

# **The Battle for the Schoolhouse in Jim Crow Georgia**

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The Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) awarded me a travel grant to do research at the RAC from June 23-30, 2010. I am working on a monograph which examines the experience and evolving meaning of education in one rural Georgia county (Hancock) from Reconstruction until the Brown decision of 1954. This new study builds on my earlier publication, *The Rural Face of White Supremacy*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005, which was an examination of the daily experience of race relations in this plantation-belt county during the Jim Crow Era. The current research project will trace the contours of the debates over the meaning of education in the county, including black and white perspectives about what kind of education was best suited for the needs of whom. It also examines changes in the availability of education: the funding of teachers, the condition of schoolhouses, the length of terms, etc. Primarily, I want to know how ordinary black and white farmers of all classes understood the purpose of education during these decades. I want to understand how each generation within this period put their educations to use. As I delved into this study, I was pulled out of Hancock County by the need to understand regional and national forces impinging on my subjects, forces which opened or closed educational opportunities. Chief among these external forces were the Northern-based educational philanthropies of the early twentieth century.

Much of my data touching on the educational motives and experiences of ordinary people has come from hundreds of interviews I conducted with elderly black and white people from this county, between 1988 and 2000. (Most of these interviews are now housed in the Southern Oral History Collection in the Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.) Statistics and reports contained in the Annual Reports of the Georgia Superintendent of Education provided a framework of trends in funding, length of school term, qualifications of teachers, etc, during the years in question. The correspondence, reports, and internal papers of the divisions within the Georgia Department of Education (housed in the Georgia State Archives) offered a glimpse of the agendas and tactics of the educational bureaucrats who administered the state school system. To view decisions made by Georgia educators in a wider regional context, I examined materials relating to rural black education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the state archives of North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Florida. Finally, to gain a clearer understanding of the motives and impact of philanthropic organizations in southern education, I reviewed the Rosenwald papers at Fisk University and the University of Chicago, and the General Education Board papers at the Rockefeller Archive Center.

The historiography of educational philanthropy has been as lively a battleground as the original contest that northern philanthropists, their administrators, white southern politicians, black and white educators, and southern parents fought over the meaning of education in the Jim Crow South. The first histories of educational foundations were largely hagiographical and frequently in-house reports, which described their work as a triumph for American democratic values and modern progressive rationalism over deeply imbedded southern racist traditions. There was a story of private wealth working for the public good.<sup>1</sup>

The first major wave of academic scholarship provided a liberal critique, and re-wrote the story as a generally well-intentioned intervention which fell far short of its goals. Louis Harlan's seminal interpretation depicted an unforeseeable tragedy, in which GEB pro-educational propaganda—intended to liberalize southern education for the benefit of African Americans—actually set off the southern crusade for schools, a movement which ended in the shifting of scarce educational funds from black to white schools. According to Harlan's interpretation, the philanthropic intervention in education inadvertently undermined its own egalitarian goals.<sup>2</sup>

The radical scholars who defined the field in the 1970s and 1980s were even more sharply critical of educational philanthropy. According to them, the philanthropists and their administrators had never aimed at racially egalitarian outcomes at all. Rather, being guided by profit motives and social Darwinist philosophy, they intended to replace the violent, turbulent, and unsystematic landscape of southern racial exploitation with a more modern, more efficient, more scientific system of exploitation. Instead of crudely denying education to African Americans, these “white architects of black education” would instead train them to accept subservient positions in the economy. Through the simplest industrial programs, southern African Americans would be “schooled for the new slavery” as Donald Spivey put it. James Anderson's highly nuanced contribution, *The Education of Blacks in the South*, capped this interpretive school and has provided the foundation for all subsequent scholarship in the field.<sup>3</sup>

In the past decade, a new wave of scholarship has re-evaluated educational foundations yet again. The reputation of the Rosenwald Foundation was the easiest to repair, as its policies directly improved the number and quality of rural black schoolhouses. A number of local recent histories have praised Rosenwald schools as cornerstones of entire communities and springboards to upward mobility.<sup>4</sup> Other studies have identified the Rosenwald Fund as an essential organizational and financial force for black educational opportunity in the south during

the first decades of the twentieth century. It supported black teachers associations, and unlike the GEB, it placed some African Americans in positions of influence from its inception.<sup>5</sup>

The reputation of the GEB has been more difficult to rehabilitate. Early in the twentieth century, its administrators and agents had criticized the idea of college education for blacks, assiduously promoted industrial education in place of liberal education at all levels, and endorsed white supremacy both publicly and privately. Yet, in recent publications, Eric Anderson, Alfred Moss, and Adam Fairclough have added new complexities to the history of this foundation as well. They have identified debates among GEB agents and administrators, which led to a transition toward more liberal goals and policies between 1919 and 1922. In contrast, most former studies had focused on the earlier, explicitly social Darwinist years of the GEB.

My research in GEB records impressed me with repeated evidence of a shift in racial philosophy and educational policy around 1920. For example, in 1921, Abraham Flexner and other officials of the GEB and Rosenwald Foundation visited commencement exercises at Tuskegee and Hampton. Tuskegee, a black-run institution, put on “practically a 100% Negro show,” according to Flexner, which showed in the energy and pride of the event, and “the earnestness and cleverness of the students.” In contrast, when the group attended the Hampton exercises, Flexner complained that “the exercises were interesting in so far as the colored students were responsible for them, but there was too much white and it was quite mediocre.” Flexner wrote Wallace Buttrick, the secretary of the GEB that the experience had raised “certain questions” in his mind, which he hoped to discuss when the two next met.<sup>6</sup> A few years later, Buttrick, who was then president of the GEB, condemned vocational training in college and stated that “education is for intelligent self-direction.”<sup>7</sup>

An essential but under-examined element in the story of the GEB and black education in the south is the 1913 creation of a new state government position: the Director of the Division of

Negro Education, housed within the state Departments of Education of the southern states.<sup>8</sup> The state Divisions of Negro Education, the directors, and all subsequent staff within the divisions, were created and funded by the GEB, and as the GEB administrators hoped, they acted as trojan horses. These state school agents embraced the Progressive agenda of the early twentieth century as they expanded and professionalized the state system of schools. But they did more. By using shifting strategies over many years, they quietly facilitated the expansion of tax-supported funds available for the public education of black children. Furthermore, the Negro Division itself served as a crucial state-sanctioned base from which black and white Rosenwald agents quietly and effectively operated. Beginning in 1939, the GEB gradually phased out subsidies from these positions, forcing the states to assume their support. In the end, southern state departments of education contained state-supported officials responsible for the growth of black education. Yet, there have been criticisms of the GEB strategy in this project. As a previous recipient of a Rockefeller Archive Center grant, Sarah Thuesen argued in her 2001 report, these positions were exclusively filled by white southerners, even though many of these appointees held liberal views which set them apart from other state officials. Thuesen's criticism certainly held true for the first decades. By 1948 however, although no African Americans directed state Divisions of Negro Education, over seventy-five percent (sixty-eight out of eighty-nine) administrative positions in state Negro Divisions were held by African Americans.<sup>9</sup>

Whether the GEB should be characterized as reflexively paternalistic in promoting white leaders for black education or whether their decisions should be seen as understandably cautious, given the rabid racism of so many southern politicians of the era, will be the subject of ongoing scholarly research and debate. My recent research at the RAC leads me tentatively to view the GEB as having a more positive impact on southern black education in the long run. As they saw themselves, they were playing an extended game, gradually shifting the funding policies of state

governments and the culture of the entire region. They have been rightly criticized for attempting to promote “pragmatic” industrial education for blacks in their early decades, although my reading of GEB papers suggests that GEB administrators promoted industrial education as energetically with whites as with blacks. Furthermore, there is evidence that this policy never made deep inroads across the south or affected the educational experience of many children and was allowed to lapse, beginning in the 1920s.<sup>10</sup> The GEB policies have also been properly and more effectively criticized for undermining and eliminating many small denominational schools before 1920, for persistently distrusting any public, autonomous black leadership, and for many years, of even excluding black leaders from participating in their policy decisions privately. Yet they succeeded in their primary goal of enticing racist state governments to assume the funding of black schools. No philanthropic funds, however liberally spent, could have begun to educate the many African American children of the south. Furthermore, white southern voters and their elected officials would have rejected any explicit challenge to white supremacy in education. In Georgia, the state even camouflaged the purpose of the “Negro Division” when it was begun, by naming it the “Special Division”.<sup>11</sup> While the result was a segregated public school system which never approached equitable funding, it none the less seems, in most ways, an improvement over the previous situation in which black parents paid taxes to support white schools while paying the costs of the two or three years of their own children’s education out of their own pockets.

Serendipitously for my study, the story of the creation of these offices by the GEB may connect directly back to Hancock County, Georgia. In the "Reminiscences of Dr. J. Curtis Dixon" a transcript of an oral interview of an early Director of the Division of Negro Education for Georgia, in the possession of the Rockefeller Foundation Collection, Dixon narrates the events that led to this initiative. According to Dixon, Wallace Buttrick, the president and

secretary of the GEB, visited a Georgia county early in the twentieth century, and for three or four days had been driven around the county in a horse and buggy to visit the schools by the county superintendent of education, a man named "Duggan". As a result of the experience, Buttrick subsequently decided to initiate the region-wide policy to create and fund Directors of the Division of Negro Education in southern states, or so said Dixon. Mell L. Duggan was the superintendent of Hancock County at the time. He later became state superintendent of education.<sup>12</sup>

Buttrick's papers indicate that he had met with Duggan as early as 1902, befriended him, and corresponded with him. Yet in his correspondence with Duggan, Buttrick himself did not refer to any visits to Hancock which Dixon described as a contributing factor in the creation of the state Divisions of Negro Education. Nor was Hancock mentioned in a brief in-house history of the GEB delivered by Leo Favrot at a conference of stage agents of Negro education in 1914, nor in the later history written by S.L. Smith. However, in my week of research at the Rockefeller Archive Center, I was unable to locate the contemporary record of the internal conversations which led up to this significant intervention. I hope to dig deeper on my next visit.<sup>13</sup>

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Rockefeller Archive Center Research Reports Online is a periodic publication of the Rockefeller Archive Center. Edited by Erwin Levold, Research Reports Online is intended to foster the network of scholarship in the history of philanthropy and to highlight the diverse range of materials and subjects covered in the collections at the Rockefeller Archive Center. The reports are drawn from essays submitted by researchers who have visited the Archive Center, many of whom have received grants from the Archive Center to support their research.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

## ENDNOTES:

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<sup>1</sup> Edwin R. Embree and Julia Waxman. *Investment in People: The Story of the Julius Rosenwald Fund*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949; S. L. Smith. *Builders of Goodwill: The Story of the State Agents of Negro Education in the South, 1910 to 1950*. Nashville: Tennessee Book Company, 1950; Raymond B. Fosdick. *Adventures in Giving: The Story of the General Education Board*. New York: Harper and Row, 1962.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Allen Bullock. *A History of Negro Education in the South: From 1619 to the Present*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967; Louis R. Harlan. *Separate and Unequal: Public School Campaigns and Racism in the Southern Seaboard States, 1901-1915*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Spivey. *Schooling for the New Slavery: Black Industrial Education, 1868-1915*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1978; James D. Anderson. *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988; William H. Watkins. *The White Architects of Black Education: Ideology and Power in America, 1865-1954*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Alicestyne Turley-Adams. *Rosenwald Schools in Kentucky*, Prepared for the Kentucky Heritage Council and the Kentucky African American Heritage Commission, 1977; Vanessa Siddle Walker. *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996; Betty Jane Reed. *The Brevard Rosenwald School: Black Education and Community Building in a Southern Appalachian Town, 1920-1966*. Jefferson, North Carolina: MacFarland & Company, 2004; Ann Short Chirhart. *Torches of Light: Georgia Teachers and the Coming of the Modern South*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Mary S. Hoffschwelle. *Rebuilding the Rural Southern Community: Reformers, Schools, and Homes in Tennessee, 1900-1930*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998; Hoffschwelle. *The Rosenwald Schools of the American South. New Perspectives on the History of the South*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2006; Eric Anderson and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. *Dangerous Donations: Northern Philanthropy and Southern Black Education, 1902-1930*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999; Adam Fairclough. *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Flexner to Buttrick, April 18, 1921, Folder 677, Box 303, Series 1.2, General Education Board Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, New York (hereafter designated RAC).

<sup>7</sup> "What is Education?" reprint pamphlet of a publication by Wallace Buttrick in *Peabody Journal of Education*, 3: 3 (November 1925), Folder 7, Box 1, Series 1, Buttrick Collection, RAC.

<sup>8</sup> The position of the State Agent for Negro Schools was initiated in 1910 in Virginia with Jackson Davis as the first agent. He was appointed, on Hollis Frissell's recommendation to Wickliffe Rose of the Peabody Fund, in order to expand the recently created Jeanes Program in Virginia. For the first year, his salary was paid by the Peabody Fund, until it was assumed by the GEB in 1911. The GEB then systematized the position across the south, "Origin and Influence of State Agents in Negro Schools," prepared by Leo Favrot, 1938, Folder 633, Box 286, Series 1.2, GEB Archives, RAC; Calkins to Eggleston, April 1, 1949, Folder 633, Box 286, Series 1.2, GEB Archives, RAC.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah C. Thuesen. *The General Education Board and the Racial Leadership of Black Education in the South, 1920-1960*, 2001, RAC, <http://archive.rockefeller.edu/publications/resrep/thuesen.pdf>; Easom to State Agents of Negro Education in the Southern States, September 22, 1948, Folder 633, Box 286, Series 1.2, GEB Archives, RAC.

<sup>10</sup> Mell L. Duggan, the Hancock County Superintendent of Schools at the turn of the twentieth century was an unusually enthusiastic proponent of industrial education. He approached Buttrick directly in 1902 to request matching funds to allow Hancock to build an industrial education building and hire a full-time industrial teacher who would train all rural teachers in the county on Saturdays. In all correspondence, Duggan's first priority seems to have been to train white teachers and children. The GEB later adopted this special case as a regional policy, but seems not to have found similar enthusiasm elsewhere. Duggan, in a 1905 report on the program, "Manual Training in Hancock County," wrote that Hancock "is the only county in Georgia, or elsewhere so far as we are informed, where any serious effort has been made towards the systematic introduction of manual training into the course of study of an entire county system of rural schools." Duggan to Buttrick, May 9, 1902, Folder 411, Box 46, Series 1.1, GEB Archives, RAC; Duggan report to Buttrick, 1905, "Manual Training in Hancock County," Folder 411, Box 46, Series 1.1, GEB Archives, RAC.

<sup>11</sup> Letterhead from Georgia Department of Education, Folder 633, Box 286, Series 1.2, GEB Archives, RAC.

<sup>12</sup> "Reminiscences of Dr. J. Curtis Dixon," pp. 104-1055, Box 1, Oral Histories series, RG 13, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RAC.

<sup>13</sup> Duggan and Buttrick correspondence, 1902-1906, Folder 411, Box 46, Series 1.1, GEB Archives, RAC; "History of State Agents in Negro Schools" prepared by Leo Favrot, 1938, Folder 633, Box 286, Series 1.2, GEB Archives, RAC; Smith, *Builders of Goodwill*.