"Being in the Field of Education and also Being a Negro...Seems...Tragic": Black Teachers in the Jim Crow South

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“Being in the Field of Education and Also Being a Negro . . . Seems . . . Tragic”: Black Teachers in the Jim Crow South

Adam Fairclough

“Teachers, you are the shapers of thought and the molders of sentiment, not of this age and of this generation alone, but of ages and generations to come. You are making history by those you teach. . . . You are the few that are molding the masses.” This ringing exhortation by Rev. G. M. Elliott to the 1888 meeting of the Alabama State Teachers Association (ASTA) typified the missionary fervor that teachers brought to their work in the nineteenth century. For black teachers, education brought the added duty of dispelling the ignorance, immorality, and superstition that, many believed, slavery had bequeathed to the race—of leading and elevating a benighted people. Elliott, president of the ASTA, reinforced the point the following year: “What the Negro in America is to be, and what the Negro in Africa is to be, and in short what the Negro in the world is to be, we are called to be instrumental in deciding.”

The people in the forefront of the struggle for education played a critical role in defining, articulating, and advancing the aspirations of the race. Mass illiteracy among the freedmen made teachers a natural source of race leadership, and the organization of schools helped blacks define themselves as communities. Scholars

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such as Betty Mansfield and James D. Anderson have demonstrated the importance of black teachers and black initiatives in founding freedmen's schools, redressing the overemphasis of previous historians on the work of northern white missionaries. Northern-educated blacks such as John Oliver, Thomas DeSaille Tucker, and John Wesley Cromwell began teaching in the missionary schools of Union-occupied Virginia as early as 1862. In the same year Clement Robinson, a graduate of Lincoln University, set up Virginia's first "normal school" for the training of black teachers. No sooner was Savannah liberated than blacks formed the Savannah Education Association, which swiftly raised eight hundred dollars and founded several schools. "It is wholly their own," noted Rev. John W. Alvord, "The officers of the Assoc. are all colored men. The teachers are all colored." In the rural areas, black people organized "freedmen's schools" and "Sunday schools," acting independently of northern whites. Black teachers outnumbered white ones very soon after the Civil War.²

When black men gained the vote, teachers provided political leadership. During Reconstruction, teacher-politicians such as Thomas W. Cardozo, Jonathan C. Gibbs, and James Walker Hood rose high in the ranks of the Republican party. After Reconstruction black teachers formed state associations that quizzed political candidates, lobbied state legislatures, and took positions on the leasing of convicts to private employers, temperance, and other issues of the day. Teachers in the New South continued to be involved in party politics and some, such as Charles N. Hunter, Ezekiel E. Smith, and Richard R. Wright, held federal patronage jobs. Even after disfranchisement, black teachers strove for, and often attained, positions of community leadership. Along with ministers, they enjoyed prestige and wielded influence.³

The respect accorded teachers reflected the high value that blacks placed upon education. A determination to acquire formal knowledge has been one of the most striking features of the black struggle for equality. Slaves' clandestine efforts to understand the written word, the establishment of freedmen's schools during and after the Civil War, Booker T. Washington's crusade for "industrial education," the school-building campaign stimulated by the Rosenwald Fund, the fight for equalization and then integration of public schools led by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)—all were part of a constantly changing


but constantly waged struggle. In every period of their history in America, blacks knew that literacy and learning were essential to their freedom. In the eyes of many historians, therefore, the connection between education and the black struggle for equality has been crystal clear. Henry Allen Bullock, in a sweeping history of black education published in 1967, argued that education functioned as the main lever “pushing the movement toward the complete emancipation of the Negro.” In a more recent study focusing on North Carolina, James L. Leloudis described the segregated black schools of the New South as “vital bridges between the freedom struggles of the late nineteenth century and those of the mid-twentieth.” In short, the establishment of schools and colleges and the continual raising of standards uplifted the race and pointed it in the direction of equality. From this perspective, black teachers tilled the soil and planted the seeds of what

eventually became a full-blown revolt against segregation and discrimination: the civil rights movement.\(^5\)

To equate education with black empowerment, however, invites numerous objections. The most obvious is that education did not straightforwardly empower black southerners. For one thing, the development of black education in the South was not characterized by linear progress: it was slow and haphazard, and things sometimes went from bad to worse. In the early twentieth century, for example, black schools fell even further behind the standard of white schools. That educational disparities widened after blacks lost the right to vote underlines the point: black political power waned even though black literacy had increased. As J. Morgan Kousser has stressed, the fact that black schools improved is beside the point: “In the struggle for jobs, or, more broadly, for increased economic welfare, it is relative, not absolute, levels of education that count.” Unequal education perpetuated inequality.\(^6\)

During the Great Depression, social scientists and black intellectuals became increasingly skeptical about the liberating effects of formal education. Surveys compiled a grim picture of schools being held in decrepit structures—run-down churches and ramshackle Masonic halls—that lacked adequate lighting, heating, toilets, and washing facilities and even such basic items as desks and tables. In such places a lone teacher, usually a young woman with less than half a year’s training, could teach classes of as many as seventy-five children spread over eight grades (the average class size in 1928–1929 was forty-seven).\(^7\)

In a one-teacher school in Macon County, Georgia, the sociologist Arthur Raper asked a child named Booker T. Washington Williams for whom he was named. Neither he nor any of the other pupils knew. Even the teacher could not identify Booker T. Washington. In 1939, while researching *An American Dilemma*, the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal “hardly believed his eyes and his ears” when he questioned the students in a similar school. “No one could tell who the President of the United States was or even what the President was. . . . No one had heard of the NAACP.” Asked about the Constitution of the United States, “all remained in solemn silence, until one bright boy helped us out, informing us that it was ‘a newspaper in Atlanta.’” Schooling was often “so perfunctory and meaningless,” one report con-

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In the 1930s one-teacher schools housed in churches, like this one in Gee's Bend, Alabama, outnumbered the Rosenwald schools. Social scientists questioned their educational value.

Courtesy Library of Congress.

cluded, “that most of the children cannot be said to have been touched by any real educational influence whatever.”

Assessing the shortcomings of the missionary schools of Reconstruction, Bertram Wyatt-Brown has argued that “American pedagogy at midcentury was totally unsuited to the rural and penurious character of black life.” In the 1930s the disjunction between schooling and sharecropping remained equally sharp. “Having no relation to life or its needs,” wrote Charles S. Johnson, “education has no meaning beyond the luxury of form.” Studying rural schools in six cotton counties scattered across the South, Johnson concluded that for many black children education was a confusing, disturbing, alienating experience. Poorly prepared teachers, harsh punishments, rote learning, and a lifeless curriculum promoted “maladjustment” to

school and inhibited “proper personality development.” Small wonder that many children left school at the earliest opportunity.9

A second objection to education-as-empowerment concerns the fundamental character of the social order in the United States: Even when blacks improved their position relative to whites, educational gains did not lead to commensurate economic and political gains. Starting in the 1940s, black and white schools in the South moved steadily toward equalization; yet even as the gap closed, blacks remained politically powerless and suffered systematic job discrimination. By 1965 black schools had achieved near parity with white schools in per capita spending, teachers’ salaries, and length of school terms. But young black men were still earning 30 percent less than young white men. As Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis argued in their classic 1976 study Schooling in Capitalist America, echoing a conclusion reached by Horace Mann Bond and W. E. B. Du Bois thirty years earlier, “Education . . . has never been a potent force for economic equality.”10

A third objection to education-as-empowerment reflects the basic dilemma that confronted all black southerners during the Jim Crow era: the need to appease whites while still maintaining personal dignity and racial loyalty. Teachers experienced that pressure in a particularly acute manner, because, unlike black ministers, they depended upon white support, both political and financial, in order to do their jobs. School improvements had to be achieved through supplication and persuasion rather than negotiation and pressure. The role of teachers as racial diplomats, therefore, made it hard for other blacks to regard them with unalloyed respect. On the one hand, teachers were admired for their selfless dedication; on the other hand, some blacks resented the privileged status that whites accorded teachers and wondered where their ultimate loyalty lay. In addition to respect, teachers evoked cynicism and distrust.

The position of black teachers as community leaders was therefore deeply ambiguous—some would say fatally compromised. Stranger and Alone, a 1950 novel by J. Saunders Redding, offered a chilling portrait of a black teacher devoid of idealism, racial loyalty, and spiritual strength; mentored by the cynical, corrupt president of a black state college, he betrayed NAACP members—fellow teachers—to the white superintendent. Critics of teachers reserved their sharpest barbs for black college presidents. Where such men “have taken over as leaders of Negro communities,” observed Redding, “there rises a nauseating reek of devious and oily obsequiousness. It is a kind of fascism in reverse.” Lewis K. McMillan, who taught history at South Carolina State College, complained that in a black college, “the president is usually


an ignorant autocrat” who “stands a surer chance of keeping his job to the extent that he is hostile to the best interests of his own people.”

In exploring the efforts of black teachers, moreover, it is important to acknowledge a fourth objection, or qualification, to the education-as-empowerment thesis: gains from education were rarely clear-cut. Establishing connections between educational change and social change is always difficult; almost every educational strategy has entailed conflicts, costs, and compromises. Determining what constituted progress in the education of blacks is an especially vexing question.

The emergence of an all-black teaching force in the South’s segregated public schools illustrates the problem. Even before the Civil War ended, many blacks expressed a strong preference for teachers of their own race. It came as something of a shock to the American Missionary Association (AMA), for example, when it entered Savannah upon the heels of Gen. William T. Sherman, to find that blacks resisted the offer of northern white teachers. In letters from across the South, the Freedmen’s Bureau heard similar reports: “They want a colored teacher.” After Reconstruction blacks pushed hard to have all whites who were teaching in the black public schools replaced. By 1919, when Charleston finally acceded, the campaign for black teachers had achieved its goal throughout the South. The displacement of white teachers represented an economic gain for blacks and reflected a healthy desire for community autonomy. According to the renowned black teacher Richard R. Wright Sr., it was an educational gain too, for white teachers employed pedagogical methods ill-suited to the “mental, moral and physical constitution” of blacks. The problem was accentuated with southern-born whites, who, according to the pioneer black teacher John W. Cromwell, were too imbued with the “false and wicked ideas” bred by slavery safely to instruct black children.

Yet the departure of white teachers was a mixed blessing. In the rural areas, the preference for black teachers often represented a bending to the wishes of local whites, who hated the “Yankee schoolmarm” but would tolerate southern blacks whom they felt more able to control or intimidate. “They have had a school house burnt by having a white teacher to teach them,” reported a Freedmen’s Bureau officer from Fayetteville, Tennessee. A black teacher “would meet the approbation of the community at large.” In the cities, where southern whites had occupied the sought-after teaching positions, their departure often caused white taxpayers and administrators to lose interest in black schools, leading to a decline in support. Some believed that the loss of white teachers lowered the quality of black public schools.

In cities such as New Orleans and Charleston, Creoles and mulattoes, descendants of the free Negroes of antebellum times, often preferred private denomina-

tional schools that retained white teachers. Catholic schools and American Missionary Association schools tended to become havens for the lighter complexioned and the better off. “I knew only emerged or emerging classes when the aim was to follow the white cultural pattern,” recalled Lura Beam, who taught at the AMA’s Gregory Institute in Wilmington, North Carolina, in the early part of the twentieth century. “The lowest economic group—the ‘arms and legs’ folks, who had only simple farming skills—I never knew at all.” The difference between the public schools and the private schools helped to perpetuate a long-standing class/color division.14

Speech patterns widened this gulf between the classes. Some blacks wanted white teachers, explained a Freedmen’s Bureau official, because “they want to learn to pronounce and speak like white persons.” Yet those who learned to “speak correctly,” recalled Richard Wright Jr., were “sometimes ridiculed and called ‘proper’ or ‘white folksy.’” When educated teachers went back into the country, they could barely communicate with their pupils and neighbors. “The people don’t know enough words for a fellow to carry on a conversation with them,” complained the teacher and future novelist Charles W. Chesnutt. “He must reduce his phraseology several degrees lower than that of the first reader.” Wright believed that educated blacks often lost influence with the masses by belittling vernacular dialect.15

In the rural areas, black teachers sometimes replaced whites only to find themselves at loggerheads with black preachers. Ministers had often led the opposition to white teachers. Keen to establish their independence from white-controlled denominations, they resented whites who disparaged black religious worship as ignorant, superstitious, and overemotional. In 1869 Rev. F. W. Morris ejected a white teacher from his church in Staunton, Virginia, and took over the classes. “You don’t need any Northern teachers,” he told the congregation, “let your own people teach you.” But the church’s success in extending its influence over schools did not always produce happy results. Charles P. Adams, who founded the school in northern Louisiana that became Grambling University, contended for years against bitter opposition from Baptist ministers who sponsored a rival school. Denominational rivalries also encouraged cash-strapped churches to spread themselves too thin, resulting in duplication and unnecessary competition. Secular-minded educators such as Booker T. Washington—who charged that “a very large number of our colored ministers are morally unfit”—complained that “denominational prejudice” hampered the efforts of professionally trained teachers to develop an efficient school system.16

Washington himself personified both the ambiguous character of teachers' leadership and the elusive nature of educational progress. Whether the benefits of his Atlanta Compromise outweighed the costs is an issue that divided blacks then and perplexes historians now. Critics argue that Washington's stress on "industrial education," even when viewed in the most favorable light, represented an approach to social change that was almost glacial in its gradualism. Most blacks in the South both valued education and understood the need for other forms of collective effort. Yet by treating education as a panacea, by abjuring protest, and by denigrating politics, Washington offered a fundamentally unrealistic program of racial advancement. Even as an economic program, industrial education failed. Moreover, Washington did little to disabuse his corporate and southern white backers of the notion that industrial education entailed the acceptance by blacks of second-class citizenship. Most whites happily accepted the proposition that education would "solve the race problem" if it meant the continuation of white supremacy. By Washington's death in 1915 it was painfully clear that the appeasement of southern whites had done little to soften racial discrimination.¹⁷

Yet if education, in the short term, produced neither political empowerment nor liberation from Jim Crow, in the long term it contributed to both. Campaigns to establish and sustain black schools fostered a sense of community, diminished illiteracy, and helped nurture the hope of equality. Moreover, in the cities—which depression-decade investigators, obsessed with the plight of farm tenants and sharecroppers, tended to overlook—schools steadily improved. Meanwhile black colleges, state and private, educated many of the men and women who led struggles against discrimination, racial violence, and second-class citizenship.

Perhaps, as Diane Ravitch has suggested, criticism of industrial education and undue stress on the disparities between black schools and white schools obscure a more important point: "Blacks were more often oppressed by the education they did not receive than by the education they did receive." Regardless of curriculum and irrespective of how far black schools lagged behind white ones, education could not but encourage discontent over the oppressions of Jim Crow. Simple but telling is the

fact that black newspapers, famously outspoken in the revelation and castigation of racial prejudice, achieved record circulation during World War II, precisely when the rate of black literacy approached 90 percent. As Gunnar Myrdal argued in 1944, “the long-range effect of the rising level of education in the Negro people goes in the direction of nourishing and strengthening the Negro protest.”18

Despite the repressive nature of Jim Crow, therefore, teachers worked for equality through indirect methods. After Redemption and disfranchisement destroyed black political influence, open challenges to white supremacy were futile and dangerous. But even in the South of James K. Vardaman, Coleman Blease, and Eugene Talmadge, education was a sphere of quasi-political activity that whites were prepared to tolerate, albeit with suspicion. While accommodating to the outward forms of white supremacy, teachers engaged in institution building, professional organization, and social activism to promote democracy and equal opportunity. Viewed in this light, the accommodationist strategy of Washington and his followers takes on a different meaning. As a method of raising the status of black education, it was a qualified success. Through skillful racial diplomacy, Washington fended off the threat that disfranchisement might cause the destruction of black public schools altogether. His advocacy of industrial education also helped to unite the purse strings of both northern philanthropists and southern white taxpayers. Washington’s gradualist policies struck many black southerners as a sensible, pragmatic strategy for securing and strengthening black schools.19

In some cases, it was only by stressing industrial education that blacks acquired state-supported higher education. Such was the case, for example, with Tennessee State Agricultural and Industrial Normal School, founded in 1909. Indeed, William Jasper Hale, its long-serving president, once fended off the threat of closure by calling upon the assembled students to stand up if they took agriculture. To the discomfort of the white trustees—who were complaining that the college had departed from its original purpose—the entire student body rose to its feet.20

For all his economic and political conservatism, Washington stoutly defended black humanity and never renounced the ultimate goal of equality. His letters and speeches, the sociologist and educator Charles S. Johnson concluded in 1949, “show that he envisioned complete political, social, and economic equality for Negroes.” The Tuskegee ethic of hard work, self-improvement, and Christian virtue was apolitical and individualistic. Yet that ethic, Washington insisted, would “give the lie to the assertion of his enemies North and South that the Negro is the inferior of the white man.” Such statements explain why many white southerners never abandoned their suspicion of Washington. Their hysterical reaction to Washington’s dinner

with President Theodore Roosevelt contained a basic insight: as an Arkansas school superintendent complained, the episode betrayed Washington’s “deep down antipathy to white supremacy.”

Thus even the restricted education advocated by Washington heightened blacks' consciousness of their minority status and implicitly challenged Jim Crow. White southerners remained suspicious of black education for precisely that reason. As Charles S. Johnson insisted, the white South failed to construct a true “caste system” because blacks never accepted the legitimacy and permanency of white supremacy, making the Jim Crow regime inherently unstable. Hence black teachers made a crucial contribution to the struggle for racial equality during the age of segregation. The image of the black teacher as Uncle Tom or race traitor is a grotesque stereotype.

Disfranchisement, of course, clouded the whole concept of black leadership. After black politicians were abolished, southern whites came to regard black educators as acceptable representatives of the black community. Teachers figured prominently in the work of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, founded in 1919, which opposed racial violence but not segregation or disfranchisement. Mayors and governors often appointed teachers to advisory boards and committees. Yet teachers were “leaders” and “representatives” of dubious validity. Nobody elected them, not even in the limited sense that Baptist churches selected their preachers. Teachers were dependent, either directly or indirectly, upon politicians and officials who insisted upon black acquiescence in white supremacy.

Washington established a degree of autonomy for Tuskegee Institute by building up a large private endowment. Yet the survival of his college depended upon the support of Alabama’s white leaders, and Washington took care to cultivate good relations with them. State-supported black colleges, however, had far less independence. As the disfranchisement movement swept across the South, the tenure of the men who headed those institutions became precarious in the extreme. E. L. Blackshear of Prairie View College, Texas, was dismissed for being on the wrong side of the temperance question. Thomas DeSaillie Tucker, president of Florida Colored Normal School, was fired for appointing too many northern teachers who, allegedly, sneered at “southern institutions” and instilled in their students contempt for “the agricultural and industrial life of the race.” Richard R. Wright, Republican politico and longtime president of Georgia State Industrial College in Savannah, found the deterioration in race relations so oppressive that he quit the South in disgust.

Conforming to the humiliating etiquette of white supremacy, black educators


resorted to flattery and guile in dealing with whites who possessed money and power. The annual open days at black colleges, for example, became legendary for their excesses in pampering white visitors; politicians and trustees were treated to mouth-watering feasts, elaborate entertainments, and fawning attention.

“Toadying,” secured results but exacted psychic costs. At one open day in the 1930s, students at Kentucky State College refused to take part in a tableau that required them to wear bandannas while pretending to pick cotton. Even the singing of spirituals came to be regarded as demeaning. Isaac Fisher, traveling with the Tuskegee Institute quartet on a fund-raising tour, complained that whites wanted them to accompany their singing with shouts and moans, asking them to “‘play the Nigger’—their own words—more.” When the white philanthropist George Foster Peabody complained that the Hampton Institute choir neglected the spirituals on a tour of England, Robert R. Moton, Washington’s successor at Tuskegee, explained that many blacks “look with suspicion on Negro melodies.” Of course, it was not the songs themselves that offended, but the context in which they were sung. In 1926 Hampton students initiated a protest strike by refusing to sing spirituals in front of a visiting British colonial official.24

In the Deep South, especially, black teachers went to great lengths to obtain white protection and approval. Principals of private schools prevailed upon local bankers, planters, and merchants to serve as trustees. Laurence C. Jones, who founded the famous Piney Woods School in Mississippi in 1909 and headed it for sixty years, “was careful to heed the will of his white friends, seeking their advice and sanction frequently and staying away from politics.” His habit of donning work overalls whenever he visited state officials in Jackson spoke for itself. Later, when the civil rights movement challenged segregation, Jones could always be relied upon to assure whites, “I like things the way they are.”25

The principals of black public high schools enjoyed even less room for maneuver. Few in number, especially before 1940, they and their institutions were completely dependent upon white financial support. Moreover, because whites eyed black high schools with suspicion, superintendents kept their principals—accessibly located in the towns and cities—under careful scrutiny. In Charleston, South Carolina, the school board “closely monitored the black principals’ work [and] their after-school activities,” writes the scholar Edmund Drago. Elsewhere, superintendents and school board members often treated black principals as chauffeurs, gardeners, repairmen, and errand boys. They “asks you to do things,” a Louisiana principal told Horace Mann Bond, “and it’s right that you should do it. They give you your job. The other night I was


got up at 2 o’clock in the morning doctoring on one of the school board member’s horses.” School superintendents also expected black principals to keep them apprised of what was going on inside the Negro community. The fact that most principals were men (most black teachers were women) may have increased their susceptibility to white pressure.26

Nevertheless, black teachers retained respect and influence. For one thing, a continuing pattern of black voluntarism bolstered the relationship between teacher, school, and community. Most black schools and colleges began life as private projects, with churches providing buildings, farmers land, parents money, and teachers lifetimes of service and sacrifice. Even when schools received private philanthropy and some state funding, they continued to depend upon the voluntary contributions of patrons and the heroic efforts of teachers. The five thousand Rosenwald schools that were erected between 1917 and 1932—the vast majority of them elementary schools—could not have been built without an enormous community effort. The money allocated by the Julius Rosenwald Fund itself constituted “less than the total raised by the Negroes themselves in small amounts, county by county and village by village.” Parent-teacher associations (PTAs) then raised money to buy supplies, pay for fuel, extend the school year, and even purchase school busses. The anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker, studying the black community of Indianola, Mississippi, marvelled at the PTAs’ “indefatigable . . . efforts [to] maintain and improve the schools.”27

Given their huge material and human investment in their schools, blacks came to treasure them. The Rosenwald schools were monuments to black achievement and symbols of black hopes for the future. The schools also functioned as community centers, providing nondenominational meeting places in which Baptists and Methodists could both feel comfortable; reaching out to adults by offering classes in health, homemaking, agriculture, and literacy. In rural areas the annual “school closing” exercise—“speeches, orations, plays, drills, monologues, and singing”—constituted the most important community celebration of the year.28

Black teachers in the rural South were not all heroic pioneers in the mold of


Blacks donated land, materials, labor, and money—17 percent of the total cost—to secure Rosenwald schools such as this one in Mississippi.

*Courtesy Fisk University.*

Booker T. Washington. Low pay, crude housing, and lack of social amenities deterred many of the better-qualified teachers from working in the countryside; they gravitated to the cities. Corruption and favoritism in the appointment of teachers compounded the problem. White officials commonly treated teaching positions as patronage, doling them out to local favorites and refusing to hire “outsiders.” Teachers sometimes had to bribe trustees, school board members, and even county superintendents to secure positions. At times the unqualified gained appointment through the intervention of a minister or a personal connection with an influential white person. “The daughter or the son of a black woman who worked as a domestic in the home of a member of the Board of Education was readily added to the teaching staff,” one teacher recalled bitterly. A white planter might block the dismissal of an incompetent teacher because she was married to his best sharecropper. Many rural teachers—poorly trained, poorly paid, and faced with impossible working conditions—lacked motivation and commitment.29

Still, there were thousands like Dorothy Robinson, men and women who taught “with zeal and dedication . . . as though they felt a personal mandate to compensate for the areas of lack in the lives of their students.” Black schools received such paltry public support that teachers were virtually compelled to seek community assistance.

Help was usually freely given, for the teacher, often the only literate person in the community, and one expected to perform a variety of extracurricular tasks, commanded respect and affection. Recalling his work in east Texas in the early 1930s, Robinson wrote, “I was asked to teach Sunday school, write orders to Sears and Roe-buck, write letters, and figure up weekly wages. It never occurred to me to refuse their varied requests. . . . I became not merely the children’s teacher but also the community’s, and everyone referred to me as ‘our teacher.’”  

A. C. Facin, who headed Mineral Springs School in Ouachita Parish, Louisiana, typified the kind of teacher that Washington praised: college graduates “who go into lonely desolate districts with little hope of getting salaries . . . and give themselves in this beautiful manner to the uplift of our people.” During his ten years as principal, Facin leveled the site for the new three-teacher Rosenwald school, added a home economics room, built his own house, organized canning clubs, and developed a school farm that included a grist mill and vehicle repair shop. In 1933 the school made $118 from the sale of two bales of cotton—enough to pay for a secondhand piano, fix broken windows, and replace missing doorknobs. In his early days Facin contended against jealousy, lack of cooperation, and outright threats from parents who were angered by the corporal punishment he inflicted on their children. Faced with pressures that might have destroyed his effectiveness, Facin enlisted the aid of the local mail rider, “one mean white man,” to visit the families who had threatened him and “sort out” the problem.  

Such resourceful, unorthodox tactics typified the double-edged nature of black leadership in this period. John J. Coss, a board member of the Rosenwald Fund and a professor of philosophy at Columbia University, was struck by the “roundabout fashion in which by various subterfuges Negro education has been improved.” Teachers who succeeded in breaking down white prejudice against black education were “almost miracles,” thought Coss, for they “have come through the state of the despised or tolerated, been subject to condescension, and still have kept their steady goodness without bitterness.” He cited the example of William M. Hubbard, principal of a two-year normal school in Forsyth, Georgia. “Slow, soft-spoken, plodding but patient and humble and beloved by many of the white town folks,” Hubbard was particularly adept at cultivating the principal of a white Baptist girls’ college. He sent his boys to do odd jobs at the college, and, in return, received periodic donations of dog-eared books and worn-out equipment. Behind their ingratiating facade, however, men such as Hubbard were often astute diplomats, who used their connections with northern supporters—church boards, philanthropic foundations, and wealthy individuals—to manipulate state officials and leverage increased funding.  

30 Robinson, Bell Rings at Four, 14, 45.  
Through “diplomacy and machinations,” wrote the Tuskegee sociologist Lewis W. Jones, the black high school principal often prized additional funds from skeptical whites. “When he wanted to develop a band or an athletic team he exploited local pride. His appeal for support . . . was that the good white people of Sandusky couldn’t afford to let those of neighboring Belltown provide better for their Negro school.” Many a principal also exploited that old standby, the Negro spiritual. Arthur Harold Parker, who created Birmingham, Alabama’s Industrial High School, the most famous black high school in the South, assiduously cultivated the city school superintendent, John Herbert Phillips, who, like many other whites, could be moved to tears by hearing “those plaintive, tuneful and soul stirring melodies.” On one occasion, Parker recalled, Phillips lamented that if the high school got an orchestra instructor, the young people might forget the slave songs. “You will get an instructor of orchestra on one condition,” the superintendent promised, “and that is that you will always sing these old songs.”

If teachers had to do their share of bowing and scraping, blacks rarely condemned such role playing so long as they considered it beneficial to the interests of the community. Hortense Powdermaker was astonished to see how a college-educated teacher in Sunflower County, Mississippi—a strong self-respecting person—transformed herself into “the essence of meekness” in front of her white superintendent. Afterward, with a cynical chuckle, the teacher explained to the anthropologist how by “acting proper” she secured books, equipment, playgrounds, and better wages for black teachers. Blacks understood these facts of life. “She was admired and liked by all the Negroes,” Powdermaker recalled.

Inside the classroom, teachers enjoyed greater freedom of speech and action than one might expect. For one thing, it was rare to see a white person in a black public school. The teaching force was entirely black, and white superintendents, especially in the rural South, rarely visited black schools. Dorothy Robinson recalled that in the 1930s, “I was a rather free agent and did just about what I wanted to do, as long as I did not ask for anything that would entail the expenditure of money.” That whites regarded black women as less threatening than black men also have contributed to the relative freedom enjoyed by teachers, for at least three-quarters of all black teachers were females.

The fact that superintendents often delegated administration to a Jeanes teacher increased the de facto autonomy of black schools. The Jeanes teachers, nearly all of them women, were paid by the Anna T. Jeanes Fund to promote “industrial education”—including cooking, sewing, and basketmaking—in rural schools. Yet


these “supervising industrial teachers,” to give them their official title, soon outgrew their Washingtonian job description. They hired and fired teachers, lobbied school boards, organized public health campaigns, set up PTAs, and established homemakers clubs. Sometimes feared, usually respected, they acted as informal social workers and general problem solvers.36

The philanthropic foundations persistently complained that the Jeanes teachers had become all-around administrators rather than promoters of “industrial education.” Only foundation bureaucrats, however, clung to the dogmatic belief that black schools should specialize in something called “rural education.” Black teachers and black parents resisted the notion that children should be educated to stay on the farm. They knew all too well that agriculture was a dead end. One survey of black schoolchildren asked the sons of farmers to state their preferred careers: only 8 percent chose farming. When high school students in Louisiana were questioned, the boys wanted to be teachers, doctors, aviators, ministers, mail clerks, carpenters, and lawyers; the girls aspired to be teachers, nurses, beauticians, seamstresses, stenographers, and musicians.37

Blacks perceived a high school education and, even more, a college education as means of escaping the poverty, cultural isolation, and political tyranny of the southern countryside. In the 1930s, when 250 students at Livingstone College in Salisbury, North Carolina, returned a questionnaire on their intended occupations, not one chose agriculture. Even at the so-called land grant colleges, only about 10 percent of students took classes in agriculture. The fact that black aspirations had so far outdistanced white expectations was due, at least in part, to black teachers. As the president of the North Carolina black teachers association pointedly asked of Nathan C. Newbold, the white head of the state’s Division of Negro Education: “Is it to be the policy to confine Negroes to certain occupations . . . or is it to be the American policy to both allow and encourage their participation in all of the occupational phases of the national life?”38

While proclaiming their support for “industrial education,” black teachers quietly and steadily raised academic standards. In 1908, for example, Sam Huston College in Austin, Texas, boasted courses in sewing, millinery, dressmaking, cooking, house-
keeping, and printing. Instead of glorifying “political harangues, opera house speeches, and constitutional amendments,” the college proclaimed the need for “prayer, patience, quiet demeanor, and a spirit of good will.” Five years later Sam Huston advertised a college course, insisting, “We must have prophets, priests, seers, poets, philosophers, artists, physicians, [and] orators.” In Georgia, Rev. Joseph W. Holley persuaded local whites to support the Albany Bible and Manual Training Institute, founded in 1903, by promising to turn out well-trained domestic servants and efficient farm laborers. By 1927 Holley’s school was a state-supported college with a three-year liberal arts program. Even the exemplars of “industrial education,” Hampton Institute and Tuskegee Institute, added college-level courses in the 1920s. Southern state education officials actually encouraged the raising of academic standards by setting higher qualifications for teachers.

Even in the state-funded colleges of the South, black administrators retained a large degree of control over the curriculum. As Kenneth R. Warlick discovered when he studied North Carolina, most college presidents were moderates rather than conservatives and forthrightly insisted that blacks should receive exactly the same kind of education as whites. F. D. Bluford, for example, consistently favored the liberal arts, retained Latin and Greek in the face of white carping, and transformed North Carolina A&T into the state’s fourth-largest college and one of the best black colleges in the nation. “Conformity and conservatism . . . proved difficult to guarantee,” Warlick concluded, even when whites controlled the purse strings.

Black teachers used organization and research, not just flattery and dissembling, to press the case for equal opportunity. The Journal of Negro Education and the Quarterly Journal of Higher Education for Negroes, both established in the 1930s, documented disparities between black and white schools, pushed for higher standards, and sponsored conferences where teachers could engage in political debate, hearing and interrogating the likes of W. E. B. Du Bois, Walter White, and Ralph J. Bunche. In addition to their state associations, black teachers formed several national associations, with different constituencies but overlapping memberships, that amplified their collective voice. The most important, the American Teachers Association, cultivated the philanthropic foundations, criticized racism in textbooks and Hollywood films, promoted the teaching of Negro history, and sought recognition from the National Education Association. The Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools for Negroes worked to have black schools accredited by the white education associations, asking that black schools be rated on exactly the same basis as white institutions.


41 In 1904 black teachers formed the National Association of Negro Teachers, renamed the National Association of Teachers in Colored Schools in 1907 and the American Teachers Association in 1937. A parallel organiza-
The growth of black higher education—the number of black college students increased from 12,000 in 1928 to 37,000 in 1941—constituted one of the major achievements of black teachers. Although students still chafed under Victorian codes of conduct, the very frequency of student strikes from the 1900s to the 1940s suggests that the black colleges, far from being tyrannies, were safe environments where young people could challenge constituted authority. If colleges were hardly the “models of democracy” that the Morehouse College sociologist Walter Chivers called for, they were oases of freedom compared to the surrounding society. Inside the classrooms, students and professors discussed politics, economics, sociology, history, and literature. (Chivers, who taught Martin Luther King Jr., even offered a course titled “Karl Marx and the Negro.”) In both private and public colleges, students could hear visiting speakers such as James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Kelly Miller, Walter White, and W. E. B. Du Bois. Black colleges fostered the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC), which held its 1942 conference on the campus of Tuskegee Institute. Fred Patterson, Tuskegee’s president, served as an adviser to the SNYC—during its lifetime (1937–1949), one of the most important and most radical civil rights organizations.42

Through the Negro history movement, initiated by Carter G. Woodson, teachers directly addressed the position of black people in America. In some states and cities, Negro history was added to the school curriculum. During Negro History Week in New Orleans, for example, children in grades one through eleven read poems by black authors, heard stories about black heroes, learned about Louisiana’s free people of color, and considered the current economic status of Negroes. Even in its most diluted form, Negro history encouraged children to celebrate black achievements and promoted racial consciousness. When Angela Davis attended Birmingham’s Carrie A. Tuggle elementary school, “Black identity was thrust upon us.” She learned about Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman; she thrilled to the words of James Weldon Johnson’s “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” the “Negro National

Anthem,” which the school sang at every assembly. “I always sang the last phrases full blast: ‘Facing the rising sun, till a new day is born, let us march on till victory is won!”43

The simplest and safest method of political education was to celebrate the American ideal of democracy. In proud statements of purpose, black high schools echoed the belief of philosopher John Dewey—by 1940 familiar to virtually all college-trained teachers, black and white—that the fundamental aim of the school was to prepare its members for democratic living. The “Philosophy of Huntington High School,” Newport News, Virginia, drafted in the 1930s by Lutrelle F. Palmer, struck a shrewd balance between criticizing segregation and appearing to accept it:

we must take frankly into account that the school serves a segregated and underprivileged people who have not yet been admitted to full citizenship. . . . It would be a serious mistake to shut our eyes to these conditions in developing a curriculum for Negro children. . . . The core of the Huntington High School’s philosophy is an unshakable faith in democracy. . . . In developing a curriculum here as a vehicle for the growth of the pupils, we must always work within the framework of this democratic ideal.

Such rhetoric was completely in tune with the idealism of the period. The New Deal had redefined government in terms of helping the common man and promoting equality. Public education, declared the State of Tennessee, was essential to the survival of democratic society. “Every child in Tennessee is entitled to an equal educational opportunity with that of every other child in the state.” By the 1940s, black teachers were winning the ideological argument.44

All the evidence, however, suggested that whites in the South would not concede equality of opportunity in practice. The struggle for racial equality demanded a direct confrontation with white officialdom, a head-on challenge of the kind advocated by the NAACP. Many doubted that teachers would rise to that challenge. “They have become well known in recent years for their lack of conviction on public issues,” lamented the journal of the black teachers association in Texas. Despite the very real risks, however, many teachers did join the NAACP. Teachers headed branches in Hampton, Virginia; St. Petersburg, Florida; Dallas, Texas; and High Point, North Carolina. Teachers made up a fifth of the NAACP’s members in Savannah, Georgia. Many more teachers expressed support for the NAACP through their state associations. In the early 1940s, after much internal struggle, the teachers associations


agreed to finance and support lawsuits, to be litigated by the NAACP, challenging discriminatory salary scales that awarded white teachers far better pay.45

Their campaign for pay parity required black teachers to sue their employers and to confront white officials in federal courthouses. It also meant rejecting the paternalism of the white state agents of Negro schools who, because they were paid by the Rockefeller-funded General Education Board, were far more helpful to blacks than most other state officials. Black teachers worked closely with these men, often involving them in the detailed planning of association affairs. The NAACP’s confrontational approach also risked alienating the northern philanthropic foundations, which preferred the gradualism of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation. It thus took courage for black teachers to throw in their lot with the NAACP: they were putting their jobs on the line. Those who did so bitterly (but usually privately) denounced the traditionalists as “Uncle Toms,” “pimps,” “stool pigeons,” and “yes, yes” white folks men.” Yet even in Mississippi, most teachers backed the NAACP’s strategy.46

The salaries campaign, eventually successful throughout the South, forged an alliance between black teachers and the NAACP. In Louisiana, the Colored Teachers Association (later the Louisiana Education Association) financed all the education suits litigated by the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (“Inc. Fund”). Similar alliances formed in North Carolina and elsewhere. Moreover, for every dollar that black teachers sent to the American Teachers Association, the Inc. Fund received ten cents. Although limited in scope, the salary equalization suits constituted the opening salvo of a legal battle that in 1954 produced the NAACP’s most important victory, Brown v. Board of Education. But the litigation also illustrated some of the risks of taking white officials to court. Irate school boards fired many of the plaintiffs and dismissed several teachers’ leaders, including Lutrelle F. Palmer, president of the State Teachers Association of Virginia, and Noah W. Griffin, his counterpart in Florida.47


When the NAACP won its first courtroom victories against racial discrimination in education, black teachers in the South finally gained some real bargaining power. Alarmed by the prospect of court-ordered integration, governors appointed commissions to consider ways of improving public schools. Action soon followed. Assisted by tax revenues generated by the postwar boom, state legislatures appropriated substantial sums to replace wooden schools with brick buildings and to build black high schools where none had existed before. In Louisiana the per capita sum allocated to black children increased from $16 to $116 between 1940 and 1955, from 24 percent of the amount spent on white children to 72 percent. South Carolina earmarked a $75 million bond issue and a 3 percent sales tax for equalizing black schools. In 1950 even Mississippi started an ambitious school-building program. College presidents used the threat of integration to gain additional resources. James E. Shepard saw the budget of North Carolina State College grow from $23,000 in 1934–1935 to $171,000 ten years later. Louisiana gave Southern University a law school. Florida gave Florida A&M graduate programs in pharmacy, nursing, and education. Texas finally gave its black citizens a university—to, in fact.

Black teachers now linked education and equality with a new explicitness. An exchange within the Governor’s Committee on Higher Education for Negroes in Alabama revealed the determination of black teachers to press the issue. When the committee discussed “providing adequate education for Negroes,” the black members contended that “adequate” meant “equal.” The whites members demurred. “I would not say equal,” said one. “There is no way to get your complete equality,” agreed another. H. C. Trenholm of Alabama State College refused to concede the argument. “But the law says [what is] available to one should be available to all. . . . The State has a moral obligation to provide it in some way.”

The NAACP’s decision to abandon equalization for integration involved a strategic decision to attack Jim Crow at what appeared to be its most vulnerable point. Given its (virtually) consistent opposition to legally imposed segregation, the decision was entirely consonant with the organization’s basic philosophy. As Walter White put it, segregation was “economically unsound and . . . works against the development of mutual respect and understanding.” Moreover, given the central role of Jim Crow laws in perpetuating racial discrimination, it is difficult to see how blacks in the South could have destroyed white supremacy without attacking segregated schools.

Still, the shift from equalization to integration produced profound misgivings among black educators. Du Bois argued that “most Negroes would prefer a good school with properly paid colored teachers, to forcing children into white schools

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49 “Transcript of Meeting of the Sub-Committee of Governor’s Committee on Higher Education for Negroes in Alabama,” March 12, 1949, Trenholm Papers.

50 White to Anson Phelps Stokes, Nov. 2, 1939, folder 11, box 31, Phelps-Stokes Fund Papers.
which met them with injustice and discouraged their efforts to progress.” And he predicted that “if any outside power forced white and colored children in the same schools, the result would be turmoil and uprising as would utterly nullify the process of education.” He was correct on the second point, and probably right about the first. Moreover, many blacks, especially in the Deep South, viewed their schools and colleges with pride; built at great personal cost, they provided jobs, leadership, and community facilities. For black southerners, integration was a leap in the dark.51

The NAACP promised to do everything in its power to prevent teachers from being intimidated and dismissed, but it was uncompromising in its view that the elimination of segregated schools should take priority over the career interests of black educators. Thousands of black teachers might indeed lose their jobs when integration occurred; in higher education, said White, “colored people . . . must be willing to give up their little kingdoms.” As the NAACP lawyer William Ming put it, “there are fatalities in all social change.” Such statements were hardly likely to reassure black teachers. Moreover, the integration of the University of Louisville in 1950, which led to the closure of Louisville Municipal College and the dismissal of five of its six teachers, was not a happy precedent. Fred Patterson warned that black teachers would not greet integration with “a wave of enthusiasm.” After Brown, recalled the former NAACP lawyer Constance Baker Motley, the association met “unspoken opposition to racing in there and getting the schools desegregated.” Moreover, by 1956 repressive state laws caused black teachers to resign en masse from the NAACP.52

The strength of black faith in education and the absence of black political leadership in the age of segregation meant that the aspirations of the race fell heavily upon the shoulders of teachers. Yet as Michael Fultz has noted, “No other group of African American professionals . . . received so much public criticism by members of their own race for their alleged failings.” As the civil rights movement unfolded, criticisms of black teachers multiplied.53

The NAACP was angered when black state colleges devised Jim Crow graduate programs, even after the Brown decision; it was annoyed and frustrated by black teachers’ lack of enthusiasm for school integration. The student sit-in movement felt betrayed by the black college presidents who bowed to segregationist politicians and expelled student leaders. The reports of civil rights organizations were peppered with complaints that black schoolteachers failed to support protests against segregation—young civil rights workers routinely dismissed them as “the most Uncle Tom group around.” Many activists concluded that education had become divorced


from its original goals of democracy, equality, and social uplift, that teachers had become a self-interested clique of middle-class professionals. 54

Such judgments find confirmation in a large body of historical scholarship that rejects the education-as-empowerment thesis, arguing that the schooling provided for black southerners was too inadequate and misguided to have decisively advanced the struggle for equality. As Idus A. Newby concluded after studying South Carolina, black schools and colleges tried to inculcate conservatism and conformity: The civil rights movement took place despite them, not because of them. Historians of the civil rights movement have acknowledged the influence of individual teachers but downplayed the role of teachers in general. John Dittmer thus wrote of Mississippi, “As a group, black teachers in the 1950s refused to take a stand, and the movement of the early sixties passed them by.”55

Glenn Eskew’s recent study of civil rights activism in Birmingham, Alabama, supports the notion of a fundamental discontinuity between institution-building efforts during the age of segregation and the anti-institutional protests of the civil rights movement. Eskew noted that the indigenous protest movement led by Rev. Fred L. Shuttlesworth between 1956 and 1963, the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), drew its support from a handful of black ministers and a small but loyal following of predominantly working-class black people. When the ACMHR and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), led by Martin Luther King Jr., launched the protests that rocked the nation in 1963, they found the bulk of the black middle class arrayed against them. When SCLC organizer James Bevel urged children at Parker High School to join in the demonstrations, principal R. C. Johnson locked the school gates in a futile effort to stop them. In short, the civil rights movement represented a sharp break with the past—a repudiation of existing black leadership rather than an extension of it.56

Nevertheless, the discontinuity argument should not be pushed too far. The sociologist Doug McAdam has pointed to the importance of black colleges, along with churches and the NAACP, in producing the black insurgency of the civil rights movement. The historian Robert J. Norrell showed the crucial importance of Tuskegee Institute in shaping civil rights activism in Tuskegee, Alabama. In his study of Greensboro, North Carolina, William Chafe explored the role of schools and colleges in nurturing a democratic spirit that influenced the generation of 1960.57

54 Miriam Feingold to Folks, Aug. 19, 1963, reel 2, Miriam Feingold Papers (microfilm, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wis.). Similar criticisms of teachers are scattered throughout the records of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the NAACP.


56 Glenn T. Eskew, But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle (Chapel Hill, 1997).

The men and women who led the racial revolution of the 1950s and 1960s often testified to the inspirational influence of their teachers. Occasionally, those teachers were white people, reminders of the great northern crusade, launched during Reconstruction, to educate the freedmen. Rosa Parks attended Montgomery Industrial School for Girls, a private institution staffed by elderly white women. “What I learned best,” she remembered, “was that I was a person with dignity and self-respect, and I should not set my sights lower than anybody else just because I was black.” Shuttesworth, who attended a small elementary school in Oxmoor, Alabama, in the 1930s, derived the same kind of inspiration from his black teachers that Rosa Parks had gained from her white ones. “I believed in them and they believed in me,” he recalled. “These were the people from whom I learned to analyze things.”58

In the 1930s, when Andrew Young attended Valena C. Jones junior high school in New Orleans, a strong ethos of racial pride suffused black education. Young recalled marveling at the black celebrities, “from Joe Louis to Marian Anderson,” who were invited to his school by the principal, Fannie C. Williams. Williams, who headed the school for thirty-three years and taught long after her formal retirement—she died in 1980 at age ninety-seven—was one of the outstanding teachers of her day. “Miss Williams went about her task of uplifting the race and bringing unruly boys and girls under control with great gusto and . . . legendary determination.”59

At the same time, the activists of the 1960s recognized the limitations of their education. Angela Davis recalled that her teachers encouraged competitive individualism—“Work hard and you will be rewarded”—an uplift ethos that turned a blind eye to structural racism. Young had similar memories. Black teachers “seemed to believe that the path to freedom was to be found in manners and diction as much as intelligence and morality. It was an illusion.” The schools operated on the assumption that blacks would adapt to segregation, not challenge it. Tom Dent, who in the 1940s attended Gilbert Academy in New Orleans, perhaps the best private school for blacks in the South, remembered the excellence of his teachers, but none of them ever suggested the possibility of protesting against Jim Crow. Even at Howard University, the flagship of black education, “we never thought about intentionally violating the segregation laws.”60

At the height of the student sit-in movement, the state college presidents who stifled student protests were subjected to a barrage of criticism for placing the interests of Jim Crow institutions over the cause of integration. The historian George R. Woolfolk, who knew many of them personally, believed that such men

were dominated by an amoral “survival psychosis” that resulted in “intellectual and spiritual sterility.” Contemporaries often overlooked the fact that some of them, such as Warmoth T. Gibbs of North Carolina A&T, resisted pressure to expel students. Other college presidents had shielded faculty members involved in the civil rights movement—H. C. Trenholm of Alabama State quietly encouraged the Montgomery bus boycott; George W. Gore of Florida A&M supported the bus boycott in Tallahassee.

The civil rights movement would have found it edifying and inspiring had more black educators taken heroic public stands. Yet we should assess contemporary criticisms of black teachers with caution. Complaints about Uncle Toms were often the snap judgments of young activists who neither knew nor cared about the history of black communities in the South. Moreover, courage and commitment can take many different forms: black activism during the age of segregation was neither more nor less heroic than black activism during the civil rights movement. In the heyday of white supremacy, deferential behavior by blacks did not prove cowardice, lack of idealism, or corruption. The pursuit of improved schools within the framework of racial segregation was the only realistic educational strategy available to southern blacks until the 1940s.

Even if black educators, as was often the case, became so accustomed to working within the confines of Jim Crow that they found it impossible to view their own activities objectively, their perspective should not be dismissed out of hand. As John D. Boyd of Alcorn State University put it, “I think civil rights can be approached from more than one angle. I am trying to help the child for opportunities to come.” In addition, some black reservations about school integration turn out to have been well founded. Integration has often been a massive disappointment: In many cities the schools integrated only to resegregate. Even when black and white children attend the same schools, the educational benefits have often proved elusive.

“What, exactly, was wrong with the old black public schools that for years served their constituencies so well despite the deprivations and the isolation of segregation?” asked Tom Dent in 1997. “There is inescapable irony in the fact that those older schools provided much of what is lacking in today’s postsegregation schools: the desperately needed psychological support . . . [and] a sense of the historical continuity of the educational experience of their race through the existence of the school itself.” We should beware of romanticizing the segregated black schools of the Jim Crow era. But as Thomas Sowell, Vanessa Siddle Walker, and David S. Cecelski


62 “Patrol Routs New March at Lorman,” Jackson Clarion-Ledger, April 6, 1966; Bartley, New South, 422–23.
have insisted, some of those schools were indeed excellent. Integration came at a cost; whether it merited that cost was not—is not—clear.63

For a black teacher in the South, Myrdal noted, “The temptation to sell out the group and to look out for his own petty interest is great.” There were certainly some teachers for whom the strategy of “double agent,” to use Glenda Gilmore’s simile, led to corruption and betrayal. The duplicity of such teachers is documented in the recently opened files of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission. Indeed, from Du Bois’s 1903 critique of Washington, through Langston Hughes’s 1934 attack “Cowards from the Colleges,” through Ralph Ellison’s withering portrait of Dr. Bledsoe in Invisible Man, to the sit-in generation’s contemptuous dismissal of “Uncle Toms,” betrayal and bad faith have been constant refrains in discussions of black teachers.64

Yet most black teachers did not allow the demands of accommodationism to obscure their larger purpose. For half a century and more, they struggled to improve black education within a political system anchored on black disfranchisement. The incremental gains they achieved did not destroy white supremacy; by the 1960s they seemed pathetically inadequate. Yet as James D. Anderson has insisted, “There was nothing naïve about a belief in learning and self-improvement as a means to individual and collective dignity. It was not the end of their struggle for freedom and justice; only a means toward that end.”65

In a moment of frustration, H. C. Trenholm once lamented that “being in the field of education and also being a Negro, it seems to me to be tragic.” The tragedy of black teachers was the larger tragedy of Jim Crow. Seeking to comfort Felton G. Clark, then being vilified for expelling the leaders of the student sit-in movement at Southern University, a friend and fellow Southern alumnus, the principal of a high school in Los Angeles, made the essential point. “Yesteryear many decisions were made which seemed undesirable and spineless. As we have grown older . . . we can see why these things were done and at what a high cost to the individuals who were noble and strong enough to make them.”66

65 Anderson, Education of Blacks in the South, 285.
66 Transcript of meeting of the Sub-Committee of Governor’s Committee on Higher Education for Negroes in Alabama, March 26, 1949, Trenholm Papers; Brice F. Taylor to Felton G. Clark, Oct. 23, 1960, Felton G. Clark Papers (Southern University, Baton Rouge, La.).