

The General Education Board and the Racial Leadership of Black Education in the South, 1920-1960

by Sarah C. Thuesen

Doctoral Candidate in History
University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill
thuesen@email.unc.edu

© 2001 by Sarah C. Thuesen

Editor's Note: This report is part of Ms. Thuesen's dissertation-in-progress, which will examine black education in North Carolina as a case study of larger trends, such as public vs. private funding and black vs. white control, that are discussed herein. It is presented here with Ms. Thuesen's permission, but should not be cited or quoted without her consent.

Rockefeller Archive Center Research Reports Online is a periodic publication of the Rockefeller Archive Center, a division of The Rockefeller University. Edited by Ken Rose and Erwin Levold under the general direction of the Center's director, Darwin H. Stapleton, 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 or The Rockefeller University.

The history of northern philanthropy and southern black education is a familiar, yet unfinished, story. Historians have documented how private foundations, particularly the General Education Board (GEB), helped develop black education in the South, but those studies invariably conclude around 1930.¹ It is true that GEB appropriations to southern black education peaked in the early 1930s.² Nevertheless, the GEB continued to fund select programs in that field until it ceased operations in 1960. I surveyed part of the GEB papers this summer in order to determine the organization's priorities for black education during this later period. I quickly discovered that denied grant requests could reveal as much as the records of fund recipients. Throughout the thirties and forties, as African Americans organized in the South to gain greater control over their own schools, the GEB continued to fund white supervisors as its primary contribution to black elementary and secondary education. To be sure, many of these State Agents for Negro Schools held reputations as the leading white liberals in their communities. Yet the fact that the GEB repeatedly turned down grant requests from autonomous black organizations suggests its commitment to older models of white-sponsored black uplift, rather than the goals of black self-determination. Since this was also the goal of many progressive white southerners, the men of the GEB became increasingly confident to hand the business of black schooling over to the white South. This story then suggests that race, rather than region, was ultimately the more important fault line in the story of northern philanthropy and southern black education.

Contrary to the characterization put forth by some historians of early northern philanthropists as heavy-handed reformers of the South, the GEB men of the early 1920s seemed to be planning for their own obsolescence. In 1920 GEB president Wallace Buttrick judged that the "fate of Negro education lies with tax-supported schools and not with institutions supported by private contributions, excepting a limited number which train teachers and leaders." Public institutions, Buttrick explained, were becoming the GEB's "main concern."³ Other GEB officials also expressed their desire to keep a low profile in southern black education. James Hardy Dillard, president of the GEB-affiliated Jeanes Fund, told GEB president Wickliffe Rose that his aim was to "get the education of the Negro children thought of as part of the regular job of States and counties." Dillard further believed that "the more any of the Funds can sink themselves from view the better."⁴ Frank Bachman, officer of the GEB's School Surveys and Public Education Division, stated a similar objective in 1928: "to throw upon the state, county, or community the whole responsibility for carrying on the work of public education."⁵

If, as some historians have argued, early GEB administrators viewed themselves as self-appointed liberators of a benighted South, then why had they become so eager to facilitate local control of southern black schools?⁶ I would argue that while GEB officials may initially have felt a degree of moral superiority over the white southern masses, by the twenties and thirties they had found considerable kinship with white southerners who approached race relations with a paternalistic liberalism. In fact, in the early phases of the southern program, the GEB hand-picked like-minded southern white men as the fund's disciples. These men belied stereotyped images of southern whites such as those found in the wildly popular 1915 film, *Birth of the Nation*. Like the northern philanthropists, they genuinely believed in black opportunity but stopped short of advocating black autonomy.

The GEB formalized their cooperation with white southerners by creating the position of State Agent for Negro Schools.⁷ Jackson Davis, a Virginia school superintendent and descendant of that state's aristocracy, became the first such agent in 1910, when he suggested to the GEB that the black schools in his district needed closer supervision.⁸ Using Davis's work as a model, the GEB began appointing other white men to supervise black education in the southern states. By 1919 all of the former Confederate states had a white male Negro School Agent. That situation remained unchanged throughout the period of *de jure* Jim Crow. Though blacks held principalships at individual schools, the chief state administrators were always whites.

GEB officials did debate the merits of allowing blacks to hold administrative positions, but they always concluded that blacks lacked the power and influence to survive the cutthroat world of southern politics. In 1915, for example, Jackson Davis traveled to West Virginia where some local educators had considered hiring a black man as a supervisory agent. Davis judged that such a move would "tend to lessen the dignity of the position in the eyes of the southern white people and would make more difficult our cooperation in southern states which have not yet shown a desire for the work."⁹ At a conference of the State Agents in 1930, Edwin Embree of the Rosenwald Fund stated his opinion that "white leadership was more necessary at this time than Negro leadership."

He judged white leadership to be so crucial in the South "on account of money, initiative, and influence."¹⁰

Though southern politics may have limited the possibilities for black leadership, the GEB men did not bemoan white-dominated school administrative systems as a necessary evil. They viewed the State Agents not as paternalistic standard-bearers of the Old South, but as martyrs for an unpopular cause. The GEB trustees stated in their annual report in 1938 that the state agents had demonstrated "an infinite capacity for good will, courage." The report added: "Only the men who pioneered the work twenty-five years ago realize how difficult, how almost unprecedented, it was for a southern white man to take on as his major interest the care of the ignored Negro schools . . . They have served as key men, as 'interlocutors between two groups' in the delicate business of mediating that superlatively difficult problem: race relations."¹¹ Indeed, for whatever reason, workers in the field of black education increasingly noted greater tolerance for the needs of black schools. James Dillard noted in 1930 that black education had once been regarded by white school officials in the South as "a missionary effort," but now it was viewed by these same men as "part of the day's work."¹² Jeanes Fund president Arthur D. Wright similarly noted in 1932 "a new attitude throughout the South toward Negro education." He commented that twenty-five years ago he had to make emotional appeals to southern superintendents in order for them to consider the needs of black education. Now he found the average superintendent to be "better trained and more professional" and more willing to consider black needs without such special pleading.¹³ Perhaps encouraged by such reports, the GEB continued throughout the thirties and forties to fund the State Agents "as the chief medium of its Negro education program," even as it reduced its overall appropriations to black education.¹⁴

At the same time that the GEB seemed eager to support a group of home-grown white leaders in the field of black education, it remained reluctant to fund black organizations that were attempting to carve out spheres of autonomy for black teachers, parents, and students. I investigated the GEB's interactions with three such organizations: the American Teachers Association (ATA), the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In each case, the GEB offered modest grants, but denied the level of support that would have recognized these organizations as fundamental players in the world of black educational politics.

The American Teachers Association (formerly the National Association of Teachers in Colored Schools) had served as a national forum and support network for black teachers since 1904. The membership of the group was overwhelmingly black, but included a small number of white educators who worked in the field of education. Most white educators belonged to the National Education Association (NEA), which had never officially excluded black members, but nonetheless maintained a largely all-white membership. Since the mid-1920s, ATA members had discussed the merits of greater cooperation with the NEA, but the ATA remained a separate organization for another forty years. In fact, the late twenties and thirties were years of considerable expansion and activity within the ATA. The association increased its membership during those

years and pushed a politically ambitious agenda that included the removal of race-based teacher salary inequalities and increases in federal funding for black schools. The ATA maintained its autonomy during these pre-Civil Rights years partly to promote the interests of African Americans, but also out of allegiance to its affiliated state organizations from the Jim Crow South, where both law and custom dictated that black and white educators maintain separate professional associations. It was not until 1966, with the Civil Rights Movement and desegregation in full swing, that the ATA officially merged with the NEA.¹⁵

During the late twenties and thirties, when the ATA hoped to expand its membership and outreach programs, the GEB offered the group only modest support. In 1928, the GEB granted the ATA one thousand dollars for debt liquidation, with the stipulation that the group "give reasonable assurance that provision has been made for the current expenses of the Association for the coming year." But the GEB rejected two subsequent requests for aid, one in 1931 to fund a secretary, and one in 1949 for in-service school guidance workshops.¹⁶ Unfortunately, the GEB's records do not indicate the reasons for those rejections. Yet its funding of the NEA during those same years provides a striking contrast to its lukewarm support of the ATA. The GEB viewed the NEA in 1937 as "one of the most potent forces in the molding of public education policies in this country." That year it gave the association a \$35,000 grant for a task force on secondary education. Only two years earlier it had awarded the NEA \$250,000 for a five-year Educational Policies Commission designed to "overcome the natural inflexibility of established educational institutions."¹⁷ Ironically, the GEB applauded the efforts of the NEA to challenge entrenched educational bureaucracies, but it never rallied behind the ATA, which would have helped African Americans overturn established patterns of racial privilege.

A similar story unfolds from the records of the GEB's interactions with the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, an association founded by the black historian Carter G. Woodson in 1915. Woodson, often referred to as the "father of Negro history," wished to promote the scholarly study and publication of black history, as well as its wide dissemination in the public schools.¹⁸ Even in his correspondence with powerful white philanthropists, Woodson rarely diluted his espousal of black autonomy. He made it clear that the ASNLH was to sponsor the writing of black history by blacks themselves, not white scholars. As he explained once in a letter to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., blacks held the "advantage of being able to think black." After all, he added, "It would be very unwise to depend upon the Irish to write the history of the Scotchman or the Scotchman to chronicle the deeds of the Irish."¹⁹ To be sure, Woodson initially included on his executive council many important representatives from the major white philanthropies - men such as Thomas Jesse Jones, A. G. Phelps Stokes, James Hardy Dillard, George Foster Peabody, and Julius Rosenwald. Yet Woodson sought primarily the financial cooperation of these men, not their ideological approval, and by the early twenties he was making efforts to include more blacks in the Association's leadership.²⁰ It is revealing that at the annual meeting of the ASNLH in 1920, Howard University professor Kelly Miller spoke on the "Limits of Philanthropy in Negro Education." Miller argued that goal

of the foundations should be "equipping the Negro to take over his own school systems."²¹

Woodson's spirited independence eventually clashed with the goals of his sponsors. Since 1922 the ASNLH had received grants from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial (LSRM), an affiliate of the larger Rockefeller Foundation.²² But Rockefeller officials began to withdraw their support in the early thirties when Woodson began moving away from the scholarly production of black history to a much larger popular movement that would use churches and public schools as conduits for the ASNLH's messages of race pride. Woodson was coming to believe that the most promising ground for innovation in black education was at the primary and secondary level. It was the average schoolteacher, rather than black scholars, in whom he began investing his ambitions. Woodson, for example, tirelessly promoted Negro History Week, a commemoration that Woodson started in 1916 and steadily expanded throughout the twenties and thirties. In 1932 he teamed up with the ATA to propose new social studies curricula that included the study of black history.²³ In the late thirties, he proposed hiring a black field worker who would travel to black schools in the South and demonstrate ways to incorporate ASNLH materials.²⁴ And in 1937 he launched the publication of the Negro History Bulletin, a monthly magazine that contained stories and pictures of famous African Americans, textbook recommendations, and news about upcoming ASNLH activities.²⁵

When the LSRM began reducing its appropriations to the ASNLH in the early thirties, Woodson turned to the GEB. Woodson received the same answer at every turn: Rockefeller philanthropy would help fund the scholarly publication of black history, but not "work of a general promotional character."²⁶ Perhaps GEB officials feared that Woodson's foot soldiers would intrude too deeply into the supervision of southern schools - that territory had been reserved for the State Agents. Throughout the thirties and early forties Rockefeller officials repeatedly tried to convince Woodson to scale back his activities and base the ASNLH at one of the black colleges. Woodson, who believed that the black colleges had surrendered too much power to white philanthropies, refused to budge. In 1934 he fired off a letter to Jackson Davis: "The Association has sounded the only new note in Negro education during the last quarter of a century. We are far ahead of the Negro colleges and universities. We cannot be made to trail them."²⁷ Despite his persistence, Woodson failed to regain the support of Rockefeller philanthropy.

Finally, perhaps the most revealing example of the GEB's discomfort with black autonomy was its refusal to fund the NAACP's legal battle against segregated schools. From 1928 to 1939, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. gave the NAACP annual contributions, which ranged from \$500 to \$1000. John D. Rockefeller, 3rd also made smaller annual contributions (\$200-\$250) in the mid-thirties and early forties. But when the NAACP approached the GEB about the possibility of a more substantial gift to help its legal initiatives, Jackson Davis stepped in and drew the line. Davis had long expressed his reservations towards the NAACP. He admitted in 1928 that he could "never feel any enthusiasm" for the association whose "militant, bristling attitude toward white people" would only "strengthen prejudice." Davis recognized that black militancy was the "the natural human counterpart to the demagoguery of the white South."²⁸ But when the

NAACP resorted to the federal courts to force action upon local southern governments, Davis balked. When NAACP executive director Walter White sought money from the GEB in 1937 for its legal expenses, Davis advised GEB president Raymond Fosdick to reject the request. He felt that the NAACP had "done more harm than good." The South, he insisted, "can be persuaded but they cannot be forced."²⁹

Davis was not alone among the GEB men. Fosdick echoed Davis in 1939 when S. R. Redmond, president of the St. Louis branch of the NAACP, asked if the GEB could exert pressure on Washington University to open its graduate programs to blacks. Fosdick informed Redmond that "the Rockefeller Foundation and the General Education Board have consistently refused to bring any sort of pressure upon the educational institutions to determine their policies and we believe that this is a wise practice to which we should continue to adhere."³⁰ Likewise, when Walter White again requested in 1948 that the GEB "assist the NAACP in its campaign against educational discrimination and segregation," Albert K. Mann replied that White's proposal "falls outside the program of the [GEB]," which supported the development of the South through "a selected group of institutions for Negroes and for whites." The GEB, in other words, channeled its aid to existing southern institutions rather than outside pressure groups.

On the surface, the GEB's position toward the NAACP was consistent with its advocacy of local control, a policy that had dictated the development of the State Agents as homegrown leaders in black education. But, despite its northern origins, the NAACP had, by the mid-thirties, cultivated a significant southern grassroots network. The New York-based NAACP, like the Washington D. C.-based ATA and ASNLH, promoted grassroots organization among African Americans living in the trenches of the Jim Crow South. These organizations promised some measure of "local control" for blacks within a world of white hegemony.

If historians assess the GEB's liberalism on the basis of its appropriations during the last half of legalized Jim Crow in the South, it is clear that it wished to foster a more enlightened, if paternalistic, white leadership in the South. Yet it also remained reluctant to fund politically oriented black organizations that wished to make direct challenges to the power structure in the region. What remains for historians to investigate is the extent to which the GEB indirectly funded black empowerment through its support of black colleges and universities in the South, where many black Civil Rights leaders got their training.³¹ Moreover, it seems that we need more in-depth study of the GEB-funded State Agents of Negro Schools. These men not only played a major role in the history of the GEB, but also in the history of the South. Before their stories are known, we will not be able to determine whether they, in fact, served as crucial interracial diplomats, or whether they simply forestalled the kind of radical change needed to challenge race-based educational inequalities in the South.

NOTES

¹Louis 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); Donald Spivey, *Schooling for the New Slavery: Black Industrial Education, 1868-1915*

(Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978); James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Judith Sealander, *Private Wealth & Public Life: Foundation Philanthropy and the Reshaping of American Social Policy from the Progressive Era to the New Deal* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1997); Eric Anderson and Alfred A. Moss Jr., *Dangerous Donations: Northern Philanthropy and Southern Black Education, 1902-1930* (University of Missouri Press, 1999).

² GEB spending on black education peaked in 1931-32 when it approached \$7 million, but that figure had dipped below \$1 million by the end of the thirties. See charts of appropriations to Negro Education in the *GEB Annual Reports* (New York: General Education Board).

³ Wallace Buttrick to Frank Chapman, 5 March 1920, folder 303, box 33, series 1.1, General Education Board Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, New York; hereafter GEB Archives.

⁴ James H. Dillard to Wickliffe Rose, 25 October 1927, folder 2123, series 1.2, GEB Archives.

⁵ Report on the Conference of State Agents of Rural Schools for Negroes, 8-9 June 1928, Signal Mountain, Tennessee, folder 2000, box 208, series 1.2, GEB Archives, RAC.

⁶ Eric Anderson and Alfred Moss have argued that white northern philanthropists "had a vision of race relations (and black potential) that was significantly different from the ideas of the South's white majority." See *Dangerous Donations*, p. 11.

⁷ 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).

⁸ On Davis's influence on other State Agents, see "Reminiscences of Jackson Davis," by Leo Favrot, 22 April 1947, folder 3038, box 291, series 1.2, GEB Archives. For a short biographical sketch of Davis, see Raymond B. Fosdick, *Adventure in Giving: The Story of the General Education Board* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 89-90.

⁹ Jackson Davis, "A Study of the West Virginia Schools," 27 October 1915, folder 3033, box 290, series 1.2, GEB Archives.

¹⁰ Report on the Conference of State Agents of Rural Schools for Negroes, 5-6 June 1930, Atlantic City, New Jersey, folder 2002, box 208, series 1.2, GEB Archives.

¹¹ "The State Agents for Negro Schools," a report in GEB Trustees' Bulletin, No. 10, 15 October 1938, Series 9, GEB Archives.

¹² Report on the Conference of State Agents of Rural Schools for Negroes, 5-6 June 1930, Atlantic City, New Jersey, folder 2002, box 208, series 1.2, GEB Archives.

¹³ "Annual Report of the President to the Board of Trustees of the Negro Rural School Fund, Inc. (Anna T. Jeanes Foundation)," 28 April 1932, folder 2126, series 1.2, GEB Archives.

¹⁴ Fosdick, *Adventure in Giving*, 98

¹⁵ See Thelma D. Perry, *History of the American Teachers Association* (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1975).

¹⁶ See records of correspondence with the ATA, folder 2024, box 210, series 1.2, GEB Archives.

¹⁷ General Education Board, Trustees' Bulletin, No. 3, 15 December 1937, series 9, GEB Archives.

¹⁸ Two biographies of Woodson exist: Jacqueline Goggin, *Carter G. Woodson: A Life in Black History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993) and Patricia Watkins Romero, "Carter G. Woodson: A Biography," (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1971). Also useful is August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915-1980* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

¹⁹ Carter G. Woodson to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 25 March 1927, folder 967, box 96, series III-8, Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Papers, RAC.

²⁰ Goggin, *Carter G. Woodson*, Chapter Two, especially 40-45, 59-60; "The First Biennial Meeting of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History at Washington," *Journal of Negro History* 2 (October 1917): 442-448.

²¹ "Proceedings of the Annual Meeting, Washington, D.C., November 18, and 19, 1920," *Journal of Negro History* 6 (January 1921): 126-130.

²² For a detailed account of Woodson's interactions with white foundations, see Goggin, *Carter G. Woodson*, Chapter 3.

²³ For examples of the mix of intellectuals and schoolteachers at ASNLH meetings, see "Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, Inc., Held in Pittsburgh, October 24, 25, 26, 1927," *Journal of Negro History* 13 (January 1928): 1-6; "Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History Held in Washington D.C., October 27-31, 1929," *Journal of Negro History* 15 (January 1930): 1-13; "Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History Held in St. Louis, Missouri, October 21 to 25, 1928," *Journal of Negro History* 14 (January 1929): 1-11. The cooperation of the ATA (NATCS) and ASNLH is mentioned in "Annual Report of the Director," *Journal of Negro History* 17 (October 1932): 391-399.

²⁴ Carter Woodson to Jackson Davis, 16 December 1940, folder 1959, box 205, series 1.2, GEB Archives. For more correspondence on attempts to secure a field worker, see series 2 (Correspondence, 1912-1950), Papers of Carter G. Woodson and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1915-1950 [microform], Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1998.

²⁵ In explaining his motivation for this new undertaking, Woodson explained in a letter to Jackson Davis, director of the GEB, "this publication is to meet the needs of the children in the schools just as *The Journal of Negro History* supplies the need for the study of the Negro in the colleges and universities." Carter Woodson to Jackson Davis, 9 July 1937, folder 1959, box 205, series 1.2, GEB Papers.

²⁶ Jackson Davis, record of interview with Carter G. Woodson, 19 December 1940, folder 1959, box 205, series 1.2, GEB Archives.

²⁷ Carter Woodson to Jackson Davis, 6 January 1934, folder 1959, box 205, series 1.2, GEB Archives. This series in the General Education Board Archives contains a number of exchanges on this topic. In one particularly pointed letter, Woodson argued that the black colleges had proven to be unreliable supporters of his cause. He noted in 1934 that "the Maryland Normal School at Bowie gave us [the ASNLH] \$40 last year, but Howard University nearby gave us nothing. A Negro high school near Richmond sent us a contribution of \$7.50 last year, but Virginia Union failed to send as much as a penny. The Booker T. Washington High School in Atlanta contributed \$187 to this work last year, but Atlanta University in the same year contributed nothing." See Woodson to Jackson Davis, 13 January 1934. Woodson's comments reflect his growing concern during this period for what he perceived to be an aloofness among educated blacks. In 1931, he wrote that "the large majority of the Negroes who have put on the finishing touches of our best colleges are all but worthless in the uplift of their people." See "Negro History Week, The Fifth Year," *Journal of Negro History* 16 (April 1931): 125-131. Woodson's most detailed statement on the educated black bourgeoisie can be found in his *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (Washington: Associated Publishers, 1933). See especially Chapter 6, "The Educated Negro Leaves the Masses." Also see Goggin, *Carter G. Woodson*, 88-94.

²⁸ Jackson Davis to Thomas Appleget, 23 March 1928, folder 383, box 36, Record Group 2, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

²⁹ Jackson Davis to Raymond Fosdick, 3 December 1937, folder 2660, box 257, series 1.2, GEB Archives.

³⁰ S. R. Redmond to Raymond Fosdick, 24 April 1939, and Fosdick to Redmond, 11 May 1939, folder 2660, box 257, series 1.2, GEB Archives, RAC.

³¹ Nearly two-thirds of the GEB's total appropriations to black education from 1902 to 1960 went to select institutions of higher learning. In terms of actual dollars received, the top five institutions were: Atlanta University, Fisk University, Tuskegee Institute, Spelman College, and Dillard University. See Fosdick, *Adventure in Giving*, 329-332.