

THE POLITICS AND CULTURE OF LITERACY IN GEORGIA, 1800-1920

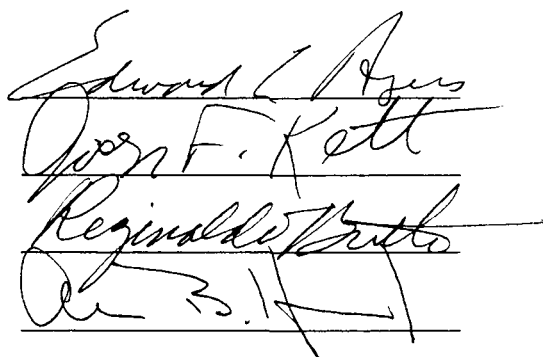
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the uses and meanings of reading in the nineteenth-century American South. In a region where social relations were largely defined by slavery and its aftermath, contests over education were tense, unpredictable, and frequently bloody. Literacy figured centrally in many of the region's major struggles: the relationship between slaveowners and slaves, the competing efforts to create and constrain black freedom following emancipation, and the disfranchisement of black voters at the turn of the century.

Education signified piety and propriety, self-culture and self-control, all virtues carefully cultivated and highly prized in nineteenth-century America. Early advocates of public schooling argued that education and citizenship were indissociable, a sentiment that was refined and reshaped over the course of the nineteenth century. The effort to define this relationship, throughout the century a leitmotif of American public life, bubbled to the surface in the South at critical moments: during the early national period, as Americans sought to put the nation's founding principles into motion; during the 1830s, as insurrectionists and abolitionists sought to undermine slavery; during Reconstruction, with the institution of black male citizenship; and at last, during the disfranchisement movement of the 1890s and 1900s, with the imposition of literacy tests. This study examines each of these episodes in turn, focusing especially on how

the ideology of literacy was contested and redefined, how the ability to read and write came to stand for moral, social, and civic worthiness, and how that perception of worthiness was, by the end of the nineteenth century, cynically and perversely twisted into a justification for disfranchisement under the guise of what was blandly and misleadingly termed "qualified suffrage."

The capricious manner in which literacy tests were administered made a mockery of the ideals of an informed citizenry. White Democrats sometimes drew on the language of principle as they wrote the disfranchisement laws, but they had their eyes fixed firmly on the bottom line: their goal was to solidify their political and racial domination by eliminating black voters from the rolls. Disfranchisement left the political process atrophied and hollow in the Southern states for the next sixty-five years.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AHC	Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Ga.
<u>AHR</u>	<u>American Historical Review</u>
AU	Atlanta University Department of Archives and Special Collections, Atlanta, Ga.
<u>BAU</u>	<u>Bulletin of Atlanta University</u>
Emory	Special Collections Department, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Ga.
<u>GHQ</u>	<u>Georgia Historical Quarterly</u>
GDAH	Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta, Ga.
<u>JAH</u>	<u>Journal of American History</u>
<u>JSH</u>	<u>Journal of Southern History</u>
U.Ga.	Hargrett Rare Book Room and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Ga.

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If this study demonstrates nothing else, it stands as proof positive that the notion of scholarly solitude is a myth. While I have enjoyed my days working alone, roaming through the stacks of libraries, digging through boxes at the archives, and hunched over the keyboard of my computer, I have been surrounded by colleagues, family, and friends who have inspired and sustained me with their ideas, imagination, energy, and patience. While nothing I know how to write can do justice to the fullness of the support I have felt, I have long looked forward to the opportunity to thank the many people who have contributed to my efforts.

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For Ann

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM OF LITERACY IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

Mary Jones led a blessed and busy life. The mistress of a large plantation in southeastern Georgia, she often rose before six in the morning so that she could read a bit before joining her family for worship and breakfast. Her mornings were spent gardening, sewing, and tending to her home. On a typical spring afternoon her home might be bathed in "the glorious sunlight--the soft south wind & the green earth & the blue heavens," her husband Charles wrote their son in the 1850s. "Mother sees and enjoys it all, but she is too busy to come out now & take a view." If not entertaining visitors in the afternoon, she would take "her Book or pen in hand," or indulge in a catnap. After dinner, the Jones family and their guests would retire to the piazza for an hour more of conversation. After the company departed, the family would convene for evening worship, then "we all retire now to our study or rooms & when the business of the day is over, then Mother enjoys the quiet & loves to sit up reading & writing & conversing," Jones wrote his son. "She says this is the pleasantest part of the day for her." While he viewed his wife's daily routine as "natural," Charles Jones was

grateful for his family's blessings: "Surely our hearts should be full of gratitude to God for all His unnumbered and undeserved favours to us as a family."¹

Reading and writing were of central importance in the lives of the Jones family. As children left home for school or marriage, letter-writing kept the large family together, apprised of births, deaths, toothaches, and news from home and abroad. Time spent reading and writing was an ordinary but treasured part of the family's routine, a measure of the leisure they enjoyed as landowners and slaveholders. Reading and writing at once symbolized and made possible the civility and self-control the members of the Jones family expected of themselves as ladies and gentlemen in the antebellum South.

Like the Joneses, many nineteenth-century Southerners placed great value in the ability to read and write, but the blissful scene described by Charles Colcock Jones was rare. The civility and self-control masters associated with their own reading often evaporated when they confronted the transgressions of their slaves. In 1890, a former slave identified only as Jane recalled her own efforts to read in the antebellum South. One evening, her master returned home from church unexpectedly and caught Jane looking at the Bible. He threw the Bible into the fire and struck Jane savagely on the head with the gold handle of his cane. She almost died from blood loss following the blow, and she bore the scar of his abuse for the rest of her life. Jane asked her mistress what harm could come from her looking at the book. Her mistress candidly admitted

¹Charles Colcock Jones to Charles C. Jones, Jr., May 22, 1854, Charles Colcock Jones, Jr., Papers, U.Ga.

that “you couldn’t control niggers” if they learned to read and write. “Niggers were never made to read, nohow,” Jane recalled being told. “Niggers knowledge is too thick ter learn.”²

The associations between race, learning, and power ran deep in the minds of Southerners of both races. Whites used every tool at their disposal to monopolize access to education and to define its meanings. Black Southerners, first under slavery, then in the tenuous freedom of the late nineteenth century, did everything they could to learn to read and write and to use their learning in the cause of personal and racial uplift. As a free woman in 1890, Jane demonstrated to her former mistress that she had learned to read, that freedom had “thinned out” her knowledge. Unable now to control Jane’s freedom to learn, the woman instead tried to define what Jane’s learning meant. She preferred to acknowledge miscegenation rather than the possibility that a black person could read, insisting that “a real black nigger couldn’t learn to read ‘n write: perhaps a white nigger could learn a little.”

This study explores the interconnected worlds of people like Charles and Mary Jones, Jane and her mistress, and others in the nineteenth-century South who struggled over access to literacy and who struggled to define what the ability to read and write signified. It examines the unstable, uncertain, and often competing uses and meanings of reading and writing, and traces the cultural, social and political changes associated

²“Aunt Jane’s Story,” Bulletin of Atlanta University, no. 17, March 1890, 3.

with the rise of literacy in the lives of black and white Southerners. The ability to read and write became commonplace in the lives of most ordinary Americans over the course of the nineteenth century, and widening access to education hardened the sense that morality, self-control, and political power could only be fully realized by those who knew how to read and write. As desirable as the skills of reading and writing were, literacy and learning seemed to promise more than mere utility. Education was emblematic of piety and propriety, self-culture and self-control, all virtues carefully cultivated and highly prized in nineteenth-century America.³

Reading and writing were never simply the polite arts of ladies and gentlemen in the South. These were hard-won abilities, and the privileges bestowed by literacy were hotly contested through most of the nineteenth century. Those whose gender, race, wealth, education, and access to the political process gave them power sought to protect and enhance that power by controlling access to education and by presuming to define what education would mean. For black and white Southerners alike, reading was an explicitly political act, but the political meanings of reading and writing were continually shifting, differing from one group of people to another, one time period to another. In the South, where social relations were defined by slavery and its aftermath, the contests over education were tense, unpredictable, and frequently bloody. Literacy figured centrally in many of the region's major struggles: the relationship between

³The term self-culture was first popularized in 1838 by William E. Channing in a speech given in Boston, published as Self-Culture (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1838).

slaveowners and slaves, the competing efforts to create and constrain black freedom following emancipation, and the disfranchisement of black voters at the turn of the century. This study examines each of these episodes in turn, focusing especially on how the ideology of literacy was contested and redefined, how the ability to read and write came to stand for moral, social, and civic worthiness, and how that perception of worthiness was, by the end of the nineteenth century, cynically and perversely twisted into a justification for disfranchisement under the guise of what was politely termed "qualified suffrage."

Perhaps it is fitting that a study of the role of written language in the South should focus on Georgia, home to many of the region's most astute observers and widely read writers, including Alice Walker, Erskine Caldwell, and Flannery O'Connor--not to mention the creators of the most enduring myths of the Old South, U. B. Phillips and Margaret Mitchell. Georgia itself is a study in contradictions. One of the largest but least populous of the original thirteen states, Georgia boasted more people than any other Southern state by 1900. Begun as a penal colony that prided itself on being the only nonslave colony in the South, Georgia emerged as the leading slave state in the lower South by the mid-nineteenth century. The state was home to celebrated proponents of slavery reform, like Charles Colcock Jones, and to some of the region's most vitriolic defenders of the slave regime, including Robert Toombs. In a region noted for its obsession with the past, Atlanta--famously destroyed during the Civil War--established itself in the postwar years as the most forward-looking city in

the South, bent on commercial growth and eager for national recognition as an economic powerhouse. In the New South, Georgia was home to a large population of illiterate black Southerners, but it also was the region's center of black education, with Atlanta University, Spelman College, Clark University, Morehouse College, and Morris Brown College, all situated on a hill two miles west of downtown Atlanta.⁴

**The Public Meanings of Literacy:
Slavery, Freedom, Citizenship, and the Suffrage**

Like Americans in other parts of the nation, white Southerners built networks of information in the early nineteenth century, including postal roads, railroads, telegraph lines, and publicly funded schools for their children. White Southerners increasingly relied on the flow of information in their economic, personal, and political lives, but the region's large size, sparse population, and anemic commitment to public education limited the growth of communications networks. The South, a vast and thinly populated region, remained at the periphery of the young nation's metropolitan centers.

It is in this context that this project begins, with a chapter focusing on the efforts of the itinerant bookseller Mason Locke Weems to distribute pamphlets, Bibles, and diverse moral tracts to people in the countryside and small frontier towns of early nineteenth-century Georgia. The country's publishing industry was concentrated in Philadelphia, where Weems' publisher was based, and in Boston and New York City.

⁴A good recent synthesis of the state's history is James C. Cobb, Georgia Odyssey (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997). See also Numan V. Bartley, The Creation of Modern Georgia, 2d ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990).

During the first third of the nineteenth century these cities developed an increasingly dense and efficient communications infrastructure. Not surprisingly, states in the Mid-Atlantic and New England also enjoyed comparatively low illiteracy rates. In 1840, the first year the United States census documented illiteracy, 8.5 percent of white Americans over the age of twenty reported being unable to read and write. The self-reported illiteracy rate among whites in Georgia, as for most of the Southern states, was over twice the national average, with almost one in five white Georgians describing themselves as unable to read and write.⁵ Despite the relatively high illiteracy rates in the South, Weems and other early nationalists were persuaded that the young republic could only be sustained by an educated citizenry, that reading would inculcate the virtues necessary for self-government.

Weems, like others in the early national period, wrote of the urgency of creating common ground, a common future worth protecting and improving. Recent social theorists have picked up on this idea, arguing that a common literary culture

⁵"United States Historical Census Data Browser," <<http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu>>, February, 1999. Census enumerators in 1840 asked the head of each household, "How many people in your family over twenty years of age cannot read or write?" Because literacy was self-reported, the figures from 1840 are unreliable as exact measures, but they present a clear pattern nonetheless. Of the ten most illiterate states, six (including North Carolina, which led the nation at 28 percent) were in the Deep South; two, Kentucky and Missouri, were border states; and only one state, Delaware, was a non-slaveholding state. Of the ten states with the lowest self-reported literacy rates in 1840, only Michigan lay outside the northern Atlantic seaboard and New England. A full discussion of the literacy figures in the 1840 census can be found in Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens, The Rise of Literacy and the Common School: A Socioeconomic Analysis to 1870 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 155-161.

helped to create a sense of national identity and purpose in a world grown too complex and expansive to accommodate face-to-face relations. While eighteenth-century thinkers asserted as self-evident that reading sharpened an individual's civic faculties, cultural critics Benedict Anderson and Michael Warner, among others, have investigated the source of that belief. In Warner's and Anderson's view, access to printed information helped to create cohesion and public consciousness amid the chaos of the new nation, allowing people to imagine a common identity and national purpose in spite of great distances, poor transportation and communication, and diverse experiences and ideologies. Anderson writes that print capitalism created a band of "fellow-readers," that connections shared through print formed the "embryo of the nationally imagined community." As a community grows too distended for its constituents to maintain personal relationships, he argues, the printed word comes to serve as a surrogate bond, an imagined community which is the basis of nationhood. Similarly, Michael Warner argues that printed matter can assume political importance, a role in creating a public sphere, only if individuals are able to see themselves as part of something larger than themselves and their immediate relations. People must be able to imagine things that are not concrete, and yet understand them as very real.⁶

⁶See Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (New York: Verso, 1983), 47; on the impact of print capitalism see esp. 46-49, 61-62; Michael Warner, Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 62. A long line of scholars have examined the relationship between nation-building and the dissemination of print media. American scholars in the early twentieth century, led by Charles Horton Cooley, John Dewey, and Robert Ezra Park, felt that mass communications could help restore communities disrupted by the

The task of creating an educated citizenry was complicated in the South by the presence of the growing population of African American slaves, whose servile status was insured, in part, by their legally mandated, and sometimes brutally enforced, illiteracy. Slaves engaged in a frequently bitter contest over education with their masters. White Southerners recognized early on that in order to preserve the institution of slavery, they had to radically limit the intellectual freedom, as well as the physical freedom, of the region's slaves and free blacks. Even as slaveholders created a self-consciously highbrow literary culture of their own, they sought to eliminate entirely slaves' access to reading and writing. Members of the slaveowning class asserted their

quicken pace of social change.

The scholars of the Frankfurt school, particularly Herbert Marcuse and T. W. Adorno, pointed to the authoritarian underside of this progressive view. Harold A. Innis, a Canadian historian and the mentor of Marshall McLuhan, saw communications media as the keystone of any large-scale organization, especially nations. These thinkers, among others, are examined in Daniel J. Czitrom, Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 91-182.

Anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss is similarly critical of progressive interpretations of literacy. Upon discovering that the Nambikwara people of Brazil had learned what it meant to read and write (though they could do neither), he mulled over the idea that writing allows people to store vast amounts of information and, as a form of "artificial memory," makes possible a more nuanced organization of past, present and future, and that the management of information over great distances and long periods of time allows the formation of complex and centrally organized political systems.

Levi-Strauss turns these notions on their head, concluding that writing seems to favor "the exploitation rather than the enlightenment of mankind," and that the "primary function of writing, as a means of communication, is to facilitate the enslavement of other human beings." The secondary functions of writing--the pursuit of "satisfactions of the mind" so enjoyed by Mary Jones and other elites--serve mainly to reinforce, justify, and dissimulate its primary functions. See Claude Levi-Strauss, A World on the Wane, trans. John Russell (New York: Criterion Books, 1961), 292.

dominion over their human property by writing an increasingly elaborate slave code that prohibited the education of slaves; when those laws failed, they often turned to violence, as Jane's master did. Georgia's slave code, like slave laws in other Southern states, included proscriptions against slaves' access to reading and writing. Beginning in 1770 with a simple injunction against teaching slaves to read and write, by 1831 the slave code banned the sale of paper, pen, and ink to slaves and forbade the employment of slaves in print shops.

Despite these laws, whites found it impossible and impractical to keep the slave population entirely illiterate. Efforts to withhold literacy from enslaved people were undermined by the determined efforts of slaves and their northern allies, and even by many Southern whites. Slaves secretly struggled to learn to read, often with the aid of sympathetic whites. Frequently these were Christian masters who could never resolve in their own minds withholding the Bible from their bondsmen, or masters who felt they could best prepare their slaves for freedom by teaching them to read. Other masters depended on the skills of literate slaves and chafed against state laws that disregarded their proprietary control over their slaves. Slaves in the American South saw in literacy a promising strategy. Those seeking redemption on earth could use writing to forge passes, and reading to obtain information that could aid their flight to freedom. Most, though, had to settle for the spiritual redemption offered by reading

the Scriptures, and many slaves openly defied anti-literacy laws in their pursuit of salvation.⁷

While masters sought to circumscribe their slaves' learning, they found their own children's education limited as well. A handful of students attended publicly funded schools, but most of these schools were either in private homes or in ramshackle one-room buildings, perched next to a field or on the edge of town. Literacy rates remained low among white Southerners compared to other white Americans, but schooling nonetheless played a critical role in teaching white boys and girls how to function as ladies and gentlemen within their slave society. As they learned to read, white children in Georgia also learned to reconcile the tensions between oral and written expression, between vernacular and formal culture, between self-culture and public authority. In rural "field schools" and in town academies white boys and girls learned to read aloud, chanting the alphabet as small children and later competing in spelling bees. When they were ready for the more "solemn and formal" business of learning to read, students memorized favorite speeches and stories from both national and regional reading primers, and they honed their oratorical skills by competing at Friday night declamations. While girls dominated the earlier stages of learning--the alphabet recitation and spelling bees--oratory was a male domain, as boys

⁷See Janet Duitsman Cornelius, When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 34-36; Carter G. Woodson, The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861 (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1919; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1968); Charles Colcock Jones, The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States (Savannah: Thomas Purse, 1842).

learned the skills they would later use in court, as legislators, or in the pulpit. The social context in which boys and girls learned to read taught them the possibilities and limitations of speaking in their "own tongue and tone," as one observer put it.

Almost as soon as the Civil War began, the U.S. Army and northern missionaries began working to educate freed slaves. During the war, a small number of northern women and union soldiers taught "contraband" slaves both in camp and in areas under federal occupation. The educational arm of the Freedmen's Bureau continued what had begun as an unofficial activity of the Union Army during wartime. Though the dissolution of the Confederacy and the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment marked the end of chattel slavery, the meaning of freedom remained indeterminate. Black Americans--national leaders as well as rural ex-slaves--saw that the ability to read and write would be crucial in their efforts to fashion freedom on their own terms, a freedom which would be meaningful, sustainable, and defensible from white attack. When slavery ended, black Southerners of all ages filled makeshift classrooms across the region. Within a few days of Sherman's arrival in Savannah, local black leaders founded an educational association that set up schools in the city's old slave market. By the end of the year, hundreds of black children were attending school in Savannah. While freed slaves saw learning to read as a primary expression of freedom, a way of distancing themselves from slavery and a means of accumulating cultural capital, whites saw education as a means of channeling and controlling black venality and laziness. J. W. Alvord, the Freedmen's Bureau Superintendent of Education, voiced the beliefs of many of his white contemporaries when he commented

that "it is through the school-book channel alone that these people are to be lifted from the paths of ignorance, and rescued from the snares of evil and wickedness." In a telling metaphor, a northern teacher commented that the "mirthfulness and want of order" among her students made it difficult to keep them "in the harness."⁸

The most violent and protracted struggles of Reconstruction occurred over the right of freedmen to vote. Reactionary whites responded to black voting with intimidation, threats, beatings, and worse. Discussions among white progressives and black elites about the right to vote invariably hinged on the notion of a "qualified electorate." Leaders of freedmen's conventions in Georgia and elsewhere conceded that literacy qualifications were a likely compromise in the fight for black suffrage. Restricting the suffrage to those who could read seemed a reasonable requirement. Such a qualification would protect black voters against white charges of ignorance and corruption, they hoped, and would create an incentive for the illiterate to learn to read. Before Reconstruction was over, black men had won the right to vote, but the toothless Fifteenth Amendment fell short of guaranteeing universal male suffrage. In the decades following Reconstruction, white politicians chiseled away at black political power, and by the end of the century they had effectively disfranchised the black electorate.

⁸American Missionary, November 1865, 256-258; March 1866, 63; Jacqueline Jones, Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 73.

The children and grandchildren of freed slaves struggled for free and equal schooling, for literacy and the claim to social and political power it seemed to offer. The spiritual value literacy had held under slavery remained after emancipation, but was considerably broadened and transformed. In a world where moral and educational progress were indistinguishable, black Southerners knew they must learn to read in order to demonstrate their moral standing, self-restraint, and temperance, critically important virtues for black men seeking to stake their claim to the suffrage. For black Southerners, as for whites, literacy and spirituality were fused with outward manifestations of middle-class respectability and political power. Many African Americans pinned their hopes for success in freedom on the ability to read and write, but found their efforts discouraged and dismissed by Southern whites. The drive for literacy among the younger generation of African Americans caused strains within the black population as well. Atlanta University students introduced thousands of rural black students to the ABCs in makeshift summer schools in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Their letters and reports reveal not only their optimism and their commitment to learning, but also the tension which arose among black Southerners as this more literate younger generation gravitated toward the cities, leaving their unlettered parents and siblings in the countryside.

Literacy was both the subject and the means of reform for African Americans. The move from a predominately oral world into a dynamic mixture of oral and literate culture proved to be a powerful but elusive means of assimilation into American life. Reformers of every stripe--preachers, teachers, and other race leaders--emphasized the

connections between freedom and literacy on a variety of levels. During slavery and afterwards, reformers spoke of the need for education in the drive for racial uplift, drawing connections between the self-control manifest in reading and the need for absolute propriety in the conduct of one's affairs. In countless public pronouncements, most issued from the pulpit, black Americans challenged one another to hold themselves to the highest standards of conduct; white suspicion of black morality was used to justify withholding civil and political rights.

By the end of the nineteenth century, seeing a white stranger on the street, especially in the cities, one could be almost certain that the stranger could read and write with some competence, and that he or she had also been enrolled in public school for at least several years. Public schools for white children, so rare and transient before the Civil War, became fixtures of the municipal landscape, and even sparsely populated rural counties could boast at least one public school--aside from the post office, perhaps the only public building in the community. As notoriously stingy as the governments of the postwar South were, a consensus emerged that public schooling was a necessary, and even good, investment of public money. While black public schools went starving, whites made certain that their own children could attend public elementary and even high schools. The old field schools of the antebellum era gave way to monuments of brick and glass; school administrators wielded public money and political power. Whites, like blacks, believed in the association between the ability to read and middle class proprieties, and they drew increasingly explicit connections between education and civic life.

The final chapter of this study examines the continuing struggle over the right to vote and the ideology of the qualified suffrage, focusing on the institution of literacy tests to disfranchise black (and many white) voters in the years between 1890 and 1908. During these years, elite white Southerners, with the complicity of some elite blacks, drew an explicit link between literacy and the suffrage. Dominated by Democrats, state legislatures across the South deployed literacy tests as part of a broad arsenal of voting qualifications designed to keep Republicans--mainly black and poorer white voters--out of the polls. The notion held at the beginning of the nineteenth century that a democratic nation could only be sustained by an educated populace, that civic and intellectual life were interlaced, had become through the course of the nineteenth century a fixed, internalized, and largely unquestioned ideology that assigned civic worth--and ultimately civil rights--only to those presumed to be able to read and write. White Southerners at the turn of the twentieth century were able to claim that limited suffrage was a positive reform that would strengthen democracy, even as they stripped hundreds of thousands of black citizens of the vote. In the years that followed, politicians in the north borrowed from the Southern strategy, restricting the suffrage of immigrants on much the same basis.

To the extent that they had to justify their actions, the disfranchisers drew on the late-eighteenth century notion that democracy could only be sustained by an educated populace. Early advocates of publicly funded education, such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Rush, argued that education and citizenship were indissociable--a sentiment that was refined and reshaped over the course of the nineteenth century.

The effort to define this relationship, throughout the century a leitmotif of American political life, bubbled to the surface at critical moments: during the early national period, as the United States struggled to find its footing and as Americans sought to put the nation's founding principles into motion; during the 1830s, as insurrections and abolitionists posed a sustained attack on slavery; during Reconstruction, with the institution of black male citizenship; and at last, during the disfranchisement movement of the 1890s and 1900s, with the imposition of literacy tests.

For all the lofty talk of virtue, corruption, and decay, the principles themselves became corrupted, as the ideology of a republic of educated citizens was transposed into an exclusionary principle. Advocates of education in the early national period never could have anticipated the racially inclusive citizenship that arose with slavery's end, but they did argue that education made citizenship more meaningful and sustainable. By the end of the nineteenth century, literacy tests became a favorite means of political exclusion, as white legislators across the region convened to write laws that predicated the right to vote on the ability to read. The capricious manner in which these laws were enforced made a mockery of the ideals of an informed citizenry, but white Democrats at the turn of the twentieth century had no truck with these ideals. They sometimes drew on the language of principle as they wrote the disfranchisement laws, but they had their eyes fixed firmly on the bottom line: the goal was to solidify their political and racial domination by eliminating black voters from the rolls. Disfranchisement left the political process atrophied and hollow in the Southern states for the next sixty-five years. The elimination of significant opposition voting led to

dramatically declining turnouts even among qualified voters, and by 1920 elections in the South were routinely won with as little as a 20 percent turnout.⁹

⁹The classic account of disfranchisement in the South is J. Morgan Kousser, The Shaping of Southern Politics, 1880-1910 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), which argues that disfranchisement was a political response to a political problem, rather than an irrational racist outburst. Democrats threatened by opposition voting in the late nineteenth century responded by eliminating non-Democrats, most of them black, some of them white, from the polls.

In recent years, a number of scholars have written on the history of citizenship in the United States. Focusing on the relationship between education and citizenship, Richard D. Brown argues that the idea of an informed citizenry, born in seventeenth-century England and fully articulated in the United States during the revolutionary era, was weakened during the nineteenth century by universal white male suffrage, and eventually by the extension of citizenship to include women and African Americans. As distinctions were drawn between citizenship and the right to vote, the connection between "being informed and being empowered" was severed: "Universal education, which was good for individuals and for society as a whole, need not mean universal suffrage." Richard D. Brown, The Strength of a People: The Idea of An Informed Citizenry in America, 1650-1870 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 187, 195.

Michael Schudson identifies three distinct periods in the history of citizenship in the U.S., beginning with the "politics of assent" in the early national period, in which white gentlemen delegated authority to like-minded representatives. This soon gave way to the "politics of parties" in the early nineteenth century. Schudson sees the institution of secret ballots and literacy tests as part of the shift to the "politics of information" at the end of the nineteenth century. See Michael Schudson, The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life (New York: Free Press, 1998).

In Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), political scientist Rogers M. Smith offers a comprehensive view of the "intellectually puzzling, legally confused, and politically charged and contested status" of American citizenship. Smith's study examines in great detail the many forms of "civic hierarchy" that belie the national mythology of liberal democracy. Looking at restrictions on voting rights, naturalization, and immigration, Smith concludes that almost all of U.S. history has been characterized by exclusion from the rights of citizenship, not only for immigrants and would-be immigrants, but for the majority of native-born adults living in the United States (15). Smith rightly places the disfranchisement of African Americans in the late nineteenth-century South within the larger context of the frenzy of exclusion he calls "the Gilded Age of ascriptive Americanism" (347-409).

The Private Uses and Meanings of Literacy

Within this public narrative--the story of legal restrictions on reading under slavery, battles for public support for schooling, the black drive for education, and the use of literacy tests to disfranchise black voters--is another story, a story marked more by private reflection than by public pronouncement. Many of the region's educated elites, those bred to letters, commonly kept journals, or daybooks, some for the duration of their adult lives. These documents, unremarkable in their own time, have long been the staple of the historian's diet. Here we find people expressing their most intensely personal feelings, offering us tantalizing glimpses into the struggles, the worries, and the daily routines that marked the private lives of nineteenth-century Americans. These journals also record the importance of reading and writing in the lives of those who wrote them, both in the fact of diary-keeping itself and in the discussions of reading that they frequently contain. For example, Henrietta Armstrong, a young woman living in southern Georgia on the eve of the Civil War, wrote of her experiences and thoughts as the excitement of secession gave way to the ominous realities of war. The striking feature of her journal, though, is the log of reading activity that occupied her days; indeed, reading novels aloud to her husband was one of their primary mutual enjoyments. As the couple grew busy with the flurry of war preparation, Henrietta lamented their time lost reading together. Fifty years later, Magnolia Wynn LeGuin, a middle-class woman bound to her home in middle Georgia by ill health, found in her diary a nightly escape from the duties of looking after her parents, husband, and children. For LeGuin, who never traveled beyond a seven-mile

radius of her birthplace, a subscription to Ladies' Home Journal was a delicious treat she allowed herself in better years, a link to the wider world that offered a welcome imaginary flight from her otherwise isolated life.¹⁰

Armstrong and LeGuin wrote primarily for themselves, and the public exposure they now receive is an accident of found documents. Others wrote their stories hoping to create a public record for posterity, to secure their place in history. Writing a memoir was an especially reassuring exercise for those on the margins of reading and writing, those who knew their lives would otherwise be forgotten. In 1859 Peter James, an itinerant preacher from Mississippi, wrote a brief history of his improvident life. Left alone and destitute after the death of his wife and son, James wrote that "in my Seventieth year I am beginning a Work I augh to have don long Since but I have been too busy either in the Promotin of Christianity among [my] Fellowmen or working with my own hands to Provide for the Wands of myselfe or others to write one line onley in case of Necessity." Similiarly, Georgia Morrison, a student at Atlanta University at the end of the nineteenth century, wrote that "I fear that the biography of my life will never be written if I leave the task for someone else, so I have decided to write my own biography." Onnie Lee Logan, a black Alabama midwife, told her oral biographer that she "was gonna write a book" even if "she had to scratch it out" herself. "I got so much experience in here that I just want to explode. . . . I want to

¹⁰Daily Journal of Henrietta Eugenia Vickers Armstrong, December 1860-December 1861, GDAH; Charles A. LeGuin, ed., A Home-Concealed Woman: The Diaries of Magnolia Wynn LeGuin, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990).

show that I knew what I knew--I want somebody to realize what I am." Writing allowed these diarists and memoirists and others to transport themselves, to make their otherwise narrowly circumscribed lives fuller and more satisfying, and to inscribe their lives into our collective social memory. For their part, public men often wrote one or more autobiographies, hoping to seal their place in a history they knew they had helped to shape.¹¹

I began this project with a fairly straightforward, though open-ended, question: "What did it mean to be able, or unable, to read and write in the nineteenth-century South?" The answers that I have uncovered in nineteenth-century documents and in scholarly studies of literacy and the history of reading belie the seeming simplicity of the question. Journals, memoirs, and other documentary sources have brought life to my reading of the scholarship on literacy and illiteracy. The past three decades have produced a wide-ranging interdisciplinary scholarship on literacy, the history of books and print culture, and the history of readers and reading practices. Early scholars, following the lead of anthropologist Jack Goody, generally emphasized the cognitive phenomena associated with literacy, focusing on how the ability to read and write reorganizes the conceptual world, reshaping the way people remember their past, speak, and tell stories. More recently, ethnolinguist Shirley Brice Heath has sought to

¹¹Diary of Peter James, July 5, 1859, GDAH; Georgia Harrison, "My Biography," Horace Bumstead Papers, Atlanta University Library; Onnie Lee Logan and Katherine Clark, Motherwit: An Alabama Midwife's Tale, (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1989), ix.

reorient scholars around social and functional concerns, examining the context of reading and writing, emphasizing the utility of reading to the reader, and suggesting degrees of literacy rather than drawing stark distinctions between readers and nonreaders.¹²

Much of the research on reading practices in North America has explored the shift from the intensive, usually devotional, reading in the eighteenth-century, with its restricted literacy and limited book distribution, to the more extensive, information-oriented reading in the nineteenth century, with the increase in literacy among non-elites and the more efficient and widespread distribution of books and newspapers. This reading "revolution" unfolded concurrently with other revolutions in American culture, including the decline of deference and inherited privilege, the expansion of the marketplace, and the shift from the sacred to the secular. Ronald Zboray has linked the creation of an American national identity to the spread of print culture during the industrial and transportation revolution. Janice Radway, Cathy N. Davidson, Michael Denning, and others have focused their attention on the practices of readers within this

¹²Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy" in Jack Goody, ed., Literacy in Traditional Societies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 27-68. Another scholar who explores the cognitive shift from oral to literate modes of thought is Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (New York: Methuen, 1982). Ong, a psychiatrist and a Jesuit priest, celebrates the technology of writing, arguing that writing allows the "interior transformations of consciousness" (82) that make us fully human. On the social uses of literacy in the United States, see Shirley Brice Heath, Ways With Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), and Shirley Brice Heath, "The Functions and Uses of Literacy," in Suzanne de Castell, Allan Luke, and Kieran Egan, eds., Literacy, Society, and Schooling: A Reader (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 15-26.

emerging national print culture, and have shown that women and working-class readers created their own worlds of meaning in the texts they read. Women read romantic fiction, especially, in ways that suited their own needs and predilections, and in the process they undermined the moral order that reading was presumed to convey. The work of Radway, Davidson, and Denning suggests that to speak of a unified national print culture is to overlook the widely varied constituency of readers in the United States, and to ignore the active role of the reader in subverting assertions of moral authority through print.¹³

¹³Helpful reviews of the vast and growing literature on the history of reading in the United States include Carl F. Kaestle, "The History of Readers," in Carl F. Kaestle, Helen Damon-Moore, Lawrence C. Stedman, Katherine Tinsley, and William Vance Trollinger, Jr., Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading Since 1880 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 33-72; "Readers and Reading in America," in David D. Hall, Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 169-187 (on concurrent revolutions, see 185); and Robert A. Gross, "Reading Culture, Reading Books," Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 106, I (1996): 59-78. On the rise of national print culture, see Ronald J. Zboray, A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), and Richard D. Brown, Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). On women readers, see Cathy N. Davidson, Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) and Janice Radway, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Michael Denning, Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America (New York: Verso, 1987). In his study of a rural community in Vermont between 1780 and 1835, William J. Gilmore shows that book ownership remained very limited during that period. He maintains that reading remained "intensive," and he cautions against overstating the "reading revolution." See William J. Gilmore, Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780-1835 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989).

Despite the profusion of work centered on New England and the middle Atlantic in the early nineteenth century, historians have paid little attention to the history of literacy and reading in the complex context of the American South, a society dominated by literate elites who explicitly drew racial, social, and political lines between literate and nonliterate, and who used literacy to demarcate and enforce those lines. Historians of the South have noted anti-literacy measures taken by slaveholders and the drive for education by blacks after emancipation, but few have pushed their analysis beyond generalizations about the eagerness of slaves and their descendants for education, or about the apparent relationship between illiteracy and poverty, literacy and opportunity. Historians of education in the South have been largely concerned with educational reform movements, usually confining their inquiry to the legal and political battles which brought about or hindered institutional change. I have drawn on this rich historical literature on the South and on education, but my own concerns are primarily with the culture of written language in the South, with seeking to understand the interactive (and usually contested) processes through which the value of reading and writing was defined. I began this study wanting to explore the connections between the ability to communicate and the exercise of various forms of social power. We take for granted the rather bland truism that "knowledge is power," but in this study I aim to show how the relationship between knowledge and power actually operated in people's lives.¹⁴

¹⁴On black language and culture, see Lawrence W. Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom, (New

Finally, this project takes issue with one of the most enduring and demeaning stereotypes of the region--the image of the ignorant Southerner. This reputation has persisted in black and white for generations, as the slouching, mumbling Tom and the straw-chewing hayseed. This study traces the roots of this widely held view of Southerners, looking to see to what extent the image is based in reality and examining how both the image and the underlying reality came to be.

One of the more memorable characters from the otherwise forgettable 1970s television variety show "Hee-Haw" was a man from Forsyth County, Georgia, named Junior Samples. Samples wowed a Nashville producer with a tall tale involving a mammoth fish head, delivered in his deadpan comic style. Junior's gag was to appear as a salesman of junked-out cars. Dressed in overalls, he would shuffle out in front of his old cars, make a sales pitch in his slow country drawl, and work his way to the punchline, which was the same every Saturday night: "Dial BR-549," he would mumble, pointing to the telephone number written on his sign. The audience, prompted by a donkey with a laugh balloon, would howl. The joke was that Junior never got the number right. The sign would be upside down, or he would stop halfway through the number, or he would jumble the number hopelessly. After a few tries, he would give up.

York: Oxford University Press, 1977); on changing social value, see Lawrence W. Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), 1988.

In fact, Junior Samples never learned to read. The junked-out cars, the overalls, and the misread telephone number told the story, or seemed to: the South was a poor, hick, uneducated place. Junior Samples's act resonated deeply with the national view of Southerners as laughably ignorant, unlettered, and naive.

While Junior Samples seemed to Americans to be a fair representation of the rural South, an Arkansas man interviewed by journalist Charles Kuralt in the spring of 1973 defied every expectation. Eddie Lovett, the son of African American sharecroppers, made his living as a farmer, a carpenter, and a doer of odd jobs. He never finished high school himself, but had worked hard to provide his children a better shot at life. Despite his abbreviated formal education, Lovett spent much of his life teaching himself to read, and he eventually amassed one of the finest private libraries in the state. He read everything from the plays of William Shakespeare to the science of astronomy, which he mastered by stargazing from the rooftops of barns and by corresponding with the astronauts. Lovett had attended segregated black schools as a child, but found the experience unsatisfying: "I wanted to read but I could never learn what I would like to learn. I wanted to learn some things that I though were more constructive than what I actually learned, such as 'Bah Bah Black Sheep'."¹⁵

¹⁵The story of Eddie Lovett is from "Piney Woods Thoreau," CBS Evening News, April 23, 1973, Television News Archive, Vanderbilt University; rebroadcast in "One for the Road," CBS Television, May 4, 1994. For an excellent account of an African American autodidact in the small-town South, see also Melton McLaurin, Separate Pasts: Growing Up White in the Segregated South (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 42-64.

For generations rural isolation had proved one of many impediments to schooling in the South, but Lovett preferred the solitude of the country. "I like to be quiet, and the country is about the best place that I can find quietness to read and research and study," he told Kuralt. Asked what good reading had done for him, Lovett replied that "a man is happy wherever he loves. And I love to read." A sign reading "Hic Habitat Felicitas" adorned his tin-roofed home. "I think that it's doing me, chiefly my children, a lot of good. . . . Truth be tell, I'm really living for my children."

"By me pondering in my library, researching, I have declared war upon my ignorance," Lovett told Kuralt. "The more I learn the more I learn that I need to learn and the more I learn that I don't know; and I aspires to drink very deep from the fountain of knowledge." As a black sharecropper in the rural South, Eddie Lovett lived in the margins of America. His reading, so central to his life, was so unusual as to be newsworthy--the only thing noteworthy, perhaps, in a life otherwise ordinary and unnoticed. A black sharecropper in the rural South, after all, was more likely to be illiterate than any other class of American. Who could be more ignorant, less worldly, than poor rural Southerners? This study seeks to complicate our view of the "ignorant" Southerner and to suggest what was at stake for people like Mary Jones, the ex-slave Jane, the humorist Junior Samples, or the star-gazing Eddie Lovett, as they encountered the written word in the American South.

CHAPTER 2

THE PARSON'S FLYING LIBRARY: MASON LOCKE WEEMS AND THE SOUTHERN BOOKTRADE, 1800-1825

In 1810, after almost two decades of bumping up and down the eastern seaboard of the United States, Mason Locke Weems remained optimistic about his prospects. The fifty-one year-old former Anglican minister had managed to make acquaintances and sell books all over the Southern states, in the most established cities and in the roughest frontier towns. Parson Weems sought out crowds wherever he went, assessing local reading tastes, selling books, and making new contacts. He attended the horse races in Charleston and Augusta, hawking moralistic tracts on the dangers of gambling. In the evenings he could often be found at the taverns, where he might make a toast or two to the republic and sell the locals pamphlets on the evils of drink. He was likely to turn up on town squares whenever court was in session, with a ready supply of sermons, histories, atlases, primary readers, and stationery. A popular orator, Weems was frequently called to the lectern on commencement day and the Fourth of July. Arriving in a new town, he might be asked to sanctify the ground breaking of a new church, to perform a wedding, or to lecture to the local Masonic guild. His orations were filled with patriotic pieties that dovetailed neatly with his own interests as a bookseller. The customary theme of his lectures was the critical role

reading would play in the fate of the nation, a sentiment he expressed in a favorite ditty:

God prosper long our noble state!
In Wisdom, Wealth, and Peace,
And Grant that Reading now too rare,
May day by day increase.¹

Weems was a well-known figure across small-town America in his day, but over time his reputation has largely faded into footnotes. He was known in his lifetime and in later years primarily as the author of the hagiographic and often-reprinted Life of Washington, with its legendary account of young George chopping down the cherry tree, and of the less well-known Life of Marion, which helped to seal the Swamp Fox's place in the pantheon of revolutionary heroes. Weems's depictions of Washington and Marion have been enjoyed by generations of schoolchildren who have shared the Parson's taste for fancy; they have been dismissed by generations of historians who have viewed Weems as a fabulist, a fraud, and a hack.

While the Lives have been Weems's most visible and enduring legacy, for almost thirty-five years he worked as an itinerant pitchman and peddler across the

¹The ditty is from the Georgia Journal (Milledgeville), November 28, 1810, reprinted in Emily Ellsworth Skeel, ed., Mason Locke Weems: His Works and Ways, 3 vols. (New York: privately printed, 1929), 3: 29-30, hereafter cited as Weems. The same verse appeared in the Augusta papers with a telling variation: "God prosper long the CHURCH and STATE," it began. Augusta Chronicle, Feb. 16, 1811, in Weems, 3:37. On commencement in Athens in 1810 see Georgia Express (Athens), Aug. 4, 1810, reprinted in Weems 3:24; on wedding see Augusta Chronicle, August 4, 1810; on Masons and a church ground breaking, see the Georgian (Savannah), May 28, 1821, reprinted in Weems 3: 315; on stationery, see Weems to Carey, Feb. 28, 1810, in Weems, 3:16.

eastern seaboard of the United States. In his time Weems was perhaps the most productive and widely traveled bookseller in the provincial United States, selling what he could carry and drumming up subscriptions for books to be shipped. Leaving his wife and children at their home in Dumfries, Virginia, for up to two years at a time, Weems struck out for the regional cities and small towns of Pennsylvania, Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. Like a Friar Tuck or a Falstaff, Parson Weems was an affable man, the center of conversation at the pub in the evening, with a fiddle in hand and a flair for good stories. He was equipped with a salesman's instinct for striking up new friendships and remembering old faces wherever he went.

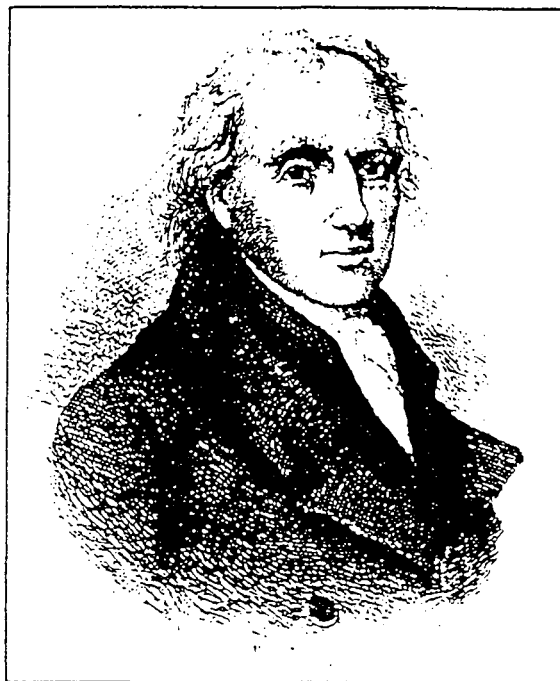


Fig. 1. The Rev. Mason Locke Weems
Reprinted from Lawrence C. Wroth, Parson Weems:
A Biographical and Critical Study (Baltimore, 1911).

Much of Weems's career as a bookseller focused on opening up the Southern book market for Philadelphia publisher Mathew Carey. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Carey was the largest publisher in the United States, and from 1792 until his death while on a bookselling mission in South Carolina in 1825, Weems served as Carey's roving link to the Southern marketplace. Through frustrating and often costly trial and error, Parson Weems developed a sense for the distinct tastes of readers in the different markets he visited. The demand for certain types of books was relatively predictable no matter the location. Lawyers required law books, physicians needed medical books, farmers needed almanacs and books on animal husbandry, and readers everywhere demanded Bibles and spelling books. But readers in different regions continually expressed their distinct tastes, and Weems did his best to meet their demands. Carey published a German-language edition of Weems's Life of Washington for distribution in German-speaking central Pennsylvania. Weems found that Virginians, with their love of finery and elegance, preferred expensively bound books, no matter the subject. Carolinians called for materials "of the lighter sort," and Georgians, Weems noted, were especially eager for song books and joke books.²

Though he knew that Carey would send South whatever books remained in overstock in his warehouse, Weems continually expressed the preferences of his

²Mason Locke Weems, Das Leben des Georg Waschington; mit sonderbaren Anekdoten [Life of Washington] (Lebanon, Pa.: Mathew Carey, 1810); John Tebbel, A History of Book Publishing in the United States, vol. 1, The Creation of An Industry, 1630-1865 (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1972), 115.

customers in the regional markets. In a typical order to Carey he wrote, "If you want me to do much good, this fall, for the Country or yourself--send me immediately \$100 Bucks Theological Deity. 300 Russells 7 sermons, no more Blairs.--20 Whitfields sermons. 12 village sermons, 50 Bunyans Visions, 50 Rippons hymns, 12 Pilg. progress, 100 Doz Webster's spellg. . . . 4 Reams writing paper--it sells well, 20 Doz testaments--10 Doz Bibles--and 1 to 150 4⁰. Bibles @ \$4.25. 50 destruction of Jerusalem, no more plays, great many of Josephus . . . 1 to 200 Websters . . . 20 Bards Compend." Readers in the South wanted books, and Weems was certain he and Carey could sell them by the thousands--if only Carey would send him what his customers wanted, if only the mails arrived on time, if only the roads were passable.³

Creating an Informed Citizenry

On the eve of the nineteenth century, there was no doubt about the new nation's need for an educated citizenry, for the efficient and widespread distribution of books

³Weems to Carey, July 30, 1810, in Weems, 3: 23. Much of what follows is drawn from letters written by Weems and published in Skeel, ed., Weems. The best recent accounts of Weems's career as a book trader include Ronald J. Zboray, A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 37-68, and Lewis Leary, The Book-Peddling Parson (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1984); see also Cathy N. Davidson, Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 24-26; and Marcus Cunliffe's introduction to Weems's Life of Washington (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), ix-lxii. On Weems's efforts in the South, see James Gilreath, "Mason Weems, Mathew Carey and the Southern Booktrade, 1794-1810," Publishing History 10 (1981): 27-49, and Catherine Clinton, "Wallowing in a Swamp of Sin: Parson Weems, Sex, and Murder in Early South Carolina," in Catherine Clinton and Michele Gillespie, eds., The Devil's Lane: Race and Sex in the Early South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 24-36.

and newspapers, and for reliable roads and postal service. Commerce required the dependable and rapid flow of information, while the Protestant doctrine of sola scriptura placed a premium on individual literacy and on access to the scriptures. And, as Noah Webster, the lexicographer and author of the nation's bestselling spelling book pointed out, Americans at the end of the eighteenth century also faced the fundamental task of creating a "national language," an American vernacular.⁴

Advocates of an effective communications infrastructure and public education pointed to several considerations that demanded the creation and expansion of an educated citizenry, a national readership, and a free press. At the turn of the nineteenth century, many Americans feared that their experiment with democracy was destined to fail. While most agreed that the republic was the best form of government yet devised, they were just as certain it was doomed by history, sure to follow the fate of earlier experiments with self-rule. They viewed republics as fragile by nature, arguing that vice posed an especially poisonous threat and that an educated citizenry would provide the strongest fortification against the threat of corruption, the most reasonable assurance that the new nation could achieve and sustain the virtue necessary to hold the project together. As a citizen of Georgia put it to the president of the state's new university in 1805, "education, my friend--I mean instruction generally diffused among the great mass of the people, is the only means of attaining of what we

⁴Alan R. Pred, Urban Growth and City-Systems in the United States, 1840-1860 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980); Noah Webster, Dissertations on the English Language (Boston, 1789), 36, quoted in Richard Bridgman, The Colloquial Style in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 7.

have got & acquiring more, of public leadership, liberty, and peace." At the turn of the century, such pronouncements were more than mere rhetorical flourishes. Political acrimony at home and continued threats from abroad posed real threats to the nation.⁵

Others emphasized that the unrestrained public discourse promised by the First Amendment would strengthen and enliven the democratic experiment. As early as 1731 Benjamin Franklin had expressed the belief that "when Men differ in Opinion, both Sides ought equally to have the Advantage of being heard by the Publick." The reading public paid printers to "cheerfully serve all contending Writers," Franklin wrote. Franklin saw free expression as a defining element of popular rule, but as a printer himself he also knew that in a market economy printers could compete only if left unmuzzled. The Philadelphia physician Benjamin Rush argued that "a free government can only exist in an equal diffusion of literature." Without learning, he wrote, "men become savages or barbarians, and where learning is confined to a few people, we always find monarchy, aristocracy, and slavery." The press lent unity to people in their struggle against the power of a central authority.⁶

⁵Expressions of the republican fear of decay are found in Drew McCoy, The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980; reprint, New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), esp. 7-8, 15, and Gordon S. Wood, The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 58-70. Joel Barlow to Josiah Meigs, Aug. 28, 1805, quoted in Keith Whitescarver, "Creating Citizens for the Republic: Education in Georgia, 1776-1810," Journal of the Early Republic 13 (Winter 1993) 455; see also Peter S. Onuf's introduction to Mason L. Weems, Life of Washington, ed. Peter S. Onuf, (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1996).

⁶Franklin quoted in Stephen Botein, "Printers and the American Revolution," in Bernard Bailyn and John B. Hench, eds., The Press and the American Revolution

In late eighteenth-century America, the ideal of an informed citizenry was understood in its restrictive sense. While rule by informed citizens broadened public authority dramatically, these citizens were still understood to be gentlemen, men of property, talent, and culture. Perhaps the most famous articulation of this view, Thomas Jefferson's "Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge," argued that only an educated class of leaders could effectively guard against tyranny. Nature endowed some people with "genius and virtue," Jefferson wrote, but only society could provide the liberal education that enabled them to protect "the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens." Weems's story helps us to understand the transition of the ideal of an informed citizenry as an expression of the narrow authority of gentlemen to its more expansive nineteenth-century meaning. By peddling books Weems helped to broaden the constituency of informed citizens, reasoning that if effective citizenship

(Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1980), 19-20; Benjamin Rush, "A Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools and the Diffusion of Knowledge in Pennsylvania," in Frederick Rudolph, ed., Essays on Education in the Early Republic (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1965), 3, 6. Richard Buel, Jr., "Freedom of the Press in Revolutionary America: The Evolution of Libertarianism, 1760-1820," in *ibid.*, 59-97, argues that late eighteenth-century leaders, building on the libertarian ideology of John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, "attached great importance to the freedom of the press, at least as they understood it." Leonard W. Levy, Emergence of a Free Press (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), questions the commitment to free expression, showing that it was severely undermined almost as soon as the First Amendment was ratified. Joseph F. Kett and Patricia A. McClung note that advocates of the "diffusion of knowledge" used the term "both descriptively and normatively. They believed not only that a progressive spread of knowledge through books, periodicals, and newspapers was occurring but had to occur if republican institutions were to thrive." "Book Culture in Post-Revolutionary Virginia," Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 94, I (1984): 102.

required learning, along with the self-control and moral rectitude that learning implied, then citizens required books.⁷

Parson Weems had a unique ability to adapt his own version of nationalism to the widely varied tastes of his readers, to create common ground between schoolteachers and lawyers, gamblers and preachers, townspeople and farmers. His career selling books in the early nineteenth-century South illustrates no movement toward impersonality and abstraction, no gravitation toward cultural homogeneity or toward personal relations lived vicariously through print. His success selling books depended on his ability, as he put it, to "dash around with his books to the Courts, preach with the Preachers reason with the Lawyers & Doctors, and render himself dear to the Leading Characters of Society, themselves purchasing his books and recommending them to all their Friends & Neighbors." While his employer saw the Southern market primarily as a dumping ground for remaindered books, Weems's correspondence shows that book-buyers in the lower South were aggressive and demanding consumers who played an active role in shaping the literary marketplace. In Weems's experience, the cultivation of personal relations and the spread of print were synergetic, coarticulate enterprises; and for his customers in the lower South,

⁷Thomas Jefferson, "Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge" reprinted in Roy J. Honeywell, The Educational Work of Thomas Jefferson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931), 199. On the principles of informed citizenship in the revolutionary and early national periods, see Richard D. Brown, The Strength of a People: The Idea of an Informed Citizenry, 1650-1870 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 49-118, and Michael Schudson, The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life (New York: Free Press, 1998), 48-89.

print discourse in no sense served as a substitute for personal relations. Weems had little doubt that his own fortunes and those of the nation were one and the same, that his efforts to bring books to the farms and small towns of Georgia, the Carolinas, Virginia, and Pennsylvania would knit the new nation together. He was engaged in creating a nation of informed citizens, though the endlessly diverse tastes of readers militated against any "nationalizing" tendency of print. At best, Weems helped to reconstitute a nascent national literature according to the fickle and diverse tastes of readers in regional marketplaces. While he professed a preference for "republican" literature or "moral" literature, he remained willing to sell whatever promised to turn a profit.⁸

Minister, Editor, Author, Bookseller

Born in Maryland in 1759, Mason Locke Weems freed his family's slaves upon his father's death in 1779 and left Maryland for England to train for the Episcopal ministry. Upon his return home to Maryland in 1784, Weems began his brief career as a minister, but he suffered from a fervency and a spirit of ecumenism that his contemporaries found troublesome. He preached everywhere he went--to slaves on Friday nights, in the homes of the poor, even to Methodists. He had the habit of assuming "the Complexion and entering the Spirit" of whatever company he found himself in, a fellow clergyman noted with consternation. Weems's proselytizing

⁸Weems to Carey, n.d., but probably 1810, in Weems 3:26.

strained the patience of his fellow Anglicans, and he soon began to cast about for a more independent means of expressing himself.⁹

While still a minister, Weems began publishing and selling religious tracts. He hired a printer in Wilmington, Delaware, to print a volume of sermons by English theologian Robert Russell, and soon followed this effort with a book of sermons by Scottish minister Hugh Blair. He found it hard to sell such dry biblical exegesis, however, and began to leaven his holdings with tracts bearing titles like Twelve Cents Worth of Wit, or Little Stories for Folk of All Denominations. Such small, affordable publications did well, and Weems found he could vary editions in each printing to suit his readers' tastes and budgets. Clipping the liveliest chapters from popular books, and adding his own sentiments when he felt it appropriate, Weems glided from one role to another: from minister, to editor and author, to bookseller. He found a long-dead but best-selling collaborator in Luigi Cornaro, a fifteenth-century Venetian nobleman whose Sure and Certain Methods of Attaining a Long and Healthy Life helped Weems find a readership in the Chesapeake Bay area. He added his own calls for temperance, sensible eating, and "moderate exercise" to Cornaro's three hundred year-old advice. Such early experiments led Weems to discover that selling books afforded him a better living and more independence than preaching. As he saw it, editing, writing and selling books broadened and secularized his pulpit, allowing him to find an extensive, nondenominational audience that responded with open minds and open pocketbooks to

⁹Lawrence C. Wroth, Parson Weems: A Biographical and Critical Study (Baltimore: Lord Baltimore Press, 1911), 30-55 (quotations on 32, 44).

his admonishments to virtue. His interests were political as well as religious, as his bishop discovered when he found Weems selling Thomas Paine's Age of Reason in the portico of a tavern. Soon after that uncomfortable encounter, Weems left the pulpit altogether to become a full-time bookseller, a career he continued until his death in 1825 on a bookselling mission in Beaufort, South Carolina.¹⁰

In 1792 Weems struck up an association with Mathew Carey, a Philadelphia printer who, facing stiff competition in the busy northern book market, was anxious to expand his trade into the South. Carey, a native Dubliner, had been imprisoned early in his career for his pro-Catholic publications, and after his release he had fled Ireland disguised in women's clothing, seeking exile in Philadelphia. With a loan from the Marquis de Lafayette, Carey bought a used printing press and in 1785 began publishing newspapers and bibles. Lamé, dyslexic, and nearly broke, Carey nonetheless quickly established himself as one of the most energetic and prosperous printers in the United States. He took the lead in organizing book exchanges among the leading printing houses, so that each printer could offer a wider variety of stock; he circulated booklists so that competing printers might regularize their production schedules; he organized competitions for improved printer's ink, paper, and binding techniques. Though he

¹⁰Gilreath, "Southern Booktrade," 13-18; Leary, Book-Peddling Parson, 13-18; Wroth, Parson Weems, 47.

prospered as his business grew, Carey also assumed greater and greater debt, which he struggled to meet through much of his career.¹¹

Weems and Carey had a great early success selling Oliver Goldsmith's The History of the Earth, and Animated Nature. Carey had several thousand copies of the book on hand when Weems first approached him. Within two years Weems had sold them all and the book was reprinted. Weems distributed the book across Virginia, in Fredericksburg, Norfolk, Petersburg and Richmond. Soon Carey had Weems unloading other overstock volumes into the Southern market. Though the success of Goldsmith was never matched, the partnership between Weems and Carey continued on and off for thirty years.¹²

Through his years of hard traveling, haggling with his difficult employer, and sleeping among strangers in inns hundreds of miles from his family, the Parson felt constant pressure to "do good" for the country and for himself. Despite serious

¹¹Carey wrote an autobiography, published serially in the New England Magazine in 1833 and 1834; this was reprinted as Mathew Carey: Autobiography (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Eugene L. Schwab, 1942). Carey explained his ailment, now recognized as dyslexia, as a "destitution in my cranium of the bump designating the power of arrangement," a frustrating and costly problem for a printer. "The paragraphs were often so transposed that the first, and middle and last changed places. The sentences underwent the same changes--some were wholly omitted--some transposed--others substituted. . . . This system, the result of my utter deficiency of the proper mode of arranging my MS. has at all times greatly enhanced the expense of my printing." Autobiography, 61. See also Earl L. Bradsher, Mathew Carey: Editor, Author and Publisher (New York: Columbia University Press, 1912) 13-28; One Hundred and Fifty Years of Publishing, 1785-1935 (Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger, 1935), 5-21; Tebell, History of Book Publishing, 1:106-114.

¹²Gilreath, "Southern Booktrade," 31.

obstacles, he remained confident that his strategy was working, that he was helping Americans develop into a nation of readers. Weems wrote that these sentiments were a natural extension of his philanthropy, and were what had drawn him into selling books in the first place. "The greatest Lovers of Mankind are the Happiest--and he who does the most good in this world will be the most glorious in the next. Twas this expression that first set me on vending books," he explained in 1807.¹³

The mixture of nationalism, religious idealism, and commercial self-interest that first led him into bookselling continued to motivate the Parson through the years and was a fixture in his correspondence with his publishers. As he arranged with Philadelphia printer Caleb P. Wayne, another publisher he represented, for books to be sent to the college in Athens, Georgia, Weems reflected that "the wider I extend my observation the more entirely am I convinced that Infinite Service to the Public, and infinite Emolument to the Private & Prudent Adventurers, will result from my plan of Book vending." The following year he wrote to Carey that "I feel the same passion now to multiply the Copies of Good books, especially those that tend to display the charm & happiness of Pure Religion & Politics." From Augusta a few years later he pressed the point once again. "There is no time for wrangling," he wrote. "The Country is in darkness. Men's minds are uninform'd, their hearts bitter, and their manners savage. Humanity and Patriotism both cry aloud, Books, Books, Books."¹⁴

¹³Weems to Carey, June 19, 1807, in Weems, 2:364-5.

¹⁴Weems to Caleb P. Wayne, Aug. 20, 1806, in Weems, 2:344; Weems to Carey, July 30, 1810, in Weems, 3: 23.

A principled pragmatist, Weems was eager to cultivate morality in his customers, but he was always responsive to the widely varied tastes of his readers and the changing demands of the reading marketplace. He frequently voiced his desire for what he called "ad captandum" books. Translated literally as "for the people," the term held a dual meaning in Weems's mind that reflected, on the one hand, his desire to appeal to the mass of readers, to meet the tastes and demands of his customers and thereby insure their saleability. The term also referred to books that were instructive and that would inculcate civic virtue in his readers. Heavy treatises did not do well in most places in the South, he wrote, and instead he asked Carey to send him "a little piece of Choice moral wit, & give it a popular title." He reminded Carey that he had promised to supply "the best school books with 40 to 50 varieties of the ad captandum piece. Yes, and I repeat it, the ad captandum pieces. These were what I wanted, and none else. I wanted none of those books that might or might not sell . . . such as "Miller's Retrospect"--"Adam's Defence," and innumerable other many volumn'd masses of Antediluvian Law & Divinity. These I well knew wd never answer our two great objects in selling books, viz. to enlighten the World and to enrich ourselves."¹⁵

Newspapers and Book Distribution in Cities

In their inventory of book ownership in early nineteenth-century Virginia, historians Joseph Kett and Patricia McClung show that towns generated the critical

¹⁵Weems to Carey, Oct. 29, 1810, in Weems 3:28; Weems to Carey, March 8, 1811, in Weems 3:38.

mass of literary activity that gave credence to claims that the early 1800s were an “age of reading.” While rates of book ownership were actually somewhat higher in the rural counties they studied, book owners in cities owned more books and represented a surprisingly broad spectrum of occupations. More city occupations demanded and rewarded literacy; while the professions of law, medicine, and the ministry ensured a small class of readers in both the countryside and the city, in cities, shopkeepers and artisans found ciphering skills useful and print a fixture of their work environments. The books that Virginians read were much the same as those read elsewhere: books on natural science, travel books, histories, books of sermons, and how-to books “taken together formed a common culture that transcended sectional differences.” In Kett and McClung’s view, where books were read they constituted a commonly shared national culture; the difference between northern and southern literary activity was reflected mainly in the predominately rural character of the South. The majority of Southerners lived outside of towns, where book ownership was mostly restricted to professional men, and presumably the women in their households.¹⁶

While about half of the city households Kett and McClung surveyed owned books, libraries and newspapers were available in Savannah as early as the 1760s, and by the early 1800s Georgia’s smaller inland towns were publishing their own

¹⁶Kett and McClung, “Book Culture in Post-Revolutionary Virginia,” 94-147. About half of the estates Kett and McClung inventoried included books, ranging from a low of 31.7% in Charles City County to a high of 61.6% in Lunenburg; half the inventories in Fredericksburg contained books, as did 48.6% of the inventories in Petersburg.

newspapers and assembling their own libraries. Newspapers were the most common source of written information within communities, and they were the primary conduits of culture from northern publishing centers to the cities and towns of Georgia. In 1775 Georgia had just one newspaper, James Johnston's Georgia Gazette, published in Savannah, the legislative seat and the cultural and economic center of colonial Georgia. In 1762 Georgia's general assembly began requiring that laws should be printed and distributed to the public. The assembly appointed Johnston, a young Scot "well skilled in the art and mystery of printing," to publish their acts and apparently helped to buy him a press. Johnston took the opportunity to begin a range of related enterprises. He began printing the Gazette, which provided the perfect vehicle to advertise stationery, writing ink, and books for sale, as well as the assorted written instruments of commerce: "Blank Books, Bills of Sale, Mortgages, Powers of Attorney, Indentures, Bills of Lading, Articles of Agreement between Masters of Vessels and Seamen, Summonses, Executions for the Use of Magistrates, &c. &c. &c."¹⁷

At least two large libraries had existed in Savannah for decades by the time of the Revolution. George Whitefield's Bethesda Orphanage had a library containing 1,200 books, and a collection known as the "Parson's Library"--a library housed in the care of the local Anglican priest--filled a catalogue 56 pages long, over twice the length of the Bethesda Orphanage catalogue. The German-born William Gerar De Brahm, in

¹⁷Georgia Gazette, June 2, 1762, quoted in The Pioneer Printer of Georgia (The Southern Printer, 1929), 6-8; Alexander A. Lawrence, James Johnston: Georgia's First Printer (Savannah: Pigeonhole Press, 1956), 6.

a survey of Georgia published around 1760, described it as a region where "there is scarcely a House in the Cities, Towns, or Plantations, but which have some Choice Authors, if not Libraries of Religious, Phylosophical, and Political Writers." Booksellers, he wrote, "endeavor to import the newest editions, and take care to commission the best, well knowing they will not incumber their Shops long, but soon find Admirers and Purchasers."¹⁸

By the end of the eighteenth century, several towns in Georgia boasted newspapers. The Augusta Chronicle was founded in 1785; the Savannah Republican in 1798; and the Washington News in 1800. By 1810 there were thirteen newspapers in the state, and by 1833 citizens could buy 20 different local papers in towns across the state. After 1800 Augusta emerged as the undisputed center of publishing in Georgia; in 1820 three different presses cranked out the state's only daily newspapers, employing 13 men and five boys and bringing in \$18,000 annually.¹⁹

In Weems's estimation the booming economy of the lower South held great promise for the booktrade. He enjoyed great success selling books at community

¹⁸John Gerar William DeBrahm, DeBrahm's Report of the General Survey in the Southern District of North America, ed. Louis De Vorsey, Jr. (reprint, Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1971), 144; Richard Beale Davis, A Colonial Southern Bookshelf: Reading in the Eighteenth Century (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979), 5, 21-22. On the Bethesda Orphanage, see Thomas Gamble, Jr., Bethesda: An Historical Sketch of Whitefield's House of Mercy and of the Union Society (Savannah, Ga.: Morning News Print, 1902), 16, 34, 42-3.

¹⁹Sherwood Adiel, A Gazetteer of the State of Georgia (3rd ed., Washington, Ga.: P. Force, 1837), 315-8; Digest of the Accounts of Manufacturing Establishments in the United States (Washington: Gales and Eaton, 1823), 23.

gatherings, especially those in or near cities, or wherever crowds gathered. At horse races he sold song books, dream interpretation books, Bibles, dictionaries, compilations of jokes, biographies, and other light material. At a racing event in Charleston, he sold 300 copies of his own Life of Washington in one week. Court sessions and legislative sessions presented somewhat different but equally profitable markets. Here he found that the works of Washington Irving, books on military strategy, almanacs, school books, law and accounting books sold well. Religious revivals, naturally, presented a market for sermons and other religious treatises.²⁰

Using Augusta as his home base, Weems traveled to smaller regional towns, trying to arrive in county seats when court was in session. He tried to anticipate what his readers would want in each of the many local markets. Methodists, Baptists, and Episcopalians all seemed to the Parson to have different tastes. He found selling books in the upcountry more difficult than selling in the sea islands, where book buyers were fewer but had more money. He learned to anticipate the difference between his male and female customers, between parents and their children. Early in the century, books were so dear that buyers refused to compromise. Later, as books became more common, reading tastes broadened, and Carey and Weems lost their market dominance, book purchasers more frequently expressed their preferences about the color of their books and the quality of the paper and binding, suggesting a new pride in the physical appearance of their books, as they might take pride in fine horses, clothing, or

²⁰Gilreath, "Southern Booktrade," 39.

paintings. During the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Georgians became a savvy and particular book-buying public.

Cities, especially booming trading centers like Augusta, presented endless opportunities. In the winter of 1810, Weems reported from Augusta that Carey and other publishers would do best to concentrate on selling books in the lower South rather than in Virginia. "The advantage in point of wealth is infinitely in favour of this state & Carolina," he wrote. "See! in Orange and Madison Counties (Virginia) I tried the Courthouses, for two weeks, I sold but about 150 Dolls. Here, in two weeks I sold, cash & good notes, 700 Dolls! No comparison. And what wonder? Here in Augusta, they annually take forty thousand bales of cotton; making at 10 cents a pound 12 hundred thousand dollars!" He even entertained the idea of moving his family to Georgia in the fall of 1810, so that he could be ready for the "Courts & the two Legislatures, & great Races," all of which offered him great opportunity to sell. The relative proximity of the Georgia and South Carolina legislatures made it easier to service both markets, making the lower South a richer prospect than his home state of Virginia, with its glutted markets and greater distances.²¹

Milledgeville, the state capital for much of the antebellum period, lay squarely in the middle of the state, located on the banks of the Oconee River not far from the Federal Road. In 1808, a few years after the town was platted, the town had its first newspaper, the Milledgeville Intelligencer. The Southern Recorder, the Federal Union,

²¹Weems to Carey, Feb. 27, 1810, in Weems 3:15.

the Journal, and the Standard of Union soon followed. By 1840, Milledgeville led the state in the amount of capital invested in printing. Printing a newspaper in the shadow of the state capitol assured timeliness in reporting legislative news, and the state printing contract remained the most lucrative job a printer could hope for anywhere in the state.²²

Milledgeville vied with Augusta to become the cultural center of the state. An editor in 1827 proudly called attention to the similarity between the state capital of Milledgeville, with its seven hills, and ancient Rome, and dreamed that Georgia's state capital "would one day be covered with Theatres, Collosiuses, Temples, and superb private edifices fit to lodge the leaders and rulers of a Great Republic." The self-consciously styled legacies of the ancient republics were evident everywhere one looked in early nineteenth-century Georgia, and were frequently associated with institutions of learning and culture. A youngster could grow up in a town called Sparta or Rome reading ad captandum pieces bought from Weems. Later he might attend college in Athens, where he could hone his oratorical skills as a member of the Demosthenian Literary Society. Not surprisingly, Weems merchandised his books to suit his readers' taste for the ancients. He wrote from Milledgeville in 1810 that Bard's Compendium

²²James C. Bonner, Milledgeville: Georgia's Antebellum Capital (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1978), 26; Sherwood, Gazetteer, 318.

“stuck to me like wax,” but after he described it in his catalogue as “‘The Grand American Aristotle’ . . . it sold like green peas in spring.”²³

Milledgeville’s newspaper publishers were prominent and prosperous. The Virginia-born brothers Seaton and Fleming Grantland, who came to Milledgeville in 1809, founded the Georgia Journal, bought new presses from Philadelphia, and like James Johnston in colonial Savannah, thrived with the help of the state government’s printing contract. After his brother’s death in 1819, Seaton started the Southern Recorder, the state’s leading Whig organ, and began to acquire land and slaves. Grantland’s partner, Maryland native Richard McAllister Orme, arrived in Milledgeville in 1811 to learn the print trade; he too amassed considerable wealth through the success of the Recorder and through his shrewd investments in land and slaves.²⁴

For those outside the graces of the state legislature and outside the larger towns, newspaper publishing could be a precarious business. The editor of the Georgia Patriot put the newspaper up for sale in 1827, claiming that “to an industrious and intelligent gentleman, who knows how to shape his politics to the circumstances of the times, this establishment offers very great advantages.” The paper had circulated between 1500

²³Georgia Statesman, March 16, 1827, quoted in Bonner, Milledgeville, 46; E. Merton Coulter, College Life in the Old South. As Seen at the University of Georgia (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1928; reprint ed., 1973), 103-133; Joseph P. Reidy, From Slavery to Agrarian Capitalism in the Cotton Plantation South: Central Georgia, 1800-1880. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 53-54; Weems to Carey, Sept 18, 1810, in Weems, 3: 25.

²⁴Bonner, Milledgeville, 41-42.

and 2000 copies weekly in recent years, he estimated. But the editors of the profitable Southern Recorder warned their competitors of the state's dim publishing prospects. "The existing state of things, of long credits, small pay and great eventual loss, the condition of the newspaper press in the United States is in a wretched state." The editors pointed to the "numerous failures of News-printers in Georgia--to the entire ruin of men possessing all the requisite skill, industry, energy, prudence, and talents to command at least a moderate portion of success and make a living in almost any other occupation." Newspaper editors frequently became indebted to their workmen, their paper suppliers, and other creditors. While papers in the lesser cities of Columbus and Macon were risky enough, smaller village papers faced the worst prospects. "Of all the avocations which are not discreditable, almost any should be preferred to printing of a village newspaper," the editors of the Southern Recorder wrote. "'Tis labor literally thrown away, where there can be neither profit nor a reasonable hope of any.'"²⁵

Newspaper publishers' best strategy for turning a profit was to diversify their offerings to include related items for sale, as James Johnston had done in Savannah. Newspaper offices supplied town residents paper, pen, ink, and books. In 1804 the editor of the Augusta Chronicle ran a notice announcing the formation of a new bookstore, located across the street from the newspaper offices. He had "formed connections with one of the most opulent and best assorted booksellers in the United

²⁵The Athenian (Athens), May 18, 1827; Southern Recorder (Milledgeville), June 7, 1828.

States,” and could offer books “in every department of literature; a circumstance that must greatly add to the literary improvement of the people, and consequently to the prosperity of the state.” The list of selections ran the full length of the column, and included dictionaries, histories, medical books, travel accounts, books on animal husbandry, political economy, and law; books of sermons, French grammar books, and the classic writings of the Enlightenment. The only drawback to this enticing announcement was that the “bookstore” contained only a few titles; the rest had to be ordered on subscription.²⁶

Book publishers often offered newspaper publishers a copy of a book in exchange for running an advertisement, which allowed newspaper publishers to accumulate books for sale. In exchange for a complimentary copy of Ramsey’s Life of Washington, the editors of the Augusta Chronicle ran an advertisement, indistinguishable from the news stories on the same page, announcing the publication of the book. The advertisement featured the assurances of “several gentlemen” that it was a “work of the most classic elegance.”²⁷

Outlying Towns

Weems’s visits to the state capitol in Milledgeville always promised to bear fruit. Prior to visiting the town in 1810, Weems arranged to deliver a “Discourse on

²⁶ Augusta Chronicle, June 2, 1804.

²⁷ Augusta Chronicle, June 13, 1807.

the Importance of Education" in the general assembly's chamber in the State House. He advertised his speech in the local paper, inviting those "who mean to procure some good books" to "honor him with their attention as soon as possible." He urged "benevolent characters" especially to consider his own lives of Washington and Marion, offering "liberal allowance" to those who would take them "for Christmas boxes to their young relations." Milledgeville is the "Metropolis of Georgia," he wrote of the rough little town in 1810. Though the town boasted only 1,027 white residents, over half of whom were under sixteen years of age, Weems described it as the "Lancaster [Pennsylvania] of the Georgia up country, that is the place of Rendezvous Universal." He sold \$800 worth of books there in just fifteen days, and left another \$1500 in books in the care of John Devereaux, the city's postmaster. Weems urged Carey to send a large order of books to Devereaux, whom he trusted a great deal, suggesting that he and Devereaux might split the commission.²⁸

After years of working in Georgia and the Carolinas, Weems felt he had won the confidence of people like Devereaux across the state. "Few People have such advantages as I possess, and very few [are] so universally known and so generally befriended by everybody," he assured Carey. He considered himself "very much in the good graces of the Judges, Lawyers, & Divines, & People of this Country," he

²⁸Georgia Journal (Milledgeville), November 28, 1810, reprinted in Weems, 3: 29-30; Weems to Carey, March 28, 1811, in Weems, 3:45. In 1810, 465 white adults and 562 white children lived in the town of Milledgeville; there were three free persons of color and 226 slaves. See Aggregate Amount of Each Description of Persons Within the United States of America, 1810, vol. 3 (Washington, D.C., 1811), 81.

wrote from Oglethorpe County, Georgia, a reputation secured in part by his publication of the Life of Washington, and his pamphlet God's Revenge Against Gambling, which he delighted in selling at the horse races.²⁹

Town squares in front of courthouses regularly offered gatherings of people. Lawyers bought schoolbooks for their children, novels and etiquette books for their wives, histories and religious treatises for themselves, and stationery for their offices. A court session to be held in Augusta promised a bonanza for Weems. If he had on hand three thousand dollars worth of "such Books as I cou'd name, I have not the shadow of a doubt but I should sell every man of 'em in two weeks," he wrote. "Send me INSTANTLY INSTANTLY 30 or 40 Josephus, 20 Hunters Biography, 20 or 30 Red Morocco Family Bibles, 20 pocket Bibles, 100 Principles of Politeness, 50 Charlotte Temple, (the 50/100 edition if possible), 50 of Braken's farriery, 10 secret history of St. Cloud." In addition to their eclectic tastes, Weems found lawyers liked and could afford high quality books. For one upcoming court session, he asked for "100 to 1500 Dolls worth of your handsomest Books, Histories, travels, new Novels, new Political works, Farrieries, Cookeries, Elegant Maps &c.c.c. all beautifully bound red, green & every showy flashy colour."³⁰

²⁹Weems to Carey, Feb. 27, 1810, in Weems 3:15; Weems to Carey, n.d., but probably 1810, in Weems 3:26.

³⁰Benjamin Rush commented on courts and county seats as the center of learning: "'County towns' are favorable to the propagation of political and legal information. The public officers of the county, by being obliged to maintain a connection with the capital of the government, often become repositories and vehicles of news and useful publications, while the judges and lawyers who attend the courts that are held in these

Courthouses and the state legislature also offered a place where Weems could unload the dense, dry treatises which he could not sell anywhere else. "The Books shipped for the South, were all for Columbia, at the Session of the Legislature. Hence they were chiefly historical, Political, Philosophical &c. &c." These books, however, had never reached Columbia, but had gone instead to Charleston. Weems had learned that "there were to be Racings, Gamblings, & other things to bring People together" in Augusta, however, and had the shipment forwarded to meet him there. Not surprisingly, though, the selection meant for the South Carolina legislature made a poor selection for the races in Augusta. "Books I did not want were sent in shoals. Books, for which I was continually torn to pieces, & for which I was continually writing, were never sent."³¹

Conversely, he sometimes arrived at a court session with no law books. "At every Court house, the Lawyers, the Physicians, the mechanics wd pour around me," he wrote. "'Well, thank God, you are come at last, so now where's my Impy's Practice, my McNally On Evidence, my Hawkin's Pleas of the Crown--my Rush's Sydenbaum, my Blomenbach &c.&c.&c.&c.! To all these eager questions, these high & assured expectations, I had no answer to make but by blank looks & pitiful apologies." Even given his earlier disappointments with Carey, Weems was dismayed

towns seldom fail of leaving a large portion of knowledge behind them." Benjamin Rush, "Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools," in Essays on Education in the Early Republic, 8. Weems to Carey, Jan. 31, 1806, in Weems 2:358; Weems to Mathew Carey, Oct. 20, 1806, in Weems 2:350.

³¹Weems to Carey, March 15, 1811, in Weems, 3:41.

at this "total blasting of the very fond & high hopes which I once entertained of doing great Good to the Country by disseminating thousands of books among them."³²

While court sessions presented Weems his greatest opportunities for selling in small towns, court calendars changed on short notice for a variety of reasons. "Great sickness in the families of the Judges" kept the Milledgeville courts from meeting in the fall of 1810, again undermining his chance at capitalizing on the gathering of lawyers. Later that year, he traveled from Augusta to Saundersville, planning to find the Superior Court in session. "But as the Devil, or which I suppose is about the same thing, the Judges & Lawyers, wd have it the Court was adjourned."³³

While the cosmopolitan residents of Savannah and well-to-do planters were ready "admirers and purchasers" of books in colonial Georgia, after 1800 this thin band of reading elites gradually broadened to include the residents of small farms and remote villages. Though Weems generally used Augusta as his headquarters, he focused his energies on selling books in rural and small-town Georgia. Selling books where no one else could provide them was as easy as shooting fish in a barrel, particularly where residents pooled their resources to form cooperative libraries. Even in the state's rawest frontier settlements, the demand for books was more than he could meet. In tiny Watkinsville, which boasted only twenty white adults when he visited in 1810, he faced "people tearing me to pieces" trying to purchase schoolbooks for their

³²Weems to Carey, March 15, 1811, in Weems, 3:42-3.

³³Weems to Carey, Sept. 18, 1810, in Weems 3:24; Georgia Journal (Milledgeville), November 28, 1810, reprinted in Weems, 3: 29-30.

children. The citizens of "the poor little County of Lincoln," spread along the Savannah River north of Augusta, ordered a library worth three hundred dollars. The residents of Jackson County, in the upcountry north of the new university in Athens, also subscribed for three hundred dollars, as did the people of Greene County, some miles to the south. Everywhere he went, the Parson found people eager for books and willing to pay for them. He must have been heartened by the youthfulness of the population; in many places he visited, children outnumbered their parents, which made for a brisk market in primary readers and held great promise for the future.³⁴

Weems traveled into regional cities and small towns selling subscriptions either for books yet to be printed, or books in Carey's Philadelphia warehouse. After obtaining testimonials from local citizens who had heard about or read the book, Weems traveled door to door collecting down payments until a profit was assured. He then either brought the books to the purchasers on a return visit or shipped the books in the care of some trustworthy local citizen. This arrangement allowed him to avoid the expense of shipping books which might go unsold. People who bought and paid for books on subscription sometimes found that the promised books never arrived; in

³⁴Mason Locke Weems to Mathew Carey, March 24, 1810, in Weems 3:19; Weems to Carey, May 31, 1810, in Weems, 3: 23. In 1810 Lincoln County had 1267 white children and 1001 whites sixteen years and older; Jackson County's 3722 white adults were outnumbered by their 4977 children; and Greene County had 2924 white adults and 3307 children. Aggregate Amount, vol. 3, 80, 80a. Even where funds were limited, community libraries flourished on the frontier. In the Ohio Valley, a cooperative "coonskin" library was established in 1803 when one resident hauled furs all the way to Boston in exchange for \$73.50 worth of books. Louis B. Wright, Culture on the Moving Frontier (New York: Harper & Row, 1955), 117-118.

Edenton, North Carolina, a group of subscribers wrote a letter to the local newspaper editor wondering what had ever become "of a certain Parson Weems, who passed through this State some time ago fiddling and hawking the Life of Gen. Washington." Similar letters arrived on the desks of Carey and Wayne in Philadelphia.³⁵

The risk of shipping books from Philadelphia without the assurance of a subscription was made clear in a newspaper notice Weems ran in Augusta in 1811: "Reading Legion, ATTENTION! The Subscriber, now about to reship 30 trunks of Books to Philadelphia, informs the lovers of wisdom, that by prompt calling at His Book-Store (Mr. Fury's brick building) they may get GREAT BARGAINS. The assortment is large.--Besides a galaxy of Law, Physic, and Divinity Luminaries, there are some wandering stars of singular brightness and curiosity, such as The Harleion Miscellany, Belsham's Great-Britain, Gibbon's Decline, &c. &c."³⁶

A variation on the subscription strategy was to employ adjutants, local agents who would hold books and take subscription orders from people in the community. Weems envisioned, and Carey promised, a system of several hundred bookstores across the region, but it never happened. Bad roads, difficulty communicating, and, most tellingly, Carey's poor judgment about or indifference to the demands of the Southern readership, brought their first venture to an end by the turn of the century. The books

³⁵Kett and McClung, "Book Culture in Post-Revolutionary Virginia," 119-120; Edenton Gazette, October 15, 1807, quoted in James S. Purcell, "A Book Pedlar's Progress in North Carolina," North Carolina Historical Review 29 (1952), 13.

³⁶Augusta Chronicle, June 28, 1811.

which went unsold in Weems's early ventures in Virginia were returned to Philadelphia. The list reads like a comedy of errors: anti-Paine pamphlets, antislavery publications, and outdated revolutionary tracts, needless to say, were hard to sell in Virginia at any price.³⁷

The relationship between Carey and Weems was a complex and troubled one, a continuous cycle of empty threats, unfulfilled promises, unheeded advice, and unacknowledged pleas for help. There were numerous internal contradictions in Weems's personality and in his relationship with Carey. Weems was at once industrious and improvident; a principled pragmatist, determined to spread the republican gospel but equally eager to satisfy the public's taste; an optimist who suffered great doubts about his life's work. Though Weems was by all accounts his most prominent agent, Carey viewed him with disdain, mistrusted his judgment, and ignored his pleas for cooperation. They bickered over their terms of payment, over book supplies, over shipping practices. After ten, fifteen, even twenty years of selling books for Carey, Weems still found himself the target of contemptuous, dismissive letters from his employer. Weems, who spent his life talking with book buyers all over the country, felt he had come to know the marketplace intimately. He frequently begged for books he thought would sell well in the increasingly competitive Southern marketplace, but his requests were routinely ignored by the shrewd and stubborn

³⁷Gilreath, "Southern Booktrade," 31-37; on the subscription system, see Helmut Lehmann-Haupt, The Book in America: A History of the Making and Selling of Books in the United States, 2nd ed. (New York: R.R. Bowker, 1951), 51-54.

Carey, who continued to view regional markets as a way of reducing his inventory of remaindered books.

Carey's obstinacy and his remove from the Southern market were reflected in Weems's accusation that he was "pushing out books at random," despite the Parson's repeated requests for specific books--it was like trying to sell "fiddles at a Methodist meetinghouse," Weems complained. "I beggd you to send me to Augusta 20, I now say 40, or 60, or 80 copies Josephus History of the Jews. . . . I see but one Josephus!! this I see very little done on my plan!--nothing done on my plan! and yet you are beginning already to talk of remittances. See here, Citizen Carey, -- I love you. I've had a hell of a time in your service that's certain--but I believe you honest, I believe you generous and noble, I love you--But I'll be no slave." Weems's frustration is palpable in a letter written later that month, when he wrote from Augusta, "Why can't I be heard? Why can't I get the books I want?"³⁸

Weems lived in a world in which pecking orders remained unambiguous and inviolate. In a town like Milledgeville or even a larger city like Augusta, he stood to benefit from the same arrangement that left him powerless against Carey. "It is a great thing at these Public times and places, to have the big People take me by the hand & send the Little Fry to me," he wrote Carey. But doing business with Carey was like "a Dwarf going a warfaring with a Giant." While other printers paid him 25 percent, or even a one-third cut of his book sales, Carey paid only 15 to 20 percent, despite

³⁸Weems to Carey, March 15, 1811, in Weems, 3:41; Dec. 2, 1806, in Weems, 2:354; Dec. 28, 1806, in Weems, 2:355-6.

promises to the contrary: "I tell you I shou'd be guilty of domicile & suicide were I to take 15 & 20 pr cent." Carey dismissed these heartfelt pleas for cooperation, responding that "after what has passed so very recently I cannot justify myself in complying with your directions. I believe you incapable of being made, by any experience or admonition, a man of business. . . . My connexion with you has been from its earliest contract, a source of chagrin, vexation & loss." Carey's tight-fistedness and the size of his enterprise compared with Weems's hand-to-mouth existence added to the strain between the two men. "Moored as you are like a tall 3 decker, with a Family bible ahead & a school ditto and Testament on each quarter you can laugh at the darkening storm & defy all its range [rage?]. But a poor Tender crazy as I am, a ragged Mathew Carey's Chicken like me has everything to dread from it," Weems wrote his boss. Despite the tensions in their relationship, Weems saw Carey as his best chance to make a living and his best chance to bring books to print-hungry readers. While he occasionally sold books for other printers and tried to parlay these other relationships into better terms with Carey, Weems could never gain any leverage, and Carey remained his chief supplier.³⁹

Weems might have done better, but the coordination of books orders and shipments was made difficult by postal delays, the unreliability of banks in small towns, and court cancellations. Postal service was expensive, slow, and irregular in

³⁹Weems to Carey, March 12, 1810, in Weems 3:18-9; Weems to Carey, Mar. 8, 1811, in Weems 3:38; Weems to Carey, Dec. 28, 1806, in Weems, 2:355-6; Carey to Weems, 10 Feb 1807, in Weems, 2: 359; Gilreath, "Southern Book Trade," 36.

Georgia. "We have mail but once a week," a Milledgeville resident wrote in 1809.

"The packages are made up previous to its arrival," and the stage "stops but for a few minutes in the town, so that we can never answer a letter until the successive week." It took ten days for a letter to travel from Milledgeville to Rossville, less than 200 miles away. To one printer Weems wrote "send, Oh send on immediately--I had counted to find every thing here full & ready. My God! When will my disappointments cease!"

The failure of the books to arrive meant his trip "thro' fire & water" to meet the superior court of Columbia was pointless. He frequently found it necessary to return from small outlying communities to Augusta, where the postal service was more trustworthy. "Not thinking the up country post offices safe, nor indeed the grand mail stages perfectly infallible in matters of money I thought it my duty to you to concentrate all my monies in into good drafts from Augusta," he wrote. This cost him not only time and energy, as he noted, but also took time away from prospective sales. As a measure of safety when mailing paper currency, he would tear the notes into halves and mail the pieces separately.⁴⁰

⁴⁰Weems to Wayne, Aug. 25, 1806, Weems, 2:344; Weems to Carey, October 29, 1810, in Weems 3:27; Carey to Weems, March 4, 1811, in Weems 3:37. Weems's name frequently appeared among the "List of Letters" waiting to be picked up at the Augusta post office; see the Augusta Chronicle, July 14, 1804; July 5, 1806; July 4, 1807, and November 20, 1810; on mail delivery, see Bonner, Milledgeville, 32. Travel was slow and precarious. In the years around 1830, coaches typically traveled only four to five miles per hour even in good weather. The fare was high--a dollar for every eight or ten miles. The ninety miles between Macon and Columbus cost twenty dollars, though the rate eventually was driven down by competition. See Henry DeLeon Southerland, Jr., and Jerry Elijah Brown, The Federal Road Through Georgia, the Creek Nation, and Alabama, 1806-1836 (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 62-3.

For all his labors on Carey's behalf, Weems was barely able to feed his family. Absent from his wife and his twelve children for up to two years at a time, he depended on Carey to mail money and supplies to his wife. "You, thank God, are rich, possessg wealth perhaps above one hundred thousand dollars," he wrote in the winter of 1809. "I am worth nothing but my Health & Spirits. And when I left Mrs. Weems, I left her in the last fortnight of gestation--in a town--with 12 in family--a hard winter setting in and with only 40 Dolls. Thus after all the thousands & tens of thousands of dollars that have come through my hands to John Adams, Caleb P. Wayne, and to yourself, I can hardly support my family, cannot give them the education they deserve." The following spring, the Weems family had to borrow money from their neighbors. Despite Carey's poor treatment, Weems was selling books by the thousands; during the last fifteen weeks of 1810, he sent to Carey \$4350, exclusive of his expenses for freight, travel, and postage. The following spring, he sold \$2800 worth of books in just over two months, traveling between Augusta, Milledgeville, Washington, and Sparta.⁴¹

⁴¹Weems to Carey, December 26, 1809, in Weems 2:436; Weems to Carey, May 31, 1810, in Weems, 3:22; Weems to Carey December 25, 1810, in Weems, 3:31. In the spring of 1811, Weems posted the following amounts:

- \$700 from Augusta and Mville (April)
- \$200 from Mville and Elberton (May)
- \$400 from Washington and Sparta (May)
- \$1500 deposited in bank in Augusta (on June 13)

Figures in letter from Weems to Carey, June 14, 1811, in Weems 3:48. The scale of Weems's booktrade is evident in the estimate that he sold almost 4,000 copies of John Marshall's Life of Washington for publisher Caleb P. Wayne, collecting \$40,000 for that book alone. See Lehmann-Haupt, The Book in America, 131.

In addition to Weems's numerous other difficulties, alarming news threatened to end his labors altogether as he made his rounds in the regional courthouses in the spring of 1810. After several days of brisk sales at the Elbert County courthouse, "an express came from the Govr that we were all to be murderd by the Negroes. Judge, Jury, Lawyers and all took the alarm--the Court was adjournd, The Court of Lincoln County which was to sit last week, was also adjournd!! For who could bear to go out from hom & leave his wife & children to be murderd by the d__d Negroes?" Apparently, Weems was willing to take the chance: "I got a Waggoner to go down to Lincoln with me where I made my 300 Dolls." A fire in Augusta in 1810 destroyed their stock, and the worsening economy conspired to deflate their early successes. The embargoes that preceded the War of 1812 rounded out the picture.⁴²

Worse than any of these passing circumstances, Carey continued to ignore the preferences of the Southern reading public. Instead of the spellers, almanacs, and light reading that Southern readers wanted (including Weems's own light morality plays) Carey sent dense works from New England authors--Jonathan Edwards, or Henry Kames's Essay on the Principles of Morality and National Religion. Summing up the numerous difficulties he had encountered on the road and in his maddening relationship with Carey, Weems wrote from Augusta in the winter of 1810 of the "wet, cold, feverish, thirsty, hungry, bad roads, wintry weather, floods, Robbers, fatigue

⁴²Weems to Carey, May 3, 1810, in Weems, 3:21.

unprofitable labours, wasting life, an indigent family, all these evils and many others, which I had daily to encounter.”⁴³

The Books in Demand

Despite Weems's experience in anticipating the markets, he frequently found readers' requests unpredictable, different from one town to the next, changing from one visit to the next. People of every religious denomination and every political persuasion had their own favorites, and they refused to purchase books that did not suit them. “The People among whom I am going, differ very widely in the political sentiments, & in their religious characters, &c&c&c&c&c. In one neighbourhood the Majority are Methodists, in another Baptists. Here they cry out for Jefferson, there for Adams. Hence, Books which in one place wd go off like a flash, wd in another lie till doom's day on the shelves.”⁴⁴

There was simply no way to stay abreast of the demand, no way to accommodate the diverse and growing market. Church histories, books on animal husbandry, etiquette books, and popular novels all did well, but what was most important was variety. “Of the 10,000 books that are published & constantly asked for I certainly have not more than one hundred varieties & so many of these so costly & ponderous as to preclude all hope of sale,” Weems complained after making the rounds

⁴³Weems to Carey, Feb 26, 1810, in Weems 3: 12.

⁴⁴Weems to Carey, March 8, 1811, in Weems 3:39.

at the country courthouses in Washington and Sparta. The collection Carey had sent him contained "not a single Bible of any sort, nor a Dictionary, nor a latin book, nor Greek book, nor French book, nor Dream book, nor Horse Doctor's." Still, Weems had "sold in two weeks 6 to 600 Dolls."⁴⁵

Some items were always in demand, always predictable. Requests for school books were unrelenting. "I cou'd, on a moral certainty, make a fortune for any man who could keep me in book blast, I mean SCHOOL BOOKS chiefly," Weems wrote from Augusta in 1806.⁴⁶ He wrote from Augusta that "had I but a full assortment of school books & Religious do [ditto] & some latin & greek, I cou'd with what I now have on hand, I could make up 3, 4, or 5 pretty assortments for the rich counties & large academies which are multiplied here most gloriously." The opening of a school in Sunbury, near Savannah, offered Weems a golden opportunity. When William McWhir opened his academy for the fall session in 1806, he supplied Weems with a list of books for his students, which Weems passed along to Caleb P. Wayne in Philadelphia. The university in Athens held even greater promise. "If you can make out to please the Trustees you may have the supplying this growing Institution, with

⁴⁵Weems to M. Carey, Oct. 27, 1806, in Weems 2:351; Weems to Carey, Feb. 26, 1810, in Weems, 3:11.

⁴⁶Weems to Wayne, September 30, 1806, in Weems 2:349.

books as long as you shall think proper," he wrote Wayne. "The Genl promises to remit the monies as fast as the books sell."⁴⁷

When he returned to Georgia for the last time in the early 1820s, Weems faced a new host of problems. Saturated book markets meant that Southern consumers were no longer willing to buy the first book that fell off his wagon. While in previous visits Weems had found consumers particular about the contents of the books they bought, they now expressed preferences about the physical appearance and quality of the books. The rising competition in the region hurt subscription sales as well. A buyer might put money down on a volume from one vendor and find that another vendor came along and offered it at a lower price. Despite the new complexities of the marketplace and the considerable pains of his old age, Weems gamely worked to keep up, devising new marketing strategies, writing advertisements for the local newspapers, and doing his best to appeal to a younger generation of readers. He was troubled by the sense that these young people did not understand or properly respect the ideals of their parents' generation, and he pressed the literature of virtue and love upon them in an effort to keep the old republican ideals alive.⁴⁸

The glut in the market must have filled Weems with mixed feelings. To a large degree, it was a sign of his own success that city booksellers now offered a variety of books. He must have been secretly delighted to find that Carey's printing of

⁴⁷Weems to Carey, Feb. 27, 1810, in Weems 3:15; Weems to Wayne, in Weems 2:341, 343.

⁴⁸Weems, 3:348.

LaVoisine's atlas had to be sold at one-half its original price; book buyers in Georgia and South Carolina, as it happened, were unimpressed that the atlas contained no maps of the Southern states. "It is regretted here that in the Specimen of the Amn Atlas, you have not given a map of this state or of Virginia or Georgia," he wrote Carey. "The little states of Connecticut, Maine, &c. are rather too remote and unimportant to excite Curiosity." Nevertheless, at the 50 percent discount people bought the atlas by the trunkload; Weems reported that "I have been told that everyone in Georgia has it."⁴⁹

In 1806 Weems had found that prospective buyers in Savannah considered his Bibles bound in red morocco leather "& were polite enough to say were too much in the Scarlet whore of Babylon colour for a Protestant Bible." He was able to offer "Bibles in a good modest Christian dress," but "when I askd 12\$!!! why they were ready to set the dogs on me." By the time of Weems's final turn in the South, the market had matured. Too many books in the local market drove the prices down dramatically, giving buyers more leverage and driving Weems to resort to discounts and rebates.⁵⁰

By the early 1820s there was simply no market left for Bible sales in many communities. Though Carey and Weems had entered the Southern market in part because there was relatively little competition, by the 1820s there were so many books

⁴⁹Weems to Carey, n.d., received January 10, 1822, in Weems, 3:330-1; Weems to Carey, March 11, 1822, in Weems, 3:340.

⁵⁰Weems to Wayne, Aug. 5, 1806, in Weems 2:340. Weems sold about 3,000 copies of Carey's Family Bible, according to one estimate. See Lehmann-Haupt, The Book in America, 131.

on the market that readers had acquired sophisticated tastes which they used for leverage in their dealings with Weems. Once the market for Bibles was saturated, for example, readers voiced their preferences for nicer editions. "My best friends here, I mean the wealthy Planters, (subscribers) say that if you cou'd take a little from the thickness of the paper & add it to the whitens of the same your edition wd beat Westall all hollow." Weems reported in 1822. Weems also sent on reports of the poor quality of American binding compared to English binding. "Great complaints are made of the American Binders, that while the English books will bear to be knockd about 3 or 4 years unhurt the American books will start from the stitching to crumble to pieces in one or two years." This held true especially for books which were read intensively over the years, like the Bible and prayer books. But at the same time, he found that people complained that the red Morocco Prayerbooks were too expensive, or that "my hope of success in this costly edition [of the Bible] rests too much upon the effect of the prints." "The town is chockful of Bibles," Weems wrote from Charleston in 1822. "Westall's Bibles from London--Collins's Ditto from New York--some fair sales, some, whipping the Devil round the stump by raffles." As an additional inducement to encourage sales, Weems suggested printing "the name of a Beloved Wife or child on the lid" in fine gold lettering, printing up "a very large Show Bill" to attract subscribers.⁵¹

⁵¹Weems to Carey, March 2, 1822, in Weems 3:339; Weems to Carey, March 11, 1822, in Weems 3:340; Weems to Carey, n.d., recieved January 10, 1822, in Weems, 3:330; Weems to Henry Carey, Feb 18, 1822, in Weems 3:334-5.

Weems increasingly focused on the younger generation in his effort to combat the crowded market, hoping that the rising generation of readers and book buyers would relieve the pressure. He turned to using endorsements and advertisements aimed at the parents of schoolchildren. He published long pieces in the local papers, playing on parents' guilt, urging them to provide their children with useful reading material. These modern times are not like the old days, he wrote in a newspaper advertisement, when "a girl, for example though illiterate as her own waiting maid, yet if she had but a pair of fine sparkling eyes," and with her family's wealth and a "caravan of Mandingoes to hold up her train, might fairly sail into a ball room, and kill as many beaux as she pleased." No, Weems warned, now the young men "are out of the reach of such small shot as that. The truth is . . . the young men are not getting to read and to think, and to look for pleasure, where alone it is to be found, i.e., in the mind." Young men "must have something in a wife beyond shawls and bonnets. They must have mind, sir; and that mind stored with knowledge and virtue, rendering the wife at once the helpmate and the charmer of her husband, covering his life over with blossoms of pleasure, and still every day ripening into the fruits of EVERLASTING FRIENDSHIP."⁵²

As Weems got on in years, he was increasingly concerned with the problem of preserving the "Morals and Character especially of the rising generation." The songbooks and jokebooks preferred by Georgians in his earlier ventures South were no

⁵²On use of guilt and endorsements, see 3:318, 3:328 3:314, 337. Charleston Courier, Feb 21, 1822, reprinted in Weems 3:335-6.

longer appropriate. "The World beginning now to talk of us as the Friends of Youth, will not be so well pleas'd to see light song books &c&c in our vice-extinguishing Collections," he wrote. If in 1800 Weems had hoped to inculcate virtue in the masses of the new nation, by 1820 he was working to teach youngsters the ideals of the earlier period. What had been described generally as "vice" twenty years earlier expressed itself more specifically in the younger generation. Boys were subject to "groveling sensualities" and girls to the "pernicious vanities of dress," the Parson warned parents. "If we cant get the Fair & Flush now in their teens to read the Bible & imbibe the spirit of Christian, i.e. Republican Simplicity, frugality, Honesty, Industry, & all such virtues that make men love one another we shall soon be a divided & a Ruined People," he wrote to Carey in 1822. With the passing of time and the rise of the new generation, the parson's mission became "to enlighten the Public mind & thereby exalt the Moral & Political character of the rising Generation." "My mind, to be explicit & honest, is this--to print letters from Great Public characters, also essays on Subjects of high public utility as Education &c."⁵³

Weems's Legacy

While the market for books had changed over the years, Georgia's summer heat had not. The difficulty of traveling in the South grew worse as Weems grew older.

⁵³Weems to Henry Carey, Feb. 28, 1822, in Weems 3: 338; Advertisement in Charleston Courier, July 14, 1821, in Weems 3:318; Weems to Carey, March 11, 1822, in Weems 3:340; Weems to Carey in Weems, 3:318; see also Weems to "Teft and Finn," the editors of The Georgian, April 10, 1821, in Weems 3:311.

Traveling in South Carolina and Georgia in the summertime had always been bad.

"Even the Natives are afraid to travel thro' the Sultry, infected air of this fenny, loggy dreadful Country," he had written from Charleston in the summer of 1806, and the Savannah weather he found "most terrific. The grave yawns wide & daily takes in Youth & Beauty by the herseload." Still, with great effort, he could travel as many as forty miles a day. But when he returned in the 1820s, when he was in his sixties, Weems wrote that "the melting heat, fatigue, & noxious miasmata of that Southern clime" were taking an intolerable toll on him.⁵⁴

Weems set out from Savannah in the April of his sixty-third year to "make a descent on the wealthy Islanders of Hiltonhead, Edisto & St. Helena. But those day & night tormentors of men & beast, the sand flies & musquitoes, drove me back." Travel had grown difficult, but he still had his head in the game, and he was still looking for ways to tap into the market: "Considering the great revival of Religion throughout our Country, wd it not be advisable to think of preparing for the popular passion that way, a collection of half a dozen or dozen of the more noted kind such as Prayer books--Hymnbooks--Hervey's Meditations, elegant edition--Hunter's Biography. . . ."⁵⁵

In his old age, Weems suffered from sicknesses of various sorts, including inflamed bowels, hemorrhoids, and finally the gout and rheumatism. "It pleasd God

⁵⁴Weems to Wayne, August 18, 1806, in Weems 2:343-4; Weems to Carey, Oct. 3, 1821, in Weems, 3:320; on miasma and heat, see Weems to Carey, April 16, 1822, in Weems, 3:345.

⁵⁵Weems to Henry Carey, April 16, 1822, in Weems, 3:346.

that I shd be attackd on the road with the Gout & Rheumatism which have completely stoppd all my operations for nearly 5 weeks. In fact I am not positive I shall ever get well." Several days later he wrote that "the Doctor tells me I am getting better but I have my doubts." He reminded his young boss, Mathew Carey's son Henry, of his years of service to the Careys, imploring him to have compassion on the widow he would soon leave behind.⁵⁶

The final letter came to Carey's son. With undue modesty, the Parson admitted to having done "very little--in the right spirit, I mean, from the Love, even a FILIAL LOVE of God & the Divine ambition & joy to be a co-worker with him in the glorious work of making the world HAPPY." Nonetheless, Weems wrote, he felt "a comfortable hope that I shall be taken, thro mercy, to a better state, go when I may." A month later, he died in Beaufort, South Carolina, over five hundred miles from his home in Dumfries. His obituary estimated that he had distributed over a million copies of the Bible and "other valuable works. . . . His very eccentricities, for failings they could not be called, were the eccentricities of genius and benevolence."⁵⁷

During the winter of 1809, Weems repeatedly had asked Carey to print copies of his Life of Marion to sell at the horse races. With characteristic warmth, Carey had responded that "nothing affords a plainer proof of your extreme worthlessness than

⁵⁶Weems to Carey, March 8, 1811, in Weems 3:40; Weems to Henry Carey, January 25, 1825, in Weems 3:358; Weems to Henry Carey, January 28, 1825.

⁵⁷Weems to Carey, February 25, 1825, in Weems, 3:360. Obituary in the Raleigh, N.C. Register, July 23, 1825, reprinted in Leary, Book-Peddling Parson, 151.

your anxiety about Marion.” Weems finally broke down and took a gamble, despite his family’s extreme financial distress, and paid to publish Marion on his own. He sent Carey twenty dollars of his “own small private monies,” asking the publisher to print copies of Marion in “the cheap inexpensive style of blue papers,” and then to ship them to be bound by John Hoff, a Charleston bookseller.⁵⁸

Weems’s reputation as a biographer, which he had worked so persistently to establish during his lifetime, fell into disrepute after his death. One of his earliest but most polite critics was William Gilmore Simms, who published his own biography of Francis Marion in 1844. Simms deemed Weems’s work “a delightful book for the young,” but unsuitable for “less credulous readers.” Simms judged that Weems’s Marion inspired “frequent doubts” in its readers, and that Weems had “rather loose notions of the privileges of the biographer.” Later historians were less restrained, dismissing Weems’s work as “grotesque and wholly imaginary,” “beneath contempt,” “pernicious drivel,” and a “slush of plagiarism and piety.”⁵⁹

While Simms and other latter-day critics held themselves to comparatively exacting standards of documentary and historical accuracy, Weems was under no such

⁵⁸Carey to Weems quoted in Weems to Carey, Dec. 18, 1809, Weems, 3:428-9; Weems to Carey, Jan 12, 1810, in Weems, 3:7.

⁵⁹See “Preface” in W. Gilmore Simms, The Life of Francis Marion 8th ed. (New York: Geo. F. Coolidge & Brother, 1844), n.p. Simms published a longer and more sympathetic evaluation of Weems’s work in Views and Reviews, Second Series, 1846, reprinted in Leary, Book-Peddling Parson, 153-6. The later critics included Albert J. Beveridge, John Spencer Bassett, William Roscoe Thayer, and Rupert Hughes, whose remarks are quoted in Cunliffe’s “Introduction” in Weems, Life of Washington, xxiv.

burden. Weems's principal goal, his driving passion, was to preach the twin gospels of reading and nationalism. He saw biography, like his book peddling, as a means of inscribing his sentiments about civic and intellectual progress into the American canon. The strategy worked. Despite the numerous and pointed criticisms of Weems, the reading public and scholars alike continued to draw on his accounts of George Washington and Francis Marion. Generations of American schoolchildren have learned the story of Washington and the cherry tree, internalizing Weems's lessons about the virtues of honesty and personal responsibility.

Weems's Life of Marion, which he had worked so hard to persuade Carey to publish, concluded with words that could possibly have been spoken by Marion, but the sentiments allegedly related by the Swamp Fox were vintage, unadulterated Weems. Weems claimed to have visited Marion shortly before the hero's death, and he recounts their conversation. Marion told the Parson that "we fought for self-government; and God hath pleased to give us one, better calculated perhaps to protect our rights, to foster our virtues, to call forth our energies, and to advance our condition nearer to perfection and happiness, than any government that was ever framed under the sun. But what signifies even this government, divine as it is, if it not be known and prized as it deserves?" Weems asked Marion how he thought this could best be done. "Why certainly," replied Marion, "by free schools." When Weems demurred, saying he doubted the legislature would comply, Marion exclaimed, "God preserve our

legislature from such 'penney wit and pound foolishness!' What, sir, keep a nation in ignorance, rather than vote a little of their own money for education!"⁶⁰

Several pages later, "Marion" concluded his long soliloquy: "In short, my dear sir, men will always fight for their government, according to their sense of its value. To value it aright, they must understand it. This they cannot do without education. And as a large portion of the citizens are poor, and can never attain that inestimable blessing, without the aid of government, it is plainly the first duty of government to bestow it upon them. And the more perfect the government, the greater the duty to make it well known."⁶¹

This was Weems's philosophy in a nutshell, and his strategy of using Marion to articulate it worked better than he could have imagined. While Weems believed in what he said, he had come to doubt his own place in history. He recognized that his words would have more credibility, and more lasting effect, coming from the nation's Fathers rather than from the pen of an itinerant book salesman. In 1922, Edgar W. Knight, a professor at the University of North Carolina and one of his era's most productive and respectable historians of education, quoted "Marion's" deathbed testimonial in favor of public education drawing verbatim but without attribution from Weems's Life of Marion:

⁶⁰Brig. Gen. P. Horry and M. L. Weems, The Life of General Francis Marion, a Celebrated Partisan Officer of the Revolutionary War (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1856), 240.

⁶¹Horry and Weems, Life of Marion, 246.

"What! Keep a nation in ignorance rather than vote a little of their own money for education! . . . Men will always fight for their government according to their sense of its value. To value it aright they must understand it. This they cannot do without education. And, as a large portion of the children are poor, and can never attain that inestimable blessing without the aid of government, it is plainly the duty of government to bestow it freely upon them."⁶²

This pronouncement, in Knight's telling, was meant to carry great weight, coming as it seemed to from the eminent revolutionary hero. By having the Swamp Fox articulate these sentiments, by playing the ventriloquist, Weems ensured that his message would have a broad and lasting audience. Weems's genius in his writing, as in his practical labors, lay in his chameleon quality, his ability blend into his surroundings, to vanish behind his message. In Knight's work, as in the myth of Washington and the cherry tree, Weems's disappearance is complete. Only wise old Marion and honest young George remain, with the Parson invisible but still speaking his nationalist gospel.

⁶²Edgar W. Knight, Public Education in the South (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1922), 115.

CHAPTER 3

LETTERS AND THE LAW OF BONDAGE: THE STRUGGLE OVER SLAVE LITERACY

Why w'en I wuz grown up and had a child, I was looking at de Bible one night while all de family had gone to church and de old marster come in and foun' me. He had a headache and come back from church early. 'What are you looking in dat book for?' he says. "Don't you know you'll lose all yer sense and won't know enough to go to de do'." And he threw the book into the fireplace an he struck me with his gol'-headed cane--blim--an' made it ring like it appeared ter me fier blew out uv my eyes. Dere is de mark on my head, now. I 'spect I los' nearly two quarts er blood. It ran on de flo' and over de bed till I fainted erway an' dey had ter sent two miles ter git a doctor to sew up my head.

De nex' mawning I ast my missis, "Miss I wan' ter know wot harm dey is in lookin' et er book? I didn't know dere wuz any harm in lookin' at dem. Marster says if I look et books I won't have any sense. I don't see why someer dem white folks don't lose dere senses. Dere's dese lawyers settin' ober books all day. Why don't dey lose dere senses?" And miss's said, "Why, you couldn't control niggers ef dey could read an' write. Dey could write passes for demselves and go where dey pleased."--And so I reckon dey could. And I said "I like ter look at picters and I allus wanted ter read de Bible." And miss's lafft an' said, "Well, I reckon yo' never will learn. Niggers were never made to read, nohow. Niggers knowledge is too thick ter learn. That is fur white folks. Look at yer hands, so big and strong. Dey were jess made to work for us." And I didn't know any more and thought perhaps dey wuz. I have been down here since and showed her dat freedom has thinned out my knowledge. She said "a real black nigger couldn't learn to read `n write: perhaps a white nigger could learn a little."

-- Jane, an ex-slave, to her employer in 1890¹

¹"Aunt Jane's Story," Bulletin of Atlanta University, March 1890, 3. Jane's metaphor of "thinning" out her knowledge resonates with an image frequently used to



Fig. 2. A female slave from Clarke County,
Georgia, posing with a book, 1853.
Courtesy, Georgia Department of Archives and History

describe the education of blacks; as a Atlanta University broadside put it, "A thoroughly educated class of young people is thus being trained up among the Negroes of the South, and by it the whole mass will eventually be leavened." BAU no. 67, October 1895, 1.

Only after slavery's end was Jane able to continue her education. After the war she found a white teacher from the North, who taught her to read using Webster's blue-backed speller. She paid her tuition by washing for three families. "I wuz an ole woman ter go ter school--nigh forty years ole--but I learned ter read a little, jess enough ter read God's word." Slaves across Georgia and throughout the South saw in the ability to read and write the forbidden fruit of freedom. Many, like Jane, sought to read the Bible. Others used their skills reading and writing as a weapon, invisible and intractable, against their masters.²

Slaveholders' very efforts to withhold literacy from their chattel betrayed their fears of an educated slave force. Every pronouncement against slave literacy underscored to their slaves its usefulness, its power, its desirability. Frederick Douglass recalled his master Hugh Auld's discovery that his wife Sophia was giving Douglass reading lessons: "A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master--to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world," Auld told his wife. "If you teach that nigger . . . how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would become at once unmanageable, and of no value to his master. . . . It would make him discontented and unhappy." Auld's anger was directed at Sophia, but Douglass took his words to heart: "In learning to

²BAU, March 1890, 3.

read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both.”³

In compliance with her husband's wishes, Sophia Auld quit her reading lessons, but Douglass's appetite for learning, once whetted by his introduction to the alphabet, intensified. He set about making friends with white children, and “with their kindly aid . . . I finally succeeded in learning to read.” Knowing he would be suspected of reading if he was absent for too long, he did his errands quickly in order to carve out time to read. When he was about twelve years old, Douglass recalled, he came across a copy of an anti-slavery publication, The Columbian Orator, which he committed to heart. A favorite passage featured a dialogue between a master and slave, in which the slave made intelligent and compelling arguments for his freedom. The publication gave Douglass words to describe his enslavement and helped him pose his own arguments for freedom.⁴

But Douglass discovered the fruit of the tree of knowledge left a bitter aftertaste: “The more I read, the more I came to abhor and detest my enslavers. . . . I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without a remedy.” Cast into a deep depression by his unrequited desire for freedom, Douglass resolved to run away. To

³Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself (Boston, 1845; reprint ed., Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), 58-9.

⁴Douglass, Narrative, 64-66.

ensure a successful escape, he set about learning to write, using as his copy-book the "board fence, brick wall, and pavement" and engaging white boys in writing contests to improve his hand at writing. Using his young master's copy-book, Douglass mastered a fair approximation of the boy's handwriting, thus arming himself with his means of liberation. Years passed before he found the opportunity. He came close enough to escaping at one point that he had already forged free passes, but the plot was aborted and the passes destroyed. When Douglass finally made his break in 1838, he carried a black sailor's protection papers and, dressed as a sailor, arrived in New York City without incident. He married, changed his name to Douglass, and soon moved on to Massachusetts. His master's prediction had come true at last.⁵

The Problem of Slave Literacy

Jane's account of her beating and Douglass's more famous narrative resonate with the experiences of many slaves and masters and suggest a number of themes subsequently explored by historians of slavery. For decades scholars have tried to untangle the Gordian knot of slavery, to make sense of the contradictory implications of the slave's status as property and the recognition by white Southerners that slaves were also human. The internal tensions that the South confronted as a slave society hung largely on this paradox. The question of whether slaves should be taught to read

⁵Douglass, Narrative, 67-71, 118-119, 142-144; Waldo E. Martin, Jr., The Mind of Frederick Douglass (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 7-17; Marion Starling Wilson, The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981), 249-293.

presented a concrete expression of the paradox; those who decided to teach slaves to read felt they had hit upon a concrete solution.⁶

Though antebellum whites were convinced that Africans and their descendants constituted a lower order of humanity, they nonetheless viewed slaves as human. The answer seemed to lie in defining what rights humans possessed fundamentally, despite their temporal status as slaves or free people. Slaveholders were in general agreement that slaves were, not unlike themselves, children of God. A slave's status could in fact be ameliorated, and a master could work to fulfill his or her Christian duty, if slaves were included at God's table. Whites commonly compared blacks to children--dependent, in need of externally imposed supervision and structure, but capable of growth and improvement. The impulse to Christianize slaves, and the sense that their lot could be improved if, like children, their mental faculties were developed, found their expression in the desire to teach slaves to read. Here was a skill that Protestant beliefs held was necessary for salvation, and that cultivated the mind. Teaching reading allowed slaveholders to perform their duty to cultivate what they perceived as their slaves' limited mental capacity. At the same time, biblical instruction fulfilled their duty before God.

⁶Expressions of this paradox are numerous. Historian Melton McLaurin puts it elegantly: "Antebellum southerners viewed their slaves as both chattels and persons, a paradox reflected in the legal systems of the slave states. Southern society insisted that the law uphold the master's property rights, while recognizing that as human beings slaves possessed certain rights, including an inviolable right to life." Melton McLaurin, Celia, A Slave (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 140.

Slaveholders in the American South, however, viewed unauthorized communication among their slaves with considerable nervousness, and they spent a great deal of energy and imagination trying to limit slaves' access to each other and to the printed word. Slaves who knew how to read could not only gain access to information printed by whites, but could communicate with one another outside their masters' knowledge or control. Slaves taught to read the Bible could read newspapers and abolitionist publications as well, and those adept at writing could forge passes. Prohibitions against slave literacy reflected whites' determination to keep slaves separate, to sever the grapevine telegraph that was so effective in conveying information from plantation to plantation.⁷

⁷The classic study of slave education in North America remains Carter G. Woodson, The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861 (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1919; rpt ed., New York: Arno Press, 1968). Charles Colcock Jones, perhaps the first historian of black education in North America, provides a detailed overview of early education in The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States (Savannah: Thomas Purse, 1842). More recently, Janet Duitsman Cornelius has studied the religious imperatives that opened the way for slave education in South Carolina; see "When I Can Read My Title Clear": Literacy, Slavery and Religion in the Antebellum South (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991). Olwyn Mary Blouet has examined similar themes in the Caribbean context, concluding that the education of slaves helped to undermine the slave regime in that region. See her "Slavery and Freedom in the British West Indies: The Role of Education," History of Education Quarterly 30 (Winter 1990): 623-643. Harvey Graff places literacy in the slave South in a global context, focusing on literacy's role in the naked power struggle between masters and slaves. He suggests that the threat it posed to slaveholders' control was more imagined than real: "Slaveholders accepted traditional elite conservative fears of the power of literacy. . . . A population of literate bondsmen could only be threatening, regardless of literacy's actual power for overturning Southern society and power relations." Harvey Graff, The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 362.

Slaves' access to newspapers, the mails, print shops, and above all to abolitionist materials and free passes was perceived as a potential threat to masters' control over their bondsmen. As early as 1770, whites in Georgia were prohibited from teaching slaves to read and write. Increasingly elaborate proscriptions against slave communication were installed by the state legislature and by local governments during the antebellum years. These laws aimed to eliminate the legacies of African forms of communication and to bar slaves' access to the communication systems rapidly developing in the United States. Slaves in Georgia were forbidden to beat drums, to gather at night, or to share medical or herbal knowledge; they could not deliver mail nor, in certain waterways, could they pilot boats.⁸

As slavery became the defining institution of Southern life, the social and legal relationships between masters, slaves, and the state grew complex enough to require a new, more comprehensive statute. In 1829 Georgia enacted the first wholesale revision of its slave code since colonial days. The anti-literacy measures enacted in 1829 stood at the center of slaveowners' ongoing effort to stanch the flow of information among the state's slaves. A half-century of experience pointed to the necessity of controlling black literacy: the persistent problems of runaways, some of whom forged their own

⁸Thomas R. R. Cobb, A Digest of the Statute Laws of the State of Georgia. (Athens: Christy, Kelsea & Burke, 1851), 980. A law passed in 1770 forbade slaves to "teach and instruct another slave in the knowledge of any poisonous root, plant, herb, or other sort of a poison." See Oliver H. Prince, A Digest of the Laws of the State of Georgia (Athens: privately printed), 1837, 779-780. In 1807 Gideon Granger, the Postmaster General of the United States, published a notice calling for local postmasters' contracts, stipulating that "no other than a free white person shall be employed to carry the mails." Public Intelligencer (Savannah), May 30, 1807.

passes; a series of uprisings led by slaves reputed to be literate; and the dissemination of abolitionist literature, the most notorious of which was David Walker's Appeal, published in 1829. A publication written by a black man which called for bloody rebellion, as Walker's pamphlet did, seemed ample evidence that black reading and writing threatened white security and safety. Georgia lawmakers acted promptly to ban Walker's pamphlet and similar publications, and scrambled to fine-tune the state's outdated anti-literacy code.⁹

Control over black reading and writing remained slippery despite the new laws. Anti-literacy statutes were ignored, and even openly defied, by whites who found it morally untenable to keep their bondsmen from reading. Like Douglass's mistress Sophia Auld, many whites felt compelled by their Christian beliefs to teach their slaves to read the Bible. Protestant theology had given birth to mass literacy in Europe by linking the personal search for salvation to the ability to read the Scriptures. Protestant leaders began to teach European peasants to read and eventually expanded their mission to include enslaved Africans in the Americas. Religious groups were organized to disseminate the gospel along with the skills necessary to read and understand it. The largest and most visible of these, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, was founded in England in 1701, aiming to spread the scriptures to the

⁹David Walker, Appeal, in Four Articles. Together with a Preamble to the Colored Citizens of the World. But in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America, ed. Sean Wilentz (Boston, 1829; rev. ed. New York: Hill and Wang, 1995); Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia, 1829 (Milledgeville: Camak & Ragland, 1830), 175.

people of North America--including the "Indians and Negroes." By the late eighteenth century, as the American South emerged as a full-fledged slave society, mainstream Protestant sects sought to strike a balance between teaching slaves the Bible and keeping them subordinate. Slaveholders found themselves in a perplexing and contradictory situation. As religious whites taught free blacks and slaves to read, it quickly became evident that they could not teach slaves to read the scriptures without also imparting a source of independent thought and action, a potential means of gaining freedom.¹⁰

The liberating potential of biblical instruction led to widespread opposition to slave education, though pockets of dissent on the issue remained, particularly among clerics. While precise literacy rates are unavailable, it is clear that slave literacy remained very restricted through much of the South throughout the antebellum era. Most estimates place aggregate slave literacy rates in the late antebellum period between 5 and 10 percent.¹¹

¹⁰Jones, Religious Instruction of the Negroes, 8; Cornelius, When I Can Read, 13. On the doctrine of sola scriptura, see also Ronald D. Zboray, A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 89-92; Kenneth Lockridge, Literacy in Colonial New England: An Enquiry into the Social Context of Literacy in the Early Modern West (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974); Graff, Legacies of Literacy, 10; Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens, The Rise of Literacy and the Common School (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 192.

¹¹Estimates of literacy rates among slaves have generally been in agreement with the 1870 census figure of five percent, though Carter Woodson and, more recently, Janet Duitsman Cornelius have put the number at ten percent. See Woodson, Education of the Negro Prior to 1861, and Cornelius, When I Can Read, 8-9.

Slave Experiences Reading and Writing

Slave literacy rates varied considerably within Georgia, as they did elsewhere in the South. In coastal Georgia, over 70 percent of the total population were slaves throughout the antebellum period. Most slaves in the sea islands had limited contact with whites; they created a distinctive patois of English and West African languages and remained relatively isolated from written language.¹²

Africans sold into North American slavery had a different relationship with written language than did their European enslavers. While post-Reformation Europeans used reading and writing as instruments of commerce and communication as well as for religious purposes, most West Africans had little or no contact with written language. Political life was conducted orally, as were economic transactions. But in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, literate Muslim traders and clerics had stretched down from the Sahara into the riverine communities of the Niger delta, which would become the main source of slaves sold into North American slavery. The flow of West African-born slaves into the United States until 1809, and the survival of Africans up through the end of slavery, meant that despite a steadily Americanizing slave population, features of

¹²On language of the sea islands, see Lorenzo D. Turner, Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1969); Margaret Washington Creel, "A Peculiar People": Slave Religion and Community-Culture Among the Gullahs (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 15-20; J. L. Dillard, Black English: Its History and Usage in the United States (New York: Random House, 1972), 73-228.

West African life survived even into freedom, including literacy among formally educated Muslims.¹³

By the eighteenth century, Europeans relied increasingly on written language, which reinforced and recreated privatistic and hierarchical social structures. Wealth, power, and prestige were increasingly available in the European and Euro-American world only to those with a mastery of written language. Not so in sub-Saharan Africa, where language remained primarily oral, dialogical, and relational.¹⁴

The notion of an independent African intellect, much less Africans who could read their own language, strained the imagination of white Southerners. Arabic literacy seemed outlandish and impossible. While Arabic-literate slaves were rare in the American South, there was in fact an African-born slave called Ben Ali who lived on Sapelo Island, Georgia. This may be the same man known as Bel Ali Mahomet, born in the Timbo, in the highlands of Futa Jalon in West Africa. He maintained a journal in Arabic, which, along with his advanced age, lent him an air of mystery. Ben Ali was bought by Thomas Spalding and brought to Sapelo island, where he married a woman named Fatima, with whom he had twelve children. All but the youngest of Ben

¹³Janet Cornelius writes that "West Africans lived on the 'margins of literacy'; contact with literate Moslem traders and religious leaders and the proximity of Timbuktu, the home of the renowned medieval university of Sankore, permeated West African cultures with an awareness of the written word." Cornelius, When I Can Read My Title Clear, 12.

¹⁴See Lawrence Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 30-32.

Ali's and Fatima's children were reported to be versant not only in English, but in French, some Arabic, and their parents' first language of Fulfulde. Despite his literacy, Mahomet was a trusted slave. During the war of 1812, his master entrusted about eighty slaves to his care, and armed them with muskets to fight off British raids.¹⁵

In 1896 Joel Chandler Harris published The Story of Aaron (So Named): The Son of Ben Ali, a fictionalized account of Ben Ali's story. Like most of Harris's novels, the book is fanciful, filled with animals commenting on human inadequacy and cruelty. Speaking through the voices of animals, Harris throws his words, allowing him to say things he could never have said in his own voice. A horse tells the children

¹⁵On Ben Ali, see Ronald A. T. Judy, (Dis)forming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 209-227, and Allan Austin, African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook (New York, 1984). Austin has compiled a good bibliography of narratives of African Muslims in antebellum America in Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., The Slave's Narrative (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 328-330. See Philip D. Curtin, Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), for other narratives. Michael A. Gomez estimates the number Muslim slaves in America as "thousands, if not tens of thousands" in "Muslims in Early America," ISH 60 (November 1994) 4: 671-710. Ulrich Bonnell Phillips mentions the story of Prince, an African-born slave who wrote a letter in Arabic to the American Consul in Tangier. See American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment, and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1918; reprint, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 428; on Muslims in the antebellum South, see also Michael A. Gomez, Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Charles Joyner, Remember Me: Slave Life in Coastal Georgia (Atlanta, Ga.: Georgia Humanities Council, 1989), 22-25, and Terry Alford, Prince Among Slaves (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977).

of having seen Aaron cuffed and bound; a white pig tells the story of a cruel schoolmaster, whose students in turn "would go out and stone the cows and hogs. They killed a blood cousin of mine."¹⁶

The story proceeds from the familiar Harris formula. On a plantation in middle Georgia, three young children, Sweetest Susan, Buster John, and their black slave playmate, Drusilla, go to visit the mysterious slave named Aaron, a copper-colored man with straight hair, who, when prompted, shares his secrets with the children, including a mirror and a diary written in Arabic, "the talk of Ben Ali."

"You think I'm a nigger, don't you?" He turned to Buster John.

"Of course," said the youngster without hesitation. "What else are you?"

"I'll show you." From his pocket Aaron drew a little package -- something wrapped in soft leather and securely tied. It was a memorandum book. Opening this small book, Aaron held it toward Buster John, saying, "What 's here?"

"It looks like pothooks," replied the boy, frankly.

"Ain't a word in it I can't read," said Aaron. . . . Thereupon Aaron began to read from the book in a strange tongue, the tone of his voice taking on modulations the children had never heard before.¹⁷

The children, skeptical, clamor for explanation, and Aaron continues: "'It's the talk of Ben Ali . . . my daddy. Every word here was put down by him. . . . He was no nigger.'" He was "Arab--man of the desert--slave hunter--all put down here," said Aaron, tapping the little book with his finger." In Harris's account, Aaron's secret book was Ben Ali's diary, which described his life as a desert trader, his contact with

¹⁶Joel Chandler Harris, The Story of Aaron (So Named): The Son of Ben Ali (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1896), 47 (horse) and 144 (pig).

¹⁷Ibid., 11-12.

Senegambians, his participation in the slave trade, and finally his own capture on the Guinea coast. Ben Ali's narrative continues in Virginia, with Ben Ali's marriage and the birth of his children--including "Aaron, So Named." In Harris's account, the ability to read and write lifted Ben Ali and his son from their presumed status as "niggers." Ben Ali's diary also inscribed a separate and secret history--in Harris's telling, a history inscrutable to whites and unknown to all but slaves and white children.¹⁸

A letter to the editors of the Southern Recorder reported as late as 1859 that a ship called the Wanderer, carrying 36 Africans, had been captured in Worth County, Georgia, and detained in Jacksonville, Florida. The Africans, though being held captive, were judged "perfectly happy . . . as contented and free from care as if roaming their native wilds." The writer commented on their intellect: "Some of them are quite smart, and all are quick to learn. At first, they could not speak a word of English . . . several of them, since they have been here, have mastered many words. "Money" and "whiskey" are favorite words with them -- all love money and all appear to love whiskey. They seem to have a knowledge of the value of coins, but none of our paper currency. I gave one an order for something at a store, since which time, all

¹⁸Ibid., 13-14. Historian Janet Cornelius writes that "Africans who were enslaved quickly recognized the value of reading and writing--not only for their practical uses (from the beginning of slavery, slaves used reading and writing skills to run away) but because literacy, especially the ability to write, signified an establishment of the African's human identity to the European world. Narratives written by former slaves in the eighteenth century show how Africans who had gained knowledge of books established their own 'selfhood' by mastering the tools of power in the European world." Cornelius, When I Can Read, 16.

scraps of paper are in great demand. A newspaper was torn into small pieces and carefully put away, they thinking it will answer the same purpose as money. . . . Most of the older ones are quite ingenious, making knives and other things out of iron hoops and sardine boxes.”¹⁹

Georgia planter Charles Colcock Jones, the most careful nineteenth-century student of black education, cited the Bishop of London’s 1727 “Letter to the Masters and Mistresses of Families in the English Plantations abroad; exhorting them to encourage and promote the Instructions of their Negroes in the Christian Faith.” Jones quotes the Bishop’s letter as pointing out the difficulty “that they are utter strangers to our language and we to theirs; and the gift of tongues now being ceased, there is no means left of instructing them in the doctrines of Christian faith. . . . But if I am rightly informed, many of the Negroes who are grown persons when they come over, do of themselves attain so much of our language as enables them to understand and to be understood, in things which concern the ordinary business of life; and they who can go so far, of their own accord, might doubtless be carried much further, if proper methods and endeavors were used to bring them to a complete knowledge of our

¹⁹Southern Recorder (Milledgeville) March 22, 1859. The Atlanta Daily Intelligencer reported that local slaves “treat them with sovereign contempt--walking around them with a decided aristocratic air,” March 9, 1859. The story of the Wanderer is recounted in Tom Henderson Wells, The Slave Ship Wanderer (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1967). Caroline Seabury, a schoolteacher in Columbus, Mississippi, went to see the Africans aboard the Wanderer, whom she wrote were being sold into the interior states. See Suzanne L. Bunkers, ed., The Diary of Caroline Seabury, 1854-1863 (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 55-56.

For more on the Wanderer, see The Wanderer Case: The Speech of the Hon. Henry R. Jackson of Savannah, (Atlanta: E. Holland, 1891).

language.” And, the bishop hoped, they might in turn instruct those of their own language. The children of Africans born in the colonies, the bishop reasoned, “who have never been accustomed to pagan rites and superstitions,” might “easily be trained up, like all other children, to any language whatsoever, and particularly to our own.”²⁰

While farms in middle Georgia tended to be large, slaves had more contact with whites in the interior than those in the coastal islands.²¹ Slaves on inland farms were more likely to have at least second-hand contact with written language, and the presence of even one literate person within a slave community gave all slaves access to written information. As a master from South Carolina’s upcountry wrote, “with us they are neither so numerous, nor kept so entirely separate, but constitute a part of our households, and are daily either with their masters or some members of the white family; from this circumstance they feel themselves more identified with their owners than they can with you.” Relations between masters and slaves were relatively more intimate and fluid in the upcountry than in districts with majority slave populations. As one piedmont planter reported, “we have no special organization for the instruction of the negroes Indeed, there does not exist the same necessity for such

²⁰Jones, Religious Instruction of the Negroes, 17-18.

²¹On regional variation, see Sam Bowers Hilliard, Atlas of Antebellum Southern Agriculture, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 28-34. See also Eugene D. Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 562-5. Genovese writes (563) that the large plantations of the Black Belt probably saw the lowest literacy rates, “for both law and a hostile public opinion operated there with the greatest force and effectiveness.”

organizations in the up-country, where our colored population is comparatively small, as in the low country where your numbers are large."²²

Literacy among slaves and free blacks was highest in the cities. Cities offered comparatively fluid social relations: the presence of free blacks and the demand for skilled slave labor tempered the slave experience. And the presence of newspapers, books, and street signs provided both opportunity and motivation for slaves to learn to read. "It is not unusual to see slaves reading newspapers, and familiar with the current news of the day," a woman visiting Augusta noted in 1860. All the churches in Charleston in the mid-1840s supported Sunday schools for black children.²³

Everywhere slaves looked, they could see the powerful association between reading and writing and freedom. Reading and writing seemed to confer power, status, and control. Slaves saw their masters reading big, serious-looking books. Georgia Baker, for example, knew that "Marse Alec"--Alexander B. Stephens--was an important man, partly because of his reading habits: "On Sundays, whenever Marse Alec was home, he done lots of readin' out of a great big old book. I didn't know what it was, but he was pow'ful busy wid it." Slaves dispatched their masters' letters

²²Proceedings of the Meeting in Charleston, S.C., May 13-15, 1845, on the Religious Instruction of the Negroes, Together With the Report of the Committee, and the Address to the Public (Charleston, S.C.: B. Jenkins, 1845), 21, 24.

²³Lillian Foster, Wayside Glimpses, North and South (New York, 1860), 94, quoted in Richard C. Wade, Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820-1860 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 174; on slavery in cities, see 91, 173-7; on Charleston church schools, see Proceedings of the Meeting in Charleston, S.C., May 13-15, 1845, on the Religious Instruction of the Negroes, Together With the Report of the Committee, and the Address to the Public (Charleston, S.C.: B. Jenkins, 1845), 39.

and collected their mail and newspapers. They saw their mistresses keeping diaries in their leisure hours. And they saw their young masters and mistresses sent to schools where they became distinguished young ladies and gentlemen who commanded admiration and respect. They also heard of blacks up north whose education helped to create and protect their fragile freedom. Learning to read was a defining element of freedom, and the memory of learning to read and write remained important to former slaves, a way of signifying their claim to the individuality, full humanity, and personal agency bestowed by freedom.²⁴

Slave narratives frequently contain accounts of learning to read. These accounts share some common motifs. Many remembered their early introduction to the ABCs by pious mistresses or white playmates, and the use of white children's reading primers--Webster's blue-backed reader. They frequently commented on the need to keep the skill secret. Most held a close association between reading and religion. Those who could read invariably maintained that once the door to education had been opened, it could never be closed. The ability to read was easy to disguise; and once mastered, it could never be taken away.

²⁴George P. Rawick, ed. The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972): Georgia Narratives: 12 (1): 55. On delivery of mail, see Rev. I. E. Lowery, Life on the Old Plantation in Ante-Bellum Days, or, A Story Based on Facts (Columbia, S.C.: State Company Printers, 1911), 99-109. In this memoir by a former slave, "Little Jimmie," a mulatto house slave, had the duty of picking up the mail for his master every Wednesday and Saturday (104). He conveyed other information to the plantation as well: He drove his mistresses to white social gatherings, and with his sharp ears he obtained "considerable advantage . . . in gaining knowledge and information," which he passed on to the other slaves (103).

Despite these unifying themes, slaves' experiences with reading and writing were highly varied. Some slaves found their masters would accommodate their reading efforts, but a good many were whipped, threatened, or even maimed when discovered reading. Others found their masters were simply indifferent. Too, a slave's access to education depended on timing. Those coming of age in the early 1830s, at the time of David Walker's Appeal and Nat Turner's uprising in Southampton, Virginia, found their masters on edge, unsettled by anything that hinted of flight or rebellion. Twenty years later, in the midst of a movement to liberalize anti-literacy laws, many masters were willing to turn a blind eye toward surreptitious reading. Many masters had no fixed policy regarding slave education, but addressed the issue as it arose, calling on common sense and the advice of fellow planters as they confronted the problem. Henry Bland, who lived on a large plantation in middle Georgia, recalled that his master made no effort to teach his slaves anything but manual skills. "If, however, a slave secured a book," Bland said, "Mr. Coxton would help him learn to read it. Above all, religious training was not denied."²⁵

²⁵Slave narratives can give a misleading sense of the extent of slave literacy. As Paul D. Escott notes, a disproportionate number of WPA informants were house servants. They therefore were more likely to have been taught some reading by white children or mistresses. See Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 13. The other major source of first-hand accounts of slavery, published narratives written by freed slaves, can skew our view of the frequency of slave literacy for obvious reasons. On liberalization in the 1850s, see Clarence L. Mohr, On the Threshold of Freedom: Masters and Slaves in Civil War Georgia (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 235-271; Henry Bland narrative in Rawick, ed., American Slave: Ga. Narr. 12 (1): 83.

Through much of the antebellum period, though, most slaves found their masters intransigent on the issue. Slaves, after all, were valued for their labor. Time spent in school, in addition to “unsuited” blacks for slavery, took them away from farming. Hall County native Anderson Furr, when asked if he and his fellow slaves had learned to read and write, gave the obvious response: “Good Lord, Miss! Slave folks warn’t ‘lowed no time for to larn readin’ and writin’. Deir time was all tuk up in de field at wuk.” Georgia Baker, an 87-year-old former slave born on a large plantation in middle Georgia, responded similarly to inquiries about slave education: “No Lord! None of us Niggers never knowed nothin’ ‘bout readin’ and writin’. Dere warn’t no school for Niggers den, and I ain’t never been to school a day in my life. Niggers was more scared of newspapers dan dey is of snakes now, and us never knowed what a Bible was dem days.”²⁶

On plantations where the lash ruled, there was good reason to be afraid of newspapers and other reading material. “Iffen we was caught lookin’ in a book we was treated same as if we had killed somebody,” one former slave remembered. The most brutal masters seem to have favored the removal or crushing of thumbs of slaves caught reading or writing. A number of former slaves recalled that those caught had their thumbs “mashed.” Lewis Favors, born a slave near Greenville in the 1850s, said that slaves on his plantation were all “afraid to even try because they would cut these off,” pointing to his thumb and forefinger. Favors himself had been more fortunate. Sickly

²⁶Rawick, ed., American Slave: Ga. Narr. 12 (1): 349 (A. Furr); 44-45, (G. Baker).

as a child, he became the favored house slave of the plantation mistress, "Widow" Favors. The widow's nieces spent the months prior to emancipation teaching the boy to read and write. Many others paid dearly for their daring. Tom Hawkins recalled that when a nearby slaveowner, Dr. Cannon, "found out dat his carriage driver had larned to read and write whilst he was takin' de doctor's chillun to and f'um school, he had dat Niggers thumbs cut off and put another boy to doin' de drivin' in his place."²⁷

Other masters were even more imaginative in their cruelty: a former slave from Augusta recalled that his brother, a slave who worked at an academy, was taught to read and write by the sympathetic schoolteacher. One night "Marster passed our window and heard him readin'," and the next day tricked the youngster into revealing his skill. "Marster was so mad that he could read and write better than his own boy that he beat him, took him away from the academy, and put him to work in the blacksmith shop. Marster wouldn't let him wear no shoes in the shop 'cause he wanted the hot cinders to fall on his feet to punish him."²⁸

Alec Bostwick, born in Morgan County on the eve of the Civil War, painted a brutal picture of life on his plantation, with an overseer who awakened the slaves with a gun and drove them with a cat o' nine tails. "Dey warn't know schools for de Niggers in dem days," Bostwick remembered. "If a Nigger wuz seed wid a paper, de

²⁷Escott, Slavery Remembered, 40; Rawick, ed., American Slave: Ga. Narr. 12 (1): 323 (L. Favors); *ibid.*, 12: (2), 131 (Hawkins). Escott cites a number of testimonials about crushed thumbs as punishment for reading or being found in the possession of written materials.

²⁸Rawick, ed., American Slave: Ga. Narr. 13 (4): 297.

white folks would pretty nigh knock his head off him.” Nancy Boudry, from Thomson, Georgia, had similar memories. She recalled being stripped down to the waist and whipped by her master, and made to plow and split wood “jus’ like a man.” On Boudry’s farm, slave life had been very restricted. The slaves even “had to ask ‘em to let us go to church. Went to white folks church, ‘tell de black folks got one of dare own. . . . I dunno how to read. Never had no schools at all, didn’t ‘low us to pick up a piece of paper and look at it.” Another slave, who ironically bore the name Jefferson Franklin Henry, similarly recalled that slaves were forbidden even to pick up or carry papers or books: “A slave warn’t ‘lowed to take no book in his hand to larn nothin’; it was agin’ the law to permit slaves to do that sort of thing.” Cutting off the thumbs of violators was certain to emphasize the point.²⁹

Confrontations between master and slaves discovered writing could be fearful and tense, and former slaves bitterly recalled such naked displays of power. Octavia Rogers Albert, born a slave in middle Georgia, related the story of a slave named Stephen in her 1892 book House of Bondage, set in Louisiana. Stephen had copied the free papers of a local free black and determined to run away from his plantation. But a plantation-wide search for contraband led to the discovery of the papers, and “it seemed like the news had gone out like wild-fire through the quarters that passes, free

²⁹Rawick, ed., American Slave: Ga. Narr. 12 (1): 109 (A. Bostwick); 113-14 (N. Boudry). *ibid.*, 12: (2), 185 (J. F. Henry).

papers, and books had been found in 'poor Stephen's house,' and that old master was going to kill him."³⁰

Stephen was summoned to see his master. "As I stepped on the porch of the big house I saw old master sitting in his dining-room with a table before him. On the table were all of my letters, old passes, free papers, newspapers, books, and other papers, and by the side of these old master had a fearful-looking dagger and two army revolvers. 'Ah,' said he, 'you are the one that gives passes to my niggers and makes free papers for those who run away.' And he swore at me. I tried to answer, but he was in such a rage he would hear nothing. I thought he would kill me every minute."³¹

As his master lectured him, Stephen's anxiety worsened. "'An educated nigger is a dangerous thing, and the best place for him is six feet under the ground, buried face foremost,'" his master told him. "'Ah, sir, your end is come, and you will not have use for papers, books, and pens any longer.'" Stephen protested that his former master's children had taught him, that he had only forged the free papers so he could visit his wife and children, that he had never forged papers for anyone else. At last, the master relented. "How that man did not kill me I can't imagine, except that God would not let him," Stephen recalled. Ironically, as punishment Stephen was sold to a

³⁰Octavia V. Rogers Albert, The House of Bondage: Or, Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1890; reprint, Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1972), 110.

³¹*Ibid.*, 111.

nearby storekeeper, who valued Stephen precisely because he was educated. "As I was good at figuring and could read and write, he had me to weigh out things and to wait on many of the customers whenever he needed me."³²

Like Stephen, young slaves sometimes found willing conspirators in their white playmates, who were eager to share what they perhaps considered the drudgery of schoolwork. Washington B. Allen of Columbus recalled that after his South Carolina master died, his son bought all the slaves in the estate. The children of Allen's new master taught him to read and write. Minnie Davis, a slave of the Athens postmaster, recalled that her master's children "were caught teaching my mother to read and write, but they were made to stop." Mose Davis, raised on a large plantation near Perry, tried to persuade his playmate, Manning, to teach him to read, "but Manning always refused." A former slave who grew up in northern Georgia recalled that "we didn't had no schools. Dey wouldn't let de white chillen tell us about books. One day I axed about sumpin' in a book, and one de chillen say, 'Mama tole ne not to learn you nuttin' or she'd whup me.'"³³

Such off-again, on-again access to reading, with its lurching, uneven progress, characterized black education throughout the nineteenth century. Opportunities to read were fleeting, stolen moments; education was acquired in piecemeal fashion--in barn

³²Ibid., 112-113.

³³Rawick, ed., *American Slave: Ga. Narr.* 12 (1): 10 (W. Allen); *ibid.*, 257 (Minnie Davis); *ibid.*, 270 (Mose Davis); *ibid.*, 12 (2): 120 (S. Harris). For other accounts of white children teaching slaves, see *ibid.*, 13 (3): 4 and 13 (4): 143.

lofts, the woods behind the pasture, and kitchen pantries. Like most exercises of freedom within slavery, getting an education was mainly improvised and informal. Many slaves, like Stephen, found their access to reading and writing could change suddenly, with the death of a master, a move to another plantation, or the arrival of a literate slave or a complicitous white.

Knowing how to read suggested new opportunities for slaves, opened new avenues of resistance. Those who could read used the skill in a variety of ways--to raise money, to gather information, to secretly read to others in defiance of plantation policy. In the period before her young masters were caught teaching her to read, Minnie Davis's mother learned enough to continue on her own. She sought to capitalize on the ability by advertising liquor for sale; at one point, her daughter recalled, she was threatened with a whipping by the town marshal for "writing letters, asking people to buy whiskey from her"--but her owner would not let the marshal touch her.³⁴

Forgery offered another means of raising money. Mose Davis recalled that his cousin was taught to read and write, and had "forged Colonel Davis' name to a check and drew the money from the bank before the hand writing was discovered." He was punished with a "sound whipping and assigned to hard labor." In 1828, a slave named Jerry was arrested for forging a due bill on the Savannah firm of Chichester and Johnson. He received seventy-eight lashes and a short jail term, and was made to stand

³⁴Rawick, ed., American Slave: Ga. Narr. 12 (1): 257.

in a pillory built especially for his punishment. A Savannah newspaper pointed to Jerry's forgery as an example of the evils resulting from the efforts of "self-styled philanthropists" to "attempt to instruct and enlighten a class, whose situation can never be elevated in society, and amongst whom 'ignorance is emphatically bliss.'" Others took a more direct approach to raising funds, writing letters to abolitionists and running advertisements in northern newspapers, seeking money with which to buy their freedom. An African-born slave in Mississippi won widespread support for his and his family's freedom after he wrote a letter in Arabic to the United States consul in Tangiers.³⁵

The overwhelming majority of slaves never learned to read, and most never even learned the alphabet. The shame and defeat of their enforced illiteracy remained with many former slaves--or else they felt compelled, even a half-century later, to continue the protective charade of ignorance first learned as children. Callie Elder, almost eighty, told her white interviewer about growing up on the plantation of Billy Neal, near Rome. "Not a Nigger could read or write on Marse Billy's plantation. Dey was all too dumb to larn. . . . Jus' to tell the truth dem Niggers on our place was so dumb dey didn't even take in 'bout no North. Dey didn't even know what de war was

³⁵Rawick, ed., American Slave: Ga. Narr. 12 (1): 270 (Mose Davis); Savannah Republican, July 22, 1828, and Southern Recorder (Milledgeville), August 2, 1828 (Jerry). James R. Starkey wrote a series of letters in the late 1840s to the Rev. William McLain and published appeals for funding in a New York paper, and succeeded in raising enough money to buy his freedom. See John W. Blassingame, ed., Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, and Autobiographies (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 82. The story of the Mississippi slave is recounted in U. B. Phillips, American Negro Slavery, 428-9.

'bout 'til it was all over." Interestingly, Elders noted that none of these "dumb" slaves "ever runned away to the North. Dey was too busy runnin' off to de woods."³⁶

The diarist Fanny Kemble found "the science of reading" to be more common among slaves than she had imagined. A cooper named London "made an earnest petition" for her to send him Bibles and prayer books, but he refused to admit how he had learned to read. Kemble's inquiries about slaves' ability to read were met with "considerable reticence." After her arrival in Georgia, slaves were at first unwilling to trust her; instead she found "a reluctant acknowledgment of ignorance, which, however, did not always convince me of the fact." As time went by, though, she gained some trust, and eventually she was approached by a young house slave, a waiter named Aleck, for reading lessons. "I told him I would think about it. I mean to do it. I will do it," she resolved, despite the law. At any rate, she shrewdly reasoned, because she was a femme couverte, a married woman, her husband would bear the penalty for her actions. She would keep her actions secret, hoping that by the time her husband found out, "the lad may have learned his letters." Kemble hated the loneliness, discomfort, and cruelty of plantation life. But realizing that "you are absolute on your own plantation," she did what she could to turn her isolation and dominion to her advantage. If other masters could maim and brand their slaves without

³⁶Rawick, ed., American Slave: Ga. Narr. 12 (1): 310-311 (C. Elder).

interference, Kemble reasoned, she could safely take the liberty of teaching the boy the ABCs.³⁷

Kemble wondered if perhaps the "mere possession of the holy books" was thought to bring salvation to those unable to read them. Books, especially Bibles, did seem to hold a special power, a special authority, in slaves' lives. Family Bibles were used to record family names and birth and death dates of both slaves and whites. A midwife or master would record a slave child's name and birth date in the Bible, which served as legal proof of age if the child was put up for sale. For black families, the inscription of the names and dates of family members in the Bible lent credibility to information that was often incomplete and uncertain. Catherine Beale, sold as a child to a Twiggs County farmer, was uncertain of her age, but throughout her life she carefully stored a letter which recorded her approximate age. She explained that "Niggers never did know how old they were." This information, when written in the front and back pages of the Bible, was unimpeachable. "The white fokes put the names down in a big Bible and kept up with it but the Niggers didn't mind about it." Alice Bradley told an interviewer that her mother had four children, including herself, during and after the war. "I think dat las' one wuz me, but I ain't sho'," she admitted. But subsequent family dates had been carefully recorded: "My pa's name wuz Jim Hill, and my ma's name wuz Ca'line Hill. Both of 'em is daid now. Pa died October 12,

³⁷Frances Anne Kemble, Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation in 1838-1839, (New York: Longman, Roberts and Green, 1863; reprint, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 193, 271, 272.

1896 and wuz 88 years old. Ma died November 20, 1900; she wuz 80 years old. I knows dem years is right 'cause I got 'em from dat old fambly Bible so I kin get 'em jus' right."³⁸

Bradley apparently never learned to read English, but she won widespread respect among both races for her skills reading cards. Since she was a little girl, she had liked to "run de cyards." She had begun using "old wore out cyards, dat had been th'owed away, 'cause I could see things in 'em." Whites relied on her skills as well as blacks, she claimed: "I 'member one time when I wuz small and didn't know so good what de cyards wuz tellin' me, dat a rich man, one of the riches' in Wilkes County, wuz at our place, I tole 'im de cyards when I run 'em." The cards told her "sompin' wuz goin' to happen on his place, dat two colored mens would be tangled up wid." Sure enough, "two colored mens sot fire to his barns and burned up all his horses and mules. . . . Dey ketched the mens, and dey served time for what dey done." Perhaps Bradley, as a small girl, had overheard of the impending insurrection and let it slip to the visiting white man--and had concocted the story of reading the cards to appease her own conscience over the fate of the men and to protect herself against recrimination in the slave quarters. Over time, her reputation grew: "I 'members one white lady way

³⁸Kemble, Journal of a Residence, 193; bible inscriptions as legal record in Blassingame, ed., Slave Testimony, 580; Catherine Beale interview in Macon Telegraph, February 10, 1929, reprinted in Blassingame, Slave Testimony, 574; Alice Bradley narrative in Rawick, ed., American Slave: Ga. Narr. 12 (1): 119 (C. Elder).

out in Alabama sont a note axin' me to run de cyards for her. I runned 'em and got one of my friends to write her what I read."³⁹

Other former slaves, though unable to read English, nonetheless demonstrated extraordinary abilities to read and write mysterious "spirit-directed" language--the literary equivalent of speaking in tongues. The interviewer of Mary Gaddy noted that while Gaddy could not write English, she had long experienced "visitations of the spirit" which "impel her to rise up and write in an unknown hand." During her interview in the 1930s, Gaddy produced eight pages of writing which bore "a marked resemblance to crude shorthand notes," which she was able to "cipher" when "the spirit is upon her." But "when the spirit eases off," her interviewer noted, "she again becomes totally ignorant of the significance of that mysterious half of her spirit-directed writings." Gaddy's abilities, like those of Alice Bradley, attest to the talismanic significance of written language, a significance which went well beyond its ordinary temporal functions.⁴⁰

³⁹See Rawick, ed., American Slave: Ga. Narr. 12 (1): 120-121. Jon Butler notes that belief in magic, fortune-telling, and folk remedies was widespread in antebellum America, among whites as well as slaves. See Jon Butler, Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 228-252. The syncretism between African and American religious belief worked both ways, Butler argues: "Blacks incorporated African elements into a Christian structure that had itself been reinterpreted first in terms of the slave experience, then in terms of African heritage" (252).

⁴⁰Rawick, ed., American Slave: Ga. Narr., 12: (2), 19.

Masters Confront the Problems of Slave Literacy

Slaveowners frequently had to relinquish control over their workforce in order to conduct their affairs. Every independent slave action, though, undermined the compartmentalization of slaves necessary to ensure the safety of masters and their control over their slaves. While religious convictions led some masters to educate their slaves, others found withholding literacy impractical, knowing that slaves who were able to read and write could help them conduct business more efficiently. Masters had to fashion their slaves into productive workers while withholding any skills that might assist a slave's quest for freedom. Masters struggled with the tension between keeping slaves isolated and dependent on the one hand, and ensuring their utility and knowledgeability on the other.

Some masters, like Virginia planter John H. Cocke, relied heavily on literate slaves to keep distant plantations in order. Two trusted slaves, George and Lucy Skipwith, wrote their master regularly, keeping him abreast of plantation news: progress building fences, problems managing other slaves, crop and weather reports, sick or disabled animals. After Cocke complained of not hearing news in 1847, George Skipwith felt obligated to write that "i am sorry that you complain of not hearing from me once a month. the fault must be in the male for i have wrote to you every munth sense i wrote my first letter." Skipwith himself made a similar complaint to his master several years later: "I have written to you every two weeks since you

wrote me. . . . I do not know whither you received my letters or not. I have not heard from you but twice since mr Perkins went away."⁴¹

Letter writing also allowed slaves to maintain affective ties with absent masters, as it did between Ben, a slave whose young master left home for school in Savannah: "My dear Master--I hope you are doing well. . . . Your horse is very fat. I always feed him every night and morning. . . . be well & hearty. Has your room got a fire place? I hope so, your boy Ben."⁴²

Southern legislatures enacted a variety of measures to control the nature and extent of slaves' contact with one another. Pass laws enforced by patrollers (or "paterollers"), anti-literacy laws, and injunctions against drumming, nocturnal meetings, and sharing folk knowledge became the stock-in-trade of the slave South. Each of these features of the evolving slave code were designed to cut off lines of communication among slaves.

Slaves in Georgia were required as early as 1765 to carry "a ticket or letter, or other token" which would convince patrollers of the "reasonableness of their absence"

⁴¹George Skipwith to John Hartwell Cocke, November 18, 1847; Skipwith to Cocke, November 10, 1850; both reprinted in Blassingame, ed., Slave Testimony, 69, 72. Special skills could be simple and of little threat to a master's control, but they were significant in the memories of ex-slaves. James Bolton, a former slave from a plantation in Oglethorpe County, recalled that his "Mistess done learned the cook to count the clock," and viewed that skill as an unusual and desirable privilege. See Rawick, ed., American Slave: Ga. Narr. 12 (1): 97.

⁴²Ben to John Kell, 1838, reprinted in Mills Lane, The People of Georgia: An Illustrated Social History (Savannah: Beehive Press, 1975), 141. On use of letter writing to maintain affective ties, see Zboray, A Fictive People, 112-113.

from their master's plantation. In 1770 the required token was refined into a "ticket signed or subscribed" by the master. Such a pass could be forged by any slave able to write, thus requiring the restriction of literacy. The 1770 law provided that anyone who taught, or who caused "any slave or slaves to be taught to write or read writing, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe in any manner of writing" would face a fine of twenty pounds sterling.⁴³

Planters conceded a certain amount of freedom--allowing slaves to visit spouses on nearby plantations, for example--but sought at every turn to control the flow of information among slaves. Masters or overseers who allowed slaves to "beat drums, blow horns, or other loud instruments" or who countenanced "any public meeting, or feasting of strange slaves" on their plantations were subject to steep fines. Slaves were also prohibited from teaching one another folk medicine or practicing medicine except in the presence of a white person.⁴⁴

Whites viewed pass laws as a measure that would not only control slaves' movements, but ensure the property rights they held in slaves. Slaves leaving their plantation without a pass were subject to being stolen, beaten, or whipped; a pass signed by a master was a voucher of protection. The Georgia Supreme Court made this

⁴³See Prince, Digest, 769, 774-75; Cobb, Digest, 980.

⁴⁴Cobb, Digest, 980 (drums and feasting); Prince, Digest, 779-780 (medicine). In spite of regulations against practicing medicine, slaves apparently were not afraid to show their skills. Thomas Charlton hoped the medical knowledge of his runaway slave, Isaac, would help identify him: "having been owned by a Physician [he] talks much of his knowledge of medicine." Public Intelligencer (Savannah) August 21, 1807.

protection explicit in an 1849 ruling. The burden to see that slaves obeyed the pass laws fell on whites, the Court ruled. "It is the right of the slave, founded in his character as a sentient human creature, and in the obligations of humanity, when leaving his master's protection, with his consent, to have the protection which the permit affords against punishment." While a pass system enforced by patrollers "originates in the necessity of a vigilant police," passes also afforded slaves protection against patrollers, whose "necessarily stringent" enforcement of the law "operate[s] humanely and beneficially for the slave, as well as the master, and the whole body of the community."⁴⁵

The law required passes "especially on Saturday nights, Sundays, or other holy-days," according to the 1770 law, a stipulation which reflected white acceptance of a degree of black autonomy during these periods. The law also revealed, however, white discomfort at the prospect of slaves roaming the backcountry in the dark of night. That passes were required especially on Saturday nights and Sundays also implies that signing passes for routine trips off the plantation during weekday working hours was impractical for planters and slaves, an impediment to the flow of work.⁴⁶

⁴⁵Macon & Western Railroad Company *vs.* Philip S. Holt, 8 Ga. 159 (1849). Some blacks were exempted from the pass system; for example, in 1833 a private bill was passed freeing Henry Adams, a black preacher, from the pass requirement. See Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia, 1833, (Milledgeville: Polhill & Fort, 1834).

⁴⁶Cobb, Digest, 980.

Slaves, particularly on small farms that offered fewer options for companionship, pushed for visiting privileges. Masters, understanding that a "slack halter was preferable to an empty one," commonly issued passes allowing slaves to visit neighboring farms. They knew Saturday nights, traditionally the time for visiting friends and relatives nearby, made a good time for escape; slaves on the roads were a common sight on Saturday nights, and runaways knew they might not be missed until the following day. One Saturday night in the spring of 1832, a slave named Nathan fled Zachariah Bias's plantation near Columbus. His master reported in the paper that "he can write, and will probably have a pass." He would probably change his name, his master reasoned, and strike out for a distant state. Another slave, Jim Darby, persuaded an Irish railroad worker to write a pass on his behalf.⁴⁷

A mastery of English could aid a runaway's escape in a variety of ways. Like Frederick Douglass, or the slave Stephen described by Octavia Rogers Albert, those who could write could write their own free passes. Clearly spoken English could help a runaway pass for a free educated black. Those who could read found helpful information in newspapers and circulars--advertisements for their own capture, for example. But a facility with English could also be used to identify a runaway. Abandoned masters often identified runaways by their speech as well as by their skin

⁴⁷Columbus Enquirer, April 14, 1832 (Nathan); Joseph P. Reidy, From Slavery to Agrarian Capitalism in the Cotton Plantation South: Central Georgia, 1800-1880 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 26 (Jim Darby). Reidy also cites the case of a literate runaway named Daniel who forged a pass (Georgia Messenger, August 4, 1836).

color, dress, or height. In 1807 John Jones, a slaveowner in Montgomery County, Georgia, advertised the disappearance of Titus, whom he described as "stout made, talks good English," and Newry, who was "not so large, though talks equally as well." Isaac, the slave of Thomas Carlton, was described as speaking "bad English," but his master warned that he told "an artful and plausible story." And Benjamin White, a Milledgeville planter, offered twenty dollars for the return of Giles, who "moves briskly, affects the use of elegant language, and has a small scar on the lower lip."⁴⁸

Some slaves unable to write but determined to escape their bondage contrived ingenious solutions. In 1848, William and Mary Craft stole away from Macon, Georgia, embarking on a hair-raising escape to the North. Mary, a very light-skinned woman, disguised herself as the male master of her husband William. They cropped her hair, and she donned a man's trousers and coat, a top hat, and a poultice and a pair of dark glasses to cover her fair face. Neither Mary nor William knew how to write. A three-day pass from their masters would buy them time to travel north without being missed, but Ellen faced the vexing expectation of having to sign hotel registers and the custom-house book in Charleston, where the couple planned to book passage north.

⁴⁸Public Intelligencer (Savannah), May 30, 1807 (Jones advertisement); Public Intelligencer (Savannah) August 21, 1807 (Carlton ad); Southern Recorder, August 1, 1836 (Benjamin White ad). Descriptions of runaways' speaking habits generally described either their facility with English, like Jones's and Carlton's advertisements, or a slave's manner of speaking, as did the notice posted by W. H. Hughes in his search for his slaves Sandy and Sarah, a husband and wife: Sandy had a "long head, good teeth, [is] very polite spoken, and some of his fingers are off at the joint." Columbus Daily Sun, August 23, 1853.

Ingeniously, she thought to bind her arm in a sling, which she hoped would readily explain her inability to sign her name.⁴⁹

In fact, the Charleston Custom House almost proved the Crafts' undoing. Ellen, successfully disguised as a white man, was nonetheless unable to persuade the customs agent to sign her name in the register. Fortunately a convivial military officer from Savannah, his perceptions apparently aided by brandy, stepped in to vouch for the lame master and his slave. "I know them like a book," the officer swore, and proceeded to register their names.⁵⁰

In four days, the Crafts managed to travel from Macon to Philadelphia, and moved on to Boston into the refuge of the abolitionist community. When the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law two years later once again jeopardized their freedom, they moved to England, where they lived until after the Civil War. The Crafts returned home to Georgia in the 1870s, purchased a plantation near Savannah, and founded a freedmen's school.⁵¹

⁴⁹Willam Craft and Ellen Craft, Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom, or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery, (London: William Tweedie, 1860; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1969), 29-32, 34.

⁵⁰Ibid., 56-7.

⁵¹Ibid., xv-xviii.

Rebellion, Control, and Dissent

Southern whites saw their slaves carve out a degree of independence even within their bondage, and they read anxiously of slave rebellions in distant parts. They read about the leaders of these uprisings, and wondered if their own slaves were capable of or predisposed toward such action. They remembered the timely discovery of Gabriel's planned insurrection outside of Richmond at the turn of the century. Gabriel's narrowly aborted uprising alerted local whites to the dangers of black education; many of the conspirators, like Gabriel, were able to read. Shortly after the affair, a Richmond school for freedmen was burned. In the years that followed, the Virginia legislature took further action to protect the commonwealth's bondsmen from unhealthy influences. In 1819, several days before it chartered the University of Virginia, the legislature barred free blacks who had left the state in search of education from re-entering the state.⁵²

Southern whites were intensely hostile to efforts by northern abolitionists to foment or support such rebellions. Abolitionist efforts to publicize and gain support for their movement sensitized slaveowners to the danger of literacy among slaves. It was obvious to Southern whites that a slave who could read could be led astray by antislavery publications and persuaded to strike a blow for freedom. Following the Gabriel affair, white Charlestonians reacted to a Methodist anti-slavery pronouncement

⁵²On Gabriel, see Douglas R. Egerton, Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 20, 57, 70, 165; on rebellions generally, see Herbert Aptheker, American Negro Slave Revolts (New York: International Publishers, 1943; reprint, 1963).

with characteristic fury, burning the directive and nearly drowning a preacher. Slaveholders across the South were chilled in particular by memories of one free black man of "daring and profligate" disposition. Denmark Vesey, a widely read man who drew his message of liberation from the Scriptures, mounted another narrowly squelched rebellion in South Carolina in the early 1820s. Everywhere, it seemed, slaveholders were under siege, and literate slaves and the abolitionist publications which spurred them on seemed the common denominator of every revolt.⁵³

As slaveholders and legislatures recalled these and other close calls with rebellious slaves, they came to regard restricting slaves' access to information as a critical ingredient of their control. Laws that had been on the books for years but were easy to ignore came to be regarded more seriously after the late 1820s, as fear of rebellion mounted, as northern anti-slavery literature was published and circulated, as a small class of free blacks emerged within the Southern states, and as slaves learned to turn written language into an instrument of freedom. Anti-literacy laws, refined in the late 1820s and early 1830s, were part of an increasingly complex and comprehensive slave code which aimed to cut off any unauthorized communication between slaves, or between slaves and their would-be liberators. Abolitionist efforts to reach out to Southern slaves heated up in the 1820s, creating a climate of ruthlessly enforced unanimity among white Southerners on the issue of slavery. Reminders of the danger

⁵³See Cornelius, When I Can Read, 26-27, 29-31; William W. Freehling, Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816-1836 (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 54-61.

of black education had cropped up from time to time in previous years, but two events around 1830 sent slaveholders, newspaper editors, and the state legislature into a frenzy: the publication in the fall of 1829 of David Walker's Appeal, and Nat Turner's bloody uprising in Southampton, Virginia, in August 1831. Walker called for bloody revolt, and Turner, alleged to be literate, seemed to put Walker's call into action.

David Walker was born in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1785, the son of a free black woman and her enslaved husband. Walker left North Carolina for Philadelphia, then on to Boston in 1825, where he opened a clothing shop and became an agent for a black newspaper, the Freedom's Journal, and its successor, The Rights of All. Walker found his political voice as an outspoken member of the anti-colonizationist General Colored Association of Massachusetts, and in September 1829, he published the first of three editions of his famous pamphlet, known as Walker's Appeal. The Appeal advocated violent and immediate action: "Let twelve good black men get armed for battle and they will kill and put to flight fifty whites. . . . If you commence, make sure work; don't trifle, for they will not trifle with you. . . . Kill or be killed," he counseled. Walker's ascendancy as an anti-slavery leader was cut short when he was found dead on the floor of his print shop the following June, amid rumors that Southern planters had offered \$3000 for his murder.⁵⁴

⁵⁴Walker, Appeal ed. Wilentz, 25. See Joseph Cephas Carroll, Slave Insurrection in the United States, 1800-1865 (Boston: Chapman and Grimes, 1938; reprint, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973), 124; Sterling Stuckey, The Ideological Origins of Black Nationalism, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 8-13; John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan, eds., The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, Volume 5 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press,

Before his death, Walker managed to distribute his appeal into a number of Southern cities, despite the best efforts of state legislators and local authorities. Copies of the Appeal made it as far South as Louisiana; a North Carolina journalist reported the discovery of several copies; and Walker himself distributed thirty copies of the pamphlet in Richmond in January of 1830. Twenty were later seized, but the other ten copies went missing.⁵⁵

At least seventy copies of Walker's pamphlet found their way to Georgia. Fifty were shipped from Boston to a black preacher in Savannah in December 1829, but were intercepted by the local police, "adjudged to be of insurrectionary character," and turned over to the Governor's office in Milledgeville. The pamphlet arrived in the state capital on the last day of the 1829 session of the general assembly, where it was eagerly read and promptly outlawed.⁵⁶

The following month, Elijah H. Burritt, the New England-born publisher of the Milledgeville Statesman and Patriot, was discovered in possession of twenty copies of the pamphlet, as well as a letter from David Walker that seemed to implicate Burritt as an anti-slavery ally. Despite his abolitionist ties, Burritt insisted there had been a mix-

1992), 69. Opposition to Walker and his Appeal was not limited to the South. In a passage widely reprinted by Southern newspaper editors, the Boston Centinel denounced Walker's pamphlet as "one of the most wicked and inflammatory productions that ever issued from the press." See Boston Centinel article reprinted in Georgia Messenger (Macon), March 13, 1830.

⁵⁵Ibid., 126-7.

⁵⁶Statesman and Patriot, (Milledgeville) January 2, 1830, reprinted in Southern Recorder, August 28, 1830.

up. He swore that he had written to Walker in his role as a newspaper editor, ordering "one, or more copies" of the document, which he felt was "likely to become a theme of considerable discussion and serious interest" in the state. He produced a notarized copy of his letter in his defense, but was arrested. Released on a technicality, Burritt fled the state permanently; the local sheriff sold his possessions.⁵⁷

Through the summer of 1830, Burritt's wife, Ann, published countless open letters in the Milledgeville press in an effort to exonerate her husband. Her husband had not read Walker's pamphlet before ordering it, she argued, and had little idea of its contents. The law forbidding the importation of the pamphlet had not yet been passed when he wrote to Walker. Burritt had been completely above-board in ordering the pamphlets, even discussing the propriety of his actions with a state senator. Finally, Ann Burritt pointed to the perfidy of her husband's business partner, who, it seems, had called in the authorities in order to sabotage Burritt's interest in their newspaper

⁵⁷E. H. Burritt to David Walker, December 21, 1829, reprinted in the Southern Recorder, July 31, 1830. (Emphasis in original.) On the circulation of Walker's Appeal see Peter P. Hinks, To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 116-173; Glenn Maurice McNair, "The Elijah Burritt Affair: David Walker's Appeal and Partisan Journalism in Antebellum Georgia" Georgia Historical Quarterly (forthcoming), and James C. Bonner, Milledgeville: Georgia's Antebellum Capital (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978), 60. Upon his return to Connecticut, Burritt wrote an astronomy textbook that eventually became a national bestseller; he died in 1838 but by 1876 over 300,000 copies were in print. His brother Elihu Burritt was one of the nation's leading peace activists. See Elijah H. Burritt, The Geography of the Heavens, and Class-book of Astronomy: Accompanied by a Celestial Atlas (New York: Mason Brothers, 1833, reprint, 1856). On Elihu Burritt, see Merle Curti, The Learned Blacksmith: The Letters and Journals of Elihu Burritt (New York: Wilson-Erickson, 1937), and Ronald G. Walters, American Reformers, 1815-1860 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 117-120.

enterprise. Ann Burritt's appeals for her husband's safety and reputation were passionate and forceful. "I saw him torn from me and my helpless babes, and hunted like a beast of prey," she lamented. "All this, with the thousand vituperous calumnies, and unmerited reproaches which have been wafted upon every breeze, added to what I have since suffered from the tempestuous buffetings of an unceasing storm that would exceed the power of language to portray."⁵⁸

Burritt's arrest and flight gripped middle Georgia--or at least the editorial pages of middle Georgia--for most of 1830. Ann Burritt, a native-born Georgian, saw the irony of impinging white freedom in the name of maintaining control over the state's slaves. Burritt's treacherous partner, Mr. Polhill, "tries to make it a hanging matter, that Mr. Burritt should have written to the 'infamous negro,'" Ann Burritt wrote. "Mr. Burritt's object was to get the book--He wrote to the reputed publisher for it. This is his usual method of obtaining books. . . . America will cease to be a free country when a white man is deprived the liberty of purchasing a book where and of whom he please. It will be a new epoch in her history, when her penal code shall take a man's life for loaning a book to his neighbor!" Despite her appeals, the law remained on the books, and her husband remained outside of Georgia.⁵⁹

Forty years later, Charles Wallace Howard, a white planter from Rome and himself a newspaper editor, remembered the Walker affair as a turning point in slave

⁵⁸Southern Recorder, July 31, 1830.

⁵⁹Southern Recorder, October 9, 1830.

relations in Georgia. Appearing before a congressional committee during Reconstruction, Howard cast himself as a racial moderate with impeccable paternalist credentials. He had grown up among slaves, he said, and his "old nurse loved me and attended to me as a mother." In 1829 Howard was a college student in Athens and the superintendent of a Sunday school for slaves. Until Walker's Appeal, as Howard recalled, blacks had been allowed to read, but white tolerance for black literacy ended abruptly with the introduction of the incendiary material. The pamphlets "circulated through the post-office," causing "a very great excitement in the State," and Howard's Sunday school was soon after threatened by a band of Athens men. His teachers armed themselves to defend what Howard mistakenly recalled was then a legal right, "the right to teach the negroes to read."⁶⁰

Howard's mistaken recollection of the anti-literacy law prior to the Walker affair was undoubtedly inspired by his desire to put a humane spin on the institution for his Reconstruction inquisitors. But it is just as likely that the 1770 statute, though still in force, had grown so completely neglected in the fifty years since its enactment that Howard was oblivious to the illegality of teaching slaves to read. Howard may have been confused on the point of law, but he was certain that Walker's Appeal had led to the 1829 anti-literacy statute.

⁶⁰Report of the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States (The Ku-Klux Conspiracy), Georgia, Part II (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 836.

His memory on that point was accurate. The very day the Walker pamphlet arrived in the state capital from Savannah, a committee went to work revising Georgia's slave code. The committee reporting on the 1829 slave bill, headed by William Ezzard of Dekalb County, made explicit the nature of white anxiety about interaction among slaves. The committee urged the legislature to recognize "that the safety of the good people of this state, as well as the real welfare of the slave, requires that the means of intercourse and correspondence between our slaves in different sections of the state should be rendered as limited as possible." Although "due regard" to the improvement of slaves' morals required white Georgians to "tolerate the human and philanthropic in teaching the slaves to read print," in order that slaves could learn the scriptures, Ezzard argued that "it is impolitic that slaves and free persons of color should be allowed to acquire the art of communicating by manuscript." And while the committee agreed that no harm might come of "slaves, &c." performing "laborious and menial duties in printing offices," it warned that if blacks were permitted to "learn the use of types, communications between them may be greatly facilitated." The knowledge of publishing, "possessed by one or more of daring and profligate dispositions," as Walker's case demonstrated, "may lead to deplorable consequences."⁶¹

⁶¹Journal of the Senate of the State of Georgia, 1829, p. 120. See also W. McDowell Rogers, "Free Negro Legislation in Georgia Before 1865," GHQ 16 (March 1932): 30-31 (reprinted in Paul Finkelman, ed., Race, Law, and American History, 1700-1900, vol. 2, Race and Law Before Emancipation, (New York: Garland, 1992), 421-431.

The law also recognized that the presence of literate free blacks amid an unlettered slave population could pose a threat. Following the Ezzard committee's recommendations, the legislature passed a law providing that any black person, free or slave, found teaching any "slave, negro, or free person of color to read or write either written or printed characters," would face a fine or a whipping. Whites guilty of the same crime could be fined up to five hundred dollars and thrown in jail. The 1829 act also outlawed the use of slaves and free blacks in "the setting of types in any printing office" in Georgia. Printers found in violation of the law were subject to civil suit, and could be made to forfeit ten dollars per day for each slave or free person of color working in their shop. The penalty had the dual effect of keeping slaves and free blacks away from printed material, and of protecting the labor of white pressmen.⁶²

Shutting down contact among free and enslaved blacks posed an especially difficult problem in cities, particularly port cities. Laws passed at the beginning of the century had begun the effort to isolate city slaves. An 1806 ordinance forbade slaves from skippering boats between Augusta and Savannah, which not only protected the economic interests of white captains but also restricted unsupervised slave movement--especially in ocean waters and port cities, with their constant flow of free black sailors. Georgia's 1829 code made it illegal for free persons of color, employed aboard ships as mariners or stewards, to have any communication with "the colored people of this State." Black sailors were quarantined aboard ship for forty days; those who had "any

⁶²Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia, 1829, (Milledgeville: Camak & Ragland, 1830), 171, 175.

communication with any person of color,” and those who came ashore, were obliged to remain in jail at the captain’s expense until the ship sailed. Local blacks, slave or free, were prohibited from boarding ships. Blacks employed on steamboats and war vessels were exempted from the law, as were American Indians, “free Moors, Lascars, or other colored subjects of the countries beyond the Cape of Good Hope.” The 1829 law aimed literally to quarantine the state’s slaves from any contact with the greater world. By shutting off every conceivable channel of communication, Georgia planters hoped to reassert control over their human property, which seemed threatened from within and without.⁶³

Anti-literacy statutes were enacted or refined by legislatures across the South in the period following Walker’s Appeal. Louisiana, in 1830, enacted a slave code which stated “‘that all persons who teach, or permit or cause to be taught” reading and writing would spend between one and twelve months in prison. The same year North Carolina’s legislature “forbade teaching or giving books to slaves . . . since such teaching `has a tendency to excite dissatisfaction in their minds and produce insurrection.’” Virginia “provided penalties for whites who assembled with Negroes to

⁶³Augustin Smith Clayton, A Compilation of the Laws of the State of Georgia, 1800-1810 (Augusta: Adams and Ducykinck) 1813, 332-33 (1806 boating law). On quarantining of black sailors, see Cobb, Digest, 999-1000, and Southern Recorder, January 16, 1830. For more on efforts to eliminate contact between free black sailors and slaves in port cities, see Freehling, Prelude to Civil War, 111-116. See also Julius Sherrard Scott, “The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Era of the Haitian Revolution,” Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1986, on the circulation of information among propertyless free blacks in the late eighteenth-century Caribbean.

teach reading or writing, or who taught any slave for pay." Alabama followed in 1832; the South Carolina law, passed in 1834, was the most sweeping in the region.⁶⁴

⁶⁴Cornelius, When I Can Read, 32-33. Cornelius writes that while repressive codes are not uncommon among slave societies, what set the American South apart in the period from 1829 to 1834 "was the stress on religion and literacy as a major cause for the revolts." Before the Civil War, every Southern state except Tennessee legally forbade the education of slaves, but Cornelius argues that the sweeping extent of the anti-literacy laws has been exaggerated: "Laws banning the teaching of slaves were only in effect in four states for the period from the 1830s to 1865: Virginia, North and South Carolina, and Georgia," and argues that "slave learning and teaching went on in all southern states, regardless of the legal penalties" (33-35). See also Eric Foner, Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 96.

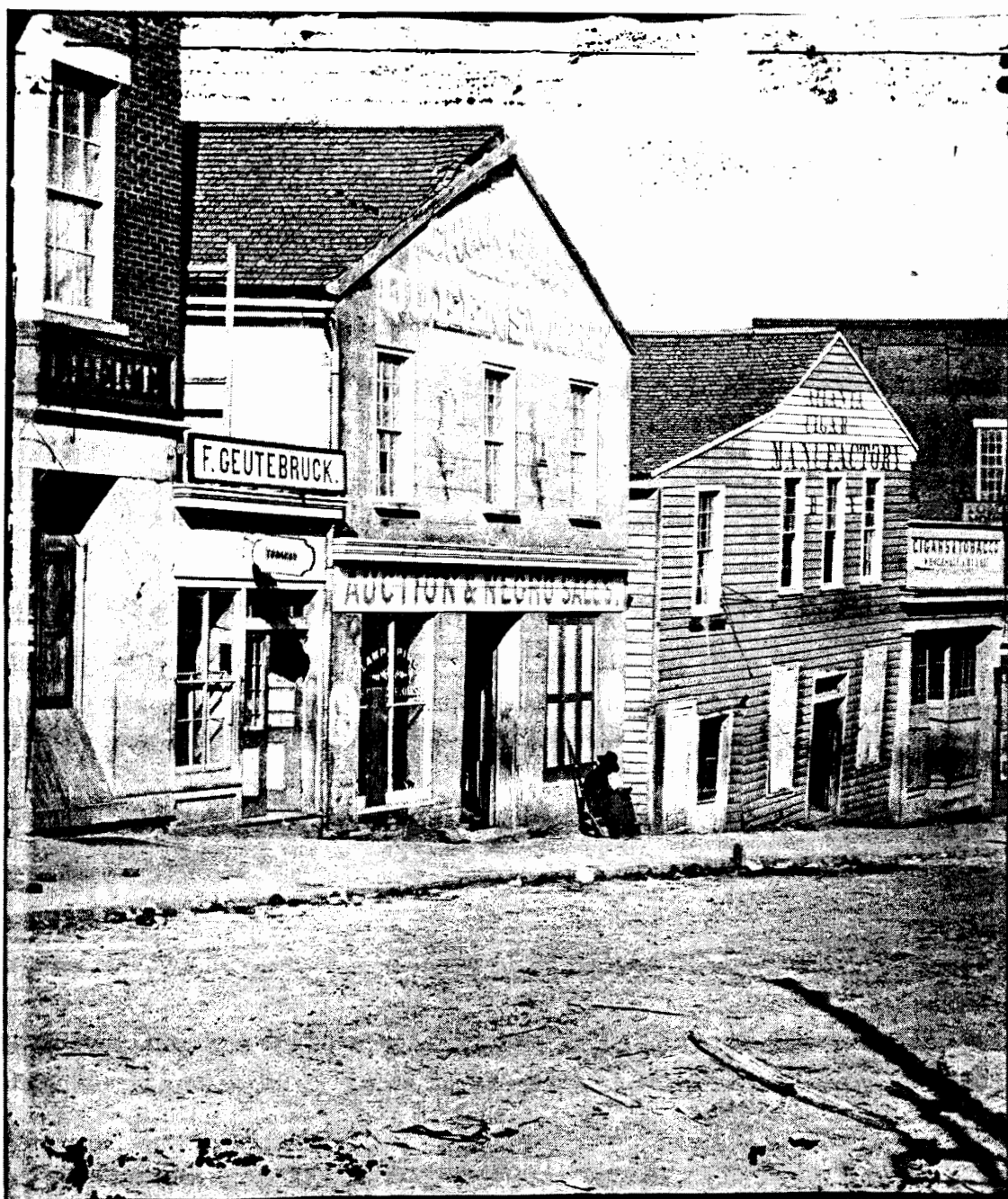


Fig. 3. A man with a shotgun, reading a book outside a slave market in Atlanta. Library of Congress.

In the wake of Nat Turner's Southampton uprising in August 1831, Southern legislatures again went into a frenzy of anti-literacy statutory revision. In 1833 the Georgia legislature revised its code once again, this time targeting those who taught writing and those who "shall procure, suffer, or permit, a slave, negro, or person of colour, to transact business for him in writing."⁶⁵ Print shops were again singled out as potential flashpoints of insurrection. "If any person, owning or having in his possession and under his control any printing press or types in this State, shall use or employ, or permit to be used or employed, any slave or free person of colour, in the setting up of types, or other labour about the office, requiring in said slave or free person of colour, a knowledge of reading or writing, such person so offending, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor, and on conviction, shall be punished by a fine not exceeding one hundred dollars." The penal code of 1833 also tightened up the pass laws, making it a misdemeanor, punishable by a \$50 fine, to give a slave a "ticket, pass, or-license" to a slave owned by another person. The penal code regulated the importation and exportation of slaves and outlawed hiding slaves.⁶⁶

⁶⁵Acts of Georgia, 1833, 202. The 1833 penal code was over seventy pages long and included fifteen divisions; see the thirteenth division for "offences relative to Slaves."

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 202-203.

Dissent

In 1841, the Georgia legislature addressed the problem of white complicity in slave literacy, prohibiting the sale or gift of "all printed or written books, papers, pamphlets, writing paper, ink, and all other articles of stationery," to slaves and free blacks. Anyone found guilty could be fined, and a second offense could bring as many as sixty days in jail.⁶⁷

Georgia's new anti-literacy measures, like the institution they sought to regulate, had taken on an elaborate and attenuated quality. As Ann Burritt warned, white Georgians would pay the price for their hypervigilance, as they saw their own freedoms eroded by efforts to restrict black autonomy. As masters sought to tighten the controls over communication among slaves, they forfeited their own freedom of expression. From the early 1830s on slaveholders were increasingly on the defensive, and they squelched opposition to slavery in the newspapers, in the mails, in politics, and in their daily conversation. In 1831 the Athens newspaper carried a notice from a Virginia newspaper warning of the danger of William Lloyd Garrison's The Liberator. The Virginia editors doubted the paper could be circulated in the Southern mails. "No Post Master in the Southern Country would deliver the numbers should there be found a man hardy enough to vow himself a subscriber." To those foolish enough to circulate the paper privately, "be they black or white if detected, we cannot promise them a fair trial." Those who would "sow the seeds of insurrection among our black

⁶⁷Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia, 1841, (Milledgeville: Grieve & Orme, 1842), 139.

population, could be viewed in no better light than a murderer or a cutthroat, and should be deprived of the protection of law. The stake and the faggot, those relics of the barbarous age, would be too good a destiny for such a sanguinary fiend."⁶⁸

Some postmasters did deliver the Liberator in Georgia, at least for a short time. The Milledgeville paper reported early in 1832 that "we received by Tuesday night's mail, a No. of Garrison's 'Liberator,' 'enlarged and improved.'" While the editors vowed not to "demean ourselves, by taking any further notice of this outlaw, and his unabashing effrontery in thus insulting us with his incendiary publication," they reminded their readers of the state's standing offer of five thousand dollars for Garrison's successful prosecution. The law not only put a price on Garrison's head, but on the head of anyone "who shall utter, publish, or circulate within the limits of this State, said paper called the Liberator, or any other paper, circular, pamphlet, or address of a seditious character."⁶⁹

The problem persisted. Several years later, Milledgeville editors once again found it necessary to remind their readers that "the publication, within the limits of the non-slaveholding States, of tracts, addresses, essays, or treatises in any form, urging the abolition of slavery in the southern States, is an unjust and pernicious exercise of

⁶⁸Athenian, November 1, 1831.

⁶⁹Southern Recorder, January 19, 1832. This resolution was printed by order of the governor in the "public journals of this State," and "such other papers as he may think proper." This resolution was enacted and published as law in Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia, 1831, (Milledgeville: Prince & Ragland, 1832), 255-56.

the freedom of the press, which cannot contribute to the prosperity of the former; while it is pregnant with danger to the latter. Such publications may be, they certainly have been, they will probably again be employed to excite an insurrectionary spirit among slaves." In a telling metaphor, the editors compared this "violation" of the freedom of the press to shooting off a gun in a crowded place--there is a freedom to bear arms, readers were reminded, but no freedom to shoot guns in crowded places. Similarly, they reasoned, there was freedom of speech, but no freedom to incite insurrection.⁷⁰

The speech of outsiders was monitored especially closely. In 1836 a committee of vigilantes from Hillsboro tarred and feathered a man named Aaron W. Kitchell, whom they accused of being an abolitionist. Kitchell, a stranger to middle Georgia, had travelled around the region seeking work as a schoolteacher and as a minister, and was seen away from his residence at night talking to slaves. Before long he found himself accused of "portraying [to slaves] the blessings of Freedom--that all men were born equal, and should have equal rights and liberties--contrasting their present situation with the happiness they would enjoy when they had burst the bonds of servitude, and such like stuff." The accusations worsened. Kitchell was guilty not only of inciting insurrection, but unfair horse trading as well. The vigilantes charged in an open letter that "Mr. Kitchell is guilty of swindling, forgery, and perjury, for all of which there can be sufficient evidence produced in any Court of Justice." But

⁷⁰Federal Union (Milledgeville), January 22, 1836. See also Leonard W. Levy, Emergence of a Free Press (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

Kitchell had by that time been run out of the region; lacking any real grounds to prosecute him, he was tarred, feathered, and banished.⁷¹

Despite the continuing efforts of the Georgia legislature, despite vigilance committees, despite the suppression of free speech even among the region's whites, antislavery pamphlets continued to make their way into the hands of slaves throughout the antebellum period. As the issue of slavery in national politics came to a head during the 1850s, the accusations against anti-slavery outsiders heightened. In 1859, a drummer from New York named Charles Scott was run out of Columbus for "too freely expressing his views in our midst" after John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry. "He had with him a sermon from the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, with sentiments of which he concurred, and thought, of course, Capt. Brown, the insurrectionist, a martyr of liberty. A Vigilance Committee waited on Mr. Scott and summoned witnesses to attend." Despite rumors that attachments of Brown's gang were hiding out near Columbus, Scott was released and banished from the city. The following year, a white man was discovered reading "insurrectionary pamphlets" to slaves in Habersham County; the slaves were whipped and the white man was given five hours to leave the state.⁷²

⁷¹Southern Recorder, October 4, 1836; Southern Recorder, October 25, 1836; see also Ralph B. Flanders, Plantation Slavery in Georgia (Cos Cob, Conn.: John E. Edwards, 1967), 274-5.

⁷²"A Little Excitement," Southern Recorder, November 22, 1859.

Oral Instruction as an Alternative to Slave Literacy

Despite the closely regulated access of slaves to printed materials, to literacy skills, and to abolitionist "propaganda," and despite the steep compromises of free expression made by whites, powerful voices within Georgia's planter elite expressed their dissent, their displeasure with anti-literacy laws, and their intention of ignoring those laws in accord with their religious beliefs. Protestant thought and free labor ideology not only fueled anti-slavery sentiment in the North; it also created pressure within the South, among a number of Christian masters, to find a way around the anti-literacy provisions of the slave code.

Charles Colcock Jones, a planter with extensive holdings in the low country west of Savannah, struggled for decades to resolve the tension between his conviction that slaves should be converted to Christianity and his obligation to keep slaves distant from the world of print. Jones fell just short of open defiance of anti-literacy laws, hitting upon a system of oral religious instruction. In his 1842 book, The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States, Jones provided a lengthy history of white efforts to convert Africans and African Americans to Christianity. He concluded with a treatise on how one might teach slaves to worship as Christians, within the doctrine of sola scriptura, and yet withhold the skills of reading. Jones, a Princeton-trained Presbyterian cleric himself, even had an assistant on his plantation, an Episcopal priest who taught Bible lessons using oral instruction.⁷³

⁷³Jones, Religious Instruction of the Negroes; Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 45; Anne M. Boylan, Sunday School: The Formation of an American

Jones drew the idea of oral instruction from a plan developed by a Virginia minister in the early 1820s. This method, Jones wrote, required students to repeat the answers after the teacher "until committed to memory." The recitation of catechisms gave masters a chance to hammer home carefully chosen lessons underscoring the virtues of duty and servility. "Preaching alone does not convey sufficiently definite ideas to the African mind," Charles C. Pinckney explained. "They require, in addition, catechetical instruction in the principles of Christ." Oral instruction allowed Christian masters to attend to the apostolic imperative without compromising their power over their slaves. Minnie Davis, an ex-slave from Athens, remembered oral recitation on her plantation, recalling that "our white fōlks didn't teach their slaves to read and write because it was against the law," but they did quiz their slaves on Bible lessons. "The slaves that were smart enough were asked to repeat the verses they had learned from hearing Miss Fannie, Miss Sue, and Marse John read."⁷⁴

Jones's catechism was widely used in the South, and a number of planters commented on its salutary effect. A farmer near Spartanburg, South Carolina, reported

Institution, 1790-1889 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 28-9. On Habersham County, see Macon Telegraph, November 21, 1860, cited in Flanders, Plantation Slavery in Georgia, 276.

⁷⁴The study Jones cites is John Mines, The Evangelical Catechism, or a Plain and Easy System of the Principal Doctrines and Duties of the Christian Religion; Adapted to the Use of Sabbath Schools and Families; with a New Method of Instructing Those Who Cannot Read. (Richmond, 1822). Mines lived in Leesburg, Virginia. See Jones, Religious Instruction of the Negroes (1842), 68-69; Proceedings of the Meeting in Charleston (1845), 20; Rawick, ed., American Slave, 12: Ga. Narr. (1), 257 (Minnie Davis). See also letter from Jones's slave Lucy in Blassingame, Slave Testimony, 90-91.

that his neighbor had had a great deal of trouble with his slaves "especially in their family relations." He introduced them to "special religious instruction" using "Jones' Catechism," and "his people soon became interested; the children were pleased with the catechism; and at this time, there is apparently a change in the views, feelings, principles, and tempers of all."⁷⁵

Oral instruction provided proslavery clerics a neat response to their northern brethren. "The unlettered need not be cut off from the best of all knowledge," a Methodist minister noted. "'Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.' Oral instruction has been, is, and perhaps always will be the main access of mankind to the truths of the gospel." Vaguely citing "recent statistics" showing that fully half of the adult population of England and Wales were unable to write, the minister argued that American slaves were better off by virtue of their intimate contact with the "life-giving civilization" of the "superior race."⁷⁶

One of Jones's contemporaries, Charles Wallace Howard of Rome, recalled the minister-planter's efforts to educate his slaves. Jones and his family "spent their winters on their plantation and not only had a Sunday school, but during the week one of the ladies of the family devoted herself to teaching a regular day school for the

⁷⁵Charleston Meeting on Religious Instruction (1845), 21-2.

⁷⁶H. N. M'Tyeire, Duties of Christian Masters (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing, 1859), 157-8.

negroes on the plantation." Jones "gave up his whole time and his great abilities to that labor," Howard noted approvingly.⁷⁷

Lucy Skipwith, a slave of Virginia planter John Hartwell Cocke, ran a school with her master's blessing in the 1850s. Bible lessons were at the center of her work, but she also taught her students to read and write. She reported on the work of her school in her letters to Cocke: "I have read from the 15th of Matthew to the 3rd of Luke since you went away. none of the people have improved enough to read the prayers as yet but I hope that some of them will be able to do it before very long. My School Children that comes to school every day are improveing in learning, but the boys that do not come every day I fear shall never be able to do much with them as it do not lay upon their mines as it ought." In 1855 she wrote that she was continuing her school, and that the "Children are still improving as they are going on reading so well. I am now Teaching them to write. and some of them can make letters very well. I am inhopes that some of them will write by the time you come out here." Skipwith also taught a night school for town children, she reported, who seemed "to improve very slow in reading. but they improve makeing figures very much. and they seem to have a great love for it. I Think that mr Eastman done much good by having the Black Board made. as the children all love to work on it."⁷⁸

⁷⁷Ku-Klux Conspiracy, Georgia II: 837.

⁷⁸Lucy Skipwith to John Hartwell Cocke, August 17, 1854, reprinted in Blassingame, Slave Testimony, 73; Skipwith to Cocke, May 19, 1855, reprinted in *ibid.*, 74. For more on Lucy Skipwith, see Randall M. Miller, ed., "Dear Master": Letters of a Slave Family (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978).

The involvement of churches in educating slaves could lead to peculiar and contradictory circumstances. The procurement of slaves by churches seemed a likely prospect for recruiting missionaries to Africa, an Alabamian reported in 1845. "The black part of our congregation here is very interesting; I wish the whites afforded as much encouragement. Among our coloured members there are two or three that can read. One of these can read Greek and Latin. He is the servant Ellis, whom the synods of Alabama and Mississippi proposed to purchase in order to send him as a missionary to Africa. He is an extraordinary man. His blood and colour are unmixed. . . . He is anxious now to undertake Hebrew."⁷⁹

Movement for Repeal

In the 1850s, a movement arose to back away from the stringent anti-literacy stance of the early 1830s. Even as the sectional debate over slavery became polarized, and even as passionate attacks on slavery, with their "pernicious influence," threatened to circulate among the region's slaves, some leading whites seemed willing to moderate their position on slave education. As the slave South came under persistent attack, whites cast about for ways to make the institution appear more humane in the eyes of the nation. Their efforts appeared forward-looking and progressive, but the goal was to reform slavery in order to preserve the institution. Leading Georgians debated the question of slave education at agricultural conventions in 1850 and 1851, and resolved

⁷⁹Charleston Meeting on Religious Instruction (1845), 65-6.

to request that the legislature legalize slave literacy. Such a bill was passed by the House in 1852, but defeated in the Senate.⁸⁰

Though anti-literacy laws were not repealed, they continued to be unevenly enforced, as the editors of a Columbus paper warned in 1856. Denouncing recent efforts "tending to corrupt and inflame" the minds of slaves, they complained about the "lax enforcement" of laws passed for white protection. In many places blacks were "taught to read and write, allowed to purchase books and papers, to traverse the country without legal permits, &c., &c." Efforts to teach the city's slaves to read and write "under the guise of religious instruction" were no exception to the law, and "should be checked. . . . The instruction of negroes lays the foundation--prepares the way--for consequences which may more properly be left to the reader's own reflection, than declared here."⁸¹

Efforts to amend the law continued even into the Civil War years, and took on a new urgency as religious leaders waged a mighty public relations battle with God Almighty and the community of nations. Hearing a movement was afoot to repeal the anti-literacy law again in 1862, Samuel K. Talmage, the president of Oglethorpe University, wrote a lengthy appeal urging the legislature to go forward. He recalled

⁸⁰See article commenting on the "pernicious influences" of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin in the Southern Recorder, December 16, 1856; William P. Vaughan, Schools for All: The Blacks and Public Education in the South, 1865-1877 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974), 2; Woodson, Education of the Negro Prior to 1861, 226. On the liberalization movement of the 1850s, see Aptheker, American Negro Slave Revolts, 60.

⁸¹Daily Sun (Columbus) August 27, 1856.

that it was only the "Tappans of New York with their miserable crew of fanatics" that had necessitated the 1829 law in the first place. The intent had never been to withhold the scriptures from slaves, but rather anti-slavery literature, and for that "the abolitionists must take responsibility." But now, the Confederacy was forced to pay the price for earlier abolitionist impertinence: "I am not sure but this very law is one of the many reasons why God is withholding, in a degree, his smiles from the righteous struggle which we are waging with our cruel foes," Talmage wrote. The smiles of Paris and London were to be considered as well, he reminded his audience. The Cherokee Baptist Convention, held in the spring of 1862, and Georgia's Central Baptist Association, held in August, denounced the state's anti-literacy statutes. Samuel Boykin, editor of the Baptist Christian Index, observed that secession had effectively neutralized the threat of abolitionist literature. To continue keeping slaves from the Bible, he argued, would only "assist in peopling hell."⁸²

Testifying before a congressional committee during Reconstruction, Rome editor Charles Wallace Howard maintained that anti-literacy laws, along with most other objectionable aspects of plantation slavery, would have died a natural death if only the gentle hand of paternalism had been allowed to take its course. "I have no doubt if our troubles had not occurred, laws would have been passed allowing the negroes to learn to read," he testified during Reconstruction. "A great many of us had them very close to our hearts, and laws would have been passed materially modifying

⁸²Southern Recorder, November 4, 1862; Christian Index, September 9, 1862, quoted in Mohr, Threshold, 249.

the condition of the negroes." Marriage would have become legally recognized, the sale of family members outlawed, permission to read and write granted. "These were the principal features of the laws we contemplated; but those difficulties came on and that passed away." Reverend Talmage concurred; to him, as to many others, the slave regime amounted to a noble attempt to civilize Africans. "The truest and best friend to Africa is the Southern slaveholder," he wrote. The Civil War "is on our part a war of humanity in behalf of Africa."⁸³

The assessment of slavery offered by Howard and Talmage would represent the dominant white memory of slavery for much of the century that followed. Their sentiments were echoed and inscribed into the region's history by one of the most careful students of slavery, the Milledgeville-born historian Ulrich B. Phillips. Phillips wrote derisively of black literary achievement, describing the Latin verse of Jamaican poet Francis Williams as "rather a language exercise than a poem," and dismissing the African American polymath Benjamin Banneker as "somewhat of an astronomer." Phillips is perhaps best remembered, ironically, for his analogy of plantations as "the best schools yet invented" for the enlightenment of "that sort of inert and backward people which the bulk of American negroes represented."⁸⁴

⁸³Ku-Klux Conspiracy, Georgia II: 836; Southern Recorder, November 4, 1862.

⁸⁴Phillips, American Negro Slavery, 432, 343; on the historiographical impact of Phillips's analogy, see David Brion Davis, "Slavery and the Post-World War II Historians," Daedalus 103 (Spring 1974): 1-2.

A contemporary of U. B. Phillips, an historian named Lawton B. Evans, expressed his own views about education in the antebellum South in a 1908 textbook read by Georgia schoolchildren. While the sons and daughters of slaveowners found reassurance in the notion that slavery had enlightened "inert and backward" Africans, they also learned that their forbearers had enjoyed the privileges of high culture and art. "The residences of the planters were abodes of culture and luxury," Evans wrote. "The sons and daughters were educated in the best schools of the country, and music, painting, art, and literature made the home life refined." But even many wealthy farmers had difficulty securing a proper education for their children. The education of white children was crucial to maintaining and recreating the region's slave society, but the South's sparse population, lack of qualified teachers, and distrust of public spending conspired against the creation of a well-funded public schooling system. The effort to educate white children contained its own difficulties, its own complexities, and its own hidden meanings.⁸⁵

⁸⁵Lawton B. Evans, A History of Georgia for Use in Schools, (New York: American Book Company, 1908; reprint, Spartanburg, S. C., The Reprint Company, 1972), 187-8.

CHAPTER 4

"IN THEIR OWN TONGUE AND TONE": WHITE READING AND WRITING, 1820-1865

Even for white children, getting an education in Georgia during the first half of the nineteenth century was no mean feat. The lackluster efforts of the state to provide schooling for its children meant that even wealthy parents--especially those in rural areas--found themselves engaged in a perennial search for teachers, schoolhouses, and books for their children. More was at stake in this quest than simply learning to read, write, and cipher. The widely scattered classrooms of antebellum Georgia were full of students learning how to read; but these children also were learning to negotiate between national middle-class values and the values of the Southern planter class, between a world that rewarded individual achievement, self-restraint, and politeness, and a patriarchal world that prized decorum, honor, and family ties. White children learning to read and write in antebellum Georgia also confronted tensions between oral and written expression, between vernacular and formal culture, between self-culture and public authority. As they learned to read and write, these children imbibed lessons about what it meant to be to be white in a slave society, what it meant to be a lady or a

gentleman in a world full of strangers, what it meant to be Southern in an increasingly divided nation.¹

Living on the periphery of the nation's centers of culture, far distant from the lyceums, libraries, and universities of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, planters in the South self-consciously created a high culture of their own. The Chesapeake planter William Byrd II famously catalogued his literary achievements in the seventeenth century, daily recounting his exercises in the languages and arts. While Byrd seems absurd (or at best manic) in his pursuits, his successors in the region have left us with a more graceful and self-assured image of their cultural pursuits. Books lining the shelves of grand homes, parlors decorated with pianoes and portraits, the continual

¹Historians have long argued whether planters were middle-class men on the make who happened to own slaves, or paternalists bound by mutual obligation and dependency to their families and to their slaves. For a depiction of slaveholders as middle-class entrepreneurs, see James Oakes, The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders (New York: Knopf, 1982), and his Slavery and Freedom: An Interpretation of the Old South (New York: Knopf, 1990). The leading proponent of the patriarchal nature of slave society is Eugene D. Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made (New York: Pantheon, 1974). Recent studies of the history of gender and education suggest instead a tension between bourgeois and planter values, focusing on the rituals of courtship, on the acculturation of children into the mores of plantation life, and on women's uses of reading and writing. See Catherine Clinton, Plantation Mistress: Women's World in the Old South (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 123-138, Christie Anne Farnham, The Education of the Southern Belle: Higher Education and Student Socialization in the Antebellum South (New York: New York University Press, 1994); Steven Stowe, "The Not-So-Cloistered Academy: Elite Women's Education and Family Feeling in the Old South," in Walter J. Fraser, Jr., R. Frank Saunders, Jr., and Jon L. Wakelyn, eds., The Web of Southern Social Relations: Women, Family, and Education (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 90-106; Anya Jabour, "'Grown Girls, Highly Cultivated': Female Education in an Antebellum Southern Family," JSH 64 (February 1990): 25-64; and Cathy N. Davidson, Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

flow of guests--all seem the adornments of a leisured life, marks of luxury and class standing, planters' way of defining their lives in opposition to the lives of their slaves.

In recent years, historians have worked to understand more clearly the private realities behind these public images. The popular conception of antebellum Southern ladies as porcelain dolls, without responsibility or attainment, has given way to a more appreciative view of their lives. In preparation for courtship, and to mark their standing in the world--their class identity--slaveholding women often were highly educated, reading by the time they were six, playing the piano at eight, speaking French at twelve. Cathy Davidson, Christie Anne Farnham, Drew Gilpin Faust, Michael O'Brien, and others have suggested that novels, commonplace books, journals, and other literary artifacts were more than mere window dressing for these women, more than simply part of their costume. Instead, these were resources that allowed a level of self-realization and self-determination previously regarded as unavailable to the women of the Old South. Despite legal strictures against owning property and voting, elite white women in the antebellum South, it seems, were purposeful and powerful in their public engagement, especially with the advent of the Civil War in the late 1850s.²

²In her seminal study of Southern womanhood, Anne Firor Scott downplayed the intellectual opportunities of girls training to become ladies. See The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 48, 67-75. Christie Anne Farnham argues that Southern ladies enjoyed greater access to higher education than middle-class women in the northeast, largely because their education posed no threat to occupational segregation, as it did in the North. See The Education of the Southern Belle, 3, 11-32. Many recent studies have emphasized the degree of achievement and freedom women carved out even within the confines of patriarchy; see Drew Gilpin Faust, Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,

While their sisters learned to speak French, play the piano, and do needlepoint, young white boys were busy practicing the art of oratory, committing to memory long passages of history and moral philosophy by their early teens, parsing Latin before they could be admitted to college. Anticipating careers in the statehouse, the courthouse, or the pulpit, the sons of the planter class mastered the tools of mastery. As adults, they would write the laws upon which the slave regime relied; they would write the sermons, the political treatises, and the editorials which would serve to justify an institution increasingly under attack.

At each stage of their education, these children learned to reconcile their private impulses and their public duties. As they grew older, they found their classrooms increasingly formal and rigid, increasingly exclusive and elite. Entering their teenage years, students began to internalize lessons about appropriate gender roles, as they saw the coeducational classes of their childhood give way to same-sex academies. The private act of reading took on public meanings, as boys learned to build their social standing through their oratorical skills, while girls used literature to learn and rehearse their courtship roles. Children were encouraged to read widely, but they were expected to pursue only "reading of the proper sort." They were warned against romantic

1996), 153-78; Davidson, Revolution and the Word; Mary Kelley, "Reading Women/Women Reading: The Making of Learned Women in Antebellum America," Journal of American History 83 (September 1996): 401-424; Clinton, Plantation Mistress, 123-138; and Stowe, "The Not-So-Cloistered Academy," 90-106. On the education of Southern women in the eighteenth century, see Julia Cherry Spruill, Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1938; reprint, New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 185-231.

fiction and other "licentious" and "desultory" habits of reading. At each step, the social context in which these boys and girls learned to read reminded them of the possibilities and limitations of speaking in their "own tongue and tone," as a contemporary observer put it.

Historians of the nineteenth-century South are the fortunate heirs to countless daily journals and personal letters written by these women and men. Beyond offering a rich sense of daily life in the nineteenth century, these journals and letters also convey the important role reading and writing played in the lives of those who wrote them. Many women, especially, were diligent about writing in their journals; some maintained diaries almost daily from their early teens until the end of their lives. Beyond the fact of journal-keeping itself, the journals also frequently contain discussions of reading and of education. In the letters and journals of Loula Kendall Rogers, who grew up in middle Georgia in the 1840s and 1850s, we see the untutored hand of a young teenage girl mature into the graceful writing of an adult, as we learn of her years of primary, secondary, and collegiate education. Loula Kendall emerged from college an accomplished writer and a widely read intellectual, but like many other women, she bemoaned having to leave school, sensing that her education would prove useless in her life as a wife and a plantation mistress. A plantation mistress from south Georgia, Henrietta Vickers, who married at the age of fifteen to Aeneas Armstrong, read and wrote constantly through the years of 1859 until 1861, when both her reading and her journal-keeping gave way to the exigencies of wartime. Henrietta Armstrong and her husband enjoyed reading aloud to one another; it gave their romance an

intellectual dimension that they both enjoyed. The same was true of Sylvanus and Jennie Lines, a marginally middle-class couple from the North who worked at the fringes of the planter society. Like the Armstrongs, they read together frequently. Jennie would invite her husband to write in her journal on her birthdays, and they worked together to publish a newspaper. Each of these women kept meticulous diaries in late antebellum Georgia; each was a serious, committed student and reader; and each was politicized by the Civil War, an experience that changed their lives, and their lives as readers, in ways none of them could have predicted.

Childhood Schooling

Loula Kendall, the daughter of a prominent planter and physician in rural Upson County, Georgia, attended no fewer than twelve schools between 1846, when she was eight years old, and 1857, when she graduated from Georgia Female College in Macon at the age of eighteen. Teachers came and went with the seasons. Miss Pond, a Northern lady who boarded with the Kendall family, left teaching for marriage. Mr. Clark, whom Loula described simply as "a strange specimen of human nature," stayed for a season, followed by a teacher from Ireland who taught for five months. Loula's cousin Tom Sully was next, but his brutality drove away all his pupils. Though Loula Kendall's father was wealthy and willing to spend money on his children's education, he and his neighbors were unable to find and keep competent teachers for their

children.³ In 1851, matters improved temporarily when Dr. Kendall hired Lizzie Shaw, a teacher from Marietta, Georgia. Kendall built a school on his property, and neighboring children joined the Kendalls, including one who boarded along with the teacher. They called their little school the "Chestnut Grove Seminary," and Loula felt it rivaled a nearby town academy, the "'ivy mantled Montpelier,' in its beauty, and the superior intelligence of its faithful pupils." Not many months passed, however, before Miss Shaw grew homesick and returned to Marietta, one hundred miles to the north. For a short while Loula left home for Marietta herself, living with her cousins while she attended school at Mr. Wayland's academy, "the highest school" in that town. Her father, dissatisfied at having his young daughter so far from home, brought her back to Upson County, where she finally enrolled at a proper academy in nearby Montpelier, whose "ivy mantles" the Kendall's own Chestnut Grove school had aspired to.⁴

David Kendall had good reasons to want his daughter in school. Reading prepared children for life, teaching them moral culture, self-control, and careful habits of thought. "By opening to our youth the sources of mental enjoyment, we correct and weaken their propensities to sensuality, and withdraw them from evil purposes," one proponent of education wrote. "By showing them the calm satisfaction to be derived from books, their home is endeared, their hours of necessary repose or relaxation are ennobled, and the members of the family are thus mutually respected and truly

³Loula Kendall Rogers Journal, June 28, 1855, Loula Kendall Rogers Papers, Emory.

⁴Rogers Journal, July 2, 1855.

respectable." As children approached courting age, reading of the proper sort would help focus their energies on their minds instead of their bodies. Parson Weems had run an advertisement in 1821 that made the point clear: "Ye generous Parents, who would preserve your rosy cheek'd boys from groveling sensualities, and your lovelier daughters from the more refined, but equally pernicious vanities of dress, remember that this is to be accomplished only by giving them the far better pleasures of the mind."⁵

In a slave society, education and the moral elevation it conferred distinguished free from slave, white from black. An education "makes the grand difference between a New England farmer, or day laborer, and the southern slave," a newspaper editor wrote in the 1820s. "Thinking, elevates man above the brute and raises his views and affections to heaven." For Dr. Kendall's children, the sons and daughters of the planter elite, schooling also provided a distinct class marker; while most of their childhood classmates would leave school by the time they were ten or eleven, the Kendall children would remain in school through college, leaving only when they were ready to begin courtship.⁶

For all the difficulty they had staying in school, the Kendall children were lucky to attend at all. In 1850, only a quarter of white Georgians under the age of twenty

⁵Advertisement in Charleston Courier, July 14, 1821, reprinted in Emily Ellsworth Skeel, ed., Mason Locke Weems: His Works and Ways, 3 vols. (New York: privately printed, 1929), 3:318.

⁶Christian Watchman, reprinted in Southern Recorder, November 15, 1828.

were enrolled in school. Newspaper editors, legislators, and reformers made lofty pronouncements about the value of education, but despite a half-century of idealistic language and occasional hard-fought battles in the statehouse, by the time of the Civil War not a single state in the South had an adequate common school system. The history of public schooling in antebellum Georgia is at best a series of good intentions never fully realized, at worst a catalogue of legislative cynicism and neglect. After decades of promises, postponement, and partial funding, an effective common school law finally came together in 1858. Secession and war ended common schooling in Georgia just as it began, however, and another fifteen years would pass before this first short-lived public school system was finally reinstituted.⁷

In the absence of a statewide school system, each community struck its own design for schooling its children, a design which reflected its resources, demography, and desires. A town could support an academy or seminary of some description over a

⁷Figures from the U. S. Census calculated from "United States Historical Census Data Browser," <<http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu>>, February, 1999. Peter Wallenstein, From Slave South to New South: Public Policy in Nineteenth-Century Georgia (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 23; Edgar W. Knight, Public Education in the South (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1922); Keith Whitescarver, "Creating Citizens for the Republic: Education in Georgia, 1776-1810," Journal of the Early Republic 13 (Winter 1993) 455. The best study of the academy movement in Georgia is Elbert W. G. Boogher, Secondary Education in Georgia, 1732-1858 (Philadelphia: privately printed, 1933), 79-176. On education of females, see 177-247. See also E. Merton Coulter, "The Antebellum Academy Movement in Georgia," Georgia Historical Quarterly 5 (December 1921): 11-42; Drew Gilpin Faust, A Sacred Circle: The Dilemma of the Intellectual in the Old South, 1840-1860 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 7; Jurgén Herbst, The Once and Future School: Three Hundred and Fifty Years of American Secondary Education (New York: Routledge, 1996), 54-6.

period of years, while a smaller village might establish a more modest school for a few seasons. Rough one-room "field schools" were the best most small farming communities could hope for, and children growing up on remote farms or plantations might be tutored in small groups for a few weeks or months at a time. For students and teachers alike, the experience of schooling in antebellum Georgia was marked by inconstancy, variety, improvisation, inflated hopes, and, most often, truncated careers in the classroom.

Though Georgia lacked a centralized system of education, the state did take limited measures to provide public funding for schools. After 1817 land-grant money was used to offset the expense of maintaining academies and to create a poor-school fund. Having separate schools for poor children was impractical--it was hard enough to maintain even one school in a thinly populated region--and so the poor school fund was used to compensate schools for enrolling poor students. This income made smaller academies viable, thus benefitting planter-class pupils whose enrollment alone could not sustain a school. In addition, there simply were not enough teachers for smaller communities to have separate schools for boys and girls. At younger ages, and in smaller communities, boys and girls alike attended these "academies," which despite their fancy names were often simply one-room schools. As students progressed through school, they found themselves increasingly segregated by gender and class. Boys and girls from families of modest means would end their schooling by their early teens, while the boys and girls of the planter class left home to attend larger academies, usually boarding schools in towns, where they could pursue their studies in the safety

and comfort of a single-sex environment. These larger academies and the state's handful of colleges offered a more advanced curriculum, as well as a place where students could master the conventions of the planter class.⁸

Richard Malcolm Johnston, who grew up in rural middle Georgia, recalled that his childhood field school was a log house erected at the edge of a fallow field, central to the community and "hard by a spring of purest fresh water." The structure was small, about 25 by 30 feet, with one door and a couple of windows; benches were arranged along the walls. The building was within a forty-five minute walk of every child's home. The school that Augustus Baldwin Longstreet attended at the turn of the nineteenth century was similar: "It was a simple log-pen, about twenty feet square, with a doorway cut out of the logs, to which was fitted a rude door, made of clapboards. . . . The roof was covered with clapboards also, and retained in their places by heavy logs placed on them." Wade Harris, who attended a school supported by "a - community of large estates and big families," recalled that his schoolhouse "was of the better type of country institutions," boasting a chimney, four windows, and "weatherboarding." Inside, though, the school lacked a ceiling and plaster, and paint "was an unthought-of extravagance." Students sat in rows of split pine-log benches,

⁸By 1850 there were 2,700 academies in the South, more than either the Middle Atlantic, which had about 2,100, or New England, which had about 1,000 academies. Many were church sponsored, with the Methodists in the lead in Georgia. Carl F. Kaestle, Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 193.

and "with no foot-rests and no support for the elbows,--the promising youth of that day got a good start in the direction of humpbacked humanity."⁹

Even in his relatively affluent community, Harris wrote that "few scholars were able to afford store ink. The common substitute was the ink-ball,--that unique product of the horsefly and the oak tree,--which produced a purplish-colored fluid." The pens were no better. Quill pens were "an abomination with which the children had small patience." Instead, students preferred to fashion pens with their barlow knives by cutting a piece of wood robbed from the round bottom of their log benches, so that over time the benches became pitted and grooved underneath. Copy-books were made by sewing together sheets of common writing paper. This homemade assemblage of writing tools became both the subject and the means of the students' first turns at literature; Harris recalled one ditty he "was called upon to labor over with tongue and pen:"

My pen is bad; my ink is pale,
My love for you will never fale.¹⁰

⁹Richard Malcolm Johnston, "Early Educational Life in Middle Georgia," Report of the Commissioner of Education for the Year 1894-5, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1896), 1703; Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, "The Turn Out," in Georgia Scenes, ed. James E. Kibler, Jr. (Augusta, Ga., 1835; reprint, Nashville, Tenn.: J. S. Saunders, 1992), 75-6; Wade H. Harris, My School Days: Reconstruction Experiences in the South (New York: Neale Publishing Company, 1914), 20-1. Similar descriptions of crude one-room schoolhouses are found in Edgar W. Knight, The Academy Movement in the South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1919), 9-13, and in Dorothy Orr, A History of Education in Georgia (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1950), 51.

¹⁰Harris, My School Days, 23-4.

At Richard Malcolm Johnston's school, the students arrived within an hour of sunrise and worked until noon, when they recessed for two hours to eat and play sports. No one even entertained the idea that a schoolmaster would be able to afford the luxury of a watch, he wrote, so the children kept track of the time by marking the sun's shadow on the floor; in cloudy weather they would guess.¹¹

At these makeshift schools, students found little opportunity beyond the most basic lessons in spelling, reading, writing, and arithmetic. "I can recall learning two things at this country school," Davis recalled. "One was to chew tobacco. The other was to write a good 'hand.'" By Johnston's account, a visitor approaching a country schoolhouse would hear the children long before seeing the building. "Spellers, readers, geographers, grammarians, getters-by-heart, all except cipherers, each in his or her own tongue and tone, raised to heights sufficient to be clearly distinguished from others by individual ear, filled the room and several square rods of circumambient space outside," he wrote. Children learning the letters of the alphabet began with their vowels, rhythmically chanting "a-bissel-fa, e-bissel-fe, o-bissel-fo," and so on. A careful observer might deduce that the children were practicing the letters as they sounded by themselves: "'A' by itself--'a', 'e' by itself--'e', 'o' by itself--'o'." Through this all, the master sat in his chair, watching for the "silent tongues" of

¹¹Much of the following account is drawn from Johnston, "Early Educational Life," 1703. Johnston was well known for his humorous sketches of antebellum Georgia, the most famous of which were the "Dukesborough Tales." The best study of his work is Jimmy Ponder Voyles, "Richard Malcolm Johnston: A Critical and Biographical Study" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Georgia, 1971).

children not participating. Such vigilance was unnecessary, by Johnston's account.

"Dread of the ridicule attached to the foot of the class" motivated the boys and girls to work hard, and the scholars were not likely to be found wasting their time. Having mastered the letters of the alphabet, children graduated to spelling words. Spelling bees were a favorite, with the girls leading the rivalry. Standing in line, boys and girls mixed together, and "arranged according to age and advancement," the scholars would compete.¹²

After students had mastered the basics of spelling by participating in these lively contests, they stepped into the more "solemn and formal" business of learning to read. "With the master the sentiment seemed that after one rose from spelling to reading one must be taught to feel that what was printed in books had acquired beyond spoken words dignity to which readers must pay worshipful respect." The raucous spelling bees were replaced with sober recitations pronounced in "measured, solemn flow."¹³

Oral recitation of memorized passages lay at the heart of the schooling experience. Each day, students recited a number of memorized lines, and on Friday evenings parents and children would gather to hear declamations taken from collections

¹²Harris, My School Days, 22-3; Johnston, "Early Educational Life," 1704, 1706. On the shift to silent reading in elementary classrooms in the late nineteenth century, see James L. Leloudis, Schooling the New South: Pedagogy, Self, and Society in North Carolina, 1880-1920 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 13-16, 31-35. A detailed analysis of nineteenth-century educational models for teaching beginning reading can be found in Harold Boyne Lampert, "A History of the Teaching of Beginning Reading," (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1935), 256-356.

¹³Johnston, "Early Educational Life," 1704.

of favorite speeches such as the Columbian Orator. These Friday evening declamations were social occasions of great moment to the young orators, who stood to win either the approval or the ridicule of their parents, schoolmates, and sweethearts. While the girls distinguished themselves in spelling, in coeducational schools recitation seems to have been the domain of boys. These performances were designed to set youngsters on the road to careers in law, politics, or the ministry. The boys spoke alone or in pairs, drawing upon their daily practice in school to make Friday night a success. "Practice upon practice enabled some lads of unusually good understanding, sons of the better class, to render these pieces with a grace and a spirit intensely interesting, and were not unfrequently the beginning of a career that made the young orators famous in after years," Johnston recalled. Others were not as gifted. A poor orator would render a "passionate, fiery speech" in subdued, funereal tones. The most grievous offense occurred when a student clearly failed to understand the meaning of the words he recited.¹⁴

The uncomprehending recitation learned as children spilled over into adulthood, Johnston wrote, a habit of "weak minds" which proved a rich vein for the region's humorists. Boys who had endured whippings for failing their recitations in school and who had suffered the humiliation of Friday evening declamations continued to use their poorly understood words as grown men. A man who did not make a habit of reading, but who found himself "a freeman, a voter, a married man, or a candidate for

¹⁴Ibid., 1710.

matrimony," or who aspired to the pulpit or to the justiceship of the peace, sought authority in fancy schoolboy vocabulary grown stale from disuse. These men saw politicians on the stump, heard lawyers in the courtroom, and recognized that these men drew power from their language, "the higher language of those superiors." They recalled the words and passages memorized from Murray's Reader in childhood and tried to put them to use "in social parties, court-yards, in the jury box, on the benches of justice of the peace, at regimental and battalion musters, piazzas of village and country stores, election precincts, in love letters and love tales." The results were ridiculous, as embarrassing as the failed declamations of schoolboys. The lesson is clear. Just as schoolteachers were made ridiculous by their literary pretensions, the unpracticed minds of their students were made ridiculous by their uncomprehension. Honor and respect were reserved for educated public men, men who had mastered the art of public oration as children and who had continued their studies to the professional level. Men of letters should be practical and professional in their pursuits: lawyers, legislators, men of public affairs.¹⁵

Publishers and editors of school readers were torn between amusement and instruction, between providing materials light enough to interest children and their desire to keep the lessons instructive. Webster's Elementary Spelling Book, known simply as the "blue-backed speller," supplied the youngsters with serious food for

¹⁵Ibid., 1711. On debating societies, see E. Merton Coulter, College life in the Old South (New York: MacMillan, 1928; reprint, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983), 103-33.

thought, offering unambiguous moral lessons. Fables such as "The Boy That Stole Apples" and "The Country Maid and Her Milk Pail" pointed the way to frugal and virtuous living. More advanced readings included historical lessons and passages from the Bible, and the relentless seriousness of Webster's and other readers lent mystery and import to the written word. A typical example was Murray's English Reader. While every effort had been taken to provide light and amusing materials, the editor wrote, he had avoided "every expression and sentiment that might gratify a corrupt mind." The editors of a Georgia newspaper warned that the "habits of loose, discontinuous thought" brought on by "desultory reading" would turn the "memory into a common sewer for rubbish of all sorts to float through." Others warned that reading should only be permitted in moderation: "While many do not read at all in these times, there are those who read too much, particularly the young. A moderate amount of reading and plenty of observation will develop the youthful mind."¹⁶

On the whole, though, white Georgians operated on the understanding that an educated public would be happier and more productive. The editors of a newspaper in Milledgeville, Georgia, wrote that "an intelligent man can, by reason of his

¹⁶Johnston, "Early Educational Life," 1704. On Webster's spellers, see E. Jennifer Monaghan, A Common Heritage: Noah Webster's Blue-Back Speller (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1983); John Goodrich, ed., Murray's English Reader: Or, Pieces in Prose and Poetry Selected from the Best Writers (Windsor, Vt.: Simeon Ide, 1826), vi; and Southern Recorder, January 19, 1858. The tension between reading for amusement and reading for moral instruction was a persistent concern; the bookseller Mason Locke Weems warned his publisher in the 1820s that "the World beginning now to talk of us as the Friends of Youth, [they] will not be so well pleas'd to see light song books &c. &c. in our vice-extinguishing Collections." Weems, 3:338. On reading in moderation, see Southern Recorder, August 8, 1865.

intelligence, plough and hoe and reap three times as much as an ignorant man can, even though he have less physical strength and takes no steam-water, and any-one asks for proof of this assertion, we will produce it." They reprinted a piece from an Ohio paper that echoed the sentiment: "A man may read two hours a day and make more wheat, corn, and money, than the man who don't read any."¹⁷

Responding to the concern that all the readers available to children in the South were being published in New England, New York and Philadelphia, a Charleston publisher put out a series called the Southern Reader in the 1840s and 1850s. In form, these differed little from other readers, except they included plantation sketches which offered an implicit "defence of the patriarchal institution of the South," as a Richmond editor phrased it. "Their parents learned from school books gotten up by Northern men, to regard slavery as a great evil, social, political, and moral, and the children in turn gleaned the same sentiments from like sources." A reader called Popular Lessons included one story, "The Story of Little Jack," which resonated distinctly with the experience of young white children growing up in Georgia's plantation belt. "The hero," Johnston recalled, "after the death of his mother when he was an infant, was nourished by the milk of a she-goat." The little boy naturally grew attached to the goat, and when another boy, "an unfeeling youth," attacked the goat, Little Jack rose to her protection: "'She has been like a mother to me, and I will not hear her abused as long as there is a breath in my body.'" Little Jack, living in a world in which

¹⁷Southern Recorder, October 27, 1857.

fundamental physiological differences were nonetheless bridged by mutual dependency and love, had an obligation to protect the beast that had nursed him. The story was a favorite of white children in Georgia for generations. Linton Stephens, a prominent judge and the brother of Alexander Stephens, wrote that he had brought a roomful of children to tears reading the story of Little Jack, which he himself had read as a child. "I shed about as many tears as they did," he admitted.¹⁸

The most advanced students read from Murray's English Reader. This was an anthology of English-language classics "designed to assist young persons to read with propriety and effect; to improve their language and sentiments, and to inculcate some of the most important principles of piety and virtue." Murray's included a preface instructing the youngsters on the principles of good reading. This advanced textbook expanded upon the lessons the students had learned in their basic texts: "Diligence, industry, and proper improvement of time are material duties of the young," they were reminded. "Virtuous youth gradually brings forward accomplishment and flourishing manhood." The children tolerated these sober lessons in school, but in their own time they found more attractive options in the "few romances to be found here and there in the neighborhood," Johnston recalled. They set aside the rough landscape of their native Georgia for the ancient and mystical settings of feudal Europe: Children of the

¹⁸Richmond Enquirer, February 20, 1857; The Southern Reader: or, Child's Second Reading Book: Containing Simple Reading Lessons, Progressively Arranged (Charleston, S.C.: S. Babcock, 1841); The Southern Reader and Speaker: Containing Selections in Prose and Poetry, for Exercises in Reading and Speaking in the Academies and Schools of the Southern States (Charleston, S.C.: W. R. Babcock, 1850); Johnston, "Early Educational Life," 1704-5.

Abbey, Mysteries of Udolpho, Thaddeus of Warsaw, and Scottish Chiefs were among the favorites.¹⁹

Schoolmasters

Schoolmasters in the smaller academies and field schools were generally strangers in the communities where they worked. They were marginal figures in many ways. Transient and often without family, they barely survived on the tuition they collected. Their transiency insured that they remained strangers everywhere they went, although some secured employment because they had a relative or friend in the community to vouch for them. They generally lived in a room provided by the parents of one of their pupils. To the parents in the communities where they worked, they appeared desperate creatures, presumed to have been cast out of their communities and unable to succeed in more respectable professions. Most were only marginally in control of their classrooms, and only marginally competent to teach. George Gilmer, who became a governor of Georgia, recalled that the first teacher in the "Goose-Pond" neighborhood where he grew up was a deserter from the British navy whose only qualification was that he knew how to write. The teacher was fond of the switch and "knowing in all sorts of rascality," Gilmer wrote. He ended his stay in Goose-Pond at the public whipping post after being discovered forcing the locks of his employers, apparently in search of money. Such teachers came and went in quick succession.

¹⁹Johnston, "Early Educational Life," 1705.

Gilmer, who grew up in Wilkes County in the early nineteenth century, recalled the series of teachers who passed through the field school he attended as a child: a likable man from North Carolina, a violent Irishman, an alcoholic Virginian, a sober Georgian. None remained longer than a year.²⁰

In 1828 the trustees of the Milledgeville Academy recruited Joseph Folker, a promising teacher from Macon, who promised a new course of instruction for the town's boys and girls. Folker took out an advertisement in the Milledgeville newspaper, promising prospective parents that in a few short weeks "each pupil will be instructed to compose with ease, and to write with elegance." Boys and girls alike were welcome; he had taught over thirty young ladies in Macon with success, and his daughter would join him in Milledgeville to instruct the girls in "all the branches of plain and ornamental stitch work" in addition to the general course of instruction. His pitch had the quality of a patent medicine advertisement. Folker promised that "Young Ladies and Gentlemen will do well to avail themselves of the present opportunity, as with but little attention, they may derive lasting benefit." In just eight weeks, Folker's advertisement went on, his students could obtain a thorough knowledge of the "Philosophy of Grammar."

Lectures will be given on the subscriber's Chart of Etymology delineated and Syntax simplified. At one view (by the aid of symbolic representations,) all the arrangement, agreement, and connection of our sublime language is presented to the mind; and the study of Grammar,

²⁰George White, Historical Collections of Georgia (New York: Pudney and Rusell, 1854), 581-2; Orr, History of Education in Georgia, 53-59.

which has ever been considered a dry, tedious, and uninteresting study, instantly proved to be an interesting, delightful, and important study.²¹

Richard Malcolm Johnston wrote that the old field schoolmaster seemed almost a myth, "or at least a relic of a long-decedent race." He recalled these characters appearing in his rural community, "bringing in a red-spotted bandanna handkerchief his household goods, and in his tall, whitish-furred long-experienced hat a sheet of foolscap, on which was set down what his called his 'school articles.'" Quiet, serious, and sad, he looked "as if he had been a seeker of things occult and was not content with the results of his quest." These teachers, who came and went year after year, were a homely and barren lot, Johnston wrote. Such a man usually was unmarried, or "followed by a wife unique looking as himself, if possible some nearer a blank, who had never had the heart to increase the family any further."²²

In communities where a person's identity and standing depended heavily on family connections and where people had a highly attuned sense of place and belonging, such transiency must have seemed odd indeed. But the "idea that a native-born citizen competent to instruct children would have been content to undertake such a work was not entertained," Johnston wrote. Teaching school was seen as the end of the line professionally, "fit only for those who were not qualified for any other; who, if thus qualified, would never think of thus degrading themselves." Thus the need to bring in strangers: "In view of the poverty of repute attending this last resort for the

²¹Southern Recorder, August 9, 1828, 3.

²²Johnston, "Early Educational Life," 1702.

exercise of manly endeavor,” teachers “deemed it well to go away from the places that knew them, and set up among strangers.”²³

These schoolmasters, Johnston wrote, spent their days looking out of their crude one-room schoolhouses to the world beyond, caught in a pedagogical purgatory that they endured year after year, secure in having mastered the math problems in the Federal Calculator and the reading texts in Murray's Reader. Occasionally a patron might send the master a real-world math problem to be calculated, one not included in the book, bringing shame on the teacher unable to complete it and revenge on the scholar whose parent had made the request. Murray's Reader was more comfortable territory, providing an arena where the master's authority went unquestioned. “English grammar was his pride, in which most of his harmless little productions were displayed. Upon the sweatband of his hat were inscribed grammar rules and maxims from Webster's Spelling Book, which when away from the schoolroom he fondly quoted in season and out. If a stranger, on meeting one for the first time, hesitated where to locate him, doubt instantly vanished when he took off his hat and opened his mouth.”²⁴

Such displays of pedantic genius won not admiration but derision from most onlookers. For a man to boast literary aspirations seemed suspect, foolish, foppish. The most respectable literary men in the antebellum South, lawyers and newspaper

²³Ibid., 1702.

²⁴Ibid., 1707.

editors, were men of affairs, men toughened in the rough and tumble world of politics and business, men who shaped policy and opinion. One lawyer told of stopping for the night at a country house while traveling to court in a distant county. The house where he stayed also boarded the local schoolmaster, who by "his speech and the peculiar wearing of his hair" conveyed that he had "uncommon ambition." Sure enough, as the lawyer went to sleep that evening, he found on his bedside a verse the schoolmaster had written for him:

We part, we part; but oh, I hope
We'll meet again before we lope
Into the dark and silent grave
Where there is nothing else to crave.

While men of the world could laugh up their sleeves at such displays, students were a captive audience. In public a schoolmaster-poet could be made to answer for his literary pretensions, but in the classroom he could hold forth unquestioned. "Such a man led a sort of double existence," Johnston concluded, presenting himself as "bold, commanding in the school, and hesitating, often to timidity, elsewhere."²⁵

Despite the "bold, commanding" demeanor described by Johnston, schoolmasters held little authority either with their scholars or their parents. Teaching school in the early nineteenth century could be a violent and trying experience for these outsiders. One ritual that seemed designed to remind masters of their tenuous control of their pupils was the "turning out," in which students would barricade the school against the entry of the master, usually to demand a vacation from studies. This ritual,

²⁵Ibid., 1707.

carried out in a mixture of jest and deadly seriousness, tested the cleverness, judgment, good nature, and often the physical strength of the master.

Augustus Baldwin Longstreet recalled a turn-out like those he participated in as a youth. Demanding an Easter vacation one spring, the boys of the school, egged on by the girls, fortified their schoolhouse against the master's entry. Approaching the school, Michael St. John, the schoolmaster, at first demanded that the students let him through the door, threatening to break it down. "'Break it down,'" the students replied, "'and we'll break you down.'" The teacher then "walked around the academy three times, examining all the weak points with great care." After trying in vain to coax the children to open the school by holding one pupil's easter eggs hostage, he "determined to carry their fortifications by storm. Accordingly, he procured a heavy fence-rail, and commenced the assault upon the door." He succeeded in breaking down the door in this fashion, but found himself assaulted by the students: "Bill and Pete seized each a leg, and marched off with it in quick time. . . . Michael's head first took the desk, then the seat, and finally the ground (for the house was not floored), with three sonorous thumps. . . . No sooner did he touch the ground than he was completely buried with boys." The struggle grew "hotter and hotter," and "he threw the children about in all directions and postures," but at last he relented, and offered the students one day of holiday.²⁶

²⁶This account is drawn from Longstreet's "The Turn Out," in Georgia Scenes, 73-83. Longstreet recalls the scene from his own boyhood, but turn outs like the one he described continued to be part of school life in the nineteenth century. See also Leloudis, Schooling the New South, 16-17.

Even then, the schoolmaster's authority was not fully restored. Instead, the "Captain"--the father of two of the students--intervened. After watching the entire episode, Captain Griffin stepped in and proposed a settlement. Knowing that the children were planning a turn out, he had gone to make certain that no one sustained serious injuries, and to see that the schoolmaster earned his holiday. As the Captain explained: "To prevent those consequences, to bear witness that the masters was forced to yield before he would withhold a day of his promised labour from his employers, and to act as a mediator between him and the boys in settling the articles of peace, I always attend." The authority of the master was thus undermined from both directions. Students learned the ABCs, oratory, and ciphering in school, but they also learned to assert their standing in the social order, and they learned that their communities sanctioned the use of violence to maintain that standing. In the turn-outs, and in the countless other abuses they heaped upon their hapless schoolmasters, these students witnessed first-hand the close associations between learning and social power in their communities.

Students were sometimes able to drive despised teachers out of the community altogether. Wade Harris, who entered school on the eve of the Civil War, recalled one abusive teacher, "red-haired and red-tempered," whose sole mission seemed to be the maintenance of order, which she enforced by grabbing her students' hair "then shaking the little victim almost out of her wits." She would drag boys by their hair "over to one side of the room and beat a tattoo on the wall" with their heads. If two boys were found guilty of an infraction, she would grab them both by the hair and "crack their

heads together, then impel each one to his chair with a smack on the jaw. She never used a switch." At first, when the terrified students complained to their parents, they were rewarded with more punishment at school. But "it was not long before pupils began dropping out, and reports of the teacher's cruelty began going the rounds; then the children, emboldened to talk, saw to it that the talk did not lack the element of exaggeration." The teacher, with no allies in the community to vouch for her, was finally compelled to take a vacation from which she never returned.²⁷

For women, particularly northern women, who were raised in the middle class but who needed to make a living on their own--those who remained unmarried, whose families could not or would not support them, or who chose not to be dependent on their families--teaching was a likely profession of choice. Caroline Seabury left Brooklyn, New York, for Columbus, Mississippi, in 1854. She remained in the South even after the Civil War began, despite her profound alienation. "Had I a father or mother not a moment's delay would keep me from going to them," she wrote. "Without a home except one of dependence--I had rather work and suffer here." By 1850, according to one estimate, one of every five women in Massachusetts had taught at some point in her life, and between 1840 and 1860 the number of women teachers in the U.S. tripled. Many of these northern women headed South, seeking to escape their home region's saturated teaching market.²⁸

²⁷Harris, My School Days, 11-14.

²⁸Suzanne L. Bunkers, ed., The Diary of Caroline Seabury, 1854-1863 (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 62, 123.

The teaching career of Jennie Akehurst Lines illustrates the difficulties faced by teachers in antebellum Georgia and gives a good sense of the variety of environments in which white children learned. Jennie Akehurst grew up in Clinton, New York, where she began her career as a teacher. By the early 1850s, she grew restless and bored with the routine of teaching in New York, and the surplus of teachers in her home state made it difficult for her to find work. In 1857, she moved to Georgia to join her sister-in-law, Anna Maria Lines Akehurst. During her first few years in Georgia, Akehurst taught in a dozen or so different school settings, in a small field school in the hill country north of Atlanta, as an entrepreneur trying to start her own school in Atlanta, as a private tutor on a plantation, and finally as a teacher in a female seminary in Covington, a small town east of Atlanta. Born into a middle-class family and well-educated herself, Akehurst found herself at thirty years of age without money or a mate, and teaching was her best option for earning a living.²⁹

A great believer in self-improvement, Jennie Akehurst read widely in the classics. During the years she maintained a journal in the late 1850s, she read a variety of books including inspirational poetry, romantic novels, theological discourses, religious tracts, a book on demonology and witchcraft, a biography of Cromwell, Ivanhoe, Petrarch's Lives, and the works of Byron, Milton, Shakespeare, and Alexander Pope. Frequently surrounded by students she judged "common crackers,"

²⁹This and the following account is from Amelia Akehurst Lines, To Raise Myself a Little: The Diaries and Letters of Jennie, a Georgia Teacher, 1851-1886, ed. Thomas Dyer (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982). Sylvanus Lines was the cousin of her sister-in-law, Anna Maria Lines Akehurst.

Jennie worried about "loosing ground in regard to mental culture," and she resolved to "make books my companions, and my journal may be my bosom friend." She constantly sought better working conditions, battling rural isolation, payments in unreliable currency, insufficient enrollments, even a snake in her classroom.

Alternately choosing between the isolation of the countryside and the impossible costs of living in the city, she changed jobs often, and gradually built her reputation. She managed to support herself as a teacher, and in her first few years in Georgia she strived successfully to improve her teaching environment, rising from a rural



Fig. 4. Jennie Akehurst Lines.
Courtesy, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library,
University of Georgia

one-room schoolhouse to the handsome brick campus of Covington's female college.³⁰

Akehurst began her teaching career in Georgia in Euharlee, a tiny frontier community sixty miles northwest of Atlanta, fifteen miles west of her sister-in-law's home in Cartersville. She admitted her disappointment with the isolation of the place: "They told me it was a new place and I did not expect to see a village but I thought to see at least one street and a few pretty dwellings. I did not think I was to find my home among the trees." The room where she was to live was "neither plastered nor carpeted," she wrote. Her "academy" was no more promising, though its numerous windows kept it well-illuminated and well-ventilated. "It is completely surrounded by trees and it seemed so woodsy and lonely that I could contain my feelings no longer and my tears were discovered in spite of my efforts to hide them," she wrote. She felt better when a dozen students appeared for her first day of school, and after a couple of days she began to settle in: "Am in my school-room," she wrote. "Tis the first time I have remained here alone after the scholars have left. . . . It is very quiet here, too; a good place for a school." Her early optimism was dashed, though, as her pupils disappeared at harvest time. "Here I am almost alone in the school room," she recorded in October. "Only four pupils. The people here can not prize education very highly or they would not take their children from school to put them in the cotton field.

³⁰For a summary of Jennie Akehurst's reading, see Thomas G. Dyer's introduction to *To Raise Myself*, 3. On "loosing ground," see 126.

Mrs. Glaesener says the school always closes when the cotton opens. . . . With so little to occupy ones time and attention, times drag rather heavily.”³¹

Frustrated by the absenteeism of her Euharlee students, Jennie struck out for Atlanta in the fall of 1857. At fifteen dollars a month, boarding costs in the city were prohibitive, and she began drumming up students to pay her way. She ran an advertisement in the newspaper for her services:

A school for girls under fifteen, boys under eight at the following terms
Twelve weeks in a term, four terms in a year.
Primary studies per term \$5;
Common English branches \$7;
Higher English branches \$9

Despite her best efforts, Akehurst's prospects remained uncertain in Atlanta. She wrote her sister of her worries: “O! how discouraging this scholar hunting! . . . I expected there were scholars enough engaged to commence with, did not you?”³²

Though confident in her abilities as a teacher, Akehurst perceived very clearly the burden she carried as a single woman of limited means. “It is indeed a hard lot for a penniless girl to go forth alone in this wide world to seek maintenance,” she wrote her sister. “I wish I was a man then I would not fear, but alas what can a poor woman do?” She opened her school a few days later with five students, who would only pay her a fraction of what she needed to meet her expenses. Not long afterwards, there were “no additions to my school. I must go round to night and see what I can do

³¹Ibid., 45, 47, 61.

³²Ibid., 63-4.

Really I begin to feel alarmed." Her rounds netted the promise of only one additional student, and that was unlikely to pan out: "It is not the fashion here for people to keep their word." Calling on one home to offer her services, she was met rudely by a woman who "looked at me with an eye of scrutiny and rudely said The fact is there are so many of these half handed school mistresses going about that the people are getting tired of them. I felt at first like sinking out of sight." Humiliated and broke, she resolved to leave Atlanta, explaining in a letter to her suitor, Sylvanus Lines, that given the numerous obstacles of life in Atlanta, she had "concluded it was not best to baffle with such discouragements and uncertainties, for the sake of being in town, when I could have a quiet and comperatively easy if not a pleasant home in the country."³³

She began work as a tutor on a plantation outside of Atlanta called Glen Pleasant. There, she served as a glorified nanny, feeling alternately overwhelmed by her duties and bored by her social isolation. "Through the day I am constantly with my pupils, either in the school room, in the nursery, at the piano or on the play ground," she wrote Sylvanus. "Never feel free from care until they are locked in the arms of slumber; then I 'draw a long breath' and sit down to read or write." She lashed out at her mistress: "You do not know what it is to be a governess in the family of a Georgia planter, whose wife through a false education is not capable of giving one word of advice or making one wise suggestion in regard to the training of her own children."³⁴

³³Ibid., 65-68, 75.

³⁴Ibid., 77.

Leaving Glen Pleasant, she next found work in a country school outside of Oxford, Georgia, the home of Emory College. Her schoolhouse there was a "large, airy, cool" room in the woods, but she found her students dismal. "I know from the past that I am capable of doing better than I have done since I came South," she wrote Lines. "Concequently it wounds my pride and hurts my feelings that I have to take up with these poor country schools, with these common crackers. . . . I do not I can not like teaching in the country; every thing is uncongenial to my tastes," she wrote. The older girls, she complained, had "so little refinement of feeling and cultivation of mind that it is a task to try to interest them." Again dissatisfied with country life, Jennie moved to Covington, where she began teaching at Southern Masonic Female College. The school paid her about \$800 per year, she taught better, older students, and she was able to devote more time to her own studies.³⁵

Around the time Jennie Akehurst seemed to have fashioned a stable and moderately prosperous life for herself, Sylvanus Lines proposed to her after their long epistolary courtship. Marriage to Sylvanus offered her much-needed companionship, but held no promise of wealth; like Jennie, Sylvanus was well-educated but not affluent. Born in Connecticut, he worked as a printer, newspaper editor and publisher. She agreed to his proposal, saying that though they had not spent much time together, she had "found sympathy in the spirit which breathes through your letters." Her response to his marriage proposal was almost contractual in its measured assessment of

³⁵Ibid., 82-85.

their prospects together. She warned him of her sensitive nature, and agreed to marry him if he promised not to be cold and mean to her. Jennie married Sylvanus Lines in 1859, and retired from her two-year career as a Georgia schoolteacher.³⁶

³⁶Ibid., 136-7, 141.

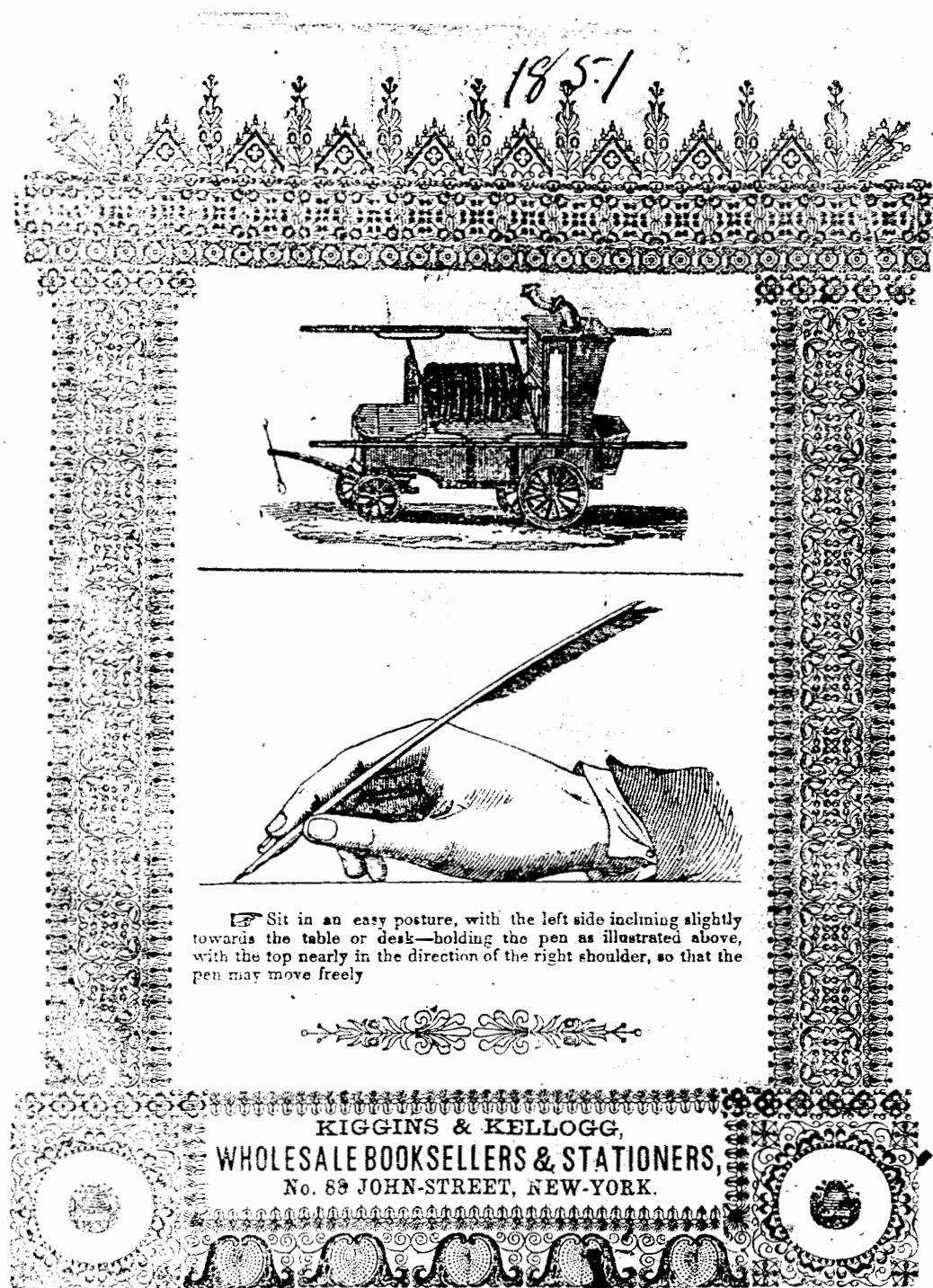


Fig. 5. Frontispiece of Jennie Akehurst Lines's Journal providing instruction in the mechanics of penmanship. Courtesy Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia

Academies and Colleges

As students from wealthy families advanced to the larger town academies as young teenagers, the rules became more formal, the setting more rarified, the lessons about their place in the social order more clear. The floorless, windowless field schools gave way to the beautiful symmetry of grand buildings and walled gardens. The students began lifelong friendships with their peers, developing intimate bonds as they ate together, studied together, slept together, and even underwent religious conversions with their classmates. The rules governing their conduct introduced them to the maze of social conventions that would govern their behavior as adults in the highly nuanced patriarchal world of the plantation. The rulebooks went on for pages, outlining rigid hierarchies unknown in their younger schooldays. Boys at Richmond Academy in Augusta were required to file in and out of school "by classes, the more advanced Classes proceeding first." The various classes at the University of Georgia were required "to give and receive, in the course of the Collegiate-life those tokens of respect which tend to the preservation of due subordination."³⁷

While the rules of conduct were more formalized at the larger academies and colleges, the lines between social and literary conventions were blurred. Just as they learned as children to recite moral and historical passages from readers, as teenagers

³⁷"Rules and Regulations of Richmond Academy," (1819) in Edgar W. Knight, ed., A Documentary History of Education in the South Before 1860, vol. 4 Private and Denominational Efforts (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953), 26; "Laws of the Senatus Academicus for the Government of the University of Georgia" (1803) in Knight, ed., A Documentary History of Education, vol. 3 The Rise of the State University (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953), 52-3.

they learned to inscribe their journals and letters with the lessons about gender, courtship, and social interaction that would govern their adult lives. By the time young gentlemen finished school, they had moved from the noisy world of chanting the alphabet with classmates into the quiet complexities of reading law and moral philosophy. Young ladies found themselves moving from the same boisterous world of the one-room schoolhouse to the world of keeping journals, writing letters, and reading sentimental fiction.

Oratory remained central to the curriculum, but reading aloud in the classroom was no longer tolerated. Having learned to read out loud as children, they were now required to read alone and to remain silent. The Richmond Academy in Augusta required that "there shall be no reading aloud, nor noise of any kind but by those who are reciting." Students were also encouraged to develop their skills as writers by keeping journals and commonplace books. A child who can write well enough "to decipher his own calligraphy" should keep a commonplace book where he could record "every word of importance," an educator noted in a Milledgeville newspaper. "'Twill aid the understanding; and more than that, he will imperceptibly get in the habit of expressing his ideas in his own language.'"³⁸

Female academies faced critics who charged that education would unsuit young women for domestic tasks. "All that a woman needs to know is how to read the New

³⁸"Rules and Regulations of Richmond Academy," in Knight, ed., A Documentary History of Education, 4:29; on commonplace books, see Southern Recorder, November 15, 1828.

Testament, and to spin and weave clothing for her family," the president of one women's college was told when trying to raise money for his school. "I will not give you one cent for any such purpose," another would-be patron informed him. "I would not have one of your graduates for a wife, for I could never build even a pig-pen without her criticizing it, and saying that it was not put up on mathematical principles."³⁹

Despite such criticism, academies for both boys and girls proliferated in the 1820s and 1830s. "Female Academies are springing up everywhere," a Charleston paper reported in 1822. "Sweetfaced maidens are seen, in sprightly troops, hastening to those sacred seats of science and virtue." While female academies were lampooned as finishing schools where the French and Italian Department might offer courses in "wearing wigs and false curls," or "wearing out 10 pair of shoes per year taking evening promenades," the academics could be challenging, and the socialization was crucial for girls learning to become young ladies. At the Female Academy in Sparta, Georgia, in addition to attending lectures by their teachers, students were required to give lectures of their own and perform experiments themselves; in this manner, "like apprentices at a trade, they become operative chemists."⁴⁰

³⁹Isabella Margaret Elizabeth John Blandin, History of Higher Education of Women in the South Prior to 1860 (New York: Neale Publishing, 1909; reprint, Washington, D.C.: Zenger Publishing, 1975), 134.

⁴⁰Charleston Courier, Feb 21, 1822, reprinted in Weems, 3:335-6; Farnham, Education of the Southern Belle, 13; Adiel Sherwood, Gazetteer of the State of Georgia, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: J. W. Martin and W. N. Bodin, 1829), 161.

After the series of one-room schools that had so frustrated her father, Loula Kendall went to the female academy in the town of Montpelier, and then on to Georgia Female College in Macon. She was a competitive student, an avid reader, and a prolific diarist and letter writer from the time she was fifteen until her death in the 1930s. Her studiousness and love of reading came early, perhaps because she was left crosseyed by disease as a young girl. Her mother encouraged her to develop her mind and character to compensate for her physical imperfection: "As I was not beautiful now I must endeavor by my amiable manners to win back my beauty," she was told, "and . . . when I was a grown lady I would be beautiful in mind, and good qualities if not in person." She often heard her sister Julia described as prettier than herself, and wrote that "I soon learned to think of myself as a hideous creature." Perhaps because of her self-consciousness about her eye and her appearance, she threw herself into studying at an early age, mastering the basics of reading and arithmetic by the time she was six years old. An unsuccessful eye operation when she was eight ruined her eye permanently, and, she lamented, "I could not see for weeks afterwards, and suffered a great deal, for I so loved my books, it seemed sinful to me, in depriving me of them."⁴¹

⁴¹Rogers Journal, June 24, 1855.



Fig. 6. Julia and Loula Kendall.
Courtesy, Special Collections and Rare Books Department,
Robert W. Woodfruff Library, Emory University

Despite the trouble with her eye, and despite the difficulty in finding decent schooling, by the time she arrived at Montpelier when she was fourteen, Loula Kendall read, wrote, and played the piano expertly; she and her sister each had their own piano. At Montpelier, she continued her academic progress, taking lessons in writing, composition, geography, botany, and music. "I am studying very hard and I think improving very much this term. I am determined I won't let the city girls go before me if I am from the country," she assured her father."⁴²

Her study of social customs intensified dramatically, especially the conventions of gender roles and courtship rituals. Loula and her classmates practiced social conventions through a variety of literary inventions, as when she and her classmates created a play post-office at her school in Marietta, each girl assuming a different fictive role: "Bettie Reynolds and Cornelia Chester were the Post-masters, whose names were "Priss Tadlauer" and "Molly Bucklon." My name was "Lillie Sinclair," an heiress of New York. Ophelia was "Dr. Dick Squaretoes," Cousin Anna's "May Lilly," and Letitia Hustelle's was "Jimmie Lumpins, Esq."⁴³

Such plays on gender identity were easily tolerated and were not uncommon, as young boys and girls learned the nuances of gender roles that would soon guide them through courtship. At a barbecue following examinations one spring--a party that included a band from town and 500 guests--Loula's older brother showed up dressed as

⁴²Loula Kendall Rogers to "Pa", 18 November 1852.

⁴³Rogers Journal, July 2, 1855.

a girl; "a great many thought it was myself," she wrote. Loula and her cousin contrived romantic plays in which each girl had a courtship role, male or female. "Cousin Anna and myself used to have so many plays, many a time have we remained at home when all the others had gone to church. . . . We made up a beautiful story (so we thought) . . . romantic, and we ourselves were the heroines. Our character was Addie Holmes (myself) who married Frank Howard. Another was Lizzie Emory (Annie) who married Frederick Combs. Emma Hamilton alias Dr. George Brewer of Savannah, and Annie Andis, alias . . . Col. Herbert Hamilton, were characters in the prettiest novel we ever composed." One evening at Montpelier, Rogers wrote her mother, she and the other girls "turned gentlemen" and hosted their female teachers at a party: "I named our room Grace's Retreat . . . and invited all the teachers. Miss Buelle said all the tickets were written so prettily. We all turned gentlemen and waited on the ladies. I handed Miss Buelle down to supper and was as attentive as a real gentleman. She says I acted the gentleman to perfection." Her roommates similarly waited on two other teachers. "We had a sweet supper and then played in our room. The teachers said they enjoyed themselves finely."⁴⁴

In addition to her course work at Montpelier, Loula began keeping a journal. Her journal became not only a place for private reflection, but a sort of commonplace book where she practiced a variety of literary forms by imitating different genres of literature and language. Perhaps most intriguing is her journal entry upon the departure

⁴⁴Rogers Journal, June 28, 1855; July 4, 1855; Rogers to Ma, 18 December 1852.

of a dear friend from school: "Oh! Leslie I am with thee now, I feel thy breath on my cheek, thy kisses on my lips . . . What--Ah: What is love? Why do I love my Leslie so much almost blindly? . . . Oh I think of her, dream of her all in the time, and oft--in the stilly night--I dream she is with me, her hands (my hands) clasped in mine, and her sweet ruby lips pressed to mine. But-ah! 'tis all a dream." Later that summer, back at her family's plantation at Bellwood, she complained of being stuck "all of this summer without a single male friend! We, we country girls do have a time amongst chickens, little squalling negroes, scratching kittens, hound dogs and dirt!! Don't we! I think it is as little as they could do, to visit us sometimes, just to keep us from forgetting there are such things!" She consoled herself with a daguerrotype of her schoolmate, "gazing on her sweet face a long time this evening--God bless her rosy pouting lips, would that I could snatch from thence this nectar kiss."⁴⁵

Such romantic female friendship, a commonplace among planter class schoolgirls, has been interpreted variously as sexual love, as a display of the relatively high degree of physical warmth shown in familial contexts in the American South, and as practice for the courtship and marriage that would follow school days.. Rogers' written description of her relationship with Leslie and other friends seems to imitate romantic fiction, which she read as a schoolgirl and later in her life. In Loula

⁴⁵Rogers Journal July 11, 1855; August 28, 1855. She came back to this page in her journal three years later, after her graduation from college, chastising herself for entertaining such thoughts: "I think Miss Loula Kendall should have remembered then that she was quite a child, and 'twas several years before she must "come out" and should not have expected gentleman company."

Kendall's world, romantic friendship at school became a literary activity, as did playtime with her cousins, her relationship with her teachers and parents, even her religious conversion. One of the key functions of academies like the one where she attended school was to prepare young girls for courtship, which, in the absence of male company, she practiced by writing about it in the genre of romantic fiction.⁴⁶

When Loula Kendall finished her studies at Georgia Female College, she was torn. She hated leaving her friends, but she also hated leaving behind her books for the world of courting and fashion. Ambivalent about her new role as a lady, she viewed the end of her student days with a sense of loss and the beginning of her courtship with apprehension. "Today is my last school day! . . . I who as early as I can remember used to love to study and go to school so much, and never wanted to be a young lady, I must now leave such scenes, and mingle with the world. . . . Now I am considered as being grown, the childish heart must be exchanged for a garb of dignity, the hallowed books must be thrown lightly away, and I am to be ushered a mass of whalebone and starch into the fashionable world."⁴⁷

In the years that followed, she went home while searching for a suitable mate. Just as she had feared, once out of school she fell inevitably into the domestic routines that she had seen consume her mother, herself a college graduate. Learning to manage

⁴⁶On romantic friendship, see Farnham, Education of the Southern Belle, 155-167; on courtship experienced vicariously through fiction, see Davidson, Revolution and the Word, 113, 123-6.

⁴⁷Rogers Journal, July 3, 1857.

a large household placed considerable demands on her time; where she once stayed up reading novels and keeping her journal, she now stayed up into the night sewing.

"Don't I wish there never was a piece of work in the world, oh! Don't I? Then I could read and write all the time, but now I've got to throw away all today on an old piece of linen for a hand, when I might be reading so nicely! It is horrid! I just know I am cut out for an old maid, for I never will love to keep home, attend to domestic concerns, and sew! Sigh! I wonder if any body ever did hate it as much as I do? If so I pity our poor sex, who are compelled to do drudgery &c., when they have no taste for it, while gentlemen can select any employment they choose, according to their own whimsiest fancies! Well, I must go I suppose, though I'd rather take a whipping."⁴⁸

Despite her doubts, Loula Kendall was soon married. But she could not have known that her family's fortune, invested largely in slaves, would be lost within a few years; she could not have known that before she was forty, she would be the widowed mother of seven children; she could not have known that her girlhood education--an education meant to make her attractive to suitors and to mark her standing in the world--would become her only asset as she set out to earn a living twenty years later, as a teacher and a writer.

Like Loula Kendall, many young mistresses entering the world of courtship, marriage, and plantation life despaired at the turn their lives took after completing their educations. After years of intensive academic preparation in the highly social

⁴⁸Rogers Journal, March 1, 1859.

atmosphere of school, they found themselves isolated, subordinate to their husbands and fathers, and burdened by the duties of running their households.⁴⁹

Women were not necessarily forced to abandon their intellectual pursuits after marriage, however. The journal of Henrietta Armstrong, a plantation mistress from south Georgia, provides a detailed and fascinating glimpse into the intellectual and literary world of a young married woman in late antebellum Georgia. Soon after her fifteenth birthday in 1858, Henrietta Vickers married Aeneas R. Armstrong, a twenty-three-year-old lieutenant in the U.S. Navy. Aeneas, listed in the 1860 census as a farmer, was wealthy; he owned over \$8,800 worth of real estate, and his personal estate, including 41 slaves, was valued at \$45,000. No children were listed in Henrietta and Aeneas's household, but their slave holdings in 1860 included four mulatto children, aged nine months to six years old. Henrietta began her diary in December, 1860, around the time her husband resigned his U.S. Navy commission and was awaiting orders to enter the Confederate Navy.⁵⁰

Though she remained busy running her Sumter County plantation, hosting guests, sewing, and taking care of sick relatives, Henrietta frequently made time for reading, clearly her favorite leisure activity. She often read aloud to her husband;

⁴⁹See Catherine Clinton, Tara Revisited: Women, War, and the Plantation Legend (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995), 42-3.

⁵⁰Much of the following account is based on the "Daily Journal of Henrietta Eugenia Vickers Armstrong," December 1860-December 1861, GDAH. On the Armstrongs' holdings, see Manuscript Census of 1860, Schedule 1 (Free Inhabitants), Sumter County, Georgia; Manuscript Census of 1860, Schedule 2 (Slave Inhabitants), Sumter County, Georgia.

indeed, this seems to have been one of their favorite means of relaxing together. She read widely, often as much as a book every day. In the winter and spring of 1861, she read several dozen books to her husband, including light humorous sketches, the poetry of Byron, Alexander Dumas' Memoir of a Physician, Jane Eyre, Pilgrim's Progress, Memoirs of Lafayette, The Count of Monte Cristo, and Oliver Twist. On visits into town, she ordered books and writing supplies, and she took advantage of her visits to the homes of friends and relatives, raiding their libraries.

With the threat of war on the horizon, Henrietta made certain to find newspapers when she could, eager to stay abreast of political news. By the summer of 1861, Henrietta and Aeneas tried to maintain their normal routine, but days spent reading, writing letters, entertaining guests, and managing their farm grew rare as the war heated up. Her reading habits broadened to include newspapers, telegraph messages, and letters bearing war news, which she reported in her journal in scrupulous detail. "We get no newspapers and hear no news at all," she wrote in March of 1861. "I received a letter from Richard and answered it. . . . Fort Sumter, it is expected, will be evacuated very soon, but the Yankees are so tricky that we can not tell anything about it."⁵¹

With the outbreak of war, Henrietta Armstrong, whose journal had previously catalogued her reading of romantic poetry and fiction, historical novels, and travel

⁵¹Armstrong Journal, March 7, 1861. On the reading and writing practices of white women in the South during the Civil War, see Faust, Mothers of Invention, 153-78.

writing, turned her considerable intellectual energies toward politics. She read the newspapers closely, looking for signs of a peaceful settlement, but she feared that "there will be more blood shed than has ever been known." Even in her rural community in the remote southwestern corner of Georgia, Henrietta learned about the shelling of Fort Sumter within a few hours of the event, and she kept abreast of the news as it unfolded through the day. "We learned this morning that the South Carolina troops has commenced firing at Fort Sumter at half past four this morning," she wrote on April 12. "Anderson returned the fire until seven o'clock tonight, when he ceased and has not fired up to this time. None of our troops were hurt and it is pretty certain that Sumter will be ours." With the shelling of Fort Sumter, the flow of information into Henrietta's household became an almost hour by hour obsession.⁵²

Time that had been spent reading with her husband was now occupied with war preparations. Her husband replaced her old sewing machine in February, and she sewed uniforms until her fingers hurt. She and Aeneas traveled to visit family around the state, in preparation for his departure to the war. At the end of April, after a long absence, Aeneas returned home, and she did her best to resume their old routine, reading to him a book called Dodds Abroad. Still, she dreaded what lay ahead: "The news today is still bad, I have not the heart to think of it." The following day, she started with a new book, entitled Varieties in English Life. Later that month, after working through much of the day sewing pants for soldiers, she read again to her

⁵²Armstrong Journal, March 28, 1861; April 12, 1861.

husband, but their thoughts were distracted by news of the war: "Tonight I have been reading to Aeneas from Jane Eyre, he is very much pleased with it. I see by the papers that Tennessee has entered the same league with the Confederate States that Virginia did, She has appropriated Five Millions of Dollars and called for Fifty Five Thousand troops."⁵³

In August of 1861, not long after her eighteenth birthday, Henrietta wrote that "after a very warm and sultry day . . . we are having the most beautiful moonlight night that I ever saw. Tonight the Moon was so brilliant, that I read a story in the Arabian Nights by its light." After this perfect summer day--a day spent visiting with family and playing the piano for guests--this young belle sat in her garden under the light of the moon, reading about a distant and mythical Africa, with her slaves in cabins nearby, and with the Civil War beginning in earnest to the north. Not long after, Henrietta's journal comes to an abrupt end. In the back of the journal, following a list of the year's cotton shipments, several pages of French lessons, and a list of Confederate generals, reads the final page:

Lieut Aeneas Armstrong was drowned in the James River, below .
Richmond, January 26, 1865. He was kind, gentle, amiable, and brave;
Noble in his deeds; just to all.⁵⁴

⁵³Armstrong Journal, April 30, 1861; May 1, 1861; May 12, 1861.

⁵⁴Armstrong Journal, August 20, 1861; December 9, 1861.

CHAPTER 5

"KNOWLEDGE IS POWER": EDUCATION AND CITIZENSHIP DURING WAR AND RECONSTRUCTION

The issue of black literacy figured prominently in the definitions of freedom and black citizenship hammered out during and after the Civil War. Even in the years before the war, the nation's black leaders convened around the nation to press for education and the right to vote. The spokesmen at these conventions frequently associated education with their claim to the suffrage. In 1852, a delegation of free black men met in the slave state of Maryland. Judging their era distinguished by its spirit of "inquiry, investigation, enterprise and improvement in physical, intellectual, and moral sciences," yet finding their race degraded by centuries of slavery, they committed themselves to the "glorious work of our own moral elevation, and . . . social and intellectual improvement." They urged the formation of educational societies and petitioned for free schools for "our poor and destitute children." The president of the New England Colored Citizens' Convention sounded a similar note in 1859, arguing that there must be a representative class of people whose learning, wealth, and moral character enabled them to speak for the nation's black people. The delegates acknowledged the "hunker-American idea, that knowledge is a dangerous element in the brain of a colored man" and they resolved "to strive for its possession, as essential to our safety and freedom." A few years later, at the height of the Civil

War, Kansas leaders declared that "knowledge is power," linking their call for education with the suffrage and predicting that "in a few years colored men will vote in all of the now seceded States." They anticipated that enemies of black suffrage would object that this "right that requires so much intelligence" would be extended to "ignorant negroes, just escaped from slavery." To the argument that black men were "too ignorant to be trusted with the ballot," Pennsylvanian Isaiah Weir shrewdly noted that white men, who alone had exercised the franchise, had "used it so stupidly" as to bring about the Civil War.¹

These black leaders recognized education as the wedge which promised political leverage, as suggested by their refrain: "Knowledge is power." Despite the seeming certainty and simplicity of the statement, the meanings of black freedom and the nature of black citizenship remained in question for years after the Civil War ended. Black Americans, both national leaders and the mass of newly freed Southerners, saw that the ability to read and write would be crucial in their efforts to gain the vote, which would help them to achieve a freedom that would be meaningful, sustainable, and defensible

¹"Maryland Free Colored People's Convention, July 27-28, 1852," in Philip S. Foner and George E. Walker, eds., Proceedings of the Black State Conventions, 1840-1865, Vol. II, (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1980), 47-48; "New England Colored Citizens Convention, August 1, 1859," in *ibid.*, 209, 219; "Proceedings of the Colored Convention of the State of Kansas Held at Leavensworth, October 13-16, 1863," in *ibid.*, 233, 237. Isaiah Weir quoted in "Interview with the House Judiciary Committee," in "Proceedings of the National Convention of the Colored Men of America, Held in Washington, D.C., January 13-16, 1869," in Philip S. Foner and George E. Walker, eds., Proceedings of the Black National and State Conventions 1865-1900, Vol. I (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 384. For an overview of black conventions, see Leon F. Litwack, Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery (New York: Vintage, 1979), 502-556.

from white attack. Of all the privileges conferred by the end of slavery, the right to vote was the most jealously guarded by white Southerners and the most zealously sought by blacks. If Klansmen and bands of night riders mounted the most vicious response to black freedom, the arguments posed in favor of circumscribing black voting rights seemed among the most rational, humane, and reasonable. Southern whites argued against black suffrage and the other privileges of citizenship on the grounds that blacks were uneducated, and were therefore gullible, dependent and corruptible. These arguments seemed reasonable to would-be defenders of freedom from the North, and to many black leaders as well. Learning and moral character were linked by black and white leaders alike as they debated the prospective political rights of the freedmen, and the ability to read and write came to serve as a shorthand estimation of black moral, intellectual, and political capability.

It was clear to everyone that opening the franchise to the freedmen would destroy the white monopoly on political power. Whites in the South saw illiteracy as the lock which could keep blacks out of the polls; black Southerners saw literacy as the key which would allow them to enter. Well aware that the federal military presence was not long to last, black Southerners felt only the right to vote could offer the protection they needed in the long run. As the Virginia freedmen's convention put it in 1865, the ballot was the primary defense against incursions against their tenuous freedom: "In one word, the only salvation for us besides the power of the Government, is in the possession of the ballot. Give us this, and we will protect ourselves. No class

of men relatively as numerous as we were ever oppressed, when armed with the ballot."²

Education of Contrabands During the Civil War

On the edges of the South, slavery began to fall apart almost as soon as the first shots of the Civil War were fired. Less than six weeks after the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter in the spring of 1861, three slaves appeared at Fort Monroe, a federal garrison near Hampton, Virginia, seeking asylum from their owner, a Confederate colonel. Calling them "contraband," a term denoting captured enemy property, General Benjamin Butler offered the three men refuge. Following Butler's example, the U.S. Army was soon offering varying degrees of aid to increasing numbers of contraband slaves. During the first months of the war, thousands of contrabands sought protection from the U.S. Army and their abolitionist allies around the borders of the Confederacy: on the sea islands of South Carolina, in the District of Columbia and Northern Virginia, and in the Kansas Territory, where 4,000 escaped slaves sought their freedom in the first year of the war. The following year, thousands of

²"Address to the Loyal Citizens and the Congress of the United States of America," in "Proceedings of the Convention of the Colored People of Va., Held in the City of Alexandria, August 2-5, 1865," in Foner and Walker, eds., Proceedings, 1840-1865, II: 271.

contrabands crowded into makeshift camps behind Union lines deep in the heart of the Confederacy, in Tennessee and Mississippi.³

In an accident of geography, the coastal islands of South Carolina, which had been among the most isolated plantation regimes in the South, were most vulnerable to the U.S. military. The earliest and most dramatic large-scale federal liberation of slaves unfolded on the island of Port Royal, south of Charleston. As federal troops captured Port Royal in the fall of 1861, local whites abandoned the island, leaving behind more than 8,000 slaves, who found themselves suddenly free but under federal control. The abolitionists who soon arrived, calling themselves Gideonites, were determined to demonstrate that these freed slaves would make productive and loyal citizens. As federal agents set about supervising the cultivation of the island's cotton crop during the spring of 1862, the Gideonites established schools, seeking to teach the ABCs as well as the virtues of thrift, industry, and cleanliness. They found a willing audience of children and adults alike. "The Negroes . . . will do anything for us, if we will only teach them," one teacher reported. While many of the students "would anywhere be considered bright," the lowcountry patois remained a challenge. Laura Towne, an abolitionist from Philadelphia, wrote of the difficulty she had communicating with her students: "They evidently did not understand me, and I could

³James M. McPherson, The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964; 2nd ed., 1992), 155, 170; James M. McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 355-6; John Eaton, Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen: Reminiscences of the Civil War (New York: Longmans, Green, 1907; reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 1-5.

not understand them, and after two hours and a half of effort I was thoroughly exhausted." Nonetheless, one of Towne's fellow teachers reported that his best students had progressed to "easy reading" within a few months.⁴

This "rehearsal for Reconstruction," as the historian Willie Lee Rose described the Port Royal project, raised the important questions of what kind of freedom America's black slaves would enjoy, how the transition from slavery to freedom would be accomplished, and what the obligation of the federal government and voluntary relief agencies would be in helping the freedmen through that transition. The education of freed slaves, central to the Port Royal project, would play a central role in fashioning freedom everywhere in the South. Freedom had come, but it remained to be seen what freedom would mean.

Susie King Taylor, a fourteen-year-old slave in Savannah when federal troops attacked nearby Fort Pulaski in 1862, abandoned her home in Georgia to join the free community in Port Royal. Secretly educated as a child by a free black woman, Taylor surprised federal officers with her ability to read and write, and they soon recruited her to begin teaching. During the course of the war, Taylor worked as a laundress, cleaned muskets, assisted in a hospital, and taught black soldiers how to read and write.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson, under whom Susie King Taylor worked in South Carolina, wrote about watching an unidentified black woman, perhaps Taylor, by the

⁴Willie Lee Rose, Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 87-8; Towne quote in McPherson, Struggle for Equality, 163.

campfire at night, teaching the black soldiers under his command. The soldiers were "spelling slow monosyllables out of a primer, a feat which always commands all ears," he wrote. The regiment's chaplain was building a schoolhouse, and Higginson was hopeful that the learning would continue. But, he noted, "the alphabet must always be a very incidental business in the camp." There was never any systematic effort in the Union Army to educate black troops, but chaplains, officers with backgrounds as abolitionists or teachers, and some officers' wives contributed to the cause. In 1865, General O. O. Howard, the newly appointed commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau, estimated that over 900 teachers had taught some 200,000 freed slaves during the course of the war.⁵

At the time of emancipation, fewer than 10 percent of black Southerners were literate, but most had seen others read and write and recognized the power of the skill. Whites often misjudged the reading abilities of newly freed slaves, and they underestimated how clearly blacks understood the power of reading and writing. A Sea Islands missionary, noting slaves' eagerness to learn to read for themselves, wrote patronizingly that they had seen "the magic of a scrap of writing sent from a master to

⁵At the close of the war, Susie King Taylor returned to Savannah, where she opened a school on South Broad Street. Susie King Taylor, Reminiscences of My Life in Camp With the 33rd U.S. Colored Troops (Boston: S. K. Taylor, 1902); reprinted as A Black Woman's Civil War Memoirs eds. Patricia W. Romero and Willie Lee King (New York: Markus Wiener, 1988), 7-13, 29-33, 37-38, 124; Rose, Rehearsal, 87. Dudley Taylor Cornish, "The Union Army as a School for Negroes," Journal of Negro History 37 (October 1952): 368-382 (Higginson quoted on 369-70); McPherson, Struggle for Equality, 172.

an overseer." Many who could read disguised their abilities; one slave caught reading turned the newspaper upside down and declared, "Confederates done won the war."⁶

During the war slaves as well as masters eagerly awaited war news brought by the newspapers. The daughter of an Athens slave recalled that her mother would "steal the newspapers and read up about the war, and she kept the other slaves posted as to how the war was progressing." Edward Glenn, a young slave in Forsyth County, Georgia, carried the newspaper to his mistress every day; and every day Walter Raleigh, the local black preacher, waited for him by the road and read the paper before Glenn took it up to the house. One day the preacher threw the paper to the ground, hollering, "I'm free as a frog!" His mistress read the paper and began to cry.⁷

Masters' control over their slaves crumbled most quickly and thoroughly in cities during the Civil War. Slaves new to the cities mingled with free blacks, beyond the oversight of masters preoccupied with the war, or who had gone to fight. In the cities, black schools and churches generally went unmolested, infractions neglected

⁶The 1870 census does not give black illiteracy rates, but Charles Warren and J. L. M. Curry estimate that 94 percent of black Georgians were unable to read and write in "Illiteracy in the United States with Appendix on National Aid to Education," Department of Education Circular (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1884). See also U.S. Bureau of the Census, Negro Population, 1790-1915 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1918), 419. On "magic," see Rose, Rehearsal for Reconstruction, 86; on newspaper, see Litwack, Storm, 23.

⁷On Athens slave, see George P. Rawick, ed. The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972) Georgia Narratives: 12 (1): 257-8, quoted in Clarence A. Mohr, On the Threshold of Freedom: Masters and Slaves in Civil War Georgia (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 209; on Edward Glenn, see Litwack, Storm, 22.

during the chaos of war. Ned Purdee, a black Methodist preacher in Augusta, ran a school, for which he was often caught, but rarely punished. When Howell Cobb's wife, Mary Ann, left her home in Athens for her brother's home in Macon, her house servant, Aggy, ran the Athens home without supervision, keeping her mistress informed by writing her letters.⁸

During the war, Atlanta was the fastest-growing city in Georgia, jumping from around ten thousand inhabitants at the war's outbreak to almost twenty thousand by 1863. Masters left their rural homes seeking refuge in the cities, and many took their slaves with them. Many slaves worked in Confederate war plants in the cities. The pace of black migration into the cities picked up substantially after the war, a move whites saw as shiftless and irresponsible. But former slaves from the countryside saw opportunity in the city, and they remembered the relative freedom and safety which slaves and free blacks had enjoyed in the cities before the war. Men found work in lumberyards and on shipping docks, as teamsters or in restaurants and hotels. Parents moved looking for schooling for their children. The cities' new black neighborhoods bore names of hope and freedom: Atlanta's black section was called "Shermantown," while its Augusta counterpart was known as "Canaan."⁹

⁸Mohr, Threshold, 205-9. Mohr emphasizes the rapid breakdown of masters' control in the cities compared to the countryside. Despite migration into cities, slavery remained a predominately rural institution through the war (210).

⁹Mohr, Threshold, 190-209; Edmund L. Drago, Black Politicians in Reconstruction Georgia: A Splendid Failure (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 107.

Both in these new city neighborhoods and in rural communities, the arduous task of creating and sustaining freedom in a world hostile to black ambition lay ahead, and procuring schooling for themselves and their children would be a high priority of newly freed slaves. As they walked away from their old masters' plantations, now without need of passes, the newly freed people of the South assessed the resources they could carry into an exhilarating and frightening future. Stuffed into hastily packed bags, along with scant other possessions, they carried with them blue-backed spellers, Bibles, and letters secretly secured under slavery. What had been kept secret before were now emblems of their freedom. Education, no longer outlawed, would bring new opportunities to the new generation of freedom. But new opportunities brought new tensions as well--between recalcitrant Southern whites and freedmen, between an older generation of black Southerners and their children, between the need to secure an education and the need to make a living.

Forging Freedom

The South during Reconstruction was a world turned upside down. Slave markets were converted into schoolhouses. Youngsters taught their elders to read and write. Northern men exhausted by years of war returned to their homes in Ohio and Illinois, while their sisters and daughters travelled South to teach the newly freed slaves. The education of white children was overlooked in the chaos of Reconstruction, even as thousands of freed slaves tasted education for the first time. Black men voted and held office while their former masters were kept from the polls.

The civility and dignity of Lee's surrender was followed by years of violent incivility, behavior that was anything but dignified. The leaders of white society donned disguises and spent their evenings terrorizing their newly free neighbors, and anyone else who dared challenge them.

When slavery ended, black Southerners filled makeshift classrooms across the region. Within a few days of Sherman's arrival in Savannah, local black leaders founded an educational association that set up schools in the city's old slave market. By the end of the year, five hundred black children were attending school in Savannah. Their lessons in grammar, geography, arithmetic, and elocution were punctuated by a steady parade of white visitors, who came to observe the classes and to remind the children of the pressing need for "mental and moral improvement" and the "dangers of idleness and vagrancy." J. W. Alvord, the Freedmen's Bureau Superintendent of Education, was pleased by the sight of the children hard at work and felt it promised "great hopes for the steady advancement of the colored race in all the paths of Christian progress." Like many of his contemporaries, Reverend Alvord believed that "it is through the school-book channel alone that these people are to be lifted from the paths of ignorance, and rescued from the snares of evil and wickedness."¹⁰

In Atlanta, a similar scene was unfolding. Two ex-slaves, James Tate and Grandison B. Daniels, established a school in a church building. A railroad boxcar

¹⁰American Missionary, November 1865, 256-258; Jacqueline Jones, Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 73.

brought from Chattanooga provided additional space, and northern missionaries collaborated with a local black pastor to provide Atlanta's black children their first taste of formal schooling. Children learned by day; their parents attended classes in the evening. No northern visitor, it seems, could resist commenting on the sight of freed slaves learning to read, bent over the Bible, McGuffey's Reader, or Webster's blue-back speller. It was a reassuring image, vindication of the enormous toll the Civil War had exacted, a promise that the nation's black population could be lifted from slavery and fashioned into productive, loyal, and Christian citizens.¹¹

Schools also were being established in the countryside. Jefferson Franklin Henry, a former slave from Paulding County, recalled that only "three months after the war, schools was opened up here for Negroes and they was in charge of Yankee teachers." Images of black children learning to read and write in the years following emancipation have animated historians just as they did contemporary observers. The scenes are familiar: children reciting Bible verses, catechisms, and the ABCs; teachers arriving from Oberlin or Yale, considerably more impassioned by the lessons of the Gospel than by the lessons of grammar, but hoping to impart both.¹²

¹¹Clarence A. Bacote, The Story of Atlanta University: A Century of Service, 1865-1965 (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1969), 4-5.

¹²Jefferson Henry quoted in Rawick, ed., American Slave: Ga. Narr. 12 (2): 191. On the religious motivation for literacy among nineteenth-century black Southerners, see especially Janet Duitsman Cornelius, When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991); on the religious motivations of northern teachers, see Jones, Soldiers of Light and Love.

The heroism of these missionaries has often eclipsed the immediate political imperatives that drove black Southerners' efforts to acquire an education. Black Southerners sought through reading to seal their personal relationship with God, according to the Protestant doctrine that each person must search the scriptures for the revealed word. Black leaders in the South and across the nation also recognized a more immediate, if more temporal, benefit as well. They knew that to make a viable bid for political participation, the freedmen would have to demonstrate their literacy to skeptical whites. In addition to its usefulness, the ability to read and write was an outward sign of respect and responsibility. Schoolhouses, like churches, were the first tangible signs of an independent, free, black community. Many saw that black leaders such as Frederick Douglass had mastered the skill and knew the ability to read and write offered prominence and power. Many wanted an education primarily because it had been forbidden under slave law; reading and writing were outward symbols of the independence and respectability conferred by freedom.¹³

Freedmen recognized that their right to make and enforce contracts, especially labor contracts, was an important means of protecting their economic interests as free laborers. Jefferson Henry felt that education offered ex-slaves their best protection

¹³Eric Foner, Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877 (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 96-7. On literacy of elite blacks, see Willard B. Gatewood, Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920 (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990); on literacy as an outward sign of freedom, see Lawrence W. Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 155-6. Levine writes that "along with spatial mobility, literacy was one of the chief symbols of the former slaves' new status; one of the manifest signs they were no longer chattel" (155).

from white fraud: "It was several years before no Negroes was able to buy land, and thar was just a few of 'em done it to start with. Negroes had to go to school fust and git larnin' so they would know how to keep some of them white folks from gittin' land way from 'em if they did buy it." Beginning in the spring of 1865, the Freedmen's Bureau oversaw these contract negotiations, which often were made tense by planters' reluctance to pay adequate wages or to recognize "in practice" that their former slaves were now free. For their part, many blacks were unwilling to enter contracts except with Northern men whom they felt they could trust. Freedmen scrupulously inspected the terms of the contracts. Frances Butler Leigh wrote that "not one signed the contract without a long argument on the subject, most of them refusing to sign at all." She sat "in a state of dogged patience" while listening to everyone "have his talk out, reading the contract over and over again as each one asked for it. . . . One wanted this altered in the contract, another one that." Some plantation workers made the establishment of a schoolhouse "an absolute condition" of their labor contracts.¹⁴

Most laborers, unable to write, signed the familiar "x" in place of their names:

¹⁴Jefferson Henry quoted in Rawick, ed., American Slave: Ga. Narr. 12 (2): 191; John Richard Dennett, The South As it Is, 1865-1866 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1965), 270. Federal law required that "Negroes must be free to choose their own employers, and be paid for their labor. Agreements should be free, bona fide acts, approved by proper officers, and their inviolability enforced on both parties." See "Circular No. 5," 30 May 1865, Rules and Regulations for Assistant Commissioners, in Circulars Etc. Issued by the Commissioner, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, (Washington, 1867). Edmund L. Drago writes that "like many nineteenth-century Americans, these ex-slaves had an exaggerated sense of what education could do for them; but in a society where labor was based on a written contract, the ability to read was crucial." Drago, Black Politicians, 138; Foner, Reconstruction, 96.

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These contract signings provided some former masters their first glimpse of skills hidden by their slaves. An Alabama planter who watched his former slave sign his full name could not contain his sense of betrayal. He ordered the laborer, a man named Arch, off his place: "You done stayed in war wid me four years . . . and I ain't known that was in you. Now I ain't got no confidence in you."¹⁵

Freedmen saw that reading, and especially writing, were also useful tools in helping buttress their fragile freedom as they petitioned the Freedmen's Bureau and the courts. Literate freedmen wrote countless letters to the Freedmen's Bureau appealing for help, and black legislators like Tunis Campbell even swore out warrants for the arrest of abusive whites. A dozen applications for redress arrived at the Atlanta office of the Freedmen's Bureau every day, requesting protection against fraud, assault, robbery, abuse, or cruelty.¹⁶

After the war, Atlanta quickly emerged as a center of opportunity for former slaves and for whites advocating the "New South." The city, shelled and set ablaze in the summer of 1864, attracted the attention of numerous journalists and travellers from

¹⁵Wm Neal's X signature from contract dated 16 April 1867, Columbia County, Georgia, in File 2, Box 89 (Reconstruction), GDAH; Alabama freedmen story in Litwack, Storm, 198.

¹⁶Dennett, The South As it Is, 271. Affidavits and warrants in Tunis Campbell Sr. Papers, GDAH.

the North, who were impressed by the city's remarkable rebirth. As he rode the train from Augusta to Atlanta at the end of 1865, John Richard Dennett, a young journalist writing for the Nation, found himself surrounded by signs of the region's recovery. The train was comfortable and made good time, and the car's passengers included drummers from New York, and men and women from across the South. "The newspapers of Chicago, Louisville, and Nashville could be bought," Dennett reported. "A one-armed man in a rebel uniform sold cigars." Dennett arrived in Atlanta on Christmas Eve, where Chinese firecrackers lit up the night sky; but the fireworks also illuminated the ruined city below: "burned buildings at the way stations, rails fantastically twisted and bent, and ruined locomotives."¹⁷

On Christmas morning, the city appeared to Dennett "a most cheerless and mean-looking place." It had been raining for weeks, and the city streets were ankle-deep in mud, strewn with animal bones, garbage, and lumber scraps. "Rough-looking fellows" clustered on the street corners and outside liquor shops; federal troops, black and white, patrolled the streets, and "Negroes of all colors abound." He came across a crowd of about 200 freedmen and a few whites, who were gathered at the city hall listening to a freedmen's bureau official, Colonel Curkendall. The Bureau had set up a camp nearby, where about 650 freed slaves were receiving "a little hard-tack and a poor place to sleep" until they could find work. Curkendall warned them that in spite of these limited provisions, "there was no comfort for them anywhere without hard

¹⁷Dennett, The South As it Is, 266-267.

work for honest wages. No land would be given them." And, the right of suffrage "they would probably get if they showed themselves qualified to exercise it. In the exercise of every other right he would certainly protect them. Exact justice should be administered. . . . Then the colonel spoke of education, and gave good advice in reference to a great many points of conduct and character." Hard work and education, Curkendall assured his audience, "would soon put the ballot into the hands of every Negro in the South."¹⁸

Citizens: Literacy and the Ideology of Suffrage Restriction

In October 1865, three hundred of Georgia's white leaders gathered in Milledgeville to reconstruct their state government under terms set by provisional governor James Johnson. Johnson instructed the convention to acknowledge the "accomplished fact" of slavery's demise, and enjoined them to protect the public from the "evils of sudden emancipation," to "secure those emerging from bondage in the enjoyment of their legal rights," and to "protect the humble, the ignorant, and weak from wrong and aggression." Late the following afternoon, the assembly's members assented by their silence to a resolution acknowledging the end of slavery in Georgia: "The government of the United States having, as a war measure, proclaimed all slaves held or owned in this State emancipated from slavery, and having carried that proclamation into full practical effect, there shall henceforth be within the State of

¹⁸Dennett, The South As it Is, 267-68.

Georgia neither slavery nor involuntary servitude." The convention refused to waive any future claims to compensation for what most white Georgians saw as property confiscated at gunpoint by the United States government.¹⁹

The resolution, buried deep within the day's proceedings, struck Sidney Andrews, a reporter from Boston, as oddly understated and anticlimactic after four years of bloody war. By the autumn of 1865 the end of slavery was, as James Johnson said, an accomplished fact. But if reconstructing the state government according to Andrew Johnson's conciliatory terms was as easy as the stroke of a pen, defining the role of freed slaves within this new body politic would be a highly emotional and frequently violent contest. Even in Georgia, where Republican rule ended late in 1870, Reconstruction required more years of struggle than had the war which brought about slavery's end. Among other things, Reconstruction was a war over the nature of black citizenship in the South, a war fought in the polls, in state legislatures, in the courts--and in its most terrifying moments, at nighttime on back roads and in farmhouses.

Black Southerners came away from this struggle in the 1870s with the fundamental rights of citizenship in hand: the right to testify in court, the right to enter into contracts, and, for black men, the crucial right to vote. But despite three amendments to the United States Constitution which defined and promised to protect freedmen's citizenship, the rights gained during Reconstruction remained vulnerable to

¹⁹Sidney Andrews, The South Since the War: As Shown by Fourteen Weeks of Travel and Observation in Georgia and the Carolinas (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1866), 241, 246-7; Harper's New Monthly Magazine, January 1866, 259-260.

white opposition. Whites pointed to what they saw as black intellectual inferiority, particularly the inability to read--the result of three decades of legally mandated illiteracy--as proof that blacks were ill-suited for freedom, much less the full rights and duties of citizenship. "Thousands of the negroes had not the slightest idea of what they were doing," reported the Southern Recorder, a Milledgeville newspaper. A planter from middle Georgia saw ten black men headed for the polls, and stopped them: "Well, boys, says he, where are you going? To vote said they. Who are you going to vote for. Dunno sar. What are you going to vote for? Dunno. Dey give us dese tickets and tell us to put um in at de box in Sandersville. . . . Dunno nuffin about it, just gwine to put dese here in.' A fine specimen of the intelligence to rule the State," the Recorder sniffed.²⁰

Augustus Wright, a leading Democrat from Rome, told a congressional committee that "I do not believe that there is any people on the face of the globe, and I know I am saying it under oath, that is capable of self-government but the white race"--except the French, he noted. "The idea that a black man is capable of self-government--how can I believe it?" Struggling for words, Wright continued, "The history of his race for thousands of years, and his type of civilization now--I do not know, it seems to me so, I may be wrong--but look at him now, just out of slavery. Congress gives its judgment in favor of him, for it gives him the ballot; and it cannot require a higher type of civilization when he receives the ballot; that is the privilege of

²⁰Southern Recorder (Milledgeville, Georgia), November 5, 1867.

the highest type of civilization." Wright had trouble describing those whose lives had been so intimately bound with his own under slavery. But he was certain that the ballot was sacred, an attribute of civilization properly reserved for those of culture, of learning--and, no doubt, of Democratic loyalties.²¹

Like Augustus Wright, many former masters were unable to conceive of sharing citizenship with their ex-slaves, and they threw up obstacles to black political participation at every turn. Images of newly freed slaves lining up to vote while their former masters stood by disfranchised were central to the white memory of Reconstruction. "Every negro of twenty-years and older was given the ballot," Mary Annette Harris recounted in a letter read by her daughter before a literary society after the turn of the century. "20,000 white men, property-holders, responsible for the good government of the State,--men intelligent, versed in literature and political economy,--men of uprightness, who had all been Confederate soldiers as well,--were denied the right to vote, while the negro field hand, the hostler [sic], and the carriage driver (to whom the alphabet was a puzzle and who could not read a syllable of his ticket) were ushered in at the polls to drop the ballot in the place pointed out to them." Such stories, told and retold, came to epitomize Reconstruction in the memory of white Southerners, and helped to justify the disfranchisement movement at the end of the century. Claiming that only they understood the true mind and character of the

²¹Testimony of the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States (The Ku-Klux Conspiracy.) Georgia, Part I. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 100.

freedmen, white Southerners resisted what they saw as an intrusive federal presence and attributed the region's continued civil unrest to Yankee meddling. White Southerners insisted that their former chattel were ignorant and weak, dependent upon the protection and stability slavery had offered. They saw the stability of the old order challenged by freedmen intent on claiming equal access to education and to the polls. For generations, white Southerners would recall Reconstruction as a humiliation thrust on them by vengeful Yankees; among the most distasteful and enduring images of Reconstruction created by white Southerners was that of unschooled, corrupt black voters casting their ballots for equally unschooled, equally corrupt black politicians, while defeated ex-rebels remained on the sidelines, disfranchised by the Radicals in Washington.²²

White perceptions of black ignorance, dependence, and political gullibility, and black efforts to combat those perceptions, largely defined the struggle over suffrage which raged throughout Reconstruction. The freedmen were "bewildered at the new position in which they find themselves," a Georgia journalist wrote in the summer of 1865. "The negro can never compete with the white race, either in the intellectual or in the agricultural field of labor. Wherever the two have come in competition, the negro has gone down," and, he predicted, "so it will be in this instance."²³

²²Wade H. Harris, My School Days: Reconstruction Experiences in the South (New York: Neale Publishing Company, 1914), 54; D. W. Griffith, Birth of A Nation (Epoch, 1915).

²³Atlanta Daily Intelligencer, June 18, 1865.

Governor Joseph E. Brown drew the line on black citizenship at voting and serving on juries. His objection to black voting, he claimed, lay in the freedmen's inability to understand "the obligations of an oath," a deficiency which arose from their "low moral culture." Moral culture was largely the product of education, Brown said. Uneducated whites, he felt assured, were exempt from this formula, having been raised "with the privilege of associating with the more educated classes, which privilege the negroes have not had." Black men could sue or be sued, he conceded, and they could testify in court. "The fact is that those who were our slaves prior to the war are now free; and so far as legal rights are concerned, are placed upon terms of equality with us," he stated. But, "I did not say that the negroes are equals of the white race. . . . Unless madness rules the hour, they will never be placed upon a basis of political equality with us."²⁴

Robert Toombs, perhaps the most stubbornly unreconstructed Democratic politician in the state, felt that "a vote ought only to be in the possession of citizens conscious of the responsibility it involves, and are intelligent and conscientious enough to use it rightly. . . . with negro suffrage good government at the South will always be

²⁴Testimony of the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States (The Ku-Klux Conspiracy), Georgia, Part II (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 822; Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel, February 20, 1866; Milledgeville Federal Union, February 20, 1866, quoted in Derrell C. Roberts, Joseph E. Brown and the Politics of Reconstruction, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1973), 40. C. Mildred Thompson writes that Brown favored compliance with the universal suffrage requirement of the Fourteenth Amendment. See her Reconstruction in Georgia: Economic, Social, Political, 1865-1872 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1915), 157.

impossible." Southern whites, now a unit, would one day be divided, he predicted, "and then they will bid for the negro vote, and the worst men will naturally make the biggest offer and control the State." As a "good" citizen, Toombs said, he would never accept the Fifteenth Amendment, and he knew he spoke for the great majority of the region's "good" citizens.²⁵

Northern Views

There was little consensus within the federal government at any level on the question of freedmen's suffrage, but James A. Garfield, then a young congressman from Ohio, seems representative in his feeling that black suffrage should be allowed--though qualified by vague standards of "intelligence" and "culture." Charles Sumner, who favored universal suffrage, was in the minority even among radicals. Some individuals within the Freedmen's Bureau, animated by old abolitionist sentiments, favored universal suffrage, but the institution's policy was less generous. Many Bureau officers held out the suffrage as a carrot to compel freedmen to work and to acquire an education--which they were not persuaded would happen otherwise. Others were bluntly racist in their estimation of the freedmen. In one Freedmen's Bureau agent's

²⁵Rome Southerner and Commercial, June 30, 1871, quoted in Ku-Klux Conspiracy, Georgia II: 881.

formulation, blacks possessed a "gross physique, degraded intellect, grovelling pursuits, habitual slothfulness, and licentious habits."²⁶

General Clinton Bowen Fisk, a Freedmen's Bureau official who opened a school for freedmen in Nashville in 1866, spoke before a delegation of Tennessee freedmen in 1865. "The political cry used to be 'agitate, agitate, agitate.' I say, 'educate, educate, educate.'" He spoke of his plans to open a school in Nashville, his hope of bringing in "good teachers from Northern cities," who believed that "the same Savior who died for them died for you." Fisk assured his audience that "the suffrage will come around all right," saying he "was one of the first men to give the colored man a bible--the first to give him a bayonet--and I shall not be behind in giving him the ballot. With this swarm of B's I think the negro will take care of himself." But even the optimistic Fisk warned that while many people of the North were willing to grant freedmen the suffrage, "there are a great many people . . . among the old settlers of this country, who believe the negro should not vote until he is somewhat educated." And, he conceded, "I don't object if the test is to be applied to the white man. . . . If I could make it a law today, I would say: after 1870 no man in American should vote who could not read his ticket and write his name upon it." But there should be "no

²⁶Joseph B. James, The Framing of the Fourteenth Amendment (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956), 3-20; Garfield quoted on 13. See also Eric L. McKittrick, Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 56-59; John Wilson Sprague quoted in William S. McFeely, Yankee Stepfather: General O. O. Howard and the Freedmen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 293.

oligarchy of skin, or of red whiskers!" Further, Fisk said he had talked at length with Andrew Johnson, who, he assured the convention, agreed with this principle.²⁷

In fact, Johnson had no patience for black suffrage, as he curtly informed Frederick Douglass. Douglass, who went to the White House with a delegation of black leaders in January 1866, engaged in a heated argument with the president, who refused to budge on the issue. Douglass responded to the charge that blacks were too ignorant to vote, "as one learns to swim by swimming, the Negro must learn to vote by voting."²⁸

The black claim to the suffrage was complicated and weakened by advocates of female suffrage, who were furious that the proposed Fifteenth Amendment would eliminate racial barriers to the suffrage while white women faced continued exclusion. Elizabeth Cady Stanton resorted to racial rhetoric as she appealed for women's voting rights: "Think of Patrick and Sambo and Hans and Ung Tung, who do not know the difference between a Monarch and a Republic, who never read the Declaration of Independence . . . making laws for Lydia Maria Childs, Lucretia Mott, or Fanny Kemble."²⁹

²⁷Fisk quoted in the "State Convention of the Colored Men of Tennessee, August 7, 1865" in Foner and Walker, eds., Proceedings, 1865-1900, I: 122.

²⁸Foner and Walker, Proceedings, 1865-1900 I, 128; James, Framing of the Fourteenth Amendment, 11.

²⁹Stanton quoted in Eric Foner, Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877 (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 448.

Federal officials in the South offered what protection they could to the freed slaves, but scarce resources and disagreement over the question of black suffrage limited their effectiveness in guaranteeing freedmen's political rights. Much northern aid toward the freedmen, from both the Freedmen's Bureau and benevolent societies, was directed toward Christianizing and civilizing them, rather than helping them stake out political ground.³⁰

The Atlanta Daily New Era, a Republican paper billing itself as "the Organ of the United States Government" and "the Organ of the Intelligent Masses," appealed for public schooling in the South, primarily to ensure a qualified black electorate: "In so large a population, there must always be a considerable number, to whom, without government aid, even elementary education must remain a forbidden fruit. If these be simply regarded in their individuality, their destitution of mental culture must appeal strongly to the sympathies of their more fortunate fellow citizens," the paper reasoned. "But the interest in the subject rises immeasurably when they are looked upon as future members of the body politic, under a constitution, extending general suffrage to male citizens. A conscientious man, wholly uneducated, always feels much embarrassment in choosing between rival candidates for popular suffrage, and whatever be his natural endowments, and however prominent his virtues, is conscious of his own want of qualification for public service. No plainer proposition can be stated that a people who govern, ought to be intelligent people." The paper made a pitch simultaneously for

³⁰See Jones, Soldiers of Light and Love.

public schooling and universal male suffrage, but at the heart of its appeal was the assumption that all who would vote, should read.³¹

O. O. Howard promised in his first substantive announcement of the Bureau's goals that "the educational and moral condition of these people will not be forgotten." He envisioned the Bureau working cooperatively with missionary associations until state governments were ready to take over. From the outset, Howard was determined that support for the freedmen would come from voluntary societies, with the Bureau assisting the efforts of northern missionaries. "The utmost facility will be afforded to benevolent and religious organizations and State authorities in the maintenance of good schools . . . until a system of free schools can be supported by the reorganized local governments."³²

J. W. Alvord, the Freedmen's Bureau General Superintendent of Education, urged the local superintendents to make their schools self-supporting, by appealing to the freedmen's resources and to "local responsibility." He envisioned the Freedmen's Bureau officials establishing public school prototypes, which states presumably would take over as the Bureau withdrew. He urged his superintendents to organize school districts with the help of Northern "educational societies"--missionary associations--and to encourage state legislatures and city governments to establish public school systems.

³¹Atlanta New Daily Era, September 7, 1870; November 1, 1866.

³²"Circular No. 2," 19 May 1865, in Circulars. Etc. Issued by the Commissioner, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, December 31, 1867, (Washington, 1867).

Alvord called on his colleagues to report on the "moral condition of the freedmen in all respects," including "facts on the subject of temperance." Alvord's notion of "intelligence" is revealing: "in all ways, general intelligence among the freedmen is to be encouraged; industry, honesty, and saving habits, as well as a high morality." Alvord urged teachers to "bring the adult population into night and Sabbath schools. Urge all suitable persons, of both colors to become their teachers." The need for teachers was pressing: "Labor to improve your normal schools. Encourage promising young persons of both sexes to attend and prepare themselves for teaching."³³

Given the limited mission of the Freedmen's Bureau, and in the face of recalcitrant ex-rebels whom the Johnson administration was reluctant to rankle, the demand for suffrage qualified by literacy seemed like the most reasonable, pragmatic stance available. Vague standards of "intelligence" and "character" were refined and recast as "literacy," a term which everyone felt they understood, and which offered a seemingly concrete, apolitical, and non-racial means of restricting the suffrage. In the minds of white Southerners, northern paternalists, and black leaders themselves, the goals of learning to read and write, improving morally and spiritually, and the privileges of citizenship, were intertwined and indistinguishable. But it was obvious that those whose political fortunes were at stake, whose claim to the suffrage was made most tenuous by their comparative lack of schooling, were the freedmen.

³³"Circular Letter No. 3," 23 December 1867, from John W. Alvord, General Superintendent of Schools, in Circulars, Etc. Issued by the Commissioner, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, December 31, 1867, (Washington, 1867).

Freedmen's Meetings

As the war drew to a close, freedmen congregated in state conventions to consolidate their leadership, to discuss the rights conferred by their freedom, and to present petitions to the public, the President, and the state and federal legislatures. The resolutions of the freedmen's conventions, like the northern conventions held before the Civil War, braided together the demands for public education and the right to vote, while calling for moral uplift among the freedmen. Freedmen meeting in Pennsylvania urged those who found themselves "disfranchised and oppressed" to "form combinations for mutual protection, mental and moral culture, and political rights." A black delegation in Indiana pledged themselves "to do all in our limited power to secure the intellectual and moral worth necessary to sustain a republican form of government." North Carolinians resolved to educate their children "not alone in book learning but in a high moral energy, self-respect, and in a virtuous, Christian, and dignified life." Delegates to the National Convention of the Colored Men of America, held in Washington, D.C., in 1869, were told to educate their children so they could "send missionaries with Bibles into heathen lands, and thus render [themselves] a civilizing power in the Republic, and an enlightening force in the world." Conventions in Virginia, Missouri, Maryland, and elsewhere issued similar calls for uplift and made similar demands for the right to vote. A Maryland meeting stated the

freedmen's needs and expectations most flatly: "Give us a Constitutional Amendment to secure the right of suffrage--and give it to us now. . . . We ask simple justice."³⁴

While freedmen met with the primary purpose of demanding equal suffrage, some state conventions, including in Georgia, also admitted the need for voter qualifications. They argued that while color was not an appropriate category of exclusion, literacy and property ownership were. Freedmen in Norfolk, Virginia, opened the door for suffrage qualification in their demand for equal suffrage. No "unbiased person," they pronounced, could read the U.S. Constitution or that of Virginia and fail to conclude that "color alone affords no constitutional or legal ground for the imposition of any civil disability." But if color alone could not be used to eliminate blacks from the polls, the implication was clearly that other qualifications--namely, the ability to read and write--would be not only constitutional, but reasonable. The Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League predicted that "in all probability, when our enfranchisement does come, it will only come to those of us who can read and

³⁴"Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Pennsylvania Equal Rights' League, Harrisburg, August 9-10, 1865," in Foner and Walker, Proceedings I: 137; "State Convention of the Colored People of Indiana, Indianapolis, October 24, 1865," in *ibid.*, 185-6; "State Convention of the Colored People of North Carolina, Raleigh, September 29, 1865," in *ibid.*, 179-80; "Proceedings of the National Convention of the Colored Men of America, Held in Washington, D.C., January 13-16, 1869," in *ibid.*, 356. "Simple justice" in "Address of the Colored Men's Border State Convention to the People of the United States, Baltimore, August 5-6, 1868," in Foner and Walker, eds., Proceedings, 1865-1900, I, 323.

write. And we utterly fail in our duty to our children if we neglect to give them education."³⁵

The earliest gatherings of Georgia freedmen were dominated by elite, well-connected, literate leaders who were quick to concede to a suffrage qualified by literacy and property requirements. A gathering in Augusta, Georgia, in January 1866 drew over one hundred delegates from around the state. James Porter, the president of the Augusta convention, was born free in Charleston in 1828, where he had surreptitiously taught a black school before moving to Savannah in 1856. There he offered music lessons to both white and black students. In 1865 he published a book entitled English Language for Beginners, and he preached in the Savannah Protestant Episcopal church. Under Porter's leadership, the demands of the Augusta meetings were qualified and conservative. They conceded that, "suffering from the degradation of two hundred and forty-six years' enslavement," Georgia's freedmen could not be "expected that we are thoroughly qualified to take our position beside those who for ages have been rocked in the cradle of education." But, they argued, we are "a people susceptible of mental culture and intellectual growth," and equitable laws would bring black Georgians up to pace with their white fellow-citizens. They called on the state legislature for asylums, schools, colleges, and churches. They pressed for the suffrage, but felt voters should

³⁵"Equal Suffrage in Norfolk, Virginia." Pamphlet produced from the "Address from the Colored Citizens of Norfolk, Va., to the People of the United States . . . June 5, 1865," in Philip S. Foner and George E. Walker, eds., Proceedings, I: 93; "To the Colored People of Pennsylvania," by William Nesbit, President of the Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League, February, 1865, in Foner and Walker, eds., Proceedings, I: 159.

be qualified by education: "We need the power to represent our interest in every department bearing upon our condition as a people. We claim at least conditional suffrage, and so most respectfully solicit your grave Body for the privilege to vote in all cases where our interest is at stake, and the education and general intelligence of our people will guarantee security in the exercise of that exclusive right."³⁶

In the spring of 1867, a mass meeting was held in a grove near the Rose Hill cemetery in Macon. Federal officials and schoolteachers, black and white, came together to speak; a banner read, "As we have got to live and vote together in one state, let us be friends." The Macon meeting was followed by another in Savannah. Black men joined ex-governor James Johnson and federal officers on the platform, and "five resolutions were passed recognizing the power of Congress, the enfranchisement of colored people, the education of the whole people as of the highest importance, the early registration and election for the convention." A mass meeting held soon after in Augusta drew over one thousand people, whose leaders called for "equal political rights and the abolition of corporal punishment."³⁷

³⁶On James Porter, see Eric Foner, Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders During Reconstruction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 173. On the convention, see "State Convention of the Colored People of Georgia, Augusta, January 10, 1866," from The American Freedmen, April, 1866, reprinted in Foner and Walker, eds., Proceedings, I: 233-4.

³⁷W. E. B. Du Bois, Black Reconstruction In America, 1860-1880 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935; reprint, New York: Atheneum, 1969), 497; Drago, Black Politicians, 28.

By the late 1860s, the state's emerging black leadership, angered by white abuse and emboldened by the promise of federal military and legal protection, began to lobby more militantly for equal political rights, but their demands for political equality remained compromised by their own belief in educational and property requirements. These politicians were an extraordinarily privileged and educated lot. Of the black officeholders in the South for whom information is available, over 80 percent were able to read and write, and sixty-four of these had some college or professional training. About three-fourths of Georgia's black lawmakers were able to read and write. While not as elite as black leaders in South Carolina and Louisiana (which had relatively large free antebellum populations), they were nevertheless among Georgia's most privileged black citizens. Almost all had been born slaves, but they tended to be older, more likely to own some property, more likely to have white fathers or grandfathers, and much more likely to be able to read and write.³⁸

Thomas Allen, a literate black man who worked as a minister and farmer, was elected to the legislature in 1868 from Jasper County, Georgia, and served as president of the local Union League. His white father had emancipated him upon his death, though Allen was unable to assert his freedom until after the war. Allen was

³⁸On the status of black lawmakers in Reconstruction Georgia, see Drago, Black Politicians, especially 37-39, 166-171. Drago compares Georgia's black lawmakers to those in South Carolina and is struck by their relative poverty and illiteracy, but compared to the mass of black Georgians in the late 1860s, these were wealthy and well-educated men. For a regional portrait, see Foner, Freedom's Lawmakers, especially xxiv; on South Carolina, see Thomas Holt, Black Over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina During Reconstruction (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977).

summoned to the home of Colonel William Lofton, who told Allen if he would disband the Union League "and go on and preach the Gospel, you will always have friends in this country." Allen demurred, telling Lofton "I cannot help it; you know the colored people now have the right of suffrage; they are ignorant people, and somebody must teach them. It is reasonable to presume that they are going to hold on to the party that freed them."³⁹

Asked whether he felt it necessary to have organizations like the Union League or the Grant Rangers "to render [the] right of suffrage efficient and practical," Allen said yes. "In all of those counties of course the colored people are generally very ignorant; the best of us are ignorant, but some know more about things than the others." He judged that blacks were particularly ignorant on large plantations, "where people never see anything; where they have been kept down." Those who "have been raised with white people as body servants and house servants, they have a great deal of sense."⁴⁰

Jasper County blacks sought "instructions," Allen said, "and I gave them the best instructions I could." He subscribed to the New York Tribune and other papers, "and in that way I found out a great deal, and I told them whatever I thought was right. I said to them that I thought they had been freed by the Yankees and Union men, and I thought they ought to vote with them; to go with that party always. They voted just as

³⁹Ku-Klux Conspiracy, Georgia II: 612.

⁴⁰Ibid., 616.

I voted." This power over the local less educated black population brought criticism from whites, including some northerners. Allen was told by a Methodist preacher from Vermont that blacks "have just as much right to vote as that horse. . . . I can make that horse take a ticket and carry it up to the ballot-box and drop it in there." To this Allen rejoined, "that is the way you want your men to vote; you would have every one of us vote the democratic ticket for you."⁴¹

Abram Colby of Greene County had also been set free by his father, a white man from Connecticut. Colby, a barber before the war, was elected to the 1868 legislature. He was beaten within an inch of his life by night riders for his political activities--he had voted for "Grant, Bullock, and Blodgett," and, like Thomas Allen, he influenced black voters in the area. Colby could not read or write, but his son William acted as his scribe, travelling with him to the legislature. "I make him read all my letters, and do all my writing. I keep him with me all the time."⁴²

White meddling with newspaper and mail delivery posed a persistent problem for black political leaders, who traveled constantly between their homes in rural Georgia and the capital in Atlanta. Romulus Moore, a literate former slave who worked as a blacksmith, served as a voting registrar and as a delegate to the 1868

⁴¹Ibid., 615.

⁴²Ibid., 696, 697, 702. On Colby, see Foner, Freedom's Lawmakers, 47-8; Edward L. Ayers, Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th-Century American South (Oxford University Press, 1984), 156-7; Jonathan Bryant, How Curious a Land: Conflict and Change in Greene County, Georgia, 1850-1885 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

constitutional convention. When his wife, teaching school in Columbia County, was told by the Klan that she must close her school, "she wrote me word of it. She had to write me notes--just write them and leave them open, and send them up [to Atlanta, where he was in the legislature] by the railroad; for we could not get a letter through the post-office, for they were liable to be broken open." Eventually, living in Columbia County became too dangerous, and Moore wrote his wife to sell their belongings and join him in Atlanta.⁴³

Perhaps the politician most widely admired by black Georgians and most widely despised by whites was Tunis G. Campbell, a New Jersey native who had moved to South Carolina's Sea Islands in 1862, and settled in Georgia's low country after the war. In his youth, Campbell worked in a hotel in New York, where he published a book entitled The Hotel-keeper and House-Keeper's Guide. By 1871, Campbell owned several hundred acres of land and a house worth \$2,500 in McIntosh County, as well as property in Atlanta. Campbell was tireless in his campaign to establish and protect the political rights of the freedmen. Like many black politicians, Campbell divided his time between the legislature and the pulpit. He preached to colored people, he said, "because I do not want to bring down, but I want to bring up." Whites complained that Campbell preached "above" his congregations, but he felt he must challenge them: "They will become educated so as to understand what I mean." His home was continually crowded with freedpeople seeking relief, advice, and protection. As

⁴³Ku-Klux Conspiracy, Georgia II: 735-737.

magistrate, he swore out affidavits against abusive whites. When Georgia's black legislators were expelled from the statehouse in the fall of 1868, Campbell was among those who travelled to Washington seeking federal protection.⁴⁴

Campbell acted as an important conduit of information to the McIntosh County freedmen. He subscribed to a number of newspapers, Republican and Democratic alike, published in Atlanta, New York, and locally, but his newspapers were often stolen or held until they were useless. His letters were opened and read. "I cannot get anything there without their knowing it," he complained to federal officials, "and I do not get them at all now." The Democrats "try to prevent the circulation of any paper by which we can get any news or information circulated among us republicans," he testified, and he complained that "I cannot get anything, or if anything comes of any value to me it is kept so long that it is of no account when it comes to me. . . . If you get any republican paper or document [at the post office] it is long after it should be there." Campbell's complaints were echoed by Romulus Moore, who was forced by mail tampering to send all his mail by hand delivery on trains. McIntosh County whites, far from viewing blacks as politically inept, saw Tunis Campbell's constituency as savvy and threatening. They decried black ignorance, but had to do everything they could to stanch the flow of political information into black hands. Black ignorance

⁴⁴Ibid., 847-852, 862; see also Russell Duncan, Freedom's Shore: Tunis Campbell and the Georgia Freedmen (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986); affidavits in Campbell Papers, GDAH.

posed no danger to democracy; on the contrary, white conduct showed that black education threatened to undermine Democratic power.⁴⁵

When the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified early in 1870, Henry McNeal Turner addressed a meeting of freedmen in Macon, hailing the amendment as "the finish of our national fabric; it is the headstone of the world's asylum; the crowning event of the nineteenth century." The United States, he said, had now become "a temple founded upon civil rectitude and religious equity." Turner's optimism over the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment proved premature. Later that year, less than a year after the black legislators were reseated, Georgia Republicans would be turned out of the statehouse once again, this time because black voters were intimidated by the Klan. Despite the black franchise, and despite the Republican oversight of the election, the Democrats won overwhelmingly. Those Republicans who did win were refused seats in the legislature. Andrew D. Rockafellow described the election scene in Atlanta that December. The first day, he said, everything went smoothly, and blacks as well as whites were allowed to vote. The ballots featured photographs of the candidates, which allowed those unable to read to know how to vote. But the second day at noon the police stood by while the black voters were "shoved off the stairway." The U.S.

⁴⁵On Campbell, see Ku-Klux Conspiracy, Georgia II: 852; on Moore, see Ku-Klux Conspiracy, Georgia II: 735-7.

Marshal tried to open the polls but was shouted down. Democracy had failed, and the Democrats were restored.⁴⁶

By the mid-seventies, the idea of black participation in politics had even staunch Republican supporters laughing up their sleeves. Thirteen years after he had safeguarded the first contrabands at Fort Monroe, Benjamin Butler, now a U.S. congressman, remarked on black suffrage qualifications: "They have shown themselves our equals in battle; as citizens, they are kind, quiet, temperate, laborious; they have shown that they know how to exercise the right of suffrage which we have given to them, for they always vote right; they vote the republican ticket, and all the powers of death and hell cannot persuade them to do otherwise." According to the transcript, Butler's comments provoked laughter among his colleagues, who were quick to understand the humor: Republicans knew they could take the votes of freedmen for granted, offering in return little more than praise, platitudes, and pieties. Butler's remarks reflected white Northerners' growing indifference toward black voting and

⁴⁶Henry McNeal Turner, "Benefits Accruing from the Ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment," in Christian Recorder, May 14, 1870; reprinted in Foner and Walker, eds., Proceedings, 1865-1900, I, 417-8. The Fifteenth Amendment was ratified February 3, 1870; see Foner, Reconstruction, 445-447; Numan V. Bartley, The Creation of Modern Georgia 2d ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 70; Testimony of the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States (The Ku-Klux Conspiracy.) Georgia, Part I. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 252-4.

citizenship. While Butler was appreciative of freedom's progress, the constituency of black voters mattered less and less in national political life.⁴⁷

A Democratically controlled Georgia approved a new constitution in 1877 that provided public schools for black and white students on a "separate but equal" basis. With one eye toward using educational requirements to limit suffrage, the state's political leaders knew that inadequate public schools for blacks would help assure their political and social domination. The 1877 constitution dramatically limited funding for education, making it difficult for rural counties to raise money for schools beyond the barest minimum. Urban counties fared a little better. Bibb, Chatham, Richmond, and Glynn counties, the homes of Macon, Savannah, Augusta, and Brunswick, maintained city school systems that offered somewhat better resources for black children. But for the most part in Georgia, as everywhere in the South, black children and their parents were left to "paddle their own canoes," as the Colored Tribune put it. "The school, the pulpit, and the press are the canoes in which we may make a successful voyage." Black youngsters in Georgia were left with pitifully scarce resources, but during the three decades following emancipation an extraordinary network of makeshift summer schools sprang up, offering tens of thousands of children their first taste of the ABCs.⁴⁸

⁴⁷Civil Rights: Speech of Hon. Benjamin F. Butler, of Massachusetts, in the House of Representatives, January 7, 1874 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1874), 12-13.

⁴⁸See Dorothy Orr, A History of Education in Georgia (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1950); also L. L. Perry, "History of Education in Georgia," n.d., in vertical files, Hargrett Library, U.Ga., 5-6; On use of underfunded schools to assure white political control, see Robert A. Margo, Race and Schooling in the South,

CHAPTER 6

THE FIRST GENERATION OF FREEDOM: ATLANTA UNIVERSITY AND THE CAMPAIGN FOR BLACK LITERACY IN GEORGIA, 1865-1900

In 1902 Willette Rutherford Banks, a student at Atlanta University, recalled her father's successive experiences as a slave, student, teacher, and farmer. Jabez M. Banks had been born in Georgia fifteen years before the Civil War, and worked as a field hand until he gained his freedom. "In those dreadful days the poor slaves were not allowed to study any kind of book," his daughter wrote. "My father used to carry a blue-back speller concealed, tied about him with a string. Every day he would slip away to the woods where he could not be seen by the overseer, studying there until he was called to field again." After the war, Banks heard about Atlanta University, and set out for the city to seek a formal education. He remained at the school for four and a half years, finishing the preparatory course, and then began teaching school in Anderson, South Carolina. Willette Banks had attended her father's school, but was needed to work on his farm for all but the late summer months, when the crops were

1880-1950: *An Economic History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
"Paddle Your Own Canoe," *Colored Tribune*, April 8, 1876.

laid by. Nevertheless, she was able to learn enough to enroll at Atlanta University, and by the time she was seventeen she applied for her own license to begin teaching.¹

Beulah Rucker Oliver recalled a similar story in her 1953 memoir The Rugged Pathway. The child of two former slaves, she grew up near Commerce, in middle Georgia. Her mother was a midwife who "could spell a few simple words such as cat or rat." Her childhood home was a log cabin, its two rock chimneys daubed with red mud, its walls plastered with newspapers her parents were unable to read. The newspaper, she said, made the house more comfortable, and "by looking at the pictures and letters on the plastered walls it increased my interest on trying to learn my a b c's." Beulah attended school in a little wooden church called Neal's Grove, in Banks County, and then went on to attend high school, though she had to withdraw when the crops were poor and her parents were unable to support her. "Since I had to remain at home

¹Willette Rutherford Banks to "Dear Friends" (circular letter), May, 1902, Horace Bumstead Papers, Atlanta University Library.

A good synthesis of black education in the postwar South is James D. Anderson, The Education of Blacks in the South, 1865-1935 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988). Anderson emphasizes the industrial education of black Southerners at the expense of academic progress, a theme sounded by W. E. B. Du Bois and many others. See, for example, Louis R. Harlan, Separate and Unequal: Public School Campaigns and Racism in the Southern Seaboard States, 1901-1915 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958, and James G. Sherer, Subordination or Liberation? The Development and Conflicting Theories of Black Education in Nineteenth-Century Alabama (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1977); and William P. Vaughan, Schools for All: The Blacks and Public Education in the South, 1865-1877 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974). A helpful overview of the considerable historiography of black education after the Civil War is Ronald E. Butchart, "Outthinking and Outflanking the Owners of the World: A Historiography of the African American Struggle for Education." History of Education Quarterly 28 (Fall 1988): 334-366.

I was determined to study my books as if I were going to school. Many times I would sit up all night poring over my studies." When she got stuck in her independent studies, her mother would hire a local teacher for twenty-five cents a lesson. She went on to graduate from Knox Institute, a Freedmen's Bureau school in Clarke County which offered an elementary program and four years of secondary schooling. As she approached graduation from Knox, Beulah had a religious vision that would lead her into a lifetime of teaching. "I almost lost my appetite. . . . I prayed frequently. The dreams or visions continued to haunt me," she wrote. After years spent teaching in public and private schools, making and selling hats, and doing numerous other jobs, Beulah Rucker Oliver saved enough money to start her own school. She later graduated from college at Savannah State college, taking summer school courses, extension courses, correspondence courses, and short courses, and eventually she founded her own school, an industrial school near Gainesville.²

²Buelah Rucker Oliver, The Rugged Pathway (1953), 5-8, in File II, Box 83, "Negroes," GDAH. On Knox Institute, see Dorothy Orr, A History of Education in Georgia (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1950), 297.



Fig. 7. Young woman standing over the shoulder of an older woman reading, 1890. Courtesy, National Museum of American History

Willette Banks' letter, and Beulah Rucker Oliver's memoir, reflect many of the patterns and strains of black education in the nineteenth-century South: slaves' furtive efforts to learn to read despite censorious legal codes and the threat of the overseer's whip; the determination to gain a formal education following freedom; the competing demands of making a living and trying to stay in school; the migration from countryside to city. Through the last half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, students continued to follow Jabez Banks' footsteps from the outlying rural areas of the South, seeking their education in the city. Literacy, along with the economic and social mobility it seemed to bear, promised to endow the freedmen black Southerners had won with limitless opportunity. A boy from South Carolina, seeking admission to Atlanta University in 1890, starkly weighed the equation between bondage and freedom, illiteracy and literacy:

Jen. 27th 1890

Dear teachers and choolars.

I will try to address this Choal with the graites of my Power Dear theachers I would like to come to yore choal and I ask you if you Please Rite me on what condition can a Po Boy come on I Dont no much I ondy to choal 4 month in my life.and I got the Prais of Being the Smartes Boy in the worl For my chance my father is Dead & my mother & I Have no one to luck to But god & I will Bine my silf to Eney good & hones man for 10 years for an edgecation and if this choal will take me up Please Rite

Yores Respectfully³

³This letter is reprinted "verbatim et literatim" from a letter of application from a South Carolina boy in the Bulletin of Atlanta University (hereafter BAU) no. 16, February 1890, 2.

Ambition and promise, often combined with influential connections and plain good luck, won a privileged handful of black Southerners admission into Atlanta University. Historian Adele Logan Alexander surveyed the 72 students from middle Georgia who attended Atlanta University in its first twelve years, and found that more than one-third were probably related to members of the region's small antebellum community of free African Americans. She estimated that over 40 of the 72 who attended Atlanta University enjoyed "at least one or more of the combined advantages of antebellum freedom, money, and familial ties to influential whites."⁴

Founded by the American Missionary Association in 1869, the university was committed to an academic curriculum from the outset, emphasizing the rudiments of reading and writing for beginning students and a classical education for those more advanced. The number of students who completed the curriculum were small. Between 1876 and 1907, about 800 men and women enrolled in the normal department and the college at Atlanta University. Between 1876 and 1907, 121 men and 29 women completed college degrees at Atlanta University; 146 men and 16 women attended the college but left before graduating. Fifteen men and 400 women graduated from the Normal Department; four men and 39 women left before graduating.⁵

⁴See Adele Logan Alexander, Ambiguous Lives: Free Women of Color in Rural Georgia, 1789-1879 (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1991), 169-175.; quotation on 174.

⁵Clarence A. Bacote, The Story of Atlanta University: A Century of Service (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1969), 146.

This small group of students emerged as the vanguard of literacy education in rural Georgia. Beginning the first summer after the university's founding, these students--often only fourteen or fifteen years old--fanned out into the countryside, set up makeshift schools, and introduced tens of thousands of freed slaves and their children to the basics of reading, writing, and "ciphering." "While multitudes of students all over our land are seeking rest and recreation that July and August bring to them," the Bulletin of Atlanta University reported, "most of our young men and women are very glad of a chance to gather country children into log school houses, and often for a paltry sum of money teach from eight to five o'clock, all through the four months of Georgia's summer heat." In 1893 John H. Hincks, the dean of the university, estimated that 70 percent of all the university's living graduates worked as teachers, and that each year some 15,000 students were taught by Atlanta University students and alumni. A survey by W. E. B. Du Bois, who taught at Atlanta University between 1898 and 1910, estimated in 1910 that over half of the nation's black college graduates who reported their occupations were teachers.⁶

Decade after decade in the years following emancipation, the census shows black illiteracy in the South steadily plummeting. In Georgia, only about one in twenty blacks could read and write at the time of emancipation. By 1920, over two-thirds of

⁶"Student-Teachers," BAU no. 69, November 1895, 3; BAU no. 48, July 1893, 2; W. E. B. Du Bois and A. G. Dill, eds., The College-Bred Negro American, Atlanta University Publications No. 15 (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1910), 67. On Du Bois at Atlanta University, see especially David Levering Lewis, W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1869-1919 (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), 198, 343-385.

black Georgians were literate. These steadily rising literacy rates following emancipation attest to a dramatic change in the intellectual lives of black Southerners. The widespread conversion from illiteracy to literacy held widely divergent meanings for the people of the late nineteenth-century South. African Americans, whose culture had been borne for generations by words spoken, sung, and heard, rather than written and read, experienced the most dramatic change--from a world of slavery where reading and writing were forbidden outright, to a world of freedom where literacy skills were economically valuable and socially valued. The young black boys and girls of the New South, the first generation of freedom, arrived in Atlanta and in other Southern cities by the thousands with the intention of securing the education which their parents and grandparents had been legally denied.⁷

In Atlanta, makeshift schools founded after the war's end soon filled to capacity. The Jenkins Street School, begun in an old church building by two freedmen, and the Walton Springs School, founded in a boxcar discarded in Chattanooga and brought to Atlanta by A.M.A. missionary Frederick Ayer, were quickly filled with students, and Ayer began looking elsewhere to expand.⁸

⁷"United States Historical Census Data Browser," <<http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu>>, February, 1999. Illiteracy rates among white Georgians were predictably lower, but show a similar decline. In 1870, 20 percent of white Georgians over ten years old was unable to write; by 1920, illiteracy had dropped to about one in twenty.

⁸Bacote, Story of Atlanta University, 4-6; Willard Range, The Rise and Progress of Negro Colleges in Georgia, 1865-1949 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1951), 13.

The quick growth of the schools, and the uncertainty of the new pupils' lives, made effective teaching very difficult. Mrs. E. T. Ware wrote of her school in Atlanta that "we commenced with seventy, and at the close of the week we had nearly two hundred." While Mrs. Ware commented hopefully that "the freedmen seem to be doing all they can for themselves," she noted in a revealing metaphor, that the "mirthfulness and want of order" among the students made it difficult to keep them "in the harness."⁹

Frederick Ayer saw the rapid growth of these schools--the insatiable demand for teachers, for classroom space, and books--and decided to make a pitch to his northern patrons to secure funding for a larger, more permanent institution. He knew of Fisk University in Nashville, and decided Atlanta needed a similar institution. His appeal worked. He received \$10,000 from the American Missionary Association, which he used to secure land for Atlanta University. The 50-acre tract he found for the new university was the site of breastworks from which the Confederate Army had unsuccessfully defended Atlanta in the summer of 1864. The school's first students walked through gaps in the breastworks created by northern shells only a few years earlier. In the early years of the school, students would dig up shells while working in the school's garden. The buildings were, not coincidentally, built of fireproof brick, which offered some protection from the frequently fiery fate of other freedmen's schools. The hilltop eventually became home to four other colleges and universities,

⁹American Missionary, March 1866, 63.

which together with Atlanta University have remained Georgia's center of black higher education since their founding: Clark University, founded in 1870 by northern Methodists; Atlanta Baptist Seminary (later Morehouse College), founded in 1879; Spelman Seminary (later Spelman College), founded in 1881 by northern Baptists; and Morris Brown University, founded in 1885 by the African Methodist Episcopal Church.¹⁰

As the students at these schools gazed east from their hilltop to downtown Atlanta, they were subject to constant reminders that white Atlantans were threatened by and contemptuous of their enterprise. These students, and the Yankee schoolteachers who came to teach them, remade these old Confederate breastworks into a new fortification. The irony was not lost on two white characters who appeared in a fictional sketch in the Atlanta Constitution in 1890:

From where you stand--within a stone's throw of the battery where Hood's guns were planted--towers a fine brick college, where niggers are taught to preach. "THE ATLANTA BAPTIST SEMINARY" reads in big letters over the arching doorway, and it makes an old man like me shed tears of sorrow. . . . Standing upon that battery-mound can be counted six fine nigger colleges. Just think of it! . . . Six colleges, as fine as any white folks' colleges, standing in plain view of the lines of battle that faced each other in 'sixty-four.¹¹

By 1870, over 5,000 northern missionaries had come South to teach freed slaves and their children to read and write; by the mid-1870s, writes an historian of the

¹⁰Bacote, Story of Atlanta University, 256.

¹¹On breastworks, see Mrs. E. Kirkland, "The Atlanta University" BAU no. 20, June 1890, 7, reprinted from the Vermont Chronicle; "Plunkett's Fireside: Since the War," reprinted from the Atlanta Constitution in BAU no. 16, February 1890, 3.

missionary movement in Georgia, the largest of these, the American Missionary Association, had "focused its energies on Atlanta University and a handful of other prized institutions, and had yielded up its elementary schools to public authorities." Given the woefully underfunded public school system, students trained at Atlanta University emerged as the vanguard of rural literacy education in Georgia.¹²

Immediately following the end of the war, there was a pressing need for spellers--the most widely used was the Webster's blue-back speller which Jabez Banks had hidden in his shirt as a slave--and for teachers to introduce students to the ABCs. Northern missionaries working among the freedmen in the South perceived the need for spellers to be almost as urgent as the need for food and clothing. Month after month, the American Missionary, a publication of the AMA, issued countless appeals to potential donors for food, clothing, and spellers for the emancipated slaves. As Mrs. E. T. Ware wrote from Atlanta, the freedmen "had two objects in view. The first was to put windows in their house, the African church, so as to have one school there, and the other to furnish a hospital for colored strangers; so that no more of them should die naked, starving and friendless in the streets."¹³

¹²Jacqueline Jones, Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 12, 13. For an excellent overview of the involvement of white missionaries in black higher education in the New South, see James M. McPherson, "White Liberals and Black Power in Negro Education, 1865-1915," AHR 75 (June 1970): 1357-1386. See also Howard N. Rabinowitz, "Half a Loaf: The Shift from White to Black Teachers in the Negro Schools of the Urban South, 1865-1890," JSH 40 (November 1974): 565-94.

¹³American Missionary, March 1866, 63. See also the correspondence of Hettie Seabbie, in Whittington B. Johnson, "A Black Teacher and Her School in

These appeals, typically reprinted either from other religious publications or from letters from missionaries describing their work and experiences in the South, often focused on the freed slaves' desire to read the scriptures. Freedom, spiritual redemption, and the ability to read were inextricably linked in their minds. In a representative passage, the American Missionary published the parting words of an old lady on her deathbed, to a young woman: "Glory be to de blessed Lord and Saviour, I dies free! . . . You's young, Tildy; you's going where they'll look out for your soul, and p'raps learn you to read de blessed Scriptur'. That's all I wanted, but p'raps I's too Old. Glory to God! I'll read His word in heaven. An' de Master Himself will teach me. Goodby, Tildy; I dies free!" Such testimonials, designed to open the hearts and the pocketbooks of northern supporters, convey as much about the missionaries who reported them as they do about the freed slaves they purported to represent. The message was clear: slaves who had achieved earthly redemption following the Civil War could also find spiritual salvation through the scriptures that missionaries could teach them to read.¹⁴

Despite their frequently patronizing approach to the former slaves, it is difficult to overstate the bravery and commitment of the teachers who came South after the war

Reconstruction Darien: The Correspondence of Hettie E. Sebatie and J. Murray Hoag", GHQ 75 (1991): 90-105.

¹⁴American Missionary, February 1866, 42. The argument that literacy was essential to Protestant religious life is central to Janet Duitsman Cornelius, When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991).

to educate the children of former slaves. Mostly young, mostly female, they were driven by selfless religiosity and, one suspects, by no small amount of adrenalin. One young woman, whose name is not known, came South in November 1865 under the auspices of the Freedman's Aid Society soon after graduating from Oberlin College. She recalled that she first taught in Vicksburg, Mississippi, where an armed guard stood outside her classroom door; another teacher had been shot through the open door during the woman's first week as a teacher. The lesson continued uninterrupted, the woman recalled, after the wounded man was carried out. She left Vicksburg to teach in a refugee camp in Louisiana, where her ramshackle schoolhouse, originally built for use as a church, was constructed of dry goods boxes; she could read the address labels on the covers. Despite the conditions, about three hundred children had met with her through the winter. She recalled that "I could put my arm through the cracks [of the walls] up to my elbow. It was so loose that the wind would blow our clothing all around us." Her male colleagues in a nearby settlement were "whipped, tarred and feathered and so abused that one of them died." According to their white terrorists, they were guilty of talking politics with the freed slaves.¹⁵

Between the rising water of the Mississippi River and the resistance of angry white mobs, the situation in Louisiana became so treacherous that the federal government ordered the young teacher away--this time north of Natchez, to Port

¹⁵This story is retold in "Early Experiences," BAU No. 24, January 1891, 405. For the experiences of northern teachers in the South after the war, see Jones, Soldiers of Light and Love, and Sandra E. Small, "The Yankee Schoolmarm in Freedmen's Schools: An Analysis of Attitudes," JSH 45 (August 1979): 381-402.

Gibson, Mississippi, where she roomed with a family of Southern whites. In Port Gibson, she remembered, "I never went into the street unless heavily veiled. . . . Whenever we went on the street to go to school men would crowd the sidewalk so that we had to pass by singly. They would say, 'There is a nigger teacher,' 'There is a damn yankee,' 'Spell cat!,' 'Spell dog!'" When in 1872 she finally came to Atlanta, she wrote, "it was almost like coming to a Northern city."¹⁶

Despite the young Oberlin graduate's relief upon arriving in Atlanta, the white, northern faculty of Atlanta University was mostly scorned and feared by the city's native white population. The missionaries' own children, unwelcome in the city's public schools, attended Atlanta University, where their parents could look after them and be certain they were receiving a good education. Mary Chase Kirkland, whose parents taught at Atlanta University in the first years after the school's founding, recalled that the teachers "were spoken of as 'N.T.', meaning nigger teachers, and were almost as much despised as the colored people themselves. Our teachers did not suffer from the title--they were simply let severely alone." Kirkland wrote that while she was a student, she had frequently stood quaking before a committee of state legislators on their annual visit to the school, hoping she would "pass for colored" in their eyes.¹⁷

¹⁶"Early Experiences," BAU, No. 24, January 1891, 4-5.

¹⁷Kirkland quote from Mrs. E. Kirkland, "The Atlanta University," Vermont Chronicle, reprinted in BAU no. 20, June 1890, 7. While Kirkland was certain state officials knew that she and other white children attended the university throughout the 1870s and 1880s, the presence of white students at Atlanta University was never an

Not surprisingly, Atlanta University and the city's other black colleges were frequently the subject of white resentment and jealousy. In 1890 the Constitution ran an article, intended to be humorous, which illustrated the contempt which white Atlantans could show for the city's black colleges. Two observers, looking at the complex of black colleges in the distance, mused,

These three houses represent the Atlanta University--property of yankee capitalists--and they have been exempted from taxation ever since the war, and the Georgia legislature gave them eight thousand er year besides, up to last year.

What er contrast twenty-five years has brought erbout. . . . The sound of the organ and the piano come from the buildings, and nigger voices float upon the breeze; but it haint the old-time plantation melodies, not the plaintive nigger voice. They sing notes now--yankee notes and yankee songs--and it wouldn't surprise me if they didn't make the children of the men who fit [fought] in these trenches move to Africa instead of themselves.

Who would have thought it?¹⁸

Educators of both races were divided on the question of what exactly they should teach black students following emancipation. Schools such as Hampton and Tuskegee emphasized the agricultural, industrial and mechanical trades, but the founders of Atlanta University were clearly committed to an academic curriculum.

issue until 1887, when the Board of Visitors suddenly "discovered" white students among the AU student body. This led to the proposed Glenn Bill, which would have outlawed integrated education in all Georgia schools; a compromise bill, the Calvin Compromise, was subsequently passed, which required that all publicly funded schools be segregated. Atlanta University refused to comply, which led to the loss of the school's \$8000 annual appropriation from the state's Agricultural Land Scrip Fund. This story is told in Bacote, Atlanta University, 86-101.

¹⁸"Plunkett's Fireside: Since the War," reprinted from the Atlanta Constitution in AUB no 16, February 1890, 3.

From its inception, Atlanta University maintained a working garden on its campus, which supplemented the school's kitchen and provided some training in farming for its students, who were required to work in it. Every student was required to work one hour every day at some task--farming, housekeeping chores, and maintenance--but the primary purpose of this requirement seems to have been to keep the school's overhead down and to instill a service ethic in the students.

As well, the school, like Tuskegee and Hampton, had an industrial shop where students learned mechanical trades. But what set this shop apart from its trade-school counterparts was that until the turn of the century, the students turned out only models of furniture, rather than fully operational (and salable) items. The model-sized items they turned out saved on material, and at any rate the students could not compete with industry-made furniture. Preparatory students and the older grammar students at Atlanta University spent seven and a half hours each week learning mechanical skills, including woodworking, mechanical drawing, and ironworking. An 1893 visitor to the school's industrial shop commented on what he saw: "We pass on and out thinking, 'It is good, excellent, admirable, just what is needed! But perhaps the best thing about it is that it develops the intelligence--the man.' Every graduate must know something of mechanics. But what is better every boy who goes through Atlanta University, which learning something valuable in the way of technical skill, learns to be something more than a workman."¹⁹

¹⁹BAU no. 48, July 1893, 4.

At the turn of the century the university abandoned for the first time its policy of turning out only model furniture and other items from the mechanical department. In 1900, students began making fully functional bookcases, tables, and wash-stands as part of their classroom work. But at the same time, the manager of Atlanta University's garden reported that because "the especial development of the school is in other directions, more natural perhaps in a city location, we shall probably leave to other institutions the especial work of agricultural instruction."²⁰

The shop at Atlanta University seems to have functioned largely as a strategic display of "practical labor," designed to convince the white Board of Visitors, white Atlantans, and ambivalent northerners that the school posed no real threat to the racial order, that Atlanta University was not "ruining" black children by teaching them to read. The presence of the industrial shop on the Atlanta University campus allowed university officials some flexibility when appealing to donors. A broadside which frequently appeared in university publications in the 1890s stated the mission of the university. It began by noting the "unsectarian" Christian nature of the institution (here clearly intending to broaden the universe of potential donors), and next stated that "industrial training is given to the boys in carpentry, blacksmithing," and other mechanical trades. But then the focus shifts to the academic work of the school:

We aim to co-operate with and supplement the educational work that is done by the Southern states, by supplying well trained teachers for common schools and other training schools. We are also helping to establish an educated ministry, and are training other leaders of the

²⁰BAU No. 118, April 1901, 2.

people, and especially by the education of women are improving the home life of the Negro. . . . A thoroughly educated class of young people is thus being trained up among the Negroes of the South, and by it the whole mass will eventually be leavened. Self-respect, ambition, hope, courage and progress, are thus supplied to a race which, left to itself, will be largely ignorant, poor, and vicious--a menace to society.²¹

In 1890 a visitor to Atlanta University, Dr. H. M. Field, published an article in the New York Evangelist in which he questioned the wisdom of teaching black students Greek and Latin. While noting that at Atlanta University, as at Hampton, students received mechanical and industrial training, he also had viewed while at Atlanta University a "class composed of the most advanced students who were reading Virgil." The Latin teacher, "a very light-colored mulatto, had a face full of intelligence, and was an excellent Latin scholar." But Field expressed his doubts about "whether this was the sort of study best fitted to prepare these young men for the work which they have to do." While some of them might become teachers, he reasoned, "surely they do not expect to teach Latin in the log school-houses in the piney woods." The students' labors in school should prepare them more practically for their "their after pursuits, and help to insure their success in life."²²

The administrators at Atlanta University had a ready answer for such critics. They noted that the elementary, normal, and higher education programs at the school

²¹BAU no. 67, October 1895, 1.

²²Dr. H. M. Field, published in the New York Evangelist, reprinted in the BAU, no. 22, November 1890, 7. For administrator's response (probably Bumstead), see 4.

had preceded the establishment of industrial training, "and on this ground, [academic training] might claim to be the main purpose of the institution. But we prefer to say that the main purpose is to fit our students, by an all-around education, to accomplish the most, not merely for themselves, but especially for others when they go out into the world."²³

The Atlanta University rebuttal to Fields noted that only a handful of Atlanta University's students took more than one year of Latin; and only a handful of black Southerners were getting a higher education. "When it is remembered that only an exceedingly small fraction of the seven or eight millions of colored people are in these institutions," the report noted, "does it seem as though the race as a whole was in danger of being overeducated or educated away from usefulness?"²⁴

While educators and critics deliberated over the competing ideals of industrial and academic education, the students at Atlanta University took advantage of the library's holdings, reading widely in the national periodical press, each student pursuing what he or she wanted to learn. Students reporting on their reading habits in 1892 admitted they preferred reading periodical literature to the classics, though many read both: "I could not desist from continually perusing especially the North American Review, Review of Reviews, The Forum, Arena, The Nation, and Scientific American," one student reported. Another student, a female, wrote that "in the

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

periodicals I would read marriages, births, and deaths, all the lynching affairs, and once in awhile I read a political piece. In the latter part of the term I made quite a change for the better in my reading and I had acquired, I think, a taste for the higher literature," including four books: "George Eliot's Adam Bede, Near to Nature's Heart, Bricks Without Straw, and Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter." Another, a freshman, admitted "with reluctance that I have not best employed my time in reading. For before coming here I did not know the value of reading."²⁵

Summer School Program

While only a fraction of black Georgians were fortunate enough to attend Atlanta University, the students who did attend had an impact on the state far beyond their numbers. In 1882, the university estimated that over ten thousand children were being taught in rural Georgia by the university's summertime student-teachers. "Nearly all who are sufficiently advanced in scholarship aid themselves by teaching," the catalog reported. Students enrolled in the college and normal departments of Atlanta University participated in the summer program. Even some of the more advanced grammar department students ran summer schools. By 1891, the numbers had dropped; a poll of the summer teachers found that fifty-nine Atlanta University students taught only four thousand students the previous summer. The summer school program remained a central experience for both male and female Atlanta University

²⁵"What Our Students Read," BAU no. 41, December 1892, pp. 2-3, 6.

students until the late 1890s, though it quickly receded in the following years. New state regulations required longer school terms, and required them to be held in the fall and winter, a "reform" which ate into the university students' own academic schedules, and made it increasingly difficult for students to balance their duties between their teaching, their own studies, and their families.²⁶

Another dynamic also explains the decline of the rural school program, a dynamic which illuminates the cultural processes associated with learning to read and write. More than merely a set of skills, literacy also conferred cosmopolitanism and class. The student-teachers were torn between their obligations to rural students and the lure of the city. Given the choice between a low-paying rural school term spent in discomfort and isolation, or making comparatively good money in the relative comfort of the city, Atlanta University students increasingly chose the latter. By the turn of the century, male students were seeking higher paying work in the city, while many female normal graduates turned to urban public schools. While Atlanta University normal graduates continued to teach in rural counties, they fairly swamped the Atlanta public schools. In 1910, three-fourths of the eighty teachers in the city's black schools were Atlanta University graduates. Teachers and principals of Atlanta schools made between

²⁶Catalogue of the Atlanta University, 1882-83, 27, 23; "Our Summer Schools," in BAU no. 27, April 1891, 4-5; "Infelicitities in Georgia's School Law," BAU, No. 42, January 1893, 4; "Changes in Public Schools," BAU, no. 79, January 1897, 3.

\$310 and \$758 annually, while rural schools were generally paid between \$15 and \$30 a month for school terms lasting five or six months.²⁷

During its prime, the summer school program made Atlanta University a presence in the Georgia countryside. The young teachers acted as ambassadors not only of the university, but also of the city and its ways--its speech, its fashions, its temperament. At the same time, summers spent in the country allowed the students, most of whom came from rural homes, to keep a foot in the country. Most importantly, these students gave thousands of black Georgians their first taste of reading and writing in an age when the state, while legally committed to providing separate but equal education, had little intention of fulfilling that commitment to its black citizens.

Student-teachers were required to report on their progress, and every September they reconvened at the University chapel, where they ceremoniously testified about their summer experiences. From the transcribed testimonials, and from the students' letters, we can see how they perceived their work and understand the changes in the program during the last thirty years of the century. Edgar Webster, the principal of the normal department, described the summer program in 1889. Atlanta University students, so young they would "be accounted boys and girls in the north," would head out into rural Georgia early in the summer. "Instead of seeking their homes, many are

²⁷W. E. B. Du Bois and A. G. Dill, eds., The Common School and the Negro American, Atlanta University Publications No. 16 (Atlanta University Press, 1911), 56-66.

seeking an examination from some county commissioner." After the students passed the exam, the commissioner sent them to a community which lacked a school. They walked through the county, visiting potential patrons to drum up support for the school. Early in the summer, building a constituency of supporters was critical, and churches were the obvious place to start. "Sundays are my busiest days," one student-teacher reported. "I attended Methodist Sunday school in the morning, Baptist church and Sunday school in the afternoon."²⁸

The schools started out small and grew as the teachers established their reputations. Teachers typically used the Webster speller and Bible stories to teach beginners, and oral recitation to drill more advanced students on spelling and reading skills. Mamie Hamilton, who taught in a "small country village not far from Atlanta," described how she taught the alphabet to her students:

Of all my classes I enjoyed the alphabet class the best. It consisted of twenty little boys and girls, every one of whom looked bright and intelligent. The word 'cat' was the first thing I presented to the class, and the picture also. When a question was asked about the picture of the cat all the hands would be raised, everyone wanted to tell something about the picture, but when I asked about the three letters they would look at each other and then at me, but would not know anything about them. After a week of hard work I succeeded in teaching those three letters and from that the class as a whole moved on rapidly, and by the time my school closed every one in the class could read every thing in the first reader, and one little fellow, who was very earnest, was ready for a second reader.²⁹

²⁸Edgar H. Webster, "Our Students' Summer Work," BAU no. 12, October 1889, 3.

²⁹Mamie E. Hamilton, "My Experience in Teaching," BAU no. 86, November 1897, 2-3. Bertram Wyatt-Brown remarks on the rapid progress students made in the

The teacher-scholars also taught "ciphering" for the specific purpose of helping their students and their families avoid being cheated by merchants. "Knowing how much injustice they suffered from not knowing how to make change and keep accounts," one student "taught the girls at a blackboard, leaning against the outside of the school-house, the four fundamental rules by giving them and making them give him imaginary examples, made up of such things as they would buy at the store." At another blackboard, the teacher drilled the boys the same way, "by examples, requiring the value of cotton as prices per pound, including fractions of a cent; also wages due, when parts of a hundred pounds of cotton were gathered. This one thing in arithmetic he aimed to teach in the simplest, concrete way." In night school, the teacher taught the students' fathers the same thing, "how to protect themselves from fraud," and he urged the parents to have their children keep the family accounts at home to compare with the merchants' accounts.³⁰

The conditions in which summer teachers worked were often stressful and demanded a good deal of resourcefulness. One young woman arrived to find her schoolhouse too dilapidated to use, "so she had built a brush arbor annex with rustic seats, where the older ones studied when the rain did not drive them into the pen." She

early stages of learning their ABCs, and finds frustration among teachers when their students hit a plateau as they learned the more complex tasks of reasoning and comprehension. See his "Black Schooling During Reconstruction," in Walter J. Fraser, Jr., R. Frank Saunders, Jr., and Jon L. Wakelyn, eds., The Web of Southern Social Relations: Women, Family and Education (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 155.

³⁰BAU no. 1, June 1883, 4.

fashioned a chalkboard of smooth planks coated with shoe blacking she had brought with her from Atlanta.³¹

The threat of physical danger was real. One student teacher, N. W. Curtwright, reported that he had narrowly escaped being shot over the summer. As he traveled in a buggy, the black man next to him was killed by a white sniper. "I was very thankful to have escaped injury," Curtwright told his teachers. "Apart from this my summer has been prosperous, and my school a success."³²

The summer teachers brought not only blue back spellers and ciphering techniques, but also the morals and manners of their Atlanta University teachers. "There was a peach-brandy distillery 200 yards in front of the school-house, and another half a mile away behind," one student reported. "Liquor selling was common. I made addresses on temperance, and was much helped in this by the course in Physiology and Temperance taught me here at Atlanta University." Another summer teacher "organized a 'Band of Hope,' a temperance society, which grew to the number of 132 members." Two grocers stopped selling cigarettes, he noted proudly.³³

³¹Ibid.

³²"Summer Experiences of Our Students," BAU no. 40, November 1892, 6; Sarah and Elizabeth Delaney similarly recalled being harrassed while traveling as teachers to a job in rural Georgia at the turn of the century. See Sarah and A. Elizabeth Delaney, Having Our Say: The Delaney Sisters' First 100 Years (New York: Dell, 1993), 128-124.

³³Webster, "Our Students' Summer Work," BAU no. 12, October 1889, 3-4.

Summer teachers impressed on their students the standards of dress and hygiene learned from their teachers in the city. One student teacher wrote that her thirty pupils at first looked "much like the dirty torn books they hold. Their hair is tightly wrapped in white cotton strings." But, she predicted, "a few weeks hence the children will look very different. You will miss the white strings and soiled, ragged aprons, for I shall teach them how to mend, and give them some of the neat garments sent by kind Northern friends."³⁴

Life in Atlanta contrasted sharply with summers in the country. Decked out in city clothes, arriving on trains, after spending one or two years in Atlanta, students found it hard not to assume the urbane posture of their New England-bred teachers, especially when reporting on their summer experiences. "The people where I taught own nothing; they never go away from home; their ideas are vague and they are superstitious, but they are desirous that their children should learn," one student found.³⁵

Another young man wrote his teachers from his parents' farm, expressing many of the familiar wide-eyed rediscoveries of college students returning home for the first time: "I met the folks at home in good spirits. Sunday, I attended services in the old

³⁴"Wayside News," BAU no. 54, March 1894, 7. Mamie Garvin Fields, a schoolteacher from Charleston teaching in rural South Carolina, recalled the conflict which arose when she brought middle-class city hair styles to her rural students. See Mamie Garvin Fields with Karen Fields, Lemon Swamp and Other Places: A Carolina Memoir (New York: Free Press, 1983), 218-19.

³⁵Webster, "Our Students' Summer Work," BAU no. 12, October 1889, 3.

home church. . . . As I sat there I could not help thinking of the contrast between that illiterate audience and the intelligent audience at the University, to which I had become so accustomed." He continued, "One of my greatest burdens here is the spiritual blindness, ignorance and superstition of the people." One can only imagine the tension which arose between this cocky young man and his brothers, who stayed home to work on the farm while he was away at school. His time in Atlanta supplied him with a new costume, new speaking habits, and honed his critical faculties. Having done domestic chores at school, he viewed his mother's housework with a newfound appreciation: "Coming home, I find that mother has a great deal to do. . . . All the housework is left for mother, besides six cows to milk twice a day. When I learned she had so much to do I told her I would milk the cows. . . . It does not seem odd at all to make beds and sweep."³⁶

Many found the amenities of the city hard to leave behind. C. W. Harper, who in the late 1890s went to teach in the winter session at a school in Clayton County, Georgia, fought his way through rain and sleet to find his lodging. His schoolhouse, he found, "had holes in the roof almost big enough to climb through." One of the school's trustees suggested that "'Fessor, if you have an umbasol you can keep dry when it is falling weather." A hot meal eased Harper's spirits a bit, though the plain country fare made him long for the delicacies of the university dining hall. Some evening entertainment followed: "banjo, guitar, and jew's harp, and such songs as

³⁶"Extract from a Student's Letter," BAU no. 21, October 1890, 6.

'Shortened Bread,' 'Johnnie Git de Gun,' etc.," Harper recorded. "I must say that I rather enjoyed the music, although it was somewhat on the old style." Later, at the home where he was to board, he drifted off into an uneasy sleep, awaking at one point to find a cat wrestling an equally-sized rat. "I arose the next morning, and after thinking over the condition of the school-building, I decided not to teach during the winter term. . . . I promised [the trustees] to come back by the middle of June to begin school."³⁷

Another student, W. H. Mallory, also experienced the winter cold. He was crowded into his host's home, a two-room log cabin, with a family of eleven. "It is needless to say that I was glad to come back to A.U. I think any one who has been out on such a mission is glad to return to their teachers and friends and where they have plenty of good books and papers to read and where every thing is made pleasant."³⁸

Despite the racism and resentment Atlanta University students faced, the city had a lot to offer. Morris Merriam, who taught at the school in the 1890s, described the appeal Atlanta held for his students: "Here are found, as found everywhere, the cheap show, the band, the fiddler, the organ; here too the noisy trafficker and the unassuming sidewalk restaurant and stand-keeper." All this, he wrote, "calls attention to the curious mingling everywhere of the old and the new in this city. . . . Negroes and 'Cracker' farmers, direct from the neighboring cotton fields, seem perfectly at

³⁷C. W. Harper, "A Student's Experience," BAU no. 81, March 1897, 3.

³⁸BAU no. 83, May 1892, 3.

home crowding their mules and oxen into squares and corners filled with modern electric cars. The 'schooner,' a shapeless covered wagon, rustic in the extreme, never fails to attract the stranger's attention as it slowly follows a bony yoke of oxen along the most fashionable thoroughfare." Nothing quite equalled Atlanta's sidewalk preaching, which, Morris wrote, enjoyed an exemption from the city's otherwise strict segregationist practices. "None of the people would think of molesting a gospel wagon, and the preacher who chooses the curbstone for his pulpit finds a kind reception at the hands of the police. . . . Here white and colored worship for once together--but perhaps for the reason that on the pavement they are both obliged to have the same footing." For a youngster who had grown up in the countryside, these must have been strange and exciting experiences indeed. The city, it must have seemed, held bright promises for a well-educated graduate of the state's oldest and finest black college.³⁹

Summer school was the chief financial support and training for the teacher-scholars of Atlanta University, but year after year, they struggled with the state's delayed payment schedule. Students met summer travel and board expenses on the promise that they would be paid at Christmas. Often, the payment, when it arrived, fell far short, which meant the students could not pay their tuition or make good on their summer debts. In "a typical case," a student who contracted with the state to teach five months at \$100 per month netted less than \$20 for the entire summer's work.

³⁹Morris Merriam, "An Evening in Atlanta," in BAU no. 74, May 1896.

Appeals to the state for just compensation fell on deaf ears, and the university was left to cover the student's debt.⁴⁰

Aside from these problems, state laws changed in the 1890s to require longer school terms, forcing student teachers--like Harper and Mallory--to travel in the winter months to claim their schools.⁴¹ In the early years, summer teachers scheduled school sessions to comply with the fickle requirements of the farming season. "If the cotton does not open too early and so call off the children, the teacher is likely to have full numbers throughout the three months of the school term," an administrator noted. A student teacher observed that "in middle Georgia [this year], the cotton is late, and so the school was not interfered with."⁴² But in the mid-1890s, Georgia's Superintendent of Education, G. R. Glenn, proposed reforms that devastated Atlanta University's summer school program. Arguing that "a child will accomplish more in one month while the weather is cool than it will accomplish in three months in confinement when the weather is hot," Glenn moved to abolish summer schools, fixing terms for the fall and winter months, when university students would themselves be back in school.⁴³

Atlanta University officials balked at the changes, arguing that Glenn's proposal meant that their students would be unable to teach. "They cannot, from the standpoint of time, afford to occupy four or five months of their own school year in teaching in

⁴⁰"A Typical Case," BAU no. 37, May 1892, 4.

⁴¹"Infelicities in Georgia's School Law," BAU, No. 42, January, 1893, 4.

⁴²Webster, "Our Students' Summer Work," BAU no. 12, October 1889, 3.

⁴³"Changes in Public Schools," BAU, no. 79, January 1897, 3.

the public schools." The effect of the change, the administration predicted, would be to drive students into other avenues of making money.⁴⁴

In fact, by the turn of the century, most of Atlanta University's male students drifted away from summer teaching, not only because of the impingements of the new state regulations, but also because city businesses offered jobs that, though menial, paid better wages. Of more than one hundred young men and boys surveyed in 1901, all but one had worked for money during the summer. Only a handful taught at country schools. Four worked on farms, while the rest worked in cities or at summer resorts. They earned money as carpenters, laborers, office boys, newspaper deliverers, or were employed in barber shops, post offices, or groceries, or in "cracker-baking, bag-sewing, elevator-running, [and] mending shoes." None of these new occupations required or even valued the skills of reading and writing. But the students were paid well; every boy in the university had earned enough money to pay his tuition and books, and some earned enough for board as well.⁴⁵

Measured in gross terms, the number of students taught annually by Atlanta University student-teachers was a drop in the bucket. In 1900, there were 286,000 black Georgians of school age. That year only 88 were enrolled in the normal and college course at Atlanta University. Yet despite the overwhelming shortage of teachers, and despite the indifference and hostility of white Southerners, the literacy

⁴⁴"How Shall Our Students Earn Their Money?" BAU no. 79, January 1897, 3-4.

⁴⁵"Summer Work of Our Boys," BAU No. 125, February 1902, 3.

rate among black Southerners rose decade after decade. Literacy rates of under 10 percent in 1870 swelled to almost 50 percent by the turn of the century.⁴⁶

The rise of literacy after emancipation, and the social power literacy conveyed, marked a hard-won and sometimes illusory step forward for black Southerners. The spread of literacy heightened the social differentiation between those who remained poor, rural, and uneducated, and those who became educated, well-to-do, and urban. For the South's most privileged blacks at the turn of the century, literacy highlighted the tightly circumscribed nature of their freedom, as suffrage restrictions based on literacy were passed in state after state. As the historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown has observed, "to become well educated was to leave the familiar surroundings of home and community and to risk rebuff and bigotry." At the same time, students absorbed at every turn the lesson that education marginalized them in their own families and

⁴⁶Census figure from table in Anderson, Education of Blacks in the South, 151; enrollment figure from "Recent Increase in Attendance of Advanced Students," BAU no. 123, December 1901, 2. The 1870 census does not give black illiteracy rates, but Charles Warren and J. L. M. Curry put the Georgia figure at 94 percent in "Illiteracy in the United States with Appendix on National Aid to Education," Department of Education Circular (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1884). In 1880, 82 percent of black Georgians ten and over were "unable to write." U. S. Bureau of the Census, Statistics of the Population of the United States, Tenth Census (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1883), 924. The rate for black illiteracy in Georgia fell to 67 percent by 1890, and 52 percent in 1900. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, Negro Population, 1790-1915 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1918), 419.

communities. It meant, in Wyatt-Brown's words, "that you cut yourself off from your own circle but [would] never be admitted to theirs."⁴⁷

In his classic The Souls of Black Folk, published in 1903 when he was a young sociologist at Atlanta University, W. E. B. Du Bois meditated on his own experiences as a summer teacher in Tennessee in the 1880s. He recalled one student in particular, a young woman named Josie. "The longing to know, to be a student in the great school at Nashville, hovered like a star above this child-woman amid her work and worry, and she studied doggedly." His class had "read and spelled together, wrote a little, picked flowers, sang, and listened to stories of the world beyond the hill." He wrote that the mass of young people "found the world a puzzling thing: it asked little of them, and they answered with little, and yet it ridiculed their offering." There were some, however, "whose young appetites had been whetted to an edge by school and story and half-awakened thought. . . . Their weak wings beat against the barriers,--barriers of caste, of youth, of life." Returning to the town a decade later, Du Bois found Josie dead of grief and overwork, the other residents scattered, married, struggling with debt, the schoolhouse torn down. "How shall man measure Progress there where the dark-faced Josie lies? How many heartfuls of sorrow shall balance a bushel of wheat? How hard a thing life is to the lowly, and yet how human and how real! And all this life and love and strife and failure,--is it the twilight of nightfall or the flush of some

⁴⁷Wyatt-Brown, "Black Schooling During Reconstruction," 159-60. Carter G. Woodson makes a similar point in his The Mis-Education of the Negro (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1933; reprint, Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1990).

faint-dawning day?" "Thus sadly musing," Du Bois wrote, "I rode back to Nashville in the Jim Crow car."⁴⁸ Du Bois entitled this chapter "Of the Meaning of Progress." He intended to illustrate how slippery, how tenuous, progress was for black Southerners in the late nineteenth century, and also to illustrate the centrality of education in the dreams of black folk for an improved life, an opening to the "world beyond the hill."

Despite the anemic provisions made for black schooling in the postwar South, black Southerners had learned to read to a degree far exceeding the challenge laid out during the first years of Reconstruction. Yet the privileges of citizenship--most especially the right to vote--were continually under attack. The institution of literacy tests in the years between 1890 and 1906, the subject of the next chapter, would draw on the ideology of citizenship and education that the black conventions had confronted and embraced during Reconstruction. The Atlanta University students rose to the challenge posed by their Reconstruction predecessors, but as adults they would find their education mocked and dismissed by white politicians, who set about making certain that even the most learned and elite African Americans would never exercise the right to vote.

⁴⁸W. E. B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk (1903; reprint ed., New York: Signet, 1969), 96-108.

CHAPTER 7

LITERACY TESTS AND THE IDEOLOGY OF "QUALIFIED SUFFRAGE": UNDERSTANDING DISFRANCHISEMENT IN GEORGIA

White children coming of age in Georgia at the turn of the twentieth century learned early on that black men simply had no place in politics. The message that blacks were somehow "unfit" for politics was made clear everywhere they turned: in their homes, their classrooms, even at the movies. Those who could afford the \$2.00 admission to D. W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation," with its images of drunken and corrupt black Reconstruction lawmakers, crowded into theaters in downtown Atlanta when it opened there in 1915. If popular culture failed to make an impression, white youngsters had only to turn to their textbooks to learn about the problems with black suffrage. The enfranchisement of black men during Reconstruction "disgusted Southerners," reported one popular history of Georgia in 1913. The purpose of the recent amendment to the state's constitution, the book said, "was to disfranchise the negroes, the majority of whom are unfitted for exercising the suffrage. If properly enforced, without regard to race, this amendment would be of great benefit in teaching the uneducated and thriftless classes that the suffrage is not to be considered as a financial asset, but a privilege to be won by the acquisition of property or by the acquiring of at least a modicum of learning." In the national press, in scholarly journals, and in statehouses around the country, writers, politicians, historians, and

political scientists portrayed the disfranchisement of illiterate voters as a progressive reform. Suffrage restrictions "purified" the ballot, the argument went, eliminating political dependency and the corruption that inevitably followed. Just as historians today refer to the Voting Rights Act of 1965 as the Second Reconstruction, white Southerners in the first part of this century viewed disfranchisement as the second Redemption.¹

Despite the anemic public funding of black schools in the South, the African American struggle for education in the last three decades of the nineteenth century was largely successful. In the course of one generation, black Southerners' ability to read and write jumped from approximately one in twenty to one in two. Placing their faith in the promise of the next generation, often sending their children to school at great personal and financial sacrifice, black Southerners did their best to meet the requirements of citizenship on the terms laid down for them at the end of slavery. But the democratization of reading ironically met its match in the anti-democratic impulses of disfranchisement and progressivism. Literacy tests offered a putatively non-racial, and therefore constitutionally viable, means of wresting the suffrage away from black voters.

¹Jack Temple Kirby, Media-Made Dixie: The South in the American Imagination (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 6, notes that Griffith's film exemplified the "intense historical didacticism" that served to legitimate disfranchisement; John Dittmer, Black Georgia in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 185-6; Robert Preston Brooks, History of Georgia, (Boston: Atkinson, Mentzer & Company, 1913; reprint ed., Spartanburg, S.C.: The Reprint Company, 1972), 209, 318, 358; see also Lawton B. Evans, A History of Georgia for Use in Schools, (New York: American Book Company, 1908; reprint ed., Spartanburg, S. C., The Reprint Company, 1972), 355.

By 1890 the "literacy" of voters had come to serve as a convenient shorthand for civic and moral worthiness--requirements that proponents of disfranchisement could put forward as a progressive measure designed to strengthen, rather than undermine, democratic rule. The disfranchisement of black and poor white men in the period between 1890 and 1908 stands as the only major abrogation of the suffrage in United States history. Every other chapter in the history of suffrage has been a story of expansion--first to propertyless white men, then to black men, to women, and finally to young adults. But in the 1890s the demonization of black men and the reemergent notion of a "qualified suffrage" allowed northern and southern white progressives, the U.S. Supreme Court, and even some black Southerners to sanction suffrage restrictions in the name of progress, to accept disfranchisement as a reasonable measure that would strengthen rather than subvert democracy. The Southern literacy requirements became a model for suffrage restrictions around the nation, as immigrants became the target of similar exclusionary tactics. The reactionary rash of Southern disfranchisement measures was at the forefront of what was at the time construed as a Progressive reform movement.²

²White Southerners did not have to wait long before the U.S. Supreme Court lent authority to their desire to limit black voting. In U. S. v. Reese (1876), Chief Justice Morrison Waite gutted the Fifteenth Amendment, writing that it did not guarantee black voters the right of suffrage, that only states could grant that right. In the *l'èger de main* which characterized the Supreme Court's posture toward the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments in the late nineteenth century, Waite's decision placed the burden on black voters to prove that they were discriminated against specifically because of their race. See United States v. Reese, 92 U. S. 214 (1876), cited in Richard Kluger, Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality (New York: Vintage, 1975), 60.

Since the publication in 1974 of Morgan Kousser's The Shaping of Southern Politics, historians have been in general agreement that disfranchisement was instituted in the South primarily for strategic reasons--namely, to eliminate opposition voting of all stripes so that Democrats could exercise unchallenged control over state politics. Recently, historians have begun to explore how ideology shaped the politics of disfranchisement, considering the role of gender politics in the story and viewing suffrage restriction in the South as part of a broad national electoral reform movement. Historians have written about the use of literacy tests as an exclusionary device, but generally these tests have simply appeared among the long lists of other restrictions. While it is clear that literacy tests were used (and were intended to be used) perniciously, as a means of eliminating black voters from the polls, the question remains why the disfranchisers hit upon literacy tests as an exclusionary device. If, as Kousser's analysis suggests, the primary concern of Democrats was to exclude opposition voters, why did they bother to adopt literacy tests? Especially in the case of Georgia, which had almost completely eliminated black voters with poll taxes decades earlier, literacy tests were hardly necessary from an electoral standpoint.³

³J. Morgan Kousser, The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880-1910 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974). Kousser's study asserts that disfranchisement laws designed to eliminate opposition (non-Democratic) voters were primarily responsible for the creation of the one-party South. Kousser's analysis took issue with V. O. Key and other political scientists who argued that disfranchisement measures were merely a formality, accomplishing on paper what had already been accomplished in fact by violence, intimidation, and other forms of social power. See V. O. Key, Southern Politics in State and Nation (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949; reprint, Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1984). Glenda E. Gilmore, Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), and Rebecca B. Edwards, Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era (New

Political historians have listed literacy tests among the tools used by disfranchisers, but they have not looked much beyond the surface of the statutes or beyond the strategic necessities surrounding their passage. This makes sense; literacy tests were never really meant to measure literacy, but rather to keep blacks out of Southern polls, European immigrants out of northern polls, and Asian and Mexican immigrants out of western polls. But if we view literacy tests as their contemporaries did, as part of the ongoing discussion of the relationship between civic and intellectual life that had unfolded through the course of the nineteenth century, the story of disfranchisement in the South becomes considerably broader, both chronologically and regionally. The success of the disfranchisement movement--its legal defensibility and its palatability to contemporary observers--rested on deeply held beliefs about the relationship between education, virtue, and the privileges of citizenship.

Literacy tests were the product of interregional borrowing. Southern states based their statutes on laws enacted by the Know-Nothings in Connecticut and Massachusetts in the 1850s, and northern and western states in turn based their post-1900 statutes on laws passed in the South between 1890 and 1908. Suffrage restrictions

York: Oxford University Press, 1997), emphasize gender in their analyses, particularly the connection between the demonization of black men in the 1890s and disfranchisement.

Historians of the American South have generally overlooked the fact that disfranchisement in the South was part of a national craze for restricting the ballot in the late nineteenth century; 38 of 44 states passed some type of suffrage limitation by 1892. See John F. Reynolds, Testing Democracy: Electoral Behavior and Progressive Reform in New Jersey, 1880-1920 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 49; Rogers M. Smith, Civic Ideals: Conflicting Views of Citizenship in U.S. History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 347-409; Michael Schudson, The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life (New York: Free Press, 1998), 144-187; and Arthur Watson Bromage, "The Political Implications of Illiteracy," Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1928.

were not simply the aberrant product of a few Southern demagogues between 1890 and 1908. States all across the country, and in many parts of Europe and Latin America, instituted voting restrictions based on literacy or educational requirements by 1920.⁴

⁴Bromage, "The Political Implications of Illiteracy," 4-9.

Table 1. Literacy Tests Used to Restrict the Suffrage in the South

State	Device(s)	Date(s)
Alabama	Literacy Test	1901
Florida	1868 constitutional provision allowed legislature to enact literacy restrictions after 1880, but was not carried out	
Georgia	Literacy Test	1908
Louisiana	Grandfather Clause (educational and property requirements)	1898
Mississippi	Literacy Test: Must be able to read or understand or interpret any section of the state constitution (1890); amended to read <u>and</u> write any section and give a reasonable interpretation	1890
North Carolina	Literacy test	1900
Tennessee	Secret ballots and literacy tests in towns in 38 counties	1898
South Carolina	Eight Box Law, Literacy test	1882, 1895
Virginia	Publicly printed ballot without party names or symbols; understanding clause; requirement to apply to registrar "in his own handwriting" stating name, age, date and place of birth, residence, occupation, etc.	1894; 1902; 1904

Sources: Chandler Davidson and Bernard Grofman, eds., Quiet Revolution in the South: The Impact of the Voting Rights Act, 1965-1990 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 65, 101, 134, 153, 190, 231, 298; on Tennessee, Student Voter's Manual (Westerville, Ohio: American Issue Publishing Company, 1921); J. Morgan Kousser, The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 118.

Table 2. Literacy Tests Used to Restrict the Suffrage Outside the South

State	Device(s)	Date
Arizona	Must be able to read the constitution in the English language and be able to write his name.	1913
California	Must be able to read the constitution in the English language and be able to write his name.	1894
Connecticut	Literacy test; no language specified until 1897	1855, 1897
Delaware	Must be able to read the constitution in the English language and write his name if he attained the age of twenty-one or became a citizen of the United States after January 1, 1900.	1897
District of Columbia	Literacy tests proposed but defeated	1866
Hawaii (territory)	Literacy test	1900
Maryland	Literacy tests defeated by popular referendum	1905, 1909
Massachusetts	Literacy tests	1857, 1878, 1884
Missouri	Literacy tests	1865; repealed in 1875
New Hampshire	Must be able to read the constitution in the English language and be able to sign his name.	1902
North Dakota	The constitution requires the legislature to establish an education test but it had not done so by 1928.	
New York	Literacy test	1921
Oklahoma	Literacy test combined with permanent grandfather clause	1910
Oregon	Literacy test	1924
Philippine Islands (territory)	Literacy test	1900

State	Device(s)	Date
Puerto Rico (territory)	Literacy test	1902
Wyoming	Must be able to read the Constitution unless prevented by physical disability	1889

Sources: Maxwell Hall, Student Voter's Manual (Westerville, Ohio: American Issue Publishing Company, 1921); Bromage, "The Political Implications of Illiteracy," 4-5, 21-24, 49-56, 57-63.

Everywhere, restrictive laws were pitched as progressive reforms, as twentieth-century legislators drew on the nineteenth-century language of self-culture, self-improvement, and self-mastery, all virtues that reading was understood to inculcate. Far from being condemned for enacting laws to restrict the suffrage, Southern legislators found their efforts praised, seemingly from every quarter. "The man who can neither read nor write demonstrates a lack of intelligence or ambition that should disqualify him from exercising the highest prerogative of American citizenship," reported the Newark, N.J., Evening News in 1900. Commenting on recent "ballot reforms" in Georgia, the Newark paper concluded that "if, in the midst of all the opportunities which exist in America for the acquisition of money, he has failed to amass at least a modest little sum, he is manifestly too indolent or thriftless to have a voice in the conduct of municipal, state, or national affairs." A New Jersey minister summed up the danger succinctly: "An ignorant voter is at the mercy of the politicians and is easily manipulated by the machine."⁵

⁵Newark Evening News, October 27, 1900, quoted in John F. Reynolds, Testing Democracy: Electoral Behavior and Progressive Reform in New Jersey, 1880-1920 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 122-3, 121.

Literacy tests appealed to the disfranchisers for a number of reasons. As Southern legislators vied with one another to create the most impenetrable set of election laws, they borrowed language from earlier statutes that had already passed muster with the courts, as literacy tests had. Of all the disfranchisement measures, literacy restrictions were most easily cast as legitimate "suffrage qualifications," which made them more palatable to would-be critics. The belief that education heightened moral sensibilities, and therefore fitted a person to bear the responsibilities of self-government, made literacy tests appear on the surface as a reasonable and fair-minded means of limiting political rights. Disfranchisement was enacted in Georgia, as elsewhere, during a particularly nasty period of race-baiting and demagoguery; still, the disfranchisers confronted opposition from white and black Republicans--and to some extent, from within the ranks of the Democratic Party. Despite concern that some whites might be disfranchised by educational requirements, literacy tests broadened support for disfranchisement. Most black leaders, even in their strongest condemnations of suffrage restriction, agreed that educational qualifications were reasonable, at least in part because they felt they could meet them. The claim that democracy could be protected and even enhanced by eliminating "unqualified" voters gave disfranchisement laws a veneer of prudent reform, even as democracy was extinguished in the region.

Literacy requirements did not appear out of thin air in the 1890s, but were the culmination of an ideology that had roots in the early national period and that had been central to the struggle over defining black citizenship during Reconstruction. Learning and moral character were continually linked by black and white leaders alike as they

debated the prospective political rights of the freedmen during Reconstruction, and the ability to read and write came to serve as a shorthand estimation of intellectual and political capability. There had been little consensus on the question of freedmen's suffrage, though many northern whites and blacks favored black voting rights qualified by vague standards of "intelligence" and "culture." Some northerners, animated by old abolitionist sentiments, favored universal suffrage, while others wanted to hold out the suffrage as a carrot to compel freedmen to work and to acquire an education--which they were not persuaded would happen otherwise.

Georgia was among the first Southern states to pass an effective exclusionary law, but it was the last Southern state to enact an omnibus disfranchisement bill. Its cumulative poll tax, in place since 1877, was proudly described as "the most effective bar to Negro suffrage ever devised." Even in the headiest moments of the Populist movement, poll taxes had severely restricted black voter turnout. The institution of the white primary in 1898 effectively completed disfranchisement in Georgia.

Nevertheless, in 1898 Thomas W. Hardwick, first in the Georgia statehouse and later in the U. S. Congress, began pushing for a suffrage bill that included a literacy requirement. Many conservatives, citing the poll tax--and ever aware of their own occasional need for black votes--saw further restrictions as unnecessary and undesirable. However, Hardwick was ceaseless in his efforts. As a congressman, he proposed repealing the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, countering opposition

from New York's Union League and from northern congressmen by pointing out that Connecticut and other northern states had educational requirements.⁶

Black leaders opposed Hardwick's efforts, arguing that the proposed changes placed too much power in the hands of individual registrars, opening the door to manipulation and dishonesty. But they conceded that literacy tests, if equally applied, were acceptable: "It is ignorance and crime that menace decent government in Georgia, and not the color of its citizens. Away then with ignorance and crime, but let the rule that regulates the restrictions apply to white and black alike." Those who protested against the bill used the proposed literacy tests as an opportunity to call for equal education, as had black educators in a similar appeal to the Louisiana legislature the previous year: "'In a free country no state has the right to condition the franchise upon intelligence and then deny its citizens the means of education.' We sincerely hope that the white citizens of Louisiana will recognize the justice of this demand, and that the constitution providing for the disfranchisement of illiterates will also provide for the ultimate extinction of illiteracy."⁷

Assured by promises of fair enforcement and by the fact that black illiteracy had dropped from over 90 percent to less than 50 percent in a single generation since the end of slavery, these black spokesmen, W. E. B. Du Bois among them, viewed literacy requirements as reasonable. T. Thomas Fortune, the black editor of the New York

⁶Kousser, The Shaping of Southern Politics, 65; speech by Thomas W. Hardwick in Congressional Record: Containing the Proceedings and Debates of the Fifty-Eighth Congress, Second Session, vol. 38 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904), 1272.

⁷Atlanta Constitution, November 10, 1899.

Globe, argued that it was the "proper function of government to see that its citizens are properly prepared to exercise wisely the liberties placed in their keeping." In order that the people "may more clearly know their rights and how best to preserve them and reap their fullest benefits, they should be instructed in the language which is the medium through which to interpret their grand Magna Carta." Literacy requirements could be used to support arguments in favor of black education, and if fairly enforced they would actually help keep the black franchise alive.⁸

White lawmakers found a welcome ally in Ben Davis, the black editor of the Atlanta Independent. In 1904 Davis published an editorial entitled "The Elimination of the Negro from the National Life as a Political Force is Inevitable," in which he advocated limiting the right to vote based on "intelligence and property qualifications." Arguing that blacks were "innately unfit for the ballot," Davis wrote that black political participation was low because black voters had no "patriotic conception of the duties and responsibilities of citizenship." Such comments were met with praise and agreement from the Atlanta Constitution, which praised the good judgment of this "intelligent Negro editor," and chimed in, "the ignorant negro must stop his childish attempts to play in the political fire, go to work, go to church, to school, learn a trade, cultivate some common sense, and with it the good opinion and friendship of fair-minded white people who have become disgusted with the 'political nigger.'" Black

⁸W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Suffrage Fight in Georgia," Independent, November 30, 1899, 3226-7; "Louisiana's Constitutional Convention," Outlook article reprinted in the BAU, March 1898, 3; T. Thomas Fortune, Black and White: Land, Labor, and Politics in the South (New York: Ford, Howard, and Hulbert, 1884), 63, 65.

Augustans, on the other hand, wondered if "some hotheaded evil genius has either got hold of Brother Davis' editorial pen or his head."⁹

In 1906, two newspaper editors, Clark Howell of the Atlanta Constitution and Hoke Smith of the Atlanta Journal, faced off in the Democratic primary for governor. Race and suffrage reform emerged as the central issues of the campaign, as the candidates struggled to define their differences before their homogeneous electorate of poll-tax-paying white Democrats. Smith promised full disfranchisement, and warned of "negro domination" under a Howell regime. Howell warned that literacy tests would disfranchise many whites and cause blacks to flock to school, which he warned would unsuit them to field labor. True to his word, after winning the election Hoke Smith presented a disfranchisement bill that brought under one tent the entire array of devices developed and perfected in other Southern states over the previous twenty years: a character test, an understanding test, a literacy test, property requirements, and poll taxes cumulative from 1877. A grandfather clause exempting Confederate veterans and their offspring from these requirements completed the picture. The Atlanta Journal reported that Georgia had now "taken her place among the enlightened and progressive states which have announced that the white man will rule." The week after the referendum, Ben Davis, after years of arguing in his newspaper that blacks did not deserve the suffrage, directed his fury at the black community rather than the

⁹Clarence A. Bacote, "The Negro in Georgia Politics, 1880-1908" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1955), 336, 393-4.

legislature: "Where were all the preachers, school teachers and Negro leaders last Wednesday when the race's rights were being voted away?"¹⁰

The institution of literacy tests heightened public consciousness over what after 1900 came to be called "the crisis of illiteracy." Moonlight schools held in the evening, and "lay by" schools held during the late summer, were founded in Kentucky and South Carolina to train illiterate adults to read. Between 1900 and 1920 illiteracy commissions were founded across the Southeast. A short-lived "simplified spelling" movement was even promoted by President Theodore Roosevelt in an effort to make learning to read easier. Teachers checked their student's eyesight and voiced their concern over the proper illumination of classrooms.¹¹

Arguments were made that literacy requirements would help make a case for black schooling; literacy requirements would actually reduce illiteracy--and with it, poverty and criminality. "Compulsory education becomes a matter of self-protection" not only by reducing poverty, and thus the burden on the taxpayers, but also because "illiteracy is the spawning place for most vices," a Georgia education committee

¹⁰Kousser, The Shaping of Southern Politics, 210, 217-20; Dittmer, Black Georgia, 94-104; Bacote, "Negro in Georgia Politics," 396-468, 503; Atlanta Journal, October 8, 1908, quoted on 500; Ralph Wardlaw, "Negro Suffrage in Georgia, 1867-1930" (M.A. thesis, University of Georgia, 1932), 61-3; A. J. McKelway, "The Suffrage in Georgia," Outlook, September 14, 1907.

¹¹On moonlight and lay-by schools, see Florence Estes, "Cora Wilson Stewart and the Moonlight Schools of Kentucky, 1911-1920: A Case Study in the Rhetorical Uses of Literacy," (Ed.D. dissertation, University of Kentucky, 1988), and Teresa Scott Kincheloe, "An Examination of Adult Literacy Efforts in Louisiana From 1900 to 1940," (Ed.D. dissertation, Northwestern State University, 1985); A. C. Hill, "Prison Schools," Bureau of Education, Bulletin No. 27 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1913); on simplified spelling movement, see "Prezident and Suprem Cort Used to Fire Tu," Washington Star, 15 August 1937.

reported in the early 1900s. "The intelligent, educated and well informed man fills but few prison cells and is seldom found in the charity wards of our public hospitals. . . . Ignorance has no place in the conduct of our public affairs; illiteracy can play no part in the administration of the county or state government. The educated man is always at the front; the illiterate man always at the rear. In most cases, the illiterate man is at the mercy of the educated man."¹²

For three generations following disfranchisement, black Southerners sought to beat restrictive voting laws, but to little avail. Blacks in Atlanta retained enough political power to win several victories for public education in the years that followed, passing bond referenda to raise teachers' salaries, securing a black library, and eventually a black high school--the only black high school in the area until 1946. Regionally, the picture was dismal. Voter turnout plummeted in the South in the years following disfranchisement, with turnout for presidential elections dropping from almost 80 percent in 1876 to less than 20 percent in 1924. By 1940, only 3 percent of the South's 5 million voting-age blacks were registered to vote. Blacks made significant gains in the following years, but as late as 1964 Florida and Tennessee were alone among the Southern states in registering as many as half of their voting-age black citizens.¹³

¹²"What is Said by Those Who Know," 15, issued by the Educational Campaign Committee, n.d. (ca. 1907-08), W. J. Northern Papers, GDAH.

¹³Howard N. Rabinowitz, The First New South, 1865-1920 (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 1992), 154-155; Numan V. Bartley and Hugh D. Graham, Southern Politics and the Second Reconstruction (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 8-9.

The polite fiction that literacy tests tested literacy thrived in the twentieth century. The federal education department and the census bureau issued sober reports measuring the illiteracy of the voting-age population; reformers published voting guides outlining the requirements of the various states; church basements were turned into night schools; calls were made for volunteers to teach potential voters how to read. As black determination to register intensified, Southern registrars stooped to ever more ridiculous and insulting measures to make sure they failed. By the 1960s registrars were seen testing black applicants "on such matters as the number of bubbles in a bar of soap, the news contained in a copy of the Peking Daily, the meaning of obscure passages in state constitutions, and the definition of such terms as habeas corpus."¹⁴

In 1962 Jacob Javits brought a bill before the U. S. Senate abandoning literacy tests in favor of a universal requirement of a sixth-grade education. One Georgia attorney testified before a Senate subcommittee that the sixth grade requirement was meaningless, on the grounds that completing six years of public school in Georgia was no guarantee that a person could read, and he brought in affidavits from teachers in support of his claim. Like his predecessors in the early 1900s, he was willing to enlist every tool at his disposal to keep black voters out of the polls, preferring to acknowledge the inadequacy of his state's public school system rather than allow black voting. The belief that the vote should be withheld from those presumed to be illiterate

¹⁴"Illiteracy of the Voting Population in the United States," Report of the Commissioner of Education for the Year 1902, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1903), 789-818; Maxwell Hall, The Student Voter's Manual (Westerville, Ohio: American Issue Publishing Company, 1921), "The Way it Works," Bulletin of the Atlanta University 23 (December 1890): 3; Abigail M. Thernstrom, Whose Votes Count? Affirmative Action and Minority Voting Rights (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 2, 15.

proved itself once again as malleable as it was durable. One hundred years after the end of the Civil War marked the beginnings of black freedom, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 finally eliminated literacy tests. Since that time, those seeking to limit the political power of minorities have resorted to battles over enumeration, apportionment, the drawing of congressional districts, and the creation of at-large seats on city councils.¹⁵

In the 1960s, as in the 1860s, Americans struggled over the proper relationship between intellectual and civic life, between the ability to read and the exercise of citizenship. The drive to create an informed citizenry that had begun in the early national period, the rise of "self-culture" in the nineteenth century, the struggle to come to terms with the potent but vague notion that "knowledge is power," and the struggle over the franchise at the end of the nineteenth century, all attest to the power of reading in American public life. At every turn, the private act of reading assumed new and contradictory public meanings.

¹⁵"Literacy Tests and Voter Requirements in Federal and State Elections," Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights of the Committee on the Judiciary of the United States Senate, (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1962), 351-2. An excellent analysis of the continued abrogation of voting rights in recent years is J. Morgan Kousser, Colorblind Injustice: Minority Voting Rights and the Undoing of the Second Reconstruction (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); on Georgia, see esp. 197-242.

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