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## **Exploring the New South Agenda in the Records of Southern Colleges and Universities**

**Sara J. Harwell**

On 21 December 1886, Southern editor Henry W. Grady gave a speech at New York's Delmonico's Restaurant in which he called for the South to lift itself out of its slump of poverty, backwardness, and defeatism, and make itself over into a New South. In this speech, soon to be known as the New South speech, Grady stated: "The Old South rested everything on slavery and agriculture, unconscious that these could neither give nor maintain healthy growth. The new South presents a perfect democracy, the oligarchs leading in the popular movement—a social system compact and closely knitted, less splendid on the surface, but stronger at the core—a hundred farms for every plantation, fifty homes for every palace—and a diversified industry that meets the complex needs of this complex age."<sup>1</sup> The two main goals of the New South agenda, industrialization and

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<sup>1</sup> For sources used in this essay, please see the bibliographic note at the end.

agricultural diversification, were thus set forth in this ringing manner.

The New South, which prevailed roughly from the end of Reconstruction until the eve of the First World War, represented an attempt to make the region over in the image of its bustling neighbors to the North, with full-scale industrialization and diversified agriculture to replace centuries-old reliance on King Cotton. The rationale was that the Confederacy had lost the war because of too much dependence on cotton, so the solution was to follow the North's example and industrialize. Corollaries to this central belief were that a more efficient agricultural system would be a foundation for economic growth; that more widespread education, especially vocational training, would promote material success; and that sectional peace and racial harmony would provide a stable environment for economic growth.

How were Southern colleges and universities to respond to this challenge? What issues of class or race were involved in deciding who would receive vocational training? How would Southern colleges and universities train the new business class? What would be the role of the black race in the new order? These questions, and others like them, can be answered by turning to the records of Southern academic institutions. In taking the New South as an example, or case study, of the broader ideas which can be found in the records of academic institutions, several important themes emerge which help to shed light on the total picture of what the New South meant and how it transformed Southern society in the late nineteenth century. Involved are issues of academic freedom, social mobility, race, gender, and the democratization of the educational process, among others.

The education scene in the South at the close of the Civil War was indeed a bleak one. For most of the last half of the nineteenth century at least one-fourth of all Southerners were

illiterate. Public schools were open only three to four months a year, and teachers were ill prepared and underpaid. There were several private preparatory academies in the region, but too few public schools to fill the gap between the inadequate primary schools and the colleges and universities. And many of the colleges and universities held their distinction in name only.

The Southern intelligentsia of the period between Reconstruction and the First World War were the most actively critical native sons in the South's history. The Southern education movement was the part of the New South with which intellectuals most concerned themselves, although economic advancement directed much of the underlying goal in improving Southern education. Considering the major New South themes in the context of higher education, most colleges and universities were not directly concerned with the first New South goal of industrialization, although the educational leaders of the time felt that improving education would raise economic levels and better prepare men for the new industrial order. As University of South Carolina president Samuel Chiles Mitchell pointed out, raising the general income through better education was the key to progress. More of the Southern colleges and universities were concerned with the second major New South goal, agricultural diversification, primarily because it seemed the more immediate need. The major black educational institutions, notably Tuskegee and Hampton Institutes, were more directly responsive to the industrial age, with their emphasis on training skilled workers through vocational education.

Educators proclaimed that intellectual freedom was a necessity, not a luxury, and that building schools would create a climate to foster such freedom. To this generation of Southern intellectuals, education promised the moral regeneration of the South. James H. Kirkland, chancellor of Vanderbilt University, identified the school "in its parental capacity" with the state itself,

the citadel of virtue and democracy. John C. Kilgo, president of Trinity College, soon to be renamed Duke University, was one of the region's foremost defenders of intellectual freedom and objective research. He had no illusions about what he was up against in convincing the South to make drastic changes in its educational system. To his theologically conservative friends, who in his view wished to limit the search for the truth in the church colleges (of which Trinity was one), Kilgo replied: "In every moment of the world's notable advances the most stubborn resistance has been a creed. Science has had to halt at altars and thrones, philosophy has stood fettered at ecclesiastical tribunals, civic progress has been impeded by traditional teaching, and truth has made its way on the earth by hard contentions and tedious advances. It is a horrible treason against the throne of God and the mission of the Holy Ghost to set any limits upon the rights of the sons of God in their efforts to find the truth."

Kilgo and Kirkland both wanted their schools to be institutions of national stature, with a strong emphasis on objective research and discourse, rather than the old methods of lecture and rote memorization. Kilgo in particular held that better colleges would result in a greater reliance on reason and less on emotion. The Southern atmosphere was "too emotional, too sentimental, too romantic," and consequently the South had failed thus far to produce a great thinker or "sound body of ideas to influence people." Kilgo believed there was a better South beneath the ignorance, emotionalism, and prejudice, and that teachers, educated clergy, and enlightened businessmen would lead their neighbors to it. With the help of Southern philanthropy on the part of the Duke family of Durham, North Carolina, Kilgo made a series of improvements in Trinity's academic and financial status. Kirkland was able to accomplish much the same good results with Northern money, principally in the form of grants from the General Education Board. Both

Kilgo and Kirkland had to withstand intense opposition from their ruling boards since both Trinity and Vanderbilt were then Methodist schools with boards dominated by conservative church officials.

An educated people would be freed from the corrupting ideas of caste, reaction, and provincialism inherited from the Old South. The average man would think critically about politics, bringing about the death of the Solid South as he avoided being manipulated by politicians who pandered to him. Most importantly to the New Southerner, he would make more money, whether as farmer or businessman, and prepare the way for progress. As Mitchell pointed out, slavery had choked liberalism, secession had smothered nationalism, and cotton had starved industrialism. Education would change all that.

Records in Southern academic institutions reveal that many college administrators and faculty also had a very active interest in improving and expanding Southern primary and secondary schools. There was some self-interest as well as altruism in this goal, since better educated young people would mean greater college enrollments. Many college administrators, including Chancellor Kirkland of Vanderbilt, took time to promote the cause of public education. Kirkland was the guiding force behind the establishment of the Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools of the South, an organization which worked to establish academic standards for religious colleges and for schools which prepared young men to attend those colleges.

Agricultural education was at the center of the movement to reform rural southern culture. Seaman A. Knapp, an agriculturalist from New York, moved to Louisiana during this period and developed a new rice belt using machinery imported from midwestern wheat fields. He invented the demonstration method of agricultural education by showing farmers the most productive practices on selected plots of land, with the aim of

teaching by example. Knapp's work later led to a national system of county farm and home demonstration agents. Many schools in the South established demonstration farms based on Knapp's system, George Peabody College's Knapp Farm, for example.

Much of the overall New South program involved emulating the North, especially in the South's goal to industrialize and to have a diversified economy. There were specific ways that the attempt to be like the North was evident in higher education. New South educators wanted their institutions to be like the large northern education institutions. James H. Kirkland stated his intention that Vanderbilt be the Harvard of the South. His neighbor across the street, Bruce R. Payne, president of George Peabody College for Teachers, based his institution's curriculum on that of the Teachers' College of Columbia University. (Although, interestingly, the Peabody campus was modelled on an Old South institution, the University of Virginia).

George Peabody College was the main beneficiary of one of the most generous of the Northern philanthropic agencies, the Peabody Education Fund, established in 1867 by George Peabody, a London banker born in Massachusetts. The Peabody Fund granted some 3.6 million dollars to public schools by 1914. When it was dissolved, most of its capital was transferred to the newly named George Peabody College for Teachers, established in 1875 as the Peabody Normal School of the ailing University of Nashville. Aid from the Peabody Fund was supplemented by one million dollars in the John F. Slater Fund, established in 1882 and earmarked for schools for African Americans, notably Tuskegee.

The largest benefactor, John D. Rockefeller, contributed 53 million dollars to various educational initiatives in the South, including the endowment of a school of education for the University of Virginia and the neo-classical Social-Religious Building at George Peabody College for Teachers.

The Southern desire to emulate Northern institutions of higher learning appealed to Northern benefactors, and Southern educators could not help but be aware of that fact. In fact, a major theme which can be found in the record of Northern support of Southern education is reconciliation between the two sections in the decades after Reconstruction, although the hands-on involvement of Northern philanthropy sometimes led to friction over educational goals.

A fitting question to ask on this issue is "What do the records documenting Northern support of Southern education reveal about the history of the two sections' relationship that would result in this philanthropic activity?" The roots should be found in the old missionary crusades of the abolitionist movement. It has also been suggested that perhaps Northern robber barons acted out of some sense of guilt for their exploitation of Southern natural and human resources.

Records of academic institutions reveal that Southern intellectuals, more than politicians, helped to channel the humanitarian impulse of Northern business barons into concrete financial support for Southern schools. This factor led directly to the formation of the Southern Education Board, founded by Robert C. Ogden in 1898, and to including members like Edwin Alderman, president at that time of the University of North Carolina, and Vanderbilt's James H. Kirkland. These young educated Southerners, many trained outside the South, saw the great potential of Northern philanthropy for Southern education.

The support for Peabody College reflects a more universal interest on the part of Northern benefactors in teacher education for the South. Teachers who could give children a healthy start in basic skills were thought to be a key in the region's economic and social advancement during the New South era. In 1903 Charles W. Dabney at the University of Tennessee persuaded the Southern Education Board to underwrite a summer school for



teachers. He then built Jefferson Hall to house the school. During the next three years 11,000 teachers participated in the school.

The Northern role in Southern affairs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can be illuminated by examining Northern willingness to be involved in the South's economic and education movements, but not in its politics. Once Reconstruction was over, the Bourbon Redeemers, members of the former planter class, were allowed free rein, not only to restore the South's political system, but its racial system as well. When it came to economic views, however, Bourbons embraced the new order. Most of them championed an industrial New South while singing the praises and endorsing the social mores of the Old South. Most of the Northerners who interested themselves in Southern affairs made no effort to influence Southern racial views. And very few of the most enlightened of the Southern educational leadership saw the need to grant black Southerners any measure of genuine equality.

Records of Southern institutions of higher learning provide evidence that educational leaders of the period allowed themselves to be co-opted by the New South agenda. One of the most striking examples of this phenomenon can be found in the University of Tennessee's Bureau of Investigation and Information, which served as a New South propaganda machine. Although the bureau conducted one of the most thorough studies of the South's poverty and the educational backwardness of the era, its existence and much of its function illustrates the extent to which Southern educators unquestioningly accepted New South values. William E. Dodd, then of Randolph-Macon, openly criticized intellectuals who had succumbed unquestioningly to New South boosterism. He felt that the quest for philanthropic funding had led them to be silent on such issues as how capitalists like John D. Rockefeller had achieved their wealth.

His views caused him to be ostracized by the leading intellectual establishment of the South, and the next year he moved North to the University of Chicago, which was, ironically, established by a grant from Rockefeller.

In many ways, social issues in education provide an interesting contrast with economic goals in the New South education movement. While improving the economic status of all Southerners was the major objective of the New South and of educational efforts, Southern leaders were well aware that improving the standard of living for the Southern people would help ensure social stability and preserve the racial system. After 1877, the illiterate poor were streaming into the cities to escape rural poverty, a development which led to widespread urban unemployment. This created a turbulent social situation that cried out for intelligent leadership. Therefore, maintaining the social order and instilling middle class values while lifting the poor out of poverty was a major initiative of New South education.

College and university records should answer several questions on this subject: Who was going to college in the South between 1877 and 1914? Why were they attending? What did they hope to gain from their efforts? Did the upper classes still desire a classical education or did they want training to become businessmen? What were the experiences of the women and blacks who were achieving an education as groups for the first time? What kind of social mobility, if any, did this make possible?

The New South did produce some real progress in the region, even though the extent of the progress was generally exaggerated by its advocates. New South liberals established boards of agriculture and agricultural experiment stations to help carry out rural diversification goals; they set up boards of public health; founded agricultural and mechanical colleges, normal schools and

women's colleges, and state colleges for blacks. But in 1914 the South still lagged behind the rest of the nation in economics and education. The agricultural economy still relied to too great an extent on cotton and other staple crops, and the shameful sharecropping and tenant system which had replaced slavery at the end of the Civil War perpetuated the poverty cycle for millions of Southerners, black and white. The rate of illiteracy in the south was still the highest in the nation.

Many research avenues are suggested by the records in Southern colleges and universities. How has New South education of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries been documented? Do Southern records become more like Northern ones for this period or are they still distinctive in their revelation of a defeated region trying to come to terms with the Industrial Age? Have college and university archives been neglected, if not ignored, by all scholars but those working directly on the history of the parent institutions? While this might be something of an overstatement, it is not far from the truth. Academic archives represent a large body of untapped research opportunities.

What types of sources bear the most fruit in this kind of research? First and foremost, in the records of the main administrator of the institution, one is likely to find evidence of academic initiatives undertaken by the school, as well as information about the major education trends of the day. In the records of the ruling body, usually the board of trustees, extensive discussions can be found about plans for expanding and modernizing curriculum, and resolutions on various programs and academic controversies. Papers of prominent faculty members and of academic departments can reveal information about curriculum matters, the role of the faculty in the institution, and social relationships.

This paper is an attempt to illustrate the research opportunities available in institutional archives, to some extent unobserved by scholars. The scholarly value of manuscript collections, by contrast, has long been understood and appreciated. Great manuscript collections, in fact, have helped enhance the reputations of more than several institutions of higher learning.

Records of such institutions as the ones mentioned in this paper are vital to the study of the New South. They are as important as those of major industrial barons and prominent political figures for what they disclose about efforts to reconstruct the South, or more accurately, to construct a new South, and for what they reveal about relations between North and South. As much as the words of any single eminent individual, the influence of the teachers, scholars, and ministers trained in these institutions suffuse the economic, political, and social history of the South in the twentieth century.

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