A HISTORY OF NEGRO EDUCATION IN THE SOUTH

From 1619 to the Present

Henry Allen Bullock

Texas Southern University

HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, Massachusetts

1967
A History of Negro Education in the South

The inclination of certain owners to respond to the sheer challenge offered by a slave's brightness of mind and gift of talents gave added impetus to the invasion of the plantation society by sentimentalism. Many masters placed such slaves under the tutelage of master craftsmen. Henry Harris of Clarksdale, Mississippi, was sent by his master to an iron foundry in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where he learned to mold iron. The slave Gregory, who was reared in Charleston, South Carolina, was observed by his owner to have a love for tools. He was apprenticed to a master carpenter who taught him the skillful use of the hammer and saw. Frederick L. Olmsted noticed cases like these during his travels through the seaboard states. One slave he encountered, called “the watchman” by his owner, was entrusted with keys to all the store provisions of the plantation. He weighed and measured all the rations issued, supervised all the machines, and made all the machinery, including the steam engine. He acquired these skills when his master took him to a steam engine builder and paid $500 to have him trained as a machinist. Records show, however, that production was not always the aim of these training opportunities. The wills of many owners contained provisions for the education of their slaves and occasionally for their manumission.

It was not long before the growing number of highly trained slaves became redundant, exceeding the capacity of many owners to involve them in their productive enterprises. Consequently, these servants were often maintained as status symbols for their owners, who frequently found it necessary to provide some means of holding and supporting them. Out of the pressure of circumstances came a policy of “hiring out” slaves to employers who needed them. Although this policy was legally forbidden by every slave state, it was freely practiced, and instances of prosecution for this violation were extremely rare. Despite continued opposition, the practice of training slaves continued to make the plantation what Booker T. Washington called an “industrial school.” What was to become one of the most controversial movements in the entire history of Negro education was actually begun within a system officially committed to the policy that Negroes should not be educated at all.

The informality and permissiveness inherent in these practices reduced the rigors of plantation life and produced leadership within the Negro population. It fostered a higher self-concept among the slaves and, because of the many manumissions that resulted, led to the rise of an aggressive and mildly secure middle class within the free Negro population. Some of the slaves so favored by these educational opportunities managed to develop their own business enterprises. Lydia Maria Child, a former slave in South Carolina, cited one such example in her grandmother, whose talents had been observed and developed by her master.* What was more important, however, was that the permissiveness contributed to the development of a group of skilled workers within the free Negro and slave populations. This fact is clearly evidenced by the number who were employed in skilled occupations during 1848. Using the industrial census of Charleston, Phillips showed that free Negroes were employed in all but eight of the fifty occupations composing the skilled group, and slaves were employed in all but thirteen. Negroes were fairly dominant as carpenters and joiners, barbers, hairdressers, and bankers. Slaves represented between 47 and 67 percent of all such employed workers in the area.

By the opening of the nineteenth century, permissiveness had eroded the plantation society’s rational policy, and new educational opportunities had opened for a select group of slaves. As an expression of the emotional needs and rugged individualism of the planter class, the institution of slavery had become infected with a form of indulgence that was eventually to create an educated group of slaves who would supply a leadership on behalf of their own freedom.

A familial pattern that placed household servants in direct personal contact with the master class and outside the direct restrictions of the slave laws developed. And, it should be added, this kind of relaxed sociocultural setting was not infrequently available to many of the slaves on the larger plantations of the South. The practice of keeping some of them close to the “Big House” was common. In the case of Michan v. Wyatt, for example, evidence

---

* After Lydia Maria Child's grandmother was trained as a cook and seamstress, she was allowed to go into business for herself and to use the profits to clothe herself and her children. She eventually accumulated enough funds to purchase her freedom. See Lydia Maria Child, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (Boston, 1861), p. 12.
showed that Leah Michan was very much attached to certain slaves and reared most of them in the dwelling with her own children. Evidence in the case of Randall v. Lang revealed that a slave boy was born and reared in the family of the owner. Some slaves slept in the same room with their owners in order to be handy for any need that might arise. Selected slave girls were the almost constant companions of the little mistresses to whose whims they catered, and body servants were equally inseparable from their masters, who indulged them as a kind of luxury. Although one could hardly build a case for slavery as a bed of roses, it was probably this relaxed setting that prompted Simon Phillips, an ex-slave from the Bryant Watkins’ plantation in Alabama, to reflect, “Then there were the special privileges that made it so worthwhile being a servant on the old plantation.” W. Austin Steward, a slave for twenty-one years, recalled in 1859 that the slaves of Colonel Alexander were always better fed, better clad, and had greater privileges than any he knew in the Old Dominion. “And, of course,” he added, “the patrol had long had an eye on them, anxious to flog some of those ‘pampered niggers’ who were spoiled by the indulgence of a weak owner.”

Historians have been inclined to underrate the sociohistorical significance of these patterns of master-slave relationships. Such relationships were more than instances of sheer physical proximity and the availability of slaves for exploitation by their masters; they carried a degree of personal intimacy that reached beyond the level of blood mixture and miscegenation into the area of cultural diffusion and acculturation. They constituted a way of life that transformed many Negro children into personality types quite unlike those prescribed by the rational order. There was a closeness of mind involved in them and a social nearness which helped give some of these children a special self-image—a feeling of worth and superiority. Slaves of the more wealthy usually referred to themselves as belonging to “quality folks,” and established within the Negro American subculture in the South a tradition of looking down upon poorer white people.

In many instances psychological identification with the master class and its high-toned ways was firmly internalized by those slaves who had access to these special experiences. There were actual cases in which some, influenced by persistent intimacy with their owners and their families, became very much like the quality folk with whom they lived. For example, Julie, the slave nurse in the family of William Alexander Hoke, was reared like the other girls of the Hoke family. She was married to a mulatto boy from the same plantation, and the ceremony was held in the Episcopal Church “in a big white-style wedding.” Accepted as a family member by all the Hokes, Julie embarrassed the family and fell from grace when she later shouted in a Negro church.

Neatness of dress and elegance of appearance quickly found their way into the value systems of personal servants, for the women who served in personal attendance to a mistress were given sound advice along these lines. Indeed, some of them learned so well that advising the little mistress about her appearance became one of their duties. Assimilation in some instances was so complete that a slave could pass for white under the banner of master-class demeanor unless betrayed by his complexion or someone’s knowledge of his condition. A mulatto slave girl purchased at Louisville and reared on the Affleck plantation in Texas ran away to the nearby town of Bremham, where she registered as a white woman. After receiving all the courtesies usually accorded an aristocratic Southern woman, she was pursued by her master and was returned to the bondage from which she had temporarily escaped. She never dropped her aristocratic demeanor, however. Though sold to another family and married off to their servant, she was later freed and lived to serve as hostess to her former master, who visited her at her home in Mississippi. To slaves like these, being white or being special was the only life they really knew. They could not all be “Sambos.”

Gradually and inescapably, the indulgence of their masters led many to literacy. Contrary to the implied assumptions of Stanley Elkins and Roger Bastide, personality results not from a one-way impact of a cultural setting upon the individual, who passively reflects its imprint, but from the interplay—a game, so to speak—between the child and those who train him. Many favored slaves wanted to be the quality people with whom they identified. They thought that being able to read and write made them such, and
they used all the opportunities to become literate that the informal system afforded them. A house servant learned through necessity how to distinguish among the different newspapers his master ordered him to select, and slaves who served as foremen had to learn enough to keep a daily record. More generally, however, some slave children gained literacy through the "play schools" that grew out of the sociable relations maintained with their owner’s children. Though starting in play, these schools were often taken seriously by both “teacher” and “pupil.” Such was the case on a Mississippi plantation when a planter’s son aspired to make scholars out of some of his father’s slaves. Five of these slaves learned to read so well that they became ministers. Recalling her life as a girl in Virginia before the Civil War, Letitia Burwell reported that she and her sister operated one of these “schools,” and she emphasized the reward her father gave them for teaching arithmetic to the slave boys he was training as mechanics. Richard Sinquefield experienced similar educational advantages through the literary enthusiasm of the white children with whom he played.*

As the spread of antislavery literature among the slaves grew more threatening, the official camp of the plantation order fought back, but the practice of teaching slaves to read and write merely moved underground. In fact, a play school for teaching slaves operated within the household of the Honorable John Fouchereau Grimke, judge of the Supreme Court of South Carolina. His daughters, Sarah and Angelina, took delight in teaching slave children at night and against continued legal opposition. In describing how she operated her school, Sarah reported lightly: “The light was put out, the keyhole secured, and flat on our stomachs before the fire, with spelling books in our hands, we defied the laws of South Carolina.”

The spirit of defiance expressed by these children spread to the slaves themselves. Thomas H. Jones pursued the freedom of self through a spelling book which became his constant companion. The literary zeal of Frederick Douglass was nourished in this way.

* An account of these experiences may be found in Life and Times of Rev. Richard Anderson Sinquefield, 1832–1908 (Nashville, Tenn.: Sunday School Union, 1909). pp. 7-8.
bondage beyond the seas” and had made some progress in this direction. One century later, the Presbyterians took even bolder steps toward developing religious leadership among the Negroes by making formal training directly available to them. In 1740, Hugh Bryan, a wealthy and deeply pious Presbyterian, opened a Negro school in Charleston. By 1755, other schools had been opened in Virginia, where Presbyterians were teaching the slaves to read and spell. The movement even extended to college training for selected Negroes. Anxious to determine whether or not a Negro was capable of acquiring a college education, Presbyterians selected John Chavis of North Carolina as an experimental subject and sent him to Princeton University. After graduation he became a leading teacher in the South. However, once his school was established, Chavis was forced to make it available only to white children. He can be rightly classified as the first Negro to act as the headmaster of Southern children of aristocratic parentage. Many of his students became great leaders in government and politics. And, although Negro children were denied access to his scholarship, he did prove that Negroes were capable of acquiring a college education and that this kind of education for them could be profitable.

Educational work among the slaves was considerably augmented by other religious groups. Dr. Thomas Bray of England, organizing the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel near the opening of the eighteenth century, raised funds, aggregated teachers, and established schools for slaves and Indians in Charleston, Savannah, and other parts of Georgia. The Southern Quakers soon joined Dr. Bray’s associates in providing the rudiments of an educational system under the slave regime. Beginning merely as a missionary gesture aimed at improving the conditions of the slave under bondage, the Friends soon moved to a more liberal position of absolute adherence to the philosophy of radical abolitionism. The years between 1764 and 1785 marked the period of their most aggressive campaign. They established their first school in Virginia, where they began with 108 pupils who stood at a variety of academic levels. They founded a second school at Gravelly Run and by 1808 had instituted a trustee system by which slaves could receive individualized instruction on a familial basis, followed by eventual manumission.

These educational opportunities, like all the others developed for Negroes prior to the Civil War, were neither available to all the slaves nor firmly established as an acceptable part of the official Southern society. They were privileges gained principally by household servants still under the slave regime or by the free Negroes who had escaped it.

Out of this indulgence and stealth there had developed for Negroes a greater trend toward freedom and a leadership that would keep the trend alive, though not always in great force. A free Negro population was allowed to grow up outside the walls that held the slaves. Between 1790 and 1860, this population had increased at rates significantly higher than the slave population. It expanded from 32,523 or 4.7 percent of the total Negro population in the South in 1790 to 238,346 or 6.3 percent in 1860. And most of this increase was concentrated in those areas of the South where informal patterns of interracial permissiveness had been the most prevalent. Considerable interbreeding between the master and slave classes had resulted in a sizable mulatto population that included many who had apparently gained their manumission through the conscience of their white parentage. Some had been freed through master-class indulgence, and, of course, intermarriage between free Negroes had resulted in free births. Notwithstanding its source of origin, however, the free Negro population of the South gradually came to constitute a threat to the region’s official way of life.

Of even greater threat was the literate and articulate Negro leadership that permissiveness had allowed to develop. This leadership was sometimes crude and bold, at other times more sophisticated and subtle. But at all times it was able to keep the official society off balance and on a collision course with the antislavery sentiments that were developing both within and outside the South. The Negroes in Charleston, for example, after reading the anti-slavery debates of the Missouri Compromise, became emboldened by the attacks upon slavery that it implied and revolted in an effort to effect the institution’s extermination. They found their
leader in Denmark Vesey, an educated Negro who had brought his ideas of freedom from Santo Domingo. They struck against their masters in the bloody insurrection of 1822. Although their attempt was crushed, there were to be others in other years and at other places led by Negroes who had gained some rudiments of education. David Walker, another Negro who had managed to acquire a high degree of literacy under slavery, emerged from the free Negro population of Wilmington, North Carolina, to use his knowledge against the existing regime. He published his Appeal in 1829 and through it urged all the slaves of the South to rise up against their masters. In a subtle and prophetic style, he made this promise to those of his people still in bondage: "For although the destruction of the oppressors, God may not effect by the oppressed, yet the Lord our God will bring other destruction upon them, for not infrequently will he cause them to rise up against the others, to be split, divided, and oppress each other, and sometimes to open hostilities with sword in hand." 48 Copies of the Appeal were widely distributed among the slaves, causing an increase in their spirit of revolt. This is evidenced by Governor John Forsyth's communication to the Georgia legislature in which he attributed the seriousness of the insurrectionary movement to the distribution of this type of literature. 49 Two years after its distribution, although no evidence of connection has been found, Nat Turner, the mystical and literate slave rebel of Virginia, led his famous insurrection against the slave masters. Despite stringent measures instituted by the formal plantation society, the fire of insurrection continued to smolder, kept alive by various kinds of appeals that were sent into the South by the educated Negroes who had left the area.

Probably the heaviest blow that Negroes struck against slavery came from those slaves who had gained their education under bondage and who had escaped North to join the antislavery movement. Through their personal narratives, the leaders of this movement found ready-made materials for their propaganda machines. William Wells Brown, Thomas H. Jones, Lunceford Lane, Frederick Douglass, Austin Steward, and the Reverend Richard Anderson Sinquefield are examples of those who had acquired their education while slaves and had escaped to serve the antislavery movement in this capacity. The works they published through the antislavery press and the speeches they made from the antislavery platform were used not only as proof that Negroes could learn but also as a dramatization of the evils of slavery that was more graphic than any other type of antislavery literature. The activities of these Negro leaders make one conclusion clear: Many opportunities for the personal emancipation of the Negro American had come into being as early as 1860 with the unintentional help of those who dominated Southern society at that time.

EMERGENCY FUNCTIONS DURING THE CIVIL WAR

With the coming of the Civil War, the Negro's developing educational opportunities moved into a new cycle. A series of historical events began to push them from underground and to establish them as an official part of the new order imposed upon the South after its military defeat. But here, again, the change was not the result of initial intent.

As one looks back over these decades, it is apparent that the trend was operative in the South as early as the middle of the last century. Even by that time the continuous invasion of the official system by unofficial permissiveness had weakened the formal order and rendered it vulnerable to the pressures of a war in the making. Out of the rationality of societal organization had come an incompatibility between North and South that would make violent conflict between the two regions inevitable. Their diverse courses of economic development had removed all bases for interregional companionship at the equalitarian level. 50 The credit system upon which the South's agrarian economy had rested was itself the result of Northern industrial profits, causing the major portion of the plantation class to resent this dependency strongly. The system of slave labor so important to the Southern economy was causing the nation's tide of European immigrants to veer away from the South westward in the direction of national expansion. These newcomers, therefore, were continuing to swell the population of the free states and to create an imbalance in congressional representation un-


20. For examples of laws prohibiting masters from allowing slaves to hire their own time, see V. Alton Moody, "Slavery on Louisiana Sugar Plantations," Louisiana Historical Quarterly 7:4-11 (April 1923); H. M. Robinson, A Digest of the Penal Laws of the State of Louisiana (New Orleans, 1841); and Oliver H. Prince, A Digest of the Laws of the State of Georgia (Athens, Ga., 1857).


24. Armstrong, Old Massa's People, p. 34.

25. Austin Steward, Twenty-one Years a Slave and Forty Years Freeman (Rochester, N.Y.: Allings and Cory, 1859), p. 33.

26. William Alexander Hoke Papers (undated), Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library.


35. Edwards and Broughton, 1891), pp. 21-22; and Olmsted, Journey in the Seaboard States, pp. 196-197.

36. Armstrong, Old Massa's People, p. 104.

37. Nehemiah Adams, Southside View of Slavery, p. 32.


40. Luther P. Jackson, "Religious Development of Negroes in Virginia," Journal of Negro Education 16:176 (January 1937); John Rankin, Letters on American Slavery (Boston: Garrison and Knapp, 1838), p. 31; Charles C. Jones, A Catechism of Scripture and Doctrinal Practice for Familial and Sabbath Schools (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1825). Though planned for oral instruction, Jones's Catechism was used by slaves who were learning to read secretly.


42. Woodson, Education of the Negro, pp. 113-114.


46. Despite the difference in opinions expressed by historians who attempt to account for the origins of the Civil War, contrasting political, social, and cultural values seem to constitute causes on which there is general agreement. See Kenneth M. Stampp, "What Caused the Civil War," in Richard W. Leopold and Arthur S. Link, eds., Problems in American History (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1952), pp. 372-425.

