

"The school houses are crowded, and the people are clamorous for more"

The results of emancipation in the United States of America. By a committee of the American freedmen's union commission. (New York, c. 1867), pp. 28–31.

As you read...

The American Freedmen's Union Commission was organized in the North and its members raised money, organized schools, recruited teachers, and collected textbooks to educate African Americans in the South. At the end of the Civil War, many people in the North wanted to help rebuild the South and to assist Southerners — white and black — in building a new life. As one of the largest northern organizations working in the South, the Commission worked closely with the U.S. Government's Freedmen's Bureau.

This excerpt from a Commission pamphlet describes the work of the Commission and the desire of formerly enslaved African Americans for education.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Where did the Commission set up schools? What buildings did they use?
2. How did the Commission believe that schools for African Americans would be funded in the future?
3. What were the conditions of the schools?
4. What types of classes did the Commission offer at its schools?
5. What dangers did the teachers and students face? Why do you think there was hostility towards these schools?
6. The Commission found that not all white southerners were hostile to their activities. Where was the Commission successful and what did they believe accounted for that success?
7. Why do you think formerly enslaved people were so eager to attend school?

Emerging from their bondage, the negroes in the very beginning manifested the utmost eagerness for instruction, and their hunger was met by a corresponding readiness on the part of the people of the North to make provision for it.... No co-operation or sympathy was extended to these educational efforts by the Southern people. On the contrary, they had to contend, at first, against their deep-seated prejudices, and bitter hostility. They were regarded as an unwarrantable encroachment upon their peculiar rights, and derided as an absurd attempt to elevate the negro. The school-houses were, in several instances burned,

and school teachers mobbed and driven away, and, even until a very late period the teachers were unable to secure board¹ in reputable white families, and were subjected to every kind of taunt and ridicule. “Nigger teacher” was one of the most opprobrious epithets that the Southern vocabulary furnished....

The educational progress has been very rapid and very marked. The first schools were held in deserted churches, in abandoned hospitals, in private houses temporarily occupied by military authority, in old sheds, under the shadow of a tree, and even, in one case, in a dismantled bombproof. The books, in the beginning, were little better than the buildings, the schools depending largely upon voluntary contributions of old and sometimes obsolete school books from the North. In many of the larger places the Freedmen’s schools are now regularly graded, beginning with the primary and ascending to the normal. The teachers are, many of them, among the best in the country, and some of the schools are not inferior to those of the Northern towns and cities. In the District of Columbia, the colored schools, fostered and sustained by the voluntary contributions of the friends of the freedmen, are equal to any in the land.

The effect of these schools upon the public sentiment of the South has been very marked. Many Southern church organizations have taken up the work of education, at least so far as to pass resolutions in favor of its prosecution. Probably only the lack of means prevents their vigorous participation. In several of the States, laws have been passed looking to the establishment of the free school system. In the District of Columbia, the school tax on the colored population is henceforth to be appropriated for their schools. The same is true in the States of Maryland and of Florida. In Tennessee, Missouri and Western Virginia, a free and impartial system of education has been provided for by law, but for want of necessary funds has not yet been put in efficient operation. In the Carolinas, leading men are working for the establishment of a similar system. In Georgia, the colored people have formed themselves into an educational association, with the purpose of establishing schools in every county in the State; in other regions of the South, individuals have contributed of their means for the maintenance of schools in special localities; while in the very States and towns where, a year ago, a “nigger school marm” was the object of undissembled contempt, applications are continually made for situations as teachers by Southern people desirous of engaging in this work. Wherever these schools have been longest established, there the prejudice between North and South is least virulent; and wherever they have not yet gone, there this sectional prejudice still continues with unabated vigor. The eagerness of the negroes to learn can scarcely be overstated. The school houses are crowded, and the people are clamorous for more.

These schools are of four kinds — the day school, for children; the night school, (often conducted by the same teachers,) for adults; the industrial school, where women and children are taught sewing and other household arts; and Sunday schools. The interest of the freedmen is indicated by the facts that the average attendance is fully equal to that of the whites in the Northern cities; that the pupils beg that the work may not be intermitted for the necessary summer vacation; that, ordinarily, suspension from the privileges of the school is the severest punishment which the teacher needs to inflict; and that out of their poverty the colored people have made so large contributions for the purchase of land, the erection of buildings, and the support of teachers. More than half the schools in the South are sustained in part by the freedmen....

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Notes

1. This is *board* as in *room and board* or *boarding* — a place to stay and food to eat.