

# Race and Education in New Orleans: Creating the Segregated City, 1764-1960

William A. Link

University of Florida, [linkwa@ufl.edu](mailto:linkwa@ufl.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

### Recommended Citation

Link, William A. (2019) "Race and Education in New Orleans: Creating the Segregated City, 1764-1960," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.21.1.26

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol21/iss1/26>

## Review

Link, William A.

Winter 2019

**Stern, Walter C.** *Race and Education in New Orleans: Creating the Segregated City, 1764-1960*. Louisiana State University Press, \$49.95 ISBN 9780807169186

*Race and Education in New Orleans* considers an important question for American historians: What forces created racial segregation? Using schooling as a focal point, Walter Stern skillfully unpacks the complex factors underlying white supremacy and the city's social and racial order. Although New Orleans is critical for students of urban America, it possessed distinctive features that, over time, became transformed into a pattern resembling the rest the country.

Stern adopts an interesting, and somewhat novel, periodization of his subject, that defies the usual attention paid to desegregation of schools during and after the civil rights movement. Instead, he is interested mainly in the more complex subject of segregated schools, how they came into existence and with what consequences. The book is framed around two stories, both involving the mixed legacy of schooling for African Americans. The first occurred in 1764, when a seven-year-old West African girl, eventually known as Marie Couvent, was kidnapped and sold into slavery. She first resided in French Saint-Domingue, but after the Haitian Revolution somehow secured her freedom and arrived in New Orleans in 1804. A leader in the city's freed population, Couvent acquired enough property to make a bequest, on her death, that financed New Orleans's first black school. Couvent's bequest suggested a larger development: an enthusiasm for learning and schools among people of color—something that remained a persistent theme across the history of New Orleans schools. Stern concludes his study in November 1960 around the story of Ruby Bridges and the eruption of white violence opposing the desegregation of the community's schools.

In many important respects, New Orleans defies our understanding of race and slavery, even while the city remains central to understanding those subjects. The city lay at the heart of the slaveholding cotton South, serving as a financial, manufacturing, and trade center for the Mississippi Valley, and its huge slave market was a hub for the involuntary transportation and

sale of thousands of enslaved people. At the same time, during the antebellum period, New Orleans possessed a large community of freed people of color who constructed their own locally controlled schools. In addition, the city's racial lines were fluid, and, like the rest of the Americas, a mixed-race creole class mediated between slaveholding whites and the enslaved population.

Stern's study, which is as much a study of urban racial structures as it is of schooling, charts how the Civil War ushered in radical changes. Everywhere in the South, the war's aftermath saw the introduction of new systems of common schools in Reconstructed states. As a condition for readmission to the Union, Congress required that new state constitutions guaranteed schooling for former slaves. In most parts of the South, this meant segregated public education; New Orleans, however, provided an exception. During Union occupation and Radical Reconstruction, the antebellum freed population, mobilizing and exercising political leadership, established racially mixed schools. Yet by the 1870s this experiment in integrated education, rare for the South, collapsed in the wake of virulent racism and the violent end of Reconstruction.

In the most crucial part of this book, Stern examines how white supremacy expanded from the 1870s through the middle of the twentieth century. Charting the growth of New Orleans, he describes the transformation of the integrated mid-nineteenth-century city into a highly stratified and segregated modern urban community. Here Stern's scholarship shows how New Orleans resembled the rest of urban industrial America. As the city expanded, its housing pattern became increasingly segregated. Suburbanization offered a refuge for whites fleeing the city; public policies, both local and federal, encouraged this development. Pushing back against the conventional wisdom, Stern portrays schools as a form of social policy that encouraged racial stratification. That is, rather than school segregation reflecting housing patterns, he argues, the extreme segregation of modern New Orleans resulted from segregated schools.

This is an important addition to the literature about race and education. The urban history is excellent, and Stern casts a wide net that extends well beyond the four walls of schools as institutions. Unlike many studies that have promised to integrate social change and schooling, *Race and Education* successfully explains both in the context of a major American city. The result is required reading for anyone interested in the development of the modern South and American education.

*William A. Link, University of Florida*