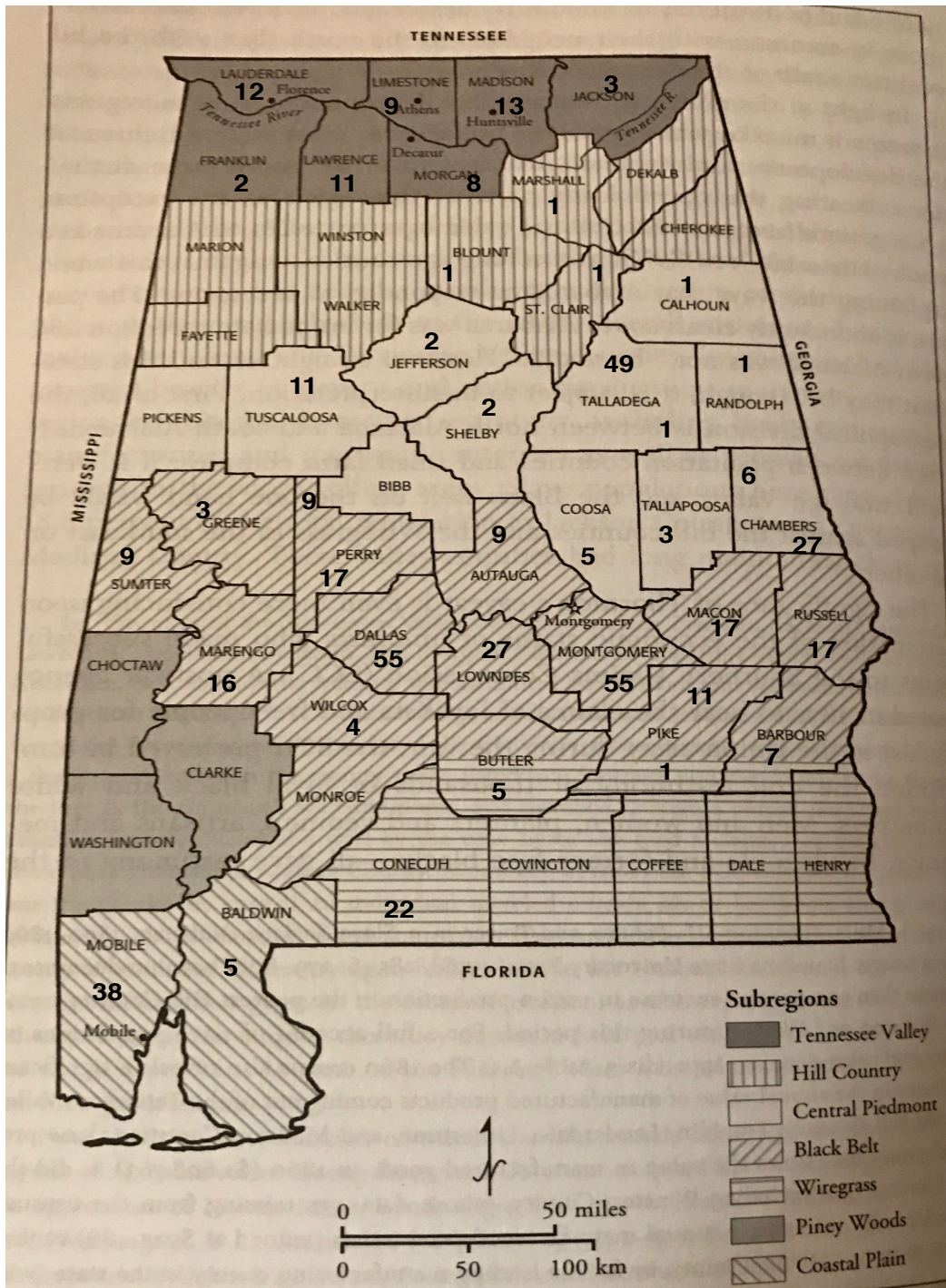


Figure 0.1. Total number of teachers in each county between 1865 and 1870. Base map from Margaret M. Storey, *Loyalty and Loss: Alabama's Unionists in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 10. The map represents Alabama's counties as of 1860 and therefore does not include the following counties which were created between then and 1870: Bullock, Clay, Elmore, Etowah, Hale, Lee, and Cullman. Numbers for teachers in those counties have been placed in the approximate area of each new county.

Chapter 1

The Teachers

“How far our people would go towards a school taught by an utter *stranger* (a white person) I am at a loss to say,” a resident of Troy, Alabama, informed the head of the Freedmen’s Bureau in the state. He was certain, however, that “the introduction of a ‘School Marm’” would incite “much prejudice & ill feeling.”¹ From the earliest years of freedmen’s education in the South, Northern female teachers have received a great deal of attention for their work educating ex-slaves. In her 1869 book, Northerner Linda Warfel Slaughter, who herself had taught ex-slaves in Kentucky, described “*Yankee schoolmams*” as dedicated teachers “armed with the Bible and spelling-book, who invaded the South in as genuine a spirit of heroism, for as patriotic and deserving a cause, and with as triumphant results, as the grand army of pioneers who had led the way and thrown down the barriers of caste.” In contrast, Dunningite historian Walter L. Fleming, writing in the first decade of the twentieth century, contended that Northern teachers “fleeced their black pupils and their parents unmercifully” and “caused trouble by using books and tracts with illustrations of slavery and stories about the persecution and cruelties of the whites against the blacks.” Although “[m]any of the northern teachers were undoubtedly good people,” Fleming concluded, “all were touched with fanaticism.” In his 1941 book, *The Mind of the South*, Southern journalist W. J. Cash described the Northern schoolmarm as “horsefaced, bespectacled, and spare of frame.” “[S]he was, of course,” he wrote, “no proper intellectual, but at best a comic character, at worst a

¹ A. N. Worthy to Maj. Gen. Swayne, 20 June 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0174 (emphasis in the original).

dangerous fool, playing with explosive forces which she did not understand.”²

The “Yankee Schoolmarm” was, however, little more than a stereotype. In his recent study of the teachers of ex-slaves between 1861 and 1876, historian Ronald Butchart has shown that a significant number of Northern white men also taught freedpeople and, moreover, that Southern black teachers were more numerous than their Northern white counterparts.³ Although many of the teachers who educated the freedpeople of Alabama in the first years after the Civil War were, in fact, unmarried Northern women, they were part of a diverse corps of men and women, both white and black, who came from both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line and, in a few cases, from the wider world. From Chieti, Italy, and Columbus, Nebraska, Alabama’s teachers came. Some hailed from towns as far away as Hallowell, Maine, while others were born and raised in Alabama. They were white and black, Republican and Democrat. Among them were Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Quakers, Congregationalists, and Episcopalians—to name just a few of their religious affiliations.

Some teachers were missionaries eager to perform the work of the Lord in an exciting new field, while others were widows or widowers in search of a means to feed their families. Still others were college students looking for a break or for divine

² Linda Warfel Slaughter, *The Freedmen of the South* (1869; repr., New York: Kraus Reprint, 1969), 110 (emphasis in the original); Walter L. Fleming, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama* (1905; repr., New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), 627-630; W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South*, (1941; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 137. Slaughter taught a school in Kentucky sometime between 1867 and 1868. She dedicated her book to the teachers and described herself as “one who has shared their privations, their persecutions, and their rewards.” See “Missionaries and Teachers for 1867-8,” in *The American Missionary* 12, no. 4 (Apr. 1868): 77; and Slaughter, *The Freedmen of the South*, dedication page.

³ Ronald E. Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861-1876* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 80-81. According to Butchart, 1,047 Northern white men and 2,115 Northern white women served as teachers between 1861 and 1876. Southern black teachers were slightly more numerous, with 2,081 men and 1,251 women teaching in freedpeople’s schools.

inspiration, or white Southerners who had remained loyal to the Union during the war. A good many had until recently been slaves themselves or, in a few cases, had known what it was to be a free person of color before the Civil War. Some teachers came South with the intention of remaining for only a short time, but ended up staying a lifetime, while others left far sooner than they had expected. In short, their backgrounds were as diverse as their reasons for teaching, and their experiences paint a vastly different picture than the “Yankee Schoolmarm” stereotype.

Although historians continue to enrich scholarship regarding the men and women who taught ex-slaves during Reconstruction, none have focused on those who taught in Alabama. This chapter expands existing portrayals by examining the 585 teachers identified as having taught freedpeople’s schools in Alabama between 1865 and 1870.⁴

⁴ Alabama Freedmen’s Teachers Database, 1865-1870. The database consists of 585 individuals who were named or mentioned as teachers of black students in Alabama at any point between 1865 and 1870. It is based principally on letters and reports to the Freedmen’s Bureau, the American Missionary Association (AMA), and other sponsoring organizations. I recorded their names, where they taught, and the year(s) they taught. Teachers who were mentioned, but not by name, were entered into the database as “unnamed teacher.” I also recorded other information in the documents, such as hometown or place of origin, sponsoring organization (if any), race, sex, antebellum status (free or slave), pay, and whether they taught with the aid of an assistant. Such information was not consistently available, and I therefore searched census, marriage, and death records, voter registration lists, veterans’ records, and secondary sources to fill gaps. Although I often could have reasonably deduced certain bits of information regarding teachers, such as race, sex, and whether a teacher was Northern or Southern, I did not include any such facts about a teacher unless they were explicitly stated. For example, I did not assume that teachers mentioned without a racial designator were white, even though they probably were. The database does not include every teacher of freedpeople in Alabama, as I was unable to account for teachers who did not report to the Freedmen’s Bureau, the AMA, or other sponsoring organization and were not mentioned in official letters and reports. Existing scholarship regarding freedmen’s schools points to the likelihood that some teachers who operated schools in rural areas were outside the orbit of the Freedmen’s Bureau and unknown to other teachers in the state; such teachers are no doubt underrepresented in the database. The most important primary source from which the database was created are photocopied documents in the collection of the Freedmen and Southern Society Project, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland; records of the Superintendent of Education for the State of Alabama, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1870, microfilm M810, NARA; American Missionary Association Archives, 1865-1870, microfilm, reel 1 [Alabama]; *Friends’ Intelligencer* 22 (1866), 23 (1867), 33 (1876-1877), and 49 (1892); *The American Missionary* 11 (1867), 12 (1868), and 14 (1870); and census, military, marriage, death, and burial information from ancestry.com. The 1868-1870 issues of *Friends’ Intelligencer* contained no relevant information. Neither the 1865 issue of *Friends’ Intelligencer*, nor the 1865, 1866, and 1869 issues of *The American Missionary* were readily available.

It asks who they were and whence they came, examines their motivations for teaching ex-slaves, and considers how they made ends meet in an occupation that offered minimal and sporadic pay, oftentimes in communities that were hostile to the education of former slaves.

From all parts of the country and all walks of life they came. Some were soldiers who put down their rifles and picked up Webster's "Blue Back Speller." Others were clergymen and missionaries seeking to fulfill Christ's "Great Commission." At least three were European immigrants. Southern sons and daughters joined the mix—some

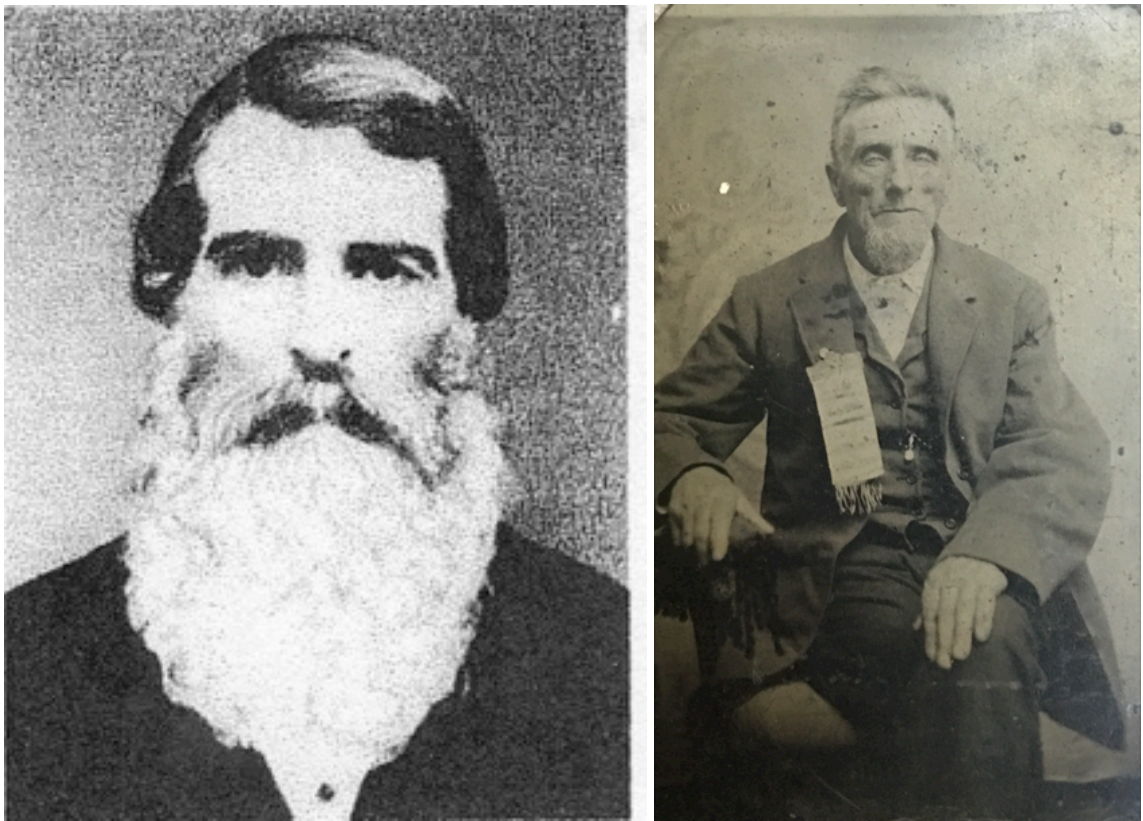


Figure 1.1. Pasquale Vassetti, teacher in Greene County, Alabama. Vassetti, who was born in Chieti, Italy, was one of three foreign-born teachers known to have taught in Alabama. Photograph courtesy of Jacqueline Black.

having themselves been slaves. Among the Southern white teachers, some had been slaveholders and perhaps taught people they had once owned. Regardless of their

backgrounds, these men and women came together for a shared purpose: to educate Alabama's freedpeople. They often carried out their work with little direction, meager funding, and inadequate teaching materials. Despite such obstacles, they established a vibrant network of schools for freedpeople in the state.⁵

One Northern publication claimed in 1865 that "New England can furnish teachers enough to make a New England out of the whole South,"⁶ and for several decades, historians described the teachers of former slaves as "Yankee Schoolmarm[s]." Jacqueline Jones, for example, writes that, among the teachers, "women in particular came to symbolize a 'New England' spirit that historians might praise or condemn, but could rarely ignore." Those in Georgia were "young, well-educated, unmarried women from middle-class northern homes" who sought to save the freedpeople from a life of oppression while also seeking "to liberate themselves from the comfort and complacency of a middle-class existence."⁷

Such characterizations are not entirely unfounded. In Alabama, 137 of the 197 teachers whose geographical origins are known hailed from the North, but only 32 of that

⁵ The schools established in the immediate post-emancipation years were not Alabama's first houses of education. In 1854, the state established a meager public school system for white children which operated until secession brought the endeavor to a halt. See Peter Kolchin, *First Freedom: The Responses of Alabama's Blacks to Emancipation and Reconstruction* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1972), 79. Among the beneficiaries of the antebellum schools were a handful of non-whites—members of Mobile's Creole population. In 1832, when the state legislature prohibited teaching slaves and free blacks to read, free people of color in Mobile and Baldwin counties protested the edict on the grounds that it "violated the codicils of the treaty by which the United States ratified the Louisiana Purchase," under which "Creoles were guaranteed all the rights of American citizens." In response, the legislature recognized the right of people of color to receive an education if they were "direct descendants of the Negro Creoles who lived in and around Mobile in 1803." See *ibid.*, 79; Robert G. Sherer, *Subordination or Liberation? The Development and Conflicting Theories of Black Education in Nineteenth Century Alabama* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1977), 150n1.

⁶ *Freedmen's Journal*, Jan. 1, 1865, quoted in George R. Bentley, *A History of the Freedmen's Bureau* (1955; repr., New York: Octagon Books, 1970), 179.

⁷ Jacqueline Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 5, 8.

number called New England home. In Alabama, the Midwest—not New England—supplied more teachers than any other region. Of those teachers whose origins are known, Midwestern teachers represented three times the number from any other part of the country, including Alabama itself. Of the Midwestern states, Ohio provided by far the largest number, with Wisconsin and Michigan each maintaining a considerable presence. Outside of the Midwest, New York and Alabama contributed notable numbers, although teachers from these states amounted to only one-fifth and one-half, respectively, the number from Ohio.⁸ (See Table 1.1.)

Teachers from the top-providing states came from only a handful of towns and cities. Those from Ohio were chiefly from Cleveland, Elyria, New London, or Paddy’s Run, with Oberlin sending the largest number. Most of the New Englanders hailed from Vergennes in Vermont or Hallowell in Maine. Prescott, Wisconsin, sent several teachers. Most of the native Alabamian teachers were from Talladega, Marion, or Montgomery, where the first normal schools for African Americans were established. Still, the pattern was not all-encompassing. At least three teachers came from Florence, Alabama, where a normal school for black students was not opened until 1903.⁹

Teachers’ geographical origins sometimes influenced how long they were willing to stay in Alabama. Those from the North were unaccustomed to the Deep South’s harsh

⁸ Alabama Freedmen’s Teachers Database.

⁹ Alabama Freedmen’s Teachers Database. A normal school existed in Florence prior to 1903, but it accepted only white students (it later became the University of North Alabama). The Burrell School, as Florence’s normal school for African Americans was called, had been established in Selma in the late 1860s by the American Missionary Association, but the AMA moved it to Florence after the Selma campus was destroyed by fire. On the normal school for whites in Florence, see “About Our School,” University of North Alabama, NBC Nightly News, 2016, accessed Sept. 6, 2016, <https://www.una.edu/kilby/about-our-school.html>. On the Burrell School, see “Florence History Scavenger Hunt,” Florence-Lauderdale Public Library, accessed Sept. 6, 2016, <https://flpl.org/flplhistory>.

Table 1.1 Geographical Origins of Freedmen's Teachers in Alabama, 1865-1870

<u>New England</u>		32
Connecticut	9	
Massachusetts	7	
Vermont	7	
New Hampshire	6	
Maine	3	
<u>Mid-Atlantic</u>		16
New York	9	
Pennsylvania	7	
<u>Midwest</u>		87
Ohio	50	
Wisconsin	14	
Michigan	8	
Illinois	6	
Indiana	6	
Iowa	2	
Nebraska	1	
<u>North (state not known)</u>		2
<u>Total North</u>		137
<u>South</u>		28
Alabama	23	
South Carolina	2	
Maryland	1	
Mississippi	1	
Tennessee	1	
<u>South (state not known)</u>		29
<u>Total South</u>		57
<u>Foreign</u>		3
Canada	1	
England	1	
Italy	1	
Total		197
Origin not known		388

Source: Alabama Freedmen's Teachers Database.

summer weather, and summer thus posed a formidable obstacle for many Northern-born teachers. Not yet “seasoned,” they frequently sought to escape the oppressive and sometimes deadly heat by temporarily returning to the North. In early June, 1867, James McGogy, the Freedmen’s Bureau subassistant commissioner in Talladega, reported that “[t]he warm weather as well as the disagreeable locality of the School house have rendered it quite impossible for the teachers to continue the School at this place longer than the 15th inst.”¹⁰ That same summer, Mary Wells and her three assistants closed their school in Athens and traveled northward to escape the scorching heat. A measure of their



Figure 1.2. Mary Wells, superintendent of Trinity School in Athens, Alabama. *A Woman of the Century: Fourteen Hundred-Seventy Biographical Sketches Accompanied by Portraits of Leading American Women in All Walks of Life*, ed. Frances E. Willard and Mary A. Livermore (Buffalo, NY: Charles Wells Moulton, 1893), 759.

¹⁰ J. F. McGogy to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 8 July 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0713.

determination is the distance they traveled: Ann Arbor, Michigan, was the furthest south any of them spent the summer months.¹¹ The Northern teachers were not alone in their distaste for the hot weather. In July 1867, freedpeople in West Point, Alabama, most of whom were no doubt accustomed to the heat, requested a two-week vacation from school—a request that their teacher, Bryant Edmundson, granted.¹²

While most Northern teachers preferred to leave Alabama in June in order to avoid the summer months, some were equally adamant about when they would return. Charles and Emma Adams, who taught in Greenville, argued not only that early September was “too hot and unhealthy to make it really safe” to return, but also that a late September arrival afforded ample time to prepare for an early October school opening.¹³ With weather a serious concern, a teacher’s geographical origin was a matter of importance because it might dictate when schooling would be available.

Teachers’ geographical origins influenced not only when the freedpeople would be taught, but also who would teach them. Southern white women were subject to rigid rules regarding white womanhood. Perhaps because of social mores that sought to separate Southern white women from black men, Northern white women outnumbered their Southern counterparts in Alabama’s black schools nearly five to one.¹⁴ Although

¹¹ M. F. Wells to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 10 June 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1101. In the summer of 1867, a shortfall in Freedmen’s Bureau funding assisted the teachers in their efforts to avoid the heat. In July, the Bureau’s superintendent of education in Alabama declared that “[a]s a general thing school will be closed during August.” The suggestion for a summer vacation did, however, include a caveat that “those schools which can be made self-supporting should continue.” The superintendent is quoted in 1st Lt. [George Shorkley] to Messrs. Bailey & Emons, 23 July 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0914.

¹² Bryant Edmundson to Maj. General Wager Swayne, [4?] July 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0537.

¹³ C. H. Adams to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 16 Aug. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0256.

cultural constraints did not keep Northern white women out of Alabama classrooms, they were susceptible to periods of ostracism from local white society that might last anywhere from several weeks to more than a decade. In Talladega, local whites refused to speak to Maria Hopson for more than six weeks. Mary Wells in Athens was even more unfortunate in her interactions—or lack thereof—with the town’s white residents. In 1876, a full eleven years after Wells first arrived in Alabama, she confessed that she was taking her vacation in Boston in order to “see and converse with cultivated men and women—*be recognized* by Christians of my own race—feel that I am no longer a leper.”¹⁵

Female teachers were, however, outnumbered by men in Alabama’s black schools. Of the 463 teachers whose gender is known, 244 were men, while 219 were women.¹⁶ Although men were subject to some of the same criticism and hostility as women, male teachers’ experiences were different from—and sometimes better than—those of their female counterparts. Men, for example, were generally paid more than women. Male teachers averaged monthly pay of \$53.21, with a top-paying position of \$130. Women, on the other hand, were paid an average of \$40.94 per month, with the

¹⁴ Of 117 teachers for whom race, sex, and geographical origin are all known, I have identified 39 white female teachers from the North, but only 8 from Alabama or elsewhere in the South. See Alabama Freedmen’s Teachers Database.

¹⁵ Maria C. Hopson to Gen’l Swain [*sic*], 11 Mar. 1866; Maria C. Hopson to Mr. Buckley, 2 Apr. 1866, and C. M. [*sic*] Hopson to Mr. C. W. Buckley, 22 Apr. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frames 0047, 0050, and 0053; M. F. Wells to M. E. Strieby, August, 9, 1876, quoted in Harriet E. Amos Doss, “White and Black Female Missionaries to Former Slaves during Reconstruction,” in *Stepping out of the Shadows: Alabama Women, 1819-1990*, ed. Mary Martha Thomas (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 54 (emphasis in the original). For a fuller discussion of the ostracism teachers faced, see below, Chapter 3.

¹⁶ Alabama Freedmen’s Teachers Database.

top-grossing female teachers earning just \$60.¹⁷ Black teachers fared even worse. The highest-paid African-American teachers received \$30 per month, including a man who had been teaching longer than 98 percent of all other teachers in the state.¹⁸

The experiences of male and female teachers differed in other ways as well. Men, for example, were more likely to teach with a family member as an assistant. Of the small number of teachers who reported that they received the assistance of a family member in the classroom, eighteen were men, while only two were women.¹⁹ Women and men also taught in somewhat different settings. Women were more likely to teach in towns where there were other female educators. Between 1865 and 1870, almost 47 percent of female teachers taught in places with four or more female teachers at the same time. In contrast, only 26 percent of the men taught in towns with four or more male teachers simultaneously at work.²⁰

In Alabama, white people were more likely to teach freedpeople than were African Americans. Of the 270 teachers whose race is known, 100 were black, but that figure probably overstates black representation in the teaching corps as a whole, given the tendency of white officials to explicitly cite the race of those who were black while

¹⁷ Ibid. Only a few women earned more than the average paid to men; they included Sarah Bowman, Ellen Benton, Mary Ryan, S. B. Anthony, M. J. Knight, Amelia Drake, Julia Wanzer, Laura Day, Anna Smith, Marietta Morrill, H. C. Coe, Carrie Smith, and Mrs. A. W. McCullough.

¹⁸ Alabama Freedmen's Teachers Database. John Wiley, an ex-slave in Troy, Alabama, was the highest-paid African-American teacher. Wiley, who began teaching in 1866, was also among the less than 1.8 percent of educators who taught in Alabama for at least four years between 1865 and 1870.

¹⁹ Alabama Freedmen's Teachers Database.

²⁰ Ibid. Although I have identified a total of 244 male teachers and 219 female teachers, the location of their schools is known for only 210 of the men and 197 of the women.

attaching no racial designator to white teachers.²¹ Between 1865 and 1870, only twelve towns in Alabama had more than one black teacher at any given time—the record number belonging to Florence, which boasted a total of ten black teachers over the six-year period.²²

These numbers suggest that white men and women who taught during the earliest years of freedmen’s education generally did so in the company of other white teachers. They had fellow teachers to whom they could turn for advice, comfort, or assistance in a state where local white sentiment was often hostile toward both black schools and the educators who staffed them. By contrast, many of the African Americans who taught, such as Edmund Watkins in Church Hill and Fannie White in Rockwood, did so without the benefit of other teachers of their race in the same vicinity.²³ After knowing freedom for just a few years, those teachers who had been slaves found themselves teaching during the years of Radical Reconstruction, black male suffrage, and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. Through it all, many black teachers lacked fellow black teachers with whom they could share their experience as an educator.

Although African Americans made up a minority of Alabama’s teachers, they were a growing proportion of the teacher corps. (See Table 1.2.) The first three years of

²¹ Alabama Freedmen’s Teachers Database. Of 585 teachers in the state, race is known for only 270. In constructing the database, I included a teacher’s race only when it was explicitly cited; I did not assume that teachers whose race was not noted were white, although such may well have been the case. As a result, white teachers are probably undercounted. On the other hand, the database does not include teachers of independent, self-organized schools who did not report to the Freedmen’s Bureau or Northern aid societies, and many such teachers were probably black.

²² Alabama Freedmen’s Teachers Database. Of the 270 teachers whose race is known, locations are known for 77 black teachers and 149 white teachers.

²³ Alabama Freedmen’s Teachers Database. Other teachers in this category include Henry Watson in Union Springs, William Hooper Council in Averyville, Amanda White near Elyton, W. S. Beckley in Decatur, John Wiley in Troy, William Murphy in Spencer, and Allen Williams in Tuscaloosa.

freedmen’s education in the state saw no more than seven African-American teachers at any one time. By 1869, that number had skyrocketed to fifty, which was more than four times the figure from the previous year. The opening of normal schools for black students—institutions that were designed to train black teachers—was partly responsible for the increase. Of the fifty African-Americans teaching in 1869, no fewer than eighteen came from Talladega, where a thriving normal school was located.²⁴

Table 1.2. African-American Teachers in Alabama, 1865-1870

1865	6
1866	7
1867	6
1868	12
1869	50
1870	42

Source: Alabama Freedmen's Teachers Database. Of the 585 teachers in the database, race is known for only 270, of whom 100 were black. Teachers who taught for multiple years are counted in each year they taught.

Many of the black men and women who served as teachers were highly successful. William Hooper Council, for example, was a former slave who “first learned his letters in March [18]64” at a freedmen’s school in Stevenson, Alabama. Council soon became “the best scholar of all that school,” and by January 1869 he was teaching in nearby Averyville under the supervision of Henrietta Starkweather, a teacher sponsored

²⁴ Alabama Freedmen’s Teachers Database. In February 1870, Talladega College reported twenty-two freedpeople who had either successfully completed their studies and already begun teaching or would begin teaching in the near future. See L. E. Brown to Col. Beecher, 1 Feb. 1870, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1702.

by the Presbyterian Committee of Home Missions. So impressed was Starkweather with Council's performance that "were he not a married man," she wrote, "I should think he was worthy of a scholarship in the Ashman [*sic*] Institute." By the following year, Council was teaching in a brand new school building in Huntsville, Alabama. Council's dedication to educating Alabama's freedpeople ran deep. Not only did he rise from slavery to become a teacher, but in 1875 he founded the Huntsville Normal School, which later became Alabama Agriculture and Mechanical University, and served as the school's first president.²⁵

Council was not an isolated example of a freedman who became a successful teacher. In August 1865, the freedpeople of Wetumpka, Alabama, asked William Turner to open a school. Turner desired not only to educate the town's youths, but also to mold them into good citizens and help them "resist the temptations of this life." He continued to teach in Wetumpka for at least three years—a rarity in Alabama between 1865 and 1870, when 95 percent of the teachers of black schools taught for two years or less.²⁶

²⁵ H. R. Starkweather to [illegible], 1 Jan. 1869, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1563; Eddie E. Davis, Jr., *William Hooper Council: The Greatest Negro the Race Ever Produced* (Huntsville, AL: Presh4wrod Publishing, 2013), chap. 2; Wm. Council to Col. Edwin Beecher, 10 May 1870, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1718. The Ashmun Institute was "the nation's first degree-granting Historically Black College and University." Located in Pennsylvania, it was established in 1853 "for the scientific, classical and theological education of colored youth of the male sex." In 1866, it was renamed Lincoln University. See "History," Lincoln University, accessed Nov. 12, 2016, <http://www.lincoln.edu/about/history>. On Council's role as founder and first president of Alabama A&M University, see "Past Presidents," Alabama A&M University, accessed Sept. 6, 2016, <http://www.aamu.edu/aboutaamu/office-of-the-president/past-presidents/Pages/default.aspx>. On the history of Alabama A&M University, see "AAMU-at-a-Glance," Alabama A&M University, accessed Nov. 27, 2016, <http://www.aamu.edu/aboutaamu/pages/aamu-at-a-glance.aspx>.

²⁶ William Turner to Rev. T. D. Williams, 16 Aug. 1865, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1806]. Turner first appears in Freedmen's Bureau records as a teacher in 1865. He appears again in 1866 and 1867, but disappears from the record thereafter. Of the 585 teachers known to have taught in Alabama between 1865 and 1870, only 35 taught for more than two years—a little over 6 percent. See Alabama Freedmen's Teachers Database. For other examples of freedpeople who became successful teachers, see J. Silsby to George Whipple, 2 Nov. 1865, AMA, reel 1,

Some black men and women with limited education were persuaded by local freedpeople to teach a school until a more experienced instructor could be found. “Rather than simply waiting for help to come,” historian Heather Andrea Williams writes, “[freedpeople] used what learning they had to begin to teach”—a phenomenon John Alvord, the Freedmen’s Bureau inspector of schools, called “native schools.” Such schools were carried over from the days of slavery when slaves who possessed scraps of knowledge taught fellow slaves, and the practice continued even after formal schools were established.²⁷

Although such self-organized schools probably existed throughout the state, only a few are documented in the records of the Freedmen’s Bureau or the Northern aid societies. In September 1865, Captain A. L. Brown, the Freedmen’s Bureau agent at Greenville, reported two schools already operating in the area, “number[ing] about 50 pupils.” “The education of the Teachers is very limited,” Brown acknowledged, but “the moral effect of the school[s] is good.”²⁸ That same month in Florence “[a] school was in operation, with over 100 scholars,” thanks to “the advantage of good leaders” who had organized both a school fund and a school board. The school was run by “[a] colored

no. 5; William M. Gilbert to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 25 May 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0586.

²⁷ Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 139; Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, *First Semi-Annual Report on Schools and Finances of Freedmen, January 1, 1866*, by J. W. Alvord, Inspector of Schools and Finances (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1868), 9-10; Janet Duitsman Cornelius, “*When I Can Read My Title Clear*”: *Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 77.

²⁸ A.L. Brown to Colonel C. Cadle., Jr., 30 Sept. 1865, Reports of Operations from the Subdistricts, ser. 17, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1593].

man and woman, who themselves needed to be taught” but “were doing their best.”²⁹ By November 1865, an ex-slave named George Poole had also established a school in Florence that was said to be in a “flourishing” condition despite the fact that he himself had been educated solely by means of the scraps of information he picked up while working as a bootblack at the Florence Wesleyan University. Poole’s limited education suggests that his curriculum was probably restricted to the basics, but his ability to learn by eavesdropping on the job, then use that knowledge to teach a school, are testaments to his determination.³⁰

Ex-slaves were not the only teachers who had to make do with meager educations. Although Jacqueline Jones found that most of the Northerners who taught in Georgia were “well-educated,” the same may not have been true everywhere. In 1868, John Alvord, the Freedmen’s Bureau inspector of schools, devised a new “Teacher’s Monthly Report” that was “more minute on some points” in order to accommodate “teachers of less intelligence.”³¹ Thomas Crevatt, a teacher in Newbern, Alabama, was presumably a beneficiary of the revised form. In a letter to the Bureau, Crevatt confessed that he did not have much education. The explanation was in fact unnecessary; Crevatt’s poor spelling and grammar gave him away long before he made the admission. Crevatt argued that he was nevertheless fit for the position and assured the Bureau that he could teach his

²⁹ Capt. Richard J. Hinton to Capt. T.W. Clarke, 18 Sept. 1865, Registered Letters Received, ser. 3379, Nashville TN Headquarters, RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-6142].

³⁰ *Florence (AL) Journal*, November 1, 1865, p. 2. For another example of a freedman who taught school despite having only a limited education, see Martin Conner to Col. Callis, 9 May. 1866, vol. 58, p. 175, Letters Received, ser. 112, Huntsville, Ala., Subasst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-2068].

³¹ Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love*, 5; J. W. Alvord to Rev’d C. W. Buckley, 24 Jan. 1868, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1157.

thirty-six pupils to “read and write and sipher [*sic*].” However frustrating Crevatt’s limitations may have been for his students, they preferred a poorly-educated teacher to none at all. “[T]he Pepol [*sic*] dont [*sic*] want me to quit teaching,” Crevatt claimed, boasting that “I have 36 scholars on my list and can get as many more if I succeed in geting [*sic*] my appointment as Teacher.” Crevatt received the appointment and was still teaching in Alabama as late as 1869.³²

Different white authorities sometimes subjected black teachers to dramatically different standards. In May 1866, William Peck, the Freedmen’s Bureau agent in Tuscaloosa, reported that an African-American man by the name of Allen Williams had been teaching school there for a year and had even built a log schoolhouse with his own funds. In Peck’s estimation, Williams was a “worthy” teacher who “ought to be encouraged with a little money from month to month” to help cover his living expenses. Williams’s school reports also suggested that his school was doing well; enrollment was increasing, and the students were steadily advancing in their studies.³³ By March 1867, however, there was a new superintendent of schools in Tuscaloosa, Charles Arms, who described Williams altogether differently. While Arms recognized that Williams had potential and even suggested him as a “pioneer” teacher in another location, he complained that Williams “wants to be a teacher but he does not seem to realize the

³² Thos. W. Crevatt to Mr. C. W. Buckley, 9 Sept. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0461; Alabama Freedmen’s Teachers Database.

³³ Wm. H. H. Peck to Supt. of Freedmen’s Schools, 14 May 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0071; Wm. H. H. Peck to Major O. D. Kinsman, 26 May 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0078; Allen Williams, Teacher’s Monthly Reports, 30 July 1866, 31 Aug. 1866, 30 Sept. 1866, Nov. 1866, Dec. 1866, Jan. 1867, Feb. 1867, Mar. 1867, Monthly Reports of Teachers, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 6, frames 0090, 0113, 0146, 0251, 0297, 0346, 0432, and 0553.

necessity of preliminary preparation and self-culture on his own part.” Moreover, he spurned criticism because he “imagines he is *already* qualified.”³⁴

Even though Tuscaloosa was in need of another teacher for a new primary school, the Bureau sided with Arms and withdrew its funding from Williams’s school. Accordingly, Arms notified Williams that “his services as teacher in this place were no longer required.” Williams, however, refused to give up his school, arguing that the Bureau had agreed to employ him for a year. Neither Williams nor Arms would concede, and a battle of wills ensued. So bitter was the conflict that Arms resorted to slander. In a letter to the Bureau, he described Williams as “self-conceited, ignorant, crafty, and I believe, dishonest”—claims for which he offered no evidence. After a month of antagonism and some prodding from the Bureau, Williams finally accepted a position at a school in nearby Carrollton. For a brief moment, it seemed that relations between Arms and Williams had settled down. Arms was rid of a teacher he deemed sub-par, while Williams was given a fresh start in a new location. But Arms soon renewed the feud, reporting on June 1 that Williams had been absent from his new classroom for three of the eight weeks since he assumed control of the school.³⁵

Some Northern teachers were disdainful of local black teachers who lacked much formal training. E. M. Mears, a white teacher of a freedmen’s school in Florence, reported “two freedmen teaching in the county near this place who cannot read well in

³⁴ Chas. C. Arms to C. W. Buckley, 4 Mar. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 36, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-2186] (emphasis in the original).

³⁵ Chas. C. Arms to C.W. Buckley, 4 Mar. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 36, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-2186]; Chas. C. Arms to Mr. C. W. Buckley, 18 Mar. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0210; Charles C. Arms to Mr. C. W. Buckley, 1 June 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0237.

McGuffey's Third Reader." He proposed that the local Bureau agent administer a test that would determine their fitness for teaching. "As badly as I want teachers to teach these people," Mears asserted, "let them be of use or let us have none at all."³⁶

While the teachers cited by Mears may have lacked enough education to teach, another black teacher lacked the necessary commitment. In November 1866, C. A. Tenge, the Freedmen's Bureau agent in Florence, reported that a freedman described only as "Gainer" had received rations and permission to open a school. However, Gainer made no further reports. Given that Tenge called Gainer "an adventurer" and that the would-be teacher disappeared from the record thereafter, it is possible that he had signed up to teach not for altruistic reasons, but in order to receive rations from the Bureau.³⁷

Local African Americans were not the only teachers in Alabama who were native to the South. White Southerners also joined the ranks of Alabama educators. Lewis McGraw, who was born in South Carolina, made teaching a family affair in Sparta, Alabama. His children Amanda and Thomas were both teachers in the town, and between them, the McGraw family operated three schools. Benjamin Hildreth, another South Carolina native but a long-time resident of Alabama, taught a school in Greenville with the assistance of Emma Clancy, a local white widow. After Hildreth quit teaching, Clancy remained in the profession, teaching alongside two Northern white AMA teachers. Indeed, Clancy was among the very few teachers who taught Alabama's

³⁶ E. M. Mears to Col. Callis, 14 May 1866, vol. 58, p. 171, Letters Received, ser. 112, Huntsville, Ala., Subasst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-2066].

³⁷ C. A. Tenge to Col. Callis, 6 Nov. 1866, vol. 59, p. 171, Letters Received, ser. 112, Huntsville, Ala., Subasst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-2034].

freedpeople for four or more years between 1865 and 1870.³⁸

In order to receive support from the Freedmen's Bureau or a Northern benevolent society, Southern white teachers had to prove their dedication to the cause of freedmen's education and demonstrate "Northern sympathies." When Lizzie Yates, a white woman in Pleasant Hill, applied to become a Bureau-supported teacher, she assured those reading her application that, "[a]lthough not a northerner either by birth or education," she was "amply competent to teach the young freedmen." With her "discipline and mode of instruction being deduced from Schools of a high order," Yates, a longtime teacher of white students, claimed to be adept at teaching Dallas County's freedpeople, so much so that "the parents of my pupils were well pleased."³⁹ Amanda Hood, a teacher in Louina, was known by the AMA school superintendent in LaFayette to be "an undoubted Union Woman" in spite of her Southern birth.⁴⁰ Although it is unclear whether D. K. Bennett of Columbus, Georgia, ever received a teaching position, his application asserted not only that he had fifteen years of experience as a teacher, but also that he was "solicitous for the education and welfare of the freedmen."⁴¹ William Cooper of Greenville sought the endorsement of a Union officer in his area before applying to become a teacher, and Mrs. Margaret Dumas was hired in Selma because, among other qualifications, she was "the

³⁸ Alabama Freedmen's Teachers Database. Other Southern white teachers of freedpeople in Alabama included Miss H. F. Treadwell and Mrs. L. C. Steward in Marion, Rev. James S. Jarrett in Greenville, Daniel Price in Livingston, Mary Ryan in North Port, and William Bayley in Pleasant Hill.

³⁹ Lizzie Yates to Lieut. Shorkley, 1 Nov. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1151.

⁴⁰ Elliot Whipple to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 29 May 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1086.

⁴¹ D. K. Bennett to "Chief Freedmens Bureau," 15 June 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0019.

daughter of a . . . Union man.”⁴²

Although Lizzie Yates seems to have been politically neutral, some Southern white teachers were not. In Tuscaloosa, Ellen Benton, a Northern white AMA teacher, informed the association that she had recently visited a sabbath school sponsored by the local Presbyterian Church. Most of its teachers, she reported, were Southern white women—although some were “originally from the north.” All were “ardent supporters of the ‘lost cause.’” Their political leanings, however, did not seem to interfere with their teaching and, according to Benton, had not for several years. The women had tried to carry on the sabbath school “under the reign of slavery,” but their efforts had been thwarted by local authorities. “[N]ow under the hated rule of the ‘Yankees,’” Benton remarked, “they are unmolested.” Indeed, the ladies were so committed to their work that they not only taught alongside an African-American teacher, but also came under the superintendency of an African-American man—a rarity in Alabama between 1865 and 1870. Their progressive spirit was, however, not without bounds. “One would think that such ladies would feel cordial and kind towards us,” Benton maintained, “but I do not think they do, certainly they do not manifest any cordiality.” While the women were willing to work with local Southerners, both white and black, their “lost cause” tendencies tinged their view of the invading army of teachers from the North.⁴³

Still, “lost cause” propensities could be misleading. When opposition from local whites drove one Demopolis teacher away, a Southern white man named William May

⁴² Wm. Cooper to Mr. Buckley, 14 Aug. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0437; Geo. Shorkley to C. W. Buckley, Esq., 21 June 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0901. In their applications, both Cooper and Dumas emphasized their loyalty to the Union.

⁴³ Ellen Benton to Rev. E. P. Smith, 26 Aug. 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 78.

stepped in to fill the position and keep the school open. C. S. Drake, the Freedmen's Bureau superintendent of education in Demopolis, described him as a teacher "of high moral character and fair ability" who taught the city's freedpeople "with commendable conscientiousness & zeal." Such dedication to educating former slaves came as a surprise to Drake, given that May had been a slaveholder. Nevertheless, Drake seemed genuinely impressed with May's work, so much so that he implored the Bureau to offer him a monthly salary of \$75. Drake even allowed May to hire two assistants and followed his recommendations for the positions: a white teacher and a black teacher who were both from the local area.⁴⁴

The teachers of Alabama's former slaves cited a variety of motivations. Some of them had taught black students in other places and desired to educate freedpeople once again. Such was the case for A. W. McCullough, a teacher sponsored by the Philadelphia Freedmen's Aid Commission who taught alongside his wife in Huntsville. McCullough had taught black children since 1866 before arriving in Alabama two years later and was "desirous of promoting the work still further." McCullough even acquired a "teachers professional certificate" to accompany his other credentials—a step that suggests a deep sense of commitment.⁴⁵

In May 1867, Ellen Benton traveled to Tuscaloosa from Hampton, Virginia, where she had taught in a freedmen's school since 1863. Benton's previous experience had given her a keen sense of how such schools should operate. Although valuable in

⁴⁴ C. S. Drake to Capt. Buckley, 2 Mar. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0493.

⁴⁵ A. W. McCullough to Rev. R. D. Harper, 2 Oct. 1868, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1264.

many respects, such insight could be a source of frustration in a setting where both money and teaching materials were scarce. Benton was thrilled to discover that her new students were “making more rapid progress” than her former students in Virginia, but she lamented that she lacked “those things that are sent so freely and abundantly to the schools in Virginia.” Benton evidently found ways to cope with the material challenges, for she became one of the less than 2 percent of teachers who taught in Alabama for four or more years between 1865 and 1870.⁴⁶

Other educators in Alabama also had previous teaching experience, although not necessarily in freedmen’s schools. Miss Wanzer, a Northern teacher who came to Alabama during the summer of 1867 under the auspices of the AMA, was described as “a teacher of long experience, and of fine character as a lady.” E. S. Grover, a Northern teacher in Calhoun County, had nearly two decades of experience in education and committed himself to teaching “as long as I am able to impart light and knowledge to the poor unlettered freed-people.” Thomas Whitley, who was also a veteran teacher, was surprised at the effort required to teach his pupils in Auburn, Alabama. “I have had to labour very hard,” he confessed, “more so than I ever labored with a white school.”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Loren Schweninger, “The American Missionary Association and Northern Philanthropy in Reconstruction Alabama,” *Alabama Historical Quarterly* 33 (Fall/Winter 1970): 129-156; Ellen Benton to Rev. Edw. P. Smith, 22 May 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 56; Ellen Benton to Rev. E. P. Smith, 29 July 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 70. On Benton’s work in Hampton, see Robert Francis Engs, *Freedom’s First Generation: Black Hampton, Virginia, 1861-1890* (1979; repr., New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 68. For Benton’s lengthy service in Alabama, see Alabama Freedmen’s Teachers Database (percentage calculated in relation to the 585 teachers known to have taught in Alabama).

⁴⁷ Edw’d P. Smith to C. W. Buckley, Esq., 21 May 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0893; E. S. Grover to Capt. Buckley, 30 Apr. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0577; Thos. H. Whitley to Mr. Buckley, 29 June 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1108.

The teachers of Alabama's freedpeople were motivated by more than a sense of duty or what one historian describes as "religious and humanitarian interest."⁴⁸ E. S. Grover's daughter, Harriet Bucks, was also an experienced teacher and considered herself qualified to teach "the higher branches of the English course[,] Embroidery, and Music." While Grover seemed motivated by duty to the freedpeople, his daughter cited different reasons. In her teaching application, which offered both her own services and those of her two sisters, she explained that they wanted the positions because "Father has a large family to support and we are anxious to assist him."⁴⁹

Indeed, among the reasons teachers cited for desiring to teach, need of an income was the most common. Although Charles Arms came to Tuscaloosa because he sympathized "with those who are striving to obtain an education & a profession in spite of pecuniary difficulties," he also had other goals. "A year's residence in Philadelphia in the prosecution of my medical studies caused such a reduction of my resources," Arms explained, that it "necessitated me to procure more means in order to accomplish my ends." At the same time, Arms worried that such honesty about his monetary motives might result in the rejection of his application. He assured the Freedmen's Bureau that he was "deeply in sympathy with this work" and intended to teach for at least an additional year. R. S. Tilly wanted to teach in order to save enough to obtain a college education. He soon found, however, that he could make more money elsewhere. In 1867, after teaching one year in Evergreen, Alabama, he closed his school to take a job at the local

⁴⁸ Henry Lee Swint, *The Northern Teacher in the South: 1862-1870* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1941), 35.

⁴⁹ Harriet R. Bucks to Capt. C. W. Buckley, 17 Aug. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0303.

revenue office.⁵⁰

Those educators for whom financial motives were uppermost were often disappointed. A position as a freedmen's teacher was anything but lucrative. Indeed, many teachers found their salary insufficient for basic needs, much less "wants." Mrs. S. S. Dupree had been "left in needy circumstances with several little children to support by her own labor." Although she was "a very estimable lady" and seemed to be successful in her work, she had difficulty making ends meet. The Freedmen's Bureau subassistant commissioner at Opelika asked "[i]f the Bureau could do anything for Mrs. D. besides selling her rations at govt price." Bryant Edmundson, a teacher in Bluffton, also reported that his income was inadequate to meet his expenses. For this reason, J. H. Caldwell, the local point of contact for the Freedmen's Bureau, asked that Edmundson's monthly salary be increased from \$50 to \$75.⁵¹

Even if a teacher deemed his or her pay adequate, it was often issued at irregular intervals, thus creating serious material need. Beginning in 1867 and continuing through the end of the decade, dozens of teachers reported that they had not been paid by their sponsoring organizations. The problem was not unique to Alabama. Jacqueline Jones has noted that "[t]he late 1860s and early 1870s marked a period of retrenchment, if not retreat, in the voluntary and government effort" to support black schools and their teachers. "Contributions dropped off," Jones writes, and "the Freedmen's Bureau

⁵⁰ Chas. C. Arms to Mr. C. W. Buckley, 22 June 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0246; R. S. Tilly to Mr. C. W. Buckley, 28 May 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0990.

⁵¹ R. T. Smith to Mr. R. D. Haper [*sic*], 7 Apr. 1868, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1315; J. H. Caldwell to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 31 May 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0393.

withered away.” One result was the withdrawal of many Northern missionary teachers—be it to better paying jobs or their Northern homes.⁵²

An examination of the crisis as it played out in Alabama reveals the severity of the financial drought the teachers experienced. One cause of diminished financial support was a decrease in the amount of tuition students paid. Miss Ryan, a teacher in Northport, and Thomas Whitley in Auburn both reported that they were not receiving the promised amounts from their pupils. The shortfall was no insignificant matter. Tuition was a critical, although unstable and unpredictable, form of funding that teachers often used to supplement their salaries or to pay for living expenses, including rent. When the students, whose parents were generally poor or even destitute, failed to pay, they created a financial predicament for their teachers. In some cases, these problems forced the Freedmen’s Bureau to consider supplementing a teacher’s income. This decision was a crucial step toward keeping teachers in the classroom, but it was problematic at a time when Bureau funding for education was drying up.⁵³

The funding shortage affected not only those teachers whose salaries were paid or supplemented by tuition charges. Between March 1867 and January 1869, a steady stream of complaints poured into Freedmen’s Bureau offices from teachers who had previously received, or believed they should receive, some measure of support from the Bureau. John Hart, M. B. Badger, J. T. Coleman, C. S. Drake, and Haseltine Eckols all

⁵² Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love*, 12.

⁵³ Chas. C. Arms to Mr. C. W. Buckley 30 Mar. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0225; Thos. H. Whitley to Mr. Buckley, 29 June 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1108. Whitley explained that what little money he had received from the freedpeople in months past, he had “appropriated to the paying [of] house rent, and for firewood.” Charles Arms asked the Freedmen’s Bureau to increase Miss Ryan’s salary to compensate for the tuition she was not receiving from her pupils.

asked for pay or back pay.⁵⁴ Bryant Edmundson, Jane Meriweather, John May, Oscar Waring, John Wiley, Charles Arms, Ellen Benton, J. F. Brown, E. S. Grover, E. S. Thompson, and W. G. Morris also joined the chorus reporting that they had not been paid for services rendered.⁵⁵

The list was staggering, but more staggering still was the news these teachers soon received. “By 1867 the bureau had exhausted all its funds for teachers’ salaries,” Jacqueline Jones explains, “and within two years the money earmarked for transportation and supplies was gone.”⁵⁶ The Freedmen’s Bureau was not alone in its financial

⁵⁴ Chas. C. Arms to Mr. C. W. Buckley 30 Mar. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0225; M. B. Badger to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 4 Dec. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0317; Ro. Christian to Col. C. W. Buckley, 14 May 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0391; J. T. Coleman to C. W. Buckley, 22 Nov. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0487; C. S. Drake to Capt. C. W. Buckley, 24 Oct. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0518; H. J. Eckols to Capt. Buckley, 22 July 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0541.

⁵⁵ For these examples and others, see B. Edmundson to Mag. Gen. Wager Swayne, 17 Dec. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0563; J. B. F. Hill to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 2 Sept. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0664; John M. May to Maj. Gen’l Swayne, 4 July 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0718; Jos. [F.] Travelli to Rev. C. W. Buckley 8 July 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1003; Henry C. Wiley to Major C. W. Buckley, 30 Mar. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1053; Chas. C. Arms to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 11 Jan. 1868, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1154; Ellen Benton to Mr. H. M. Bush, 29 Feb. 1868, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1162; J. F. Brown to Genl O. O. Howard, 7 Mar. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1172; E. S. Grover to Superintendent of Education, Bureau R, F, and A. L., 26 Dec. 1868, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1230; Geo. P. [Sherwood?] to R. D. Harper, 21 July 1868, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1325; [W?] G. Morris to Mr. Sears, 27 Jan. 1869, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1585; John D. Easter to Maj. Gen. Swayne, 12 Oct. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0556.

⁵⁶ Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love*, 92. According to George Bentley, historian of the Freedmen’s Bureau, funds for teachers’ salaries continued to be tight through November 1868, at which time the Bureau’s commissioner, General O. O. Howard, “arranged a way to make the Bureau’s rent money

dilemma. In April of that same year, the AMA also reported financial hardship. “On account of our large expenditures for our 450 teachers and an unexpected decrease in our receipts caused by the falling off of trade and prices,” wrote AMA executive Edward P. Smith, “we are constrained to ask the indulgence of our missionaries and teachers.” “How much of the payments now due can be delayed?” the AMA asked, and “How long?” The association even resorted to asking if some or all of a teacher’s salary could be loaned to the association at 7 percent for a period of up to six months.⁵⁷

In Montgomery, Mary Colton, who apparently had not received Smith’s notice, wrote to the AMA in July to express her frustration at not having been paid. Asserting that she was “treated unfairly” by a local superior, Colton seemed unaware that the AMA itself was in dire financial straits. Her irritation was understandable. Not only had she spent her “last \$40 for board,” but she was also facing the prospect of having to use “every cent” of her daughter’s salary. With nowhere to turn and not even enough money to send a telegram, Colton pleaded with the AMA to forward her back pay so that she might return to her home in Cleveland.⁵⁸

Although many teachers closed their schools for the summer, the financial crisis did not ease in their absence. By August 1867, the AMA was still experiencing financial woes. In order to relieve some of the pressure, the Freedmen’s Bureau paid the salaries of all AMA teachers in the state on the condition that by 1868 the AMA would resume its

available for paying salaries.” Northern aid societies that owned or leased school buildings could send the Bureau a monthly bill for rent that was equivalent to \$10 for each teacher in the school. The aid societies were to use that money to supplement the teachers’ salaries. Howard also announced that the Bureau was “about to give them the schoolhouses the Bureau had constructed or ‘repaired’ on land they owned,” which they could use “to realize a rental income.” See Bentley, *History of the Freedmen’s Bureau*, 173.

⁵⁷ Rev. Edw. P. Smith to Rev. J. Silsby, 25 April 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 51.

⁵⁸ Mary T. Colton to J. S. Talcott, 5 July 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 64.

payments.⁵⁹ The intervention, although generous, was one the Bureau could ill afford. In October, some teachers were notified that “no more salaries will be paid by [the] Govt.”⁶⁰ With state support for freedmen’s education not yet in place, those teachers who relied on either the AMA or the Freedmen’s Bureau found themselves with little or no income.

Although pay problems continued through 1868 and also appeared in 1869 and 1870, they were on a downward trend after 1867—a decrease that can probably be attributed to the establishment of a state-supported public school system. Alabama’s new state constitution, which was ratified in 1868, called for “[t]he common schools, and other educational institutions of the State” to be placed under the management of an elected board of education whose duty it was “to establish, throughout the State, in each township or other school-district which it may have created, one or more schools, at which all the children of the State between the ages of five and twenty-one years may attend free of charge.” Unlike those established in 1854, the new common schools would serve black children as well as white.⁶¹ Between 1868 and 1870, as the shift to the new public system took shape, no fewer than 124 freedmen’s schools reported that they were

⁵⁹ C. W. Buckley to Rev. Edw. P. Smith, [15?] Aug. 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 77.

⁶⁰ C. S. Drake to Captain C. W. Buckley, 14 Oct. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0515.

⁶¹ Alabama Constitution, 1868, in *The Federal and State Constitutions*, comp. Francis N. Thorpe, 7 vols. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1909), 1:148-150. The constitution provided that one-fifth of the state’s annual revenue “shall be devoted exclusively to the maintenance of public schools,” authorized the state legislature to “give power to the authorities of the school-districts to levy a poll-tax on the inhabitants of the district in aid of the general school-fund,” and required the legislature to “levy a specific annual tax upon all railroad, navigation, banking, and insurance corporations, and upon all insurance and foreign bank and exchange agencies, and upon the profits of foreign bank bills” that was to “be exclusively devoted to the maintenance of public schools.” The constitution did not mandate segregated schools, but the board of education passed a resolution in August 1868 that made it illegal “to unite in one school both colored and white children, unless it be by the unanimous consent of the parents and guardians of such children.” See *School Laws of the State of Alabama* (Montgomery: J. G. Stokes, 1870), 15, quoted in Kolchin, *First Freedom*, 93-95.

receiving either partial or total support from state and local school boards.⁶²

Exploring the ways in which teachers spent their salaries provides a glimpse into why they were so frantic to receive their pay and so frustrated when it was erratically dispensed. Although only a few teachers provided details regarding their expenditures, clues from their letters and reports help piece together a picture of the financial constraints they experienced. One pressing need for every teacher was lodging. Since most of the teachers were not members of the local community, lodging was usually secured in exchange for a monthly payment. Northern teachers Carrie Smith and Marietta Morrill, for example, each paid \$25 per month for room and board in Selma—half their monthly salaries.⁶³ In Tuscaloosa, Ellen Benton also earned \$50 per month for her services as a teacher, \$35 of which went to rent and board. So tight were Benton's funds that in May 1867 she requested a raise from the Freedmen's Bureau. "[L]iving is so very expensive here that I think I cannot remain without some advance of my salary," she wrote, "at least to sixty dollars a month." Benton's payment for room and board did not include laundry services, which meant that she was left "but a small amount" at the end of each month.⁶⁴

⁶² Alabama Freedmen's Teachers Database. For the development of the new public schools, see Kolchin, *First Freedom*, 96-99. According to Kolchin, the system was not fully operational until 1870.

⁶³ J. Silsby to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 11 May 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0880.

⁶⁴ Ellen L. Benton to Mr. C. W. Buckley, 22 May 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0285. The parlor in Benton's boarding house also served as her classroom. In 1868, she complained to the Freedmen's Bureau that "there are no schoolhouses here that can be rented for a colored school." After searching in vain and being refused a building that was available for rent, Benton ultimately taught her school in "the parlor of a Union Lady's house, with whom I also board." See Ellen Benton to Mr. H. M. Bush, 29 Feb. 1868, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1162. The difficulty did not deter Benton, who had been teaching in the state since the previous year. As late as 1870, she was still teaching Alabama's freedpeople, although at some point she did transfer to Selma, perhaps because of continued difficulties in Tuscaloosa. See Alabama Freedmen's Teachers Database.

Perhaps more frustrating was the limited range of available living quarters. Since educating the freedpeople met with hostility in many parts of Alabama, the number of landlords willing to rent to freedmen's teachers was small. Charles and Emma Adams, who taught in Greenville, complained that they "endured the hotel" before finally finding a newlywed couple willing to house them. "As near as I can learn," Charles explained, "the white folks generally have leagued together to prevent our finding board among them, thus to drive us from town, if they could." Suggesting that such problems were the least of their worries, he closed his missive by writing, "Wish they had no more power for evil than that."⁶⁵

Maria Hopson's landlady was harassed and threatened by others in Talladega. Since Hopson complained of ostracism by the white community during her first year in Alabama, it can be assumed that her lodging options were anything but bountiful. These attempts to thwart Hopson's and the Adamses' ability to choose from a larger variety of lodgings suggests that in places where black schools were opposed by local whites, teachers may have been forced to endure whatever living quarters were available at whatever prices could be had. Housing was therefore high on a teacher's list of priorities. Charles Adams, for example, confessed that although he was excited about the new school building in the town, he was "*very anxious*" for the Freedmen's Bureau to assist him in having a home built for the city's teachers.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Chas. H. Adams to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 20 Mar. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0213. On the social ostracism that resulted in the teachers experiencing difficulty finding lodging, see below, Chapter 3.

⁶⁶ Maria C. Hopson to Gen Swain [*sic*], 1 Mar. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 36, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-2184]; Chas. H. Adams to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 20 May 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0234 (emphasis in the original). The full extent of Hopson's ostracism is discussed below, in Chapter 3.

By October 1866, Hopson's lodging problem was resolved. For \$350 a year, she and other freedmen's teachers could stay in Mrs. Warwick's house, which became the Talladega teachers' home, known simply as "the 'Home.'" Hopson was anxious for the Freedmen's Bureau to help them secure their "Home" with all its "comforts and privileges" for an additional year. Further north in Athens, Mary Wells was equally desperate to retain her living quarters. In November 1867, General Wager Swayne, the Freedmen's Bureau assistant commissioner in Alabama, ordered that the house where Wells and her fellow teachers kept both their living quarters and their school be restored to its ex-Confederate owner. Wells found Swayne's order alarming, not only because it meant that "the school must be disbanded," but also because its four teachers—"all from Yankee Land"—would be unable to find other lodgings in the local white community.⁶⁷

One teacher left clues as to other living expenses that might be incurred. Mrs. S. J. Peterson in Montgomery provided the AMA with a detailed account of her daily expenditures during the month of January 1868. On New Years Day, Peterson bought milk, potatoes, meal, sugar, flour, lard, butter, eggs, and meat—purchases that cost a total of \$30.50. The next day, she made another trip to the market, this time purchasing for \$8.85 bowls, a platter, lettuce, a pail, a cake cutter, and irons. On January 4, Peterson bought additional groceries: milk, potatoes, butter, eggs, sugar, and meat. After adding turnips and beets to the order, the total came to \$10.76. Peterson made thirteen additional trips to the market that month, purchasing anything from a clothesline and a washboard to oysters. When Peterson figured in a servant's wages, total expenditures for the month

⁶⁷ C. M. [*sic*] Hopson to Gen'l Swayne, 27 May 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0629; Mary F. Wells to Gen'l O. O. Howard, 30 Nov. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1140 (emphasis in the original).

amounted to \$265.54.⁶⁸

Although Peterson's expenditures were for "an average of 10 persons," perhaps the residents of a teachers' home, her account is useful for estimating what other teachers spent on groceries and household goods. In order to purchase the essentials for a month's meals, Peterson paid \$30.50—an average of \$3.05 per person. Even on her least-costly trip to the market, she spent \$1.65 for a mere three items. Considering that freedmen's teachers in Alabama were paid an average of \$53.21 per month for men and \$40.94 per month for women, one begins to understand how quickly living expenses added up, leaving a teacher with nothing for unexpected expenditures. Certainly no teacher could afford to miss a paycheck, much less for extended periods of time. Although not all teachers lived in areas where local whites ostracized them for their connection to the education of ex-slaves, many did, a circumstance that made it unlikely they could turn to the local community for help in time of need.

Financial hardship may have played a significant role in the high rate of turnover among freedmen's teachers in Alabama. Between 1865 and 1870, almost three-quarters of the teachers taught for only one year or less. (See Table 1.3.) In 1867, when the fiscal woes of the Freedmen's Bureau and the AMA became serious, at least 144 teachers taught for only that one year. This figure was more than four times higher than the number of one-year teachers in 1866 and represented the highest turnover of any year between 1865 and 1870.⁶⁹ Although the Freedmen's Bureau, the AMA, and other freedmen's aid societies hoped to keep the schools open longer by cutting back on

⁶⁸ Mrs. Peterson's Acct, [Jan. 1868], AMA, reel 1, no. 119.

⁶⁹ Alabama Freedmen's Teachers Database.

teachers' salaries, the policy instead drove teachers from the classroom. Indeed, there was a never-ending shortage of teachers. In 1867, when funding for freedmen's schools began to wane across the South, to lose a teacher could mean that his or her school would be closed indefinitely.

Table 1.3. Number of Years Teachers Worked, 1865-1870

Total Years Taught	Number of Teachers	Percentage of Total
1	432	74.5
2	116	20.0
3	25	4.3
4	8	1.4
5	1	0.2
6	1	0.2

Source: Alabama's Freedmen's Teachers Database. Percentages calculated in relation to the total number of known teachers, 585.

Still, a quarter of the teachers in Alabama stayed on to teach for two years or more.⁷⁰ Such a significant percentage suggests that a sizable number were motivated by more than money. Of the other motivations teachers cited, a religious-based desire to elevate the freedpeople was among the most prominent. Between 1865 and 1870, the AMA sponsored at least 116 missionary teachers in the state, some of whom also received support from other organizations, such as the Western Freedmen's Aid Commission. The African Methodist Episcopal Church, Baptists, Methodists, and

⁷⁰ Calculated from Alabama Freedmen's Teachers Database. Length of service is available for 579 of the 585 teachers in the database.

Presbyterians all maintained a presence in the state, as did Episcopalians, Quakers, and Congregationalists, the latter of whom were heavily, although not exclusively, associated with the AMA.⁷¹ Some teachers who cited religious motivations espoused a lofty view of their work. Elliot Whipple, for example, considered his mission divinely appointed. “[A]n influence for good is exerted on the minds of these people such as no race of men ever had an opportunity to exert since the world began,” Whipple declared, “because the freedmen, regarding us as their deliverers from the horrors of slavery look upon us as the very messengers of God, sent in answer to their secret prayers offered up through long years of suffering.”⁷²

Between 1865 and 1870, only ten teachers remained in the job for four or more years. One was black, while the other nine were white. At least seven were white Northerners. Two of them were men—the Reverend John Silsby and Joseph Sears, both of whom taught in Selma. Mary Wells, Maria Hopson, Ellen Benton, Eliza Ethridge, and Pheebe Beebe accounted for the other five white Northerners; Beebe and Hopson both taught in Talladega, while the others taught in Athens, Tuscaloosa, and Mobile, respectively. Two of the long-term teachers were from the South: Emma Clancy, a white woman who taught in Greenville, and John Wiley, a freedman who taught in Troy. For Wiley, the approval of local whites, including his former master’s son, seems to have

⁷¹ Alabama Freedmen’s Teachers Database.

⁷² Elliot Whipple to Rev. E. P. Smith, 17 June 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 58. Such views were common among the Northern missionary teachers. Historian Heather Andrea Williams has shown that teachers from the AMA could be, and were often encouraged to be, paternalistic toward the freedpeople. A desire to “bring about the ‘intellectual and moral improvement of the colored people,’” Williams argues, “was deeply embedded in a philosophy of Northern white supremacy, and, as such, fit well with the AMA’s goal in entering the educational field.” The AMA “wanted to take the freedpeople ‘by the hand, to guide, counsel and instruct them in their new life, protect them from the abuses of the wicked, and direct their energies so as to make them useful to themselves, their family and their country.’” See Williams, *Self-Taught*, 89.

been imperative. The geographical origins of the tenth long-term teacher, Elizabeth Thompson, who taught in Columbiana, are not known.⁷³

Teaching in a town or a school with other teachers or having the option to move to another town or school seems to have also been instrumental in keeping Alabama's teachers in the field. Each of the Northerners who remained for four or more years taught or eventually taught in schools with other teachers, while six of the long-term teachers—all but one of them Northerners—taught in more than one town or school. This pattern suggests that the presence of a fellow teacher to help shoulder the emotional toll of teaching in what was often hostile territory was crucial. Indeed, three of the ten long-term teachers, all of them white women, reported having been ostracized, slandered, or threatened during their time in the state, while another's house was destroyed by fire.⁷⁴

Sponsorship by a Northern freedmen's aid society also contributed to longevity of service. Of the ten teachers who remained in Alabama for four or more years, only two, John Wiley and Elizabeth Thompson, did not report support by a Northern society. Each of the other eight—Mary Wells, Maria Hopson, Emma Clancy, Ellen Benton, Eliza Ethridge, Phebe Beebe, John Silsby, and Joseph Sears—received assistance from the AMA during or throughout the period between 1865 and 1870. One of the ten long-term teachers reported that she used her own funds to partially support her school, one received aid from the Freedmen's Bureau, one was partially supported by the freedpeople

⁷³ Alabama Freedmen's Teachers Database. For local whites' approval of Wiley, including Wiley's former master's son, see A. N. Worthy to Maj. Gen. Swayne, 20 June 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0174; Henry C. Wiley to Major C. W. Buckley, 30 Mar. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1053.

⁷⁴ Alabama Freedmen's Teachers Database. The instances of ostracism, threats, and violence are discussed and documented in Chapter 3, below.

in her town, one was sponsored for a time by the Western Freedmen's Aid Commission, and another was assisted by the Cleveland Freedmen's Union Commission.⁷⁵

Whether they taught only briefly or for multiple years, the former slaves who became teachers regularly expressed a desire to help fellow freedpeople as their principal motive. William Turner, who taught in Wetumpka, wanted to educate the youths of his community so that they might be better citizens. His application to the Freedmen's Bureau emphasized that educating the freedpeople would not be an easy task, but "as the rough stone passing through the hands of the artist." Concerned about black children who were "roaming about [the] streets in mischief," Turner proposed that the Bureau help him open a school so that the town's freedpeople, through education, "may come out to be a shining ornament to the age in which we live."⁷⁶

In many respects, Turner's words echoed the sentiments of the Northern white missionaries. Whether the Northerners' motives for educating the freedpeople stemmed from a sense of racial superiority or paternalism is not always clear. However, Turner's record suggests that his stated reasons for teaching were genuine. He taught in Alabama for at least three years, making him yet another member of the minuscule percentage that taught for more than two years.⁷⁷ He also served on more than one occasion as an advocate for freedmen in Wetumpka who found themselves facing lengthy jail sentences after being falsely arrested or convicted of minor charges. Turner himself was arrested on trumped-up charges with a group of other freedmen as they left a church gathering

⁷⁵ Alabama Freedmen's Teachers Database.

⁷⁶ William Turner to Rev. T. D. Williams, 16 Aug. 1865, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1806].

⁷⁷ Alabama Freedmen's Teachers Database.

after dark in November 1865.⁷⁸ So dedicated was Turner to the cause of justice that in 1866 he wrote to Holland H. Thompson, who had been a member of Alabama's 1865 Colored Convention and would later become one of the first black members of the state House of Representatives, to complain of the unjust acquittal of a white man for savagely beating a freedman.⁷⁹ Between his role as an advocate for freedpeople in Wetumpka and the three years he served as a teacher there, Turner's zeal seems to have derived not from any sense of superiority, but from a deep desire to improve the lives of the former slaves.

External circumstances could sometimes persuade even dedicated teachers to leave the profession—or at least the state. Elliot Whipple, a Northern teacher in Lafayette, was one example. In May 1867, when Whipple, a Vermont native and graduate of Dartmouth College, first arrived, he seemed enthusiastic not only in his duties as a teacher, but also in his service to the surrounding community. During his first few weeks, he secured a schoolhouse and obtained books for his more than one hundred pupils, and also requested books for a nearby teacher who was starting a school. His zeal inside the classroom spread to the world outside it. In his off-duty hours, Whipple established a temperance society and held political meetings for both white and black

⁷⁸ William Turner to Gen. Wager Swayne, 17 Nov. 1865, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1653].

⁷⁹ William Turner to Honorable H. Thompson, 15 June 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1803]. Thompson, who was born into slavery near Montgomery, was literate prior to emancipation. He attended Alabama's 1865 Colored Convention and two years later became a speaker for the Republican Congressional Committee, a delegate to the Republican state convention, and a member of the party's state executive committee. Thompson held several elected offices during Reconstruction, including member of the Alabama House of Representatives, 1868-1872, city councilman in Montgomery, 1869-1877, and city school board member, 1870-1873. Himself a teacher of ex-slaves, Thompson was not only an advocate of freedpeople's education, but "was instrumental in establishing [Montgomery's] system of public education." See Eric Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders during Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 212. For Thompson's work as a sabbath school teacher in Montgomery, see Holland Thompson to Mr. Smith, 30 Sept. 1868, and Holland Thompson to Rev. Edw. P. Smith, 9 Oct. 1868, AMA, microfilm, reel 1, no. 163 and no. 167.

citizens. Like Turner in Wetumpka, Whipple intervened on behalf of local freedmen he believed had been falsely jailed and protested the acquittal of a white man who murdered a black man. Whipple also applied for aid to needy freedpeople. As a young teacher who believed he was one of the “God-sent deliverers” to the freedpeople of the South, Whipple seemed to be in his element. And as an outspoken “Radical Republican,” his decision to teach the freedpeople of Lafayette seemed a natural fit for a man of his personality, political persuasion, and talents.⁸⁰

Less than three months after Whipple began his work in Lafayette, however, he resigned. He had been offered a position at Wheaton College in Illinois and was required to give immediate notice of acceptance in order to move his family and make arrangements for the academic term that was to start in just twelve days. The offer must have seemed the opportunity of a lifetime for the twenty-five-year-old teacher and family man. Still, why would a teacher who seemed so dedicated to the freedpeople of Lafayette leave almost as suddenly as he came? Whipple’s correspondence with the Freedmen’s Bureau provides clues to his hasty departure. Within a month of his arrival, Whipple became a target of whites in Lafayette. Whipple reported in June that local whites had threatened his life and on at least two occasions had attempted to poison him. Such hostility must have been magnified by the increase of violence across the state in mid-1867 as Congressional Reconstruction replaced the milder Reconstruction that President Andrew Johnson had overseen. Viewed in this light, Whipple’s decision to leave

⁸⁰ “Personal Notes,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 4 (July 1893-June 1894): 463; Elliot Whipple to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 29 May 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1086; Elliot Whipple to Rev. E. P. Smith, 17 June 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 58; Elliot Whipple to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 15 June 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1093.

Lafayette fewer than ninety days after his arrival is less surprising. Regardless of his commitment to the work at hand, Whipple perhaps could not justify continuing in it at the risk of his life.⁸¹

The teachers of Alabama's freedpeople were as diverse as their reasons for teaching. Some called New England home, but teachers from the Midwest were more numerous. Also in the mix were white Southerners, some of them native Alabamians. Some female teachers were unmarried, but others were widows or women who were married even as they worked as teachers—a rarity in a society in which middle-class married women were often expected not to engage in paid employment outside the home. They were joined by male teachers, among them single men, married men, and men with families. Among Alabama's educators were both white and black teachers. Some of the latter had been free before the Civil War, while for others, freedom was still fresh and new. A small number of European immigrants also joined the ranks of those who taught freedpeople in the state.

Freedmen's teachers have been portrayed as motivated by "religious and humanitarian interest and abolitionist experience, desire for improvement of financial status, search for health, previous vocational connections, and love of adventure."⁸²

Some historians have hailed them as "soldiers of light and love" or a "modern Gideon's

⁸¹ Elliot Whipple to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 17 Aug. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1130; Elliot Whipple to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 15 June 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1093. On the increase in violence, see C. W. Buckley to Rev. E. P. Smith, 17 May 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 54.

⁸² Swint, *Northern Teacher in the South*, 56.

band.”⁸³ While some teachers in Alabama, especially those who taught the longest, fit such descriptions, others were widows looking for a way to feed their children or young men just out of college who hoped to put their education to use while also fulfilling religious or political goals. Some had been slaves just a few years earlier and wanted to pass along their learning to others who shared their experience of bondage, their liberation, and their quest for enlightenment. One was a black man who had acquired literacy while working as a boot-black at a local college. Perhaps for religious reasons or because they had an effective support network, a small handful of teachers remained in the job for four or more years, and at least one of them (Mary Wells) dedicated the remainder of her life to educating the freedpeople. Whatever the teachers’ origins, their prior experience and their motivation had to sustain them through the rigors of educating the freedpeople, which was no easy task during the early years of Reconstruction.

⁸³ Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love*; Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 452.

Chapter 2

In the Classroom

“FITZ & FRAZER, SLAVE BROKERS.” Although the Montgomery, Alabama, building had been painted three years earlier, by October 1868 the “bold, black letters” had begun to show through. The structure, which was now a school for black children, stood as a testament to how much had changed since the end of the Civil War. “A great thing it is for a nation to get permission of itself to blur out its infamy as we have done,” exclaimed one missionary. Thanks to General James H. Wilson’s Union cavalry, which had disbanded the slave firm and made the building available for “legitimate business,” people to whom education had once been forbidden now used “[b]ooks, maps, and the ‘higher branches’” in the very space where they and other ex-slaves had once stood on the auction block.¹

A teacher did not have to work in a former slave pen to be reminded of the sweeping changes emancipation had brought to Alabama. When teachers entered their classrooms, they encountered some of the state’s 435,080 men, women, and children who until recently had been chattel slaves. For the freedpeople, education provided a means of achieving autonomy, independence, and upward mobility. Although the teachers often lacked adequate educational materials, guidance, and financial support, they made a way where there otherwise might have been none. Despite inadequate funding, dilapidated

¹ “The Old Rebellion,” *American Missionary* 12 (October 1868): 229. The slave pen was located at or near the intersection of Dexter Avenue (then Market Street) and S. Decatur Street (see Figure 2.1). In 1879, the site was purchased by “a breakaway segment of the congregation of the ‘Brick-a-Day’ First Baptist Church” that built a church between 1883 and 1889 and later christened it Second Colored Baptist Church. The church, renamed “Dexter Avenue Baptist Church,” would be the first preaching assignment of Martin Luther King, Jr. See “History,” Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, accessed July 1, 2016, <http://www.dexterkingmemorial.org/about/history/>.

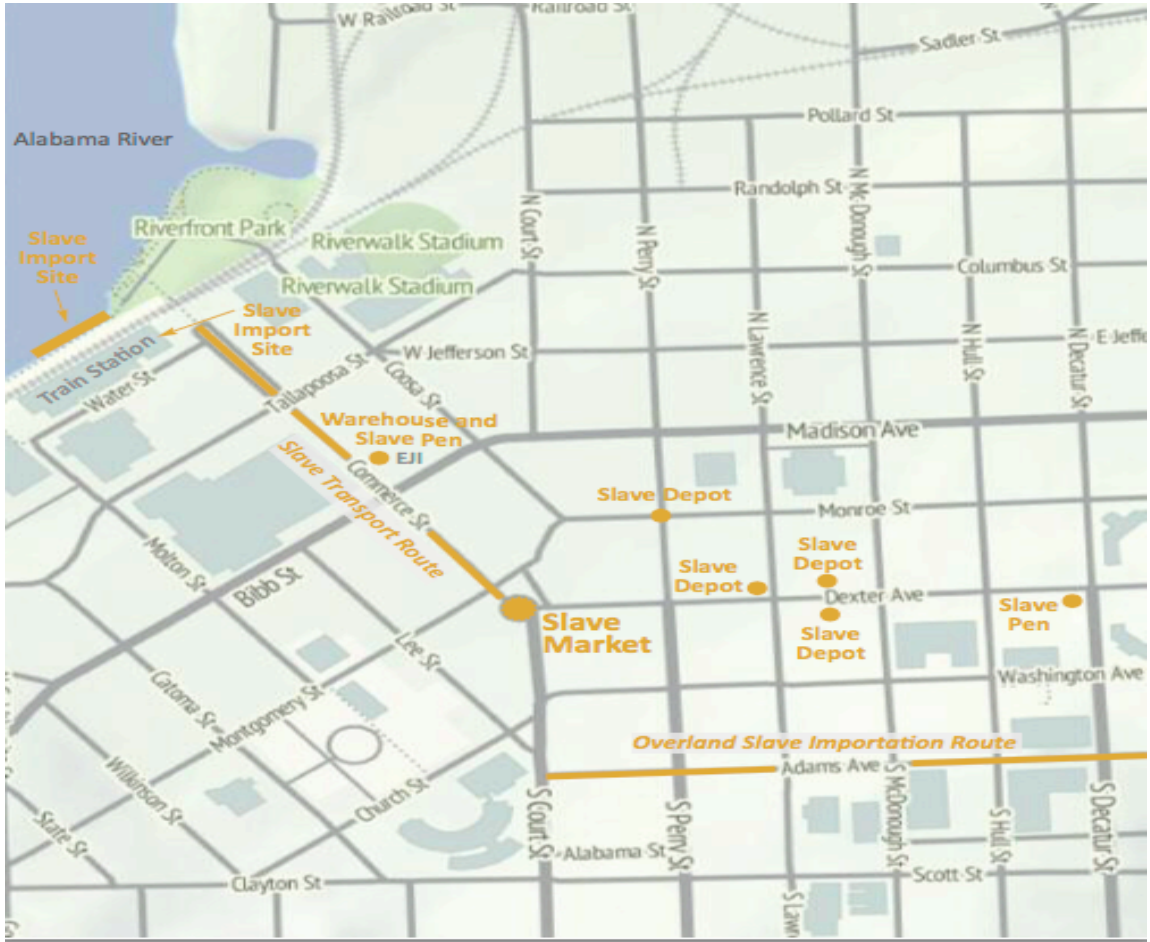


Figure 2.1. Downtown Montgomery, Alabama, ca. 1850. Equal Justice Initiative, *Slavery in America: The Montgomery Slave Trade* (Montgomery, AL: Equal Justice Initiative, 2013), 9.

structures, and overcrowded classrooms, these men and women built a network of schools that ultimately became the foundation of a public school system that served both black and white students.²

Although historians have long understood the significance of education during the transition from slavery to freedom, relatively little is known about what happened inside the classroom of the schools for Alabama’s ex-slaves. Formal instruction was the

² For the state’s slave population, see U.S. Department of the Interior, *Population of the United States in 1860, Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census*, by Joseph C. G. Kennedy (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1864), 7.

teachers' chief responsibility, but in order to open a school and keep it running, they often had to be accountants, property managers, politicians, and problem solvers as well. In Alabama, the teachers of black schools worked within an unstable educational system and were able to reach only a small percentage of the state's freedpeople. To the extent that they did so, their schools succeeded only because the teachers overcame myriad obstacles, endured daunting workloads, and juggled auxiliary tasks that kept their doors open during the pioneer phase of education for ex-slaves.

During the first years of freedpeople's education in Alabama, schools were conducted wherever a building could be had.³ In Athens, Mary Wells requested funds for a schoolhouse that would enable her to escape the "dilapidated hotel" in which she conducted her four-grade school. Another teacher later described the hotel as having "wide-open cracks, through which pea-shooters and pop-guns were often introduced to the great discomfort both of the teachers and pupils." Ellen Benton taught her Tuscaloosa classes in "the parlor of a Union lady's house" when no other structure could be secured. J. Silsby taught in Mobile's Medical College until he moved to Selma in 1866, and there his school occupied a series of buildings, including a carpenter's shop, a hotel, the house of a local family, and a black church with such inadequate flooring that during the winter the teachers "[stood] on benches 'to protect their feet from the cold.'" Several teachers held their classes in church buildings, many of which housed black congregations. Methodist congregations in Stevenson, Montgomery, and Union Springs

³ Alabama's schools were not unique in this regard. Historian Jacqueline Jones writes that Georgia's teachers often "had to settle for accommodations in the Freedmen's Hospital, church basements, and the mission home." Among the other structures used in Georgia were "a Confederate commissary transplanted from Chattanooga, Tennessee, . . . deserted mansions, cotton gin buildings, and old slave 'praise houses,'" as well as "a cotton house where slaves had been whipped." See Jacqueline Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 119-120.

allowed teachers to use their churches for educational purposes. Methodist churches in Mobile and Florence also served as schoolhouses for ex-slaves, as did St. Peter's Church in Mobile and the Presbyterian church in Tuscaloosa.⁴

Some teachers were fortunate enough to have a dedicated building for their schools. When Allen Williams, a black teacher in Tuscaloosa, could not "procure a room," he used \$60 of his own funds to build a log house in which to hold classes. Local whites in LaFayette helped freedpeople in their town purchase the Blanchard Male Academy for \$200, while the Freedmen's Bureau promised to provide \$300 for repairs "if the A.M.A. and the freedmen will do their part." At Jones Cross Roads, an "old Negro man" contributed more than \$40 to buy the lumber and nails needed to construct a school in a town where, so the teacher claimed, there would otherwise have been none. In 1867, the Freedmen's Bureau and the American Missionary Association combined resources to purchase the Talladega Baptist Male High School, which had been built by

⁴ Mary F. Wells to Geo. Edw'd P. Smith, 18 Feb. 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 34; "Trinity School, Athens, Ala.; By a Teacher after an Experience There of Fifteen Years," *American Missionary* 58 (Dec. 1904): 328; E. L. Benton to Mr. H. M. Bush, 29 Feb. 1868, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1162; J. Silsby to Rev. George Whipple, 2 Dec. 1865, AMA, reel 1, no. 6; H. R. Starkweather to Dr. E. [Hinnlesey?], 1 Jan. 1869, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1563; J. Silsby to Rev. E. P. Smith, 26 Mar. 1866, AMA, reel 1, no. 11; Tho. Pullem to C. Cadle, Jr., 21 July 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Subasst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1749]; Sam S. Gardner to Mr. Buckley, 30 Aug. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 36, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-2183]; Report of Oscar M. Waring, [2? Nov. 1866], vol. 59, p. 29, Letters Received, ser. 112, Huntsville, Ala., Subasst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-2035]; L. Kimball to Col. Edwin Beecher, 1 Feb. 1870, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1766; E. L. Benton to Rev. E. P. Smith, 26 Aug. 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 78. In Selma, Silsby did not teach in an actual schoolhouse until the fall of 1868, when Jabez Burrell, a wealthy abolitionist who had helped found Oberlin College, donated \$10,000 to the AMA for a school in the town. The AMA used most of that donation to build a school that was named for Burrell. See Joe M. Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction: The American Missionary Association and Southern Blacks, 1861-1890* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 101; Robert G. Sherer, *Subordination or Liberation? The Development and Conflicting Theories of Black Education in Nineteenth Century Alabama* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1977), 124-125. For Burrell's biography, see "Burrell-King House," Facility Detail, Oberlin College & Conservatory, accessed Feb. 6, 2017, <http://new.oberlin.edu/arts-and-sciences/facilities/detail.dot?id=30303&buildingId=9375>.

slaves.⁵

The few existing images of Alabama's earliest schools for ex-slaves reveal that they could be primitive. A photograph of William Hooper Council's school in Averyville, for example, shows a rough-hewn, windowless, log cabin with a sloping roof (see Figure 2.2). Without windows to provide natural light, the students must have struggled to read. The large number of children lined up behind the two adults who were presumably their teachers meant that the schoolhouse was not only overcrowded, but also that the teachers were probably overwhelmed by the high student-teacher ratio.

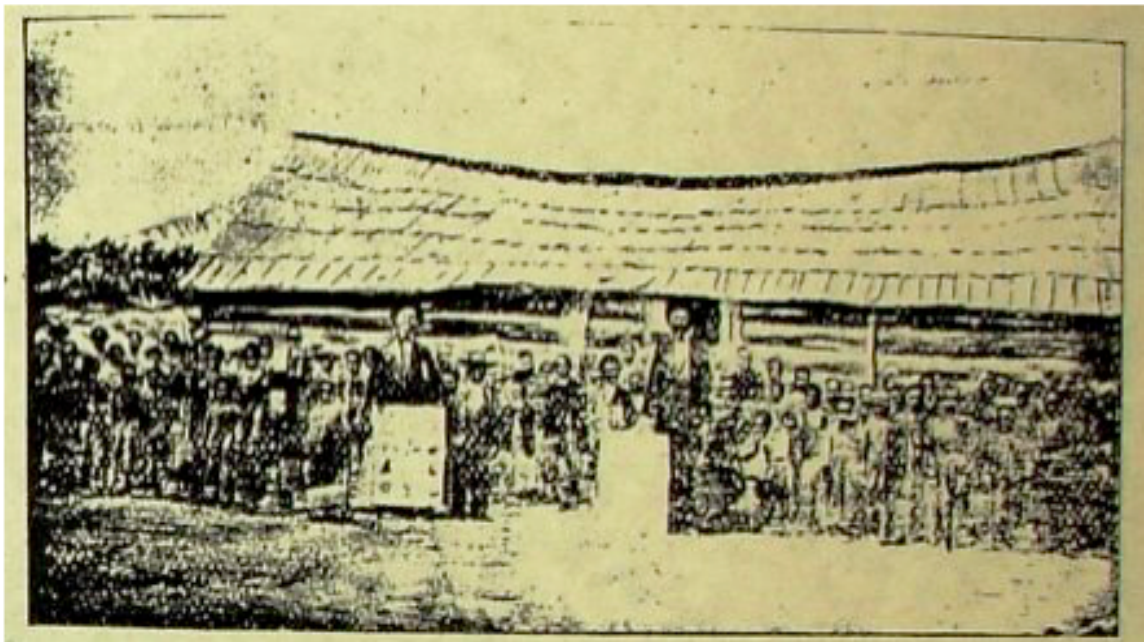


Figure 2.2. William Hooper Council's school in Averyville, Alabama, 1865-1868. Courtesy of University Archives, Alabama A&M University, Normal, AL.

⁵ Wm. H. H. Peck to Major O. D. Kinsman, 26 May 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0078; Elliot Whipple to Rev. E. P. Smith, 5 Aug. 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 75; W. T. Hubbard to Col. Edwin Beecher, 1 Jan. 1870, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1737. For the purchase of the Talladega school, see Sherer, *Subordination or Liberation*, 134-135. For more on African Americans and whites who assisted freedpeople in either procuring or building a schoolhouse, see Chapter 3, below.

Some teachers provided written descriptions of the buildings in which they taught. In Huntsville, where he taught after leaving Averyville, William Hooper Councilll rented a building “18 ft long, 18 ft wide, and 6 feet high” for the first three months of 1870, then erected a schoolhouse on land “purchased by the colored people and deeded to the township trustees ‘for the use of a free school for colored children forever.’” The new school, which was made of oak, chestnut, and poplar, was “20 ft wide, 30 ft long and 10 ft high” and had “six windows, three on each side, with a large door in the north end of the house” and “12 lights each 10 x 12 inches.” With its additional 276 square feet, the new structure could accommodate more students than the previous building. H. L. Wheeler reported that a Mrs. Shavers, whose old school building in Macon County was “20 x 22 ft,” would soon occupy a new one that measured “20 x 46 feet and cost 350\$.” Miss E. S. Thompson’s schoolhouse in Columbiana was a “40 feet long 20 wide frame work [with] 2 Brick Chimneys.”⁶

Inside their classrooms, teachers used whatever furniture could be had. Although Charles and Emma Adams’s school in Greenville was newly constructed, it was furnished only with benches. Mary Wells in Athens reported that the receipt of desks for just one of her four classrooms “adds much to the comfort and fine appearance of the

⁶ Wm. Councilll to Col. Edwin Beecher, 10 May 1870, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1718; H. L. Wheeler to Col. Edwin Beecher, 6 May 1870, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1820; Miss E. S. Thompson to Mr. Beecher, 7 May 1870, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1710. Councilll’s letter was one among several written in response to a Freedmen’s Bureau request for physical descriptions of their schoolhouses. For examples of other responses, see Wm. P. Miller to Col. E. Beecher, 8 Mar. 1870, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1773; J. B. Healy to Colonel, 9 May 1870, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1755. Councilll was a pupil in a Stevenson, Alabama, freedpeople’s school before becoming a teacher in nearby Averyville and, later, in Huntsville. See Eddie E. Davis, Jr., *William Hooper Councilll: The Greatest Negro the Race Ever Produced* (Huntsville, AL: Presh4wrod Publishing, 2013), chap. 2.

pupils” and “greatly facilitated” their work. Because the seats in Charles Arms’s Tuscaloosa school belonged to a local black church, he feared they were “liable to be taken away at any time.” When Arms learned that the congregants “contemplated at one time the removal of their church,” he informed the Freedmen’s Bureau of the “urgent necessity of *seats with desks*” and asked if it could provide them. His scholars were studying a variety of subjects from grammar to geography, Arms reported, and “over 40 write with a pen.” But in the absence of desks with seats, they had to write “upon a single desk rudely improvised consisting of a single board upon an inclined plane,” which was “awkward & inconvenient” for using “both slate & book at the same time.” Arms’s request was granted one month later, and a local freedman agreed to make the desks.⁷

The small size of many schools and the fact that the students were of all ages and sizes made it difficult to select and arrange appropriate desks even when funds permitted their purchase. Teachers frequently complained that their schools were so cramped that they had to turn away prospective students. While the desired size of desks depended on the layout of the classroom and the age of the pupils, few freedpeople's schools were graded and students often included not only children between the ages of six and sixteen, but also adults, making it nearly impossible to provide desks suited to all the students. Indeed, between March 1866 and June 1870, an average of one in seven students in Alabama's schools for ex-slaves was over the age of sixteen, and some were well into

⁷ C. H. Adams to C. W. Buckley, 21 June 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0244; M. F. Wells to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 28 Nov. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0181; Chas. C. Arms to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 6 Feb. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0193 (emphasis in the original); Chas. C. Arms to C.W. Buckley, 4 Mar. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 36, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-2186].

middle age.⁸ “In the first flush of freedom,” writes historian Joe Richardson, “grandparents and grandchildren surged to the crude schoolhouses to secure the magic of reading and writing.”⁹ In Union Springs, for example, William Gilbert reported that his pupils’ ages ranged from four to forty-seven. George Mutch’s students in Opelika were as young as five and as old as twenty-four. W. S. Beckley in Decatur and J. B. Healy in Girard both had students over the age of eighteen in their schools. The task of selecting desks that could accommodate students of such varied sizes and also permit the maximum possible attendance proved difficult.¹⁰

Desk makers sometimes helped teachers devise a configuration that would allow for maximum attendance in a confined space. When Henry Bush ordered desks for his Montgomery school, George and C. W. Sherwood used the size of the school and the type of desks Bush was ordering to suggest options for room configuration (see figure 2.3). “The 3 rooms 24 x 32 will seat nicely 64 pupils,” the Sherwoods wrote, with “3 1/2

⁸ Alabama Freedmen’s Schools Monthly Attendance Database. This database was created using the more than 1,000 teachers’ monthly reports submitted to the Freedmen’s Bureau between March 1866 and June 1870. It includes the location of schools, the date of the reports, the number of male and female students, and the number of pupils over and under the age of sixteen. Although the reports were usually properly completed, teachers sometimes omitted most of the requested information and those reports were not included. See Records of the Superintendent of Education for the State of Alabama, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1870, M810, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), roll 6 (Monthly Reports of Teachers, March 1866-February 1869) and roll 7 (Monthly Reports of Teachers March 1869 to June 1870).

⁹ Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction*, 37. The age range diminished over time. “By the mid-1860s,” explains Ronald Butchart, “adults increasingly had to attend night school so that they could work during the daytime, and the black day school began to look more like traditional schools, filled with school-age children.” See Ronald E. Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861-1876* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 7.

¹⁰ W. P. M. Gilbert to Rev. E. P. Smith, 16 July 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 65; George Mutch, Teacher’s Monthly School Report for June 1866, Monthly Reports of Teachers, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 6, frame 0063; W. S. Beckley, Teacher’s Monthly School Report for Jan. 1869, Monthly Reports of Teachers, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 6, frame 1570; J. B. Healy, Teacher’s Monthly School Report for June 1867, Monthly Reports of Teachers, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 6, frame 1130.

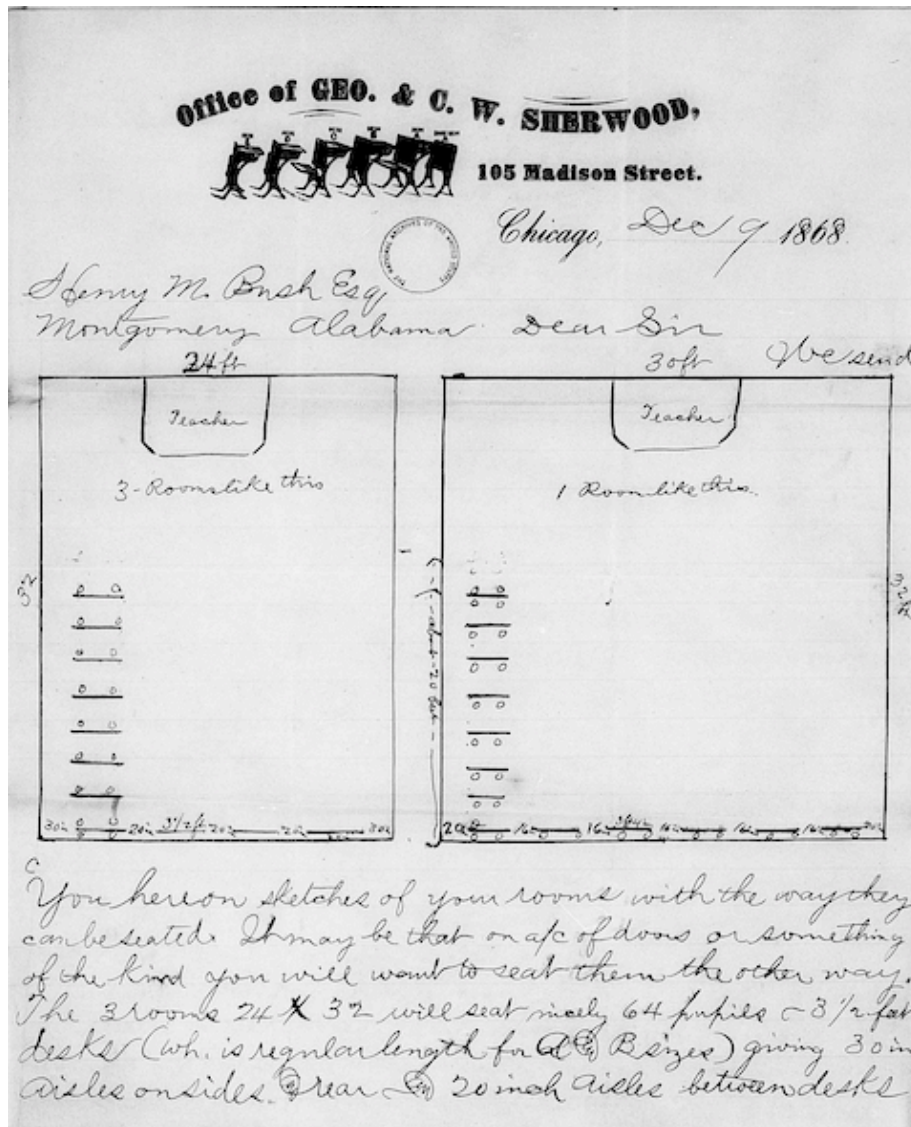


Figure 2.3. Desk maker's diagram. Geo. & C. W. Sherwood to Henry M. Bush, Esq., 9 Dec. 1868, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1341.

feet desks” that would allow for “30 in. aisle on sides.” The desk makers realized, however, that obstructions in the room might render that proposal unfeasible, so they also suggested an alternative plan that would “not quite take in 6 rows of 3 1/2 feet desks.”¹¹

¹¹ Geo. & C. W. Sherwood to Henry M. Bush, Esq., 9 Dec. 1868, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1341. Barnes & Rankin, an Indiana-based company contacted about making desks for a freedmen’s school, asked for such details as “Size of the room or rooms to be furnished,” “Number and age of the pupils to be seated,” and “Position of any obstructions to furniture such as pillars, stoves, rostrums, &c.” For desk options and considerations,

According to the Sherwoods' suggestions, Bush would either need to purchase smaller desks and decrease the aisle width, or have the desks face the adjacent wall of the classroom.

In Alabama, the most common types of schools for ex-slaves were day, night, sabbath, and normal schools. Most desirable was the day school, which offered the best prospects for sustained education. The hours and schedule of day schools varied from school to school. In Union Springs, G. W. Germany was "taxing himself to the utmost teaching from 6 to 8 & 9 hours daily." In Talladega, Maria Hopson was "in the Schoolroom from 7:00 am. until 5 pm. with an intermission of 2 hours" educating ninety-five "regular Scholars"—a number that could swell to 138 if all enrolled students were in attendance. In Greenville, the Reverend James S. Jarratt taught three two-hour sessions per day—one in the morning and another in the afternoon, both for children, and a third in the evening for adults. Not all teachers spent long blocks of time in the classroom. Dr. John D. Easter normally taught only two to three hours in his Tuscaloosa school each day.¹²

Day schools were not accessible to would-be students who worked, and some teachers were therefore willing to conduct night schools for the benefit of adults who could not attend during the day. The night school in Oskaloosa had fifty students, while

see G. H. [Hartupee] to Rev. J. G. McKee, 12 May 1868, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1261.

¹² William M. Gilbert to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 25 May 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0586; C. M. Hopson to Mr. C. W. Buckley, 22 Apr. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0053; James S. Jarratt to Gen. Swayne, 7 May 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0109; Wm. H. H. Peck to C. W. Buckley, 19 Jan. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0785.

Henrietta R. Starkweather taught half that number at her night school in Stevenson. Once a night school was opened, however, there was no guarantee it would remain in operation. In addition to physically exhausting the same teachers who were already in the classroom for most of the day, the darkness of night introduced other problems. In October 1867, Ellen Benton lamented that she had had to give up her night school of “the most enthusiastic scholars” because it was “unsafe to go to it alone” and “very wearing in the hot weather.”¹³

In Athens, all the teachers at Trinity School taught a graded day school and also “quite a large” school at night.¹⁴ One of the teachers later recalled the scene.

Cannot you picture that night school; that frail, alert little woman surrounded by a sea of black faces, the man in linen ulster, the seven boys who had one pair of presentable trousers between them, and so came to school turn and turn about, the old aunties in homespun and bright turbans, the young men in odd mixtures of soldier and civilian clothes, the girls in missus’ cast-off finery? Learning to read was a task then I can tell you, with any odd leaf for a book and a candle end between two for a light. But they came, day in night out, and many of them learned to read “de bressed book,” and received enough to be willing to go through fire and water, if only their children could get all which could be given them.¹⁵

Although few descriptions of Alabama’s earliest night schools exist, this account indicates what it must have been like for freedpeople across the state who sought an education after the workday was done.

For students who were unable to attend either day or night schools, some teachers offered yet another option: the sabbath school. Sabbath schools operated only once a

¹³ [Tavvie?] S. Underhill to Mr. C. W. Buckley, 14 May 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1041; H. R. Starkweather to Mr. Beecher, 24 Nov. 1869, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1636; E. L. Benton to Rev. E. P. Smith, 28 Oct. 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 88.

¹⁴ Mary F. Wells to Geo. Edw’d P. Smith, 18 Feb. 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 34.

¹⁵ “Trinity School, Athens, Ala.,” *American Missionary* 58 (December 1904): 328.

week and, as historian Peter Kolchin explains, “gave instruction in elementary education as well as religious subjects.” Sabbath schools did not require a full-time teacher, and almost any literate individual who was willing to sacrifice a Sunday morning or afternoon could serve. D. M. Seals, an attorney, taught a sabbath school in Clayton, Alabama, where the freedpeople might otherwise have received no education whatsoever. In 1868, Holland Thompson, an African-American member of the Alabama House of Representatives, took time out of his busy schedule to both teach and superintend a sabbath school in Montgomery, the state capital. Some full-time teachers also volunteered in sabbath schools. In Talladega, Maria Hopson superintended a sabbath school in addition to her day school and proudly reported that twenty of her sabbath-school scholars could read from the Bible.¹⁶

Sabbath schools varied in number and size. Tuscaloosa boasted three sabbath schools, one of which had forty-four scholars. Lower Peach Tree had two. So large and well known was E. L. Grover’s sabbath school that it required the help of five African-American assistants and attracted more white opposition than his day school. Some teachers in effect took the sabbath school to the community. In Talladega, Lucy Brown “held cottage prayer meetings and helped to teach older students to read the Bible.” Brown expressed admiration for Phoebe Beebe, another Northern teacher in the town, because she was “not only a faithful teacher, but a devout and zealous missionary, carrying the gospel into the homes of the people with an interest that will ever crown her

¹⁶ Peter Kolchin, *First Freedom: The Responses of Alabama’s Blacks to Emancipation and Reconstruction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972), 87; D. M. Seals to Maj. Genl. Wager Swayne, 18 June 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0121; Holland Thompson to Mr. Smith, 30 Sept. 1868, AMA, reel 1, no. 163; C. M. Hopson to Mr. C. W. Buckley, 22 Apr. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0053.

name with living memories.”¹⁷

For those students who aspired to become teachers, the normal school offered a more advanced opportunity for learning. The establishment of normal schools “was not merely a natural progression in African American education,” argues Hillary Green, but rather “a response to address the specific needs of the newly created public schools.” Although the demand for education in Alabama exceeded the number of teachers, the state’s normal schools for freedpeople maintained stringent admission requirements. According to historian Joe Richardson, the normal school in Talladega required applicants to be at least fifteen years of age and to “have passed satisfactory exams in reading, writing, spelling, elements of English grammar, general geography, and arithmetic through general fractions.” The school’s administrators also mandated that the students possess a “[g]ood moral character.” Upon graduation, the students were obligated to teach in the state for at least two years. As of 1867, only Talladega boasted a normal school for the training of black teachers, but schools in Athens, Marion, and Montgomery each offered advanced education that also produced black teachers.¹⁸

¹⁷ Charles C. Arms to Mr. C. W. Buckley, 1 June 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0237; Isaac H. Salter to Gen. Swayne, 20 Aug 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0927; E. S. Grover to Capt. Buckley, 30 Apr. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0577. For Brown’s prayer meetings and her description of Beebe, see Harriet E. Amos Doss, “White and Black Female Missionaries to Former Slaves during Reconstruction,” in *Stepping out of the Shadows: Alabama Women, 1819-1990*, ed. Mary Martha Thomas (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 47.

¹⁸ Hilary Green, *Educational Reconstruction: African American Schools in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 7; Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction*, 128-129. For the two-year commitment to teach, see Elizabeth Bethel, “The Freedmen’s Bureau in Alabama,” *Journal of Southern History* 14 (Feb. 1948): 88. On Talladega’s normal school and other schools with advanced studies, see Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction*, 114-115, 290n21. According to Richardson, Emerson Institute in Mobile had a normal department by 1869, “but it was several years before many normal students were trained.” Richardson notes that “graded schools with a few advanced students . . . sometimes made a remarkable impact on the community and since a normal diploma was not generally a prerequisite for teachers, furnished teachers as well.” See *ibid.*, 118, 115. There seems to have been some flexibility in the normal schools’ entry requirements. “John Alvord, Bureau superintendent of education,

In Alabama's day schools for ex-slaves, neither the school week nor the school year was standardized, and the availability of education could therefore be sporadic. According to teachers' monthly reports to the Freedmen's Bureau, most school weeks were five or six days long, although a few were four or less. The length of the school year also varied. Most teachers opened their schools sometime between February and May but closed during the hot summer months, as well as during the cotton harvest. Some schools opened again in November, and the number of schools in session continued to increase through the winter and early spring months. A small number of schools remained in session year-round.¹⁹

However many days their schools were in session, teachers regularly reported that their pupils lacked adequate aids to learning. George Card, who taught in Uniontown, cited the "absolute necessity" of maps and blackboards. Ellen Benton, who had previously taught in Virginia, complained that the schools in Tuscaloosa had "nothing to assist us to interest the children or to attract them to the schools." She appealed to the AMA to provide "some of those things that are sent so freely and abundantly to the schools in Virginia." Most common among teachers' pleas were requests for textbooks. Although schoolbooks were crucial tools for instruction, many schools had either too few

sought to ensure high-caliber teachers by standardized examinations," writes historian Ronald Butchart, "but as was often the case with nineteenth-century educators, his concern was not so much with academic or intellectual competence as with adaptability, 'love of work and the desired moral qualities.'" See Ronald Butchart, *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction: Freedmen's Education, 1862-1875* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 123-124.

¹⁹ Alabama's Freedmen's Schools Monthly Attendance Database. A contributor to *Lippincott's Magazine* reported that across the South, some teachers remained in their schools for the summer "at the request of the boys and girls themselves, and partly at their expense." Other schools were taught by "vacation-teachers" during the summer—usually the school's top students, who continued classes while their Northern teachers traveled to cooler climes. See William R. Hooper, "Shall He Be Educated? A Reply to 'The Freedman and His Future,'" *Lippincott's Magazine of Literature, Science and Education* 4 (Dec. 1869): 671.

or none at all. Writing from Talladega in March 1866, Maria Hopson asked the Freedmen's Bureau to send her one dozen first readers. After selling all thirty-six books that the Bureau had sent him, Elliot Whipple in Lafayette requested an additional "three dozen of the 'Union Primer' and half a dozen Readers (No. one)." Whipple charged his students fifteen cents for each book, but noted that most students purchased them on credit. And in the closing days of 1867, G. L. Peterson in Mobile requested at least 175 readers.²⁰

Teachers used a variety of textbooks. Some of Alabama's freedpeople learned addition and subtraction from *Colburn's Arithmetic*, while Ellen Benton's students in Tuscaloosa used *Common School Arithmetic*. Benton also found time to expose her budding scholars to the world outside Tuscaloosa with *Cornell's Grammar School Geography*. William Gilbert's students in Union Springs used Noah Webster's *Elementary Spelling Book*. When it was time for the day's reading lesson, pupils acquired literacy from several sources. Elliot Whipple preferred the *Union Primer* for his students in LaFayette. Some teachers used textbooks written specifically for ex-slaves. J. Silsby's sabbath-school pupils took their lessons from the *American Tract Society Primer*, while some students in Montgomery read from Lydia Maria Child's *Freedmen's Primer*. Although Child was a staunch abolitionist, historian Robert Morris describes her textbook as "almost as moderate as those published by the American Tract Society." Still, there were differences. The American Tract Society publications, although anti-

²⁰ Geo. N. Card to Col. Beecher, 18 Jan. 1870, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1712; E. L. Benton to Rev. E. P. Smith, 29 July 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 70; Maria C. Hopson to Gen'l Swain [*sic*], 11 Mar. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0047; Elliot Whipple to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 29 May-June 3, 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1086; G. L. Peterson to Rev. E. P. Smith, 26 Dec. 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 103.

slavery, were less radical. Child told her readers “that it was a sin against God to hold you in Slavery, and that you are worthy to have your names enrolled among the freemen of the United States of America.” While the American Tract Society’s textbooks provided “biographies of colored persons” and “the life and words of ABRAHAM LINCOLN,” writes Morris, Child discussed “the slave driver’s whip, the middle passage, the sadistic overseer, separated families,” and “tyranny and hatred, cruelty and despair.”²¹

In addition to secular textbooks, teachers frequently requested New Testaments or “Sunday School papers.” Charles Arms in Tuscaloosa, Maria Hopson in Talladega, and Carrie Smith in Selma each asked for testaments to use in their classrooms. Although pupils in Lower Peach Tree’s Methodist and Presbyterian sabbath schools learned to read from spelling books and catechisms, teacher Isaac Salter requested testaments for local freedpeople who were “without money to purchase them.” Teachers' requests for testaments and tracts were usually non-specific, suggesting that they would accept any type of religious reading material. But some teachers were more particular. For his

²¹ Eliot Whipple to Rev. E. P. Smith 18 July 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 66; Ellen L. Benton to Rev. E. P. Smith, 29 July 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 70; William M. Gilbert to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 25 May 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0586; J. Silsby to Rev. M. G. Strieby, 21 Apr. [1866?], AMA, reel 1, no. 14; Abstract from Prof. Silsby’s Letter, 3 May 1866, AMA, reel 1, no. 15. On Child’s textbook, see Robert C. Morris, *Reading, 'Riting, and Reconstruction: The Education of Freedmen in the South, 1861-1870* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 202, 206. For the “sin against God” quotation, see L. Maria Child, *The Freedmen’s Book* (1865; repr., New York: AMS Press, 1980), 260-261. For the description of the American Tract Society’s *Freedmen’s Third Reader*, see Morris, *Reading, 'Riting, and Reconstruction*, 199 (emphasis in the original). Webster’s *Elementary Spelling Book* was widely used by freedpeople across the South. The text had also been significant for African Americans during the antebellum period. Historian Heather Andrea Williams explains that because of its small size, it could be easily concealed, and thus many “enslaved people used [it] in their first steps toward literacy.” Both in slavery and after emancipation, Webster’s speller, also known as the “blue-back speller,” was one among many books that “African Americans used . . . to announce to the world that they wanted to be literate and could become literate.” See Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 129-130, 137.

students, who were “*black, bright, and full of the ludicrous,*” William Gilbert, who taught in Union Springs, requested twelve dozen copies of the Gospels of Matthew and John and three dozen testaments in “*large print,*” which was “so much better adapted to those beginning to read.”²²

Use of religious materials could, however, cause trouble. Religious instruction in freedpeople's schools, although commonplace, was not officially endorsed by the Freedmen's Bureau. For some teachers in government-sponsored schools, religious affiliation, discrimination, or instruction could be cause for the withdrawal of Bureau support. In 1867, Selma teacher J. A. Walden was notified that the Bureau “declined aid” for his school. Fearing that the decision was based on an assumption that his school was denominational, Walden insisted that it “is altogether a separate thing” and “not ‘auxiliary to the formation of a Presbyterian Church’” in the town. The Bureau had reason to be suspicious, for Walden was an active missionary. In addition to his work as teacher of one of the city's day schools for black students, he served as a minister and as a sabbath-school teacher. Walden claimed, however, that his ecclesiastical activities did not interfere with his secular work, and he assured the Bureau that he had “no inclination to bias [his pupils'] minds in the day school toward any creed, or party.” “In this day school,” he wrote, “I am simply a trainer of the mind.” Another teacher, Miss Bird, was forced to resign her position as a teacher in Tuscaloosa when the Freedmen's Bureau

²² Chas. C. Arms to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 6 Feb. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0193; C. M. Hopson to Rev. C. W. Buckley [*sic*], 3 Mar. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0615; Carrie E. Smith to Capt. Bush, 11 Feb. 1868, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1310; Isaac H. Salter to Gen. Swayne, 20 Aug 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0927; W. P. M. Gilbert to Rev. E. P. Smith, 16 July 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 65 (emphasis in the original).

superintendent of schools in the city discovered that she was not only operating a parish school under the guise of a “government school,” but was also preventing non-Episcopalians from attending her class. The superintendent of the parish school, Dr. John D. Easter, tried to make amends with the Bureau. While acknowledging that his failure to properly oversee the school had resulted in a “lack of system & rigor in its management,” Easter assured the Bureau that his educational enterprise was worthy of government support, citing among other things the school’s new “Northern” teacher and charitable donations to its pupils. In spite of Easter's efforts, however, Miss Bird did not return to the classroom.²³

Although the Freedmen’s Bureau did not fund overtly denominational schools, students encountered religion in most Bureau-sponsored classrooms. “Most teachers, especially Congregationalist AMA envoys,” explains historian Peter Kolchin, “considered religious instruction to be an integral part of the education they were providing.” Although his proposed school was to be “denominational,” H. E. Brown, an AMA missionary in Talladega, assured the Bureau that it was not “under any ecclesiastical authority.” Religious zeal was certainly central to Brown’s purposes. “I am fully satisfied that the day has come,” he wrote, “when common school teachers, as well as other teachers, should be *Aggressive Christians*, should feel that *souls* are in their hands to be moulded for eternity.” While the AMA “leaves the students, with the advice of their parents, to select their regular place of worship,” Brown believed that Christian

²³ On Walden, see J. A. W[alden] to Maj. Gen. W. Swayne, 6 May 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1068. On Miss Bird, see Charles C. Arms to Mr. C. W. Buckley, 25 Feb. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0200; John D. Easter to Mr. C. W. Buckley, 16 Apr. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0526. Most of the “13 or 14 pupils” Miss Bird taught were poor whites.

teachers could “lead *many very* many of their older pupils to Jesus.”²⁴

Religious instruction was only one educational objective that extended beyond literacy and numeracy. As historian Robert C. Morris argues, “[p]reparation for responsible citizenship became an integral part of the curriculum.” Classroom instruction therefore focused not only on “The Three R’s” or on scripture, but also on social objectives such as temperance. In his July 1867 *Semi-Annual Report*, John Alvord, the Freedmen’s Bureau inspector of schools, declared that freedpeople “cannot afford the cost of such a habit” as alcohol, and its use would impede their “mental and moral improvement.” When the Bureau launched the Lincoln National Temperance Association and an auxiliary for children, it hoped “to suppress intemperance among the colored people of the United States, and such white persons as may choose to unite with them.”²⁵

The Bureau’s drive for temperance aligned with the goals of the missionaries in the teacher corps. In Alabama, AMA teachers boasted the largest divisions of the Lincoln National Temperance Association. Charles and Emma Adams’s division in Greenville, which had 101 members, earned an honorable mention in Alvord’s *Fourth Semi-Annual Report*. In June 1867, when Elliott Whipple founded his division in LaFayette, 112 members signed pledges to abstain from consuming alcohol. By the

²⁴ Kolchin, *First Freedom*, 84; H. E. Brown to Capt. H. M. Bush, 17 June 1868, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1198 (emphasis in the original).

²⁵ Robert C. Morris, “Educational Reconstruction,” in *The Facts of Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of John Hope Franklin*, ed. Eric Anderson and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 159; Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, *Fourth Semi-Annual Report on Schools and Finances of Freedmen, July 1, 1867*, by J. W. Alvord, Inspector of Schools and Finances (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1867), 88. For the constitution of the Lincoln Temperance Society, see *ibid.*, 88-91. On the civic nature of freedpeople’s education, see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, updated ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 2014), 146; Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love*, 4, 15.

following month, enrollment had increased to 130. The temperance society and the zeal Whipple exhibited in establishing his division conformed with his characterization of freedpeople's teachers as "deliverers from the horrors of slavery" and "the very messengers of God" who "are . . . an influence for good . . . on the minds of these people such as no race of men ever had an opportunity to exert since the world began."²⁶

In addition to social lessons, some teachers taught not only the "Three R's," but also more advanced academic subjects. In Tuscaloosa, Miss Bird taught grammar "according to ability." In Demopolis, James Caldwell taught Latin, while Mary Wells exposed her senior pupils in Athens to "Gram. Latin and Higher Branches." Maria Hopson, Mary Wells, Charles Arms, and Ellen Benton all taught geography and arithmetic in their schools. Some of Allen Williams's Tuscaloosa pupils learned needlework. So large and successful was Mobile's Emerson Institute by 1870 that the school employed Mary E. Kelly to teach music classes. In Hayneville, Mary Atwater provided a rigorous and varied curriculum. In addition to reading, writing, penmanship, and Bible lessons, Atwater taught "Geography of their own State, the tables of Arithmetic in concert, something of the proceedings of a court of justice, [and] many particulars of good manners." In the future, she planned to add "oral lessons upon United States History and Physiology." William Hooper Council, himself a teacher, was so determined to further his own education that he "paid a learned professor fifty cents for each lesson" in physics and chemistry. Such schools and such tutors were the exception, however, and not the rule. Nonetheless, the fact that at least some teachers provided an

²⁶ Alvord, *Fourth Semi-Annual Report*, 90; Elliot Whipple to Rev. E. P. Smith, 17 June 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 58; Elliot Whipple to Rev. E. P. Smith, 18 July 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 66; Elliot Whipple to Rev. E. P. Smith, 5 Aug. 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 75.

advanced education was significant.²⁷

Although pedagogical approaches varied, teachers generally regarded recitation as central. “Having the students recite out loud, in concert, was the most common form of student instruction,” writes historian Peter Kolchin. Miss Bird “drilled” the girls in her Tuscaloosa classroom “several afternoons in each week.” Mary Atwater relied upon individual recitation, interspersed with collective activities, in her Hayneville school. “We teach four hours per day without room recess,” she reported, “varying the exercise with concert repetition and singing, and then dismiss for the day.” In Talladega, Maria Hopson conducted a public examination on the “Aniversary [*sic*] of the Commencement of my School.” “Some of the best & *most* influential citizens of this place were present,” she reported, “& seemed highly gratified with the exercises, & expressed much Surprise at the proficiency to which some of our pupils had attained.” “[I]t was a proud day for me,” she remarked.²⁸

Many teachers believed that separating children into grades contributed to successful instruction. When the first schools for ex-slaves opened in Alabama, most of

²⁷ Wm. H. H. Peck to C. W. Buckley, 19 Jan. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0785; Brevt. Leuit. Colo. [*sic*] Edwin Beecher to Jas. V. Caldwell, 30 Mar. 1869, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1417; Mary F. Wells to Geo. Edw'd P. Smith, 18 Feb. 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 34; C. M. Hopson to Mr. C. W. Buckley, 22 Apr. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0053; Mary F. Wells to Geo. Edw'd P. Smith, 18 Feb. 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 34; Chas. C. Arms to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 6 Feb. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0193; E. L. Benton to Rev. E. P. Smith, 29 July 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 70; Allen Williams, Teacher's Monthly School Report for March 1867, 30 Mar. 1867, Monthly Reports of Teachers, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 6, frame 0553; L. Kimball to Col. Edwin Beecher, 1 Feb. 1870, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1766; Atwater quoted in Kolchin, *First Freedom*, 84; Councilll quoted in Sherer, *Subordination or Liberation*, 33.

²⁸ Kolchin, *First Freedom*, 84 (including Atwater quotation); Wm. H. H. Peck to C. W. Buckley, 19 Jan. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0785; C. M. Hopson to Rev. C. W. Buckley [*sic*], 3 Mar. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0615.

the students were at the same level of ability. But as “the spread between the most elementary and the more advanced students widened,” writes Peter Kolchin, “[a] few large institutions in major cities developed into graded schools.” In Athens, for example, Mary Wells divided her school into four lettered grades—A, B, C, and D—that increased in difficulty as a student advanced. Adelle Du Bois’s Grade A was reserved for students who were learning the alphabet and reading from the First Reader. Grade B, taught by Miss S. Sturges, relied upon the Second and Third Readers and added arithmetic to the curriculum. Miss M. C. Sturges’s Grade C also learned arithmetic, but her students read from the Fourth Reader and studied geography. And by the time students advanced to Miss Wells’s Grade D class, they were reading from the Fifth Reader, studying grammar and Latin, and gaining exposure to “the Higher Branches.” At least one teacher separated children not only by ability, but also by gender. L. Kimball reported that the Emerson Institute in Mobile had separate classes for boys and girls in three of four grades. Only the first grade was coeducational.²⁹

Other teachers believed a good school was the product of more than the structure of its classes. In March 1867, Charles Arms, superintendent of schools in Tuscaloosa, requested a woman as an additional teacher at a new primary school because “a lady will be better contented & more patient with the little ones than will a gentleman.” Charles Gardner in Hayneville cited the importance of “order in the schools established, instructing teachers in the art of teaching, and producing competition among the scholars

²⁹ Kolchin, *First Freedom*, 82-84; Mary F. Wells to Geo. Edw’d P. Smith, 18 Feb. 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 34; L. Kimball to Col. Edwin Beecher, 1 Feb. 1870, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1766.

and among the teachers.”³⁰

Although teachers frequently described their educational activities in missives to Northern audiences, few letters illuminate their underlying assumptions and commitments as well as a letter from a young black boy in Athens, Alabama. George Wells, the adopted son of Trinity School’s superintendent, Mary Wells, was just seven years old when his teacher asked him to write to a Sunday school class in a Northern church.

TRINITY SCHOOL, ATHENS, ALABAMA

Feb. 15, 1868.

Dear Children—My teacher asked me to write a letter to you. I am a little black boy. I don’t suppose I’ll ever be white. I’m free, though. My mother is dead, my father went off with the Yankees. I lived in the camps one year with the Yankee soldiers. I used to dance around the camp for sugar and bread:

‘Dey gives me hard-tack,
Tougher as a rack
It almost break my jaw.’

When I left the camp, I went to live with Aunt Mary[.] She beat me, and knocked me about, and almost put out my eye. One time they beat me very bad, and tied me to the fence to keep the chickens off the garden. I untied the string and *runned* away, and now I have a nice home with Miss W. She teaches me to be good; and I am trying to be the best boy in the world.

I have learned to pray and read the Bible. I recite my Sunday school lesson with the big class. I am going to be a minister, and preach the gospel; and I am going to do my work well. I am going to have good sense. I am going to be *energetic*, too!

I had some Christmas presents, and I’ve got them yet. I pick up chips, and learn my lessons, and read the paper. I have read through the First Reader and the Second Reader, and now I am in the Third Reader, and I study Geography. I have very nice clothes, with pockets in them; I eat with a fork. I used to sit on the floor and eat with my fingers, and get grease and molasses all over myself. I didn’t have any apron then, nor any manners, nor anything to eat hardly. Now I have everything nice, and I try very hard to be a nice boy. I am a temperance boy. I don’t drink any rum, and I never will. I make temperance speeches, too; and Miss R. is teaching me a song about,

³⁰ Chas. C. Arms to Mr. C. W. Buckley, 18 Mar. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0210; Chas. Gardener to Major Genl. Wager Swayne, 6 June 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0591.

‘These temperance folks do crowd us so awfully.’
I shall sing it at the exhibition next summer. I played on the melodeon three
times, and

‘I want to be an angel,
And have a harp within my hand.’

Do you sing

‘Beautiful land of rest?’

I sing it every day.

I am quick to duty, up and at it. I walk very still. I do what is told me,
and do it cheerfully. I learn Latin, too, when Miss W.’s class recites their lesson:
Ille, illa, illud. Sum, esse, fui. Rego, regere, rexi, rectum! ‘The verb must agree
with its subject in number and person.’ I shall study Latin, I think, before I
preach, and history too. History tells about George Washington who never told a
lie; and Abraham Lincoln, who made us free; but Miss W. says ’twas God
though.

I go to bed early, and I always pray before I go to bed. I love to pray.
When I didn’t live here, I didn’t have any prayers, then I had whippings. But I
like praying a good deal the best, don’t you? I hope you pray every day, and
every night before you go to bed, and think all about what you have done. Jesus
hears me when I pray, and He loves me, too. Do you love Jesus? He is good and
blessed, and he wants you to love him.

Perhaps I shall get on the cars some time and come to see you. Would you
speak to a black boy? I shall be 8 years old next May. I will now close my letter.

GEORGE WELLS³¹

Because George was a small child with just a few years of education, it is likely
that his teacher suggested the topics he should address, and his letter reveals a great deal
about the pedagogical goals of the Northern missionary teachers. Education, they
believed, should free ex-slaves from the ignorance, poverty, and violence that had
defined their lives as chattel. It should also promote religious redemption. George had
run from persecution into the open arms of “Miss W.” (Mary Wells), who not only saved
him from physical abuse, but also taught him “to pray and read the Bible.” The young
boy enthusiastically explained that he was going to become a minister when he grew up
and assured his audience that with the help of his newly discovered civic-mindedness and

³¹ George Wells letter, 15 Feb. 1868, quoted in Linda Warfel Slaughter, *The Freedmen of the South* (1869; repr., New York: Kraus Reprint, 1969), 193-195 (emphasis in the original). I have omitted the quotation marks Slaughter used to indicate the beginning and ending of each paragraph.

religious obedience, he would “do [his] work well,” “have good sense,” and be “*energetic*, too!”

George (and his teachers) wanted his Northern audience to know that lessons in civility and manners had led him to wear nice clothes, eat with a fork, and keep his clothes clean. Moreover, George was “a temperance boy” who would never imbibe alcohol. He was dutiful (“I am quick to duty, up and at it”), obedient (“I do what is told me”), and joyous about his work (“and [I] do it cheerfully”). He was intelligent (“I learn Latin, too”) and keenly aware of two U.S. presidents who had exemplified honesty, integrity, and moral character. George closed his letter by explaining to his audience that he loved to pray and preferred prayers to the whippings he had known in his earlier life.

George Wells’s letter was that of a child, and an air of innocence pervaded it. Even so, it addressed themes that would interest a missionary teacher or a Northern religious organization more than a seven-year-old boy who had spent half of his life in slavery. Small children whose earliest memories in life included oppression and abuse were not likely to marvel at non-molasses-stained clothes. George’s letter was designed to reach an audience that believed education should rescue ex-slaves from idleness and ignorance. Schools, the Northern missionaries believed, should teach freedpeople to participate in civilized society and encourage them to avoid such pitfalls as liquor, laziness, and ingratitude. Whether or not George's teacher “coached” him in writing his letter, it represented the expectations of Northern reformers.

In their reports to the Freedmen’s Bureau and Northern aid societies, teachers regularly assessed the success of their schools in achieving those goals. Most teachers insisted that their schools were “coming along nicely” or “progressing well” and their

students were “learning rapidly.”³² Some used the typical progress of white students as a yardstick. W. G. Kephart, an army chaplain stationed in Athens, reported the progress of his black pupils as “about an average of white children under far more favorable circumstances.” Some teachers were surprised to discover that children with darker skin learned as readily as lighter-skinned children. “[I]t is not always the lightest or ‘brightest’ skinned ones that are the best scholars,” wrote Emeline Wright of her students in Eufala. Indeed, she wrote, “the only really *black* scholar I have has, I think, the best intellect in the school.” Miss J. E. Beigle, a teacher in Oswichee, also noted that “[t]he very dark ones [learn] as rapidly as the ligh[t] colored.”³³

Descriptions of success without struggle, although common, were not universal. From Auburn, Thomas Whitby reported that “the pupils in the main have made greater proficiency than I expected them to make. [T]here are exceptions it is true, but I have had to labour very hard, more so than I ever laboured with a white school.” The *Florence Journal* reported that George Poole, a black teacher in the town, “is said to keep very strict [discipline] in his school, and to apply the chastising rod quite freely.” While L. Kimball was pleased with the progress of his students in Mobile, who, he reported, “rather pleasantly disappoint me,” they were not above reproach. Some of them were so chronically late that he “arranged a system of tickets for the tardy ones” under which guilty parties had to see him before they could continue on to their classrooms.³⁴

³² Such reports cannot, of course, be taken entirely at face value. As historian Jacqueline Jones observes, “descriptions of the children’s performances are so glowing, and so predictable in both style and content, that they are rendered highly suspect as true reflections of the educational process.” See Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love*, 116.

³³ Kephart, Wright, and Beigle all quoted in Kolchin, *First Freedom*, 83 (emphasis in the original).

³⁴ Thos. H. Whitley to Mr. Buckley, 29 June 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1108; *Florence (AL) Journal*, November 1,

Kimball was not the only teacher with tardy pupils. Despite freedpeople's intense interest in education, tardiness and absence were inevitable among students who lacked clocks and rarely enjoyed the luxury of attending school full-time.³⁵ Economic instability made daily attendance difficult for many students, while poverty kept others out of the classroom altogether. In Stevenson, Wilmer Walton reported that the "orphan and half-orphan" scholars in his school "are working hard mornings & evenings to procure a *scanty subsistence*" while also "endeavoring to improve their minds, and elevate their condition of life." In Evergreen, crop season—the most frequently cited reason for absences—interfered with school attendance. Some freedpeople, however, found creative ways to bridge the gaps that labor created in their educations. Two Alabama sisters "managed to keep up with class by alternating at work and school so that one could always teach the day's lesson to the other."³⁶

Cotton exacted the heaviest toll on attendance. It required the dedicated work of field hands almost year round, with children's labor especially important during the picking season. Teachers complained that their students missed class during the chopping and harvest seasons, and their monthly reports provided corroboration. Attendance steadily increased between February and late spring, but sharply declined

1865, p. 2; L. Kimball to Mr. Beecher, 2 Dec. 1869, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1507 (emphasis in the original).

³⁵ "[T]he great stress placed on 'punctuality' as measured by a timepiece," writes historian Jacqueline Jones, "had little meaning to a people whose work schedule had been and still was shaped by the movements of the sun." See Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love*, 111.

³⁶ Wilmer Walton to Gen. O. O. Howard, 26 Jan. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1814] (emphasis in the original); Wm. P. Miller to Col. Edwin Becher [*sic*], 14 July 1869, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1531. For other examples of crop-related absences, see Elliot Whipple to Rev. E. P. Smith, 17 June 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 58; Elliot Whipple to Rev. E. P. Smith, 18 July 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 66. For the sisters who alternated, see Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction*, 50.

during the summer months and did not begin to increase again until November. In the Black Belt, where cotton was “king,” labor-related absences were all the more magnified. Between May and July, average school attendance in the Black Belt decreased by as much as 60 percent. During the busiest months of the picking season, attendance decreased by as much as 91 percent. Attendance remained low until November, at which time students began to return to their classrooms. Thereafter, it continued to improve through the winter and early spring months.³⁷

A far more serious impediment to education was violence and the threat of violence. Many white Southerners were convinced that “teachers from abroad put foolish notions in [a freedman’s] head, and destroy the usefulness of his labor.” While this fear may have encouraged some planters to establish plantation schools in order to avoid Northern intervention, it incited violence among other white Southerners.³⁸ In Alabama, between the first Freedmen’s Bureau report of a school in 1865 and the end of 1870, school furniture was destroyed in at least two counties, five schools were burned, three teachers received threats of violence, one was driven out of town by the Ku Klux Klan, one was the target of attempted poisoning, one was physically attacked, one teacher’s

³⁷ Alabama’s Freedmen’s Schools Monthly Attendance Database. For the seasonality of cotton’s labor demands, see Steven F. Miller, “Plantation Labor Organization and Slave Life on the Cotton Frontier: The Alabama-Mississippi Blackbelt, 1815-1840,” in *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas*, ed. Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 159. Freedpeople’s school attendance in Mississippi was also dictated by cotton schedules, as well as by Northern teachers’ aversion to Southern summers. See Christopher M. Span, *From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse: African American Education in Mississippi, 1862-1875* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 69-70.

³⁸ *Flake’s Bulletin*, 10 Feb. 1867, quoted in George R. Bentley, *A History of the Freedmen’s Bureau* (1955; repr., New York: Octagon Books, 1970), 181. According to Bentley, *Flake’s Bulletin* advised planters that “[e]very planter who can find on his place a white or black person, intelligent enough to teach reading and writing, will avoid a world of perplexity by establishing the school and by not waiting for the government to send one who may perhaps inculcate notions not exactly in accordance with our social customs, and with the necessities of our situation.”

house was destroyed by fire, one teacher was brutally beaten and left for dead, and one was lynched. The threat of violence was such that in May 1867 the Bureau's state superintendent of schools in the state, Charles Buckley, asked the AMA not to send any additional teachers for the time being. Three years later, Augustus Purejoy, an African American teacher, held a school for three weeks near Sparta, Alabama, at "the Colored Meeting House" until "enemies" burned it down. When a man in town offered a building for a replacement schoolhouse, "he was told that if he did they would burn it down also." As a result, Purejoy decided not to reopen the school. Such acts of violence were extremely disruptive and served as deterrents to a teacher's work.³⁹

Disease could also disrupt a teacher's school year or even bring it to a halt. In northern Alabama, a smallpox outbreak in October 1867 led to a marked decrease in school attendance. At first, only students with the disease were absent, but by April the epidemic had forced the entire closure of schools in Florence, which did not re-open until November. Further south in Gainesville, George Farrand's classroom endured a prolonged period of ill health in mid-1867. In August, he explained that poor attendance among his pupils was due to sickness, which had "greatly disturbed the progress of the school during the last three months."⁴⁰

Yellow fever posed a particularly menacing threat. In January, 1868, John Alvord, the Freedmen's Bureau general superintendent of schools, attributed at least some

³⁹ These and other episodes of violence are discussed and documented in Chapter 3, below. On Purejoy's school, see Wm. P. Miller to Col. E. Beecher, Esq., 9 May 1870, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1775.

⁴⁰ Major General Wager Swayne to Major General O. O. Howard, 31 Oct. 1866, Press Copies of Letters Sent, ser. 32, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1575]; G. A. Farrand to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 27 Aug. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0569.

of the diminished attendance in 1867 to a yellow fever epidemic that spread across the Deep South. “Congestive Fever” (malaria) was also dangerous. In the first week of August, 1865, Martha Brown of Illinois, a teacher in Madison County, fell ill with congestive fever and one week later succumbed to the disease. Only twenty-two years old at the time of her death, she was well loved by her students, who wept as she was laid to rest. Brown’s death left her two colleagues with the formidable challenge of tending to 200 pupils.⁴¹

Inadequate clothing and family needs also prevented attendance. In 1867, Charles Arms reported that he expected more of Tuscaloosa’s ex-slaves to attend school “as soon as they can get suitable clothes & books.” “[T]hrough the liberality of friends in New York,” Dr. John D. Easter’s school in Tuscaloosa came to the assistance of students who were previously unable to attend because of “the want of proper clothing.” Older students were often subject to familial obligations that prevented them from attending school. Half of Maria Hopson’s students in Talladega were adults who were forced to “do their utmost by study at home, to keep pace with their classes” because, Hopson explained, “[s]ome of them are regularly *irregular*, losing two days in the week from school, which are spent in washing & ironing.” In Barbour County, one of Thomas Kennedy’s students had to leave school because she was pregnant.⁴²

⁴¹ On the yellow fever epidemic, see Alvord, *Fifth Semi-Annual Report*, 10. On Brown, see Capt. Richard J. Hinton to Capt. T. W. Clarke, 31 July 1865, H-47 1865, Registered Letters Received, ser. 3379, Tenn. Subasst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-6135]. The epidemic began early in the fall and spread from Texas to “the Gulf coast and lower Mississippi, with the [*sic*] uncertainty as to where it would stop.” See Alvord, *Fifth Semi-Annual Report*, 10.

⁴² Chas. C. Arms to Mr. C. W. Buckley 30 Mar. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0225; John D. Easter to Mr. C. W. Buckley, 16 Apr. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0526; Cynthia M. Hopson, Teacher’s Monthly School Report for Jan. 1867, Monthly Reports of Teachers, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 6, frame 0339 (emphasis in

In one unusual instance, a teacher stood between two students and an education. In March 1867, James McGogy, the Freedmen's Bureau subassistant commissioner in Talladega, reported a problem with Maria Hopson, the principal teacher at the town's school. "On my arrival here," McGogy wrote, "many complaints were made to me by both whites and coloreds in response to the number of hours taught per day and the great number of days lost altogether [*sic*]." Hopson also failed to submit monthly reports to the Bureau. She finally went too far, McGogy believed, when she "expelled from school two freed children, aged respectively 6 and 8 years old, on account of something that was said by Mrs. Hansen the Lady that is raising said children." Since the Freedmen's Bureau did not condone expulsion "except for bad conduct," McGogy "very delicately requested Mrs. Hopson to allow said children to return to the school," but Hopson refused. McGogy then wrote to another teacher at Hopson's school, Miss Phelps, suggesting that she "obtain the consent of Mrs. Hopson to allow her to receive the children in her—Miss P's—class." Still, Hopson would not allow the children to return and, as a result, McGogy reported, "the children are now wandering through the streets from day to day."⁴³

Whatever its cause, decreased attendance could have serious consequences not only for the absent students, but also for the very existence of the school. Teachers reported monthly attendance to the Freedmen's Bureau superintendent of schools in Alabama, and it was a major factor in determining which schools retained government

the original); Tho^s. M. Kennedy, Teacher's Monthly School Report for June 1867, Monthly Reports of Teachers, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 6, frame 0966.

⁴³ J. F. McGogy to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 22 Mar. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0695. It is not known if the two children were eventually allowed to return to the school.

funding. A school had to maintain “at least thirty pupils per teacher” in order to be officially recognized by the Bureau, and some local superintendents required “an average attendance of 45.”⁴⁴ Enrollment was also used to determine which teachers kept their jobs, a lesson that Phillip Kennedy, a teaching assistant in Greensboro, learned the hard way. When enrollment decreased at J. L. Warren’s school, Kennedy’s services were no longer required.⁴⁵

The Freedmen’s Bureau also took tardiness into account when determining whether or not to continue its support. In September 1866, Benjamin Hildreth, a teacher in Greenville, indicated on his monthly report that none of his students were “Never Tardy.” Shortly thereafter, Charles Buckley, the state superintendent of schools, admonished Hildreth, suggesting that “[t]his is a good indication of a very poor school.” Buckley’s intuition was correct. Hildreth's services as a teacher were so lackluster that both white and black citizens of Greenville opposed his work, albeit for very different reasons. James McGogy, the local Bureau superintendent at the time, reported that the town’s freedpeople were “dissatisfied with Benjamin Hildreth” and, more specifically, “with his teaching methods, with his unwillingness to accept all who wished to attend, and with the fees he charged.” McGogy believed that Hildreth's assistant, Emma Clancy, was the better teacher, and he was “opposed to paying a man \$50 per month, and a woman \$30 per month for the same service especially when the woman is superior.” By

⁴⁴ For the thirty-pupil rule, see Bentley, *History of the Freedmen’s Bureau*, 174. For “an average attendance of 45,” see G. Shorkley to C. W. Buckley, Esq., 27 Apr. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0876. Although the Freedmen’s Bureau required a minimum number of students in exchange for funding, the rule seems to have been at least somewhat flexible.

⁴⁵ C. S. Drake to Rev. C. W. Buckley, Esq., 1 June 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0504.

the end of 1866, McGogy was so “thoroughly discouraged by Hildreth’s incompetence” that he threatened to close the school until “two good teachers could be found.” The school did not close, but Hildreth’s poor performance resulted in the termination of his employment.⁴⁶

Despite the many obstacles they faced, Alabama's ex-slaves did all within their power to make it to school.⁴⁷ Distance from the schoolhouse was a common problem. According to historian Peter Kolchin, “[m]any students had to walk two or three miles or farther to attend school.” R. H. McCord reported that students “come to my school from all directions Some 4 miles some further.” Wilmer Walton’s students in Stevenson, many of whom were “orphans & half-orphans, whose Fathers were killed by the Rebels,” migrated to the town in search of an education. William Hooper Council, who was a student of Walton’s until tuition became a burden and he opened his own school, later noted that he had “walked eight miles, three times a week, for three lessons.” Hunger and inadequate clothing plagued many students. Residents of LaFayette asked Elliot Whipple to request from the Freedmen’s Bureau “a quantity of provisions to feed children who can not otherwise attend the school.” In Athens, the pupils at Trinity School were “hungry and thirsty, half-naked, but ‘so happy’ to be ‘educated.’”⁴⁸

⁴⁶ B. Hildreth, Teacher’s Monthly School Report for September 1866, 30 Sept. 1866, Monthly Reports of Teachers, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 6, frame 0123. For Hildreth’s poor performance, see LaWanda Cox, “The Perception of Injustice and Race Policy: James F. McGogy and the Freedmen’s Bureau in Alabama,” in *Freedom, Racism, and Reconstruction: Collected Writings of LaWanda Cox*, ed. Donald G. Nieman (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 202. For Hildreth’s firing, see C. W. Buckley to Rev. R. B. Knight, 19 Dec. 1866, Letters Sent, vol. 1, pp. 24-25, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 1, frame 0014. Buckley cited Hildreth’s “inexperience in teaching of late years” and his “general incompetence” as reasons for his dismissal.

⁴⁷ John B. Myers, “The Education of the Alabama Freedmen during Presidential Reconstruction, 1865-1867,” *Journal of Negro Education* 40 (Spring 1971): 164.

⁴⁸ Kolchin, *First Freedom*, 86; R. H. McCord, Teacher’s Monthly School Report for May 1866, 28 May 1866, Monthly Reports of Teachers, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll

Most teachers described their school buildings and teaching staffs as too small to accommodate the ex-slaves' desire for education. C. P. Wheeler accepted 125 scholars to his school in Eufala, but reported that "many more are anxious to be admitted." In Union Springs, William Gilbert's student body "more than doubled" in one week and promised to "double again and that soon." In April 1866, Maria Hopson, who was teaching 100 students in Talladega, was so overwhelmed that she threatened to quit unless she was provided with an assistant. Three weeks later, "so much fatigued and *disappointed*" from overwork, she "dismissed over half of [her] school" until help could be found. She soon discovered, however, that the decision was difficult to enforce. "It seems almost impossible to exclude them," Hopson confessed. "[T]hey seem *so* anxious to learn."⁴⁹

Whether they received help from another teacher, an advanced student, or a family member, the presence of an assistant helped reduce student-teacher ratios, which averaged 51 students per teacher, but ranged from as few as 6 to as many as 292 between

6, frame 0030; Wilmer Walton to Gen. O. O. Howard, 26 Jan. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1814]; Councilll quoted in Sherer, *Subordination or Liberation*, 33; Elliot Whipple to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 29 May-June 3, 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1086; "Trinity School, Athens, Ala.; By a Teacher after an Experience There of Fifteen Years," in *American Missionary* 58, no. 10 (Dec. 1904): 328. Although Councilll never returned to the classroom as a student, he maintained an appetite for education. According to historian Robert Sherer, Councilll "once plowed three days to get a Greenleaf's Arithmetic" and "studied at night by the light of split cedar," which he referred to as "his 'Cedar College.'" See Sherer, *Subordination or Liberation*, 33.

⁴⁹ C. P. Wheeler to Rev. E. P. Smith, [8?] Nov. 1868, AMA, reel 1, no. 174; Wm M. Gilbert to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 8 June 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0597; C. M. Hopson to Mr. Buckley, 2 Apr. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0050; C. M. Hopson to Mr. C. W. Buckley, 22 Apr. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0053 (emphasis in the original). Teachers sometimes accommodated large numbers of students in cramped quarters. From Union Springs, William Gilbert reported that one of the teachers in his district was teaching more than 100 students in "small rooms" and, as a result, was "struggling against great disadvantage." See William M. Gilbert to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 23 May 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0581.

1866 and 1870.⁵⁰ But because it was often difficult to secure the services of another teacher, educators usually had to look elsewhere for help. Freedpeople from the local community sometimes assisted in the classroom. C. P. Wheeler, who taught in Eufala, requested “one good capable teacher” but in the meantime was “trying to get along with the help of a freedman.” Charles Hutton, a freedman in Greenville, assisted the Reverend James S. Jarratt in his school during the spring of 1866. Although he had “little experience in teaching,” Hutton was “very acceptable to the colored population” and was also “indorsed [*sic*] by an estimable lady of this place who raised him.” Even more common was the practice of assigning advanced students to teach younger pupils. L. Kimball in Mobile reported that a Miss Hoyt and a Miss Europe, both of whom were ex-slaves and still pupils themselves, “teach a short time each day.”⁵¹

Northern teachers who brought their families with them to Alabama often turned to their kin for assistance in the classroom. The services of J. Silsby’s son, Eddie, were such that the Freedmen’s Bureau paid him \$15 per month, and his father believed he deserved more. In August 1867, Harriet R. Bucks, who was an experienced teacher, applied to become her father’s assistant in his Fort Deposit school. She was so “anxious to assist” in the support of their “large family” that she also offered the labor of her two sisters. Emma Adams was her husband’s assistant in Greenville, and C. L. Drake in

⁵⁰ Average student-teacher ratio calculated from Alabama Freedmen’s Schools Monthly Attendance Database. Such data is not provided in the teachers’ monthly reports for 1865. While he taught in Montgomery, J. Silsby may at one point have had an even higher student-teacher ratio. In June 1866, Silsby reported that his school had 315 pupils, and he cited no assistants. The following month, however, he listed three other teachers at the school, so it seems likely that he simply failed to note them in the earlier report. See J. Silsby, Teacher’s Monthly School Reports for June 1866 and July 1866, Monthly Reports of Teachers, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 6, frames 0059 and 0082.

⁵¹ C. P. Wheeler to Rev. E. P. Smith, [8?] Nov. 1868, AMA, reel 1, no. 174; James S. Jarratt to Gen. Swayne, 7 May 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0109; L. Kimball to Col. Edwin Beecher, 1 Feb. 1870, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1766.

Demopolis also received his wife's help. Bryant Edmundson, J. L. Warren, A. B. Norris, H. E. Brown, A. W. McCullough, and Lewis D. McGraws all relied on either their wives or their children to assist them in their schoolroom duties.⁵²

Assistants not only made for more effective teaching, but also allowed teachers to tend to non-curricular responsibilities. Mary Wells, for example, felt burdened by the time required to fill out school reports. "I have so many Reports to send to different parties interested in our work," she complained, "that I hardly know when I am through." Some teachers had to serve as structural or project managers for their school buildings, at times digging into their own pockets and purses to pay for repairs. When Mary Atwater and Laura Brown wanted to purchase a school building in Hayneville, they "promised to advance the money to repair the leaky roof out of our pockets." Although Charles Adams did not use his own funds for his Greenville schoolhouse, he acted as liaison between the Freedmen's Bureau and the contractors who constructed the building.⁵³

In many cases, teachers were also required to account for funds received from Northern aid societies, the Freedmen's Bureau, and their pupils. This work was easier said than done. Most of Alabama's freedpeople were poor or even destitute, and tuition payments were therefore an uncertain source of funds. Such was the case in August 1867 when Charles Arms asked the Freedmen's Bureau to increase the salary of Miss Ryan, a

⁵² J. Silsby to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 11 May 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0880; Harriet R. Bucks to Capt. C. W. Buckley, 17 Aug. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0303; Alabama Freedmen's Teachers Database.

⁵³ M. F. Wells to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 28 Nov. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0181; Mary Atwater and Laura E. Brown to Col. Beecher, 8 Jan. 1868, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1368; Chas. H. Adams to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 20 May 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0234.

Northport teacher. The town's freedpeople had agreed to pay her \$25 per month, but had failed to provide even "half that sum." Demopolis teacher C. L. Drake concluded in June 1867 that "[t]he probabilities are that but little will be received for tuition until fall." When fall came, Drake still complained that the school, though "progressing," would "not pay a fair salary." Poor crops in the Gainesville area resulted in George Farrand's receiving less than a quarter of the tuition he had taken in during his first three months. After only two weeks of teaching in Alpine, Samuel White reported that he had to close his school "on the account of the people were not promptly paying me up."⁵⁴

Freedpeople were generally not delinquent by choice. A significant number of people in the state, both white and black, were simply too impoverished to pay tuition. During 1865 and 1866, at least one of every ten Alabamians requested rations from the Freedmen's Bureau. Crop failures made matters worse. The Civil War delayed the 1865 crop-planting season, and "[a]dverse weather and the ravages of the cotton worm" made it impossible for Alabamians to harvest a successful crop until 1869. When freedpeople did make tuition payments, they were often partial because wage rates were so low. According to historian Peter Kolchin, the average tuition represented one-tenth the wages of an agricultural laborer, an unaffordable luxury for many of Alabama's freedpeople.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Chas. C. Arms to Mr. C. W. Buckley 30 Mar. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0224; C. S. Drake to Rev. C. W. Buckley, Esq., 1 June 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0504; C. S. Drake to Capt. C. W. Buckley, 24 Oct. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0518; G. A. Farrand to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 27 Aug. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0569; Samuel White to Col. E. Beecher, [??] May 1870, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1823. The closure of White's school may have been temporary; H. E. Brown, a missionary teacher in Talladega, had suggested that White work on his own education "until the schools commence again in the Fall."

⁵⁵ Bethel, "Freedmen's Bureau in Alabama," 58-59, 70-71; Kolchin, *First Freedom*, 86.

Freedpeople nevertheless contributed what they could, and many teachers did receive some compensation from tuition. When Mobile's newest school for ex-slaves opened its doors in May 1865, tuition ranged from 25 cents to \$1.25 per month. By January 1866, the school had already received \$1,875.18. Some teachers accepted alternative forms of payment in lieu of cash. Mary Wells, for example, allowed her pupils in Athens to pay for their schooling with "wood, cabbage, chickens, and squirrels." In most cases, the Freedmen's Bureau and local freedpeople did not cover all of a teacher's expenses, and Northern aid societies were instrumental in filling the gap. Between 1865 and 1870, the Pittsburgh Freedmen's Aid Commission, Pittsburgh Freedmen's Relief Association, Freedmen's Aid Commission, Western Freedmen's Aid Commission, Pennsylvania Freedmen's Relief Association, and American Missionary Association all provided crucial support to Alabama's teachers. In Florence, the assistance of a Northern aid society made it possible for Oscar Waring's students to attend school free of charge except for the cost of books, which was also covered if a pupil was unable to pay.⁵⁶

Funding was a concern for teachers and freedmen's aid societies alike, so much so that beginning in 1867 many Alabama teachers had to submit expense reports detailing how much money they received and how they spent it. George Farrand's and H. E. Brown's expense reports illuminate the variation in a school's finances. Between March and August 1867, Farrand, who was teaching in Gainesville, received a total of \$52.50,

⁵⁶ On tuition in Mobile schools, see Bureau Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, *First Semi-Annual Report on Schools and Finances of Freedmen, January 1, 1866*, by J. W. Alvord, Inspector of Schools and Finances (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1868), 4. On alternate forms of payment, see Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction*, 50. For the sponsoring organizations, see Alabama Freedmen's Teachers Database. On Waring's school, see report of Oscar M. Waring, [2? Nov. 1866], vol. 59, p. 29, Letters Received, ser. 112, Ala. Subasst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-2035].

but spent \$13 of that money to purchase four brooms, a water pail, a school bell, wood, books, a “Petition [partition] for Resitation [*sic*] Rooms,” and “repairing doors.” Brown’s expenditures from October 21 to December 31, 1867, totaled \$57.75. With those funds, Brown, a teacher in Talladega, bought a record book, a round-trip train ticket to Selma, keys, nine brooms, one shovel, one pail, and a pelt to use for chalkboard erasers; he also paid room and board for two teachers. Brown could afford these expenditures because he received \$150 from the AMA between October and December to supplement tuition payments. While Brown’s AMA school had almost \$128 on hand after two months, Farrand’s had only \$39.50 at the end of six.⁵⁷

In the earliest years of black education in Alabama, teachers faced myriad obstacles. They first had to acquire buildings that would accommodate the freedpeople’s demand for education, as well as classroom furniture for students of varying sizes and ages. They had to determine what kind of school would be best for their students and devise a schedule for the week and for the year that took into account such considerations as hot summers and the cotton harvest. Once they succeeded in establishing a school, pedagogical preference might call for separating students by grade, but without an assistant or sufficient space, that goal was often not possible. While teachers might have had high hopes as to the subjects they would teach, they were frequently hindered by insufficient textbooks and other learning aids. Until the Freedmen’s Bureau or a Northern aid society could fulfill their requests, teachers had to make do with whatever they had. Many schools flourished despite such difficult circumstances, and some taught advanced subjects. But they were not the norm. Most teachers had to stick to instructing

⁵⁷ G. A. Farrand to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 27 Aug. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0569; H. E. Brown to Rev. E. M. Cravath, Jan. 1868, AMA, reel 1, no. 108.

their students in the basics in overcrowded, ill-furnished classrooms, and with few material resources.

Many teachers also struggled to achieve their religious or social goals without drawing too much attention to themselves or generating opposition from local whites, the Freedmen's Bureau, or other authorities. Although religion was regularly present in the classroom, teachers who were deemed too exclusively denominational sometimes lost funding from the Freedmen's Bureau or, worse still, their jobs. Furthermore, teachers who openly espoused certain political and social objectives became potential targets of violence at the hands of white Southerners. In a state where the mere notion of teaching ex-slaves could prompt threats or attacks, many teachers were forced to reconcile what they believed should be taught inside the classroom with the risk it incurred outside of it.

Tardiness and absences on the part of the students were problems for many teachers. Such causes for absence as the cotton harvest, lack of adequate clothing, familial circumstances, and disease affected both teachers and students and in some cases could bring the school to a halt. Because the Freedmen's Bureau and some Northern aid societies used enrollment to determine which schools would receive funding, teachers were mindful of anything that might cause its decrease and were prepared to explain deficiencies. Those teachers who could not justify significant changes in enrollment risked losing the critical funding that kept their schools open.

Once students were released from classes for the day, their teachers' work was far from done. In order to operate a school, teachers had to fulfill a multitude of extracurricular responsibilities. They prepared reports and wrote letters to the Freedmen's Bureau and Northern aid societies to persuade them that any financial or

material contributions would be worthy investments. Some teachers kept detailed records as a measure of fiscal accountability. In order to address pressing needs, they sometimes devised alternate forms of tuition payments, such as food or firewood. When their schoolhouses were in disrepair, they became liaisons between their sponsoring organizations and the workers who fixed the problems. If their classrooms were inadequate, they lobbied to have new ones purchased or built. In short, teachers' work inside the classroom was dependent upon their ability to manage myriad auxiliary tasks.

Some teachers had high hopes for their ex-slave students but also assumed that intelligence was inherently tied to whiteness. Such men and women were surprised to discover that black students learned as quickly as their lighter-skinned classmates or as white children. Some teachers taught their pupils not only the "Three R's," but also more advanced subjects. Like their Northern counterparts, some black students in Alabama studied grammar, history, geography, or Latin. In one unusual case, a pupil received instruction in physics and chemistry. Many teachers also believed it their duty to train the ex-slaves to be responsible citizens. They taught lessons in manners in order to ensure that their pupils were well-behaved in both public and private settings. They employed Bible lessons to teach morality and temperance lectures to promote upright behavior. Perhaps as a civics lesson, or maybe because racial discrimination put ex-slave students at high risk for arrest, one teacher explained court procedures.

Freedpeople eagerly rose to the challenge of advanced instruction and overcame numerous difficulties in order to receive an education. Some students walked several miles to attend school. More still came to school with inadequate clothing or empty stomachs. So fierce was their desire to learn that some students came to school after long

workdays, while others could attend only on the Sabbath. The efforts they made speak volumes not only about their aspirations, but also about their expectations of the teachers and of education itself.

In the first five years of freedpeople's education in Alabama, schools for ex-slaves survived and succeeded not only because of the lessons the teachers taught, but also because of the lengths to which they went to keep their schools open. With an overwhelming number of students in inadequate structures and often in hostile communities, the men and women who taught the first schools for ex-slaves in Alabama met with seemingly never-ending financial, material, and personal challenges. Little wonder that only a quarter of them taught for more than one year. In spite of it all, most of the men and women who taught Alabama's ex-slaves between 1865 and 1870 managed to adapt to the difficulties around them. In so doing, they not only educated the state's freedpeople, but also blazed a trail for a public school system that would serve Alabamians of all races.

Chapter 3

Beyond the Classroom

Teachers spent many hours in formal instruction, but they also interacted with the local community outside the classroom. These exchanges were dynamic, and relationships could improve or worsen with little notice. Such was the case for Wilmer Walton, a Quaker missionary who, he later recounted, “left my Pennsylvania home to teach the freedmen of Stevenson, Ala., and to do what I could toward elevating their condition in life.” After he finished teaching for the day, Walton frequently went out into the community to address the needs of local freedpeople. In January 1866, for example, he informed readers of the *Friends’ Intelligencer*, a Quaker publication, that he had distributed their clothing donations to ex-slaves, some of whom “insisted upon my taking pay for some nice dresses they had selected.” He went on to request “shoes and stockings,” as well as “garden seeds, onion slips, &c.” to enable the freedpeople to “support themselves during the present year.” The local white population, he claimed, deliberately withheld “land, garden seeds, or any thing [*sic*] else” lest the freedpeople “thrive too rapidly and enjoy their *freedom* too much.” Walton did not discriminate when approached by someone in need. In at least one instance, he aided a family of “poor whites” that was homeless. “[A]fter trying in vain to get shelter for them among the white folks,” he finally found quarters at “a colored man’s house.”¹

¹ Wilmer Walton to Dear Friends, Aug. 1866, in *Friends’ Intelligencer* 23, no. 26 (1 Sept. 1866): 410; Wilmer Walton to Anne Biddle, 22 Jan. 1866, in *Friends’ Intelligencer* 22, no. 49 (10 Feb. 1866): 782 (emphasis in the original). Walton frequently received donations for the freedpeople of Stevenson. The treasurer of the Friends’ Association for the Aid and Elevation of the Freedmen noted that Walton had received “16 pairs of children[’]s shoes, 106 pairs do. woolen hose and mitts, 230 papers [of] seeds, and 3 doz. hoes.” See Henry M. Laing, report from “The Friends Committee of Friends’ Association for the Aid and Elevation of Freedmen,” *Friends’ Intelligencer* 22, no. 50 (17 Feb. 1866): 799.

The freedpeople of Stevenson experienced considerable hardship in the years following emancipation. Many of them lived in cabins at the base of a rocky mountain and “work[ed] early and late, to secure an education for as large a number of them as possible.” Owing to Walton’s aid and their own labors, Walton reported, they were “surpassing the whites religiously, morally & intellectually.” As a result, the town’s white residents soon identified Walton’s presence as a threat to white supremacy and embarked on a campaign to bring an end to freedmen’s education in the area. “[T]he plan is to conspire together in forcing these blacks into a condition of servitude, equal to, or even worse for them, than the old system of slavery,” Walton charged. Although Walton’s opponents hoped to force him out of Stevenson, their opposition instead persuaded him to take on yet another role. In November 1865, he volunteered to serve as a Freedmen’s Bureau agent, explaining that it was his desire to “do all in my power to procure justice for these abused people in this place.” Although his work as a teacher would prevent him from attending to the entire county, he believed he was qualified to serve Stevenson’s freedpeople. “I *now* have numerous cases almost daily to settle, *unofficially*,” he noted.²

On December 13, Walton began his work as Bureau sub-agent for Jackson County, but he relinquished the position less than a month later because it interfered with his teaching responsibilities. Walton recommended William C. Webb, a Union officer from Wisconsin, to replace him as sub-agent, but a local white man, John McCauley, was instead appointed to the position. McCauley worked for J. T. Anderson, “a wealthy

² Wilmer Walton to Genl. Fisk, 27 Oct. 1865, and Wilmer Walton to Genl. Wager Swayne, 1 Nov. 1865, both in Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1657] (emphasis in the original).

planter of an adjoining county,” Walton reported, and continued to do so while employed by the Freedmen’s Bureau. According to Walton, McCauley and Anderson aimed “to break up the ‘Nigger schools’, ‘send the damned Yankee Nigger Teachers back to the North’, and ‘keep the Niggers in ignorance’ as long as possible.” Moreover, McCauley had been heard to say that he “would not mind accepting the office himself, if he thought it would promote Mr. Anderson’s interests.” Those interests included Anderson’s ownership of “most of the land” in Stevenson, including the rocky plots where the freedpeople had built their cabins. Walton and the freedpeople were therefore alarmed by McCauley’s appointment, especially given Anderson’s alleged determination “to send all the ‘Niggers’ away” if they were unable to pay a monthly rent of \$2.50 for use of his land.³

McCauley and Anderson also focused their attention on the black children of Stevenson. Many of the town’s 170 black students, Walton reported, “are orphans & half-orphans whose Fathers were killed by the Rebels; and they have come here to attend school. Many of them are working hard mornings & evenings to procure a scanty subsistence” while “at the same time endeavoring to improve their minds.” McCauley’s appointment as Bureau sub-agent threatened their plans. According to Walton, McCauley “intends binding all the orphans & other poor colored children out to the old settlers in the country as ‘Apprentices.’” Apprenticeship would crush the children’s dreams of “elevat[ing] their condition in life” and place them in an arrangement where, like slaves, they would “labor for their victuals & clothes; and receive no education at

³ Wilmer Walton to Gen. O. O. Howard, 26 Jan. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1814].

school.”⁴

In an attempt to thwart McCauley’s intentions, the freedpeople held a public meeting at which they “*unanimously* agreed” to seek authorization from the Freedmen’s Bureau to levy a self-imposed tax on the town’s black population in order to “erect an orphan’s home, where those orphans and sick & destitute, as well as aged & infirm people can be sheltered & provided for.” Under the plan, Stevenson’s black orphans would be “allowed to attend school, while there is an opportunity for doing so,” instead of being “bound again to those who were recently their *masters*.” The thought of removing the orphans from school and binding them as apprentices was so detestable that the freedpeople “would rather take up arms and die” than to see such things come to pass.⁵

On May 7, 1866, tension between local whites and Walton reached the boiling point. An intoxicated man, “an entire stranger” to Walton, entered Walton’s room and haranged him. After “a sign given him by the crowd outside,” Walton reported, the man then “struck me a severe blow with his clenched fist upon my right temple, which knocked me over against the wall and stunned me severely.” Worried that the local black population would retaliate, Walton’s assailant fled the scene—and with good reason. According to Walton, “a number of stout, active colored men, who heard of the affair, and immediately rushed to my protection” proposed to “pursue the young man.” Walton,

⁴ Ibid. An agent sent by the Freedmen’s Bureau to investigate concluded that McCauley was well-respected in Stevenson and that Walton may have exaggerated. To keep the peace, however, he removed McCauley as sub-agent. See T. J. Mitchell to Col. Callis, 11 May 1866, vol. 58, pp. 154-155, Letters Received, ser. 112, Huntsville, Ala., Subasst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1814].

⁵ Wilmer Walton to Gen. O. O. Howard, 26 Jan. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1814] (emphasis in the original). It is not known whether the tax proposal was approved.

a devout Quaker and believer in non-resistance, refused their offer. Later that night, however, the freedmen “sent guards to watch the movements of [Walton’s] assailant,” intending “to inflict capital punishment upon the offender.” Walton managed to diffuse the situation, but he realized that further action was required if conflict was to be prevented.⁶

Concerned that race relations in Stevenson would degenerate into violence as they had just days earlier in Memphis, Tennessee, Walton decided to confront his opponents openly.⁷ Addressing an all-white crowd, Walton explained that he had come to Stevenson to “do what I can to exercise and improve the God-given talents (whether great or small) which these colored people possess.” He was “not troubled with any fear” of the local citizens, he asserted, and would remain until “the time fixed upon for closing our schools.” He concluded with an invitation to those present to openly air their grievances with him. If they thought it “an honorable transaction to take the life of an unarmed man,” Walton suggested they “come forward now and commit the deed,” assuring them that he would not resist. According to Walton, no one said a word, but “every head was bent down in apparent shame.” Following the meeting, “[s]everal of the citizens present, who had never spoken to me before, then came forward and spoke to me

⁶ Wilmer Walton to Dear Friends, Aug. 1866, in *Friends’ Intelligencer* 23, no. 26 (1 Sept. 1866): 410-412.

⁷ Following the arrest of a black man on May 1, 1866, for his involvement in a minor carriage accident with a white man, the city of Memphis was ravaged by violence for three days. Historian Eric Foner writes that as a result of the riot “at least forty-eight persons (all but two of them black) lay dead, five black women had been raped, and hundreds of black dwellings, churches, and schools were pillaged or destroyed by the fire.” See Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, Updated ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 2014), 262. Walton was clearly aware of these events, as he wrote to the *Friends’ Intelligencer* that he “deemed it prudent to assemble that class [freedpeople], and give them some advice in regard to the proper course for them to pursue in case of an event similar to the disgraceful affair at Memphis.” See Wilmer Walton to Dear Friends, Aug. 1866, in *Friends’ Intelligencer* 23, no. 26 (Sept. 1866): 410.

in a pleasant, friendly, style,” and during the remainder of his time in Stevenson, he was never again threatened or harmed. White acceptance of education for ex-slaves was, however, short-lived. Only four months after Walton’s June 1866 departure, a representative of the Freedmen’s Aid Commission of Western Pennsylvania, Eastern Ohio, and West Virginia reported the burning of a black school in the town. Believed to be a work of an arsonist, the building’s destruction occurred “just the day the school was to commence.”⁸

Wilmer Walton’s experiences demonstrate that teachers did not operate exclusively in the classroom. Their often-controversial activities required them to interact with both black and white members of the local community. Much of this interaction was positive. Teachers often relied upon local freedpeople to help construct or repair school buildings and upon local whites for lodging and board. Relationships between teachers and their communities were sometimes symbiotic. Although teachers received money or goods in exchange for their labors, many of them also worked to relieve destitution and suffering among the freedpeople and sometimes among whites as well.

Other interactions were less positive. Some teachers found themselves embroiled in freedpeople’s legal battles, while others endured social ostracism or were the target of threats or physical violence. Some lost the buildings in which they taught when ex-Confederate owners demanded the return of their property. Many teachers lived in fear that vandals would destroy their classroom furniture and instructional materials. Some

⁸ For Walton’s address to local whites in Stevenson, see Wilmer Walton to Dear Friends, Aug. 1866, in *Friends’ Intelligencer* 23, no. 26 (1 Sept. 1866): 410-412. For the burning of the school, see Rev. Jos. A. Travelli to Maj. Gen. O. O. Howard, 25 Oct. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1810].

saw their schools go up in flames.

Whether positive or negative, teachers' interactions with the communities around them serve as reminders that their jobs were never restricted solely to the classroom. The multiple roles they played—counselor, minister, missionary, legal advocate, investigator, peacekeeper, fundraiser—shed light on community reactions to and attitudes towards freedmen's schools.

One problem teachers faced was competition with local whites over the buildings in which schools were held. In 1865, the Freedmen's Bureau granted Mary Wells, a Northern teacher in Athens, Alabama, who was sponsored by the American Missionary Association, use of the town's Missionary Baptist Church for her school, but soon after classes began, the church's deacons asked the Bureau to return the property to the congregation. The deacons, who claimed to be "of loyal and conservative sentiments" and had "remained so during and through the rebellion," protested that the federal army's seizure of the building and its use "for hospitals and other purposes" had "not only deprived the congregation of their place of worship, but left it in a much damaged condition." Even after Union troops withdrew from Athens, the building had not been returned. Instead, Charles Anderson, chaplain of the 46th Wisconsin Infantry, and his wife "took possession" of it for use as a school for ex-slaves. The Bureau's assignment of the building to Wells displeased the deacons, who complained that it was being employed for "purposes wholly different from and inconsistent [*sic*] with the uses and benefits intended by its founders and present members."⁹

⁹ Miss M. F. Wells to Maj. Gen'l. O. O. Howard, 10 July 1865, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1617]; Deacons of Missionary Baptist Church to

Return of the building would pose a difficult problem for Wells and the school's other two teachers, not to mention the ex-slave students. In the short time the school had been in session, it had already become both popular and successful. When it opened on May 23, 1865, it had ninety-three pupils. One month later, enrollment had more than doubled, and the "average attendance" was 162. Almost a quarter of the students had already learned to read, some of them at an intermediate level. The deacons' complaint thus threatened not only to interrupt the work of scholars who had begun to receive a long-delayed education, but also to necessitate the location of another building large enough to accommodate nearly 200 pupils. In a town where local sentiment did not favor the education of ex-slaves, the task of locating any school building at all—much less such a large one—promised to be daunting.¹⁰

At least the deacons' complaint was civil. Other demands for the return of confiscated buildings were less restrained. In Mobile, Dr. Josiah C. Nott, a renowned physician, ardent secessionist, and leading scientific racist, vehemently denounced use of the Medical College of Alabama as a school for former slaves. Nott had been instrumental in founding the college in 1859. Two years later, he became medical director of the Confederate hospital in Mobile and medical inspector in the Confederate

General Fisk, 3 Aug. 1865, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1617].

¹⁰ Charles Anderson to Major Gen. O. O. Howard, 26 June 1865, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1617]; Miss M. F. Wells to Maj. Gen'l. O. O. Howard, 10 July 1865, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1617]. The church was evidently returned to the congregation, as records indicate that Wells was teaching in a different location the following year. In that location, too, she faced the threat of eviction. In November 1867, when General Wager Swayne, the Freedmen's Bureau assistant commissioner for Alabama, ordered the return of Wells's school building to its former owner, the frustrated teacher protested that her work was "not recognized by any white family in the place," and if the house was returned to its former owner, "the school must be disbanded, for there is no other building in the place that can be had for School or Teachers." See Mary F. Wells to Gen'l O. O. Howard, 30 Nov. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1140.

Department of the Gulf.¹¹ When the war ended, Nott quickly began lobbying for return of the building to its use as a medical college, not as a school for ex-slaves.

In his letters, Nott simply requested return of the college to its ex-Confederate owners, explaining that the Bureau's decision to allow the building to be used as a school for black children had "created an angry feeling towards [the] bureau in the town & state." In person, Nott was less polite. When the commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau, General Oliver Otis Howard, visited Mobile in November 1865, Nott treated him "in a most insulting manner." During their meeting, Nott declared that "he would rather see the building burned down than to have it used as a school for colored children." According to the Bureau superintendent at Mobile, Colonel George D. Robinson, Nott was not alone in his sentiments regarding the education of former slaves. "The feeling expressed by Dr. Nott pervades this Entire community," Robinson reported, "and a building cannot be procured for any money for the purposes of Establishing a colored School."¹²

¹¹ Reginald Horsman, "Josiah C. Nott," in *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, accessed Sept. 6, 2016, <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1484>. Nott believed "that a black's brain was nine cubic inches smaller than that of a white man" and asserted that "the idea that the brain of the Negro or any other race can be enlarged and the intellect developed by education has no foundation of truth, or any semblance of support from history." Quoted in William Preston Vaughn, *Schools for All: The Blacks and Public Education in the South, 1865-1877* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974), 43.

¹² J. C. Nott to Genl. Swayne, 11 Nov. 1865, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-2761]; Col. Geo. D. Robinson to Brevet Colonel C. Cadle, 4 Nov. 1865, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-2761]. One year later, the freedpeople of Mobile completed a church building that was also to serve as a school, which would allow Nott and his colleagues to regain control of the Medical College. But on the very night the new building was finished, it was destroyed by fire. The emergency did not draw Mobile's Fire Department in full force, but it did cause the "rejoicing" of white Mobilians who watched the blaze. See Bt. Col. [O. D. Kinsman] to Bt. Maj. Gen. W. Swayne, 10 Mar. 1866, vol. 4, pp. 293-294, Letters Sent, ser. 3, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1910]. Bureau officials in Mobile were convinced that the fire was the work of someone enraged that the building was "about to be used as a colored school." [O. D. Kinsman] A.A.G. to Maj. Genl. Wager Swayne, 1 Mar. 1866, vol. 4, pp. 279-282, Letters Sent, ser. 3, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1910]. Historian Michael W. Fitzgerald writes that after his sour meeting with Nott, "General Howard engaged in a stubborn bureaucratic battle to prevent the restoration [of the Medical College] or else secure another building," and one year later, the Bureau and the AMA purchased a

When confronted with the possibility that their school buildings could be seized at any moment, teachers like Wells and the educators at the Medical College must have felt both anxious and helpless. In places with sizable freed populations in search of an education, finding a building—much less one that would accommodate the large numbers of students who flocked to the schools—could be extremely difficult. When the local white community was hostile, the prospects must have seemed all the more discouraging.

In addition to trying to put black schools out of business by demanding the return of buildings to their ex-Confederate owners, local whites subjected the teachers to social ostracism that ranged from minor slights to wholesale exclusion. Teachers reacted differently to such behavior. For some, the “prejudice” was bothersome, but not oppressive. Mary Wells, for example, complained that she was made to feel an outsider by Athens’s whites. “[O]ur deepest blackest crime in their estimation is in being *Yankees*,” she sarcastically explained, but “we rejoice in the forgiveness of our Heavenly Father for the sin of being born north of the Masons & Dixons [*sic*] line.” As late as 1876—eleven years after she first arrived in Athens—Wells had still not been accepted by the white townspeople.¹³

Teachers in Tuscaloosa also experienced ostracism. According to William Peck, the local Freedmen’s Bureau assistant superintendent, the female teachers had

building in hopes of establishing “a permanent presence” for a freedmen’s school. Fitzgerald argues that “bureau leaders invested personal ego in the outcome, if only to defy the rebellious whites of Mobile.” The school became one of the largest freedmen’s schools in the state. See Michael W. Fitzgerald, *Urban Emancipation: Popular Politics in Reconstruction Mobile, 1860-1890* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 46-48.

¹³ M. F. Wells to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 28 Nov. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0181; M. F. Wells to M. E. Strieby, 9 Aug. 1876, in Harriet E. Amos Doss, “White and Black Female Missionaries to Former Slaves during Reconstruction,” in *Stepping out of the Shadows: Alabama Women, 1819-1990*, ed. Mary Martha Thomas (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 54 (emphasis in the original).

encountered “such a prejudice” that he feared “they will many of them abandon the project.” In 1867, Ellen Benton, a Northern white teacher in the town, confirmed that “bitterness among the white people towards us” remained a problem. The subject “has so often been reported,” she added, “that it is an old story, and tedious to be repeated.”¹⁴

Although Wells and Benton seem to have taken such ostracism in stride, Maria Hopson, who taught in Talladega, was less resilient. Her health began to fail, nearly prompting her to give up her school. In March 1866, she informed General Wager Swayne, the Freedmen’s Bureau assistant commissioner in Alabama, that “the prejudice is so great & the treatment I receive is so severe that I know not what to do & write this to you for protection & advice.” The harassment did not end with Hopson herself, for members of the local white community also targeted anyone who associated with her. The “neighbor [*sic*] & friends of the lady with whom I’m boarding, annoy & even threaten her house if she harbors me,” wrote Hopson, who feared she would “have to seek shelter elsewhere.” Hopson had discussed her predicament with the local Bureau agent, but he “paid very little attention” and “seemed to think that unless Gen’l [O. O.] Howard sent me, or had something to do with it, my commission amounted to but little.” In April, when federal troops left Talladega, the agent would not guarantee her protection. In truth, the extent of Hopson’s complaint was that no local white people had spoken to her in six weeks. Still, such ostracism was crippling. With nowhere to turn and little more than reassurance from the Bureau’s state superintendent of education that she was doing good work, Hopson was certain she would have to quit. She had nearly resolved to leave,

¹⁴ Wm. H. H. Peck to Supt. of Freedmen’s Schools, 14 May 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0071; Ellen L. Benton to Rev. E. P. Smith, 29 July 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 70.

but “as soon as the citizens heard of this, two, among the most prominent” broke the communal silence and guaranteed her safety. Although there is no indication that Hopson and the two citizens ever established cordial ties, the gesture proved to be the kindness Hopson needed to carry on her work.¹⁵

Teachers who found themselves the target of threats would no doubt have preferred ostracism. In communities where white citizens opposed black education, violence often began with threats and then escalated to physical attacks. By 1867, the year Radical Reconstruction began, violent opposition to black schools was increasing and had also become more sinister. In August of that year, G. R. Talley requested a transfer to a school in a nearby town because the whites in Autaugaville had threatened to kill him, probably because he was active in Republican politics. “‘If a riot should occur,’ say they, ‘we would first hunt up the white men who are leaguers & leaders and kill them’ Before we would point a gun at a *negro*,” Talley informed the Freedmen’s Bureau superintendent of schools in Alabama. In Mobile, which had a school for black children as early as 1865, the situation in March 1867 was so dire and protection so insufficient that George Tracey, the Freedmen’s Bureau subassistant commissioner in the city,

¹⁵ Maria C. Hopson to Gen’l Swain [*sic*], 11 Mar. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0047; C. M. Hopson to Mr. C. W. Buckley, 22 Apr. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0053. Although Hopson experienced more severe ostracism than most other teachers in the state, her story also had an unusually happy ending. In 1867, she gave her students an examination to celebrate the one-year anniversary of her school—a date she “did not expect to see.” The event was open to the public, and, much to Hopson’s surprise, “some of the best & *most* influential citizens of the place were present” and “seemed highly gratified with the exercises & expressed much surprise at the proficiency to which some of our pupils had attained.” Even her housing situation, which had seemed so dire, was resolved with the establishment of a teachers’ home in Talladega. See C. M. Hopson to Rev. C. W. Buckley [*sic*], 3 Mar. 1867, and C. M. Hopson to Gen’l Swayne, 27 May 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frames 0615 and 0629.

thought it best not to open another school.¹⁶

According to General Howard, the Freedmen's Bureau commissioner, Southern whites disapproved of schools for ex-slaves because of "prejudice against educating the blacks, and the belief that the teachers are fostering social equality."¹⁷ Given the controversial nature of their work, teachers sometimes found themselves in the crosshairs of local whites. By 1868, teachers in Alabama were reporting threats from a new source, the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan, which had formed in 1866 in Pulaski, Tennessee, as a "social club," became a terrorist organization that targeted both black and white Republicans across the South.¹⁸ In Alabama, Klan terror varied from place to place. In some cases, teachers were threatened, but not physically harmed. T. H. Crevatt, a Union veteran who was teaching in the central-Alabama town of Newbern, reported that he had "been threatened by mob violents [*sic*] & the Ku kluck klan to be driven from the County for Teaching a negro School." In other instances, teachers feared not for their own well-being, but that of their students. In Tuscaloosa, Ellen Benton assured the Freedmen's Bureau that she was not concerned about her personal safety, but thought the Klan "may

¹⁶ G. R. Talley to Rev. C. W. Buckley [*sic*], 26 Aug. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1014; Geo. H. Tracy to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 2 Mar. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0966. The "leaguers" to whom Talley referred were presumably members of the Union League, which advocated equal rights for freedpeople and then, beginning in 1867, when black men were enfranchised, mobilized black voters. See Foner, *Reconstruction*, 110, 283-285. On the Union League in Alabama, see Michael W. Fitzgerald, *The Union League Movement in the Deep South: Politics and Agricultural Change during Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989). In May 1867, Charles W. Buckley, state superintendent of schools for the Freedmen's Bureau, asked the AMA not to send any additional teachers for the present, given "the recent exhibition of violence and passions in this state and other states at the South." See C. W. Buckley to Rev. E. P. Smith, 17 May 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 54.

¹⁷ Howard quoted in George R. Bentley, *A History of the Freedmen's Bureau* (1955; repr., New York: Octagon Books, 1970), 178.

¹⁸ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 342.

affect my school some.”¹⁹

Klan activity drove some teachers from their posts. In 1869, a “Miss Graham,” a black woman from the North, accepted a position as superintendent of a school in Florence. During her time there, the school flourished—a fact that drew the attention of the Ku Klux Klan, which across Northern Alabama “spread ‘a *nameless terror* among negroes, poor whites,’ and other Republicans.” One night, Klansmen dressed in full regalia appeared at Graham’s house. “We are Southern people,” the Grand Cyclops of the group informed her. “We are opposed to having those of another race from the North to teach us.” If she did not leave Florence, “they would burn the school house and kill her.” Graham, however, was not easily bullied. According to a Northern newspaper, she “broke forth into a laugh, and perfectly discomposed her persecutors.” In fact, they apologized and left her house. But they were not finished with Miss Graham. The following day, the Klan threatened to burn her house with her in it. On the advice of friends who believed the threat credible, Graham quit her work and left the town.²⁰

Graham’s experience illustrates both the nature and the effectiveness of Klan threats. Although Graham was composed enough not to show fear to her intimidators, their visit was cause for alarm. By 1869, Klan violence was widespread both in Alabama and across the South, and Graham was in danger not only as a Northerner, but also because she was black. Although the Klan did not physically assault her, its threats were

¹⁹ T. W. Crevatt to Col. Edwin Beecher, 31 May 1869, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1427; E. L. Benton to Mr. H. M. Bush, 4 Apr. 1868, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1181.

²⁰ William B. Figures to William H. Smith, 20 Oct. 1868, Alabama Governor’s Papers, quoted in Foner, *Reconstruction*, 342 (emphasis in the original); *Raftsmen’s Journal* (Clearfield, PA), March 3, 1869.

serious enough to prompt her to flee.

Teachers in Alabama had every reason to regard such threats as credible. From the outset, local whites made their opposition known. Their disapproval was usually signaled first by threats, which left teachers anxiously wondering if and when an attack would occur. In many cases, threats were followed by violent actions that reminded the whole of the community in a visible and terrifying way that teaching ex-slaves could be a risky endeavor.

The Reverend Robert Alexander, a minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, was the victim of one such attack. Alexander began teaching freedpeople in Auburn, Alabama, in early 1866. At only twenty-six years of age and weighing barely more than 100 pounds, he was described as “an innocent-looking man” who was “simple in manners.” His unassuming presence did not, however, protect him. In fact, he received several death threats during the five months he taught and preached in Auburn. On the night of June 14, 1866, Alexander testified two days later, “four white men came at my house” and, after a brief exchange, “dragged me out of doors, clubbed me and carried me to the woods.” They were angry because the town’s freedpeople were supporting Alexander as their clergyman instead of the local white minister. “They stripped me off [*sic*] my clothes,” Alexander continued, “and beat me with leather straps until the blood was running down,” then informed him that he had “till sunday following” to leave the area, that “no d— nigger should preach nor teach school there.” With the help of some local freedwomen and a white Good Samaritan, Alexander was rescued, his wounds dressed, and his life spared. He left for Georgia the next day.²¹

²¹ H. M. Turner to Bro. Lynch, June 19, 1866, in *Christian Recorder*, June 23, 1866; H. M. Turner to Brig. General David Tilson [*sic*], 16 June 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 632, Ga. Asst.

For another teacher, threats culminated in a gruesome death. Born in Ireland, William Luke had immigrated to Canada, where he began his career as a Methodist minister. In 1869, after an infidelity scandal led to his suspension, he moved to the United States where, his brother-in-law later recalled, he vowed that “if the opportunity afforded he thought of going to the South to teach.” In Alabama, the opportunity presented itself. Luke worked briefly as a teacher at Talladega College and oversaw construction of the school’s new dormitory. He then moved to Patona to work for the Selma, Rome, and Dalton Railroad as a bookkeeper and teacher. Soon he opened a school for ex-slaves in the town, a decision that fulfilled his vision for a new beginning in the American South but also precipitated his eventual demise. Shortly after Luke’s arrival in Patona, the Ku Klux Klan was informed that he “was teaching racial equality.” Rumors about his personal interactions with African Americans also began to surface, and he was “threatened with being run out of the country.” By May 1870, the Klan had stepped up its campaign against Luke, this time firing a shot through the window of the room in which he was mistakenly thought to be sleeping. Although the Klan failed to kill Luke that night, he was lynched in nearby Cross Plains less than two months later.²²

More frequent than personal assaults against teachers was the destruction of school buildings and other school property. Between 1865 and 1870, school furnishings

Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-5477]; Affidavit of R. Alexander, [16 June 1866], in *Land and Labor, 1866-1867*, series 3, vol. 2 of *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*, ed. René Hayden, Anthony E. Kaye, Kate Masur, Steven F. Miller, Susan E. O'Donovan, Leslie S. Rowland, and Stephen A. West (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 528-530.

²² Gene L. Howard, *Death at Cross Plains: An Alabama Reconstruction Tragedy* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1984), chaps. 2-9 (quotations on pp. 31, 50, 52). Although the Klan’s ire was no doubt fueled by “lies and half-truths” regarding Luke’s activities (including a charge that he “had been seen hugging a Negro woman”), they probably hid what was really at stake. On the night the Klan threatened Luke, one assailant claimed that Luke “had no business telling blacks about wages and schools and the Bible.” See *ibid.*, 52.

were demolished in at least two Alabama counties, and at least five schools were destroyed by fire. These and other acts of violence were extremely disruptive. More importantly, each generated considerable fear and no doubt caused teachers to question whether it was safe to continue their work.²³

The story of Benjamin Hildreth, a teacher in Greenville, demonstrates how frightening attacks on schoolhouses could be. His ordeal began on May 4, 1866, when “a gang of notorious carracters [*sic*] of the town” embarked on a night of terror that local residents would not soon forget. The spree began at the homes of several citizens, where the gang committed unspecified “outrages” before setting its sights on a new target—the black school. The school was unusual among its counterparts elsewhere in the state. A Freedmen’s Bureau agent reported that Hildreth, a local white man, taught “principally to colored scholars.” Although the agent provided no further details, his wording suggests that Hildreth must also have taught at least a few white students in his one-room school. Perhaps angry about an integrated classroom and its suggestion of racial equality or simply appalled at the thought of Greenville’s former slaves receiving the gift of education, the “gang of notorious carracters” set about destroying the school’s property. Although they did not raze the building, they “broke benches and tables in fact all the Schoolroom furniture” and “burned some of them.” They also “threatened with profane

²³ On damage to school property, see Capt. F. O. Steinberg to Maj. O. D. Kinsman, 20 June 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1722]; Lt. Joseph G. Waters to Judge S. J. Bolling, 21 Dec. 1866, Letters Received, ser. 2323, Subdistrict of AL, Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands, RG 393 Pt. 2, NARA [FSSP C-8686]. For the school burnings, see [O. D. Kinsman] A.A.G. to Bt. Maj. Gen. W. Swayne, 10 Mar. 1866, vol. 4, pp. 293-294, Letters Sent, ser. 3, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1910]; Rev. Jos. A. Travelli to Maj. Gen. O. O. Howard, 25 Oct. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1810]; Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, *Fifth Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen, January 1, 1868*, by J. W. Alvord (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1868), 31.

language the life of Mr. Hildreth,” who somehow managed to hide during the attack.²⁴

Hildreth escaped with life and limb intact on the night of May 4th, but at least three of Greenville’s white citizens were not finished with him. Less than five weeks later, on the very day his school was to open, Hildreth received a shocking letter. Its penmanship may have been crude, but its point was clear.

M^r hildreth
dear Friend

And School mate I am more than Happy to say to you that it would be a very good thing for you to save your Bacon and quit associating with the colored gents and there off-Springs as it is a very bad habit You know you have got a very good character here in this place and for Fear that you should loose your own dear character you take my advice and quit teaching young Africans for fear would become as knowing as you and turn to be in a higher estimate in Society than you and your family my opinion is that a man that would do as you are doing would Steal the grease off a dead negroes cunt to fry Eggs in And Steal the Eggs. I believe you would Steal from a white person quicker than a negro it is nothing more than a certain fact that you are a dam low down old Rascal and you ought to be tarred and feathered and rode on a rail out of Greenville for a man that is run away from one place for Stealing and other lowdown devilmint Should not be permitted to Stay among white people Especially in Such buisness as you are now engaged. I think it would be better for you to follow your old occupation of Stealing than Educating young Kinkie heads from what I can learn of your family they are generally whores and Rogues and the damedest Rascal on earth now if you want to save your bacon and stripes from your old withered ass you had better be vacating your little pets and Save the house you are now harbored in

I sine my Self as your friend
which you will find by taking
my advice

You will have Ten days
to make the decision
from June 1st 1866²⁵

Three independent
characters

²⁴ Capt. F. O. Steinberg to Maj. O. D. Kinsman, 3 June 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1722]. For more on Hildreth’s one-room schoolhouse, see LaWanda Cox, “The Perception of Injustice and Race Policy: James F. McGogy and the Freedmen’s Bureau in Alabama,” in *Freedom, Racism, and Reconstruction: Collected Writings of LaWanda Cox*, ed. Donald G. Nieman (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 202. This was not the only time school property in Greenville was destroyed. In December 1866, E. J. Hicks was accused of, among other things, “destroying desks & benches of the Freedmen’s School.” See Lt. Joseph G. Waters to Judge S. J. Bolling, 21 Dec. 1866, Letters Received, ser. 2323, Subdist. of Ala., Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands, RG 393 Pt. 2 [FSSP C-8686].

Captain James McGogy, the district Freedmen's Bureau superintendent, reported that "from past experience [Hildreth] had every reason to believe that the threats would be carried into execution," and he had therefore postponed the opening of his school until the Bureau could provide protection.²⁶

Hildreth's encounter demonstrates how terrifying it must have been for teachers to be the focus of violent opposition. But it is also useful for understanding how devastating the destruction of a school's furniture could be. Although the Bureau agent in Greenville did not estimate the monetary value of the damage inflicted on Hildreth's school, bills for the construction of a school that was completed in the town in mid-1867 may approximate the costs. Its benches alone cost \$24. Construction of the school, which took sixty-two and one half days, required more than 600 feet of lumber, 130 pounds of nails, two door hinges and eight screws, two door locks, and foundation blocks. Its chimney required bricks and mortar, as well as additional material and labor costs. Before the addition of furniture, the building cost \$210 to complete. With twenty-four benches at \$1 each, the grand total came to \$234.²⁷

²⁵ Anonymous Letter to M^r hildreth, [n.d. June 1866], enclosed in Capt. J. F. McGogy to Major O. D. Kinsman, 20 June 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1722]. I have transcribed the letter verbatim except for the insertion of space at points that lack punctuation but seem like natural breaks; *sic* is not used.

²⁶ Capt. J. F. McGogy to Major O. D. Kinsman, 20 June 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1722]. In 1868, not only was the black school in Greenville once again under attack, but so was one of its teachers. That year "disguised white men burned a freedmen's school house" as well as "the residence of the poor widow lady because she taught the freedmen." See Doss, "White and Black Female Missionaries," 54. The widow was probably Emma Clancy, who served as Hildreth's assistant and continued to teach after Hildreth was fired.

²⁷ C. H. Adams to C. W. Buckley, 21 June 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0244. The figures for the new school in Greenville seem to be about average. Further north in Stevenson, the Freedmen's Aid Commission purchased a school building for \$250. When it was destroyed by fire in October 1866, the Reverend Joseph Travelli, whom the Freedmen's Aid Commission sent to investigate the crime, informed the Freedmen's

As these examples suggest, one night's work by a vigilante could interrupt a teacher's work for months or perhaps indefinitely, all the while leaving him or her to wonder if rebuilding was worth the cost. Such acts of violence reminded teachers that some local whites were not only hostile, but also ready to vent their hostility in criminal activity. "Fires that usually occurred when the buildings were fairly empty may not have caused much loss of life," historian Harriet Doss argues, "but they served to intimidate religious workers and teachers." Nevertheless, the attacks had mixed results. "Some [teachers] feared for their lives," while "others . . . only strengthened their resolve to continue their service as missionaries."²⁸

Sometimes it was not the local whites who were opposed to the teacher, but the teachers who were opposed to the local whites. In at least two instances teachers refused to work in particular locations—both of them plantation schools. In May 1867, George Shorkley, the Freedmen's Bureau subassistant commissioner in Selma, reported that a Mr. Emerson, a teacher on the plantation of former Confederate general William J. Hardee, had returned to Selma after finding it "impracticable for him to teach there." Although Hardee had agreed to a school on his plantation (probably at the request of his workers), he did not appear to be genuinely interested in educating the ex-slaves who worked his land. Indeed, Emerson reported, "the enterprise was not encouraged by Mr. H— in any material way." John Hart, who taught in Tuscaloosa, shared Emerson's disdain for plantation schools. Hart was normally a flexible teacher who was willing to

Bureau it would cost \$222 to rebuild. See Jos. S. Travelli to Major Gen. Swayne, 24 Dec. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0164. For the burning of a school in Stevenson, see Jos. S. Travelli to Maj. Gen. Swayne, 1 Nov. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0147.

²⁸ Doss, "White and Black Female Missionaries," 54.

teach almost anywhere the Freedmen's Bureau sent him. So serious was his offer to teach wherever needed that he had made preliminary arrangements for his "room full of scholars" in Tuscaloosa to be taught by a Miss Benton, a "very efficient teacher." But when Hart's new assignment turned out to be a plantation school, he declined. Although he did not explain his dislike for such schools, Hart apparently knew enough of them to know that he did not wish to teach one.²⁹

Strained relations, prejudice, and hostility between freedmen's teachers and local whites were not unusual. Historians who have attempted to analyze the source of such animosity have concluded that at its heart was the schools' overarching purpose. Freedpeople used education "to define the meaning of freedom, citizenship, and the Civil War," writes historian Hillary Green. They "successfully enshrined the . . . schoolhouse as the fundamental vehicle for distancing themselves from their slave past." While such distance was beneficial to the ex-slaves, their former masters regarded it as reprehensible. In less than a decade, Southerners—both white and black—saw their society, culture, politics, and economy dramatically transformed. The sight of ex-slaves receiving an education served not only as a reminder of how much had changed, but also as a threat to white supremacy. Although white hostility was also directed toward schoolhouses and black students, teachers frequently found themselves a target. "Those who fought so determinedly for slavery," suggests historian Joe Richardson, "could hardly be expected to welcome 'abolitionist emissaries' among their former chattels."³⁰

²⁹ Geo. Shorkley to C. W. Buckley, Esq., 20 May 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0890; Jno. A. Hart to Mr. C. W. Buckley, 2 June 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0632.

³⁰ Hilary Green, *Educational Reconstruction: African American Schools in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 2-3; Joe M. Richardson, *Christian*

Later in the century, a white teacher clarified the underlying threat that black education posed to white supremacy. “Suppose our educational schemes succeeded?” the teacher asked; “suppose we elevate him [the Negro] as a race until he has the instincts and drives of a white man? . . . Being trained for office he will demand office. Being taught as a Negro child the same things and in the same way as the white child, when he becomes a Negro man he will want the same things and demand them in the same way as a white man.” Such aspirations and expectations were anathema to Southern whites who, Dunningite historian Walter Fleming explained in 1904, “have always believed, and will always believe, that the negro should be controlled by them.”³¹

Some historians have argued that the hostility of white Southerners derived solely from the presence of Northern teachers. According to Henry Lee Swint, “The Southerner did not fear the education of the Negro—he feared Negro education in the hands of the typical ‘Yankee teacher,’ under the program of education advanced by the Radical legislatures.”³² But such assessments account only for attitudes toward *Northern* teachers. In Alabama, 57 of the 197 teachers whose regional origins are known were Southerners, and of that number, 18 were white. At least two of those white Southerners were singled out for violence: Benjamin Hildreth, who hid during the attack on his schoolhouse and later received a profane threatening letter, and Emma Clancy, a widow

Reconstruction: The American Missionary Association and Southern Blacks, 1861-1890 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 213.

³¹ Teacher quoted in Claude H. Nolen, *The Negro's Image in the South: The Anatomy of White Supremacy* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1967), 127-128, as cited by Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 486; Walter L. Fleming, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama* (1905; repr., New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), 626.

³² Henry Lee Swint, *The Northern Teacher in the South, 1862-1870* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1941), 95.

whose residence was burned to the ground. Hildreth appears to have been disliked by members of both the white and black communities, which may have accounted for his selection as a target. But Emma Clancy was different. As a Southern white widow, Clancy should have been a protected member of society and therefore exempt from assault.³³

Hildreth's and Clancy's experiences demonstrate that white Alabamians did not reserve their hostility for Northern teachers. As recent scholarship has shown, local whites' attacks on teachers and schoolhouses targeted the symptoms of what they believed to be a larger and more sinister problem. "[T]he early years of Reconstruction marked a period of intense struggle between blacks who wanted to assert themselves and whites who hoped to regain social as well as economic control over their former slaves," argues historian Jacqueline Jones. "[W]hite people," she points out, "associated black education not only with the revitalization of Afro-American life, but with the abolitionist heresy of 'social equality.'" White Southerners harassed, ostracized, threatened, and impeded the work of the teachers because they sought to eliminate the threat to white supremacy that the education of former slaves posed, no matter whether the teachers were Northern or Southern, white or black, abolitionist or not. "It did not take an abolitionist in the classroom to teach the freed people to expect equality and freedom," historian Ronald Butchart emphasizes. "[T]he freed people did not need to be taught that expectation by anyone."³⁴

³³ Alabama Freedmen's Teachers Database. For complaints about Hildreth from black residents of Greenville, see Cox, "Perception of Injustice," 202.

³⁴ Jacqueline Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 77; Ronald E. Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861-1876* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 157-160.

Nonetheless, as Butchart also argues, “[t]he white South was not monolithic.”³⁵ In Alabama, some teachers described local whites as cordial. Others gained the support of members of the white community who, like Dr. A. N. Worthy, a white resident of Troy, realized that education was inevitable or even necessary for “advancing [the freedpeople] *morally* or *socially*.” Still, acceptance had its limits. In 1866, Worthy assured the Freedmen’s Bureau that whites in his town would assist the government in “building up schools Especially for the young.” “[I]t ought to be done,” he asserted “— and, in my opinion, will be done sooner or later.” Worthy made it clear, however, that an integrated school for freedpeople and poor whites would be regarded as “steps taken in the direction of *Social Equality*” and would not be tolerated. Furthermore, not just any teacher would be acceptable. “How far our people would go towards a school taught by an utter *stranger* (a white person) I am at a loss to say,” Worthy warned, but he was “sure that much prejudice & ill feeling would be aroused by the introduction of a ‘School Marm.’” For the position Worthy instead suggested “John Wiley—former slave of Judge Wiley a man of good repute—with a very slight education.”³⁶

Perhaps the slightness of John Wiley’s education or his relationship to a prominent white citizen made him acceptable to local whites. In any case, Worthy was not the only white citizen to approve of the ex-slave. When John Wiley’s teaching position was in jeopardy the following year, his former master’s son, Henry Wiley, petitioned the Bureau on his behalf. Henry Wiley explained that his father’s former slave “has the confidence and kind wishes of the larger & more respectable portion of both

³⁵ Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 161.

³⁶ A. N. Worthy to Maj. Gen. Swayne, 20 June 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0174 (emphasis in the original).

racess.” With the support of local whites in Troy, John Wiley remained the teacher of his school.³⁷

Whites in Union Springs also supported the education of former slaves, at least to the extent of sponsoring a sabbath school. The school, which by July 1866 boasted nearly 200 scholars, was held in the basement of the Methodist church. Once again, however, local whites’ commitment had its limits. When James Leonard, an African-American minister, arrived in Union Springs and announced plans to establish an African Methodist Episcopal Church, the town’s black Methodists agreed to go with him. So angry were the white Methodists at this development that they refused to allow the freedpeople to continue to use the church basement for the sabbath school. The white congregants insisted that it was not black education to which they were opposed, but rather the division of the church. Even so, their reaction indicates that some teachers might be allowed to carry on their work only if they conformed to white expectations.³⁸

By 1867, white citizens in Demopolis, Alabama—among them “influential planters”—were lobbying the Freedmen’s Bureau to establish more schools in the town. At the start of the year, F. R. Hensen, a local white clergyman, said that in addition to the “large and flourishing” black school already in operation, he and a number of planters had agreed to donate an acre of land for a second school. There were, however, stipulations. The school was to be religiously affiliated, and its teachers would be required to attend Hensen’s church. Furthermore, the school would be open only during

³⁷ Henry C. Wiley to Major C. W. Buckley, 30 Mar. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1053. Wiley taught for at least the following two years, but in 1869 he disappears from the record. See Alabama Freedmen’s Teachers Database.

³⁸ Tho. Pullam to C. Cadle Jr., 21 July 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1749].

the agricultural off-season because, Hensen claimed, freedpeople would be more likely to send their children then. His assessment was not altogether unfounded, but he failed to mention that the arrangement would also benefit the school's planter patrons.³⁹

For other teachers, white acceptance came with no strings attached. In Gainesville, George Farrand, a Northern white teacher, described the aid of local citizens as crucial to keeping the town's black schools open. Oscar Waring, a black teacher in Florence, reported that the town's whites "have always, *without an exception*, treated me with respect" and were supportive of freedmen's education. William Gilbert described whites in Union Springs as cordial. In Tuscaloosa, Ellen Benton, whose students were later harassed by the Ku Klux Klan, reported in 1867 that her friendship with a powerful man in town made her feel "well protected" despite the fact that "there have been threats made and most malicious falsehood told" about her. By 1869, Mary Atwater, a teacher in Montgomery, believed that "Southern Sentiment is dissolving." "Alls well that ends Well," she concluded.⁴⁰

³⁹ F. R. Hansen to Major General Wager Swayne, 28 Jan. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1854]. The Freedmen's Bureau took Hansen's request seriously. The chief staff officer to the Bureau's assistant commissioner in Alabama responded that if the planters would uphold their end of the bargain, the Bureau would provide funds for building the additional school. See Major O. D. Kinsman to Rev. T. R. Henson, 2 Feb. 1867, vol. 8, p. 370, Letters Sent, ser. 3, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1854]. In June 1867, Major C. W. Pierce, the Bureau's subassistant commissioner at Demopolis, reported that, although it had once been unsafe to have schools in the town, public sentiment had changed considerably—so much so that they were now demanded in almost every neighborhood. In Demopolis and its vicinity, 913 pupils were attending schools in nine different towns. See C. W. Pierce to Col. O. D. Kinsman 11 June 1867, vol. 139, pp. 100-109, Letters Sent, ser. 78, Demopolis, Ala., Subasst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-2151].

⁴⁰ Geo. A. Farrand, Teacher's Monthly School Report for February 1867, 1 Mar. 1867, Monthly Reports of Teachers, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 6, frames 0424 and 0545; Oscar M. Waring to Mr. C. W. Buckley, 28 May 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1083 (emphasis in the original); W. P. M. Gilbert to Rev. E. P. Smith, 16 July 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 65; E. L. Benton to Rev. E. P. Smith, 28 Oct. 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 88; Mary Atwater to Col. Beecher, 2 Apr. 1869, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1372.

Northern teacher Elliot Whipple thought that he too would be accepted. On June 1, 1867, he “met about fifty Freedmen and as ma[n]y whites” and “explained my mission, told them what they must do &c” in order to establish a school in Lafayette. After his remarks, those in attendance appointed a committee to raise funds to repair the schoolhouse. “[T]he com[mittee] obtained over twenty dollars,” primarily from local whites, Whipple reported, which would be “no more than enough to procure seats, blackboard, &c.” But white citizens’ contributions did not end there. Instead of the “wretched old *flea-inhabited* building” that had been rented, a local judge suggested that another committee raise funds to purchase “the ‘*Old Acad.*’” for \$200. “I have good grounds for believing that the \$200 can be raised here,” Whipple wrote, “as several *prominent* whites have promised to give liberally.” Although he did not remark upon the freedpeople’s monetary contributions, Whipple did note that “the negroes are enthusiastic in the matter.”⁴¹

Whipple also commented on the political climate in the town. On June 3, 1867, a biracial convention met to discuss, among other things, “the congressional plan” for Reconstruction. According to Whipple, “several negroes addressed the crowd without manifesting much common sense, or idea of what they were saying,” prompting complaints by freedmen in the audience that “the speakers of their own race were ‘*no count.*’” Despite that bumpy start, the meeting was eventually brought to order, at which

⁴¹ Elliot Whipple to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 29 May-June 3, 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1086 (emphasis in the original). Although white and black locals agreed to work together to establish a school, relations between the races in Lafayette were otherwise far from harmonious. Whipple complained to the Freedmen’s Bureau that some freedpeople were not being paid for services rendered, while others were arrested on false charges and their pay withheld while they were jailed. See *ibid.* Lafayette was not the only place where whites contributed to freedmen’s education. William Preston Vaughn reports that in Dallas County, Alabama, “whites helped build forty schoolhouses for blacks, and at Montgomery they donated money to a black college and paid tuition for black students at private schools.” See Vaughn, *Schools for All*, 41.

point some white citizens addressed the gathering. “[S]everal speeches made by those who had been original secessionists, but who now *profess* to accept the congressional plan in good faith,” preceded Whipple’s own contribution. “I spoke briefly,” wrote Whipple, “opposing a few ideas which had been advanced but commending most of the remarks that had been made as in accordance with republican sentiments.” Although he did not describe the resolutions adopted by the meeting, Whipple pronounced them “very good, I think, for secessionists to propose and pledge themselves to.”⁴²

Whipple’s initial impression was that “[t]he Freedmen are very ignorant about the method of exercising the right of suffrage, but are jealous of their white neighbors and not willing to trust them at all on *this point*.” They were eager to vote as Northern Republicans might vote, Whipple added, and would therefore “believe almost anything” he told them. The white citizens of Lafayette, on the other hand, suspected Whipple of “radical republican” beliefs and engaged him in “endless discussions on dead issues.” But through patience and perseverance, Whipple had “gained their respect—and secured their cooperation thus far, by opposing confiscation and favoring the repeal of the disfranchising clause, after the state is heartily reconstructed.” In their encounters with Whipple, the white citizens of Lafayette seemed cordial, respectful, and even helpful, and it appeared that his educational work would continue unopposed.⁴³

But Whipple soon discovered that relationships with local whites could change with little warning. On June 15, he reported that although there was an “*immense* amount

⁴² Elliot Whipple to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 29 May-3 June 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1086 (emphasis in the original).

⁴³ *Ibid.* (emphasis in the original). The “disfranchising clause” was the provision of the Reconstruction Act of March 1867 that prevented men who had taken an oath of allegiance to the United States before the war and then served in or supported the Confederacy from electing delegates to the new state constitutional convention or serving in the convention. See Foner, *Reconstruction*, 275-276.

of ‘good will’ *expressed*,” he was unsure how much was genuine. While “the effort to educate the freedmen is worthy of praise,” local whites might have ulterior motives. Whipple told of freedmen who were not paid for their work, were treated unfairly, or were jailed indefinitely “on false charges.” A white man who had killed a freedman was not only acquitted, but “well received among the gentlemen of this county as though no stain of *murder* rested on him.” Moreover, white resentment and mistreatment were not reserved for the freedpeople. “I had not been in the place four hours,” Whipple complained, “before a plan was laid to drive me off, or get me into a scrape to compel me to leave,” and the conspirators offered \$50 to anyone who succeeded in accomplishing that end. When their initial plan failed, a second plot “was coolly discussed” in which Whipple was to be poisoned in a glass of whiskey. When he declined to imbibe, his adversaries hatched a third plot to break into his hotel room and poison his food. After all three plans proved unsuccessful, the group tried to bait Whipple into a fight by making “insulting remarks & covert threats” within his hearing.⁴⁴

Just twelve days earlier, Whipple had seemingly made friends with whites in Lafayette. He even sympathized with them to a degree and appreciated their contributions to freedpeople’s education. He continued to praise the “more respectable & influential men” of the town, who, he believed, disapproved of the schemes against him. But neither their disapproval nor their ostensible support for Congressional Reconstruction translated into protection for Whipple himself. The disjuncture revealed “the real political condition and loyalty of a portion of these people.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Elliot Whipple to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 15 June 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1093 (emphasis in the original).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

An editorial dispute in the local newspaper, the *Chambers Tribune*, shed light on the tension between Whipple, local whites, and Lafayette's freedpeople. "In your Report, as Secretary of the Public Meeting held at the Court House, June 1st," Whipple wrote to the paper's editor, "you put me on record as expressing 'my surprise and gratification at the unanimity existing between the whites and blacks.'" Whipple insisted that he had been misquoted and provided his original statement that he "[w]as extremely pleased at the good will expressed by the white citizens toward the freedmen, the willingness manifested on all side[s] to guarantee equal rights before the law to all, and the generous efforts put forth to educate them and make them worthy to exercise their new rights." Whipple believed that "unanimity" between the races did not yet exist in Lafayette but hoped the dream would someday come to fruition.⁴⁶

Beneath Whipple's letter, the editor, Ike H. Vincent, printed the following remarks:

We publish the above letter for the especial benefit of Gen. Swayne and Governor Patton. We have heard from various sources that these gentlemen consider this County one of the most disloyal in the State, and where the negro is least likely to have justice done them. To prove that such an idea is erroneous, we have from the pen of their own witness, a letter saying how pleased he was to "see the good will expressed by the white citizens towards the freedmen, and the willingness manifested on all sides, to guarantee equal rights before the law to all." If this fails to convince these Radical gentlemen that this Chambers [County] territory is as loyal as any portion of the South, we would like to know what will. If they expect us to grant them equal social rights, they are sadly mistaken, and the promulgation of such an idea will only bring destruction upon the heads of the negroes.

If we, as Secretary, misrepresented the remarks of Mr. Whipple, we assure him that it was unintentional on our part, and if there really exists no unanimity between the two races, the negro is to blame for it, for according to his letter, the whites are doing all in their power to encourage such a feeling. It is not generous

⁴⁶ "Local Items," *Chambers Tribune*, updated clipping enclosed in ibid.

for the negroes to dislike us simply because we are white, we can't change our color.⁴⁷

Vincent's response suggests that Whipple's assessment of less-than-harmonious race relations was accurate. Coupled with the attempts to either kill Whipple or drive him from the town, it also indicated that the cordial treatment Whipple initially described was little more than a facade. Local whites' actions were not the product of genuine support for freedmen's education. Rather, they were an attempt by whites in a notoriously disloyal county to gain favor with the federal authorities assigned to oversee Reconstruction.⁴⁸

Whipple's experiences in Lafayette are a reminder that teachers' interactions with local whites were the products of dynamic, rather than static, relationships. Like Whipple, a teacher might be well received at first, only to have relationships sour. Whites might even disingenuously accept a teacher in an attempt to achieve certain political goals. For teachers like Wilmer Walton and Maria Hopson, white opposition might end peacefully. For others, including Emma Clancy and Mary Wells, white opposition might be an ever-present fact of life.

In part, relationships between teachers and the communities in which they lived and worked reflected Alabama's Civil War experience. In a state that had been bitterly divided over secession, it is perhaps not surprising that teachers' experiences were far

⁴⁷ Ibid. General Wager Swayne was the Freedmen's Bureau assistant commissioner for Alabama, and Robert M. Patton was governor of the state.

⁴⁸ In yet another shift of opinion, Whipple reported to the AMA in August 1867 that members of Lafayette's white community had made good on their promise to help purchase the "Blanchard Male Academy" for use as a freedmen's school. Whipple's tone was optimistic. "The *people*" of Alabama, he wrote, would "accept the congressional plan by a large majority." This observation, combined with the prospect for "free schools & equal treatment for *all*," led Whipple to assert that "it is safe to predict a future of unbounded prosperity for Alabama." See Elliot Whipple to Rev. E. P. Smith, 5 Aug. 1867, AMA, reel 1, no. 75 (emphasis in the original).

from uniform.⁴⁹ “The Southern [white] reaction to the presence of the Yankee teacher was definite, decided, and violent,” historian Henry Swint reports. Such responses were “an intrinsic part of the process of social change since 1865,” Eric Foner suggests.

Whether at the hands of individual assailants or the Ku Klux Klan, freedpeople’s teachers and their students could be the targets of white violence.⁵⁰ But as Wilmer Walton’s and Maria Hopson’s examples demonstrate, whites who initially opposed the teachers and their work could eventually become supportive. In towns such as Florence, the Ku Klux Klan might intimidate one teacher because of her Northern origins and her black race, while another Northern black teacher escaped violent attack. For some teachers, including George Farrand and William Gilbert, opposition seemed to be minimal or non-existent.

In short, there was no standard response from white Alabamians to the men and women who taught the state’s freedpeople between 1865 and 1870. The teachers’ work was not only highly visible to both whites and blacks in the places where they served, but it was also, as historian Ronald Butchart has argued, “always, everywhere, and inevitably

⁴⁹ During the secession crisis, Alabama was home to both extremist “Fire-Eaters” and, especially in the state’s northern counties, dedicated unionists. The citizens of Lauderdale County, for example, voted 230 to 1 in favor of remaining in the Union. So troubled were the residents of Winston County when Alabama seceded that the county attempted to secede from the state, earning the nickname “Free State of Winston.” Although Alabama’s unionists were “a tiny minority marooned in enemy territory,” they made their presence known and braved violence throughout the war “not simply to keep the South in the Union, but to keep themselves and their loved ones *in the South*.” See Margaret M. Storey, *Loyalty and Loss: Alabama’s Unionists in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 4-5. For Lauderdale County’s secession vote, see Capt. Richard J. Hinton to Capt. T. W. Clarke, 18 Sept. 1865, H-118 1865, Registered Letters Received, ser. 3379, Tenn. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-6142]. On Winston County, see David McRae, “Free State of Winston,” *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, accessed Sept. 6, 2016, <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1850>.

⁵⁰ Swint, *Northern Teacher in the South*, 94; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 342. “Those blacks who managed to acquire an education were often singled out for attack,” Foner writes. One freedman in Georgia lost his life because the local Klan believed “he was ‘too big a man . . . he can write and read and put it down himself.’” See *ibid.*, 428.

political.” Thus, teachers’ experiences with local whites were often based less on the teachers’ geographical origins, race, or religious or political affiliation, and more on the political atmosphere in the particular community. In some towns, white reactions to freedmen’s education and their teachers were mild or even supportive. But in areas of the state that had been embittered by war, Union occupation, and Reconstruction, planters believed it necessary to “have full authority over Negro children, to bring them up to know their place and fear to step out of it,” as historian Peter Kolchin points out.⁵¹ In order to gain “full authority,” such white Southerners sought to drive out the men and women who educated Alabama’s ex-slaves.

The teachers of black schools were not limited to interactions with local whites. In addition to their work with black students inside the classroom, teachers in Alabama almost always interacted with the freedpeople outside of it, which some white Southerners considered controversial. Freedpeople’s support for schools was crucial to initiating, maintaining, and continuing the educational work. Indeed, as historian Herbert Gutman has argued, “the former slaves themselves played the central role in building, financing, and operating these schools.”⁵²

Because most freedpeople in post-emancipation Alabama had few material resources, black support for education came in a variety of forms. One way black Southerners assisted teachers was to provide a building to be used as a school. In some places, freedpeople were fortunate enough to own a building, almost always a church,

⁵¹ Butchart, *Schooling the Freedpeople*, xix; Peter Kolchin, *First Freedom: The Responses of Alabama’s Blacks to Emancipation and Reconstruction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972), 63.

⁵² Herbert G. Gutman, “Schools for Freedom: The Post-Emancipation Origins of Afro-American Education,” in *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*, ed. Ira Berlin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 260.

that could double as a schoolhouse. Samuel Gardner, the Freedmen's Bureau superintendent in Selma, reported that members of "a society of freedmen" were "very much interested in educating their children," which prompted them to offer use of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church as a school. Although the building was in need of repairs, Gardner assured the Bureau that if it provided the \$150 needed to fund the work, the money would be "of great and much needed service to the cause of education."⁵³

Local black leadership and community involvement among freedpeople in Florence made it possible for the students of black teacher Oscar Waring to attend school free of charge. "This is the first free school for colored children ever opened in Florence," Waring proudly reported. "[N]o tuition whatever is charged, and books are given to those children whose parents are too poor to purchase them." Waring's ability to operate a free school was due in part to the generosity of the Pittsburgh Freedmen's Relief Commission, under whose sponsorship he taught, as well as the local Methodist Episcopal Church, which allowed him to hold his classes in its building.⁵⁴

Many teachers depended upon the freedpeople to help establish schools and keep them in operation. In spite of teachers' complaints when their students failed to pay tuition or paid less than they had promised, local black communities were a crucial source of support. While freedpeople could not always pay tuition or contribute money, they donated buildings, held fundraising events, and contributed their labor to the

⁵³ Sam S. Gardner to Mr. Buckley, 30 Aug. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 36, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-2183].

⁵⁴ Report of Oscar M. Waring, [2? Nov. 1866], vol. 59, p. 29, Letters Received, ser. 112, Huntsville, Ala., Subasst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-2035].

building, repair, and furnishing of schoolhouses. Indeed, many teachers reported that local freedpeople sustained their schools either in whole or in part (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Schools in Alabama Reported by the Freedmen’s Bureau as Sustained Wholly or in Part by Freedpeople, 1867-1870

Date	Number of Schools	Number of Schools Sustained by Freedpeople
January 1867	51	21 (41.2%)
July 1867	175	33 (18.9%)
January 1868	70	9 (12.9%)
July 1868	78	70 (89.7%)
January 1869	35	29 (82.9%)
July 1869	80	56 (70.0%)
January 1870	27	2 (7.4%)
July 1870	41	24 (58.5%)

Source: Adapted from John Alvord, *Semi-Annual Reports*, 1-10 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1867-70). For a similar table regarding schools in Mississippi, see Christopher M. Span, *From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse: African American Education in Mississippi, 1862-1875* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 42.

When no building could be had, freedpeople often donated their own funds, time, and talents in order to provide a schoolhouse. In Opelika, freedpeople “bought a lot and built a house at considerable expense” for their teacher (who was also their preacher) to use as a school. W. M. Gilbert, a teacher in Union Springs, reported that when no building could be rented for a schoolhouse, the town’s freedpeople “succeeded in putting up a building with a room 40 x 20.” So, too, did the freedpeople of Stevenson pool their resources to construct a schoolhouse where their children could be educated. In Jones Cross Roads, W. T. Hubbard owed his schoolhouse in large part to a freedman who

provided some \$40 of his own money to purchase lumber and nails for the project. And by 1870, at least two schools in Sparta were owned by the town's freedpeople.⁵⁵

Constructing a school or providing a building from within the community was a major contribution to black education, for black-owned buildings saved costly rent payments and eliminated the possibility of eviction.

Some teachers enjoyed the benefit of a building but in less than ideal circumstances. In Huntsville, the Rev. A. S. Lakin reported that the school with which he was associated had "suffered greatly this winter with cold." Lakin dreaded the summer even more, because the school was "located on a grave yard and within fifty steps of a slaughter yard." To remedy the situation, freedwomen in the town "held a Fair and raised some funds" to purchase a farm building to use instead. Try as they might, however, they were still short of their goal, which prompted Lakin to request "\$150 or \$200" from the Freedmen's Bureau.⁵⁶ That the freedpeople of Huntsville, who likely had few resources, were committed enough to organize a fundraiser speaks volumes of their commitment to education.

Another way freedpeople assisted teachers was by circulating news of schools in the area. In 1866, Mrs. M. C. Milligan in Valhermoso Springs reported to the AMA that she had "commenced school with about a dozen scholars," a small enrollment compared

⁵⁵ William M. Gilbert to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 23 May 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0581; Jos. S. Travelli to Maj. Gen. Swayne, 1 Nov. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0147; W. T. Hubbard to Col. Edwin Beecher, 1 Jan. 1870, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1737; Wm. P. Miller to Col. E. Beecher, 8 Mar. 1870, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1773.

⁵⁶ A. S. Lakin to General John [B.?] Callis, 4 Feb. 1867, vol. 59, p. 29, Letters Received, ser. 112, Huntsville, Ala., Subasst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-2042].

to other black schools in the state. But when freedpeople spread the word that Milligan was teaching a free school, her enrollment increased to thirty-five, with more on the way.⁵⁷ Increasing attendance was a crucial objective for teachers because in Alabama “an average attendance of 45” was required in order to obtain recognition by the Freedmen’s Bureau.⁵⁸

In lieu of monetary contributions, ex-slaves aided teachers in other ways. In Athens, for example, many of Mary Wells’s students could not afford to pay tuition, so they paid her in “wood, eggs, cabbage, chickens, and squirrels.”⁵⁹ Since Wells lived among whites who ostracized her for the duration of the Reconstruction period, such provisions must have offered some relief by reducing her need to purchase goods from white merchants. Protection was another form of non-monetary contribution. After Wilmer Walton, the Quaker teacher in Stevenson, was assaulted, local freedmen took it upon themselves to monitor the assailant’s movements. Their willingness to put themselves in harm’s way on behalf of their teacher was telling.⁶⁰

Alabama’s ex-slaves made such sacrifices to establish schools and keep them open because they shared the sentiments of delegates to the Alabama Colored Convention of 1865 who declared that “we regard the education of our children and youth as vital to the preservation of our liberties.” Education was a means to obtain literacy, and literacy was a vehicle for uplift. Freedpeople “had spent more than two centuries observing the

⁵⁷ Mrs. M. C. Milligan to Rev. Sam’l Hunt, 31 July 1866, AMA, reel 1, no. 23.

⁵⁸ G. Shorkley to C. W. Buckley, Esq., 27 Apr. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0876.

⁵⁹ Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction*, 50.

⁶⁰ Wilmer Walton to Dear Friends, *Friends’ Intelligencer* 23, 410-412; Gutman, “Schools for Freedom,” 276-277.

powerful with formal learning . . . ,” Ronald Butchart argues, “and knew that the codes of power that lay in literacy were essential to a people who were to continue to live among whites.” Freedpeople also considered the school an important way to demonstrate to former masters and mistresses their own authority as parents. Education, writes Christopher Span, “signified a new social order in the South in which black parents, not slaveholders, controlled and managed the time and futures of their children.” As Peter Kolchin points out, their efforts “dispell[ed] the planter-fostered myth that Negroes were too childlike and irresponsible to show real affection for or take care of their children.”⁶¹

Yet black efforts to establish schools were more than a way to defy white authority. They were also, as Jacqueline Jones asserts, “an expression of community self-interest.” Religion played an important role, as evidenced by freedpeople who cited a desire to read the Bible as a reason they pursued an education. Learning how to count money, read contracts, and defend oneself intellectually—these skills, too, were dependent on education. “If emancipation was to be meaningful,” Ronald Butchart has argued, “if it was not to end in a form of freedom not far removed from slavery, it must also be political. It must promote equality, protect autonomy, and provide access to information.” Freedpeople expected education to “re-map southern social and racial boundaries,” Butchart suggests. “They intended to make the schoolhouse a fortress of freedom, set deep into territory long claimed by their oppressors.” For the freedpeople, education was “symbolic of emancipation and independence from white control.”⁶²

⁶¹ Convention quoted in Kolchin, *First Freedom*, 85-86; Butchart, *Schooling the Freedpeople*, 8; Christopher M. Span, *From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse: African American Education in Mississippi, 1862-1875* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 43; Kolchin, *First Freedom*, 72.

⁶² Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love*, 3; Butchart, *Schooling the Freedpeople*, 9-12, 15-16.

Freedpeople not only understood the correlation between education and freedom, but also knew they needed teachers in order to maximize their liberty and gain “independence from white control.” They therefore “conceived of the school, donated their churches to house it or built new cabins from scratch, provided fuel, and paid tuition,” writes historian Heather Andrea Williams. Likewise, they promoted educational endeavors “by defending with their bodies both the school and the teachers.” As much as the freedpeople needed teachers in order to enjoy the fruits of emancipation, the teachers needed the freedpeople for their schools to succeed.⁶³

If freedpeople assisted their teachers, many teachers returned the favor. Emma Adams, who taught in Greenville, took her work out into Greenville’s ex-slave community to reach those who were “too old and infirm to get to school.” Adams regularly visited “Aunt Susan,” an “old and infirmed” woman with whom she read the Bible and Sunday School papers. On one such occasion, Adams drew an additional audience of freedpeople, and when she left, “there was no little *discussion* about her *lending* her paper.” “From one to another it had passed,” Adams recounted, “until it came to ‘Sam’—and it ‘had been toted till it was so black he had got to keep it and give her another one.’” In a single visit Adams had thus reached several freedpeople. Not all of Adams’s extracurricular work was as cheerful as her visits with Aunt Susan. When one of her pupils died in June 1867, she spent an afternoon “doing her last work” for the child and perhaps comforting his mourning family.⁶⁴

⁶³ Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 5, 94.

⁶⁴ Emma D. Adams to Mr. C. W. Buckley 29 Mar. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0221 (emphasis in the original); C. H. Adams to C. W. Buckley, 7 June 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0239.

Teachers sometimes played the role of legal advocate for freedpeople or reported racially-motivated injustices. From Lafayette, Elliot Whipple informed the Freedmen's Bureau of a freedman named Stephen Dent who, after working on a plantation for three months, "was arrested, by authority of a loaded pistol, on charge (which he denies) of stealing two bushels of corn." After a trial before a magistrate, Dent languished in jail for almost ten months until he "was bailed out & worked for T. Bradford without wages" before being "recommitted to prison." Dent, who was evidently supposed to assist Whipple with his school, remained behind bars until "a Mr. Driver" offered to "procure his release" on condition that Dent "would work for him a year." Although Dent was no longer jailed, Whipple concluded, "he can not [*sic*] help us much about starting the school, can he?"⁶⁵

In some cases, teachers wrote to the Freedmen's Bureau in hope of securing federal intervention and protection for freedpeople who had been wronged. On more than one occasion, William V. Turner, the former slave teaching in Wetumpka, complained that local authorities were treating freedpeople unjustly. On November 17, 1865, he reported to General Swayne, the assistant commissioner for Alabama, that "last night the police of this place made the law to suit themselves." "[S]everal of the most respectable young Col^d people of this place were cooped up in the calaboose for nothing but being out to a tea party after nine o'clock," he wrote, as were "three or four who were coming from church"—one of whom was Turner himself. "[T]he Col^d people of this place do beg and beseech you to do something in our behalf," he pleaded. Otherwise "we

⁶⁵ Elliot Whipple to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 29 May-June 3, 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 1086.

will never enjoy any of the rights of freedmen.”⁶⁶

By the following year, conditions in Wetumpka had not improved. In June 1866, Turner wrote to Holland Thompson, a black political leader and future representative in the state legislature, to seek his intervention with the Freedmen’s Bureau. “I am getting on very well with my school having no interruption from any one,” Turner reported, but other freedpeople in the town had experienced both violence and injustice. On two separate occasions, “an Ex Rebel captain” named J. P. Hagerty had brutally assaulted freedpeople. One of the victims had reported the incident to a magistrate, James Thomas, who issued a warrant for Hagerty’s arrest. When the case went to trial, however, Thomas (whom Turner described as a “Reconstructed functionary”) declared that “[t]he case didn’t come under his jurisdiction,” then “closed the court without giving the Freedman an inkling of a chance, and turned to him and said ‘Sir (to the Freedman) you have the costs to pay.’” According to Turner, Thomas “asserts that he has authority to take up all freedmen that is not in the employ of some white man.” Turner seemed resolved not to let the magistrate intimidate him. “[I]f he or any other of these Scoundrels attempts to place their fetters on my Civil rights,” Turner threatened, “he will be made to regret it.” Turner asked Holland Thompson to “confer an especial favor on me by letting Gen Swayne see this.”⁶⁷

One teacher took his extracurricular role as legal advocate very seriously. In 1867, George Farrand reported that many freedpeople in Gainesville had been jailed on

⁶⁶ William Turner to Gen. Wager Swayne, 17 Nov. 1865, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1653].

⁶⁷ William Turner to Honorable H. Thompson, 15 June 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 9, Ala. Asst. Comr., RG 105, NARA [FSSP A-1803]. The fact that Turner’s letter is filed among Swayne’s records indicates that Thompson did as Turner asked.

false charges, and “[i]n every part of the community of Freedmen men [are] beaten and on the plantations they were often shot.” Unlike other teachers who simply reported injustices, Farrand took matters into his own hands. He visited “one of the families in which a girl had been beaten with a board” and “assumed the right to investigate,” which prompted whites in the town to threaten to shoot him. In response, Farrand “talked of sending them to Montgomery in irons [giving] the impression to the people that I was empowered with supreme authority from the government.” Thereafter, Farrand wrote, “all the shooting and beating Freedmen every where ceased.”⁶⁸

Not all assistance was legal or protective in nature. Some teachers worked to alleviate destitution among the freedpeople. In 1866, Mrs. M. C. Milligan, who taught in Valhermoso Springs, informed the Freedmen’s Bureau that its rations were not reaching those who were most impoverished. “The Government has already assisted these poor people,” she wrote, “but unfortunately the assistance of the Freedmen’s Bureau does not always enter those parts where it is most needed.” “Poor widows or orphans cannot walk 20 or 30 miles to Huntsville or Decatur to draw their rations,” she pointed out. Miss Peck, a Northern white teacher, was so dedicated to serving the freedpeople of Union Springs that she chose to reside in a black household. Peck could have boarded with a white family fairly close to the school, claimed fellow teacher William Gilbert, but against Gilbert’s advice, she instead moved in with an African-American family, “believing she can there do more good.”⁶⁹

⁶⁸ G. A. Farrand to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 27 Aug. 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0569.

⁶⁹ Mrs. M. C. Milligan to Rev. Sam’l Hunt, 31 July 1866, AMA, reel 1, no. 23; Wm M. Gilbert to Rev. C. W. Buckley, 8 June 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Ala. Supt. of Education, RG 105, NARA, microfilm M810, roll 3, frame 0597.

A teacher's race, gender, geographical origin, religious affiliation, or political leanings did not necessarily dictate a hostile reaction or ensure personal safety. After all, if blackness or Northern origin could explain white hostility, one must ignore the fact that Southern white teachers—at least one of whom was a woman—were also targets of violence. Moreover, in spite of their outsider status, some Northern teachers enjoyed the support of local whites. When white Alabamians lashed out at or ostracized teachers, they attacked what the teachers' work represented. In the aftermath of Confederate defeat, white Southerners discerned the limits of their own authority by watching ex-slaves realize their freedom. Teachers who were suspected of espousing "social equality" were cause for alarm among white men and women who viewed black schools as symbols of their own loss of status. Some white Alabamians attempted to drive out freedmen's teachers in order to close institutions that had come to embody black autonomy.

White reactions to black education, however, were not uniform. Some white Alabamians supported the endeavor if only because they believed it was inevitable. Although such ex-Confederates may not have embraced the changes emancipation brought, they came to terms with at least some of them. They recognized education not only as a fact of life under Reconstruction, but as a newly won right of the freedpeople, and that recognition was crucial to the success of black schools.

Teachers' relationships with the freedpeople were equally critical. Teachers provided academic expertise, but they did so with the help of the people they taught. The black men and women of Alabama, as elsewhere in the South, gave of their money, time, and labor in order to make the dream of education a reality. They supported and

protected the teachers because they recognized education as central to achieving autonomy and power in a society that otherwise denied it.

The teachers of Alabama's black schools had to learn as well as teach. They had to navigate complex community relationships with precision, because a wrong decision could prove disastrous. Some teachers faced open hostility from local whites, and even supportive relationships could sour. Similarly, they had to work with the freedpeople they served as they worked to establish schools. For white teachers, doing so meant learning to interact with people who had recently been enslaved, while for black teachers, it meant learning to be leaders, rather than peers, in the black community.

The reactions of local communities, both white and black, are important not only in understanding Alabamians' responses to emancipation and Reconstruction, but also to discovering the complexities of being a teacher in the state's first schools for ex-slaves. In a new educational system plagued by a lack of funding, limited learning materials, and inadequate facilities, local inhabitants' actions and reactions made teachers' work either more or less difficult. Local whites might provide much-needed support for black schools. Conversely, they could severely impede a school's ability to function, sometimes by acts of violence. By the same token, freedpeople were not merely the recipients of education; they were also benefactors of the schools. For good or for ill, successfully or not, the teachers who pioneered black education in Alabama found that their duties inevitably took them beyond the classroom.

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