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How Reconstruction Created American Public Education

theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/12/reconstruction-education-black-students-public-schools/675816/

November 13, 2023

Freedpeople and their advocates persuaded the nation to embrace schooling for all.

By Adam Harris

Lenard Smith for The Atlantic

November 13, 2023

Editor's Note: This article is part of "On Reconstruction," a project about America's most radical experiment.

Before the Civil War, America had few institutions like Antioch College. Founded in Yellow Springs, Ohio, in 1850, Antioch was coed and unaffiliated with any religious sect; it was also the first college in the nation to hire a woman to serve on its faculty as an equal with her male colleagues. It was unquestionably progressive, and would not have been that way without its first president: Horace Mann.

Mann, the politician and education reformer from Massachusetts, sought to mold a certain kind of student: conscientious, zealous, inquisitive. For years, Mann had opposed slavery; he hoped his students would as well. He charged those he taught at Antioch to dedicate themselves to eradicating injustice with sedulous care. "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity," Mann told the graduating class of 1859.

Mary D. Brice was one of Mann's students at Antioch, and she was a true believer in Mann's vision. In December 1858, alongside her husband, Brice traveled 900 miles to New Orleans, to teach.

Brice found a city that was like no other in the antebellum South. In New Orleans, a small class of free Black people lived and worked as citizens alongside white people; they owned businesses and, in some cases, plantations. And if they were wealthy enough to afford tuition, or light-skinned enough to pass for white, they could attend school.

Yet the free Black New Orleanians who were neither wealthy nor light enough had few options. In 1865, Benjamin Rush Plumly, a white abolitionist politician who'd joined the Union army at the outset of the war, and who would eventually lead the Board of Education for the Department of the Gulf, described the antebellum situation in the region bluntly: "For the poor, of the free colored people, there was no school."

Brice, a deeply religious person, believed that God meant for her to create one. She opened "a school for colored children and adults" in September 1860, at the corner of Franklin and Perdido Streets, near present-day city hall. The effort was short-lived. In June 1861, two months after Confederate troops fired the first shots of the Civil War, Brice was forced to close the school.

But the war could not stop Mary Brice. By November of that year, she had moved to Magnolia Street and reopened her doors. Again she was shut down, this time more forcefully. Confederates began a terror campaign against the school, leaving signs outside her home: Death to nigger teachers, they declared. So Brice began teaching in secret, sneaking to her students' homes under cover of darkness.

By the end of April 1862, Union troops had captured New Orleans. Brice was now able to conduct her work without the constant threat of violence. With funding from northern missionary associations, other private teachers began to travel to New Orleans. The poor Black people of the city—including the formerly enslaved—wanted an education.

The educators' efforts were slow and piecemeal at first, but eventually, with federal assistance, they helped create the infrastructure for public education in Louisiana. There, and across the South, education reformers and abolitionists like Brice carried out Mann's vision for schools that were free and universal. The existence of public education today in the South—for all children—is largely their doing.

In the early days of the republic, the Founders often wrote and spoke about the need for an educated population. Yet schooling was typically reserved for the elite. Wealthy families hired private tutors, and those in the middle class sent their children to subscription schools (parents paid only for the period of time their students attended), where they learned the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Higher education was rarer still: Even into the late 1860s, only about 1 percent of 18-to-24-year-olds were enrolled in postsecondary schools. Before the Civil War, many children were limited to learning whatever their parents were able to teach them at home.

The idea of public common schools—that is, schools funded and organized directly by communities and free to most children—had been slow to take off, though Mann had been proselytizing for them since the 1830s. In time, his approach took root in the Northeast and crept into the rest of the country, but such schools were more typically found in cities than rural areas. White southerners, in particular, were skeptical of Mann's ideas. The contours of a slave society were fundamentally incompatible with widespread free education—public goods of many kinds were eyed with suspicion as potential tools of insurrection.

"Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity," Horace Mann told his students. Mary Brice was a true believer in Mann's vision.

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New Orleans, however, had a rich history of parochial schools. In 1841, the state legislature hoped to extend this tradition when it first approved funds for a public-school system in New Orleans, one of the oldest in the South. The schools there thrived—but they were available only to white students.

Education in the rest of Louisiana and the South was still rudimentary, even as the rest of the country made strides. In the years preceding the Civil War, Justin Morrill, a shopkeeper turned congressman from Vermont, tried to create a nationwide system for training workers by introducing a bill to give states land they could sell to fund colleges. The bill was opposed by southern congressmen wary of federal intervention in their states, and was ultimately vetoed by President James Buchanan.

After the war began, however, Morrill saw an opportunity. Southern lawmakers had been expelled from Congress for treason, and the nation was in need of skilled military minds. He reintroduced the bill in December 1861; the Morrill Act was signed by President Abraham Lincoln the following July. States in the North quickly began building land-grant universities.

Under the law, all southern states were barred from the program while in rebellion against the Union. But because New Orleans fell so early, the war presented an opportunity for the city. Major General Nathaniel Banks, the Union commander of the Department of the Gulf, issued General Order No. 38, which established a "Board of Education for Freedmen."

The smattering of schools that had been established for Black students by missionary associations and individual citizens, including Brice's, were quickly subsumed by this newly created board. The student rolls grew from an average of 1,422 in April 1864 to 9,571 by the end of the year. The board had established a foundation for education through a "unity of purpose and concert of action," Plumly, the chair of the board, wrote. "In nine months we have succeeded, against the grave obstacles incident to the beginning of so great an enterprise, in gathering under instruction half of the colored juvenile population in the State."

In 1865, Plumly released a report on the state of education in New Orleans, trumpeting his board's success in expanding schooling through the example of Brice, whose school "continued to thrive" under his board, where she was known as "an efficient and honored principal." Plumly's report quickly spread across the nation, and after Confederate General Robert E. Lee's surrender in April 1865, it served as a model for those who hoped to establish public education in the South. The reunification of the country would be an enormous task, and no one knew what would become of the millions of Black Americans who were now free citizens—not to mention the masses of white southerners who would need to be reintegrated into the nation. Perhaps, the thought went, education could help make citizens of both the white and Black poor.

On April 3, 1865, the *Chicago Tribune*, opining about the New Orleans project, noted that although many of the teachers struggled "with every manner of difficulty—insufficient accommodations—leaky sheds with ground floors," they were heartened by the fact that the school system had grown at such a rapid pace. The editors thought that the project might serve as a model for children, both white and Black, across the entire South.

"This is … but the beginning of a work which must spread over the entire Southern States, until both freed blacks, and the almost equally ignorant and even more degraded and vicious 'poor whites' have been brought within its christianizing and civilizing influences," the *Tribune* article read. The work of expanding the nation's schools no longer had to be "slow or tedious," it said, "but can be accomplished rapidly and encouragingly."

Outside New Orleans, however, there was less infrastructure for this kind of rapid transformation. Southern states were in the early process of being readmitted into the union, which required the states to disavow secession, repudiate war debts, and write new constitutions, and they could not yet access funds from the Morrill Act. If there was any hope for the sort of mass education that the *Tribune* editors believed was necessary, it would require private associations to step into the void. Groups such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the American Baptist Home Missionary Society began establishing primary schools and colleges, as well as schools to train teachers.

Major General Oliver Otis Howard, who became the commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau, was unsure that his agency had the authority or money to set up such institutions on its own. Yet he found the schools operated by military governments, such as Louisiana's under Major General Banks, to be a good model. "More than 200,000 people, old and young, in the insurrectionary states, have learned to read in the last three years," Howard wrote in a letter to the American Institute of Instruction. The letter was read aloud to the nearly 1,000 people who had gathered in New Haven, Connecticut, for a meeting of the group on August 9, 1865.

Howard worked to establish a network similar to Banks's, on a larger scale. Among the institutions founded in this effort were the Fisk Free Colored School, now Fisk University, and the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia, Booker T. Washington's alma mater. Howard also personally helped create Howard University, named in his honor, and later served as its president.

Because of its small budget, the bureau primarily operated in a supervisory role. Howard appointed superintendents to oversee the logistics of the schools, which included training and hiring teachers, ensuring that they had military protection to conduct their work safely, and providing schoolmasters with fuel and provisions.

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Most of this work was conducted out of the public eye, with missionary organizations in leadership roles. Even so, the bureau's efforts ran the risk of vexing white southerners, many of whom simply opposed the idea of educating Black people at all. White objections to the involvement of the Freedmen's Bureau in southern affairs often mentioned reports of ineptitude, poor administration, or outright fraud in its operations. Certainly, the administration of these new public schools left much to be desired. As Plumly wrote in his report about local schools, 1864 was a year "of great financial delays and embarrassments in this Department." Teachers would routinely go months without pay—and although Plumly noted that the educators rarely complained, conditions wore on their morale.

But, in the main, the white objection to the bureau was still, simply, its existence. "Even the most friendly studies of the Bureau have exaggerated its weaknesses and minimized its strengths," the Reconstruction historians John and LaWanda Cox wrote in 1953. "At the vital core of the Bureau's activities was the explosive and still unresolved problem of the nature of race relationships that should follow the forcible destruction of slavery." And as prominent physical reminders of the bureau's presence, schools became a target.

Mobs routinely burned buildings and churches where classes were held. In some cases, teachers and agents of the bureau were murdered. According to James D. Anderson, professor emeritus of education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, at least 126 public schools in Louisiana overseen by the bureau faced closure from the combination of white terrorism, financial woes, and incompetence.

Still, the bureau's work improved the educational outlook for millions of people who'd previously had no access to formal schooling. According to records gathered by Kamilah Stinnett, a specialist with the Smithsonian's Freedmen's Bureau Project, many Black people felt empowered to shape their education themselves. On March 17, 1866, a school official in Louisiana wrote to the bureau that Black residents were requesting Black instructors because they "object to paying [white] persons who continually insult them." In 1868, the board of a "colored" school in Henderson, North Carolina, asked the bureau for $300 "for assistance in finishing our school house."

Soon the number of people in the South entitled to common education was expanded even further. In 1867, Louisiana held an election for its constitutional convention; ultimately, aided by votes from freedmen and the disenfranchisement of former Confederates, 49 white delegates and 49 Black delegates were chosen. The constitution they produced guaranteed integrated public schools.

Across the South, state conventions established similar constitutional provisions, and states were subsequently readmitted to the union, which also allowed for the expansion of college access through federal programs such as the Morrill Act. By 1870, five years after the bureau was established, roughly 78 percent of children of all races between the ages of 5 and 14 were enrolled in public schools.

That would prove to be the high-water mark for most of the next century. When the bureau was dissolved by Congress in 1872, a large share of the federal government's oversight of common schools disappeared. Over the next decades, the educational foundation built by the Freedmen's Bureau endured a concerted assault from white supremacists. The so-called Redeemers, who sought to reclaim political power through coercion and violence, had objected to the Reconstruction constitutions from the beginning and fought to overthrow them. They also objected to integrated education. Faculty at the University of Mississippi revolted, arguing that they would rather resign and the university close its doors than educate a single Black student. State legislators in North Carolina went even further, stripping UNC of its funding and forcing it to close in 1871. When the university finally reopened in 1875, several avowed white supremacists sat on its new board of trustees, including one former leader of the state Ku Klux Klan.

That same year, members of Congress introduced legislation that would endow common schools via land grants, and expand Morrill's funding for land-grant colleges. Southern lawmakers helped kill the legislation, fearing that introducing additional federal money also meant introducing federal oversight of their activities. Such oversight of the public schools in New Orleans, for example, would have revealed that, in 1877, the state legislature reduced school-tax rates by 80 percent, dramatically cutting back resources for education.

Meanwhile, violent campaigns raged across the South. School buildings were once again burned. Educators were threatened. The network of common schools established by the Freedmen's Bureau remained, although diminished. Some struggled until they fell apart; others hobbled along, underfunded but resolved to continue the work of educating those who were being shut out of other institutions.

By 1890, Morrill had untethered his new bill to endow land-grant colleges from the common-school bill, and it passed—with a caveat. Colleges could not make a distinction of race in the admission of students; states could, however, operate separate colleges for Black students. They used a portion of the funds to endow schools born of necessity—Black colleges such as Tuskegee University, North Carolina A&T State University, and Langston University.

Six years later, after the mixed-race activist Homer Plessy sued for the right to ride Louisiana railway cars reserved for white people, the United States Supreme Court decided that state-mandated segregation laws did not violate the equal-protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. *Plessy v. Ferguson* ushered in the era of formalized segregation in the South, but America's higher-education infrastructure had already taken to the idea. Soon, its common schools formally did so as well.

When Mary Brice moved from Ohio, she hoped that she might be able to bring education to Black New Orleanians—and, in the spirit of Horace Mann, win a victory for humanity. The Freedmen's Bureau helped expand Brice's vision to the entire South through federal intervention, providing what became the political and administrative scaffolding for all public

education. But as remarkable as that achievement was, it could not withstand the extraordinary efforts by Redeemers to claim the benefits of such an education for white Americans and deny them to Black Americans.

On February 8, 1898, a group of white Louisiana Democrats gathered in Tulane Hall, in New Orleans, for a constitutional convention. The primary agenda item: to settle the question of whether Black men in the state should be allowed to vote. There was little question of what the convention's result would be.

The convention could not explicitly circumvent the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, but Democrats got as close as they could. They established a poll tax and literacy tests, and required voters to own property. Ernest B. Kruttschnitt, the president of the convention, bluntly admitted the purpose of these laws. "What care I whether it be more or less ridiculous or not?" he said to applause. "Doesn't it meet the case? Doesn't it let the white man vote, and doesn't it stop the negro from voting, and isn't that what we came here for?"

This Jim Crow constitution worked as intended. There were 127,923 Black voters on Louisiana's rolls in 1888; by 1910, that number had dropped to 730. From 1896 to 1900 alone, there was a 96 percent decline in registered Black voters. When the convention ended, Kruttschnitt returned to his day job—leading the New Orleans school board.

With the *Plessy* decision propping him up, Kruttschnitt launched what Donald E. DeVore and Joseph Logsdon, the authors of *Crescent City Schools*, called a "massive cutback in educational opportunities for black children." Under his leadership, the district cut public schooling for Black students down to grades one through five, and the board announced, as DeVore and Logsdon put it, "that they were giving up all pretense of creating separate schools 'identical with that of white schools.'" By 1920, there were about four times as many schools for white students as there were for Black students in New Orleans. The city's idea of a universal, free public-education system, established in large part to serve Black students, now only feigned doing so.

It would take 40 more years, another federal intervention, and the protection of U.S. Marshals before Ruby Bridges and the McDonogh Three would reintegrate public schools in New Orleans—schools that likely never would have existed in the first place if not for the work of the federal government and the Freedmen's Bureau.

For Black people who'd been emancipated, the full experience of citizenship that the Founders believed comes with education was short-lived. The country has been shaped in many ways by their subsequent exclusion. Even after court-mandated desegregation, educational opportunity has been highly stratified by race, and both educational attainment and quality in America as a whole have lagged relative to other wealthy countries. In 2023, the Supreme Court struck down affirmative action, the most serious effort to date at realizing Brice's dream nationally. The history of the South illustrates that efforts to splinter or deny

education on the basis of race will inevitably diminish even those who lead those efforts. "Create a serf caste and debar them from education, and you necessarily debar a great portion of the privileged class from education also," Mann once argued. But the history also demonstrates the inverse: Making public education truly public and equal for all is the cornerstone of a nation.

This article appears in the December 2023 print edition with the headline "The Black Roots of American Education." When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

Adam Harris is a staff writer at *The Atlantic*.

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Race, Reconstruction, and Redemption: The Fate of Emancipation and Education, 1861-1876 Chapter 6 from Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861-1876 by RONALD E. BUTCHART, 2010 [edited for length]

From slavery through Reconstruction and into Redemption, African Americans fought tenaciously for literacy. Enslaved blacks risked fearsome punishment to read and write;1 at the dawn of freedom, the black quest for schooled knowledge flowered brilliantly. Even before formal emancipation, and at an accelerated pace thereafter, the freed people built schools, recruited teachers from among the literate in their own communities, welcomed anyone else willing to teach them, and filled the schools to overflowing. Black school attendance surged; secondary and higher institutions for the freed people multiplied. In many southern states in the late 1860s, newly minted state departments of education, the fruits of southern interracial politics, geared up to assure free schooling to all southern children, black and white.

Yet that promising dawn did not usher in a bright new day of educational, social, and political possibilities. Threatening clouds formed early, auguring a storm of reaction, retrenchment, and repression. Within three to four years after their ambitious beginnings, state education bureaucracies were reduced to skeletal structures on eroded foundations. Schools closed; school years were halved; teachers went unpaid. The number of southern white teachers in the black schools rose, though the number of black teachers rose faster, but the growth in teachers for black schools remained woefully behind demand. Only the most fearless of the northern white teachers had the courage and commitment to weather the storm. Systematic educational discrimination sprouted in the storm's eerie aftermath. Historians have described the process of constructing unequal southern education as almost exclusively legislative and political, what Henry Allen Bullock described as "the chain of legal containment." As part of the white South's effort to restore home rule, Democratic hegemony, and white supremacy during Reconstruction, Redeemers promised black voters that public education would not be abolished under their rule. Once in power, they honored the letter of their promise, retaining state-funded education, though they dismantled the educational bureaucracies created under Republican governments and slashed state school budgets. Still, in the early years of Democratic rule, the funding cuts were relatively equal across white and black schools. Only after the disfranchisement campaigns of the 1880s and 1890s, and after the New South men began to replace the older Bourbon Democrats, did legislatures across the South begin to devise means to assure the greater prosperity of white schools at the expense of black schools.

The assault on educational opportunity did not begin with late nineteenth-century legislative actions, however, nor even with the political chicanery of the 1870s that resulted in the retrenchment of the school bureaucracies that had worked to extend the reach of public

education in the middle years of Reconstruction. It began earlier, at the moment of emancipation. It was not only, nor even primarily, an attack on educational opportunity. It was, rather, an assault on a dream, the dream of black independence and freedom through education, the dream of the fullest emancipation through literacy and knowledge. The assault began as soon as the freed people began to act on the dream. White terrorism, systematic, organized, and relentless, targeted the dream with deadly accuracy. The South lost the battles of the Civil War, surrendering its armies and losing slavery and the goal of Confederate independence, but there was no peace treaty after Appomattox, no armistice, and there was no peace. Over the subsequent decade the South fought a new war on new terrain with new 155 strategies, holding fast to its most fundamental institution. The South won that war, the war to retain white supremacy.

Crushing the most liberatory aspects of black education was crucial in the South's ultimate victory. Unbridled white resistance, violence, and terror, dating from the beginning of the education of the freed people, took an incalculable psychological and physical toll on the southern black com- munity and its few white supporters and set the stage for a white suprema cist reshaping of black education. By the end of the nineteenth century a triumphalist white supremacy reunited the North and South, or, in Edward J. Blum's more provocative rendering, reforged the white republic. Thereafter, northern and southern white elites would begin to work together to reshape black education to better serve their ends.

Many writers have noted some aspects of Reconstruction era southern white resistance to black education. Few get the dates right; most blame teachers and learners for southern white resistance; and none appreciate the full fury, force, and effect of the resistance.

[...]

Southern white resistance to black education was, first and foremost, opposition to black independence and intellectual striving, no matter who imparted the habits of mind that nurtured such independence and intellect; southern white teachers-suffered precisely the same sorts of opposition and violence that northern white teachers faced; black teachers suffered the same level of violent resistance as white teachers.

Further, southern opposition did not begin in the late 1860s as a result of conflict over presidential politics [...]. It began virtually from the outset of freedmen's education, increasing in virulence throughout the Civil War and Reconstruction. By the mid-186os, it amounted to open terrorism aimed at destroying the black dream of intellectual emancipation through education. The terrorism was directed at both the black franchise and black education, for on one level the black vote and black education merged. Each was an affront to white supremacy and racial paternalism. Together, the franchise and education bespoke black autonomy, agency, and determination; education free of paternalism was essential to a free ballot, and, as it turned out, a free ballot was essential to free and equal education.

The unrelenting terrorism targeted teachers, schoolhouses, and students during and after the Civil War, when blacks acted most forcefully on the dream of black literacy and freedom. The terrorism doubtless rein- forced the black community's folk knowledge that white rage against black freedom knew no moral bounds, that open resistance to white power courted deadly force, and that any educational movement intent on emancipating black minds would reawaken the beast of white terrorism. Over the next century that folk knowledge was reinforced by the social relations of sharecropping, by disfranchisement, by poverty, by lynchings, and by the daily indignities of segregation. It was further ramified by aspects of the largely unexplored dark side of post-Brown desegregation the summary firing of tens of thousands of black educators in the 1970s, forms of desegregation that fell with greatest force on black students, the closing of black schools with the consequent loss of school traditions, trophies, mascots, and support systems, and other aspects of desegregation.

THERE ARE MANY PROBLEMS WITH THE TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATION OF southern white resistance to the freed people's schools. Take first the claim that southern resistance was aimed at northern teachers, not at black education. The claim founders on the fact that more than one half of the teachers in the first generation of southern black schools were native white southerners, including hundreds of former Confederate soldiers. Yet southern teachers faced the same opprobrium and anger as did their northern counterparts. For example, Alfred W. Morris, a white resident of Nixonton, North Carolina, taught the freed people of his community in early 1866 but closed his school after only six weeks, "apprehensive for his safety" because of the "threatening state of public feeling" regarding his work.

Mary Bowers established a black school near Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in 1866, occasionally assisted by her husband. Both were lifelong residents of the area, yet their neighbors were outraged that they would attempt to teach the area's former slaves. Bowers wrote that "no one seems even to be willing that they should be taught at all," and added, "My neighbors went so far as to say that my Husband and myself ought to be drummed out of the country for teaching the colored people." Two weeks later she observed that she was "teaching night and day though much against the wishes of the white people, they are *very bitter* against me for teaching the colored people."

[...]

Southern hostility toward native whites teaching in black schools was sufficiently virulent that some southern teachers were punished by being denied the opportunity of subsequent employment in white schools. Ellen M. Buggy, for example, taught in the New Orleans' Colored School No. 2 in 1864, then taught in a white school for two years. When a Democratic school board took over, she was fired. As she explained, despite her southern roots, "I was known as a Yankee, because I had been in the black school, and they thought I was not fit to teach white school." Likewise, Catherine Brim, a white teacher in Dawson, Georgia, noted that "before I took the colored school I was doing well in teaching but it has injured my capacity in taking other schools, and standing in the esteem of the community." Buggy, Brim, and

others were victims of a general sense among many southerners that teaching in black schools was degrading-"if you teach niggers, you are no better than a nigger yourself," according to some. Others considered teaching the freed people as treason, fearing the possibility that educating the freed people could lead to social equality.

Status in the community did not mitigate the opposition to southern whites teaching the freed people. [...] Southern teachers, just like northern teachers, faced opprobrium, social isolation, and occasional violence. Nor was the problem that the teachers were white. Black teachers, whether from the North or the South, faced as much opposition, and occasionally more deadly violence, than did white teachers. Peter Hamilton opened a school in Bonham, Texas, right after the Civil War ended. As soon as Union troops were withdrawn, local whites struck. "Hamilton was driven off, his life threatened, and the school broken up." The former Confederate guardhouse Hamilton used as his schoolhouse was torn down to drive home the point that black schooling was intolerable. Hamilton appears never to have attempted teaching again.

[...]

The Deep South was not the only place where black teachers faced potentially deadly force from southern whites intent on ending their work. In Maryland, a terrorist "fired with deadly intent" at John Wesley Cromwell, grazing him, and mobs attacked Martha L. Hoy and Mary E. Perry in separate incidents in 1865. When Klansmen confronted Edward Bowman in North Carolina, he escaped a beating, or worse, by leaping out of a window. [...] Elsewhere in Tennessee, two Fisk University students established a school at Dresden in the spring of 1869. On 2 September 1869, they were awakened at gunpoint, roped together at the neck, and "dragged more than a mile into the woods," where twelve men took turns beating them "with whips and heavy rods." They were then ordered "to run and as they fled they were followed by a volley of bullets." A white female teacher in Maryland gave a clear answer to claims that black teachers were treated better by southern whites than white teachers. She reported that opponents of her work told her, "If they had sent a black teacher here we would have burnt the old shell, (church), teacher and scholars together before this time." She was convinced that "but one obstacle stood in the way" of violence against her; "the subject in hand was a white woman."

[...]

Southern resistance to black education, then, had little to do with a widespread abolitionism among the teachers. It arose, rather, from the fundamental effrontery of black education itself. It did not take an abolitionist in the classroom to teach the freed people to expect equality and freedom-the freed people did not need to be taught that expectation by anyone the white South was not monolithic, of course. There were many who were simply indifferent to the black schools. For instance, James P. Butler, a Union veteran who taught for one year in Huntsville, Texas, before becoming a Freedmen's Bureau agent in the city, observed

that "the public seems to have no objections to the organization of Schools," but added that white Texans "will furnish no assistance for that purpose, and they are averse to having any Southern person teach them, using such expressions as, 'It is beneath the dignity of a Southern lady or gentleman to teach "niggers."'

At the other end of the former Confederacy, Thomas Jackson reported "indifference or hostility to educating freedmen with few exceptions" among whites in Virginia.37 There were also some southern whites who supported black education to one degree or another. In 1867, whites in Sherman, Texas, raised $150 to assist in building a local black school, while the largest landholder in Liberty, Texas, donated a tract of land for a black school. Three years later, citizens in McKinney, Tennessee, assisted the freed people to rebuild a school burned down by opponents of black education. A native white teacher in Macon County, Alabama, thought that public opinion regarding her school by 1870 was "about equally divided" for and against, though that same year another native white teacher with five years' experience in a black school in Coosa County, Alabama, described her neighbors as "very indignant" about her work.

The thousands of southern white teachers who taught the freed people were themselves testimony to some level of support for black literacy, though, as we have seen, many made it clear that they taught black students out of economic desperation, not out of any commitment to intellectual emancipation. Further, it became clear to some of the educators that southern support for black education could also be a means to keep out good teachers and blunt the emancipatory force of education. James Fitz Allen Sisson reported that, in much of rural Georgia, "colored and white teachers are employed that cannot read, and spell correctly, and know nothing beside. The whites are constantly urging the Freed people to employ teachers of the classes mentioned: first, to keep out others, from the North, East, & West, and second: because they do not wish them to learn beyond just enough to make them contented; but, without much real benefit. They first urge them not to have schools." Yet even though some southern whites supported black education, few were willing to speak up forcefully in its defense, itself a sign of the intensity of resistance among the majority of southern whites.

[...]

Terrorism through fire was often effective in ending educational efforts and driving away teachers. Arson in Fayetteville, Tennessee, in 1866 caused the local white teacher to give up the cause, and no new school was attempted, while George Childs and his wife left Edgefield, Tennessee, after their school was burned down in the same year. A. G. Perryman, a ' white man, fled his school in Georgia after it was burned down in 1867 and the white citizens threatened to hang him for teaching. Jordan K. Parker, a black native of Roxboro, North Carolina, quit teaching in 1869 after his school was burned down one year after he opened it. After the Klan destroyed Morris Maier's school in Kaufman, Texas, in 1868, he left the state, and the local bureau agent concluded that "it would be an impossibility to reorganize the school in that town."

Burning down schoolhouses was symbolically potent, striking at the central physical manifestations of black intellectual aspirations, school- houses and schoolbooks. Arson had the potential not only to curtail educational work but also to stoke primal fears. Arsonists struck at night when teachers and buildings were most defenseless, using a weapon-the spectacle of flaming buildings-certain to evoke terror and suggesting, some. times explicitly, that teachers faced the same fate as their schoolhouses if they continued with their work. When the school taught by Robert W. Stokes, a black teacher in Missouri, was burned to the ground, for instance, he was informed that he would be "treated in the same way" as his school- house if he remained in the state. Further, many of the targets of arson were schools built and paid for by the freed people themselves. Incendiary terrorism against education thereby became economic terrorism as well, depriving the black communities of places of learning (and, frequently, places of worship) and divesting them of scarce communal capital.

Other forms of intimidation were aimed at teachers' living quarters, often, as with arson, at night. The enemies of black education fired shots through open doorways, threw stones at walls and windows, shouted insults and obscenities from the darkness, set fires, invaded households, and in other wa1s disrupted teachers' lives outside of school. Jennie Starkey withstood intimidation in Humbolt, Tennessee, for most of three years, but finally left after enduring a nighttime raid during which her house was assaulted "with bricks & other missiles, breaking the windows & greatly endangering the lives of the helpless inmates," as an observer reported black students were also terrorized in a bid to discourage their attendance at the black schools. [...]

White terrorism toward black education did not slop with the symbolic violence of burning down schools or intimidating students and teachers. Teachers were the direct victims of escalating physical violence through-out Reconstruction. Thomas B. Barton built two schoolhouses near Long Creek, North Carolina, and taught in both of them. On 19 December 1866, armed white men took him from his bed, carried him a few miles into the woods, and threatened to kill him, saying, "you damn nigger teacher, we have got you now and will blow your damned Yankees brains out." Rather than killing him, they satisfied themselves by beating him with tree limbs, intending, as they told him, to "mark me so I would not be known." He subsequently armed himself and continued teaching into the spring of 1867, intending to leave in April, having received "nothing for my trouble except the satisfaction that I have done some good among the poor colored people." [...]

Northern teachers received their share of physical violence, but southern teachers, white and black, were also targets. Rebels broke up two different schools that Margaret S. Clark, a white southerner, established in North Carolina in 1868. [...]

One historian has claimed that women teachers were spared actual physical violence, "perhaps the result of a remnant of chivalry, but more likely because threats alone often sufficed to drive them away." While fewer women than men appear to have suffered direct violence, chivalry did not extend as far as that claim suggests. Three different women teachers,

Mary E. Perry, Julia F. P. Dickson, and Martha L. Hoy, all northern black women, were assaulted in Maryland in 1865 and 1866. Edmonia G. Highgate, also a northern black teacher, was shot at in her classroom on two different occasions in 1866.

[...]

Both the supporters and opponents of black education knew that the presence or absence of Union troops in the South was crucial in determining the level of violence against the schools and teachers, and violence against the freed people in general. Yet throughout Reconstruction, troop levels were constantly drawn down, leaving increasing areas of the South unprotected. A continual theme in letters from Texas in the 1860s, for example, was the near impossibility of establishing schools without the presence of the military to protect the teachers and the freed people, particularly in smaller settlements. The bureau agent from De Witt County, Texas, reported that there were no schools in Clinton and Yorktown, though each could attract sixty or more students. However, "it would be almost impossible to carry on a school in either of these places without the presence of the Troops, for, if the school, once started, was not broken up by a shower of bullets from the Pistols of a crowd of Drunken Ruffians, it would be unreasonable to expect Teachers to remain where they would be hourly daily grossly insulted without any means of redress."

[...]

THE BLOODY RACE RIOTS IN MEMPHIS IN 1865 AND NEW ORLEANS IN 1866 demonstrated the efficacy of terror. Rioters in Memphis burned down a dozen black schools, four black churches, and over ninety black homes, and murdered one teacher. In the days after the nots, other teachers were threatened with death if they did not leave the city. The terrorist intimidation was effective: of the more than fort) teachers who taught in black schools in Memphis in 1864- 65, only thirteen, or one third, returned the following year, five of whom were local black teachers. The total teaching force in Memphis in the year following the riots fell to fewer than thirty. Meanwhile, because the New Orleans riot occurred in the summer when most schools were not in session, teachers and schools were less frequently the target of terror. The number of teachers in black schools in New Orleans in the year following the riot was actually slightly higher than before the riots (eighty-eight in 1865-66, ninety-three in 1866-67). However, in the latter year, only thirty-two of the teachers, about one-third, were repeaters, and nearly half of those, fifteen in total, were local black teachers. Put another way, four-fifths of the white teachers in each city failed to return in the year following the riots, a higher rate of "drop-outs" from one year to the next than found in other southern cities in the 186os.88 There can be no doubt that the threats and the actual violence and murder that increasingly surrounded the schools and teachers had an impact. We can never know how many teachers left the South or abandoned black education to take up safer work in the South because of terrorism, but the discouragement and fear is clear in many of their letters.

[...]

The freed people understood the link between political efficacy and literacy, and even as early as 1870 they knew that they had been betrayed. Ralza M. Manly, Virginia superintendent of education, who would spend many years working in black education, heard as much from the freed people. "They feel and say," he wrote, "that the Government, having given them freedom and franchise, should not leave them in ignorance." As much as they could do, and did do, for themselves, they understood deeply that authentic access to formal education for all of the community required more than they could do alone. As Manly noted, they were "ready to help support schools with all they have or can get, except what is necessary to provide the coarsest food and scantiest clothing, but without teachers or friends to advise, the State doing nothing, and Government, which they thought they could trust to the end, 'gone back on them,'" access would be severely limited. Less than a decade after emancipation, the freed people "bitterly shut the door of their new schoolhouse and turn away to their toil, feeling that they have not only been bereaved but wronged." The dream that an end to slavery would allow African Americans free access to the power of literacy was met not with access and reason but with betrayal, butchery, fire, and force.

[...]

The threats to paternalistic care posed by the growing hundreds of black schools and thousands of teachers serving black learners reveal the deeper impulses of southern race relations and expose the malignant side of paternalism. Independent thought and action, the ability to question, to seek one's own truths, to act on one's own initiative, opened the possibility of questioning all aspects of social relationships. Independent learning carried the possibility of reaching conclusions heretical to the established and sanctified southern racial order. The criticality that is always potential within literacy included the potential to supersede dependence. The reassertion of racial control and paternalism, stripped of its pretensions of affectionate care and benevolence, was essential to white supremacy.

Literate African Americans undermined a belief in racial inferiority that was essential to the psychic health of postbellum whites. Worse, black education and literacy signaled an erosion of racial control. If educated, blacks would better understand their world and could act more intelligently to shape that world outside the control of whites. That was clearly the message that a group of terrorists conveyed to Thomas Barton, a northern white teacher in New Hanover County, North Carolina, m January 1867 when they abducted and beat him. "The niggers were bad enough before you came," they told the teacher, "but since you have been teaching them, they know too much and are a damn sight worse."

The claim by southern white men that, as a result of schooling, the freed people "know too much," betrays the sources and intentions of white violence toward black education. Knowledge might, indeed, be power, or lead to power. The mind of the white South could not imagine power that was not power over others. Hence, independent access to knowledge had to be crushed and the remnants of black schooling had to be redirected into safe channels. In the black-and-white intellectual universe that southerners had created, whites either had total

power and control over their inferiors, or they were powerless and controlled by their inferiors. From such a worldview sprang the bizarre justification that William Haffa's assassins gave his wife for their crime; teachers such as the Haffas "could not rule over them and do as they please with them."101 From that worldview came the continual battle cry of the last years of Reconstruction that the white South would not tolerate "Negro rule." From that worldview arose an entire historical interpretation of Reconstruction that saw the South as prostrated by scalawags, carpetbaggers, and blacks and that sanctified violence and fraud as "redemption."

The causes of white violence during Reconstruction, then, had their roots deep in a culture that had been nurtured to defend racial slavery and class inequality. Southerners were engaged in a deadly war of attrition against independent black education. Their victory in that war was not total, but their terrorism took an enormous toll. Throughout Reconstruction, hundreds of teachers abandoned their schools out of fear for their lives. An untold number, probably adding up to scores, were killed outright. Others were worn down by the isolation and insecurity of the work and turned away from the freed people. Many of the school buildings that terrorists burned down were rebuilt immediately by courageous black communities and their teachers, but many other schools died in the cooling embers. We can never know the number of potential students who never enrolled because employers threatened to throw families off the land if they did, or who began their studies but ·withdrew in the face of those sorts of threatened, and occasionally practiced, acts of economic terrorism.

As Reconstruction sputtered to its ignominious end, with nothing re constructed but with white supremacy redoubled, the dream that education would be a part of the emancipation project, that knowledge might provide a path to autonomy and equality, that an entire people could understand and act upon their world through reason and literacy, was bloodied and bruised. A people's collective struggle for education met the savage rage and fury of overwhelming white power. In the decades to follow, while enduring sharecropping, lynching. Jim Crow social relations, and migrations, southern African Americans would continue to sacrifice greatly for their children's education. They would sustain a vital network of black colleges and universities, law schools and medical colleges. But while a tiny minority gained advanced education. the majority of America's black children absorbed, again and again, the implacable lesson that the codes of power were for others and that the surest means to survival lay in the culture and codes of the black community. They were at risk in schools that whites created and controlled; they were safe in the world their fathers and mothers created and controlled.

In the long view of history; the South lost the war to create a new nation, and its gamble cost it one of its most revered institutions, racial slavery. But before the United States had reached its centennial anniversary, the South had won the war to salvage slavery's legacy, white supremacy. Its subsequent enforced construction of generations of at risk black children, perpetually ill served in inferior schools, provided victorious and triumphalist whites, northern and southern, with evidence for their self-fulfilling

assertions of racial supremacy. The white South's victory in the uncivil war for white supremacy established the terrain for the subsequent battles over the shape and content of black education. That terrain would greatly favor the power of wealthy whites to bend black education to their ends. The freed people's emancipation project was irrelevant to, even subversive of, those ends. The children and grandchildren of the freed people did not abandon that project but, on the terrain of the choosing of the powerful, their efforts were continually blunted and deflected. Laura Towne's prediction that "this race is going to rise" remained the dream, but education as the means to achieve that goal proved, in the final analysis, inadequate in the face of white oppression.

"The Steep Edge of a Dark Abyss": Mohonk, White Social Engineers, and Black Education [edited for length]

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By Lasana Kazembe

Twenty-five years after the 13th Amendment abolished slavery in the United States, a select group of elite White citizens gathered in upstate New York to discuss, dissect, and distill an essential, burning question: *What shall we do with the Negro?* The question's genesis, in fact, preceded both the U.S. Civil War (1861–1865) and Reconstruction, and had understandably occupied and agitated the consciousness of White Northerners and Southerners whose collective economy had evolved and flourished across generations owing to three major factors: (1) the genocide of millions of Indigenous people; (2) the systematic theft of Indigenous-occupied lands; (3) the extirpation and forced labor of millions of enslaved African people.

Coterminous with the emergence and intellectual juggling of "The Negro Question" were the numerous repatriation and colonization schemes that had been conceived and popularized by entities ranging from the American Colonization Society to the presidential administration of Abraham Lincoln. In fact, Lincoln's 1862 'Panama Plan' was widely regarded as a component of a broader effort by The Great Emancipator to roust British imperial power and thereby hasten and tighten U.S. control over trade monopolies in the Caribbean. For their role in Lincoln's blueprint, Black Americans (nearly 200,000 of whom had sacrificed their lives assisting Lincoln and the Union secure victory against the secessionist South) would serve as the human lubricant for U.S. colonial engines located strategically throughout the west- ern hemisphere. Given the unprecedented displacement of millions of Black people, their postbellum presence in the newly-(re)formed United States, and the specter of class division, racial stratification, and memories of violent uprisings by the enslaved population, it becomes quite easy to comprehend why Black peoples' presence prompted speculation from the dominant White society–whose most elite representatives were the potente and planners of the Mohonk Conferences.

What Shall They Do With the Negro?

The First Mohonk Conference on "The Negro Question" occurred during June 4–6, 1890, and a second conference convened exactly 1 year later. Conference proceedings indicate that conveners, spokespersons, and attendees viewed the Mohonk conferences as [largely] Christian-inspired philanthropic efforts to uplift and rehabilitate Native Americans and Southern Negroes in order to assimilate both groups into a highly-stratified, rapidly industrializing, racialized sociopolitical hierarchy. A clear constant that emerged throughout both the Indian2 and Negro conferences is the propensity and intensity of paternalist, ruling-class Euro-Americans to assume roles as colonial agents, racial benefactors, and social engineers. And while the agency and welfare of Indigenous and Black Americans was the touted rationale for White benefaction, a more critical textual analysis of the Proceedings from the

1890 conference suggests that Mohonkers' actions were largely motivated by a mix of racially-mediated socio religious beliefs, political and capitalist intentions, and White society's collective, deep-seated racial fear and loathing of Black Americans. All of this, of course, was buttressed by Whites' collective allegiance to maintaining domination and the U.S. as a White ethnostate. Channeling the socioracial theorizing of E. Franklin Frazier and Martin Luther King, Jr., historian Brandon M. Terry (2018) contends that the racialized, irrational fears of Whites include fear of "losing economic or social standing, of contamination of an unknown future, and, above all, of revenge and retaliation" (p. 14).

Deeper scrutiny of the political rationale of Mohonkers belies what the author contends is a pernicious and toxic White paternalism driven by multiple factors, including: an exaggerated fear and organic loathing of Blacks/Blackness; uncomfortable memories of Black political leadership and socioeconomic mobility during Reconstruction; collective anxiety over Communism, the U.S. economy, jobs, infrastructure; perceived threats against White agency (particularly that of White women); and broader concerns over Whiteness/White identity, globalization, and the feared increase of an educated and skilled free Black population. In one harrowing example, the convict-lease system served as effective mechanism to exploit Black labor. By criminalizing petty offenses stemming from the infamous Black Codes, White industrialists sought to keep freed Black workers tied in perpetuity to their former owners' farms and plantations. As Blackmon (2008) avers, the convict-lease system operated in every southern state subjected Black men, women, and children to work in coal mines, lumber camps, and turpentine factories. This system that was created could effectively be understood as a response to Black progress during Reconstruction.

In this paper, the author will provide a critical overview of the First Mohonk Conference on "The Negro Question" and discuss its historical significance, its attendees and their political inspiration, implications and educational recommendations for Black Americans.

[...]

The Mohonk Conference on "The Negro Question"

"We have in this country the grave problem of the negro." - excerpt from a letter by Harvard zoologist Charles B. Davenport to the Carnegie Foundation regarding his eugenics experiments at Cold Harbor, NY in 1903.

According to the 1890 United States Census, Black people numbered roughly 7,488,676 (or 11.9 percent) of the total counted population (U.S. Census Bureau, 1890). Both before and after passage of the Thirteenth Amendment on January 31, 1865, the question of what to do with a free (i.e., formerly enslaved) Black population had long-occupied the minds of Whites from the so-called Cotton States, and also the minds of their brethren to the north. *How would the Negro live? Where would they live and how would they be kept there? Should they have a role in the new South? How should they live? Who and/or what is the Negro? How are they to be educated? Is emigration feasible? Are they owed anything? If so, what? Whom will they serve?*

How had enslavement prepared them? How had freedom spoiled them? Were they ready for citizenship and did they even deserve it? Had Negroes been sufficiently cleansed of the

barbarous influence of their African past? Might Christianity civilize them? How were future generations of Negroes to be organized within the rapidly expanding social and political structure of the U.S.? As evidenced by copious political, scientific, and social literature of the times, these and other ravenous questions coopted and colored the thinking of Whites in the U.S., particularly those occupying elite, influential positions as civic leaders, businessmen, and politicians.

[...]

Organized during June 4–6, 1890, the First Mohonk Conference on "The Negro Question" was convened at Lake Mohonk, New York and attended by over one hundred businesspersons, philanthropists, social reformers, teachers, politicians, newspaper editors, and clergymen. For three full days, these White social architects, met to present and share formal reports, discuss and forge common understandings, and implement collective, tactical plans to tackle what was termed and popularly understood as "The Negro Question." A Second Mohonk Conference on the Negro was convened exactly 1 year later (June 3–5, 1891) with former U.S. President Rutherford B. Hayes again serving as official chairman. Prior to both Mohonk Conferences on "The Negro Question," White social engineers (for 22 consecutive years), had held similar annual gatherings at Lake Mohonk where they focused their anthropological gaze and social engineering plans on Native American people.

It is noteworthy that conference organizers did not include any Black people [men] at both the 1890 and 1891 conference. Yet, while Blacks were intentionally not invited, a few of the Mohonkers recommended that specific Black men be included. In one instance, author and attendee George W. Cable wrote to A. K. Smiley (conference convener and owner of the Lake Mohonk mountaintop retreat) suggesting that the then well-known Booker T. Washington (Tuskegee University president), William T. Scarborough (Wilberforce University president), and John W. Cromwell (a Washington, D.C.-based lawyer, teacher, and founding member of the American Negro Academy) (Fishel, 1993) be invited. In his reply to Cable's letter (a copy of which had been sent to him), the Wizard of Tuskegee issued a faint rebuke as he viewed the propensity of "our friends" [Whites] to exclude Black people from conversations about the future of Black people as "rather trying and perplexing at times" (Butcher, 1948).

Specifically, the 1890 Mohonk Conference attendees included White clergy, missionaries, businessmen, military officers, publishers, politicians, college presidents, professors, and a former U.S. president. During the conference, several speakers introduced themselves as long-time abolitionists, antislavery activists, and advocates for Reconstruction. Conference organizers assumed formal roles as chairman, secretaries, treasurers, and planners. In addition, the Conference included an executive and publication committee, with H. O. Houghton (co-founder of Houghton Mifflin Publishers (now Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) and former mayor of Cambridge, MA) serving on both. Diverse organizations were represented at the conference including universities and schools (21), religious-affiliated (16), social welfare (4), government (2), publishers (14), and private philanthropic (2) (First Mohonk, 1890).

Convened across 3 days and 6 sessions, the 1890 Conference featured 39 speakers (men and women) who offered prepared remarks in the form of sermons, statistical analyses, formal briefs, philanthropic pledges, ethno- graphic reports, and position statements. The speakers offered observations and perceptions on various aspects of Black people's lives and character including their (recent) enslavement, absence of surnames, home life, fitness for citizenship, amiability, intelligence, encounters with and reactions to White aggression/racism, regional experiences, educational accomplishments, and morality (First Mohonk Conference, 1890). These loquacious wit- nesses also provided copious testimony regarding Black peoples' aesthetic traits, economic practices, habits of mind, temperament, generational distinctions, Christianization, and potential for improvement and advancement in society. More than a few expressed marked relief that 19th century Negroes appeared to have shed all vestiges of African culture (specifically language and religion expression) which, in turn, had moved them that much closer to the "civilizing" force of European-sponsored religion and education.

As highly influential members of the U.S. ruling-class, the Mohonkers' intense scrutiny of the social lives, character traits, collective personal habits, cognitive ability, and civic potential of Black people was particularly striking as it revealed Euro-Americans' penchant for claiming, classifying, naming, assigning, and establishing hierarchy and dominion. In a curious sense, White Southerners' antebellum speculation over Black peoples' enslaved bodies and labor potential resembled White Northerners' postbellum speculation over Black peoples' emancipated lives and educational futures. Blacks found themselves, in both cases, on the receiving end of heightened racial scrutiny, White authoritarianism and coloniality, and imposed decision-making. As northern minister and writer Rev. Samuel J. Barrows (1891) contended, the question "What shall we do with the negro" belied negative assumptions, and therefore, would be more practically posed as "What can we do to contribute to his development?" (p. 693).

As at earlier Mohonk Conferences, opinions, observations, and suggestions explicated by attendees during the 1890 gathering were diverse, yet seemed to fall within six general areas: (1) concern for national prosperity and security; (2) sense of religious duty/purpose; (3) Northern political obligations; (4) liberal, paternalistic guilt and pity; (5) development of the mental and moral character of Black people; (6) fear of southern backlash from Blacks and poor Whites. For White corporate philanthropists in attendance, their collective outlook seemed to be undergirded by concern over several things including maintaining power and control in a rapidly industrializing United States, a productive agricultural base, a favorable business environment, and access to cheap labor. For forward-thinking capitalists, a common understanding was that reannexation of the southern states was critical to the future economic stability and prosperity of the country.

The general consensus among Mohonkers was that such stability and prosperity could only come about through the gradual elevation [to second- class citizenship] of the South's nearly 8 million Black citizens. White Northern altruism was, in fact, eclipsed by commercial concerns for

the nation's future. Mohonk Conference chairman and former U.S. President Rutherford B. Hayes proclaimed that if decisive action to assist Black people were not taken, then the nation would face "industrial bankruptcy, social degradation, and political corruption" (First Mohonk Conference, p. 9). Further scrutiny of Hayes' opening remarks seems to indicate that political expediency, commercial security, and White racial protectionism– not altruism– were his true motivations for wanting to uplift his "brothers in black" (p. 9). White missionary philanthropists, on the other hand, espoused a different set of concerns with regard to the education of Black people and the young nation's future. Departing from Hayes' fear of national economic collapse and social ruin, the collective motivations of Mohonk's Christian devotees exposed concern with religious enlightenment, national character, social amelioration, social welfare, and pursuing the promise of informed democracy. For General Samuel Chapman Armstrong and others espousing this outlook, "deficiency of character"–not three hundred years of enslavement, exploitation, and psychic terrorism–was the true source of Black peoples' plight (First Mohonk, p. 13). Along this premise, Armstrong and others of his ilk felt that the educational and religious instruction prescribed for Black people must encourage subservience, passivity, and docility. Toward this end, White architects of education saw the benefit of ceding to Blacks opportunities to participate in and serve society by cultivating their own subordinate character, albeit in very particular, stringent, prefabricated, and socially-engineered ways (Fishel, p. 19). The impassioned testimony of religious Mohonkers exposed their interest in Black character-shaping vis-à-vis intense Bible instruction, manual labor, and, through ultimate commitment, Christian regeneration (evangelization). Much Mohonk testimony was offered by White Social Gospel reformers who shared stories of their individual involvement with projects they described as being designed to aid and assist the Black peoples' moral, spiritual, and character development. In one detailed report, Ohio journalist and politician John Cutler Covert detailed the prodigious building of churches and schools for southern freed- men by various religious denominations and the tens of millions of dollars involved (First Mohonk, p. 33).

With regard to education, a general consensus among the Mohonkers was that Black people be: (1) rapidly evangelized; (2) trained for service. Allocated funds and written policies (the smoking guns of formal testimony) indicate the strong, collective conviction among Mohonk's White social engineers to curate and choreograph a particular type of education for Black Americans in the South. Indeed, this brand of White sponsorship bespoke a broader and more nuanced program of social engineering designed to simultaneously "improve" the South, the nation, and to "uplift" Black Americans by preparing them for second-class citizenship. Upchurch (2004) rightly points out that the majority of the Mohonkers were not so much interested in the welfare of Black Americans as they were with maintaining a stable south- ern economy and securing "partisan political advantage that could be gained from the [B]lack vote of the south" (p. 15). In support of that reasoning, Virginia Senator John S. Barbour expressed what he considered to be the disproportionate tax burden imposed on White southerners and hinted at its likely increase should the federal government not do something to improve the literacy rate of Black children. Inaction, according to Barbour, would likely spur Southern

Whites to reassess their political loyalty (especially during election time) and "vote with the man from Wisconsin [rather than] the man from Virginia" (First Mohonk, p. 74).

As pointed out by Mohonk speaker, John Jay (prominent New York attorney and grandson of Founding Father and Chief Justice John Jay), the South's time-honored practice of imposing illiteracy on enslaved Black Americans had served multiple purposes, not least of which to ensure the physical safety of Whites. However, Jay reasoned, in the postbellum world, White southerners (indeed, Whites everywhere) were now forced to rethink the logic of the strategy of denying education to a newly freed 8 million Black people–arguably, a nation within a nation. By extension, with consideration to White southern taxpayers' collective angst regarding their so-called disproportion- ate tax assessment, not a few Northern Mohonkers reminded the assembly of the historical conditions that created White southern wealth, Blacks underdevelopment, and the resulting terse racial imbalance. In an eerily prescient critique, Jay expressed concern that these "plain facts" had not been under- stood by "misinformed Whites" (First Mohonk, p. 75).

From surviving accounts, it appears that most nineteenth and twentieth century Europeans and Euro-Americans contended that people of African ancestry (i.e., the people who would become or are still becoming African Americans) were as rootless, savage, and as backward as the continent from which they originated. Indeed, closer scrutiny of the observations of European and Euro-American philosophers, scientists, and politicians belies protracted efforts to systematically and routinely mischaracterize, oppugn, and negate the history and humanity of African people. Long before they had even conceptualized "The Negro Question," many influential Europeans and Euro- Americans had first conceptualized an Africa/n question.

[...]

Mohonk, Education, and Black Agency

Broadly, Mohonk Conferences could be understood as a major axis of a grand political strategy conceived and orchestrated by ruling-class Whites to sustain power and control well into the future. For that to be realized, however, it was critical that the South's nearly eight million Black Americans be amalgamated into the social structure and political economy in such a way that White rulership and control were maintained. Direct testimony from Mohonkers reveals that they generally favored a specialized form of education for Black people bracketed by intense religious instruction, industrial service, and total subservience. In short, ruling-class Whites supported such education (or training) for Black people to the degree that it served and protected Whiteness, discouraged and disallowed Black independence and autonomy, did not question or critique existing power arrangements, and did not challenge White social control, hegemony, and privilege.

Nearly a decade prior to the First Mohonk Conference on "The Negro Question," philanthropic White financiers such as John Fox Slater (The Slater Fund) and George Peabody (The Peabody Fund) had provided money to promote industrial education for Blacks in the South. These men

applied their firm belief in the gospel of wealth and the power of education to finance normal schools and teacher training programs for Black people that lever- aged their experiences with two centuries of enslavement (indeed, the ultimate on-the-job training) and simultaneously prepared Blacks to strive for second-class citizenship. In many ways, these grand efforts were an updated version of the "seasoning" or "slave breaking" process that Europeans/Euro-Americans employed in order to acclimate African people to enslavement and to acquiescence to White enslavers (Blassingame, 1971; Gilroy, 1993).

Generally understood among Mohnkers was the need to provide Black people with the type of training that would foster lower-rung citizenship, develop their missing higher-order traits, and make them more useful to the immediate and long-term economic growth and modernization of the Southern states (specifically) and the United States (generally). Relatedly, during the 1890 conference, some Mohonkers reserved their presentation time to showcase the accomplishments of exceptional Black men who had surpassed higher education and settled into professional careers as professors, physicians, lawyers, and clergy. As noted in Conference proceedings, many Whites both welcomed and supported the development of a "talented" Black elite, if for no other reason, so that this group may inherit and tackle "The Negro Question" and thus relieve the White man's burden.

Even as many White social engineers regarded sponsored education/training as a practical and expedient route to elevate the condition of Black people, others favored keeping Blacks locked out of federal land distribution (i.e., Homestead Acts). Between 1862 and 1934, it is estimated that over 250 million acres of southern and western land (seized through violence- backed land cessions) had been transferred to White Americans and to newly- arrived European immigrants (Gates, 1940). Seemingly, the question of whether Negroes should be included in land distribution was never seriously considered, nor was the fact that said land had been violently and systematically stolen6 from Indigenous inhabitants of North America. Unlike federally-sanctioned land allocations to individuals, money and land (totaling over 100 million acres) granted to southern and northern states went toward the establishment of an educational structure that included schools, universities, agricultural and mechanical colleges, and associated public land.

During the last day of the fifth session of the 1890 Mohonk Conference, with ex-President Hayes chairing, Judge Albion Winegar Tourgée (abolitionist, novelist, and lead attorney in the famed Plessy v. Ferguson case) commenced the morning session by speaking on "The Negro's View of the Race Problem." Though no Blacks had been invited to Mohonk, Judge Tourgée expressed interest in wanting to know (and to have heard by all) the representative collective testimony of the nearly eight million Black Americans, even going so far to suggest that said testimony would prove (at least to him) far more valuable than the opinions of "the wise White people" assembled (First Mohonk, p. 106). Interestingly, as a well-known fiction writer, Tourgée admitted that he culled his insights on Black people and their collective sociopolitical leanings through his fictionalizing of them in his numerous novels and plays. Tourgée presented on three

separate occasions at Mohonk and dedicated much of his presentation to praising the "industrial excellences" among Black people and going so far as to posit that their industrial and social progress was surpassing (and quite possibly incurring the envy) of poor southern Whites (First Mohonk, pp. 24–25).

Another important historical point to glean is that the First Mohonk Conference on "The Negro Question" occurred 6 years before the monumental 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision. Thus, at the long doorstep of the 20th century (and beyond), the unfinished business of Mohonk involved White ruling elites grappling with the contentious reality of Black subjectivity (biography), Black population numbers (demography) and territory (geography). Whereas the Problem South formerly referred to sectional grievances and confliction over Reconstruction, as a "discourse and a material reality" (Ring, 2012), the geopolitical contours of the Problem South were expanded to refer to any U.S. state or territory south of Canada in which a Black presence loomed (p. 18).

As the political subtext of Mohonkers belied, an orderly South [they felt] would be best realized alongside the establishment of an intensely racialized social, class and economic hierarchy in which permanent White rulership was ordained, Blacks' second-class status was compulsory, and their full-citizenship was perennially negligible. To achieve that reality, a new Southern strategy would have to be devised and implemented. Not incidentally, the updated vision was politically and economically expedient and, therefore, perfectly proportioned to the vision of White northern industrialists, merchants, corporatists, and religious philanthropists. Finally, for the vision to be realized, White liberals would have to continue serving as the principal architects of philanthropy and curated education reform for current and successive generations of Black Americans. During and beyond the Mohonk era, these individuals served as the social engineers who helped to shape the content, character, and direction of Black education. The grand outcomes of White social engineering, in order to come to pass required (then as now) continuous cross-class collaboration from different (seemingly opposed) groups of Whites.

A few years following the Second Mohonk Conference on "The Negro Question," a new group of White social engineers convened at Capon Springs, West Virginia for a long series of education conferences to discuss the future of the American Negro (Ogden, 1903). Similar in nature to Mohonk, the conversations at Capon Springs centered on plotting the future socio-industrial order for the U.S. South and the nation. In the "new" South, the emergence of an educated Black mass would ultimately prove instrumental in challenging White rule and its attendant social and political arrangement of power. As Anderson (1988) observes, White conveners of these southern education conferences were deeply invested in practicing a form of toxic paternalism toward Blacks and were simultaneously fortified in their "shared beliefs in universal education, [W]hite supremacy, and [B]lack industrial training" (p. 84).

Lessons from Mohonk

One of the most important historical lessons that Mohonk teaches is that the past and present are far from polar opposites, and should instead be understood as symbiotic, fluid, and dynamic. Dramatic examples drawn from the history of Mohonk's White social engineers offer a window through which to see kinship with the present, and a mirror through which to learn and leverage the lessons of the past. For example, Black peoples' modern-day, full-spectrum struggles over extrajudicial and racialized vigilante killings constitute an existential threat against Black agency, and are easily the modernized form of 20th century struggles waged against the gross spectacle of racialized terror lynchings. Jim Crow racial terrorism (often state-sanctioned) has given rise to Jim Crow schooling. A century (1850s–1960s) of literacy testing has been upgraded by sophisticated forms of voter suppression, census tracking, and culturally and geographically biased standardized testing. Mass enslavement and the convict lease system easily represent the historical precedent to the present-day system of mass incarceration and cradle-to-prison pipeline. Relative to the tenuous features and hegemonic structure of Black U.S. citizenship across time and space, O'Dell (2010) offers intriguing insight when he suggests that "in defining the colonial problem, it is the role of the institutional mechanisms of colonial domination which are decisive. Territory is merely the stage" (p. 138).