

INTRODUCTION

Before the Civil War there wasn't a free school in the state, but under the Reconstruction government, we built them in every county. . . .

We paid to have every child, Negro and white, schooled equally.

Today, they've cut down on the educational program, and discriminated against the Negro children, so that out of every educational dollar, the Negro child gets only 30 cents.

—GEORGE WASHINGTON ALBRIGHT, *The Daily Worker*, 1937

In June 1937, at the age of ninety-one, an ex-slave from Holly Springs, Mississippi, by the name of George Washington Albright was interviewed by the *Daily Worker* regarding his legislative and educational activities during and after the Civil War.¹ Albright proffered the above statement, and his intentions seemed unmistakable. Cognizant of Mississippi blacks' existing educational opportunities and their vulnerable and denigrated status, he wanted to inform the public of the important contributions African Americans—in particular former slaves—played in the establishment of Mississippi's first comprehensive tax-supported public school system. Albright knew firsthand that the status of African Americans in the decade following slavery and in contemporary Jim Crow Mississippi were markedly different. Prior to the end of the Reconstruction era and the rise of de jure segregation, African Americans in Mississippi viewed the initial years of emancipation optimistically and had rights that extended beyond second-class citizenship.² For nearly a decade after the war, they voted, attended school, became landowners, determined and negotiated their working conditions, and were leaders and contributors in their local communities, counties, state, and nation.

As an active agent in the processes promoting education in postwar Mississippi, Albright recalled the foremost public school initiatives he and the

other black delegates in attendance at the state's 1868 constitutional convention wanted for Mississippi. Public schools in Mississippi were to be free, all-inclusive, and, most important, equitable, irrespective of a child's gender, race, class, or previous condition of servitude.³ In attempting to achieve this aim, Albright was convinced that African Americans of his generation—through their determination, appreciation of the value of education, and limited resources—collectively laid the groundwork for the rise of universal education in postwar Mississippi. They provided the financial resources and “sweat equity” for the establishment and continuation of the first schools for African Americans, served as teachers, solicited northern-born teachers to migrate to Mississippi, and pressured state legislators to consider their educational ambitions and needs as newly freed citizens. During the war, Albright, himself barely literate and no more than eighteen years old, served as one of the first teachers for formerly enslaved African Americans. As the Civil War commenced, Albright taught his first class under a shade tree in Holly Springs, then in an abandoned barn, and thereafter in a church. “The state had no teachers,” he contended, “until we brought in teachers from the North, men and women, white and Negro.”⁴ To Albright, this generation of formerly enslaved African Americans was not a powerless citizenry forced, like their descendants, to accept the laws and dehumanizing status quo of Jim Crow Mississippi. On the contrary, formerly enslaved African Americans in Mississippi were an empowered group that contributed to the pursuit of education not only on their own behalf but for all children in postbellum Mississippi.

The editors of the *Daily Worker* virtually dismissed Albright's recollections of his and his generation's activities in the first decade after slavery. While the Communist editors thought Albright's commentary to be quite animated, they questioned the accuracy of his memories, especially regarding the legislative and educational impact former slaves had had on Mississippi's postbellum political economy.⁵ However, Albright's retrospection concerning the influence formerly enslaved African Americans had on public education in Mississippi—despite his occasional lapses in memory—was sharply accurate. It epitomized W. E. B. Du Bois's assertion that “the first great mass movement for public education at the expense of the state, in the South, came from Negroes” and that “public education for all at public expense, was, in the South, a Negro idea.”⁶

Contemporary scholarship indicates that during and after the Civil War,

educational opportunities for African Americans throughout the South arose primarily from the efforts and enthusiasm of African Americans themselves.⁷ This was especially true in Mississippi. Prior to the end of the war, before the concerted arrival of northern religious or freedmen aid organizations, such as the American Missionary Association or the Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands (better known as the Freedmen's Bureau), African Americans in Mississippi began organizing schools, wherever possible, and educating themselves. As early as 1862, free, freed, fleeing, and enslaved African Americans established churches and schoolhouses for individual and collective improvement. Literate free and freed African Americans in Mississippi served as these schools' first teachers, and previously enslaved African Americans— young and old, male and female — were their pupils. By 1868, countless missionary organizations, teachers, and government and military officials had migrated to Mississippi intent upon educating, uplifting, and protecting former slaves. These grassroots initiatives proved to be the origins of universal education for African Americans in Mississippi as well as the catalyst for the state's first comprehensive tax-supported public school system, inaugurated in the autumn of 1870.

Despite the proactive demeanor of formerly enslaved African Americans, their educational history in post-Civil War Mississippi and their contributions amid this development remain virtually untold. In 1979, historian William Leon Woods deduced that "historians who have concerned themselves with Mississippi during Reconstruction have written very little about black education in the state."⁸ Neither James Garner, nor Vernon Lane Wharton, nor William C. Harris—the state's foremost postbellum historians—devoted much attention to the evolution of African American education following the Civil War. Garner and Wharton were more concerned with the political and economic affairs African Americans and whites in Mississippi wrestled with following the Civil War than with the probable role education played in dealing with these affairs. William C. Harris, being more selective, focused on the political battles waged among President Andrew Johnson, Congress, and Mississippi's postwar legislatures over the readmission of Mississippi into the Union. In his immense 1979 publication, *The Day of the Carpetbagger: Republican Reconstruction in Mississippi*, Harris did include a chapter on the rise of public schools in the early 1870s under Republican rule. This account, however, did not specifically consider the educational history of African Americans in Mississippi and, similarly to his earlier publications, made very

little mention of how acquiring an education, or even desiring its rudiments, assisted formerly enslaved black Mississippians in their postbellum experiences.⁹

Nevertheless, moderate but meaningful scholarship does exist concerning the origins and history of schools for African Americans in postbellum Mississippi. In 1918, Stuart Grayson Noble wrote the first, and to this date only, history of African American education in postbellum Mississippi, entitled *Forty Years of the Public Schools in Mississippi: With Special Reference to the Education of the Negro*.¹⁰ His work chiefly described the educational policy considerations associated with the rise of public schools for African Americans between 1870 and 1910. Noble's educational history accompanied numerous early twentieth-century monographs to make mention of schools established for formerly enslaved African Americans in Mississippi during this era; the majority of these publications can be found in the periodical *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society*, edited by Franklin L. Riley. These early histories of Reconstruction provide piecemeal analysis and evidence regarding the policies and persons endeavoring in Mississippi in the name of African American education. They also provide, in much greater detail, information on the persons and organizations utterly opposed to African American education—such as local officials and the Ku Klux Klan—and the tactics they used to deter, and in some cases eradicate, schools established for former slaves and their children.

Whereas these early histories are informative, they are also loaded with glaring and immediate problems that diminish the reliability of their analysis and assessment of the Reconstruction era and the origins of schools for African Americans in Mississippi. All are outdated—some over eighty years old—but more important, the interpretations presented in the vast majority would be deemed patronizingly racist, or at the bare minimum antiblack, by contemporary standards. Evident throughout these histories are personal biases against African Americans and a staunch disapproval of the opportunities that African Americans gained with the downfall of slavery and the overall reconstruction of the South. They praised the tactics, even the violence, used to prevent African Americans from purchasing land, voting, becoming statesmen, or attending school; they penned their discontent of black self-sufficiency, the Freedmen's Bureau, northern-born teachers, and the Republican Party; and they belittled the policies, practices, and ideologies that seemed to challenge the doctrine of white supremacy and the eti-

quette and power structure upon which the white South was built. Authors of these early histories articulated their own personal cynicism regarding African Americans. They were certain formerly enslaved African Americans were inherently unable to govern themselves as freedpeople. Few expressed this sentiment more vehemently than W. H. Hardy in his 1904 Reconstruction history of east and southeast Mississippi. While he felt the law should protect African Americans' personal rights, property, and happiness, Hardy was convinced that this could only be achieved under the leadership and guiding hand of southern whites because of the "inherent" limitations of blacks.

The negro has *no fitness for wise self-government*, and the thirty-five years of freedom and education that has *intervened* show that *he cannot be fitted* to share with the white man in governing a republic. . . . The negro *will never* be permitted to share in governing the white people or his own people because he *is not capable* of governing, and *centuries may elapse before he reaches that stage of evolution* which will fit him for self-government. [italics added]¹¹

Under the editorship of Franklin L. Riley, the publications of the Mississippi Historical Society offered a very pejorative portrayal of African Americans in Mississippi and of those engaged in the process of educating or assisting them. The historians represented formerly enslaved African Americans as little more than passive, indiscriminate recipients of a corrupt school system imposed upon them by underhanded Republicans and overzealous northern-born missionary schoolmarmes.¹² To state the obvious, such illustrations of the era, and of the legislative and educational contributions of Mississippi blacks following the war, were quite different from the recollections proffered by George Washington Albright.

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historians of this era and region felt it their duty to construct a past that rationalized the actions—no matter how inhumane or unjustifiable—of white southerners and the overall subjugation of African Americans within an oppressive system of segregation known as Jim Crow. Historian Leon Litwack deduced that this generation of Reconstruction traditionalists and historians “rummaged in the past to find a history that would best serve the needs of the present, and professors and teachers went on to miseducate the next several generations in a prescribed version of reality.”¹³ These “histories,” or “propagandas of his-

tory” as W. E. B. Du Bois aptly described them, served to validate the rigid, brutal, and dehumanizing practices that the doctrine of white supremacy espoused and maintained so efficiently: de jure segregation and African American subservience well into the twentieth century.¹⁴

Few of these studies from the turn of the century presented an accurate description of the processes and persons that shaped southern Reconstruction or the rise of universal education for African Americans in Mississippi. As in other southern states following the Civil War, newly freed African Americans in Mississippi saw the earliest years of emancipation as a time of great promise and opportunity, including the chance to gain and exercise full citizenship—the legal right to vote, own land, and participate in all the duties, rights, and privileges afforded to civilians in society. They characterized education in similar fashion, and determined its acquisition to be essential in their pursuit of becoming citizens and obtaining equality and self-sufficiency. In *Trouble in Mind*, Leon Litwack—with precision and literary expertise—captured this collective sentiment among previously enslaved African Americans.

When black Southerners in 1865 staked out their claims to becoming a free people, they aspired to a better life than they had known, to a life once thought impossible to contemplate. They wanted what they had seen whites enjoy—the vote, schools, churches, legal marriages, judicial equity, and the chance not only to work on their own plots of land but to retain the rewards of their labor. During Reconstruction, they seized the opportunity to make these goals a reality, to re-order the post-bellum South. It was a time of unparalleled hope, laden with possibility, when black men and women acted to shape their own destiny.¹⁵

Albeit ignored or overlooked in much of the previous analysis, such drive, determination, and initiative established the first schools for African Americans—free or freed—in Mississippi, and were instrumental in assuring their continuation throughout the Reconstruction era. It challenged white Mississippians—especially the state’s planter and ex-slaveholding class—to reassess, even alter, their treatment and expectations of African Americans in slavery’s aftermath as schools for African Americans became an ever-increasing feature in the state’s landscape—grassroots schools at first, then public and private ones later on—and as African Americans, native born and

otherwise, quickly became lead officials in Mississippi's postbellum political economy.

Amid the events that ultimately shaped the rise of universal education for African Americans in Mississippi, ubiquitous tensions were deeply entwined in the racial segmentation of the state's political economy. Central to the rise of universal education for African Americans, not just in Mississippi, but throughout the postbellum South, was the question of what purpose schools for African Americans served, and as important, who would control them: southern blacks, southern whites, migrant northerners, or some combination of each group? As in the political and economic arenas, the perennial question "What shall we do with the Negro?" took center stage in the earliest formation of schools for African Americans in the South and became more pressing as the schools became more permanent. In Mississippi, this new "Negro problem" consumed the thoughts of all involved in the establishment of schools for African Americans and in the overall transition of slaves into freedpeople and citizens.

Between 1862 and 1875—the formative years of schools for African Americans in Mississippi—tensions over the general purpose of these schools and who would control them ran deep. Where most African Americans envisioned schools established by and for them as a chief means of achieving independence, equality, political empowerment, and some degree of social and economic mobility—in essence, full citizenship—there were many northerners assisting them who saw such expectations as unrealistic. Where Mississippi freedpeople further expected to live as independent landowners and possibly receive compensation for years of forced and unpaid labor, again most northerners among them assumed otherwise and expected African Americans to continue laboring for those who had previously enslaved them and their families, only this time as citizens laboring in a free market economy. These northern-born emissaries sought to control the first educational experiences of freed Mississippi blacks, convinced that former slaves were not capable of maintaining themselves. They envisioned the type of learning freed African Americans received would entail the moral and literacy lessons necessary for them to subsist and understand their new status as freedmen and freedwomen in a post-slave economy South.

White Mississippians, in general, disapproved of schools for African Americans and despised the new status and opportunities afforded to former