

### Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861-1876

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## Review

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**Butchart, Ronald E.** *Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861-1876*. University of North Carolina Press, \$39.95 ISBN 978-0-8078-3420-6

### A Post-Civil War Inspection of the Struggle for Black Education

Scholars interested in the role of education during the transition from slavery to freedom will henceforth have to consider both the data and the arguments in *Schooling the Freed People*. The reason is simple: those of us who still envision an unmarried white Yankee schoolmarm when we hear the phrase “freedmen’s teacher” could not be more wrong. In reality, the first teaching corps in southern black schools was quite diverse, with northern and southern African Americans representing more than one-third of all teachers; it counted more men than women; and, most surprisingly perhaps, southern whites comprised its majority by the end of Reconstruction. Due to the fact that these teachers came from more varied backgrounds than previous scholars have acknowledged, it follows that no common cause or vision united them.

Ronald E. Butchart has spent untold years combing all available sources—aid society archives, military and pension records, city directories, college alumni catalogues, personal letters, and autobiographies, to name a few—to identify these educators. The result is the Freedmen’s Teacher Project, a massive database that “currently includes more than 11,600 individuals representing upwards of two-thirds of all the teachers who actually worked in black schools” (xvii) between 1861 and 1876. Two appendices detail the parameters of individual inclusion and how Butchart calculated his numbers. Because federal and northern sponsors had withdrawn or scaled back their activities by 1872 and incomplete records have survived in only five southern states, he concedes that “full data is known only for a minority of the teachers” (180). Nevertheless, having compiled the most comprehensive list, he feels confident asserting that future additions to it are “not likely to substantially

change the overall conclusions" of this study (180). One of those conclusions, that these teachers facilitated, mediated, or hindered freed people's aspirations, seems readily apparent. Butchart's contribution lies in animating this data to describe who these teachers were and, more pointedly, who they were not.

After setting the stage by explaining what education and literacy meant to the freedmen, Butchart's chapters on each representative group of teachers provide insights both familiar and revealing. He demonstrates that, more than any others, African Americans utilized the language of racial uplift and racial solidarity to articulate their reasons for taking up the work and that they understood its political implications. This confirms the arguments of Heather Andrea Williams' *Self-Taught*, which has so ably established the centrality of African Americans in the educational freedom project. The significance of his depiction of the black teaching corps, Butchart claims, is that previous scholars have not recognized its size. The same holds true for the southern whites who predominated numerically but also left the least documentation regarding their thoughts and activities. Examining this cohort, Butchart finds that they typically taught for shorter periods; that their ranks included former slaveholders and Confederate veterans; and that religion played a minor role in their decisions to teach. Instead, as we might expect, desperate poverty drove most into the classroom. Striking portraits also materialize when Butchart turns to northern white teachers, the majority of whom hailed not from New England but from the middle and western states. Almost all relied on northern philanthropic societies to secure a position but, contrary to popular belief, few explicitly highlighted abolitionist credentials in their applications. Butchart is at his best when he grounds these men's and women's motivations in the "disinterested benevolence" advocated by religious teachings and in their appropriation of missionary language (107). When they spoke of "doing good" and "being useful," he convincingly maintains, they revealed their "self-referential needs" (105). In essence, northern white teachers were more concerned with their own self-emancipation than with black emancipation.

An additional strength of Butchart's work rests in his efforts to take readers inside the classroom. Surveying available textbooks, he discovers that most teachers relied on those used by their colleagues in all regions of the country. After freed people mastered the basics, teachers broadened the curriculum; in the process, both validated black intellectual equality. Considering how teachers taught, Butchart admits most employed traditional methods that combined rote memorization and harsh discipline. Others embraced more modern methods,

such as instituting incentives to replace punishments, which were beginning to emerge in urban and northern areas. Thus, Butchart concludes, the first generation of teachers fashioned a curriculum and pedagogy that did not relate to the everyday lives of their students. Such trends emerged later, in the context of the reconstruction of white supremacy and the scaling back of curriculums to suit a predominantly agricultural labor force.

*Schooling the Freed People* sounds only a few false notes. Butchart's engaging an outdated historiography—from the Dunning School to studies published in 1941 and 1985—means his argument occasionally falls flat. Elsewhere it is unbalanced. For example, we learn that more men taught though women taught longer, but Butchart offers no explanation of why. Similarly, his discussion of the minority's practicing a more modern pedagogy simply overwhelms the consideration he gives to the majority's reliance on traditional methods. And while it remains undeniably true that southern white women crossed gender, race, and class boundaries when they entered black classrooms, the same does not hold for black women, with the possible exception of class. As Elsa Barkley Brown has shown, gender relations in the postbellum black community were more fluid and black women's working, or practicing of politics based on communal participation, did not constitute gender transgressions.

Butchart rightly insists that southern black education was an inherently political project, and under attack from day one. Indeed, his observation that incendiary terrorism against black schools was also a form of economic terrorism against freed people's sacrificing time and money to build and support them is quite astute. Equally telling are the politics of competition between aid societies, whose decisions to move teachers frequently meant breaking the bonds of trust they had established with local communities. Yet traditional politics, both federal and state, are missing from *Schooling the Freed People*. Readers expecting to ascertain how specific local conditions—or even an in-depth discussion of the distinction between urban and rural job assignments—influenced teachers' experiences will be disappointed as will those who wonder how black students, young and old, applied their lessons in specific locales. Here, the exclusive focus on teachers prohibits a clear view of education itself as a form of community organizing with political ends. This does not diminish what Butchart has accomplished. It simply means he has bequeathed a valuable gift to those who would explore such questions in the future.

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