

The Struggle for Equality of Educational Opportunity

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Black people have struggled for quality education during their more than 300 years in America, first as slaves, than as segregated persons, and now.

From where did Black people get their burning desire for education? Actually, it is no accident that Blacks today see hope for survival and development in education. Africans were among the earliest builders of great civilizations. From as far back as pre-history in Thebes, there was much temple building. Many of these temples were what we today call colleges. It was to African Thebes that scholars from foreign lands came to study. It was from African Thebes that religious ideas and architectural designs spread abroad. The ancient religion of Thebes gave birth to science, art, engineering, architecture, economics, and politics. It gave birth also to history, writing, music, medicine, dance, philosophy, and astrology.

Also in Africa, in a town called Memphis, during the predynastic period of about 4500 B.C., stone was first used in building, hieroglyphic writing was invented, the great Pyramids were built, and stone quarrying perfected.

Likewise, learning flourished among the Blacks of West Africa. One of the principal centers of learning was Timbuktu, the Sudanese metropolis. At the head of the educational system at Timbuktu was the world famous University of Sankore, the center of intellectual life. Students from all West Africa and scholars from Asian and European countries traveled to the University of Sankore because it contained large and valuable collections of manuscripts in several languages.

It is no wonder then, that laws were passed making it a crime to teach slaves to read, since whites were dealing with a people who traditionally had a passion for learning. If slaves had been able to read, they would have read the Constitution which embraces the tenets of freedom and liberty and seen the inconsistencies in the nation's behavior. They would have recognized it as a contradiction in practice. Blacks would have read newspaper accounts of insurrections and seen the advertisements for the numerous escaped slaves and more of them would have revolted than did. They would have read the slave narratives and

David Walker's Appeal to the Colored People of the World, published in pamphlet form in 1829. This fine piece of literature, written by a Black man, called for Black men to revolt and murder their owners. It frightened whites so much that they pushed for new laws to restrict Blacks in ever increasing ways. So, by and large, slaves were kept illiterate as a mechanism of control. But some slaves learned to read anyway, as education went underground. In some cases, slaveowners taught their most favored slaves. As an outgrowth of this relationship between slaves and slaveholders, many household slaves were taught to be carpenters, artisans, blacksmiths, weavers, seamstresses, construction workers, and machinists. In fact, Blacks used all of the opportunities to become literate in their new world that the indulgence and permissiveness of some slaveholders afforded. One hundred years later, the Presbyterians gave formal training to Blacks in an effort to develop religious leadership among those in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1740 and in Virginia in 1755. One, John Chavis, a Black of North Carolina, was sent to Princeton University and later became a teacher of white children in the South.

Other religious groups also established schools for slaves. Nevertheless, educating slaves was by no means a universal practice under the slave system. Generally, education was a privilege sometimes gained by household servants or by free Blacks.

This education of slaves was to betray the intentions of those who engaged in it, for education was to become a means of Blacks liberating themselves. As an outgrowth of this practice of educating some slaves, a middle class was established within the Black population as more and more slaves became educated and subsequently manumitted. Consequently, many ex-slaves were able to establish their own business enterprises using the skills learned. By the beginning of the 19th Century, this skilled group became the proponents of freedom for their people.

Many Black participated in the establishment of schools for Black children. In the North, Blacks themselves established a school in Boston in 1800 and employed two Harvard University men as instructors. The school continued until Boston opened an elementary school for Blacks in 1820. Miss Deaveaux, a Black educator, opened a private school in 1838 in secret and eluded slaveholders for more than a quarter of a century. Mrs. Mary D. Price established a school in New Orleans in 1858. Another pioneer Black teacher was Mrs. Mary Peake, who set up a school in 1861. Hers was the first Black school of the South to have the legal authority and protection of Union guns. Later, Miss L. Humphrey established an evening school in 1862 and developed many Black teachers for the emergency schools set up for the freedmen.

Educated Blacks spoke against slavery in their speeches and published works. They provided leadership in insurrection after insurrection. A few in this cate-

gory were Denmark Vesey, David Walker, William Wells Brown, and Frederick Douglass.

During the Civil War and Reconstruction, masses of Blacks began moving from the plantations into the cities. Thus, the Emancipation Proclamation, which became final on January 1st, 1863, simply caused more bondsmen to seek the protection of the invading Union forces. This concentration of refugees within Union lines precipitated immediate official action since it hampered military operations. Therefore, General W. T. Sherman and other generals made public appeals for organized emergency help for the recently freed slaves. The appeals emphasized providing for physical wants and the establishment of a system of instruction to enable Blacks to support and govern themselves.

Benevolent societies were established in some cities in the North and Midwest in 1862 to provide clothing, food, money, religious leaders and teachers for the freedmen. These benevolent societies and church organizations established a freedmen's school system.

As an outgrowth of this activity, Congress created an agency in March, 1865, called the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands to centralize the responsibility of caring for the freedmen. This agency, which became known as the Freedmen's Bureau, was located within the War Department and the President appointed General Oliver O. Howard as its first commissioner. This effort gave official backing to the establishment of a complete school system

for the freedmen.

The freedmen themselves contributed \$672,989 in taxes and tuition through the Freedmen's Bureau and donated approximately \$500,000 through their church organizations. Also, despite their poverty, 1867 records show that freedmen of Louisiana, Tennessee, and Virginia had entirely supported 46 schools, had contributed to the support of 42 others, and had purchased 33 buildings through their own resources.

Funds from the benevolent societies, religious groups and from Blacks with some money grew larger and helped to support the institutionalization of the freedmen's educational system. First, common schools were established, then high schools came into being as the school movement gained momentum, so that by 1868 the school system was virtually completed. By 1869, the regular school attendance in the freedmen's schools had reached over one hundred thousand Black children at great sacrifice to their families who could have used their labor on the farms to help produce food for their families. This kind of sacrifice was quite common among destitute Blacks who believed that education was their only hope for survival.

HIGHER EDUCATION

As the school system stabilized, so too, did the methods and programs of instruction. Individualized instruction according to the needs of each pupil evolved into groupings around reading levels. The curriculum was a classical one which emphasized



We salute the contributions of Black people

to Oregon and to the nation

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