"A Toilet in the Middle of the Court House Square":
The Summer Teaching Institute of 1915 and the Influence of Booker T. Washington on Negro Teacher Education in Alabama

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The faces of Black and White men and women stare back from the sepia-colored pages of the past. These images, set between the pages of a tattered black photograph album, are a record of a bygone era. Men and women, Blacks and Whites, all gathered together to record their experiences of the summer of 1915: the setting, rural Alabama, the participants, Negro teachers, White supervisors, and a special category of educators known as Jeanes Teachers, named after the philanthropic fund which supported their activities. The story of the summer of 1915 is one of learning, dedication, and achievement. It represents a piece of Negro history in Alabama which has all but been forgotten—Negro self-help, White involvement in Negro education, and the nature of Black rural communities. The Civil Rights rhetoric and highly-profiled achievements of Blacks during the 1950s and 1960s has likely eclipsed the story of the slow-but-steady progress made by a handful of Negro leaders and scores of Negro followers, especially in the rural South, decades earlier. This paper, however, is not an attempt to show that every cloud has a silver lining, but rather to illuminate a small piece of history that has heretofore largely gone unnoticed. It is also an attempt to draw connections between the educational thought of Booker T. Washington and that of Progressive Era reformers such as John Dewey so that Washington's educational philosophy may be considered less as accommodationist politics and more as sound educational theory.

In order to understand the “Summer of 1915” and its meaning to Negro teacher education as well as rural Negro education, one must first understand the education path many rural southern Negroes followed, that of industrial education. The course of southern Negro education was set when Booker T. Washington graduated from the Hampton Institute in 1875 (Bond, 1934). Washington, born into slavery, came under the influence of General Samuel Chapman Armstrong, founder of the Hampton Institute, and former military commander during the Civil War (Bullock, 1967, 76). Washington, who, decades after his work on behalf of rural Negro education, has been much maligned by both Whites and Blacks for not seeking an intellectual vision for Black Americans, but rather confining his vision to that of industry and labor (Hedin, 1979, 95). His vision for Black Americans contained an economic component coupled with a moral vision, albeit one whose foundations rested upon manual labor as a character builder rather than the development of an intellectual class, as timing, according to Washington was everything. At the Hampton Institute, Washington studied moral philosophy. Accordingly, one of Washington’s biographers (Bond, 1934) wrote that Washington’s “first duty at Tuskegee was not to erect a formidable catalogue of technical ‘courses’: [rather] on his first school day, he noted every missing student, every dirty collar, every filthy shirt or uncreased trouser. [Thus,] his first assignment was to request that these defects be repaired by the next day” (p. 119). Washington’s ground-floor philosophy became the hallmark of his life’s work at Tuskegee and of his educational thought.

The Great Vision, the Great Fear

Likely, more than a few Tuskegee graduates who heard Washington’s messages of cleanliness and attention to duty, were captured on film, and are represented in the photographs contained in the black tattered album. These images give sharp testimony to the scores of Negro teachers and students, who embraced Washington’s approach to the uplifting of the Negro race—pride in self, and pride in work. His directives of cleanliness, orderliness, and personal hygiene are evidenced in every photograph (Alabama State Archives, Jeanes Teachers, SPP28). Yet, as dynamic as Washington was, his ability to generate funds within the Black community for Black education was limited. However, his great vision for Tuskegee, some 30 miles east of Montgomery, Alabama, the state capitol, came at a time when northern philanthropy was at its peak. Thus, individuals such as Julius Rosenwald, one of the principals of Sears Roebuck, Anna T. Jeanes, a wealthy
Quaker, George Peabody, and John F. Slater, from the Slater textile family, played a pivotal role in southern rural Negro education, albeit their work was often viewed with skepticism by those who feared that they would unduly influence southern Negroes (Bond, 1934). To be sure, White fear often focused on the Negro’s assertion of individual rights, along with the perceived attempt by some that Negroes might place themselves, through education, on the same plane as southern Whites.

In 1906, W.E.B. DuBois delivered a speech at the Hampton Institute in which he eloquently outlined the ideas behind this White fear. On the one hand claimed DuBois, the voices which comprise the “Great Fear,” as he called it, experienced saner moments in which Negroes were accepted to some extent as human brothers. On the other, the voices cautioned that Negroes must be dealt with in a careful manner. One way to accomplish this “carefulness” was to emphasize duty and minimize the rhetoric of rights. As DuBois succinctly stated, “take the eyes of these millions off the stars and fasten them in the soil; and if their young men will dream dreams, let them be dreams of cornbread and molasses” (Aptheker, editor, 1973, 9). Thus, the industrial training schools promoted by DuBois’ counterpoint, Booker T. Washington, and then later by the philanthropists who supported Washington’s ideas, seemed to quell the Great Fear and perhaps redirected the gaze of some from the stars to the soil. In any event, Washington’s industrial model seemed less of a threat to the “old order,” and thus met with White approval (McElroy, 1992, 89; Bruce, 19, 241).

The idea that the South needed many hands to help it rise from its failed attempt at nationhood contributed to the energy and vitality that Washington and others brought to the educational endeavor of building up industrial programs (Elder, 1977, 2-3). More to the point, as a former slave Washington himself had witnessed the brief ascent of his people during the Reconstruction period when the “Yankee occupiers” thrust scores of former slaves or northern Negroes into political offices in the South, only to be turned out once Reconstruction ended. Thus, Negro aspirations were confronted, at the close of Reconstruction, with growing resentment by southern Whites. This resentment resulted not only in acts of violence, but also in institutional endorsements of White racial superiority. In one revisionist account of Reconstruction (Stampp, 1965, 198), the author outlines southern White sentiment:

To prevent the ‘Africanization’ of the South, they demanded: ‘A White man in a White man’s place. A Black man in a Black man’s place. Each according to the eternal fitness of things.’ [Additionally,] an appeal of South Carolina Democrats on behalf of “the proud Caucasian race, whose sovereignty on earth God has ordained” protested against the “subversion of the great social law, whereby an ignorant and depraved race is placed in power and influence above the virtuous, the educated and the refined” (Ibid).

In the face of such extreme opposition, Washington’s conciliatory approach to education and the Negro acted as a salve upon an inflammation. Yet, the intellectual dream refused to die. The irony is that Washington did not advocate industry without intellect nor did DuBois advocate intellect without industry. These two endeavors according to both men were not mutually exclusive. However, at the turn of the century, it likely seemed that both approaches to Negro education were locked in a winner-take-all combat (Fox, 1978, 23). In 1895, while United States Commissioner of Education, William T. Harris, continued his advocacy of a classical-style education for Negroes before audiences at Atlanta University, Washington campaigned at the Atlanta Exposition that same year for Negroes to abandon the lofty ideals of the classics and ‘cast down [their] buckets’ where they were (Bullock, 1967, 87). At the Exposition meeting Washington put the following before his audience: ‘Ignorant and inexperienced, it is not strange that in the first years of our new life we began at the top instead of the bottom; that a seat in Congress or the state legislature was more sought than real estate or industrial skill; that the political convention or stump speaking had more attractions than starting a dairy farm or being a truck driver” (87). He went on to admonish his fellow Negroes to ‘cast down in agriculture, mechanics, commerce, domestic service, and in the professions’ (87). Thus, his response to Harris and others who were like-minded, was immediate and profound; it resounded around the nation and the world.

Washington’s educational philosophy was largely born out of his own experiences, albeit one can find numerous connections to the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey whose own work at about the same time was receiving praise at home and abroad. Of the many writings by others on the subject of Booker T. Washington and his advocacy of the industrial model, few, if any, make reference to his experiences as a child born into slavery and then later as a youth who struggled to understand the road to success upon an American landscape dominated by White values as the basis for his mature philosophy. In his autobiography, Washington spoke of his wonderment at discovering how Miss Mackie, the principal of the Hampton Institute and a lady from one of the “oldest and most cultured families in the North,” worked side by side with Washington cleaning windows and dusting in order to ready the school for the new term (Washington, 1901, 72). Washington’s careful attention to observation and the art of reflection allowed him to construct an understanding of the world around him that revealed a belief that White privilege had more to do with hard work and attention to duty than accident of birth. In
other words, he steadfastly maintained that the Negro race would be uplifted only after its members grasped the notion of a hierarchy of needs. For Washington, that also meant providing for one's needs through self help and not a reliance on government assistance as experienced during the early days of Reconstruction (Williams, 1992, 12; Marable, 398).

Washington believed that the experiment of Reconstruction was founded on a "false foundation" (Washington, 1901, 84). His observation and understanding of Reconstruction led him to assert that "... there was an element in the North which wanted to punish the Southern White men by forcing the Negro into positions over the heads of Southern Whites" and that in the end, it would be the Negro who suffered (84). This change in the balance of power, as Washington correctly saw it, would erode any gains made as a result of emancipation and formed the basis of his accommodationist policy. This is not to say that he believed in the industrial educational model only as a way to accommodate Whites. In all of his writings, Washington upheld his belief in the industrial model as a way to instill pride and gain self-sufficiency. What Washington likely saw that DuBois—owing to his location in time and place—could not see, was the precarious position of 4 million ex-slaves thrust upon a Southern landscape with only those skills needed for an economic system now bankrupt. Hence, his educational philosophy, born out of strong personal convictions and experiences, also contained an element of the practical. Although his accommodationist policy has been chastised severely in the decades following his death, one should carefully examine Washington's educational philosophy on its own merits and try to disentangle it from the politics surrounding the man. After all, his philosophical beliefs were formed, if one is to believe Washington's own writings, long before he became famous or even began his experiment at Tuskegee.

Early on, Washington understood that he could easily have achieved political heights. Yet, his desire was not for office, because in order to accomplish political fame, he would achieve success “at the cost of failing to do my duty in assisting in laying a foundation for the masses” (93). The task of laying a foundation for the masses was daunting. This meant spreading large doses of the kind of moral philosophy that had guided Washington throughout his own educational experiences at the Hampton Institute throughout the rural Black South, especially Alabama. As he traveled the back roads of rural Alabama in order to assess the needs of “his people,” he noticed two distinct problems. One, these former slaves, now free men, continued to plant cotton instead of planting a vegetable garden which could sustain them. And two, their humble cabins might contain “showy clocks” or an organ, all purchased on credit, yet was absent of even the most basic of personal needs such as eating utensils (Washington, Up From Slavery, 1901 and Character, 1902, 33). Hence, Washington took great care at Tuskegee to instill within the student body all-personal routines and necessities of hygiene before tackling the formal curriculum.

In fact, his Sunday night chapel talks with students were generally dedicated to discussions on how one should live one’s life. Washington lectured his young students on everything from placing the dishtowel in the same place each time to when meals should be served (Washington, Character, 1902, 84-5). One of his most challenging educational obstacles was the belief by many that school “was a place where one was expected to do nothing but study books: where one was expected not to study things, but to study about things” (39). Washington met this challenge by working side by side with his students as Miss Mackie had done at Hampton with him. Until his death in 1915, Washington never wavered in his belief that education should reflect the needs of the community and that school was not a place where one went to learn about something, but rather that the school was both father and mother in preparing the child (student) to take his or her necessary and valuable place in society. As a result, Washington’s school at Tuskegee was not only self-sustaining, its students were trained in everything from brick making to farming and home industries, everything a healthy and well-functioning community would need. Washington sincerely believed that no man goes unrewarded both in terms financial and humanitarian gains whose labors or talents are needed by the community. His goal of educating students who knew how to do something that was valued and needed in the communities in which they lived seemed in concert with the educational aims of Progressive educational reformers such as John Dewey, despite the fact that Washington failed to mention in his autobiography or other writings the influence of Progressive Era reformers on his own educational thought.

Nevertheless, the connection between the educational thought of Dewey and Washington rests on strong foundations. In 1899, some two to three years before Washington’s autobiography Up From Slavery (1901) and his collection of published Sunday night “talks with students,” entitled Character Building (1902), were published, Dewey delivered a series of lectures to those interested in the University of Chicago Elementary School. These lectures were later published as The School in Society by the University of Chicago Press (1900, 1915 revised, 1943 & 1990). The educational thought of Dewey put forth in these lectures mirrored that of Washington located in the heart of rural Black America. When speaking of the work of the school, Dewey asserted that we judge the school according to the “improvement in manners, habits of promptness, order, and industry...” of the individual child that we know, but that the community should want for all of its children what the best and wisest parent wants and expects for his own (1990, 7). From here, Dewey went on to speak of social change—
meaning industrial life—and reminded his audience, if not somewhat nostalgically, of the value of genuine work as a teaching and learning tool.

He extolled the virtues of an earlier life when he said that one needed to go back only a few generations to “find a time when the household was practically the center in which were carried on, or about which were clustered, all the typical forms of industrial occupation” (Dewey, 1990 revised, 10). He spoke of the necessity of raising sheep for wool which was later spun into thread and woven for clothing, and of the flour mill, Blacksmith shop, or other stores where townfolk congregated. These villages served, in his mind, as living educational laboratories. To Dewey, “the entire industrial process stood revealed, from the production on the farm of the raw materials till the finished article was actually put to use” (10). Accordingly, he said, “we cannot overlook the factors of discipline and of character-building involved in this kind of life: training in habits of order and of industry, and in the idea of responsibility, of obligation to do something, to produce something, in the world” (10-11). A striking resemblance exists between the educational philosophies of Dewey and Washington. When Dewey spoke of the work of the school, his words could have been uttered by Washington:

When we turn to the school, we find that one of the most striking tendencies at present is toward the introduction of so-called manual training, shopwork, and the household arts—sewing and cooking. This has not been done ‘on purpose,’ with a full consciousness that the school must now supply that factor of training formerly taken care of in the home, but rather by instinct, by experimenting and finding that such work takes a vital hold of pupils and gives them something which was not to be got in any other way.... it keeps them alert and active, instead of passive and receptive; it makes them more useful, more capable, and hence more inclined to be helpful at home; it prepares them to some extent for the practical duties of later life (11-12).

Despite the obvious admiration of both men for industrial education, Dewey’s promotion of manual training had more to do with a theoretical approach to learning than Washington who believed that manual training and the industrial arts were the foundation stones for an entire race of people who must now acquire a values system of its own. In *Working With The Hands* (1904), Washington spoke of the need to demonstrate in a positive way advancements made by Negro farmers and business men—participants in his Negro Business Conference, an outreach program of Tuskegee—in the hope that White society would view these models and come to understand that these men of substance were worthy of full participatory citizenship and would be capable of exercising judgment at the ballot box (Hurd, 1993, 29; Myrdal in Kilson, 2000, 4). In fact, Washington posed the question, “Is it dangerous to give the ballot to that kind of a citizen? [one who had risen from “rags to riches”] Will he be apt to use it to promote extravagant taxation ”(141)? It was upon this foundation of self-help and industrial labor that Washington had hoped to accomplish two things. One, to lay a foundation for “his race” which began with personal hygiene as a measure of a civilized human being and two, to promote training in the industrial arts which provided individuals with practical skills. According to Washington, no man would suffer injustice whose skills were needed by the community. While numerous authors have chosen to view Washington from the perspective of a shrewd accommodationist politician, his educational thought had more to do with the practical reality of an entire people, largely uneducated and thrust upon a hostile landscape upon which they must survive, and to whom he chose to dedicate an entire life for the purpose of uplifting “his race,” than with politics.

With enthusiasm, White northern philanthropists lined up behind Washington and his Tuskegee experiment, a program whose core was comprised of moral teachings and industrial know-how. However, rather than simply handing over sums of money for Negro education, the approach taken by some northern philanthropists, like Julius Rosenwald, included an insistence on the participation from both the White and Black community. For example, the terms of the Rosenwald school building program involved contributions by both White and Black communities. By 1932, some 5,300 Rosenwald schools had been erected in fifteen southern states (Embree and Waxman, 1949), with Alabama serving as the birthplace of the Rosenwald schools. The vision of both Washington and Rosenwald regarding the school building program was to offer community grants of one-third the cost of construction with the other monies emanating from the local Black community, public support, and the local White community. According to one writer and critic, however, the reality failed to meet the vision—“the attitudes of southern Whites were little changed by Rosenwald grants and few Whites were induced to contribute to the building fund” (Rosenwald School Building Fund, Alabama Historical Commission, 1997). Yet, the enduring stories of community successes refuse to slip into obscurity. For example,

In Mississippi, John H. Culkin, superintendent of Warren County, having learned of the Rosenwald buildings in other states, became disturbed because there were not decent schools for Blacks in his county. He became determined to erect a new building in each of the twenty-five Black communities in Warren County. Disliked by the local Ku Klux Klan because he was Catholic and because two of his board members were Jews, Culkin ordered that the entire program be begun in each community and in the utmost secrecy. Complete bills of material and specifications of all the schools were given to large lumber mills with orders to deliver the goods on a specific day.
in Vicksburg. White citizens not only gave money, but provided mule teams and wagons to carry the materials to the sites. Workmen had already laid the foundations and women and children organized by Jeanes teachers, cleaned and graded play areas and walkways and the women served hot lunches to the laborers. Within a week all twenty-five schools were enclosed and roofed and within a month, all had been completed, painted and equipped. By the time the Klan had convinced the courts to issue an injunction to stop the building, the superintendent had completed his plan (Embree and Waxman, 45-46).

Despite the massive amount of funding Rosenwald administrators poured into the rural school building program—$4,071,463 for school house construction alone—the philanthropic effort was later viewed as a crutch rather than a stimulus (Rosenwald School Building Fund, Alabama Historical Commission). Both Washington and Rosenwald had envisioned a "public-private partnership, believing that a shift in southern White attitudes toward Blacks could be achieved by retaining the goodwill of southern Whites and working with the South's social system" (Werner, 1939, 366). However, far from being a failure, other money funneled into programs like Negro teacher education by philanthropies such as the Jeanes Foundation, was largely considered a success.

In 1907, Miss Anna T. Jeanes initiated a fund of one-million dollars, consisting of income-bearing securities for "the furthering and fostering of rudimentary education in small Negro rural schools" (Rosenwald School Building Fund, Alabama Historical Commission, sec. E, p. 16). By 1915, the Jeanes Fund had placed supervisors in 134 counties with the majority of these counties accepting responsibility for some percentage of their salaries. The largest recipient of Jeanes teachers was the state of Alabama. Jeanes Teachers seem to defy definition. Their own motto was "the next needed thing" (video tape of Jeanes Supervisors, Alabama Historical Society). By their own accounts, they would go into communities and "do what ever needed doing." In Alabama, at the turn-of-the-century, 40% of the state's population was Negro, and 90% of that figure lived in rural communities throughout the state. Thus, the role of the Jeanes Teachers, often referred to as Jeanes Supervisors, was pivotal in organizing schools for Negro children in rural Alabama. In 1917, the state's Rural School Agent, James L. Sibley, published his report on the work of the Jeanes Supervisors. In it, he wrote "the South is dependent upon agriculture for a great deal of its prosperity and upon the [N]egro farmer and laborer for a large part of its industrial development. There should be some method to train [N]egro children while attending rural schools to become intelligent, thrifty, and skillful workers" (Sibley, 1917, 4-6).

According to Sibley, Jeanes teachers "visit the [N]egro rural schools, teach the industrial work in the classes, supervise the schools under the direction of the county superintendent, and hold patrons' meetings for the improvement of schools. During the winter months, their time is largely devoted to actual work in connection with the schools. In the summer they devote their time to club work and community affairs" (Ibid). His strong and approving words are testimony of the extent to which not only the communities valued the services of the Jeanes Teachers, but also White superintendents and the Rural State Agent himself, Sibley. His report is filled with their accomplishments such as agents of the then popular "Homemakers' Clubs," (443 clubs in 541 communities in 1916), and their work with community folk in planting home gardens, growing their own supplies, saving and storing food for winter months, and improving their homes.

Other duties filled by these Jeanes supervisors included, meeting with trustees, organizing improvement clubs, and sponsoring fund-raising rallies. Some even personally raised money for school building programs. One Jeanes supervisor, Mary Sanifer, serves as an example of the type of individual who exhibited the level of perseverance Jeanes Teachers were noted for.

One day while reading a copy of the Christian Index, I noticed a headline "Better Rural Schools." With much interest I read the notice that Mr. Julius Rosenwald was deeply interested in better Negro school buildings and would give dollar for dollar in the erection of modern Negro school buildings. I wrote to him immediately for further information. He referred me to Mr. C.J. Calloway, Rosenwald's Agent, Tuskegee Institute, Alabama. From him I received all needed information. Filled with encouragement I began to advertise my project. It seemed impossible to make the people believe a man would give dollar for dollar to erect a school building. I tried to organize a school improvement association. I succeeded with three men and four women. The men were afraid to venture, so I had to assume all the responsibility. I bought two acres of land at a cost of $50.00. With my school improvement association we planned a school rally and raised $62.00. This paid for the land, which was encouraging. I then began to raise money and subscriptions for money to qualify. When I covered the amount in subscriptions, I suggested that we borrow the money paying as much as possible in labor. The three men secured subscriptions and immediately afterwards during my absence, had their signature abolished from security. When I found it out, I did not know what to do. Trusting God, I continued. I went to the man who was lending us the money and offered my name as security. Seeing my anxiety for the building he accepted me alone. I deposited the money and the county superintendent sent in the application. It was accepted and the work began. The community was convinced that the work would be done. I employed a contractor and the community joined in. As a result we succeeded with a beautiful two-teacher Rosenwald building (Rosenwald School Building Fund, Alabama Historical Commission, p. 45-46).
Sanifer’s story is one of many. Her work in raising money for Washington’s industrial school model was echoed throughout the South as Negro leaders and parents sought to educate their children “up from slavery,” toward self-determination, despite protests by some leaders and citizens who argued against the education of Negroes. However, by the summer of 1915, Jeanes Teachers were familiar faces and a welcome presence in many rural Black communities.

The Summer Teaching Institute of 1915

The participant record by county for the Summer Institute of 1915 for rural Black teachers and Jeanes Supervisors stretches from Mobile County in the far south of the state of Alabama to Calhoun County in the far eastern part of the state and Tuscaloosa County to the north. More than 1,600 educators were enrolled in the institute, which ran from July 12 to September 29, owing to the fact that the school term for most Negroes began in October after the harvest. The reports which accompany the photographs were written by the in-service institute’s “Conductor,” and generally contained the following information: enrollment figures; a note on the character of attendance; work stressed by the conductor; role of the Assistant; list of visitors; spirit of work, and distinctive features (Alabama State Archives, Jeanes Teachers, SPP28). Although not richly detailed, these brief reports offer us, in synopsis form, a glimpse at this turn-of-the-century teacher in-service institute.

Booker T. Washington, his wife, and James Sibley, the State of Alabama Rural Agent were among those present at the opening week of the institute, held in Tuscumbia, Decatur, and Huntsville, located in the northern-most part of Alabama. The goals stressed by the Conductors ranged from arithmetic in grammar grades to the removal of illiteracy. Of seemingly high interest during the entire summer institute was a model of a sanitary toilet, as it was mentioned in nearly every Conductor’s report. It is helpful at this point to recall the emphasis that Washington placed upon personal hygiene as a symbol of the civilized individual. The role of the Assistant at Huntsville, for example, was to discuss work in the Primary grades, demonstrate games and the use of a sand table, plus a discussion of the vocational work of girls. The Huntsville institute was visited by the Honorable E.B. Almon, Congressman, who spoke on the “Advantages of present over past system of Schools” (Alabama State Archives, Jeanes Teachers, SPP28).

The Superintendent, S.R. Butler also spoke to attendees on the importance of the institute, while Sibley addressed the group on Agriculture and Sanitation. Superintendent A.A. Persons discussed the “Proper Use of Fertilizers,” while Dr. L.B. Moore, Dean of Howard University, spoke on “the Need of Correlation and continued preparation.” P.C. Parks discussed Colored school farms, while Miss Nixon lectured on Primary Handwork and Mrs. Gordon demonstrated how to prepare a “wholesome meal on the farm” (Alabama State Archives, Jeanes Teachers, SPP28). The “spirit of work” described by the Conductor included his assessment that “teachers showed a determination to be of service to their communities.” The distinctive features of the Huntsville institute included a demonstration on how to make a fireless cooker, the evening social and Dr. Moore’s address.

The County Superintendent wrote a brief report about the institute’s Conductor, H.C. Binford, in which he described his work “as being beyond the average for negro instructors. He is willing and seems to have a fair knowledge of what the negro needs.” Likely, the county superintendent would not in any way consider his remarks about Binford to be biased or negative, yet they underscore the then current attitude prevalent among many Whites, that the level at which Negroes function is inferior to that of Whites. A more telling remark from a White superintendent about Negro educators came from the Clarke County superintendent who described his Conductor as “a typical African: a smart man and a most excellent institute conductor. Can’t be beat for his place.” Other such remarks emanated from the county superintendent of Morgan County, Decatur, Alabama, when he wrote that the Conductor of his institute, G.W. Trenholm, was “a capable Negro.”

At the Decatur institute, the conductor stressed community clubs and industrial work. Like the Huntsville meeting, the fireless cooker demonstration received special mention, and stamping out illiteracy was a collective goal. In Tuscumbia County, the conductor reported that the “spirit of work” was excellent and that “teachers worked over time each day, once till dark on making the sanitary toilet.” These demonstrations and “hands on” projects were indicative of the type of work and curriculum developed for the 1915 summer teachers’ institute. The distinctive features outlined by the Tuscumbia Conductor included an illiteracy parade with about 50 placards, flags, and pennants, “mending for men,” “chair caning,” sanitation, and the fireless cooker, while the county superintendent reported the distinctive features as “construction work in the way of manual training and domestic art.” Although the enrollment for Tuscumbia was 56, the country superintendent believed that it was light owing to the early date of the institute.

While the institutes organized in most counties resembled one another, each offered a unique curriculum, although the universal attendance of James Sibley and A.A. Persons seemed to provide continuity. For example, when the institute moved from the northern part of the state to the central, the week of July 26, Conductors and Superintendents focused on the scholarship of teachers; however, they also
stressed the industrial model which included a dose of Washington’s moral philosophy through lectures on punctuality and sanitation. In Tuscaloosa, attendees heard lectures on issues such as agriculture, improvement of teachers, school improvement, health and cooperation with patrons. The usual demonstrations of canning and lessons on Whitewashing were part of the curriculum. The county superintendent’s assessment of the spirit of the institute included the following: “Those in attendance, I feel satisfied were greatly benefited as I have never attended a negro institute where a more marked spirit of determination has been shown to do better work among their people than was evinced at the closing hour of this institute” (Alabama State Archives, Jeanes Teachers, SPP28). In Pickens County, the attendees were so proud of the sanitary toilet they built during the institute, that they placed it “in the middle of the court house square for inspection” (Jeanes Teachers, SPP28).

In Dallas County, Selma, Alabama, during the week of August 2, community uplift and gardens were topics on the agenda. The Assistant emphasized primary methods, sewing, domestic science, and the need for good teachers. Guest speakers spoke on topics such as sanitation, personal cleanliness, care of babies, and training of hand, head, and heart, while the attendees in Hale County listened to lectures on “Better Rural Schools,” “Making Farm Life Happy,” and “Correlating Rural School and Country Life.” One “distinctive feature” of interest was how to study “geography in local grocery and dry goods stores” (Jeanes Teachers, SPP28).

Clarke County’s program was slightly different. It stressed academic subjects and content such as English and Arithmetic and methods of teaching in the “advanced grades.” The Conductor spoke on the need to organize reading circles and school improvement leagues. Interestingly enough, these leagues were gender distinctive: one for men and one for women. At the Clarke County meeting, the Conductor reported that a number of local White people attended the sessions and “large crowds of colored.” In fact, the Conductor stated that there was “hearty cooperation on the part of the teachers in attendance and the people of the community both white and colored” (Alabama State Archives, Jeanes Teachers, SPP28).

In South Alabama, in the town of Brewton, which is located in one of the most rural sections of the state, teachers went into neighboring homes and gave domestic science lessons to residents. Other notable demonstrations included pine needle baskets and “shuck work.” Only an hour away in Monroeville, home of two of America’s best-known writers, Truman Capote, In Cold Blood, and Harper Lee, To Kill a Mockingbird, the Conductor stressed “kindness to children,” “teachers living in the community,” and “clean-up day,” among other topics. The County Superintendent was enthusiastic when he remarked that “I consider the institute a success in that it evoked the approbation and commendation of the best people of the town” (Jeanes Teachers, SPP28). Lee County’s Superintendent also made positive remarks about his institute when he said, “the negroes of Lee county are loyal and cooperate in progressive measures” (Jeanes Teachers, SPP28). One interesting feature of the Barbour County institute was the use of a former slave in teaching craft work. According to the Conductor’s report, “an old negro basket weaver who had learned his trade in slavery days was employed to give the teachers lessons in basket making, bottoming chairs and shuck work” (Jeanes Teachers, SPP28).

Conclusion

While an examination of each county’s report on the success or lack of success of the 1915 summer institute is a worthwhile endeavor, this analysis and summary of events demonstrates several unique aspects of Alabama’s Summer Teaching Institute for rural Negro teachers at the turn-of-the-century. One, the curriculum clearly embraced Washington’s industrial model of practical crafts such as sewing, cooking, canning, and other domestic arts and sciences and stands well within reforms espoused by Progressive educational reformers of the day. Two, the curriculum also focused on agricultural science, including planting and raising livestock. However, one of the most distinctive features of Washington’s educational plan was what Bond (1934) referred to as moral philosophy. Throughout the 1915 summer institute, for example, one can find references to punctuality, sanitation, cleanliness, and health. These personal qualities were as important to Washington as learning a trade because to him they spoke of character building. He had learned well from his mentor, General Armstrong, at the Hampton Institute, who once remarked that his desire for Colored Americans was to ‘go out and teach their people, first by example, by getting land and homes; to give them not a dollar that they can earn for themselves; to teach respect for labor; to replace stupid drudgery with skilled hands and to those ends to build up an industrial system for the sake of characters’ (Rosenwald School Building Fund, Alabama Historical Commission, ed. E, p.12). For both Washington and Dewey, industrial education naturally led to character building.

As a kind of afterthought, what can be said in retrospect about Washington’s industrial educational influence in the Black rural South? To begin with, the scores of Negroes who followed the agricultural and industrial dream quickly realized that in the areas of agriculture and industry, southern Negroes failed to fit White expectations. The scientific approach to farming was based upon the concept of land ownership and directly competed with White notions of Negro farming: Negroes as tenants not competing land
owners. In industry, skilled Negro labor rapidly deteriorated. As both avenues narrowed, their followers sought relief in the professions. Some turned from farming to farm agent; others turned from farming or industry to teaching, while females trained in domestic sciences looked to teaching as a profession rather than business. Thus, the photographs contained in this 1915 album show nearly an equal number of men and women engaged in the profession of teaching. In the end, teaching, not agriculture or industry became an equalizing force for many Black Americans, which assured them the prestige within their community that agriculture, industry, or domestic science had promised, but not delivered. As William E. Hutchins so succinctly posed the question nearly a century ago when he argued for a liberal education for Negroes instead of industrial education, “what can you teach colored women about washing clothes?”

References

Alabama State Archives, Photograph Album of Jeanes Teachers Summer Institute 1915, SPP28.


