

Education and Aid for African Americans in WNC from 1865

This project is an analysis of the struggle to obtain consistent, equitable education along with other programs previously established to provide success for African Americans. Racial history presents a consistent pattern of opposition by the white population in fear that the few blacks could dominate the towns of Western North Carolina. The soon-to-be mentioned organizations have urged a comprehensive plan to assist with the old condition of forced labor to the new state of voluntary industry for African Americans. The historical experience begins in 1865 with the establishment of the Freedmen's Bureau in Buncombe County to the contemporary school system in areas of Southern Appalachia. The obstacle of funding toward proper resources for African American families has occurred frequently since the Emancipation of enslaved blacks, and since then has consequently promoted a generational cycle of underemployment and poverty for the African American community.

Late 19th century- Mid 20th century

In March of 1865, the United States Congress enacted the Freedmen's Bureau, formerly known as the Bureau of Refugees, to provide aid for millions of formerly enslaved blacks and poor whites in the South. The U.S Congress assigned the Bureau under the military department due to its emergence by the aftermath of the Civil War. The Bureau provided resources such as food, housing, and medical aid, meanwhile establishing schools, transportation to jobs, and legal assistance. However, the politics of race, reconstruction, and funds promptly concluded the term of the Bureau in the summer of 1872. Although the Voting Rights Act or 24th amendment, had not been enacted at the time, the program encouraged African American involvement in politics.

The white conservative mountaineers who predominantly supported the Republican party at the time remained in power post-Civil War. Therefore, the Freedmen's Bureau frequently faced tension from the bitter power struggles among white supremacist mountaineers and African Americans. Historian Steven Nash discusses some of the challenges the Bureau faced during its term in his article "*Aiding the Southern Mountains: The Freedmen's Bureau in*

Buncombe County.”¹ The leading white conservatives of Buncombe County requested night watchmen for local defense against potential criminals. The head of the Bureau, perceived the request with suspicion. One reason was that a band of armed conservative whites of the town would seek hegemony and evolve a reconstituted slave patrol. In the case of that concern, the military department bargained to provide a police force under the conditions that it is balanced to the ratio of black and white registered voters and also that the local Freedmen’s Bureau agent supervise this organization,² The conservatives in Buncombe County did not agree with the options or the firm support it reflected for African Americans political and civil rights and thus rejected the jurisdiction.

The rejection was made by individuals who also believed in the ideas of Stephen A. Douglas, who once said, “For one, I am opposed to negro citizenship in any and every form. I believe this government was made on the white basis. I believe it was made by white men, for the benefit of white men and their posterity forever.”³ Douglas’s quote was nothing short of the significant social values many of the white population believed at the time.

American Sociologist, William E.B Du Bois, illustrated the half-hearted steps the U.S government took for the aid of African Americans in his journal article *The Freedmen’s Bureau*. Oliver Otis Howard, as commissioner of the Freedmen’s Bureau in May of 1865, examined a disorder of despotism, communistic experiments, peonage, and more, all cloaked in helping the freedman.⁴ The Bureau also faced resistance from former president Andrew Johnson, who came into the presidency after the assassination of former President Abraham Lincoln in April of 1865. In February of 1866, Congress introduced an extension to the Bureau’s term, and President Johnson vetoed the proposed legislation. Johnson stated that it interfered with states rights and gave preference to one group of citizens over another while also imposing a substantial financial

¹Nash, Steven E. "Aiding the Southern Mountain Republicans: The Freedmen's Bureau in Buncombe County." *The North Carolina Historical Review* 83, no. 1 (2006): 1-30.

²Nash, Steven E. "Aiding the Southern Mountain Republicans: The Freedmen's Bureau in Buncombe County."

³ Chase, Nan K. *Asheville: a History*. McFarland & Co., 2007.

⁴ The Atlantic Monthly; *March 1901; The Freedmen's Bureau; Volume 87, No. 519; pages 354 - 365*

burden on the federal government,⁵. Ultimately, the continuous resistance by the conservative whites against the Freedmen's Bureau generated its demise in 1872.

Historians, Conrad Oswald and Phoebe Pollitt published their research on the Salem School and Orphanage, established for African Americans in Elk Park, North Carolina during the late 19th century. Elk Park, located deep within the Blue Ridge Mountains, was a small settlement where most families lived on small farms and had no central government among many other things. When reconstruction began, Northern Protestant churches sent missionaries to Appalachia in order to establish churches and schools for African Americans and poor whites. The Mennonite Brethren were out to help better the black mountaineer community. Mission work toward the African Americans in the mountains during the late 19th and early 20th century was rare due to the fixed racism and the popular opinion that the greater need was to uplift poor mountain whites,⁶. The authors, Oswald and Pollitt suggested that the poverty among white mountaineers gave reformers a reason to turn away from the conditions of African Americans with a clear conscience.⁷ For that reasoning, the Mennonites were staunch on recognizing the neglected state of the black community.

The Salem school faced its unique challenges by the anti-black mountaineers. Emily Prudden, an educator, and missionarian, began her work in North Carolina in 1884 after purchasing four acres of land in All Healing Springs in Gaston County. Prudden built Elk Park Academy for African American children who resided in Avery, Mitchell, and Watauga County. At the start of the 20th century, Mitchell County schools had fifty-nine white school districts and four African American school districts.⁸ Despite the continuous lack of educational opportunities for black mountaineers, the locals grew upset that the missionaries provided help to African Americans and made it difficult to recruit teachers. Funding support began to weaken and Prudden no longer had teachers for the school. The Salem school and Orphanage both closed by 1905, although Elk Park continued to remain the site of the county's public school⁹.

⁵ Nash, Steven E. "Aiding the Southern Mountain Republicans: The Freedmen's Bureau in Buncombe County."

⁶ Oswald, Conrad. "The Salem School and Orphanage: White Missionaries, Black School." *Appalachian Journal*. April 01, 1993.

⁷ Oswald, Conrad. "The Salem School and Orphanage: White Missionaries, Black School." *Appalachian Journal*. April 01, 1993.

⁸ Griffith, Clay. "Elk Park School, Avery County" *National Register of Historic Places*. December 16, 2005.

⁹ Griffith, Clay. "Elk Park School, Avery County" *National Register of Historic Places*. December 16, 2005.

Mid 20th Century

In 1936, the Saint Anthony of Padua School opened by Franciscan Missionaries who were seeking to provide high-quality education to African Americans. Saint Anthony's had a strong mission which was "to offer children in the heart of Asheville's African American community a top-notch education in a spiritually nurturing environment,"¹⁰. The families found that their students were not behind and the teachers focused on the needs of the students. Lonnie Gilliam, an alumnus of St. Anthony's recalls, "Failure was not an option. Even though all the students in the school were poor, our families wanted us to have this great education,"¹¹ The school produced dozens of lawyers, educators, corporate and non-profit executives. As schools were becoming more and more integrated, enrollment at St. Anthony's declined, and students were redistributing to more desegregated schools. Soon there was a lack of inner support and funding, which led to the school closing in 1969 and eventually became Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church. For the African American families, the loss of the school meant that their kids no longer had the strong support the missionaries had established. Black students were then compelled to join integrated schools which then began the disastrous system of the growing achievement gap.

After that, there was a drastic change in the African American community beyond the educational struggles. Rejection against the African American community continued to build on the impoverished families and subtly seethed through the daily lives of the adults. Asheville author, Nan K. Chase, sheds light on the contemporary livelihood of the black community in Asheville. Chase mentions that when black residents sought work in Asheville's white businesses, whether it was retail stores, industrial plants, or professional offices, their role was generally subservient.¹² The unemployment factor only encourages poverty within the black community as white men continued to monopolize black residential communities.

¹⁰ Simone. "Building on the Past – Then & Now: St. Anthony of Padua School and New City Christian School." *The Urban News*. July 11, 2008.

¹¹ Simone. "Building on the Past – Then & Now: St. Anthony of Padua School and New City Christian School." *The Urban News*. July 11, 2008.

¹² Chase, Nan K. *Asheville: a History*. McFarland & Co., 2007.

Furthermore, education was one of the pillars of the black community although it crumbled during the city's desegregation process. Many black Ashevilleians consider Asheville to have always consisted of subtle racism and for that reason, it made it all the more difficult for black students to succeed. Chase emphasizes the difference in treatment among the black and white boys by teachers inside of integrated schools. The comforting dynamic changed evidently when little white boys were sent home to change if they were dress-coded but little black boys would instantly be suspended for the same cause. Thus, as integration progressed, the African American community lost their schools and the culture they established due to the redistribution of funding, decreased attendances, and weakening support of the school board.

21st Century

In the early years of the 21st century, Coral Jeffries, a graduate of Asheville City Schools became interested in alternative educational options for neglected African American students. Jeffries was disappointed to observe that many second-grade students had fallen behind academically over the years. Jeffries began dreaming of a school in Asheville that would focus on classical education, starting in Kindergarten and focusing more on the "old school" style.¹³ This new system would include emphasizing phonics, drills, memory work, reading and being read to, math skills, and broad exposure to basic facts about the world. In 2006, the Tabernacle Missionary Baptist church, formerly St. Anthony of Padua School, collaborated with New City Christian School to provide the quality education of which Jeffries had dreamed. By 2008, New City Christian School test scores were in the top third nationally, four out of ten counts were in the top tenth, and it expanded its grade levels to second grade.¹⁴ New City's mission, similar to St. Anthony of Padua, is to make quality education available to all families including African Americans. More individuals like Jeffries have sought to provide better educational training for black students. Black students often perform below average in test scores and grades while white students often score above average. This dynamic among the two races has continued to widen

¹³ Simone. "Building on the Past – Then & Now: St. Anthony of Padua School and New City Christian School." *The Urban News*. July 11, 2008.

¹⁴ Simone. "Building on the Past – Then & Now: St. Anthony of Padua School and New City Christian School." *The Urban News*. July 11, 2008.

the achievement gap since integration; and the lack of resources and funding for black students is a primary variable in this problem.

In an interview with a former Hall Fletcher Elementary parent and PTO member, S. McGee, she explains that while the Hall Fletcher Community consists of predominantly middle to upper-class Caucasians, there is also a large number of public housing families within the area that attend the school. Simply, the families receiving public housing in that area were predominantly minorities and the middle to upper class white families sent their kids to a magnet school across town. Data reports from Greatschools.org show that over seventy percent of the students at Hall Fletcher come from low-income families and the majority of students receive free or reduced lunch. The PTO member shares that “Hall Fletcher students do not have the same opportunities as other schools due to lack of funding.” The students could not afford field trips, or interactive and engaging activities that required further technological resources for the whole school. At one point, the School Board decided to implement a year-round school system to improve end of the year test scores and provide meals throughout the year which benefited the families who could not afford to feed their kids during the summer. Soon, Hall Fletcher could no longer afford to continue with this program and for other reasons, Hall Fletcher Elementary reverted to the traditional calendar. The PTO member hopes that more people would advocate for the board to recognize where the school system is falling short within the African American communities and fill in for that.

In an interview, Y. Williams, an educator who has been teaching in the Western North Carolina region for over fourteen years, shared her personal experience within the Asheville City Schools. The communities Williams spent her time in were predominantly black areas such as Lee Walker Heights. During her experience there, she encountered parents as young as fifteen years old, who did not know much about the schools and the resources available to them and their children. These resources would include proper healthcare, proper nutrition and basic early literacy skills. Williams points out that “some of the parents were products of molestation and many of the victims did not understand what exactly had happened to them.” Therefore there was a lack of maturity, understanding, and curiosity for the betterment of their children.” Williams stated that at many points, she found herself taking extra steps to make sure her students had

what they needed. Ms. Williams and Coral Jeffries are examples of educators have taken it upon themselves to provide resources to African American students.

Inside some of the Asheville City Schools Ms. Williams taught at, there was a considerable amount of external conditions in effect. A large portion of the school was white but most black or Latino students, no matter the age or grade, seem to always land in a black teacher's classroom. Williams quoted "it seemed as if the black teachers classrooms were the place to send those kids because they looked like the teacher and the teachers could figure out what to do with them. In many ways, black teachers became counselors and mentors for black kids who were often deemed to have behavioral issues.," The school had come up with a program called "cohorting" where students who have disabilities or behavioral issues could be in the same classroom regardless of classification. The students notorious for behavioral problems were known to lack a present parent. The black classes were observed by the school board three times more than the white teachers classrooms.¹⁵ However, most of the African American teacher's believed what was happening was segregation among the students within the school. Overall, Williams observed this common predicament among the many Asheville city elementary schools she has taught at including Claxton, Hall Fletcher, and Isaac Dickson Elementary.

In a reflection of this analysis, it is heart-wrenching to see that in every case, African Americans are consistently forced to endure an endless cycle of inadequate funding and little systematic support. So I wonder, why is it that policies seem to keep African American communities at the bottom? Almost 70 years after Brown V. Board of Education desegregated schools, separate but equal still stands. Across the nation, more than two million black students attend schools where over ninety percent of the student body is made up of black students. These schools are commonly known to have less experienced and low paid teachers. As many already know, the determinant of funding for schools comes from property taxes, and since African Americans often live in low-income areas, predominantly black schools endure school days without proper resources. As Nash stated in his essay regarding the Freedmen's Bureau, white supremacist mountaineers were determined to rule, and this has continued to ring true.

¹⁵ In an interview with former western north carolina and southern appalachian educator, Y. Williams discusses the unsound conditions of the classrooms and schools she taught in. The conditions were due to the targeted biases the school had for black students.

Asheville, a city known for its beauty and acceptance towards minority groups, still has a few changes to make for the African American community. In a town where diversity is glorified, Asheville resident and the former University of North Carolina at Asheville staff member, M. McGee, says, “there is still a failure to acknowledge the permanence of racism,” and it is precisely the permanence of racism that continues to hinder African Americans from succeeding.

At the point when the Elk Park School was struggling to remain in existence, former President Woodrow Wilson delivered his speech on the Day of Dedication, our nation's Independence. Although his speech held a more political outlook, there were a few points which remained questionable. Wilson presented the great promise made by General Washington and his associates during the creation of the American government which was meant, in his exact words, for all mankind. He continued to emphasize in a quote “It shall be understood that they, the founding fathers, spoke and acted, not for a single people only, but for all mankind,--- They entertained no private purpose, desired no peculiar privilege. They were consciously planning that men of every class should be free,”¹⁶ Wilson’s speech demonstrated a purpose of securing the liberties of all mankind or in simpler words, all kinds of men and men in every class. While the speech was based on the intentions of World War I, it still reflects a concept said to established, yet not practiced. Nevertheless, African Americans also fought in this war. They fought for the same ideals Wilson and other white Americans believed. Today, African Americans continue to endure the same discrimination and unsound conditions. These situations make it more difficult not only to live as an African American but to survive as a human being.

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