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A Schoolhouse Behind Every Cannon: Freedpeople's Education and Reconstruction in Virginia, 1864-1876

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A SCHOOLHOUSE BEHIND EVERY CANNON:
Freedpeople's Education and Reconstruction in Virginia, 1864–1876

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Lyon Gardiner Tyler Department of History

The College of William and Mary

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

By

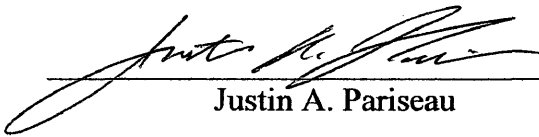
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2005

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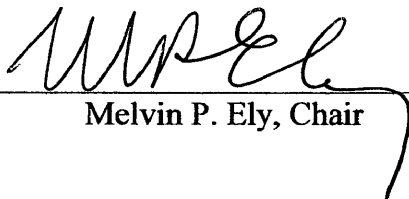
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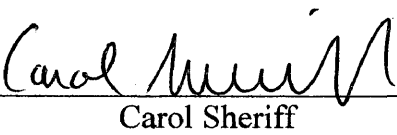


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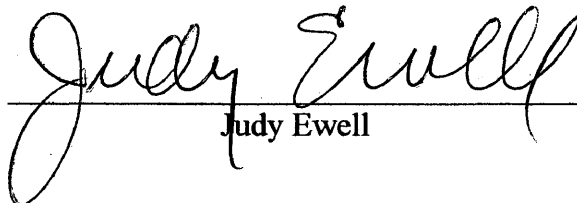
Approved by the Committee, August 2005



Melvin P. Ely, Chair



Carol Sheriff



Judy Ewell

Dedicated to my parents, Donna and Joseph, and their parents,
Catherine, Raymond (1931-2003), Mildred (1925-2005), and Joseph (1920-1991).

“You have to understand the past to understand the present.” – Carl Sagan

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To all the master's students who arrived at the College of William and Mary in 2003: for all the help weathering the storm that was our first year, both figuratively and literally.

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Finally, to Sarah and my family – your love and support make the journey worthwhile.

Justin A. Pariseau
August 2005

ABBREVIATIONS

- EGSL* Earl Gregg Swem Library, Manuscripts and Rare Books Department, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia
- FBR* United States Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, Records of the Superintendent of Education for the State of Virginia, 1865-1870, Accession 32073, Federal Government Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond
- LVA* Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia
- MHS* Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts
- NHA* Nantucket Historical Association Research Library, Nantucket, Massachusetts
- UVA* Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia.

ABSTRACT

The story of freedpeople's education has long been a topic of debate among historians, many of whom have largely cast the era of Reconstruction (1865 – 1877) in terms of failure and success. This trend has both dominated the historiography of the period as a whole and specifically shaped earlier examinations of black education.

This thesis examines what many of the earlier histories of Reconstruction and freedpeople's education have neglected to discuss—the classroom environment, interaction between white teachers and black students, and Southern white attitudes toward black education. While the voices of the African American students themselves, young and old, remain largely unrecoverable, surviving sources, including the teacher's diaries, notebooks, letters, memoirs, and Freedmen's Bureau records, can open the closed doors of the schoolhouse, and at the same time lead the reader into the streets of the wider community. Whether Northern teachers left accounts of their time spent educating Virginia's freedpeople as a testament to their accomplishments and struggles, to justify their work, or to shape the opinion of later generations, we are left with a remarkable record of the work that took place to educate newly freed slaves in Virginia during Reconstruction.

By feeding, clothing, and educating the freedpeople, teachers solved a series of problems that a war-ravaged state could not hope to address on its own. White Virginians grudgingly came to accept the incursion of teachers from the North, and some Southerners, black as well as white, taught in the schools. The education of freedpeople that took place in Virginia and other parts of the former Confederacy laid the groundwork for more radical change to come, both in the permanent establishment of public schools across the South and the fight for racial equality that would continue well into the twentieth century and beyond.

A SCHOOLHOUSE BEHIND EVERY CANNON

INTRODUCTION

In the hours just before dawn, October 24, 1822, news that slave catchers had arrived on the island of Nantucket, Massachusetts, forced a number of white and black island residents from their beds to protect one of their own. Arthur Cooper had lived as a member of the island's segregated black community for two years, in a neighborhood commonly referred to as New Guinea. Cooper had been a slave in Virginia before escaping north with his family to freedom in 1820. He was not alone. The promise of steady work in the whaling industry and Nantucket's Quaker heritage had drawn roughly 274 people of African ancestry to the island by 1820. Responding quickly as news spread across the small island, members of this group in addition to a number of white residents worked together to delay a federal marshal and several others just long enough so that Cooper, along with his wife and children, could escape out a back door of his home.¹

On the surface this event would seem to matter little in the larger scheme of American history. Cooper faded into obscurity, while other fugitive slaves would garner a great deal of attention and even a measure of fame and celebrity in the mid- to late nineteenth century. In contrast with such public figures as Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, Cooper lived out his life on Nantucket, serving as a minister in New Guinea. He lies today interred in Nantucket's African burial ground. It was what happened after Cooper made his escape from the slave catchers that would cause a ripple

¹ *Nantucket Inquirer*, 29 October 1822. See also "Account of Slaves in the State House, Mass.," n.d., Collection 222- Blacks on Nantucket, 1773-1886, Folder 4, *NHA*, and Nathaniel Philbrick, *Away Off Shore: Nantucket Island and its People, 1602-1890* (Nantucket: Mill Hill Press, 1994), 177-186.

effect, and figure prominently in the life of one woman who would go on to teach former slaves in Virginia in the aftermath of the Civil War.

For the next few weeks, the Cooper family hid in the homes of some of the island's most outspoken white abolitionists, including the attic of Oliver C. Gardner. Gardner's six-year-old daughter Anna witnessed much of what happened. Despite her age she was able to recognize the fear in Arthur Cooper's face. Philena Carkin, a friend and colleague of Gardner's, recalled in a journal kept during her time spent teaching freedpeople in Charlottesville, Virginia, "She told me that one of her [Gardner's] first recollections was of a fugitive slave whom the man hunters had traced to her father's house. She could never forget the contrast between his black skin and the ashy whiteness of his lips when he found they had come for him."² It was the memory of what happened in 1822 that would stay with Gardner forever and would shape her professional career. Forty years later, and on the heels of the Union Army, after having been a leader in Nantucket's abolitionist movement and a teacher of black students in the island's African School, Oliver C. Gardner's daughter Anna headed south for the Carolinas to do her part in educating the freedpeople.

Gardner's commitment to African Americans "had formed a part of her whole life," long before she arrived in the South.³ An active participant in Nantucket's anti-slavery efforts, she had also served as a teacher for the island's segregated "African

² Philena Carkin, "Reminiscences of my life and work among the Freedmen of Charlottesville, Virginia, from March 1st 1866 to July 1st 1875," in Papers of Philena Carkin, 1866-1902, Accession 11123, *UVA*. Carkin kept a journal that recorded events between 1866 and 1875 while she was in Charlottesville. Dates appear only periodically in the manuscript in the context of her entries. A variation of the journal with the same content but a slightly different title, "Reminiscences of Philena Carkin," dates to 1910, suggesting that Carkin intended to publish the journal as a record of her work. Philena Carkin, "Reminiscences of Philena Carkin," 1910. Accession 11123-a. Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, *UVA*.

³ Carkin, "Reminiscences," Papers of Philena Carkin, *UVA*.

School” before Nantucket’s integration efforts during the 1840s.⁴ A *carte de visite* from either the 1850s or 1860s shows Gardner in middle age, wearing a piece of jewelry that Carkin noticed when they met in 1866: “She had a beautiful, heart-shaped gold medal which those pupils presented her, which was engraved with a statement of this fact.”⁵ Gardner wore the inscribed medal for the rest of her life, clearly proud of her service to her students on Nantucket. Her clear commitment to the abolition of slavery and the education of black students in both the North and South led Carkin, a fellow Massachusetts teacher, to remark that “she came of good old antislavery stock.”⁶ She was, however, by no means alone in her convictions. Many northern men and women who shared similar beliefs and experiences ventured south from New England churches and schoolhouses both during and after the Civil War. They did so in large part to train the freedpeople for a life after slavery. Even so, as a host of Northern teachers arrived in Virginia, the situation of newly freed African Americans was anything but secured by Union victory.

In the preface to a collection of reminiscences and poetry that Gardner published in 1881, the Rev. Phebe A. Hanaford wrote that teachers arriving in North Carolina early in 1862 could only reach the freedpeople “on the small strip of sea-coast held by our forces.” Many teachers were still very much on the frontlines of the war effort, “when a school-house was planted behind every cannon.”⁷ Hanaford greatly exaggerated the number of freedpeople’s schools dotting the Southern landscape, especially at this early

⁴ Anna Gardner, *Harvest Gleanings, in Prose and Verse* (New York: Fowler & Wells, Publishers, 1881), 23-45, 172-174, and Nathaniel Philbrick, *Away Off Shore: Nantucket Island and its People, 1602-1890* (Nantucket: Mill Hill Press, 1994), 181, 198, 258-259.

⁵ Edwin B. Robinson, *Photographic Portrait of Anna Gardner, carte de visite*, n.d., *NHA*, and Carkin, “Reminiscences,” Papers of Philena Carkin, *UVA*.

⁶ Carkin, “Reminiscences,” Papers of Philena Carkin, *UVA*.

⁷ Phebe A. Hanaford in Gardner, *Harvest Gleanings*, viii.

stage of Northern educational efforts. Her statement nevertheless reveals much about the expectations and realities tied to freedpeople's education. Hanaford, Gardner, and many others believed that educating the freedpeople was the next logical step to pursue after the war concluded. Even in Union-occupied territory, however, this effort met with resistance among the South's white population. While not every schoolhouse may have required a cannon for protection, education became such a hotly contested site of conflict that it may have seemed that way to the teachers at the time.

Fortunately for scholars today, a number of the schoolteachers and missionaries who ventured south during and after the Civil War left records of their travels for a variety of reasons. Fifteen years after she arrived at Yorktown, Virginia, Margaret Newbold Thorpe transcribed her letters and reminiscences about teaching among the freedpeople into a notebook. She saved her story for posterity in order "to give a true picture of the lives of these people [former slaves]; of how industrious they were, how uncomplaining, how anxious to train their children aright and how they struggled to know how to read and write."⁸ Many people, students and teachers alike, saw education as the central component in the fight to attain a greater measure of equality for blacks in Southern society. Teachers reflecting on a life spent partly in the South recognized the importance of what they had done—so they left a record behind, for themselves and for those who would follow.

⁸ Margaret Newbold Thorpe, "Life in Virginia by a Yankee Teacher," and "Life in North Carolina," AMS (photocopy), *EGSL*. The letters Thorpe transcribed into the notebook appear in sections divided by year, with indications in some places as to the month when she wrote them. Only the notebook survives as a record of the letters written during her time in Virginia and North Carolina. See Richard L. Morton, ed., "Life in Virginia by a 'Yankee Teacher,' by Margaret Newbold Thorpe," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, April 1956, 182-183.

Northerners and Southerners, blacks as well as whites, brought a series of expectations, hopes, and dreams to the table. Whether Northern teachers left accounts of their time spent educating Virginia's freedpeople as a testament to their accomplishments and struggles, to justify their work, or to shape the opinion of later generations, we are left with a remarkable record of the work that took place during and after the Civil War. The diaries, letters, and memoirs of Northern teachers far from home, in a world both foreign and often hostile, provides a window into what it was like for the teachers and students following the bloodiest few years in American history. Collectively they tried to make sense out of a shattered world.

The story of freedpeople's education has long been contested ground for historians, who have largely cast the era of Reconstruction in terms of failure and success. This trend has both dominated the historiography of the period as a whole and specifically shaped earlier examinations of black education. Historians who supported Redemption, the reversal of many of the initiatives introduced in the South during Reconstruction, offered a racist portrait of Southern blacks, ultimately blaming them for the supposedly inevitable failure of Reconstruction. In 1915, the movie *The Birth of a Nation* made its debut in a major public attack on the legacy of Reconstruction. Three years later, the historian Ulrich B. Phillips offered a less inflammatory, yet still patronizing picture of black character in his book, *American Negro Slavery*; he asserted that blacks after Emancipation reverted to "a greater slackness than they had previously been permitted to indulge in."⁹ Phillips and his contemporaries accepted that blacks could gain an education through the system of public schools in use after Reconstruction. Like

⁹ Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966), 401.

many white Southerners of their parents' generation, however, these writers held firm to the belief that given the opportunity, black children could not perform equally with white children in the classroom, and would not or could not effectively use the training that they received.

W. E. B. Du Bois, in contrast, wrote in 1934 that "had it not been for the Negro school and college, the Negro would, to all intents and purposes, have been driven back to slavery." He ultimately concluded that the Freedmen's Bureau and the teachers had been successful because educational efforts after the Civil War created a foundation of black leadership on which black communities could build after Reconstruction.¹⁰ For years to come, historians would continue to argue about black education and its legacy as a part of the larger effort to reconstruct the South after 1865.

By the early 1950s, Joseph Vance argued that "Negro education . . . remained as a permanent contribution of Reconstruction." Vance qualified this statement, however, suggesting "educational achievements must be weighed against race antagonism aroused by such persons as Miss [Anna] Gardner, whom local whites viewed as a meddling fanatic." Taken as a whole, the story of Reconstruction remained a cautionary tale for Vance. "Not understanding Southern institutions," he explained, Gardner had "aroused the Negro to unattainable dreams and created animosities which in the long run would react unfavorably against Negro welfare." At the same time, Vance suggested that

¹⁰ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America; An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1935; reprint, Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus-Thomson Organization Ltd., 1976), 667 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

Gardner and others had had to “overcome the indifference of Negroes to their new position” in order to gain any measure of success.¹¹

Vance based his assessment of the benefits of black education on the impression that blacks were apathetic and unaware of their “inherent worth and potential as individuals.”¹² That verdict echoed, in less overtly racist fashion, a conclusion drawn by the famed historian of Reconstruction, William Archibald Dunning, a half-century earlier. Referring to the collapse of Reconstruction, Dunning argued that “in the ultimate test of race strength the weaker gave way,” and that blacks’ power “had been so reduced as to correspond much more closely to their general social significance.”¹³

More recent scholarship has explored the inner workings of freedpeople’s education in an attempt to add complexity to the story, and to explain why black schools and certain educational initiatives survived in the South after Reconstruction. Robert Engs wrote in 1979 that the American Missionary Association teachers at Hampton, Virginia, were successful in opening schools and other educational opportunities to former slaves, even though “their achievements were purchased at considerable cost to themselves and to their understanding of the freed slaves. Their evolving disillusionment cast a pall over the future of Northern white cooperation with the freedmen.”¹⁴ For Engs, the inability of the missionaries to convert the freedpeople to their worldview, and growing Northern indifference to the plight of the freedpeople, doomed their educational

¹¹ Joseph C. Vance, “Freedmen’s Schools in Albemarle County During Reconstruction,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, October 1953, 438. For another negative view of the role women played in educating the freedpeople, see Henry Lee Swint, *The Northern Teacher in the South, 1862-1870* (New York: Octagon Books, 1967).

¹² Vance, “Freedmen’s Schools in Albemarle County,” 438.

¹³ William Dunning, “The Undoing of Reconstruction,” in *Essays on the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 362-363.

¹⁴ Robert Francis Engs, *Freedom’s First Generation: Black Hampton, Virginia, 1861-1890* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), 64.

efforts as a lasting enterprise: “The tragedy of the Hampton missionaries was that they could not connect the right to be free with the right to be different. They too proved guilty of that arrogance from which blacks sought freedom.”¹⁵

Engs added a new dimension to the discourse on black education, identifying Northern racial views as a critical factor affecting the missionaries’ work in Hampton, Virginia. By conducting a localized study, Engs exposed the complicated relationships that existed in the community as whites interacted with former slaves, an uneasy relationship driven by differing expectations of one another.

Historians writing in the late 1980s began to follow through on the link between the Freedmen’s Bureau schools and the public schools that continued to develop in the South after 1877 to help define the enduring legacy of Reconstruction. “The seeds of educational progress planted then [could not] be entirely uprooted,” according to Eric Foner. Even with the public schools being “wholly inadequate for pupils of both races,” Foner contended, “schooling under the Redeemers represented a distinct advance over the days when blacks were excluded altogether from a share in public services.”¹⁶

Susan Gillespie reached a similar conclusion in her 1998 master’s thesis. Gillespie argued that the combined efforts of the American Missionary Association and the Freedmen’s Bureau to educate the freedpeople were only the beginning of a process that would last well into the twentieth century:

The “Unfinished Revolution” that began with the arrival of missionary teachers at Fort Magruder [Virginia] in 1861 laid the groundwork for the real Southern

¹⁵ Engs, *Freedom’s First Generation*, 65. See Robert C. Morris, *Reading, ‘Riting, and Reconstruction: The Education of Freedmen in the South, 1861-1870* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) for his explanation of the limitations of education during Reconstruction due to the doctrine of self-help ideology and growing Northern calls for gradualism in the education of blacks.

¹⁶ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 602.

social reconstruction which began . . . in the school system with *Brown versus the Board of Education* nearly one hundred years later.¹⁷

Freedpeople's education in the 1860s and 1870s led to the establishment of a system of public schools in the South, allowing for the survival of black schools, and securing the position of education as an enduring legacy of Reconstruction. "An examination of this most successful component can," in Gillespie's estimation, "delineate many of the motives and results of the larger Reconstruction experience," and most importantly, "answer broader questions about [Reconstruction's] successes, failures, and lasting impact on Virginia, the South and the nation."¹⁸

What many of the earlier studies have left undone is an analysis of the conditions on the ground—the classroom environment, interaction between white teachers and black students, and Southern white attitudes toward black education. With the Confederacy's capital at Richmond only a short distance from Washington, D.C., Virginia took on tremendous strategic and symbolic importance between 1861 and 1865. Many of the fiercest, bloodiest, and most important battles of the war took place in Virginia.¹⁹ The Northern teachers who arrived in Virginia after 1865 set foot on "what then seemed the soil of the enemy," at a time when nothing but the freedom of African Americans had been guaranteed by the outcome of the Civil War.²⁰ Surviving sources—diaries, notebooks, letters, Freedmen's Bureau records, and memoirs—can open the closed doors of the schoolhouse and at the same time lead the reader into the streets of the wider community. The everyday experiences of the teachers and students reveal how the

¹⁷ Susan W. Gillespie, "Church, State, and School: The Education of Freedmen in Virginia, 1861-1870" (M.A. thesis, College of William and Mary, 1998), 66.

¹⁸ Gillespie, "Church, State, and School," 12-13.

¹⁹ For information on the major battles of the Civil War that took place in Virginia, see James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 339-350, 424-427, 464-489, 528-533, 571-574, 639-645, 724-739, 756-760, 845-852.

²⁰ Carkin, "Reminiscences," Papers of Philena Carkin, *UVA*.

education of former slaves could continue even after Redemption brought much of the progress of Reconstruction to a halt—and why black schooling was not permitted to advance further than it did.

CHAPTER I

First Impressions

The wind was blowing cold off the York River when Margaret Newbold Thorpe and Martha Haines stepped off the boat at Yorktown, Virginia, for the first time in February 1866. While the weather may have reminded them of their now distant homes in Philadelphia, the situation Thorpe and Haines encountered easily could have led them to believe they had just entered an entirely different world. They were only two of the many Northerners arriving throughout the Reconstruction-era South to teach former slaves. In Yorktown, the local Superintendent of Schools, “which had been established by the ‘Friend’s Freedmen’s Association of Philadelphia,’” met with the new teachers and advised them of the situation. With five teachers already working in the vicinity of Yorktown, teachers were needed at other schools operated by the society on the Peninsula. Because of the mounting need for teachers, Thorpe and Haines soon made the ten-mile trip “over one of the worst kind of roads in the world” to Fort Magruder on the outskirts of Williamsburg.²¹

On September 21, 1864, about a year and a half before Thorpe and Haines arrived in Virginia, General Order No. 30 for the District of Eastern Virginia, the headquarters of which was at Norfolk, provided local administrators with procedures for filling open teaching positions on the Virginia peninsula. The orders stipulated that “teachers will be selected from those sent by various benevolent institutions, and such teachers as are

²¹ Morton, ed., “Life in Virginia by a ‘Yankee Teacher,’” 183.

approved by the Committee will be furnished with quarters, rations, and fuel.” Brigadier General George F. Shepley made clear the objective at hand: “to provide the means for the education of all the colored children in this district, the representatives of various benevolent associations having given assurance that they would forward the requisite number of teachers, and provide for their compensation.”²²

Lieutenant Kinsman, General Superintendent of Negro Affairs in Virginia under General Benjamin Butler, later reported in October 1864 that “with but a few exceptions,” of the ninety-nine teachers serving in thirty-nine schools spread out over the seven counties in Virginia under his supervision, “all these teachers have been supplied by the various Freedmen’s Associations of the North, and their salaries paid by the contribution of the charitable. The Government contributing largely to those results by its liberal aid.”²³ Northern aid societies early on took an active part in schools for Virginia’s freedpeople.

Such activity by Union forces to organize the resources provided by Northern aid societies prefigured the role that the federal government would take in educating the freedpeople after the creation of the United States Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, more widely known as the Freedmen’s Bureau, on March 3, 1865. The activities of the bureau came under the direction of the War Department, the most important agency involved in the actual process of reconstructing the former Confederate states on the ground. Eric Foner has argued that the establishment of the Freedmen’s Bureau “symbolized the widespread belief among Republicans that the federal

²² *Freedmen’s Advocate*, November 1864.

²³ *Freedmen’s Advocate*, October 1864.

government must shoulder broad responsibility for the emancipated slaves.”²⁴ As acknowledged in the military records, however, the Freedmen’s Bureau relied on a steady supply of Northern teachers and matériel in order to educate the freedpeople. By 1869, of the 9,503 teachers working to educate former slaves across the South, roughly 5,000 were from the North.²⁵ In Virginia and across the South there was a tremendous demand for teachers to meet the needs of the freedpeople, with many like Thorpe and Haines leaving their homes and schools in the North to teach former slaves.

Recruiting teachers to fill a growing number of openings in the freedpeople’s schools appears to have occurred primarily at the local level in the North. Newspaper articles served as an effective way for Northern men and women to find opportunities to teach among the freedpeople, and for aid societies to recruit educators who were both qualified to teach and who also fit in with a particular organization’s social and religious outlook for the freedpeople. One such article appeared in the *Christian Recorder*, the organ of the African Methodist Episcopal Church based in Philadelphia. On June 22, 1867, the same Quaker organization that sponsored Thorpe and Haines in Yorktown and Williamsburg advertised the reopening of its schools in North Carolina and “on the peninsula of Virginia.”²⁶ The Society of Friends in Philadelphia shared a central goal with its black evangelical brothers and sisters—the successful education of the freedpeople—and was therefore willing to post its advertisement in a predominantly black newspaper. Using a predominantly black newspaper, the society could reach out to

²⁴ Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 31. W. E. B. Du Bois called the Freedmen’s Bureau “the most extraordinary and far-reaching institution of social uplift that America has ever attempted,” Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 219-220. For more on the involvement of Union forces and an interpretation of black agency in the creation of schools as part of early educational efforts in the South, see James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 9-15.

²⁵ Swint, *The Northern Teacher in the South*, 35.

²⁶ *Christian Recorder*, 22 June 1867.

a wider network of people, black and white, who were already interested in issues affecting freedpeople in the South. The association did not discriminate according to gender or race: “this invitation,” it proclaimed, “is extended alike to persons of both sexes, white and colored.” Religious beliefs figured prominently in what qualified a person for service as a teacher; the committee declared itself “especially desirous of availing themselves of the services of God-fearing persons, who will labor conscientiously for the welfare of those committed to their charge.” Whether or not teachers were required to make a demonstration of their faith before the committee is not known, but the advertisement made it clear that “only persons of evangelical belief will be accepted.”²⁷

The Friends’ Association of Philadelphia was ultimately looking to furnish approximately ten schools with teachers, each “with a principal teacher thoroughly qualified by education, and experience in teaching,” as well as “one or more assistant teachers” to assist the primary teacher.²⁸ Despite the society’s call for black and white teachers of both sexes, as Carkin noted during the late 1860s and early 1870s in the western part of Virginia, it appeared that men and women were not volunteering as teachers in equal numbers: “it was usually her as women teachers far outnumbered the men.”²⁹ The narrow focus of the advertisements, even coming in a black periodical, played a role in determining who would go South to teach.

Local black teachers from Virginia certainly played an important role in the schools, especially when the schools were inundated with freedpeople and the need for teachers reached critical levels. Across the South, white Southerners recognized either the

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Carkin, “Reminiscences,” Papers of Philena Carkin, *UVA*.

need to educate the freedpeople—or as historian Henry Lee Swint has suggested, Southerners came to realize that “the best defense against the Yankee teacher was active participation in Negro education,” and joined the schools as teachers.³⁰ These groups were supplemented by a number of Northern white men, including Jacob Yoder, who served with distinction in Virginia. In the end, however, many of the teachers who were most qualified to meet the criteria set forth by the Friend’s Freedmen’s Aid Society and other societies, were the white, evangelical women who appear in such great numbers in the writings of nineteenth-century observers, and in the monthly reports sent by the teachers to aid societies and the Freedmen’s Bureau.³¹

In an example of how tangled and complicated the network of aid societies could be, even though Carkin technically worked under the auspices of the New England Freedmen’s Aid Society and corresponded with that group, the “certificate of commission” issued to Carkin on February 28, 1866, came from the American Freedman’s Aid Commission, Eastern Department, New York:

This may certify that the American Freedman’s Aid Commission has appointed Philena Carkin a teacher of Freedmen for the term of ___ from the date hereof, and accordingly commends her to the confidence and assistance of all persons to whom these presents may come.³²

For any local or federal authority Carkin encountered before or after she reached her final destination, this document would serve to notify the reader of her credentials to serve as a teacher.

³⁰ Swint, *The Northern Teacher in the South*, 122-128, 132-136.

³¹ *FBR*, Superintendent of Education, Virginia, Roll 15, *LVA*, and Swint, *The Northern Teacher in the South*, 175-200.

³² Certificate of Commission: American Freedman’s Aid Commission, Eastern Department, New York – February 28, 1866, Papers of Philena Carkin, *UVA*.

Margaret Thorpe and Martha Haines arrived in Virginia in 1866 with the backing of the Friend's Freedmen's Association of Philadelphia and Its Vicinity for the Relief of the Colored Freedmen. While Thorpe was considered a "devoted Episcopalian," her ancestors had been members of the Society of Friends, and Haines was herself a Quaker, perhaps explaining their involvement with this particular relief organization.³³ Although Anna Gardner was also a Quaker, the support for the schools that Gardner and Philena Carkin would later oversee in and around Charlottesville came from the New England Freedmen's Aid Society.³⁴ Essentially "nonsectarian in character," the New England Freedmen's Aid Society counted among its officers a collection of fiery abolitionists, supporters of women's suffrage, and reformers committed to temperance—reflecting the society's commitment to social change, though on its own terms. The society's vice-president, Jacob Sleeper, was also president of the Massachusetts Temperance Association. Another of the society's officers, E. N. Kirk, was president of the American Missionary Association.³⁵ Agendas may have differed between, and sometimes within, aid societies, but the people who came from the North to teach in freedpeople's schools shared a common worldview that incorporated both religious and reformist impulses.

Farther to the west in Lynchburg, Virginia, Jacob Yoder, a descendant of Swiss Mennonites, worked under the auspices of the Pennsylvania Freedmen's Relief Association—a Quaker-sponsored organization. Yoder's future wife Anna Whitaker, arrived in Lynchburg in 1866 from Ashford, Connecticut, with support from the Baptist

³³ Morton, ed., "Life in Virginia by a 'Yankee Teacher,'" 180-181.

³⁴ New England Freedmen's Aid Society Records, 1862-1876, 3 Boxes. Manuscripts, Ms. N-101, *MHS*, and Vance, "Freedmen's Schools in Albemarle County," 430.

³⁵ Swint, *The Northern Teacher in the South*, 15, 30-31.

Home Mission Society.³⁶ The federal government helped organize efforts to aid the freedpeople, but the numerous aid societies that sent teachers to Virginia operated independently of one another, and were often as diverse as the people who volunteered to take on the task of teaching the South's population of ex-slaves. Candidates had to exhibit "undoubted loyalty to the Federal Government," but other criteria, especially religious views, played a role in the selection process.³⁷ Despite the narrow focus of recruiting efforts in the North, a wide array of regional differences and different religious backgrounds would still be represented in the cadre of teachers assigned to Virginia. Finding the right people—teachers who were both qualified and fit the mission of a given aid society—required active recruiting that included a degree of marketing.

Funding was central to supporting the schools as well as the teachers whom aid societies wanted to persuade to join their educational efforts. The Friends' Association of Philadelphia itself promised "to remunerate justly all who may be engaged to teach."³⁸ Before they could fulfill such a promise, the society had to raise funds. Sponsoring societies sent a teacher south only when donations ensured the society's ability to pay for the teacher's upkeep; "each Branch Society raising the sum of 500.00 had a special teacher assigned to it, with whom the secretary of such society entered into correspondence upon matters relating to his or her school."³⁹ Wholly dependent upon the aid of freedpeople's aid societies for financial backing, teachers headed south relying on

³⁶ Jacob E. Yoder, *The Fire of Liberty in Their Hearts: The Diary of Jacob E. Yoder of the Freedmen's Bureau School, Lynchburg, Virginia, 1866-1870*, ed. by Samuel L. Horst (Richmond: Library of Virginia, 1996), xii-xiv, xxvi.

³⁷ The Constitution of the Educational Commission, 7 February 1862, New England Freedmen's Aid Society Records, 1862-1876, *MHS*.

³⁸ *Christian Recorder*, 22 June 1867.

³⁹ Carkin, "Reminiscences," Papers of Philena Carkin, *UVA*.

the goodwill and organizational abilities of the officers back in the North who worked to run those organizations.

Once teachers arrived in the South for the first time, they rarely knew what to expect. In some cases, Virginia was only one of the stops for northern schoolteachers who sought opportunities to educate former slaves. Some would spend parts of their careers as teachers in other parts of the South. In September 1869, Thorpe ended up in Warrenton, North Carolina, after her time in Yorktown and Williamsburg.⁴⁰ Anna Gardner spent five years alongside other teachers in Charlottesville, Virginia, educating newly freed African Americans in the shadow of Thomas Jefferson's university, but only after teaching in New Berne, North Carolina, "on the small strip of sea-coast" held by Union forces after a major battle there in 1862.⁴¹ Where Northern teachers were ultimately assigned had much to do with the sponsoring aid organization that provided financial support for the teachers and supplies for the students. The Freedmen's Bureau allowed these aid societies to determine and provide for most of what Virginia's freedpeople's schools needed.

Much had changed in Virginia since 1864. Initially freedpeople's schools operated only in Union-controlled areas along the coast. Following the end of the Civil War, aid societies had to furnish teachers for schools that were now spread out across the state. Travel over an almost universally poor network of roads and railways across the war-ravaged state was difficult at best. In an attempt to describe the condition of the local roads to a correspondent, Thorpe asked her reader to "imagine the worst possible and

⁴⁰ Morton, ed., "Life in Virginia by a 'Yankee Teacher,'" 182. See also Richard L. Morton, ed., "A 'Yankee Teacher' in North Carolina, by Margaret Newbold Thorpe," *The North Carolina Historical Review*, XXX, 1953, 564-583.

⁴¹ Gardner, *Harvest Gleanings*, viii.

then think they are five times worse and you may have a slight idea of what we went over and through and around.” She recalled that it took five hours to complete the twenty-mile journey from Yorktown to Hampton. The reason for the delay is apparent in what happened when Thorpe’s colleague, Martha Haines, stepped out of the carriage in Hampton. “When we got out of our carriage,” she reported, “one of Martie’s [Martha’s] overshoes came off, and although it was carefully sought, it was never found.” The mud that consumed Haines’s shoe was so deep by Thorpe’s estimation that “we never succeeded in finding the bottom in Virginia.”⁴²

Travel conditions like these meant that visits to colleagues in other parts of the state were infrequent, only heightening the isolation of teachers far from networks of family and friends. Several different schools operated by the New England Freedmen’s Aid Society after 1866 were located near Charlottesville, including Gordonsville, Orange Court House, and Louisa Court House. “We did stray so far from our own folds as to visit the Northern teachers at these places occasionally – but the visits were few and far between,” Carkin reported.⁴³ A combination of distance, transportation problems, and extensive duties to be fulfilled beyond the many hours spent in the classroom prohibited more frequent visits among teachers. She added:

Each teacher was expected to write at least one letter, and make out a report of the school, every month to the parent society in Boston, and a monthly letter to the Branch Society, and it was frequently necessary to write two or three in place of one. For a time also they were expected to report monthly to the Freedmen’s Bureau in Washington. In fact no Freedmen’s teacher ever had to seek far for an occasion to write a letter to somebody or for somebody.⁴⁴

⁴² Morton, ed., “Life in Virginia by a ‘Yankee Teacher,’” 203.

⁴³ Carkin, “Reminiscences,” Papers of Philena Carkin, *UVA*.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

It is little wonder that teachers had so little time to visit with friends or to continue with their own personal correspondence. Teachers' monthly reports alone constitute the bulk of the Freedmen's Bureau's records for Virginia's Superintendent of Education between 1865 and 1870.⁴⁵ In his capacity as superintendent of the schools around Lynchburg, Jacob Yoder seems to have traveled more widely than other teachers.⁴⁶ This may, however, have had just as much to do with his gender, and subsequently his ability to travel more freely through the countryside unattended, than with his position of leadership.

Once a society had the funds to send a teacher to one of its schools, regardless of whatever training or preparation the teacher had received before boarding the train or boat and heading south, nothing could have prepared him or her for what they would find upon arriving in their assigned school district. Perhaps Philena Carkin said it best when she recalled that "during the nine and a half years that I labored among these people, I met with many and varied experiences of a curious, interesting, terrifying, or comical nature."⁴⁷ Even though every teacher's individual experience was different, when teachers finally made it south of the Potomac River many were struck by the devastation caused by the war. All dealt directly with the consequences of a land ravaged by years of civil war and the ensuing hostility directed toward them as Northerners. Traveling south on the Orange and Alexandria Railroad in March 1866, Carkin noted that "one year of peace had not effaced the outward scars of war. Remnants of old uniforms, old canteens, and the bleaching bones of horses were scattered all about." A Southern woman sitting

⁴⁵ *FBR*, Superintendent of Education, Virginia, Roll 15, *LVA*.

⁴⁶ Yoder, *The Fire of Liberty in Their Hearts*, 55, 58, 59, 61, 107, 108-110, 113, 118, 121, 122, 126-129.

⁴⁷ Carkin, "Reminiscences," Papers of Philena Carkin, *UVA*.

next to Carkin who observed the same scene gave voice to the lasting bitterness that survived the war: “the Yankees have made a terrible piece of work of this country.”⁴⁸

Having spent much of the summer and fall back home in Philadelphia, Margaret Thorpe returned to Virginia in November 1866, once again by boat. Traveling in a group of eight, the teachers attracted unwanted attention from fellow passengers. Thorpe recalled that the Southerners in attendance mimicked her accent, “saying most uncomplimentary things about Yankees in general, and threatening dire evils if we came to work where they lived.”⁴⁹ A few years later in November of 1871, Anna Gardner ran into trouble on the road to a new assignment at Elizabeth City, North Carolina. The New England Freedmen’s Aid Society received a letter that Gardner had finally reached her new posting at Elizabeth City “after an unpleasant journey.” Fortunately for Gardner, the secretary for the society wrote that she had traveled part of the way with “a Northern gentleman who cared for her comfort on the boat and introduced her to a boarding place where she fared well but finds it too expensive to continue.”⁵⁰

Prospects failed to improve as she searched the town for a place to stay. The society’s daily journal entry for November 1, 1871 notes Gardner’s continued difficulties in the town: “Miss Gardner...has been board hunting and thinks it a discouraging business. Thinks she will have to pay much more than [a recently reassigned colleague] did.” In a letter sent out the same day as the journal entry, Gardner’s colleagues in Boston could only respond that they were sorry to learn of her plight, and offer encouragement for the future: “To Miss Gardner, saying that we are sorry to learn of her discomforts and discouragements, but that we hope they may soon end, and assuring her meanwhile of our

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Morton, ed., “Life in Virginia by a ‘Yankee Teacher,’” 188.

⁵⁰ Daily Journal 1871-1874, 1 November 1871, New England Freedmen’s Aid Society Records, *MHS*.

hearty confidence and sympathy.”⁵¹ Whether traveling in a group or alone, as was the case with Gardner, teachers were forced to fend for themselves in an unpredictable environment.

Gardner’s ordeal highlights one of the greatest obstacles experienced by a substantial number of the freedpeople’s school teachers—gender. The problems that Gardner encountered during her voyage and in the course of finding lodging probably related to her status as a single white northern woman traveling alone in the South. As a native-born resident of Nantucket, Gardner’s accent would have set her apart from most Massachusetts residents, let alone among a group of Southerners. Traveling alone without a husband or male companion also would have been highly unorthodox, one reason for why she may have sought the friendship of the “Northern gentleman.” To make matters worse, perhaps even before she arrived in town, Gardner’s role as a teacher in the local freedpeople’s schoolhouse would have been widely known in the local community. Local whites may have been trying to drive her out of town by raising the cost of room and board. From the very beginning, freedpeople’s teachers, especially single women, encountered a host of obstacles even before they set foot in the classroom.

Often, teachers could expect little or no help from local residents. Carkin asked for the location of fellow teacher Anna Gardner when she first stepped off the train in Charlottesville. She later recalled, “I gained nothing by my questions but the curious and not over friendly regard of the crowd assembled at the station.” It became clear to Carkin from “a combination of cold stares and curt answers of “No, I don’t know her,” despite clear recognition of Gardner’s name, that the local whites gathered at the station had

⁵¹ Ibid.

realized why Carkin was in Charlottesville, and had decided to give the new freedpeople's teacher an inhospitable welcome.⁵²

Working sixty-five miles to the southwest in Lynchburg, Jacob Yoder noted that "it is too plain that this people still love Slavery with some blind madness. They have only accepted the result of this war, because they must." Yoder tied the less than welcoming reception given to teachers with general attitudes toward the former slaves. Confiding to his diary that "many hate every measure that is intended to elevate them [blacks]," and considering that education would be the key to elevating the freedpeople, Yoder concluded, "Therefore the whites . . . bitterly oppose it [education]." One teacher in nearby Liberty, now Bedford, Virginia, worked in fear of his life, leading Yoder to conclude that "these reconstructed rebels it seems are still thirsting for blood."⁵³ White residents of this part of the state also evinced curiosity over the teachers working in the freedpeople's schools. When he made a visit to Liberty in May 1866, Yoder noted that "our party attracted considerable attention. Every body must have a glance at the nigger teachers." In the hamlets and towns in which many teachers found themselves, news traveled fast, he remarked: "I suppose soon after our arrival the village was informed of it."⁵⁴

Not all the teachers, however, came from the North. Although a number of the teachers in charge of schools in Virginia were white Northerners, and as a result were subjected to insults as outsiders, the schools could not have functioned without the assistance of African American students and adults from the community who served as

⁵² Carkin, "Reminiscences," Papers of Philena Carkin, *UVA*.

⁵³ Jacob E. Yoder, *The Fire of Liberty in Their Hearts: The Diary of Jacob E. Yoder of the Freedmen's Bureau School, Lynchburg, Virginia, 1866-1870*, edited by Samuel L. Horst (Richmond: Library of Virginia, 1996), 3.

⁵⁴ Yoder, *The Fire of Liberty in Their Hearts*, 23.

teachers in the schools. This development only served to heighten the level of distrust and anger directed at the schools. A survey of teachers' memoirs and the teachers' monthly school reports in the papers of the Superintendent of Education for Virginia between 1865-1870, which listed the number of teachers and assistants at each school as well as their ethnicity, bears out that black teachers played an important role in staffing Virginia's freedpeople's schools.⁵⁵

In a letter dated April 5, 1870, Jacob Yoder wrote that of twenty-eight teachers under the supervision of the Pennsylvania Freedmen's Relief Association in seven counties of western Virginia, half were from the North. The remaining fourteen were from Virginia. In this group, Yoder recorded that only three were white; "the rest are colored." While Yoder was quick to point out that the qualifications of the black teachers were limited, they represented the majority of his educational staff that hailed from Virginia.⁵⁶

In Charlottesville, a black student of Anna Gardner's quickly took on an important role as a teacher in the schoolhouse. Philena Carkin noted that Paul Lewis, a former slave, "was slow but deep. He made a good teacher, adopting Miss Gardner's methods of instruction, and drilling his pupils very thoroughly." Carkin, who arrived in 1866, left Charlottesville only after working there for nearly ten years. After her departure, the school and Lewis fell on hard times. Information in Carkin's journal suggests that she kept in contact with the young man, adding to one of the later entries that "he [Lewis] continued in the work for a year or two after I left, and then owing to some trouble he had with a white resident, he lost his position as teacher, and resumed his

⁵⁵ *FBR*, Superintendent of Education, Virginia, Roll 15, *LVA*.

⁵⁶ Jacob Yoder, Lynchburg, to Sarah Fisher Corlies, Germantown, 5 April 1870, in Jacob E. Yoder, Letterbook, 1870, Accession 35108, Personal Papers Collection, *LVA*.

old track of shoe making.”⁵⁷ Once the local school board gained control in 1874 of black education in Charlottesville, Lewis was able to hold on to his position as a teacher until 1876 when the board determined that his services were no longer needed.⁵⁸

Yoder expressed frustration over the shortage of qualified teachers available to him in his diary entry for May 16, 1866. “This place,” he wrote, “will not flourish before it shall have received large accessions of Yankees.”⁵⁹ Waiting for an influx of Northerners to materialize, however, would have crippled efforts to teach the freedpeople. On the other hand, while Yoder had three local white teachers serving in the freedpeople’s schools in his part of Virginia, there were not nearly enough white Virginians willing to teach in the schools by April 1870 to meet the needs of the 1,575 students enrolled in and around Lynchburg.⁶⁰ The situation compelled Yoder to turn to the black community for help. An unnamed African American woman who taught with Yoder appears in a photograph with him and their class in the early 1870s.⁶¹ Black teachers benefited greatly from the presence of their Northern colleagues, but suffered some setbacks both during and after the latter departed.

With Northern teachers, local freedpeople, and some Southern whites working side by side in the schools, various attitudes and behaviors toward black education emanated from the rest of the local white community. On the opposite end of the spectrum from the white Southerners working as teachers in freedpeople’s schools, the

⁵⁷ Carkin, “Reminiscences,” Papers of Philena Carkin, *UVA*.

⁵⁸ Philena Carkin, Charlottesville, to Ednah D. Cheney, Boston, 1 April 1874, Box 3 – Letters, New England Freedmen’s Aid Society Records, 1862-1876, *MHS*, and Paul Lewis, Charlottesville, to Ednah D. Cheney, Boston, 8 July 1876, Box 3 – Letters, New England Freedmen’s Aid Society Records, 1862-1876, *MHS*.

⁵⁹ Yoder, *The Fire of Liberty in Their Hearts*, 19.

⁶⁰ Jacob Yoder, Lynchburg, to Sarah Fisher Corlies, Germantown, 5 April 1870, in Yoder, Letterbook, 1870, *LVA*.

⁶¹ Yoder, *The Fire of Liberty in Their Hearts*, 2.

rise of the first Ku Klux Klan, and the related outbreaks of violence during this period in various parts of the South, could easily lead one to believe that freedpeople's schoolhouses in Virginia were in danger of burning down on a nightly basis. Yet this was certainly not the case. Not all white Southerners took a violent stance toward the schools. In fact, most local residents seem to have taken a restrained approach, leaving the teachers to do their work. Attitudes shifted over time, largely for the better, as most Southerners accepted black education as a lasting institution by the end of Reconstruction. Even so, Northern teachers in Virginia still experienced their full share of insults and injuries from a very hostile and very dangerous minority of Southern whites.

Some white Southerners saw the combination of white teachers and black community leaders working together in an educational setting as a direct threat to their way of life, helping to explain the less than cordial welcome for teachers when they arrived in town. Perusing official records, one might not get a complete picture of the situation on the ground. The teachers' monthly school reports that survive in the records of the Superintendent of Education for the state of Virginia reveal some of the problems involved in studying social relations between Southern whites, Northern teachers, and the freedpeople. Thorpe and Haines, when asked in their teacher's monthly school report for March 1868 to "state the public sentiment towards colored schools" for their night school at Fort Magruder, responded "indifferent." Haines responded similarly for the Fort Magruder day school, as did Thorpe in her report for the Williamsburg day school and Isaac Duvall in Richmond County.⁶² Sarah Goodyear, a teacher in Northumberland County, considered local sentiment to be "generally hostile" toward the schools and

⁶² Monthly School Reports, March 1868—York County, Fort Magruder, and November 1868—Richmond County, *FBR*, Superintendent of Education, Virginia, Roll 15, *LVA*.

teachers in her area, a view shared in the counties of Sussex, Prince George, and Brunswick by January 1869.⁶³ The official reports tend to complicate the picture of violence against the teachers and schools. While the reports to local superintendents and to the Freedmen's Bureau in Washington, D.C. indicate a level of tolerance for the schoolhouses dotting the Virginia landscape, attitudes could change. Indifference may not have been an accurate word to describe the situation on the peninsula around Fort Magruder and Williamsburg between 1866 and 1868.

In relating the story of one black scholar who attended the evening school regularly in 1866, Thorpe addressed the influence of the Ku Klux Klan who were by this time very active in "our neighborhood" around Williamsburg, and the action taken by at least one of her students:

One man with daughter and granddaughter lived three miles from the school house, and very seldom missed their six miles walk. After the Ku Klux came into our neighborhood, this old man always came armed with sword and gun, both so large, clumsy and rusty we concluded they were relics of the Revolution. The weapons would be carefully placed in the corner of the room, the Primer taken from the pocket, and the poor old worn white head bent over its pages as he patiently spelled the words over and over, and his triumph when he mastered one was most touching. Often he would say "Isn't this a most blessed privelege [sic] Many a time I have been whipped for being found with a book, for I always wanted to learn to read."⁶⁴

Because of the very real threat of violent reprisals for their participation in the Freedmen's Bureau schools, blacks protected themselves as best they could from hostile members of the white community. Problems continued well into 1867 and 1868 for the schools at Fort Magruder and Williamsburg. Thorpe noted in her memoir that the Ku Klux Klan was still very active in the area during these years, "we have received notice

⁶³ Monthly School Reports, November 1868—Northumberland County, and January 1869—Sussex County, Prince George County, and Brunswick County, *FBR*, Superintendent of Education, Virginia, Roll 15, *LVA*.

⁶⁴ Morton, ed., "Life in Virginia by a 'Yankee Teacher,'" 185.

that they intend giving us a call.” Nevertheless, she expressed little worry over the situation, as Klansmen would “find it warm work to get inside the Fort, for our men have armed themselves and keep watch outside our house every night.” She had initially hoped that the Klan would become merely a nuisance. “At first we thought the K.K.K.’s would not hurt any one,” she wrote, “that it was only fun, and a desire to frighten the negroes from voting the Republican ticket.”⁶⁵ Thorpe would prove wrong in her assumption.

One of Thorpe’s exchanges with a male student provides tremendous insight into the matter. She cautioned the student “in case of an attack to guard against killing any one” for fear of reprisals. The young man, named Griffen, took a squarely tongue-in-cheek stance in answering his teacher’s appeal. He “assumed a cunning look” and responded, “‘Please mum may I give you an understandin of the matter; them things are sperits, and you know bullets goes right through ‘em, as they really are sperits, and don’t hurt ‘em, so it aint no harm to shoot ‘em.’ But as he turned away I heard him mutter, ‘And if they aint sure enough sperits, shootin is what they ought to get.’”⁶⁶ Griffen’s conversation with Thorpe highlights in part the efforts of the first Ku Klux Klan to play upon what they identified as the superstitions of the freedpeople by impersonating the spirits of dead Confederate soldiers.⁶⁷

While Thorpe provides little information about how members of the Williamsburg Klan dressed, they clearly used the guise of Confederate ghosts in their attempt to terrorize Thorpe’s students. One Klan member, as Thorpe recalled the story, “held out a skull to one of our [freed]men, and asked him please to hold [it] while he fixed his back

⁶⁵ Morton, ed., “Life in Virginia by a ‘Yankee Teacher,’” 202.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ For a more detailed discussion of the elaborate costuming of the first Ku Klux Klan in the South, see Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Iron Confederacies: Southern Railways, Klan Violence, and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1999), 109-111.

bone!” In another instance, a Klansman confronted a student named Aleck, demanded something to drink, and “in some way disposed of a whole bucket full of water.” Thorpe remembered that the student was incredulous, and could not believe that the “sperit” could “drink so much,” to which the Klansman replied, “Wait till you’ve been in hell for a year.”⁶⁸

Griffen’s earlier comment shows how blacks dealt with such threats and seized agency in the aftermath of the Civil War. Fully realizing that the “spirits” threatening their homes and schools were very much of this world, the freedpeople in Williamsburg made an effort to protect family and friends, as well as their newly won freedom, against a tangible physical threat. Thorpe’s students prevailed in spite of increased violence in the region, some of which came as the direct result of Klan activity.⁶⁹ At least for a few hours at night, the freedpeople attending school at Fort Magruder were able to set aside the weapons they had taken up to protect the schoolhouse and focus on the lessons denied them in slavery.⁷⁰

Further complicating the official reports made by Thorpe and Haines is the fact that Thorpe was herself a target of violence in 1867-1868. “For a few weeks,” Thorpe wrote, “I walked to and from W[illia]msburg,” over which time she recalled, “I had a few unpleasant little affairs.” Local whites employed a wide array of tactics, from verbal abuse to physical threats, in order to discourage the teachers. Thorpe recounted that “once I was struck by a stone thrown by a man (white of course).” “[A]nother time a bull dog was hissed on my horse, and it jumped to catch her by the throat,” but as turned out, she

⁶⁸ Morton, ed., “Life in Virginia by a ‘Yankee Teacher,’” 202-203.

⁶⁹ For more on the first Ku Klux Klan and the violent role this organization played in Reconstruction, see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction*, 342-343, 425-444, and Swint, *The Northern Teacher in the South*, 107-108.

⁷⁰ Morton, ed., “Life in Virginia by a ‘Yankee Teacher,’” 185, 202.

was prepared to deal with the situation: “I had trained ‘Katie’ to rear when I raised the reins, so that the dog did not spring high enough, and I rode quickly away.” When these tactics failed to intimidate Thorpe, the planning became more elaborate:

Another time a colored man told me that he heard some white men say, “Well if that don’t get her off her horse, we wont try any more.” That was all he heard, but from what he saw he told me he thought the trouble would be where the street had a sharp turn, and the road was in such bad condition every one was obliged for about a square to ride on the sidewalk. The houses were uninhabited and in wretched condition. I rode pretty fast as I came near the spot, but looked intently before me and sure enough the thinnest [*sic*] possible lath was put out a window just where it would strike me across the breast. I did not slacken my speed in the least, but ducked my head, or rather my body, so I escaped it, and did not even look around. I heard a laugh in the house, but that was all and no one ever again molested me in that way.

Where such direct physical threats to Thorpe failed, personal insults also came into play. Thorpe was subject to mockery not just on her voyages from Philadelphia to her posting at Fort Magruder, but also during her walks to a school in Williamsburg from Fort Magruder. She recalled from her journal and letters between 1867 and 1868 that “One time I met two young men who stopped right in front of me and one said, ‘Do you think she’s pretty?’ The other replied, ‘Good heavens, no,’” a direct attempt on the part of some of the local men to publicly embarrass her.⁷¹

In the western part of the state the situation was much the same, a combination of open threats, marginal acts of defiance against the teachers, but ultimately an uneasy acceptance of the schools by the majority of the local whites. Philena Carkin found it difficult to befriend residents of the town so soon after the war. “A few – a very few met us with some degree of cordiality, and we found them very agreeable,” Carkin wrote, but the Civil War remained fresh in the minds of the majority. “It was too soon for us to expect the feeling of bitterness to have died out...and we were Yankees.” Compounding

⁷¹ Ibid., 188, 201.

the problem for Carkin and fellow teachers was the reason they were in Virginia in the first place. She noted in her journal the difficulty locals must have had playing host to freedpeople's teachers; "it could not have been easy for them to look upon us as friends so soon particularly in view of the work we went there to do, which, to their minds, was not a friendly one." In Charlottesville, as in other parts of Virginia, Carkin, Gardner, and others were excluded from enjoying the social life of the towns in which they worked:

Our position as teachers of the Freedmen was such as to shut us out of the sympathy and society of the white people generally, so I can say but little in regard to them socially except that I have reason to think they were, in their own way, very kind and charming people.⁷²

Carkin surmised that the early protection of the federal government played a role in deflecting some of the potential difficulties of living in Virginia as a teacher from New England.

Invitations to social functions were the least of Carkin's worries in a Virginia college town. Home to the University of Virginia, Charlottesville had its share of student-related trouble. After federal troops pulled out of Charlottesville on June 8, 1866, the teachers feared a backlash. "We heard of many threats to break up our school after the soldiers left," Carkin wrote. "I find in my diary of that date this significant item 'they threaten to burn us out.'" Fortunately for Carkin, Gardner, and the other teachers in the area, the decision to go "on with our work as if we had no thought of trouble" did in fact prove "the wisest course, for the trouble did not come." Carkin's journal still provides a record of isolated problems she encountered with local white Southerners, including when passengers on the train into town which "passed within a rod of our school

⁷² Carkin, "Reminiscences," Papers of Philena Carkin, *UVA*.

building” threw rocks and often broke the windows of the schoolhouse. Carkin remembered one particular incident when she finally challenged the stone throwers:

One Saturday when I heard the train coming I seated myself quietly at my open window facing the track, book in hand. As the train drew near I could see that every one had a stone ready. I looked up from my book innocently as if it had never occurred to me that they would do so brutal a thing as to throw – and they did it.⁷³

Her peaceful act of resistance did little to curtail ill will toward the teachers in Charlottesville.

Passengers on the train were not the only people in town to cause damage at the school. When Charlottesville learned of Ulysses S. Grant’s first Presidential victory in 1868, Carkin “was roused from a sound sleep by the crashing of stones through the windows of my sitting room.” It turned out that students from the college, angry over the election results, “and, furious at learning of the Republican success vented this spite in that way, making the act energetic by a vigorous accompaniment of oaths and imprecations – as if we could have prevented the election of Grant had we wished to do so – which we did not.”⁷⁴

Teachers in Charlottesville also suffered from more organized forms of violence. As was the case in Williamsburg and other parts of Virginia, the Ku Klux Klan was active in Charlottesville. In an attempt to drive the teachers away, “they once left a picture of a coffin with the regulation mark K.K.K. upon it at our door, and they made various efforts to annoy us.” Once again, Klan tactics proved to be mostly ineffective, though more due to the character of the intended victims than for lack of planning. Carkin observed that the Klan acted “perhaps with a view of frightening us away: not

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

considering, perhaps, that had we been timid and easily frightened we should not have gone in the first place.”⁷⁵

The instances of threats to the schoolhouse in Charlottesville played only a minor role in Carkin’s overall narrative. She made a point to mention a few cases “as specimens of some of the annoyances to which we were occasionally subjected,” but placed far greater importance on the business of educating the freedpeople. Klan activity and attacks on the school certainly “formed a unique part of our experience there,” but only a small part of the story in Carkin’s estimation.⁷⁶ Not only did violence fail to significantly hinder the progress of teachers and their educational efforts; stories of violence failed to dominate the narratives of teachers who recorded their experiences among the freedpeople of Virginia.

A likely explanation for the uneasy acceptance of the freedpeople’s schools in Charlottesville and elsewhere, especially after the withdrawal of Union troops from Virginia, involves living arrangements. Carkin, Gardner, and Paul Lewis’s family eventually ended up living at their school.⁷⁷ At Williamsburg, Thorpe and Haines lived together in a two-room house within the earthworks at Fort Magruder.⁷⁸ Isolated from the larger white community, these teachers thereby removed themselves from most contact with white Southerners, allowing local citizens the opportunity to ignore their activities.

Teachers recalled that residents of Charlottesville eventually “became accustomed to our work there so we were never seriously disturbed,” although Carkin was quick to add, “I do not mean by this that we were wholly ignored, for they often paid us the

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Morton, ed., “Life in Virginia by a ‘Yankee Teacher,’” 183.

compliment of threats, or broke our windows or showed us some other delicate attention of a similar nature.”⁷⁹ It seems that an uneasy truce was struck between the teachers and the greater community of Charlottesville. As Carkin noted some of the same annoyances Thorpe recorded in her diary and letters, not everyone would honor this unspoken agreement, but teachers were still mostly allowed to pursue their work in peace.

Even though Virginia escaped much of the worst violence against freedpeople’s schools and teachers, news traveled fast of violence in other parts of the South against black communities and of attacks on freedpeople’s schools. On May 1, 1866, a major riot broke out in Memphis, Tennessee. After three days of racial violence, at least forty-six blacks and two whites were dead, five black women had been raped, and many of the city’s black homes, churches, and schools had been damaged beyond repair or burned to the ground.⁸⁰ On May 7, only a few days later, Jacob Yoder wrote in his personal diary that “the rebels no doubt think the Negroes are becoming superior themsel[v]es if they do not burn their school houses and destroy their spelling books. They have commenced the first in memphis on a large scale.”⁸¹ The national press picked up on the story by the end of the month. *Harper’s Weekly* published a sketch by Alfred Rodolph Waud on May 26, 1866 of the violence in Memphis. A burning freedpeople’s schoolhouse, surrounded by a celebratory white mob, became the symbol for the riot.⁸²

Some in Lynchburg feared that a celebration on June 5, 1866, marking the anniversary of the first African American Sabbath Schools in the town would draw

⁷⁹ Carkin, “Reminiscences,” Papers of Philena Carkin, *UVA*.

⁸⁰ Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction*, 117.

⁸¹ Yoder, *The Fire of Liberty in Their Hearts*, 13-14. Yoder also heard about a month later on May 28 of supposed unrest in Gordonsville, in Orange County, Virginia; “At three o’clock the news reached us that there had been a riot in Gordonsville last night and to day. But this evenings train from that place knows nothing of it.” Yoder, *The Fire of Liberty in Their Hearts*, 27.

⁸² *Harper’s Weekly*, 26 May 1866.

“interference by the rowdies,” a very real concern after what had happened in Memphis.⁸³ Yoder wrote in his diary that even the American flag had to be concealed before the celebration as a precaution: “In times past the flag was a protector. Now, at least in these parts, it needs itself to be protected. We sent it down town covered over.”⁸⁴ The feared outbreak of civil unrest never materialized. The parade and celebration went so well that some white women around the town waved handkerchiefs out of their windows and doors during the procession “to manifest their feelings of approbation,” a welcome change in attitude around the town for Yoder. In all, 2,400 residents turned out for the celebration. Although he noted “some slight exceptions” in the overall “good feeling” around the town, Yoder believed that a majority of the townspeople were not bothered by the parade.⁸⁵

By the end of Yoder’s first year, changes were apparent in the attitudes of local whites toward the schools. He made an encouraging observation in his diary entry for June 19, 1866: “There are now quite a number of citizens here whose eyes are beginning to open.” It had been quite some time since Yoder had heard of any “meddling with our work,” and thought that prospects for the future were bright.⁸⁶ Aside from his general impressions of the situation on the ground, Yoder’s conversations with residents in and around Lynchburg shed some light on the changes in what local whites thought about the freedpeople and schools. Yoder was pleasantly surprised by one encounter with a German immigrant who had fought as a Confederate soldier. Yoder wrote the following diary entry on June 14, 1866: “This meeting was the happiest if possible. Though

⁸³ Yoder, *The Fire of Liberty in Their Hearts*, 32.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

Southerner in Sentiments generally he is liberal and reasonable...he said 'I believe that the slaves will in ten years be better off than they ever were before.' Typical of local white attitudes, however, the former Confederate preferred a moderate approach to social change. The man informed Yoder of his belief that the "radicals are too radical."⁸⁷

Yoder struck up a conversation with an Irish overseer watching over three sharecroppers later that same month. The man was clearly torn between the belief that the war had ruined the country, and reluctant acceptance of equal rights for the freedpeople. Asked by Yoder whether the freedpeople had the capacity for education, the overseer responded, "some are smarter than the white man a few seem duller." Overall, he had more of a problem with black men receiving the right to vote than with freedpeople's access to educational opportunities.⁸⁸ Exchanges like these highlighted the ambivalence of many white Southerners on issues that concerned Northern teachers and the freedpeople. Not all local white residents fell either on the side of the minority teaching in the schools, or among the numbers of those who joined the ranks of the Ku Klux Klan. It was the group that occupied the middle ground between these two extremes that teachers tried to win over.

Beyond what they did in the freedpeople's schoolhouses, the teachers sometimes served as a last resort for Southerners who had fallen on desperate times. One freedpeople's aid society had a "Committee on Clothing" that sent "garments and other articles necessary for the physical comfort of those whom the Commission is seeking to benefit; which supplies shall be distributed by the teachers."⁸⁹ Some of these supplies

⁸⁷ Ibid., 39-40.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 50-51.

⁸⁹ The Constitution of the Educational Commission, 7 February 1862, New England Freedmen's Aid Society Records, 1862-1876, *MHS*.

ended up in the hands of destitute white Southerners with nowhere else to turn for help. During the winter of 1866-1877, one that Thorpe's students described as "the hardest for twenty years," one woman, a former slave owner, wrote the teachers in Williamsburg for assistance.⁹⁰ Thorpe and Haines responded by sending both clothing and money to help support the woman and her eight children. Overjoyed at the assistance given to her family, the woman praised the teachers in a letter. "You must have been sent by God to help the poor," she wrote, and even mentioned her thanks for the education that her former slaves had received at the freedpeople's school: "I am grateful to hear from Clarantine, Ned, and Henry of your goodness to them."⁹¹ Devastated by years of war, white Virginians now had to define themselves in a world without slavery, all the while living among those they called carpetbaggers, and relying on them for support.

The freedpeople's teachers, once they proved themselves, stood out among the Northerners now inundating the state as a group willing and able to attend to the needs of the communities in which they worked, thus prompting the woman Thorpe and Haines helped with money and clothing to cry out "thank God I revealed my wants to friends."⁹² Some locals responded with similar kindness midway through 1868. Thorpe was on a return trip from Williamsburg to Fort Magruder when the wagon she was riding separated from her horse. Tossed into mud about "half a foot deep," and forced to lead her horse Katie home while carrying all her belongings in her skirt, it did not take long for two local women to catch up to her in their wagon. As Thorpe recalled, "They had seen the wrecked wagon and had hurried up their me-ule [sic], so as to overtake me. They seemed greatly relieved when they found I was not hurt, and insisted upon my riding with them,"

⁹⁰ Morton, ed., "Life in Virginia by a 'Yankee Teacher,'" 193.

⁹¹ Ibid., 193-194.

⁹² Ibid.

an offer that Thorpe “cordially” declined.⁹³ While generosity on both sides helped to ease tensions in the local community, overall change in attitudes occurred slowly, especially among Northern teachers.

Despite progress on both sides, Northern teachers often regarded white Southerners with suspicion, even when supporting them in times of need. Just after sending aid to the former slaveholder and her family, Thorpe made it clear in her journal that the freedpeople were her primary concern: “I am glad the starving Southerners are to be fed, and thankfully help relieve their physical suffering.” Try as she might, however, Thorpe could not separate white Southerners from their past involvement in slavery:

I do plead in the name of justice and humanity that we shall not place them in our high places, giving them power while their poor victims are standing outside in the cold, thanking God that they are free but wishing that freedom had brought a little more warmth and food.⁹⁴

Gardner similarly viewed the situation in Virginia with less optimism than some of her colleagues, and believed that many years would pass before Northerners and Southerners treated one another on an equal basis:

With respect to the treatment of teachers by ex-slaveholders, there is observable only this degree of improvement. They are no longer openly taunted and habitually persecuted—but simply “let alone.” Another decade will pass before the arrogant Southerner will discern the fact that Yankees (a name contemptuously given to all Northerners) may have social “rights which they are bound to respect.”⁹⁵

The support system for Northern teachers in Virginia as it existed in the 1860s and 1870s did not last long enough for the teachers to win anything more than widespread indifference towards their particular brand of education.

⁹³ Morton, ed., “Life in Virginia by a ‘Yankee Teacher,’” 206.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 196.

⁹⁵ Gardner, *Harvest Gleanings*, 27.

The loosely bound organizations that provided material support specifically for the freedpeople's schools began to pull out of the South in the middle to late 1870s, at roughly the same time that federally sponsored Reconstruction initiatives began to unravel. The teachers who had come south to educate Virginia's large population of former slaves in large part returned home. The conditions that led to this dramatic change for the freedpeople, both at the national and regional level among the aid societies that had supported the schools, and at the local level in the community and the schoolhouse, bear further examination.

CHAPTER II

“Forbidden Fruit” – The Maturation of Freedpeople’s Education in Virginia

Demand for education ran high in Virginia’s black communities following the Civil War, exceeding the expectations of many Northerners and the ability of most schoolhouses to deal with the initial flood of scholars. One teacher in particular had earlier experience teaching African American students that had made her aware of blacks’ desire for education. Anna Gardner had seen black Nantucketers take advantage of the opportunities offered at the island’s African School, and fight for equal rights to education in the Nantucket High School during the 1840s. She witnessed a similar situation in the South:

Is it at all astonishing that when the doors of the school-room were at length opened to these repressed, down-trodden victims, that they rushed in like water into an opened lock? – that when the key of knowledge was placed in their hands they studied books with such avidity? “Forbidden fruit” is the most desirable. “Prohibition sharpens appetite.”⁹⁶

In Williamsburg, Thorpe recalled that the teachers stationed at Fort Magruder, York, and Williamsburg had few problems with their students: “we had no difficulty in keeping them [the freedpeople] attentive to study or work, as they looked upon it all as a ‘great privilege.’”⁹⁷ Gardner recognized that the zeal of the black students for learning had to be supplemented by one critical ingredient in order to make the difference between full schoolhouses and empty seats: “the enthusiasm of their teachers was an important factor

⁹⁶ Gardner, *Harvest Gleanings*, 26.

⁹⁷ Morton, ed., “Life in Virginia by a ‘Yankee Teacher,’” 184.

of such successful results.”⁹⁸ As years came and went, and attendance rose and fell according to the seasons in Virginia’s farming districts, northern schoolteachers encountered a host of challenges that would put their enthusiasm to the test and determine the legacy of the freedpeople’s schools in Virginia.

For seven counties in Union-controlled Virginia and North Carolina in 1864, there were thirty-nine schools and ninety-nine teachers for 5,930 students.⁹⁹ The sketches drawn by Alfred Rodolph Waud for *Harper’s Weekly* tell a similar story across the South—a high degree of participation in schooling among newly freed blacks, and limited resources with which freedpeople’s aid societies could meet the demand.¹⁰⁰ Monthly school reports to the Superintendent of Education for Virginia emphasize the conditions that were typical of freedpeople’s schools—a high number of scholars in cramped quarters.¹⁰¹ In 1864, there were on average 152 students per school in those Virginia and North Carolina counties, with approximately sixty students per teacher, a tremendous burden on an overextended workforce.

The various freedpeople’s aid societies that sent teachers south to Virginia in the 1860s and 1870s had certain expectations about how to organize a system of schools that would avoid overcrowding in the classrooms. The Quaker-run Friends’ Freedmen’s Aid Society of Philadelphia provides an example of what aid societies hoped to set up when they began operations in the South under ideal circumstances. This particular society ran schools in both North Carolina and Virginia. According to a newspaper report in June 1867, Philadelphia’s Quakers intended “to establish and conduct at each of the principal

⁹⁸ Gardner, *Harvest Gleanings*, 26.

⁹⁹ *Freedmen’s Advocate*, October 1864.

¹⁰⁰ *Harper’s Weekly*, 23 June 1866, 15 December 1866.

¹⁰¹ *FBR*, Superintendent of Education, Virginia, Roll 15, *LVA*.

centers of colored population” in each district “a well graded school, of which a Normal class will, wherever practicable, form a prominent feature”—“normal” instruction meaning the training of teachers.¹⁰² Northern teachers hoped that the “normal classes” could develop a group of freedpeople and willing local whites who could continue operating the schools long after the teachers sponsored by aid societies returned home.¹⁰³

Aid societies recognized the need for teachers and tried to provide as many teachers as possible, but the number of schools expected to be in operation and the number of students these buildings could accommodate proved to be one of the greatest obstacles faced by freedpeople’s aid societies. Requirements differed as to how many schoolhouses were to be established and by whom. Philadelphia’s Friends’ Freedman’s Aid Society wanted ten schools that could each house between 150 and 300 students, with a requirement of one principal teacher “thoroughly qualified by education, and experience in teaching, to conduct a school of the class designated,” according to the society’s newspaper advertisement, and “one or more assistant teachers . . . for each school.”¹⁰⁴ It seems that most of the societies in Virginia followed a similar pattern. The New England Freedmen’s Aid Society had at least five schools open in the western part of Virginia in the late 1860s.¹⁰⁵ By 1870, Yoder oversaw a network of thirty schools, forty-nine teachers and superintendents, and a monthly average of 1,530 students for the Pennsylvania Freedmen’s Relief Association—with roughly fifty-one students attending

¹⁰² *Christian Recorder*, 22 June 1867.

¹⁰³ Henry Allen Bullock, *A History of Negro Education in the South: From 1619 to the Present* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1967), 53. See also Yoder, *The Fire of Liberty in their Hearts*, 148, 1 April 1868, 29 April 1868, and 4 May 1868, Daily Journal 1868-1869, Box 1—New England Freedmen’s Aid Society Records, 1862-1876, MHS, and 4 October 1871, 11 November 1871, and 29 November 1871, Daily Journal 1871-1874, New England Freedmen’s Aid Society Records, 1862-1876, MHS.

¹⁰⁴ *Christian Recorder*, 22 June 1867.

¹⁰⁵ Carkin, “Reminiscences,” Papers of Philena Carkin, UVA.

each school.¹⁰⁶ The network of schools in Virginia grew quickly after the end of the Civil War, but could not always keep pace with the demand of the freedpeople for access to educational opportunities.

The need for buildings alone required that teachers rely on the aid societies for support. The New England Freedmen's Aid Society stated in its constitution that it would "expect and gratefully welcome any facilities which the Government may be pleased to grant, such as passes for teachers and supplies, and rations, and due protection for said teachers while engaged in their work."¹⁰⁷ These arrangements rarely met the needs of the teachers on the ground. As Northern teachers found upon their arrival in the South, once they had come to terms with the local community, they still had to struggle to provide the freedpeople with viable schoolhouses.

Even though the sponsoring aid organization saw to many of the basic needs of the teachers, Philena Carkin noted that the teachers in Charlottesville received their salaries and travel expenses from "the main society." The War Department was expected to provide the actual building that would serve as the schoolhouse. As Carkin recalled:

Buildings for school purposes were usually furnished by the War Department or Freedmen's Bureau, taking any suitable building that had been used for Confederate hospitals or other Confederate purposes. These buildings were used until means could be procured to erect better ones. Money for this purpose was raised in various ways, . . . [including] contributions from individuals and from [the] Freedmen's Bureau and funds raised by the Freedmen themselves. . . . after a few years fairly comfortable and convenient buildings were erected in many of the larger cities and towns.¹⁰⁸

In the short term, however, freedpeople's aid societies had to use whatever buildings were available in the community. Writing about her experiences in Charlottesville, Anna

¹⁰⁶ Yoder, *The Fire of Liberty in Their Hearts*, xxiv.

¹⁰⁷ The Constitution of the Educational Commission, 7 February 1862, New England Freedmen's Aid Society Records, 1862-1876, *MHS*.

¹⁰⁸ Carkin, "Reminiscences," Papers of Philena Carkin, *UVA*.

Gardner recalled that “the schools, though generally fully attended, were seldom composed of the best materials.”¹⁰⁹ The schoolhouse operated by Margaret Thorpe at Fort Magruder “was outside the Fort. It was a long low log building poorly lighted.” Thorpe and Haines improved the structure as best they could: “we put in a number of benches, a few desks, and one table, no maps or blackboards.”¹¹⁰ This building had to house approximately thirty evening scholars and sixty day scholars depending on the season.¹¹¹ Space was also an issue for Yoder at Lynchburg, forcing him to expend a good deal of his budget in 1870 on a new schoolhouse.¹¹²

Neither schoolhouse compared to the building used by Gardner and Carkin in Charlottesville. Between 1866 and 1867, Carkin lived relatively well in a three-story brick building that housed the area’s Union military officials. The schoolhouse, however, was not in as good condition as Carkin’s living quarters. A day after Carkin met Anna Gardner for the first time, she visited her new schoolhouse, describing it as “a large wooden building erected by the Confederates for a hospital. It was 140 feet long by some 70 feet in width, and two stories high. This served us as our school building for three or four years.” The building had to serve a variety of functions during that time. About midway through 1867, the teachers began to use the second story for living quarters. On the lower level, a visitor would find four classrooms, some storage space, and between the two schoolrooms on the right side of the building a space “used for a time by the colored people for a Baptist church.”¹¹³ Charlottesville’s freedpeople’s school served a variety of functions, as did many other freedpeople’s schoolhouses throughout Virginia.

¹⁰⁹ Anna Gardner, *Harvest Gleanings*, 46-47.

¹¹⁰ Morton, ed., “Life in Virginia by a ‘Yankee Teacher,’” 184.

¹¹¹ *FBR*, Superintendent of Education, Virginia, Roll 15, *LVA*.

¹¹² Jacob E. Yoder, Letterbook, *LVA*.

¹¹³ Carkin, “Reminiscences,” Papers of Philena Carkin, *UVA*.

The building's former life as a military hospital came back to haunt some of the current residents.

The floorboards of the schoolhouse served as a troubling reminder of battles fought not long before to provide the scholars in the classrooms with their freedom. Carkin recalled the effect the bloodstained floors of the former hospital had on her students:

We were too much interested in our work and too busy to let our imagination dwell upon the dark stains here and there upon the floor . . . but the superstitions of some of our colored friends peopled the building with phantom soldiers who flitted restlessly about the place at night.¹¹⁴

It would not be until April and May of 1868 that the society and local freedpeople accumulated enough funds to plan the purchase of a parcel of land for a new schoolhouse.¹¹⁵ Space was but one of the many obstacles that teachers had to overcome in order to conduct their work. It was widely acknowledged that constant letter writing was an expectation of the job. Teachers had to be in nearly constant contact with sponsoring aid societies and the Freedmen's Bureau to report the progress of their schools and make their concerns known. Circumstances on the ground, including the condition of the schoolhouse, sometimes required immediate attention, an important consideration when taking into account the distances over which communication normally took place between teachers and aid society officials in Northern cities.

When an aid society tried to be proactive, it might choose to pursue a course of action contrary to what the teachers needed to operate the school successfully. Between December 16, 1871, and January 3, 1872, a flurry of correspondence went back and forth

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Daily Journal 1868-1869, 29 April 1868 and 4 May 1868, New England Freedmen's Aid Society Records, 1862-1876, *MHS*.

between the teachers in Charlottesville and the aid society in Boston over what was needed for the schoolhouse. The New England Freedmen's Aid Society wrote Robert Scott and several other teachers "that we think there is great need of a bell on the school building; that it would be of service in calling all kinds of meetings, and that we advise taking enough of the money [part of the yearly budget] . . . to buy a suitable bell and to have it properly hung."¹¹⁶ This was apparently an old desire on the part of the society's leaders, one that dated back at least to 1869 when they wrote to the teachers in Charlottesville, "a belfry or a separate tower can be added when Mr. Peabody or somebody else gives you a bell. But you must have a large hand bell [and] ring in your pupils [and] have them file in in order when you get the new house."¹¹⁷ Apparently nothing came of that demand in 1869; unfortunately, the society issued it again at a time of particular need in Charlottesville.

Scott wrote back to clarify the needs of the schoolhouse, "he thinks the schoolhouse there needs enclosing and repairing more than it does a bell, [and] says that Miss Carkin thinks so too," a suggestion that was then referred to a committee. Four days later, the society responded to Scott's suggestion "that we agree with him in regard to the wants of the school and trust to his judgment in deciding what are its most pressing needs." In the final entry on the matter, Carkin tried to smooth over any ruffled feathers at the society's office in Boston: "she says a bell would be a great convenience, but that gutters for the building and fencing the schoolhouse lot are more needed."¹¹⁸ Carkin and

¹¹⁶ Daily Journal 1871-1874, 16 December 1871, 23 December 1871, 27 December 1871, 3 January 1872, New England Freedmen's Aid Society Records, 1862-1876, *MHS*.

¹¹⁷ Ednah D. Cheney, Boston, to Anna Gardner, Charlottesville, 7 July 1869, in Daily Journal 1868-1869, New England Freedmen's Aid Society Records, 1862-1876, *MHS*.

¹¹⁸ Daily Journal 1871-1874, 16 December 1871, 23 December 1871, 27 December 1871, 3 January 1872, New England Freedmen's Aid Society Records, 1862-1876, *MHS*.

Scott successfully obtained what they needed to allow their schoolhouse to function, but only after several letters had passed over the course of roughly three weeks. It made little or no sense to add a school bell to the old Confederate hospital at a time when teachers had to deal with decrepit buildings and a shortage of space, especially when such a bell could attract even more students to the school, and likely more attention from the white community.

With the high numbers of students attempting to gain access to the freedpeople's schools, teachers had no choice but to pack as many students as they could into buildings like the ones at Charlottesville and Fort Magruder. Well over two hundred students attended the classes overseen by Anna Gardener, Philena Carkin, and Paul Lewis. According to Carkin, "old as well as young flocked to us hungering and thirsting for the knowledge which had been denied to them heretofore. Poor souls!" Such was the need for education and teachers that those students in the evening school, primarily a group of older adults, were then asked by Carkin, Gardner, and other teachers "to impart what they learned in school to their less favored friends," both to alleviate the stress on the teachers and on classroom space, and to educate the children who either would not or could not attend the school in Charlottesville.¹¹⁹

Irregular attendance was a common complaint among the freedpeople's teachers. Seasonal change wreaked havoc on the curriculum of the freedpeople's schools. Teachers realized that the first priority for the freedpeople was survival. Their reliance on agriculture meant that during the spring, teachers could expect to lose a significant portion of their students to the fields. Thorpe and Haines wrote a letter on April 28, 1866, to accompany their monthly report, that details the situation most teachers could expect in

¹¹⁹ Carkin, "Reminiscences," Papers of Philena Carkin, *UVA*.

Virginia beginning in April: “Recently the usual attendance has diminished owing to pressing spring work.”¹²⁰ During the winter, Thorpe and Haines offered food, clothing, and medicine for the sick. As soon as the weather turned warm in April, however, they began to distribute seeds, in addition to more clothing.¹²¹ Forced to follow the natural rhythms of the Virginia countryside, teachers seized upon the spring months as a time to offer assistance for the coming growing season, and more evening classes to cater to those who could not attend classes during the day.

Yoder especially vented his frustration in his diary when only a fraction of the enrolled students attended class. Between January 7, 1867 and March 17, 1867, only ten to twenty students made the trip to the schoolhouse on any given day, this when Yoder had noted in June 1866, “The schools were very full. Taking the three s[c]hools together—the num[ber] has bee[n] three hundred.” Poor attendance in this case was not the fault of the freedpeople. So few students came to class on account of “dreadful snow” that kept many at home. The weather seemed to conspire against Yoder, as he confided to his diary, “If it keeps on snowing long at this rate an under snow railroad will be necessary for those that must go out. Church bell is ringing away but the people can hardly come out.”¹²²

The quality of the students who did fill the classrooms across Virginia was a constant worry for teachers. Only the best students continued in the curriculum for any length of time. Of those who expressed their reasons for attending school, Gardner noted that for many “the greatest incentive to scholarship was that by learning to read, write,

¹²⁰ Margaret Newbold Thorpe and Martha A. Haines, Fort Magruder, to [?], 28 April 1866, in the *Freedman's Friend*, July 1866.

¹²¹ Morton, ed., “Life in Virginia by a ‘Yankee Teacher,’” 196.

¹²² Yoder, *The Fire of Liberty in Their Hearts*, 35, 114, 119, 122, 125-126, 130.

and calculate, they would be able, at some future day, to make a 'heap of money'...."¹²³

Teachers quickly realized that the lives of their students were also heavily influenced by work, and especially agriculture. In order to work around the demands of the growing season on their students' labor, teachers modified educational plans to give the freedpeople the most useful material in the shortest period of time. Carkin wrote that their approach consisted of simplifying the curriculum. "It was necessary that the languages, higher mathematics, etc should wait until the pupils thoroughly understood those branches which would be of most importance in their every day lives," she wrote.¹²⁴

Preparing the freedpeople for their lives outside of slavery arguably became the primary objective of the aid societies. "The object of the Educational Commission," according to the constitution of the New England Freedmen's Aid Society, "shall be the industrial, social, intellectual, moral, and religious improvement of persons released from slavery in the course of the War for the Union."¹²⁵ Such a curriculum highlights what Northern reformers thought the freedpeople needed most to survive in the reconstructed South.

Teachers also expected that their students would take on an important role in the process. One of Gardner's black protégés, Paul Lewis, assumed the position of assistant and teacher after a short period of time. On February 26, 1868, the New England Freedmen's Aid Society received a letter from Philena Carkin, articulating her belief "that through her pupils, Miss Gardner's [and] Ms. Gibbins's[,] no less than 100 people are receiving instruction outside of the schools."¹²⁶ Due to the "crowded state" of some of the schools around Charlottesville, Carkin wrote in 1873 that some students were

¹²³ Anna Gardner, *Harvest Gleanings*, 46-47.

¹²⁴ Carkin, "Reminiscences," Papers of Philena Carkin, *UVA*.

¹²⁵ The Constitution of the Educational Commission, 7 February 1862, New England Freedmen's Aid Society Records, 1862-1876, *MHS*.

¹²⁶ Daily Journal, 1868-1869, New England Freedmen's Aid Society Records, 1862-1876, *MHS*.

receiving their lessons from “a girl only thirteen years of age, but a remarkably apt pupil and one of the best of girls. She takes the whole charge of their studies.” Similarly, classes in geography, spelling, reading, writing, grammar, and arithmetic were all being taught by former students:

Harriet Wayner, my oldest pupil teaches a class in reading and spelling, and a fine teacher she is in that branch. I have just as much work as I can possibly do, with all the assistance rendered me by my pupils. I listen to the lessons recited to the pupils, and advise them in regard to methods of instruction as much as possible, and their scholars are doing very well.¹²⁷

Forced to operate in less than ideal conditions, teachers in Virginia did their best to reach the greatest number of students, relying on black assistants to accomplish their mission.

Sometimes the freedpeople acted independently of the teachers when confronted with a problem. The actions of J.E. McGoldrick, a white teacher at Liberty, Virginia, and Jacob Yoder’s handling of the man, draw attention to another mode of black participation in the educational system. In a letter dated March 17, 1870, to Robert Corson, secretary-treasurer of the Pennsylvania Freedmen’s Relief Association, Yoder wrote, “Mr. McGoldrick got himself into some trouble at Liberty with the school committee,” over something serious enough that Yoder proposed closing the school until a replacement teacher could be found.¹²⁸ Corson received clarification from Yoder on March 21:

Mr. J.E. McGoldrick fell in love with one of his pupils. Love letters passed between him and the woman in question who by the way is a married woman. The matter became public last week. Every body knows it both white and colored. Believing that the public good requires it I advised Mr. McGoldrick to resign.¹²⁹

McGoldrick’s affair with a student would have been bad enough had it not involved a married woman. Sexual relationships between teachers and students were as

¹²⁷ Philena Carkin, Charlottesville, to Ednah D. Cheney, Boston, 1 November 1873, Box 3–Letters, New England Freedmen’s Aid Society Records, 1862-1876, *MHS*.

¹²⁸ Jacob Yoder, Lynchburg, to Robert Corson, 17 March 1870, in Yoder, Letterbook, *LVA*.

¹²⁹ Jacob Yoder, Lynchburg, to Robert Corson, 21 March 1870, in Yoder, Letterbook, *LVA*.

objectionable in the nineteenth century as they are today. Historian William Link has identified teacher-student affairs as one of the “strict taboos in rural Victorian society.”¹³⁰ McGoldrick not only threatened to tear apart the fabric of a close-knit community by committing adultery, the interracial nature of the affair appears to have angered everyone in the community and caused tensions on both sides of the racial divide.

On March 25, McGoldrick was still in Liberty to the chagrin of Yoder, and “some of the colored people made an effort last week to drive him away by force of arms.”¹³¹ Yoder concluded on April 6 that McGoldrick was “a disturber of the peace. It is feared by the people that he will carry on his mischief till bloodshed will result.”¹³² Although McGoldrick stayed in Liberty as the head of his own private school, seemingly without further incident, the episode demonstrates the critical role the freedpeople played in determining their own course of action. With the authorities unable to handle the scandal at Liberty, local black residents tried to take matters into their own hands.

When everything was running smoothly between the teachers and their students, the teachers could focus on educating the freedpeople. Class often began with a variety of songs—hymns, temperance songs, and songs “born of the events of the Civil War.”¹³³ When teachers could do so, they included reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar with composition, and geography, with a little natural philosophy, history, and geology added to the mix in their curriculum for the day schools. In the evening, the average age of students rose dramatically. At the school operated by Thorpe and Haines just outside Williamsburg, Thorpe recalled that “nearly all the night scholars were grown men and

¹³⁰ William A. Link, *A Hard Country and a Lonely Place: Schooling, Society, and Reform in Rural Virginia, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 36.

¹³¹ Jacob Yoder, Lynchburg, to Robert Corson, 25 March 1870, in Yoder, Letterbook, *LVA*.

¹³² Jacob Yoder, Lynchburg, to Robert Corson, 6 April 1870, in Yoder, Letterbook, *LVA*.

¹³³ Carkin, “Reminiscences,” Papers of Philena Carkin, *UVA*.

women, some so old that their bowed heads were covered with white hair.”¹³⁴ The stories that the teachers had pupils read, especially those in the evening classes, emphasized the underlying self-help ideology that many teachers hoped would ensure lasting prosperity for the freedpeople. Literacy was a key avenue through which former slaves could attain a measure of self-sufficiency, making the simple act of learning to read an end in its own right. The priorities for the teachers in this situation were clear—teaching students reading and the basic skills needed to survive.

During the day, when Thorpe’s school operated from nine in the morning until two in the afternoon, there were an average of “seventy five scholars, all children.” After three-thirty in the afternoon, she taught “some of the older children and a few grown women writing and sewing.” Later on, at night, Thorpe departed even further from the curriculum offered during the day:

How they all enjoyed an evening when we would talk to them, instead of teaching the usual lesson in readers and arithmetics. We would touch upon moral and social subjects, try to impress upon them the necessity of being cleanly, thorough, punctual, honest and any other subject we felt might be helpful.¹³⁵

Lessons like this one highlight the importance Northern teachers placed on preparing their students to live as free people. Such lessons offer another possible reason for why local whites tolerated the schoolhouses. Northern teachers were not offering lessons in radical ideology. Rather, they focused on teaching their students what was needed to survive in the conditions present in Virginia, something that even local whites could accept. And at times, the Yankee teachers may have done so with a condescension not entirely foreign to the native-born whites.

¹³⁴ Morton, ed., “Life in Virginia by a ‘Yankee Teacher,’” 185.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 186.

The *Freedmen's Spelling Book* and *Second* and *Third Reader*, all widely used in the Virginia schools, focused on giving the teachers a basic framework to use in the schoolroom, and the basic lessons necessary for the freedpeople to learn to read and write. Lesson 259 in the *Freedmen's Spelling Book* in fact provided a description of the ideal schoolhouse: "a pleasant school is like a family, where the teacher, or preceptor, takes the place of a parent, giving instruction or exercising discipline, while the pupils, anxious to remove their ignorance and obtain an education, obey cheerfully and study patiently."¹³⁶ The lessons taught students new vocabulary and reading comprehension through recitation, as well as information on subjects as diverse as trade and government, domestic and wild animals, birds, insects, and the meaning of the Civil War. On the last subject, the book remarked that "it was sad to see men die in battle, but it was to make us free. We will not forget all that God did for us."¹³⁷

Beyond the ideological lessons and hands-on training that students received in practical applications like sewing, as students worked through the readers, they read about farming, carpentry, masonry, painting, cabinet-making, carriage-making, blacksmithing, harness-making, as well as the trades of hatter, tailor, shoemaker, shipbuilder, fisherman, and gunsmith—in short, all possible trades that members of the black community could freely and successfully pursue.¹³⁸ Students were taught far more than the basics of reading and writing. The schoolteachers tailored the whole curriculum to prepare former slaves to take on appropriate roles in society as they started their lives as freedpeople.

¹³⁶ Morris, ed., *The Freedmen's Spelling Book*, 2: 134.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 22, 130-131 146-149.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 110-125.

All three of the books were also infused with a religious sensibility that, by and large, was in keeping with white southern moral principles and may thus have won the teachers a measure of goodwill. As was seen in the course of recruiting northern teachers, religion played a central role in the mindset of the people educating Virginia's former slaves. Teaching the freedpeople to read was inextricably linked to religious education. Not only are many of the lessons littered with Biblical references and citations from Scripture, the stories themselves were often religious in nature. God played a direct role in one lesson that featured an illiterate black girl named Tidy who tried to learn how to read: "she was enabled, by Him who watches over the lowly, to understand what she read." Eventually the act of reading itself could become "the means of leading her [Tidy] to Jesus Christ," both through the Bible and religious hymns.¹³⁹ Lessons like these served to accomplish the primary goals of teachers working with the freedpeople.

Commitment to religious instruction did not, however, extend to full toleration of the particular brand of Christianity practiced by African Americans in the South. Northern teachers in general recognized and could relate to the intense religiosity of their neighbors. In her journal, Philena Carkin listed the various faith communities, black and white, that could be found in Charlottesville in the late 1860s and early 1870s; "a goodly number of churches of the various Orthodox denominations – Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Carmelites [Campbellites?], Episcopalians and a sect called Christians." Carkin was surprised to see even a synagogue in Charlottesville "as there were a good many Jews in the town."¹⁴⁰ Although the teachers, including Carkin, respected the intense

¹³⁹ Morris, ed., *The Freedman's Third Reader*, 2: 212.

¹⁴⁰ Carkin, "Reminiscences," Papers of Philena Carkin, *UVA*.

spiritual commitment to be found in the region, they took issue with some of the more charismatic elements of Southern Afro-Christianity.

Religious revivals in particular were a major cause of consternation in a group of teachers that included a great many members of the Society of Friends. Ideas about appropriate expressions of religious belief differed significantly, even between white Northern evangelicals and their African American brothers and sisters in the South. “One of the greatest difficulties we had to contend with in our work, was the occasional spell of madness which would attack the chief part of the community of colored people, called a religious revival.”¹⁴¹ African American religious services generally appeared foreign to northern observers with “constant wailing and groaning,” and people falling to the floor when one of the worshippers “gits de power.”¹⁴² Carkin remembered, “When the frenzy was at its height, all sense of responsibility in other matters became second to the one idea of saving souls.”¹⁴³ Religion, then, was both a help and hindrance to the teachers. Striking a balance between two competing visions of religiosity proved yet another of the challenges faced by teachers in the schools.

Gardner echoed Carkin’s sentiments on the subject of the revivals. She considered it the “almost universal opinion of those who are and have been teachers from the North” of any religious background “that the most formidable obstacle to the elevation of these people, and that which most adversely affects the work of education among them, is their spurious religion.” Back home on Nantucket, the African Meetinghouse played host to both the African School, in which Gardner taught, and the black community’s Baptist church. With her connections in the black community and with her work taking place in

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Morton, ed., “Life in Virginia by a ‘Yankee Teacher,’” 187.

¹⁴³ Carkin, “Reminiscences,” Papers of Philena Carkin, *UVA*.

the same building as that of “New Guinea’s” primary house of worship, it can reasonably be assumed that Gardner would have been keenly aware of northern black religious practices, and she may well have been a guest at services.

But familiarity had bred a certain amount of contempt. After having observed black southern religious ceremonies, Gardner had few complimentary words to share about her experience:

I have myself been present at these gatherings, and witnessed fearful contortions of features and limbs, and insane ravings accompanying them, which surged higher and higher, until they reached a climax of noise and confusion which baffles description. One after the other they gather and crowd around the altar, forming a solid mass, then separate, and joining hands, form a ring, or perform a kind of march, one behind another, accompanying their steps now and then with a spasmodic jump, flinging up their arms, shouting, laughing, exhorting indiscriminately, rending their garments, shaking their hands, beckoning to each other with frantic gestures, all the time ejaculating vehemently, ‘Bress de Lord! I’s e got ‘ligion! See, massa Jesus! He come! Glory! Amen!’ etc., all shouting together at the top of their lungs, until, completely exhausted, many fall prostrate upon the floor.¹⁴⁴

Judging from Gardner’s narrative, she may have been present at what historians have described as the “ring shout,” a form of ritual trance dancing that often included hand clapping, foot stamping, and leaping.¹⁴⁵

Yoder similarly viewed charismatic Afro-Christianity with distaste, although not with the intensity of Gardner’s observations. During his time in Lynchburg, Yoder made a habit of visiting many different religious services and meetings around town. On two occasions he recorded his impressions of black religiosity. On Sunday, June 10, 1866, Yoder attended a meeting of African Methodists. “The colored Methodists have had a very lively and as they suppose a very good meeting,” Yoder wrote in his diary; “I cannot

¹⁴⁴ Gardner, *Harvest Gleanings*, 48-49.

¹⁴⁵ Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998) 145-146.

appreciate such [a] service.” Four days later, Yoder wrote again about what he called “the mode of worship of the colored people.” Yoder concluded that “all of them are quite unanimous in their noisy worship. If no expression is given to their feelings by dancing or by vocal expression they think their worship is not acceptable.”¹⁴⁶ Yoder’s comments clearly betray the cultural elitism of an outside observer with little knowledge of the traditions in question. He could only reluctantly accept that anyone would prefer this type of religious expression. “It may however be the best that there is for those that prefer such a mode of worship, ” he admitted.¹⁴⁷

Outward displays of religion of this type conflicted with the dual goals of “learning and right living” as defined by most freedpeople’s teachers.¹⁴⁸ Charismatic elements of black Christianity ran counter to what northern teachers considered appropriate for both religious expression and public behavior, and they were viewed as irrational. Gardner’s sharp criticism of black religious traditions probably reflects her frustration over the continuation of these practices in spite of her teachings in the classroom. Many teachers echoed Gardner’s distaste for the freedpeople’s particular religious practices. As active participants in the educational process, black students shaped their experience, taking what they needed from the classroom, and holding on to what they wanted from their cultural heritage, much to the dismay of teachers like Anna Gardner.

Religious instruction, coupled with education in the use of practical skills, prepared the students in the teachers’ minds for freedom in a world dominated by former masters. Not everyone, particularly among Virginia’s African American population,

¹⁴⁶ Yoder, *The Fire of Liberty in Their Hearts*, 37, 39.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁴⁸ Morton, ed., “Life in Virginia by a ‘Yankee Teacher,’” 207.

agreed that theirs was the correct direction to take in black education. White teachers from northern states had already shown a strong inclination toward cultural elitism, a problem that would only intensify over time. Freedpeople's education had come a long way between the early 1860s and the late 1870s. Blacks in Virginia had gained unprecedented access to education. The schools had been established long enough to win over a majority of white Southerners, if not their support then at least their acceptance. The initial experiment, however, could not last. Changes that would influence the direction of black education well into the twentieth century began to erode support for the schools among Northern aid societies early in the 1870s. In some ways, the final chapter of the experiment would prove to be the most difficult for everyone involved.

CONCLUSION

Black education in Virginia had made tremendous progress during Reconstruction, while still maintaining much of the social climate that had existed before the Civil War. That no overwhelming wave of violence confronted Virginia's freedpeople's schools suggests that the schools did not pose a threat to the majority of white Southerners. Historian Reginald Hildebrand has suggested that Northern teachers avoided conflict by steering clear of "educational plans that had the potential to educate blacks out of their traditional subordinate position in the social and economic hierarchy of the South."¹⁴⁹ Some evidence indicates that whites in Virginia tolerated the freedpeople's schoolhouses and northern teachers out of apathy, or a sense that the experiment would fail. It seems from available evidence, however, that the curriculum used by freedpeople's schoolteachers was well within the bounds of what most white Southerners considered acceptable, and that whites consequently allowed the freedpeople's schools to continue their work with few major disruptions.

Perhaps it is most important to note that the freedpeople had to rely on a tenuous support system of teachers and aid societies. As long as the money and teachers remained in Virginia, the experiment could continue. Roughly at the end of every May, teachers across Virginia left the South for the summer months. Margaret Thorpe and her teaching companion Martha Haines did just that in May 1866. "It was very painful to leave our

¹⁴⁹ Reginald F. Hildebrand, *The Times Were Strange and Stirring: Methodist Preachers and the Crisis of Emancipation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 24.

people,” Thorpe reminisced. “They [the freedpeople] grieved so and were needy and had no one to call upon when we were gone, and although we promised to return in the Autumn, they were despondent.”¹⁵⁰ Yoder similarly headed for home in Pennsylvania on June 28, 1866, and noted the response of the freedpeople in his diary: “The colored people do not like to see us leaving.”¹⁵¹ While black assistants and teachers most likely remained in their communities while the schools were in recess—very little information survives about their experiences—such departures were common for teachers like Thorpe and Yoder who had the luxury of returning home.

After a few months spent in more comfortable surroundings, most teachers appear to have returned to their assignments. The reception they got from the freedpeople on their return was not lost on the teachers. Thorpe’s students, she recalled, rejoiced when she returned to Virginia in November 1866. What they could not have known at the time was that this would be her last stay at Fort Magruder and Williamsburg. Their cries, “We done looked fo you dese two munts,” and “We done knowed you’d come fo suah,” reflected both the freedpeople’s excitement at the return of their teachers, friends, and advocates, as well as relief that the teachers had not abandoned them.¹⁵²

The Freedmen’s Bureau oversaw many of the schools at the administrative level, and teachers reported to the Superintendent of Education for Virginia, but the infrastructure of the educational effort relied on the various Northern freedpeople’s aid societies that provided material support. When financial and ideological support for Freedmen’s Schools waned in the North during the 1870s, some of the freedpeople’s

¹⁵⁰ Morton, ed., “Life in Virginia by a ‘Yankee Teacher,’” 188.

¹⁵¹ Yoder, *The Fire of Liberty in Their Hearts*, 53.

¹⁵² Morton, ed., “Life in Virginia by a ‘Yankee Teacher,’” 188.

fears came to fruition. Northern teachers ultimately returned home, leaving behind a growing network of public schools to assume the burden of education.

In general, freedpeople's school teachers in Virginia looked back upon their experiences with fondness and pride. Carkin wrote a letter to Ednah Cheney expressing her disbelief over the situation. "I can scarcely realize that the N.E. Society has really disbanded," Carkin wrote; "it has been so long in operation."¹⁵³ As was the case with Northern teachers' attitudes toward Afro-Christianity, however, some of the earliest observations of the teachers, along with their reflections as they prepared to leave the freedpeople behind, betray a self-congratulatory, often condescending attitude toward the people they had endeavored to help.

Despite his long tenure as a teacher in Lynchburg, Yoder in particular seems to have harbored fundamental doubts about the intellectual capabilities of the freedpeople. Yoder had started his work in Lynchburg as the principal of the Camp Davis School in 1866, working his way up through the ranks to serve as Superintendent of Virginia's Lynchburg region for the Pennsylvania Freedmen's Relief Association by the autumn of 1868.¹⁵⁴ Yoder expressed his concerns to a colleague in April 1870 that black Virginians could not succeed without the help of Northerners:

A nobler work than this of educating the late slaves was never undertaken by any people. Its excellence can be compared to nothing...It is a success as far as it goes. But it is not complete...The Freedmen cannot do it alone. They lack the means pecuniarily and mentally.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Philena Carkin, Charlottesville, to Ednah D. Cheney, Boston, 1 April 1874, Box 3 – Letters, New England Freedmen's Aid Society Records, 1862-1876, *MHS*.

¹⁵⁴ Yoder, *The Fire of Liberty in Their Hearts*, xiv-xx, xxii.

¹⁵⁵ Jacob Yoder, Lynchburg, to Sarah Fisher Corlies, Germantown, 5 April 1870, in Yoder, Letterbook, 1870, *LVA*.

Yoder's statement is a prime example of the condescension that comes through at times in the memoirs and letters of freedpeople's teachers. Northern teachers made a significant difference in the lives of many Virginia freedpeople, to be sure. It cannot be overlooked, however, that the Northern teachers brought their own expectations both about what it meant to be an American, and what it would take to bring African Americans into the fold. Anything that stood in the way of Northern educational goals was not subject to compromise, and often led to observations like Yoder's about the ability of black Virginians to make the most of their newfound freedom.

On May 16, 1870, Yoder wrote to Robert R. Corson, secretary-treasurer of the organization, expressing his desire to resign. "I take this opportunity to offer my resignation as Supt [Superintendent] of Freedmen's Schools to take effect on the first of June next," Yoder wrote. In a climate of financial uncertainty and doubt over the future of the Pennsylvania Freedmen's Relief schools, Yoder suggested, "I believe you can secure the services of a man that can be more useful than I can. I have not the influence among the colored people of Lynchburg which I ought to have. A man of more show can command more influence and hence can be more useful."¹⁵⁶ Frustrated with the progress of his school, Yoder's opinion of his black scholars only grew darker by November:

Long ago I had learned that free Government was not intended for an ignorant people. Today the first time the question came up in my mind whether a people can be too ignorant for free schools.¹⁵⁷

Yoder decided to return to teach in Lynchburg, ultimately working in that town's black public schools long after the Pennsylvania Freedmen's Relief Association had ceased to operate schools in Virginia. At the time of his death on April 15, 1905, Yoder was the

¹⁵⁶ Jacob E. Yoder, Lynchburg, to Robert Corson, [?], 16 May 1870, in Yoder, Letterbook, *LVA*.

¹⁵⁷ Yoder, *The Fire of Liberty in Their Hearts*, 177.

leading white educator of blacks in the Lynchburg public schools. A local newspaper noted that his funeral was attended by black and white members of the community in such high numbers that some had to be turned away for lack of space.¹⁵⁸ All of this suggests that Yoder's attitudes changed over time, an important fact considering the point of view held by southern whites at the close of the Civil War, and their eventual acceptance of the freedpeople's schools. Neither side of the debate remained static. Black or white, North or South, freedpeople's education in Virginia forced people on all sides to confront the new reality of life without slavery, and the new question of what that meant for Virginia's former slaves.

More often than not, teachers believed that they had made a difference in the lives of their students. Thorpe closed out her memoir by honoring her former students. "I would pay tribute to the kind hearts and brave patient spirits of the colored people," she wrote, all of whom fought to gain equality through education in what Thorpe described as the worst of circumstances, "under a mountain load of discouragement, sickness and poverty."¹⁵⁹ As Carkin considered her work among the freedpeople, she wondered "what would have been the condition of the colored people of the South but for the good work it [the New England Freedmen's Aid Society] has carried on."¹⁶⁰ Drawing on old letters and diary entries to write their memoirs several years after their time in Virginia, teachers undoubtedly embellished the impact of what they had accomplished while working among Virginia's freedpeople. No one can deny, however, that despite the mixed motives, mutual misunderstandings, and cultural elitism displayed by white teachers, the

¹⁵⁸ Yoder, *The Fire of Liberty in Their Hearts*, xxix-xxxii.

¹⁵⁹ Morton, ed., "Life in Virginia by a 'Yankee Teacher,'" 207.

¹⁶⁰ Philena Carkin, Charlottesville, to Ednah D. Cheney, Boston, 1 April 1874, Box 3 – Letters, New England Freedmen's Aid Society Records, 1862-1876, *MHS*.

freedpeople's schools helped set the course for Virginia's freedpeople, for better and for worse, for the remainder of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century.

Philena Carkin offered her final thoughts on her experiences with the freedpeople as she prepared to shut the doors of the schoolhouse in Charlottesville for the last time in 1874. "I can truly say that I have never had a more successful year," she wrote, "and when I leave I shall carry with me many pleasant memories of my last session at Charlottesville."¹⁶¹ Once the officers of the New England Freedmen's Aid Society voted on March 20, 1874, to officially withdraw their financial support for the schools under their direction, Carkin made the decision to return home to Massachusetts.¹⁶² Carkin's imminent departure added to an already depressing feeling among the freedpeople in March 1874; "the death of Charles Sumner has cast a gloom over us here, for the colored people feel that their best friend has gone."¹⁶³

Looking at Reconstruction-era education locally reveals the complexity of freedpeople's education in ways that an overarching study of the South cannot. The actions of individual teachers profoundly influenced the education of freedpeople in Virginia. Even though the schools and teachers were loosely connected under the umbrella organization of the United States Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (the Freedmen's Bureau), day-to-day operation, staffing, supplies, funding, and other critical issues remained in the hands of autonomous freedpeople's aid societies. Because Northerners were unprepared to deal with the long-term financial

¹⁶¹ Philena Carkin, Charlottesville, to Ednah D. Cheney, Boston, 28 February 1874, Box 3–Letters, New England Freedmen's Aid Society Records, 1862-1876, *MHS*.

¹⁶² The Constitution of the Educational Commission, 7 February 1862, New England Freedmen's Aid Society Records, 1862-1876, *MHS*.

¹⁶³ Philena Carkin, Charlottesville, to Lucretia Crocker, 14 March 1874, Box 3–Letters, New England Freedmen's Aid Society Records, 1862-1876, *MHS*.

demands of supporting the schools, and because ideological differences divided Northern reformers and the freedpeople, the schools could not carry on indefinitely. Certainly white Virginians hurled many an insult and more than a few stones, but for the most part, they tolerated the freedpeople's schools. Other factors, not the threat of violence, drove the freedpeople's school teachers out of Virginia.

The transition from freedpeople's schools to public education happened quickly. Teachers withdrew from the field almost as soon as states were admitted back into the Union. As Carkin noted in Charlottesville, local school boards took over the business of educating the freedpeople:

As fast as the people of the Confederate states showed a disposition to accept the situation and cooperate with the friends of education in the North, the Society gradually withdrew its teachers from the field, leaving the local school boards to take up and carry on the work they had begun—until finally in the late seventies the entire work was dropped as far as northern organized aid was concerned.¹⁶⁴

A few teachers such as Jacob Yoder stayed behind to pursue their work in Virginia's black community. Philena Carkin recalled that the Charlottesville freedpeople's schoolhouse soon came under the direction of the local school board; "later on when the Societies and Bureaus had closed their work the war impoverished towns of the South found these buildings a great help in starting the schools required by their new constitutions."¹⁶⁵ Even though the quality of the education received by black students did not keep pace with that afforded their white counterparts, black students were nevertheless able to gain access to the rudiments of a public education. In the face of significant opposition from elite whites, rural communities, and religious leaders, the Virginia legislature passed a law in July 1870 that established a system of public

¹⁶⁴ Carkin, "Reminiscences," Papers of Philena Carkin, *UVA*.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

education in Virginia. Although schools were to be segregated, the law stipulated that the state was to take responsibility for black education. It would require nearly a decade to make the law a reality, but, by the end of the 1870s, public education was generally accepted as a fact of life in Virginia.¹⁶⁶

The survival of black education into the twentieth century, and the rise of public schools in the state on the foundations of the earlier freedpeople's education, serve as reminders of the important work that took place in Virginia between 1864 and the withdrawal of most northern support for freedpeople's schools in the state by 1876. White Virginians grudgingly accepted the incursion of teachers from the North. By feeding, clothing, and educating the freedpeople, northern teachers solved a series of problems that a war-ravaged state could not hope to address on its own. Former slaves obtained an education. Former slaveholders at least sometimes gained more productive workers. In the process, the freedpeople's schools laid the groundwork for more radical change to come, both in the permanent establishment of public schools across the South and the fight for racial equality that would continue well into the twentieth century and beyond.

Historian James D. Anderson has given a great deal of credit to African Americans for creating the infrastructure that made possible the creation of schools as early as 1860. Many of these schools, essentially "Sabbath" schools, focused solely on religious education and differed substantially from the schools inaugurated after the fall of the Confederacy.¹⁶⁷ Even though one school started by blacks in Savannah, Georgia, may have operated as early as 1833, this appears to have been the exception rather than

¹⁶⁶ Link, *A Hard Country and a Lonely Place*, 16-20.

¹⁶⁷ Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South*, 4-15.

the rule.¹⁶⁸ When existing schools first came under the direction of the United States military and later the Freedmen's Bureau, they still lacked the wherewithal to survive in the aftermath of a terribly destructive war. While black agency certainly played an important role in freedpeople's education during Reconstruction, neither the black community nor the federal government could have started, operated, and sustained the schools in Virginia for as long as they did without the support of the Northern aid societies that furnished supplies and teachers both during and after the Civil War.

In July 1876, Anna Gardner's prize student Paul Lewis shared his fears for the future of black education with Ednah D. Cheney, now a former officer of the New England Freedmen's Aid Society. Lewis and several of his colleagues had attempted to gain admission to a lecture by Ralph Waldo Emerson at the University of Virginia; "his worldwide reputation had caused me to have great anxiety to hear him...but alas! we were rejected simply on account of our color."¹⁶⁹ Eventually Lewis would not even be able to continue as an educator in the Charlottesville school system.

Looking back on his time with Gardner, Carkin, and other teachers from the North, Lewis sent a report on July 8, 1876, about the present state of the Charlottesville schools to an old member of the society:

The condition of our schools this term have [sic] been very good we have three very promising young teachers from Hampton but I am afraid that it will be a long while before we shall have as good teachers as we have had from the North. I should be very glad to see you in our schools again. I shall be ever grateful to you for the good you have done for us.

Lewis concluded his correspondence with a telling reminder of how much work had been left for the next generation to accomplish: "I am sorry to leave this to say but it is true

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁶⁹ Paul Lewis, Charlottesville, to Ednah D. Cheney, Boston, 8 July 1876, Box 3 – Letters, New England Freedmen's Aid Society Records, 1862-1876, *MHS*.

there is a prejudice existing against our color that can only be obliterated by time, education, and wealth. I hope the eyes of the rising generation may be opened to the wrongs practiced by their fathers.”¹⁷⁰ The freedpeople’s schools had established young men like Paul Lewis as leaders in their communities. Subsequent generations would have to carry on the work that Northern teachers and their counterparts in Virginia had started in the years after the Civil War, a process that continues even to the present day.

¹⁷⁰ Paul Lewis, Charlottesville, to Ednah D. Cheney, Boston, 8 July 1876, Box 3 – Letters, New England Freedmen’s Aid Society Records, 1862-1876, *MHS*.

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