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Fifty Years of Segregation: Black Higher Education in Kentucky, 1904-1954

John A. Hardin
Western Kentucky University

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Introduction

AS THE SMOKE of the Civil War battles cleared in 1865, Americans, in particular those of African descent, lived for the first time in a national culture without chattel slavery. The immediate concern for blacks was survival as emancipated men and women in a society where they did not enjoy the full rights, privileges, and immunities of citizenship. Aware of this conundrum, thoughtful blacks equipped themselves for their predicament by pursuing what they could not easily obtain before emancipation: an education. Organizations and individuals previously involved in the fight for abolition of American slavery now focused their efforts on the education of freed blacks. The American Missionary Association, the Slater Fund, the Anna T. Jeanes Fund and, much later, the General Education Board committed extensive resources to black education over a period that extended well into the twentieth century. At the same time, these organizations supported the existing social order, in which blacks remained subordinate to southern whites, who would be allowed to restart the region's economy and reconstruct their state governments.

At Virginia's Hampton Institute and later at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, presidents Samuel C. Armstrong and Booker T. Washington argued that blacks would best contribute to this process via industrial education, an approach that limited blacks to agriculture and semi-skilled occupations not wanted by white workers. In this scheme of the future, industrial education became the key process to transform formerly enslaved blacks into subordinate employees, with white local authorities and worker supervisors maintaining paramount control and reaping the benefits.¹

Not all white southerners were supportive of efforts to educate blacks for citizenship. Most northern campaigns to educate blacks in the 1860s and 1870s were directed toward the former Confederate

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and slaveholding states where there had been large black populations and where their formal education had been ignored. One of these states, Kentucky, occupied a unique position before, during, and after the war. Kentucky supported slavery but did not join the Confederacy. When the war ended, the state legislature refused to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment and incredulously aligned itself with southern states by refusing to spend public money to educate its black citizens and by enacting racial segregation statutes. All the while, Kentucky blacks preserved and used their right to vote in spite of violent intimidation by white terrorist groups. Given this racist treatment, Kentucky blacks persisted in their demands for equal treatment under the law by local and state authorities.

As white-controlled legislatures began spending more public funds on education in the 1860s, Kentucky blacks fought for their fair share despite the legal roadblocks. Under an 1866 state constitutional amendment, blacks and whites could not be taught together.² Taxes collected from blacks and whites were spent on white common schools, and if there were enough funds left over, black schools received support. When the prospect of litigation forced the state legislature in 1882 to equalize public school appropriations, Kentucky school officials began seriously to support black public schools.³

Although meager initially, state support for these schools expanded black community interest in organizing and supporting local educational institutions. Under postbellum state laws, blacks paid property taxes that funded schools but excluded blacks from enrollment. Blacks paid additional taxes or contributed in-kind materials, for example, lumber, to establish racially segregated public schools. Deep South blacks during the Reconstruction era accepted that condition as a part of the sanctioned social order. However, some Kentucky blacks, who operated private schools in Louisville as early as 1847, were determined to reestablish their schools and to resume educating their children after the war's end.⁴

Teachers for these schools were the greatest need in 1865. (Facilities at early stages were less important because black churches often doubled as classrooms.) White missionary teachers gradually fo-

cused their energies on other states with larger black populations. This change made attracting teachers from normal schools more critical. Kentucky blacks struggled on their own to hire qualified “race” (or black) teachers when “Yankee schoolmarms” went elsewhere. Kentucky whites almost universally abdicated their responsibility, saying the “Yankees freed them, now let the Yankees take care of them.”⁵

The first important organized group that supported a normal school came from the Kentucky General Association of Colored Baptists, established in 1865 as an organization for the commonwealth’s black Baptists. This body, representing the largest black religious group in the state, served as a locus for discussion of the issue. Its interest in establishing such a school centered on the desire of black Baptists to create a ministerial teacher training facility under denominational control.

The campaign to create a state-supported teacher training school persisted among black educators and organizations but failed to make any substantive headway in the conservative, white-controlled legislature. In 1877, after agitation by the Kentucky Colored State Teachers Association and church groups, Superintendent of Public Instruction Howard A.M. Henderson convened a meeting of the state’s black school teachers to discuss the issue. The meeting reinvigorated the black Baptist association’s sporadic efforts to establish a school of its own that would include normal as well as theological curricula.⁶ After these meetings and upon securing financial support from the state’s white Baptists, the association opened the Kentucky Normal and Theological Institute in 1879 at a Louisville site.⁷

The school’s religious mission initially excluded industrial courses favored by contemporary white philanthropic organizations and black leaders such as Booker T. Washington. Kentucky’s black Baptists wanted a school primarily to train future ministers as well as other students who wanted a liberal arts education. By 1884 the institute trustees had changed its name to State Colored Baptist University to reflect its denominational connection and the right of

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each state senator to send one “properly equipped student” from his district at state expense.⁸ With the addition of college courses to its elementary and secondary level programs, State University became Kentucky’s first black-owned, comprehensive educational institution. Within the next decade several local black, private professional schools that were faced with financial shortfalls merged with State University: Harper Law School, Louisville National Medical College, and Central Law School. These additions spurred such confidence in State University that white adjunct faculty members were added to the medical college faculty. By 1900 State University in Louisville had become the central location for black higher education in Kentucky.

The growth of State University sprang from its leadership. After its first year (1879-80) under founder Elijah P. Marrs, the trustees appointed William J. Simmons to head the school. Although he professed public support for the Hampton-Tuskegee educational model, Simmons still supported black schools with either all-industrial education programs or all-liberal arts curricula; at that time he considered hybrid institutions with both types of programs unacceptable.

Simmons’s tenure at State University ended abruptly in early 1890, when he resigned the presidency to establish Eckstein Norton Institute at Cane Spring, Kentucky. Named after Louisville and Nashville Railroad executive and patron Eckstein Norton, the institution followed a mostly industrial education path rather than the diverse curricular approach of State University. Operating with this narrow focus, the institute struggled for survival after Simmons’s sudden death in October 1890. Although managed effectively by Simmons’s protégé Charles Henry Parrish, dwindling enrollments and shrinking resources led to the school’s eventual merger with Lincoln Institute in Simpsonville, Kentucky.⁹

In contrast to the private support given State University and Eckstein Norton Institute, the publicly supported Kentucky State Normal School for Colored Persons (which I will refer to as Kentucky State) was established in 1886 with limited resources and sparse attendance. After a brisk competition among seven Kentucky

cities for the school, a donation of land from the Frankfort city council confirmed its site. The state legislature made initial biennial commitments of three thousand dollars for operating expenses and seven thousand dollars for classroom construction. In its first term Kentucky State had three teachers, fifty-five students, one building, and an industrial teacher training curriculum.¹⁰

Gradually, the school attracted more students during its first decade and took advantage of provisions of the 1890 Morrill Land Grant Act to acquire additional moneys and property. With them the school received increasing amounts of political and economic support from Kentucky whites who advocated the Hampton-Tuskegee industrial education philosophy. In his report to the white trustees later forwarded to the state school board, school president John Henry Jackson, mindful of the white acceptance of the Hampton-Tuskegee paradigm, praised the trustees for their support of the school's industrial education efforts "by encouraging and promoting, by every means in [their] power, those industrial pursuits that are so wholesome and so helpful in raising up a class of producers." Jackson, who had received a classical college education at Kentucky's integrated Berea College, had no alternative but to praise the industrial education paradigm. To justify his requests for increased funding for new facilities for mechanical courses, he argued that the school produced "skilled mechanics, scientific agriculturalists and females trained in domestic economy." The presence of workers with such skills, he maintained, improved both the "moral and intellectual well-being" of each community.¹¹

Jackson, while praising the soundness of industrial education for blacks, neglected to mention what everyone knew implicitly, that this philosophy encouraged black subordination to white employers. Rather than depriving whites of employment, as some whites had feared, occupations in agriculture and domestic service were designated informally as respectable "negro jobs" after proper training in an industrial education normal school such as Kentucky State.¹²

As this movement for diverting blacks into industrial education attracted increasing support both nationally and regionally, the state legislature recognized its potential usefulness as trainers of

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workers for the commonwealth's agriculture, coal, light manufacturing, and thoroughbred horse industries. To make the industrial education approach feasible, the legislature provided additional land and facilities for Kentucky State through special laws in 1893, 1896, and 1897.¹³ Given this additional support for less-than-collegiate-level industrial education, Kentucky State served at least two purposes. In its early years it enabled the state to remove black teacher training from the outside influence of northern whites at Berea College, and it diluted the influence of the state's black Baptists on higher education.

At the turn of the century, three issues clouded the future of higher education for Kentucky blacks: the funding of black secondary education, the movement for accommodation to segregation by black leaders, and the decline of white liberal support at such places as Berea College.

Confronted by white indifference toward black activist attacks on segregation laws, Kentucky blacks continued their private financial contributions to the inadequately funded public, all-black high schools in Covington, Frankfort, Lexington, Louisville, Owensboro, Paducah, Paris, and Winchester.¹⁴ One faction of black educators, however, received measured white acceptance. After a widely celebrated 1895 Atlanta speech by Booker T. Washington of Alabama's Tuskegee Institute, favoring both southern white control and industrial education, Washington's ideological supporters at Kentucky State and Eckstein Norton Institute enjoyed increased financial support from the white power structure.

In spite of Washington's accommodation to dominant southern white views on race, one Kentucky college refused to enforce rigid racial segregation. Since 1866 many Kentucky blacks had attended the jewel of racially integrated southern colleges, Berea College, which required its students, regardless of race, to undergo both industrial training and classical education. However, hostility toward black participation at Berea College had begun to increase in the 1890s from without and within. Appalachian white students and unsympathetic Berea College administrators had lost the fervor for interracial

education advocated in 1866 by its abolitionist founder, John Gregg Fee. In moving away from Fee's original vision, the college's administrators, like many whites in other areas of life, enforced and hardened a color line that W.E.B. Du Bois predicted would be the major social problem of the twentieth century.

Although the color line started to take shape as the Civil War ended, its dominant presence in Kentucky communities took longer to create. In a border state later described by jurist Thurgood Marshall as "civil" toward black litigants, educated Kentucky blacks fought in the courts to hold on to liberties guaranteed by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. The activism of educated Kentucky blacks, carried out in their own special ways, affected the social fiber of the state more than the small numbers of blacks would suggest. This narrative on Kentucky black higher education does not focus, therefore, on curricula or educational philosophies *per se* but on a half-century of internal struggles and institutional adaptations by educated blacks who emerged from a complex labyrinth of antebellum racial prejudice. Their largely untold story exposes both black capitulations to racism and small triumphs by other blacks over travails associated with racially segregated higher education.

On the surface, this account appears no different from that of other southern states. But Kentucky was not geographically in the Deep South. The social history of the post-Civil War Deep South included a canon of racial segregation traditions that required the social separation of blacks and whites from womb to tomb. Kentucky, with a smaller black population, often deviated from the accepted racial practices. Unlike those in other southern states, Kentucky blacks voted unhampered and were politically active in urban areas. They were elected to local offices in counties with large black populations. These isolated deviations permitted the state to practice what historian George C. Wright described as "genteel" or polite racism.

This study concerns Kentucky's efforts to impose an important part of that polite racism—racially segregated public and private higher education—on educated, twentieth-century blacks who, for their own complex and tactical reasons, initially tolerated it but

soon rebelled and ultimately rejected it. Kentucky civil rights activists subsequently used these experiences in fighting segregated education in their attack on other forms of racial discrimination in the 1950s. They started to disestablish them, and other activists continued the task in the 1960s. Black educators in Kentucky, as well as those few whites who recognized the basic unfairness of racial segregation, fought for equality of higher education for blacks to prove that truly equal educational opportunities could exist. Largely ignored by most civil rights historians, these Kentucky battles for higher education equity from 1904 to 1954 served both as early, critical skirmishes in the national struggles for *de jure* civil rights and as test sites for activist strategies. For these reasons, the story of Kentucky's agonizing experience with segregated black higher education must be told.

To explain how Kentucky educators operated their system of higher education circumscribed by a color line, this study identifies the state's leading black educators from 1904 to 1954 and compares their ideologies of education for blacks and the quiet, often unseen struggles to implement them. It also examines the gradual evolution of the institutions that these educators administered and the internal conflicts among them in this period and thereafter. The saga begins in 1904 when a newly enacted Kentucky law forced Berea College, one of the South's few integrated, private colleges in the early twentieth century, to exclude its 174 black students because of their race. As opposition to the segregation law faded, such administrators at black institutions as Green Pinckney Russell and Dennis H. Anderson grudgingly accepted the political correctness of racially segregated higher education. Within this social order, two factions developed among Kentucky black educators. In the years following 1904, the majority supported Washington's Hampton-Tuskegee model of industrial education, while a minority supported classical, liberal arts curricula for Kentucky's black collegians. When industrial education gradually lost its popularity in the late 1920s, black awareness of the social weakness of industrial education led to its rejection as the paramount educational philosophy for blacks.

During this era that paralleled the Depression, national and regional toleration of segregation by blacks began to change. Civil rights activists within the education profession disputed the prevailing white belief that segregated education, higher or otherwise, was somehow positive for blacks. By 1930, moreover, the industrial education philosophy in the state's segregated black colleges had come under fire from most black educators. Black state representative and civil rights activist Charles W. Anderson Jr. also challenged the state's alleged "equal" educational opportunities for blacks as being unequal. By 1930, the liberal arts-based teacher education curricula at Kentucky State and Louisville Municipal College gradually replaced the older, narrowly focused industrial education programs.

As the turmoil of World War Two ended, American blacks who had fought to end Nazi fascism overseas became dissatisfied with a de jure second-class citizenship enforced under state statutes. Lawsuits by blacks against segregation policies proliferated as victory over Hitlerian terror was celebrated and the campaign to fight international communism developed. Without financial aid from the national attorneys of the NAACP, Kentucky blacks financed their own anti-school segregation litigation in 1948. The national NAACP gave special attention to five lawsuits concerning public school segregation in other states. These cases, in concert with legal challenges filed by Kentucky civil rights activists, led to significant reversals of state law controlling segregated schools and colleges.

As the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* rulings disrupted the national legal foundations of racial segregation, Kentucky continued to make progress toward the destruction of segregated education at all levels. The peaceful desegregation of Kentucky's colleges and schools constituted a benchmark in the 1950s and 1960s for other states to follow. In the 1970s, however, violent white resistance in Louisville to busing to achieve school desegregation demonstrated that the black struggle for equal educational opportunities had not ended. In the 1980s Kentucky was ordered by the federal government to end vestiges of segregation in higher education, a condition that some thought was long gone. These events again reminded the nation

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and, more precisely, Kentuckians, that the color line, once created, had become a difficult and perplexing social institution to disestablish.