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BLACK INITIATIVE IN BLACK EDUCATION PRIOR TO AND DURING THE CIVIL WAR

美国内战前和内战期间黑人在教育中的主动性

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PREFACE

In his most recent book, a sweeping, authoritative account of slavery in the Western Hemisphere, the renowned historian David Brion Davis emphasized "the revolutionary meaning of the Civil War—a revolutionary message that the South and then the nation would long struggle to repress."① Davis's point is one that historians have been working to place at the center of the narrative of America's great upheaval of Civil War and Reconstruction for the past two decades. Eric Foner, for example, subtitled his definitive 1988 history of Reconstruction "America's Unfinished Revolution," thereby drawing attention to the repression—and oppression—that were the tragic aftermath of what Davis presented as the revolutionary events of 1861 - 1865.

Among the most revolutionary of the war's outcomes was the mass movement for the education of the four million men, women, and children who had been liberated, and liberated themselves, from slavery during the war. This extraordinary drive for the uplift of an entire race—a drive shared by thousands of whites, including a high proportion of white women—has been insufficiently examined by scholars. Several historians have concluded that the movement for black education was primarily given form and direction by well-meaning, and certainly

① David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 298.

devoted and talented, Northern Christian missionaries affiliated with the American Missionary Association (AMA). While the AMA certainly labored heroically to establish and maintain schools for freed people throughout the devastated South, however, the activities of these Northern philanthropists was only one part of a much larger and more complex story.

It is this richer story that Dr. Ying Ye gives us in her excellent book. Dr. Ye shows without doubt that, rather than responding to initiatives that came from the AMA or other Northern philanthropic societies, black Southerners themselves initiated the drive for education. In this sense, education became the first, radical mass social movement for liberation undertaken by African Americans after 1861.

Dr. Ye places the wartime push for black education in a broader context of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century educational thought in America, and she reveals that there had always existed a divergence of views about the aims and even methods of education between Euro- and Afro-American writers on the subject. Also of great importance to this story, given the specifically Southern context of wartime and postwar black education, was the absolute prohibition in law, if not always in practice, of providing even the most elementary forms of education, and literacy in particular, to slaves. "What he [my master] most dreaded, that I most desired," wrote the great black abolitionist and escaped slave Frederick Douglass about the dawning desire for knowledge that he felt during his boyhood. "That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn."② This was

② Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, ed., Benjamin Quarles (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), 59.

the reaction of millions of African Americans to the promise of literacy and education as they experienced emancipation during the Civil War. Douglass's booming voice in 1845 truly spoke for an entire striving people twenty years later.

A key event in the history of black education was the establishment of a school in the camp of Federal armies at Fortress Monroe, Virginia, in September, 1861. This remarkable achievement, just six months after the war began, serves as an empirical test for the hypothesis that Northern benevolent societies were the initiators of black education, while the freedpeople essentially reacted to the philanthropists' original action. Dr. Ye shows that this iconic school was in every way the outcome of black initiative, and not merely a response to the deeds of others. But the reason the school is in fact iconic is precisely because the activities there were repeated again and again during the war and subsequent Reconstruction period.

Dr. Ye therefore furnishes a new, more appropriate sense of proportion to our understanding of the relative roles that were played by Northern white philanthropists (the American Missionary Association in particular) and a proactive black community. In conducting extensive preliminary research in the secondary sources, Dr. Ye began to consider that African American initiative was much more important in the story of Civil War and Reconstruction black education than the standard narratives in the histories of Reconstruction have allowed. The point of Dr. Ye's research is by no means to denigrate the great work of the AMA, which indeed becomes more impressive the more closely it is examined, but to challenge the simplistic narrative of Northern philanthropic initiative followed by black response in the matter of early black education.

In the course of her book, Dr. Ye shows how, in this concrete instance, education was not merely a tool for material advancement, but

an element in collective identity-formation as well. Her research led her to profound reflection on the purposes and effects of education, at all levels.

Dr. Ye's book makes important contributions to the study of black education, the social history of the Civil War, and education theory itself.

Matthew J. Mancini
St. Louis, Missouri, USA
June 2007

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Ying Ye
St. Louis, Missouri
April 2007

ABSTRACT

This dissertation has given a historical explanation for the extraordinary enthusiasm that the freed African Americans had displayed for education in their first days of freedom, and has highlighted the initiative role black people played in educating themselves before and particularly during the Civil War. Above all, with sufficient and irrefutable evidence, it has falsified the prevalent notions that it was Northern educators who either brought schooling to the ex-slaves or modeled and transmitted the values of education to them and that it was Northern societies that established the first schools among the former slaves and thus initiated the educational movement for the freed people.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation investigates African American theories and practices of education in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and examines how the campaign to educate the freed blacks had its beginning during the Civil War at Fortress Monroe, Port Royal and other places seized by the Union troops. It provides a historical explanation for the astonishing enthusiasm for education that the ex-slaves demonstrated during the war and Reconstruction and brings to light the active role that Southern blacks played in launching the educational movement for the freed people.

In the Southern states, black education had been discouraged and opposed by the whites for over a hundred years. The earliest law to forbid black literacy was passed in 1740 in South Carolina. The most large-scale and stringent prohibition of black education happened during the three decades before the Civil War, when every state in the South outlawed black literacy and any means of black education. The anti-literacy legislation deprived black people rights of education; it did not, however, succeed in extinguishing their zeal for knowledge. Instead, it

intensified it. After the enactment of the anti-literacy laws, there still had been teaching and schooling for slaves and free blacks here and there, now and then, but these activities were all done clandestinely. The prohibition significantly reduced black people's opportunity for education. On the whole, black schooling was scarce in the South during the antebellum years.

The publicly known black education did not start until 1861. When the Union army got its first foothold in the South at Fortress Monroe, the slaves who ran away from their master to the lines of the federal troops displayed immense enthusiasm for education. They considered learning to read and write their first need in freedom. Together with local free blacks, they established and sustained schools among themselves. The first publicly-recognized school for escaped slaves was founded and taught at their request by a colored woman named Mary S. Peake. Following Peake's example, literate and half-literate colored persons set up black schools one after the other in Fortress Monroe and vicinity, in Port Royal and its surrounding areas, and in other places in the South promptly after their occupation by the Union troops. Thus they initiated the black educational movement, which started during the Civil War and flourished in Reconstruction Era.

Early in the war, Northern benevolent societies joined one after another in this educational enterprise. They provided books, ink and pens and sent teachers from the North to educate the freed people. The combined effort of the Southern blacks and the Northern associations and teachers made the few sparks of black education at the beginning of the war a prairie fire that spread all over the South when the war finished. At the end of the war, black schools appeared in every Southern state, over nine hundred teachers were in the field, and approximately 200,000 freed African Americans had received instruction in rudiments of literacy.

When the Freedmen's Bureau was established on March 3, 1865, it entered as well this endeavor to educate the emancipated blacks. Building on the foundation laid during the war, in the post-war years, the Freedmen's Bureau, Northern teachers and associations, and Southern blacks expanded together the educational work. Within several years of Reconstruction, they had set up schools and institutions that supplied most of the primary and secondary education and nearly all college training for Southern black people until well into the twentieth century.

Indisputably, the venture to educate the freed African Americans was a joint effort of the Southern blacks, the Northern teachers and associations, and the Freedmen's Bureau. In present studies of African American education in the Southern states during the Civil War and Reconstruction, however, much emphasis has been laid upon the Northern participation and, especially, the Northern whites' participation in the freed people's education. Monographs by historians Henry Lee Swint, Jacqueline Jones, Joe M. Richardson, Ronald E. Butchart, Linda B. Selleck and William H. Watkins all focus on the role Northern individuals, groups, or foundations played in black education.

In contrast to this rich literature on the Northern whites' participation in black education during the Civil War and Reconstruction, only a few articles and books have been devoted to the studies of the role blacks, Southern and Northern, played in this movement. In addition, a belief prevalent in the field of black education studies has been that it was the Northerners who either brought schooling to the freed people or modeled and transmitted the values of education to them. This belief further obscures the active role that local African Americans played in pursuing knowledge and education.

This doctoral project was originally designed to emphasize Southern

African Americans' own initiative in launching the campaign to educate themselves. It was planned to center on Mary S. Peake's school at Fortress Monroe. Peake's school is widely acknowledged as the first school for the freed people and has been repeatedly mentioned as the earliest fruit of Northern effort to educate the freed African Americans, and the first school established and sponsored by the American Missionary Association. ① Implied in this perception of Peake's school is the view that Northern benevolent societies initiated black education and that the freed people just responded, though positively, to their action.

Many historians, such as Joe M. Richardson, James D. Anderson, Henry H. Mitchell, and Horace Mann Bond, share the opinion. Historians Ronald E. Butchart and Robert C. Morris, however, have articulated different views. Acknowledging that Peake's school was the first school established for the runaway slaves, Butchart has argued that the school was, in fact, begun and supported by the black community itself. It was organized by Mary S. Peake, a literate black at Fortress Monroe. The AMA, Butchart contends, only belatedly paid a small salary to Peake. The emphasis of Butchart's argument, however, is laid not on the black initiative demonstrated in Peake's school, but on which Northern group made the first move to educate the freed people. The focal point of his argument is that the earliest black educational effort from Northern societies was not made by the AMA, but by Northern educators at Port Royal, South Carolina in 1862. ②

Morris thinks that Mary Peake's school was a result of cooperation between Peake and the AMA. But it was not, Morris argues, the first school for the runaway slaves. He maintains that it was only the first such to be supported by a Northern benevolent association. He believes

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① Hereafter the American Missionary Association is referred to as the AMA.

② Ronald E. Butchart, *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction, 1862 -1875* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980), 4.