

Training Poor Whites: The General Education Board and Southern Education

by *Edward-John Bottomley*

Dept. of Geography, University of Cambridge



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The early years of the General Education Board are usually studied in reference to its efforts to shape the education of African-Americans.¹ The board took a racist paternalist stance which encouraged the industrial education of blacks, such as through its support and funding for the Tuskegee Institute of Booker T. Washington. And it discouraged or, at least, did not encourage, the higher education of African-American education in areas such as the liberal arts. Yet, in an era where support for the education of African-Americans was politically and physically dangerous, the Rockefeller philanthropies were unusually progressive and, through the GEB, contributed millions of dollars of funding for black schools and colleges. What is often forgotten is that the education of blacks was not a priority of the early years of the GEB. Instead, as W.E.B. Du Bois confirmed, ‘it put stress on and gave precedence to the education of whites’.² In the early years of Rockefeller educational philanthropy, the Southern and General Boards of Education made sure that the focus was on Poor Whites.

In this the GEB was assisted by the ‘propaganda’ campaign of the Southern Education Board (SEB) which, among others, sought to encourage a widespread public campaign for tax-supported public schools.³ No mere offshoot of the General Education Board, the SEB was the intellectual and emotional engine of early Rockefeller efforts in education philanthropy. The trustees of the two boards were virtually identical and, in the twelve years of its existence, it was the Southern Board that laid the groundwork for GEB efforts in the reform of Southern and, especially, Poor White education.

It started with a train dubbed the ‘Millionaires’ Special’. In 1901 Robert Ogden, an affluent New York businessman, hired a special train from the Pennsylvania Railroad and invited fifty high-profile guests to attend a conference on education in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. At the Conference for Christian Education in the South the year before, various prominent Southerners and Northerners, including bankers, newspaper owners, philanthropists and college presidents, had already declared their intention to establish an organisation devoted to the uplift of Southern education. The Ogden trip would formalise their declaration.

Guests on the Millionaires' Special included John D. Rockefeller, Jr., publisher Walter Hines Page and George Foster Peabody. Along the way, the party visited various struggling Southern schools and colleges, including the Hampton Institute for African-Americans. Ogden shrewdly advertised the problems of the rural South to his wealthy guests as they made their way to the conference. They networked and discussed and listened to lectures on rural decline. Rockefeller, Jr., who had been contemplating a philanthropy devoted to African-American education, called the trip 'one of the outstanding events of my life'.⁴ At the conference delegates resolved to form the Southern Education Board (formally the executive arm of the Conference of Education in the South) to campaign for public schools. It was supported by an initial gift of \$30,000 from George Foster Peabody and in subsequent years by the GEB. The board of the new organisation included Ogden, Peabody, Page (who was later a member of the Country Life Commission) and a professional acquaintance of the Rockefellers, Wallace Buttrick. On the return journey Rockefeller was dissuaded from restricting any philanthropic gifts only to African-Americans by, amongst others, an address on the train by Henry St. George Tucker, president of Washington and Lee University. 'If it is your idea', Tucker said, 'to educate the Negro, you must have the white of the South with you. If the poor white sees the son of a Negro neighbor enjoying through your munificence benefits denied to his boy, it raises in him a feeling that will render futile all your work. You must lift up the "poor white" and the Negro together if you would approach success'. The applause that followed this statement 'drowned even the noise of the train'.⁵

Soon after his return, Rockefeller, Jr. met with, amongst others, Ogden, Peabody, Page and Frederick Gates, the family's chief advisor, to form the General Education Board. Buttrick was made executive secretary and, two years later, Ogden became chairman. Writing to Ogden in 1907 Rockefeller, Jr. confided that '[w]henver I think of the work of the General Education Board and the magnificent future which is before it, I always remember that its conception and foundation were to a large extent the result of the Southern trip which I made as your guest'.⁶

The SEB, as the propaganda arm of the General Board, had to defend against accusations of racial favouritism right from the start. The organisation had made it clear that it was also promoting African-American education. Walter Hines Page, in reply to a journalist's question as to whether there was a 'negro in the woodpile', said that '[y]ou will find when the wood pile is turned over not a negro, but an uneducated white boy. That is what we are after'.⁷ On the defensive, Edgar Gardner Murphy, executive secretary of the SEB, put it in an address at Washington and Lee University: '[t]his movement has assumed that when philanthropy comes into the South with an exclusive interest in the Negro, it is likely to fail in its service both to the South and to the Negro ... Racial favouritism makes for interracial hatred'.⁸ The organisation, he said, was, in point of fact, deeply concerned for the welfare of Poor Whites:

I chafe under the contempt, which is sometimes expressed in high quarters, for the poorer and humbler white people of our Southern states. You may call their representative a 'country-man', a 'hill-Billy' or a 'cracker', you may ply him with ridicule even more caustic than that visited upon the Negro of the cotton patch, but the fact remains that the merchant who scorns him is usually the first to ask his trade and that the politician who derides him is always the first to seek his vote. He represents a great actual power, a greater potential power in the rehabilitation of our land. He is the primary resource of the industrial South.⁹

He was certainly not alone in his concern for Poor Whites. G.S. Dickerman, agent and later board member of the SEB, pleaded with attendees to advance the cause of education for Southerners — black and white. This was especially true in an era of increased immigration, he said. 'Why, as an American, should I be more interested in the children of Boston or of New Haven than those of the Carolinas and Georgia? Who are the children of Boston? Sixty-seven per cent of them are of parentage from beyond the sea...' There was nothing wrong with providing education for immigrants, he said. 'I only speak of what we are doing for them to emphasize what we ought to do for those of our own blood'. Americans were

neglecting their own people. The ‘whites of the South are the children of colonial pioneers ... The cracker is of the same blood with the merchant prince’.¹⁰

The annual Southern conference organised by the SEB served as a sort of clearinghouse for ideas on how to uplift education in the region, but it soon expanded to include a number of smaller conferences with the general theme of rural decline. In 1914 thousands of delegates could attend lectures on farm demonstrations, canning clubs, the country home, the education of African-Americans and Sunday schools. There were demonstrations of bread baking, sanitation and pest-control. The organisers led day trips to Poor White and poor black schools in the region. And, for the influential visitors, the Ogden train continued nearly until his death in 1913. The conference had the air of a religious revival. Delegates attended sermons and prayer meetings. There was even a dedicated music programme for attendees to sing songs and hymns.¹¹

The leaders of the SEB were right to be concerned over the school situation in the South. Although most Northern states had instituted mandatory school attendance laws by the turn of the century, only one of the Southern states, Kentucky, had followed suit. Fewer than half of the children of school-going age were regularly enrolled. Buttrick, during his regional fact-finding trips, reported that in rural regions the school term was about four months long and, when cotton picking began, attendance dropped by 70%.¹² The schools themselves were isolated one-room structures and generally in poor repair. Teachers were poorly paid and generally the product of the same rural schools that they taught in. Conditions in African-American schools were even worse.

The SEB was particularly concerned over the illiteracy of rural white Southerners. According to Murphy ‘[a]mong the whites of the South we have as large a proportion of illiterate men over 21 years of age as we had fifty years ago. In a half century we have made no progress in lifting the dark cloud of ignorance from our own race ... Notice that these are not Negroes, but grown white men, the descendants of our original Southern stock’.¹³ Similar warnings, along with calls

for racial pride and racial solidarity, were annually made at the SEB conference and then picked up by the press, which avidly followed the proceedings. In 1903, *The New York Times* reported the speech of Charles Dabney, president of the University of Tennessee, who warned of an ‘army of illiterates’, particularly in Appalachia. ‘Shall we permit another generation of these mountain boys and girls to grow up in ignorance? In the mountain counties nearly one-fifth of white males cannot read or write. These are our brethren, fellow-citizens of these States and of the great Republic ... How dare we permit so large a portion of our fellow-citizens to live any longer under these conditions?’¹⁴ *The Churchman* reported that Southern states contained nearly three million ‘mountain whites’ whose ‘arrested civilization has brought many districts lower in ordinary appliance and environment of life than any other part of the English-speaking race’. The *Mail & Express* noted that the ‘dark army’ of illiterates ‘disgrace the States and the whole nation’.¹⁵ Partly this was also a concern over possible labour unrest. Julian Ralph, a reporter for the *Mail & Express* who was assigned to the conferences, reported that ‘this is a movement born of pity and compassion for both poor whites and blacks, but not of affection in the fraternal sense. They have not yet come to know that we believe the illiteracy of the “cracker” and the negro is in our opinion a menace to the safety of the republic’. He reminded readers of an address by the governor of North Carolina, Charles Aycock, wherein he warned that ‘there lies, in the mass of illiterate people in our rural districts, a greater danger of ... a flood of ignorance that may devastate our entire Southern land, engulfing whole commonwealths’.¹⁶

The SEB and many of the delegates to its annual conference were part of a major movement to promote industrial and vocational education. The 1901 Conference for Education in the South adopted a resolution to the effect: ‘With the expansion of our population and the growth of industry and economic resources, we recognise in a fitting and universal education and training for the home, for the farm and the workshop ... the only salvation for our American standards of family and social life’.¹⁷ At the same conference James Russell, dean of Teacher’s College at Columbia, argued for the urgent institution of vocational education. Society, he

said, had to balance a desire for individualism with a desire for stability. For the latter, there was ‘no other way given under heaven or by man whereby this result can be obtained but by bringing the individual communities up to the social standard of the times and keeping them there until the necessary habits of thought and conduct are fixed and pleasurable’.¹⁸

Rapid industrialisation and urbanisation had put strain on an education system that, in the period, was devoted to teaching Latin and Greek rather than the workplace skills an industrial economy needed. Reformers were convinced that the task of the school was to train youths for jobs and they proposed replacing the standard literary curriculum with practical courses.¹⁹ The movement encompassed a broad range of reformers, from those who opposed child labour to those who supported compulsory education. It attracted labour unions, philanthropies, businesses and academics. Public support grew in kind. ‘We are besieged’, declared one State School Superintendent in 1908, ‘with public documents, monographs, magazine articles, reports of investigations too numerous to mention...’ Another called it a ‘mental epidemic’, like Klondike gold fever.²⁰ The same year Theodore Roosevelt called for education to be ‘directed more and more toward directing boys and girls back to the farm and shop’.²¹

The old school system was in rapid need of reform and the SEB had no shortage of ideas on how to do adapt it for rural whites. The organisation compiled a list of constructive lectures that had been given at its conferences. This included a talk by David Houston, president of Texas A&M, entitled ‘The problem of educating 80% of our people in schools adapted to their needs’. Another, by professor P.P. Claxton of the University of Tennessee, was called, more directly, ‘The country school must prepare for life in the country. It should have a farm or at least three acres, and a house for the teacher’.²² Reformers often pointed to vocational reforms in Europe, such as farm and agricultural schools in France and Belgium.²³ In particular they were taken by the Danish folk high school movement started in the 1830s by Bishop Nikolaj Grundtvig and which quickly spread to other Nordic countries. The folk high schools were primarily conceived

as a way to educate the rural poor. They combined a sense of romantic nationalism with a focus on vocationalism and spirituality. They set no exams and conferred no degrees.²⁴

In the United States there was often a distinct racial component to vocational education. Although only some whites needed dedicated vocational training, African-Americans as a whole could not rise beyond it. Seaman Knapp, in a speech to agricultural agents in Georgia, advised that '[w]hen I talk to a negro citizen I never talk about better civilization, but a better chicken, a better pig, a whitewashed house'. Black schools were doing a great harm in trying to teach Latin and Greek, he said, as they 'were teaching every child that knew anything at all to get away from that country' instead of helping people on the farm. 'You are doing a great wrong', Knapp told them. 'Why don't you get at the people themselves and teach them something practical?'²⁵ Yet this same sort of language was also applied to the Poor Whites, best typified by a memo from Gates to the Rockefeller Board: 'We shall not try to make these people or any of their children into philosophers or men of learning or of science ... nor will we cherish even the humble ambition to raise up from among them lawyers or doctors, for the task that we set before ourselves is a very simple as well as a very beautiful one ... to train these people as we find them for a perfectly ideal life just where they are'.²⁶

In 1905 the GEB began subsidising the salaries of professors of secondary education at state universities in the South. These so-called education agents were to travel the region, survey conditions and, most importantly, lobby for the establishment of public high schools. In the period most high schools were private and intended for the children of wealthy elites. The professors acted as 'high-school evangelists', in part because the lack of decent public education had resulted in a dearth of well-trained teachers in the rural South.²⁷ The high school campaign also highlighted a lack of state oversight of rural education, which was something the GEB sought to fix in its subsequent, far more ambitious, campaign.

In 1908 the SEB, with Peabody funding, began a campaign to appoint 'rural supervisors for schools'. The project was managed by the general agent of the Peabody Fund, Wickliffe Rose, who had spent most of his career as a philosophy lecturer in Tennessee. Rose was also a member of the SEB's fact-finding department and advised Roosevelt's Country Life Commission. The new campaign adapted the technique the GEB had used when lobbying for high schools. The organisation attached officials to the office of each state superintendent for education in the South. The officials reported to the superintendent, but were chosen by Rose and funded by the SEB. The result would give modern politicians and philanthropies legal nightmares. The Southern Education Board (and by extension the GEB) had an agent surveying rural education in the office of every state education superintendent in the South. Peabody and, later, Rockefeller money underwrote the rural interests of state education departments. According to the GEB these agents had a broad function:

They would have to show the local officials how to go about building better schoolhouses and how to organize the innumerable little one-room crossroads schools into more effective consolidated units. They would have to find ways of training the rural teachers on the job, until the teachers' colleges could turn out a better prepared generation of instructors. They wanted to evolve a wholly fresh curriculum with significance to farmers' sons and daughters. And since all this would take money, they would have to campaign for more and higher local tax levies.²⁸

The reformers campaigned especially for the consolidation of small rural schools into larger and centrally located public elementary schools that would serve an entire community. In the period many rural schools were in isolated regions and not always accessible when, for instance, hard rain made the poorly-drained dirt roads inaccessible. Unlike modern schools these single-room schools usually had only one teacher who divided his or her attention between children in a range of ages and grades. According to one pamphlet from the period, such schools were an 'insignificant factor in the life of the community'. The rural school was 'a little

building on a little piece of land where a little teacher for a little while teaches little children little things'.²⁹ Consolidating a number of rural schools into a larger, central school meant more teachers and more children, enough to divide into classes based on age. Consolidation also meant the building of a new school with new facilities — a blank slate for education reformers to project their ideals of cleanliness, sanitation and an adapted curriculum. The consolidated school, much like the demonstration farms, was a centre for reform and it would radiate its influence outward into the countryside. By teaching the children to be clean, to be healthy, and to learn a vocation, they would gradually reform the parents, and so uplift the Poor Whites of the rural South.

The campaign for new and better schools was laced with a strong helping of environmental determinism. The physical environment instilled moral values: clean spaces made for clean souls. And the converse was also true. A 1915 survey of rural schools in Tennessee found 'unattractive, uncomfortable, unsanitary' rural schools, with outhouses 'such as you might expect to find at a construction camp', and which produced 'physical and mental cripples, and moral perverts'.³⁰ Better and cleaner schools 'would encourage students to associate academic progress with orderly, efficient ways of learning and living'. Thus 'the new rural school, better constructed, furnished and cleaned, could provide a physical model of the ideal rural dwelling'.³¹



Fig. 1. An old, unimproved rural school, with stove in middle of classroom.



Fig. 2. The same classroom after being improved. Clean, painted and neat.³²

The rural school agents, active as they were, could not hope to adequately monitor and inspect even a majority of rural schools in the state. In particularly rural and problematic regions the SEB funded female county agents who reported to the county supervisor. In contrast to the whirlwind visits of state agents, who were engaged in lobbying whole communities, these female agents inspected local schools and suggested improvements. These ranged from introducing vocational elements such as cooking or gardening, to cleaning grounds, painting walls, fixing privies and monitoring health. Some arranged summer schools or 'moonlight schools' in the evening which were aimed at eradicating adult illiteracy. Their task was certainly not easy. The female agent for Dorchester County, South Carolina, Caroline Dickinson, described a visit to two poor rural schools on the same day. The schools had '[n]o grounds, no outbuildings, no water, rough, unlined, no paint of white-wash, and with cracks in the door through which you can see the passers-by. No fire in either. A few rough benches and a stove in each instance constituted the entire equipment'. One school contained eight children, the other nine. 'In the Lebanon School I found a local farmer presiding, stolid and patient. They sat amidst dirt, soot, and papers'.³³

The campaigns of the rural agents, and the ideologies and interests of the SEB, fed into state efforts to improve rural education. In a 1916 pamphlet distributed to rural schools in Virginia, R.C. Stearnes, the state superintendent of public instruction, exhorted readers to 'help the weak as well as the strong'. By this he was referring to poor country schools. On the other side of the pamphlet was a 'score card for country schools' which schools were expected to put up in the classroom. Schools achieving at least 90% on the scorecard were entitled to appropriations from state funds, as well as a certificate. The card, which scored schools out of one hundred, gave points for cleanliness, neat grounds, sanitary outhouses and painted buildings. Points were awarded for a teaching salary of at least \$40. Further points were given if the floors were swept daily and free of trash paper. A water cooler, instead of common drinking cups, also helped. The teaching of manual training and domestic science was encouraged, as well as

elementary agriculture. Finally, it awarded points if some of the schoolchildren were members of corn, canning, poultry or other clubs.³⁴

By 1914 the SEB campaigns had led to some measure of reform. Teacher salaries were higher, many counties had appointed full-time superintendents of education, as well as attendant school and country supervisors. ‘The South is coming to believe in education’, said Buttrick. ‘At times one encounters a freshness, vigor and confidence that recalls the middle west and northwest of twenty years ago; one meets teachers, administrators, laymen aglow with what to them is a new discovery ... Four years ago there was not a consolidated school in Mississippi; there are now one hundred and seventy-five. In Louisiana only twelve-hundred one-room schools are left’.³⁵ In 1913 Ogden passed away and the following year the Peabody Fund was dissolved. The Southern Board was left with only a fraction of its resources. The GEB, which had been part-funding the SEB for years, stepped in to take over the bulk of the SEB’s projects, including the continued funding of state agents for rural education. The agents continued lobbying for consolidation and rural reform. The programme continued until 1928, when the states themselves assumed responsibility for the position.

In many respects the GEB’s stewardship of the Southern programme remained unchanged, although it began increasingly to focus on efforts to promote African-American education as state and public support for rural white schools increased, but African-American schools were ignored.³⁶ The essential character and reformist vision of the SEB carried over into the larger organisation which, after all, was overseen by almost the exact same people. At its various conferences, in its wide-ranging publications, in the offices of every state superintendent for education and in the schools and communities it wanted to reform, the SEB had promoted a vision of the ideal rural school — one that not only educated, but uplifted its students. The organisation would consolidate the poor little one-room schools into one large, modern building, with classrooms and teachers for every grade. The school would be warm, clean, light and newly-painted. It would be healthy, airy, and sanitary. The teachers would be well-trained and well-paid. It

would support community uplift initiatives like poultry and canning clubs. It would teach not only algebra and Latin, but skills to help in the home and on the farm: domestic science and agricultural science. It would set students on the path to a trade by teaching carpentry and metalwork. The new school would teach its students not only how to learn, but how to live. It would be a centre of reform in the community, evangelising the students and sending them to convert their parents and neighbours, teaching them habits of cleanliness and sanitation and convenience. And in due course the South would be made modern, prosperous and white.

¹ See, for instance, Eric Anderson and Alfred A. Moss, *Dangerous Donations: Northern Philanthropy and Southern Black Education, 1902 - 1930* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1999).

² W. E. B. Du Bois, 'The Cultural Missions of Atlanta University', *Phylon* 3, no. 2 (1942): 107

³ *Ibid*, 19.

⁴ Fosdick, *Adventure in Giving*, 7.

⁵ Fosdick, *Adventure in Giving*, 7.

⁶ JDR Jr. to Robert C. Ogden, February 1, 1907, Folder 1899, Box 200, series 1.2, General Education Board (GEB)

⁷ Southern Education Board, 'Some Reports Denied', *Southern Education* 1, no. 8 & 9 (May 7, 1903): 116.

⁸ 'The Task of the South', Folder 7418, Box 721, Series 1.5, GEB, 5.

⁹ 'The Task of the South', Folder 7418, Box 721, Series 1.5, GEB, 26.

¹⁰ Conference for Education in the South, Proceedings of the Fourth Conference for Education in the South (Committee of the Conference for Education in the South, 1901), 27-28.

¹¹ 'Gathering at Louisville, KY', Folder 7424, Box 721, Series 1.5, GEB.

¹² Fosdick, *Adventure in Giving*, 18.

¹³ 'The Task of the South', Folder 7418, Box 721, Series 1.5, GEB, 40.

¹⁴ The New York Times, 24 April 1903, Folder 7425, Box 721, Series 1.5, GEB.

¹⁵ Mail & Express, March 25 1905, Folder 7425, Box 721, Series 1.5, GEB.

¹⁶ Mail & Express, April 26 1905, Folder 7425, Box 721, Series 1.5, GEB.

¹⁷ Conference for Education in the South, *Proceedings*, 11.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 80.

¹⁹ Kantor, Harvey. 'Work, Education, and Vocational Reform: The Ideological Origins of Vocational Education, 1890-1920'. *American Journal of Education* 94, no. 4 (August 1986): 401—26.

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- ²⁰ Sol Cohen, 'The Industrial Education Movement, 1906-17', *American Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1968): 96
- ²¹ William R. Ogden, 'Vocational Education: A Historical Perspective', *The High-school Journal* 73, no. 4 (1990): 247.
- ²² 'The conference is a constructive body', Folder 7424, Box 721, Series 1.5, GEB.
- ²³ Representative work from the period would be Edwin G. Cooley, *Vocational Education in Europe*, vol. 2 (Chicago: The Commercial Club of Chicago, 1915).
- ²⁴ Danish Folk High-schools, 'A Brief History of the Folk High-school', *The Danish Folk High-schools*, accessed 16 September 2015, <http://www.danishfolkhighschools.com/about/history>.
- ²⁵ Hoffschwelle, 'Better Homes on Better Farms', 195.
- ²⁶ 'The Colleges and Rural Life', Folder 198, Box 19, Series O, Office of Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR).
- ²⁷ General Education Board, *The General Education Board*, 83.
- ²⁸ Fosdick, *Adventure in Giving*, 67.
- ²⁹ 'The one and two-room country schools of Virginia', Folder 1766, Box 188, Series 11, GEB, 9.
- ³⁰ Mary S. Hoffschwelle, *Rebuilding the Rural Southern Community: Reformers, Schools, and Homes in Tennessee, 1900-1930* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998), 36.
- ³¹ *Ibid*, 7.
- ³² School improvement, Folder 411, Series 1054, Box 42, GEB.
- ³³ 'Leaves from a Supervisor's Notebook', Folder 1198, Box 131, Series 1.1, GEB, 6.
- ³⁴ 'Score card for country schools', Folder 1765, Box 188, Series, 1.1, GEB.
- ³⁵ General Education Board Minutes for 28 May, 1914, Folder 56, Box 23, Series 3, GEB.
- ³⁶ Wallace Buttrick to Seth Low, January 25, 1908, Folder 416, Box 46, Series 1.1, GEB.