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## It Takes Great Nerve to Walk Here: Yankee Schoolmarms and Southern Belles in Post-Bellum Freedman's Schools—1860-1870

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It Takes Great Nerve to Walk Here: Yankee Schoolmarms and Southern Belles in Post-Bellum  
Freedman's Schools—1860-1870

When the Union army trudged into the rebellious Confederacy, toting guns and ammunition, an army of a different kind trickled in behind. Its troops wore not uniforms but hoopskirts, and for weapons they carried books instead of bayonets. These were the schoolmarms answering the call for education among the South's newly emancipated slaves, or freedmen. They set up camp in schools funded by charitable organizations and the U.S. Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, otherwise known as the Freedmen's Bureau. While blessed with hundreds of eager students and supportive black communities, it was not light work. Teachers were met with long hours for little pay, social ostracization, and constant threats to property and life from former confederates. Yet thousands faced all of this knowingly, somehow finding the courage to cross the threshold of a black schoolhouse. Between the years of 1862-1876, almost 2,115 white Northern women taught in freedmen's schools, while 700 white Southern women made their way into the black classroom.<sup>1</sup>

What motivated these women to take up the mantle of a freedmen's teacher? What spurred Northern women from the bountiful opportunities of the North to the chaotic post-war South? What prompted their Southern counterparts to cross racial and social boundaries into the classroom?

Scholars have considered these questions and extensively studied freedmen's teachers, but have reached conflicting conclusions regarding their motivations. From an examination of primary sources, including the diaries and letters of Laura Towne, Sarah Chase, and other

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald E Butchart, *Schooling The Freed People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2010), 81.

teachers, it has been concluded that the main catalyst for Northern women to teach Freedmen came from a strong sense of moral and religious conviction.

Southern teachers left few traces in the historical record, doing their best not to publicize their career. Thus, sources like the diary of Sarah Morgan Dawson and Myrta Lockett Avary's *Dixie After the War* were used to assess Southern female attitudes towards teaching in freedmen's schools. Secondary works, in conjunction with census data and Freedmen's Bureau records, helped determine that Southern women taught because of economic need.

This paper concludes that the majority of Northern teachers were motivated to enter the freedmen's classroom thanks to religious fervor, higher levels of pedagogical training and education, and the fact that teaching was a more socially acceptable occupation for Northern women. Southern women, on the other hand, entered the classroom chiefly to support their families in a depressed post-war economy, and while politics affected the lives of women from both regions, it was not the primary source of motivation for the majority of either.

#### *Limitations*

The author faced various limitations in researching this topic. Time, as always, is the student's foe, and thus this research is by no means a complete study of white female freedmen's teachers. Rather, it is an argument of their motivations. The American Missionary Association archives and the applications of freedmen's teachers were unavailable to the author due to time and travel constraints, and while primary sources are quoted directly wherever possible, the majority of the applications quoted are relayed from secondary sources. Studies of Freedmen's Bureau teachers are ongoing, and recent revision has led to confliction in statistics regarding the number of teachers, their gender, and region of origin. However, the statistics cited in Ronald Butchart's *Schooling the Freed People* are the ones used in this paper.

This paper proffers a side-by-side comparison of the motivations of Northern and Southern white women in freedmen's schools. It will examine the motivations and deterrents of each regional group, starting with political motivations, followed by economic, and finally, the social factors which played into women's decisions to teach.

### **Northern Political Motivations**

Though some may believe women who taught former slaves were political crusaders, eager to usher in a new era, the reality is that most Northern women did not express explicit political incentive for their work, and were more anxious to have their students read bibles than ballots. While many teachers possessed some form of anti-slavery and abolitionist leanings, they drew inspiration from the religious side of abolition rather than the political.

The New England Freedmen's Aid Society (NEFAS) hoped its educators would teach the freed slave "to be worthy servants of God and good citizens of the Republic," though interestingly claimed that it was not "committed to any political theory or mooted theory of equality of the races."<sup>2</sup> Teachers reflected this rhetoric, with even the most politically active citing religious motivation above political. Jane Briggs Smith, by far one of the strongest advocates for black political equality, spoke of her initial motivation as having come from the belief that her work "would be so glorious that I should feel...I was working with God."<sup>3</sup>

While their motivation did not spring from partisanship, it is doubtful that any freedmen's teacher was unaware of the political ramifications of her work—Southern opposition forces made sure of that. Jane Briggs Smith wrote to a friend that her Southern neighbors took "every

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<sup>2</sup> New England Freedmen's Aid Society, *The Freedmen's Journal* 1, no. 1 (1865), 173.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Briggs Smith, "Jane Briggs Smith To William Fuller Fiske, March 14, 1867", Letter (Sumter S.C., 1867), The American Antiquarian Society.

means in their power to vent their spite” if and when she voiced a political opinion.<sup>4</sup> Southerners were sure that Yankee schoolmarms would influence their pupils for the Republican vote—though this ignored the agency of former slaves who were more likely to vote Republican because of Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, rather than what their teachers said. Some associations, like the American Missionary Association (AMA) discouraged its teachers from meddling in politics in an effort to avoid friction with confederate neighbors.

The AMA and the teachers it employed exemplified the promotion of a religious agenda over a political one. Though founded on anti-slavery principles, Freedmen’s expert Ronald Butchart notes that the AMA, and the teachers it employed, “were not exponents of a post-war interracial or egalitarian agenda” but put “proselytizing above the political needs of the freed people.”<sup>5</sup> The AMA’s employment requirements were void of politics, asking only for applicants with a missionary spirit, health, energy, common sense, good character, and teaching experience.<sup>6</sup> In Butchart’s extensive study of AMA applications, the women who specifically mentioned being abolitionists were less likely to be hired than those who gave religion as their motivation, despite holding higher teaching qualifications than the latter.<sup>7</sup>

The majority of Northern women had sympathies similar to teacher Laura S. Haviland. When challenged as to where she drew inspiration for her civil rights work she responded, “We find them between the lids of the Bible. God created man in his own image... We believe all are

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<sup>4</sup> Jane Briggs Smith, "Jane Briggs Smith To William Fuller Fiske, July 25, 1867", Letter (Worcester, MA, 1867), American Antiquarian Society.

<sup>5</sup> Butchart, *Schooling*, 111.

<sup>6</sup> “Teachers: Their Qualifications and Support,” *American Missionary* 10 (July 1866), 152.

<sup>7</sup> Butchart *Schooling*, 112.

alike objects of redeeming love.”<sup>8</sup> It was this firm religious belief in love and divine mission that informed Haviland’s political views, and brought her and so many others into the South.

### **Southern Political Motivations**

The majority of Southern women were reluctant freedmen’s teachers who were pushed into the classroom by poverty rather than political conviction. Southern whites almost universally opposed black education, and feared that radical Republican notions of equality, suffrage, and education would lead, at worst, to a black uprising, and at best, swing the vote in favor of the Republican Party. Southern apologist Myrta Lockett Avary considered most Yankee schoolmarms political and religious fanatics, intent on destroying the Southern way of life. She argued, “We should teach the negroes ourselves if we do not wish them influenced against us by Yankees,” though this was under the condition that the Negro *had* to be educated—a position Southerners were loathe to accept.<sup>9</sup>

The Yankees, for their part, were equally wary of Southern teachers’ political motives. Laura Towne, upon becoming American Freedmen’s Union Commission superintendent for Pennsylvania cautioned the organization against hiring native Southern teachers, saying there was “little doubt [as to] what kind of political instruction” their students would receive, referring to the efforts of maintaining white supremacy through education.<sup>10</sup> Keeping blacks ignorant of their newfound rights was one of the few ways Southerners could maintain white hegemony, but this was usually not done through the classroom. A posse of native Kentucky teachers was accused of teaching their students “nothing unless it be in the injunction of the apostle, ‘Servants

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<sup>8</sup> Laura Haviland, *A Woman's Life Work: Labors And Experiences Of Laura S. Haviland*, ebook, 1st ed. (Cincinnati: Walden and Stowe, 1882), accessed December 8, 2016, <https://archive.org/details/womanslifeworkla01havi>, 149 .

<sup>9</sup> Myrta Lockett Avary. *Dixie After The War : An Exposition Of Social Conditions Existing In The South, During The Twelve Years Succeeding The Fall Of Richmond*. New York: Doubleday, 1906, 320.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Charles Morris, *Reading, 'Riting, And Reconstruction*, 1st ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 132.

obey your masters.’”<sup>11</sup> A few teachers like the Kentuckians attempted to stunt black equality through the classroom, but most Southern women were generally more focused on filling their pockets than their pupils’ minds. The majority faced abject poverty, and the brevity of their teaching careers, usually only one semester, betrays no lofty political motive, either for good or ill.

Robert Morris postulated that some teachers taught because of Unionist leanings and a belief in black education. However, assertions of Union sympathies were rare, and it is difficult to assess if these assertions came from true political belief or financial desperation. Ronald Butchart notes that of the 22,000 South Carolinians who pledged to the state’s claim office that they were Unionists, only fourteen taught in freedmen’s schools, evidencing that unionist sympathy did not make a teacher.<sup>12</sup>

Had Southern women attempted to teach freedmen to further a political agenda, they might have found favor with neighbors for attempting to derail black education from the inside out. This was not the case, however, and the Southern-Belle-turned-schoolmarm found herself slandered along with her Yankee counterpart. Southern political forces favored eliminating Negro education altogether. Unfortunately, these forces gained a victory with President Andrew Johnson. Johnson’s lenient reconstruction policies, including the defunding of the Freedmen’s Bureau, left black schools at the mercy of hostile Southern communities. Black education took blow after blow as the stream of teachers and funding from benevolent societies dried up in the post-reconstruction years. Southerners left black public schools underfunded and under supplied, finding the policies of intimidation, discrimination, and disenfranchisement more potent than biased instruction.

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<sup>11</sup> Morris, 134.

<sup>12</sup> Butchart, *Schooling*, 60.

### Northern Economic Motivations

After the war, carpetbaggers came south to make a quick buck, and the defeated rebels assumed Yankee schoolmarmms were also seeking to profit from their defeat. However, Northern women were hardly the get-rich-quick fanatics some Southerners assumed them to be. Those who wished to make a profit from teaching would have done better to stay north, where jobs were plentiful and wages higher.

The Northern job market for teachers was strong. War drafts had drained schools of male teachers, and women rose to fill the ranks. Between 1860 and 1870, the number of women in teaching positions rose by ten percent.<sup>13</sup> Many freedmen's teachers gained job experience in Northern classrooms before moving South. Of the 600 teachers whose pre-war occupations that can be identified, eighty three percent worked as teachers before coming South.<sup>14</sup>

Northern schools also offered better wages than Freedmen's schools. In 1867 daily wages were a dollar higher in the North Central states than in the Southern Atlantic region.<sup>15</sup> By 1873, the average monthly wage for a female teacher in Pennsylvania was \$32.44, whereas in North Carolina public schools paid \$25.00 a month.<sup>16</sup> The American Missionary Association paid its female teachers only \$15.00 a month and many had to charge their pupils a small fee to pay for room and board.<sup>17</sup> Sometimes allowances were given for living expenses, but these were often sparse, and rarely consistent. Teacher Maria Waterbury wrote that she and her colleagues had not

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<sup>13</sup> Joe Pearlmann and Robert A. Margo, *Women's Work? American Schoolteachers, 1650-1920*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2001), 87.

<sup>14</sup> Butchart, *Schooling*, 84.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Margo, "The North-South Wage Gap, Before And After The Civil War" (National Bureau of Economic Research, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w8778.pdf>, 2002), 42.

<sup>16</sup> United States Department of the Interior, Report Of The Secretary Of The Interior, :Report of the Commissioner of Education (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1873).

<sup>17</sup> Butchart, *Schooling*, 122.



been paid in months, leaving them to subsist on charity, but in true missionary spirit, she trusted her “prayer-hearing God of our needs,” to provide.<sup>18</sup>

Inspired by religious conviction, some teachers refused salaries altogether. Sarah Chase refused to take a salary, preferring to be supported by her family. She felt “that a truly interested person” could accomplish their work without personal monetary reward.<sup>19</sup> Besides low pay, the work was not a challenge for the weak of heart or the fortune seeker.

### **Southern Economic Motivations**

Despite diarist Leticia Dabney Miller’s assertion that “A Southern woman would starve before she would teach Negroes,” some women chose the classroom over starvation.<sup>20</sup> Most Southern women who taught in Freedmen’s schools were desperately poor. The results of Butchart’s Freedmen’s Teacher Project revealed that two-thirds of white Southern women in freed people’s schools had less than five hundred dollars annual income, and the majority of those stated no income at all.<sup>21</sup> “If white Southerners at first objected to teaching Negroes,” wrote Myrta Avary, “this objection speedily vanished before the argument: ‘I must make a living.’”<sup>22</sup>

Considering the state of the Southern economy, it is easy to understand why women would be willing to risk violence for a salary. In 1865, one federal dollar was worth 1,850 confederate dollars. Staples, such as cornmeal, could cost upwards of \$8.00 a bushel, and the average monthly cost of supporting a family of four had risen to \$68.25 from just \$6.55 in

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<sup>18</sup> Maria Waterbury, *Seven Years Among The Freedmen*, ebook, 1st ed. (Chicago: T.B. Arnold, 1890), accessed December 8, 2016, <https://archive.org/stream/sevenyearsamongf00wate#page/n5/mode/2up>, 127.

<sup>19</sup> Sarah Chase, "Sarah Chase To Fred W. May, Nov. 1, 1866", Letter, 1866, The American Antiquarian Society.

<sup>20</sup> Leticia Dabney Miller, *Recollections Of Leticia Dabney Miller*, 1st ed. (Chicago, 1926), 31.

<sup>21</sup> Butchart, *Schooling*, 68.

<sup>22</sup> Avary, 320.

1860.<sup>23</sup> However meager, a teacher's salary offered desperate Southern women a means to support their families. American Missionary Association director J. W. Alvord received dozens of applications from Southern women, ranging from modest requests for work to blatant admissions of need. "I am in very indigent circumstances," "I am a poor widow with eight little children," and the all-encompassing "I am not ashamed to teach a Freedmen's school if it pays me."<sup>24</sup> Beggars cannot be choosers, and despite being shunned by friends and neighbors, many women chose feeding their children over feeding their pride.

### **Northern Societal Motivations**

#### *Religion*

Northern freedmen's teachers were not inspired to go into the classroom because of economic or political motivations, but because of a combination of social elements including religion, education, and culture. In the 1860s, the major question of the day was the well-being of the nearly four million newly emancipated African-Americans spread across the South. Widely illiterate, unemployed, and without access to basic necessities, freedmen were essentially refugees in their own country. Recognizing a humanitarian crisis when they saw one, religious organizations were the first to take action.

Before the Freedmen's Bureau was established in 1865, societies like the AMA rallied educators with stirring reports in *The American Missionary*, speaking of destitute, but willing pupils. "Today we need a thousand added to our corps of teachers..." wrote a North Carolina

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<sup>23</sup> Ray Browne and Lawrence Kreiser, *The Civil War And Reconstruction*, ebook, 1st ed. (Westport: Greenwood, 2003), accessed November 28, 2016, [https://books.google.com/books?id=bSuVc6ludXQC&dq=The+Civil+war+and+reconstruction+Browne&source=gs\\_navlinks\\_s](https://books.google.com/books?id=bSuVc6ludXQC&dq=The+Civil+war+and+reconstruction+Browne&source=gs_navlinks_s),181.

<sup>24</sup> Butchart, *Schooling*, 68.

educator. "All around us the Freedmen are struggling hard against poverty, some against actual starvation, yet they beg harder for a school than for food..."<sup>25</sup>

The AMA opened nearly five hundred schools before merging with the Freedmen's Bureau, employing thousands of teachers across the South.<sup>26</sup> Other religious associations and churches such as the Friends, the Protestant Episcopal Church, and the Methodist Episcopal Church, created their own aid organizations to send instructors south.<sup>27</sup> The NEFAS requested educated applicants who had "all the motives of religion" and indeed, Christian conviction is very present in the papers of benevolent society teachers.<sup>28</sup> Northern women's applications to the AMA cited their "desire to win souls for Christ," "to do good," and a wish to "begin a service to which, if God will, I... joyfully, consecrate my life."<sup>29</sup>

Freedmen's teachers also regularly took responsibility for their students' spiritual education. Jane Briggs Smith opened her class every day with a scripture reading, and she sometimes taught Sunday school as well.<sup>30</sup> Teachers' work in the South had the tenor of missionary work abroad. Long hours, ill-supplied classrooms, and hostility from Southerners were par for the course. Despite this, many found happiness in their work. "Oh I am so happy I know not what to do--God help me to work as I wish--faithfully & effectively," prayed Sarah Chase.<sup>31</sup> Few women would face such trials when there was easy money to be made at home, among peaceful and accepting communities. It was a strong faith and sense of moral duty that

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<sup>25</sup> "Extract From Letter Of H.S. Beals", *The American Missionary* 11, no. 1 (1867): 4, accessed September 15, 2016, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89066174400.4>.

<sup>26</sup> "American Missionary Association (AMA) | American Organization", Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified 2016, accessed September 15, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/American-Missionary-Association>.

<sup>27</sup> Swint, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Morris, 59.

<sup>29</sup> Butchart, *Schooling*, 106.

<sup>30</sup> Jane Briggs Smith, "Jane Briggs Smith To William Fuller Fiske, January 12, 1868", Letter, 1868, American Antiquarian Society.

<sup>31</sup> Sarah Chase, "Sarah Chase, Richmond, Virginia, April 18, 1865", Letter, 1865, American Antiquarian Society, <http://www.americanantiquarian.org/Freedmen/Intros/freedteachers.html#prov>.

brought Northern women into the classroom, and kept them there for two years on average—twice as long as their Southern counterparts.<sup>32</sup>

### *Education*

Another reason why Northern women were eager to go into the Freedmen's classroom was due to high levels of education. New England's common school movement of the nineteenth century ensured that the majority of Northern women received an education. As of 1860, fifteen percent of white women over twenty in slaveholding states were illiterate, while in Northern free states, only five percent of the adult white female population could not read or write.<sup>33</sup> The differences in literacy can be attributed to a lower number of schools in the south, longer school terms in the north, and differences in enrollment rates. Female enrollment was almost thirty three percent higher in the Northeast than in the South.<sup>34</sup> Women usually taught longer than men, and took less pay, making them desirable employees, and so many female teacher-training colleges were opened in the antebellum era.<sup>35</sup> Thus, Northern women were better prepared to take on teaching roles than their often illiterate Southern counterparts.

### *Cultural Attitudes*

A final factor in Northern women's decision to teach was that teaching was a more socially acceptable vocation in Northern society. In the antebellum North, teaching was taken to be an almost natural extension of women's roles in society. For the educated middle and upper

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<sup>32</sup> Butchart, *Schooling*, 183.

<sup>33</sup> My own calculations from the 1860 census, recording slaveholding states as Southern, and Free states as North. I subtracted the number of white women under 20 from the general white female population for both regions. I then took the number of illiterate women, recorded in the census as those over age 20 who could not read, and divided it by the general population of white females over 20 for each region, arriving at the current numbers. Washington D.C. Not included in this calculation, and free states including California.

<sup>34</sup> Pearlmann, 62.

<sup>35</sup> Mary Elizabeth Massey, *Women In The Civil War*, 1st ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994, 108.

class woman who wished to avoid the difficult labor of industrial occupations, teaching offered a respectable alternative. Women eventually came to be preferred as teachers in the North because of their reliability and lower cost. By 1860, forty percent of public schoolteachers were women.<sup>36</sup> In 1865, a New York Times editorial said, “It is pleasing to see women assuming such great prominence among us as educators...It is a work to which intelligent women are pre-eminently adapted...It offers to women the "mission" for which so many of them seek and sigh in vain through life.”<sup>37</sup>

Also, while free blacks were not treated as social equals in the North, the racial divide was less severe than in the South, and thus white women teaching in black classrooms was not quite as scandalous as it was for Southern women, especially under the pretence of missionary or humanitarian work. Southerners, on the other hand, often refused to house Yankee schoolmarms who were teaching blacks, resulting in some schoolmarms boarding with black families, a scandalous breach of Southern social protocol. To the horror of whites in both regions, a few schoolmarms married black men, though even the AMA refused to condone such radical social equality.<sup>38</sup> Myrta Lockett Avary expressed shock that white schoolmarms, who befriended and lived with former slaves, dared to expect to be treated as equals by Southern society ladies.<sup>39</sup> Teaching freedmen could be culturally isolating, but Northern women drew strength from the belief that they went with the blessings of their friends and family to work “in Christ’s vineyard.”<sup>40</sup> “No mortal is happier than I am in my work” wrote Sarah Chase. “I give no thought

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<sup>36</sup> Swint, 46.

<sup>37</sup> New York Times, "Our Educational Institutions, Ladies As Teachers.", 1865, accessed September 29, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/1865/09/21/news/our-educational-institutions-ladies-as-teachers-our-readers-are-reminded-through.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 231.

<sup>39</sup> Avary, 131.

<sup>40</sup> *Freedmen's Journal*, 64.

to the hatred of the whites, knowing how useful it is my good fortune to be, to the blacks--and how truly they love me. . .”<sup>41</sup>

### **Southern Social Motivations**

#### *Religion*

Southern religion, educational training, and culture were in many ways the antithesis to their Northern counterparts. Southern women often refused to teach freedmen because they were religiously opposed to the work, lacked education, and were loath to disgrace themselves in social circles.

In the Southern mind, the Confederacy was God’s chosen nation, charged with the “‘Christianizing’ of African slaves...Southern preachers declared that slavery was a sacred task imposed on the South...God had ordained slavery as a punishment for African paganism.”<sup>42</sup> One anti-abolitionist tract, circulated in 1862, referred to slavery as a natural state for blacks, asserting that abolition and education would “‘inflict a deadly blow upon the cause of humanity, civilization, and Christianity.”<sup>43</sup> Defeated confederates feared that Yankee schoolmarm would teach blacks that they were equal to their white neighbors, upsetting their natural, God-ordained place in society. While a handful of churches supported black education, Southerners generally found it “‘degrading to teach a degraded race.”<sup>44</sup>

The ever-opinionated Myrta Lockett Avary characterized slaveholders as “‘missionaries without the name,” claiming that many masters saw it as their Christian duty to provide a

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<sup>41</sup> Sarah Chase, "Sarah Chase To Sarah R. May, Columbus, Georgia, Feb. 5, 1866", Letter, 1866, American Antiquarian Society, <http://www.americanantiquarian.org/Freedmen/Manuscripts/Chase/02-05-1866.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Harry Stout, "Religion In The Civil War: The Southern Perspective, Divining America, Teacherserve©, National Humanities Center", Nationalhumanitiescenter.Org, last modified 2016, accessed September 29, 2016, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nineteen/nkeyinfo/cwsouth.htm>.

<sup>43</sup> Anti-Abolition Tracts, ebook, 1st ed. (New York: Van Evrie Horton & Co., 1866), accessed September 29, 2016, <https://archive.org/details/antiabolitiontra00>.

<sup>44</sup> Butchart, *Schooling*, 63.

religious education for their slaves.<sup>45</sup> This missionary work did not include literacy in most cases. When it came to Southern freedmen's teachers, even those who worked with Christian societies like the AMA rarely made assertions of faith or proselytized to their students.

The church was a social epicenter of Southern life, especially in wartime, but female parishioners made no secret of their hatred for freedmen's teachers, even in a house of God, sometimes even refusing to share a pew with them. Doubtless craving companionship in times of war and trouble, few women want to risk alienation from their friends and congregation by teaching freedmen.

### *Education*

A second deterrent factor was that Southern women lacked the training and experience required for the classroom. The South had a significant educational deficit when compared with the North. In the New England region, in 1860, seventy-two percent of women ages five to nineteen were enrolled in school, whereas in the Southern Atlantic region, only thirty-nine percent of adolescent women were in school.<sup>46</sup> Southern enrollment rates were half of what they were in the North.<sup>47</sup>

Southern women also lagged behind in teacher training. While there were numerous women's seminaries in the South, indeed, more than in the North, these did not prepare their students for a career in education, and were reserved largely for the upper classes. Historian Judith Harper postulates that since most well-to-do Southern women did not go to school to achieve a career, there was little incentive to study, and few students stayed beyond a year before

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<sup>45</sup> Avary, 20.

<sup>46</sup> Maris A. Vinovskis and Richard M. Bernard, "Beyond Catharine Beecher: Female Education In The Antebellum Period", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3, no. 4 (1978): 856-869.

<sup>47</sup> James McPherson, "The Differences Between The Antebellum North And South", in *Major Problems In The Civil War And Reconstruction*, Thomas Patersoned. , 3rd ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth Cengage, 2011), accessed November 9, 2016, [http://www.shsu.edu/~jll004/163\\_spring09/mcphersonnorthandsouth.pdf](http://www.shsu.edu/~jll004/163_spring09/mcphersonnorthandsouth.pdf), 27.

dropping out to get married.<sup>48</sup> With no public education, there were few educational opportunities for poor children. Leticia Danby Miller, a rich planter's daughter, recalled there were no public schools before the war, and planters like her father employed tutors for their children.<sup>49</sup> The Southern women who taught freedmen usually did so with little to no preparation. Being ill-equipped for a job rarely bodes well, and few Southerners stayed in the schoolhouse longer than a year.<sup>50</sup>

### *Cultural Attitudes*

Another issue Southern women faced was that teaching, especially in freedmen's schools, was not a socially acceptable career. Rigid Southern domestic roles had gradually loosened by the nineteenth century, meaning that teaching had become a more acceptable occupation for a lady, but many families still found it disgraceful to have their women working in the public sphere.<sup>51</sup> "If we are to be penniless as well as homeless, I'll work for my living...I would rather die than be dependent; I would rather die than teach...Teaching before dependence, death before teaching," wrote Southern diarist Sarah Morgan.<sup>52</sup> In 1860, only thirty-eight percent of Southern families had daughters employed outside the home—these making up only thirty six percent of teachers employed.<sup>53</sup> However, this was in exclusively white schools—black schools were a different matter altogether. "Nigger teachers" as they were called, were threatened and harassed, and there were reports of the Ku Klux Klan burning down more than one black schoolhouse.<sup>54</sup> Most women wished to avoid such experiences, and even if they were not opposed to black

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 133.

<sup>49</sup> Miller, 15.

<sup>50</sup> Butchart *Schooling*, 56.

<sup>51</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers Of Invention: Women Of The Slaveholding South In The American Civil War*. University of North Carolina Press, 2000, 87.

<sup>52</sup> Sarah Morgan Dawson, *A Confederate Girl's Diary*, ebook, 1st ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), accessed December 8, 2016, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/dawson/dawson.html>, 105.

<sup>53</sup> Pearlmann, 48.

<sup>54</sup> Avary, 318.



education on principle, they thought black teachers should teach black children, and white should teach white.

An 1869 Vicksburg Herald editorial summed up the Southern attitude towards female teachers in colored schools with the quote, “A lady who is capable of teaching at all must be in sore need if she has to resort to a colored school to eke out a precarious existence, and we hope the time will never come when a true daughter of the South will ever be put to that necessity.”<sup>55</sup> Almost seven hundred daughters of the South were put to that necessity, but they did their best to avoid publicizing their career, leaving few traces in the historical record.<sup>56</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The instrumental motivation for the majority of white Northern women to teach in freedmen’s schools was a strong feeling of religious and humanitarian duty towards former slaves, societal acceptance of their profession, and the fact that they were already prepared with a teacher’s education. Though usually harboring abolitionist leanings, the women drew on the religious side of the movement rather than the political. With plenty of higher paying, more comfortable positions available up north, few women chose a life of harsh conditions and discrimination for financial reward, but for the eternal reward of having done the Lord’s work.

Southern women were reluctant to join their Northern counterparts in the black classroom for multiple reasons. The staunch religious and social conventions of the South discouraged many, and few were equipped with the education of a teacher, or a political agenda. Those who did brave the classroom usually did so out of economic necessity. The war-torn South left many women financially destitute, and they were willing to risk violence and social ostracization to support their families.

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<sup>55</sup> Culpepper, 156.

<sup>56</sup> Butchart, *Schooling*, 55.

Unfortunately, like most wars, the battle against oppression and ignorance took longer than expected. Most of the Northern support behind the freedmen's education movement fizzled out with the dissolution of the Freedmen's Bureau in the 1870s. Left to the ravages of white supremacy, black communities struggled fiercely for equal education—eventually succeeding a century later with the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. While the march was a long and hard one, it was the work of freedmen's teachers that assisted its beginning. Thousands of teachers, black and white, male and female, Northern and Southern, helped open the door of knowledge to millions of people.

Women who entered the freedmen's classroom, whatever their motivation or region of origin, by the standard of the day, remarkable. Every group has its miscreants, but most women probably felt genuine care, affection, and responsibility towards their students, even if they left no personal record of their feelings. They, and thousands of other freed people's teachers, risked life and limb for the small victory of placing a book in the hand of a child. "It certainly takes great nerve to walk here," wrote Laura Towne, but nerve they had, and walk they did.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Towne, 7.

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