Church, State, and School: The Education of Freedmen in Virginia, 1861-1870

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https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-815e-4b41

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Approved June 1998

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Melvin P. Ely
Dedicated to Melinda Simons, who got me through the first seven months, and when it really counted, got me out.

Thank you.
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Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the following people whose extra effort, assistance, and understanding made it possible to complete this thesis long-distance:

Scott Nelson, for going above and beyond the call of an advisor by downloading, photocopying, and distributing numerous drafts to the committee;

Eric Gee, for shuttling library books back and forth between Arlington and Williamsburg;

Carrie Nelson, for assisting with resources at Georgetown University; and

Robert Townsend, for allowing occasional absences from work to handle the details.
Abstract

Reconstruction in the post-Civil War South was one of the most tumultuous eras in United States history. Traditional roles that had once been defined by race, land ownership, or economics changed drastically. Politicians and missionaries worked for land reforms, voting rights, political restructuring, and social programs that still have an impact on the region today. Even as these programs were being implemented and carried out, it was commonly accepted by Southerners and Northerners, blacks and whites, that Reconstruction failed to meet the needs of any of the parties involved; today these opinions are still supported by scholars.

Yet one program under the broader rubric of Reconstruction—education of the freedmen—was judged at the time and is still believed today to be one of the few success stories played out between 1861 and 1870. The education programs were a combined effort of several different religious organizations, most notably the American Missionary Association (AMA), and the government office of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands; the unique relationship between the two factions enabled education to flourish while other programs failed.

This thesis will explore several questions surrounding freedmen’s education in Virginia during and after the war: Why did the AMA (as representative of many religious organizations) and the Bureau decide to concentrate upon education as the primary means of improving the life of the freedmen? How did the perspectives of policymakers and those who traveled South to teach differ? How did the two organizations—one religious and one controlled by the government—relate to and depend upon one another during Reconstruction? And what role did the freedmen take in their own education and other efforts to rebuild their lives after emancipation? Above all, this study will attempt to determine who or what was primarily responsible for the success of the education programs in the postbellum South. And finally, what specific combination of factors allowed education to avoid the pitfalls that ultimately doomed other Reconstruction programs?
Church, State, and School:
The Education of Freedmen in Virginia, 1861–1870
Introduction

The post-Civil War years in the South were one of the most traumatic social and political eras in the history of the United States. Traditional roles, whether dictated by race or by class, were redefined almost daily. Politicians and missionaries worked for land reforms, voting rights, political restructuring, and social programs that, whether successful at the time or not, still have an impact on the region today. Even as programs were being implemented and carried out, it was commonly accepted by Southerners and Northerners, blacks and whites, that Reconstruction failed to meet many of the needs of any of the parties involved. Contemporary scholars like Eric Foner and Leon F. Litwack have supported and built upon this truth in history, offering comprehensive studies of the reconstruction era from a variety of perspectives. Yet one program under the broader rubric of Reconstruction—education of the freedmen—was judged at the time and is still believed today to be one of the few success stories that played out between 1861 and 1870. To understand this piece of the Reconstruction era and its relative success, it is necessary to look at the circumstances surrounding slave and black education in the three decades prior to the war.

Nat Turner's 1831 insurrection in Southampton County, Virginia, had many consequences for both slaves and slaveowners in the antebellum South. Rebellion was not new—slaves in South Carolina banded together and attacked the white community in the Stono Rebellion of 1739, and a Virginia slave named Gabriel attempted a carefully
conceived but ill-fated revolt in 1800—but the national political situation of 1831 made
the consequences of Turner’s rebellion more severe than they had been in any previous
uprising or attempt. During the preceding decade, for example, Southerners had
witnessed the Missouri Compromise arise from a political split along sectional lines,
signaling ever-increasing Northern antislavery sentiment. Literate slaves like Gabriel and
Nat Turner were also aware of political changes in their worlds, and Gabriel in particular
timed his rebellion accordingly. In addition, literate slaves were able to quickly spread
plots and news of impending revolts throughout the slave community, making wide-
ranging conspiracies possible.¹

The very real possibility of future unrest frightened slaveowners and other
southern whites, who searched for ways to control their slaves more effectively. To do
this, they felt they must suppress potential leaders of revolt and looked for reasons why
Nat Turner might have achieved a position of leadership in the slave community.
Turner’s ability to read and write, skills he had learned from his white “family,” set him
apart from many slaves and free blacks in the antebellum South. White elites believed
that this knowledge had enabled him to study abolitionist literature and to spread its
teachings to his fellow slaves. In the aftermath of his revolt, slave owners and
government officials alike worked to tighten their control over slaves’ education, whether
it be from white masters, fellow slaves, or free blacks, through both legal and social
restrictions.

Until the events of August 22, 1831, education had been, for the most part, an

¹Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in
the Antebellum South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), p. 3.
unregulated affair for slaves and free blacks. Though Southern states began banning formal education for blacks as early as 1740, these laws were not universal and were generally not enforced against the relative few who did instruct their own or others’ slaves. Within one year of Turner’s revolt, however, most Southern states enacted strict antiliteracy laws to prohibit whites from teaching blacks and blacks from instructing one another. Only a few months after the event, the Virginia General Assembly curtailed black education by declaring that any white person who taught slaves or free blacks to read or write could be fined up to one hundred dollars or imprisoned for as long as two months.\(^2\) Whites may have borne the brunt of the punishment under the formal law, but it was understood that any slave caught reading or writing was subject to the wrath of his master and of any other whites who witnessed the event.

The legal restrictions and understood threats against them did not stop all slaves from obtaining education in the antebellum South, but such threats did change the ways in which both slaves and free blacks could be taught. Blacks were hungry for schooling for a variety of reasons, and it was not something they would give up. Many viewed formal education as the best route out of slavery and towards independence. Others saw education as a path to salvation, learning to read so that they might study the Bible and spread its teachings to others. Despite antiliteracy laws, blacks had underground opportunities for education before the Civil War: sympathetic masters; free blacks who were legally or illegally educated before Turner’s rebellion; even children of plantation owners, whose status as minors kept them out of reach of the law. Many slaves took

personal risks for education, knowing that, if caught, they could be whipped or otherwise punished. Albert Jones, an ex-slave and Civil War veteran from Portsmouth, Virginia, remembered that “you better never let mastah catch yer wif a book or paper, and you couldn’t praise God so he could hear yer. If you done dem things, he sho’ would beat yer.” The majority of slaves, whether or not they found a way to learn, were bitter that education, like so much else in their lives, was denied them. “There is one sin that slavery committed against me which I will never forgive. It robbed me of my education,” another former slave recalled. After emancipation, freedmen had many and varied goals—some wanted mainly food and shelter; others hoped for their own land or business; still others desired to reunite their families. Nearly all shared the desire for education.

This widely shared goal helped lay the groundwork for one of Reconstruction’s major components: formal education of the freedmen. The American Missionary Association (AMA) and the Education Division of the federal government-sponsored Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands were two of the primary institutions that worked for freedmen’s education in the South after the war. Each recruited, trained, and paid Northern teachers, built or requisitioned and maintained

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4In keeping with the terminology used by the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, the term “freedmen” is used in this thesis to refer to all former slaves. Unless otherwise stated, it may be assumed that both male and female former slaves are being discussed.
6Among government officials, “refugees” referred specifically to whites, while “freedmen,” obviously, was limited to blacks, though it was often used as a general term, encompassing both former slaves and blacks who had been free before the war. Oliver Otis Howard, The Autobiography of O. O. Howard: Major General United States Army (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1907, reprinted 1971), vol. 2, p. 164.
schoolhouses, and provided administrative and financial support. Both organizations worked to educate the freedmen so that they could become not only self-sufficient citizens but also active contributors to the Southern economy and culture. The two groups, and the teachers they employed, worked as a team for nearly a decade, and yet their initial motives for launching such programs were very different. The relationship between the two organizations had a difficult beginning, compounded by the needs of a humanitarian crisis in the postwar South. Nonetheless, each overcame its challenges, and the partnership enabled education programs for blacks to flourish in the South. Nearly 20,000 black pupils were enrolled in Virginia schools alone by 1870 and approximately 150,000 in total in the former Confederacy and the District of Columbia.

The activities of the AMA and the Bureau between 1861 and the abolition of the Bureau’s Education Division in 1870 raise many questions about the ideology and execution of Reconstruction. Many historians of the nineteenth century, including Eugene Genovese and Eric Foner, consider these educational programs to be one of the greater successes of the Reconstruction era, in part because such programs provided blacks with training for self-sufficiency and independence. Farmland could offer economic independence, but education could provide skills for those who might not have the opportunity to manage a farm, as well as opportunities for spiritual and religious growth for all. Financial security and independence were vitally important to freedmen defining

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their roles in the postbellum South. Many saw education as the best, though not always the easiest or fastest, means to attaining both economic and personal independence and freedom. Freedmen fought bitterly for land and voting rights, while at the same time gratefully accepting the education that was offered to them. They certainly had to work hard in school to reap the benefits of education, but, unlike in their struggles for land and suffrage, they did not have to fight for the opportunity to do so once missionaries arrived in the region.

Working together, the administrators and employees of the AMA and the Bureau avoided or overcame many of the problems that eventually doomed other Reconstruction policies. Competing and ever-changing political interests, issues surrounding race relations, and economic questions pitted North against South, rich against poor, and black against white. Education was certainly not without its controversies or foes—many freedmen’s schools in the deep South were burned by vengeful southern whites. However, in Virginia these attacks against schools were rarely as vicious as others made against black individuals in this period, in part because the presence of white northern women helped mollify violent impulses.

How the AMA and the Bureau managed to succeed is a complicated question. Broadly speaking, Reconstruction was a series of government programs, many of which were short- or long-term failures. What did the government do differently with its educational programs? Can their success be attributed to the presence of the AMA and other charitable and religious organizations—a form of support that land reform and voting rights programs did not have? To what extent can the long-term success be traced
to individuals, black or white, and not only to organizations—a question that until recently has been largely ignored by scholars of Reconstruction? What direct impact did the missionary teachers and the freedmen themselves have on the development of the postbellum South?

This thesis will explore several questions surrounding freedmen’s education in Virginia during and after the war: Why did the AMA (as representative of many religious organizations) and the Bureau decide to concentrate upon education as the primary means of improving the life of the freedmen? How did the perspectives of policymakers and those who traveled South to teach differ? How did the two organizations—one religious and one controlled by the government—relate to and depend upon one another during Reconstruction? And what role did the freedmen take in their own education and other efforts to rebuild their lives after emancipation? Above all, this study will attempt to determine who or what was primarily responsible for the success of the education programs in the postbellum South. Other Reconstruction programs either failed outright or left long and bitter legacies in their wake. What specific combination of factors allowed education to avoid these pitfalls?

During the past twenty years, two historians have set up an intriguing debate about black education in the South during Reconstruction that strikes at the root of these questions. In her 1980 work *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865–1873*, Jacqueline Jones argues that the drive for education was spawned by Christian organizations in the North, and that the freedmen were the relatively passive, yet still accepting and in some cases eager, recipients of their programs. In her
introductory chapters, Jones portrays the typical freedman as childlike, submissive, and broken by the system of slavery, not unlike the "Sambo" image depicted vividly by mid-twentieth-century scholar Stanley Elkins, and more mildly by his contemporary, Kenneth M. Stampp. "Deprived of responsibility for his own spiritual and physical welfare," she writes, "the slave had descended to a state of moral degradation in which he had no ability or incentive to take care of himself." In her hypothesis, this assessment all but eliminates the power of the freedmen from the Reconstruction equation.

Perhaps, then, success lay in the hands of the organizations and teachers, and yet, according to Jones, the government, too, was at odds with the altruistic mission of the AMA and other benevolent organizations. She presents evidence that the impetus behind the AMA's missionary efforts in the South was the belief that slavery was a sin against God more than against man, and that it was a sin committed by all, not only those who actually owned slaves. It was one's Christian duty to atone for this sin through charitable work. Freedmen had been physically and legally saved by the government and must now be spiritually saved in order to be truly free. In this sense, education was simply a continuation of the prewar abolition work many missionaries had undertaken.

According to Jones, the government, particularly the Bureau, had other motives. "The overtly moralistic rhetoric of the freedmen's aid groups presented a striking contrast to the attitude of federal officials responsible for carrying out the laws and programs of Reconstruction...The clash between reformers and government officials...revealed deeply conflicting perceptions of the war between two different segments of the northern...

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population." Thus, Jones effectively refutes traditional scholarship which states that much of Reconstruction, particularly education, was a bureaucratic program of government agencies, and argues that its success lay almost entirely with individual teachers and the religious organizations they represented. In the following pages I will explore evidence to test Jones’s hypotheses about individuals versus organizations, and about which individuals were the driving force behind education.

James D. Anderson, in his 1988 work *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935*, upholds Jones’s thesis that individuals were more influential than organizations, but argues that the freedmen themselves, rather than the teachers, provided the major push for education. The development and involvement of the benevolent organizations and the Bureau were reactions to the freedmen’s desire for education, rather than promoters of it. Anderson writes that “it was [Sabbath and other schools run exclusively by ex-slaves] that spurred the establishment of widespread elementary and literacy education and provided the grassroots foundation for the educational activities of northern missionary societies and the Bureau.” Just as Jones acknowledges the role of freedmen themselves, Anderson does not disregard the presence of northern missionaries, but he argues that with or without them, freedmen would have found ways to educate themselves, an argument supported by evidence of an underground education system in place before emancipation. And yet, when one looks at the odds stacked against the freedmen in their first years out of bondage, it is difficult to believe that they could have continued their education programs unaided.

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10 Jones, p. 15.
11 Anderson, p. 15.
Though her work focuses more on the antebellum than the postbellum South, Janet Duitsman Cornelius, in her 1991 *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South*, makes many of the same points as Anderson. She, too, argues that blacks were the primary force behind education before, during, and after the war, and that missionary teachers simply supplemented the work already in place by 1861. “Most of the teaching, though, was done by African-Americans themselves. Despite the credit for black education which is often given to northern missionaries and philanthropists, black people themselves were responsible for founding and perpetuating most of their educational efforts in the South,” she wrote. \(^{12}\) Though Cornelius’s argument does have some merit when applied to the rural areas of the South, the more settled areas of Tidewater Virginia did not seem to have had an extensive school system for blacks in place before the war. Also, she focuses primarily on teaching, while overlooking the supplies, administration, and facilities that were under the jurisdiction of the missionary organizations. While her work reaches the same conclusion as Anderson’s, her narrow focus does not offer a full representation of the many factions that contributed to education in the postbellum South.

Together, the arguments of Jones and Anderson, with some supporting evidence from Cornelius, form an interesting contrast to Eric Foner’s monumental work *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*, which presents a more traditional, government- and policy-oriented picture of Reconstruction, though not overlooking individual contributions entirely. Foner upholds Anderson’s argument for the

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\(^{12}\) Cornelius, p. 149.
driving force of the freedmen for education. However, he also points out that "northern benevolent societies, the Bureau, and, after 1868, state governments, provided much of the funding for black education during Reconstruction" and describes an incident in which a faltering black-run school system was forced to turn itself over to the AMA for governance and support.\textsuperscript{13} Clearly, the success of educational programs was the result of a balance between the many factors in question, but one must ask how this balance was achieved, and why it could not be done with other Reconstruction programs.

Historians have long debated the motives—political, social, religious, and humanitarian—and the successes and failures—for freedmen and whites, for northerners and southerners, for the government and the people—surrounding Reconstruction. Perhaps no other period of United States history has been so controversial, with so few definitive truths or answers. Was Reconstruction primarily an effort to rebuild the South economically or socially, or the entire nation politically? Were freedmen the victims and former slaveholders the beneficiaries, or vice versa? Amid the controversies of the time and the historiographic debates of today, few will disagree that, through education, many southern freedmen and northern policymakers achieved and often exceeded their goals of rebuilding the southern economy and retaining the labor force made up of southern blacks.

An examination of this most successful component can delineate many of the motives and results of the larger Reconstruction experience, and answer broader questions about its successes, failures, and lasting impact on Virginia, the South and the

nation. Foner writes that “perhaps the remarkable thing about Reconstruction was not that it failed, but that it was attempted at all and survived as long as it did.”14 Foner adds that Reconstruction, despite its general failure, was radical and progressive in its conception and planted the seeds for later social and economic reforms for blacks and whites in the South. Within the broader scope of Reconstruction, one branch—education—was able to overcome many of the pitfalls that destroyed other programs, and it did more than just “survive.” A study of the ups and downs of the AMA and the Education Division of the Bureau will explain not only how education succeeded, but perhaps also why other programs did not.

14Foner, p. 603.
The American Missionary Association

The American Missionary Association (AMA) was the backbone of black education in the Union Army-occupied sections of Virginia during the Civil War. Headquartered in New York City, the AMA was officially an interdenominational organization, though most of its revenue came from the Congregational Church and from donations by Congregationalists in the North. Before the outbreak of the Civil War, the AMA had worked to spread the “good providence of God” through missions in Africa, India, Jamaica, and the western United States and its territories; its only contact with American slavery was in programs to Christianize fugitive slaves who had escaped to Canada.¹

Despite its lack of direct intervention into the problem of slavery, the organization had always been a strong supporter of abolition. AMA literature repeatedly expressed the need, first, to free the slaves and, second, to educate and Christianize all blacks in the South, despite the fact that by the Civil War, many slaves were already practicing Christianity, either in public or in private. The AMA literature and correspondence of the very early 1860s makes no mention of the need to provide charitable aid, such as food and clothing, to escaped slaves, only educational and spiritual guidance. The AMA and other missionary organizations depended on the federal government to see to the slaves’ more concrete needs—a decision that would be challenged soon after their missionary teachers arrived in the South to establish religious, academic, and vocational education

Neither AMA officials nor teachers had a broadly conceived plan to "reconstruct" the South or its residents, black or white; instead, they simply intended to offer spiritual guidance and education to those they saw in need. Yet the AMA and other organizations like it would become critical to Reconstruction.

The AMA recruited teachers, trained them, and sent them to the South as early as 1861. The typical teacher was a white Protestant between 20 and 30 years old, well-educated and well-off, but not wealthy. At first only men enlisted for teaching duty in the South—a region seen as far too dangerous for women—but with the beginning of military conscription in the North, men were pulled away from educational duties. By 1863, a significant number of women had also traveled south to teach. The first AMA-sponsored school in Virginia opened at Fort Monroe in 1861, in response to the more than 600 black fugitives who had come to the fort seeking aid. Able-bodied black men often joined the Union army, but women, children, and the elderly remained at the fort.

Throughout the eastern part of the state, other schools were rapidly established under similar circumstances. Teachers arrived from the North with supplies, and worked with the help of educated freedmen and, occasionally, Union soldiers. Dozens of secular and religious charitable organizations, including the American Baptist Home Missionary Society and the Freedmen's Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, joined the AMA's efforts, but even all these working together could not keep up with the ever-

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increasing number of freedmen seeking refuge and education. Most freedmen’s schools in Virginia during this time averaged one teacher for more than 100 pupils. Many teachers taught both day and night schools to accommodate pupils of all ages and schedules. In addition, teachers often spent their time and their own money to provide physical aid to the freedmen, which took their attention and resources away from the classroom. Margaret Newbold Thorpe, a missionary teacher in Yorktown, Virginia, remembered being “kept very busy dealing out seeds in addition to a large supply of clothing. One Saturday when we commenced immediately after breakfast dealing out from our stores of necessary articles we did not stop to eat any luncheon; we were so tired by five o’clock that we decided not to see any new comers...but a knock on the door had such a childlike pathetic sound.” Unfortunately, a missionary teacher’s minimal income, coupled with the lack of resources available in the South during the war, meant that little could be done without assistance from headquarters.

As missionary teachers arrived in the South and witnessed the slaves’ deplorable living conditions, they inundated the AMA with requests for humanitarian aid, often with the argument that it would, in the long-term, benefit the greater mission of the organization. Portsmouth teacher H. S. Beals pleaded to the AMA that if “the wants of the poorer families be met in the way of clothing, I have good evidence that there would be an additional 100 scholars in less than a week.” Though AMA officials worried about

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their teachers’ workload, teachers themselves seemed more concerned with doing all they
could to support the freedmen, even if it came at the expense of education. J. P. Green, a
teacher at Virginia’s Camp Hamilton, wrote to headquarters that “I might be able to do
more for these poor people, but unless I board at the Ft. I see not how I can have a night
school...The past few weeks have been very hard for me as I have spent some time each
day in the quarters tending the sick, making nourishing food for them, etc.”6 There is no
question that the AMA’s primary and secondary goals of Christianizing and educating the
freedmen faltered in the face of so many other, more immediate, problems, but over time,
it resulted in stronger educational programs, with greater longevity.

AMA officials in New York were not unfeeling about freedmen’s living
conditions and responded to teachers’ requests to the best of the organization’s financial
ability. However, its primary mission, as indicated by articles and editorials in its monthly
magazine, The American Missionary, and correspondence between officials and teachers,
was not to provide humanitarian aid. Rather, AMA officials believed that charity would
only keep freedmen in a dependent state not unlike slavery itself, and prevent them from
ever becoming self-sufficient or contributing to the economic reconstruction of the South.
They felt that most of the negative traits many whites commonly attributed to blacks at
that time, such as poverty and laziness, could be traced both to their treatment under
slavery and to their “heathenism.” Without a “proper” Christian education, they believed,
blacks could not be expected assimilate with whites, and thus missionary organizations

6American Missionary Association Archives (The Library of Virginia, Richmond): H. S. Beals to
AMA Headquarters, April 28, 1863; J. P. Green to AMA Headquarters, September 18, 1862.
7Butchart, p. 41, 49.
moved in to do their work. AMA officials and their missionaries believed that Christian education would eliminate these negative traits permanently, though gradually, while charity would provide temporary relief at best and would not give blacks any tools for self-improvement.

Missionary teachers and AMA officials agreed that, in the long run, education would be more beneficial to the freedmen, but the teachers made sure that AMA officials, physically isolated from the realities of life in the South, also saw to the more immediate problem. This worked both ways—though AMA officials sent food and clothing to Virginia, their commitment to the AMA mission kept teachers from completely losing sight of the organization's primary goal amid more pressing concerns.

Though they wanted to focus on Christian, academic, and vocational education, AMA officials and teachers would not let the freedmen starve in the classroom. Because the AMA was an independent, self-supporting organization, it could change its priorities relatively easily depending upon each individual situation, a luxury that the larger and more powerful government organizations did not enjoy. However, in reality the AMA's flexibility was often limited by time, human resources, available supplies, and money. Pursuing causes as varied as humanitarian aid, proselytizing, and academic and vocational education was draining for teachers and financially debilitating for the AMA.

Outside assistance was necessary, and initially association officials looked to Union soldiers. Most schools were situated within forts, and soldiers seemed to be an abundant resource; one teacher at Fort Monroe wrote confidently to headquarters that
"soldiers will be glad to teach [the freedmen]."\textsuperscript{8} Officials and teachers quickly realized, however, that the Union soldiers would not always play the role the AMA assigned to them. Some did assist, while others ignored the teachers' and the freedmen's needs, and still others actively worked against any program to help the ex-slaves in their midst.

Missionaries, newly arrived in the South, saw the war and their role in the fight far differently than did the soldiers. Charles P. Day, a teacher stationed at Fort Monroe, wrote to AMA headquarters that he and his colleagues were "nearly discouraged by the opposition manifested by military men. Some officers and soldiers here, seem to have lost sight of the rebellion, and are fighting the ex-slaves." Norfolk teacher W. L. Coan agreed, writing that "many of our military officers are against us; but thank God not all."\textsuperscript{9} The soldiers' hostility was intensified after blacks began joining the Union army; in early 1865 a Union soldier wrote home that "the colored troops are very much disliked by our men & several affrays have taken place in town between them, in which the darkeys have always got the worst of it two or three of them having been killed & several wounded."\textsuperscript{10} Collectively these statements reflect the great rift between soldiers and missionaries. The missionary teachers were there for only one reason—to aid the freedmen—while the soldiers were there primarily to preserve the union. Though many had more or less willingly joined the army, even after conscription began, few of those had done so

\textsuperscript{8}The American Missionary, July 1861, p. 163.  
\textsuperscript{9}Charles P. Day to AMA Headquarters, August 11, 1862, reprinted in The American Missionary, October 1862, p. 232; W. L. Coan to AMA headquarters, September 5, 1863, reprinted in The American Missionary, October 1863, p. 23.  
because they wanted to emancipate and assist the slaves.

In addition, while nearly all AMA teachers were staunch abolitionists, many Union soldiers were less clear in their beliefs— or were confessed racists. "I am not in favor of freeing the negroes and leaving them to run free and mingle among us," wrote Illinois soldier J. R. Barney. Though he supported abolition, he believed that the solution to potential problems with former slaves was colonization—a belief he shared with many civilians and other soldiers. For these men, it was futile to spend time and money educating the freedmen who they believed should be sent to Africa at the war's end.\(^\text{11}\) AMA officials and teachers were in a unique position in that nearly all had the same values, goals, and attitudes toward the freedmen. The government, like the Union soldiers, was far less united in its beliefs, which made developing and executing Reconstruction programs a difficult, sometimes impossible, task.

It would seem that, in the face of so many obstacles, missionary organizations in general, the AMA specifically, and the entire education program in Virginia would have been doomed from the start. Unexpected problems cropped up daily, just as they would for the government when dealing with political and economic reconstruction programs. As early as 1864, teachers in Virginia, both black and white, were sending angry letters to the Reverend George Whipple, the head of the AMA in New York City. On April 15, 1864, teacher P. Morris wrote from Norfolk: "I organized a school here buoyed by the mistaken impression that Prof. Woodbury, as superintendent of schools, would sustain me in all emergencies as far as he was able." H. C. Percy, another teacher from the same

\(^{11}\)J. R. Barney, October 24, 1862, reprinted in Wiley, p. 112.
school district, complained bitterly of the workload, informing headquarters on January 19, 1865, that “during the month no material change has been made in the general operations and the interest of the teachers and pupils seems to increase...Some of the teachers having six reading classes of different grades.”

Clearly both AMA officials and teachers were overwhelmed with the magnitude of problems in the war-torn South, which would only get worse in the months to come. The demands of the needy far exceeded the resources of the caregivers, much as it did for organizations devoted strictly to humanitarian relief both during and after the war. Yet from the beginning the AMA had attributes that helped ensure its survival, many of which can be attributed to missionary organizations as a group. Among these assets were a staff of teachers and administrators deeply and whole-heartedly committed to the cause and a clientele willing to devote long hours to and make personal sacrifices for their education. The teachers and the freedmen, along with the missionary organizations, were already in place and established in their roles by the end of the war. However, for them to go on there had to be another institutional player to help save and educate the freedmen— one that would have the time, the energy, and, perhaps most important, the financial resources to assist the AMA’s efforts. The informal relationship with soldiers had been largely unsuccessful, and the missionaries needed something more structured and permanent. Almost as soon as missionaries began training, AMA officials looked to the federal government to provide them with such support.

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12 American Missionary Association Archives: P. Morris to AMA Headquarters, April 15, 1864; H. C. Percy to AMA Headquarters, January 19, 1865.
The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands

The federal government was slow to act, but on March 3, 1865, the Senate and the House of Representatives created "a department of freedmen and abandoned lands, whose object shall be the good of the freedmen, and the administration of lands and other property falling to the national government in the rebel states, not heretofore appropriated to other uses." The Bureau had four duties: to oversee and redistribute abandoned land; to serve as the record-keeping body for labor, schools, and supplies; to manage the financial matters of Reconstruction; and to maintain medical and hospital services as needed. Major General Oliver Otis Howard, former commander of the Union army in Tennessee, assumed control as commissioner of the Bureau. The organization's original charter was for one year after the war's end, as the federal government intended the Bureau to be a stopgap measure until Washington could implement more permanent reconstruction programs with the assistance of reconstituted Southern state governments. That the Bureau actually operated until 1872, and its Education Division until 1870, indicates that rehabilitating the freedmen and the Southern economy and politically reuniting the nation were far more complicated tasks than anybody, except perhaps those organizations like the AMA already in place in the South for three years or more, had anticipated.

The AMA offered input in the creation of the Bureau, sending recommendations

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1House of Representatives, 38th Congress, 2nd session, Report 9.
which were generally well received. However, no member of the AMA or any other missionary group was considered to be a candidate for the post of Bureau commissioner—the early abolition leanings of these groups were unacceptable to a government organization with more on its agenda than simply aiding the freedmen. The Bureau was in part a military organization, and its leader would be a soldier.

The AMA initially greeted the Bureau with relief. The burden of providing humanitarian aid as well as education was too much for the missionary organizations. They needed a unifying body with financial resources to coordinate and support their efforts. “[The Bureau] should be encouraged to provide for all the colored people of the South free schools, under competent teachers, and should receive the cordial co-operation of the benevolent of the North in this work,” ran an editorial in *The American Missionary* soon after the Bureau’s creation. More importantly, however, the AMA looked to the Bureau to assist with humanitarian aid, the need for which by 1865 had reached a critical stage. Soldiers were quickly leaving the South, and with emancipation most slaves lost their homes and their livelihood. AMA teachers found themselves alone in the midst of an ever-growing problem.

Despite their obvious differences in leadership, structure, and mission, the AMA had pinned its hopes for assistance on an organization much like itself in many ways, although at the beginning neither group realized how much it would come to rely on the other. The Bureau recognized that the emancipated slaves desperately needed food and

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shelter and that education must take a lower priority, at least temporarily. Like the AMA missionaries, Bureau agents in the field saw the urgent need for aid and appealed to their leaders. Also like the AMA, however, the Bureau did not believe that charity was an effective way to assist the freedmen.\(^5\) AMA officials, having learned from their experience in the field for four years, offered advice to the Bureau and to the government on this matter.

In a circular printed in February 1865, the AMA warned Congress that “if the commissioner can withhold rations from those who will not work, then he can compel them to work when and as he will.”\(^6\) Unfortunately, the full context of this statement is lost—only portions of the text were reprinted in *The American Missionary* and the circular itself could not be found among the records in the American Missionary Association archives. Nevertheless, the statement still offers a great deal of insight into the relationship between the AMA and the Bureau, or more generally the missionary organizations and the United States government. The AMA realized that perhaps it was losing some sight of its educational goals in the midst of the humanitarian crisis and hoped that the Bureau would not make the same mistakes. Both organizations believed in work, be it academic, spiritual, or manual, over direct charity for the freedmen. Yet neither group knew where to draw the line between gently forcing the freedmen into self-sufficiency and blatantly and cruelly withholding much-needed aid. Given the title of the


\(^6\) American Missionary Association Archives: *Objections to the Adoption of the Report of the Committee of Conference of Freedmen’s Affairs* (Circular published by the American Missionary Association), February 1865.
circular, and outside knowledge of both groups' activities, it seems likely that the statement was meant as a warning, though without more information this cannot be confirmed. Either way, however, it clearly shows the issues with which the two organizations struggled.

In the months immediately after the war's end, they would work alone and together as a team to define this line, always shifting the boundaries as individual circumstances warranted. Unlike the political and economic reconstruction programs, which were trying to recreate somewhat modified versions of systems that had existed prior to 1861, the AMA and the Education Division of the Bureau were navigating uncharted waters. Never before in the history of the United States had any organization worked to rebuild, rather than suppress or relocate, an entire race and culture.

Ideally, humanitarian aid should not be an issue for these two groups, neither of which initially intended or was equipped to provide such relief, but the AMA had realized, and the Bureau soon would, that at times it simply had to take priority. In addition to the problem of balancing education and humanitarian relief, the Bureau faced a second challenge that the religious and secular organizations did not: rebuilding the economy of the South. General Howard personally believed that education could speed this rebuilding by training people to work and consume, though some government and Bureau officials disagreed and instead favored land distribution programs. The government faced tremendous pressure from Southern elites to settle the land issue quickly, and preferably in their favor.7 As commissioner, Howard had to find a way to

accommodate many different viewpoints. His greatest desire was to expand the black educational programs already in place, but he also had to fulfill the federal government's promises to bring about reconstruction in the realms of land, economics, and politics. Howard and the Bureau were pulled in all directions, making every task at times seem an impossibility. It was a situation that ultimately doomed many of the Reconstruction programs, but with the help of the AMA the Education Division of the Bureau persevered.

During the first year of Reconstruction, Howard and his Bureau agents worked closely with the missionary organizations to give the freedmen not only the education but also the humanitarian aid they needed. Bureau records indicate that from September 1865 to September 1866, an average of 29,819 rations were issued daily throughout the South, but given the sheer number of destitute blacks, not to mention poor whites, in 1865, this barely began to address the problem.\(^8\) By November\(^{1865}\), conditions in the South had deteriorated to the point of desperation; the AMA observed that "the conditions of the freedmen in many of the late rebellious states is everyday becoming more and more alarming." During the crisis the AMA and other religious organizations joined in the relief effort, providing direct support and appealing to their contributors for help. In December 1865 the AMA issued a plea to its readers in the North: "At no former period has this destitution appeared so great, or the numbers involved in it so large, and UNLESS THE PEOPLE OF THE NORTH, OR THE GOVERNMENT, COME TO THE RESCUE, WITH CLOTHING AND FOOD, THOUSANDS MUST PERISH. The

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*Peirce, p. 97.*
Association will do what it can to meet these wants."

After the war, when most soldiers departed and all blacks were free, the AMA and the Bureau had no choice but to join together in a full-scale relief effort. Schools continued to function during this time, but conditions in the South lessened their importance in day-to-day operations during the first critical months after the war. Yet the combination of organized support and individual persistence saved the school system from collapse during the first year after the war.

Though both recognized and acted upon more urgent needs, the AMA and the Bureau could not allow themselves to lose sight of education if they wanted to achieve their larger goals. During the first few months of postwar reconstruction, Howard and the Bureau wrestled with the same moral dilemma as the AMA: that humanitarian aid in the form of charity would not, in the long run, benefit either the freedmen or the Southern economy. In his autobiography, Howard recalled a conversation with Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, in which Howard declared that “the education of the freedmen’s children, and of adults, as far as practicable, was true relief...relief from beggary and dependence.”

Christianization was not an issue for the Bureau as an organization, but many other long-term goals behind the AMA’s push for education, such as the freedmen’s economic independence, their ability to defend themselves against swindlers and accusers, and their general development and growth into an active and viable part of Southern society, were all parts of Howard’s plan for the New South. In order to rebuild

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9The American Missionary, November 1865, p. 241; December 1865, p. 269.
any sort of economic base, the government believed, the South desperately needed low-cost agricultural labor, for which many of the freedmen were eminently qualified. If food and clothing were donated to them, Howard believed they would have no incentive to work and earn the money for such necessities. Many northern officials believed that if each free black man were given a parcel of land (the famous “forty acres and a mule”), he would not willingly enter into a labor contract or work as a sharecropper, and thus would not help as much in rebuilding the economy of the South. Interestingly, however, the sharecropping system was aided by education, as freedmen were more willing to enter into a work contract that they could read, and therefore be assured that they were not being taken advantage of. Though the Bureau’s Education Division, which was Howard’s greatest interest, worked for the good of the freedmen, the long-range focus of the Bureau itself was the economy of the South. Howard knew that the Bureau was only a temporary measure that might not be followed by other government programs. He wanted to be sure that, when left on their own, the freedmen would have the tools not only to survive in a free society but also to contribute to that society. Education, not philanthropy, would accomplish this.¹¹

Charity, therefore, should be left to those organizations dedicated specifically to philanthropy, and government resources that were already being pulled in so many directions should be allocated to other programs with broader goals. Historian John A. Carpenter has observed that “this was an age when it was considered the duty of private philanthropy or local government to care for the poor; surely it was not the function of the

Howard was firm in his belief that charity should not be part of the Bureau’s long-range plan. In his opinion, charity was “abnormal to our system of government [and] would be but temporary.” Yet the Bureau had significant advantages in providing relief that the AMA did not: namely, the backing of the federal government and a budget, which meant that the Bureau was not dependant on charitable donations. The end of the war made more resources, including food and supplies from the North, available to the Bureau, some of them procured in the South itself and others by train from the North. Though neither the Bureau nor the AMA wanted to allocate resources for humanitarian aid, each was forced to by the critical situation in 1865. Ironically, if the problem of relief in the South had been smaller, it might actually have been much more disastrous to the freedmen, and eventually to their education, as relief organizations might not have pumped money, resources, and manpower into the system. Neither the AMA nor the Bureau wanted to take control, but the magnitude of the effort forced both to draw on every resource they had and to assist one another in a way neither had anticipated only six months earlier; this teamwork would eventually result in a stronger and more effective school system, run by two organizations that had learned to build on one another’s strengths and weaknesses.

Yet another difficulty that the Bureau encountered was opposition from Southern whites. At its inception, the Bureau commissioner was given the “authority to set apart, for the use of loyal refugees and freedmen, such tracts of land within the insurrectionary

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states as shall have been abandoned, or to which the United States shall have acquired title by confiscation or sale.\textsuperscript{14} Many Southern planters who had lost their land and slaves in the war were threatened by the agenda of the Bureau and worked against those programs that might redistribute resources and power to the freedmen. Planters for generations had defined their world by their land, and the Bureau's actions raised the possibility of destroying this definition. Reactions to the AMA's educational efforts, which had the potential to give blacks power, were mixed, but the Bureau's early plan to add property, and thereby economic power, to the intellectual power inherent in an education, was unacceptable to many Southern whites, especially those in the elite classes. It was not long before Andrew Johnson's Reconstruction platform restored much of the abandoned and confiscated land to the whites, rather than distribute it to freedmen, but white anger towards the Bureau did not abate.

Despite this rocky beginning, an agenda too ambitious for one organization to accomplish, and opposition at every turn, Howard and the Bureau doggedly persisted in their work. On July 16, 1866, the Bureau won a two-year extension of its charter, along with a sizable budget increase: $6,940,450 for the coming year, as compared with the $478,363 it had spent in the first year.\textsuperscript{15} At that point, conditions in the South were slowly stabilizing; internal disputes between the Johnson administration and Bureau officials over land reforms, specifically whether confiscated land should be given to the freedmen rather than returned to former owners, had been resolved in favor of whites; and the difficult winter of 1865–66 was over.

\textsuperscript{14}U.S. Statutes at Large, XIII, p. 508; quoted in Carpenter, p. 107.
\textsuperscript{15}McFeely, p. 288, 289; Howard, vol. 2, p. 264.
The aid programs in place during that first difficult year did not meet the demand—despite the combined efforts of the AMA and the Bureau, by 1866 nearly 1,300 black Virginia families were dependent upon government support for their existence. This was a small percentage of those in need of help, but still more than either organization would have liked to see dependent on outside support for their basic existence. However, the two organizations began to sort out their roles and devise a more efficient system to manage relief and education. With the help of the AMA, Howard could finally direct the Bureau toward education rather than immediate humanitarian relief, and as a result, educational programs flourished during the next few years. Howard noted in his autobiography that “the many benevolent organizations...gradually lessened their eleemosynary features and gave themselves vigorously to the teaching of children and youth and the planting of schools.”

Land reform had faltered nearly as soon as it began, owing to pressure from Southern whites, the conservative leadership of President Johnson, and the widespread American belief in the sanctity of private property. Congress and the President clashed in 1866, throwing political reform into turmoil, while tentative and controversial early ideas about black suffrage were shelved until 1867. Educational programs, however, thrived during the next four years. Building on what the AMA and other missionary organizations had begun, the Bureau greatly expanded the school system in Virginia. Schools remained under the control of various missionary organizations, though an increasing number were funded by tuition. The Bureau served as an overseer and record-keeper. Its job was not to

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“supersede the benevolent agencies...but to systematize and facilitate them.”

Enrollments climbed steadily, but student/teacher ratios dropped dramatically within months of the Bureau’s initial involvement, thanks in part to its assistance in training and transporting teachers recruited by the AMA and other organizations. At the beginning of the 1865–66 academic year, 21 teachers in 12 Virginia schools taught 1,649 pupils; by the close of the year there were 225 teachers in 145 schools, with 17,589 students. In addition to reading and writing, students studied geography, arithmetic, the “higher branches” of the sciences and mathematics, and, for female students, needlework. Religious education that had started with the AMA continued as a significant part of the curriculum. The Bureau expanded the curriculum to include vocational programs. Blacks trained for occupations outside of agriculture, opportunities which the Bureau believed would be plentiful in an increasingly industrial South. Over time, as Janet Duitsman Cornelius observes, the Bureau shifted from its position that freedmen were most useful in the agricultural world and began encouraging their participation in rebuilding the entire South and its infrastructure, rather than just the agricultural South. “As education for freedmen progressed,” she writes, “southern whites were forced to confront in new ways the realities of their changing situations.”

In some districts, blacks paid tuition for their education; in others they boarded teachers to contribute their share of the cost. By 1869, tuition payments constituted $15,000 of the $133,000 spent by the Bureau for education in Virginia, while an

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estimated $4,000 in goods and services was contributed by freedmen who boarded teachers in their own homes. Though much of the school system was still subsidized by the government and by charitable donations, under the Bureau's direction freedmen, both students and teachers, took an increasingly active role in their own education.19

Nowhere are the accomplishments of the education program more apparent than in the Bureau monthly statistical and narrative reports to Howard. In 1869, R. M. Manly, the Bureau's School Superintendent for Virginia, observed "the growing earnestness and spirit of self-help among the freedmen. They have been thrown more upon their own resources, and have responded accordingly." By "their own resources," Manly meant, in part, the ever-increasing number of tuition schools in Virginia, which fell under the jurisdiction of the Bureau. In October 1865, 19 schools employing 21 teachers were funded by the tuition of 590 students. By the end of the 1865–66 academic year the number had grown to 26 schools with 30 teachers and 1,246 students. One year later there were 34 tuition-supported schools in the state, and by the spring of 1868, more than 70. On average, more than 75 percent of these tuition schools employed black teachers from Virginia, while AMA and other missionary schools continued to bring teachers from the North.20

Though land grants to freedmen never came about and charity was only a short-term response to a long-term problem, education had done its job, and done it well. In one of his monthly reports to Howard, Manly wrote that

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19 Statistics gathered from *VA State Superintendent's Monthly Reports, BRFAL, September 1865–March 1869.*
20 *VA State Superintendent's Monthly Reports, BRFAL, 10 July 1869; Statistics gathered from monthly reports from October 1865–June 1869.*
It is almost impossible to estimate the good already accomplished by the Bureau and the cooperating societies. Not less than fifty thousand of the late slave population of this state have learned to read and write. More than three hundred are in Normal school; many who three or four years ago did not know the alphabet are acceptable teachers; many are successfully pursuing advanced studies at home and abroad. Youth has become the instructor of age...The schools have been the principal cause of the hopefulness and patience with which they have endured the hunger, the nakedness and the unavenged wrongs of their transition state.21

Superintendent Manly, clearly a Bureau loyalist, was overly optimistic, as there were certainly serious problems with black education in Virginia. Even after the Bureau assumed control, the schools were overcrowded and did not serve all communities where freedmen resided. Teachers often received minimal training in order to meet the demand for instructors quickly, and many teachers, both white missionaries from the North and educated free blacks from the South, felt the sting of anti-black sentiment from white Southerners. Yet education managed to succeed where many other programs failed or radically changed course. During the relief crisis immediately after the war, the AMA and the Bureau had come to rely on one another, and their shared goals for the freedmen strengthened this relationship within the school system. Their relationship was often tested, as in the case of the Butler schoolhouse dispute (to be discussed in the next chapter), but one year of trial by fire had taught the two organizations what it would take to succeed.

Thus, through education, the AMA and the Bureau worked toward meeting their broader goals. The freedmen were working to better their own lives, they were active in the labor market and economy of the South, and many were adopting a more sedate form

21 VA State Superintendent's Monthly Reports, BRFAL, March 1869.
of Christianity than they had practiced before the war and were forming their own churches.\footnote{Leon Litwack, \textit{Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery} (New York: Random House, 1980), pp. 462–71.} From inside the schoolhouse came people somewhat prepared for the world of the New South, though the failures of other Reconstruction programs left this new world incomplete.

Despite the odds, the combined skills of the AMA and the Bureau brought success that did not happen for other Reconstruction programs. The educational mission of these organizations survived because of their relationship with one another, but it prospered because of the actions of two groups of individuals—the teachers, and the freedmen themselves.
It is clear that the AMA and the Bureau found a way to work together and become one of the most powerful, if temporary, teams created during Reconstruction. Less clear is exactly how they formed this partnership: the day-to-day operations of the two groups; communications, both between Bureau agents and teachers in the field, and between these “frontline” workers and officials at the respective headquarters in New York City and Washington, D.C.; and, most important, the two organizations’ ability to divide up the work so that each group built on its strengths and minimized its weaknesses. The humanitarian crisis immediately after the war explains how the two organizations reached a consensus on the financial and ideological issue of who should provide physical relief and aid. However, it does not address the working relationship required to fulfill their common mission: to provide education for the freedmen of the South. Both Howard and AMA officials regarded this as entirely separate from the issue of aid and realized that it would require a different sort of structure for a successful working relationship.

From the beginning, much of the burden for establishing such a relationship lay with the Bureau, simply because the AMA and other missionary organizations were already in place, with fixed personnel and operating systems. Moreover, the missionary teachers were already living in the South, some for three years or more, and the Bureau officials and agents were the newcomers to live in the postwar South. In its formative stages, the Bureau reacted and respond to the organizations with which it would be working. The missionary groups certainly welcomed the Bureau; Howard recalled in his
autobiography that, on arriving for his first day as head of the Bureau, “at least thirty
Northern benevolent societies had written letters, and now acknowledged me as their ally;
their numerous willing workers at the front, they declared, regarded me as their friend and
coadjutor.” Thus, Howard faced, in addition to so many other challenges, the task of
working sometimes with and sometimes around a school system and corps of officials
and teachers more familiar with the area, its people and their needs, than he and his own
staff were. Bureau agents, many of them former Union soldiers, were not strangers to the
South as a war zone, but had little experience dealing with its citizens in peacetime.

Howard approached this challenge first by appointing a hierarchy of officials to
oversee not only education, but all duties of the Bureau in each state of the former
Confederacy. Not surprisingly, most were former military officials, either colonels or
generals, with whom Howard had served during the war. There can be no question that,
despite his interest in assisting the freedmen and his commitment to education, Howard
treated his job, and indeed the entire organization, as a military endeavor. In the long run,
this approach was beneficial, as it gave the missionary organizations the structure and
support they needed to continue their work, but in the beginning such a regime was
difficult for the more lassez faire organizations to accept.

For example, the primary means of communication between the Bureau officials
and the missionary teachers were monthly statistical and narrative reports. Before the
Bureau, record-keeping seemed to have been a relatively unstructured affair for the AMA.

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1 Oliver Otis Howard, Autobiography of Oliver Otis Howard, Major General United States Army
2 Howard, p. 215.
Reports, though technically required monthly, were informal, and many teachers failed to file them on time, if at all. There was no set format: some included only financial data from their schools (often with requests for reimbursement), while others offered narratives of daily activities or school demographics. There appears to have been little middle-management (to use a thoroughly modern term) in the AMA; teachers sent their correspondence directly to the Reverend George Whipple, head of the AMA, and, though his letters have not been preserved, it is clear from surviving correspondence that he responded personally. Many letters contained more information about pupils’ or teachers’ lives than about education. For example, one teacher relayed a classroom incident to Whipple in which she asked "'Where was Jeff Davis caught,'...Among others who raised their hands was a bright little boy of 8 years of age, who upon being permitted to speak, rose with dignity and said ‘Running away in the woods with his wifes (sic) dress and petticoat on.'" This anecdote helps to demonstrate the political knowledge and understanding that even some of the youngest freedmen possessed. More importantly, that such an anecdote was addressed to the head of the AMA is indicative of the informal governance of the AMA up to the end of the war.

This all changed when the Bureau joined in the operation of the school system. Though correspondence with Whipple continued, teachers from all missionary organizations were required to fill out monthly reports for the Bureau; in Virginia these were collected by Superintendent R. M. Manly, who then prepared a more general report.

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3Evidence gathered from the American Missionary Association Archives (The Library of Virginia, Richmond), 1863–65.
to send to his superiors in Washington and also to the missionary organization officials. These reports were very detailed, requiring daily counts of students in attendance, age and gender break-downs, and even such questions as "Do the mullatoes [sic] show any more capacity than the blacks?" and "Do the colored scholars show equal capacity with the whites?" The chain of command meant that Howard and other high-ranking Bureau officials, unlike Whipple, had little contact with teachers and that requests or problems took much longer to resolve. The reports also meant more work for the teachers, who at the beginning saw few benefits from the Bureau and complained that the school system was changing, becoming more formal and businesslike. Yet this was all in keeping with Howard's plan not "to supersede the benevolent agencies...but systematize and facilitate" their work. Eventually, the AMA would take primary control of the schools while the Bureau oversaw other necessary details, such as the procurement and maintenance of buildings, but the radical structural changes of 1865 made AMA teachers and officials wary of what was to come.

In the beginning of the partnership, many AMA teachers felt that the Bureau was taking over their work. Regulations, reports, and government schools made life difficult for the teachers, while having little impact on day-to-day operations in the schools, though by the following year these reactions would be reversed. Teacher correspondence mentioning the Bureau, both positively and negatively, as well as required reports appeared in the AMA archives dated as early as March 1865, while mention of these

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5 American Missionary Association Archives: Freedmen's Bureau School Report, November 1865.
changes in *The American Missionary*, the official voice of the association, did not appear until July, and even then only as a brief acknowledgement of the Bureau’s creation.7 Though the Bureau brought assistance with humanitarian aid, its initial educational efforts did little but increase the teachers’ impatience with the government.

AMA officials became involved, and acceptance of the Bureau from both headquarters and the field grew when the Bureau stepped up its efforts in another of its areas of interest: abandoned lands. Physical conditions in the missionary schools were deplorable: roofs leaked, stoves and fuel were scarce, and relocation was common as buildings became uninhabitable or were repossessed. C. P. Day, one of the AMA’s most prolific correspondents, wrote from Hampton that “the chief obstacle we have to encounter is the want of suitable school buildings. Our rooms are so badly arranged that we have always had to labor under great difficulties.”8 H. C. Percy echoed this sentiment and demonstrated the extreme flexibility pupils and teacher needed to keep going in a letter later that year: “The schools in Portsmouth that were recently deprived of their rooms, have become nicely settled again in an old church.”9 Yet another teacher complained that “my school for the past four months as been in a very unsettled condition. I have been teaching in the Anderson [?] room of the Ninth Street M.E. Church.”10

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7American Missionary Association Archives, March 1865; *The American Missionary*, July 1865, p. 147.
Considering that teachers dealt with disease, poverty, human suffering, and threats from Southern whites on a daily basis, Day’s rating of accommodations as the most serious problem may be something of an exaggeration, but it does indicate that providing physical space was the AMA’s weak spot. Books and food made their way to the South (though they were often delayed), and requests for new teachers were limited only by money, not by available manpower. However, the AMA did not have the political power to requisition buildings for its schools and, after the war, could no longer use military bases for either classrooms or teachers’ accommodations.

The Bureau, on the other hand, was created in part to oversee the distribution of “abandoned lands,” including buildings. Much of its effort was directed at redistributing plantations and farmland, but it also had the authority to designate buildings as hospitals and schools for the destitute; Howard decreed that some land and property in every state must be “set apart for refugees and freedmen...for the employment and general welfare of all such persons within the lines of national military occupation in insurrectionary States.”\(^1\) Howard also recommended that, once obtained, the buildings be turned over to the managing school district, thereby allowing the Bureau to aid educational efforts without actually being involved in the classroom itself.\(^2\)

This division of labor worked well. By mid-1866, teachers were writing of how much they and their pupils enjoyed the new and more spacious conditions and rarely complained of government intervention and bureaucracy. Inevitably there were some

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\(^1\)Howard, vol. 2, p. 234.
problems with the new system. In the American Missionary Association archives is a series of letters between various Bureau officials and Whipple of the AMA regarding the procurement and ownership of the Butler School near Norfolk. Correspondence dragged on for months. There were accusations of improper reports being filed, lost requisitions, and miscommunications between the two organizations. Whipple was clearly frustrated that he could not simply take title to the school building, but rather faced an overwhelming bureaucracy and hierarchy of command—something he had not known in the years when the AMA was the sole overseer of its schools. And yet, once he got through the proper channels, the school was legally his, not subject to repossession by another individual or group, and he had complete control over the teachers, pupils, and curriculum.\textsuperscript{13} The AMA had the teachers, many of the supplies, and the organizational mission to handle the human and curricular aspects of the school, while the Bureau had the resources, the political power, and a mission to oversee the facilities. From this collaboration came a strong and successful program.

From the initial months of unclear roles and a humanitarian crisis, it took less than one year for the Bureau and the AMA to become a smoothly operating team, with clearly defined roles for each organization. In early 1866, a series of three letters illustrates this aptly. In January, the Bureau Superintendent at Ft. Monroe wrote to AMA headquarters requesting “a teacher for the Industrial School at once.” The same day, Stuart Bemis of the Bureau wrote Whipple to “acknowledge herewith the receipt of seventeen (17) Bibles. One (1) case and one (1) bale of clothing cloth for distribution to destitute Freedmen.” A

\textsuperscript{13}American Missionary Association Archives: E. Knowlton to Rev. Whipple, May 24, 1865, May 31, 1865, June 6, 1865; R. M. Manly to Rev. Whipple, September 8, 1865.
week later, another Bureau official wrote Whipple with “the honor to enclose vouchers for the transportation of [first name illegible] Burnett from Southampton [New York] to Norfolk.” The AMA had the responsibility for supplying teachers, whether for their own or government-sponsored schools, while the Bureau would assist with the costs of transporting those teachers to the South. Both shared the responsibility for supplies, educational or humanitarian, depending upon the circumstances of each situation.

This relationship brought many attributes to education that other areas of Reconstruction lacked. Bureau officials and agents, AMA leaders, and missionary teachers all quickly realized that a bottom-up, grass-roots intervention by the Bureau was unnecessary. A thriving and successful school system was already in place; it needed support, not competition. Fortunately, the Bureau was headed by a commissioner dedicated to making education a priority, even if it meant releasing some of the government’s control to the smaller, private organizations. Government bureaucracy, though frustrating at times for organizations with a flexible structure, did wield political power, which benefited teachers and pupils alike. Yet this bureaucracy had to be tempered—teachers and AMA officials had enough authority to question policies and argue for change when necessary, which kept the government from taking total control. The combination of public and private meant that all voices were heard, giving the educational program the support it needed to survive.

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Life in the Schoolhouse

The American Missionary Association Archives, the American Missionary, and the records of the Freedmen's Bureau have made it relatively easy for historians to study Reconstruction and its educational programs from the top down and to understand the organizational relationship between the Bureau and the AMA. Education could not have succeeded without strong leadership and support. We have a clear idea of what went on in the AMA headquarters offices, the Congress, and the state governments in creating educational programs. Less clear is how these programs and policies were applied—what went on in the classroom as a result of policies developed in Washington, D.C., and New York City? Yet a knowledge of the daily operations of the school system is critical to understanding the success of education.

Unfortunately, this aspect of educational programs during Reconstruction is difficult to trace. Former slaves who reflected on their education rarely mentioned the specifics of classroom dynamics, discussing only the general benefits of education. Teachers' letters and diaries provide a more thorough analysis, though they were more likely to write of their own needs or their responsibilities outside of the classroom than of actual day-to-day operations. Their official reports to the AMA and Bureau headquarters tend to be more financial and statistical than narrative. However, the letters that a handful of teachers in Virginia wrote to AMA headquarters in the early years of Reconstruction have been preserved, and these offer a much closer look inside the classroom than other sources allow.
Jacqueline Jones, one of the few Reconstruction scholars who has taken this bottom-up approach, looks inside the classroom in what is perhaps the most valuable chapter of *Soldiers of Light and Love*, simply entitled "Schooling." According to her study, missionary teachers attempted to recreate northern schools as closely as possible. The curriculum, discipline, and values were all part of an effort to bring New England schools to the South:

In the first place, they believed that all black people should learn the basic literacy skills to prepare them for life and work in a democratic society. Secondly, they felt that the school should supplement the family in providing a broad education, consisting of the rudiments of citizenship training plus a distinctive brand of Victorian-Protestant "moral instruction." The long-range purpose of schooling, in this view, was the intellectual and moral growth of responsible individuals who recognized their duty to God, country, family, and self.¹

The logic behind such thinking is clear when one considers that many of these teachers, particularly those working through the American Missionary Association, were raised in New England, in churches and schools not far removed from the Puritan traditions. Teaching methods and philosophies that had been applied, more often than not successfully, for generations in the North were transplanted to the South. Northern missionaries wanted to mold a New South in the image of the North: a world where slavery and heathenism would be permanently laid to rest. Not surprisingly, these traditions met their match in a world far removed from New England. And yet, their use helped greatly in making the educational programs so successful.

Throughout their correspondence with officials at AMA headquarters, teachers

repeatedly compared their students, schools, and lesson plans with those they had known in the North. Becoming more "northern" was a sign of progress and improvement, as teacher Nellie Parmenter noted when she wrote that "at the commencement of this school the children were very rude and rough, and knew but very little about order, but their [sic] has been a gradual improvement, and I think my school will compare favorably with our Northern school."\(^2\) C. P. Day related to Whipple an incident in which he caught two young boys in a fight and made them write letters of apology, which he then sent to Whipple as an example of how students with far fewer advantages than those in the North could still distinguish right from wrong and admit mistakes and transgressions. He praised his pupils for rising above the level of slavery in the South and adopting northern morals.\(^3\)

Curriculum, too, echoed northern sentiments and was heavily shaped by the Christian bent of the missionary organizations. Among the supplies most sought after by teachers were Bibles and testaments. H. C. Percy wrote in early 1865 to make a request of "100 Small Testaments, 400 Test. Psalms (next larger), 200 Large (Library) Testaments, 100 Brever's 12 mo. Bible, 50 Family Bible."\(^4\) Teachers and organization may have hoped to offer the freedmen skills for self-sufficiency, but the classroom instruction often focused on the less practical, though certainly no less important, areas of education.

Patriotism was greatly stressed in the schools. Abraham Lincoln was revered as a

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\(^4\)American Missionary Association Archives: H. C. Percy to the American Bible Society, January 30, 1865, Norfolk, Va.
hero, while Confederate leaders like Jefferson Davis were ridiculed. Jacob E. Yoder, a missionary teacher in Lynchburg, Virginia, wrote with distress that “all the schools small today on account of the holiday. The people in Dixie celebrate this day in memory of the Death of Gen. Stonewall Jackson...All this celebration amounts to is simply this: it shows the feelings toward the United States Government.”5 As missionaries, the teachers worked to instill their own religious, moral, and political values in their pupils; those pupils, who had received little or no guidance up to this point except from parents and elders, appeared to accept eagerly what they were taught. The curriculum combined the practical (reading, writing, spelling), with the vocational (sewing, agriculture), and the moral (scripture and discipline). This combination served to meet the goals of the teachers and the needs of the students in a challenging environment.

Schools were unstable in the postbellum South; teachers migrated between districts, and pupils, living in so uncertain a world, could not predict from one day to the next whether they would be in school. Yoder began many of his diary entries during the final months of the 1865–66 school year with a count of the pupils in attendance, and the number fluctuated daily.6 In addition, most schools encompassed an extremely wide range of ages and abilities—toddlers to grandparents, and “alphabet classes” as well as lessons for those who had received years of underground schooling. While curriculum and teaching philosophy might have reflected Northern traditions, often classroom dynamics and demographics did not. Teachers faced the difficult task of trying to blend philosophy

6 Yoder, entries from April 30–May 30, 1866.
and reality into one working system. Just as the AMA tempered the strict government policies, forcing the Bureau to adapt to changing circumstances, so did the actions of the freedmen force teachers to rethink some of their teaching philosophies, such as a strict division into grades by pupils' ages, in order to create a school system that would work for a unique group of people.

Lastly, physical conditions inside the schoolhouse, though greatly improved after the advent of the Bureau, were often primitive at best, and teachers competed with numbing cold, sweltering heat, and leaky roofs for their pupils' attention. There were a few exceptions to the impoverished school system of the postbellum South, including some schools in non-Confederate states which accepted black pupils from the poverty-stricken areas to their south. One such example is Saint Frances' Academy for Colored Girls in Baltimore, an institution so affluent that it required of its pupils "a uniform dress for Sundays and Holidays...in winter, purple merino dress, and large cape of same material, black straw hats, trimmed with purple ribbon. For Summer, blue de-laine skirts, white waist; black sacque, white straw hats, trimmed with blue ribbon. They should also have three black alpaca aprons, for school. Each pupil should have a white dress."\(^7\) However, the academy was unusual, and few from Tidewater Virginia could attend—most students and teachers saw discomfort and deprivation as a unquestionable part of schooling in the postbellum South.

Though the AMA and the Freedmen's Bureau set educational policies,

\(^7\)Daniel A. P. Murray Collection, 1818–1907: Catalogue of pupils of Saint Frances' Academy for Colored Girls: under the direction of the Sisters of Providence, for the academic year 1867–8, incorporated 1867, p. 3.
recommended textbooks, and wrote curricula, it was by and large the teachers who had the greatest influence over classroom life, simply because they were there and in charge. If an individual teacher disagreed with a particular policy or edict handed down from headquarters, he or she could ignore it and proceed in a different fashion. If on a given day it seemed more important to tackle discipline, manners, or nourishment than geography, the teacher was at liberty to do so. This flexibility, which meant that a school could be tailored to meet the needs of its pupils, was a key factor in the success of the school system during Reconstruction. Government backing, financial support and supplies, and strong leadership were not enough—to succeed schools needed strong, caring, and compassionate support from within, as well as financial and administrative guidance from afar.
The Teachers

Who were the men and women who traveled South into a war zone to educate a race of people few had ever had contact with, and in some cases had never even seen? What motivated them to risk health and safety in the name of God and Christianity? And, most important, how critical were they to the educational process? On the surface, missionaries and Northern organizations might seem tangential to the education of freedmen—slaves had found ways to learn and to teach one another long before emancipation, and there were literate blacks, though not enough to meet the demand by themselves, as well as Southern whites willing to teach the freedmen—most notably those who had conducted underground schools before emancipation. Were the missionary teacher, or even the AMA and the Freedmen’s Bureau, necessary to ensure that the freedmen were educated in the postbellum period? Did they have other roles that justified their presence in the South to both the government and the white landowners? And, were the teachers in control, aided and supported by the freedmen, as Jacqueline Jones argues, or were those roles reversed, as in James Anderson’s Reconstruction-era South?

Jones has offered a demographic portrait of missionary teachers, but age, economic status, and religious background do little to answer these broader questions. The monthly teacher’s reports of the Freedmen’s Bureau, which often contained narrative portions as well as statistical information, offer some clues to the real duties of missionary teachers, as do a small number of surviving letters and diaries written by those who served. Margaret Newbold Thorpe’s memoir, reprinted in the Virginia Magazine of
History and Biography, provides as complete an account of a Northern missionary teacher in Virginia as survives today. Thorpe was stationed at Fort Magruder, near Williamsburg, Virginia, from 1866 to 1868, and moved on to North Carolina in 1869. Demographically she is the prototype of Jones’s portrait: though her exact age is not known, she is described as young and was of an age to marry shortly after finishing her service as a teacher. She came from a prominent family in Philadelphia, and was an active member of the Episcopal Church in that city.\(^1\) Clearly she did not need the meager salary that such a job provided (the average AMA teacher received ten dollars a month plus room and board),\(^2\) and must have relied on the other, non-material rewards that her teaching position provided to carry her through the most difficult days.

At the beginning the conditions she found at the fort were a rude contrast to her well-to-do upbringing, as they must have been for so many other middle-class missionaries: “when our house was furnished it could not be called luxurious, as we had no carpets or easy chairs, in our bedroom no wardrobe or closet; but our greatest discomfort was not caused by lack of furniture, but lack of furnace or any stove.” Ironically, this woman who had given up everything to dedicate herself to teaching the freedmen complained bitterly about the “tall black utterly incompetent [sic] woman” who cooked for Thorpe and her fellow teachers.\(^3\) Not knowing the woman’s culinary ability, it is still surprising to find that a missionary, committed to helping the poor, would have had a cook at all. Just as Union soldiers had mixed feelings on educating the

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\(^2\) American Missionary Association Archives, (The Library of Virginia, Richmond), 1864.
\(^3\) Thorpe, pp. 183–84.
freedmen, clearly the teachers themselves were not all pure-hearted and free of racial prejudice, nor could they always overlook the most difficult parts of their jobs or their living situations.

Throughout the teachers’ diaries, letters, and reports, one overriding theme is the amount of work beyond classroom duty which circumstances demanded of teachers and which they willingly offered. It was not unusual for a missionary to teach in both day and night school, and in his or her “spare” time to act as nurse, relief worker, pastor, midwife, and even surrogate parent. In their writings, these teachers expressed their frustration at working in the midst of such human misery, but most persisted, realizing that teaching under such circumstances meant much more than standing before a classroom of well-fed children—which had been the experience of many before making the journey South. Here, they faced pupils ranging in age from toddlers to the elderly getting their first taste of education, and those who had learned the fundamentals of reading and writing in the underground school system next to those who had never before seen a book. And yet reading, writing, and arithmetic were among the least of their duties or their problems.

The pages of Thorpe’s diary reveal the many roles she played besides that of classroom teacher. “We distributed clothing, medicine, garden seeds, implements for carpenter work and farming; also advice!” she wrote of a typical day at the fort.4 Educational duties aside, perhaps the most important role that the missionary teachers played in the South was that of caregiver. The living conditions for the freedmen in the South were deplorable, and nobody knew that better than the missionaries who lived in

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4Thorpe, p. 185.
proximity to, sometimes even in the same house with, them. The AMA and the Freedmen’s Bureau as organizations had to work through the humanitarian crisis of the immediate postwar years, but it was the teachers—the men and women who interacted with the freedmen on a daily basis—who distributed the food and clothing and made sure that officials in remote northern cities like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia knew how critical the situation really was. The AMA and the Freedmen’s Bureau were able to work together, support one another, and survive the crisis years immediately after the war because teachers like Margaret Thorpe kept them informed and held them responsible for ensuring that the freedmen were cared for as well as educated. As early as 1863, AMA teachers had begun submitting reimbursement requests to the AMA for out of pocket expenses; within a year these reports had become stylized and an official part of the AMA records.Officials’ responses to the teachers’ requests helped make the AMA a more efficient organization, capable of weathering the crises of the period and still achieving its mission of Christian education.

The aid administered by teachers, in all forms from food and clothing to medical assistance and agricultural support, often came at the expense of education. Teachers lamented this sacrifice, and yet they knew what their priorities had to be. The January 1863 edition of The American Missionary issued an “Appeal for the Freedmen,” ranking their needs in order as physical (clothing and shelter), education, preaching of the gospel, and finally assistance in organizing churches and schools. The teachers made sure that education was not lost entirely from the AMA’s program in the South, which ensured the

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5 American Missionary Association Archives, 1863.
survival of the organization and the betterment of the freedmen, but they also worked to ensure that the freedmen survived and even to some degree prospered, so that they could take advantage of these programs.

Education’s success owes a great deal to the presence of these teachers, who acted as a liaison between policy makers and pupils, advocating for one cause or another as they saw fit. Thus, education thrived during the general turmoil of Reconstruction. The teachers were in the presence of the freedmen daily, seeing what needed to be done and acting on those needs more quickly than could officials from headquarters. And, more important, they had the backing of both the missionary organizations and the government to accomplish their goals—a vital network of financial and administrative support that other Reconstruction programs lacked from their inception, and which prevented some programs and proposals from ever being attempted.

Clearly Jacqueline Jones’s thesis has merit—the missionary organizations and their teachers were critical to educating the freedmen, and, more broadly, to the relative success of education amid the other dismal failures of Reconstruction. Though some slaves were marginally educated before the war—one study estimates that only five percent were literate at the time of emancipation⁷—the arrival of missionary teachers signaled a new era of education, more formalized and systematic, with teachers held accountable for their work and a school system that did not have to be disbanded if word went out that the master knew of it. In addition, without the aid of the missionary teachers, the freedmen’s lives immediately after the war would have been even more

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preoccupied with basic needs than they already were, leaving much less time for education of any sort. Margaret Thorpe did not belittle the accomplishments of her pupils, nor their incredible desire to be educated either by themselves or by missionary teachers. Yet she made clear her opinion that it was the teachers, not the students, who were the driving force behind nearly every facet of the freedmen’s lives, not just education. At her departure from Virginia to go home on holiday for the summer of 1866, she wrote that “it was very painful to leave our people. They grieved so and were so needy and had no one to call upon when we were gone, and although we promised to return in the Autumn, they were despondent . . . They would say ‘we trust you will come again’ and so amid a storm of tears and sobs and ‘God bless you’s’ and ‘May de good Lawd bring youn’s back again’: we mounted the ‘Ark’ that carried us to Yorktown, where we were joined by other of the missionaries and went joyfully on our homeward way.”\(^8\) Thorpe would return to Tidewater Virginia for two more years, distributing both aid and education to what she perceived as a desperate, needy, and helpless group of people. But what role did these newly freed people play in the educational process, and to what degree were they responsible for the success of one of Reconstruction’s programs?

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\(^8\) Thorpe, p. 188.
The Freedmen

Within the web of bureaucracy, the shifting political motives, constant economic and social crises, and ever-changing organizations that surrounded freedmen's education, and indeed Reconstruction programs in general, there was one constant—the freedmen. Some had found learning in the South long before northern missionaries arrived, in many cases even before they were legally able to do so, and their devotion to education only increased with the end of slavery. W.E.B. Du Bois noted in 1910 that "the thirst of the black man for knowledge . . . gave birth to the public free school system in the South."\(^1\) Certainly education could not have succeeded without the dedication of teachers, any more than it could have without the unique and well-timed meeting of the AMA and the Freedmen's Bureau. Just as certainly, it could not have lasted—perhaps, as James Anderson argues, could not have even begun—without the contributions of the freedmen themselves. Within the framework of education, they were more than just pupils—many taught as well, and by the late 1860s were contributing money for teachers’ salaries and board. Regardless of their exact roles, there is no question that throughout the South the freedmen were much more than the passive recipients of education and charity that Jacqueline Jones portrayed them to be.

The commitment that freedmen had to education, the active role they played in establishing and maintaining schools, and the personal sacrifices they made and risks they took both before and after emancipation, were common themes in the writings of

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teachers, and in the official records of the AMA and the Freedmen’s Bureau. Before the war many slaves were willing to risk punishment to gain education, and after the war, when they had the chance to attend school legally, few passed up the opportunity. In his February 1868 report, Superintendent Manly observed that

Among the Colored people, with the exception of a few localities, the whole colored population are calling for schools. Education seems to be regarded by them in a threefold light. 1st as a long denied right and therefore they demand it because it is theirs without reference to the uses of it where it shall be attained. 2nd as a badge of freedom and of manhood. 3rd as a element of power. Many see clearly that without education their political and social position, as well as their material interests, will never be advanced.²

Likewise, Margaret Newbold Thorpe and other missionary teachers were constantly astounded by their black pupils both inside and outside of the classroom. When she first arrived, uncertain of what to expect and armed with Yankee prejudices, Thorp described her pupils as “snarling puppies, not so much from ill humor as the result of a training that had taught them neither self respect or respect for any one but those with white skins.” Yet as she spent more time with them, she wrote in wonder about “these people; of how industrious they were, how uncomplaining, how anxious to train their children aright and how they struggled to know how to read and write.”³ Across the South, former slaves and education advocates echoed Manly’s and Thorp’s sentiments. Education, like religion, these people believed, would help to heal the wounds inflicted


on blacks by slavery, even after land reform was aborted, and even if political reform should prove futile.

Though many former slaves wanted their own land, it was apparent very early that the government's and the former slaveowners' plan for land redistribution would not work in the freedmen's favor. Education was the best chance that Reconstruction offered. As former slave Archie Booker of Hampton remembered: "When de war wuz ovuh, de gov'ment jes let de slaves drop. Den ye had tuh 'root like a pig er die.' Ah went to night school right roun heah an' den ah bought dis place fum de white folks."\(^4\) To the freedmen, whose primary contact with the education system was the missionary teachers, education seemed independent of other governmental policies that worked against them.

Across the South, in the face of harsh federal policies, freedmen abandoned their dreams of owning land to become sharecroppers and attended night school after working a full day in the fields. To "root like a pig" was not how freedmen had envisioned their lives after slavery, and education offered them some of the dignity and pride not often found in the post-Civil War South. Margaret Thorpe wrote of her pupils on her first day at Fort Magruder: "A motley assemblage greeted us on our opening day, every shade of color from jet black to blue-eyed blondes. Cold, dirty and half naked but eager to learn, none seemed to care to know what we intended to give in the way of clothing and food, but anxious to feel sure that they would have the privilege of coming to school every day."\(^5\) These students had lived their lives in poverty, and the privilege of going to school


\(^5\)Thorpe, p. 184.
would not be hampered by lack of shoes or clothing.

*Weevils in the Wheat*, a compilation of 237 interviews with former slaves and other Virginia blacks conducted under the Works Progress Administration of the New Deal, offers insight into the lives and minds of the freedmen, and, more broadly, into their attitudes toward Reconstruction. Though these interviews cannot be taken as the definitive resource on the subject, as they were conducted some 60 to 70 years after the fact and were carefully guided by the interviewers’ list of prescribed questions, they still provided one of the only formats to record former slaves speaking about their experiences.

One of the most significant indications of Reconstruction’s general failure is that no interviewee mentioned the word “reconstruction” or any other broad description of the political and social policies of the era, and only seven spoke of the government in connection with post-war programs in any way; not surprisingly, many of these references were shrouded in bitterness and anger. Matilda Carter, 76 years old at the time of her interview, told of how “after Lincoln [was killed], Johnson went into office. Things sho change den. Johnson gave de rebels’ lan back to em an’ give em all dey privileges what dey had fo’ de war. One day a committee of three men came around . . . Dese men went to all de Negroes houses—mine too, an’ made de people sign a paper sayin’ dey property wasn’t deirs.” Only 92-year-old Allen Wilson spoke of the Freedmen’s Bureau by name, and he remembered that “hit was a house for soldiers to come to be recognized as citizens before entering as citizens—naturalized jes like foreigners or people coming from other

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6 Statistics gathered from Purdue.
places." No interviewee connected the government with education; thus their anger and frustration with the problems of the postbellum South remained separate from their attitudes toward education.

By contrast, 40 of the interviewees spoke of education—both of the bans against it before the war and the opportunities afterwards—and of these, eight specifically mentioned the names of schools they attended or teachers they learned under. Though none spoke of specific missionary organizations, many like George Lewis remembered that "immediately after the War the Yankees from the New England states sent teachers down to the South to teach the children of ex-slaves. Such schools were opened in the different colored churches of [Richmond]." Throughout these interviews, former slaves enumerated their reasons for wanting an education. Some were practical: "Had an awful ruckus gittin' the deed fo' my property, though. I hadn' had much schoolin' but I knew that when you bought any land, you was supposed to get a deed with it," others more personal: "When I was growing up, although I was a slave, I had everything a person could wish for except an education." In the minds of the freedmen, the government that had so obviously failed to protect and provide for them for over a century was a separate entity from that which helped provide them with schoolhouses, teachers, and books after emancipation, mainly because they had direct contact with missionaries, while interactions with government officials were fewer and often negative. Thus, freedmen found less fault with education than in other government-based Reconstruction programs.

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7 Purdue, p. 68, 327.
8 Statistics gathered from Purdue.
9 Purdue, pp. 184, 197, 234.
Unlike voting rights, which would directly benefit only men, or land reforms, under which few other than young to middle aged men, and occasionally single or widowed women, could hope to receive a title to a piece of property, education could be used by all, and used immediately. Men and women, those who had been small children or infants at emancipation and those who had been adults with children of their own, field hands and house slaves all remembered with passion their schooling in the years immediately after the war.

It was in large part because the freedmen had such a positive reaction to education, and put so much personal effort into it, that these programs were able to succeed. Obviously enthusiasm on the part of the freedmen and their desire to take an active role in Reconstruction programs were not enough—had they been, land reforms and voting rights would have enjoyed equal and immediate success. But without the contributions of the freedmen, the education programs could never have made it past the first few months, let alone found the long-term success that they did. An earlier example of this principle is the effort to send blacks back to Africa, which had both government support and the backing of private organizations like the American Colonization Society. However, the slaves and free blacks themselves were generally hostile toward the program, and it never found widespread acceptance.

The freedmen realized that Reconstruction was a series of imperfect programs, in which, in realms other than education, one group must always lose for another to win—the conservative white South had to be defeated for the Union to survive; slaves received their freedom while slaveowners lost their property and livelihood; former slaveowners
retained land while poor southern whites and freedmen received little or none. The very experience of slavery had prepared the freedmen for a long and often disappointing wait—one former slave, on learning that he would not receive land as promised, cried "Damn such freedom as that!"—and made them more willing to accept relatively small triumphs like the right to an education while still waiting for more substantial victories, like voting rights. Historian Leon Litwack captured this sense of tentative and guarded victory among the freedmen in the years immediately following the war. Writing of Reconstruction mainly from a black perspective, he observed that

With every blundering step made by President Johnson, black people came closer to full recognition of their rights. But the victory, when it came, would be something less than a triumph of democratic principles. That is, Congress would yield to political necessity, not to the spirit of the Declaration of Independence or to black arguments about patriotic service to the country, taxation without representation, and the natural rights of man. Understandably, blacks would celebrate the triumph, while ignoring the mixed motives that made it possible. If they exuded a certain confidence, however, that may have reflected the experience of the past two years, in which they had prepared themselves.

Recognizing that no victory was absolute, freedmen could embrace without question the one program that they saw as entirely for their benefit, despite its flaws. By the efforts of the Freedmen’s Bureau education division, the AMA, the teachers, and their own hard work, freedmen saw their conditions slowly improving. This was something that no government that they had ever known—Union or Confederate, state or federal, pre- or postwar—had ever given them. For them, that was the mark of a truly successful Reconstruction program.

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10 Speaker unidentified, quoted in Litwack, p. 405.
11 Litwack, p. 538.
Conclusion

The AMA was the first organization to set up schools and send teachers to the South, and it laid the groundwork for the entire freedmen's school system. Yet within three years the organization was teetering on the brink of collapse from the strain on its financial and human resources. Teachers were frustrated at the lack of supplies and support that an organization dependent on donations could offer, discouraged by the miserable conditions in which they and their pupils lived, and overwhelmed by the number of freedmen seeking education. The Freedmen's Bureau stepped in with manpower and money, but also with the bureaucracy and limitations of any government organization. It saved the AMA at a time when the AMA's future was questionable, and the AMA offered recommendations to the Bureau and made sure that education remained a priority. This combination of factors helped education to rise above the political turmoil of Reconstruction, while the presence of teachers ensured that the freedmen got more than just education at a time when they sorely needed so much to rebuild their lives. The freedmen themselves depended upon this support network to build on what they had already begun at great personal risk and with very limited resources.

The freedmen's schools in Virginia continued after the Bureau's Education Division was disbanded in 1870 and after missionaries left Virginia and returned to the North. The AMA and the Bureau were correct in their belief that charity was an ineffective way to rebuild the South and that education and work were what the situation called for. The freedmen received the aid they needed, but the teachers made sure that this
was not all they had as they rebuilt their lives. The Bureau, as a government agency, dealt with confrontations about labor, land redistribution and political reform. The AMA’s presence ensured that education did not become embroiled in these conflicts, particularly in the Virginia and upper South of the former Confederacy (though there were more brutal battles further south) by providing some distance between educational programs and the more controversial—and less successful—Reconstruction programs. Most important, blacks took an active role in their own education and worked side by side with whites. They worked just as hard and believed just as passionately in other areas of the reconstruction process, such as land reforms and suffrage, but in education they could quickly see positive results, giving them the incentive to keep moving forward.

Having established what combination of factors, ranging from timing to personal qualities, gave the educational programs their success and longevity, the question then becomes: Could other Reconstruction programs have emulated this model and met with greater success than they did? And, if so, why did they not? Sadly, it seems very unlikely that they could have followed the practices of education. The only common element among all facets of Reconstruction was the government, and while the Freedmen’s Bureau was certainly critical to the education process, it could not have done so much good without outside help. The missionary organizations and especially their teachers were needed to provide support and to attack a problem by dealing with individuals, rather than pursuing a more policy-oriented course of action.

Acceptance of missionary organizations and the education program as a whole varied greatly by geographic region—the upper South was more accepting of missionary
teachers and programs than was the lower South. Throughout the South, however, the missionary organizations helped temper, though not entirely dissipate, the bitter feelings of white southerners against the government by occupying a relatively neutral and, more important, a nonmilitary position. This acceptance was helped by the presence of white female teachers, who were perceived as less dangerous or destructive than northern white men or freedmen. Also, they were providing a free asset for both blacks and whites in the South—something that would be difficult for any impoverished community to refuse, though, again, this varied greatly by region. While suffrage programs in the South attracted some non-government Northern support—the same types of organizations that had been rallying for suffrage for women since Seneca Falls—they did not have the mass appeal as Christian and vocational education, which appealed to religious groups of many denominations. In addition, suffrage programs challenged the already embattled state governments in the South, while missionary teachers dealt only with the Freedman’s Bureau on a policy level. Finally, suffrage programs offered less direct contact than the schools did between Northern whites and Southern freedmen, which was central to the survival of the freedmen, and thereby to the success and longevity of their school system.

Most important, no other program launched under Reconstruction could help one group so much without taking away from another. The freedmen were educated, but not at the expense or sacrifice of white Southern education—indeed, Reconstruction brought the South’s first public schools for whites, too. Education could be made available to all, and while resources might be scarce, the actual commodity could never be depleted. Land reform, on the other hand, dealt with a finite commodity, and inevitably the stronger
group would defeat the weaker for control. Within the freedmen’s community, education was one of the few things, along with religion, that knew no boundaries. Suffrage left black women without rights even in freedom, but education was available to all.

While the freedmen’s education program in the South was certainly not perfect—among other faults it segregated blacks and whites in the classroom (a problem that would take ninety years to rectify) and often overlooked the educational needs of poor whites who were also devastated by the war—it brought together the right combination of organizations, individuals, and ideals, and provided the best chance the former slaves had to rebuild their lives in their first five years of freedom. Those in Washington who drafted plans for Reconstruction had political and economic motives in mind. The AMA and the Education Division of the Bureau, while not completely disregarding these motives, focused their attention on what would best help the freedmen to help themselves and gave them power and authority within the school system—something that they did not have in any other part of their world except the church. The result was one success story in an otherwise bleak period of United States history. The “Unfinished Revolution” that began with the arrival of missionary teachers at Fort Macgruder in 1861 laid the groundwork for the real Southern social reconstruction which began, not surprisingly, in the school system with Brown versus the Board of Education nearly one hundred years later.
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