



Freedmen's Schools in Albemarle County during Reconstruction

Author(s): Joseph C. Vance

Source: *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (Oct., 1953), pp. 430-438

Published by: Virginia Historical Society

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4245969>

Accessed: 09-11-2017 17:49 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Virginia Historical Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*

FREEDMEN'S SCHOOLS IN ALBEMARLE COUNTY DURING RECONSTRUCTION

by JOSEPH C. VANCE*

FREEDMEN'S schools in Albemarle County were launched in the fall of 1865 upon the arrival in Charlottesville of "Yankee School Marm," Miss Anna Gardner. The schools were financed mainly by the New England Freedmen's Aid Society, but a few local Negroes and whites contributed both their time and money. Freedmen's Bureau agents located in Charlottesville supervised Negro education with unusual tact and competence.¹

Miss Gardner, single and fifty years old, was of a seventh generation Nantucket, Massachusetts, family. At the age of twenty-five, she had been instrumental in calling the first antislavery meeting on her native island. An avid reader of William Lloyd Garrison and an ardent abolitionist, she had followed the advancing Union armies during the war and had taught Freedmen's schools for two years in the Carolinas before coming to Charlottesville. A woman of tireless energy and real ability, she possessed sincere regard for the freedmen's welfare. But as an exponent of race equality, she disliked and distrusted the ex-masters, "those alien and hostile people . . . primitive in appearance and habits." Throughout her five-year sojourn in Charlottesville, she doubted the good intentions of the whites toward Negroes.² Having once established her school, she feared the loss of the building on a legal technicality to "those subtle, slippery Virginians."³

To Miss Gardner, the University of Virginia was a place of wickedness; she feared the effect of its "baleful shadow" over her school; she daily expected her school to be attacked by University students, whose "calathumps" were "the terror of the place."⁴

Reports of Captain William L. Tidball, able and tactful Freedmen's Bureau agent in Charlottesville, indicate that Miss Gardner may have exaggerated local white hostility to Negro education. As a rule, only the lower

*Mr. Vance is a graduate student in history at the University of Virginia. This paper won first prize in the 1953 history essay contest sponsored by the Albemarle County Historical Society, and second place in the 1953 history essay contest sponsored by the University of Virginia History Club.

¹Records of the Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees and Abandoned Lands, Army Division, National Archives, V, 128-131, *passim*.

²Anna Gardner, *Harvest Gleanings* (New York, 1881), pp. 17-40.

³Freedmen's Bureau Records, School Reports, File 692, Letter from Anna Gardner.

⁴Gardner, *Harvest Gleanings*, p. 40.

class whites, who were in economic competition with freedmen, opposed the general principle. At the end of June, 1866, Tidball reported: "If the expressions of the leading citizens . . . are to be received as truth, and as indicative of the feelings of the community, the education of the colored people is regarded as a great necessity in their new condition."⁵ But a few months later he was somewhat more cautious, reporting in September, 1866: "I have met with no manifest opposition to the education of the children of freedmen, but the encouragement is by no means zealous. The common school system of education is almost wholly unknown to these people, and they regard it with jealousy, as they do all innovations upon their established usages."⁶

Hence, Tidball found traditional Southern opposition to *any program* of free, public education an obstacle to Negro education. But in the same report he put his finger on a real sore spot: Local whites resented the social and political doctrines taught by Miss Gardner and her colleagues. Under "the guidance of a different class of teachers," Tidball explained, Negro schools would receive "open encouragement." "The teachers of this county," he continued, "have not been the recipients of the courtesy and respect which are usually bestowed upon persons engaged in their honorable vocation. But this arises altogether *from matters outside their employment.*"⁷

The inflammatory issue of what was being taught by the "Yankee School Marms" was heightened as political passions waxed hot with the advent of Radical Reconstruction in the spring of 1867. An exchange of letters between Miss Gardner and J. C. Southall, conservative Charlottesville *Chronicle* editor, revealed clearly the crux of the issue. Miss Gardner opened the correspondence with an appeal to Southall for a "donation":

Feb. 9, 1867.

Mr. J. C. Southall.

Not knowing any Southerners personally [she had at this time lived in Charlottesville for almost two years], I have always sent to the North for everything indispensable in the prosecution of my work here; but having heard colored people speaking of you as a true friend to the cause of education among them, I take the liberty, on their behalf, of requesting you to make a donation to the Jefferson School, in the form of printed diplomas, stating that the graduate is qualified to commence teaching the rudiments of an English Education. . . .

Yours respectfully,

ANNA GARDNER.

⁵Freedmen's Bureau Records, Vol. 128, p. 127.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 287.

⁷*Ibid.* *Italics mine.*

Southall replied:

Feb. 12, 1867.

Miss Gardner, I take as deep an interest in the welfare of the negro race as any one. I am anxious to see them educated and elevated, and am prepared to give my aid to further those objects. The impression among the white residents of Charlottesville is, that your instruction of the colored people who attend your school contemplates something more than the communication of ordinary knowledge implied in teaching them to read, write, cypher, &c. The idea prevails that you instruct them in politics and sociology; that you come among us not merely as an ordinary school teacher, but as a political missionary; that you communicate to the colored people ideas of social equality with the whites. With your first object we sympathize; the second we regard as mischievous, and as only tending to disturb the good feeling between the two races.

If I am mistaken in supposing that you do not confine your teachings to topics usually covered by school instruction, I will cheerfully furnish without charge the circulars you applied for.

Respectfully,

JAMES C. SOUTHALL.

Miss Gardner shot back:

Mr. J. C. Southall, I teach *in school* and *out*, so far as my political influence extends, the fundamental principles of "politics" and "sociology," viz:—

"Whatever you would that men should do to you, do ye even so unto them."

Yours in behalf of truth and justice,

ANNA GARDNER.⁸

Later, in April, 1867, a Negro, addressing a political meeting in Charlottesville, maintained that whites in general opposed Negro schools.⁹ But his contention must be weighed against evidence that some whites were willing to cooperate. For example, Tidball reported . . . "one of several instances in this county in which white citizens [were] endeavoring to build up schools for the education of colored children. But the poverty of this part of the country, prevent[ed] the accomplishment of this purpose."¹⁰ Further examples of white support kept cropping up as Freedmen schools were organized and put into operation.

The first free school was set up by Miss Gardner. In her teaching she was assisted by R. A. Musgrove, a local white who had already been running a tuition school of thirty-two Negroes.¹¹ Miss Gardner and Musgrove each used a room in a large, brick building of the Delevan Hospital unit.¹² Known

⁸Walter L. Fleming, *Documentary History of Reconstruction* (Cleveland, 1906-1907), II, 183-184.

⁹Charlottesville *Chronicle*, April 25, 1867.

¹⁰Freedmen's Bureau Records, Vol. 128, p. 235.

¹¹*Ibid.*, School Reports, File 692.

¹²*Ibid.*

locally as "Mudwall," this unit had been an academy before the war and a Confederate hospital during the war. During Reconstruction it served as quarters for occupation troops and destitute freedmen, as well as a school and a home for the teachers.¹³

For school buildings, Delevan was obviously in poor condition. But Miss Gardner, "conquering her prejudices against the filth of the place, and gathering her garments out of the confluent streams of tobacco juice," made her entrance. Then with "an abundant supply of soap, lime . . . and volunteer labor [she] soon made the place tidy and comfortable."¹⁴

"About eighty scholars entered the school immediately,"¹⁵ and by November, 1865, the enrollment was at ninety. Sixty students were in Miss Gardner's class, ten males and fifty females, of whom only three were under sixteen years of age. The attendance of her class averaged about eighty-five percent, compared to about seventy-five for Musgrove, who had forty males and ten females with ten under sixteen. In addition there was a tuition school taught by James A. Munday with forty students and a hundred percent attendance. In the free school a special effort was made to teach arithmetic and to train the better students as teachers.¹⁶ Miss Gardner thought that the students' primary aim in education was to increase their earning power but that the best students were drawn away by the temptation of immediate employment.¹⁷

Early in 1866, just prior to his replacement by Tidball, Lieutenant Joyes sent in a glowing report:

The Schools . . . are conducted in a very flourishing manner. The number of scholars is daily increasing in this town, and I have now in preparation the setting up of two more schools at a distance of 16 miles, to be taught for the present by daughters of farmers, and I feel confident from the assurances I have received that, on opening day there will be upwards of one hundred scholars. The proficiency made by the Scholars is very satisfactory; for example three weeks since, a boy about 14 years of age did not even know his letters. On yesterday he, unassisted, addressed a letter to an officer on duty here.¹⁸

By April three new teachers had been added in Charlottesville, and the total enrollment had reached 241. All teachers were paid by the New England Freedmen's Aid Society. The latest teacher to arrive was Miss

¹³Freedmen's Bureau Records, Vol. 128, p. 367.

¹⁴Gardner, *Harvest Gleanings*, p. 40.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁶Freedmen's Bureau Records, School Reports, File 692.

¹⁷Gardner, *Harvest Gleanings*, p. 47.

¹⁸Freedmen's Bureau Records, Vol. 128, p. 43.

Philenae Caskie from Boston. "Miss Gardner, from Nantucket," Joyes affirmed, "is a *very* efficient teacher, and we have decided to select the most promising scholars and give them to her for a normal school. I have just received outline maps, etc., for her use."¹⁹

"Mr. Musgrove, is a citizen of Charlottesville and is doing as well or better than could reasonably be expected of a Southern man."²⁰

At the end of the 1865-1866 academic term the new Bureau agent, Tidball, reported that the schools had been well conducted. Order and discipline had done much to improve the department of scholars. Rapid advancement in the branches taught had been made in every department.²¹ The outlying schools mentioned by Joyes apparently had not been continued, for Tidball knew of no Freedmen Schools in the country.²²

By midsummer, 1866, state Bureau headquarters in Richmond instructed all agents to ascertain the best locations for schools within their districts.²³ Accordingly, Tidball consulted with the magistrates of the Albemarle districts, and on the basis of an average of fifty potential students, recommended that schools be established in the following places: Batesville, Boyd's Tavern, Brown's Cove, Carter's Bridge, Cobham, Covesville, Earlysville, Free Union, Garland's, Greenwood Depot, Keswick, Meechum's River, Millington, Moorman's River, South Garden, Owensville, Scottsville, Warrens, and Yancey's Mill. Two tuition schools only were serving this entire area.²⁴

Tidball enumerated serious obstacles to this ambitious program. Freedmen could neither support the schools financially nor provide suitable lands upon which they could be erected. Nor were public buildings available outside of Charlottesville. On the other hand, whites throughout the county were viewing the schools more favorably, and Negroes stood ready to maintain the buildings and to furnish the wood for heating.²⁵

As for the schools in Charlottesville, Tidball suggested that they be moved from Delevan to the lots of freedmen, which would be donated rent free. Building materials could be procured by tearing down one of the wooden buildings at Delevan.²⁶

When the Bureau did not establish schools in the county districts in the fall of 1866, local Negroes themselves attempted to found three. Three

¹⁹Freedmen's Bureau Records, School Reports, File 692.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹*Ibid.*, Vol. 128, p. 128.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 79.

²³*Ibid.*, Circulars, No. 23.

²⁴*Ibid.*, Vol. 128, p. 261.

²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 358-360.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 320.

teachers had been located, but the Negroes could not pay them. One of these was Lindsay Smith, a freedman, who devoted part of his time to instructing thirty-three students in the African Church near Carter's Bridge. Another was Mrs. J. W. Pleasants, a "white lady," who would furnish a room and teach for ten dollars a month. The third was a "white gent," for whom the Negroes would build a log school. "I am satisfied," wrote Tidball, "that they may very safely be instructed with the education of those who know nothing, and such is the condition of nearly all the colored children outside of this place [Charlottesville]." ²⁷

Some of these schools were continued with neither Bureau nor benevolent society support, for in the spring of 1867 Tidball reported that several schools were operating in the county, supported by the freedmen alone. He had little information regarding these and did not include them in his reports. ²⁸

In May, 1867, the Charlottesville schools, still with four teachers, reported an enrollment of 280, one hundred of whom were over sixteen years of age. All studied writing and arithmetic; forty were "in alphabet"; sixty "read easy lessons"; no pupils were yet "in higher branches"; thirty had been free Negroes before the war. ²⁹ Miss Caskie and Miss Gardner were still on hand. The latter was serving as "Principal of Freed Schools." ³⁰ In June of that year both were furnished transportation by the Bureau to vacation at their homes in the North. ³¹

The year 1868 saw little change in school organization. Eight day schools were in operation throughout the county, of which four were located in Charlottesville. Misses Caskie and Gardner were still present; and the other two teachers were both colored men, Paul Lewis and Robert Morris. James Munday still operated his tuition school. In addition to the day schools, there were six Sabbath and two night schools in Charlottesville and Scottsville. Tidball reported considerable help from whites and begged for more aid from the Bureau: "One of the Sabbath Schools in Charlottesville is conducted by A. P. Abell cashier of the National Bank. Another by Mr. E. Calvin Williams a student at the University. Mr. Abell has 200 scholars and could increase it to 500 had he books enough. Books suitable for these schools should be furnished these Gentlemen who are doing a most praiseworthy work." ³² Therefore, not all the local whites merited Miss Gardner's scorn.

²⁷Freedmen's Bureau Records, Vol. 128, p. 339.

²⁸*Ibid.*, Vol. 129, p. 260; Vol. 130, p. 16.

²⁹*Ibid.*, School Reports, File 692.

³⁰*Ibid.*, Vol. 129, p. 270.

³¹*Ibid.*, Vol. 130, p. 22.

³²*Ibid.*, School Reports, File 692.

By 1869 enough students had finished elementary work to justify a "graded" school system. Of the four Charlottesville schools, two were still classified as "primary"; one of these, the Savage School, taught by Isabella Gibbon, colored, at Delevan, had sixty students. The average schedule provided for a six-hour school day, eighteen days a month. The John Brown School was taught by Paul Lewis, a Negro; his reports show him to be almost illiterate.

Next above the "primary" rank was the Lincoln school classified as "Intermediate" and taught by Miss Caskie; it had an enrollment of fifty, twenty-seven of whom were males. The cap of the pyramid was the Jefferson School, of "normal" grade, taught by Miss Gardner at a salary of twenty-two dollars monthly. (The other teachers received twenty-five dollars.) In the Jefferson School, girls slightly outnumbered boys in a class of fifty.³³ For the dedication of this school Miss Gardner wrote a poem, part of which follows:

... Six years ago — and on this ground
 We dedicate to-day —
 Hundreds of human souls were bound
 In abject slavery. . . .

Then Knowledge, Education, rolled
 The heavy stones away
 From buried mind — where wealth untold
 Folded in darkness lay. . . .

Fetters no longer chattles bind;
 But still the task remains
 To sever shackles from the mind —
 And climb to lofty plains. . . .³⁴

During 1869 the Bureau became more generous in appropriations for school purposes, allotting eight hundred dollars for repairs on the school building in Charlottesville and five hundred dollars for a new school near Scottsville.³⁵

During 1870 the number of schools, the organization, and the teachers remained the same in Charlottesville. Miss Gardner's normal school was sending out teachers. Early in that year she expressed her concern to the

³³Freedmen's Bureau Records, School Reports, File 692-693.

³⁴Gardner, *Harvest Gleanings*, p. 173.

³⁵Freedmen's Bureau Records, Letters of Assistant Commissioner for Virginia, Vol. 1, p. 31.

Richmond Bureau headquarters over the welfare of a recent woman graduate who had been sent to an isolated area with only a "Rebel" family near by. She also informed the officer that she had two more graduates "anxiously waiting for a situation." Charlottesville must have been tiring, for as spring advanced she wrote: "We feel a desire for a little change. Do the Richmond teachers have a spring vacation? If so we would like one likewise." In a later letter she invited the official to Charlottesville for a school exhibition.³⁶

Three new schools were started in the county in 1870. At Glendower, a primary school had two Negro teachers and an average of forty-two students; here there were eleven "in advanced readers"; hence, some form of school must have existed previously. In the same locality, a "Sabbath School" reported sixty-eight pupils and six teachers. At Mount Pleasant, another was reported to have thirty-five students in "mixed" grades with one teacher; no pupils were "in advanced readers."³⁷ This school might have been the outgrowth of a complaint to Richmond by Scottsville Negroes in early 1870, in which the incompetence of the Negro teacher was stressed. It was suggested then that a teacher be chosen from among the whites, several of whom would be willing to teach and would be accepted by the Negroes.³⁸ The freedmen in that area must have been much better off financially than the average, for a report in the spring of 1870 shows them owning two school buildings valued at \$2,400.³⁹

With only seven official schools operating in Albemarle and Charlottesville in 1870, the system was far short of the minimum number considered necessary by Tidball. Under these conditions, little more than a fourth of the potential students could have been reached. The only alternative would have been a large number of private schools, which in light of the general poverty seemed very unlikely.

Theoretically, following the adoption of the Underwood Constitution in the summer of 1869, with its provision for free public schools, there was no longer a need for "Yankee School Marms" and northern financial support of freedmen's schools. But actually, in the early days of the new constitution, only token schools were established; and with the departure of Miss Gardner and her colleagues, Negro schools in Albemarle declined for a time. But with the nucleus of teachers her system had produced and with the increased effectiveness of the new state school system under Superintendent W. F.

³⁶Freedmen's Bureau Records, School Reports, File 692.

³⁷*Ibid.*, File 696.

³⁸*Ibid.*, File 692.

³⁹*Ibid.*, File 696.

Ruffner, the passage of a decade saw a fairly adequate Negro school system in operation in Albemarle.⁴⁰

Though Negro education during Reconstruction in Albemarle fell short of what its proponents considered ideal, it had nevertheless by 1870 played a significant role as the county made the transition from the old order to the new. In the first place, agitation for the free Negro education had pointed up the issue of free education for whites also. In time local whites were to accept enthusiastically the principle of free, universal education for all.

In the second place, Miss Gardner and her supporters had laid down a systematic foundation for graded Negro schools. Moreover, her "system" had charted the course that future Negro education would take, especially in training colored people to teach their own race.

Education had proved to be exceedingly popular with Negroes. If not popular with a majority of the whites at the time, it was at least tolerated; and, as has been pointed out, some local whites not only encouraged it but played an active part in its functioning.

Negroes often ranked education with social status and political power as desirable objects of Reconstruction. Owing to generations of the master-slave relationship, social and political equality were doomed from the beginning unless imposed by outside forces. These questions were in a large measure settled by the Conservative political triumph of 1869 and the end of Radical Reconstruction. Negro education, however, remained as a permanent contribution of Reconstruction.

But educational achievements must be weighed against race antagonism aroused by such persons as Miss Gardner, whom local whites viewed as a meddling fanatic. Not understanding Southern institutions, she aroused the Negro to unattainable dreams and created animosities which in the long run would react unfavorably against Negro welfare. On the other hand, exponents of Miss Gardner's course could point out that she and her colleagues helped overcome the indifference of Negroes to their new position, instilled in them an awareness of their inherent worth and potential as individuals, and educated them so that they could function as members of a free society.

⁴⁰Allen W. Flannagan, Jr., "The Effect of the Underwood Constitution on Education in Albemarle County," a private manuscript.