East Texas Historical Journal

Volume 51 | Issue 1 Article 6

3-2013

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Recommended Citation

Roth, Jeffery and Watson, J.B. Jr (2013) "African American Education in Nacogdoches County, 1890-1970," East Texas Historical Journal: Vol. 51: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol51/iss1/6

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AFRICAN-AMERICAN EDUCATION IN NACOGDOCHES COUNTY, 1890-1970

By Jeffery Roth and J.B. Watson

For decades after emancipation, illiteracy was widespread in the black population, and an educational system slowly emerged.¹ By the time of the Jim Crow era in Texas, African American education proved to be a liberating factor for many who were fighting to fully exercise their U.S. citizenship. As the national literacy rate for the black population hovered at only thirty percent, Booker T. Washington and other advocates fostered an educational movement that changed the United States and unfolded in Nacogdoches, Texas in as it did in thousands of old southern towns and cities. In many places that were much like Nacogdoches, black citizens constructed their own opportunity through education during the early twentieth century.²

This paper will detail the education problems in the segregated black community, and the local school movement that followed in Nacogdoches County within the broader context of southern social conditions during the early twentieth century. The poor status of black education prompted a strong response across the region from about 1900-1919. By the time the education movement peaked, communities had joined forces to solve their own problems at the local level. Educational institutions transformed communities and produced dynamic people who thrived under difficult circumstances, or took flight in the Great Migration as they sought better opportunities in urban America. The black population in Nacogdoches County peaked in number by the 1940s, but local black schools continued to anchor both African-American culture as well as the segregated neighborhoods these institutions served until the late 1960s.

STATE AND NATIONAL CONTEXT 1890-1914

In the U.S. Census Bureau's comprehensive publication *U.S. Ne-gro Population 1790-1915*, lead historian John Cummings described a continuing struggle for freedom that included education. This document detailed statistics on institutionalized illiteracy and labeled "ignorance" and lack of educational opportunity as the greatest problem facing the black population of the United States.³ In Nacogdoches,

thousands lived in that climate of "ignorance" and illiteracy.

Between 1890 and 1910, informative trends appeared in the census. Throughout the South the black population was largely rural. While three-quarters of the African American population still lived there in a rural place, many educated people were already on the move in the United States at the beginning of the Great Migration.⁴ Texas followed these trends and census records note that the black rural population dropped from 83.7% in 1890 to 74.1% of the total black population in Texas in 1910.⁵ Either in pursuit of education or empowered as a result of it, those who had departed to the West and North had dramatically higher literacy rates of 95-97%. Apparently, many who defeated illiteracy made the decision to leave the Deep South for greater opportunity.⁶ Others stayed at home in places like Nacogdoches and fought for the freedoms promised by an education.

NACOGDOCHES AND THE STATE IN 1890-1914

After passing strict laws, white authorities segregated their majority population from black citizens at the turn of the twentieth century. At that time, the Texas legislature wrote laws and created separate institutions including schools for white and black children. The law defined who would be segregated as "colored children" or "any child of 'negro' ethnicity." State law added: "colored trustees" were to be elected for the "colored children" who were to receive a "pro rata" share of the county school funds that were to be "impartially divided." In 1914, well after these laws were enacted, white education experts called expenditures on rural black schools in Nacogdoches a "waste."

A faction within state government at the time avoided all significant expenditures on black education by opposing compulsory education laws. As a result, rural black populations suffered in real and quantifiable ways because lack of education reflected unfavorable societal conditions in general.¹⁰ For example, at the beginning of the twentieth century, illiteracy manifested a poor quality of life demonstrated by mortality statistics showing that black men lived to be about 34 and women about 37 while their white counterparts lived to 50 and 53 respectively.¹¹ In 1910, Texas ranked poorly among the states in educational attainment and joined the former slave-holding states of Mississippi, Alabama, and South Carolina who had no compulsory

education laws.

As a result, the most important educational issue in 1910 was attendance because almost half of all African-American school aged children were not in school that year. In detail, "Black" school aged children attended at a rate of 52.2% and those classified as "Mulatto" at a rate of only 58.2%. In 1910, as 62,044 black children worked on farms and in factories or failed to attend school in Texas, the Census Bureau reported that about a quarter of the state's black population over the age of 10 were illiterate. Clearly, significant steps forward had already been made despite many challenges.

In rural districts where most black Texans lived in 1910, education problems were more pronounced as a result of widely dispersed populations and poor road conditions. The larger rural population had an illiteracy rate of 27.3% while the smaller urban population had an illiteracy rate of 17.9%. Poverty compounded these issues. Nonetheless, the importance and desire for an education was shown in the fact that more than half of "Negroes" between six and twenty were attending school. Nacogdoches county reflected the statewide numbers, where 1426 or 29.9% of that population over ten were illiterate and 62.8% of children from six to fourteen were attending rural schools. The black population lived within segregated neighborhoods in the city and illiteracy in that population was about 29.6% for those over 10. Children in the city aged six to fourteen were attending school at a rate of about 60%.

After 1914, a national education movement took hold around the ideas and inspiration of Booker T. Washington who would be joined by wealthy philanthropists such as Julius Rosenwald. Strong resistance to the education of black children also emerged, and it was reported by Texas education leaders such as E.V. White and E. E. Davis who converged on Nacogdoches in 1914. In the *Bulletin of the University of Texas* White and Davis described continuing opposition to compulsory education generated by white, anti-education forces who feared that state money would be used for the benefit of black children. White and Davis reported:

A few apparently honest people have been so far misguided as to oppose any form of compulsory school attendance because of their disbelief in the education of the Negro. They would place a bridal of restraint and negligence on the white children...on account of their antipathy for the negroes....¹⁷

White and Davis visited all the rural schools in Nacogdoches County during 1914, and they championed: "a profitable investment. . .[be] made to set the Negro's feet on the path of industrial efficiency." After their tour in Nacogdoches County they concluded: "There are 29 negro schools in the county. The greatest waste of the public-school funds is on these negro schools." They reported on poor facilities, but found the greatest problem to be in the fact that rural black schools, they wrote: "conformed to an educational system planned entirely for the whites." These sentiments reflected a soft bigotry of low expectation and an effort to limit black education to only vocational and industrial work.

As the money for black education in Nacogdoches County was called a waste, Booker T. Washington countered and challenged a national audience when he wrote:

For a number of years I have had the feeling that the more liberal and advanced thinkers of the South among the white people do not know the poor school facilities that are provided for members of my race in certain sections of the South. . . . More money is paid for Negro convicts than for Negro teachers in Alabama. . . . I do not mean to imply that. . . [this] is the only state where such conditions exist."²¹

Washington claimed that as long as this trend continued there would be higher levels of crime and perpetual danger from the ignorant.²² Washington voiced his "disbelief" at the "ignorance and stupidity" of many state school officials. After making tours elsewhere similar to that of White and Davis in Nacogdoches, rather than waste, Washington saw hope in the perseverance of students under bleak circumstances. He wrote:

On my visits to the country schools in these and other States, I have seen some very pathetic sights. In some

of the so-called school buildings the roofs leak, the winds blow up through the cracks of the floors and down through the ceilings. I have seen in many of these schools five little boys and girls trying to study out of the same book. In some cases two children would occupy the front seat with the book between them, with two others peeping over their shoulders, and a fifth trying to peep over the shoulder of the four.

I have seen scores of little children sitting for hours on a rough bench with no back to it and their feet dangling in the air. [During winter in the unheated schools] a fire would be built on the outside of the school-house, and teachers and pupils would study for a few minutes until they got so cold they were compelled to go outside to warm their fingers and feet When these conditions exist in a school with a term of only three or four months, conducted by a poorly paid teacher, it is wonderful that any progress at all has been made in such places in the matter of education.²³

There had been progress in Nacogdoches and the physical presence of schools anchored and inspired communities. The arguments put forth by Booker T. Washington were echoed locally and created a wave of positive expectations that swept through progressive circles and reached the wealthy philanthropist Julius Rosenwald. Rosenwald started actively funding schools after reading an article that appeared in *The Outlook* magazine in 1914.²⁴ He acted after reading powerful arguments put forth by Washington such as: "The colored boy who has \$1.50 a year spent on him for his education is punished by the same court under the same rules of evidence as the white boy who resides in the county and has \$15 a year spent on his education."²⁵

Rosenwald decided to spend a significant sum from his fortune made as president of Sears by helping Booker T. Washington's cause. The two inspired one of the most influential education programs ever devised, and this changed rural communities in profound ways. Rosenwald went on to serve on the Board of Trustees for the Tuskegee Institute until 1932. In this capacity he contributed leadership, his wealth, and mobilized additional support from many friends.²⁶ The influence was noteworthy in every Southern State which all passed legislation offering state aid in conjunction with community and Rosenwald support to improve the segregated black schools.²⁷

On June 1, 1914, Washington described the early results of the

program in a letter to Rosenwald as follows:

Yesterday I spent one of the most interesting days in all of my work in the South....[A] trip was planned that enabled us to visit four of these communities where the schoolhouses have been completed.... At each of the points visited there was a very large audience averaging I should say a thousand people of both white and black people.... It was a most intense, interesting day, and the people showed in a very acceptable way their gratitude to you for what you are helping them to do.... I have never seen a set of people who have changed so much within recent years from a feeling of despair and hopelessness to one of courage and determination.²⁸

Black communities were compelled to do as much as they could in building the schoolhouses by making cash contributions, and donations of material and labor. The word of opportunities provided by an education spread quickly.²⁹ Rosenwald money would not reach Nacogdoches County until the 1920s, but the essence of these ideas in locally supported schools was already evident by 1911. Booker T. Washington "Colored" School District along with about thirty-one other common "colored" school districts (Table 1), and the city's schools were already serving black children. Nacogdoches was making progress well before World War I.³⁰

Table 1: "COLORED" SCHOOLS 1911-12 SCHOOL YEAR³¹

	- Carried Street	Constitution Principal Contract of Contract of
Dist #	"Colored School"	
2	Chireno	7 grades
5	Trawick	7 grades
9	Campbell	6 grades
10	Oak Grove	6 grades
11	Friendship	6 grades
12	Nat	6 grades
13	Douglas	6 grades
14	Melrose	6 grades
17	Oakridge	6 grades
23	Woden	4 grades
24	Caro	6 grades
27	Myrtle Springs	4 grades
24	Sand Ridge	6 grades
30	Red Flat	5 grades
32	Attoyac	7 grades
35	Fairview	5 grades
47	Pleasant Grove	6 grades
49	Little Flock	7 grades
50	Jamesville	6 grades
51	Dawes Creek	4 grades
52	Eden	6 grades
53	Gravel Ridge	6 grades
54	Stubble Field [sic?]	6 grades
55	Hickory Flat	7 grades
58	Bethel	6 grades
60	Lone Ridge	6 grades
61	Washington	7 grades
62	Upshaw	6 grades
63	Twilight	6 grades
64	Lone Star	6 grades
67	Sacul	5 grades
68	Mayotown	6 grades
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In Nacogdoches County, the process of building schools for black children followed a common path at the beginning of the twentieth century. This was exemplified in one community called Upshaw or County Line. There, interested people organized themselves into a common school district and took responsibility for the education of their children before 1911. In 1915 they needed a new school and the people of County Line resurveyed the boundaries of taxable properties within Upshaw Common School District number 62. They then petitioned the Nacogdoches County Commissioners Court for the right to tax their own property within the survey boundary to issue county bonds to buy property, build and equip a school. The tax supported the sale of construction bonds that were approved by the Texas Attorney General and issued beginning November 17, 1915.³² This process was repeated in Nacogdoches County along with similar responses across the Deep South.³³

A 1916 school census conducted within the city limits quantified the strength of the black education movement. While black citizens represented about a quarter of the total population, their children accounted for almost half (47.8%) of the students in school. The younger black children constituted a majority of the students, and those under the age of ten numbered 379, while 361 white children were separated in cross town institutions. The school census seemed to show that people from rural areas boarded their children with townspeople in an attempt to achieve the best education. For example, thirty-seven vears after he founded the Zion Hill Baptist Church in Nacogdoches, the retired Reverend Lawson Reed was listed as place of residence and "person rendering child" for nine year old Geraldine Reed, Moses Blount, Florence and Carroll McClure, Clyde Sanders, and Walter Scott. Emeline Carpenter was listed as place of residence and "person rendering child" for Beadie and James Fears. Numerous other children went to town, and people opened their doors out of community obligation, kinship ties, or boarding house situations. In 1916, the "Scholastic Census" reported a total of 959 white children in school, and 879 "Colored" children, along with two German and fourteen Mexican children.34

NACOGDOCHES AND THE NATION DURING THE 1920S

In 1921, the State Supervisor of "Negro" schools, L. W. Rogers

pronounced three goals in his yearly report. He sought to insure good teaching of fundamental subjects in the rural schools. Second, he encouraged "teaching of lessons in sanitation, good citizenship, and correct standards of living." Third, he supported industrial and vocational training. In this report, Rogers noted the help of the Rosenwald Fund in achieving these goals and described the basic process of school construction that would take place in Nacogdoches County during the 1920s. Rogers reported that the Rosenwald Fund assisted state and local officials in the construction of schools, industrial buildings, and teachers' homes along with equipment including desks, blackboards, heaters, libraries, toilets and outhouses. Communities participated by donating two acres or more for playgrounds and local agriculture. There was a two acre minimum size for a one teacher school. 35 Additional sources from the 1920s indicated that the education movement was of central importance within local communities. 36

Rosenwald's program helped local communities across the South design more than 5000 schools and support buildings that became a rural education standard. Many white districts adopted these plans along with the desire to improve rural education as they added another 15,000 similar schools to the landscape. As a result, these structures became ubiquitous in the rural landscape.³⁷

Black leaders in the United States reported on the growing number of schools that were instilling a sense of pride and accomplishment within black communities including Nacogdoches.³⁸ Washington echoed others and moral support for education increased as many voices championed a movement that diffused across the Deep South.³⁹ While these ideas about education originated outside Nacogdoches, it was the African-American residents of the county who actually built the institutions and fought for better opportunities for their children. They even voted to tax themselves and succeeded in establishing a continuing source of revenue for schools.

The education movement expanded into the 1920s and local money provided the bulk of the investment for the schools of Nacogdoches. Schools opened and consolidated through the era, so out of about 32 public schools operating for black children during the 1920s, the Rosenwald fund contributed to only eleven. Of those, the Rosenwald fund provided about 17% of the total cost. For the eleven Rosenwald schools, records show that county citizens provided 39.5 acres of land

and black residents contributed \$6000 (13%) of the costs and probably most all the labor. The Rosenwald Fund provided \$7700 with an additional \$1800 (4%) from "white" citizens. Locally supported property taxes and the public education fund paid the remaining two-thirds of the costs.⁴⁰

The Rosenwald fund assisted in the construction of a two teacher school on two acres in Chireno, in the 1922-23 budget year. A oneteacher school on 3.00 acres was also constructed in Pleasant Hill in 1922-23. The "Nat" one-teacher school built in 1924-25 on 3 acres still stands next to Salem CME church on highway 343. The "Douglass" one-teacher school was built in 1924-25 and was located on 2.00 acres of land probably in the Winters Hill community. Sand Ridge had several schools as of 1925-26 and added a one-teacher school on 2.00 acres in that year. Washington "Colored" School District, added a three-teacher school on 3.00 acres in 1926-27 and as of this writing it stands off of the Washington School Road. The Macedonia twoteacher school was built from 1926 and 1927 on 7.00 acres and may have been converted into a church after local schools were integrated during the late 1960s. Central Heights constructed a three-teacher school on three acres in 1927-28. Two schools were built during 1928-29 and included a four-teacher school on 9.5 acres in Garrison and a three-teacher school on five acres in Bethel in the southeast section of the county (Table 2).

Table 2: "COLORED" TEACHERS AND SCHOOLS 1928-1929, (local and Rosenwald name for school often differ)⁴¹

DICT !!	NAME	CALADY
DIST #	NAME	<u>SALARY</u>
2 Redland	Beatrice Hooper	75
2 Redland	A. L. Hooper	95
2 Central Heights	Inez Clemons	55
9 Harmonia	Gwen [?] McChristian	90
12 L. Grove	Ella M. S. West	70
12 Friendship	Joe Ella Hardeway	65
12 Salem	Millie D. Wade	65
13 Douglas	Lillian Walton	75
13 Winter Hill	Loraine Teal (Walton)	75
14 Melrose	Ruby Bell	60

16	Martinsville	Sarah Ligon	53.53
14	Melrose	Aslee Clark	80
23	Grey Land	Fannie B. Sleet	100
29	Sand Ridge	Annie B. Starks	80
37	Macedonia Ella	Lewis Wright	70
37	Macedonia	A. J. Whitaker	100
40	Little Flock	McKinley Blount	135
47	Pleasant Grove	Cora F. Davis	85
50	Jamesville	Marie Skillern	60
52	Loco	Alma West	75
52	Eden	Ernistine McNeil	65
52	Pleasant Hill	Odessa Whitaker	100
61	Washington	Addie B. Baldwin	90
61	Washington	Oda Vee Anderson	85
61	Washington	William Baldwin	125
58	Sand Hill	H. C. Carpenter	105
58	Sand Hill	Olga M. Scott	75
58	Sand Hill	Ella Ikner	70
58	Sand Hill	Louise M. Scott	70 - for 3 months
62	Upshaw	Helen McLemore	100
64	Lone Star	Vannie Loraine Thomas	60
87	Linn Flat	Odessa Fulgham	75
87	Linn Flat	O. D. Curl	95

The last school constructed in the county with Rosenwald funding was within the city limits of Nacogdoches on the E.J. Campbell campus at the heart of a vibrant neighborhood around Shawnee Street. It was a a four-room two-teacher "Shop," assigned to the budget year 1930-31.⁴² The Rosenwald fund was important for these schools, but significant evidence demonstrates that the local school movement succeeded because of overwhelming support from the local black community.

NACOGDOCHES AND THE NATION ON THE EVE OF WORLD WAR II

Stunning improvements in educational attainment followed the school movement in Nacogdoches along with similar places across the Deep South. As communities constructed institutions of both simple wood frame and sturdy brick, illiteracy rates plummeted because of local action. In 1930, a large majority (1,277 or 87%) of black children between seven to thirteen were attending school in Nacogdoches County. Illiteracy rates dropped to 16% in Nacogdoches County in 1930. ⁴³ Despite calamities in the national economic system and continuing institutionalized racism, a profound sense of progress developed within the black communities of Nacogdoches County. An education derived from local action empowered the black population, and many achieved stability or joined the Great Migration out of the Deep South.

Thirty to forty educational institutions operated by the people in Nacogdoches County strengthened communities in four significant ways: improved health, basic literacy, cultural literacy that facilitated mobility, and the development of marketable skills. As a result the black population of Nacogdoches County grew in vibrancy and numbers as the population peaked in 1940. Thereafter, thousands left the county and the rural schools were consolidated into Independent Districts in the larger towns until integration was "conducted with a vengeance" by white officials during the late 1960s. Today, a few of the abandoned wooden schools remain in the rural hamlets and E. J. Campbell school stands vacant and in structural jeopardy. While the old buildings faded rapidly, the institutions endured through the people and generations. This largely unrecognized movement in Nacogdoches mirrored other understudied demonstrations of African-American strength and resiliency in many communities across the South. People at the local level identified their own problems and developed solutions at schools like E. J. Campbell, Sandhill, Washington, Sand Ridge, and Upshaw. In these places, students, alumni, teachers, and families partnered together and won a battle for freedom when they defeated the oppression of "ignorance" and illiteracy through community action.

Endnotes

- 1 Robert R. Moton, "Status of the Negro in America," *The New York Times Current History*, New York, N.Y., Vol. XVI, No. 2, May 1922, 221-236. Hereafter cited as Moton, "Status of the Negro in America."
- 2 County Board of Trustees, Minutes of the Meeting of the County Trustees, Nacogdoches, Texas, August 28, 1911, 2-4. They listed 32 schools for "colored children."
- John Cummings, U.S. Negro Population 1790-1915, U.S. Census Bureau, Dept of Commerce, Washington, D.C.: U.S.G.P.O., 1918, 17. Hereafter cited as U.S. Census, Negro Population 1790-1915.
- 4 U.S. Census, *Negro Population 1790-1915*, 87. Overall rural African American population in 1910 was 72.6 percent and 78.8 percent in the South.
- 5 U.S. Census, Negro Population 1790-1915, 92.
- 6 U.S. Census Bureau, *Negroes in the United States, 1920-32*, Washington: U.S. Dept. of Commerce: U.S.G.P.O., p. 229. Black illiteracy in the "north" was 4.7% and in the "west" 3.3%.
- 7 U.S. Census, Negro Population 1790-1915, 124.
- 8 General Laws of the State of Texas, 29th Legislature, 1905, 288-289.
- 9 Bureau of Education, Dept. of the Interior, *Report of the Commissioner of Education*, Washington: U.S.G.P.O., Vol. 1, June 30, 1915, 472.
- 10 U.S. Census, Negro Population 1790-1915, 314.
- 11 U.S. Census, Negro Population 1790-1915, 311. Violent deaths occurred at a similar rate.
- 12 U.S. Census, Negro Population 1790-1915, 216.
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- 19 White and Davis, "A Study of Rural Education in Texas," 135. See also Bureau of Education, Dept. of the Interior, *Report of the Commissioner of Education*, Washington: U.S.G.P.O., Vol. 1, June 30, 1915, 472.
- White and Davis, "A Study of Rural Education in Texas," 135. See also Bureau of Education, Dept. of the Interior, *Report of the Commissioner of Education*, Washington: U.S.G.P.O., Vol. 1, June 30, 1915, 472.
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- 24 Washington, "Black and White in the South; Schools for Negroes," 590-593.
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- 28 The Booker T. Washington Papers, Vol. 13, 1914-1915, Louis R. Harlan editor, The University of Illinois Press, 39-40. Hereafter cited as The Booker T. Washington Papers, Vol. 13.
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- 36 Moton, "Status of the Negro in America," 231-232.
- 37 "Julius Rosenwald, 1862-1962, An Exhibition Honoring the One Hundredth Anniversary of His Birth," The University of Chicago Library, Special Collections, 1962, NP.
- 38 Moton, "Status of the Negro in America," 231-232.
- 39 The Booker T. Washington Papers, Vol. 13, 317.
- 40 Nacogdoches County Commissioner Court Bonds, 1904-1948, Steen Library, E.T.R.C, SFASU, Nacogdoches Texas. Fisk University Rosenwald Fund Card File Database, (http://rosenwald.fisk.edu/), acquired April 27, 2011.
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