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Writing Process

I started my historiography paper by gathering and analyzing varied historical interpretations of the formation of public education in the South. These sources ranged over one hundred years from the beginning of the twentieth century to the two-thousands. These sources contradicted each other in many ways due to inaccurate and biased depictions of it from early Reconstruction historians. After analyzing the trends and shifts in historical interpretation on this topic I crafted an argument for which category of interpretation is best. This was based on many factors including historical accuracy, clarity, and level of bias.

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Historical Interpretations of the Formation of Public Education for Freedpeople in Reconstruction South

Daniel C. Napoli

Few periods in American and global history have experienced as much historical revision as Reconstruction, likely due to the extreme polarization of the American population that stemmed from it. Despite the interpretational controversy that surrounds almost all endeavors of American Reconstruction, most historians have come to a consensus that the formation of public schools in the American South was one of the period's biggest successes. While the lasting success of its formation has been agreed upon, many aspects of it are still left up to interpretation such as who the main agent of this formation was, their motives, and the reaction to this formation.

This historiography paper seeks to analyze and explain the shift in historical interpretations regarding the formation of black public education in the South during Reconstruction. From sources dating back to the early twentieth century until the present, historical interpretations of this topic have contradicted each other in many ways. I will use differences in historians' claims to group them into interpretive categories and organize them chronologically for a sense of the timeline of these shifts. These interpretive categories include the formation of black public education as an endeavor led primarily by northern federal power to reform Southern life; as an endeavor led primarily by northern missionary groups with humanitarian motives; and as an endeavor led primarily by freedpeople with the goal of social mobility, autonomy, and equality. The two largest categories, an endeavor by missionaries and an endeavor by freedpeople, differ greatly in their portrayal of the role of freedpeople in this formation. Many historians in the "endeavor led by northern missionary groups" category continually portray freedpeople as passive, almost non-existent recipients of this change, while the "endeavor led by freedpeople" historians claim almost the opposite: that the freedpeople's intense desire and insatiable appetite for education were the sparks

that led to a Northern reaction which *guided* this formation. Each source from this category approaches the topic from a different angle or focus which helps paint a broad but detailed picture of this controversial topic regarded as one of the greatest successes of Reconstruction. Of the three interpretational categories, then, the formation of public education as an endeavor led *primarily* by freedpeople is the best because it considers black voices and actions as valid historical agents of change and engages with them in their interpretations, thus offering a more comprehensive study of the formation's causes. With a topic as important to freedpeople as public education was, interpretations of it that generalize and portray blacks as passive recipients of this formation—as both other categories do—miss a large piece of its significance.

The Formation as an Endeavor Led Primarily by Northern Federal Power

An interpretation from the oldest and smallest interpretational category of this formation, public education as an endeavor by federal power, comes from James Wilford Garner, a Dunning School historian writing not long after the end of Reconstruction. The Dunning School of Thought's impact on Reconstruction as a period of historical study cannot be underestimated. Its heavily biased interpretation of the period sought to heroize white Southern Redeemers and paint Reconstruction as an endeavor led by an oppressive federal government from the North. Traces of this school's interpretational impact can be seen over a hundred years after in racist high school and college history textbooks. Garner, applying this desired historical narrative to his work *Reconstruction in Mississippi*, offers an interpretation of the formation of public education that aligns with it.

Garner offers a flawed interpretation of the formation of public education in Mississippi by portraying it as an endeavor by Northern radicals to impose Republican ideology on the South and reform their way of life. Like other early 20th-century interpretations of Reconstruction, Garner's portrayal of the freedpeople's role in this formation is non-existent, one of the reasons why his interpretation is flawed. He refers to the primary agents of change in this formation as "reconstructionists," an umbrella term that includes all white Northerners who worked toward the goal of centralized, presidential Reconstruction from high-power decision makers down to the "Northern schoolmarm." Almost immediately, Garner interprets the formation of education for blacks negatively saying that "one of the schemes of the reconstructionists in Mississippi was the establishment of an elaborate system of public schools for the benefit of both races."¹ Garner focuses largely on the negative reaction white

¹ James Wilford Garner, *Reconstruction in Mississippi* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1901), 354.

southerners had to this formation, but these reactions give evidence as to what Garner believed the motives of this formation were. One of the reasons for a negative response, Garner writes, is because Northern officials did not consider “the general impoverishment of the people and the traditional opposition to school maintained by the state.”² Complaints like these emphasize the pervasive sentiment present in the South during this time that Reconstruction was meant as a punishment and means for the reformation of the South by the North. Another fear of Southern whites that Garner addresses was that “the teachers from the North, it was alleged, became political emissaries among the negroes, organized them into ‘loyal leagues,’ and impressed upon them the duty of voting the Republican ticket.”³ It can be seen from fears like these that the formation of public education in the South was interpreted as an attack on the Southern way of life with the help of the freedpeople. With statements like these, it is hard to believe his claim that “there was[n’t] any opposition by the more intelligent whites to an economical scheme of negro education.”⁴ Historians that truly engage with the social state of the freedpeople in Reconstruction South like Du Bois denounce sentiments like these as Southern propaganda. Garner’s clearly flawed interpretation of this formation partially explains why so much historical revision was needed on this topic and on Reconstruction as a whole. As I could tell from my research, the first wave of historical revision on this topic emerged in academia around forty years after Garner’s work and moved away from the defensive, charged interpretation of this formation featured in Garner’s work.

The Formation as an Endeavor Led Primarily by Northern Missionary Groups

This category, while still not fully recognizing freedpeople as active agents in this formation, begins to recognize the influence that Northern missionary groups’ humanitarian motives had on the formation. The earliest source from this category was written in 1941 by Henry Lee Swint and offers an analysis of this formation centered around the experiences, characteristics, and motives of northern schoolteachers that traveled, inspired by missionary organizations, to teach the freedpeople. Swint’s work is flawed in that it interprets black education in the South as an endeavor primarily—if not solely—taken on by Northern whites. He continually refers to freedpeople as passive recipients of advancements made by Northern organizations. For example, Swint writes, “When the most pressing needs of the people had been met these societies also established schools and commissioned teachers, thus following the example of the ‘educational

² Garner, 358.

³ Garner, 359.

⁴ Garner, 356.

commissions.”⁵ This is one example of Swint referring to the establishment of schools as solely taken on by Northern organizations. Historians who further revised this topic as an endeavor taken on primarily by freedpeople—the most accurate and effective interpretation—debunk this claim by providing substantial evidence proving that freedpeople themselves funded and established many schools in the South because of their intense desire for education. Swint’s interpretation as seen through this quote also dismisses the freedpeople’s concept of education as an exigency. For freedpeople, the establishment of these schools *was* a pressing need. By hinging the interpretation of this topic around the actions of Northern missionary groups, Swint is not able to give an accurate depiction of all the factors that played into this formation. In his work, Swint delves deeply into the motives of both the officers that organized missionary work and the Northern teachers themselves. He concludes from his sample of hundreds of officers and teachers that “the group, as a whole, was actuated by a combination of impulses.”⁶ Some of these impulses included “abolitionist zeal...pity for the helpless freedmen...anticipated profits as the just reward of the righteous.”⁷ Swint claims that these motives sparked resistance among southern whites, but, like Garner’s interpretation, southern whites were madder about *who* was educating the freedpeople, not that they were being educated. While this may have been true in some cases, this sentiment is criticized by scholars like Lamon as lacking in evidence and denying the probability that freedpeople would not have been educated beyond the bare minimum under the hands of southern whites.⁸

Despite being written over four decades after Swint’s work, William Preston Vaughn offers an aligning interpretation of this formation in his work *Schools for All: The Blacks and Public Education in the South* which is similarly flawed in its limited scope. Vaughn argues that educational development in the South was Reconstruction’s “most vital, visible, and lasting achievement” and should, therefore, be placed at the center of the historical narrative.⁹ He sees this development as an endeavor by philanthropic, missionary-spirited Northerners. Vaughn refuses to acknowledge the important steps slaves took to secure their own education, including funding it. He writes, “No progress was made toward the education of Southern blacks until the second year of the Civil War, when Northern religious and philanthropic organizations initiated efforts to educate

⁵ Henry Lee Swint, *The Northern Teacher in the South, 1862-1870* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1941), 3.

⁶ Swint, 26.

⁷ Swint, 26.

⁸ Lester C. Lamon, “Black Public Education in the South, 1861-1920: By Whom, For Whom and Under Whose Control?,” *Journal of Thought* 18, no. 3 (1983): 83, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23801725>.

⁹ William Preston Vaughn, *Schools for All: The Blacks and Public Education in the South, 1865-1877* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1974), ix.

slaves living within territories occupied by the Union Army.”¹⁰ This sentiment is also made clear in his diction. For example, Vaughn writes, “Numerous authors have described the joyous and enthusiastic reaction of the freedpeople to education.”¹¹ Throughout the work, he portrays freedpeople as passive agents in the development of education which is an incomplete analysis of the formation. Vaughn argues that the motives for the philanthropists’ endeavor were based on fear of spreading Southern ideology. Vaughn writes, “Northerners believed this task required their supervision, for Southern white control over black minds might produce dire consequences.”¹² He generally describes these motives as a Northern desire to reconstruct the South “along New England lines.”¹³ This, he argues, is the Southerners’ main problem with education in the South, a similar sentiment held by Swint but later rejected by a new revisionist wave. In mainstream historical interpretation, the last revisionist wave—an endeavor led primarily by freedpeople—starts around 1980, but traces of it can be found as far back as 1935 with W.E.B. Du Bois’ work *Black Reconstruction*.

The Formation as an Endeavor Led Primarily by Freedpeople

The most recent wave of historical interpretation on this formation sees the primary agents of it as freedpeople themselves with motives of social movement, equality, and autonomy from whites. This interpretation is the best because it is the most comprehensive and clearly reflects on change caused by freedpeople, Northern organizations, and the government. Historians who have written in the vein of this category, while recognizing that the formation was impacted by multiple agents, argue that Northern missionary groups and federal assistance were a sympathetic reaction to the freedpeople’s own strive for education.

The first source that offers this argument is a chronological outlier in that it was written in 1935 when the historical tradition regarding Reconstruction was dominated by racially biased scholars of the Dunning School. W.E.B. Du Bois’ *Black Reconstruction* offers a comprehensive interpretation of this formation centered around the experiences of the freedpeople while recognizing the impacts of both Northern support and federal assistance. He heavily emphasizes the utmost importance of public education to freedpeople and to the story of Reconstruction itself. Du Bois makes it clear that the striving for and formation of public education was done primarily by freedpeople with Northern help which came as a sympathetic *reaction*. He writes, “How the freedman yearned to learn

¹⁰ Vaughn, 3.

¹¹ Vaughn, 14.

¹² Vaughn, 1.

¹³ Vaughn, 28.

and know ... with the *guiding hand* of the Freedmen's Bureau ... helped establish the Public School in the South."¹⁴ He believes the main motive for this unrelenting strive was to "rise out of their condition by means of education."¹⁵ Du Bois' work is also the earliest to critique what he terms the "Southern propaganda" that held Southern elites to be in favor of education for freedpeople but against *who* was doing the teaching. Du Bois goes to great lengths to dispel this, referencing the acts of terror against freedpeople and their attempts at schooling and writing that "the Negroes were disliked and feared almost in exact proportion to their manifestation of intelligence and capacity. ... Education of the Negroes, they thought, would be labor lost, resulting in injury instead of benefit to the working class."¹⁶ Du Bois' ability to clearly see the intentions of Southern elites despite their ostensible support is one example of historians from this category adding a level of nuance and clarity to the interpretation that historians of the previous groups lacked.

The majority of scholars that contribute to this interpretive category begin to appear in academia in the 1980s, one of these being Lester C. Lamon. Lamon's 1983 work titled "Black Public Education in the South" takes a similar approach to the study of this formation, focusing on educational progress during Reconstruction with freedpeople at the center and as the primary agent of change. He argues that the formation of schools in the South was a three-part process, including help from missionary groups and the Freedmen's Bureau, but his interpretation falls into the 'endeavor by freedpeople' category because, as he writes, "By their own actions, blacks forced the issues of freedom and education to the point of decision by federal authorities and other interested Northern agencies."¹⁷ More so than Du Bois, however, Lamon stresses the motives of this self-directed endeavor for education. This motive was largely based on blacks' desire for freedom and autonomy from whites and recognition of education as the first and most important means of power. Lamon writes, "Freedom and the 'three Rs,' or rather the absence of each, became intertwined, therefore, not as abstractions but as real forces in the world. Freedom meant, among other things, access to education; education meant security for freedom."¹⁸ Lamon's interpretation of freedpeoples' motives further clarifies the causes of this formation and offers a more comprehensive study of it than the other categories

¹⁴ 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* (NY: Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1935), 637.

¹⁵ Du Bois, 638.

¹⁶ Du Bois, 645.

¹⁷ Lamon, "Black Public Education in the South," 76.

¹⁸ Lamon, 76.

that dismiss blacks as passive recipients. Lamon also continues in Du Bois' debunking of Southern propaganda, detailing Southern debates on whether or not there should be public education for blacks at all and arguing that "it is highly doubtful that the South would have educated blacks beyond the barest rudiments' because its 'opposition was very largely aimed at black education of any kind.'"¹⁹ Du Bois and Lamon's critique of these historical myths shows this category's success in offering a revision of the history of an extremely polarized and biased history.

Another historian who treads through these controversial waters neutrally and accurately is Eric Foner, one of the most prevalent scholars of Reconstruction-era America. Foner's work *A Short History of Reconstruction* takes an economically centered interpretive approach to the overall study of Reconstruction, and through this lens offers a unique interpretation of the formation of black education. Foner focuses on the ways that blacks gained autonomy from whites through taking control of churches and schools, and while he recognizes that Northern organizations "provided most of the funding for black-education during Reconstruction," he writes that "the initiative often lay with blacks themselves."²⁰ Foner shifts the traditionally biased interpretation of this category by highlighting the overlooked fact that many of these schools were operated and funded by blacks themselves. Like Lamon's work, Foner further clarifies the causes of this formation by detailing the motives of blacks' strive for education, claiming that "the most striking illustration of the freedmen's quest for self-improvement was their seemingly unquenchable thirst for education...Access to education for themselves and their children was, for blacks, central to the meaning of freedom."²¹ Foner also offers an interpretation of the motives of Northern teachers, something that Swint focused on heavily. Foner's explanation of their motives contains many of the sentiments Swint focused on such as philanthropic motives, but it adds the unique possibility that these teachers acted with motives of social control, hoping to shape the future role and behaviors of the freedpeople to their will. Additions like these show the greater level of nuance consistent in the works of scholars in the 'endeavor by freedpeople' category.

The first twenty-first-century interpretation of this formation comes from a work titled "Leveraging the State: Private and the Development of Public Education for Blacks" written by a group of scholars led by David Strong. Strong takes a civil rights-focused approach to explain the freedpeople's self-led

¹⁹ Lamon, 83.

²⁰ Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction, 1863-1877* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1990), 43.

²¹ Foner, 42-43.

endeavor to secure education. These authors look at the lack of civil rights African Americans had, especially after Disenfranchisement, and analyze its relationship to their ability to affect policy development. The authors argue that despite not having the right to vote and having their voices dismissed by white decision-makers, blacks were able to indirectly affect policy and “leverage the state” by “us[ing] private funds to directly establish services in the public sector”²² to develop public education. This article is unique in its detail on *how* blacks were able to form public schools in the South against much opposition. Due to the nature of this article—analyzing the ways a socially suppressed group used their lack of rights to affect policy-making—this article falls under the ‘endeavor by freedpeople’ category. While it recognizes the importance of Northern philanthropist groups, it portrays them in a supporting rather than leading role in this formation. For example, the authors write, “In a coalition with Northern philanthropic organizations, blacks extended and refined a strategy that had proved successful”²³ The authors also address the motives of this formation through the lens of Disenfranchisement, saying that blacks engaged in leveraging the state tactics “for purposes of securing social rights.”²⁴ This article is successful in its unique approach to explaining *how* freedpeople secured their education despite the countless obstacles and forces against them.

The most recent and far-leaning work into this revisionist category comes from Anne Marie Brosnan in her work “To Educate Themselves.” This work fully embraces and emphasizes the importance of a historical revision on the topic of the formation of black public education during Reconstruction. Her article focuses on the false stereotype that freedpeople’s teachers were mostly “Northern schoolmarm” and instead shows that most teachers for blacks were blacks themselves. While the article’s focus is on teachers, it does not shy away from giving a historical interpretation of the formation of public schooling itself. Brosnan’s interpretation leans far into the ‘endeavor by freedpeople’ category with arguments like, “Southern black men and women were not passive recipients of northern largesse. Instead ... North Carolina’s black population played a powerful role in shaping the contours of southern black schooling.”²⁵ The article does not dismiss the importance of Northern philanthropist organizations; rather, it argues that “these aid and missionary societies were responding to, rather than

²² David Strong et al., “Leveraging the State: Private Money and the Development of Public Education for Blacks,” *American Sociological Review* 65, no.5 (2000), 660, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657541>.

²³ Strong, 662.

²⁴ Strong, 667.

²⁵ Anne Marie Brosnan, “‘To Educate Themselves’: Southern Black Teachers in North Carolina’s Schools for the Freedpeople during the Civil War and Reconstruction Period, 1862-1875,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 20, no.3 (2019), 231, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14664658.2019.1690743>.

inspiring, the freedpeople's persistent demands for education."²⁶ Brosnan lists many motives for these enthusiastic demands for education as varied as the desire to read the bible, upward social mobility, autonomy from white control, and enfranchisement. The historiographical consciousness, unique attention to teachers, and debunking of historical stereotypes are all aspects of this article that contribute to its success as a historical revision.

Overall, the historical analyses of this topic have evolved and been revised over time to include the undeniable importance of blacks' self-led and motivated endeavor for education. Except for Du Bois' chronological outlier, the traditionally white-dominated and biased interpretations on this topic have been phased out in favor of a more comprehensive and clear interpretation of its causes as embodied by the scholars in the 'endeavor by freedpeople' category. This shift in mainstream historical interpretation has paralleled blacks' increased autonomy, civil liberties, and representation throughout the development of our country's flawed democracy. Historians and scholars that participate in the revisionist tradition of the 'endeavor by freedpeople' category offer the best interpretation of this formation because of their neutral, clear, and comprehensive explanations of it that consider the actions of *all* contributing groups as equally valid historical agents of change.

This process of historical revision continues to be of extreme importance, especially for topics as traditionally flawed in their study as American Reconstruction. Historical interpretations, by being held and passed down as truths in our nation's classrooms, have profound impacts on how youth understand our country's history and the present-day exigencies that result from it. The preservation of racially biased and inaccurate interpretations of our country's tumultuous past has contributed to our polarized population's inability to come to terms with it. The teaching of revisionist waves of our country's history in today's classrooms has been under attack for spreading anti-American sentiment among youth, but by neglecting our nation's faults, forward progress becomes almost impossible. As W.E.B Du Bois writes in *Black Reconstruction*, "Nations reel and stagger on their way; they make hideous mistakes; they commit frightful wrongs; they do great and beautiful things. And shall we not best guide humanity by telling the truth about all this, so far as the truth is ascertainable?"²⁷ Through historical revision and aligning educational reform, future generations will be better equipped to come to terms with our country's faults and learn from them to move toward more great accomplishments.

²⁶ Brosnan, 233.

²⁷ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 714.

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