

**Freedom in Education:  
The Movement to Educate the Freedmen in the Pee Dee Region During  
Reconstruction**

--Aliyyah Willis--



Aliyyah Willis is currently studying at Coastal Carolina University to obtain her B.A. in History and will graduate in December 2012 as a member of the Honor's program. She works part-time at the Conway branch of the Horry County Library and plans to get her Master's degree in Library Science from the University of South Carolina.

**ABSTRACT**

*During Reconstruction a movement gained momentum to educate the newly freed slaves in the South. Historians have agreed that the impetus for that movement came from the freedmen, as they came to be called, as well as northern missionary societies and religious aid associations. In South Carolina that impetus started in the Sea Islands around Charleston. Many historians have studied what is known as the Port Royal Experiment and the educational programs in Columbia and Orangeburg, particularly as they pertain to the higher education institutions for African Americans that arose from these efforts. But no one has specifically studied what was done to educate the freedmen in the Pee Dee region of northeastern coastal South Carolina. Using a combination of research drawn from scholarly sources and primary documents from the*

*time period, this article has found that educational efforts in the Pee Dee mirrored much of the work done in other areas of the state. While not all of the schools created were successful, they provided the basis to push the African American community in the Pee Dee region to continue to keep education in the forefront into the twentieth century.*

### **Introduction**

Before the Civil War and Reconstruction, education in the South was the domain of the elite and the wealthy. Those who could afford it went to private academies or had private tutors who taught them the classics and as well as the three R's, reading, writing, and arithmetic. With the conflict and upheaval of the Civil War came changes regarding who received an education. With the Emancipation Proclamation and ultimately the Thirteenth Amendment, thousands of slaves were suddenly free to live their lives as they saw fit. With this freedom they and many of their supporters in the North realized that education could be a gateway to a better life. No longer bound to one place or person, freedmen and freedwomen had to decide how they wanted to earn their livelihood, trying to obtain a bit of the American dream so long denied them. This was the case all over the South, including eastern coastal South Carolina. This Pee Dee region, as the area is called, may not have been as sophisticated as Charleston to the south or as political as Columbia to the west, but the drive to bring education to the newly freed slaves was just as strong. This article examines the drive to education in five counties, or districts as they were called in the late 1800s, of the Pee Dee region: Darlington, Georgetown, Horry, Marion, and Williamsburg ([Figure 1](#)). Through the efforts of the Freedmen's Bureau, officially known as the Bureau of Abandoned Lands, Refugees, and Freedmen, various northern aid societies, and religious organizations, the first public schools in the area opened their doors to white and black alike. Without this first impetus, public schooling for African Americans may never have gotten off the ground, though it faced severe tests from both within and without.<sup>1</sup> ([See note.](#))

The current scholarship on the education of the freed slaves in the South during Reconstruction is not so much one of differing points of view but of specialization within the broader topic. Most of this scholarship focuses on the southern region of the United States as a whole, rather than limiting the scope to just one state or smaller geographic area. Instead of arguing for or against a particular point of view, today's historians are focusing on one part of the larger topic to elucidate and analyze. Whether studying the people themselves and their motivations, the teachers who educated the freed slaves, or the system of education that resulted, each separately argues that the freed slaves were very active in their own educational destiny. Each scholar also emphasizes the hardships and obstacles that faced both the freed slaves in procuring their education and the movement towards universal education in the South in general.

### **Freedmen as Agents of Their Own Educational Destiny**

Historian R. Butchart (2010) uses a variety of primary sources to chronicle the intense enthusiasm of the freed slaves towards literacy and education. Through firsthand accounts and historical statistics, he paints a picture of the unprecedented and long-term demand for education. Butchart also lists the goals of those educated, including being able to read the Bible and becoming autonomous. In addition, he provides support for the idea that literacy and education

were indelibly linked with emancipation in the minds of the freed slaves. Butchart also introduces the struggles that they went through to obtain their education, from material hardship to the backlash from the southern white community. He counters the arguments of past historians that the newly freed slaves did not truly understand why they wanted an education but were only mimicking the actions of their masters. Butchart demonstrates that the freed slaves more thoroughly understood what education and literacy would mean for them than was indicated by historians from the early twentieth century.

Reiterating some of Butchart's views, J. Anderson argues (1988) that the former slaves were the first in the South to actively want education and who ultimately brought about universal education in the region. Anderson describes their desires, their struggles and the obstacles they encountered, primarily by examining the reports of John W. Alvord, the national superintendent of schools for the Freedmen's Bureau. He also uses firsthand accounts of students and teachers as well as correspondence and reports from teachers and supervisors throughout the South. Anderson argues that the Northern missionary societies did not bring education to the South; rather, they were only part of the aid that the freed slaves requested in their drive to become educated. Anderson cites other historians and their studies of African American education during Reconstruction as well as members of the planter society that made up the South during that time period in his arguments. While Anderson makes a compelling case for the drive of the former slaves to become educated, he limits himself to only a few primary sources, relying too heavily on the reports made by Alvord. Instead, he could have used more accounts from white southerners from the time period or used more reports from other organizations and other teachers to create a well-rounded basis for his argument.

H. A. Williams (2002) also discusses how freedmen and freedwomen valued education and northern white teachers' perceptions of their students. Williams agrees with Butchart that education and literacy were highly valued by the freed slaves as evidenced by the lengths that they would go to attend and stay in school. She emphasizes the reality of poverty that afflicted most of the freed population, which made it hard to pay for necessities, let alone school buildings, teachers and supplies. She argues that because of the hardships associated with attending school, the freedmen became savvy consumers, often patronizing the schools with the best teachers if more than one school was made available in the area. Having made their choice, they pressed those teachers to keep the school open as long as possible. At the same time, the northern white teachers were surprised by the intelligence they found in their students; they were more apt to believe African American intellectual inferiority, even as they had pressed for African American freedom. These teachers were more likely to help and support students with lighter skin, seeing more of themselves in these students than those with darker complexions. Williams also argues that northern men, many of whom had advocated for abolition, were starting to consider limiting African American higher learning as more and more accounts came to them of the great capacity for learning shown by the freedmen. Despite these accounts, they were also of the opinion that African Americans could not understand abstract ideas and thoughts, and thus, they argued, only needed a rudimentary education in order to survive. This conscious thought to limit education would have far-reaching consequences for the future of African American education. Williams uses a variety of primary sources, including the journals and memoirs from various students and teachers, and letters and evaluations between the

teachers and their supporting organizations, such as the American Missionary Association (AMA), to elucidate her arguments.

Expanding on the themes she examined in her 2002 work, H. A. Williams specifically highlights the experiences of the students in the freed schools in her 2005 book *Self-taught*. She notes the importance placed on education while also outlining the challenges students faced in attending school. Poverty, lack of basic necessities and white hostility all could keep African American students from attending school, but still many persevered so that they could better themselves. The whole experience of formal education was seen as somewhat mysterious, an unknown quantity that could be scary when first starting out. In the classroom, these students also had to deal with the cultural and racial gaps between themselves and their teachers, especially with differences in speech, dress and expectations of behavior causing many misunderstandings. The teachers had to contend with their own notions of African American inferiority and intelligence against evidence to the contrary and wanted to give advantages to lighter-skin or mulatto students. As Williams had pointed out previously, northern white teachers empathized with the lighter-skinned students as they saw their whiteness reflected in these students, making slavery more personal and not just something that happened to an inferior race of people. Favoring these lighter-skinned students gave them a way to assuage their guilt and, at the same time, ignore to some extent the great progress in learning that their darker students were exhibiting. Williams uses biographies and personal memoirs of former students, and letters, memoirs and reports of teachers as evidence for her claims.

### **Organization and Advocacy**

In the realm of advocacy, Williams (2005) discusses the political actions undertaken by enfranchised African American men in the fight to keep black education moving forward. In particular, Williams summarizes the actions of the African American conventions in several states to provide public education for their communities. Because there were no laws that made education a right, even for whites, the African American men of these conventions used flattery and subtle threats to convince state legislatures that public education, especially African American education, was necessary. Yet they also could be bold in their assertions, as evidenced by the words of the delegates to the South Carolina Convention: “whereas, Knowledge is power, and an educated and intelligent people can neither be held in, nor reduced to slavery, we will insist upon the establishment of good schools for the thorough education of our children” (Williams, 2005, p. 78). Williams uses the minutes of the proceedings of these conventions and correspondence from African American men who prominently supported the educational movement as her sources for this part of her study.

Williams (2005) continues in her study of the education of the freed slaves by focusing on how these communities asked for help and dealt with the white missionary organizations, and how complex relationships arose between the freed slaves, northern whites and native whites. Williams uses several different examples from a spectrum of situations that African American communities encountered while achieving their goals. She also highlights the struggle of freed slaves with white missionaries over control of the schools. The missionaries wanted to imbue northern values on the southern African Americans, so they were more willing to hire white

northern teachers than African American local teachers. The freed slaves, however, wanted control of their own schools with African American superintendents and teachers. The situation was not always contentious as evidenced by the experience of the freed slaves with Quaker missionaries in Columbus, Mississippi. The Quakers were more than willing to give credit to the African American community for its help in keeping the missionary school open and protecting the school from threats, while the Quakers encouraged African Americans to become self-sufficient. This instance also provides a good example of the various attitudes of the native white population from cautious support to violent opposition. For the most part, AMA reports and correspondence are used as primary sources with the exception of sources on the Quakers and information used from the Freedmen's Bureau.

### **Teachers of the Freedpeople**

Most of the studies on the education of the freedmen spend at least some time chronicling the lives of the teachers in the schools. R. Butchart (2010), in looking specifically at the teachers in these freedmen schools, first focuses on the African American teachers from both the North and the South. He examines their struggles to help educate their people and delves into their personal history and background in shaping their choices. These were the first teachers the freedmen had, and they made up one-third of all the teachers for freedmen schools during that era. Butchart uses individual histories at the beginning and end of each chapter to set the tone and convey the chapter themes. He examines the regional make-up, the gender divisions and the economic backgrounds of these teachers to better understand why they chose to teach. Butchart also examines the relationship between the African American teachers and the Freedmen's Bureau and the various northern aid societies. Butchart found that for the African American teachers, their goal came down to promoting individual emancipation among their fellow people.

H. A. Williams (2005) also highlights the work of the African American teachers from both the North and South. Williams especially uses reports from the Freedmen's Bureau in Georgia to illuminate her points. She found that African American teachers were the embodiment of the challenge African American education posed to the white South. Many were not trained to be teachers and faced many challenges, including physical, mental and monetary. They had to teach in ill-equipped spaces and deal with white opposition to African American schools in the form of intimidation and outright violence with little pay. Yet they persevered in the face of these challenges to bring their people out of oppression. In addition to the Freedmen's Bureau's reports, Williams bolsters her arguments by using AMA reports and evidence from other historical studies done on missionary associations and the association-supported African American teachers as well as biographies of African American teachers from that time period.

Historian A. Fairclough (2007) chronicles the difficulties African American teachers faced, while specifically highlighting the reasons why education and literacy were so important to blacks. Fairclough explains that southern African American teachers usually lacked the experience and education of their northern counterparts, white or black, and so were looked down upon. This lack of education stemmed from the customs and laws during slavery forbidding African Americans from trying to get an education. Yet these efforts were little enforced and unsuccessful. Southern African American teachers also often faced violent

opposition from southern whites, yet got little protection or money from the federal government or northern missionary associations. Meanwhile, the northern missionary associations sought to control African American education and were disapproving of the efforts of southern African American teachers to create their own autonomy. In contrast, northern African American teachers were better educated and believed in the missionary movement and so were better liked by the various aid organizations. African American teachers moved into the arena of political action with Radical Reconstruction starting in 1867. However, this move tied them to the Republican Party who supported them, thus inciting more hatred and violence from the local southern white population. It was only after Radical Reconstruction and Republican rule ended that southern white opposition to African American education began to wane.

Instead of focusing on the difficulties African American teachers experienced, R. Morris (1981) turns to the qualifications of the African American teachers and the preference that many of the missionary associations had for experienced white teachers over them. However, he cites the limited supply of these preferred teachers as the impetus for placing African American teachers, especially those from the South who were not as well-trained, in the classroom. Morris shows that many African American teachers were actually very capable, even without formal training, and were integral to the process of bringing education to their own people. Using personal accounts, letters and paperwork from the various organizations that supported the schools in the South and statistical data collected at the time, Morris brings to light the various circumstances that motivated African American citizens to teach and the trials and triumphs they experienced.

Focusing more on the individual achievements of African American teachers during this period, historian K. A. Taylor (2005) analyzes the lives of African American teachers Mary S. Peake and Charlotte L. Forten. She argues that by examining these women's lives, particularly their experiences as teachers, the field of educational history will be enriched; her study adds to the existing literature on African American female schoolteachers, highlighting their roles as the first African American teachers in their respective settings. Taylor also wants to identify and highlight the discrepancies in earlier accounts of each woman's life. To do this Taylor uses the historical case study method to create life histories for both women. From diary accounts, letters and accounts by people who worked with both women, Taylor is able to piece together their work in the field of teaching and their contributions in bringing education to their fellow African American citizens, both slave and free. Both their life experiences and their teaching histories serve to paint a broader picture of the struggle in the history of education and to bring more interest to the lives of African American teachers in general.

R. Butchart (2010) delves into the subject of southern white teachers for the freed slaves. He shows that many more southern whites became teachers than had been shown previously by other historians. They did not seem to be motivated by religious motives like their northern counterparts; they were more likely in it for what little money they could make. They rarely traveled outside of their communities for work and did not leave behind many personal accounts to help understand what drove them. They only taught for a short period of time and were more likely to be older men. Butchart refutes a claim by R. Morris (1981) that they were motivated by loyalty to the Union; in fact, many Confederate veterans became teachers, while there is a lack of self-professed Unionists in reports and appeals to northern aid societies where such a profession

would have helped their cause. Moreover, many Unionists when given the chance to teach in black schools declined it. Butchart backs up his claims with evidence gained from the data collected from his Freedmen's Teacher Project as well as census data, accounts to school organizations and the few personal accounts still available.

Butchart (2010) also talks about the white teachers from the North and challenges the stereotypes about them. In truth, most northern white teachers were female and single. However, their regional backgrounds were more extensive than just the New England area, the hotbed of abolitionist sentiment, and they tended to be middle-aged. In terms of their teaching goals, they had the most religious bent, though they were not as evangelical as previously thought. And while they tended to want to "do good," their sights were turned usually more inward instead of outward toward the freedpeople who were their pupils. Butchart backs his claims with the data collected from his Freedmen's Teacher Project as well as census data, accounts from the different northern aid organizations and personal accounts from the teachers themselves. Most were supported by a religious northern aid organization, although in the beginning there were several large secular organizations that also sponsored schools and teachers. Butchart disagrees with fellow historian J. McPherson (1974) that the teachers were for the most part evangelical, despite the later monopoly by the evangelical aid organizations, because there were just as many Quakers and Unitarians who had no evangelical aims but still worked long and hard as teachers.

### **Textbooks and Pedagogy**

Moving the focus from the teachers and students to the materials and methods they used in the pursuit of education, H. A. Williams (2005) looks at the textbooks used in the freedpeople's schools. Most were published in the North and espoused northern ideologies, but lack of monetary resources often meant that schools had few books and little choices. That said, the evidence seems to suggest that African American teachers avoided using the newly created Confederate textbooks, despite the lack of options. A few textbooks were created just for the newly freedpeople, emphasizing the values the northern teachers felt they should know. Williams uses information gleaned primarily from reports to the Freedmen's Bureau as well as studies done specifically on the textbooks created and used during the late 1800s.

R. Butchart (2010) also examines the curriculum and the pedagogy of those early schools. Butchart argues that it mattered what the freedpeople were taught and also how they were taught. By analyzing what subjects the freedpeople were taught and the ways in which they were taught, Butchart is able to provide evidence to support his argument that the new modern system of teaching played a large part in the educational movement of the freed slaves. It challenged the social relations of the rural South through encouragement of critical thinking and more equal standing between students and teachers. It also made it easier to incorporate the creation of school systems into the new states' constitutions with its emphasis on order and structure. It provided a broader mix of subjects than traditional strategies, giving students a more diverse understanding of their world than they may otherwise have gotten. Finally, it provided the basis for more formal teacher training, thus creating the ability to have continuity and sustainability in the educational field. Butchart references previous arguments by other historians who were critical of the curriculum of the freed schools and dismissive of the ability of the freedpeople to

truly understand what they were taught as a counterpoint to his own argument. Butchart uses the records of various aid organizations and reports and letters by the teachers to enhance his own argument.

### **Opposition and Resistance**

For all the strides that the freed slaves made in their quest for education, there were many obstacles to face, not the least being white southern opposition to their education. In dealing with the attitudes of the local population to African American education, R. Butchart (2010) focuses on that southern opposition. Butchart argues that southern white resistance to African American education was not a response to the northern teachers in African American schools or their abolitionist leanings. Instead, Butchart believes that the opposition and resistance stemmed from the link between African American education and African American emancipation. Partly because southern whites could do nothing about the latter, they lashed out with violent intention towards the former. African American emancipation and education challenged the social system in the South and the idea of white superiority. Southern whites fought back against this with intimidation, social ostracism and threats to teachers, both white and black, southern and northern. They also used such economic means as refusing boarding for teachers, refusing to sell land for schools and denying African American access to buildings that could be used for schools. In the extreme instance, they used arson and physical violence, even murder, to force schools to close and teachers to stop teaching in the African American community. Their tactics, unfortunately, were successful in keeping African American schools underfunded and under-supported and in allowing white supremacy to continue in the South.

### **Efforts in South Carolina**

Focusing on South Carolina, J. Martin (1971) discusses how the freedmen's aid societies first organized and how they came to be involved with the freed slaves. With the occupation of the Sea Islands near Charleston by the Union army in November 1861, most of the native white population fled, leaving behind their slaves. As this was before emancipation, there was a great debate over what should be done with them. In the end their status changed from slave to either contraband or refugee, depending on the circumstance. In this way the army could care for them without freeing them, which would give bordering states a reason to secede from the Union. The effort to care for them and to have them continue to work on the plantations was eventually called the Port Royal Experiment, named for the new territory claimed by the army. A U.S. Treasury agent by the name of Edward Pierce was put in charge of the operation, and it was Pierce who called on the assistance of newly formed freedmen's aid societies to help with the educational effort. These aid societies had been formed in the North specifically to push for the abolition of slavery and to then give aid to the newly freed slaves. Eventually, three different groups came to work and teach in Port Royal; all were abolitionist but had different ideologies.

Martin (1971) argues that the establishment of the Freedmen's Bureau came about with the need for a centralized government agency to deal with the various issues involved in the emancipation of the slaves. Some of these issues were already brewing, for the northern cotton agents sent by Pierce tried to set up their own fiefdoms on the plantations, sowing distrust among the



contraband slaves of northern white civilians. This made Pierce's job even harder since the military was also contemptuous of the contrabands as well as the teachers and superintendents Pierce sent to educate the contrabands. Eventually, General Rufus Saxton took over Pierce's work in Port Royal and with the Emancipation Proclamation found a pressing need for a central government agency to work with the newly freed slaves. Thus, on March 3, 1865, Congress passed a bill establishing the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, better known as the Freedmen's Bureau, within the War Department. The first bill, however, did not mention education; that would only come in later.

As head of the Freedmen's Bureau in South Carolina, General Saxton, Martin (1971) argues, was determined to establish schools for the freedmen. To that end he appointed Reuben Tomlinson as State Superintendent of Education for the Freedmen's Bureau on October 3, 1865. Tomlinson was already working in Port Royal as Inspector General of Freedmen's Affairs. The freedmen's aid societies and teachers they employed at Port Royal all approved of Tomlinson's appointment. He already knew the freedmen, the educational work being done and the teachers assigned. He was modest and conciliatory in his approach, saying that because South Carolina could not yet financially support the educational work, the freedmen's aid societies would humbly assist while qualified persons from South Carolina could help by teaching. He called on landowners to establish schools, appealing to their economic interests in telling them that teaching their workers would increase industry and thus their profits. Tomlinson felt that the Bureau's purpose in the educational work was only to assist keeping school structures in good repair and to lay the foundation for a public school system. But he also helped the various aid societies by receiving and distributing books, school supplies and clothing. To increase contributions from the North and gain the support of southern whites, Tomlinson also wrote many accounts of the schoolwork being done throughout the state. He believed his efforts created more favorable attitudes on the part of the native white population, but his assessment would prove to be premature.

Martin (1971) asserts that the Freedmen's Bureau and the freedmen's aid societies saw their most productive period in educational work from September 1866 to July 1868. In that time the state had the closest thing to a public education system for African American children, emphasizing increased educational quality and regular attendance. In that period several normal, or teacher training, schools were starting to train African American teachers for these schools. Between 1866 and 1867, Congress passed two Reconstruction Acts that had a direct impact on the schools for African American children. They called for the nullification of the old state government and the creation of a new, more just and equitable state constitution. These acts also called for the registration of all male citizens of the age of 21 and the taking of an "ironclad oath," which disqualified most of the white males in South Carolina. Consequently, mostly newly enfranchised African American men devised the new state constitution, a topic that H. A. Williams (2005) also touches on. This new constitution called for a public system of education open to all children, regardless of race, class or previous status. This provision, stipulating that all publicly funded schools must be open to all children, created more opposition in the native white community, while the establishment of a public education system signaled to northern whites that South Carolina was ready to take on the financial burden of supporting the African American schools on its own. As a consequence, the northern freedmen's aid societies ceased most of their financial support at a time when it was needed most. At around the same time,

Tomlinson resigned as state superintendent, reducing morale even more. The Bureau continued its educational activities until July 1870 but its achievements were greatly reduced. Overall though, Martin concludes, the Bureau and the freedmen's aid societies had a significant impact on the education of black South Carolinians, getting them to a place where black education was grudgingly accepted as a normal part of the entire public education system. Their most lasting impact, however, was on the establishment of normal schools for the training of African American teachers, many of which are still in existence as African American colleges today.

M. Abbott (1967), in his book on the Freedmen's Bureau in South Carolina, argues that though a substantial effort was made to educate the freedmen, the northern missionaries' excessive emotionalism killed the momentum that the educational movement needed to thrive. While they were intensely dedicated and almost zealous in the beginning, those feelings could not be sustained; interest declined and necessary financial assistance dropped away, leaving many efforts unfinished. However, there were missionaries and teachers who continued to dedicate their lives to educate the freed slaves long after the first emotional impetus had waned. Many of the teachers were tested both physically and mentally, yet still went on to dedicate decades of their lives in educational service and founded some of the most prestigious and longest running educational institutions in the African American community. The educational movement during Reconstruction, however, was still unable to reach many in the African American population, and Abbott posits that the education they received may not have been of practical help, immersing them as it did in subjects both foreign to their experience and impractical for daily life. Although Abbott feels no generalizations can be made about the attitudes of the native white population toward African American education, it is clear to him that the combination of southern white opposition, of the type talked about by R. Butchart (2010), and the increasing northern white apathy created a pessimistic future for the educational movement.

J. Williamson (1965) charts the rise and decline of the movement to educate the freed slaves in South Carolina first in the impetus among the slaves before the Civil War, continuing with the efforts of the freedmen's aid organizations and the Freedmen's Bureau, and ending with the state-supported public education. Williamson argues that although the efforts to educate the freed slaves fell far short of the actual needs of the time, it created leaders in the African American community who kept the educational efforts moving forward in the resulting years and who made great progress despite both internal and external opposition. Even before the Civil War, both slaves and free blacks in South Carolina found ways to educate themselves. Before the 1834 law prohibited the teaching of slaves, slave children would attend school alongside their masters. And in Charleston the free black community and white sympathizers established schools for the free black children. Even after 1834, these schools continued to run, albeit with white supervision. Slaves also found ways to teach themselves and their children in secret and at home. At the time of emancipation, around 5% of newly freed slaves and free black community members in South Carolina could at least read and write a little, a dramatic number given the severe restrictions on their educational opportunities.

When the northern missionaries came to the Sea Islands in 1862, they continued this interest in education, ranking free schools on the same level as free labor as part of the reconstruction of southern society. After the Union army occupied Charleston, they seized the buildings that

housed the free school system and set about continuing its good work. State Superintendent Tomlinson was exceptionally devoted to the educational cause, serving for three years in that capacity. His powers, however, as superintendent were extremely limited since he was only able to supply the buildings, furniture and books for the schools. Nevertheless, Williamson (1965) argues that the Bureau's record is impressive, especially with the limited resources they possessed. In mid-October 1865, there were 48 new schools reported with around 6,000 students and 108 teachers. These schools were mostly concentrated in Charleston and the surrounding areas, but new schools were reported all over the state, including in Columbia, Greenville, Georgetown, Florence and Darlington. By mid-October 1867, Bureau Commissioner General O. O. Howard estimated that 20,000 students were enrolled in Bureau-supported and private schools in South Carolina. And in the first half of 1867, Tomlinson spent \$22,551.12 on construction of new school buildings, rents for school buildings and other school purposes.

At the other end of the spectrum, the mostly negative attitudes of the white population of South Carolina also had a profound impact on the progress of the educational movement for African Americans in the state. At the beginning of Reconstruction, the white response was totally negative, but as time went on, some of the leaders, particularly church leaders, gave their qualified support. The aims of the churches were to control what African Americans learned and to teach only a select few more extensively so they could serve as preachers. Most still felt that African Americans were inferior to whites and should continue to take subordinate roles. Even those who supported African American education were unanimously opposed to the mixing of races in the schools, though they did not have clearly understandable reasons for their opposition. Both the legislature and white politicians felt that separate schools were necessary to educate whites out of their prejudice, but they were unclear as to how that would happen.

The African American community, however, was entirely supportive of integrated schools, particularly as they felt that racially separate schools gave whites the opportunity to deny them equality in funding and resources. The African American men who participated in the state conventions in 1867 and 1868 to create the new state constitution expressed this support for universal education, as explained by both Williamson (1965) and Martin (1971). However, Williamson argues that the leaders among this group were divided as to how and when universal, integrated education should be implemented. In the end, the action of many African Americans showed that they were more interested in obtaining an education than in pushing for integrated education.

The public, or common, school system under the new state constitution and Republican government brought about universal, compulsory education but was not without its flaws. Its faulty execution can be blamed equally on the legislature, the newly elected county commissioners and the voters alike, but the bulk of the blame lay squarely with the legislature. They not only delayed passing the new school law until 1870, but they also wrote unrealistic bills and wasted vast amounts of money through corruption. To combat these faults, Governor D. H. Chamberlin implemented in 1874 a program of reform, starting with trying to limit the absolute powers of the county commissioners. He was more successful in improving the quality of teacher training. Despite the corruption and ineptness, Williamson (1965) argues that the Republican program of public education did have some impressive gains. In 1869 only 10% of

the school-age population (aged 6 to 16 years of age) was in school, but by 1875 half of the school-age population was attending school. And in the African American community, the number of children in school went from 9% in 1869 to 44% in 1876. At the same time, higher education for African Americans progressed rapidly with three institutions dedicated specifically for them established by the end of Reconstruction, while white higher education actually regressed.

The availability of education and the eagerness of students combined during this period to create an impressive record of achievement. Unfortunately, this great progress was limited in its scope, mainly in such urban areas as Charleston and Columbia, while more rural areas showed very little improvement. Even though the illiteracy rate in African American community went down between 1865 and 1870, it was still the same at around 80% in 1880. Williamson (1965) argues, however, that those who gained a good education during this period went on to champion the cause of African American education and kept the community moving forward educationally after Reconstruction. Despite major cutbacks in public funding for African American schools, these leaders in the community reduced the illiteracy rate by almost 30% to around 52% by 1900.

All of the historians seem to agree that the freed slaves were active participants in their own educational destiny. These historians, like Anderson (1988) and Williams (1965), highlight the challenges they faced and try to profile their experiences in general. Many, like Fairclough (2007), Morris (1981) and Taylor (2005), focus specifically on the teachers from among the freed slaves as well as their free northern counterparts. Others, like Butchart (2010), try to understand the range of teachers who came to the educational movement. Still others, who focus specifically on South Carolina, do so with an eye toward the work done by the Freedmen's Bureau and various northern aid societies. Williamson (1965) also continues the dialogue into the new state public system created with the support of the African American community. They all examine the relationships between students and teachers, teachers and aid organizations, and the whole against the background of white opposition in the South. The conclusions reached add strength to the argument that despite the enormous obstacles they faced, freedpeople set a courageous example in their fortitude and willingness to sacrifice in pursuit of their goals.

### **Findings**

No scholars focus exclusively on the Pee Dee region of South Carolina in examining the education of the freed slaves. Some, like Anderson (1988) and Butchart (2010), focus primarily on the southern region of the United States as a whole when discussing the education of the freed slaves. Others, like Taylor (2005), focus on specific people working in South Carolina but not the Pee Dee region. Still others, like Williamson (1965) and Martin (1971), focus on the education of the freedmen in the whole of South Carolina with an emphasis on Charleston and Columbia and only anecdotal evidence from the Pee Dee. Abbott (1967) does give some attention on the Pee Dee region in his praise of the work of Benjamin Franklin (B. F.) Whittemore, but his focus is mainly on the Freedmen's Bureau and their work in the whole of South Carolina. So, the task of this study is to focus on the educational efforts put forth in the Pee Dee region in order to compare them with the efforts in the rest of the state. Along with the

secondary sources mentioned above, the Freedmen's Bureau records, monthly reports from the teachers in the region, the annual reports from the Superintendent of Education and newspaper articles provide a clearer view of what the educational movement for the freed slaves in the Pee Dee region was like during Reconstruction.

In 1865, B. F. Whittemore, an army chaplain from Massachusetts, was charged by the Freedmen's Bureau to establish schools in the area and the rest of eastern South Carolina. According to reports from State Superintendent Tomlinson, he established schools in Darlington, Cheraw, Bennettsville, Chesterfield and Florence, using Confederate government buildings given to him by the Treasury Department as school buildings repurposed with volunteer labor and money from the freedmen (Bureau, 1865). The first school he established was in Darlington in January 1866 with the freedmen moving a building from Florence to Darlington to be used as a school building. That school taught 500 students with 5 teachers. Between January 1, 1866 and May 19, 1866, 11 schools were established in the Eastern District with 12 teachers and a total of 818 students (Martin, 1971, pp. 57-59). One school in Camden was established that bore his name and ran for two months. The school building and property in Conway, known then as Conwayboro, that would bear his name was entrusted to him and several local men in 1871, again by the Freedmen's Bureau (Bureau, 1866; Wachman, 1975, pp. 21-23).

The freedmen were also highly involved in the creation of these schools as evidenced by the names of the other trustees listed in the transfer letter. These included Reverend Henry Wallace Jones and Augustus Reeves Thompson, who were both delegates from the Horry District to the 1868 Convention to create the new state constitution. They also represented two disparate groups of freed slaves: Rev. Jones being at least literate and a leader in his community, and having established the first African A.M.E Church in the area, while Mr. Thompson could neither read nor write and had only recently aspired to the position of leader. However, their determination to bring about change and education to their fellow African Americans can be evidenced by their participation in that convention and their willingness to become trustees in a school for freedmen in Conwayboro (Wachman, 1975, pp. 21-23; *Marion Star*, 1868).

The freedmen were also active in other parts of the Pee Dee area, including Kingstree where they built a school in April 1866 without any outside assistance and insured it for \$600. In Georgetown in 1866, they also built a school using their own money, and in Darlington they contributed \$500 in labor and money for a new school building (Bureau, 1865; Martin, 1971 pp. 57-59). By October of 1866, the freedmen of the Eastern District had raised \$3,850 in money and labor for the educational efforts in their communities (Martin, 1971 p. 174).

Not as much is known about the first teachers of the freedmen in the Pee Dee region. The American Freedmen's Aid and Union Commission paid most of the teachers from both the New England and New York Branches. According to their records, the following were teachers in the area in December 1866 (American Freedmen's Aid and Union Commission, 1866, p. 142):

New England Branch Teachers:

Darlington:

B. T. Whittemore [most likely B. F.]

Mrs. B. F. Whittemore  
 Ellen A. Gates  
 Sarah A. Woodworth  
 Marion D. Stuart  
 Springville [near Darlington]:  
 Henry E. Hayne  
 Kingston [most likely referring to Conway area]:  
 S. A. Swails [or Smalls]  
 Mrs. S. A. Swails  
 Timmons ville:  
 Mary L. Shrewsbury  
 Louisa Dibble  
 Florence:  
 Thomas C. Cox  
 J. A. Washington  
 Society Hill:  
 Etta Payne  
 James Hamilton

As identified above, B. F. Whittemore's wife and most likely himself were teachers in Darlington, and in a history of Florence County, Thomas C. Cox is mentioned as the first teacher of the freedmen's school in Florence. Cox, a free black from Charleston, was most likely sent to Florence at the behest of the Freedmen's Bureau superintendent, who experimented with sending educated native blacks from Charleston to the Pee Dee area as teachers. Reverend Joshua E. Wilson, another African American, who claimed that he provided the money for the school, later succeeded him. This school came to be called the Wilson school, though there is some debate as to whether it was named after Rev. Wilson or Henry Wilson, the congressman from Massachusetts who had sponsored the Freedmen's Bureau bill (King, 1981, p. 62).

The monthly school reports from teachers in the region in 1870 provide another glimpse into who taught the students and some of what they were learning (South Carolina State Superintendent of Education). These reports, however, are limited, for there were no reports for the Georgetown District and only a few reports for the Horry and Williamsburg Districts available. The bulk of the reports came from schools in Darlington and Marion Districts. For instance, in Conway an H. W. Jones is listed as the principal teacher for the school for black children there. This is most likely Rev. Henry Wallace Jones, especially given that the school and land it sat on is listed as being owned by the African Methodist Church. Now having Rev. Jones as a trustee of a school in 1871 makes more sense, if he were already teaching either at the same school or another in town. Most of the teachers in the reports are indicated as being black southerners. And a majority of these teachers were male. The women reported were either southern blacks or northern whites. The only southern whites reported as teachers were all male. The reports also indicate how many students were learning a particular subject during that month. These included basic elements like the alphabet, reading and writing, as well as slightly more advanced subjects like geography and history. At this point in time, none of the schools

reported having students in advanced studies, but some had students learning history and many had students learning geography.

In terms of the school buildings themselves, the monthly school reports are also helpful. According to the teachers, many of the buildings being used to house the schools were in bad condition. Only a few were maintained enough to merit “very good” or “quite comfortable” assessments. Most of the buildings were made of wood or logs (South Carolina State Superintendent of Education). The buildings owned by the Methodist Episcopal Church or the African Methodist Episcopal Church were rated in the best condition, while those owned by private citizens varied and those owned by the Freedmen’s Bureau rated worst. One report states that the school is run in a private residence and it rated as in “very good” condition.

Unlike most of the rest of the state, as Martin (1971) had previously stated, the Pee Dee region actually saw improved attendance from 1869 to 1876. The annual reports from the Superintendent of Education (South Carolina General Assembly, 1871, pp. 45-100; 1877, pp. 335-386) give the most complete overall view of the issue. In one dramatic example, only about 7% of school-age African American males attended public schools in Williamsburg District in 1869, but by 1876, around 58% attended school.<sup>ii</sup>([See note.](#)) The same held true for African American females in the district. This is close to the overall percentage change in South Carolina that Williamson (1965) discussed. In Horry County the percentage was around 18 for African American males in 1869, rising to almost 52 in 1876 based on the county commissioner’s numbers with a similar rise in numbers among African American females. ([See Tables 1.1 and 1.2.](#)) What must be taken into account, however, is the tendency for teachers, county commissioners and the state superintendent to estimate numbers without proper evidence, as Martin (1971) and Williamson (1965) both talked about. However, in spite of the lack of accuracy, these percentages are comparable to the numbers of students reported in the monthly teacher’s reports, giving them credence that they may not be too distorted. Whether this upward trend continued or not could be the subject of a subsequent study.

Similarly, the numbers of African American teachers increased in the Pee Dee region during this time. Again, the annual reports are a good source for the overall numbers for each district. Williamsburg District, once again, holds the greatest change. In 1871 there were six African American teachers reported, while in 1876 there were forty. As the numbers of African American children attending public school rose, so, too, did the numbers of African American teachers (South Carolina General Assembly, 1871, pp. 45-100; 1877, pp. 335-386).

It is also known that out of these new schools emerged leaders who guided the African American community to progress steadily in the educational field, as J. Williamson (1965) argues. One of these individuals was from the Georgetown community. William A. Sinclair was born a slave in the Georgetown District before being sold away. He later returned after emancipation to live with his father. He was educated at the local schools and went on to attend the African American Claflin University as well the University of South Carolina (during the time it accepted African American students) and then continued his studies at another historically black college Howard University in Washington D.C. He got his bachelor’s, master’s and theological degrees at Howard and obtained a medical degree while working for the AMA. He then came

back to Georgetown and became principal of one of the local public schools for African Americans, thus bringing more knowledge and experience back to the community (Williamson, 1965 p. 238; Sinclair, 1965, pp. ix-x).

Overall, the educational movement for the freed slaves in the Pee Dee region looks remarkably similar to the rest of the state. The increases in numbers of African American children attending correspond with the increases overall in the state. Teachers were all at first overseen by the Freedmen's Bureau and the northern aid societies, particularly the New England and New York Branches of the American Freedmen's Union Commission. The Bureau, northern aid societies and the freedmen themselves put together the funds and labor to establish the schools in the region. Like the rest of the South, the freedmen in the Pee Dee region were active in both advocating for their own education and in bringing that education to their communities. More so than was seen in other areas, African American teachers rose up to oversee these new schools. Further research would need to be done to bring more of their stories to light and to truly recognize how much their efforts impacted the African American community and identify how the children taught in these schools used their education to better their communities. These schools provided the basis to push the African American community in the Pee Dee region to continue to keep education in the forefront with leaders like William Sinclair to move the community into the twentieth century.



FIGURES

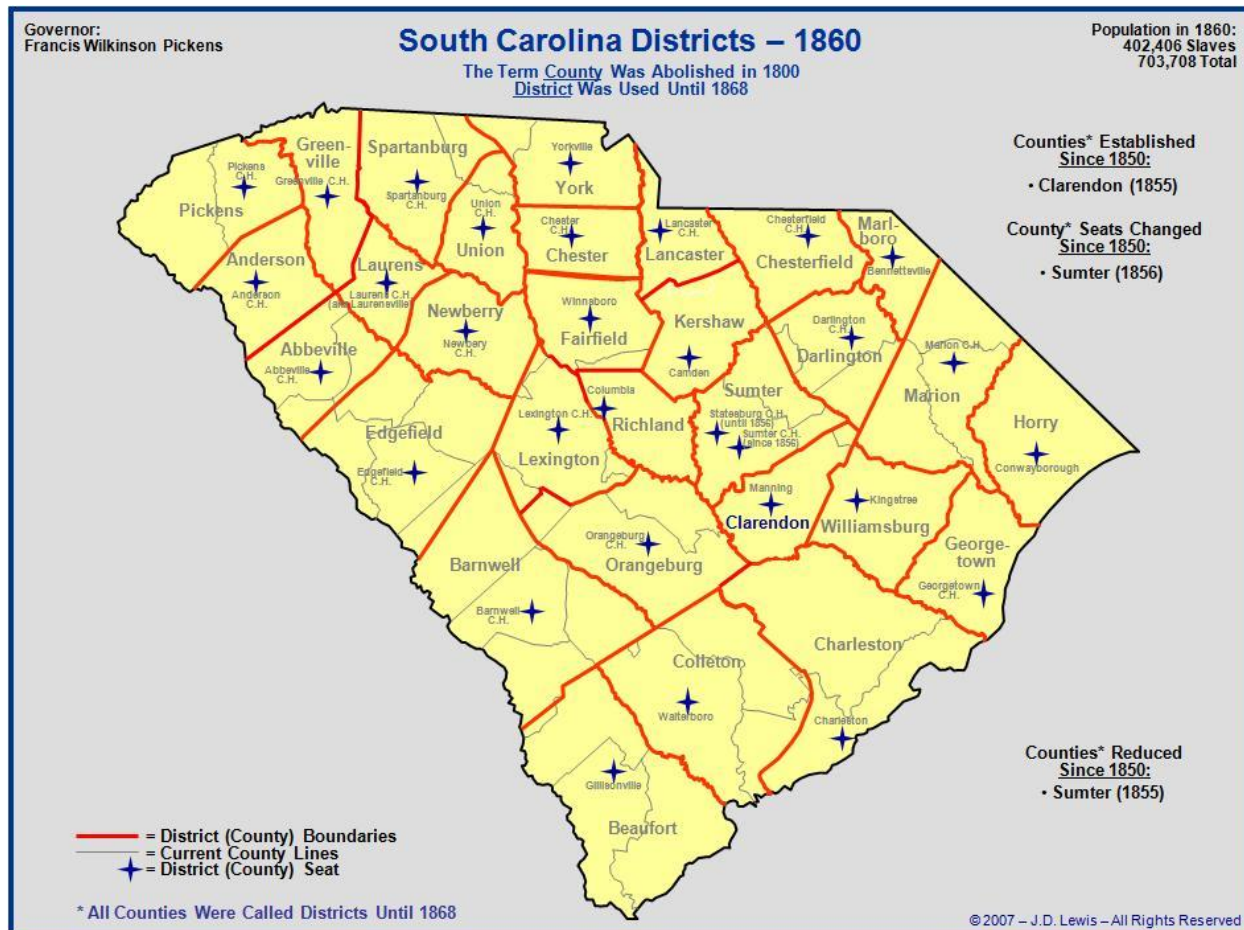


Figure 1: 1860 South Carolina Districts (Lewis, 2007)

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## TABLES

| Districts           | 1869<br>Attendance/Census<br>Male | 1869<br>Attendance/Report<br>Male | 1869<br>Attendance/Census<br>Female | 1869<br>Attendance/Report<br>Female |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <b>Darlington</b>   | 13.02%                            | 56.25%                            | 12.11%                              | 56.25%                              |
| <b>Georgetown</b>   | 31.14%                            | No report                         | 33.82%                              | No report                           |
| <b>Horry</b>        | 18.48%                            | 17.27%                            | 19.62%                              | 18.26%                              |
| <b>Marion</b>       | 20.88%                            | 15.71%                            | 26.29%                              | 16.67%                              |
| <b>Williamsburg</b> | 6.85%                             | 6.74%                             | 6.81%                               | 6.74%                               |

**Table 1.1: Percentage of School-Age African American Children in the Public Schools (1869)**

| Districts           | 1876<br>Attendance/Census<br>Male | 1876<br>Attendance/Report<br>Male | 1876<br>Attendance/Census<br>Female | 1876<br>Attendance/Report<br>Female |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <b>Darlington</b>   | 40.23%                            | 36.88%                            | 41.10%                              | 36.54%                              |
| <b>Georgetown</b>   | 103.27%                           | 69.19%                            | 87.88%                              | 81.08%                              |
| <b>Horry</b>        | 73.23%                            | 51.74%                            | 66.88%                              | 55.54%                              |
| <b>Marion</b>       | 49.70%                            | 47.11%                            | 48.11%                              | 48.06%                              |
| <b>Williamsburg</b> | 57.60%                            | 59.78%                            | 57.76%                              | 65.67%                              |

**Table 1.2: Percentage of School-Age African American Children in the Public Schools (South Carolina General Assembly: 1872, 1877)**

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## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup>To make the terminology uniform, *African American* and *white* will be used throughout this paper, unless *black* would be more appropriate in place of *African American*. But it must be noted that the scholars mentioned all use other terms including black, colored, and Negro.

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<sup>ii</sup>Percentages based on numbers reported in the 1869 and 1875 Census, respectfully, versus reported attendance, balanced by difference between numbers reported in the Census and the numbers in the county commissioners' reports, if available.

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