Schools for Freed Peoples, 1860s [1]
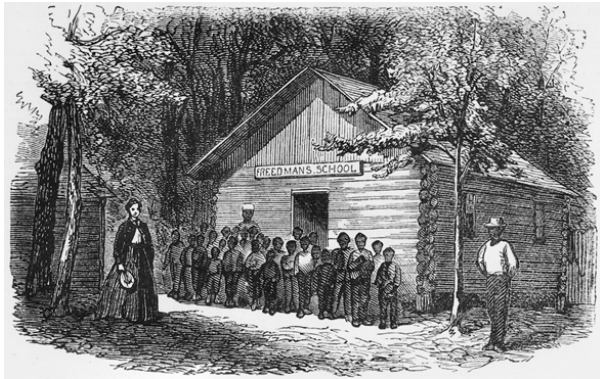
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Schools for freed peoples

By Alex Sandifer and Berry Dishong Renfer
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See also: Freedmen's Bureau [2]

An 1868 engraving of "James's Plantation School" in North Carolina. This freedmen's school is possibly one of those established by Horace James on the Yankee or Avon Hall plantations in Pitt County in 1866. North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library.

The Civil War [3] (1861–1865) brought freedom to the slaves of the South. But freedom alone did not solve their problems. Instead, freedom introduced them to many problems that they had never had to face as slaves. Once free, most of them had nothing except the clothes on their backs—no livestock for draft animals, no seeds for food, no land to farm, no houses to live in, no money. And most of them did not know how to read or write.

As slaves, African Americans [4] had not been allowed to attend schools. In fact, after Nat Turner's [5] slave revolt in 1831, North Carolina had an antiliteracy law that made teaching any black person, enslaved or free, to read and write a crime. Some continued to learn from various sources in secret, but they faced severe punishment if they were found out.

The first schools for freed people

During the Civil War, when enslaved persons heard that Union troops were approaching, many took any opportunity to escape. When Union forces led by General Ambrose Burnside [6] captured the Outer Banks [7] in 1862, hundreds of coastal slaves sought protection behind Union lines. Burnside put Vincent Colyer, an army chaplain, in charge of taking care of these escaped slaves. Camps were set up for them, and many were given jobs helping Union soldiers build forts.

Colyer knew that just helping the escaped slaves with their temporary daily needs was not enough. They needed preparation for lives as free citizens after the war—they needed educations. So, on July 23, 1863, Colyer established the first school for freed people in North Carolina. This school was on Roanoke Island [8]. Another was soon opened in New Bern. Both were taught by soldiers who volunteered their free time.

Schooling assistance from the North

After the war, every former slave became a learner, every person a teacher, every place a school—or so it seemed. With torn spelling books and reading primers in hand, freed people gathered in homes, in cellars, in sheds, in corners of meetinghouses, even under shade trees during breaks from working their crops. African American children learned from teachers, and older family members learned from them. In one classroom, a six year-old girl sat alongside her mother, her grandmother, and her great-grandmother, who was over seventy-five years old. All of them were learning to read for the first time.

For some, their goal was to read the Bible. Others wanted to protect themselves from scalawags [9] and carpetbaggers and

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former masters by reading for themselves rather than having to trust others to read for them.

Schools were sponsored by private aid societies and benevolent societies from the North such as the American Missionary Association (AMA) [10] and the National Freedmen's Relief Association. Sabbath schools, night schools, and privately sponsored schools also taught freed people.

In addition, many schools were established by the Freedmen's Bureau [11], a United States government agency that tried to help freed people make the transition to life as free citizens, to assist the "industrial, social, intellectual, moral and religious improvement of persons released from slavery." The bureau built schoolhouses for African Americans and helped pay for teachers and supplies.

Challenges for Ashley

The Reverend Samuel S. Ashley had come to North Carolina from Massachusetts as a teacher sponsored by the AMA. He helped establish schools for freed people in Wilmington [12] and, after the war, decided to stay in North Carolina. He was sent as a delegate to the state Constitutional Convention of 1868 [13] and campaigned for a system of free schools for all. He believed that the people of North Carolina could not make wise decisions about their futures unless they became more educated—"An intelligent people constitute a powerful state." Ashley later became the state's first superintendent of public schools under the new constitution.

His job was to get the state's new public school system up and running. He had to face shortages in money, teachers, schoolhouses, and textbooks. He also had to deal with the large number of children who were now in need of an education, both black and white.

Most whites did not want their children going to school with black children, and they demanded separate schools. Some whites fought the education of blacks with violence. A few schools were burned, and some white teachers who had come from the North to teach blacks were beaten. One white man was reported to have "attempted to set a savage dog" upon one female teacher from the North. Though the majority of white people in North Carolina were not violent, most of them resented northern teachers, thinking that they would disrupt southern society. They refused to associate with northern teachers, to give them board, or to lease them school space.

Assistance from Hood

Still, Ashley believed that African American children had just as much right to an education as white children. He decided to manage not one school system, but two—one for whites and one for blacks. He turned to the Reverend James Walker Hood [14] for help, naming him assistant superintendent.

Hood, an African American preacher who had moved to Cumberland County [15] from Pennsylvania, had also been a delegate to the Constitutional Convention on 1868. His first duty was to travel the state and gather information about its schools for blacks. While he discovered thousands of freed people in hundreds of schools, this was just a small fraction of the 330,000 former slaves in the state. Still, it was a good start. Freedom had brought many changes for blacks, and education was one key to making sure those changes were positive ones.

For Further Reading:

Butchart, Ronald E. 2010. *Schooling the freed people: teaching, learning, and the struggle for Black freedom, 1861-1876.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina.

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

Image Credit:

An 1868 engraving of "James's Plantation School" in North Carolina. This freedmen's school is possibly one of those established by Horace James on the Yankee or Avon Hall plantations in Pitt County in 1866. North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library.

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