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## **Embattled Learning: Education and Emancipation in the Post-Civil War Upper South**

Lucas Somers

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EMBATTLED LEARNING: EDUCATION AND EMANCIPATION IN THE POST-  
CIVIL WAR UPPER SOUTH

by

Lucas R. Somers

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate School,  
the College of Arts and Sciences  
and the School of Humanities  
at The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the establishment of schools for and by formerly enslaved African Americans in Kentucky and Tennessee in the decade after the Civil War, analyzing the different individuals and organizations that supported or opposed those efforts. Members of Black communities strove to secure an education for children and adults while doing everything in their power to maintain control of those schools. Widespread poverty, racism, and uncertain political status necessitated that African Americans accept help from outsiders, especially from teachers and agents sent by the federal government and northern benevolent associations. The central argument is that the ultimate failure to create quality educational opportunities for freedpeople occurred in large part because of deliberate decisions to perpetuate inequality made by groups and individuals tasked with helping Black communities.

This study is primarily focused on advancing two specific subfields of the historiography of the post-Civil War South. First, it builds on the scholarship that interprets emancipation not as a single celebratory event but instead as a process that did not immediately improve the lives of newly freed people. Second, this dissertation builds on the body of work about the education of formerly enslaved African Americans in the former Confederacy. The present study is focused on the Upper South region to uncover specific experiences of emancipation that will contribute to broader understandings of this history. Kentucky and Tennessee, more specifically, offer the chance to examine the experiences of emancipation and early Black education beyond the purview of full-scale Radical Reconstruction, as they were either loyal or already “reconstructed” before federal policies could take effect. Because civil state governments remained in power

throughout this period, former Confederates reclaimed political control in both Kentucky and Tennessee by about 1870, therefore significantly limiting the opportunities for racial progress witnessed in the Deep South. As this work demonstrates, however, African American communities made important advancements during the postwar decade by leading the movement for their own education and working to maintain control of their schools to the best of their ability.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the assistance of many individuals to whom I am extremely grateful. I would first like to thank my dissertation advisor Dr. Susannah J. Ural who consistently supported me throughout the PhD program at the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) and in the development of this project, even when it changed directions more than once. Her mentorship has reinforced my passion for the study of history, which I hope to pass on to another generation of students during my career. I would also like to thank Dr. Kyle Zelner for being so instrumental to my experience at Southern Miss, inside and outside the classroom, having served on both my comprehensive exam and dissertation committees. He gave me so many opportunities to grow as a graduate student and learn what it means to be a good colleague. I am grateful to others serving on my dissertation committee, Dr. Andrew Haley, Dr. Max Grivno, and Dr. Patrick Lewis, as each of your feedback has been crucial to this project. Thank you as well to Dr. Allison Abra, Dr. Rebecca Tuuri, and Dr. Heather Stur who served on my exam committee and were influential in my graduate education. Each of you helped me develop as a scholar in ways I could not have imagined several years ago, and this project would not be what it is now without having you all as professors.

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the Lexington Public Library in Lexington, Kentucky, and the Southern Historical  
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## DEDICATION

I am fortunate to have an amazing support system of family, friends, and colleagues whose continuous support has sustained me during the years I spent working on this project. To my wife, Kari Lynn, thank you for being my partner through six years of graduate school, dealing with the stress and anxiety that went along with that, and for moving more than seven-hundred miles to be with me as I finished. Your consistent encouragement, patience, and proofreading have helped me during this journey more than you can know, and I love you very much for it. To Pam and Bob, my parents, thank you for giving me every opportunity to pursue my dreams, even when it meant letting me live at home well into my mid-twenties. I am also blessed to have two older sisters, Hannah and Sarah, who always modeled the work ethic and integrity that has kept me on this path for so long. To my in-laws, Diane, Skip, and all the Besings, thank you for welcoming me into your family and for always cheering me on through the various milestones of working on the PhD. I dedicate this work to you all.

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## CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

Elijah P. Marrs believed education offered the chance for a better future and dedicated a significant part of his life to helping a younger generation enjoy its advantages. Secretly learning to read and write as a child held in bondage, he spent his first decade in freedom teaching other formerly enslaved people in Kentucky. Soon after escaping to join the Union Army in 1864, Marrs began sharing his knowledge with other soldiers in his unit, and about two years later, after leaving the military, he opened a primary school near his home in Simpsonville, Kentucky in 1866. Operated and supported by local African Americans, Marrs's first educational institution required parents to pay a tuition of one dollar per month per student. With a total of 150 students, the Black board of trustees paid Marrs a salary of twenty-five dollars per month. Importantly, Simpsonville's school received no funding from the state, the federal government, or any missionary society.<sup>1</sup> The following year, Marrs moved to the nearby town of La Grange where he taught more than one hundred African-American children but received a monthly check for fifteen dollars from the Freedmen's Bureau—a federal agency operating in the post-Civil War South. Soon after arriving, his school was forced to divide into two institutions because of a sectarian disagreement between Black Methodists and Baptists in La Grange. This created controversy as both new schools claimed a right to federal aid, and the Bureau decided to pay each a smaller sum of ten dollars per month.<sup>2</sup> This account highlights the determination of Black educators like

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<sup>1</sup> Elijah P. Marrs, *Life and History of the Rev. Elijah P. Marrs, First Pastor of Beargrass Baptist Church, and Author Rev. Elijah P. Marrs* (Louisville, Kentucky: The Bradley & Gilbert Company, 1885), 11-15, 28, 77-78; Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 97.

<sup>2</sup> Marrs, *Life and History*, 80-82.

Marrs to share the opportunity provided through learning with newly freed communities. Marrs's experiences as a teacher underscore, too, the willingness of formerly enslaved people to make financial sacrifices for their own education and the difficulty of obtaining outside assistance, even at the height of racial progress during Reconstruction.

Throughout his career as a teacher, Elijah Marrs navigated both the violent white resistance to Black education and the financial challenges of sustaining schools without sufficient government support. Marrs had personal encounters with the Ku Klux Klan while leading schools in three separate towns: Simpsonville, La Grange, and, later, in New Castle, Kentucky. In the first case, a white mob rode into his yard, fashioned switches from trees, and threatened everyone inside. That night, the vigilantes retreated from the house without physical confrontation. On a separate occasion in Simpsonville, Marrs witnessed a man he believed to be in the Ku Klux Klan fire his gun into a group of students while they were outside for recess.<sup>3</sup> Marrs and his schools fortunately survived subsequent confrontations with violent whites, though similar attacks throughout the region resulted in the loss of both teachers and schoolhouses, often shattering educational opportunities for Black communities.<sup>4</sup> Struggling mightily to maintain his efforts on the tuition from his impoverished students and unreliable stipends from the Bureau, by the early 1870s Marrs developed more creative ways to raise his own salary.<sup>5</sup> Beginning with

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<sup>3</sup> Marrs, *Life and History*, 78-79; Williams, *Self-Taught*, 122.

<sup>4</sup> Marrs, *Life and History*, 86-90.

<sup>5</sup> In early 1869, Marrs's La Grange school raised thirty dollars per month from tuition and received fifteen dollars per month from the Freedmen's Bureau. A year later, he requested additional federal aid as he was in desperate need of money. Elijah P. Marrs, "Teacher's Monthly School Report," January 1869, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 52, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed October 16, 2021); Marrs to Runkle, March 13, 1870, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 45, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 9, 2020).

the 1871-1872 school term in La Grange and again the following year in New Castle, he held spring exhibitions, selling tickets to the public and raising more than a hundred dollars at each event.<sup>6</sup> While white terror threatened the lives of Marrs and his students, his educational efforts faced other challenges on a daily basis. Without a public school system incorporating African-American communities in Kentucky, quality education for formerly enslaved people required more than their personal sacrifices could provide. As this study demonstrates, even when their white allies provided such governmental support, racial equality among those schools remained out of reach.

During the late 1860s, Tennessee's Republican state government passed legislation awarding tax revenue to Black schools, representing a significant contrast to educational policy in Kentucky. John Eaton, Jr. served as the state's Superintendent of Public Instruction from 1867 to 1869, and his administration required each county to open a separate school for African-American children to receive state funds for white schools.<sup>7</sup> Even at its peak, however, Tennessee's public school system did not guarantee every community the same educational opportunities. African Americans in the town of Sparta, for example, were prevented from opening a school because they lacked both a building and a teacher. By February 1868, an appointed board of trustees, consisting of three Black men, working in conjunction with one of Eaton's local superintendents, had raised enough money from their community to purchase a piece of land on which to build

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<sup>6</sup> Marion B. Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky: Volume 1 From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891* (Frankfort: The Kentucky Historical Society, 1992), 248-249; Marrs, *Life and History*, 90-93.

<sup>7</sup> Passed in March 1867, this legislation required Black schools to be formed when at least twenty-five school-aged freed children lived in the district. See *Acts of the State of Tennessee, Passed at the Second Adjourned Session of the Thirty-fourth General Assembly, for the years 1866-67* (Nashville, 1866), 33-48.

a schoolhouse. Having done this, Sparta's trustees petitioned the Freedmen's Bureau, requesting an additional \$300 to help them erect the building and to send them a teacher, preferably an African-American teacher.<sup>8</sup> Purchasing the land, however, was not enough to receive assistance from the Bureau. The freedpeople in Sparta would also have to raise an additional \$100 to spend on the building itself to get the amount requested.<sup>9</sup> This federal practice of requiring Black communities to pay for their own education was pervasive in the Upper South in the late 1860s, and it betrayed the American tradition of free common schools. Evidence reveals that the Freedmen's Bureau implemented an educational system after the Civil War that discriminated against formerly enslaved people by denying them a free school system, which they justified with the rhetoric of the free labor ideology.

By about 1870, much of the progress in Tennessee had been reversed by the return of Democrats and former Confederates as political leaders, who ended Eaton's public school system and implemented policies like a poll tax to disfranchise Black voters. Convinced that their state would no longer act on their behalf, Black Tennesseans appealed directly to the federal government for a specific change: the integration of public schools. An 1871 convention of African Americans in Nashville asked Congress to "establish a national school system

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<sup>8</sup> James McGinnis, Charles Clark, and William Dibrell, "Petition of Trustees of col'd school at Sparta, White Co., Tenn.," February 20, 1868, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 51, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed December 10, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> William F. Carter to David Burt, February 20, 1868, BRAFL, NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 48, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed December 10, 2019).

of instruction which will be impartial to all of our citizens.” They described the degrading experience of being “forced by local authorities to separate schools,” which compounded the frequent KKK attacks against their schools and the inability of many Black communities to pay to maintain schools to create a desperate situation.<sup>10</sup> Facing the same challenges, a similar 1874 convention in Tennessee again called on the federal government to create a system of mixed schools, and such a policy was concurrently being debated in the nation’s capital.<sup>11</sup> Specifically, a provision of the proposed Civil Rights Bill of 1875 would have forced all public schools in the country allow Black and white students to be instructed in the same classrooms. African-American educators insisted that this policy was the only way to ensure equal educational opportunities for their communities. At this point, however, Eaton intervened to ensure such a measure never became law. The most prominent white advocate for Black education in postwar Tennessee had been appointed by President Grant as the U.S. Commissioner of Education in 1870, and in this role, Eaton convinced lawmakers in Washington, D.C. that forcing mixed schools on the South would reverse the educational progress made since the end of the war.<sup>12</sup> His conversations resulted in Congress killing the mixed schools provision. This ensured that the opportunities for racial equality in public education would have to wait, and it reveals how white allies of Black education consciously determined that

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<sup>10</sup> State convention of the colored citizens of Tennessee (1871: Nashville, TN), “Proceedings of the State Convention of the colored citizens of Tennessee, held in Nashville, Feb. 22d, 23d, 24th & 25th, 1871.,” *Colored Conventions Project Digital Records* (accessed January 7, 2022), <https://omeka.coloredconventions.org/items/show/309>, 3.

<sup>11</sup> “Civil Rights: The Colored State Convention at Nashville,” *The Daily Memphis Avalanche*, April 30, 1867.

<sup>12</sup> John Eaton, Jr., *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), 261-264; Earle H. West, “The Peabody Education Fund and Negro Education, 1867-1880,” *History of Education Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1966): 3-21.



outcome. Racial equality in education was denied by the same local and Northern whites who had actively assisted in the establishment of schools for African Americans, making it a failed endeavor from the start.

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During the decade following the Civil War, formerly enslaved African Americans in Kentucky and Tennessee fought for educational opportunities because they represented a crucial element of both their freedom and citizenship. Even facing the myriad challenges of emancipation, they paid monthly tuition, contributed to subscription drives, served as teachers and trustees, and endured violence from their white neighbors to ensure their children could attend school. Because it was so important, Black communities strove to maintain control over their own education as much as possible. Still, widespread poverty and uncertain political status necessitated they accept help in establishing schools from local whites, state governments, the federal government, and Northern missionaries. Importantly, these allies perceived Black education not as a means of becoming equal American citizens but instead as a way to either morally uplift African Americans or to create an educated workforce. With these perceptions about the purpose of schools for freedpeople, local and Northern whites perpetuated a racial hierarchy viewing people of color as inferior, resembling the racial system that had supported slavery. This study argues that, despite the determination of Black Kentuckians and Tennesseans to achieve racial equality through education, their mission was doomed from the start by the racial prejudice of their white allies.

“Embattled Learning” explores the education of formerly enslaved African Americans during the decade following the war in the unique political context of the

Upper South. Kentucky and Tennessee, more specifically, offer the chance to examine the experiences of emancipation and early Black education beyond the purview of full-scale Radical Reconstruction. Beginning in 1867, and continuing for the next ten years, Republicans in Congress passed a series of laws and constitutional amendments, which offered equal civil and political rights to formerly enslaved populations in the South. The federal government enforced these policies through the military occupation in most of the former Confederacy, and each of those states rewrote their constitutions to reflect more progressive racial views. This transformative period included the introduction of biracial public-school systems and rise of Black politicians to positions of power at the state and national level. But Kentucky's loyalty during the Civil War and Tennessee's early readmittance into the federal Union prevented Radical Reconstruction, and its revolutionary potential, from affecting racial progress in the same ways. While troops and Freedmen's Bureau agents operated for a short period, the civil state governments remained autonomous from federal control. And when they had no choice but accept the ratified Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, white lawmakers found means of oppression, like poll taxes, that would be used more broadly during the Jim Crow-era to prevent African Americans from voting and exercising other basic civil rights. Focusing on these Upper South states, therefore, highlights the specific experiences of freedpeople with minimal federal protection, who nevertheless fought for their own equality.

While this study responds to the vast scholarship on the era of Reconstruction, it is more specifically focused on advancing sections of two subfields of that

historiography.<sup>13</sup> The first of these interprets emancipation not as a single moment in history but as an imperfect and often very painful process for the newly freed population. Jim Downs has been at the forefront of this scholarship. His monograph *Sick from Freedom* proves that freedom did not represent an instantly improved life for all enslaved people in the South. Instead, it sometimes led to more tragic outcomes, as conditions were so poor that newly emancipated people battled deadly diseases and continued oppression, if in new forms.<sup>14</sup> Downs further argues that the Freedmen's Bureau, even with sick and suffering African Americans under their care, expected former slaves to sign contracts to work for their former owners because they believed that labor would prevent Black people from becoming ill and disorderly.<sup>15</sup> Amy Murrell Taylor's recent study on Civil War refugee camps is another significant contribution to this scholarship

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<sup>13</sup> Eric Foner's *Reconstruction* remains the best single volume on the era in general. Other recent historians have offered important studies that focus more on the experiences of emancipation, upon which this study builds. See Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988); Elsa Barkley Brown, "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life from Slavery to Freedom" *Public Culture* 7 (1994): 107-146; Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Laura F. Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Nancy Bercaw, *Gendered Freedoms: Race, Rights, and the Politics of Household in the Delta, 1861-1875* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003); Wilma A. Dunaway, *The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Susan Eva O'Donovan, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Kate Masur, *An Example for All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle over Equality in Washington, D.C.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Carol Emberton, *Beyond Redemption: Race, Violence, and the American South after the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Jim Downs, *Sick From Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 16.

<sup>15</sup> Jim Downs, *Sick From Freedom*, 122.

because it illustrates the Union Army's direct role in the process of emancipation during the Civil War.<sup>16</sup> While those camps quickly disappeared after the war's end, Taylor's focus on localized emancipation and the federal government's treatment of refugees offers important context for the postwar transition to the end of slavery in Kentucky and Tennessee. This branch of the historiography is well illustrated in an essay collection edited by Downs and David W. Blight entitled *Beyond Freedom*, which collectively pushes historians away from the celebratory narrative of emancipation to fully appreciate the realities of newly freed men and women.<sup>17</sup> These scholars suggest that historians focus on how formerly enslaved peoples fit within their local communities and polities to determine the extent to which they could exercise the rights and privileges granted them by law, thereby providing a more accurate explanation for the legal curtailing of those rights by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup>

The second subfield to which this study responds has focused on the establishment and maintenance of schools for freedpeople during Reconstruction. While this scholarship dates back several decades, two recent studies have provided inspiration for the approach and arguments found herein.<sup>19</sup> Heather Andrea Williams's *Self Taught* is

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<sup>16</sup> Amy Murrell Taylor, *Embattled Freedom: Journeys through the Civil War's Slave Refugee Camps* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> David W. Blight and Jim Downs, eds., *Beyond Freedom: Disrupting the History of Emancipation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Blight and Jim Downs, eds., *Beyond Freedom*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> That older scholarship is nonetheless significant for its impressive insights and information that laid the groundwork for the work that followed. See Henry L. Swint, *The Northern Teacher in the South, 1862-1870* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1941); Phillips, "A History the Freedmen's Bureau in Tennessee" (Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1964); Ronald E. Butchart, *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction: Freedmen's Education, 1862-1875* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980); Jacqueline Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1980); James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); The use of gender analysis

one of the first books to shift historians' perspective in viewing African Americans as the driving forces in educating their communities rather than focusing on the Northern whites who aided them.<sup>20</sup> The current study follows that analytical framework to reach the conclusion that, along with the violent opposition from Southern whites, freedpeople's educational opportunities were also crushed by their allies in establishing schools. Hillary Green's *Educational Reconstruction* is another important work that examines African Americans' consistent focus on freedom and citizenship during their educational pursuits and that analyzes the various partners involved in establishing schools for Black communities.<sup>21</sup> Importantly, she focuses on two Southern cities—Richmond, Virginia and Mobile, Alabama—to make specific arguments about urban African Americans after the Civil War. Green also pushes scholars beyond the traditional chronology of Reconstruction to look at the long-term development of statewide public-school systems, asserting that the drift toward Jim Crow segregation and inequality in education took place slowly and was not guaranteed until about 1890. This study, however, argues that this shift took place much faster in Kentucky and Tennessee because they never benefitted from the extensive racial progress that Radical Reconstruction allowed for in Virginia, Alabama, and elsewhere in the former Confederacy. It also shows how this process played out differently in rural versus in urban areas. “Embattled Learning” fills a

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and more accurate demographic data has created a more nuanced understanding of freedmen's school teachers in recent books and articles: Jim Downs, “Uplift, Violence, and Service: Black Women Educators in the Reconstruction South,” *The Southern Historian* 24 (Spring 2003): 29-39; 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).

<sup>20</sup> Williams, *Self-Taught*, 5-6.

<sup>21</sup> Hilary Green, *Educational Reconstruction: African American Schools in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 3.

void in the historiography by fully examining education and emancipation in two Upper South states where opportunities for equality had been squashed by 1875.

This work draws upon primary sources that trace the establishment of African-American schools in Kentucky and Tennessee from various perspectives. The records of the Freedmen's Bureau represent one of the largest and most important archival collections for this project. Officially the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, this branch of the U.S. Army operated during and after the Civil War to facilitate the transition from slavery to a free labor society throughout the South. The Bureau began its occupation of Tennessee in 1865 and the following year in Kentucky. Agents—both military officers and civilians—spread across each state and reported to Assistant Commissioners stationed in Nashville and Louisville respectively. These documents describe agents' efforts to oversee the signing of labor contracts, build and maintain freedpeople's schools, indenture Black children to white families, and, at times, to uphold the civil and political rights of newly emancipated people.

The Freedmen's Bureau records allow this study to emphasize the voices of the formerly enslaved population during the process of emancipation and to assess the nature of federal occupation in these Upper South states. Historians over the past several decades have examined many of these documents, and the addition of those sources to studies on Reconstruction helped disprove the racist interpretations of the Dunning School.<sup>22</sup> Recently, Jim Downs cautioned scholars to remain aware that African-American voices in the Freedmen's Bureau documents were recorded by white agents

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<sup>22</sup> The *Freedmen and Southern Society Project* at the University of Maryland launched in 1976 and collected many of the Freedmen's Bureau records into several published volumes.

who held their own biases and objectives separate from the interests of black communities.<sup>23</sup> By providing appropriate context and using the analytical approach modeled by Downs, the Freedmen's Bureau records reveal invaluable information about Southern communities' transition to the end of slavery. Additionally, because military Reconstruction did not have total authority in Kentucky or Tennessee, Bureau agents were often the only representatives of the federal government remaining in many counties. Their interactions with local Blacks and whites, therefore, might have been the only significant contact some communities had with federal occupiers after the Civil War.

Similar to the Freedmen's Bureau, Northern churches deployed missionaries throughout the South during and after the Civil War to teach African Americans. The archives of organizations like the American Missionary Association (AMA) contain correspondence from teachers with detailed reports of their schools, pupils, and events within their adopted communities as well. These records explain the role missionaries played in the education of African Americans in postwar Kentucky and Tennessee. This study also draws from diaries, letter collections, personal memoirs, census data, military service records, and veterans' and widows' military pension applications. The memoir of John G. Fee, a white Kentucky abolitionist who worked to educate freed men and women at Camp Nelson and Berea College—the first interracial college in Kentucky—during and after the war, provides insight into the struggle for equal education of both races. While most memoirs of the nineteenth century were written by white men and women,

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<sup>23</sup> Jim Downs, "Emancipating the Evidence: The Ontology of the Freedmen's Bureau Records," in David W. Blight, and Jim Downs, eds. *Beyond Freedom: Disrupting the History of Emancipation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017): 160-180.

several African Americans from Kentucky and Tennessee also recounted their experiences during slavery and emancipation. Particularly significant to this exploration is the memoir of Elijah P. Marrs. Born into slavery in Kentucky in 1840, Marrs served in the Union Army during the Civil War, taught freedpeople in several towns in his home state during the postwar years, and later became a prominent Baptist minister.<sup>24</sup> His account demonstrates the realities of emancipation from the perspective of someone who prioritized education to advance the Black communities to which he belonged during and after Reconstruction. Marrs also provides a good example of Black teachers' roles in freedmen's schools and how black Kentuckians experienced attacks from the Ku Klux Klan and other violent white vigilante groups. Finally, the case studies within rely on census data, service records, and pension applications to supplement the archival sources and provide personal information that cannot be found elsewhere, especially in the case of African Americans.

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“Embattled Learning” is divided into two parts. This structure intentionally prioritizes the perspectives of Black Kentuckians and Tennesseans as they strove to educate their own communities over those of local and Northern whites who directly interacted with them. Leading scholars like Elizabeth R. Varon and Lacey K. Ford have similarly organized their monographs into sections that emphasize a central argument or an effective means of approaching a subject.<sup>25</sup> This study begins with Part I, entitled

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<sup>24</sup> Marrs, *Life and History*.

<sup>25</sup> Lacey K. Ford, *Deliver Us from Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Elizabeth R. Varon, *Disunion: The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008). Along



“African Americans Educate Themselves,” which amplifies Black voices as much as possible to understand their goals for education. Though often filtered through white individuals who kept records for various purposes, this section remains focused on the experiences of formerly enslaved people. Part II shifts the focus to the different groups of mostly whites who acted as either allies or adversaries to African-American schools. It becomes clear that, in each case, these groups had their own goals in mind for Black education. While freedpeople viewed acquiring knowledge as a means of defining both freedom and citizenship, whites instead wanted to use education to keep African Americans in their inferior stations. It is crucial, therefore, that this study gives preference to the Black experience so that it is not overshadowed by the dominant white narrative that justified inequitable education during the postwar decade. It is necessary to challenge that repressive narrative to finally bring light to the racial inequities in American schools today.

Part I begins with a chapter providing important context for understanding the challenges of emancipation. “Navigating Emancipation in the Upper South” breaks down three specific challenges facing newly freed people in the Upper South, providing evidence and analysis for each. First, the practice of the local, state, federal government indenturing Black children to white families forced many parents to fight for custody with their former owners. The Freedmen’s Bureau oversaw the signing of Black “apprentice” contracts, a practice with tragic results that represented the federal government’s perpetuation of white social control over African Americans. Bureau

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with Varon and Ford, Hilary Green organized *Educational Reconstruction* into four parts, each containing two chapters.

agents often required white landowners to guarantee they would provide a basic education for the child, and, for this reason, formerly enslaved mothers and fathers similarly promised they would send their child to school if given custody. This process illustrates that even the federal government viewed education for formerly enslaved people within the context of continued Black dependency on wealthy whites, while freedpeople insisted using their schools to gain independence from their former owners. Second, freedpeople frequently faced poverty in the postwar years, which required all members of the family to contribute to the earning of wages. This typically meant that young children joined their parents laboring on a farm, forcing them to balance work with their desire to attend school. Third, Black communities made careful decisions regarding who they allowed into their schools as teachers, especially taking into consideration the race and gender of teachers. This was done, first and foremost, to protect the school from local white violence. Black teachers, for example, gained little unwanted attention when living amongst freedpeople, but a white woman, on the other hand, represented a particular challenge when no local white family was willing to board her.

Considering those challenges facing formerly enslaved people, chapter 2 and chapter 3 focus respectively on Kentucky and Tennessee, and each contain two case studies. “Striving for Independence: Freedpeople’s Schools in Kentucky” begins with an examination of multiple schools for African Americans in Hopkinsville, Kentucky. Two of these schools were housed in Black churches and taught by Black men, who also served as community leaders, and a third school was taught by a Northern white woman. Examining these institutions highlights how much freedpeople valued maintaining control of their own education as well as the difficulty of sustaining their efforts without

sufficient outside funding. The next Kentucky case study focuses on the urban setting of Louisville, whose antebellum free Black population provided a foundation of churches and schools upon which freedpeople expanded. Importantly, however, widespread poverty prevented equal access to schools, even among the city's African-American population. In chapter 3, Black communities in two Tennessee towns demonstrated a willingness to use whatever political or social power was at their disposal to maintain control of their schools in the face of white abuse and violence. Lebanon's freedpeople actively resisted an abusive, unqualified teacher who supported opposing political ideas, essentially forcing him to leave. They also spoke out against a federal agent who took advantage of the community to make money. In Franklin, an active Union League preparing Black men for their first election specifically campaigned for the Republican candidates because that party helped built their schools. It was following a day of Black political campaign events that a crowd of former Confederates attacked League members in downtown Franklin.

Part II, "Whites Influence African-American Schools," shifts the focus from African-American communities to the outside groups who interacted with Black schools in meaningful ways. Chapter 4 examines local whites who either worked with the Freedmen's Bureau or violently opposed schools for freedpeople. During its organization in 1865 and 1866, the Bureau frequently appointed prominent white civilians and former slaveholders to oversee federal operations in their respective counties. Even when these individuals supported educational efforts, they largely did so to control formerly enslaved people or to create an educated workforce that benefited elite whites. The federal government's reliance on these Southern leaders, therefore, represented a significant

barrier to racial equality. Local whites also used terrorism to reverse education progress for African Americans by attempting to chase their teachers out of town or by destroying their schoolhouses. While other scholars have viewed the general lack of educational resources and daily attacks on freedpeople's homes as more devastating than the destruction of schoolhouses, this study argues that those factors were connected and collectively represented a significant impediment to progress. These losses resulting from white terror often overwhelmed rural Black communities who lacked the means to find another teacher or to rebuild.

Chapter 5, “‘Let Expediency . . . Go to the Dogs’: State Governments Suppress Equal Public Education Opportunities,” grapples with the state governments’ involvement in African-American education, which had, by the mid-1870s, ensured that public schools would remain racially separate and unequal. During the immediate postwar years, Kentucky and Tennessee each passed legislation on behalf of Black schools, but neither provided adequate funding or access to quality education. When the federal government retreated from the South and refused to pass a national law to integrate public schools, the states were left on their own to manage a segregated system with distinct racial inequities in education, the remnants of which remain today.

Chapter 6 analyzes the federal government’s support for African-American education. The Freedmen’s Bureau, operating on behalf of the federal government, implemented a plan that placed unrealistic expectations on formerly enslaved people. Using the popular free labor ideology as justification, the Bureau required freedpeople to pay for their own education, thereby violating a tradition of American primary education being free to individual families. This policy reveals that the federal government viewed

Black communities as existing outside of the traditional white community, and it suggested that education for African Americans should focus solely on moral living, hard work, and self-subsistence. This resulted in a clash between Black leaders who wanted more from their education and white leaders who wanted less. Finally, chapter 7, “Conflicting Missions: The Educational and Religious Work of Northern Benevolent Societies,” explores those missionaries directly involved in teaching schools in Black communities. It argues that Northern whites’ racist attitudes prevented them from seeing persons of color as their equal, and they, consequently, perpetuated a system based on bigotry. As the most likely allies of freedpeople, white missionaries adopted their own racial hierarchy that kept African Americans in inferior positions. This analysis also presents those missionaries as complicated and fallible individuals who were often convinced of their positive role in uplifting formerly enslaved people but were nevertheless unable to see beyond their own bigotry. Despite sometimes espousing ideas of racial equality, they generally failed to implement them in practice, resulting in continued discrimination.

This study, at its core, is about understanding why African Americans never gained access to the same educational opportunities as their white neighbors. Even during a period of revolutionary potential, Kentucky and Tennessee failed to approach the level of progress made in the Deep South where freedpeople gained more independence and political power during Reconstruction. While the violent attacks were devastating, overwhelming evidence shows that white Southerners’ resistant to Black schools did not solely account for the failure to achieve equal educational opportunities. Rather, those individuals actively working *with* African Americans to build and teach schools were

directly responsible for the segregated and unequal system that emerged. Despite their sacrifices and determination to gain a level of independence, formerly enslaved people ultimately could not sustain education on their own. In the end, they were forced to work with white reformers, their perceived allies, and the result was separate and unequal educational institutions.

PART I – AFRICAN AMERICANS EDUCATE THEMSELVES

## CHAPTER II – NAVIGATING EMANCIPATION IN THE UPPER SOUTH

For four days in August 1865, more than one hundred delegates from twenty-two counties and six military regiments met in Nashville, Tennessee as representatives of state's African-American population to discuss the meaning of freedom and the responsibilities it carried. This convention especially advocated for right to vote, for which they had already petitioned the state legislature and failed. Before adjourning, the delegates agreed to publish two public addresses to accompany the meeting proceedings: one to "loyal white citizens of Tennessee" and the other to Black Tennesseans. The first aimed to persuade whites why their former bondsmen deserved suffrage, addressing various arguments made by the opposition. To the complaint that African Americans were too "ignorant" to vote, the convention declared, "that learning is not the test in this State, if it were, many white voters would be stricken from your rolls."<sup>1</sup> The second address advised freedpeople on the best ways to convince their white neighbors and legislators of their worthiness. It fell to Black communities, argued the delegates, to forget the injustices of slavery and work to improve their relationships with whites. They attributed education as a key barrier between the races and claimed it was African Americans' responsibility to rectify it: "there is a gulf between the whites and us, because of intelligence on their part and illiteracy upon ours. Neither politicians nor Congress can bridge this chasm, nor can it be done by any save ourselves, than by our own exertions in

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<sup>1</sup> State Convention of Colored Men of the State of Tennessee (Nashville: 1865), "Proceedings of the State Convention of Colored Men of the State of Tennessee, with the addresses of the convention to the white loyal citizens of Tennessee, and the colored citizens of Tennessee: Held at Nashville, Tenn., August 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th, 1865," *Colored Conventions Project Digital Records* (accessed June 23, 2020), <https://omeka.coloredconventions.org/items/show/522>, 21.



the direction of education, uprightness, the acquiring of wealth, and industry.”<sup>2</sup> While those leading Tennessee freedmen denied literacy as a legitimate requirement to vote, they recognized that education would allow African Americans to participate in society as a whole alongside whites and they bore responsibility for securing schools for their communities.

A similar convention of Black Kentuckians took place in March 1866, though this group of delegates ultimately decided to take a softer stance than their neighbors to the south on demanding political equality. In its “Declaration of Sentiment and Resolutions,” published after the meeting, this body emphasized the need for formerly enslaved people to lift themselves out of poverty to eventually earn a position equal to that of white Kentuckians. The delegates were split on the issue of suffrage, specifically whether to demand it now or to wait, as some explicitly conceded to legal and social inequality for the present time. Significantly, some delegates warned that demanding suffrage too soon would endanger Black communities, especially those in rural parts of the state.<sup>3</sup> Even in freedom, African Americans living in rural areas were more vulnerable to white violence than those in larger towns or cities. In rural Kentucky, they often depended on their former owners for employment and land on which to live, while cities offered more diverse economic opportunities and a sense of security within dense Black communities. After many lengthy debates, they finally agreed to a more conservative resolution on that

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<sup>2</sup> State Convention of Colored Men of the State of Tennessee (1865: Nashville, TN), “Proceedings,” 25.

<sup>3</sup> First convention of colored men of Kentucky (1866: Lexington, KY), “Proceedings of the first convention of colored men of Kentucky held in Lexington, March the 22d, 23d, 24th and 26th, 1866. With the constitution of the Kentucky State Benevolent Association. Printed by order of the convention.” Colored Conventions Project Digital Records, accessed July 26, 2020, <https://omeka.coloredconventions.org/items/show/459>, 9.

issue. They agreed to surrender, “for the time being, the ballot box and the doctrine of equality before the law.” Arguably more importantly, they continued, “we ask the opportunity, we demand the privilege of achieving for ourselves and our children . . . the blessings which pertain to a well ordered and dignified life.” Only months after their legal emancipation, freed Kentuckians expressed a desire to earn for themselves the right to stand on equal footing with whites. They prioritized education as key to their communities’ future advancement and as necessary to their becoming citizens. Their hesitation in demanding political equality also highlights how difficult it was for Black Kentuckians to earn a measure of independence from dominant whites.<sup>4</sup>

These meetings of Black men were the first of their kind in those respective states, each coming on the heels of freedom from slavery. While they could not represent every African-American community across the two states, the conventions revealed the manner in which leaders of formerly enslaved communities believed Blacks should formally express their stance on significant issues. Each group of delegates emphasized the necessity of elevating their populations through hard work and education in order to prove that they deserved political, legal, and social equality. Additionally, they insisted that the responsibility for this advancement belonged to themselves alone. Over the next several years, the African-American communities largely followed these plans and sent thousands of their children to the hundreds of schools organized throughout Tennessee and Kentucky. They often requested and accepted aid from the Freedmen’s Bureau,

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<sup>4</sup> First convention of colored men of Kentucky (1866: Lexington, KY), “Proceedings,” 21-24.

Northern benevolent societies, and some of their white neighbors, but they continuously refused to relinquish African-American control over African-American education.

African-American communities took the lead, despite elite white resistance, in educating their children during the transition to freedom. It is also essential to remember that this process of establishing and maintaining African-American education in the aftermath of the Civil War took place among the numerous other challenges that faced a newly emancipated people. This chapter analyzes three major obstacles that threatened the movements to establish schools for freedpeople and to Black education in general. Additionally, these issues were crucial to defining the processes of emancipation because they shaped the daily lives of formerly enslaved people. First, the efforts of parents to gain custody of their own children from white families often included consideration for the child's education. Second, freed adults and children had to balance the necessity of laboring for wages or shares of crops with their desire to attend school, which was especially difficult considering the pervasive poverty forced upon those people. Third, African Americans took great care in deciding who they would allow to enter their communities to teach their children, especially taking into consideration a teacher's race and gender. Examining various places across Kentucky and Tennessee, this study aims to show representative examples for these states in order to account for their internal diversity. The challenges discussed herein were also important factors of emancipation throughout the Reconstruction South, though freedpeople in these Upper South states experienced them within their own specific context.

Former slaveholders sometimes kept and refused to give up possession of African-American children, and local and federal authorities supported this process by

sanctioning the practice as “apprenticeships.”<sup>5</sup> In parents’ appeals to the Freedmen’s Bureau to gain custody, they often promised to provide their children with an education, which proved to be a deciding factor in their favor. In these cases, or in those where Black families remained intact, this brought added challenges because sending children to school often cost up to one-dollar tuition per student. For impoverished families, it would have been tempting to contract their children’s labor for wages, though freedpeople’s schools still thrived in many rural areas of the Upper South. It became necessary, therefore, for young freedpeople to balance their desire for education and the necessity of working to supplement their families’ income. African-American communities also dealt with the threat and reality of white violence directed at their schools. Because members of the local white community often targeted white teachers, freedpeople began to insist upon hiring African-American educators who could blend into their communities as a means of defense. As a result, formerly enslaved people in Tennessee and Kentucky faced tremendous challenges when they assumed the responsibility of educating adults and children in their communities during the immediate postwar years.

Location played an important role in determining the assistance given to freedpeople’s schools throughout the South, and the political status these two Upper South states prevented progressive federal Reconstruction policies from benefitting formerly enslaved people as profoundly as they did in other states.<sup>6</sup> Because Kentucky

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<sup>5</sup> Mary Farmer-Kaiser, *Freedwomen and the Freedmen’s Bureau: Race, Gender, and Public Policy in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 97-99.

<sup>6</sup> Hilary Green and Heather Andrea Williams emphasize the Reconstruction Acts of 1867-1868, and the state constitutions that followed, as pivotal to creating a system of public education in former Confederate states, Green, *Educational Reconstruction: African American Schools in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 27-35, 49-

remained loyal during the Civil War and Tennessee had been readmitted into the U.S. government in the summer of 1866, the Reconstruction Acts subsequently passed by the Republican-dominated Congress could not be fully implemented. While the Freedmen's Bureau and some army personnel offered aid to formerly enslaved people in the two states for a few years, the civil state governments remained autonomous and separate from the military regimes that emerged elsewhere in the South. That process—of the federal government requiring most of the former Confederacy to thoroughly transform the society that had enslaved millions of African Americans before rejoining the U.S. (often called Radical Reconstruction)—simply did not apply to Kentucky or Tennessee. Their politicians had the power to legislate on behalf of the newly freed populations and sometimes attempted to block federal laws to grant them equal status to whites. Despite the initial political leadership of white Unionists, by about 1870 former Confederates took control of each state government and, when necessary, revised legislation to align with antebellum racial ideologies. The unique political context of Kentucky and Tennessee, therefore, limited the scope of Northern educational support for African Americans, leaving freedpeople subject to policies that, from the beginning, established racially segregated and unequal school systems. In this initial section, the present study attempts to explain how this distinct version of Reconstruction affected the creation of Black education and the broader experiences of emancipation.

Not only did Kentucky and Tennessee stand apart politically from the former slave states that made up the Confederacy, their internal diversity also created very

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50; Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 79, 193-194.

different experiences of emancipation and access to education. The Freedmen's Bureau and U.S. Army presence could not occupy every locality across each state, and the aid they provided often depended on proximity. Northern benevolent organizations also had to be strategic in where they sent teachers and missionaries due to their limited funds and personnel. People living in the more isolated and rural regions were less likely to interact with outsiders than those living in larger town and cities. Additionally, the concentration of formerly enslaved population varied, with the western and central regions of both Kentucky and Tennessee containing the vast majority of African Americans while they represented a much smaller proportion of the population in the eastern Appalachian counties. This study aims to show how freedpeople's schools operated in all the different contexts and contains evidence from each of the major regions. Evidence shows that African Americans remained committed to supporting schools within their communities because they viewed education as crucial to their conceptions of freedom and citizenship. Understanding Black involvement and visions for their nascent schools facilitates a discussion in the second part of this study on the various groups who offered assistance to freedpeople. As it will then become clear, both local and Northern whites believed that Black schools served a very different purpose, one that reflected and reinforced a racial hierarchy that viewed freedpeople as inferior. Because African-American communities were forced to accept outside aid, their efforts to achieve equal access to quality education was thus condemned to fail from the beginning.

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The apprenticing or indenturing of African-American children to white families after emancipation during the early postwar period represented the *de facto* continuation

of slavery and directly impacted Black education in many Upper-South communities. Historians have, in recent years, studied this practice, explaining its role in defining freedom during Reconstruction and even describing the Freedmen's Bureau role in facilitating it.<sup>7</sup> While the Bureau oversaw and approved the signing of many apprenticeship contracts, Black parents also sought help from the same federal agents to reunite with and gain custody of their children. In their efforts, freed mothers and fathers attempted to show the Bureau that they could both financially support their children and send them to school. Similarly, the white landowner often had to agree in the indenture contract to teach the child "to read, write and cipher," demonstrating that Black apprenticeship laws took into account the importance of educating formerly enslaved children. Importantly, this practice allowed former slaveholders to benefit from the free labor of African Americans until they became legal adults, which could be nearly two decades in some cases. Several examples of freed parents struggling to gain custody of their children in the Upper South expose this as one of the most significant threats to Black freedom in the era, one that was nevertheless sustained by the federal government during Reconstruction. These apprenticeships, therefore, revealed a key difference between how African Americans and whites understood the meanings of freedom and education.

The apprenticeship of formerly enslaved children became a widespread response to emancipation by local and state governments across the South. It represented a key

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<sup>7</sup> Peter W. Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex, and the Law in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Farmer-Kaiser, *Freedwomen and the Freedmen's Bureau*; Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976).

pillar of the Black Codes written by many former Confederate state legislatures following the Civil War to reinstate a racial order resembling the former slave society. Kentucky passed its own Black Codes in late 1865, which resembled antebellum laws that supported slavery. Policies regarding vagrancy and apprenticeships, for example were revised to both coexist with legal emancipation and exert social control over newly-freed African Americans.<sup>8</sup> Tennessee, on the other hand, did not officially pass these sorts of laws in the immediate postwar period as their Republican governor and legislature supported policies that fell in line with the Radical Congress in Washington, D.C. which led to the state's early readmission into the Union. Still, the Volunteer State practiced those same policies as local officials interpreted existing laws in a racist manner, which comprised *de facto* Black Codes.<sup>9</sup> Both of these Upper South states indentured young Black children to white families as a means of continuing to control the formerly enslaved population.

Among the various functions it carried out during the postwar period, the Freedmen's Bureau played an important role in determining the custody of freed children. While federal agents sometimes intervened to help African-American parents retrieve their children who had been wrongfully bound out, historians have proven that the Bureau also supported the system of apprenticeship. Indeed, the federal government begrudgingly accepted it as "an unavoidable evil," while the Freedmen's Bureau enacted policies to prevent its abuse without stopping it. Instructing agents to "respect the African

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<sup>8</sup> Beverly Forehand, "Striking Resemblance: Kentucky, Tennessee, Black Codes and Readjustment, 1865-1866," (1996), *Masters Theses & Specialist Projects* Paper 868, <https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses/868>, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Forehand, "Striking Resemblance," 13.



American family and protect black children,” the Bureau nevertheless indentured children “whose parents were absent or incapable of supporting them for whatever reason.”<sup>10</sup> Importantly though, education, or at least the promise of it, played a crucial role in those custody battles. The apprenticeships sanctioned by the Freedmen’s Bureau often required that the child be provided with a basic education before the expiration of the indenture. Those issued by civil governments, on the other hand, sometimes allowed for the child to be paid a sum of money and given a set of clothing in place of an education. When family members—typically mothers—petitioned the Bureau for custody of an African-American child, they often pledged to educate them. Along with trying to convince Bureau agents to act on their behalf, this promise also reflected freedpeople’s broader interest in teaching their communities in order to take advantage of their newfound freedom.

The Freedmen’s Bureau office in Louisville, Kentucky received many requests from relatives seeking assistance in gaining custody of Black children. Freedpeople throughout the South escaped their owners’ control in large cities like Louisville for more opportunities, including easy access to numerous schools for African Americans. On March 23, 1867, Ellen Thompson filed an official complaint with Bureau Assistant Superintendent R. W. Roberts to gain custody of her seventeen-year-old son James Miller. Formerly owned by a wealthy farmer in Jefferson County named Abraham Blankenbaker, Thompson and her son remained on that land for a year after emancipation became legal.<sup>11</sup> In July 1866, her son, James Miller, was legally indentured to work as a

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<sup>10</sup> Farmer-Kaiser, 107-108.

<sup>11</sup> Ancestry.com, *1870 United States Federal Census*, Harrods Creek Precinct, Jefferson County, Kentucky.

farmhand for Feilding Blankenbaker, her former owner's son. Preparing to leave for the city around Christmas of the same year, Thompson wanted her son to go with her, but Feilding Blankenbaker threatened her, "not to interfere with the boy and if she did he would make her suffer for it." Making a convincing case to the federal officer, she explained that she is married to a man named Lewis Baker who is "a sober and industrious man," that her and the rest of her children are doing well. She continued, "That it is her wish and intention to give all her children some education," and that her husband, "has a desire to assist in procuring a partial education for all her children."<sup>12</sup>

If Ellen Thompson's story and desire to educate her children were not enough to convince Roberts to help retrieve her son, then Feilding Blankenbaker's own testimony might have been enough. Because he received approval for the indenture from the county court, Blankenbaker neither received parental consent nor did he promise to educate young Miller. He ended his deposition by claiming that neither Thompson nor her husband were "capable of taking care of their children."<sup>13</sup> According to Freeman's Bureau policies, failing to receive consent from parents and not promising to educate the child was enough to void an apprenticeship. The officer who received the testimonies initially declared, "The binding is illegal," which should have settled the matter in favor of Thompson. However, statements in support of Blankenbaker, especially by a family physician named T. S. Bell, helped convince federal officials to stray from their own

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<sup>12</sup> Deposition of Ellen Thompson, March 23, 1867, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 116, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 10, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Deposition of Feilding Blankenbaker, March 27, 1867, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 116, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 10, 2020).

rules. Even the commanding officer for the Kentucky Bureau determined that leaving Thompson's son with Fielding Blankenbaker, rather than allowing his mother custody was in "the best interest of the child."<sup>14</sup> The Bureau likely found it easier to consider him an orphan in need of a white family because Miller's biological father was seemingly out of the picture and not petitioning alongside Thompson for custody of their son. In this case, the promise of education mattered less to the Bureau than the perceived living situation that favored an elite white family over a Black mother's wishes.

Regardless of the end result, mothers and other relatives commonly used educating their children as a way to prove they could support them as well as any white family. In November 1866, Darney Matthews arrived at the Louisville Bureau office seeking help to find her daughter who was living in a different part of the state. In 1860, her owner at the time, John B. Bell, brought Matthews to Louisville where he hired her labor out to someone else while keeping her young daughter with him. During the war, Bell moved to Christian County, taking Matthews's four-year-old Julia with him. In her petition, Matthews assured the agent, Calvin H. Frederick, that she "is able to labor and gets constant employment with families in this city, and will be able to raise and educate the child."<sup>15</sup> This plea had apparently achieved its purpose. By 1870, Julia lived with her

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<sup>14</sup> Ellen Thompson vs. F. Blankenbaker, March 27, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 116, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 10, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Deposition of Darney Matthews, November 9, 1866, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 115, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 2, 2020); A similar situation played out in Washington County, Tennessee where a Black mother petitioned the Bureau to retain custody of her four children, explaining that they were all attending school. See Herman Bokum, *Daily Journal of Complaints*, February 13, 1867, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1911, Roll 21, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 10, 2020).

mother in Louisville and attended one of the city's many freedpeople's schools.<sup>16</sup> In a different case, Adam Woods traveled from Leavenworth, Kansas to Louisville in late 1867 to place his three nephews in his custody or that of other relatives living in Kentucky. His brother and the children's father, Pleasant Woods, died while serving in the Union Army, and their mother had already died before that. The boys lived with their former owner Franklin Ditto in Meade County, where they had all been apprenticed to him by the local government, which only required him teach them, "the trade, art, and business of farming."<sup>17</sup> Adam Woods insisted that the boys had four aunts and two other uncles living nearby, and any of them would be "able and willing to assist in raising and educating these children."<sup>18</sup> The Freedmen's Bureau evidently decided not to interfere with the indenture, as all three children appeared in the 1870 census working as farm laborers for Ditto.<sup>19</sup>

Education also proved important in custody disputes in which the mother and father disagreed with each other about the child's future. In May 1867, for example, Nancy Harris requested that the Bureau inquire into the status of her eleven-year-old son who she had left with Elizabeth Searce, a white woman in Clark County, Kentucky around Christmas in 1865. The mother had previously been denied custody because the

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<sup>16</sup> Ancestry.com, *1870 United States Federal Census*, Fourth Ward, Louisville, Jefferson County, Kentucky.

<sup>17</sup> Indenture of Apprenticeship, Frank Ditto and Milton Woods, John Woods, and Pleasant Woods, June 4, 1866, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 116, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 10, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> Deposition of Adam Woods, November 11, 1867, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 116, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 10, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Ancestry.com, *1870 United States Federal Census*, Fourth Ward, Louisville, Jefferson County, Kentucky.

child's father, Anderson Bartlett, gave Searce consent to apprentice the boy. Harris asked the Bureau to determine whether that indenture was legal and specifically whether Searce had "bounded herself to educate the child as the law directs." She ended her deposition by promising that she and her current husband were "abundantly able to raise and educate her boy and are anxious to have him with them."<sup>20</sup>

The custody of freed children was arguably one of the most personal and emotional aspects of emancipation, especially for single mothers. The use of a child's educational prospects to convince federal officials to award African Americans custody could have been a strategic way of appearing respectable to Northern white men. Certainly, some Bureau agents were inclined to perceive a Southern white home as a more positive environment for Black children than living with a single mother who struggled to lift herself out of poverty. However, those mothers' efforts could have also been genuine expressions of a desire to provide their child with a future that finally offered them opportunities beyond slavery. In either case, those custody battles represented a daily reality for African-American communities across Kentucky and Tennessee during the immediate postwar period, even as they strove to provide schools for their children.

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A second daily reality of freedpeople in Kentucky and Tennessee that represented a challenge to their movement for education was the necessity and nature of their labor. As was the case throughout the postwar South, the majority of African Americans in

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<sup>20</sup> Deposition of Nancy Harris, May 30, 1867, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 116, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 10, 2020).

these Upper South states lived in rural areas and labored in agriculture. That fact alone made it difficult for many children to attend school, as most schools were established in towns and cities. While plantation schools likely existed in some places in the Upper South, they were much more common in the major cotton-producing states of the Deep South. The Freedmen's Bureau sometimes required labor contracts to guarantee the schooling of Black laborers, but, even in those cases, planters largely retained control over the educational institutions.<sup>21</sup> Scholars have demonstrated the transformation of Southern agriculture and economy resulting from emancipation as well as African Americans' desire to own land to gain independence from their former owners.<sup>22</sup> Because the federal government never followed through on promises to redistribute land from white slaveholders to their former bondspersons, Black landownership remained low during this era. For this reason, many formerly enslaved people in rural Kentucky and Tennessee continued laboring for their former owners.<sup>23</sup> Even in freedom, labor continued to dominate the time and source of livelihood for many African Americans. Their reliance on wages or a portion of the crop made it difficult for them to afford

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<sup>21</sup> James D. Anderson's discussion of former slaves negotiating with planters for access to schools does not necessarily apply to most places in Kentucky and Tennessee as his examples came from the Deep South. See Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South*, 20-25; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 164-168.

<sup>22</sup> Roger L. Ransom, and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Foner, *Reconstruction*, 392-411; Michael W. Fitzgerald, *The Union League Movement in the Deep South: Politics and Agricultural Change During Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989).

<sup>23</sup> Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 269-270; Robert Tracy McKenzie, *One South or Many? Plantation Belt and Upcountry in Civil War-Era Tennessee* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 149.

tuition for schools, thus forcing families to prioritize work over education during certain seasons of the year.

Newly emancipated people in the Upper South were sometimes forced to balance their children's work and school lives, pulling them out of school during harvest season to earn wages for the household. In places with less dense Black populations, communities struggled to financially support a school, revealing the impoverishment facing each family. Additionally, seasonal student absences threatened to close the schools altogether. In November 1866, Orville T. Andrews—a New York native, veteran of the Fifteenth Illinois Volunteer Infantry, and teacher in Cleveland, Tennessee—informed the superintendent for education that the freedpeople struggled to subscribe money toward their school owing to a poor growing season. That Black community also had to postpone their plans to build a church and school building that winter for lack of funds.<sup>24</sup> Approximately 300 freedpeople resided in that Appalachian Valley town located in southeastern Tennessee, and they managed to send roughly one third of that population to school that winter.<sup>25</sup> During the following March, however, Andrews noted that his day school lost seventeen students who “were compelled to leave school in order to raise

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<sup>24</sup> Orville T. Andrews to Burt, November 26, 1866, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 13, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> William J. Witcher to the American Missionary Association, April 24, 1867, American Missionary Association Manuscripts, Amistad Research Center, Tilton Hall, Tulane University, New Orleans, La.; Andrews, “Teacher's Monthly School Report,” January 1867, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 52, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 13, 2020); Andrews, “Teacher's Monthly School Report,” February 1867, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 52, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 13, 2020).

a crop.”<sup>26</sup> While some children missed school in order to work, a group of adults dedicated time to both. Andrews also taught a night school of about thirty-five adult students who went from the fields during the day to the classroom in the evening.<sup>27</sup> A local minister observed of these students, “I am sorry for those that are grown up to manhood—they labor by day for a support, and then go at night to school, and pay their five cents per head as a tuition fee—this looks very hard.”<sup>28</sup> The threat of poverty both hindered their ability to provide themselves with an education and necessitated that freed children labor alongside their parents rather than attend school when needed. This did not, however, prevent both adults and children from spending scarce time and money for an education.

When students missed school for agricultural work, their absences often followed predictable patterns. Edwin H. Freeman, a Northern Black minister teaching in Franklin, Tennessee, noted in October 1867, “most of my old scholars are now at work in the cotton field most of them will return next month.”<sup>29</sup> The statistics in his school reports reflect this attendance trend. Freeman’s prediction proved accurate as his students expanded from sixty-two in October to seventy-nine in November. Attendance continued to grow during the winter months, reaching as many as 114 enrollees in February. Among these new students were fourteen more boys than girls, likely showing a gender discrepancy of children working in cotton fields. While Freeman specified that those

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<sup>26</sup> Andrews to Burt, March 30, 1867, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 13, 2020).

<sup>27</sup> Andrews to Burt, November 26, 1866.

<sup>28</sup> Witcher to AMA, April 24, 1867, Box 163, AMA Manuscripts; Ancestry.com, *1870 United States Federal Census*, Sixth Civil District, Bradley County, Tennessee.

<sup>29</sup> Freeman to Burt, October 30, 1867, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 48, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 13, 2020).



absent were his “old scholars,” only five more students attending in the winter were older than sixteen.<sup>30</sup>

Elsewhere in Middle Tennessee, Carrie Alford witnessed an exodus of students from her Tullahoma school to their farms on the eve of spring. She stated, “some of the older scholars are leaving school to work on farms and more will leave us as the season advances. Some small children come in to take their places.”<sup>31</sup> Teachers could expect to lose a significant portion of their students during growing seasons, roughly between the months of March and October, which underscores the importance of freed children laboring on farms in Black communities. However, those children would often return during the winter months, causing a significant increase in school size from November to February. Even if they only attended school for a few months during the year, African Americans ensured that the children and adults in their families were educated, while also working to support themselves financially.

The need for African-American children to work as farmhands to avoid suffering from poverty also occurred in the tobacco-growing regions in Kentucky. In the spring of 1867, the Black community in Henderson struggled to afford tuition to send children to school. The Freedmen’s Bureau superintendent stationed there observed that sixty

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<sup>30</sup> Freeman, “Teacher’s Monthly School Report,” October 30, 1867, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 52, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 13, 2020); Freeman, “Teacher’s Monthly School Report,” November 1867, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 52, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 13, 2020); Freeman, “Teacher’s Monthly School Report,” February 1868, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 52, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 13, 2020).

<sup>31</sup> Carrie Alford to Burt, February 27, 1867, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 13, 2020).

potential students were “unable to attend school & pay tuition their fathers being in service now or died in the service.” If those living soldiers could send money home, it did not amount to enough for those families to pay tuition.<sup>32</sup> Even those families without a father in the military often needed the income from their children. Bailey wrote to Noble that in his section of western Kentucky freedpeople required assistance paying a teacher due to widespread poverty. He explained his region “is a large Tobacco Growing country & a large amount of the labor required to cultivate it could be & was done by children & it now furnishes them their means of subsistence & employment.”<sup>33</sup> In the nearby town of Owensboro, Bureau agent A. W. Lawwill pointed out a major obstacle confronting their “flourishing” schools: “the ignorance of many of the Freedmen who are made to believe by the whites that to educate a negro makes him lazy.”<sup>34</sup> This comment likely arose in reaction to the same trend of freedpeople prioritizing work over school in cases in which their subsistence depended on scant but hard-earned wages or a portion of crops. Throughout Tennessee and Kentucky, the necessity of work among freedpeople represented a crucial challenge to the education of their communities.

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A third challenge to the education of formerly enslaved people involved the necessity of Black communities to make careful decisions about who should teach their

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<sup>32</sup> Wells S. Bailey to Ely, March 31, 1867, “Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 20, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 15, 2020).

<sup>33</sup> Bailey to Noble, April 1, 1867, “Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 20, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 15, 2020).

<sup>34</sup> A. W. Lawwill to Ely, January 31, 1867, “Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 20, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 15, 2020).

schools. While local freedpeople sometimes led schools on their own, it was common for the Freedmen's Bureau and benevolent societies to connect communities with trained teachers from Northern states. These women and men, both Black and white, traveled either by themselves or with immediate family to instruct newly emancipated children and adults. They typically went to rural towns and relied on the Bureau, their respective societies, or the freedpeople themselves to pay for their travel, board, salary, and any other expenses incurred. Whenever possible, Black communities voiced their opinions to their Northern allies about who they wanted to take over the schools in which they had already invested a significant amount of time and money. Their specifications typically centered on the race and/or gender of the prospective teacher. African-American community leaders did not make these decisions out of prejudice or arbitrary preferences. They had to take seriously the security of their homes and neighborhoods before they welcomed a Northerner into their schools, as they knew well how some members of the white community might react. For this reason, a Northern Black teacher could easily blend into their number without raising much suspicion. Additionally, Black parents and trustees cared about whether they hired a woman or man because of the gender norms and expectations they sought to foster in their children. African Americans' preference for teachers reflects the overarching significance of race and gender during the processes of emancipation, but it also highlights yet another difficulty freedpeople faced in their efforts to acquire an education.

The desire of African-American communities to acquire teachers of their own race was more overt and obvious than their preferences for a teacher of a specific gender. Reports and correspondence from the Freedmen's Bureau and the American Missionary

Association (AMA) often mentioned a racial preference as they scrambled to hire enough teachers to fill the many vacancies. In his final report for the year 1867, Kentucky's Freedmen's Bureau education superintendent Thomas K. Noble explained to general superintendent J. W. Alvord that white violence towards freedpeople's education forced "the employment of colored teachers in nearly all places in the state not garrisoned by U.S. troops." Local whites directed much of their hostility toward those Northerners leading freepeople's education through the destruction of school buildings, threats against white teachers, and "constant efforts to prejudice the Freedmen toward those who are seeking to help them." Importantly, Noble pointed out, "It is also lately impossible to assume board for white teachers." This forced him to begrudgingly hire more African-American teachers, who he believed "as a class are not capable of conducting their school as they may be conducted."<sup>35</sup> The Tennessee superintendent noted that white teachers faced significant condemnation for boarding with Black families, which led him to support the employment of African-American teachers.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, Erastus Milo Cravath, an AMA secretary serving Kentucky and Tennessee, similarly preferred sending white teachers to educate freedpeople. He commented, "Our experience with colored teachers leads us to be very cautious in commissioning them."<sup>37</sup> Despite these federal officers' and missionary leaders' preference for white teachers, their respective offices

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<sup>35</sup> Noble to Alvord, January 1, 1868, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 2, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 15, 2020).

<sup>36</sup> C. E. Compton in J. W. Alvord, *Eighth Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1869), 63-64.

<sup>37</sup> Erastus Milo Cravath to Burt, November 14, 1866, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 13, 2020).

received numerous requests from African-American trustees and their allies for teachers of their own race.

Representatives of African-American communities made requests for Black teachers to the Freedmen's Bureau with the explicit purpose of protecting themselves from potential hostility. In September 1867, Columbus M. Johnson, John Rogan, and Warner Cage, three Black trustees of a Gallatin, Tennessee school wrote to the Bureau's education superintendent for the state, David Burt, regarding assistance from the Bureau for the upcoming school year. These trustees expressed gratitude in advance for any help continuing their school beyond the current month but continued that they "would deem it as a great favour to allow us to choose our own teachers." These men then insisted that if a group of strangers were sent to teach their school, "that it will only stir up a bad feeling between us and the whites." Because of the tense feelings surrounding state election during the previous month, Black communities knew their white neighbors needed little provocation to incite violence against them. For this reason, Johnson, Rogan, and Cage wanted to avoid "anything that would have a tendency to incur their displeasure."<sup>38</sup> Burt responded to the trustees by informing them that in order to receive assistance from missionary groups and the Bureau, they "must have some respect to their judgement in the selection"<sup>39</sup> of a teacher.<sup>39</sup> This essentially forced Gallatin's Black community to decide between receiving much-needed financial assistance for the survival of their

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<sup>38</sup> Columbus M. Johnson, John Rogan, and Warner Cage to David Burt, September 20, 1867, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 48, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 13, 2020).

<sup>39</sup> Burt to Johnson, Rogan, and Cage, September 23, 1867, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 5, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 13, 2020).

school and ensuring their own safety from white violence that was emerging across Middle Tennessee in the form of the Ku Klux Klan. In that same region, a board of trustees for a school in Fayetteville knew they had no choice but to find an African-American teacher because they recently “had school house burnt by having a white teacher.”<sup>40</sup> When freedpeople expressed racial preferences for prospective teachers entering the community for the first time, they made intentional decisions to protect their educational investments and themselves. This represents a key reason African Americans strove to maintain control of their schools while accepting outside aid.

Other appeals for African-American teachers included more subtle hints about the broader community’s safety. Nelson C. Lawrence, a Freedmen’s Bureau agent for several counties in southern Kentucky, forwarded at least four such requests between July and November of 1867. The freedpeople in the small town of Gordonsville, for example, could guarantee board and other expenses for a Black teacher.<sup>41</sup> For two different schools in Logan and Christian counties, Lawrence explained more directly that “it would be hard for a white person to get board and lodging,” which necessitated the Bureau instead send an African-American teacher to both locations.<sup>42</sup> Lewis Braxton, a Black man writing on behalf of the community in the East Tennessee town of Kingston seemed more indecisive

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<sup>40</sup> George F. Bowles, to Burt, November 30, 1866, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 13, 2020).

<sup>41</sup> In the same letter, Lawrence requested another African-American teacher for Greeneville, Kentucky, Lawrence to Burbank, November 15, 1867, “Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 29, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 15, 2020).

<sup>42</sup> Lawrence to Charles F. Johnson, July 27, 1867, “Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 29, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 15, 2020).

regarding the race of their prospective teacher. In January 1867, he admitted to being “at a loss what to say as to whether we should have white or colored teachers.”<sup>43</sup> Within a few weeks, Braxton admitted his desire to acquire an African-American teacher explaining, “if colored teachers can be had we will board them.”<sup>44</sup> Whether to protect their communities from violence or for the practical purpose of being able to easily board them with Black families, freedpeople repeatedly expressed their preference for teachers of their own race.

In some places, gender also represented an important preference for a prospective teacher. In the fall of 1866, the African-American community in Somerville, Tennessee, located in the southwest region of the state, where freedpeople represented a majority of the population, communicated a message to the Bureau through local agent N. Shaddinger.<sup>45</sup> While he made similar comments regarding the ability to safely board a Northern white teacher there, Shaddinger declared, “the colored people seem to prefer a female teacher.” Among the reasons given for wanting a woman teacher, he explained that members of the Black community believed “that she would not be as likely to be annoyed and insulted as a man.”<sup>46</sup> This opinion echoed the explanations for preferring Black teachers, and in this case proved somewhat prophetic. During the summer of 1868,

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<sup>43</sup> Lewis Braxton to Burt, January 28, 1867, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 13, 2020).

<sup>44</sup> Braxton to Burt, February 19, 1867, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 13, 2020).

<sup>45</sup> In Fayette County, enslaved people made up 15,473 out of a total population of 24,327 in 1860. A decade later, African Americans represented 16,987 of 26,145, Walker, “Table II. Population, 1790-1870,” 61-63.

<sup>46</sup> N. Shaddinger to Burt, November 14, 1866, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 13, 2020).

local whites successfully chased off a Northern white man named Isaac M. Newton who had been teaching Somerville's AMA school for more than a year.<sup>47</sup> Somerville's freedpeople hoped for a woman teacher for another important reason: "she would be more likely to teach the girls correct and ladylike deportment and manners than a male teacher would be able to do."<sup>48</sup> This suggests that the African-American community placed value on their young girls learning gender roles that mirrored those of the dominant white society.<sup>49</sup>

Within a few months, Somerville received both a man, Newton, and woman to teach their school for freedpeople. It appears common for these schools to have a teacher of each sex to teach the same gender and the roles that society had constructed for each. A Northern supporter of freedpeople's schools in Nashville plainly stated that his benevolent organization "will provide good and efficient teachers for both the male and the female pupils, in the different things to be learned by each sex to fit them for usefulness."<sup>50</sup> This practice likely explains the employment of a man and woman in the same school throughout these Upper South states. For example, in 1870, freedman Henry Marrs taught in a Frankfort, Kentucky public school for Black children. He explained, "I am only teaching the male portion of this school while Miss M E Anderson is teaching

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<sup>47</sup> "The Outrage at Somerville," *Memphis Evening Post*, June 12, 1868.

<sup>48</sup> Shaddinger to Burt, November 14, 1866.

<sup>49</sup> This reflects the findings of recent scholars arguing that during Reconstruction, Black men and women adopted gendered traditions, like marriage, from the dominant white society to be more easily accepted as citizens. See Laura F. Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion*.

<sup>50</sup> John R. Slentz to Oliver O. Howard, October 31, 1865, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 27, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 15, 2020).



the females.”<sup>51</sup> In schools where the student population included a significant majority of one sex, Black communities requested a teacher of that majority gender. In Fayetteville, Tennessee, George Bowles claimed, “a lady teacher is preferred as they are more females here in school than males.”<sup>52</sup> While the gender of a teacher could have influenced their likelihood of receiving threats or acts of violence, requests for women teachers also stemmed from Black communities reinforcing gender roles for their children. Many of these postwar schools were populated by more girls than boys owing to the prevalence of the boys staying on farms to work. This demonstrates that communities like Somerville preferred a woman teacher to ensure that the girls who attended school would be instructed in skills and practices that proved useful for women in the broader society.

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The educational progress made within Black communities during the postwar decade is even more impressive considering these challenges and the daily struggles that emancipation sometimes represented. Formerly enslaved mothers and fathers forced to prove their ability to raise their own children promised to provide them with an education. Adults and children sacrificed free time and precious wages in order to attend school. School trustees and parents took steps to ensure that any teacher who entered their community would not elicit unwanted attention or violent behavior from local whites while also considering the gendered education seen as necessary for young children in the dominant society. These experiences provide a foundation for

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<sup>51</sup> Henry Marrs to Runkle, March 8, 1870, “Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 45, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 15, 2020).

<sup>52</sup> Bowles to Burt, November 16, 1866, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 13, 2020).

understanding the African-American communities discussed during the next two chapters. Despite the significant strains forced on newly freed people on a daily basis, they still placed an emphasis on educating themselves and maintain control of their schools. As this chapter has demonstrated, freedpeople valued gaining a measure of independence from their former owners, and this carried over into their educational efforts.

### CHAPTER III – STRIVING FOR INDEPENDENCE: FREEDPEOPLE’S SCHOOLS IN KENTUCKY

As an enslaved child in Shelby County, Kentucky, Elijah P. Marrs found creative ways to acquire knowledge. He first turned to local white boys for any nugget of education they could share with him and eventually learned to read by practicing with the addresses on letters he was ordered to deliver and on newspapers. For one year in his youth, Marrs attended an illicit night school taught by an African-American man named Ham Graves on the farm, where he began learning how to write. As he got older, Marrs’s owner allowed him to continue reading, as his owner, “wanted all the boys to learn how to read the Bible,” but he was still forbidden from advancing his writing skills. “We had to steal that portion of our education,” he explained, “and I did my share of it.”<sup>1</sup> Despite the danger of severe punishment, other enslaved children and adults found covert opportunities to learn as well. Born around 1850, an enslaved girl named Bell had been taught the alphabet by her mother before her owner, and father, sold her away from her family at the age of five. After that, she learned how to write watching white children practice until she became free during the Civil War. By early 1866, at sixteen-years-old, Bell had reunited with her mother and siblings, and she attended a school in Paducah, Kentucky taught by white Michigan native Jennie Fyfe.<sup>2</sup> For Black Kentuckians like Marrs and Bell, learning had been a consistent means of resisting their status as enslaved people, and freedom lifted all prohibitions they had theretofore eluded. With new

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<sup>1</sup> Elijah P. Marrs, *Life and History*, 12, 15; Williams, *Self-Taught*, 24.

<sup>2</sup> Jennie Fyfe to Ellen Mott, February 22, 1866, Folder 1, Fyfe Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.

opportunities, freedpeople continued educating themselves as part of larger struggles for equality, and they used that newfound knowledge to help them gain independence from their former owners.

Soon after becoming free, Elijah Marris and his brother Henry C. Marris used the informal education that had acquired during slavery to uplift their fellow African Americans. While serving as a sergeant in the 112<sup>th</sup> U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery and stationed at Camp Nelson in central Kentucky during the fall of 1864, Elijah Marris organized classes for some of the soldiers in his unit and taught basic grammar.<sup>3</sup> Within months of mustering out of the army in 1866, he began teaching his first school in Simpsonville, Kentucky where he remained for a year before teaching a different school in nearby La Grange beginning in 1867. Henry Marris, also a Union sergeant during the war, simultaneously taught his own schools in various Kentucky towns in the late 1860s and 1870s. In addition to teaching, the Marris brothers assumed more extensive leadership roles by advocating for the civil rights of their respective Black communities. In May 1866, Henry Marris wrote a letter to U.S. Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton with hope that the federal government could address racial discrimination in Shelbyville. In particular, the freedpeople there had been disallowed from all public accommodations while it was also illegal for African Americans to own and operate their own businesses. Soon after this, Elijah Marris also wrote to Secretary Stanton on behalf of the Black community in La Grange, complaining about the state law barring the testimony of African Americans in cases involving a white person.<sup>4</sup> Having both served as sergeants in

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<sup>3</sup> Elijah P. Marris, *Life and History*, 28; Williams, *Self-Taught*, 49.

<sup>4</sup> Williams, *Self-Taught*, 67-68.

the army, Elijah and Henry Marris logically identified Stanton as a contact within the federal government capable of assisting freedpeople in Kentucky. This is significant because it demonstrates the connection formerly enslaved people made between education and enjoying basic civil rights. The Marris brothers were not satisfied only teaching schools for freedpeople in their communities continued to be treated as an inferior race, and, especially in a state that resisted racial progress during Reconstruction, Black communities treated education as a crucial element of their freedom and citizenship.

Black churches emerged concurrently with schools during the postwar years to become arguably the most significant institutions in African-American communities. Sometimes housed in the same buildings and led by the same individuals, the autonomous Black church and school signified freedpeople's new status.<sup>5</sup> While many white Northern missionaries—representing various churches, denominations, and benevolent organizations—offered education and religious services to the formerly enslaved population, African Americans preferred to rely on themselves when possible.<sup>6</sup> During his tenure as teacher in La Grange, Elijah Marris encountered the independent pride within Black churches, which extended to the local schools and often threatened their external financial support. In the fall of 1867, a sectarian disagreement between Methodists and Baptists caused a division among the board of trustees and resulted in the creation of two separate schools. Exacerbating the significance of this split, both new schools claimed a right to the Bureau's aid that the original school had received.

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<sup>5</sup> William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South, 1865-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 96.

<sup>6</sup> Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, 142-152.

Ultimately, Marrs retained one hundred of his original students at one of the schools, and the Freedmen's Bureau agreed to split its funding between the two institutions.<sup>7</sup> Because federal funding often kept Black schools going, the need for different denominations to operate independently of each other might have jeopardized freedpeople's educational opportunities in La Grange. It is important to understand the central role Black churches played in educating their communities, as religious concerns became important factors in the nascent school systems. The coexistence of African-American schools and churches in the same buildings further signified the ownership freedpeople assumed for their own education.

Black educators and community leaders like Elijah and Henry Marrs found that their state government largely resisted efforts to achieve quality education and equality for freedpeople. Beyond the scope of full-scale Radical Reconstruction, Kentucky opposed, and when possible blocked, federal policies granting civil and political rights to African Americans.<sup>8</sup> During this period, white lawmakers created a segregated public education system that, from the start, provided inadequate support for Black schools.<sup>9</sup> By 1870, after most Freedmen's Bureau operations had ceased in the state, some schools became desperate for assistance to continue teaching freedpeople. Elijah Marrs's La Grange school had grown so much by early 1869 that he hired a second teacher to adequately serve the students, and he depended on monthly payments from the federal

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<sup>7</sup> Marrs, *Life and History of the Rev. Elijah P. Marrs*, 80-81.

<sup>8</sup> Lowell H. Harrison and James C. Klotter, *A New History of Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 239-242; Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 178-209; Ross A. Webb, *Kentucky in the Reconstruction Era* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1979), 12-35.

<sup>9</sup> William E. Ellis, *A History of Education in Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 70-76; Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 229-267.

government to keep the doors open.<sup>10</sup> A year later, after the Bureau failed to send funds, Marris reported he was “out of money.”<sup>11</sup> Henry Marris, meanwhile, found himself in a similar situation at his Union Day School in Frankfort. Receiving insufficient financial support from the local school system, this school would have had to release one of its two teachers had Marris not acquired additional Bureau funding.<sup>12</sup> This was a rare occurrence, however, as Henry Marris declared in March 1870 that after filing regular schools reports with the Bureau for three years and receiving “little or no aid” for his school during that time, he refused to work with the agency any longer.<sup>13</sup> Despite the establishment of hundreds of African-American schools across the state during the five years following the Civil War, Black communities struggled to achieve their educational goals as their governments left them with unsustainable schools systems.

This chapter features case studies that examine the postwar education of freedpeople in two Kentucky towns: Hopkinsville and Louisville. The African-American communities in each were among the densest and most organized in the state. While not necessarily representative of all Black Kentuckians, they provide the best illustrations of the potential for educational progress and the disappointing regression that occurred in

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<sup>10</sup> Elijah P. Marris to Benjamin P. Runkle, January 20, 1869, “Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 42, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 9, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Elijah P. Marris to Runkle, March 13, 1870, “Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 45, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 9, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Henry C. Marris to Runkle, February 23, 1869, “Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 42, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 9, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Henry C. Marris to Runkle, March 8, 1870, “Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 45, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 9, 2020).

the postwar decade. Most importantly, the voices of formerly enslaved people are most accessible in the locations chosen for this chapter. These cases demonstrate the leadership of freedpeople in the process of establishing and maintaining schools; reveal their interactions with local whites, federal agents, and Northern missionaries; and explain how African-American conceptions of education aligned with efforts to attain racial equality. The experiences of Elijah and Henry Marrs are echoed in the explorations of Hopkinsville and Louisville, as Black educators throughout the state remained in contact with each other and strove toward similar goals. Insistent on maintaining control of their institutions while depending on external aid, freedpeople in Kentucky never stopped fighting for better educational opportunities.

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African Americans in Hopkinsville, Kentucky created educational opportunities for their children during the years following the Civil War. Significantly, members of that community sought to maintain control of their schools even after the arrival of Northern allies, though they still sought much-needed physical and financial assistance. Hopkinsville, the seat of Christian County and located in southwestern Kentucky, held the highest proportion of enslaved people in the state in 1860, at forty-six percent of the population, and contained the state's third largest African-American population in 1870. This section of the state was largely flat and free of trees, but the soil supported the cultivation various crops including dark tobacco. The expansion of slave labor here, especially after the 1830s, led to the rise of large farms that resembled those in other



Southern states during the antebellum period.<sup>14</sup> While many of Christian County's slaveholders supported the Confederacy during the Civil War, white Unionists there did not necessarily oppose slavery or the racial ideology that sustained it.<sup>15</sup> After the war ended and Kentucky accepted emancipation by the end of 1865, African Americans transformed their community of bondspeople into one of freedpeople who worked to financially support themselves, become autonomous from their former owners, exercise civil and political rights, worship, and provide education for both children and adults.

Hopkinsville sent two delegates to Lexington for the first convention of African-American men in Kentucky in March 1866: Christopher Malone and B. S. Newton. Among the notable features of this meeting were Black Kentuckians' insistence that they lift themselves out of slavery and their relatively conservative stance regarding the right to vote. Though neither Malone nor Newton served in leadership roles during the proceedings, both joined the new permanent organization for the improvement of African Americans known as the Kentucky State Benevolent Association.<sup>16</sup> Within two years, Hopkinsville established a local benevolent organization to meet the needs of their own community, which likely served as an auxiliary to the statewide group. At the inception of the state association, its founders set specific goals involving the general elevation of their race within society: "to encourage sound morality, education, temperance, frugality,

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<sup>14</sup> Francis A. Walker, "Table II. Population, 1790-1870, in each State and Territory, by Counties, in Aggregate, and as White, Free Colored, Slave, Chinese, and Indian," *Ninth Census Volume I, The Statistics of the Population of the United States* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 31-33.

<sup>15</sup> Jack Glazier, *Been Coming through Some Hard Times: Race, History, and Memory in Western Kentucky* (Knoxville: University Press of Tennessee, 2012), 11-12.

<sup>16</sup> First convention of colored men of Kentucky, "Proceedings," 32.

industry, and to promote everything that pertains to a well ordered and dignified life.”<sup>17</sup> These objectives gave Malone, Newton, and their neighbors something to work toward, but the reality of freedom forced them to focus on day-to-day survival. Less than two years after the convention, one white ally described Hopkinsville’s Black benevolent society as channeling “their scanty resources in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked & especially burying the dead.”<sup>18</sup> This African-American community had not lost sight of the importance of education to their elevation in society, but physical needs and a lack of outside support threatened that mission.

The same men and women who organized to provide necessities for Hopkinsville’s newly emancipated Black community also took active roles in education. Christopher Malone began teaching the Colored Baptist Church school no later than February 1867 and acknowledged himself as the first African American to ever teach members of his own race in that town.<sup>19</sup> The Colored Methodist Church opened the second school for freedpeople in April 1867 taught by James W. Bell and B. S. Newton, two other Black men in the community. By the time Malone and Bell submitted their first reports to the Freedmen’s Bureau for February 1868, the schools had thirty-six and thirty-two students respectively, and each depended on the tuition for less than half of the

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<sup>17</sup> First convention of colored men of Kentucky, “Proceedings,” 28.

<sup>18</sup> William T. Buckner to H. A. Hunter, March 18, 1868, “Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau Field Office Records, 1865-1872.” Images. *FamilySearch*. <http://FamilySearch.org>: 14 June 2016. Citing NARA microfilm publication M1904. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d., Roll 133, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 19, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Malone to H. A. Hunter, March 17, 1868, “Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 133, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 19, 2020).

children to sustain itself and its teachers.<sup>20</sup> Through these institutions, the Black community in Hopkinsville began teaching their own children just over a year after Kentucky legally abolished slavery. Importantly, the schools were led by freed persons who also represented the community at statewide conventions of African-American men, illustrating how education fit into the broader movement for racial equality. The connection between Hopkinsville's schools and Black churches is also significant because it suggests a desire to keep education under the purview of freedpeople rather than that of Northern white missionaries.<sup>21</sup>

Men like Malone, Newton, and Bell, who assumed responsibility for educating their community, faced direct and indirect challenges to their work from their allies. As these schools opened, other parties, local whites, representatives from the federal government, and Northern missionaries involved themselves in African-American education in Hopkinsville. These groups offered financial support and Northern teachers to freedpeople and, in the process, challenged the Black communities' control over their schools. In particular, the white allies doubted the intelligence of local Black teachers and expected freedpeople to offer more financial support to schools than was possible. While accepting this necessary aid, African Americans refused to relinquish the autonomy of their schools and churches.

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<sup>20</sup> Malone, "Teacher's Monthly School Report," March 19, 1868, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 51, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 10, 2020); James W. Bell, "Teacher's Monthly School Report," March 19, 1868, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 51, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 10, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, 151-152.

The first federal agent working on behalf of the formerly enslaved population in postwar Hopkinsville was a local white man and former slaveholder named Daniel S. Hays. In the fall of 1866, the Freedmen's Bureau appointed Hays, a resident of the town for more than fifty years, to oversee its operations in Christian County.<sup>22</sup> A native of Virginia and veteran of the War of 1812, Hays was at least sixty-five years old when appointed by the Bureau. He had owned enslaved persons and earned a reputation as a lawyer who would help widows and impoverished people at no cost.<sup>23</sup> An important and often overlooked aspect of Reconstruction in places like Kentucky is the presence of white Unionists who acted as the only physical representative for the federal government as emancipation became a reality. This allowed for white members of a recent slave society to make judgements regarding the future of their neighboring Black community. Hays generally supported the education of freedpeople, but he refused to acknowledge their ability to teach themselves and therefore attempted to bring their schools under white control.<sup>24</sup> Hays's socialization as a prominent white man in a slave society and his

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<sup>22</sup> Nelson C. Lawrence to Charles F. Johnson, October 12, 1866, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 18, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 20, 2020); Glazier, *Been Coming through Some Hard*, 79-80.

<sup>23</sup> Ancestry.com, *1812 Pension Application Files Index, 1812-1815*, Daniel S. Hays; Ancestry.com, *1830 United States Federal Census*, Hopkinsville, Christian County, Kentucky; Ancestry.com, *1840 United States Federal Census*, Hopkinsville, Christian County, Kentucky; Ancestry.com, *1850 United States Federal Census-Slave Schedules*, District 1, Christian County, Kentucky; William Henry Perrin, ed., *County of Christian, Kentucky. Historical and Biographical* (Chicago, Illinois: F. A. Battey Publishing Co., 1884), 95-96.

<sup>24</sup> Hays did actively work to protect African Americans from white terrorism. In June 1867, he requested that federal troops be sent to Christian County after former Confederate soldiers had made multiple attacks against Union veterans. Additionally, he reported that the civil officers in Hopkinsville—who are former Confederates—prevented freedpeople from getting justice against whites who refuse to pay them or whip them, Hays to Sidney Burbank, June 1, 1867, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 2, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 20, 2020); Hays to Johnson, June 26, 1867, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 2, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 20, 2020).

belief in paternalism prevented him from accepting that the African-American community could help themselves through men like Malone, Bell, and Newton, or allowing them to do so. Hays's appointment likely reinforced the Black communities' desire to oversee their own schools and churches. Instead of an abolitionist who advocated for the advancement of freedpeople, Hays represented a continuation of the social hierarchy that had theretofore enslaved them and could not perceive education as a means of achieving racial equality.

During his tenure with the Bureau, Hays worked directly with the Black schools to facilitate federal support from the superintendent for education in Kentucky, Thomas K. Noble. In that role, Hays opposed the institutions led by Black teachers and attempted to replace them with a white Northern educator. In April 1867, Hays explained to Noble his hiring of Lucy R. Hughes, a white native of Cleveland, Ohio and former student at Oberlin College, as a teacher for freedpeople within his district.<sup>25</sup> Hughes previously taught with her sister at a Black school in Clarksville, Tennessee when Hays arranged for her to come to Hopkinsville.<sup>26</sup> Hays decided that Hughes was more suitable for the position than the three African Americans teaching at the Baptist and Methodist churches. He argued for the three Black teachers to be removed from their positions because of "alleged" incompetence and wanted the Northern teacher to have full access to the church buildings for her school. After Malone opened his school in the Colored Baptist Church, Hays had apparently arranged for Hughes to conduct her school in the

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<sup>25</sup> Daniel S. Hays to John Ely, April 15, 1867, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 23, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 20, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> Glazier, *Been Coming through Some Hard Times*, 85.

Colored Methodist Church. Before that happened, however, Bell and Newton claimed that church building for their own school, forcing the Ohioan to keep teaching in a room that could barely hold her fifty students. Hays accused the local Black teachers of trying “to break Miss Hughes down,” and the Bureau agent committed himself to help her succeed. In his effort to discredit them, Hays asserted that students were “learning nothing” from Malone, Bell, and Newton and that local parents preferred instead to send their children to Hughes’s school, but she had no room for them in her small classroom.

The solution Hays proposed to Noble involved requiring the African-American teachers to pass qualifying exams to prove their capability as educators. According to this plan, they would be “examined by competent persons and if not qualified to teach—put a stop to their impositions.”<sup>27</sup> Noble approved this plan and ordered Hays to personally examine each teacher in Hopkinsville to determine their ability. Noble further declared that those teachers who passed the examination should continue to work, but the “incompetent will be immediately discharged,” and, “that the buildings they occupy may be used by the teachers who are really fit for their work.”<sup>28</sup> Having expressed opinions about the Black teachers and pushed for Hughes to take over one of their buildings, Hays was hardly objective in this scenario. However, the Bureau gave him the power to replace any educator he deemed unfit. From the perspective of the African-American community, the level of qualifications of their teachers probably mattered less than their maintaining control over their schools.

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<sup>27</sup> Hays to Ely, April 15, 1867.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas K. Noble to Hays, April 22, 1867, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 2, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 20, 2020).

Existing records do not indicate whether Hays followed through with examining the teachers in the spring of 1867, but, by February 1868, the same three schools with the same teachers reported to the Freedmen’s Bureau.<sup>29</sup> For at least a few months, the federal government helped sustain each of these institutions with monthly rent checks, though this money apparently did little to pay teachers’ salaries. Despite Hays’s claims of incompetence, Malone, Bell, and Newton continued teaching in their respective churches. Hughes, on the other hand, was forced to make her own accommodations for a classroom, and she conducted her school in the home of an African-American woman named Patsey Jones. In addition, the Bureau’s monthly payment of ten dollars for Hughes’s school went directly to Jones for rent of her house.<sup>30</sup> For her own salary, Hughes collected tuition from each of her fifty-seven students, a requirement that was both rare for common schools in the nineteenth century and difficult for impoverished Black communities to sustain just a few years removed from slavery.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, the

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<sup>29</sup> Bell, “Teacher’s Monthly School Report,” March 19, 1868, “Kentucky, Freedmen’s Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 51, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 10, 2020); Hughes, “Teacher’s Monthly School Report,” March 19, 1868, “Kentucky, Freedmen’s Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 51, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 10, 2020); Malone, “Teacher’s Monthly School Report,” March 19, 1868, “Kentucky, Freedmen’s Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 51, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 10, 2020).

<sup>30</sup> A. Benson Brown to Benjamin P. Runkle, March 25, 1868, “Kentucky, Freedmen’s Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 32, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 21, 2020).

<sup>31</sup> Between February and April 1868 Hughes’s school declined from fifty-seven to forty-seven students, but she reported in both months that “all” students paid tuition. Hughes, “Teacher’s Monthly School Report,” March 19, 1868, “Kentucky, Freedmen’s Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 51, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 10, 2020); Hughes, “Teacher’s Monthly School Report,” April 17, 1868, “Kentucky, Freedmen’s Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 51, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 10, 2020).

Baptist and Methodist schools collected tuition only from those who could afford it, amounting to less than half of the pupils.<sup>32</sup>

In March 1868, multiple teachers in Hopkinsville's Black schools felt serious financial strain that made them consider giving up their positions to find better employment elsewhere. About a year after Hays had convinced her to open a school in the community, Lucy Hughes expressed dissatisfaction with her situation and asked the Bureau to help her relocate and teach freedpeople elsewhere. She wanted to leave Hopkinsville because of "the meager support which I receive from the col.[ored] in this place."<sup>33</sup> This suggests that Hughes expected more payment directly from the Black community, as the federal government had been doing everything in their power to keep her there. She explained to Bureau agents that "she cannot dress respectably," and could "barely pay her board, with the small amount she can gather from her patrons." She insisted that she would not be able to stay in Hopkinsville without additional financial

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<sup>32</sup> During the same months that Hughes collected tuition from each of her students, Malone and Bell reported only a fraction of their pupils paying tuition. In February 1868, Malone's Baptist school received tuition from sixteen out of thirty-six students (44 %) and in June from twenty out of forty-three students (53%). Bell's Methodist school collected from fifteen out of thirty-two students (47%) in February and then from twenty-one out of sixty-three students (58%) in May. Bell, "Teacher's Monthly School Report," March 19, 1868, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 51, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 10, 2020); Bell, "Teacher's Monthly School Report," May 23, 1868, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 52, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 10, 2020); Malone, "Teacher's Monthly School Report," March 19, 1868, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 51, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 10, 2020) Malone, "Teacher's Monthly School Report," June 1868, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 52, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 10, 2020).

<sup>33</sup> Hughes to Hunter, March 18, 1868, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 133, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 20, 2020).



support.<sup>34</sup> Sufficiently convinced of Hughes's needs, by the end of March, the Bureau commander for Kentucky increased the monthly payment for Hughes's school from ten dollars to twenty dollars, though it is unclear how much of that went directly to Patsey Jones for rent of her building.<sup>35</sup> Despite receiving tuition from all of her students and additional funding from the Freedmen's Bureau, Hughes sought more compensation for her work and looked for it elsewhere.<sup>36</sup> The larger monthly rent payment, however, could not keep her there. By the end of the year, Hughes had assumed another teaching role in Columbus, Kentucky, where she continued collecting tuition from all of her students.<sup>37</sup>

At the same time Hughes prepared to leave her position in Hopkinsville, the Black community struggled mightily to maintain their educational efforts. In March 1868, Christopher Malone pled to the Freedmen's Bureau for assistance in the form of money or books. He explained that he had been teaching in the Colored Baptist Church for more than a year, and that he charged tuition to any student who could afford it as his only source of payment. Malone calculated that he was owed \$175 for teaching "that never has been paid, and never will be unless it is paid by the kind benevolent hand of the government." He expressed his willingness to accept aid from the Bureau because, "my

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<sup>34</sup> A. Benson Brown to Benjamin P. Runkle, March 25, 1868, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 32, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 21, 2020).

<sup>35</sup> Levi F. Burnett to Brown, April 30, 1868, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 133, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 21, 2020).

<sup>36</sup> Hughes, "Teacher's Monthly School Report," March 19, 1868, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 51, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 10, 2020).

<sup>37</sup> In December 1868, Hughes taught a school of twenty-three students in Columbus, and she collected tuition from each of them. Hughes, "Teacher's Monthly School Report," December 26, 1868, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 51, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 10, 2020).

race is not able to pay it.” The African-American community’s inability to pay tuition trickled down to Malone, to the extent that he would not be able to continue teaching unless he received outside assistance. He explained to the Bureau, “I have to pay taxes pay High rent and people not able to pay me for teaching—if I have no aid I be bound to quit teaching and my school will go down.” Malone also revealed the extent of his personal impoverishment, admitting, “I have a family to maintain and have not got decent clothes to wear myself.”<sup>38</sup>

In early April, soon after Malone’s plea for federal aid, local Bureau agent M. E. Billings acted on behalf of both Malone and Bell to help their schools remain open. Billings acknowledged that Malone’s Baptist School was on the verge of closing but recommended to his superior that it could be saved “with a little encouragement and pecuniary assistance.” Billings also praised Bell’s Methodist School, but lamented, “unless help is given the assistant teacher will have to be discharged.” This assistant, Newton, was the same man who accompanied Malone to Lexington two years earlier as representatives for Christian County’s Black community at the first statewide convention of African Americans. Billings requested that each of these schools receive fifteen dollars per month which would go directly to the three teachers. The commanding officer for the Kentucky Freedmen’s Bureau approved this amount retroactively, beginning in April 1868.<sup>39</sup> These requests from or on behalf of Malone’s Baptist school and Bell’s

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<sup>38</sup> Malone to Hunter, March 17, 1868, “Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 133, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 21, 2020).

<sup>39</sup> M. E. Billings to Brown, April 13, 1868, “Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 32, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 21, 2020); Runkle to Billings, April 24, 1868, “Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 133, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 21, 2020).

Methodist school—likely combined with Hughes’s departure—resulted in the Bureau’s aid of both in the spring of 1868. While neither of these Black-led institutions received any outside assistance in February 1868, by June they had each had begun receiving monthly checks.<sup>40</sup>

Hopkinsville’s African-American teachers used their federal aid to continue striving for their lofty goal of educating their community, but that goal appeared to be unsustainable. Instead of dismissing their assistant teacher, the Methodist school actually added a third teacher in May 1868 to accommodate their expanding student population.<sup>41</sup> Newton still taught at that school in June 1870, when he filed his last existing report with the Freedmen’s Bureau. At the point, however, the Methodist school no longer received monthly payments from the federal government, reflecting the Bureau’s retreat from the Upper South.<sup>42</sup> The Baptist school began to improve as well, and he opened a night school for adults in June 1868 which immediately attracted more than twenty students.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Bell, “Teacher’s Monthly School Report,” March 19, 1868, “Kentucky, Freedmen’s Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 51, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 10, 2020); Bell, “Teacher’s Monthly School Report,” May 23, 1868, “Kentucky, Freedmen’s Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 52, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 10, 2020); Malone, “Teacher’s Monthly School Report,” March 19, 1868, “Kentucky, Freedmen’s Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 51, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 10, 2020) Malone, “Teacher’s Monthly School Report,” June 1868, “Kentucky, Freedmen’s Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 52, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 10, 2020).

<sup>41</sup> Elvira Hargraves became the third Black teacher at Hopkinsville’s Colored Methodist school, which, by May 1868, recorded sixty-students. Bell, Newton, and Elvira Hargraves, “Teacher’s Monthly School Report,” May 1868, “Kentucky, Freedmen’s Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 51, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 21, 2020).

<sup>42</sup> Newton, “Teacher’s Monthly School Report,” June 1870, “Kentucky, Freedmen’s Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 58, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 21, 2020).

<sup>43</sup> Malone, “Teacher’s Monthly School Report,” June 1868, “Kentucky, Freedmen’s Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 52, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 21, 2020).

Malone personally continued struggling to financially support himself and his family for at least the next few years. He admitted in November 1869 that he was “almost ready to stop” teaching because he made “such a poor living” from it.<sup>44</sup> His situation unlikely improved as the Bureau’s support soon ceased. Though he had seriously considered giving up, Malone continued teaching in Hopkinsville until at least 1880.<sup>45</sup>

During the years following the Civil War, the Freedmen’s Bureau provided vital financial support that allowed Black schools in Christian County to continue operating until the state government effectively provided funding for them. African-American communities remained committed to their own education while struggling through the many challenges they faced transitioning to freedom. Indeed, any outside assistance rarely lasted more than a short period of time. In the early 1870s, those schools for freedpeople were incorporated into the racially segregated state public education system, though Black communities and schools continued struggling for adequate financial support.

More than anything, this analysis of Hopkinsville, Kentucky demonstrates that Black communities desired to remain in control of their schools even when depending on the financial aid from outsiders. Hopkinsville benefitted from the existence of two African-American churches which provided physical spaces to teach, as well as already having established organizations in which the freedpeople worked toward a common purpose. Despite the relatively small number of students between the three schools, the

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<sup>44</sup> Malone to Runkle, November 25, 1869, “Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 42, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 9, 2020).

<sup>45</sup> Ancestry.com, *1880 United States Federal Census*, Hopkinsville, Christian County, Kentucky.

Black community took steps to ensure their own schools had access to the church buildings instead of allowing Hughes to start her own school there. The tuition raised by Hughes essentially took limited funds out of that community, while Malone, Newton, and Bell struggled to clothe themselves while teaching and collecting even less tuition. Further, those men had personal stakes in the education and advancement the freedpeople of Christian County. Malone and Newton had helped organize the first statewide benevolent organization for African Americans and took the lead in helping their families and neighbors' transition to emancipation. They used education as first step toward equality and independence, demonstrated by their determination to maintain control over their educational institutions when local and Northern whites tried to seize them. Despite their determination, widespread poverty, obstructed civil and political rights, and an inadequate public school system combined to prevent Hopkinsville's Black community from witnessing revolutionary progress during the postwar period.

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The largest city in either of the two Upper South states examined in this study, Louisville, Kentucky represents the best opportunity to examine how emancipation and education evolved in an urban setting. This discussion of freedpeople's education in an urban context provides contrast with the rural majority in the region and reveals how certain advantages offered by an urban setting helped that community achieve its educational goals and work toward equality. While Black schools in rural areas often represented key targets for white aggression during the postwar period, cities like Louisville provided relative security which allowed education for freedpeople to flourish. In the country and in smaller towns, without Union troops nearby, white mobs more

easily attacked Black schools without retribution. But the denser Black populations in urban areas provided a level of security from vigilante attacks as they could more easily defend themselves, and because they had easier access to federal troops who were stationed in Louisville.<sup>46</sup> For that reason, newly freed African Americans flocked to cities in large numbers during and after the Civil War to escape their owners, seek new employment opportunities, and reunite with family members that were separated during slavery.<sup>47</sup> By the early 1870s, Black urban communities throughout the South had developed their own unique cultures that benefitted greatly from schools, churches, and social organizations that were less prevalent in rural areas.<sup>48</sup> Recent scholars have used urban settings to argue that educational progress for Black education continued well beyond the 1870s, which was true in large cities with communities capable of pressuring policymakers to enact change.<sup>49</sup> The present study instead offers a close examination of the postwar decade to demonstrate why progress was delayed during the period of revolutionary change, which reveals that, from the start, African Americans' white allies actually prevented equal educational opportunities between the races.

Louisville's postwar Black schools benefitted greatly from the existing communities of African Americans that developed during the antebellum decades. Of its 1860 population of over 65,000, 7.5% were held in bondage, amounting to about 5,000 people. That percentage had decreased significantly over the previous two decades due in

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<sup>46</sup> Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 236. Historian Tera Hunter explained some of the advantages of urban slavery and emancipation felt by African Americans living in Atlanta, Georgia in *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 4-43.

<sup>47</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 81-82.

<sup>48</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 396-398.

<sup>49</sup> Green, *Educational Reconstruction*, 9.

part to an internal slave trade that sold African Americans to the Deep South.<sup>50</sup> Importantly, free Blacks were more likely to live in towns and cities, and in Louisville specifically they lived in their own communities.<sup>51</sup> Free Blacks played important roles in antebellum churches where they served as both ministers and teachers. Henry Adams and William H. Gibson, both free before the Civil War, taught African-American schools in Louisville before and during the Civil War. Adams arrived in the city in 1829, as the minister of the First African Baptist Church—later known as the Fifth Street Baptist Church—and by the early 1840s, he operated a school for mostly free Blacks with a few enslaved people.<sup>52</sup> Gibson came to Louisville in the late 1840s and immediately began teaching free and enslaved Blacks in the city’s churches, including at Quinn Chapel which eventually turned into a school for freedpeople.<sup>53</sup> These schools closed during the Civil War, but both men became important leaders for Black schools in the city following emancipation.<sup>54</sup>

By early 1866, schools at Fifth Street Baptist, Quinn Chapel, and elsewhere throughout the city taught hundreds of African-American pupils. Support from the Freedmen’s Bureau and Northern missionary groups aided them tremendously, but the existing Black community, centered on their churches, made the city’s freed schools possible. Whereas smaller towns like Hopkinsville relied on local Black teachers who were likely self-taught during slavery, Louisville already had experienced educators like

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<sup>50</sup> George C. Wright, *Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865-1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 13-20.

<sup>51</sup> Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 110.

<sup>52</sup> Wright, *Life Behind a Veil*, 35; Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 142.

<sup>53</sup> Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 142-144.

<sup>54</sup> Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 111, 140-144.

Adams and Gibson, and their respective institutions, as a solid foundation for a Black school system. These schools sometimes partnered with the federal government and Northern missionaries to survive until the local government began supporting a publicly-funded school system for African Americans in 1870.<sup>55</sup> During this interim period, schools relied on tuition from students for support, and the vast majority of these schools were taught by African Americans. The opening of Ely Normal School in the city in 1868 provided even more opportunities for freedpeople to receive the requisite training to assume teaching positions in the city (as well as throughout the state). Despite the often-hindering obstacles of emancipation, the progress made during those five years by Louisville's African-American community made a public-school system possible. This achievement is even more significant considering they had no political rights until the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment.

Writing about the education of Kentucky's freedpeople, historian Marion B. Lucas aptly asserted, "poverty represented the greatest obstacle to black education."<sup>56</sup> This remained true across Kentucky and Tennessee, including within the region's the largest city. One of the early post-Civil War teachers took notice of how it affected the community's educational progress. Twenty-six-year-old Sara G. Stanley began teaching in Louisville in January 1866 with support from the AMA.<sup>57</sup> Born in New Bern, North Carolina to free Black parents who taught in a local school, Stanley attended Oberlin

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<sup>55</sup> Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 246.

<sup>56</sup> Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 230.

<sup>57</sup> Sara G. Stanley to Samuel Hunt, January 24, 1866, Box 56, American Missionary Association Manuscripts, Amistad Research Center, Tilton Hall, Tulane University, New Orleans, La.



College in Ohio during the 1850s before moving to Cleveland with her family.<sup>58</sup> Living in the North on the eve of the Civil War, she became an antislavery activist.<sup>59</sup> Soon after opening her school, she became aware that Louisville's current education system failed to serve the poorest among the formerly enslaved people. She observed that "only those who are able to earn more than enough to supply the material necessities of these families, can send their children to school." She also encountered "hundreds of filthy, squalid untaught children are to be seen about the streets." This led Stanley to argue that the city needed more free schools to alleviate the situation, as her AMA school was the only one then in existence.<sup>60</sup> This observation highlights the limitations of a school system requiring former slaves to pay tuition, though the Black community had little other choice in the immediate aftermath of the war. Over the next few years, nascent partnerships with Freedmen's Bureau, associations like the AMA, and eventually civil leaders helped initiate a publicly-funded school system.

There were at least sixteen Black schools operating in Louisville as of March 1868. They taught more than 1,300 students, all but one of whom was African American and less than 200 over the age of sixteen. Of more than twenty teachers, only five were white. Among the Black teachers, it is difficult to tell how many, if any, had previously been enslaved. Some free Blacks, like Stanley, could have been sent by Northern benevolent societies, while others, like William Gibson and Henry Adams' son, had lived

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<sup>58</sup> Ancestry.com, *1850 United States Federal Census*, New Bern, Craven County, Ohio; Ancestry.com, *1860 United States Federal Census*, Forth Ward, Cleveland, Cuyahoga County, Ohio.

<sup>59</sup> William S. Powell, "Woodward, Sara Griffith Stanley," on *NCpedia*, <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/woodward-sara-griffith-stanley> (accessed August 3, 2020).

<sup>60</sup> Stanley to Hunt, March 1866, Box 56, AMA Manuscripts.

in Louisville during slavery. Fifty pupils across the city had been free before the war, and thirty of them attended Quinn Chapel, Gibson's school that had taught free Blacks before the war. Notably, a vast majority of those schools collected tuition from their students.<sup>61</sup> Thus, most freed children attending school in Louisville had to pay tuition and were taught by African Americans. Importantly, this pattern held true for Black students in Hopkinsville and throughout the state during this period.<sup>62</sup> Though this allowed freedpeople to maintain control over their communities' education, the external assistance they received during the late 1860s did little to establish a sustainable system of Black schools.

At the same time the Freedmen's Bureau received those teacher's reports, they prepared to open to new school in Louisville designed to train a new force of African-American teachers to fill the city's schools. The AMA, the Western Freedmen's Aid Commission (WFAC), and the Freedmen's Bureau jointly spent about \$25,000 to build the Ely Normal School on the corner of Broadway and Fourteenth Streets.<sup>63</sup> Because many African-American communities preferred hiring a teacher of their own race, the federal government and benevolent groups struggled to fill all of the vacancies across the state with qualified Black teachers. They built the Ely school to fulfill that need, which opened in April 1868 with a well-attended dedication ceremony.

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<sup>61</sup> Various teachers, "Teacher's Monthly School Report," March 1868, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 51, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 10, 2020).

<sup>62</sup> In July 1868, Kentucky reportedly employed 383 white teachers and 503 African-American teachers in Black schools while 4,343 students paid tuition out of 8,085 total pupils in day and night schools. J. W. Alvord, *Sixth Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen, July 1, 1868* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1868), 53.

<sup>63</sup> Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 238.

Thomas K. Noble, the Bureau's education superintendent for Kentucky, delivered one of first speeches to a full crowd of freedpeople, emphasizing the impact the school would have on freedpeople's education throughout the state. He claimed that the government gave this new school "for the freedmen of Louisville—where the children of your own race may be educated by teachers of their own color."<sup>64</sup> Noble's comments articulated the ultimate goal for the school. But, of the eight teachers listed on the May report, only one was African American, and 356 of a total 396 students at the school paid tuition, suggesting that, like the city's other freedpeople's schools, this plan would not help poor Blacks in Louisville. The Ely school ultimately failed to live up to its promise of creating a force of trained African-American teachers. One historian argued that it "was little different from most schools in Louisville."<sup>65</sup> By 1871, the AMA relinquished the school to a local board of trustees, and within a year, "the building fell into disrepair."<sup>66</sup> The downfall of the Ely Normal School coincided with the Freedmen's Bureau's withdrawal from Kentucky and the South in general by about 1870. This signaled a transition away from the initial system of schools for formerly enslaved Louisvillians to a one supported and funded through the local government.

African-American teachers from across Kentucky responded to the imminent removal of the Freedmen's Bureau from the state by assembling in Louisville for a state convention in July 1869. Without the Bureau's financial support, these teachers feared the demise of the system they had built over the previous four years. The 250 delegates

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<sup>64</sup> "The Education of the Freedmen. The Ely Normal School," *The Louisville Daily Journal*," April 7, 1868.

<sup>65</sup> Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 239.

<sup>66</sup> Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 247.

present aimed to ensure outside funding for Black education by petitioning both the federal and state governments. They asked the U.S. Congress for their continued federal support “until the state shall establish the common schools for the benefit of our people.” The delegates also petitioned the state legislature, imploring that body to provide a public-school system based on equal taxes to that of white Kentuckians. The last major achievement of the 1869 convention was the creation of a Kentucky State Board of Education, with prominent Louisville teacher William H. Gibson serving as its inaugural president.<sup>67</sup> This board represented an important step toward the development of an organized public-school system for African Americans in Kentucky, providing institutional foundation for a future state education that included them. Despite this progress, it took several years for public support to adequately replace the Freedmen’s Bureau presence. Unfortunately, some delegates’ fears came to fruition as many schools created after the war with Bureau support “closed for lack of funds” by the mid-1870s.<sup>68</sup>

Focusing on the immediate postwar years, this case study shows that freedpeople’s education in Louisville benefitted very little from the Freedmen’s Bureau and Northern benevolent organizations aiding Black communities. They relied on the efforts of local Black leaders who organized and taught schools throughout the city, and the broader community to maintain those institutions. Even with antebellum schools for freed African Americans as a solid foundation, the Black communities continually struggled through poverty and were unable to provide schools for their children without charging tuition. Still, hundreds, if not thousands, of Black children received an education

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<sup>67</sup> *Kentucky State Colored Education Convention, Held At Benson’s Theater, Louisville, Ky. July 14, 1869* (Louisville, Ky., 1869), 29-31.

<sup>68</sup> Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 245-246.

in Louisville during those first years of emancipation. It would take much longer for the state to prioritize the education of African Americans, but the achievements of that early school system proved vital to the community.

The 1869 educational convention in Louisville, for example, signified that a coalition of Black educators from across the state had organized since emancipation and dedicated themselves to pressuring the Kentucky legislature to act on their behalf. Continuing to represent their respective communities in La Grange and Frankfort, both Elijah and Henry Marrs attended this convention.<sup>69</sup> During the early 1870s, African Americans were essentially left to manage their schools without any assistance, and, by late 1873, their leaders threatened the state government with federal lawsuits if they failed to incorporate Black schools into a tax-supported education system. In early 1874, the legislature relented to the pressure and created a new system of public Black schools, though it was separate from and unequal to white schools.<sup>70</sup> Finally, a decade after the Civil War, freedpeople in Kentucky had a sustainable, yet unequal, school system to which their children could attend without paying tuition. This unequal system continued through the era of Jim Crow, and its legacy remains today.

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<sup>69</sup> *Kentucky State Colored Education Convention*, 40.

<sup>70</sup> Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 254-255.

## CHAPTER IV – “THE RADICALS BUILD SCHOOLHOUSES AND THE CONSERVATIVES BURN THEM”: FREEDPEOPLE’S SCHOOLS IN TENNESSEE

At the August 1865 Convention of Tennessee’s African-American leaders, discussed in the first chapter, political rights for formerly enslaved people were a primary objective of the delegates. During the next five years, Black Tennesseans gained the right to vote along with basic civil rights and access to public education. A segment of white Tennesseans responded with the formation of the Ku Klux Klan and its campaign of violence to return the state to the antebellum order. Further, in 1870, the state legislature, comprised of many Democrats and ex-Confederates, wrote a new constitution reversing much of the racial progress by, among other things, implementing a poll tax requirement to cast ballots in Tennessee.<sup>1</sup> Responding to these events, Black leaders convened once again in Nashville in February 1871 and discussed how African Americans should move forward in this new political environment.<sup>2</sup> The postwar years presented freedpeople with great opportunities for progress, followed by immense white backlash that caused quick regression in many aspects of society. Even during this unfortunate turn, however, formerly enslaved people refused to give up on their educational goals.

Comprised of only about fifty delegates from fourteen counties, the 1871 convention of Black Tennesseans tasked a special committee to investigate and issue a report on the status of their schools throughout the state. Representing counties in Middle and West Tennessee, the education committee painted a bleak picture in which white

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<sup>1</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 422.

<sup>2</sup> State convention of the colored citizens of Tennessee (1871: Nashville, TN), “Proceedings of the State Convention of the colored citizens of Tennessee, held in Nashville, Feb. 22d, 23d, 24th & 25th, 1871.,” *Colored Conventions Project Digital Records* (accessed January 7, 2022), <https://omeka.coloredconventions.org/items/show/309>: 1-16.

terrorists had burned down or disbanded most of their schools outside of cities like Nashville and Memphis. As their state government had recently passed a constitution that disenfranchised Black voters through a poll tax, these delegates instead looked to the federal government for assistance. In their education report, they asked Congress to establish a national school system that forced white Tennesseans to accept African-American children into their institutions as equals. “Each colored citizen cannot but feel degraded,” declared the committee, “so long as he is forced by the local authorities to separate schools, often of the most unfitting character and purpose.”<sup>3</sup> Confronted with the loss of their political equality and white violence against their communities, Black Tennesseans demanded racial equality through the integration of public schools, which, they rightly determined, would only be authorized through federal law. By the mid-1870s, however, their hopes were dashed when Congress dismissed a portion of the Civil Rights Bill of 1875 that would have created a national educational system with interracial schools.<sup>4</sup> This is crucial because the 1871 report on African-American education in Tennessee illustrates how far the state had already regressed from the initial postwar moment. Despite that regression, Black leaders continued pushing for social equality, which they believed could be achieved through the integration of public schools.

Reconstruction in Tennessee took a unique trajectory in comparison to the rest of the former Confederacy. A Unionist, Republican state government took over in 1865 under Governor William G. Brownlow which supported the Thirteenth Amendment and

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<sup>3</sup> “Proceedings of the State Convention of the colored citizens of Tennessee,” 3.

<sup>4</sup> The battle over integrated schools at the national level had direct ties to the public school system in postwar Tennessee and will be discussed in chapter five of this study.

Civil Rights Act of 1866, and then became one of the first states, North or South, to ratify the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. In return, Congress readmitted the Volunteer State into the Union in July 1866, allowing the state to avoid the military enforcement of Reconstruction that began the following spring. After this, Black men in Tennessee gained the right to vote in 1867 from the Republican state legislature, which led to the rise of Union League chapters in local communities across the state. This political mobilization overlapped with the movement to establish schools for freedpeople, and the legislature established its first public school system for both races in 1867 as well. The new state education fund provided support to freedpeople's schools until about 1870, when Democrats replaced this system. For a few years, at least, Tennessee's civil government appeared willing to offer freedpeople a sustainable and free school system, but the turn away from Republican policies by the early 1870s dashed that prospect. This uncertainty in whom they could trust forced African Americans to remain focused on their own objectives.

Freedpeople in Tennessee accepted help acquiring teachers from local whites, the state and federal government, and Northern benevolent organizations. In many cases, however, African Americans spoke up and pushed back when those groups and individuals acted against their interests. These efforts of formerly enslaved communities to make their voices heard coincided with the movement for political rights. While the reality of suffrage depended on time and place, African Americans organizing to provide education for their communities should be perceived as a political movement. Within this movement, Black communities sometimes disagreed and became divided amongst themselves over how schools should be run. These disagreements often revolved around



the teacher, especially when that individual had entered the community as a stranger whose motives were open to question. In contrast to Kentucky, Tennessee's Black schools were more often taught by white Northerners than local freedpeople.<sup>5</sup> While they might have had fewer autonomous institutions, African Americans in Tennessee nevertheless wielded enough power in their communities to maintain a level of control over their education at that time. When trustees or parents could influence who was sent to serve as their teacher, the race and sex of that person became crucial factors. They also refused to accept behavior from teachers that hindered their social progress or clashed with their values. In this way, Black Tennesseans protected themselves from both white violence and from Northern allies whose goals or actions conflicted with their own conceptions of freedom.

In this chapter, two cases studies from Middle Tennessee reveal the important role education played in freedpeople's exercise of citizenship. African Americans protected their schools by refusing to support unacceptable teachers or federal agents and by using their political power during the crucial years following the Civil War. This region of the state, as opposed to the plantation society in West Tennessee and the Appalachian society in East Tennessee, captures many elements common throughout the broader region of the Upper South. One historian argued that during this era, Middle Tennessee represented a "third South," separate from both the Deep South and the Southern highlands. Further, in

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<sup>5</sup> By the summer of 1867, the Freedmen's Bureau reported that of 154 teachers in Tennessee's Black schools, 111 of them were white. Further, the Bureau had provided transportation for 157 teachers, and they had financed the acquisition or construction forty-three school buildings versus thirty-eight buildings owned by freedpeople. This contrasted drastically with Kentucky at the time, which had only twenty-seven white teachers out of a total of 122. Alvord, *Fourth Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen, July 1, 1867* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1867), 68.

the middle section of the state emancipation created “a dual society divided by race” in which Black communities gained a measure of independence from their former owners.<sup>6</sup> That independence remained essential to freedpeople’s approach to freedom, and it is clearly visible in several events involving Black schools in Lebanon and Franklin during the late 1860s. These examples demonstrate the monumental opportunity presented to and seized by African Americans in Tennessee to achieve transformative change, even though it only lasted for a short period of time. Indeed, the potential for racial equality motivated the formation of the KKK in Middle Tennessee, and chapter four will show how white violence directed at Black schools helped reverse that progress by the early 1870s.

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Formerly enslaved African Americans in the town of Lebanon, Tennessee, located about thirty miles east of Nashville, found it difficult to trust some of the white Northerners involved with their schools. Complaints levied against both a teacher and Freedmen’s Bureau agent highlight the dynamics between freedpeople and some outsiders. Even when members of the Black community disagreed with each other, they made their voices heard whether in opposition or in support of those individuals who played direct roles in their education and broader lives.

By the fall of 1866, a white man named H. C. Sharp had established a school for freedpeople in Lebanon where he and his wife served as teachers.<sup>7</sup> In October they were

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen V. Ash, *Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 1860-1870: War and Peace in the Upper South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), xxi-xxii, 9-10.

<sup>7</sup> This is possibly Henry C. Sharp, a lawyer who lived with his wife Caroline Sharp in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1870. This is based on a record showing the two of them receiving reimbursement for travel to Cincinnati from the M. E. Freedmen’s Aid Society in September

teaching thirty pupils who each paid \$1 per month in tuition, the Sharps only source of income.<sup>8</sup> In one of his first communications with Freedmen's Bureau state education superintendent David Burt, Sharp explained that he had come to Lebanon to teach "on and [*sic*] independent mission," and claimed that he faced the "prejudice of the rebels" as well as from some African Americans who could not afford to send their children to his school. Sharp also suggested that the Bureau should pay his salary instead of providing a different form of aid to the school.<sup>9</sup> Within a few weeks of receiving that letter, Burt visited the school in Lebanon and evidently found Sharp less than impressive, describing him as "wholly unfit to teach." Burt advised the AMA to "leave Mr. Sharp to himself," and instead invest in erecting a school building with support from the Black community.<sup>10</sup> Burt would soon learn that the freedpeople had their own reasons for challenging the teacher. Sharp's lack of organizational support from the government or any society ultimately made him a drain on the Black communities' limited resources.

While Sharp experienced difficulties getting financial support from the federal government and benevolent societies, he had nevertheless opened a school by October 1866 with thirty students. Over the next six months, it expanded to more than one hundred students. In the spring of 1867, a group of freedpeople signed a petition for

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1866. Ancestry.com, *1870 United States Federal Census*, Cincinnati, Hamilton County, Ohio; Rust to Burt, May 27, 1867, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 23, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> H. C. Sharp, "Teacher's Monthly School Report," October 1866, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 52, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 23, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Sharp to David Burt, September 14, 1866, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 23, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Burt to Cravath, October 6, 1866, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 23, 2020).

Sharp's removal from Lebanon. The exact contents and signees of the petition are unknown, but it likely included some of the same complaints found the following spring when Freedmen's Bureau agent Michael Walsh collected testimonies about operations in Lebanon, including those of Samuel Britton and George Everett, both African-American men. They overheard Sharp claim to not care anything about the elevation of freedpeople, stating that African Americans "ought to keep their own place," presumably referring to their social status. Black parents understood the significance of this statement, as it directly clashed with their own perceptions of education as a tool for advancement. As disruptive as Sharp's attitudes were, he represented a more direct threat to freedpeople's progress. Britton and Everett also heard Sharp admit that "he had been teaching the school for the purposes of making money."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, as soon as the Lebanon school opened, he charged students tuition, though the parents' ability to pay seemingly diminished over time. In its first month of operation, Sharp collected one dollar from each of his students for a total of \$30. By March 1867, less than one-third of his students could pay, and, of those, most could only muster about twenty-five cents apiece.<sup>12</sup> Sharp's desire to use the Black population to make money not only stymied their educational progress, but it also failed miserably.

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Walsh to William P. Carlin, April 27, 1867, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1911, Roll 82, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 23, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Sharp, "Teacher's Monthly School Report," October 1866, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 52, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 23, 2020); Sharp, "Teacher's Monthly School Report," March 1867, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 52, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 23, 2020).

African-American parents in Lebanon were also concerned with Sharp's behavior and his negative impact on their children. One man testified that his son had attended the school for many months, and that Sharp had "whipped his boy severely upon the slightes[t] pretense." "He whipped him with a cow hide in the face so severely," remarked the concerned father, "that the marks of it was on his face and neck for a fortnight." They complained that Sharp "spends nearly all his time in the Billiard rooms, and that he drinks very hard," suggesting that he "does not pay proper attention to the school." This claim of negligence was bolstered by accusations that Sharp was a poor teacher. One of his students, a ten-year-old girl, could not learn the alphabet after three months of attending the school, which the parents viewed as unacceptable.<sup>13</sup> The Black community in Lebanon resisted Sharp because he was an abusive and ineffective teacher, and his influence worried many parents who entrusted their children to him. This was compounded by the evidence that Sharp cared more about making money from the school than advancing his student's education, which convinced freedpeople that he needed to leave their community.

The grievances levied against Sharp evidently stretched beyond his personal behavior and the treatment of his students. Indeed, his perceived political affiliation played a major role in freedpeople's stance against the teacher. Sharp, in a letter to Burt defending himself against the petition to remove him, explained the reason for the hostility. In a local political election, the teacher voted for a Conservative candidate, though Sharp claimed there was only one name on the ballot and insisted, "I have always been a Radical." Though Sharp denied supporting the Conservatives, his vote represented

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<sup>13</sup> Walsh to Carlin, April 27, 1867.

a significant slight to certain members of the local Black community.<sup>14</sup> In the fall of 1866, Tennessee's Conservative party consisted of former Confederates and pro-slavery Unionists opposing Brownlow's administration and the Radical Republicans both in the state legislature and in Congress who sought to expand civil and political rights for African Americans. Importantly, within a few years, the Conservative politicians helped write a state constitution that created a poll tax to negate Black voting rights. For freedpeople in Lebanon, voting for a Conservative meant voting against racial equality. Though parents and community members already wanted him to answer for the brutal lashing of students and for being an ineffective teacher, Sharp's politics compounded the sentiment against him.

Despite the disapproval for Sharp that Burt had expressed to the AMA, another Northern society, the Methodist Episcopal Church's Freedmen's Aid Society (FAS), had taken an interest in the school and considered supporting its teacher. Dr. Richard S. Rust, an FAS founder and field superintendent, received the petition from the Black parents in Lebanon to have Sharp removed. But he also received, around the same time, a petition in support of Sharp that had been signed by several different members of the Black community, especially those belonging to the local Methodist Episcopal Church. This letter claimed that all allegations made against Sharp that he was "an unmoral man," were false, as they had been sending their own children to his school since he arrived in Lebanon. They expressed support for him in no uncertain terms, pleading for Sharp and his wife to be allowed to remain there: "we implore you to let us have our teachers we

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<sup>14</sup> Sharp to Burt, November 29, 1866, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 23, 2020).

love them and our children are crying their eyes out about them going to be taken away.”<sup>15</sup> This second petition asserted that the sources for the allegations against the teacher were “some very mean Negroes here among us.”<sup>16</sup> While the initial complaints against Sharp reflected serious issues raised by Black parents, this opposing perspective is important because it reflects the diversity within freed communities even as they worked to educate themselves. Because African Americans never acted as a monolith, it is not surprising that some parents viewed Sharp’s influence as more positive than negative. Although unified in their desire to be educated, Lebanon’s Black population disagreed on how to best achieve it, therefore exemplifying another challenge to establishing quality schools for their children.

After considering both sides, Rust decided to keep Sharp in Lebanon and offer his school support from the FAS.<sup>17</sup> In the fall of 1867, Sharp again opened his school for freedpeople. K. J. Sample, a Freedmen’s Bureau agent for Lebanon and the surrounding area, requested that Burt send additional teachers to his sub-district. He noted that Sharp charged each of his students \$1.00 tuition per month, as he had the previous school year, but “the majority of the freedmen are to [*sic*] poor to pay that amount.” However, Sample admitted that this was not the only reason members of the Black community did not send their children to that school: “Mr. Sharp has lost his influence with a large number of the

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<sup>15</sup> This petition was signed by five members of the M.E. Church: Mary Everett, L. S. Owens, Ellen Manson, Better Price, and Fanny Chapman. They sent it to Rust in Cincinnati, Ohio, and Rust forwarded it to Burt a few days later, Rust to Burt, November 27, 1866, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 23, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> Rust to Burt, November 27, 1866.

<sup>17</sup> Rust to Burt, November 27, 1866.

freedmen and they will not send to him under any circumstances.”<sup>18</sup> Enough freedpeople simply refused to patronize a teacher whom they did not trust or believe had their best interest at heart, and this majority clearly expressed their position to the Freedmen’s Bureau. More than anything, this highlights how much power African Americans wielded on a local level to control their schools, confidently exercising their voices when necessary.

Black residents in Lebanon also levied complaints against Freedmen’s Bureau agent W. H. Goodwin, though these did not directly involve education. Still, this case provides another example of African Americans refusing to accept abuse from outsiders. Goodwin had been accused of various forms of financial corruption with concrete evidence of such. Several freedpeople claimed he had fraudulently charged them for carrying out the smallest task. Michael Walsh’s investigation into the situation in Lebanon found that Goodwin was guilty of a discrepancy of over \$20 in the construction of a schoolhouse in the nearby town of Alexandria. In the same inquiry, Walsh wrote that the African-American population “state that Mr. Goodwin has been tyrannical towards them as well as charging them for each and every thing he does for them.”<sup>19</sup> Soon after receiving this report, the Bureau removed Goodwin from his position and immediately sent James M. Tracy as a temporary replacement. Tracy uncovered the previous agent guilty of a separate corrupt scheme. Goodwin had illegally charged more than \$5 each for

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<sup>18</sup> K. J. Sample to Burt, September 11, 1867, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 48, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 23, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Walsh to Carlin, April 27, 1867.



apprenticing seventy-three orphans, collecting \$365 for himself.<sup>20</sup> As they had with Sharp, the Black community in Lebanon played a crucial role in Goodwin's dismissal from the Bureau by refusing to accept abuse from those outsiders sent to serve them.

The clashes between these two Northern white men and the freedpeople of Lebanon demonstrate the power African-American communities exercised to determine who could offer them assistance. They would not work with someone whose presence threatened to return them to a condition like that of slavery. Sharp's physical abuse of children and alleged political support for Conservatives were unacceptable to the portion of Lebanon's Black community who petitioned for his removal likely because the former act had been used for generations to reinforce slavery while the latter promised to restore control of the state to former slaveholders and ex-Confederates. Goodwin's abuse of apprenticeship laws to benefit himself financially also resembled the work of antebellum slave traders, with whom at least some freedpeople were undoubtedly familiar. Despite the dearth of teachers and agents available to offer African Americans aid during their transition to freedom, Lebanon's former slaves refused to settle for an abusive Northern master.

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Racial violence in a different Middle Tennessee town illustrates the political significance of education for freedpeople and the lengths they would go to protect their access to it. By the summer of 1867, the African-American community in Franklin, Tennessee had made significant strides in defining freedom for themselves by protecting

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<sup>20</sup> James M. Tracy to S. W. Groesbeck, May 6, 1867, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1911, Roll 27, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 28, 2020).

their newfound political rights. Significant to that process was the acquisition at least two schools for their children, with assistance from Northern benevolent societies. The Methodist Episcopal FAS supported a school taught by local African-American woman named Nancy Drusilla Scott. One of forty-five free Blacks living in Williamson County before the Civil War, Scott taught roughly fifty students during the fall of 1866.<sup>21</sup> The nearby Wilson's Freedmen's School was taught by the Freemans, a married African-American couple from the North, and received support from the AMA. Edwin and Sophia Freeman were both natives of Connecticut and came to Franklin after living in Newark, New Jersey. They began their school in late 1865.<sup>22</sup> Within two years, they regularly taught more than one hundred students.<sup>23</sup> The presence of Black teachers sent or financially support by Northerners followed a common pattern of freedpeople's preference. In his semiannual report on the progress of schools for the formerly enslaved throughout the South, published on January 1, 1867, Freedmen's Bureau General Superintendent of Schools, John W. Alvord noted, "it is evident that *the freedmen are to have teachers of their own color.*" He reported that while "many such teachers are already employed," he received request from Bureau officials in several states to send

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<sup>21</sup> Ancestry.com, *1860 United States Federal Census*, East Subdivision, Williamson County, Tennessee; Walker, "Table II. Population, 1870-1790," 62; Nancy D. Scott, "Teacher's Monthly School Report," November 1866, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 52, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed June 24, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> Ancestry.com, *1860 United States Federal Census*, Eleventh Ward, Newark City, Essex County, New Jersey; E. H. Freeman, "Teacher's Monthly School Report," February 1867, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 52, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed June 24, 2020).

<sup>23</sup> Their school report for June 1867 tallied 136 total students, the same number as the previous month, Freeman, "Teacher's Monthly School Report," June 1867, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 52, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed June 24, 2020).

Black teachers for reasons explained in first chapter of this study.<sup>24</sup> Whether the Black community made that demand on either the federal government or the Northern societies, they certainly supported Scott and the Freemans and made the security of their schools a significant political issue during the summer of 1867.

After the state legislature granted suffrage to African Americans in early 1867, formerly enslaved men throughout Tennessee could cast their votes for the first time in a statewide election on the first of August that year. Two local organizations emerged in Franklin's Black community to encourage and protect those voters. They boasted one of the state's most effective Union League chapters, which was also referred to as the Loyal League.<sup>25</sup> A national organization started during the Civil War, local branches emerged across the South during Reconstruction to mobilize African-American voters in support of Republican candidates.<sup>26</sup> On the eve of the election, more than sixty men in the community also mustered into an all-Black militia company to serve Second Tennessee State Guard, whose primary purpose was to protect freedmen at the polls from violent whites attempting to resist them.<sup>27</sup> While the organizations' influence waned significantly after that summer, their actions demonstrated the goals and expectations of that Middle Tennessee community. It is important to understand their mobilization as part of the broader movement for racial equality that also served as a key motivation for Black education.

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<sup>24</sup> J. W. Alvord, *Third Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1867), 36.

<sup>25</sup> Ben H. Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army: The State Guard and Its Role in Reconstruction, 1867-1869* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 88.

<sup>26</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 283.

<sup>27</sup> Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army*, 235.

The events in downtown Franklin, Tennessee on Saturday, July 6, 1867 reflect the embattled nature of emancipation as it played out throughout the postwar South. During the week prior, the Union League had gathered on several occasions to celebrate Independence Day, and they did so by marching on the outskirts of town playing instruments and carrying flags. On multiple occasions, those parades had been disturbed by Conservatives who ran into the crowd and fired guns amongst them. Nobody was hurt on those occasions, but it convinced many of the men to carry firearms of their own. On Saturday morning, several Republican candidates arrived in town that to deliver a series of speeches at the courthouse that afternoon. Throughout that day and evening, the Union League formed their procession and marched through the town to support the Republican candidates for the upcoming election. Significantly, the members of the procession carried campaign banners to accompany the other accoutrements, some containing traditional slogans like “Vote the Radical Ticket,” while others were more direct, saying: “Remember Fort Pillow when you go to the polls.” Another banner particularly expressed the Black community’s anxieties over their continued access to education given the sentiment of Conservatives throughout the state (while also underscoring the perceived importance of their own political empowerment in combatting that resistance). It read, “The Radicals build School Houses and the Conservatives burn them.”<sup>28</sup> Despite a Freedmen’s Bureau agent later criticizing this banner for having “no other effect than to stir up bad blood,” as no African-American school had been attacked in that county, Franklin’s freedpeople would have known about cases of whites burning freedpeople’s

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<sup>28</sup> “Riot at Franklin,” *Republican Banner*, July 9, 1867.

schools in surrounding towns.<sup>29</sup> Most tragic was the Memphis massacre that killed nearly fifty people and destroyed nine school buildings just over a year earlier.<sup>30</sup> Closer to home, many schoolhouses within fifty miles of Franklin had been burned in places like Shelbyville, Columbia, and Brentwood, the latter town located only about ten miles away.<sup>31</sup> Given the real threat of their schools being destroyed, the Union League banner reflected a vital political issue concerning the Black community leading to the August election.

The Union League's banners, instruments, and flags had already annoyed Franklin's Conservatives, but a final speech on the courthouse steps that afternoon pushed tensions to a new height. This speech was not part of the regularly scheduled Republican meeting, but rather an impromptu address meant to convince Black voters to reconsider their support for Brownlow's party. Joseph Williams, a Pennsylvania native, Union veteran, and the current leader of a relatively small Black faction of Tennessee Conservative, told the crowd in the town square that former slaves should support their former owners instead of the Radicals who had disenfranchised all ex-Confederates. Continuing to support Radicals, Williams argued, would make their "condition in the future . . . far worse than ever it was in the past," an attitude that illuminated divisions in the Black community, as well as Franklin as a whole.<sup>32</sup> As Williams made these and

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<sup>29</sup> Walsh to Carlin, July 15, 1867, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 39, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed July 9, 2019).

<sup>30</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 262; Alvord, *Third Sem-Annual Report*, 32.

<sup>31</sup> Alvord, *Third Sem-Annual Report*, 32.

<sup>32</sup> "Riot at Franklin," *Republican Banner*, July 9, 1867; Thomas B. Alexander, "Political Reconstruction in Tennessee, 1865-1870," in Richard O. Curry ed. *Radicalism, Racism, and Party Alignment: The Border States during Reconstruction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969): 37-79; Affidavit of A. N. C. Williams, July 9, 1867, BRFAL NARA RG 105, M1911, Roll 83.

other disparaging comments about the Radical Republicans, African-American leaders of the Union League moved away from the speaker to gather their drums and reform the procession, rather than listening to the Conservative rhetoric any longer.<sup>33</sup> That move in particular angered white and Black Conservative onlookers, who began to gather and arm themselves at the store of John L. House, a former Confederate officer, while the Union League met on the outskirts of town. After darkness set in, the partially-armed League procession marched toward their headquarters downtown to dismiss for the night. As they passed through the town square, a white liveryman named Michael H. Cody, standing outside of House's store with the Conservatives, fired his pistol into the group of primarily black men and boys in the street. Immediately, the Union Leaguers, who still held their firearms returned shots, causing a general crossfire for several minutes until those in the procession retreated to safety. When both sides fell silent, Cody lie dead, and nearly forty men and boys suffered gunshot wounds.

One of the leaders of the Union League on the day of the Franklin massacre was a young freedman named Allen Noah Crutcher Williams.<sup>34</sup> Not to be confused with the Conservative orator, this twenty-two-year-old had freed himself during the war, started his own shop near the town square, and attended the 1865 State Convention of Colored Men as the county's sole representative.<sup>35</sup> For much of the day on July 6, 1867, A. N. C.

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<sup>33</sup> Affidavit of Polk Watson, July 8, 1867, and Affidavit of Benjamin Graves, July 10, 1867, BRFAL NARA RG 105, M1911, Roll 83.

<sup>34</sup> His full name is found in a newspapers covering his retirement in 1928, though he is typically referred to as A. N. C. Williams, "Franklin Negro, Oldest Merchant, Retires," *Nashville Tennessean*, March 5, 1928.

<sup>35</sup> Ancestry.com, *1870 United States Federal Census*, Ninth Civil District, Williamson County, Tennessee; State Convention of Colored Men of the State of Tennessee (1865: Nashville, TN), "Proceedings," 10.

Williams strove to persuade his fellow League members not to upset the white residents. He also acted as a would-be mediator between the men at House's store and the procession, revealing that he had earned the respect of both races in Franklin. With that, however, came the expectation among some whites that he should convince the Leaguers to back down. Before the Black men and boys marched back into town late that night, one white man approached Williams, and, as Williams later explained, "asked me to use my influence to prevent the procession going down town and creating a disturbance." Williams then had to convince William Cunningham, a former Confederate officer, that he had already "succeeded in getting them all quiet and that they were going to break up and go home." He relayed the same message to John House at the latter's store just minutes before the procession arrived back in the town square. After the first shot rang out, Williams ran into House's store, rushed up the stairs, and hid there until the violence ceased.<sup>36</sup>

Though still very young and recently enslaved, A. N. C. Williams had earned a position in Franklin as a leading member of the Black community. He was also someone whom the white community saw as safe and sensible. A. N. C. Williams's role during the massacre is important because he chose a different method of protecting the Black community—including their schools—than other League members by not marching or fighting back. Having already secured himself among the white community, Williams nevertheless attempted to prevent violence that night by placing himself in between the two sides. Despite ultimately failing to shield his town from white terror, Williams's motivations became clear over the next several years as he emerged an important figure

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<sup>36</sup> Affidavit of A. N. C. Williams, BRFAL NARA RG 105, M1911, Roll 83.

in the local Black educational effort. Indeed, he taught his own school for freedpeople in Franklin by 1870, and, within another ten years his children would be enrolled in the community schools.<sup>37</sup> Williams's decision to break up the Union League procession rather than join it underscores the complex, non-binary nature of Black activism during this period. He wholeheartedly supported the messages displayed on the banners and the same Republican candidates, but he disagreed with the notion that standing their ground in an armed confrontation would advance freedpeople's objectives. Williams represented one of the many diverse approaches to local leadership during a tumultuous time for formerly enslaved African Americans who nevertheless remained focused on educational progress.

The Franklin massacre illuminates the significant, fragile coexistence of Black and white communities in the Reconstruction-era Upper South and highlights how crucial freedpeople's schools were in attempting to prevent violence between them. Franklin's Black community in the summer of 1867 boasted an active Union League, multiple schools taught by African Americans, and enough men willing to enlist in a militia to protect their suffrage. This went a long way to help local Republican candidates win office in that election, as the county's voters favored Radical candidates over Conservatives, 1,704 to 574. Fifteen months later, when voters returned to the polls for the 1868 presidential election, the Conservatives—who were in the process of reclaiming the Democratic Party in the state—won Williamson County 835 to 561, despite Tennessee as a whole favoring the Republican candidate, Ulysses S. Grant, by more than

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<sup>37</sup> Ancestry.com, *1870 United States Federal Census*, Ninth Civil District, Williamson County, Tennessee; Ancestry.com, *1880 United States Federal Census*, Ninth Civil District, Williamson County, Tennessee.



30,000 votes. This represented a decline in Radical votes for Franklin's county by 1,143 from the previous election.<sup>38</sup> Between those two elections, the Ku Klux Klan had an undeniable impact in suppressing the Black vote in Franklin. In fact, the Williamson County Klan chapter was first chartered in 1868 at John House's store, and two of its founding members were House and William Cunningham.<sup>39</sup> Because of this white resistance, the influence and power of Franklin's Union League waned significantly after the massacre, though A. N. C. Williams continued to win the favor of his white neighbors well into the twentieth century, when one Nashville newspaper called him "one of the best known negro citizens of the Volunteer state."<sup>40</sup> After witnessing the violence carried out against his community, Williams focused his energies on helping to educate and advance freedpeoples's status by becoming involved in teaching and serving as a minister at the Franklin Colored church starting in 1873.<sup>41</sup> This shows that even in the face of KKK violence and the reversal of Black suffrage, this Middle Tennessee community continued to prioritize the education of their children. The massacre further illuminates the diversity within the African-American community, where different leaders had different approaches to secure Black interests, peace, and safety. Williams adopted a more moderate approach than others, and later memories of him indicate that he maintained this. Though he also clearly remained a determined advocate for Black

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<sup>38</sup> Severance includes these election numbers in Appendix C and E, *Tennessee's Radical Army*, 238, 241-242.

<sup>39</sup> George S. Nichols, among the six founding members of the Williamson County chapter of the Ku Klux Klan, wrote a short memoir in March 11, 1915 after being requested to do so by his wife. This provides a brief account of the Klan's formation in Franklin in 1868, Nichols, March 11, 1915.

<sup>40</sup> "Franklin Negro, Oldest Merchant, Retires," *Nashville Tennessean*, March 5, 1928.

<sup>41</sup> "Franklin Negro, Oldest Merchant, Retires," *Nashville Tennessean*, March 5, 1928.

education in Franklin. This came with the price of ceasing the type of vocal political statements made by the Union Leaguers that called out and pushed back against white violence.

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The case studies of Lebanon and Franklin help explain the significance of education to freedpeople in Tennessee at the peak of their progress during Reconstruction and reveal the fragility of that progress. Freedpeople found that their allies sometimes represented a threat to their schools that needed to be addressed. Importantly, African Americans often adopted different approaches in their efforts to educate themselves, reflecting a diversity of ideas on how best to achieve it. While they had no unified voice, they certainly had a unified determination to advance Black education. Accepting the aid of Northern teachers and federal agents who often controlled school operations, Black communities resisted when those individuals endangered their children or otherwise hindered their advancement in society. The second part of this study will provide an in-depth examination of those local and Northern allies to freedpeople—like Sharp and Goodwin in Lebanon—whose actions ultimately prevented equal educational opportunities. Black Tennesseans also took advantage of their enfranchisement in 1867 to vote for those individuals and institutions that most helped their communities, and they formed organizations like Union Leagues to mobilize voters. The Union League in Franklin identified white attacks against Black schools as an issue on which they would base their votes. In their process of the campaigning, white violence sought to silence freedpeople’s political voices, and, over the course of a few years, the KKK essentially achieved that objective. Despite regression, Black leaders in Tennessee continued

fighting for equality by trying to reform their school systems. Specifically, in 1871 they identified the integration of public schools as the best means of improving their position in society.<sup>42</sup> Until the mid-twentieth century, the decade following the Civil War presented the best opportunities for African Americans in the Upper South to realize their vision of quality schools for their children.

The mobilization of Black communities in Lebanon and Franklin to defend their schools illuminates the revolutionary potential of the postwar period. But it is also important to recognize the limits of change in the postwar Upper South in the face of determined white obstacles. This is best represented by the story of one Black Middle Tennessee child named Nat Love. Born in 1854 on a Davidson County plantation, near Nashville, Love's owner prohibited slaves from receiving an education.<sup>43</sup> After the war, Love's family rented a plot of land from their former owner, growing, among other crops, tobacco; they lived in poverty for the next few years. During winters in the late 1860s, Love wanted to learn how to read and write, though few opportunities were available to him. His father, who was semi-literate, taught him as much as he could, and there was no school nearby that would accept Black students. Observing that "it is hard work learning to read and write without a teacher," Love focused the rest of his childhood on helping his family on the farm.<sup>44</sup> In 1869, at the age of fifteen, Love determined that his home state of Tennessee could not offer him the life he desired. He set out west for Kansas to

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<sup>42</sup> "Proceedings of the State Convention of the colored citizens of Tennessee," 3.

<sup>43</sup> Nat Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love Better Known in the Cattle Country as "Deadwood Dick" by Himself; a True History of Slavery Days, Life on the Great Cattle Ranges and on the Plains of the "Wild and Woolly" West, Based on Facts, and Personal Experiences of the Author* (Los Angeles, California, 1907), 13.

<sup>44</sup> Love, *The Life and Adventures*, 17-18.

find better employment and the informal education acquired during his career in the cattle business as he became a famous cowboy.<sup>45</sup> Despite all of the efforts by Black leaders and families outlined in Part I, by the early 1870s, the prospects for African Americans of receiving a quality education and a measure of equality had severely diminished in the Upper South. The cause of that is the focus of Part II.

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<sup>45</sup> Throughout the 1870s, almost 10,000 African Americans from Kentucky and Tennessee migrated to Kansas in search of better lives. If Love was representative of these migrants, then it is fair to conclude that a lack of educational opportunities contributed to the larger Black exodus out of the Upper South to places like Kansas. See Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), 147; Love, *The Life and Adventures*, 40, 130.

PART II – WHITES INFLUENCE AFRICAN-AMERICAN SCHOOLS

CHAPTER V – IMPERFECT ALLIES AND ANGRY MOBS: HOW LOCAL WHITES  
ENGAGED WITH BLACK EDUCATION

In the Upper South, land was precious to newly emancipated people. Forced to live and work on white-owned land during slavery, many faced the same prospects in freedom except for promised wages or shares of crops. During the Civil War, Gabriel Burdett was one of thousands of Black Kentuckians who found refuge from enslavement at the federal fortification named Camp Nelson. Born in Garrard County, Kentucky, Burdett spent his first thirty-four years in bondage, becoming a minister in adulthood and eventually enlisting in the Union army to become free in 1864.<sup>1</sup> While stationed at Camp Nelson, he befriended two white AMA missionaries, John G. Fee and Abisha Scofield, who helped organize and teach schools for soldiers and their families at the camp. As the federal government began closing the refugee home in the fall of 1865, most freedpeople there hoped to stay rather than return to their former owners, especially while slavery remained legal in Kentucky. To that end, Burdett joined with Fee, Scofield, and a fellow Black soldier named George Blakeman in attempting to purchase the land on which the camp had been built.<sup>2</sup> Land ownership represented perhaps the best chance for racial progress as it would allow African Americans to finally live and work independently from whites. This dream, however, remained largely unfulfilled during the postwar decade.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard D. Sears, ed. *Camp Nelson, Kentucky: A Civil War History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), xlvi, lxxv; Amy Murrell Taylor, *Embattled Freedom: Journeys through the Civil War's Slave Refugee Camps* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 174, 186-187.

<sup>2</sup> Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*, 228.

In October 1865, Burdett, Blakeman, Fee, and Scofield petitioned the Freedmen's Bureau to "request that the buildings of, and all the appurtenances to the Refugee Home in Camp Nelson Ky be conveyed to us." Claiming the land would be used "for school purposes," they ensured the federal government they would purchase the land from local white Unionist and landowner Joseph Moss.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Burdett and his partners planned to divide the 200 acres into smaller plots for individual Black families to live. The idea was to develop a community at Camp Nelson where African Americans would own land, farm, attend school and church, and live independently from their former owners. But the federal government denied their request to take possession of the land and property, desiring to close the camp and force the refugees to leave. Moss instead rented plots of land to freedpeople.<sup>4</sup> For the next year, determined to achieve their original goal, Burdett, Fee, and Scofield worked with Northern benefactors, including the AMA, to raise enough money to buy the land. They estimated it would cost about \$10,000 to acquire "one hundred and ninety acres of fertile ground, about thirty cottages & one large 'Superintendent's building.'"<sup>5</sup> AMA representatives, however, disagreed with the argument that they could eventually turn a profit from selling the lots to individual Black families and refused to finance the purchase.<sup>6</sup> Despite failing, this effort to acquire land for freedpeople demonstrate how significant Black landownership was to achieving racial equality. And this fact was not lost on the local white population.

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<sup>3</sup> John G. Fee, Gabriel Burdett, George Blakeman, and Abisha Scofield to Oliver Otis Howard, October 31, 1865 and Fee, Burdett, and Scofield to Howard, October 31, 1865 in Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, 291-292.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*, 229.

<sup>5</sup> Fee to M. E. Strieby, undated, in Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, 347-348.

<sup>6</sup> Cravath to Fee, October 24, 1866, in Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, 349-350.

During negotiations to sell Camp Nelson to Burdett and company, local white residents pressured Moss not to sell to freedpeople, complaining about the apparent development of an independent Black village.<sup>7</sup> Scofield, whose family had remained at the camp through 1866 to oversee the school, reported, “the rebs are using all their power with [Moss] to stop the trade.” That fall, local whites threatened to chase out or kill Scofield, claiming that “his Negro School must be stoped! [*sic*]”<sup>8</sup> Following through on their threats, white mobs, calling themselves “regulators,” repeatedly attacked the Black families who rented from Moss, including the home of Gabriel Burdett, where he lived with his wife Lucinda and several children.<sup>9</sup> During one of these raids in November 1866, when Scofield and his own wife and children came under attack, Burdett helped the Northern white family narrowly escape to the nearby town of Nicholasville. The Scofields never returned to Camp Nelson after the fall of 1866. White violence successfully chased off Northern educators and convinced Moss not to sell his land to African Americans. Following the violence and Scofield’s departure, the Bureau sent enough regular troops to protect the community, which allowed John Fee to purchase 130 acres from Moss to salvage Burdett’s vision. This smaller portion of the former refugee camp included the land on which the school sat, and Fee then sold smaller lots to more

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<sup>7</sup> Amy Taylor mentions complaints from local whites about Black “colonies” in one of her footnotes, *Embattled Freedom*, 305, n. 5. See also Scofield to Strieby and George Whipple, December 16, 1866, Box 56, AMA Manuscripts, ARC; Fee to Whipple January 16, 1866, Box 56, AMA Manuscripts, ARC.

<sup>8</sup> Scofield to Edward Parmelee Smith, September 29, 1866, in Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, 347; Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*, 229.

<sup>9</sup> Gabriel and Lucinda Burdett had four children in the fall of 1866 and would have their fifth child the following year who they named John G. after Fee. The Burdett household also consisted of Burdett’s sister-in-law and nine nieces and nephews. See Scofield to Strieby and Whipple, December 16, 1866, Box 56, AMA Manuscripts, ARC; Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, lxxv; Taylor *Embattled Freedom*, 237.



than forty individual Black families, representing a much more modest achievement than Burdett had originally hoped.<sup>10</sup> That brief federal protection gave Moss enough cover to sell to Fee, a local white minister, but he still refused to turn over his land to the formerly enslaved population fearing further violence. While Camp Nelson's educational efforts were allowed to continue, the community was still vulnerable.<sup>11</sup>

Failing in his effort to establish an independent town in the shadow of Camp Nelson, Burdett continued working with the AMA over the next decade to build churches and educate the freedpeople in his community. While he occasionally taught the local school, the AMA sometimes doubted his intelligence and instead sent a succession of Northern white educators who rarely remained for an extended period.<sup>12</sup> Burdett mainly focused on his work as a minister, establishing independent and nondenominational Black churches in the counties surrounding Camp Nelson.<sup>13</sup> Burdett also became a prominent political figure in Kentucky, participating in the second statewide convention of African Americans in 1867 and serving as a state elector for the Republican Party in the election of 1872. In 1876, he was a delegate for Kentucky at the Republican National Convention in Cincinnati, Ohio, and, though his party won the presidency, Rutherford B. Hayes's agreement to officially abandon Reconstruction in the South tested Burdett's loyalty to his political party. The breaking point came in August 1877, during a speech at

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<sup>10</sup> Fee, *Autobiography of John G. Fee, Berea, Kentucky* (Chicago: National Christian Association, 1891), 183; Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*, 237-238.

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*, 238.

<sup>12</sup> Theron Edmund Hall, one of the founders of the wartime Camp Nelson Refugee Home, reported to AMA headquarters that Burdett "is not competent to teach." On the back of Hall's letter, Edward Parmelee Smith wrote to Erastus Milo Cravath—both AMA officials—that he thought Burdett was "a first class teacher." See Hall to Strieby, September 14, 1867 in Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, 370-371.

<sup>13</sup> Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 227; Taylor *Embattled Freedom*, 229-230.

a Republican meeting in Lexington when Burdett was interrupted by opponents throwing objects at him, a symbolic destruction of his larger efforts that they had thwarted for the last decade.<sup>14</sup> At this point, Kentucky could no longer provide Gabriel and Lucinda Burdett's family with the lives they deserved, believing that Black Kentuckians were only "partially free." In 1877, they moved to Kansas, joining Nat Love and the thousands of other African Americans from the Upper South who sought better opportunities in the West.<sup>15</sup> This chapter demonstrates the power of local white authority and violence to destroy opportunities for Black advancement in Kentucky and Tennessee, driving many to seek true freedom elsewhere.

The Camp Nelson episode reveals two important facts about white communities' relationships with Black schools in the postwar Upper South. First, whites owned most of the land and therefore often controlled where schools for freedpeople were located. The correlative of this fact is that the political, economic, and social power in Kentucky and Tennessee remained in the hands of the same elite whites who had owned slaves, even when the federal government stepped in during the immediate postwar years. Sometimes these elites held positions in local government and earned the trust of Freedmen's Bureau by helping to establish schools for the formerly enslaved population. In the case of Joseph Moss, however, the landowner had been willing to work directly with freedpeople until his white neighbors intervened. This leads to the second fact: when they lacked the ability to prevent Black schools from being erected, local whites were willing to use vigilante violence to destroy them. Scholars have determined that white terrorist groups

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<sup>14</sup> Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*, 244-245.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*, 241.

like the KKK and “regulators” intentionally targeted African-American schoolhouses.<sup>16</sup> These instances of white violence represented concerted efforts to prevent the formerly enslaved population from acquiring an education, and, by extension, to prevent them from advancing in society. Importantly, the destruction of school buildings often had drastic consequences, as poor Black communities lacked the financial resources to rebuild, especially after the retreat of the federal government and Northern benevolent organizations, limited allies though they were, in the early 1870s.

This chapter analyzes how white Kentuckians and Tennesseans responded to Black efforts to educate themselves. It will explore efforts to break up or destroy freedpeople’s schools with violence from white communities, which was shaped by the local conditions of emancipation and Reconstruction. Though both states avoided the full-fledged Radical Reconstruction and military occupation from the federal government seen elsewhere in the South, many white residents still resisted the social change wrought by emancipation. That resistance was not always directly violent. Wealthy landowners could simply refuse to rent or sell property for the use of Black schools and churches, or they could threaten to evict families they employed for sending their children to school.

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<sup>16</sup> Allen W. Trelease provides a comprehensive study of the rise of the Ku Klux Klan during Reconstruction, including its targeting freedpeople’s schools, which started in Tennessee and made a considerable impact in Kentucky. See Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971). For other studies on white violence during Reconstruction in the Upper South and elsewhere, see Ronald Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); James Michael Rhyne, “Rehearsal for Redemption: The Politics of Post-Emancipation Violence in Kentucky’s Bluegrass Region,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 2006; Campbell F. Scribner, “Surveying the Destruction of African American Schoolhouses in the South, 1864-1876,” *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 10, no. 4 (December 2020): 469-494; George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and “Legal Lynchings”* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990).

Both the overt and passive means of thwarting freedpeople's education illuminate the white Southern racism that historians of this era have long emphasized. What scholars can still learn more about, however, are the ways that the Freedmen's Bureau, by employing and partnering with local whites to establish schools in Black communities, also perpetuated the existing racial hierarchy. When former slaveholders accepted positions within the Bureau, their racial ideology often prevented them from viewing racial equality as positive change. Examining white Southerners' roles as potential, but often failed allies to Black communities, alongside their roles as overt antagonists during the process of emancipation, will allow historians to better understand why radical social change—including equal opportunities to quality education for African Americans—ultimately failed during Reconstruction in the Upper South.

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In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, Congress empowered the Freedmen's Bureau to ensure that slavery was destroyed and to help African Americans transition to freedom. Assisting with the establishment of schools for freedpeople was arguably the Bureau's most important function during their relatively brief occupation of the South.<sup>17</sup> Though Black Kentuckians and Tennesseans worked to maintain control over their schools, as already demonstrated in this study, the federal government intended for white Southerners to assume responsibility for the education of African Americans once its personnel had been withdrawn. In 1865, Bureau Commissioner Oliver Otis

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<sup>17</sup> The Freedmen's Bureau began its work in the Upper South by the summer of 1865, and while it officially operated until 1872, it had removed most of its personnel by the end of 1868. See Foner, *Reconstruction*, 144-148; Robert Harrison, "New Representations of a 'Misrepresented Bureau': Reflections on Recent Scholarship on the Freedmen's Bureau," *American Nineteenth Century History* 8, No. 2 (June 2007), 206.

Howard explained that because whites would inevitably maintain political power in the state governments and thereby determine the fate of public schools, he believed his agency should persuade local leaders to support Black education. The Bureau, therefore, strove to convince Southern whites that they would personally benefit from African Americans developing into an educated workforce, an attitude that perpetuated a racial hierarchy resembling that which had upheld slavery.<sup>18</sup> This, importantly, clashed with Black conceptions of their own education as a means of achieving American citizenship and independence from white society.

As the Freedmen's Bureau carried out its mission to convince Upper South whites that African-American education was a valuable enterprise, they hired many white elites to serve as local agents or superintendents. It is important, therefore, to discuss how white Kentuckians and Tennesseans influenced Black education by working for that federal agency. Despite opportunities for revolutionary change, many communities experienced more continuity in race relations because members of the slaveholding class held on to political power and non-slaveholding whites supported them. While former Confederates quickly reemerged to political prominence by the 1870s, in the immediate postwar years, proslavery Unionists gained the trust of the federal government as ideal leaders to oversee African Americans' transition to freedom. In many cases, wealthy former slaveholders directly aided in the establishment of schools for freedpeople during the postwar period. When allocating funds to help build and repair school buildings for Black communities, the Freedmen's Bureau preferred to work with a local "citizen" instead of

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<sup>18</sup> Christopher M. Spann, *From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse: African American Education in Mississippi, 1862-1875* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 75-76.

sending money directly to freedpeople. This preference likely stemmed from the Bureau's broader desire to convince formerly enslaved people to sign labor contracts with their former owners, therefore maintaining local white control over African Americans. Providing direct aid to Black communities might have upset that fragile dynamic on which the federal government depended. Not only was it common for the Bureau to rely on local white residents to manage federal funds, but former slaveholders frequently received official appointments to serve within the agency. Some federal commanders even viewed ex-enslavers as the best-equipped individuals to work with and control freedpeople.

In July 1865, Clinton Bowen Fisk opened his headquarters in Nashville and became the Assistant Commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau for Tennessee, Kentucky, and Northern Alabama.<sup>19</sup> Kentucky gained its own headquarters the following summer, but Fisk led the Bureau in both Upper South states for nearly a year. Along with assisting African Americans in establishing schools throughout the region, he appointed superintendents in as many counties as possible to facilitate all Bureau operations. Instead of stationing a military officer to manage each county (as the Bureau was run by the War Department), Fisk frequently appointed a local civilian to serve as a federal representative in their home county. In February 1866, Fisk informed Commissioner Howard that he "appointed agents in a few counties only" to oversee the more than 200,000 newly emancipated Kentuckians, likely to emphasize the relatively small number

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<sup>19</sup> Historian Paul David Phillips provides a detailed description of Fisk's organization of the Freedmen's Bureau in Tennessee as part of a broader doctoral dissertation on the Bureau in Tennessee. See, Phillips, "A History the Freedmen's Bureau in Tennessee (Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1964), 46-63.

of army officers serving in that capacity. Having refused to accept emancipation until the recent ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, Kentucky's legislature vehemently opposed the Bureau's presence in the state, which made it difficult for Fisk to deploy military personnel in many places. This convinced him to implement a different strategy. "Superintendents were selected from the Citizens," Fisk explained, "and appointed upon the recommendation of the best men I could consult."<sup>20</sup> He also confirmed that he selected superintendents throughout Tennessee in the same manner, "generally from the Citizens."<sup>21</sup> The individuals chosen for these jobs became the primary contact for African Americans living in most counties who sought Bureau assistance, including support in establishing a school for their children and adults.

During Fisk's first year as a Bureau commander, dozens of Kentuckians and Tennesseans requested an appointment for themselves or recommended one for someone they knew. It is not entirely clear, but besides remaining loyal to the United States during the war, receiving a superintendency seemed to require being a white male who already held a prominent role in society. In many cases, local lawyers, judges, politicians, or other civil officers ultimately received these positions. For example, Fisk appointed Joel B. Smith, a hotel owner and the mayor of Tullahoma, Tennessee, to lead in the Bureau in Coffee County.<sup>22</sup> Samuel A. Spencer, the superintendent stationed in Greensburg,

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<sup>20</sup> Clinton Bowen Fisk to Oliver Otis Howard, February 14, 1866, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 29, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed March 29, 2021).

<sup>21</sup> Fisk to Howard, February 14, 1866, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 29, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed March 29, 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Ancestry.com, *1860 United States Federal Census*, Tullahoma, Coffee County, Tennessee, 131; Ancestry.com, *1870 United States Federal Census*, Civil District 13, Coffee County, Tennessee, 15.

Kentucky, also presided as the judge of the Green County Court. Spencer initially hesitated to accept the Bureau position because he already served his community in other official capacities. Importantly, Spencer's duties as local judge included the approval of contracts to indenture Black children to white landowners, and, while explaining this to the Bureau, he expressed his preference to require all such agreements to include a guarantee of educating the "apprentice."<sup>23</sup> Fisk's office, however, insisted that Spencer take the position anyway, asserting, "We need just such men as you to conduct the delicate & difficult duties devolving upon an Agents of this Bureau in Ky."<sup>24</sup> For both Smith and Spencer, both of whom had owned enslaved persons prior to the Civil War, the Freedmen's Bureau valued them as local officeholders with the power to influence policy and maintain harmony between whites and Blacks.<sup>25</sup> In Spencer's case, the Bureau likely approved of his policy of ensuring that indenture Black children learn to at least read and write as part of the larger goal of persuading white leaders to endorse African-American education. This practice, however, largely kept freedpeople repressed as dependent, but more efficient, laborers.

Based on the documents discussing these appointments, Fisk seemingly valued a person's ability to influence both the white and African-American communities more than finding someone who believed in racial progress, let alone racial equality. In Green

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<sup>23</sup> Spencer to Fisk, January 15, 1866, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 32, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed April 2, 2021).

<sup>24</sup> J. R. Jacobs to Spencer, January 26, 1866, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 2, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed April 2, 2021).

<sup>25</sup> Ancestry.com, *1860 United States Federal Census-Slave Schedule*, Tullahoma, Coffee County, Tennessee, 15; Ancestry.com, *1850 United States Federal Census-Slave Schedule*, District 1, Green County, Kentucky.



County, Kentucky, while Spencer served as superintendent, a Black man named John Sweney applied for a position within the Freedmen's Bureau. Sweney had been enslaved prior to 1861, served in the Union Army for more than two years during the war, and, by April 1866, was wrapping up a term teaching a school for freedpeople in his hometown of Greensburg.<sup>26</sup> He even listed Spencer as a reference when we requested a job in the Bureau from the headquarters in Nashville. Fisk's adjutant responded plainly, "at present there are no vacancies," despite the Assistant Commissioner complaining to Howard just two months prior about staffing shortages in Kentucky.<sup>27</sup> In Sweney's case, a proven commitment to serving the country and educating African Americans was not enough to secure a position in the Bureau. Fisk evidently preferred judges like Spencer who had established their local authority over whites and Blacks even before the war.

African Americans sometimes attempted to convince the Bureau to hire a local white man for a position, though the federal government did not always take their advice. In Lincoln County, Tennessee, more than 1,000 members of the Black community signed a petition to have a man named William French appointed as their Bureau superintendent.<sup>28</sup> Fisk evidently valued that petition enough to award French the position in early September 1865, but he revoked that appointment less than two weeks later. Fisk

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<sup>26</sup> John Sweney, *Compiled Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers who Served in the United States Colored Troops*, NARA RG 94, Microfilm Series M1821, Roll 106; Sweney to Fisk, April 10, 1866, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 32, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed April 8, 2021).

<sup>27</sup> H. S. Brown to Sweney, April 18, 1866 "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 3, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed April 8, 2021).

<sup>28</sup> William French to Fisk, August 10, 1865, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 38, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed May 3, 2021).

replaced French with a man named Alfred Bearden who had initially supported the Confederacy before shifting his loyalty to the Union during the Civil War. Some of his neighbors, however, still doubted the sincerity of his allegiance to the federal government when he applied for position with the Bureau.<sup>29</sup> It is worth noting that only a day before Bearden replaced French, a letter of recommendation was penned on French's behalf, which stated, "Negroes will fail to rec[ieve] justice at the hands of such men as Bearden."<sup>30</sup> While it is unlikely Fisk read that letter before replacing French, Bearden remained in that position for more than a year following his appointment.

Perhaps it was generally accepted that Bureau agents need not care about helping freedpeople achieve a level of social equality. That appeared to be the case when two white Unionists from Franklin, Tennessee wrote in support of William P. Campbell's appointment to the local Bureau office. The letter admitted that Campbell "was not so much a friend to negroes as he was an enemy to the Rebels," though they still found him "best qualified" for the position.<sup>31</sup> Bearden and Campbell had earned enough of a reputation for their racial views that their neighbors informed Fisk about it prior to their respective appointments. When these men oversaw Bureau operations, they likely maintained the racial dynamics that supported white dominance in society rather than working toward social equality.

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<sup>29</sup> Fisk, Special Order No. 46, September 14, 1865, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 23, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed May 3, 2021).

<sup>30</sup> C. R. Haverly to Harding, September 13, 1865, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 26, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed May 3, 2021).

<sup>31</sup> A. W. Moss and D. B. Cliffe to Fisk, August 29, 1865, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 38, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed May 3, 2021).

It is also possible that the federal government considered former enslavers as especially fit to serve as an agent as they had experience controlling African Americans. In one instance, a white Tennessean received a recommendation to be the Giles County Bureau superintendent based in part on his experience enslaving people. The author of this letter summarized Marcus L. Dismukes's perceived qualifications for the position: "A slave holder before the War, his skill in management, his firmness, his respect for the rights and feeling of the African race, and his efforts to educate and protect them."<sup>32</sup> Despite these claims that Dismukes worked to help formerly enslaved people progress after emancipation, his status as a former slaveowner, including his "management" and "his firmness," served as the basis of his recommendation, demonstrating that many local whites aimed to preserve the racial hierarchy of the antebellum era.

Not only had civilians seeking posts with the Freedmen's Bureau belonged to the slaveholding class, but their behavior also suggested they held racist views and opposed African Americans' advancement. At least two local men who applied to represent the Bureau in Bath County, Kentucky fit this description. William Lightfoot Visscher believed himself fit for the position having served in a Kentucky Union regiment for most of the war and he knew many of the Unionists living in that area who would support his work.<sup>33</sup> Visscher had grown up in a household that owned slaves, and, twenty years after applying to serve in the Bureau, he published a series of poems titled *Black Mammy*, which promoted the racist caricature of African-American women during slavery that

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<sup>32</sup> W. Stodderd to Fisk, August 16, 1865, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 27, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed June 1, 2021).

<sup>33</sup> William Lightfoot Visscher to Fisk, January 2, 1866, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 38, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed April 29, 2021).

remained popular through the Jim Crow era.<sup>34</sup> Fisk selected the other applicant for the superintendency of Bath County, Daniel Harper, who also served as the county's sheriff. Harper owned at least one enslaved person before the war and remained a wealthy farmer by 1870.<sup>35</sup> Nearly a month after this appointment, a group of local men petitioned Fisk to replace Harper, arguing that he was the wrong person for the job and that Visscher should replace him. Along with being a Democrat, the petition argued that Harper, "is known to be one of the strongest proslavery men in the county and only wanted the office for the money."<sup>36</sup> Bearden, Campbell, Visscher, and Harper likely represented a significant section of elite whites throughout Kentucky and Tennessee who were unlikely to move beyond the racial ideologies that had supported the institution of slavery. Importantly, their potential role as Freedmen's Bureau agents meant that they would have directly assisted in establishment of schools for freedpeople in the years immediately following the Civil War.

Local civilian agents and other prominent whites who worked with the Freedmen's Bureau assumed responsibility for ensuring that schools be established for the formerly enslaved population. Either in official or unofficial roles, those men who had recently owned African Americans significantly aided those same people in

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<sup>34</sup> Ancestry.com, *1850 United States Federal Census*, District 2, Boyle County, Kentucky; Ancestry.com, *1850 United States Federal Census-Slave Schedules*, District 2, Boyle County, Kentucky; See Visscher, *Black Mammy: Song of the Sunny South, and Other Poems* (Cheyenne, Wyoming: Bristol & Knabe, Printers and Binders, 1886).

<sup>35</sup> Daniel Harper to Fisk, January 2, 1866, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 38, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed April 29, 2021); Ancestry.com, *1860 United States Federal Census-Slave Schedules*, Bath County, Kentucky, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Citizens of Bath County to Fisk, January 30, 1866, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 28, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed May 1, 2021).

acquiring an education. The Tullahoma mayor and Bureau agent Joel B. Smith, for example, began in early September 1866 to assess the educational needs for freedpeople in his county as a school had yet to be organized. He reported, “There is a school needed here very badly,” and that, “a school of 55, or 60, scholars can be had.” Smith identified a building already constructed for the Black community’s use in town, and by the end of the month he had collected a thirty-five-dollar subscription from the freedpeople to support the school.<sup>37</sup> With assurances from Smith that the Black community had acquired a building and were willing to invest their own money into a school, the education superintendent David Burt immediately arranged for a Northern teacher to be sent to Tullahoma, allowing the school to open that fall.<sup>38</sup> In the East Tennessee town of Dandridge, for example, the Bureau worked with a white liaison who served as a de facto holder and distributor of educational funds. Burt reached out to a local judge and former slaveholder named James P. Swann to take responsibility for spending \$400 that the federal government approved to build a school building. The Bureau wanted to ensure that those funds were spent appropriately and trusted Swann, rather than anyone in the African-American community, to “adopt the most economical plan” for the building project.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Smith to Burt, September 10, 1866, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 3, 2020); Smith to Burt, September 25, 1866, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 3, 2020).

<sup>38</sup> Burt to Smith, September 26, 1866, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 5, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 5, 2020).

<sup>39</sup> David Burt to James P. Swann, May 27, 1867, BRAFL, NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 5, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed November 10, 2020); Ancestry.com, *1860 United States Federal Census-Slave Schedules*, Jefferson County, Tennessee, 12.

Even those elite white Kentuckians and Tennesseans who were never directly involved with Black education nevertheless expressed their views on the subject. In May 1865, Seaton E. Thompson, a student at Georgetown College in the Bluegrass region of Kentucky, made specific observations regarding newly freed African Americans to his cousin Martha “Mattie” Webber. The cousins shared the background of many other slaveholding families who despised the overthrow of slavery and the emerging racial order that resulted. “Up here they already look on themselves as equal to the white people,” observed Thompson. He told his cousin, “You would become perfectly disgusted and sick at heart to see them parading in the streets.” The freedpeople to which Thompson referred appeared to be striving for equality in part through education. He explained, “Negro schools are already in operation here. I dont [*sic*] know who teaches it nor where it is at but I see the negroes going to and fro with their spelling books in their hands.”<sup>40</sup> Seaton Thompson’s disdain for emancipation and discomfort with the idea of formerly enslaved people attending school is likely reflective of broader racist attitudes in his state. The prevalence of whites resisting the construction of schools within their communities and destroying many others indicates that Thompson’s views were not rare among postwar white Kentuckians.

As suggested in the opening to this chapter, prominent white men retained their grip on Upper South society through the management of the land and property they owned. Because the federal government never distributed confiscated property to the formerly enslaved people as many of them advocated, African Americans owned a

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<sup>40</sup> Seaton E. Thompson to Mattie Webber, May 20, 1865, The Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky.

relatively small amount of land throughout the South. While some Black communities collectively purchased or rented buildings for churches and schoolhouses, most had to rely on the willingness of white property owners to sell or lease to them. In Greeneville, Tennessee, for example, Freedmen's Bureau agent Joel Terrell worked for months to find a location for the freedpeople's school. Because it would have been difficult for the Black community to afford to purchase a plot of land and erect their own building, he thought it best to rent one of the available rooms in the two existing school buildings in town.<sup>41</sup> This plan would at least allow them enough time to raise the funds to build a permanent schoolhouse. In January 1867, however, Terrell expressed his frustration as the owners of the buildings refused to rent rooms to the Black community. He explained, "I think if they [the rooms] were wanted for any other purpose than a 'nigger school' as they [put] it, there would be no difficulty in getting either of them."<sup>42</sup>

In other cases, whites did allow the Bureau or local school trustees to lease a building, or even a single room, in which to hold classes. For example, David Burt contacted a white resident in Franklin named John Porter McKay about renting one of his buildings at a rate of "Seven dollars per month, so long as it may be used for a colored school." Burt offered to draw up an official lease for a period of five months and ensured that the Bureau would send him a check for rent "at the end of each month."<sup>43</sup> McKay

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<sup>41</sup> Joel Terrell to Burt, December 21, 1866, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed October 2, 2020).

<sup>42</sup> Joel Terrell to Burt, January 12, 1867, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed October 2, 2020).

<sup>43</sup> Burt to John Porter McKay, May 3, 1867, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 5, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed March 19, 2021).

agreed to rent his building for that purpose and explained that he had already negotiated “with the patrons of the school.” McKay also stated that an official lease would not be required, suggesting that he trusted the federal government and the Black community and supported their mission.<sup>44</sup> Cases like these, however, were not the norm. Sallie Hines McNutt and her husband James left Franklin in 1863, sought refuge in Max Meadows, Virginia, and returned three years later to their large home and thirty acres of land.<sup>45</sup> In June 1866, the Freedmen’s Bureau officially restored the property to the McNutt family, which had been “used as a Freedmen’s School.”<sup>46</sup> Upon their return, the McNutts continued this educational use of their home, but for whites only, forcing out the freedpeople’s school.<sup>47</sup>

A key factor in these decisions were the entrenched attitudes among leading whites that limited Black educational opportunities. Despite the assistance they rendered to African-American communities, ex-slaveholders often could not move beyond their personal racism in order to keep the new schools running. In Henderson, Kentucky, located on the Ohio River across from Evansville, Indiana, a local farmer named Thomas F. Cheaney, who had owned at least five enslaved people in his lifetime, served as the

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<sup>44</sup> McKay to Burt, May 11, 1867, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 5, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 1, 2020).

<sup>45</sup> Rick Warwick, ed. *Williamson County & The Civil War: As Seen Through The Female Experience* (Franklin, Tennessee: Williamson County Historical Society, The Heritage Foundation of Franklin and Williamson County, 2008), 28.

<sup>46</sup> “United States, Freedmen’s Bureau, Records of the Assistant Commissioner, 1865-1872,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 26, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed May 27, 2021).

<sup>47</sup> Blake Wintory, “A History of Female Education at Franklin Grove and in Williamson County,” September 8, 2020, <https://williamsonheritage.org/a-history-of-female-education-at-franklin-grove-and-in-williamson-county/> (accessed May 27, 2021).



Bureau agent in 1866.<sup>48</sup> After holding the position for less than two weeks, Cheaney explained to Fisk that in his county, “former slave holders are much more liberal than former non slave holders,” and that the former slaveowners, “are generally well pleased with the Bureau.” This perceived approval likely stemmed, at least in part, from the fact that Cheaney used his office to approve the apprenticeships of African-American children to remain with their “former masters.”<sup>49</sup> Efficient labor was the principal goal; not education for the sake of African-American socio-economic advancement. Sometimes, even the most basic education was denied.

Once a Black school opened in early 1866 in Henderson, local whites revealed that support for the Bureau did not equate to support for racial equality and, in some cases, education of any kind. The school in Henderson faced direct, persistent, and escalating opposition from local whites, including from Cheaney. An African-American man named Tippoo Nunion, a recent graduate of Oberlin College in Ohio, opened a school for Black children in Henderson.<sup>50</sup> He was forced to close the school after only operating for two weeks because “it was so much disturbed by the citizens.” Nunion later claimed that he reopened his school later that term, but after only a month later it “was closed by Mr. T. F. Chaney [sic] Agent of the Freedmen’s Bureau.” The teacher again attempted to open his school by visiting the Bureau’s state headquarters in Louisville, but before any action could be taken, a local police officer confronted him on the street as he

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<sup>48</sup> Ancestry.com, *1850 United States Federal Census-Slave Schedules*, District 1, Henderson County, Kentucky; Ancestry.com, *1860 United States Federal Census*, Division 2, Henderson County, Kentucky, 68.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas F. Cheaney to Fisk, January 31, 1866, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 28, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed May 13, 2020).

<sup>50</sup> Ancestry.com, *United States, School Catalogs, 1765-1935*, Oberlin, 1864, 16.

attempted to speak with a friend who was locked in jail. When Nunion refused to move from where he stood, the officer beat him with a stick, arrested him, and a crowd of local whites nearly lynched him that night.<sup>51</sup> After Nunion was eventually released and left town, he contacted a lawyer in Evansville, who insisted the Freedmen's Bureau investigate the situation. This lawyer argued, "There has been and still is a settled and determined hostility to any and all attempts to educate the blacks in Henderson."<sup>52</sup>

After conducting a brief investigation of his own, Cheaney blamed Nunion for causing problems in his town, arguing that he had been "a firebrand" and "an incendiary."<sup>53</sup> Cheaney also took offense to the claim that whites in Henderson opposed educating African Americans, insisting, "since the liberation of the slaves, the general feeling and sentiment of the people here is that the Freedmen should be educated. Their education is encouraged and not resisted by this community." He continued to blame Nunion for the violent attack made against him: "The teacher Nunion left here in consequence of his own unscrupulous misconduct, and not on account of hostility to his vocation."<sup>54</sup> Cheaney admitted that the night Nunion was arrested, he "heard several voices cryout hang him," and he expressed a certainty that the Black teacher probably would have met such a fate had he remained in Henderson much longer.<sup>55</sup> Though

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<sup>51</sup> Tippoo Nunion to John Ely, May 25, 1866, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 19, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed May 22, 2021).

<sup>52</sup> A. L. Robinson to Ely, May 24, 1866, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 19, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed May 22, 2021).

<sup>53</sup> Cheaney to Ely, June 9, 1866, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 19, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed May 22, 2021).

<sup>54</sup> Cheaney to Ely, June 2, 1866, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 13, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed May 22, 2021).

<sup>55</sup> Cheaney to Ely, June 9, 1866.

Cheaney never specified exactly what “unscrupulous misconduct” earned Nunion the descriptions of “a firebrand” and “an incendiary,” it could have stemmed from political opinions that clashed with and challenged the prominent ideology among white Kentuckians after the Civil War.<sup>56</sup> Regardless of the teacher’s personal opinions or behavior, opposition to his school should still be viewed as opposition to education for freedpeople. Cheaney viewed Nunion as a former slaveholder who expected Black men, including those from the North, to submit to whites and not as a federal agent responsible for supporting African-American schools, and by extensions their teachers.

It is important to consider why elite white men like Thomas Cheaney openly supported education for ex-slaves so soon after emancipation, but then limited that same opportunity. In the postwar years, Cheaney and his peers approved of education for African Americans that made better workers. They wanted more efficient, less violent laborers, but education that promoted anything beyond that was a threat to the power elite whites in Henderson held. Along with the other examples presented above, Cheaney’s willingness to indenture African-American children to white families and his admitted approval from the former slaveholding class suggests his commitment to maintaining the status quo. It is likely that Cheaney and other elite whites in Henderson opposed Nunion’s position as a teacher because he represented a more progressive form of Black

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<sup>56</sup> In his 1941 monograph historian Henry Lee Swint argued that white Southerners were opposed not to freedpeople’s education itself but rather that they aimed to end the political influence of the Northern women teaching in Black schools. He specifically referred to abolitionist teachers from New England who wanted to transform Southern society to fully embrace the popular free-labor ideology. It is probable that Nunion espoused a similar desire to change postwar Henderson into a more equitable community, which would have challenged the power wielded by Cheaney and other local whites who otherwise supported Black education. See Swint, *The Northern Teacher in the South, 1862-1870* (Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University Press, 1941).

education. The most important issue with elite whites' stance on schools for freedpeople was that the Freedmen's Bureau agreed with them, as will be discussed in chapter 6. African Americans, consequently, struggled to access educational opportunities that would allow them to advance in society.

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Almost immediately after African-American schools opened their doors in Kentucky and Tennessee, they became the targets of white mobs.<sup>57</sup> This violence began at the same time the Freedmen's Bureau appointed local officials to oversee operations in many counties. These instances of white terror typically aimed to break up Black schools by forcing Northern teachers to leave their communities through the threats of physical violence or by damaging or destroying the buildings in which the schools were housed. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that even when threats and attacks were directed at Northern missionaries or teachers, like Nunion in Henderson, it was Southern Black communities that suffered the most.<sup>58</sup> This was true for the violence that chased off or prevented teachers from doing their work among freedpeople, but it was also true for the destruction of property and buildings used for educating Black children and adults. Indeed, the financial investments made by impoverished communities to rent or purchase a plot of land and build a schoolhouse could be lost overnight. By early 1867, at least half of the school buildings used by Black communities in Kentucky were fully owned by

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<sup>57</sup> While most of these attacks started being reported by the Bureau in 1866, that would have likely been the earliest many places could have opened schools for freedpeople and the earliest that the agency could keep records of them. White violence against Black schools before 1866, therefore, is unlikely to appear in the available primary sources.

<sup>58</sup> Historians have pushed beyond Swint's argument that white violence only stemmed from Southerners' dislike for the New England politics of teachers to better understand the impact their attacks had on freedpeople. See Ronald Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 171.

freedpeople, and even more were partially owned by freedpeople. While that ratio was lower in Tennessee, freedpeople still owned twenty-eight school buildings to start that year compared to sixteen provided by the Freedmen's Bureau.<sup>59</sup> These numbers were unsustainable, however, in the face of white violence and Black poverty.

In a recent study, Campbell F. Scribner compiled records from a variety of sources noting the destruction of freedpeople's school buildings during Reconstruction. He counted 631 African-American schools throughout the South that were at least partially destroyed by white Southerners, though he argues that the government's failure to accurately keep track of those attacks indicates that his tally likely falls short of the actual number.<sup>60</sup> Tennessee ranked third among Southern states in the frequency of attacks against Black schoolhouses between 1864 and 1876 with seventy-six, while Kentucky fell between Georgia and North Carolina with thirty-two.<sup>61</sup> The prevalence of local whites destroying freedpeople's school buildings in the Upper South states rivaled that of the Deep South states during Reconstruction.<sup>62</sup> Scribner further argues, "Building

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<sup>59</sup> John W. Alvord, the general superintendent of education for Freedmen's Bureau published semi-annual reports on the progress of freedpeople's schools, which provide statistics for the school buildings in each Southern state. While these reports county day schools and night schools separately, it is likely that most night schools took place in the same building as a day school. In the January 1867, freedpeople in Kentucky reportedly owned thirty-two school buildings and the Freedmen's Bureau owned nine buildings out of a total fifty-four day schools. At the same time in Tennessee, freedpeople there were a total of eighty-two day schools, of which freedpeople owned approximately 34 percent. See Alvord, *Third Semi-Annual Report*, 33, 35.

<sup>60</sup> Scribner, "Surveying the Destruction," 469-494.

<sup>61</sup> Scribner's tally of destroyed school buildings included all eleven former Confederate states, the five border states—Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, and West Virginia—and the District of Columbia. Kentucky outpaced the other border states by at least twenty instances and experienced more attacks than North Carolina, Virginia, Arkansas, Florida, and Washington, D.C., "Surveying the Destruction," 475.

<sup>62</sup> Contrary to what some scholars have believed, examples like these show that destruction of school buildings was not just part of Deep South whites' efforts to end military occupation and Radical Reconstruction. See Foner, *Reconstruction*, 425-426; Gregory P. Downs,

and teacher shortages remained the primary impediment to African-American education, far more extensive than physical destruction, and attacks on schools were less frequent than other forms of violence against freedmen and their families.”<sup>63</sup> This assertion neglects the reality that white attacks against Black schools directly caused the lack of buildings and teachers, and they were part of the same campaign of violence that visited the homes of freed families. Especially in the impoverished rural communities which dominated the Upper South, African Americans lacked the means to rebuild their schools, while Northerners and freedpeople might have been too terrified to continue resisting local whites. Indeed, this white terror was intentionally designed to reverse the educational progress of formerly enslaved people and to keep them in an inferior social, political, and economic stratum. The abundance of evidence from these attacks reveals that their campaign proved quite effective in many cases.

Perhaps the most dramatic case of African-American schoolhouses being destroyed in this region took place during the Memphis massacre in May 1866. The reign of terror that lasted three days in the burgeoning city in southwest Tennessee resulted in about fifty dead African Americans, nearly one hundred homes destroyed, and the burning of all twelve schools for freedpeople in Memphis.<sup>64</sup> Those schools instructed at least one thousand children, with more than twenty teachers between them. At least three of those teachers were Northern African Americans who attended Ohio’s Oberlin College before arriving in Tennessee.

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*After Appomattox: Military Occupation and the Ends of War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>63</sup> Scribner, “Surveying the Destruction,” 473.

<sup>64</sup> Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 62.

Horatio Nelson Rankin, one of these Black educators, was at least partially supported by a Northern benevolent association, the Western Freedmen's Aid Commission (WFAC).<sup>65</sup> As the massacre unfolded, one of the rioters set fire to Rankin's schoolhouse, and the teacher joined a throng of onlookers to witness flames engulf the building. Rankin watched the flames engulf the building when a white man approached him and mockingly asked what he would do now without a school.<sup>66</sup> White police officers worked *with* other rioters and purposely torched every building in Memphis that housed a Black school. Their goal was nothing less than to demonstrate that African Americans should not enjoy the freedom or equality that education could provide. The white men carrying out violence targeted other forms of Black empowerment, including the Black Union soldiers stationed in Memphis at the time. Those white men even told the African-American women they attacked and raped that the assault was the punishment for their connection to those soldiers. From the arson to the assaults, this was about white Memphis reestablishing the control over Black men and women that had existed during slavery.<sup>67</sup> The destruction of every single African-American schoolhouse would, they hoped, ensure that this control remained in white hands.

Freedpeople in Memphis refused to yield in their effort to educate themselves, however, and they quickly began rebuilding their schools. Within only a month of the massacre, at least four schools had reopened. Rankin rebuilt his school in the aftermath as

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<sup>65</sup> Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis*, 79-80.

<sup>66</sup> Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis*, 143.

<sup>67</sup> Hannah Rosen, "Words of Resistance: African American Women's Testimony about Sexual Violence during the Memphis Massacre," in *Remembering the Memphis Massacre: An American Story*, eds. Beverly Greene Bond and Susan E. O'Donovan (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2020): 102-119; Andrew L. Slap, "On Duty in Memphis: Fort Pickering's African American Soldiers," in *Remembering the Memphis Massacre*: 120-131.

well, and it fittingly became known as the Phoenix Educational Institute.<sup>68</sup> Black Memphians were able to continue their educational work after losing school buildings in their urban community in ways that freedpeople living rural areas of Upper South could not. For one, they had the assistance of Northern benevolent societies, like Rankin's WFAC, which were largely centered in urban areas. With higher Black populations, these typically offered a level of protection from white violence that rural communities lacked. It is worth remembering, however, that this protection was not impenetrable. Some of the largest racial massacres occurred in big cities. Despite the 1866 massacre, however, most African Americans decided to remain in the Memphis, leaving a large population to support educational institutions.<sup>69</sup> The state government of Tennessee at the time was also in the process of passing a series of progressive laws to, among other things, enfranchise freedmen and incorporate Black schools into the state's tax-supported public education system. This would have further persuaded formerly enslaved people to stay in Memphis and continue working toward equality.

On a smaller scale, similar acts of terror met Black communities throughout the Upper South, destroying schoolhouses through arson in places where freedpeople were less likely to recover from the loss. In the same year as the Memphis riots, white mobs set fire to Black schools in towns across the state. Most of these attacks occurred in Middle Tennessee, where Confederate sympathies had been widespread during the war and where the KKK originated in the same year. As seen in the previous chapter, Black political activism was also at its height in Middle Tennessee, which helped stoke the fury

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<sup>68</sup> Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis*, 170; Alvord, *Fourth Semi-Annual Report*, 66-67.

<sup>69</sup> Slap, "On Duty in Memphis," 125.



of local whites as occurred in Memphis.<sup>70</sup> They burned down schools in Tullahoma, Shelbyville, Decherd, Brentwood, and multiple schools in the area surrounding Columbia. And while East Tennessee had largely remained loyal to the Union and had a relatively small African-American population, the Black communities in Knoxville and Athens also suffered the loss of their school buildings to arson.<sup>71</sup> These 1866 attacks demonstrate how quickly white Tennesseans responded to racial progress with violence, which threatened to swiftly end the movement for freedpeople's education.

White opposition to Black education in the postwar community at Camp Nelson, Kentucky in 1866 similarly resulted in the attempted destruction of a school. As mentioned in this chapter's opening, the federal government had officially closed the Refugee Home at Camp Nelson—located in central Kentucky—by March 1866, but some African Americans decided to make it their home, and the community eventually became known as Ariel. The AMA continued their efforts to support the educational and missionary work for the freed population, and they employed New York native Abisha Scofield and his family to lead the Camp Nelson school.<sup>72</sup> Scofield's daughter actually

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<sup>70</sup> Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2003), 280-284.

<sup>71</sup> Alvord, *Third Semi-Annual Report*, 32.

<sup>72</sup> For a large and rich collection of documents relating to the refugee camp during the war and the initial postwar period at Camp Nelson, see Sears, ed. *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*. These documents are drawn from the records of the Freedmen's Bureau, the American Missionary Association, and other governmental and personal collections. Scofield was about sixty-years old when he took charge of the school and church at Camp Nelson in 1866. In the 1870 Census, he was living in New York with his wife and seven children, and it is not clear if all or only some of them joined him in Kentucky. See Ancestry.com, *1850 United States Federal*, Hamilton, Madison County, New York; Ancestry.com, *1870 United States Federal Census*, Starkey, Yates County, New York, 34.

taught the school of as many as 180 students in 1866.<sup>73</sup> Between October and December of that year, groups of armed white terrorists made repeated attacks against the Camp Nelson community.<sup>74</sup> In one of these attacks, about thirty armed white men surrounded the home of Abishai Scofield while he and his family were sleeping, broke into the home, captured Scofield and his son, and led them both outside at gunpoint to a nearby ravine. Standing in their bedclothes, with guns pointed at them, Scofield finally promised these terrorists that he would leave town, which was enough to secure their release.<sup>75</sup> That same night, however, these same white terrorists also set fire to several buildings in the community, including the schoolhouse. Fortunately, those fires died out on their own before they could cause too much damage. It was the result, Scofield insisted, of a fire “so ashamed of its makers and its work [that it] turned pale and went out!”<sup>76</sup> Despite this, the event terrified the Scofields. Fearing for the lives of his family and himself, he abandoned his mission to educate freedpeople at Camp Nelson, and he returned to his home state of New York with his family, never returning to Kentucky.<sup>77</sup>

After the Scofields fled in at the end of 1866, the Freedmen’s Bureau concluded that the hostility from local whites resulted from a “determination not to have a Colored school with a white teacher in their midst.”<sup>78</sup> It appears that the Bureau was right, with

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<sup>73</sup> Scofield to Smith, September 29, 1866, Box 56, AMA Manuscripts, ARC; Scofield to Strieby and Whipple, December 16, 1866, Box 56, AMA Manuscripts, ARC. Scofield had at least two daughters who were old enough to teach the Camp Nelson School in 1866. See Ancestry.com, *1870 United States Federal Census*, Starkey, Yates County, New York, 34.

<sup>74</sup> Scofield to Whipple, October 4, 1866, Box 56, AMA Manuscripts, ARC; Scofield to Strieby and Whipple, December 16, 1866.

<sup>75</sup> Scofield to Strieby and Whipple, December 16, 1866; William H. Merrell to John Ely, December 20, 1866 in Sears, *Camp Nelson*, 358-361.

<sup>76</sup> Scofield to Strieby and Whipple, December 16, 1866.

<sup>77</sup> Sears, *Camp Nelson*, lx.

<sup>78</sup> Merrell to Ely, December 20, 1866 in Sears, *Camp Nelson*, 361.

the possible caveat that local whites would have destroyed any Black school in their community. Over the next several years, the AMA school at Camp Nelson struggled to keep any Northern white teacher for very long. Gabriel Burdett, a freedman who led the AMA's school and church at Camp Nelson for about a decade after Scofield's departure, eventually gave up on the state altogether.<sup>79</sup> Another example from Kentucky in 1866 shows, in fact, that white mobs attacked African-American teachers as well, who taught in most of the state's freedpeople's schools.<sup>80</sup> In September 1866, Elijah P. Marris began teaching a Simpsonville school. Marris, featured in the opening to chapter 2, recalled the Ku Klux Klan riding into town late one night. They used old and makeshift instruments to alert the sleeping residents to their presence. Approaching Marris's home, they fashioned switches from trees in the yard and threatening everyone inside. That night, the vigilantes retreated from the house without physical confrontation. On a separate occasion during that school year, Marris witnessed a man he believed to be in the Klan fire his gun into a group of students while they were outside for recess.<sup>81</sup> The following year, Marris began teaching a school for freed people at La Grange, Kentucky in a neighboring county, and the violent resistance to his work continued. During the four

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<sup>79</sup> Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*, 241-244.

<sup>80</sup> Statistics drawn from the John W. Alvord's published semi-annual reports on schools for the Freedmen's Bureau reveal that teachers of freedpeople in Kentucky were much more likely to be African American than in other states. At the beginning of 1867, sixty-nine of eighty-two teachers (84 percent) in Kentucky were African American, while that was only true for thirty-one of 122 teachers (25 percent) in Tennessee. The trend continued, as three years later there were 164 African-American teachers in Kentucky out of a total 201 (82 percent), and sixty-two out of 153 (41 percent) in Tennessee. See John Watson Alvord, *Third Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1867), 33, 35; Alvord, *Ninth Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1870), 7.

<sup>81</sup> Elijah P. Marris, *Life and History*, 23, 77-79; Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught*, 97, 122.

years that Marrs taught in La Grange, he faced at least one Klan night raid with similar results as the Simpsonville attack.<sup>82</sup>

Kentucky experienced a steady pace of white violence resulting in the destruction of school property in Black communities that continued through the late 1860s. Even in the urban center of Louisville at the height of the Freedmen's Bureau' occupation, schools for African Americans were openly attacked. In early 1867, when state superintendent for education Thomas K. Noble rented a building for that purpose, some local whites cut off their business ties with the owner of the house. Noble described that, "the building itself was attacked, the glass broken, the door beaten down and it was found necessary for a time to place a guard over it."<sup>83</sup> A similar case occurred in Portland, a small community outside of Louisville, where an African-American teacher named George H. Griffith petitioned the Freedmen's Bureau to protect his school. He reported that his students and schoolhouse have been repeatedly assaulted by local whites. Griffith writes that his school "is disturbed dayly[sic] by white boys throwing stones at the school house and also at scholars going to and from school and we find it growing worse every day."<sup>84</sup> Griffith testified that there were "from six to twelve" attackers, and that they were

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<sup>82</sup> Marrs, *Life and History of the Rev. Elijah P. Marrs*, 87.

<sup>83</sup> Noble to Alvord, February 11, 1867, "Education Division, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M803, Roll 20, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed October 2, 2020).

<sup>84</sup> George H. Griffith to R. W. Roberts, August 29, 1867, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 21, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed November 11, 2020).

“young men from ten to eighteen years old in Portland,” and the Bureau obtained a list of names and addresses for some of the perpetrators.<sup>85</sup>

At around the same time the Portland attacks took place, Noble recognized how widespread and influential white resistance to Black education had become in Kentucky. In the summer of 1867 he observed, “There has been special and most bitter opposition on the part of the white citizens to the education of colored children.” Noble explained that white Kentuckians “have threatened to destroy any buildings that might be used for school purposes, and I have no doubt would have carried out their threat but for the presence of United States troops.”<sup>86</sup> Unfortunately, the ability for the federal government to protect those schools only dwindled after Noble made that report. Later in 1867, another Bureau agent observing the situation in Kentucky declared, “I greatly fear that when government officers are removed, many of the school, not in successful operation in the interior of the state will be broken up.”<sup>87</sup> During the following year, however, the Freedmen’s Bureau prepared to drastically curtail their operations in both Kentucky and Tennessee, which would strip away a thin layer of protection.

As the KKK spread throughout the region in 1868, the frequency with which schools were attacked reached its peak. In July 1868, the local Klan raided the Middle Tennessee town of Shelbyville and kidnapped an African-American man named James Franklin and a white teacher from the North named John C. Dunlap. Dunlap had been abused by the local white community for quite some time before he was captured and

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<sup>85</sup> Deposition of George Griffith, August 22, 1867, “Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 21, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed November 11, 2020).

<sup>86</sup> Alvord, *Fourth Semi-Annual Report*, 71.

<sup>87</sup> Alvord, *Fifth Semi-Annual Report*, 44.

lashed 200 times.<sup>88</sup> In Bowling Green, Kentucky, the Klan did their best to scare at least two white teachers and chased out of the city in 1868. One of these teachers, A. D. Jones, received a direct threat from KKK to “leave town within ten days.” In a third case, a white woman from Cincinnati, Ohio named L. A. Baldwin struggled to find a white family to board with as most white Northern missionaries did not actually live with a Black family. Struggling to find a place to live and isolated from white society, Baldwin eventually received a letter from KKK which included a threat to kill her unless she left within five days. With “KU KLUX KLANS!,” heading the note, the threat was both direct and theatrical, but no less terrifying: “BLOOD! POISON! POWDER! TORCH! Leave in five days or Hell’s your portion!”<sup>89</sup> These persistent threats against a series of teachers in Bowling Green indicate that the terrorists intentionally tried to break up the school and prevent formerly enslaved children from receiving an education by targeting their teachers.

The vigilante mob violence in Tennessee that raged in 1868 did not just attempt to rid the state of Northern teachers, federal soldiers, and Freedmen’s Bureau agents. Rather it included the planned, determined destruction of educational opportunities for newly emancipated African Americans and thus opportunities for equality and socio-economic independence. For this reason, local freedpeople involved in those schools were specific targets of racial violence. In the fall of 1868, local whites near Chattanooga terrorized at least one African-American teacher whose name does not appear in the extant records. In

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<sup>88</sup> Trelease, *White Terror*, 36.

<sup>89</sup> Noble to Alvord, July 10, 1868, “Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 3, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed November 2, 2020); Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky*, 35.

this case, the teacher—likely formerly enslaved—had received training and graduated from a normal school earlier that year and had started his own school in that same county. During his first term as a teacher, however, members of the Klan attacked his school and burned the house in which it was held. Despite this significant loss, the teacher would not be deterred. In the ashes of his school, he “built up an arbor and brush and continued his school.” He taught through the end of that first term, enduring constant threats of “violence and death.”<sup>90</sup> White violence targeted freedpeople’s education even when qualified members of Black communities taught the schools.

Throughout 1868, Tennessee’s Bureau reported cases of school arson in the western county of Haywood, the Middle Tennessee town of Carthage, and the above-mentioned school near Chattanooga taught by a normal school graduate.<sup>91</sup> The Klan’s expansion meant that freedpeople’s schools were in more danger than ever. “A large amount of outrage, school-house burning, &c., in some of the counties,” explained a Bureau agent, was “evidently the work of the Ku-Klux and lower classes, but not sufficiently frowned upon by those of better breeding, not often indicted by civil authority.”<sup>92</sup> Despite the Klan representing a small portion of white communities in

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<sup>90</sup> Alvord *Seventh Semi-Annual Report*, 42. The identity of this African-American teacher is unknown, but he probably attended the normal school taught by Ewing O. Tade in Chattanooga, which ended its term in June 1868. By September there were at least five new schools in Hamilton County that were taught by African Americans, and the above-mentioned teacher could be one of the following Black men that appear in the records: Augustus Hawkins, James Noland, John Patton, Jessie Freeman, Isaac Dickerson, or Edward Foster. See, “Teacher’s Monthly School Report,” September-October 1868, “Tennessee, Freedmen’s Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 53, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed May 10, 2021).

<sup>91</sup> Alvord, *Fourth Semi-Annual Report*, 68; Alvord, *Sixth Semi-Annual Report*, 47; Alvord *Seventh Semi-Annual Report*, 42.

<sup>92</sup> Alvord *Seventh Semi-Annual Report*, 40.

Tennessee, its actions were essentially approved by a majority.<sup>93</sup> At the same time that Klan violence peaked and the broader white community accepted it, the Freedmen's Bureau began dwindling in the region. The Tennessee state government compounded this decision by abandoning the free public education system that had once supported the establishment of schools for freedpeople. This resulted in the loss of more than 100 African-American schools, 300 teachers, 7,500 students throughout the state between July 1869 and July 1870.<sup>94</sup>

As the Bureau began closing its doors in several Kentucky counties in 1868, white opposition increased their advantage. During the first six months of the year, at least five schoolhouses were burned down by locals. Another school was "blown up" with the intention of killing the women, men, and children inside at the time, though it is unclear if anyone was harmed during that attack. In Shepardsville, one teacher's life was threatened to the extent that a police officer was sent to serve as personal security. A county judge physically assaulted a teacher in Shelbyville and forced them to leave town. Similarly, a teacher was attacked and driven out of Crab Orchard, while, in Franklin, a white mob had to be driven from a teacher's property by federal troops.<sup>95</sup> The violence seemed to intensify by the fall, when the KKK had reached its peak of terror in the region. In Henderson County, local whites threatened a school in the town of Corydon, and they successfully burned down a schoolhouse in Rock Spring. In Germantown, only about fifteen miles south of the Ohio border, a group of white men set fire to an African-

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<sup>93</sup> "Those Terrible Kuklux. — An Incident," quoted from the *Franklin Review* in *The Pulaski Citizen*," March 6, 1868; "The Ku Klux Klan," *The Pulaski Citizen*, July 24, 1868.

<sup>94</sup> Alvord, *Tenth Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1870), 41.

<sup>95</sup> Alvord, *Sixth Semi-Annual Report*, 51-52.



American church which also housed a school. In Bullitt County, local whites burned three school buildings in the same October night, and a school in Tompkinsville was also destroyed that same month. At the same time, this Klan violence prevented the establishment of new schools in places like Auburn, located in rural southcentral Kentucky.<sup>96</sup> By the summer of 1870, Kentucky also witnessed a decline in the number of schools for freedpeople as the Freedmen's Bureau had officially ended its tenure in the state.<sup>97</sup> That same year, as African-American men gained the right to vote, white Kentuckians continued using violence to resist racial equality.

Overwhelming evidence supports the assertion that Southern white terror targeted not just transplanted teachers from the North. It also aimed to destroy the whole project of educating formerly enslaved people. Importantly, this advances the work of previous scholars by demonstrating the prevalence and impact of white violence in the Upper South, where Black communities struggled to continue their educational efforts after losing a structure or teacher. This violence was particularly devastating in Kentucky and Tennessee because of the lack of federal involvement. Newly freed African Americans who gained a level of education and began teaching in their local communities frequently had their bodies and schools threatened and attacked by nearby whites. The act or threat of violence against any teacher represented overt opposition to freedpeople's education.

It is difficult to overestimate the impact school property destruction had on formerly enslaved people's ability to educate themselves. The investments committed into school buildings strained impoverished Black communities from the outset of

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<sup>96</sup> Alvord, *Seventh Semi-Annual Report*, 44-45.

<sup>97</sup> Alvord, *Tenth Semi-Annual Report*, 43.

emancipation, and it would likely be unbearable for them to afford rebuilding destroyed and damaged property. These forms of violence from white communities across Kentucky and Tennessee left permanent scars on African-Americans communities and deterred families from sending their children to school in fear for their safety. It is, however, important to contextualize this violence as it related to the broader struggle to establish schools for freedpeople and as it related to the broader experience of emancipation.

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By about 1870, freedpeople across the Upper South felt effects of white violence targeting Black education, and they spoke out in protest. The petitions and proclamations produced by African-American state conventions addressed the physical harm inflicted against their communities in general, and their schools more specifically. A convention of delegates representing more than fifty Black communities in Kentucky met in November 1867, and their most pressing aim was to petition the state legislature to allow African Americans to legally testify in court cases involving white defendants. They prioritized their right to testimony above the political franchise and state-funded public schools equal to white schools because without legitimate Black witnesses to white crimes, formerly enslaved people had little hope of protecting their communities from violence. In their petition to the General Assembly, the delegates declared that under the present law, “we can be despoiled of our property, our females may be outraged, our school teachers shot down at their desks, and our ministers murdered in their pulpits, by any person lawless enough to do so.” They pleaded with state politicians to take this seriously because, “the sad history of the past few years must convince you that many men, thus

lawless, live in Kentucky, and we have no remedy in the courts.”<sup>98</sup> Therefore, the reality of white violence against Black communities throughout the state motivated this convention to focus on securing their right to legally testify after witnessing an attack.

Unfortunately, while the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution allowed Black Kentuckians to vote in 1870, it would take another two years for the state legislature to approve testimony against their white neighbors. By that time, much damage had already been done. In April 1871, African-American leaders in Frankfort sent a “Memorial . . . Praying The enactment of laws for the better protection of life” to the state legislature, because that body had yet to “enact any laws to suppress Ku-Klux disorder.” This Memorial included a list of 116 violent attacks made against Black Kentuckians since November 1867, including murders and raids against churches and schools.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, the violence described by the 1867 delegates continued steadily over the next few years as the government refused to take any action to alleviate it.

A similar convention of Black Tennesseans took place in early 1871, which also spoke out against Klan violence on freedpeople’s schools. Members of the convention’s education committee asserted, “the outrages on the school teachers, to both which and colored teachers in colored schools are so great that they have been broken up nearly all school outside of the large cities.” They claimed the violence that disrupted Black education on a large scale in Tennessee had been carried out “by the Kuklux outlaws,

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<sup>98</sup> *Proceedings of the State Convention of Colored Men, Held at Lexington, Kentucky in the A.M.E. Church, November 26th, 27th, and 28th, 1867* (Frankfort, Kentucky.: Frankfort Commonwealth Print, 1867), 9.

<sup>99</sup> *Memorial of a committee appointed at a meeting of Colored citizens of Frankfort, Ky., and vicinity, praying the enactment of law for the better protection of life* (Frankfort, Kentucky, 1871).

who with impunity defy, successfully all attempts that have been made to stop them in their lawlessness.” The KKK, explained Black Tennesseans, “burn school-houses and the churches in which school is taught besides inflicting punishment of the most horrible and atrocious character upon the persons of the teachers.”<sup>100</sup> These Black leaders pleaded with the now Democratic state government to integrate Tennessee’s public schools to allow African Americans the same educational opportunities as whites in order to end the violence.<sup>101</sup> Overwhelming evidence shows that violent attacks against freedpeople’s schools were fueled, at least in part, by fears that equal education would lead to racial equality. The clear solution in the minds of Black leaders was to allow their children to attend the same free public schools as their white neighbors, thus providing equal educational opportunities and preventing further destruction of their school property. Despite their appeals, segregated schools remained in the Volunteer State for nearly another century. In both Kentucky and Tennessee, statewide meetings of Black leaders drew specific attention the ongoing attacks made against their communities’ teachers and the destruction of school buildings, but with little success.

The briefly positive response among elites to Black education lasted only until they saw it as a threat to the racial hierarchy established and reinforced by slavery. This included refusing to allow schools to open or to allow the rental or purchase of property. It also included limiting the ability of outsiders to render aid to freedpeople by chasing them out of town. Equally significant, the prevalence of local whites destroying school property and attacking educators, or refusing to help stop such violence,

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<sup>100</sup> *Proceedings of the Colored State Convention, Held in Nashville, Feb. 22d, 23d, 24th & 25th, 1871* (Nashville, Tennessee, 1871), 3.

<sup>101</sup> *Proceedings of the Colored State Convention, Held in Nashville...1871*, 3.

demonstrates that Black education itself was unacceptable because it represented a challenge to the status quo and a potential for racial equality. While some white Southerners actively assisted the establishment of freedpeople's schools, this support stemmed from a belief that African Americans needed an education to contribute to society which ultimately benefitted whites. It is telling that so many former slaveholders sought out and accepted positions in the Freedmen's Bureau after the Civil War. Those white men often served as the only federal presence in their respective counties, allowing them to maintain control over local policies and over the African-American population. In many cases, these local whites carried out their official duties without working toward racial equality. Therefore, during that narrow window of time that formerly enslaved people had the opportunities to advance in society, the slaveholding class successfully hijacked the federal institution responsible for aiding them. Black schools remained unequal to their white counterparts in Kentucky and Tennessee long after Reconstruction, in part because elite whites controlled the educational institutions from the very beginning.

CHAPTER VI – “LET EXPEDIENCY GO TO THE DOGS”: STATE  
GOVERNMENTS SUPPRESS EQUAL PUBLIC EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

The long-term outlook for postwar African-American education throughout the South ultimately depended on who established the schools and who would sustain them through the post-Reconstruction era. The process began relatively soon after the war's end as existing public education systems in both Kentucky and Tennessee incorporated schools for formerly enslaved communities relatively soon after the war's end. As Freedmen's Bureau and Northern benevolent aid to Black education waned, it fell to the state governments to determine how those schools operated. At first, there were some gains, at least for the general idea of Black education, and during the late 1860s, proponents of freedpeople's education had enough influence in the Upper South to help shape early policies for Black common schools. But even these advocates insisted, almost universally, on keeping public schools racially segregated while promising that the separate schools would be of equal quality. By 1870, however, as Democrats secured firm control in both states, lawmakers reversed or obstructed earlier laws that had granted formerly enslaved people basic rights, and they ensured that Black education remained separate and unequal to white education. This continued in 1874 when the U.S. Congress considered a measure within the federal Civil Rights Act to integrate all public schools in the country, and representatives from Kentucky and Tennessee offered strong opposition. Pushing against these segregationist policies of the early allies of freedpeople and later opponents, Black leaders offered a passionate resistance because they understood that their education would remain inferior unless they attended the same schools as their white neighbors. They also feared, rightly, that separate systems were economically

unsustainable, and if cuts were made, they would be made to Black educational opportunities first.

In the decade after the war, opportunities arose for these two Upper South states to adopt interracial and equal education, but decisions made by those in power instead ushered in segregated school systems that persisted for about a century. Two reformers reflect the possibilities of integrated education and why these failed. John Eaton, Jr., a white New Englander, emerged as a prominent advocate for freedpeople's education in Tennessee as he oversaw its public schools in the late 1860s. For much of his service in the Union Army, Eaton oversaw military encampments for Southern Black refugees and established one of the first schools for formerly enslaved people in the Volunteer State. Indeed, he insisted that African Americans needed education more than anything else as they transitioned to freedom.<sup>1</sup> After his appointment to the superintendency of Tennessee's school system, Eaton ensured that Black communities received their share of public funds. His liberalism stopped there, however, and Eaton maintained racially segregated schools despite the ongoing public debates over integration. Several years later, while serving as the national leader of public education, Eaton pushed policymakers in Washington, D.C. to defeat a portion of the Civil Rights Bill that mandated all schools allow Black and white students to attend together.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Eaton, Jr., *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), 193; Phillips, "Education of Blacks in Tennessee During Reconstruction, 1865-1870," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (Summer 1987), 98.

<sup>2</sup> Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen*, 261-264; Earle H. West, "The Peabody Education Fund and Negro Education, 1867-1880," *History of Education Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1966): 3-21.

The other reformer was an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) minister named Robert G. Mortimer, an African-American contemporary of Eaton's who emerged in Kentucky as an advocate for interracial and equal education as a means of uplifting his race. Born around the year 1840 in Virginia, the records are unclear whether he had been enslaved or not, but in 1860 Mortimer lived in the free state of Ohio with his mother.<sup>3</sup> He continued his education up to college level before entering the ministry at the Asbury Chapel in Louisville by 1869, where he taught a Black school. A few months after arriving in the Bluegrass State, Mortimer wanted to complete his bachelor's degree and inquired with John G. Fee about attending Berea College. Although AME Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne directed him to complete his education at Wilberforce University in Ohio, Mortimer felt committed to help Black Kentuckians and desired to remain in the state.<sup>4</sup> Importantly, Berea had taught African-American and white students in the same classrooms since 1866, when it became the first interracial and coeducational college in the South. Mortimer pushed freedpeople to demand social equality, and he believed that school integration represented the best means to combat the glaring educational inequities between the races. While Eaton lobbied Congressmen to keep public schools segregated in 1874, Mortimer argued for mixed schools. He believed (and worked to convince others) that white racism had weakened public Black education in Kentucky. Instead, Mortimer asserted, sending all children to the same schools offered Black communities a

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<sup>3</sup> Ancestry.com, *1860 United States Federal Census*, Lancaster, Fairfield County, Ohio.

<sup>4</sup> Robert G. Mortimer to John G. Fee, May 25, 1869, John G. Fee Papers, Berea College Archives, Berea, Kentucky, RG 1.2, Box 2.



chance to gain a better footing in society.<sup>5</sup> Both liberal reformers were dedicated to establishing educational opportunities for freedpeople in the Upper South, but toward different goals. Eaton and Mortimer’s disagreement on interracial schools illustrates a broader debate taking place throughout the country during Reconstruction. While separate schools prevailed, it was not a forgone conclusion.

Much of the scholarship on education during Reconstruction has examined schools established for Black communities by the federal government and Northern missionaries while praising Radical Republican governments for establishing public education in the former slave South. Recent studies have also appreciated the existence of antebellum public schools in Southern states which provides further context for understanding postwar education policies.<sup>6</sup> This chapter uses Kentucky and Tennessee as case studies to analyze how public education departments treated Black schools during the postwar decade. Both state legislatures had adopted public school systems by the late 1830s, but they underwent sweeping changes following emancipation. The period of about five years following the war—while many transplanted Northerners participated in the management of public schools for African Americans—represented the best opportunity to permanently establish equal and integrated schools. However, this study argues that the white allies of Black communities often failed to promote real change beyond emancipation, and instead perpetuated the existing racial hierarchy that viewed

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<sup>5</sup> “What Do You think of it?—The Fruits of the Civil Rights Bill—A Paducah Colored Preacher’s Mad Ravings—No Comments Necessary,” *The Owensboro Monitor*, September 16, 1874, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/375882672> (accessed on October 12, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South*; Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 153-154; Green, *Educational Reconstruction*; Sarah L. Hyde, *Schooling in the Antebellum South: The Rise of Public and Private Education in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2016), 1-6; Williams, *Self-Taught*.

African Americans as inferior and unfit for the highest levels of education. The status of Black education during the first half of the 1870s proved that segregated schools would always remain unequal, and the forces behind that decision were lawmakers and some of the white Northern advocates of Southern education (like Eaton) perceived as allies, who refused to support interracial schools. This chapter argues that the reluctance of influential whites to accept social equality between the races ultimately explains why progress for Black education failed to reach its full potential.

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Though public education developed slowly in the state, Kentucky had established it well before the Civil War broke out. After squandering earlier opportunities to enact comprehensive legislation for education, the state legislature inaugurated a system of common schools in an 1838 law that included the allocation of a special fund and appointing a superintendent of public instruction for the first time. This system failed to get off the ground for several years due to economic struggles, and the government failed to spend funds appropriately.<sup>7</sup> Between a revised school law in 1845 and a new state constitution adopted in 1850, educational prospects for white Kentuckians improved considerably. The tenure of clergyman Robert Jefferson Breckinridge as state superintendent from 1847 to 1853 earned him the reputation as “the ‘father’ of the educational system of Kentucky,” and he turned around a system that had previously been considered “a ‘mockery.’”<sup>8</sup> His administration oversaw the drastic increase of state

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<sup>7</sup> William E. Ellis, *A History of Education in Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 21-22.

<sup>8</sup> James C. Klotter, *The Breckinridges of Kentucky, 1760-1981* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986), 59-62.

funding for education and the expansion of school districts from less than 200 when he took office to over 3,000 when he stepped down.<sup>9</sup> Breckinridge promoted and advocated for the state's educational needs and led Kentucky to become the second best public school system among slave states, trailing only North Carolina.<sup>10</sup>

Tennessee's government adopted public education along a similar timeline as common schools spread across the country. While public schools operated in some places in the state before then, a lack of funding and organization stymied the system until the mid-1830s.<sup>11</sup> Tennessee's second constitution, adopted in 1835, provided a foundation for a state-run education system, and the first superintendent of public instruction took over its operations the following year. Common schools failed to gain much popular support throughout the state, however, likely for the same reasons they struggled to gain a foothold in much of the antebellum South. White Southerners generally hesitated to commit property taxes toward public schools in comparison to their Northern counterparts. The most basic explanation for regional differences in antebellum education has been boiled down to the South's economic dependence on slave labor which pitted the needs of powerful slaveholders at odds with middle-class and poor whites—who along with enslaved people would have benefitted the most from public schools—and ultimately prevented the common school movement from succeeding as well as it had in the North.<sup>12</sup> However, by the mid-1850s in Tennessee, Governor Andrew Johnson pushed

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<sup>9</sup> Klotter, *The Breckinridges of Kentucky*, 59-60.

<sup>10</sup> Ellis, *A History of Education in Kentucky*, 36.

<sup>11</sup> A. P. Whitaker, "The Public School System of Tennessee, 1834-1860," *Tennessee Historical Magazine* 2, no. 1 (March 1916), 5.

<sup>12</sup> Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 203-216.

the legislature to strengthen the system by allocating tax monies for the use of common schools. Johnson argued that public taxes would “give life and energy to our dying, or dead, system of common school education.”<sup>13</sup> The subsequent growth of public education led the illiteracy rate among white adults in the state to drop below twenty percent by 1860.<sup>14</sup> While this signified a significant improvement, Tennessee’s antebellum common schools never benefited from a strong administrative structure to oversee the distribution of funds to individual communities.

Kentucky and Tennessee stood out from most slave states prior to 1860 as neither specifically outlawed education for African Americans. Urban centers like Lexington, Louisville, and Nashville offered some prospects for Blacks to attend schools, thanks to the presence of free persons of color. These institutions, often led by religious leaders, housed in churches, and officially designed for only free African Americans, sometimes taught enslaved persons as well.<sup>15</sup> Despite legally allowing it, the reality of African-American education in the antebellum Upper South was severely limited. Free Blacks in Kentucky never represented more than five percent of the state’s African Americans, and that number was even lower in Tennessee.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, while many slaveholders had

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<sup>13</sup> *Journal of the House of Representative of the State of Tennessee: Thirtieth General Assembly, Held at Nashville, 1853-4*, (Nashville: W. F. Bang & Co. Printers, 1854), 456; Whitaker, “The Public School System of Tennessee,” 21.

<sup>14</sup> Whitaker, “The Public School System of Tennessee,” 26.

<sup>15</sup> Tashia Levanga Bradley, “The Race to Educate: African American Resistance to Educational Segregation in Kentucky, 1865-1910” (Ph.D. Dissertation: Florida State University, 2010), 39; Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 120-145; Timothy Augustus Sweatman, “The Athens of the West: Education in Nashville, 1780-1860,” (M.A. Thesis: Western Kentucky University, 1996), 62-63; Carter G. Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861: A History of the Education of the Colored People of the United States from the Beginning of Slavery to the Civil War* (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, Inc., 1919), 223.

<sup>16</sup> Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 107-108.

previously seen education as a means of increasing the productivity of their laborers, by the 1830s fears of insurrections had convinced them that “it was impossible to cultivate the minds of Negroes without arousing overmuch self-assertion.”<sup>17</sup>

Though born in Virginia, future minister Robert G. Mortimer experienced similar white attitudes toward Black education that held true in Kentucky and Tennessee. In his youth, a white person once told Mortimer to move to Africa instead of trying to help the African-American population in the U.S. because “every black man’s skull is so thick they can’t learn.” Mortimer knew that Southern whites did not actually believe this—though they might claim it—otherwise they would not fear the results of African-American education. As Mortimer explained, “Nothing frets a white man so much as to see a colored child with a book under his arm.”<sup>18</sup> As the national crisis over slavery intensified during the 1850s, these fears caused local governments in places like Lexington, Memphis, and Nashville to turn against the Black schools in their communities to attempt, and sometimes succeed, in closing their doors.<sup>19</sup> Neither state government ever considered incorporating Black schools into their larger (white) public education systems prior to emancipation, and it took the massive upheaval of civil war to make that a possibility.

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<sup>17</sup> Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861*, 2.

<sup>18</sup> Robert G. Mortimer, “Emancipation Day: Its Observance by the Colored People—Speech of Rev. R. G. Mortimer,” *The Courier-Journal*, January 3, 1870.

<sup>19</sup> Fears of a December 1856 insurrection led the Nashville city government to close local schools for African Americans, Crystal A. deGregory, “Raising a Nonviolent Army: Four Nashville Black Colleges and the Century-Long Struggle for Civil Rights, 1830s-1930s,” (Ph.D. Dissertation: Vanderbilt University, 2011), 14-15. Following John Brown’s 1859 raid on Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, Lexington, Kentucky’s city council also “attempted to close all black schools,” Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 142. By 1860, the city of Memphis, Tennessee had also banned African-American schools, Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen*, 192.

Black education was more common in the antebellum North, where many teachers like Eaton and Mortimer lived and worked prior to serving formerly enslaved populations. Faced with racist institutions that threatened or stripped their citizenship, Northern African Americans valued education as a means of advancement and mobilized themselves to access the blossoming public school systems in throughout the region. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, they debated among themselves over whether to push for the integration of common schools or to focus on their own private schools which offered some shelter from the racist white society.<sup>20</sup> It became clear in this discourse that despite efforts within Black communities to financially support and improve their segregated schools, mixed public schools offered the most sustainable solution to educational opportunities. It was simply too expensive to operate separate school systems.<sup>21</sup> To that end, many Black Bostonians, for example, abandoned their separate schools to push for interracial education. And in 1855, the city of Boston officially integrated their common schools, though the white community eventually worked around the law to keep most Black and white students in separate schools. While such policies did not spread widely throughout the antebellum North, discussions about mixed schools consistently took place during the years leading up to the Civil War, which provided important context for the subsequent development of schools for freedpeople in the South.<sup>22</sup>

Though the outbreak of civil war in 1861 disrupted existing public-school systems in the Upper South, it created new opportunities for African-American education. After a

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<sup>20</sup> Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic*, 171-172, 176.

<sup>21</sup> Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic*, 174-177.

<sup>22</sup> Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic*, 176-179.

failed attempt to remain neutral, the Kentucky state government officially sided with the Union as slaveholders believed their loyalty would ultimately protect their property in human chattel. This hope proved futile as the course of the war created opportunities for Black people to emancipate themselves. Many enslaved men, for example, escaped their bondage to enlist in the Union Army, and thousands of newly freed soldiers and families had sought refuge at places like Camp Nelson by the end of the conflict.

Tennessee officially seceded in 1861, and it witnessed significant fighting for much of the war. This brought federal troops to the state, and later occupation, led by military governor Andrew Johnson in 1862, who attempted to bring the state back into the Union while the conflict continued to rage. White Unionists in Middle and West Tennessee were similarly disappointed by the shifting of federal policy toward the liberation of all enslaved persons, while even larger numbers of pro-Confederates reacted to emancipation with even more anger.

As the process of emancipation played out amidst the backdrop of war, schools for newly freed Blacks were established in both states. When the Army of Tennessee occupied Tennessee and moved toward Mississippi in 1862, General Ulysses S. Grant ordered a New Hampshire-born chaplain named John Eaton, Jr. to establish a camp for Black refugees in southwest Tennessee at Grand Junction. Thirty-two-year-old Eaton had already graduated from Dartmouth College, served as an educator in Ohio, and been ordained as a clergyman before enlisting in the Union Army. Grant intended for this camp to focus on organizing the labor of these men, women, and children who had escaped from their houses of bondage. Eaton's immediate tasks involved providing for basic protection and sustenance for those in camp, but he also followed the lead of an

earlier Union camp at Fortress Monroe, Virginia and on the Sea Islands of South Carolina by offering basic schooling for refugees. Indeed, he viewed education as a priority for the African Americans. Eaton asserted that “employment and protection were necessities preceding instruction in order only, —not in importance.”<sup>23</sup> He soon became the General Superintendent of Contrabands, which essentially gave him control over all those escaped slaves who encountered the Union Army throughout the Department of the Tennessee that quickly expanded south into Mississippi and beyond.<sup>24</sup> His wartime experience aiding African Americans’ transition to freedom proved significant later in his career as he assumed a more direct position involving education in Tennessee, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

Continuing Eaton’s practice, the Union Army established refugee camps throughout the slave states during the war, and, in coordination with benevolent organizations, they opened schools for African Americans.<sup>25</sup> These camps operated in various places throughout Kentucky and Tennessee, and some of the key players involved in educating refugees remained involved in the schools for African Americans that developed after the war ended. In September 1863, Joseph G. McKee—a native of Northern Ireland who was already an experienced missionary—travelled to Nashville on behalf of the United Presbyterian Church. He encountered up to 10,000 African Americans who had sought protection in the Union-occupied city and were now forced to

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<sup>23</sup> Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen*, 193; Phillips, “Education of Blacks in Tennessee During Reconstruction, 98.

<sup>24</sup> Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen*, 26-27.

<sup>25</sup> Amy Murrell Taylor provides a detailed overview of the Union Army’s refugee camps throughout the South with a particular emphasis on African-American experiences, *Embattled Freedom*.



survive with little means of supporting themselves.<sup>26</sup> From the perspective of McKee and his fellow missionaries, this population needed their “Christian sympathies” because “of their heathenish ignorance, their deep degradation, and their squalid wretchedness.”<sup>27</sup>

Within about a month after arriving, he established a school for freedpeople in the city with hundreds of students and about five teachers. This school continued to grow, spreading to multiple buildings, and McKee’s important work earned him a position within Nashville’s city government and the state school system from which he would influence the course of public education during the postwar years.<sup>28</sup>

John G. Fee, another white missionary involved in teaching, returned to his home state of Kentucky after being exiled in 1859 for promoting abolition. He began working with the A.M.A. in the summer of 1864 to establish a school at Camp Nelson.<sup>29</sup>

Beginning with the teaching of newly enlisted Black soldiers and their families, the school expanded by the end of the war to offer education to the broader refugee camp, and it employed other missionaries from Northern states. At least two African-American soldiers who had been enslaved in Kentucky until the war began, Gabriel Burdett and Elijah P. Marrs—both of whom have been discussed in previous chapters—eventually helped teach some of the classes at Camp Nelson. Burdett had served as a preacher to his

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<sup>26</sup> J. W. Wait, “The United Presbyterian Mission Among the Freedmen in Nashville,” in *Historical Sketch of the Freedmen’s Missions of the United Presbyterian Church, 1862-1904* (Knoxville: Printing Department of Knoxville College, 1904), 1.

<sup>27</sup> James McNeal, “Biographical Sketch of Rev. Joseph G. McKee: The Pioneer Missionary to the Freedmen in Nashville, Tennessee,” in *Historical Sketch of the Freedmen’s Missions of the United Presbyterian Church, 1862-1904* (Knoxville: Printing Department of Knoxville College, 1904), 10.

<sup>28</sup> deGregory, “Raising a Nonviolent Army,” 35; McNeal, “Biographical Sketch of Rev. Joseph G. McKee,” 12.

<sup>29</sup> Richard D. Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, xlv.

slave community in the neighboring Garrard County, and soon after arriving at the military installation and enlisting in the army, he met Fee who taught him and employed him to assist in the missionary schools.<sup>30</sup> For about a decade after the war, Burdett continued preaching and teaching in the Black community that remained at the camp. Elijah Marris arrived at Camp Nelson with the Twelfth United States Colored Heavy Artillery in the fall of 1864 and during their stay of a few weeks, he taught the basics of reading and writing to some of his fellow soldiers.<sup>31</sup> Elijah and his brother Henry C. Marris served as teachers in their respective schools in Kentucky for freedpeople during the postwar period, and they experienced the lack of financial and social support for Black education.<sup>32</sup>

These collective efforts of federal soldiers, white missionaries, and freedpeople during the Civil War laid a foundation for the African-American schools that were incorporated into the state education systems in decade that followed. The wartime schools in refugee camps like Camp Nelson and Grand Junction offered a promising foundation for thriving Black educational systems in the Upper South. But their connection to the federal government, especially the nascent Freedmen's Bureau, made this politically impossible in the increasingly pro-Confederate climate in Kentucky and at best short-lived under the Republican regime in Tennessee. Even when schools for

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<sup>30</sup> Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, xlvi; Fee to Simeon S. Jocelyn, August 8, 1864, in Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, 109-111.

<sup>31</sup> Elijah P. Marris, *Life and History of the Rev. Elijah P. Marris, First Pastor of Beargrass Baptist Church, and Author Rev. Elijah P. Marris* (Louisville, Ky: The Bradley & Gilbert Company, 1885), 28.

<sup>32</sup> Williams, *Self-Taught*, 97-98.

freedpeople could be incorporated into a centralized and tax-supported system, equality never existed while they remained segregated.

By the end of the war, both state governments faced the challenges of reestablishing the public schools that were forced to close during the war. They also had to determine how to legally treat the newly freed population within their borders with regard to education. In Kentucky, there were reportedly more than 700 school districts throughout the state that closed between 1860 and 1865 due to a lack of funding. Additionally, the state discontinued the means of funding public schools as they could not rely on direct taxes during the conflict. Therefore, Kentucky's education system underwent drastic change during the war, and it looked quite different as the first schools for freedpeople were being established.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Tennessee's common schools suffered greatly from the multitude of violent clashes throughout the state. Specifically, many school buildings were physically destroyed during the Civil War, and the cost of rebuilding proved a challenge for the state in the late 1860s.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, the reality of emancipation offended not only those who had supported the defeated Confederacy but also many white Upper-South Unionists whose loyalty had been motivated by their desire to preserve slavery. Nevertheless, it did not take long before

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<sup>33</sup> Zachary Frederick Smith, *The History of Kentucky: From Its Earliest Discovery and Settlement, to the Present Date ... Its Military Events and Achievements, and Biographic Mention of Its Historic Characters* (Louisville: Courier-Journal Job Printing Company Publishers, 1886), 707-708.

<sup>34</sup> John Eaton, Jr., *First Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of Tennessee, Ending Thursday, October 7, 1869* (Nashville, Tennessee: George Edgar Grisham, State Printer, 1869), 24-25.

state governments provided legislation on behalf of newly freed populations, though it was often motivated by a desire to prevent further federal intervention within their borders.

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During the five years following the Civil War, Black Kentuckians and Tennesseans witnessed their best opportunity to achieve equality in education until the mid-twentieth century. Despite acting beyond the reach of full-fledged military Reconstruction, the Upper-South states still felt the influence of the 1866 Civil Rights Bill and the three Reconstruction Amendments to the U.S Constitution that gave formerly enslaved people equal civil and political rights like their white neighbors. During this period, the state legislatures also made their first steps toward adopting public school systems for African-American communities. Republican politicians gained power in Tennessee and produced legislation as early as 1867 to provide free schools for those formerly enslaved children, a system lauded at the time by the federal government as progressive for the time. However, a close analysis of this period reveals that despite the great opportunity that existed for the freed population, the potential for real equality—in education and in society in general—remained out of reach because Black communities never had a loud enough voice nor gained enough power to pursue their goals, even while their white allies controlled the school systems. By about 1870, the window for permanent change closed as former Confederates solidified their firm control over both Kentucky and Tennessee.

The early postwar policies passed by the Kentucky General Assembly and designed to support Black education have been described by one historian as “both

progressive and puzzling.”<sup>35</sup> A series of laws passed by the legislature and endorsed by Governor Thomas Elliott Bramlette beginning in 1866 included minor protections of civil rights and the creation of a Black school system, which offered glimmers of hope for the educational opportunities for African Americans. However, overwhelming evidence demonstrates that the state government actively resisted steps toward racial equality during these years. Importantly, it made a significant shift toward embracing the most conservative platforms and electing former Confederates to office.

This political pivot began during Bramlette administration, which straddled wartime and the early Reconstruction period. A product of the state’s common school system, Bramlette served as a state attorney and a judge in central Kentucky during the 1850s. He joined the Union Army at the beginning of Civil War, rose to the rank of major general, and was elected governor in 1863 representing the Union Democratic Party.<sup>36</sup> As wartime governor, Bramlette opposed President Lincoln’s policy of enlisting Black soldiers, and emancipation more broadly, which carried over to influence his postwar stance toward the federal government.<sup>37</sup> From the perspective of many white Kentuckians, however, Bramlette ceded too much to the Radical Republicans with the creation of the Black school system and small protections for African Americans’ civil rights, which whites eventually demonstrated at the polls.

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<sup>35</sup> Ellis, *A History of Education in Kentucky*, 71.

<sup>36</sup> Ross A. Webb, “Thomas Elliott Bramlette,” in *Kentucky’s Governors* ed. Lowell H. Harrison 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 93-97.

<sup>37</sup> Patrick A. Lewis, *For Slavery and Union: Benjamin Buckner and Kentucky Loyalties in the Civil War* (2015; repr., Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2019), 125-127; Anne E. Marshall, *Creating A Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 27.

By the end of 1865, slavery had been unquestionably destroyed by the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, despite Kentucky's refusal to ratify it. During this period, Bramlette and many white Unionists continued to oppose any federal action meant to uplift the formerly enslaved population, including the Civil Rights Bill of 1866 and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. They especially resented the decision by Oliver Otis Howard and Clinton B. Fisk in late 1865 to officially expand the Freedmen's Bureau's jurisdiction into Kentucky. Within a month of this decision, Frank Lane Wolford, a representative of Casey and Russell Counties in the state House of Representatives, presented a detailed case in favor of "the removal of the Bureau from the state" which he saw as "an invasion of the rights of the State of Kentucky." Wolford argued that the state legislature should be legally responsible for passing laws dealing with former slaves, claiming, "the General Assembly feels no disposition to legislate in any spirit of oppression against the negro population, but is only desirous of enacting laws as will protect the negroes in their rights."<sup>38</sup> The governor responded by encouraging the representatives to follow through on that promise by legislating on behalf of Black communities to convince Washington that the Freedmen's Bureau's presence was unnecessary.

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<sup>38</sup> Frank Lane Wolford, "The Freedmen's Bureau in Kentucky—Speech of Hon. Frank L. Wolford on the Removal of the Bureau from the State," January 19, 1866, in *The Louisville Daily Journal*. While serving in the Union Army during the Civil War, Wolford was a vocal critic of President Lincoln's policy of recruiting Black soldiers. After a particularly scathing speech in March 1864 in which he called upon Kentuckians to "resist" Black enlistment and referred to the president as "the tyrant at Washington," Wolford was arrested and discharged from the army. This arrest angered Bramlette, as he essentially agreed with Wolford's stance on Black enlistment, and this nearly motivated him to openly oppose the president himself. Brad Asher, *The Most Hated Man in Kentucky: The Lost Cause and the Legacy of Union General Stephen Burbridge* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2021), 70-77; Lewis, *For Slavery and Union*, 126-127; Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 153.

In the early months of 1866, the Kentucky General Assembly responded to the expansion of the Freedmen's Bureau and the potential of more federal involvement by enacting policies to support Black communities, including the creation a separate public school system for African Americans. This seemed likely to achieve their goal because Freedmen's Bureau agents already recognized the necessity of government intervention in Black education. Taking stock of schools for freedpeople across the state, the Bureau noted that despite an investment of at least \$50,000 by various Northern missionary groups, more aid was needed to support the schools in Kentucky. They realized, however, that "scarcely a beginning is made in this great work" of establishing an educational system that could reach freedpeople beyond places like Louisville, Paducah, and Camp Nelson.<sup>39</sup> This outside assistance only represented a temporary boon to the educational prospects of the formerly enslaved as the government needed to provide adequate funding for a public school system.

The 1866 state law designed to benefit African Americans contained serious flaws that allowed corruption and racism on the part of local white trustees to dictate the allocation of funds to Black communities. For example, the Black school fund was to be collected solely from a new tax on freedpeople, who already suffered from widespread poverty while had to continue paying existing taxes. Additionally, that fund was not only meant for schools. Rather the law declared that half of the new tax revenue should be dedicated to supporting the poorest among them and the remainder could be spent on

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<sup>39</sup> John Ogden to Clinton B. Fisk, December 31, 1865, Tennessee Freedmen's Bureau, NARA RG 105, Box 8; Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 231.

education.<sup>40</sup> Importantly, the wording of the policy offered a way for white civil officers to simply refuse to establish a school for African Americans.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, the initial policy establishing a Black public education system in Kentucky provided minimal support for those schools. Instead of taking further steps to enhance this new school system, the state government proceeded in the following years to walk back parts of the law. Within two years, the legislature revised and amended the law to prevent any part of the new tax to be used for education until the impoverished people in the Black community were sufficiently supported.<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately, soon after this policy had been significantly diluted, the Freedmen's Bureau began dwindling their presence in Kentucky, which substantially reduced the federal support and protection they had previously provided for Black schools.<sup>43</sup>

Along with hollow legislation directed toward Kentucky's formerly enslaved population, the enforcement of federal Reconstruction within its borders—if only to a minor extent—convinced the state's politicians to shift their positions on important issues. Kentucky Republicans intentionally distanced themselves from the Radical members of their party in Congress by advocating a more moderate approach toward

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<sup>40</sup> *Kentucky General Assembly Acts of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, passed at the adjourned session of 1865-1866* (Frankfort, 1866), 51.

<sup>41</sup> Michelle Bachelor Robinson, "Still I rise!" Public Discourse Surrounding the Development of Public Schools for African Americans in Louisville, Kentucky, 1862-1872," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Louisville, 2010), 39-40.

<sup>42</sup> *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of Kentucky, for the School Year Ending December 31, 1867* (Frankfort, 1868), 277.

<sup>43</sup> While signs of waning Bureau support for African-American education in Kentucky were seen as early as 1867, their official withdrawal came in 1870. Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 244-245.



racial progress. Still, their rivals easily criticized them as proponents of political and social equality for African Americans, which turned many white voters against them. For example, during an 1866 campaign for state Court of Appeals clerk, James A. Dawson, who spoke in support of the Democratic candidate, warned that unless Kentuckians voted for Democrats, they would be forced to accept not only the freedom of African Americans but also racial equality. Dawson decried the possibility of social equality between the races and played on the racist emotions of his white audience. “Suppose the person of your wife or daughter were violated by a buck negro to-day,” he proposed. If Kentuckians allow African Americans access to civil rights under proposed federal legislation, Dawson argued, “a negro cannot be punished who commit a rape on a white person.”<sup>44</sup> Union Democrats, which included Governor Bramlette among their number, had remained loyal to the federal government during the war, but had strongly opposed Lincoln’s decision to enroll Black soldiers and to place the state under martial law in 1864. By 1866, these conservatives opposed federal Reconstruction but hesitated to embrace former Confederates as their fellow Democrats. The third faction represented the remainder of Kentucky Democrats who were known as the Conservatives or the Southern Rights Party. Supported by both former Unionists and Confederates, this faction espoused an overt desire to return the state to its antebellum racial hierarchy, opposing

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<sup>44</sup> Dawson delivered this speech in Monroe County to support Democrat Alvin Duval who ultimately defeated Union Party candidate Edward H. Hobson. Despite not running on a Republican ticket, Hobson’s support for the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution and the 1866 Civil Rights Bill led Dawson and others to paint him as a Radical politician. Further, Dawson’s argument that non-Democratic rule would result in racial equality included warnings that African-American men would be allowed to “commit a rape on a white person” without penalty. See, “A Splendid Speech,” *Louisville Daily Courier*, July 21, 1866, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/119257365> (accessed October 16, 2021).

the constitutional amendments and any attempt to grant rights to Black Kentuckians. The 1867 gubernatorial election determined that the white voters strongly preferred Southern Rights Democrats as their candidate received nearly two-thirds of the vote, signaling a broad acceptance of former Confederates in Kentucky politics.<sup>45</sup>

This shift toward pro-Confederate politics has received much attention from scholars, one of whom famously wrote that Kentucky “waited until after the war was over to secede from the Union.”<sup>46</sup> What is studied less, however, is that within this political climate, even Kentucky’s Republican Party, the closest ally that African Americans could hope for among their white neighbors, opposed significant racial progress in the war’s aftermath. The legislature passed the initial 1866 school law as a political maneuver to appease Washington, but the subsequent Civil Rights Bill passed that spring and Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments convinced most Kentucky politicians to dig in their heels in opposition to Reconstruction. Importantly, this seemingly convinced the General Assembly that the first school law had offered Black

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<sup>45</sup> Harrison and Klotter, *A New History of Kentucky*, 239-242; Webb, *Kentucky in the Reconstruction Era*, 12-35. Some scholars have described the major factions within Kentucky’s Democratic Party as the “Bourbons” on one side, who “wanted a return to the old antebellum days of privilege and dominance,” and the “New Departure” on the other side, who followed the broader “New South” movement of “accepting defeat and the end of slavery,” Ellis, *A History of Education in Kentucky*, 72. Even those who adopted the “New Departure” stance, however, have been proven racist against African Americans. Historian George C. Wright argued that a prominent leader of this faction, Henry Watterson, only advocated for Black rights “out of fear that the federal government would intervene if Kentucky failed to accept fully the end of slavery and the new status of blacks.” Wright, *Life Behind a Veil*, 26.

<sup>46</sup> Quote from E. Merton Coulter, *The Civil War and Readjustment in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926), 429. In the past decade, historians have credited this seeming shift in loyalty to the adoption of Lost Cause mythology, which coincided with support for Jim Crow laws that prevented racial equality through the mid-twentieth century. See Asher, *The Most Hated Man in Kentucky*; Luke E. Harlow, *Religion, Race, and the Making of Confederate Kentucky, 1830-1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Marshall, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky*; Lewis, *For Slavery and Union*.

communities too much, and they cut it down significantly. By the end of the 1860s, the pro-South Democratic Party had taken control of the state government, and their attempts to improve public education reflected an unwillingness to accept Black progress.

The newly inaugurated Democratic Governor John LaRue Helm served for only five days in September 1867 before his untimely death. His successor, Democratic Lieutenant Governor John White Stevenson, remained in office until 1871. During his tenure, Stevenson and his newly appointed superintendent of public instruction, Zachary F. Smith, took meaningful steps toward bolstering the existing common schools in Kentucky. But they deliberately focused on improving the quality of education for white children only.

Smith suggested several important reforms to help the system recover from the war, the most significant of which involved increasing the property tax statewide that would be allocated to the school fund. He proposed raising the tax from five cents to twenty cents “on each one hundred dollars’ worth of property to increase the Common School Fund,” which would be decided by public referendum in 1869. Leading up to this vote, a popular argument in opposition to the tax raise centered on a fear that “Congress may force the negro into the schools.”<sup>47</sup> The looming Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution—presently in the process of being ratified by individual states and offered political suffrage to Black men—contributed to an anxiety among white Kentuckians that they would be forced to accept racial equality. Smith assured the public that the state government remained in control and that, “our institutions will be managed according to

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<sup>47</sup> “Negro in the School,” *The Hickman Courier*, July 31, 1869, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/171870337> (accessed August 27, 2021).

the wishes of the people,” rather than by the military or Congress. With this being the case, he stated, “the school laws and the tax bill submitted, expressly provide that our common schools and the fund are for the white children only.”<sup>48</sup> Ultimately, this new law passed the public vote, and in his effort to enhance and expand the common school system in Kentucky, the superintendent ensured that he had no intention of incorporating formerly enslaved communities into the same system as existed for whites.

At the same time, local Black schools struggled to survive with federal support on its way out and the state still failing to incorporate them into the public education system. By early 1869, both Elijah and Henry Marris relied on support from the Freedmen’s Bureau to keep their schools financially stable. The former had expanded his La Grange, Kentucky school to almost eighty students and hired a second teacher to assist him. While local trustees ran the school, it is unclear how much tax revenue went into it because the Black community was responsible for paying \$30 per month along with a regular payment of \$15 from the federal government. However, Elijah Marris specifically requested that the Bureau help pay for the second teacher, suggesting that the needs of his school had exceeded the existing funds.<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile, his brother Henry Marris taught at the Union Day School in state capitol of Frankfort, which comprised about 120 pupils. In February 1869, each student at his school was paying sixty cents per month tuition but

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<sup>48</sup> Zachary F. Smith, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of Kentucky, for the School Year Ending December 31, 1868*, (Frankfort: Kentucky Yeoman Office, 1869), 23-25.

<sup>49</sup> Elijah P. Marris, “Teacher’s Monthly School Report,” January 1869, “Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 52, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed October 16, 2021); Elijah P. Marris to Benjamin P. Runkle, January 20, 1869, “Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 42, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed October 16, 2021).

that not enough money to pay their two teachers.<sup>50</sup> Similar to La Grange, the Frankfort school requested additional assistance from the Bureau to supplement community support because the state had failed to implement a sustainable educational system.

In the summer of 1869, about a month before white voters decided to increase tax revenue for their children's education, a group of African-American educators from across the state—including the Marrs brothers—assembled in Louisville to discuss the future of Black schools. Understanding that they would soon lose the Freedmen's Bureau financial support which helped sustain the earliest schools in Black communities, the 250 delegates present implored the Democratic legislature to grant them their fair share of educational support. After earlier protests for additional revenue to supplement the 1866 Black school fund law went unaddressed, this body asked for equal taxes and to receive the full benefits of those taxes.<sup>51</sup> They requested that the General Assembly, "grant to us the appropriation necessary to continue our schools," because it had yet to provide appropriate funds for their education as the reconstructed states further south had already done. More succinctly, the convention articulated their most urgent necessity: "We demand in the name of justice *equal taxation* and *equal education* for the colored youth of our state." Indeed, they had reason to expect more from the state government, as they witnessed improvements being made for white education through larger tax revenues.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Henry C. Marrs, "Teacher's Monthly School Report," February 1869, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 53, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed October 16, 2021); Henry C. Marrs to Runkle, February 23, 1869, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 42, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed October 16, 2021).

<sup>51</sup> Robinson, "'Still I rise!,'" 13-14.

<sup>52</sup> *Kentucky State Colored Education Convention, Held at Benson's Theater, Louisville, Ky, July 14, 1869* (Louisville, Ky., 1869), 30-32; Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 245.

The discussions at this meeting of Black educators reveal the seriousness of their situation as the decade of the 1860s ended. Although much had been accomplished since emancipation, one of their most important financial supporters would be gone, and schools for freedpeople remained outside of Kentucky's common school system. Despite their willingness and capability of controlling their own schools, African Americans struggled to maintain a statewide educational system without government support.

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From the perspective of the state politics, Tennessee's experience during the five years following the Civil War differed tremendously from Kentucky's fast and steady shift toward a Redemption Democratic government. It exited the war with a Republican regime in Nashville comprised of white Unionists and had by the summer of 1866 earned the confidence of the federal government enough to be the first former Confederate state to have its representatives seated in Washington. Led by William G. Brownlow, a firebrand minister and newspaper editor from East Tennessee who was elected governor in early 1865, this government aligned itself with the Radical Republicans in Congress by granting rights to African Americans without federal intervention. A series of laws between 1865 and 1867 passed by the Tennessee Legislature amounted to an internal Radical Reconstruction that included allowing Black men to vote, forming a state militia to fight the Ku Klux Klan, and establishing a new state educational system that included African Americans.<sup>53</sup> Whereas Kentucky feigned support for their formerly enslaved

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<sup>53</sup> For studies on Tennessee's experience during Reconstruction, see Thomas B. Alexander, *Political Reconstruction in Tennessee* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1950);

population as an attempt to keep the federal government out, Tennessee's policies affected real change. The tide of change in the Volunteer State, however, reversed course by 1870 when its own Democratic Party successfully defeated Republicans to take control and quickly rewrote their Constitution to eliminate much of the progress made under Brownlow, including the new school system. Despite their divergent paths, both Upper South states entered the new decade in very similar political positions, having successfully staved off federal Reconstruction and returned power to ex-Confederates and former slaveholders.

Despite its overhaul in 1870, analyzing the public school system created by Tennessee Republicans in 1867 during its brief existence demonstrates the potential that existed for state-supported Black education. This system contrasted with Kentucky's 1866 law because it incorporated schools for freedpeople into the same structure as it had for white schools and supervised by the same county superintendent. Importantly, the Freedmen's Bureau and Northern relief organizations praised the school system and focused its efforts on supporting it, especially with financial assistance to purchase, build and repair buildings and by supplying trained teachers. This brought several vocal and

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Ash, *Middle Tennessee Society Transformed*; William Edward Hardy, "Fare well to all Radicals: Redeeming Tennessee, 1869-1870," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Tennessee-Knoxville, 2013); Kyle Osborn, "Bondage or Barbarism,' Parson Brownlow and the Rhetoric of Racism in East Tennessee, 1845-1867," (M.A. Thesis, East Tennessee State University, 2007); Ben H. Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army: The State Guard and Its Role in Reconstruction, 1867-1869* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005).

influential former abolitionists and educators from the North, including John Ogden, Joseph G. McKee, and John Eaton, Jr. to the state, who often advocated on behalf of silenced African Americans in ways that native Tennesseans never would. Even at its height, however, this progressive educational system failed to offer equal educational opportunities to both races because its leaders refused to racially integrate the common schools.<sup>54</sup> This case study proves, therefore, that even when their white allies held influential positions within in the public-school administration, African Americans' goals were often ignored or dismissed, which ultimately contributed to the long history of segregated schools since emancipation.

In March 1867, the Tennessee legislature passed a comprehensive law to reorganize the public education system. The detailed policy contained forty-nine sections, centralized authority within a statewide superintendent, and provided means to sustain the schools over time. The basic process through which local districts to establish these free common schools began with the civil officials taking a census of all school-age children living within their boundaries. The law specified that while taking the census, the officers must open at least one segregated school for Black children when more than twenty-five lived in the district. That section continued to place the African-American schools under the jurisdiction of the same Board of Education that oversaw the operations of white schools. No other part of the law specifically mentions schools for Black children, and it

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<sup>54</sup> deGregory, "Raising a Nonviolent Army"; Albin James Kowalewski, "'To be true to ourselves': Freedpeople, School Building, and Community Politics in Appalachian Tennessee, 1865-1870," (M.A. Thesis, University of Tennessee-Knoxville, 2009); Dennis K. McDaniel, "John Ogden, Abolitionist and Leader in Southern Education," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 87, no. 6 (1997): i-vi+1-138; Frank B. Williams, "John Eaton, Jr., Editor, Politician, and School Administrator, 1865-1870," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (December 1951): 291-319.



was understood that the remainder of the law therefore also applied to them as well.<sup>55</sup> The requirement for local officials to create schools for African Americans represents an important distinction from Kentucky's 1866 law, which made it optional for the special funds to be used toward education.

The new school law ignited reactions both in opposition to and in support of the decision to provide education for Black Tennesseans. White Conservatives like former Confederate officer Albert Pike decried the policy, insisting that people of African descent were biologically incapable of learning. "To some races," he argued, "education is like pouring water on the arid sands. A negro educated is a negro still. You cannot educate its nature or its vices out of a race." Pike also connected education to a law passed earlier that year to enfranchise African-American men, declaring that "no amount of education" could make them "fit to be entrusted with the elective franchise."<sup>56</sup>

Other white voices countered these arguments and prepared themselves to aid the state in establishing schools in Black communities. John Eaton, Jr., Grant's former General Superintendent of Contrabands, praised the inclusion of freedpeople into Tennessee's common schools. Eaton cheered, "Free soil, free press, free labor, free witness stand, free schools, free ballot, and soon free speech throughout Tennessee! Change indescribable, and full of significance! The distinctions of color so soon abolished!" Eaton's background as an educator and experience working with freedpeople during the war made him a fan of the Republican legislation, though he admitted it "is not

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<sup>55</sup> *Acts of the State of Tennessee, Passed at the Second Adjourned Session of the Thirty-fourth General Assembly, for the years 1866-67* (Nashville, 1866), 33-48.

<sup>56</sup> Albert Pike, "Educating the Negro," *The Memphis Appeal*, March 9, 1867, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/213428043> (accessed on September 22, 2021).

the best that could be . . . . But it begins the work.”<sup>57</sup> Seven months later, Eaton assumed the office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and led that work himself for the next two years. While these two responses to the new law represent clashing ideologies regarding race—the former harkening back to the antebellum racial hierarchy and the latter pushing society forward through free labor—neither necessarily represented the goals of Black communities. This is important because even well-meaning figures like Eaton ultimately fell short of allowing freedpeople to achieve the full potential of the moment.

A common issue preventing freedpeople in many counties from taking advantage of Eaton’s public schools was the need to acquire their own space. In Gibson County, for example, the Black community in Humboldt purchased a plot of land and a partly built house in which they planned to open a school. Working with Eaton’s local superintendent, the school trustees requested help from the Freedmen’s Bureau of up to \$300, or as much as they could pay, to finish constructing the house. At the same time, there were at least two other school districts in Gibson County with at least 100 African-American children, and each of them also requested the same amount from the Bureau to secure property and erect a school building.<sup>58</sup> Despite all of these efforts, between 1867 and 1869, only two Black schools were opened under the state system out of a school-age population of 2,152. Meanwhile, forty-four white schools opened to serve a total of 7,640

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<sup>57</sup> John Eaton, Jr., “Free Schools in Tennessee,” *Memphis Daily Post*, March 12, 1867, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/586972715> (accessed on September 7, 2021).

<sup>58</sup> William H. Stillwell to Burt, December 3, 1867, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 48, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed October 16, 2021).

children.<sup>59</sup> This disparity illustrates one of the fundamental flaws in Tennessee's Republican school system. Regardless of the state policy or promised tax revenue to sustain their schools, formerly enslaved communities often lacked the means to purchase their buildings where they could educate their children. A system of mixed schools would have offered a relatively simple solution as white communities were more capable of acquiring school buildings, which proved to be a major obstacle in getting Black education off the ground. Integrated education was rare in the nineteenth-century United States, but it seemed nearly impossible in the postwar Upper South, even among reformers.

As the leader of public schools in Tennessee, Eaton quickly implemented the 1867 law by appointing superintendents in each county. He then tasked them with organizing boards of directors within each school district, and the local directors were to immediately begin compiling a census of all white and Black school children under their jurisdiction.<sup>60</sup> Eaton required the enumeration completed and submitted before he could allocate state funds to individual districts. This process took much longer than expected, in part because of the threat of violence against those attempting to count children in Black communities.<sup>61</sup> Eaton reported, "In some localities individuals strongly objected to counting colored children as scholastic population. To their minds it seemed to carry too strongly the idea of the manhood of the colored race."<sup>62</sup> Because the law required a minimum of twenty-five African-American children to be counted in a district before the

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<sup>59</sup> Eaton, *First Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction*, clxxxxvi, ccv.

<sup>60</sup> Eaton, *First Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction*, 9-10; Eaton, "Letter of Instruction," in *First Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction*, vii-xi.

<sup>61</sup> Phillips, "Education of Blacks in Tennessee During Reconstruction," 104.

<sup>62</sup> Eaton, *First Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction*, 11.

state could support a school, whites in rural areas believed stopping the school census would prevent formerly enslaved people from accessing education. Despite establishing more than forty white schools in Gibson County, the superintendent often heard men “condemn the whole system,” expressing a “hope that it may be abolished.” They hated Eaton’s public schools, superintendent William H. Stillwell explained, “simply and solely because it provides education for colored children.”<sup>63</sup> The delay in compiling school populations across the state made Eaton’s work difficult and very slow. Outside of the major cities, relatively few schools had been established under the state’s public school system during Eaton’s first year in office.<sup>64</sup>

Eaton’s superintendence also suffered from the mishandling of the funds dedicated to public education from within the state government, which hindered the organization of schools throughout Tennessee. Lemuel F. Drake, the superintendent for Washington County in East Tennessee, reported in the spring of 1868 that he had already organized multiple schools. However, he wrote, “in consequence of the report that the school money in the State Treasury has been used for other purposes, nearly all of them are now closed.”<sup>65</sup> These reports likely referred to the fact that the Treasury in Nashville spent money collected from the school tax “to pay railroad interest and other State expenses, as they became due.” Eaton admitted that “No separate accounts are kept of school and general revenue,” and explained that the practice of spending money from the Treasury regardless of its intended purpose had been practiced by the state government

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<sup>63</sup> Stillwell to Eaton, October 4, 1869 in *First Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction*, cli.

<sup>64</sup> Phillips, “Education of Blacks in Tennessee During Reconstruction, 104.

<sup>65</sup> Lemuel F. Drake to Eaton, March 21, 1868, in *First Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction*, cxxxiv.

since before the Civil War. Furthermore, Eaton's appropriation of funds to the counties had been delayed by about two years. The tax revenue from 1866 was not available to the schools until the fall of 1868, and the revenue collected in 1867 was not drawn upon until early 1869.<sup>66</sup>

Drake expressed the impact of this delay in financial support in his county by the fall of 1868. He wrote plainly, "I am desirous of receiving some money, to pay teachers in order to silence the evil reports of the enemies of the School law."<sup>67</sup> As Eaton began widely dispersing funds to local school districts in 1869, Tennessee educators grew hopeful and their Northern partners prepared to hand over their work to the state. However, the school system would not survive to see another year, as the legislature reversed the 1867 law to decentralize the system that Eaton had organized during his two years as superintendent.<sup>68</sup>

The Freedmen's Bureau depended on Eaton's public schools as the permanent solution to freedpeople's education. As they had approached education in Kentucky, its agents in Tennessee understood that outside support, or "charity schools," could not sustain a system for an extended period.<sup>69</sup> David Burt, the Bureau education superintendent for the state, referred to the schools he had established as "an abnormal method of education." He explained to the African-American population that the Bureau-supported schools were only meant to be a temporary solution "until schools could be

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<sup>66</sup> Eaton, *First Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction*, 122-123.

<sup>67</sup> Drake to Eaton, September 16, 1868, John Eaton Papers, 1867-1869, Tennessee Historical Society, Tennessee State Library and Archives.

<sup>68</sup> Phillips, "Education of Blacks in Tennessee During Reconstruction, 105.

<sup>69</sup> Phillips, "Education of Blacks in Tennessee During Reconstruction, 104.

established for you by the State and city laws.”<sup>70</sup> While they focused their resources assisting state schools, the Bureau still found many Black communities in need of financial support.<sup>71</sup> In Washington County, while Drake waited for Eaton to send him the allocated state funds, a teacher named J. R. Judson requested assistance from the Freedmen’s Bureau for a school he hoped to organize with forty African-American students. Drake endorsed this application to Burt but admitted, “there are not pub[lic] funds for this School nor any other at this time.” Although living in poverty, the freedpeople collectively pledged up to \$15 per month toward the school that taught about forty students, and Judson succeeded in acquiring an additional \$30 per month from the Bureau to cover the remaining expenses.<sup>72</sup> After already raising money to purchase a plot of land, the Black community in White County similarly petitioned for federal support to construct a building for school purposes in early 1868. William F. Carter, the county superintendent for public schools, could only assist them by writing to Burt on their behalf to receive \$300 toward that purchasing property.<sup>73</sup> In his capacity, Burt continued supporting Tennessee’s schools until the public school system had successfully supplied education for Black communities.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Burt quoted in Phillips, “Education of Blacks in Tennessee During Reconstruction,” 104.

<sup>71</sup> Alvord, *Ninth Semi-Annual Report*, 47.

<sup>72</sup> Drake to Burt, March 17, 1868, Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 48, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 26, 2021); J. R. Judson to Burt, March 26, 1868, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 48, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 26, 2021).

<sup>73</sup> James McGinnis, Charles Clark, and William Dibrell, “Petition of Trustees of col’d school at Sparta, White Co., Tenn.,” February 20, 1868, Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (BRFAL) at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) RG 105, T142, Roll 51, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed December 10, 2019).

<sup>74</sup> Burt to Isaac M. Newton, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 5, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed September 8, 2021); Phillips, “Education of Blacks in Tennessee During Reconstruction, 104-105.

The Bureau's close partners in creating schools, Northern missionary associations, also understood the benefit of Tennessee's common school system to their own efforts. Some Northern educators served in official positions within Eaton's administration to enforce the new policies or worked closely with it. Before the new education law passed through the legislature, at least two prominent missionary schools were established in Nashville to serve the city's large Black population. Among the first teachers of freedpeople in the area, Joseph G. McKee headed his institution with support from United Presbyterian Board of Missions to the Freedmen and operated in the northwest part of the city. The many other missionaries and federal representatives who arrived, especially after the summer of 1865, found McKee's school well under way with hundreds of students.<sup>75</sup> During his third school year, McKee encountered other missionaries working for different Northern organizations while in the process of establishing a new school nearby. John Ogden, who served in the Freedmen's Bureau while representing the Western Freedmen's Aid Commission (WFAC), joined with two AMA officials, Edward Parmelee Smith and Erastus Milo Cravath, to open the Fisk School in January 1866.<sup>76</sup> Named for Clinton Bowen Fisk, the first Freedmen's Bureau commander of Tennessee and Kentucky, and Ogden served as its first principal. The school initially taught all ages of freedpeople, but within two years had shifted into an institution for higher education known as Fisk University. These individuals and their

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<sup>75</sup> McDaniel, "John Ogden," 31; Wait, "The United Presbyterian Mission Among the Freedmen in Nashville," 1-5.

<sup>76</sup> McDaniel, "John Ogden," 31-34; McKee discussed the Fisk School in a letter to an AMA secretary, J. B. Clark soon after its opening, and he seemed frustrated that it was located so close to his own institution. He also disliked the attention the new school received in comparison to his own. McKee to J. B. Clark, January 15, 1866, Box 162, AMA Manuscripts, ARC.

schools played significant roles in the nascent state system of education in Tennessee as they attempted to represent the needs of African Americans.

In 1867, McKee oversaw the operations of his school but also served as an alderman, the chairman of the school committee, and a member of the school board for the city of Nashville. Additionally, he superintended all public schools for the county within Eaton's direction. At a city council meeting that fall, McKee proposed "a bill to increase the facilities for the education of the colored children of Nashville." This included the transfer of existing schools from the United Presbyterian mission and the Pittsburgh Freedmen's Aid Commission to the supervision and managements of the city and its school board.<sup>77</sup> While it passed successfully through the City Council, the school board issued a formal protest against the bill based on several points including its expense, a belief that the City Council was too unfamiliar with the public schools to order this change, and their belief that it was "unnecessary." The school board further stated that issuing the bill to improve schools for African Americans in Nashville would "arouse a state of feeling in regard to them, which we have strenuously, and thus far successfully, labored to avert and suppress." They feared white violence against the schools if the city followed through on the bill.<sup>78</sup>

McKee responded to the school board by emphasizing their general opposition quality education for freedpeople. He claimed that the board "accepted with extreme

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<sup>77</sup> "City Council," *Nashville Union and Dispatch*, October 15, 1867, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/83328170> (accessed on September 7, 2021).

<sup>78</sup> "Reply to the Protest of the Board of Education Against the 'Bill to Increase the Facilities for the Education of the Colored Children of the City,'" November 28, 1867, *Nashville Union and Dispatch*, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/83328449> (accessed on September 7, 2021).



reluctance the inevitable necessity of allowing the colored children *any* schools.” He further criticized them as still viewing African Americans as they had during slavery and accused the board of only supporting Black schools under the new system because they understood that “a refusal to conform to this requirement would forfeit to the Nashville schools annually from \$12,000 to \$20,000.”<sup>79</sup> McKee’s irritation with the local school board illustrates how many native Tennesseans serving in official capacities within the common school system likely regarded the introduction of Black education. This clash between Northern educators and locals represented only two perspectives while potentially obscuring the African American point of view.

When Tennessee educators gathered for the teachers’ association meeting in the fall of 1867, it represented the first opportunity for the white and Northern allies of the formerly enslaved people to openly discuss the future of Eaton’s new public school system. While they could not have foreseen the many obstacles that challenged their work over the next two years, the discussion about integration established the best possible outcome for freedpeople’s education under the state’s Republican government. The first day of the meeting featured a chorus of African-American children before it began in the morning and a demonstration of a similar group of students solving math problems to welcome the educators back for an afternoon session.<sup>80</sup> These performances were likely intended to counter ethnological arguments that white Tennesseans like Albert Pike had advanced to criticize the state’s attempt to educate the freed population.

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<sup>79</sup> McKee, “Reply to the Protest.”

<sup>80</sup> “Popular Education” November 14, 1867, *Republican Banner*; “Meeting of the Tennessee State Teachers’ Association,” November 14, 1867, *Nashville Union and Dispatch*, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/83328368> (accessed on September 8, 2021).

They also underscored that Black education had been the single most significant feature of the common school system that had been in operation for less than a year. Everyone attending the convention, therefore, seemingly agreed about the importance of educating African Americans, but they did not necessarily believe that they should receive an education *equal* to that of white children. The musical and instructional presentations emphasized the separateness or distinction of those children based on their race, which perpetuated the racial hierarchy that already viewed them as less intelligent and important than whites.

Immediately after the student's solved arithmetic problems for the crowd, Ogden delivered a message in favor of integrating Tennessee's public schools. The Fisk University principal praised Eaton's system as "liberal and progressive" for encompassing both schools for white and Black children. While it "approximates to perfection," he asserted that it "does not go far enough." The argument that followed proved largely unpopular among the group of white educators that have been discussed in this chapter. Still, Ogden advocated a plan that had the best chance of allowing freedpeople to receive quality education equal to their white neighbors. "In the school districts separate schools are provided for the whites and blacks," he explained. "This is wrong," continued Ogden, because "it encourages caste and prejudice." For him, the solution was simple: "Common school buildings should embrace both black and white indiscriminately, as one race is just as much entitled to the advantages of popular education as the other." Ogden went on to describe the benefits of requiring interracial schools across Tennessee.

Attendees spent the remainder of that afternoon session listening to responses to Ogden, as at least eight individuals publicly expressed their views on mixed schools. Burt, McKee, and three others disagreed with the proposition, mostly arguing it to be “impracticable” and favoring instead to side with “expediency.” One of three vocal supporters of Ogden’s proposal pushed back against those in opposition, arguing that he believed in “the most radical measures, letting expediency...go to the dogs.” He continued, “The negro deserved to be admitted into all our commons schools, and this right it would be an outrage to withhold.”<sup>81</sup> Tennessee’s public schools remained segregated through the end of Eaton’s term as superintendent, and the Democratic legislators who wrote the 1870 state Constitution ensured that they would remain that way well into the twentieth century.

Two prominent attendees at the teachers’ meeting, Eaton and Barnas Sears, remained silent during the discussion about mixed schools, but their words and actions over the next decade illustrated their views on the subject. At the time of the convention, Barnas Sears had recently been appointed as the agent of the Peabody Educational Fund which offered supplemental financial assistance to public school systems throughout the South after the Civil War. Sears had the power to dispense this fund, which had been established earlier in 1867 by wealthy New England philanthropist George Peabody, and, in that role, Sears intentionally assisted segregated schools while refusing to support racially integrated institutions.<sup>82</sup> Having spent the previous twelve years as Brown

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<sup>81</sup> “Popular Education” November 14, 1867, *Republican Banner*.

<sup>82</sup> William Preston Vaughn, *Schools for All: The Blacks & Public Education in the South, 1865-1877* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974), 141. Historians have explored Sears’s role in promoting racial segregation in Southern schools during Reconstruction, see Vaughn, “Partners in Segregation: Barnas Sears and the Peabody Fund,” *Civil War History* 10,

University's president, he was likely familiar with the practice of mixed schools in nearby Boston and elsewhere in the region, so his decision should not be seen as simply continuing the status quo of the time.

Delivering the first address of the meeting, Sears initially only hinted at his opinions toward Black education. He argued, "that every step of progress must be taken so slowly that it shall be permanent . . . There is nothing so discouraging in social progress as fluctuation." He also espoused the ideology of free labor by arguing that workers should be "intelligent," recognizing that Southern Blacks remained primarily a source of labor while advocating for their education.<sup>83</sup> Eaton probably personally invited Sears to the meeting, and he continued fostering a working relationship with the Peabody Fund, which, during Eaton's administration, donated about \$17,000 to normal schools in the state like Fisk University and the Lookout Mountain school.<sup>84</sup> During the 1870s, while Sears continued his work with the Peabody Fund and Eaton served as the U.S. Commissioner of Education, they teamed up to lobby Congress not to pass a law that would have legally integrated all public schools in the country.<sup>85</sup>

Both Eaton and Sears emerged in Washington, D.C. at a crucial juncture to help defeat the mixed-schools provision of the Civil Rights Bill. President Grant appointed his former officer, Eaton, as the national leader of public education in early 1870, soon after witnessing the collapse of his system in Tennessee. During his first years in office, Eaton

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no. 3 (September 1964): 260-274; West, "The Peabody Education Fund and Negro Education," 3-21.

<sup>83</sup> Barnas Sears, *First Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction*, xlvi; "Popular Education," November 14, 1867, *Republican Banner*; "Meeting of the Tennessee State Teachers' Association," November 14, 1867, *Nashville Union and Dispatch*.

<sup>84</sup> *First Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction*, 18-19.

<sup>85</sup> Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen*, 261-264.

remembered the struggles facing Southern states in maintaining their public-school systems. He later wrote that the progress already made by educators in the South “was about to be destroyed by a clause in the Civil Rights Bill, then under discussion in the House of Representatives, which if enacted would compel all the school children throughout the country to attend the same district schools regardless of race or color.”<sup>86</sup> Having already passed in the Senate, the mixed-schools measure waited in the early months of 1874 for the House to vote on it. In his official capacity, Eaton corresponded with Sears, who also worried about the Southern reaction to the law in enacted. Sears evidently discovered that “the common schools of seven States would be abolished should the bill become a law.”<sup>87</sup> Of the same mind, these two advocates for Southern education met with various representatives on the subject, including former General Benjamin Butler who represented Massachusetts in Congress until the mid-1870s and was in charge of “guiding the bill in the House” and President Grant. Their arguments seemingly convinced Butler to “withdraw” the measure from the floor, “expressing doubts as to the provisions for mixed schools.”<sup>88</sup> The final version of the Civil Rights Bill passed in 1875 without the mandate to integrate public schools. Eaton’s commitment to Black education in Tennessee was, therefore, depended on the continuation of a segregated and unequal system.

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<sup>86</sup> Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen*, 261-262.

<sup>87</sup> Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen*, 262.

<sup>88</sup> Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen*, 262-264; West, “The Peabody Education Fund and Negro Education,” 15-16.

As two of the first “redeemed” states in the South, Kentucky and Tennessee’s Democratic governments resisted granting equal rights to African Americans in the early 1870s without the fear of federal intervention. Despite the Fifteenth Amendment’s ratification, Black voters faced major obstacles when casting ballots in either state. Kentucky’s Democratic militia, the Kentucky National Legion, actively opposed African Americans attempting to vote, as they “supplemented Kentucky’s Klan, directly interfering with elections in ways that Kentucky’s Klansmen rarely did.”<sup>89</sup> Tennessee implemented a poll tax in 1870, which represented a key method of preventing impoverished Black men from voting throughout the Jim Crow era.<sup>90</sup> In regard to education, both state governments ensured that all public schools remained racially segregated, and by 1875 they oversaw educational systems that largely persisted until the Civil Rights era of the mid-1900s.

After 1868, Kentucky’s law required Black communities’ taxes to support the impoverished before they had an option to establish a free public school, and this “dual system of education” continued until the mid-1870s.<sup>91</sup> With the Freedmen’s Bureau’s subsequent retreat from the state, African Americans had been left “almost alone to educate their children.”<sup>92</sup> Howard A. M. Henderson replaced Smith as Kentucky’s Superintendent of Public Instruction in 1871, and he pushed the state to improve public schools for Black Kentuckians, highlighting the benefits of having educated voters and

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<sup>89</sup> Patrick A. Lewis, “The Democratic Partisan Militia and the Black Peril: The Kentucky Militia, Racial Violence, and the Fifteenth Amendment, 1870-1873,” *Civil War History* 56, no. 2 (June 2010), 149.

<sup>90</sup> Hardy, “Fare well to all Radicals’,” 220-221.

<sup>91</sup> Ellis, *A History of Education in Kentucky*, 88.

<sup>92</sup> Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 254.

laborers. Importantly, he also knew that forthcoming legislation in Washington could provide the state with much-needed educational support, but only if they improved the schools for freedpeople. Henderson assured the public that despite ongoing debates over integrating schools throughout the country, he remained “uncompromisingly opposed to mixed schools.” The superintendent’s plan involved creating a system of segregated schools supported by property taxes and a poll tax assessed on Black communities.<sup>93</sup> This plan was inherently unequal because formerly enslaved people owned much less property than whites which guaranteed their schools would be poorly funded, and the poll tax implemented a major obstacle African Americans voting just a few years after being legally enfranchised for the first time.

The 1869 convention of Black educators held in Louisville had already petitioned lawmakers to eliminate the two-dollar poll tax because whites did not have to pay it, and historians have proven that the poll tax represented a crucial step taken to disfranchise African Americans and reinforce the broader Jim Crow society through the mid-twentieth century.<sup>94</sup> Kentucky’s legislature passed this educational system in early 1874, largely

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<sup>93</sup> Howard A. M. Henderson, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of Kentucky, For the School Year Ending June 30, 1872* (Frankfort, 1872), 45-46.

<sup>94</sup> *Kentucky State Colored Education Convention*, 31; Victor B. Howard, “The Struggle for Equal Education in Kentucky, 1866-1884,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 46, No. 3 (Summer 1977), 314-315. For a few examples of historians’ discussions on the disfranchisement of African Americans in the late nineteenth century, see Charles C. Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All: The Battle over School Integration in Mississippi, 1870-1980* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 3-32; Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion*; Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-*

motivated by the pressure from the federal government. This law allowed local Black trustees to oversee their own communities' education, but they also had to follow specific guidelines including operating their schools "a suitable distance from white schools."<sup>95</sup> Though the school system immediately affected the education of African Americans, Henderson's plan failed in that the federal government never sent Kentucky any educational funding.

Black students also did not benefit from Kentucky's new system because the state funding for their schools only amounted to "about one-third the amount spent on white students."<sup>96</sup> This discrepancy in state support improved in 1882, when federal court cases pressured the General Assembly to equalize funding for all public schools in the state, although local school boards, especially in rural areas, still had the ability to distribute and manipulate school monies.<sup>97</sup> In August 1874, while on campaign tour in Paducah with a Republican candidate for Congress, Robert G. Mortimer expressed his deep frustrations to a Black audience arguing for both equal state-support and for integrating schools. He declared, "Why ain't the school fund equally divided? As for me, I don't believe in male schools or female, in white schools or black; but in having them all mixed

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1920 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

<sup>95</sup> Ellis, *A History of Education in Kentucky*, 88; Henderson, *Commonwealth of Kentucky, Colored Common School Laws, Approved February 23, 1874* (Yeoman Office, Public Printer, 1874). Historian Marion Lucas describes Henderson as an "ally" to Kentucky's Black communities largely for his advocacy for this separate school system, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 254-255.

<sup>96</sup> Ellis, *A History of Education in Kentucky*, 88; Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 255-256.

<sup>97</sup> Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 256-264.



up together.”<sup>98</sup> Ultimately, Kentucky’s commitment to segregated schools prevented equal educational opportunities between the races.

The downfall of Tennessee’s Republican government happened relatively quickly after the 1867 wave of legislation. White violence helped chase both African Americans and transplanted Northerners from the polls by the election of 1868. Brownlow’s resignation as governor in early 1869 ultimately split the Tennessee Republicans and opened the door for a former Confederate to win the 1870 gubernatorial election.<sup>99</sup> The relinquishing of Republican power allowed the state legislature to reverse the public-school law in 1869, and, during the constitutional convention the following year, Tennessee essentially returned control of public schools to the individual counties. A superintendent could no longer enforce the establishment Black schools in the school districts, but the state kept the school fund—to be raised through poll taxes—to assist local schools of both races, if they remained segregated.<sup>100</sup> The window for the state government to provide quality education for its African-American population had seemingly closed in 1870, and the hope for the federal government to step in also vanished within about five years.

Tennessee’s new public schools for African Americans, established under a Conservative regime in 1870, resembled Kentucky’s 1874 system, and Black communities similarly expressed their frustration with the blatant inequality. Leaders who attended the 1874 State Colored Convention discussed education at length, and they

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<sup>98</sup> *The Owensboro Monitor*, August 19, 1874, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/375882425> (accessed on August 31, 2021).

<sup>99</sup> Hardy, “‘Fare well to all Radicals’,” 242.

<sup>100</sup> Hardy, “‘Fare well to all Radicals’,” 220-221.

asked the federal government to improve support for Black education as it considered new civil rights legislation to integrate public schools. The delegates, addressing the U.S. Congress, asserted that “the public institutions of Tennessee are defective in point of principle and practice, are anti-republican and proscriptive, and that their tendency is to breed discord between citizens and the spirit of caste and hate.” Because of this, they supported the portion of Massachusetts’s Senator Charles Sumner’s civil rights bill which allowed for “an impartial education afforded to us by the public schools of the country.”<sup>101</sup> Black leaders, however, faced the strong opposition from white politicians, including some of their closest allies.

John M. Fleming, Conservative politician, and current superintendent of public instruction, took exception with this protest, blaming the conventions’ delegates of arousing “an intense feeling of indignation among the white people of the State, who were contributing so liberally to the education of colored children.” He also argued that this Black petition to the federal government could negatively impact the way in which white “school officers” carried out their work for Black communities. Fleming directly responded to the pending bill in Washington, stressing it to be “in direct conflict with the law of Tennessee under which the public school system of the state is organized.”<sup>102</sup> Tennessee’s Democratic government feared the outcome of the pending Civil Rights Bill, which potentially could have forced the state to accept mixed schools or lose federal funding.

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<sup>101</sup> “The Negro Ultimatum,” Nashville *Union and American*, April 30, 1874; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 534.

<sup>102</sup> John M. Fleming, *Annual Report of John M. Fleming, State Superintendent of Public Instruction for Tennessee, For the Scholastic Year ending Aug. 31, 1874* (Nashville, 1875), 25-28.

Importantly, former Radical governor and current U.S. Senator William G. Brownlow echoed Fleming's criticism of the Black convention. Having led the Republican state government during the immediate postwar years, Brownlow was credited for the wave of progressive policies enacted in 1867 and was considered a significant ally of formerly enslaved Tennesseans. Several years later from his seat in Washington, however, he argued that if the Civil Rights Bill passed with school integration, "the whole school fabric in Tennessee will at once fall to the ground, as it will deserve to do." He concluded, "Then the expenses of the education of their children, if they are educated at all, will be borne by themselves, and not by the white people, as they are now."<sup>103</sup> The former hero of freed Tennesseans now stood in their way of achieving equality in education, joining his former school superintendent Eaton in defeating mixed schools on the national level.

Kentucky and Tennessee each conducted public school systems during the antebellum period, but they were interrupted by the Civil War. Emancipation created hundreds of thousands of potential new students to the existing school-age population across both states. Both governments responded by enacting new policies addressing the education of freedpeople in part to prevent the federal government from enforcing Radical Reconstruction within their borders. The state-level case studies examined in this chapter demonstrate that even when the white allies of Black communities had control over state policy, they continually fell short of supporting racial equality. This is especially visible in whites' commitment to keeping common schools segregated by race

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<sup>103</sup> "Mixed Schools, Brownlow to the Front: The Senator's Vigorous Reply to the State Colored Convention," *Daily Press and Herald*, May 14, 1874, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/584962794> (accessed on August 31, 2021).

even when African-American leaders protested the government for mixed schools. In these instances, the objectives of Northern missionaries often diverged from those of Black communities. The long-term implications of this are significant in the context of state-supported public schools because educational discrimination during Reconstruction created a legacy that has shaped modern American schools.

## CHAPTER VII – “TO HELP AND NOT GIVE”: FEDERAL ASSISTANCE TO AFRICAN-AMERICAN SCHOOLS

In the spring of 1866, African Americans in places like Nashville could be seen clutching, along with their schoolbooks, a small pamphlet containing practical advice for life after slavery. Titled *Plain Counsels for Freedmen* and authored by the Freedmen’s Bureau superior officer for Tennessee, Kentucky, and northern Alabama, Clinton B. Fisk, this publication promoted the general elevation of formerly enslaved people in society and made a specific case for why education represented an important means of uplifting them and a worthwhile investment for the younger generation.<sup>1</sup> By the time his manual had been published and distributed, Fisk’s command as a Freedmen’s Bureau assistant commissioner headquartered in Nashville had been well established. Therefore, his *Plain Counsels* embodied the essence of federal Reconstruction to the Black and white Kentuckians and Tennesseans who received it. Divided into sixteen short “lectures,” the volume advised freedpeople on how to act toward their former owners, raise their children, be good husbands and wives, avoid social vices, worship appropriately, work hard for wages, and manage their finances.<sup>2</sup> Many African Americans trusted this advice from their government which had recently helped them escape slavery and, many believed, was their ally in freedom.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Clinton B. Fisk, *Plain Counsels for Freedmen: In Sixteen Brief Lectures* (Boston, Massachusetts: American Tract Society, 1866).

<sup>2</sup> Alphonso A. Hopkins, *The Life of Clinton Bowen Fisk, With a Brief Sketch of John A. Brooks* (New York, New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1888), 104-107.

<sup>3</sup> Historians have shown that formerly enslaved African Americans accepted aid from the Freedmen’s Bureau while resisting any overt oppression from them, as demonstrated in chapter 3 of this study. Freedpeople believed the federal government should provide for them after the war since they had helped emancipate them during the conflict. See Foner, *Reconstruction*, 168-169;

In one of the lectures, entitled “The Little Folks,” Fisk instructed parents on the necessity of properly educating their children. He argued, “you can not well over-estimate the value of education,” and concluded that “it is worth more to your child than money.” Along with strengthening the mind and body, education “opens numerous roads to competence and to wealth” by offering “higher wages than an uneducated man” and allowing a person to “do many more things.” Satisfied this argument sufficed, the book told Black parents, “Send your children to school while they are small, and keep them there as long as you are able.”<sup>4</sup> The ability to “keep them there” could be especially difficult for freed families who struggled to financially support their local school while also needing their child to prioritize laboring for wages that provided necessities of life. Recognizing this, Fisk counseled freedpeople on how to manage their finances. He specifically warned against spending money on “fine cigars,” “any kind of spirituous or malt liquors,” and “useless dress and ornaments.” Instead, their hard-earned wages should be directed toward “tools, horses, plows, books, lands, education.”<sup>5</sup>

Fisk’s appeal was seemingly rooted in a free labor ideology that viewed schooling, hard work, and thrift as a primary reason for the North’s moral superiority over the South during this era.<sup>6</sup> That underlying message is seen more explicitly in other

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William S. McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather: General O. O. Howard and the Freedmen* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1968), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Fisk, *Plain Counsels*, 38-39.

<sup>5</sup> Fisk, *Plain Counsels*, 15-17.

<sup>6</sup> Historian Eric Foner argues that “the Northern free labor ideology” served as the primary motivator for the Freedmen’s Bureau in the South rather than a specific interest in advancing the agendas of either Black or white Southerners, Foner, *Reconstruction*, 155-158; Robert Harrison, “New Representations of a ‘Misrepresented Bureau’: Reflections on Recent Scholarship on the Freedmen’s Bureau,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 8, No. 2 (June 2007), 210; Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War*, (1970; repr., New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 34, 50.

sections of *Plain Counsels*, including an appeal for freedpeople to mend their relationships with their former owners and to once again labor for the same people who had held them in bondage.<sup>7</sup> To emphasize the importance of working hard to improve one's social status, Fisk used the example of Black abolitionist and leader Frederick Douglass as evidence that "every man is, under God, just what he makes himself; it matters not whether he be white or colored." Therefore, freedpeople should follow Douglass's example, Fisk argued, who, "by dint of hard work . . . has made himself a man,—a wise, strong, eloquent man."<sup>8</sup> According to the Freedmen's Bureau commander in the Upper South region, Black advancement in a free society could be achieved through education, hard work, reconciling themselves with their former enslavers and a "spartan" existence.<sup>9</sup>

Fisk's pamphlet reflected the unconscious bias held by Northern whites who continued to see Southern Blacks as an inferior race. For example, when flipping through the pages of *Plain Counsels*, several illustrations caricatured formerly enslaved people. An image labelled "Peter Puff and Betty Simple" showed two men and a woman dancing to music in a tavern across from a page telling young men to focus their energies on hard work. Later, a picture of a barefoot man sitting on a tree stump in front of a modest house is titled "Dick Slack's Home" appears at the end of a lecture about how freedpeople can

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<sup>7</sup> Fisk, *Plain Counsels*, 10-12. The Bureau adopted this message in their practice of overseeing the labor contracts between Black and white Southerners immediately following the Civil War. Historians have studied this extensively, often finding the Bureau complicit in returning African Americans to a status very similar to enslavement, Harrison, "New Representations," 207-208;. McFeely, *Yankee Steppfather*, 149-165; J. Thomas May, "Continuity and Change in the Labor Program of the Union Army and the Freedmen's Bureau," *Civil War History* 17, No. 3 (September 1971): 245-254.

<sup>8</sup> Fisk, *Plain Counsels*, 17-18.

<sup>9</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 157.

work and save money to provide for themselves. In many ways this book epitomized the ideology implemented by the Freedmen's Bureau when working with African-American schools. It also provides a clear explanation of Northern whites' expectations of Southern Black behavior as freedpeople.<sup>10</sup> Fisk's book and his tone capture the damaging Bureau's attitudes, despite their determination to be an ally, which ultimately hindered lasting change in Black communities, including in areas of education.<sup>11</sup>

This chapter examines the federal government's role in supporting African-American schools in Kentucky and Tennessee and analyzes how that agency helped define emancipation during the Bureau's brief existence. The Freedmen's Bureau, in many ways, became the face of federal aid to formerly enslaved people as the Civil War ended. Scholars have noted that this came with positive potential and tragic limitations for Black communities trying to establish sustainable educational systems. Recent historians have largely accepted that free labor ideology served as an important motivator for the Bureau's work, and their studies have explored the nature of that ideology, especially the difficulty of implementing it in former slave states.<sup>12</sup> Less is known, however, regarding how these practices effected the short- and long-term education of African Americans in the Upper South. Without public education systems that effectively provided for Black communities or federal oversight curbing regressive state laws, Kentucky and Tennessee relied, at least in part, on the flawed schools organized by the

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<sup>10</sup> Fisk, *Plain Counsels*, 21, 43; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 157.

<sup>11</sup> In his post-revisionist examination of Freedmen's Bureau commissioner Oliver Otis Howard, historian William S. McFeely pointed to Fisk's *Plain Counsels* as evidence that the Bureau's efforts to build schools for freedpeople were meant "to channel the energy of the Negroes into waiting for freedom rather than fighting for it." McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather*, 321-322.

<sup>12</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 143-144; Harrison, "New Representations," 210.



Freedmen's Bureau. Examining the Bureau-supported schools and the philosophy that guided their operations reveals how the federal government implemented a racist system of education in the Upper South during the Reconstruction era.

For all the free-labor messaging in Fisk's *Plain Counsels*, American public education was grounded in communal support for a larger good. When the federal government insisted that Black people pay for their own schools, they violated a long-standing educational tradition that did not require the same from whites. Free common schools dominated the nineteenth-century North, funded by tax dollars. From the start, however, the Freedmen's Bureau, and the federal government acting through it, established a racist educational policy that masked unequal access to learning in free-labor ideology. This approach belied the American tradition that education was a communal responsibility; a national responsibility for the national good. With its approach to education and emancipation, however, federal authorities made it clear that African Americans were not part of that tradition. They reinforced a vision of African Americans as inferior people who existed outside the traditional white community. As such, the Bureau argued, Black education would focus on moral living, hard work, and self-subsistence, sold under the guise of popular free-labor ideology. With this approach, the Freedmen's Bureau, and the U.S. government, helped create an unsustainable framework for Black education in the Upper South.

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The federal agency known as the Freedmen's Bureau officially began operating in early 1865, but it traced its origins to a department of Ulysses S. Grant's army created during the fall of 1862. As noted in previous chapters, Grant appointed Chaplain John

Eaton, Jr. to command this Freedmen's Department, and in that capacity he oversaw the many Black refugee camps that emerged throughout the Mississippi Valley.<sup>13</sup> During 1863 and 1864, Eaton's operations spread throughout Tennessee, parts of Kentucky, and further South into Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi.<sup>14</sup> Grant decided to designate a special branch of his forces to African Americans in the South for both "military necessity" and "the dictates of mere humanity." He needed an efficient method of dealing with those refugees entering the Union lines to prevent them from interfering with his combat operations. He also understood the federal government's humanitarian obligation to provide a degree of protection for these people.<sup>15</sup> To be clear, though, Grant's policies prioritized his objectives as a military commander. His vision for the Freedmen's Department centered on harnessing Black labor to benefit his forces. The general explained to Eaton that African Americans were not free yet, but once they proved themselves capable as "an independent laborer," then they could be trusted as soldiers, and after that they could earn American citizenship.<sup>16</sup> This precursor to the Freedmen's Bureau, therefore, began as a practical military solution to an influx of refugees that limited the revolutionary potential of this moment. It continued a pattern that connected Southern Blacks, first and foremost, with labor that benefitted the whole population without allowing African Americans an equal share of those benefits.

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<sup>13</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 2 vols. (1885, repr., New York: The Century Co.), 1: 351-553; Brooks D. Simpson, "Ulysses S. Grant and the Freedmen's Bureau" in *The Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction: Reconsiderations*, eds. Paul A. Cimbala and Randall M. Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999): 1-28.

<sup>14</sup> John Eaton, Jr., *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), 192-220.

<sup>15</sup> Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen*, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen*, 15; Simpson, "Ulysses S. Grant and the Freedmen's Bureau," 1-3.

Despite Grant's intention for Freedmen's Department to use African-American labor in military camps and cotton fields, Eaton's leadership brought educational opportunities for the newly freed populations that set a precedent for the Bureau's postwar operations. Eaton believed education was the most important service they could provide to the refugees in the South while his department also provided more immediate relief. He worked with other officers and Northern benevolent groups who sent teachers for the camps and within the towns and cities under Union occupation. The army offered transportation, rations, living quarters for Northern civilians willing to provide services for African Americans, and abolitionist organizations like the AMA and the WFAC coordinated to provide teachers and other supplies needed for the schools. Over time, he grew particularly frustrated and disappointed in his inability to manage the various parties involved in organizing the wartime schools. These same benevolent groups assumed a prominent role in the Freedmen's Bureau's educational efforts, and similar issues continued to plague their work with freedpeople in the Upper South. The Freedmen's Department confronted other challenges that later plagued the Bureau, including hostility from white Southerners, an inefficient chain of command, and a lack of funding. Local whites attempting to sabotage Black schools were one of his main challenges. In Memphis, for example, the antebellum civil government had outlawed educating African Americans, and there was significant opposition to the establishment of segregated Black schools, ran by missionaries, after the city came under Union control. In March 1863, a

pro-Confederate Memphian forced a teacher and students to vacate a church used for Black education.<sup>17</sup>

For most of his tenure as commander, Eaton had no official authority to oversee school operations in his department and could only act in an advisory capacity. He continued working without of a uniform system of education until late in the war when he received the power to appoint officers to serve as local superintendents for Black schools, which induced respective headquarters in Columbus, Kentucky and in Memphis, Tennessee. Because the federal government lacked the power to implement a tax to support these schools, Eaton resorted to charging school tuition that ranged from twenty-five cents to one dollar and twenty-five cents per student. While he understood that charging tuition defied the basic principles underlying U.S. common schools, Eaton argued that his tuition system was effective because “its moral influence upon the Negro was far more salutary than the immediate and unconditional application of the free school privilege.” Observing a Memphis school in early 1865, one of Eaton’s teachers similarly praised the policy requiring African Americans to pay tuition for school, declaring that it taught them “manly honesty” and that it “lay the foundation for business” in their students. Most of all, paying for education, Eaton’s peers argued, taught formerly enslaved people how to be self-sufficient.<sup>18</sup> From the conception of federally-supported schools in the South, therefore, Black families were expected to buy their education, which was justified with free-labor rhetoric. Though Eaton declared that this system

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<sup>17</sup> Eaton to James C. Veatch, March 16, 1863, “Mississippi, Freedmen's Department (Pre-Bureau Records),” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1914, Roll 5, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed October 26, 2021); Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen*, 192.

<sup>18</sup> Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen*, 193-200.

“could never under any circumstances be advocated as a permanent or admirable type for a school,” the federal government evidently continued using it because of its professed moral benefits for African Americans.<sup>19</sup> After the war ended, the Freedmen’s Bureau expanded the system of schools for freedpeople, and it continued Eaton’s practice of forcing newly emancipated people to pay for their own education. This is significant because the federal government promoted this tuition system not because it had proved effective in the North. Just the opposite, it ran counter to the common school tradition. But Northern whites believed Black people needed to work for their schools rather than receive free education because they lacked a level of discipline that whites possessed.

The creation of the Freedmen’s Department coincided with the pending Emancipation Proclamation, which President Lincoln announced in September 1862 and finalized on January 1, 1863. Therefore, this new branch of Grant’s command offered a means through which the army could manage the enslaved people who came within their lines in the Confederacy. This process was complicated, however, by the fact that Kentucky and much of Middle and West Tennessee were either loyal to or occupied by the federal government at this point in the war, which exempted those places from the proclamation.<sup>20</sup> Still, the presence of refugee camps and the military enlistment of Black

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<sup>19</sup> Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen*, 198.

<sup>20</sup> While Kentucky remained protected from the proclamation as a loyal state in the Union, the case was more complicated for the Confederate state of Tennessee. After Lincoln’s preliminary proclamation, Unionists in West and Middle Tennessee complained to military governor Andrew Johnson because those regions had already been mostly occupied by federal forces. Ultimate, Lincoln exempted Tennessee from the final version of the Emancipation Proclamation. See Peter Maslowski, *Treason Must Be Made Odious: Military Occupation and Wartime Reconstruction in Nashville, Tennessee, 1862-65* (Millwood, NY: KTO Press, 1978), 98-102.

soldiers helped destroy the institution of slavery even in the border region by the end of the war.

Two examples from Kentucky during the last year of the Civil War demonstrate the limits of federal emancipation in a loyal state or region prior to the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment. The first relates to the November 1864 expulsion of almost 400 women and children from Camp Nelson—family members of Black soldiers stationed there—which revealed the vulnerability of that population’s situation.<sup>21</sup> General Speed Smith Fry, the commander of the camp and a Kentucky native, had complained for months about the African-American refugees living there, who he characterized as “very destitute, a burden to themselves and ourselves.” That summer, he advised the Union commander of Kentucky, Stephen Gano Burbridge, that the army should “return them to their homes” to prevent “pestilence and famine in the camp.” The army responded to Fry’s assessment by encouraging the families of newly enlisted Black soldiers to remain at home, which amounted to forcing them to continue living in bondage. Indeed, Kentucky slaveholders applauded the army’s policy because it allowed them to retain their human property.<sup>22</sup> While Fry was dismissed from his command following the tragic decision to expel refugees during the onset of winter and the resulting deaths of many women and children, his actions were not unusual.<sup>23</sup> The expulsion was continuation of federal policies that resisted or refused to address the plight of Black refugees in a loyal slave state, and such limited thinking would continue into the postwar period.

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<sup>21</sup> Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*, 201.

<sup>22</sup> Victor B. Howard, *Black Liberation in Kentucky: Emancipation and Freedom, 1862-1884* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 113-114.

<sup>23</sup> Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, li.

The second illustration of Kentucky's determination to maintain the institution of slavery through the end of the war can be seen in local whites' reactions to John Palmer's command in 1865. Palmer, an Illinois abolitionist who was born in Kentucky, succeeded Burbridge as the superior Union officer in the state in February 1865.<sup>24</sup> He wasted little time expanding the reach of emancipation in his new post by freeing those who remained enslaved in the city of Louisville in the final months of the war. Palmer authorized a Northern Black minister named Thomas James—who worked with the AMA—to advise and accompany a squad of federal troops to break up the several existing slave pens and to liberate enslaved people wherever they were hidden throughout the city.<sup>25</sup> The general also began enforcing a recently passed piece of federal legislation granting freedom to the families of all African-American soldiers, representing a significant step forward from Fry's stance at Camp Nelson a few months before. At the same time, Palmer ordered the recognition of legal marriages between African Americans in Kentucky, which was designed to increase Black enrollment into the army.<sup>26</sup> By the end of spring 1865, more than 70 percent of the state's enslaved population had been legally freed in the eyes of the federal government, though many of them, along with the remaining 65,000 held in bondage, had no means of leaving their owner's property.

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<sup>24</sup> Brad Asher, *The Most Hated Man in Kentucky: The Lost Cause and the Legacy of Union General Stephen Burbridge* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2021), 90.

<sup>25</sup> Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York, Vintage Books, 1975), 276-377; Howard, *Black Liberation in Kentucky*, 78; Thomas James, *Life of Rev. Thomas James, by Himself* (Rochester, New York: Post Express Printing Company, 1886), 17-18; Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 164-165; John M. Palmer, *Personal Recollections of John M. Palmer: A Story of an Earnest Life* (Cincinnati: The Robert Clarke Company, 1901), 234.

<sup>26</sup> Howard, *Black Liberation in Kentucky*, 79; Palmer, *Personal Recollections*, 232-233.

To address the state's vagrancy laws that prevented Black mobility, Palmer issued thousands of "passes" that allowed African Americans to travel on the railroads and steamboats to seek employment where they desired.<sup>27</sup> Many migrated freely for the first time and significantly accelerated the process of emancipation in Kentucky. As the federal government's representative in the state, Palmer overtly worked toward the complete destruction of slavery. And despite calls from the governor and state congressmen for his removal, the general was ultimately supported by his superiors in Washington. However, opposition among white Kentuckians toward the federal policies led to the election of a conservative legislature that fall which refused to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. It was this sentiment that convinced the nascent Freedmen's Bureau to expand its operations in the state beginning in early 1866.

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At approximately the same time Palmer assumed his command in Kentucky, lawmakers in Washington determined that the Thirteenth Amendment required the creation of a new agency to enforce emancipation. Congress officially established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands—known commonly as the Freedmen's Bureau—in March 1865, though clearly it had been operating in a more limited capacity since Grant's appointment of Eaton in 1862. This 1865 legislation gave the War Department control of the Bureau and placed it under the management of a single commissioner and a host of assistant commissioners to be stationed in each Confederate state. Its mission was to provide basic relief to both Black and white

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<sup>27</sup> Gutman, *The Black Family*, 377-379; Howard, *Black Liberation in Kentucky*, 79-81; Palmer, *Personal Recollections*, 237-239.



refugees, but Congress also bestowed the commissioner with the power to distribute and rent out confiscated land in forty-acre lots to freedpeople.<sup>28</sup> Historians often point to the Bureau's failure at following through on this initial promise of land redistribution from former slaveholders to freedpeople as a primary reason for their failure to enact permanent change in the South.<sup>29</sup> However, it is also important to note that beyond receiving control of seized Confederate property, the Freedmen's Bureau's initial purpose resembled Grant's wartime Freedmen's Department. It was larger in size, but still limited by its own vision of its power and potential. Significantly, Congress evidently did view the Bureau's work as one of the federal government's priorities because they provided no money to support it.<sup>30</sup> As had been the case with Eaton in the Mississippi Valley, the extent of the Bureau's impact on Black communities depended on the officers given control of the agency and the policies they pursued.

About two months after the creation of the Bureau, President Andrew Johnson—following through on the decision made by Lincoln before his assassination—appointed Oliver Otis Howard as the Bureau's commissioner.<sup>31</sup> The Maine native was a graduate of Bowdoin College in 1850 and the U.S. Military Academy in 1854, served as an officer in the army, and rose through the ranks during the Civil War with his appointment to major general by the end of 1862. Beginning in May 1865, Howard led the Freedmen's Bureau throughout its existence from his headquarters in Washington. Referred to as the

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<sup>28</sup> United States, *Statutes at Large, Treaties, and Proclamations of the United States of America*, vol. 13 (Boston, 1866), 507–509; McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather*, 23.

<sup>29</sup> Harrison, “New Representations,” 208–209; McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather*, 91.

<sup>30</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 143.

<sup>31</sup> Hans L. Trefouse, “Andrew Johnson and the Freedmen's Bureau,” in *The Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction: Reconsiderations*, 30.

“Christian General,” Howard was known to be deeply religious. Before his appointment, well-known Congregational minister and abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher endorsed Howard for the position.<sup>32</sup> While Howard had not been the most ardent antislavery activist, his attitudes convinced enough Republicans in Congress of his commitment to ensuring African-American freedom in the South.<sup>33</sup> Scholarly assessments of his leadership as the Bureau’s commissioner range the spectrum, but it is fair to say that, as he set out on his mission, Howard and his agency in general had the potential to help transform Southern society in the wake of emancipation.<sup>34</sup>

Howard quickly set out appointing officers to serve as assistant commissioners who would oversee Bureau operations throughout the South. Among his first appointees was John Eaton to command the District of Columbia, and his wartime experience carried over to his work through much of 1865 when Eaton resigned and settled back in Memphis, Tennessee. Importantly, the free-labor approach that Eaton implemented as commander of the Freedmen’s Department was largely accepted by Howard and the other assistant commissioners of the Bureau. Eaton had been intentionally appointed to Washington, D.C. for that reason as he would also serve as a close advisor to Howard during that first

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<sup>32</sup> John Cox and Lawanda Cox, General O. O. Howard and the "Misrepresented Bureau" in *The Journal of Southern History* 19, No. 4 (November 1953), 432.

<sup>33</sup> McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather*, 32.

<sup>34</sup> Two of Howard’s biographers, John A. Carpenter and William S. McFeely, come to very different conclusions about his role as commissioner of the Bureau. Carpenter provides extensive praise of the man in all aspects of his life, including his dedication to providing for the formerly enslaved population. McFeely, on the other hand, views Howard’s tenure with the Bureau as having a negative impact on newly emancipated African Americans, arguing that he largely neglected the freedpeople. Carpenter, *Sword and Olive Branch: Oliver Otis Howard* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1964); McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather*. The claim made by Eric Foner and other historians that the Bureau’s officers were united by the “endeavor to lay the foundation for a free labor society” does not fully address the implications of their ideology on Black communities. Foner, *Reconstruction*, 143-144; Harrison, “New Representations,” 210.

year of Bureau operations. Within a few weeks of Howard's appointment, Clinton Bowen Fisk received the position as assistant commissioner for Kentucky and Tennessee.<sup>35</sup> Fisk reported to his headquarters at Nashville by the start of July 1865, and he began establishing the foundations for the Freedmen's Bureau in these two Upper South states.<sup>36</sup>

Fisk and Howard agreed on not providing too much aid to freedpeople for fear of making them dependent on the federal government, which exemplified their racialized version of free-labor ideology. While this was a common argument about supporting impoverished people in general, racism exacerbated and hardened the policy as implemented by the Freedmen's Bureau. As a result, the Freedmen's Bureau quickly oversaw the closing of wartime refugee camps for formerly enslaved people throughout the South, including in Kentucky and Tennessee. Fisk agreed with the policy. He was frustrated by the cost required to build and sustain these camps and aimed to "relieve the Government of burthens these Camps are bringing upon it."<sup>37</sup> By early October, all but one of the wartime camps for Black refugees within his command—Camp Nelson in Kentucky—had been closed. Fisk also forbade his agents from distributing food to freedpeople because this "forces the idle to work or starve."<sup>38</sup> Whether or not Howard, Fisk, and the Bureau recognized the long-term impact of such policies, their decisions

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<sup>35</sup> Carpenter, *Sword and Olive Branch*, 97; Hopkins, *The Life of Clinton Bowen Fisk*, 93-95; McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather*, 67.

<sup>36</sup> Fisk to Lorenzo Thomas, July 1, 1865, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 1, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed October 28, 2021).

<sup>37</sup> Fisk to Howard, July 20, 1865, and Fisk to Col D. C. Jaquess, August 15, 1865 in Sears, *Camp Nelson*, 232, 239; Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*, 222.

<sup>38</sup> George R. Bentley, *A History of the Freedmen's Bureau* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1955), 77.

helped to establish a pattern that limited or eliminated government support for freedpeople. It also had a more immediate and brutal impact on newly freed people who relied on the camps for shelter, protection, and schooling.

Fisk ensured that the work of closing the refugee camps in Kentucky and Tennessee was done as efficiently as possible. During the first month after taking command, he tasked agents with visiting each camp, investigating conditions, and eventually forcing the newly freed families to leave. From Fisk's perspective, the camps had met their wartime need. As the nation transitioned to peace, the camps could close. Fisk experienced the most difficulty closing Camp Nelson, primarily because slavery continued to be a legal institution in Kentucky through the end of the year.

In later July, during his first month of command, Fisk personally visited the camp. He witnessed the terrible conditions Black Kentuckians were being subjected to by their white neighbors, describing the latter as "some of the meanest, unsubjected, and unreconstructed rascally rebellious revolutionists" that lived anywhere in the country.<sup>39</sup> While there, he further observed about 500 women and children arriving as refugees, having used General Palmer's transportation passes to escape their owners. He also approved of the schools being conducted at Camp Nelson and especially its leadership under John G. Fee. At that point, Fisk determined that the Kentucky refugee home remained "a necessity for some time to come."<sup>40</sup> But three months later, when he sent an

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<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Victor B. Howard, "The Black Testimony Controversy in Kentucky, 1866-1872," *The Journal of Negro History* 58, No. 2 (April 1973), 144.

<sup>40</sup> Fisk to Howard, July 20, 1865, in Sears, *Camp Nelson*, 232.

agent to close Camp Nelson, they still reported similar cases of large groups of refugees escaping their bondage at the federal encampment.<sup>41</sup>

In July 1865, when Bureau agent Richard J. Hinton arrived at a camp called Tunnel Hill, located about eight miles northeast of Pulaski, Tennessee, he found a haven for newly freed African Americans who had no other place to go. The refugee population at the camp had steadily increased during the first half of 1865, rising from 195 in January to eventually 391 in June. Importantly, Hinton noted that Tunnel Hill desperately needed “competent medical attendance,” as the extremely poor conditions caused illness that rendered about twenty refugees unable to work, and they averaged about four deaths per month from a lack of health care. Among the women, men, and children at the camp, more than 200 of them attended a school located on the premise, and among the students were fifty-five Black soldiers. The school was supported by the WFAC, a Northern benevolent organization, and taught by a white missionary named John Dunlap. When Dunlap began teaching at the camp, none of his students had been educated at all, and after the school had been open for just one month, 100 of them could read.<sup>42</sup> With more than half of Tunnel Hill’s Black refugees taking advantage of the school, it is evident that even the most desperate freedpeople craved the opportunity to receive an education.

On the same trip that he visited Tunnel Hill, Hinton traveled into northern Alabama to visit a camp near Decatur Junction, as it was also under Fisk’s jurisdiction. At that camp, the residents expressed anxiety about the uncertainty of their future, and

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<sup>41</sup> Farwell to Fisk, October 14, 1865, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 26, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed October 28, 2021).

<sup>42</sup> Richard J. Hinton to Fisk, July 31, 1865, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 26, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed October 28, 2021).

they most desired “obtaining land to call their own.” To this, Hinton assured the freedpeople that the government was in the process of distributing plots of land for each of their families. This is an important aspect of closing the camps that deserves attention. In his final assessment of all the camps he visited in July 1865, Hinton argued that they “should be broken up at an early day,” while he acknowledged that the Black refugees would suffer without government assistance. “The best thing to be done,” in his view, “is to make allotments wherever and as fast as possible.” Because the federal government never redistributed land to freedpeople in the Upper South, the African Americans that Hinton met would soon be left on their own under desperate circumstances.<sup>43</sup>

After helping Fisk shut down the refugee camp in Nashville, Bureau agent R. E. Farwell had the task of doing the same at Clarksville, Tennessee in August 1865. Unlike Hinton, Farwell was less interested in investigating or making suggestions about the camp and was more focused on immediately closing it down. He aimed to reduce the residents down to less than fifty within two weeks of arriving. It is likely that the refugees at the Clarksville camp resembled those Tunnel Hill and Decatur Junction. Farwell assessed each person’s likelihood of surviving on their own, determining who to send away first. For those “who have a reasonable expectation of being able to support themselves,” Farwell quickly sent them to “their former homes.” He brazenly commented, “it will not hurt them to try, and the sooner the better for the interests of the country.” He understood, however, that these individuals and families still needed assistance, warning Fisk that some might try to take the train to Nashville and enter the remnants of the refugee home there. Beyond the elderly, disabled, and orphaned, Farwell

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<sup>43</sup> Richard J. Hinton to Fisk, July 31, 1865.

determined that the government need not support these refugees in Clarksville any longer.<sup>44</sup>

Because the promise of land redistribution never came to fruition, the rapid closure of camps throughout Tennessee essentially left formerly enslaved people to find employment and housing. Due to a lack of mobility, that would likely be found with their former owners. Over a period of about two months, Bureau agents across Tennessee dismantled communities that Freedmen had called home, had helped build, over the last several years. The camps had offered some of the first opportunities freed people had for education, to open small businesses, and to create the social networks that sustained them amid the challenges of emancipation. Importantly, the well-populated schools at the camps staffed with qualified Northern teachers were forced to reestablish themselves, if possible, elsewhere in the area.

Fisk waited until October 1865 to send Farwell to Camp Nelson to begin the process of closing it, though it took nearly six months to complete. While some Black Kentuckians took advantage of their mobility to cross the Ohio River into a Northern state, others decided to remain in their native state while relying on the camp to reunite with family members who had been separated.<sup>45</sup> Acknowledging their desperation, Farwell discerned it would be impossible to shut down Camp Nelson as quickly he had done in July and August.<sup>46</sup> Despite Farwell withholding rations and destroying some of

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<sup>44</sup> R. E. Farwell to Fisk, August 13, 1865, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 26, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed October 28, 2021).

<sup>45</sup> Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*, 225.

<sup>46</sup> Farwell to Fisk, October 16, 1865, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 26, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed October 28, 2021).

the buildings in the camp and transporting many of them out of the state, many refugees stayed through the winter. The decision to stay might have been an attempt reunite with family members who had been separated, though the most likely explanation was simply because slavery had not yet died in Kentucky. It took the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in December to force the state government to officially accept emancipation, and the refugee camp guaranteed Black freedom during the interim. Camp Nelson finally closed in March 1866, about six months after Fisk ordered it closed, but a Black community with church and school supported by the AMA remained for the next decade. The Bureau's abrupt closure of encampments, where Black people received quality education, surely left many enslaved people homeless, and those who survived would have a much more difficult time navigating their newfound freedom.<sup>47</sup>

The determination of Bureau commanders to force African Americans out of refugee camps might have been designed as a motivator to find work and financially provide for themselves, however, it inevitably forced many of them into dependent and unequal relationships with their former owners. In many ways, the Bureau's attitude in that first year was a carryover from Eaton's approach to dealing with wartime refugees as commander of the Freedmen's Department, and it continued to influence the Bureau as it engaged more directly and broadly with African-American education. With the wartime encampments closed, Howard was concerned about the condition of freedpeople in Kentucky enough to establish its own headquarters beginning in early 1866, leaving Fisk's office responsible for Tennessee alone. Even with an expanded presence in

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<sup>47</sup> Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, lix-lx.



Kentucky, the Bureau's model for establishing and supporting schools prevented long-term change for Black communities.

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Recent historians have generally accepted educational work to be the Freedmen's Bureau's "greatest success in the postwar South" that "helped lay the foundation for Southern public education." But a close examination reveals that the long-term impact of their efforts was severally limited.<sup>48</sup> Acknowledging that inadequate federal funding forced the Bureau to coordinate with others to build schools for Black communities, this study argues that their underlying strategy for engaging with formerly enslaved people represented a significant obstacle to progress. The adaptation of free labor ideology exemplified by Eaton and Fisk prevented the Freedmen's Bureau from offering a sustainable school system. When assistant commissioners for each state appointed a superintendent to run the education department, that person regularly reported John W. Alvord in Washington, D.C., the superintendent for all the Bureau's schools. This allowed for a basic coherent scheme of supporting education to be implemented throughout the Freedmen's Bureau, despite the variance between local agents and conditions. But also reinforced the unsustainable free-labor ideology that shaped African-American education. In fact, the policies carried out by superintendents and agents on the ground often reflected the same attitudes that had required wartime refugees to pay school tuition and withheld basic provisions and shelter to families with nowhere else to go.

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<sup>48</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 144.

Soon after succeeding John Ogden as superintendent of education for the Bureau in Tennessee in the fall of 1866, David Burt gathered information from local agents about schools for freedpeople across the state. He assessed the financial means of individual Black communities to determine the extent of federal investment and coordinate with Northern benevolent societies to assign sponsored teachers in each school. This same pattern would also be adopted by Thomas K. Noble when he became the first education superintendent in Kentucky in early 1867. Generally, Burt and Noble accepted the practice of ensuring that each community of freedpeople receiving this assistance proved able to collectively dedicate a sum of money toward establishing a school. It appears as if this was the first test formerly enslaved people had to pass to receive an education, a very different policy than that used for the common schools to which white families sent their children across the North at no cost. This test may have been done because planters knew that segregated schools could not survive without the additional financial backing. Or perhaps Burt, Noble, and others were unsure if Black families valued education enough to seize these opportunities. Regardless of their motivations, the results of this approach were devastating.

Unsurprisingly, many Black communities found themselves unable to financially support their own education when they were only about a year removed from slavery. In rural Lawrence County, Tennessee, for example, African Americans comprised less than ten percent of the population, and the local Bureau agent found them living in poverty in the fall of 1866. Further, despite efforts made for the previous several months, no school for Black children had been established in the county seat of Lawrenceburg because the

community could not afford to hire a teacher or purchase textbooks.<sup>49</sup> No school was organized in Coffee County, Tennessee for the same reason. A local Bureau agent identified at least fifty potential pupils and a building to house a school in the town of Tullahoma, but they had no teacher. Eventually, the Bureau secured a commitment from the Black community to subscribe \$35 per month, including an initial payment before any school could be organized.<sup>50</sup> In the more rural sections of Coffee County, however, no schools could be established unless a teacher could be supplied to them for free.<sup>51</sup> In Jonesboro, Tennessee, the Black community prepared to organize a school for more than sixty students, but they ran into the same issues. They were able to pay up to \$30 each month to support a school, but they did not own a building.<sup>52</sup> In each of these cases, Black communities sought assistance from the Freedmen's Bureau in establishing their first schools because widespread poverty made it difficult to pay anything toward their education. Despite overwhelming evidence of this, the federal government continued their strategy of making sure freedpeople learned to support themselves.

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<sup>49</sup> C. B. Davis to David Burt, September 11, 1866, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed May 31, 2021); Francis A. Walker, "Table II. Population, 1790-1870, in each State and Territory, by Counties, in Aggregate, and as White, Free Colored, Slave, Chinese, and Indian," *Ninth Census Volume I, The Statistics of the Population of the United States* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 31-33.

<sup>50</sup> Joel B. Smith to Burt, September 25, 1866, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed May 31, 2021).

<sup>51</sup> Joel B. Smith to Burt, September 10, 1866, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed May 31, 2021).

<sup>52</sup> W. H. Hillery to Burt, November 1, 1866, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed May 31, 2021). C. T. C. Deake to Burt, November 20, 1866, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed May 31, 2021)

As demonstrated in Tullahoma, for those Black communities with any means to support education, there seemed to be little hesitation to make the investment. However, agreeing to pay a significant sum of money was sometimes not enough for a school to be established with the assistance of Burt's administration in Tennessee. In Cleveland, for example, freedpeople organized a day and night school with a total of about 100 students. They initially agreed to pay \$30 per month to help secure Bureau funds that would allow them to build a schoolhouse and pay a teacher's salary. Thanks to a poor farming season, however, the Black community appeared unlikely to raise and afford paying \$20 per month toward the school and they requested special assistance from Burt to make up the difference.<sup>53</sup> In Leesburg, the locals identified a plot of land on which a Black school could be established, which would only cost a down payment of \$50 with the remainder of the fee to be paid in two years. A subscription among freedpeople amounted to \$30, and they requested the Bureau pay the remainder for them to acquire the property.<sup>54</sup> In response, Burt required more detailed information including whether a building already existed on the lot, a list of names for each child who would attend the school, and how much a teacher's board would cost in town.<sup>55</sup> In Bolivar, a white Northern Methodist minister named William Crane Gray sought as much as \$700 from the Freedmen's Bureau to finish a school building being constructed for a Black school and church. His

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<sup>53</sup> Orville T. Andrews to Burt, November 26, 1866, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed May 31, 2021).

<sup>54</sup> Benjamin Cossear to Burt, February 5, 1867, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed May 31, 2021).

<sup>55</sup> Burt to Cossear, February 13, 1867, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 5, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed May 30, 2021).

congregation subscribed \$300 toward school, \$100 of which had already been paid before requesting Burt's assistance. Gray became frustrated when the Bureau only offered to pay \$300, less than half of the requested amount, having already been denied funds from the Protestant Episcopal Freedmen's Aid Commission.<sup>56</sup> In each of these instances, local communities committed their own money toward a school for African Americans based on an understanding of additional support from the Bureau. And when Black communities fell short of their initial subscription or required additional money, the federal agency did not automatically agree to provide it. In other words, while the system was based upon free labor ideals, the financial relationship between the Freedmen's Bureau and local Black schools was never a consistent source of reliable support.

While federal officers and freedpeople tried to build educational opportunities in Tennessee, Kentucky watched but seemed to learn little. Almost a year after extending its operations in the state to make it a separate entity following the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, the Bureau appointed its first education superintendent at the end of 1866, a white army chaplain named Thomas K. Noble.<sup>57</sup> At that point, Black schools existed in less than thirty locales in Kentucky, and they were regular targets of white violence.<sup>58</sup> Outside of cities and former federal camps such as Louisville, Paducah, and Camp Nelson, formerly enslaved communities had been unable to establish schools throughout 1866. While touring Nelson, Shelby, and Oldham Counties in November, a

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<sup>56</sup> William Crane Gray to Burt, February 7, 1867, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed May 30, 2021); Burt to Gray, February 9, 1867, "Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 5, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed May 30, 2021).

<sup>57</sup> Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 232.

<sup>58</sup> Philip Clyde Kimball, "Freedom's Harvest: Freedmen's Schools in Kentucky After the Civil War," *Filson Club Historical Quarterly* 54 (July 1980), 280.

Freedmen's Bureau agent found that no permanent schools for African Americans had been established. And while poverty significantly hindered the development of education in these counties, the agent emphasized the vulnerability of Black schools to local violence from white communities.<sup>59</sup>

Noble inherited a position in which he needed to make schools more accessible to Black Kentuckians and to ensure their security. As described in a previous chapter, the school and community at Camp Nelson endured a series of attacks from white vigilantes in late 1866 that chased out a Northern family sent by the AMA.<sup>60</sup> White terror had spread across the state, targeting Black education by chasing teachers from the state and destroying schoolhouses, which proved devastating to rural communities with little means to find a new teacher or rebuild. Soon after his arrival, Noble noted the crucial role of the federal government in shielding the schools, reporting that without "the protecting aid of the Freedmen's Bureau, schools for the colored children in this State would have no existence."<sup>61</sup> Using federal force to protect schools in Kentucky, or Tennessee for that matter, would prove more difficult than elsewhere in the South that came under military rule during this period. In short, these Upper South states had autonomous civil governments able to make their own policies, whereas military Reconstruction had brought other states under the legal purview of the federal government.

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<sup>59</sup> William P. Hogarty to C. H. Frederick, November 14, 1866, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 115, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed August 19, 2020).

<sup>60</sup> Scofield to Strieby and Whipple, December 16, 1866 and William H. Merrell to John Ely, December 20, 1866 in Sears, *Camp Nelson*, 354-361.

<sup>61</sup> John W. Alvord, *Third Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1867), 34.

Soon after arriving at his post in Louisville, Noble recognized the problem with the free labor approach to the existing schools for freedpeople in that city. None of them were free and he was one of the few to recognize that this policy equated failure. In December 1866, Noble wanted to immediately establish three free schools in Louisville. Because of the Bureau's protocols in support Black education, however, he knew he could not do this on his own, so he asked his contact in the AMA, "What can you do for us?" More specifically, he asked, "How many teachers are you prepared to send into this state?"<sup>62</sup> Noble soon learned, however, that neither the AMA or the WFAC—two of the most active benevolent organizations in the region—could send teachers to Kentucky that winter.<sup>63</sup> Because of his late appointment relative to his counterparts in other states, the superintendent struggled to provide schools throughout the state with qualified teachers because organizations sending them had already committed themselves elsewhere for the current fiscal cycle. The Bureau's reliance on their missionary partners made their ability to support Black education dependent on the means and preferences of those societies. Despite these setbacks, during his tenure Noble's administration successfully established schools in an additional 100 towns throughout the state. But the Bureau's presence was so brief that his educational system could not be maintained beyond 1870. Furthermore, even during the height of Bureau's operations in the Upper South, the method used to

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<sup>62</sup> Thomas K. Noble to Edward Parmelee Smith, December 12, 1866, Box 56, American Missionary Association Manuscripts, Amistad Research Center, Tilton Hall, Tulane University, New Orleans, La.

<sup>63</sup> Noble to Alvord, January 1867, "United States, Freedmen's Bureau, Records of the Superintendent of Education and of the Division of Education, 1865-1872," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M803, Roll 8, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed October 31, 2021).

support schools in both Kentucky and Tennessee had only a limited impact because it insisted on placing expectations on Black communities that could not be met.

It is significant to note that, though the federal government mostly supported primary schools throughout the South, the creation of Black institutions of higher education remains among the most important legacies of the Reconstruction era. The Freedmen's Bureau accomplished this in Kentucky and Tennessee with help from their missionary partners. In many cases, these institutions initially taught students of all ages before transitioning into a university. Clinton B. Fisk, for example, personally donated about \$30,000 to a Nashville school that opened in January 1866 and continues to bear his name.<sup>64</sup> It was organized by then Bureau education superintendent John Ogden—who served as the first principal—in conjunction with two prominent AMA allies, Erastus Milo Cravath and Edward Parmelee Smith. By the end of its first year, more than 1,000 African-American students attended Fisk. Despite offering mostly elementary education to formerly enslaved people who had never attended school before, from the beginning the founders envisioned the institution as a normal school to train Black teachers and eventually evolving into a traditional college. While it took a couple of years to matriculate people into the higher levels, Fisk University gradually resembled liberal arts colleges throughout the country.<sup>65</sup> The institution stands out from most federally funded schools because it was free, requiring no tuition or promise of support from the Black community. This initially benefited many freedpeople in and around Nashville, but its reach narrowed as it transitioned into a college.

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<sup>64</sup> Joe M. Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction: The American Missionary Association and Southern Blacks, 1861-1890* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 100.

<sup>65</sup> Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction*, 124-125.



Significantly, despite the lack of required financial investment, the Bureau still espoused a free labor message to the Fisk school's first students. Speaking at the opening ceremonies, General Fisk promoted the value of education by retelling his own experience growing up in poverty and eventually rising through society thanks to his education. He compared his childhood to that of the freedpeople in the audience, claiming, "These children here to-day are better clad than I was."<sup>66</sup> The purpose of his anecdote was to demonstrate the advantages of the Black community thanks to the generosity of Northerners like himself. Fisk remained committed to his policy of forcing freedpeople to depend on themselves instead of the government, even after he committed his own money toward their education.

In his speech, Fisk, a primary architect of the Bureau and its educational work in the Upper South, revealed an appalling ignorance for the Black experience that helps explain why federal policies failed to address the real problems facing newly freed populations. By insisting on comparing his own experience growing up in poverty as a white Northerner to that of people held in bondage, he demonstrated a complete lack of understanding for the realities of slavery. While no white person could truly comprehend the experience of being enslaved, Fisk failed to empathize with the freedpeople and erroneously assessed their condition based on the clothes they wore. This further translated into a misunderstanding of the challenges facing African Americans even in freedom, which led the Bureau to set unrealistic expectations on Black communities. They assumed that African Americans were not only able to fully support themselves, but

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<sup>66</sup> "Opening Exercises of the Fisk Freedmen's School," *Nashville Daily Union and American*, January 10, 1866, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/70782413> (accessed on October 30, 2021).

also that forcing them to do so would uplift them morally. Fisk's attitude toward freedpeople, expressed through the rhetoric of free labor, ultimately proved to be a major reason that Black educational opportunities failed to reach their potential in the postwar Upper South.

The closest equivalent to Fisk University in Kentucky was the Ely Normal School in Louisville, named for the first Bureau assistant commissioner for Kentucky John Ely. Established by the collective efforts of the Freedmen's Bureau, the AMA, and the WFAC, the school opened in April 1868 with the intention of having a place to train Black teachers so that Kentucky could rely less on those being educated at two Ohio institutions, Oberlin College and Wilberforce University. However, most of its students remained in the primary department, where they offered a primary level education.<sup>67</sup> The federal government reportedly spent up to \$30,000 on the new building in downtown Louisville. Despite this significant investment, the Ely school reflected the general pattern of sustaining Black schools by requiring the community to support it beyond paying taxes. In its second month of operation, 356 out of 389 students paid tuition to attend the Ely Normal School.<sup>68</sup> At the dedication ceremony, speakers included education superintendent Thomas Noble, AMA representative Erastus Cravath, and several commanding officers in the state's Freeman's Bureau. Assistant Commissioner Benjamin P. Runkle spoke about the founding of the American republic. He told the freedpeople in attendance that they "are not white as the Pilgrim fathers were, nor of Anglo-Saxon

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<sup>67</sup> Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 238-239.

<sup>68</sup> John G. Hamilton, "Teacher's Monthly School Report," May, 1868, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 51, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed October 30, 2021).

blood,” but they can still “achieve as great blessings for yourselves and prosperity if you but learn to *labor* and *wait*.” Following Runkle, Sub-Assistant Commissioner Colonel I. L. Catlin climbed the platform and spoke with pride and confidence about the productive role the Bureau was performing for freedpeople. He argued that, despite federal Reconstruction policies being enforced in the Deep South, African Americans in Kentucky should not yet have the right to vote, serve in political office, or sit on juries, insisting “you must forgo them for now.” Instead, Catlin asserted, “You want the right to labor and make all you can.”<sup>69</sup> Runkle and Catlin expressed genuine desires to assist Black Kentuckians in their effort to educate themselves, though they, too, framed their arguments with rhetoric promoting hard work and industry as the sole path through which freedpeople could achieve a measure of equality. Both speeches demonstrate an attitude that epitomized the racialized version of free labor ideology implemented by the Freedmen’s Bureau. Few records exist that preserve the sentiments of freed people on that day, but one would imagine that frustrations these words inspired blended with optimism for what the school could provide.

Despite their misguided speeches and the limits of their ill-advised free labor approach, the Freedmen's Bureau still made notable investments in education in postwar Kentucky and Tennessee. But in every case, it is clear that African-American communities were investing just as much or more and that they could not sustain that. At the beginning of 1867, the Bureau counted just over one hundred schools, about one-third of which were sustained at least in part by Black communities. More specifically, 1,369

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<sup>69</sup> “Education of the Freedmen: The Ely Normal School,” <https://www.newspapers.com/image/118807334> (accessed on May 3, 2019).

of 6,810 students, or about twenty percent, paid tuition to attend school.<sup>70</sup> Meanwhile, just after Noble became superintendent, freedpeople in Kentucky helped to financially support all but two of sixty-seven schools, while 2,301 of 3,973, or about fifty-eight percent of students paid tuition.<sup>71</sup> By the summer of 1868, before the Freedmen's Bureau significantly reduced its presence in the Upper South, the ratio of schools supported by freedpeople in Tennessee remained about the same, but the percentage of students paying tuition reduced to about eleven percent.<sup>72</sup> At the same time, Black Kentuckians reportedly spent \$31,228.30 in support of teacher and school expenses compared to an investment of \$35,598.12 by the Freedmen's Bureau.<sup>73</sup>

These numbers reveal several things. First, African-American communities more than proved that they were willing to invest in their own education. Paying to send their children to school, however, was not sustainable, and it was not an investment required by white families for common school education. Freedpeople's willingness to make sacrifices for the sake of education cannot be doubted, and the federal government's lack of continued support similarly proved their own lack of long-term interest in Black education. State and national leaders would not approve tax dollars for integrated schools, and they would soon end their support for African-American schools. As much as anything, the statistics highlight a stark difference in the level of federal support for Black education between the two states. Tennessee, a former Confederate state with a larger formerly enslaved population, had a significantly larger portion of their schools for

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<sup>70</sup> Alvord, *Third Semi-Annual Report*, 33.

<sup>71</sup> Alvord, *Third Semi-Annual Report*, 35.

<sup>72</sup> Alvord, *Sixth Semi-Annual Report*, 48.

<sup>73</sup> Alvord, *Sixth Semi-Annual Report*, 52.

freedpeople financially supported by the Freedmen's Bureau than their Northern neighbor. Despite this, the way the Bureau went about funding schools remained relatively similar across the states, and the long-term educational prospect for African Americans were also about the same by the early 1870s. Lastly, it is worth explaining that while free labor ideology appears in almost all Victorian charitable work, nineteenth-century American whites had theretofore treated common education as a public service. But educational policies toward African Americans made it clear that this public service was for whites only, even though Blacks helped pay the taxes that provided it. For this reason, free labor ideology reveals itself to be an inadequate philosophy on which to base school systems for formerly enslaved African Americans.

The individual federal agents were not the only influential figures making decisions about Black education based in a free labor ideology. Because many teachers were provided by Northern missionaries, the extent of Bureau support also depended on the willingness of those associations. One AMA secretary claimed that his organization was “not running charity schools” as those are “only for those who are unable to educate themselves.” He also claimed that “we are to help and not give. . . . We can do more good by helping those who are willing to help themselves.”<sup>74</sup> Importantly, the attitude expressed in these statements accurately reflects the Bureau's educational policies in the Upper South. The problem that emerges from this approach is that to prove a willingness to “help themselves” freedpeople would have to sacrifice their limited funds toward

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<sup>74</sup> Erastus Milo Cravath to Burt, September 12, 1866, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed May 31, 2021).

education. Further, this practice contradicts the popular means of educating children in Northern states through a tax-supported system of free common schools.

The Bureau and their associates were responsible for allocating resources to individual communities for educational purposes. Their decisions regarding where and whom they supported sometimes determined the fate of local schools. Among the assessments made by these officers and missionaries centered on the qualifications of the teachers within the schools they supported, which was especially crucial in cases where the teacher were locals rather than Northerners selected personally by groups like the AMA and WFAC. On the topic of supporting teachers in Black schools, an AMA secretary claimed, “We do not like to pay anything toward the support of a poor teacher black or white.” Ensuring that freedpeople receive quality education from a trained teacher needs no explanation. However, it is also possible that race played a factor in this perception of competence, as the official expanded on his previous statement: “Our experience with colored teachers leads us to be very cautious in commissioning them.”<sup>75</sup>

Freedmen’s Bureau agents sometimes came to similar conclusions when observing classrooms taught by African Americans. In Pulaski, Tennessee, agent R. P. Clark determined that T. A. Thornton—an AME minister and formerly enslaved man—was unqualified to teach. Despite living most of his life in bondage and only acquiring limited education while enslaved, by November 1866 Thornton had been teaching a school in his church for five months with seventy-five students.<sup>76</sup> Clark described him as

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<sup>75</sup> Cravath to Burt, November 14, 1866, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed October 31, 2021).

<sup>76</sup> T. A. Thornton, “Teacher’s Monthly School Report,” November 1867, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 52, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed October 31, 2021).

“quite incompetent” and stated that his students “spell, pronounce, & Read badly” and “show a lack of school discipline.” Clark also yearned for Tennessee’s schools to resemble those taught in Northern state like Ohio as the freedpeople would learn much faster.<sup>77</sup> Reports like these had the potential to dissuade the Freedmen’s Bureau and benevolent societies from supporting individual schools because they were taught by untrained teachers. In Thornton’s case, however, the Black community both sustained the school and owned the building in which he taught it, but outside funding would benefit almost every school for newly emancipated people. Particularly in Kentucky where more than seventy-five percent of teachers in freedpeople’s schools were persons of color, many communities faced the challenge of proving they deserved support.<sup>78</sup> This pattern of the Bureau preferring to invest in white and formally trained teachers exposed the faultless shortcomings of Black communities who attempted to teach their own children and risked taking away assistance necessary for them to maintain a system of education. It would take more than a few years for schools like Fisk University to Ely Normal School to train enough formerly enslaved teachers for Kentucky to reach the level of education found in the North. By the time that could happen, the federal government had already ended their support of African-American schools.

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More than anything else, free labor ideology and the briefness of the Freedmen’s Bureau’s operations in the Upper South limited its capacity to promote sustainable

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<sup>77</sup> R. P. Clark to Burt, November 1, 1866, “Tennessee, Freedmen's Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 47, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed May 31, 2021).

<sup>78</sup> By the summer of 1867, ninety-five of 122 teachers in Kentucky, or about seventy-eight percent, were reportedly African American, Alvord, *Fourth Semi-Annual Report*, 76.

schools for African Americans. In 1866, Congress extended the original lifespan of the Bureau beyond one year and abandoned the policy of land redistribution, which many refugees had relied on, as advised by Bureau officers, after the closure of federal camps.<sup>79</sup> After that, education became the major focus of the Bureau throughout the South, but without any sense that this would require a lengthy investment. As early as 1867, Commissioner Howard began cutting the number of Bureau employees in the Upper South states, keeping agents at fewer posts to continue overseeing the establishment of schools.<sup>80</sup> In July 1868, Congress took it a step further by ordering all Freedmen's Bureau operations to cease throughout the South by the end of the year except for the educational work and the distribution of payment to Union veterans.<sup>81</sup> Two years later, all federal agents, including those supporting education for African Americans, withdrew from Kentucky and Tennessee.<sup>82</sup> Thenceforth, they would rely on their respective public school systems for external assistance, which, as discussed in the previous chapter, continued administering segregated and unequal education.

As they prepared to reduce their numbers and ultimately withdraw, the Freedmen's Bureau continued promoting a message consistent with their conception of helping formerly enslaved people through education. Just before Congress finalized its bill to dismiss most of the Bureau's personnel in 1868, Kentucky Assistant Commissioner Sidney Burbank epitomized this in a message to freedpeople of that state

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<sup>79</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 243-251.

<sup>80</sup> Cimbala, "Introduction" in *The Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction: Reconsiderations*, xxvii; Carpenter, *Sword and Olive Branch*, 144.

<sup>81</sup> Congressional bill quoted in Alvord, *Seventh Semi-Annual Report*, 3.

<sup>82</sup> Cimbala, "Introduction" in *The Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction: Reconsiderations*, xxviii.



declaring his own decision to close his agency's local offices. He provided two reasons for this preemptive departure. First, "That the Government may be relieved from the burden of expense," and second, because he believed it was time for Kentucky's freedpeople to "begin to practice self reliance," that largely ignored their significant investment in education. Burbank also cited the rapid progress made to teach formerly enslaved people to read and write over the previous three years. Importantly, only about eighteen months after superintendent Noble stressed the need for federal protection of schools, the assistant commissioner determined, "No agents of troops will be left to guard your school-houses." Further, Burbank repeated the same lessons that Fisk published in *Plain Counsels*, stressing that freedpeople behave well enough to earn the status of American citizenship, especially the necessity of working hard.<sup>83</sup> By the summer of 1870, the final assistant commissioner finished closing the schools supported by the Bureau. In assessing the Bureau's role in forwarding Black schools in the state, one historian summed it up well by declaring that it "arrived late and exited early, never meeting actual educational needs."<sup>84</sup>

By the time the Bureau began its withdrawal, Tennessee's agents had already focused their educational work on supporting John Eaton's common school system, which only lasted another year or so before Redeemer Democrats rewrote the state constitution to usher in the Jim Crow era. In reflecting on their positions with the Bureau in Tennessee, two prominent figures illustrated the potential they witnessed for

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<sup>83</sup> Sidney Burbank, Circular No. 8, July 16, 1868, "Kentucky, Freedmen's Bureau," *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, M1904, Roll 48, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed October 31, 2019).

<sup>84</sup> Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 232.

revolutionary change, and they illuminated why that never came to fruition. Education superintendent Burt regretted the myriad failures of the Bureau to protect the future of freedpeople, especially giving up on redistributing confiscated lands to ex-slaves. By the beginning of 1868, he recognized that his own educational department was the only important branch of his agency left in the state after Commissioner Howard had reduced their number the previous year. Still, Burt felt that the federal government should make a more permanent commitment toward Black education.<sup>85</sup> The second figure, General William Passmore Carlin, served as Tennessee's Assistant Commissioner for nearly two years between 1867 and 1868. He later noted that he was greatly mistaken for ever thinking he could "do good" for the African-American population. One of his major frustrations echoed John Eaton's experience commanding the Freedmen's Department as he had to deal with the "jealousies and selfishness" of the missionaries who worked with the schools.<sup>86</sup> Before the Bureau left Tennessee, its schools had already been absorbed by the state's system of racially segregated schools, and the federal government did not meaningfully interfere in the state's education for nearly a century.

The Freedmen's Bureau assisted in educating thousands of African Americans in Kentucky and Tennessee in the immediate postwar period. Their financial assistance and military protection of schoolhouses, however short-lived, represented a crucial step toward building the first schools in many Black communities. Still, for the most part, the Bureau failed to offer a lasting solution for sustaining system to educate themselves

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<sup>85</sup> McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather*, 296-301.

<sup>86</sup> William Passmore Carlin, *The Memoirs of Brigadier General William Passmore Carlin U.S.A.*, eds. Robert I. Girardi and Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes Jr. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 196.

because its agents could not perceive the invisible and underlying reasons for freedpeople's status in Southern society. They believed that slavery deprived African Americans of the ability to work hard and earn a living to support themselves. According to the Northern philosophy of free labor, freedpeople only needed to be willing to work for wages to be economically successful and worthy of American citizenship. This logic was tragically flawed, however, because the racial system that supported slavery could not be abolished with emancipation. Therefore, the Bureau's method of supporting Black schools, as demonstrated throughout this chapter, was based on the false assumption that freedpeople could afford to consistently pay toward subscriptions and tuition for school along with public taxes by simply adopting a work ethic. In addition, Bureau agents could not divorce themselves from their own racist ideas about people of color to understand the obstacles facing African Americans in the South. In the end, a lack of funding might have mattered less if the Freedmen's Bureau had adopted a more practical and forward-looking strategy toward supporting education.

## CHAPTER VIII – CONFLICTING MISSIONS: THE EDUCATIONAL AND RELIGIOUS WORK OF NORTHERN BENEVOLENT SOCIETIES

As a young woman, Eliza Belle Mitchell took advantage of several timely opportunities to advance the education of freedpeople in her home state.<sup>1</sup> Born in Danville, Kentucky to two multiracial parents in the late 1840s, she was raised as a free person of color in a county where the vast majority of people with African ancestry were enslaved.<sup>2</sup> By the end of the Civil War, Mitchell had begun a formal education to become a teacher at a school in Xenia, Ohio.<sup>3</sup> During the summer of 1865, when she was about sixteen-years-old, Mitchell attended her regular church on the sabbath when she caught the eye of a visiting white preacher named John G. Fee. As she approached the altar to take communion, Fee was struck by the “manner” of the “young woman of light

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<sup>1</sup> Often referred to as “Belle Mitchell” or “E. Belle Mitchell,” she is listed in the 1860 Census as twelve-year-old “Eliza Bell Mitchell,” Ancestry.com, *1860 United States Federal Census-Slave Schedules*, Boyle County, Kentucky.

<sup>2</sup> Both of Eliza Belle Mitchell’s parents are recorded in census records as “Mulatto,” and historian Richard Sears explains that her father, Monroe Mitchell, purchased the freedom of her mother, Mary E. Mitchell, who had been enslaved. Sears, *A Utopian Experiment in Kentucky: Integration and Social Equality at Berea, 1866-1904* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996), 29; Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, lxxvii-lxxviii n. 210; Francis A. Walker, “Table II. Population, 1790-1870, in each State and Territory, by Counties, in Aggregate, and as White, Free Colored, Slave, Chinese, and Indian,” Ninth Census Volume I, *The Statistics of the Population of the United States* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 31-33.

<sup>3</sup> Mitchell’s mother intended on entering her in Wilberforce school in Xenia, but, as she was too young at the time, she instead attended a public school there beginning at the age of eleven. Affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and headed by Bishop Daniel Payne, Wilberforce trained African-American teachers, many whom ultimately went south during and after the Civil War to lead schools for formerly enslaved people, William Decker Johnson, *Biographical Sketches of Prominent Negro Men and Women of Kentucky* (Lexington, Kentucky, 1897), 68-69; Sears, *A Utopian Experiment*, 29; Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 119.

complexion.”<sup>4</sup> That first impression sparked an idea in Fee, who had spent much of the previous year organizing a school for Black soldiers and refugees at nearby Camp Nelson with support from the American Missionary Association (AMA). The Kentucky-born clergyman had already earned a reputation as uniquely committed to social equality for African Americans in comparison to most abolitionists during the antebellum era, and he believed the time had come to break down the racial caste system in Kentucky beginning at Camp Nelson. For Fee, Mitchell represented “the woman with whom to test the caste question” by adding her to the all-white teaching staff at the refugee camp. On the following day, Fee offered Mitchell a teaching position, suggesting to her parents that she was “raised up for a time like this,” and Mitchell joined the camp’s teaching staff later that week.<sup>5</sup>

Soon after Mitchell’s arrival, the white missionary teachers at Camp Nelson failed Fee’s test in dramatic fashion by refusing to accept the woman of color as their equal. Importantly, Fee insisted that his new hire eat and board alongside the other teachers, offering her a seat at his table in the dining hall. During dinner on Mitchell’s first night in the camp, a group of white women—teachers sent by the AMA and a connected group called the Freedmen’s Aid Society—reacted to the Black woman sitting at a teachers’ table by immediately leaving the hall. Fee faced widespread protest among most of the missionary teachers and leadership at Camp Nelson for allowing Mitchell to live and work on equal terms with them. Lester Williams, Jr., a Baptist preacher from Holden, Massachusetts and superintendent of the camp’s Refugee Home, captured their sentiment

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<sup>4</sup> Fee, *Autobiography*, 180.

<sup>5</sup> Fee, *Autobiography*, 180; Sears, *A Utopian Experiment*, 29-30; Sears, *Camp Nelson*, lvi-lvii.

by explaining that Fee's "introduction into this house and to the table of a woman of color...excites much comment and just repugnance to the act."<sup>6</sup> Fee defended his decision and refused to remove Mitchell from the camp despite repeated demands to do so.

About two weeks into Mitchell's employment, however, Fee left camp to visit his family in Berea, Kentucky. While he was gone, efforts to push out the new teacher intensified. Ann E. W. Williams, a teacher and wife of the camp superintendent, attempted to convince Mitchell to board with the freedpeople—the refugees at the camp—instead of living in the teachers' quarters. Mitchell responded by stating plainly that her mother would not approve of her boarding with the freedpeople and said that if she could not live in the teachers' house then she would just return home.<sup>7</sup> The camp's leaders ultimately used Fee's brief absence as an opportunity to terminate Mitchell's employment after only about three weeks, forcing her to return home with her parents in Danville.<sup>8</sup> Fortunately, her career as a teacher did not end from this episode, and she would, over the next few years, instruct freedpeople in communities throughout Kentucky including Lexington and Richmond.<sup>9</sup>

Racism expressed by white Northerners, including abolitionists, against persons of color will not surprise scholars of this era. It is nevertheless significant to emphasize

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<sup>6</sup> Lester Williams, Jr. to Fee, undated, quoted in Sears, *A Utopian Experiment*, 30. See Sears, *Camp Nelson*, lvi-lvii; Marion B. Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky: From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891* (Frankfort: Kentucky Historical Society, 1992), 241; Williams, *Self-Taught*, 119-121.

<sup>7</sup> Colton to George Whipple, September 10, 1865, in Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, 253-254.

<sup>8</sup> Sears, *A Utopian Experiment*, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Sears, *A Utopian Experiment*, 157.

the above scene because it reveals efforts, whether conscious or unconscious, by these missionary teachers to establish a new racial hierarchy in the postbellum South while they played crucial roles in establishing Black education. It is also important to appreciate and understand the impact these actions had on young people like Eliza Belle Mitchell whose desire to pursue a teaching career was threatened by fellow educators, even reform-minded educators, because of race. As demonstrated by Fee's failed experiment at Camp Nelson in 1865, white teachers' racial prejudice prevented them from treating Black people as their equal, thus contributing to postwar school systems based in bigotry. African Americans never enjoyed equal educational opportunities during Reconstruction in part because Northern missionaries like Ann and Lester Williams, while establishing Black schools in the Upper South, furthered their own racial hierarchy that forced people of color to accept a lesser status. While Mitchell's experience underscores the prevalence of white racial attitudes, they typically influenced the daily work of Northern teachers in more subtle ways. That racial ideology especially influenced missionaries' efforts to reform freedpeople's social and religious behavior to fit a Northern white definition of respectability.

Evidence of Northern whites operating within a distinct racial hierarchy in the Upper South emerges when examining their educational work. Not always as overt as that seen at Camp Nelson, their interactions with African Americans ultimately created a paternalistic dynamic based on the assumption of Black inferiority. Entering formerly enslaved communities as teachers and ministers on behalf of benevolent organizations, Northern whites encountered a cultural dissonance that made their mission more difficult than they could have imagine. In their efforts to uplift freedpeople, white missionaries

focused on attempting to reform Black social behavior and religious practices. Unwilling to understand customs in which children consumed alcohol on special occasions or that believed that religious conversion came only through a “shout,” for example, convinced some teachers of the need for reform. Believing that these communities needed to be morally uplifted, Northern whites perpetuated racist attitudes and largely refused to view African Americans as worthy of equality. In this way, educators provided by missionary groups in the North obstructed opportunities of equal education for Black communities in the Upper South.

Another factor that limited Northern societies’ ability to effect long-term educational progress stemmed from intensifying sectarian rivalries. After failing to establish an equal and anti-caste society at Camp Nelson, John Fee tried again in the nearby village of Berea. Beginning in early 1866, his school at Berea became the first institution in the South to instruct Black and white children in the same classroom, and it remained integrated for nearly forty years.<sup>10</sup> While the mixed school was an important sign of progress for Fee’s community, he became frustrated with his AMA benefactors in the late 1860s for interfering with his Berea church. Fee’s anti-caste society required all aspects of the community to promote equality between individuals, including worship, which inspired him to allow people from all faiths to join his church. AMA officials in New York took exception with this because the society’s Northern donors expected all funds to support the expansion of the Congregational Church, breaking with their original nondenominational mission. Despising what he referred to as “church planting” because

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<sup>10</sup> Luke E. Harlow, *Religion, Race, and the Making of Confederate Kentucky, 1830-1880* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 208.



it directly clashed with his vision for a truly free society in Berea, Fee eventually broke his ties with the AMA.<sup>11</sup> This demonstrates that missionary organizations like the AMA were often more concerned with spreading their specific Christian denomination in the South rather than promoting social equality. This chapter will explore both the impact of missionaries' racism in their educational work and how their religious goals worked against progress for Black education through a preoccupation with church planting, attempting to control freedpeople's social practices, and misunderstanding of African-American Christianity.<sup>12</sup>

Benevolent organizations headquartered in Northern cities sponsored teachers and sometimes helped finance new schools in Kentucky and Tennessee. Scholars have studied in detail various aspects of white teachers working on behalf of religious aid societies in schools for freedpeople, including the significant racial and gender dynamics

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<sup>11</sup> Fee, *Autobiography*, 185-190.

<sup>12</sup> Scholars have already found evidence to support all three of these aspects of Northern missionaries' work in the postwar South. Building on the vast historiography on the topic, Karin L. Zipf found that missionaries working in North Carolina found widespread support among freedpeople for their schools, but, by the early 1870s, societies like the AMA insisted that their schools be connected to Congregational churches. Zipf argues that African American turned away from the missionary schools because they preferred the form of worship practiced in other churches, "Among These American Heathens': Congregationalist Missionaries and African American Evangelicals during Reconstruction, 1865-1878," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 74, No. 2 (April 1997), 112-114. Historians like Amy Murrell Taylor have also shown the expectations placed upon Black refugees by white Northern missionaries at wartime camps in exchange for basic aid and relief, *Embattled Freedom*, 13-14. Lastly, Historians like Joe M. Richardson have discussed the postwar evolution of the AMA from a nondenominational organization to one that was, by the mid-1870s, controlled by the Congregational Church in the North. During that transition, that society's leaders struggled amongst themselves to decide whether they should continue supporting schools for African Americans in the South or focus solely on establishing churches, see *Christian Reconstruction: The American Missionary Association and Southern Blacks, 1861-1890* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 145-148.

affecting those classrooms and communities.<sup>13</sup> Though not always to the extent of John Fee, these reformers are often understood to have supported and worked toward the advancement of formerly enslaved people more vigorously than local whites, Northern whites, state government officials, or Freedmen's Bureau agents.<sup>14</sup> Evidence reveals, however, that Northern missionaries often recreated a racial hierarchy that viewed African Americans as inferior, resembling the racial dynamics already dominating Southern society. White missionaries, therefore, entrenched a bigoted system through their own racial prejudices that, despite their abolitionist beliefs, they refused to abandon. For this reason, they spent much energy attempting to reform Black behavior through temperance societies and discouraging customary Africanized styles of practicing Christianity in favor of a more acceptable white version. Further, individual societies allowed rivalries and sectarian issues to threaten and eventually consume their educational work at the expense of freedpeople. Instead of representing a force for revolutionary social change, these organizations became focused on more conservative reforms and expanding their respective churches.

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Missionaries from various churches and associations in the North followed the Union Army into the Confederacy, and, especially after President Lincoln announced the

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<sup>13</sup> Butchart, *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction*; Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*; Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love*; Richardson, "Christian Abolitionism: The American Missionary Association and the Florida Negro," *The Journal of Negro Education* 40, No. 1 (Winter 1971): 35-44; Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction*.

<sup>14</sup> Historian Joe M. Richardson describes these individuals as "Christian abolitionists" and finds them particularly dedicated to promoting equality and citizenship for freedpeople through education. He also shows that the AMA tried to not employ teachers holding racial prejudice against African Americans, "Christian Abolitionism," 35-36.

Emancipation Proclamation, these reformers began preaching and teaching Black refugees in the Upper South. As John Eaton's Freedmen's Department began its work of organizing camps beginning in southwest Tennessee in late 1862, representatives from different religious societies were some of the first Northerners to arrive and offer aid.<sup>15</sup> From the beginning of their work, teachers and agents committed their loyalty to the individual societies supporting them, and they competed to claim territory for their respective organizations to serve. This created "complications, friction and jealousies," Eaton observed among the different agencies that frustrated the military commanders with whom they coordinated during and after the war, and through a lack of cooperation between the different groups impeded their ability to offer sustainable educational systems for African Americans.<sup>16</sup> This is significant because the rivalries between individual missionary and secular societies working in the Upper South foreshadowed the sectarian preoccupations that would eventually threaten to end their educational work altogether.

The American Missionary Association (AMA) was among the largest and most active of the societies supporting Black education in the postwar Upper South. Created in 1846 through the union of three existing organizations, the AMA's original purpose was to take a stand against slavery and use missionaries to spread that message in the South. Prominent antislavery advocate Lewis Tappan quickly emerged as a leader of the society, making his organization a crucial factor in the abolition movement during the decade leading to the Civil War. From its inception, the AMA was nondenominational and has

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<sup>15</sup> Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen*, 37.

<sup>16</sup> Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen*, 195; Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction*, 72-73.

been described as more dedicated to abolition than a more traditional Christian mission to spread the gospel. Though it supported missionary work throughout the world, this society emphasized spreading a message of Christianity that denounced and opposed the institution of slavery in the U.S. By the 1850s, the AMA already commissioned ministers serving in at least three slave states: Missouri, North Carolina, and Kentucky. In the latter case, this religious antislavery activism carried over and transitioned after the war to provide education to Black Kentuckians.<sup>17</sup> Its early presence in the South and a commitment to the antislavery movement positioned the AMA well to provide relief and education to Black refugees during and after the war.

In 1848, only two years after its formation, the AMA sponsored a young missionary named John Fee, who was well-suited to lead antislavery churches in his native state of Kentucky. Born into a slaveholding family in Bracken County, Fee grew to despise the institution of slavery as a young man, and his education at the local Augusta College and subsequently at Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati solidified his support for abolition.<sup>18</sup> Fee's commission with the AMA tasked him with building new churches in Kentucky and spreading the antislavery message throughout the state.<sup>19</sup> During those years, however, most white Kentuckians opposed his cause, and Kentucky's newspapers largely refused to publish his writings. By this time, several prominent individuals in the state had already expressed opposition to the institution of slavery,

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<sup>17</sup> Richardson, "Christian Abolitionism," 35-36; Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction*, vii-viii.

<sup>18</sup> Fee, *Autobiography*, 10-14; Harlow, *Religion, Race, and the Making of Confederate Kentucky*, 67; James M. McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy: From Reconstruction to the NAACP* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975), 224.

<sup>19</sup> Fee, *Autobiography*, 56-60.

though their message was much too conservative for Fee. Robert Jefferson Breckinridge, for example—Presbyterian minister and state superintendent of public instruction from 1847 to 1853—stressed as early as 1830 a gradual approach to emancipation that should be determined by individual states. Like most elite antislavery whites in Kentucky, Breckinridge was himself a slaveholder, increasing the number of persons he held in bondage over the years even as he spoke out against slavery. By 1860, he enslaved thirty-seven men, women, and children. Like many elite Southern white reformers, Breckinridge supported the goal of the American Colonization Society (ACS) that freedpeople should migrate to Liberia in Africa, which itself was based on an ideology that viewed Black people inferior to whites.<sup>20</sup>

Fee's position against slavery starkly contrasted with that of Breckinridge and would even surpass most Northern abolitionists. Forced to publish his views mostly north of the Ohio River, Fee advocated for immediate emancipation and pushed for racial equality. In the mid-1850s, he took a stand against the ACS plan to send freed Blacks to Africa in a book titled *Colonization. The Present Scheme of Colonization Wrong, Delusive, and Retards Emancipation*, explaining that the anti-Black racism inspiring that plan represented the "caste" system that had divided people around the world.<sup>21</sup> Fee believed the American caste system would only be destroyed through "amalgamation via interracial sex," a notion that most whites throughout the country, including many abolitionists, were not willing to accept.<sup>22</sup> His message unsurprisingly gained minimal

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<sup>20</sup> Harlow, *Religion, Race, and the Making of Confederate Kentucky*, 23-25.

<sup>21</sup> Fee, *Colonization. The Present Scheme of Colonization Wrong, Delusive, and Retards Emancipation* (Cincinnati: American Reform Tract and Book Society, 1854).

<sup>22</sup> Harlow, *Religion, Race, and the Making of Confederate Kentucky*, 94-95.

support in Kentucky as it became clear by the 1850s that even the gradual emancipation plan promoted by Breckinridge and others had failed as slavery became more entrenched in state politics. The dramatic defeat of gradualist Cassius Marcellus Clay's gubernatorial run in 1851, for example, indicated the difficulty of Fee's mission, but these two men came together to birth a new Kentucky town dedicated to abolition.<sup>23</sup> Cousin of the famous Whig politician Henry Clay, Cassius Clay echoed the views of conservative antislavery advocates like Breckinridge rather than those of Fee. Clay nevertheless allowed the AMA minister to establish his own community on the 600 acres of land he owned in Madison County, and by 1854, Fee took control of the new church in the town of Berea where he could preach his message beyond the influence of slaveholders.<sup>24</sup>

Fee quickly opened a small school to accompany his church in Berea. Over the next several years, he worked to create a haven in central Kentucky for abolitionists to worship outside of the sinful slaveholding society and from which their message could spread throughout the state. In the late-1850s, Fee recruited missionary colleagues to join him to help establish a college at Berea that would follow the lead of Oberlin College in Ohio, with a program grounded in racial equality taught in integrated classrooms. An AMA-sponsored minister and former Oberlin student, John A. R. Rogers, moved to Berea in 1858 to begin this effort.<sup>25</sup> This represented an opportunity for Fee to practice his theory of mixing the races to destroy caste by teaching Black and white students in

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<sup>23</sup> Running for governor in 1851 as part of a third party committed to emancipation, Cassius Clay received only 3 percent of the vote, see Harlow, *Religion, Race, and the Making of Confederate Kentucky*, 100.

<sup>24</sup> Harlow, *Religion, Race, and the Making of Confederate Kentucky*, 102-103.

<sup>25</sup> Harlow, *Religion, Race, and the Making of Confederate Kentucky*, 111; McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy*, 244; Sears, *A Utopian Experiment*, vii.

the same school. Before Fee could open his college, however, John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, Virginia in October 1859 put into motion a series of events that prevented Fee's vision from coming to fruition. Fee was travelling outside of the state to raise money for the college when Brown attacked a federal arsenal in an attempt to launch a massive slave uprising. While speaking to crowds in the North, Fee openly praised Brown's actions on multiple occasions, and it did not take long for his words to get back to Kentucky. Many whites in the state already despised abolitionists, and Fee's support for Brown sparked anger and action among locals. Two days before Christmas in 1859, a mob of about sixty men from Madison County warned Berea's residents to leave the state within ten days to avoid violence. By the end of the year, Fee, his family, fellow missionaries, and teachers abruptly ended their abolitionist mission in Kentucky, began their exile in the North, and waited for an opportunity to return.<sup>26</sup>

In response to the humanitarian crisis caused by war in the South, benevolent organizations throughout the North, both secular and religious, mobilized to send ministers and teachers into Union camps and occupied towns. Joseph G. McKee, representing the United Presbyterian Church, arrived in Nashville, Tennessee in September 1863 while Andrew Johnson acted as military governor for the state. McKee's mindset as he prepared to serve Black refugees reveals a broader attitude of nineteenth-century Christian missionaries. The Irish-born minister had been preparing to travel to India on behalf of his church when the American Civil War changed his destination. Considering the two options, McKee pondered, "Why go to India to teach the heathen there, when there are millions of wretched heathens at our very doors, who can be

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<sup>26</sup> Harlow, *Religion, Race, and the Making of Confederate Kentucky*, 111-113.

approached much more easily, and who have at least as strong claims on our Christian sympathies?”<sup>27</sup> McKee’s explanation for his chosen missionary field depicts himself superior to the “heathens”—Indians and African Americans—whom he would serve. Scholars have determined that most American Presbyterian missionaries during this period initially only recognized and tried to overturn racist social hierarchies in foreign contexts but not in the postwar U.S. South.<sup>28</sup>

The approximately ten thousand African Americans living in Nashville in late 1863 seemed to steadily increase as more refugees sought shelter in the city.<sup>29</sup> McKee and his fellow teachers provided schooling for almost a thousand of them, and the missionaries offered what shelter and clothing they could spare during the harsh winter when many refugees seemed to have no other support.<sup>30</sup> The Presbyterians’ wartime mission to Nashville’s Black refugees provided crucial aid and initiated a pattern of benevolent organizations serving freedpeople in Tennessee’s capital city during and after Reconstruction.

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<sup>27</sup> James McNeal, “Biographical Sketch of Rev. Joseph G. McKee, The Pioneer Missionary to the Freedmen in Nashville, Tenn.,” in *Historical Sketch of the Freedmen’s Missions of the United Presbyterian Church, 1862–1904*, edited by Ralph Wilson McGranahan (Knoxville, TN: Knoxville College Printing Department, 1905), 10.

<sup>28</sup> Historian Heather J. Sharkey used McKee’s writing to demonstrate the simultaneous foreign and domestic fields for American Presbyterian missionaries in the late nineteenth century and the similar racial and social hierarchies they witness in the U.S. South, Egypt, and Sudan. She argues that by the early twentieth century, the foreign missions had opened their eyes to the racism against African Americans in their own country, see “American Presbyterians, Freedmen’s Missions, and the Nile Valley: Missionary History, Racial Orders, and Church Politics on the World Stage,” *Journal of Religious History* 35, No. 1 (March 2011): 24-42.

<sup>29</sup> J. W. Wait, “The United Presbyterian Mission Among the Freedmen in Nashville,” in *Historical Sketch of the Freedmen’s Missions*, 1.

<sup>30</sup> McKee, “Notes and Incidents from the Diary of Rev. J. G. McKee, in *Historical Sketch of the Freedmen’s Missions*, 14-16; Wait, “The United Presbyterian Mission,” 5.



The mobilization of this and other missionary and secular groups created an atmosphere in which competition and jealousy emerged. By the end of the Civil War, most benevolent organizations realized the necessity of working with the nascent Freedmen's Bureau to effectively serve Southern African Americans. In addition, a significant number of secular groups in the North joined forces to establish the American Freedmen's Union Commission (AFUC), which became an important sponsor of teachers for freedpeople. But the AMA and other religious societies affiliated with the Methodist Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches all refused invitations to join the AFUC due to their determination to pursue evangelical goals. During the first few years following the war, the AMA demonstrated that although it claimed no specific denomination of Christianity, its educational work would nevertheless be driven by an evangelical philosophy. The AMA and AFUC competed not only for territory to serve by also over the same teachers and donors to finance their work to send south. Some AMA teachers, for example, observed that their rival's counterparts lived sinfully and therefore should not be leading schools for freedpeople. On the other hand, AFUC agents criticized the AMA for prioritizing converting African Americans to their religion over educating them.<sup>31</sup> These rivalries demonstrate the kind of jealousies that emerged among some Northern teachers that wartime military commanders and postwar Bureau officials found distracting and counterproductive. Tennessee Assistant Commissioner William Carlin, for example, complained about missionary educators and others with whom he worked on behalf of freedpeople by declaring that he had "never witnessed as much baseness in

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<sup>31</sup> Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction*, 73-75.

human nature” as he met during his command with the Bureau.<sup>32</sup> It also shows how religious missionary work potentially hindered the more efficient cooperation of benevolent organizations to help Black communities establish schools.

If the AMA could not avoid competing with other societies, they could at least attempt to avoid the racist approach of McKee and other Presbyterians. John Fee, the AMA minister exiled from Kentucky, had argued in favor of true racial equality for years, and the organizations’ top officials were similarly committed to helping freedpeople secure a measure of equality. Though he served no official role during the postwar period, one of AMA’s founders Lewis Tappan had argued until his death in 1873 that African Americans should be recognized as full U.S. citizens, and that without equal rights they could not be truly free. With Tappan as a guiding force, AMA headquarters at least attempted to send missionaries into the field who would promote racial equality for formerly enslaved people while building schools and churches in Black communities.<sup>33</sup> The scene depicted in this chapter’s opening of the Eliza Belle Mitchell controversy at Camp Nelson captures the issue that most individual missionaries could not and would not accept social equality with African Americans in practice even while they taught in their communities. In that case, Fee appeared isolated from his colleagues because he had pushed too hard and fast for an anti-caste society. A closer examination of the AMA

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<sup>32</sup> While Eaton’s frustration with missionary societies during his wartime efforts to serve Black refugees is well documented and discussed earlier in this study, Freedmen’s Bureau agents noticed these rivalries as particularly disruptive. Tennessee Assistant Commissioner William Passmore Carlin, for example, found the missionaries’ “jealousies and selfishness” while teaching schools to be a major reason his agency failed to positively impact the formerly enslaved population, see Carlin *Memoirs*, 196.

<sup>33</sup> Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction*, vii-viii; Richardson, “Christian Abolitionism,” 35-36.

mission at the refugee camp in central Kentucky reveals a more complex illustration of the racial dynamics between Fee and the African Americans with whom he worked. Race represented a barrier that even the most committed white abolitionists could not completely overcome.

John Fee was forced to observe the first two years of war in exile before returning to his home in Berea, Kentucky in 1863. He waited anxiously for the AMA to send him to one of the Union Army camps in the South as he believed that encouraging the enlistment of Black soldiers represented the best way to immediately end slavery. He also became frustrated at his state's ability to largely avoid legal emancipation due to its status as a loyal free state.<sup>34</sup> The opening of Camp Nelson in 1863, however, offered a glimmer of hope as about 5,000 African Americans had enlisted there by the end of the year.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, this federal installation facilitated emancipation during the war, for the more than 13,000 enslaved people who freedom there over the next two years.<sup>36</sup> Beginning in June 1864, Fee pleaded with AMA headquarters in New York to sponsor a mission for him at Camp Nelson, and, about a month later, the abolitionist preacher traveled from Berea to the nearby fortification.<sup>37</sup> He quickly organized a school for soldiers and their families in the camp and offered his services as a minister as well. Like McKee's aid to refugees in Nashville, Fee offered crucial humanitarian relief. He strove to protect the wives and children of Black enlistees who had recently escaped from bondage. Fee unfortunately often found himself working against military commanders like general and Camp

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<sup>34</sup> Harlow, *Religion, Race, and the Making of Confederate Kentucky*, 160; Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, xliii.

<sup>35</sup> Sears, *A Utopian Experiment*, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Harlow, *Religion, Race, and the Making of Confederate Kentucky*, 160.

<sup>37</sup> Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, xlv-xlv; Sears, *A Utopian Experiment*, 4-5.

Nelson's commandant Speed Smith Fry whose decision to evict refugee families from living at the camp resulted in the tragic deaths of many like soldier Joseph Miller's wife and children described earlier.<sup>38</sup> These missionaries and benevolent societies, therefore, often represented the best allies freedpeople could find, though they were seriously flawed and could be life threatening.

Fee's educational work at Camp Nelson shows the competition between organizations that appeared often in the postwar Upper South. About two months after the first school opened, leaders of the Cincinnati-based Western Freedmen's Aid Commission (WFAC) set their sights on the Kentucky refugee camp as a fertile field to send missionaries. Likely reacting to the reality of emancipation in the South, the WFAC formed in early 1863, and, like the AMA, adopted an evangelical mission to not only teach but also minister to freedpeople. In the fall of 1864, the WFAC sent an agent named John M. Walden to visit Camp Nelson with hopes of establishing their own churches and schools among the soldiers and refugees. Instead of attempting to coordinate and combine forces with Fee and the AMA, Walden determined that the camp had already been claimed and temporarily abandoned the WFAC mission there.<sup>39</sup> During this crucial juncture when freedom was still tentative and refugees desperately needed aid from non-military entities, the refusal to share claim over a territory had potentially tragic consequences.

Another example from Fee's early work at Camp Nelson reveals the subtle racial biases that even the most progressive white missionaries held when initially engaging

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<sup>38</sup> Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, li; Sears, *A Utopian Experiment*, 6-11.

<sup>39</sup> Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, xlvi, lxxiv n. 150, lxxv n. 165.

with formerly enslaved African Americans. After only working among the freedpeople for about a month, Fee met a Black preacher and soldier named Gabriel Burdett who had been, until recently, enslaved in neighboring Garrard County. Stationed at the camp with his regiment, Burdett was one of the first students to attend the school on base. Fee shared his initial impression of Burdett with AMA headquarters: he was a man “of wonderful preaching talent—meek, gentle, and childlike.” The purpose of pointing out Burdett’s ability to preach severed the purpose of eventually recruiting him to serve his community on behalf of the AMA. Historian Amy Murrell Taylor suggested that perhaps Burdett purposely behaved in a “meek” and “gentle” manner for the white missionaries, or that Fee only wanted to see those characteristics in his new student.<sup>40</sup>

It is, however, impossible to ignore the paternalistic tone of this description. Despite his education, conversion, and reputation in the abolition movement, and his then-radical position on interracial relationships and learning, Fee still reflected the slaveholding household in which he was raised. He had been conditioned by society to treat African Americans as inferior, often using the descriptor “childlike,” despite his radical ideas on equality. In fairness, this was probably the first time in his career working directly with Black students, and even he would need to learn how to function outside of a racial caste system. The connection between these two men was not fleeting or insignificant; they remained close friends and colleagues over the next decade. Fee recruited Burdett to serve as an AMA minister and teacher at Camp Nelson after the war, and offered him a position on the Berea College Board of Trustees after it reopened in

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<sup>40</sup> Fee to Simeon S. Jocelyn, August 8, 1864, in Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, 111; Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*, 190.

1866. It is unclear whether Burdett ever pushed back against Fee's paternalism during their friendship. Tellingly, however, by 1877 the veteran, preacher, teacher, and ex-slave finally decided that Kentucky could not offer his family the lives they deserved, and they moved to Kansas to start over.<sup>41</sup>

A year after initially meeting Burdett at Camp Nelson, Fee hired sixteen-year-old Eliza Belle Mitchell to join the all-white AMA teaching staff and "test the caste question."<sup>42</sup> Based on comments he made to AMA officials several months after the Mitchell controversy, Fee's motives and actions reveal further evidence of his unconscious racial bias. He evidently chose Mitchell to experiment with in large part because of her light complexion, seemingly able to "pass" as white. The resistance from white teachers to Mitchell living and eating with them elicited particular outrage from Fee and his few supporters at the camp because, as they described it, the young teacher was only "slightly Colored."<sup>43</sup> Further, Fee evidently cared more about Mitchell's skin tone and mannerisms than her ability to instruct students, as he admitted that she was not hired on merit.

After Fee had left Camp Nelson and returned to Berea, he revealed to AMA headquarters that he never viewed the young woman of color as equal to the other teachers despite her prior education. He employed her, "With knowledge that she was not justly competent & was not to receive full wages." Fee described Mitchell as "a safe upright young lady—quite exemplary," but explained, "I knew she was not a first class

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<sup>41</sup> Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, lxii; Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*, 241-244.

<sup>42</sup> Fee, *Autobiography*, 180.

<sup>43</sup> Fee to Clinton Bowen Fisk, September 4, 1865, in Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, 249-250.

teacher.”<sup>44</sup> While her gender, age, and inexperience could all have contributed to Fee’s assessment of Mitchell’s teaching abilities as much as her race, it is worth questioning the ethics of using her simply to test a theory rather than to perform the job for which she was hired. Though it is difficult to determine whether Mitchell was a good teacher, Fee may have been incapable of recognizing it because of her race. Fee undoubtedly believed in the theory of racial equality enough to attempt it in practice, which far exceeded the views of many of his fellow AMA missionaries. But his treatment of Mitchell, combined with the paternalism he directed at Gabriel Burdett a year earlier, reveals much about his own racial attitudes.

Fee’s second attempt at creating an anti-caste society at Berea began in early 1866 and proved far more successful than his first at Camp Nelson. Indeed, his historical legacy has been defined by his successful operation of an interracial school at Berea. At the beginning of January, the school in Berea officially opened for the first time since 1859 with two separate departments: a primary school for basic education and an Academic Department that was essentially equivalent to a modern high school.<sup>45</sup> With Fee back at the helm of the church and school, his commitment to creating a truly equal community seemed more resolved than ever. To that end, he followed through on his antebellum goal of developing an interracial institution at Berea resembling Oberlin College in Ohio. In March, the first four African-American students entered the primary school at the same time, and they received a similar welcome from their white classmates as Eliza Belle Mitchell received from the Camp Nelson teachers. When the Black

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<sup>44</sup> Fee to Whipple, February 26, 1866, Box 56, AMA Manuscripts.

<sup>45</sup> Sears, *A Utopian Experiment*, 41.

children joined the classroom, more than half the white students in the primary school, probably from the surrounding area, walked out of the room.<sup>46</sup> A reported total of twenty-seven students left the Berea school in response to integration, but the school recovered most of that number as eighteen African Americans enrolled by the end of the month.<sup>47</sup> From 1866 until 1894, Black students represented a majority of the student population at Berea.<sup>48</sup>

After teaching at multiple schools for freedpeople following her discharge from Camp Nelson, Eliza Belle Mitchell attended the normal school at Berea from 1868 to 1873. This further education allowed her to resume teaching in Lexington where she married a veteran and successful Black businessman named Jordan C. Jackson who replaced Gabriel Burdett as a trustee for Berea College from 1879 to 1895.<sup>49</sup> The school, church, and larger community in Berea remained integrated through the end of the century, and it represented a truly unique society in the postwar Upper South.<sup>50</sup>

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Northern missionaries helping to establish African-American schools in the Upper South unintentionally created or reinforced barriers to quality education. Race represented the most significant of those barriers, and even the most egalitarian white

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<sup>46</sup> Fee to Whipple, March 6, 1866, Box 56, AMA Manuscripts.

<sup>47</sup> Berea teacher Willard Watson Wheeler reported these statistics to the school's Board of Trustees on March 31, 1866, see Sears, *A Utopian Experiment*, 44.

<sup>48</sup> Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 253.

<sup>49</sup> In addition to these accomplishments, Eliza Belle Mitchell was a founder of Lexington's Colored Orphan Industrial Home in 1892. See Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 253; Sears, *A Utopian Experiment*, 157; Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, lxxvii-lxxviii.

<sup>50</sup> For an article-length study of Berea's student life during these years, see Marion B. Lucas, "Berea College in the 1870s and 1880s: Student Life at a Racially Integrated Kentucky College," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 98, No. 1 (Winter 2000): 1-22.



abolitionists sometimes failed to recognize when their actions reflected the dominant racial hierarchy that had sustained slavery for more than two centuries. As Northern benevolent societies dispatched more teachers to Kentucky and Tennessee, the specific obstacles preventing them from furthering revolutionary change for freedpeople through education become clearer and more perceptible to historians. The drastic social and cultural dissonance between many white Northerners and formerly enslaved people was evident in their attempts to reform Black behavior by promoting temperance and in their misunderstanding of African-American Christianity when ministering to them. Because of the specific context of emancipation, Northern whites often interpreted intemperance and Black forms of worship through a lens of race, which ultimately prevented them from having a long-term impact on freedpeople's education.

Northerners representing evangelical societies in the Upper South were tasked with building and teaching schools for freedpeople, but they also wanted to uplift African Americans socially, morally, and spiritually. While this sometimes manifested itself as political activism, scholars have determined that many missionaries worried about the negative effect formerly enslaved people would have on the country unless they were properly educated to adopt a white reformist version of respectability.<sup>51</sup> Evangelical

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<sup>51</sup> In his 1971 article on the AMA in postwar Florida, Joe Richardson explained that AMA leader Lewis Tappan believed in full citizenship for freedpeople and advocated for African Americans' right to vote. More recent studies have emphasized the racist (or racialist) attitude among many of the religious organizations that viewed formerly enslaved people as not necessarily inferior by nature but had been made inferior through the institution of slavery. These abolitionists and missionaries, therefore, believed it their duty to nurture the Black race to fit their Northern white standards of respectability. See Butchart, *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction*, 21, 37-38; Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love*, 140-144; McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy*, 66-70; Richardson, "Christian Abolitionism," 36; Williams, *Self-Taught*, 94-95.

societies especially believed Black people to be “unstable, dangerous, threatening, unless led by proper religion, under which they became docile, tractable, safe.” This led one historian to argue that “racist assumption[s] of black malleability deeply affected the entire approach to black education.”<sup>52</sup> A common method used by missionary teachers to facilitate a moral education was the formation of temperance societies in connection with their schools.<sup>53</sup> African-American students attending missionary schools in Kentucky and Tennessee, therefore, became targets for this specific type of social reform, which they were then expected to spread more broadly within their respective Black communities.<sup>54</sup>

Many AMA teachers and agents in the Upper South accepted as part of their mission the work of eliminating certain perceived social vices of African Americans, beginning with the use of tobacco and alcohol. Illinois native and ordained Congregationalist minister, Ewing Ogden Tade headed the AMA’s efforts in Chattanooga, Tennessee for nearly a decade beginning in 1866.<sup>55</sup> Tade frequently expressed concern for what he considered the immoral behavior of freedpeople he served

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<sup>52</sup> Butchart, *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction*, 37.

<sup>53</sup> The temperance movement in the U.S. had been a prominent aspect of broader Northern reform efforts since the 1820s. It coincided with the formation of societies like the AMA, and continued to gain support through the Civil War, and it was adopted as a key political issue in the 1870s especially among the women’s rights movement. See Foner, *Reconstruction*, 520; Ward M. McAfee, *Religion, Race, and Reconstruction: The Public School in the Politics of the 1870s* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 9, 73-74.

<sup>54</sup> Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction*, 241.

<sup>55</sup> Tade typically signed his letters with his first and middle initials “E. O.” instead of using Ewing Ogden, and subsequent scholars refer to him as E. O. Tade, see C. Stuart McGehee, “E.O. Tade, Freedmen's Education, and the Failure of Reconstruction in Tennessee,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 43, No. 4 (Winter 1984), 377-378.

and sometimes of his missionary colleagues.<sup>56</sup> By the summer of 1867, he had organized the Howard School with about 400 students and a Congregational church called First Union Church of Chattanooga.<sup>57</sup> Tade described his work as more comprehensive and significant than just offering schooling to a newly freed population. He pushed students and educators toward “A higher standard of Christian living,” which meant that “every vice is handled without fear.” In this effort, Tade was particularly committed to preaching against the use of tobacco.<sup>58</sup> He also formed a temperance society among his students called the “Band of Hope” in Chattanooga, a group that was quite common among missionary schools and that required members to forsake specific practices, especially using alcohol, tobacco, or profanity. Tade remarked that his formation of the Band of Hope led to “much talk especially on the Tobacco question.”<sup>59</sup> He later formed a separate organization for adults called the Lincoln Temperance League, which had a membership of sixty-five in the spring of 1868.<sup>60</sup> This focus on “Christian living” was very common

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<sup>56</sup> An example of the latter is seen in a May 1867 letter to AMA headquarters in which Tade complained about the behavior of John Ogden, arguing that he did not deserve his position as president of Fisk University in Nashville. Having worked together in the past, Tade specifically noted Ogden’s infidelity and use of tobacco as evidence of immoral behavior, see Tade to Edward Parmelee Smith, May 15, 1867, Box 163, AMA Manuscripts.

<sup>57</sup> His Church was later renamed the First Congregationalist Church of Chattanooga, McGehee, “E.O. Tade,” 381; Tade, “Teacher’s Monthly School Report,” May 1867, “Tennessee, Freedmen’s Bureau,” *FamilySearch* NARA RG 105, T142, Roll 52, <https://www.familysearch.org/> (accessed November 27, 2021). In a letter to the AMA in March 1868, Tade informed the society’s officials that his church opened on June 7, 1867, see Tade to AMA, March 12, 1868, Box 163, AMA Manuscripts.

<sup>58</sup> Tade, “Tennessee,” in American Missionary Association, *The American Missionary* 11, No. 4 (April 1867), 80-81; Tade to Smith, May 15, 1867, Box 163, AMA Manuscripts.

<sup>59</sup> McGehee, “E.O. Tade,” 381; Tade to Smith, May 15, 1867, Box 163, AMA Manuscripts. Historian Jacqueline Jones has described the various iterations of temperance groups established by AMA teachers, which were called names including the “Bands of Hope,” “Vanguards of Freedom,” “Morning Stars,” “Lincoln Brigades,” “Cold Water Societies,” and the “Excelsior Teetotallers,” see *Soldiers of Light and Love*, 160.

<sup>60</sup> Tade to AMA, March 12, 1868, Box 163, AMA Manuscripts.

for missionaries like Tade, especially in the nineteenth-century American context in which educators rarely separated morality from education, believing them to be critically linked. This emphasis on moral reform weakened the fundamental objective of providing equal access to quality education. Consumed with reforming perceived immoral behavior, white missionaries often failed to move beyond their fears of what their students would do with the education provided to them. For teachers these teachers in the Upper South—whose racial attitudes have been described—that general fear was compounded by their racist concerns of what Black students would do with their education.

In some cases, missionary teachers used temperance societies as a demonstration to local whites that African Americans had the capacity for learning. An unidentified teacher in Tennessee reported that their students' temperance group called the "Vanguard of Freedom" had progressed significantly by the summer of 1868. With 110 members, the missionary organized the students in that group to perform at a larger school exhibition on Independence Day. The "reading and recitations" of the Vanguard during the event "were such as to force expression of surprise and commendation from all present."<sup>61</sup> It is likely that the students recited a song or pledge promising abstinence from vices that were common among these societies. Some of the popular songs of this kind made overt comparisons between drinking alcohol and slavery, declaring that temperance represented "freedom."<sup>62</sup> Among the twenty or so local whites present for this Tennessee exhibition, some were particularly interested in the performance of the temperance group because "they had never before believed it possible to education the

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<sup>61</sup> "From a Teacher in Tennessee," in AMA, *The American Missionary* 12, No. 12 (December 1868), 272.

<sup>62</sup> Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love*, 160.

colored race.”<sup>63</sup> The performance they witnessed probably presented Black children as more respectable to white society, which allowed missionaries to achieve their goal of using education to reform ex-slaves into “docile” or “safe” individuals. This teacher’s emphasis on students’ participation in a temperance society is further evidence of missionaries’ objectives that did not necessarily include helping African Americans receive a quality education that could elevate their position as American citizens.

In some cases, missionary teachers expressed frustration at African Americans’ intemperance, revealing a discord between Northern white and Southern Black social customs. Mary E. H. Pope, a white Ohio native and AMA teacher at Louisville’s Ely Normal School, was surprised when a ten-year-old boy in her classroom commented on his fondness for wine, eggnog, and sweet brandy. The student eventually clarified that he had only been intoxicated one time when his father let him taste whiskey. Pope expressed even more concern after learning that almost all her students had been allowed to drink wine and eggnog during Christmas celebrations and even beer on other occasions. Pope and the other teachers at the Ely school decided to implement temperance reform for the students in response to this realization, beginning with a meeting to discuss the issue with parents and others in the community.<sup>64</sup> During that meeting, Pope had a conversation with an older African-American man, “whose clothes were literally in rags.” She eventually determined the freedman had spent up to fifty dollars per year on “tobacco and whiskey,” which the former argued could have been spent on sending the latter’s child to school. The man, however, viewed tobacco and whiskey as “part of the necessaries of

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<sup>63</sup> “From a Teacher in Tennessee,” *The American Missionary* 12, no. 12, 272.

<sup>64</sup> Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction*, 46.

life” and not, as the missionary suggested, a luxury. During the same meeting, some of the teenaged students explained that their biggest concern in abstaining from alcohol was having to stop eating their mothers’ mince pies, which “would be good for nothing without brandy.”<sup>65</sup> Pope evidently convinced some of her students to sign a temperance pledge by telling them that continued use of tobacco would make it more difficult for them to own a home in the future.<sup>66</sup> This discussion at the Ely school about the use of alcohol and tobacco in African-American families reveals the extent to which freedpeople did not meet the expectations of white Northerners. Despite the biblical arguments missionaries made to spread their temperance message, mounting evidence suggests they ultimately wanted Black children and adults to fit their own definition of respectability to reflect Northern white society.

Related to the dissonance between white Northerners and freedpeople over the issue of temperance, missionaries working in the Upper South also encountered resistance when spreading their version of Christianity. As the competition among benevolent societies revealed, the evangelical mission centered not only on building schools but also establishing new churches in Black communities. Missionaries, therefore, placed a significant amount of energy into trying to convert African Americans to their specific Christian denomination. Though the AMA started out as nondenominational, it eventually shifted into a society controlled by the Congregational

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<sup>65</sup> Mary E. H. Pope, wife of Ely Normal School’s Superintendent G. Stanley Pope, described this scene in a letter that was published in the *American Missionary* magazine, signing her name the only the initials “M. E. H. P.,” see “Kentucky. Ely Normal School,” in *The American Missionary* 15, No. 4 (April 1871), 76-77; AMA, *The Twenty-Fifth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association and the Proceedings at the Annual Meeting held at Hartford, CT., October 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, and 26<sup>th</sup>, 1871* (New York: AMA, 1872), 52.

<sup>66</sup> Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction*, 46.

Church.<sup>67</sup> Many of these Congregational missionaries could not recognize or comprehend the religious practices exhibited by African Americans they encountered, but they were probably an adapted version of Protestantism. Historian Albert J. Raboteau demonstrated how enslaved people in the U.S. South combined aspects of African worship and Protestantism, resulting in a unique slave religion that included overt physical expressions during conversion.<sup>68</sup> AMA agents, unable to recognize or appreciate the distinct form of Christianity practiced by African Americans, often dismissed that emotional worship style as inferior or simple superstition. From their perspective, freedpeople largely rejected the reserved and introspective conversions demonstrated by Congregational ministers, and they eventually drifted toward other churches that aligned more closely with their beliefs.<sup>69</sup> The result of this religious discord was that missionary schools lost many of their students and societies like the AMA were forced to abandon their educational mission in many places.

One AMA teacher in Memphis, Tennessee named Henrietta Matson carried a heavy burden for her students, believing it her responsibility to “lead them to Christ.” On top of regular day and night school, she offered weekly prayer meetings to allow her students opportunities to declare their desire to follow God and convert to Christianity. Further, she paid close attention during the regular day class to find chances for her young students to perform “religious labors,” through which she claimed to witness “the strivings of God’s spirit.” This tireless work on behalf of freedpeople attests to Matson’s

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<sup>67</sup> ““Among These American Heathens,”” 114-116.

<sup>68</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 88-90; Zipf, ““Among These American Heathens,”” 119.

<sup>69</sup> Zipf, ““Among These American Heathens,”” 113, 119.

genuine belief in her mission. Throughout her conversations with students, she met at least one whose acceptance of Christ left her confused, if not frustrated. A middle-aged Black man who had attended Matson's night school during the winter of 1867-1868 sat down one evening with a minister of the church. During that discussion, the student agreed to "give himself up to Christ," and the minister informed him that was the only thing "God required of him." The following day, the newly saved man "was thrown into great doubt and distress because he did not shout when he 'come through,'" as he had expected based on the conversion experiences familiar to him. This freedman is referring to the literal shouting that had been linked to the moment of accepting Christ in the distinct slave religion and that other Protestant denominations had adopted in the South.<sup>70</sup> Because he never shouted when expressing his conversion to the AMA minister, the man felt concerned that he was not actually saved, and continued on for some time with a "sorrowful heart." Matson was thoroughly convinced that the man had indeed been saved, and sarcastically remarked, "I think God will yet have to indulge him with a shout before he can be satisfied."<sup>71</sup> This insensitivity to African-American worship practices represented an important barrier between missionary and student.

At his newly formed Congregational Church in Chattanooga, E. O. Tade witnessed similar Black attitudes regarding conversion that Matson encountered in Memphis, and the two AMA missionaries responded in essentially the same manner. By the spring of 1867, Tade organized weekly prayer meetings with members of the Black community during which he witnessed multiple conversions. He observed, however, that

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<sup>70</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 88-90; Zipf, "'Among These American Heathens,'" 119.

<sup>71</sup> Henrietta Matson to AMA, in *The American Missionary* 12, No. 8 (August 1868), 180-181.



many of his older students in the Howard Day School believed that in order to experience a conversion they would have to “get happy and shout.” Tade dismissed that belief, stating that “like the Indian and the buffalo” the style of worship practiced by formerly enslaved people involving a shout would “recede before the advancing tread of intelligence.”<sup>72</sup> Making light of the concurrent conquest of indigenous Americans by the U.S. military, this missionary essentially compared his work with Black Tennesseans to the expansion of an empire during which the inferior race would eventually give way to the superior. The unwillingness of Matson and Tade to compromise on the religious practices of their specific Christian denomination ultimately proved damning for the educational work of many Northern evangelical societies.

The postwar missionary work conducted by Gabriel Burdett at the former site of Camp Nelson, Kentucky on behalf of the AMA offers an insightful counterpoint to many of his Northern white colleagues. After the federal government closed the refugee camp and white vigilantes chased missionary Abisha Scofield’s family from Camp Nelson in 1866, Burdett took charge of the church and school with financial support from the AMA and renamed the village Ariel. Over the next ten years, he remained a stable leader for the community. His society sent several different white Northerners to teach the students, though none stayed for very long.<sup>73</sup> Burdett’s role as a minister in Ariel was arguably his most important contribution to the freedpeople in his community. His experience as a preacher dated back well before the Civil War when he was enslaved in Garrard County. While he was allowed conduct special sermons for enslaved people at the Forks of Dix

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<sup>72</sup> *The American Missionary* 11, No. 4 (April 1867), 80-81.

<sup>73</sup> Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, lx-lxi.

River Baptist Church by the late 1850s, Burdett likely began preaching in the secret meetings that often took place among slave communities.<sup>74</sup> While Northern whites repeatedly encountered cultural discord with their students, Burdett evidently communicated and related to the shared spiritual experiences of his Black congregations very effectively.

After the war, Burdett built churches not only in Ariel but also in Garrard County which served many of the hundreds of the people he had lived, labored, and worshipped with under the yoke of slavery. Importantly, each of these churches connected to Burdett were nondenominational.<sup>75</sup> His Ariel Church continued growing at a steady pace into the early 1870s, while the school connected to it struggled to remain open on a consistent basis.<sup>76</sup> Over time, the established Christian sects including Methodists and Baptists pressured Burdett to connect his congregations to their respective church organizations. He refused, however, despite the potential lure of the larger associations offering additional support for his school.<sup>77</sup> Burdett took a very different approach to leading his church and school than white Northerners who also received support from the AMA. The Ariel church at Camp Nelson continued growing at the same time other missionaries, including the Northern whites, temporarily taught at Burdett's school. Ohio natives Isaac M. Newton and his wife M. M. Newton, for example, taught for a few months at the Ariel

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<sup>74</sup> Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*, 175-176.

<sup>75</sup> Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 227; Taylor, *Embattled Freedom*, 229-230.

<sup>76</sup> Burdett to Erastus Milo Cravath, September 30, 1870, Box 57, AMA Manuscripts; Burdett to Cravath, November 2, 1870, Box 57, AMA Manuscripts; Burdett to Cravath, December 1, 1870, Box 57, AMA Manuscripts; Burdett to Cravath, January 4, 1871, Box 57, AMA Manuscripts; Burdett to Cravath, February 1, 1871, Box 57, AMA Manuscripts.

<sup>77</sup> Burdett to Cravath, February 1, 1872, Box 57, AMA Manuscripts; Sears, *A Utopian Experiment*, 153-155.

school in 1869, but they seemed more concerned with promoting temperance and attempting to close local distilleries.<sup>78</sup> Burdett's familiarity with African-American religion represents a stark contrast to the Congregationalists in Memphis and Chattanooga who continually neglected or misunderstood Black forms of worship. This comparison illuminates the drastic limitations white Northern missionaries' educational work in the Upper South.

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The social and religious discord between Northern missionaries and freedpeople was recognized by both sides and prevented them from achieving a sustainable system of Black schools. It also led benevolent societies to alter the trajectory of their educational work in the Upper South. As early as 1866, at least a few AMA supporters began advocating that organization shift away from teaching schools for freedpeople to focus instead on building churches in South.<sup>79</sup> Though the society quickly dismissed that option, some of its prominent officials strongly pushed agents to establish Congregational churches, despite its history of being nondenominational.<sup>80</sup> It is also significant to note that the ongoing rivalries between benevolent societies affiliated with different churches, which began as soon as missionaries entered the South, likely influenced some AMA

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<sup>78</sup> Isaac M. Newton and M. M. Newton to the AMA, March 18, 1869, Box 57, AMA Manuscripts; Sears, Camp Nelson, Kentucky, lxi.

<sup>79</sup> In her article on the AMA in North Carolina, historian Karin L. Zipf asserts that during the late 1860s, Congregational missionaries shifted away from their initial goals of supporting Black education. They grew frustrated over a lack of "religious progress in the schools and turned their efforts toward the organization of new churches." See, "Among These American Heathens," 126.

<sup>80</sup> Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction*, 145-146.

leaders to shift to a more sectarian model to protect what they perceived as the best approach to working with freedpeople.

The difference of opinion within the AMA over the extent to which it should be planting Northern churches was arguably most visible in the Upper South. For one, by the summer of 1868, the AMA had reportedly organized a total of ten churches for freedpeople. Of those ten, only four were nondenominational. But all four were in Kentucky and Tennessee.<sup>81</sup> Further, Erastus Milo Cravath, a strong advocate for building strictly Congregational churches, was the association's secretary for the two Upper South states.<sup>82</sup> This New York native and Oberlin graduate co-founded Fisk University in Nashville in 1866 and returned to that institution in the mid-1870s, supporting the Fisk Jubilee Singers and serving as president for two decades.<sup>83</sup> In 1868, Cravath was appointed to serve on the board of trustees for Berea College, the founder and leader of which, John G. Fee, remained ardently committed to fostering an equal, anti-caste, and nondenominational community, school, and church.<sup>84</sup> The ensuing conflict over the denomination of Berea's church led Fee to divorce the AMA after representing the society for twenty years. A close analysis of this controversy illuminates the incompatibility of Fee's vision for a truly equal society and the AMA's sectarian shift,

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<sup>81</sup> Three of the nondenominational churches were in Kentucky, and it is almost certain that Fee's Berea Church and Burdett's Ariel/Camp Nelson Church were counted among them. The third could possibly be a church established by Burdett in Garrard County, and the fourth was the church associated with Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, see Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction*, 147.

<sup>82</sup> Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction*, 146.

<sup>83</sup> AMA, *The American Missionary* 48, No. 2 (February 1894), 76; Sears, *A Utopian Experiment*, 195 n. 54.

<sup>84</sup> Sears, *A Utopian Experiment*, 110.

which will help historians understand why missionary schools in the Reconstruction South failed to secure equal educational opportunities for freedpeople.

In the spring of 1867, a year after the integration of Berea's school, a minister named William E. Lincoln returned after having briefly taught at the institution during the 1850s. The thirty-five-year-old had since attended Oberlin College, though because he broke the seminary's rule of not marrying while a student, he never received a degree or ordination from that institution. In 1866, however, Lincoln became an ordained Congregational minister in Ohio, and he had evidently secured support from the AMA by the time he began his missionary work in Berea.<sup>85</sup> Beginning in March 1868, Lincoln wrote a series of lengthy letters to the society's headquarters complaining about various aspects of Fee's leadership, particularly his leadership of the church. Making complex theological arguments against Fee, as well as other teachers and ministers at Berea, Lincoln's criticisms amounted to him disagreeing with the unsectarian model for the church. He informed the AMA that Fee admitted into his church "Unitarians, Universalists, Progressive Xtians [Christians] &c., on the same terms with others." Claiming to speak on behalf of others in the community, Lincoln continued, "We fear that Berea instead of becoming a bulwark of Evangelical Truth & a Tower of Zion, may fall into the hands of Unitarian, Swedenborgian & Universalist influence." He then pleaded with the AMA to send a new minister take over the church also asking them to speak with Fee to convince him of the error of his ways.<sup>86</sup> While Fee's position in Berea was never seriously threatened by this, Lincoln's complaints to New York nevertheless

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<sup>85</sup> Sears, *A Utopian Experiment*, 102.

<sup>86</sup> William E. Lincoln to the AMA, March 9, 1868, Box 57, AMA Manuscripts; Sears, *A Utopian Experiment*, 103.

caused controversy in the central Kentucky community and initiated a discussion about how AMA churches and schools should be conducted.

George Whipple, a leading AMA secretary, received Lincoln's grievances in New York and subsequently penned a series of letters to Fee to straighten out the issue. By this point, with Lewis Tappan's retirement, Whipple was essentially the only remaining leader of the association who resisted the shift toward a church building model with sole loyalty to the Congregational Church.<sup>87</sup> In spite of this, he was still concerned about Lincoln's allegations and expressed them to Fee. Whipple repeated the "rumors" of people being accepted as members of the Berea church "who are not of evangelical faith," which, he explained, should not be allowed due to the source of AMA funding. Because the society relied on donations from "evangelical Christians," according to Whipple, it was their responsibility to only put that money toward "Christian evangelical and philanthropical purposes." All of this was essentially a way of explaining that for Berea to continue receiving AMA support, the church would have to only allow true "evangelical Christians" to join as members, which amounted to it becoming a Congregational Church. Though reassuring Fee that the AMA viewed him as their "long loved and honored missionary," Whipple threatened to revoke Berea's funding if they did not follow the society's religious model.<sup>88</sup> Lincoln's actions ultimately brought "the Berea experiment to the very brink of disaster."<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction*, 146.

<sup>88</sup> Sears, *A Utopian Experiment*, 108; George Whipple to Fee, May 11, 1868, John G. Fee Papers, Berea College Archives.

<sup>89</sup> Sears, *A Utopian Experiment*, 108.

The AMA's stance on the Berea church amounted to a rejection of Fee's vision for an anti-caste society. Fee had explained his plan to promote true social equality at Berea to the New York headquarters before, and he made no effort to hide his belief in a nondenominational church. This ideal society, in his mind, would have been impossible to implement in an existing town like Lexington because "religion and custom is already sterilized," and the existing institutions would have opposed his plan. For that reason, the relatively new village of Berea was a perfect place to build a community in which every person lived, worked, attended school, and worshipped together on an equal basis. This would allow freedpeople to escape having to labor for the former owners, and Black and white children could be raised viewing each other as their equal. In other words, Fee imagined completely leaving antebellum society behind to reset social dynamics so that race and class could no longer produce inequality. Crucial to this place, however, was the single church to unite everyone in the community for worship. Fee declared, "We desire to have one church—no schism in the body." Again, he believed establishing this nondenominational church could succeed in Berea because they would not be "in the presence of the time venerated sects."<sup>90</sup> While Fee's successful integration of Berea College which endured until the early twentieth century has deservedly received much scholarly attention, it is important to understand his school as only one piece of his vision for achieving racial equality.

The William Lincoln controversy had several consequences, some of which had the potential for altering the trajectory of Berea College. First, about two weeks after Whipple sent his letter to Fee, Erastus Cravath, the AMA secretary pushing for the

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<sup>90</sup> Fee to Whipple and Cravath, January 13, 1867, Box 56, AMA Manuscripts.

expansion of Congregational Churches in the South, was appointed to Berea College's Board of Trustees. This move was meant to ensure that Fee could no longer stray from his society's overall mission. Second, by the summer of 1868, Fee officially announced that his church would "adopt for the substance of doctrine the articles contained in the Constitution of the American Missionary Association," signaling that Cravath's presence was already making a difference.<sup>91</sup> At about the same time, the trustees voted to remove Lincoln from Berea, and he returned North. Lastly, this controversy solidified the AMA's desire to make Berea "a second Oberlin." While many of Berea's teachers and trustees, including Cravath, graduated from the integrated Ohio college, Fee actively resisted trying to recreate Oberlin in his community. He had a clear vision for racial equality and had already successfully implemented a major feature of it, but the AMA quickly influenced the trajectory of the school. James H. Fairchild, Oberlin College's president, attended Berea's graduation ceremony in 1868, and, just one year later, his brother Edward Henry Fairchild began his twenty-year tenure as president of Berea College.<sup>92</sup> Fee never agreed with the AMA's decision to become an agency of the Congregational Church, and he eventually refused to accept their financial support.<sup>93</sup> Berea College continued successfully teaching Black and white students together until the early twentieth century. The AMA's decision in 1868 to force his church, school, and community to conform to its sectarian policies essentially ended Fee's experiment and replaced it with the type of missionary work observed in places like Memphis, Chattanooga, and Louisville.

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<sup>91</sup> Quoted in Sears, *A Utopian Experiment*, 110.

<sup>92</sup> Sears, *A Utopian Experiment*, 58, 111-115, 140.

<sup>93</sup> Fee, *Autobiography*, 188.



The role of Northern benevolent organizations in the establishment of Black education in Upper South is more diverse and complex than this study can fully convey. It has been the goal of this chapter to focus on some of the significant aspects of missionary schools in Kentucky and Tennessee that hindered their ability to contribute to a permanent system of quality education for freedpeople. Overt racism among white missionaries and interorganizational rivalries had immediate and negative effects on African Americans, though historians have recognized those trends for some time. Several examples demonstrated related factors that prevented Northern white missionaries from fully understanding or relating to their students. Temperance movements within primary schools sought to reform social customs that were deemed unfit for Black children or adults. Efforts at building churches and ministering to African Americans revealed a crucial dissonance between the two cultures clashing in this postwar context. The success of Black preachers like Gabriel Burdett further illuminated the failure of many white missionaries to build successful congregations that were intertwined with schools for freedpeople. The jealousies between benevolent societies during this period contributed to the transformation of the AMA—a nondenominational organization created to promote abolition—into a society controlled by the Congregational Church in New England. This is significant because it represented a shift from white Northerners working toward radical social change to more conservative religious-based reforms that perpetuated the dominant racial hierarchy.

## CHAPTER IX – CONCLUSION

In 1885, Elijah Marris looked back on his teaching career and remembered two of his particularly excellent students from the postwar years. A child named Wells from Simpsonville, Kentucky, for example, was very dedicated and talented at the primary-level school, and he studied telegraphy when he got older. Despite his demonstrated talent, Marris lamented that Wells's race "debarred him from obtaining employment" in his chosen profession, and he instead moved to Indianapolis, Indiana to serve as a police officer.<sup>1</sup> Marris also fondly recalled "a bright-eyed boy of seven years, named Henry Weeden," a pupil from his La Grange school. Weeden's success in the classroom seemingly carried over into a successful career, editing a Methodist newspaper called *Zion's Advocate* before he turned twenty-one and serving his church in other positions. He eventually found employment as a letter-carrier in Louisville.<sup>2</sup> Reminiscing twenty years after the end of the Civil War, Marris praised the talent of his young students who demonstrated the ability to find great success as adults. He ultimately regretted that being Black limited their ability to advance in society as they grew up in an increasingly oppressive society.

Elijah Marris experienced both his era's revolutionary potential and its great disappointments. Self-taught as enslaved children, he and his brother, Henry Marris, seized opportunities to advance themselves and their communities by fighting for their country, advocating for civil rights, promoting Black-owned businesses, leading

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<sup>1</sup> Marris, *Life and History*, 80.

<sup>2</sup> Marris, *Life and History*, 88.

churches, and teaching schools for African Americans.<sup>3</sup> Gaining the right to vote after 1870, they subsequently witnessed the process of disfranchisement that had silenced their political voices by the end of the century. In another depressing turn of events, they observed Kentucky's establishment of a school system for Black communities that eventually proved unwilling to provide them with quality educational opportunities. As they each taught for many years, the Marrs brothers would have understood and been frustrated by the unequal disbursement of funds for white and Black schools which became a hallmark of the Jim Crow society forming around them. Just as they had relied on their own will and creativity to support themselves in the late 1860s, Kentucky's African-American schools entered the twentieth century forced to endure with inadequate government funding.<sup>4</sup> Though education failed to allow freedpeople to achieve racial equality during the postwar period as they had hoped, Elijah and Henry Marrs likely never stopped helping their communities through dark times.

Other Black Kentuckians and Tennesseans involved in the postwar schools found their own ways of navigating the descent into Jim Crow while supporting their communities. After an unpleasant experience at Camp Nelson in 1865, Eliza Belle Mitchell continued her teaching career during the later 1860s, serving schools throughout the state before entering Berea College to finish her education. After marrying Lexington businessman Jordan C. Jackson—who served on Berea's Board of Trustees beginning in the late 1870s—she once again taught in schools in Fayette County, Kentucky. By the

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<sup>3</sup> Both Elijah and Henry Marrs had served as sergeants in the Union Army during the Civil War, and, soon after the war, they went into business together. They also served as representatives for their local communities, fighting against segregation and the ban on Black testimony in Kentucky. See Marrs *Life and History*, 77; Williams, *Self-Taught*, 67-69.

<sup>4</sup> Williams, *Self-Taught*, 201-202.

late 1880s, however, Mitchell Jackson shifted her focus to charitable work and became involved in African-American women's clubs. In 1892, serving as the president of the Ladies Orphans Home Society, she oversaw the establishment of Lexington's Colored Orphan Industrial Home.<sup>5</sup> This institution was completely controlled by the Black community and intended to be a place "where their orphan children might be cared for and trained for the usefulness in life."<sup>6</sup> Even when prevented from equal access to quality education, Black communities nevertheless attained a level of independence despite segregation that allowed them to support African-American orphans, a solution to the Black "apprentice" system adopted during Reconstruction. Mitchell Jackson spent most of her ninety-four years of life working to uplift other African Americans in the face of consistent racism and oppression. It is worth wondering, however, how much more might have been possible if these Black communities had been provided the same government support for education that their white neighbors enjoyed.

In Franklin, Tennessee, teacher, Union League leader and successful Black store-owner Allen Noah Crutcher Williams endured a period of racial violence in part by appeasing local whites. Following the July 1867 massacre in town center, the KKK had successfully silenced African-American voters by the election of 1868 through their campaign of terror. Williams had survived the initial scene of violence by attempting to mollify his white neighbors by trying to convince the Black Union League to stand down. Sixty years later, he maintained a successful business in the heart of Franklin and had earned the colloquial title of "Uncle Allen" among local whites, which was used to

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<sup>5</sup> Johnson, *Biographical Sketches*, 68-69; Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 253; Sears, *A Utopian Experiment*, 157; Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, lxxvii-lxxviii.

<sup>6</sup> Johnson, *Biographical Sketches*, 86-87.

preserve the racial hierarchy and reflected the continued paternalism that dominated the early twentieth century. By the 1920s, he had “won the highest esteem of the people of the community, both of the white and black races,” and his business served both white and Black communities.<sup>7</sup> While Williams likely demonstrated enough deference to satisfy Jim Crow society, he was also an important leader in a local Black church and in the broader community.<sup>8</sup> Once again, African-American leaders forced to accept unequal systems still found ways of finding a measure of independence through supporting each other.

This exploration of schools in the postwar Upper South highlights the determination of formerly enslaved people to use education as a vehicle for their advancement in society. It is undeniable that they had achieved much progress in this area by 1875. It is worth considering, however, why they could never achieve equality when the opportunities to do so presented themselves so quickly after the Civil War. In their consistent efforts to use education as a vehicle for progress, Black communities faced obstacles from every direction. Antebellum elites maintained their grasp on local communities by working with the federal government and controlling most of the land, while other Southern whites used violence to resist African-American schools. State governments insisted on establishing segregated and unequal public schools as they quickly reversed progressive Reconstruction policies. The Freedmen’s Bureau and northern missionaries, often viewed as the best supporters of Black communities, could

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<sup>7</sup> “With the Retail Merchants: Items of Retail Merchants Picked Up From Nashville Wholesale Merchants,” *Nashville Tennessean*, January 13, 1924; “Franklin Negro, Oldest Merchant, Retires,” *Nashville Tennessean*, March 5, 1928.

<sup>8</sup> “Franklin Negro, Oldest Merchant, Retires,” *Nashville Tennessean*, March 5, 1928.

not move beyond their free labor ideology or racist attitudes to advance equal opportunities in education. In the end, racial systems of oppression proved to outlast slavery and to transcend North-South sectionalism. Even some of the most ardent white advocates of African-American education across the country refused to accept racial equality, and this created a barrier in the creation of educational systems for freedpeople that would not be overcome. To effectively confront the current racial inequities in American schools, it is first necessary to understand that Black education was always designed to be inferior to its white counterpart. This study is meant to help challenge those unequal systems.

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