

## Excerpt from Chapter 6 – PATTERNS AND LEGACIES

### *OURstory Unchained and Liberated from HISTory*

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#### The Pattern: Education

*“Blacks don’t value education.” Says who?*

“There are many puzzling legacies of slavery. One very much unsubstantiated by any facts has been the perpetuation of the notion that African Americans ‘don’t value education.’ Here the facts of the development of black churches and historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) belie this myth.”<sup>1</sup> And examples from all over the South of blacks seeking out education, learning to read, marveling at the ability to write their names for the first time, walking *hundreds* of miles, as did the two boys who walked from their homes in North Carolina – five hundred and fifty miles – to get to Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute<sup>2</sup> to have the opportunity to get an education – these, and innumerable other examples, belie this myth perpetuated by those intent on portraying a black race desirous of nothing and intellectually capable of even less.

Here is a perfect case-in-point of the perpetuation of an education myth, a “propaganda of history,”<sup>3</sup> as W.E.B. DuBois [*and I*] would call it, a clearly biased and antiblack, subjective, non-scholarly, data-void statement cloaked as a historical fact, written by S. G. Thigpen, reprinted in Robert G. Scharff’s history of Hancock County, Mississippi:

After the war, at the urging of northern ‘do-gooders,’ the Federal government sent people south to civilize “those savage southern people.” The politicians also used the opportunity to brainwash and regiment the Negroes into the Republican party. This brainwashing was disguised as a program to educate the Negroes, so many of those who were sent to implement the program were school teachers. . . .

In spite of great efforts, the young Negroes would not go to these schools. They were definitely not hungering for knowledge, as the teachers had been led to believe. Neither did the older ones want to be uplifted. From the very first, the program was destined to fail.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly this was no historical analysis of truth; yet a multitude of books and journal articles still line shelves of libraries throughout the South that are written with this obviously malicious intent

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<sup>1</sup> Felder, *Since Brown*, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Washington, *Rediscovered*, 129.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Span, *From Cottonfield to Schoolhouse: African American Education in Mississippi, 1862-1875*, 2009, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Robert G. Scharff, *Louisiana’s Loss, Mississippi’s Gain: A History of Hancock County, Mississippi, from the Stone Age to the Space Age*, 1999, 237.

to generate and perpetuate a *history* that does not reflect accurately the condition of the black race either during or after slavery. Fortunately, it is very well documented that even before Emancipation, many slaves were being taught to read, and post-Emancipation data from those involved in the education of freedmen reveal that the development of schools and opportunities for education quickened exponentially as individuals and organizations whose hearts and minds supported freedom hastened to do what they could to respond to the ever growing demand for formal learning from the masses of ex-slaves – now freedmen and women.

On January 8, 1864, the *Liberator* newspaper printed a report received from a United Presbyterian Church missionary, Thomas Calahan, whose heart-wrenching description of the situation he encountered in Louisiana, brings me to tears. It is shared here in abbreviated form:

You have no idea of the state of things here. Go out in any direction and you meet negroes on horses, negroes on mules, negroes with oxen, negroes by the wagon, cart and buggy load, negroes on foot, men, women and children; negroes in uniform, negroes in rags, negroes in frame houses, negroes living in tents, negroes living in rail pens covered with brush, and negroes living under brush piles without any rails, negroes living on the bare ground with the sky for their covering: all hopeful, almost all cheerful, every one pleading to be taught, willing to do anything for learning. They are never out of our rooms, and their cry is for “Books! Books!” and “When will school begin?” Negro women come and offer to cook and wash for us, if we will only teach them to read the Bible. . . . Every night hymns of praise to God and prayers for the Government that oppressed them so long, rise around on every side – prayers for the white teachers that have already come – prayers that God would send them more. These are our circumstances.<sup>5</sup>

While this is an anecdotal report, lacking also in data and scholarly analysis, it at least was personally witnessed and experienced, lending substantially more credence to its veracity than the previous description borne of Thigpen’s racist, hopeful musings. The Freedmen’s Bureau records, and those of the religious organizations that came South to assist in educating the freedmen, do much to establish a believable account of the hunger and thirst for knowledge exhibited by the black race; and for those records, I am so grateful to history. They give a different and more accurate account – one that generates pride in knowing the extent to which black parents and children sought to lift the brutal mallet of intentionally-architected ignorance that slavery had forced upon them. *[How unfortunate that the white slaveholders could neither recognize nor anticipate the damage to the future competitiveness of the United States they were creating by mandating illiteracy of blacks in the South. The present state of education in the South is much the brainchild and legacy of the Southern slaveholders and their allies.]*

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<sup>5</sup> Margaret E. Wagner, *The American Civil War: 365 Days*, “Thomas Calahan,” (New York: Harry N. Adams and LOC), 6/9.

## State of the State: Schooling in Louisiana

Until approximately 1830, the Code Noir [*Black Codes*] allowed, and even guaranteed, education of slaves in Louisiana – very basic instruction in reading and writing – as a part of their religious instruction,<sup>6</sup> and well before the war ended, in 1862, a philanthropist opened a free school for former slaves in New Orleans. One by one in the larger cities around the state, small schools and academies sprang up under the auspices of organizations and individuals. Immediately after the Emancipation Proclamation took effect, the enthusiasm and insistence of the freedmen to be educated even influenced the army to consider educational possibilities for them; many refusing to work without the assurance that schooling would be made available.<sup>7</sup> Under the State Reconstruction Constitution of 1864, all children between the ages of six and 18 were to be provided public, free education. But this is where policy and practice diverge, and we find Louisiana providing a classic example of how the implementation of policy is always dependent upon those on the ground at the local level charged with the details. State Superintendent, Robert M. Lusher, had no intent of educating freedmen's children, and he was quite specific about expressing his prejudices, issuing Circular No. 3 in June of 1866 instructing the local assessors to establish an education system that would address the needs of "every white child". . . consistent with the "supremacy of the Caucasian [*sic*] race."<sup>8</sup> Lusher, it comes as no surprise, was born and raised in Charleston, South Carolina, and served in several critical posts during the Civil War for the Confederate State of Louisiana including Clerk of the Confederate States District Court as well as chief tax collector for the State.<sup>9</sup>

Thank goodness for the Federal Government and the troops stationed in the Southern states for twelve years (1865-77) following the war, which maintained some semblance of order and control in the five military districts the South had been divided into for the protection of the freedmen. In contrast to Superintendent Lusher's total disregard for the mandates of the Reconstruction Constitution, General Nathaniel Banks, for example, issued General Order No. 38 on March 22, 1864. Pursuant to this order, a formal organization was created under which schools for freedmen expanded initially well beyond the few private academies that had emerged. The Order included the establishment of the Enrollment Commission, which in turn created seven schools in New Orleans in a two-month timeframe, as well as a Board of Education for the Gulf area.<sup>10</sup> The work of the army was commendable, noticed and praised all the way up the military chain, and into the hallowed halls of the U.S. Supreme Court, where Justice Salmon P. Chase acknowledged the progress. Even before the Freedmen's Bureau officially assumed responsibility for education of the freedmen in Louisiana, reports indicated more than 11,000 black children were attending schools taught by 162 teachers, with more than

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<sup>6</sup> Charles B. Roussève, *The Negro in Louisiana: Aspects of His History and His Literature*, (New Orleans: Xavier University Press, 1937), 42.

<sup>7</sup> Barry A. Crouch, "Black Education in Civil War and Reconstruction Louisiana: George T. Ruby, the Army, and the Freedmen's Bureau," *Louisiana History*, vol. 38, no. 3 (Summer, 1997), 289-90.

<sup>8</sup> Mohamed J. Shaik, "The Development of Public Education for Negroes in Louisiana" (PhD dissertation, University of Ottawa, 1964), 45.

<sup>9</sup> Robert M. Lusher Papers, Inventory, MSS. 696,788, 1025, 1161, 1353, (revised, 2008), 4, accessed September 22, 2015, [www.lib.lsu.edu/special/findaid/0696m.pdf](http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/findaid/0696m.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Howard Ashley White, "Country Parish Schools," *Redeeming the People from Ignorance*, 294.

5,000 children daily in attendance.<sup>11</sup> However, that represented an average of 68 children per teacher! The North and the military engaged in a shared ownership of educating the freedmen, with the military promising to secure buildings and provide protection and transportation for teachers. The military expected the Northern societies to provide the teachers, the books, and the supplies. By July 1865, 19,000 former slaves were in attendance in more than 126 schools throughout the state of Louisiana – 4,000 of whom were soldiers, and 1,000 of whom were considered adult learners.<sup>12</sup>

For a brief while, this arrangement worked. But then, as evidenced by local activities in the communities, modern-day racism and practices of a dual educational system were beginning to take root. In Greensburg, several educational institutions existed in the early- to mid-1800s, including Daniel's Academy, the state-funded Greensburg Academy, and the Florida Classical Institute, but these institutions were not open to blacks. Mostly funded by tuition, the Floridian Academy, on October 10, 1857, placed a notice in the Greensburg *Imperial* imploring everyone to “pay your bills so we can keep [*the*] academy going.”<sup>13</sup> In New Orleans, the public schools available for white kids were closed even to freeborn blacks, except in some unusual cases where “fairness of complexion”<sup>14</sup> provided an entrance ticket. The Army issued General Order No. 38 to assure that schools would be accessible, and so for a time, they were dotted all across the Louisiana landscape. In houses rented by the Bureau for educational purposes “nearly in every city and parish in the state,” schools were established by the Freedmen's Bureau providing free tuition, books, and school supplies. The 51 public schools that had been established in Louisiana under the auspices of General Order No. 38 were augmented by approximately 60 Sunday Schools and 20 night schools,<sup>15</sup> which operated often in black churches. As a older teen, **SONA** began attending such a school at night, using the daylight hours to work to save money for the future.

Educational opportunities established by the Bureau did not last long, however, partly because of the enormous expense the Bureau was incurring. On December 24, 1865, just one year and nine months after the Bureau issued General Order No. 38 to establish schools, it sent out the order to “suspend [*all*] schools in operation effective January 31, 1866.”<sup>16</sup> As a substitute for closing the schools, in large cities like New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and Shreveport, a tuition system was established, and patrons were required to pay \$1 – \$1.50 a month. This worked generally well. In the rural parishes, however, a system was established to take 5% of the pay of each laborer to pay teachers' salaries and to rent places to use as school buildings. This meant that white laborers, as well as freedmen with work contracts, were being taxed to pay for the education of the freed slaves, and the white laborers were extremely displeased. Resultantly, the regulations were soon modified to discontinue the tax for laborers who did not send their kids to school. Those who “were averse to schools” were released from the tax as well. Finally, the philosophy

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<sup>11</sup> White, *County Parish Schools*, 294.

<sup>12</sup> White, *County Parish Schools*, 295.

<sup>13</sup> Greensburg *Imperial*, October 10, 1857.

<sup>14</sup> White, *County Parish Schools*, 293.

<sup>15</sup> Crouch, “Black Education in Reconstruction Louisiana,” 287-308.

<sup>16</sup> Freedmen's Bureau, *Annual Narrative Reports of Operations and Conditions, October 1866-October 1868*, National Archives Microfilm Publication, Roll 27, Target 1.

evolved that it was politically incorrect to “force” school on the freedmen. The Bureau reported that “[s]chools languished [*in the rural communities*] and were discontinued one by one.”<sup>17</sup>

The Bureau attempted to address this dire emerging situation by assigning a former black teacher and Freedmen’s Bureau supervisor of schools in New Orleans, George Ruby, a new role to “survey and evaluate” the status of schools in the state, as well as to “observe” how much effort was being expended by the white field agents to ensure that schools were being operated for black children. Not only was this a highly unusual arrangement – a New York free-born mulatto, raised in Maine, placed in authority to evaluate the performance of white southern men – it had to be a frightening assignment for this 25-year-old man, as well. Yet, he began his task. It was April 1866.

**JOSEPH FELDER** was about 21 years old at the time; **SONA**, his son, somewhere between the ages of three and five. In both St. Helena and Livingston parishes, post-Civil War relations between the black and white residents were generally considered “friendly” and “good” by the Freedmen’s Bureau’s agents in the field, who reported that in both parishes, the planters and freedmen worked essentially well together; honoring the contracts that required freedmen to be paid. At some point in time, the educational effort was augmented by the Bureau’s ability to access money from the Corps d’Afrique Fund, the Sequestration Fund, and the Hospital Tax Fund to help defray expenses.

In St. Helena Parish, Ruby located buildings and convinced the Freedmen’s Bureau to help pay the salary of a teacher who had formerly taught in the local schools. Because schooling would not be new to the area, he believed that he had the support of the community to revive education in the parish,<sup>18</sup> but he was wrong. He was unable to raise money for the schools<sup>19</sup> because the white residents of the parish simply refused to support the education of their newly freed slaves.

The ‘poor whites’ in St. Helena Parish, ‘intensely rebel in sentiment, hating all Yankees most heartily,’ wrote Ruby, disliked the ‘trouble of education for themselves and [*their*] children,’ but they also bitterly resented the idea of schools for the freedmen. They consequently did all they dared to intimidate and frighten local blacks. In April 1866, at one of the innumerable meetings Ruby initiated, two dozen of the hostile whites entered the building armed with cudgels [*clubs*]. The ‘freedmen were frightened,’ Ruby stated, and many a ‘stout fellow’ became reluctant to attend the gathering.<sup>20</sup>

George Ruby made his best effort to help the Freedmen’s Bureau establish a system of schools in Louisiana. But on the afternoon that he found himself being pistol whipped and thrown in Thompson’s Creek in Jackson Parish by a group of hostile whites who informed him that “they would not tolerate ‘any damned nigger school in that town,’”<sup>21</sup> only five months after he began this job, he quit. It was September 1866. He relocated to Galveston, Texas, continued to work

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<sup>17</sup>Freedmen’s Bureau, *Annual Narrative Reports of Operations, 1866-68*.

<sup>18</sup> Crouch, “Black Education in Reconstruction Louisiana,” 301.

<sup>19</sup> Crouch, “Black Education in Reconstruction Louisiana,” 267.

<sup>20</sup> Crouch, “Black Education in Reconstruction Louisiana,” 303-304.

<sup>21</sup> Crouch, Black Education in Reconstruction Louisiana, 307.

with the Freedmen's Bureau there, and became perhaps the most influential black politician in that state.

In keeping with Livingston Parish's reputation, the "young men fell into one of three groups . . . draft dodgers, desperadoes and individualist extremists . . . forming guerilla bands and raid[ing] both Union and Confederate camps . . . or [hiding] in the swamps, or gathering together for drinking and rabble-raising, or all of the above."<sup>22</sup> During the 14 Civil War skirmishes that occurred in the parish, federal troops commandeered the Denham Springs hotel but they burned it down when they left.<sup>23</sup> So, although the Civil War had ended, the uncivil war between the races was just beginning! It is not surprising to learn that the Livingston area was a hub of KKK activity<sup>24</sup> and that most of the blacks that had lived in the parish, including all the black **Felders** except one, left at the first opportunity. Even the initial period of "reconstruction" brought with it intense destruction in Louisiana as whites, angered by the presence of Federal military staffers and religious organizations establishing schools and educational opportunities for blacks in what they believed still to be *their* communities, responded by burning schools, insulting, attacking and terrifying teachers, "whipping and robbing students," and murdering freedmen. When the military was withdrawn, rural schools were discontinued because the "civil authorities would not protect the freedmen or punish the perpetrators." Planters would not allow Northern "Yankee" teachers to live in their homes, so teachers had to quit or "take room and board with the colored people."<sup>25</sup> St. Helena and Livingston parishes became intensely violent and intimidating communities.

Although the situation waxed and waned depending on the prosperity of the white employers, violence became a part of everyday life. Particularly when the economy was weak, even though "planters discovered freedmen worked better when [*their*] children had advantages of education," blacks faced the escalating wrath of resentful white former slave owners and neighbors. In more lucrative economic months, black education was not viewed as so much of a threat, and education, in some form, was generally tolerated. The net effect, however, of the tensions and disregard for state policy by locals charged with administration, was that by the end of 1867, the entire contingent of state-supported schools could only accommodate approximately 5000 black children, leaving "a balance of eighty-five thousand colored children uncared for except by the Bureau."<sup>26</sup>

As the chart below reveals, private academies continued to be developed although, according to the Freedmen's Bureau field agents, the teachers were black and could hardly read and write themselves. [*Of course, but at least they were making their best effort! The best proof yet of the value that blacks placed on education.*] The chart below also reveals some of the challenges inherent in each of the approaches used to develop schools to educate the freedmen in Louisiana;

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<sup>22</sup> Kathryn McQueen Kendall, "A Study of Placenames in Livingston Parish, Louisiana," (Master's thesis, University of New Orleans, December 1975), 9.

<sup>23</sup> Louisiana loose papers, untitled, vertical file, Livingston Parish, Livingston Parish Courthouse, accessed November 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Louisiana loose papers, untitled.

<sup>25</sup> Crouch, "Black Education in Reconstruction Louisiana," 267.

<sup>26</sup> Shaik, "Development of Public Education," 49.

the most obvious being teacher/pupil ratio and the discontinuation of Freedman Bureau schools. Over a nine-month period, January – September 1867, the following occurred:

### SCHOOLS FOR FREEDMEN IN LOUISIANA, 1867<sup>27</sup>

	Freedmen's Bureau			5% Tax Structure			Private "Academies"		
	schools	teachers	pupils	schools	teachers	pupils	schools	teachers	pupils
Month									
January	104	202	1134						
February	1	1	35	14	40	1550			
March	3	6	225	29	50	2525	3	3	150
April	1	2	80	27	46	2182	2	2	42
May	1	3	99	40	57	2665	9	9	361
June	-	-	-	61	72	2642	12	13	334
July	-	-	-	66	76	2239	28	28	1074
August	-	-	-	60	64	2773	48	48	1406
September	-	-	-	66	69	3154	40	41	1581

Louisiana's 1868 Reconstruction government wrote a new constitution. In it, Article 135 more explicitly defined the duty of the state, through the General Assembly, to provide free, public schools in each parish for all children ages six through 21, "without distinction of race, color, or previous condition." The duty further defined that "[t]here shall be no separate schools or institutions of learning, established exclusively for any race by the State of Louisiana." Article 136 of this Constitution forbade any "municipal corporation" to pass any act, "rule or regulation contrary to the spirit" of Article 135.<sup>28</sup> This Constitution also disallowed public funds to be used to support private education and it established English as the official language of instruction in the schools. However, in 1869, former Louisiana State Superintendent Robert M. Lusher, hired by the George Peabody Fund to administer \$11,000 of aid to Louisiana for education, misused the grant to "attempt to build an exclusively white school system, similar to the one he had established as State Superintendent."<sup>29</sup>

Captain James McCleery, US Army Superintendent of Education, in August 1870, reported that the freedmen virtually funded education entirely on their own, providing the financing for all teachers in the district except one at the cost of "fourteen thousand eight hundred and seventy-five dollars, an amount that is surprising considering the obstacles they had had to encounter. They have manifested a zeal in the cause of education, a thirst after knowledge that is worthy of all praise."<sup>30</sup> In 1871, State Superintendent of Public Education for the Second Division, E. S. Stoddard, observed and reported to State Superintendent Thomas Conway, the following:

<sup>27</sup> Statistics from Freedmen's Bureau, Annual Narrative of Reports.

<sup>28</sup> Shaik, Development of Public Education, 51.

<sup>29</sup> Howard Ashley White, "Country Parish Schools," *The African American Experience in Louisiana, Part B: From the Civil War to Jim Crow*, 347.

<sup>30</sup> Freedmen's Bureau Records, M 803, Roll 23, Louisiana, Summary of the Year's Work, 15d.

The colored children, as a rule, are advancing rapidly, much more so than the white. (I refer to the rural districts.) There is a reason for this however. As a class their appreciation of education is undeniably greater than that of the whites, as proven by the facts in the case. They are more regular in attendance, will go further and sacrifice more to attend school than will the white. Many colored children in my Division have been in constant attendance, traveling to do so a distance from four to six miles, while the whites will grumble if the school is placed a half mile from their door.<sup>31</sup>

### **Our Ancestors Embrace Education**

It is against this backdrop of hostility and disruption of schooling for blacks in Louisiana, in general, and in Greensburg, specifically, that **SONA** began his formal education around the age of 17. **SONA** hired a tutor, (T. A. or J. A. Wilson), who provided private instruction in religion. He later enrolled in one of the public schools' night programs. The year was likely 1878 but records have not yet been found. Although he is not enumerated on the 1880 U.S. Census, it is clear that in 1881, he was still in St. Helena Parish or somewhere relatively close by because Greensburg, the county seat for St. Helena Parish, is the location of the court records documenting execution of his 1881 marriage bond to **EMMA JENKINS**. Oddly, **SONA** was a brilliant reflection of the black community's urgent desire to become educated, although **EMMA** was illiterate and remained so.

In fact, so proud were black Americans of the education that they were receiving that even as late as 1939, virtually every black college documented and reported the numbers of their graduates, and every student's name was listed by institution in the national black newspapers. It was reported that "[p]ractically everyone [sic] of the institutions reporting their commencement activities declared the present class to be tht [sic] largest in the history of the school."<sup>32</sup>

Reporting in at the time of press of the June 10, 1939 edition of *The Chicago Defender* were Tennessee State (TN); Bethune-Cookman (FL); Shaw (NC); Virginia Union (VA); Morgan (MD); Alcorn A. & M. (MS); the residential high school, Bordentown Manual Training and Industrial School for Colored Youth (NJ); Bennett (NC); Dowington Industrial and Agricultural School (PA); Cheney Teachers College (PA); Lincoln Institute (KY); Winston-Salem (NC); and Tillotson Collegiate and Normal Institute (TX). Imagine the pride in these families to see their children's names in the article in *The Chicago Defender* – "Graduates Pour From [sic] Nation's Colleges"! Imagine the pride of freedmen and women to be able to sit in a school room and learn what had been forbidden! Imagine the pride freedmen and women felt to be able to witness their children going off to college!

Just imagine . . .

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<sup>31</sup> Shaik, "Development of Public Education," 57. See also Louisiana Department of Education, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Education, Thomas W. Conway, to the General Assembly of Louisiana, for the Year 1871*, Printed 1872, 122 (Google Book, accessed May 4, 2015).

<sup>32</sup> "Graduates Pour From [sic] Nation's Colleges," *The Chicago Defender* (national edition), June 10, 1939, 11.