

# NEGRO HISTORY WEEK

February 13-20

## 200 YEARS OF SEGREGATED SCHOOLS

*An historical account of the American Negroes' struggle for education in the face of a white supremacist system that kept them segregated*

*By Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois*

**T**HE African slave in America had tried physical force against oppression from the time of Columbus to the day of Nat Turner. In every island and every slave state, as Herbert Aptheker has shown us, there were hundreds of slave revolts which prove, as Haitian historians say, that the French Revolution did not spread from France to the West Indies but from the West Indies to France. Negro revolt under the Maroons culminated in Haiti where Britain, France and Spain were worsted and the United States was frightened into stopping the slave trade. The United States then got the territory west of the Mississippi as a gift.

Nevertheless, against force wielded by slaves, greater force brought to bear by organization and arms in white America kept the shackles riveted on many of the Negroes. These Negroes therefore became determined to achieve freedom by brain if not by muscle.

In the early 18th century two free Negroes of Massachusetts built schools and opened them to all who would attend. Then Negroes had schools furnished for them in New York, Philadelphia and Cincinnati. Teachers first were white and funds came from missionary organizations like the British Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and from individual philanthropists like Thomas Bray and Anthony Benezet. Sometimes Negroes took over the teaching, like Katy Ferguson, who established the Sunday

Schools in New York for white and colored; and John Chavis of North Carolina, who taught some of the most distinguished whites.

In the early 19th century free Negroes conducted schools in New York, Charleston, Savannah, New Orleans and elsewhere. As free public schools became common in the North, a few Negroes entered here and there, but the barriers closed against them and they began to fight. Alexander Crummel and two companions secured admission to a New Hampshire semi-private school but enraged whites dragged the schoolhouse into a swamp. Prudence Crandall received a colored girl into her seminary in New Haven and was crucified in spirit and property. By 1855, led by William C. Nell, the segregated school system of Massachusetts was abolished.

### *The Negro Public School*

Then there grew up later in the century distinct Negro public school systems, supported by the state, usually with colored principals but not as well equipped as the white schools. These systems spread in Northern cities like New York, Philadelphia and Cincinnati. Private higher schools also were established for Negroes, especially by churches. Lincoln in Pennsylvania, run by white Presbyterians, and Wilberforce in Ohio, run by colored Methodists, gave secondary school instruction and some college work about 1854. In 1850 there were 4000 colored children in school in the South and 22,000 in the North.

After Emancipation there arose a complete Negro public school system in Washington and in several other cities; while in the South Negro voters demanded a public school system of the reluctant whites. The Civil War and Emancipation also brought Negro schools under the Freedmen's Bureau and Northern missions. This system, which covered much of the South, became the Southern system of free public education under the Reconstruction governments.

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*Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois  
at the turn of the century.*

As I have written elsewhere, "The first great mass movement for public education at the expense of the state in the South came from Negroes. Many white leaders before the war had advocated general education for white children but few had been listened to. Schools for indigents and pauper white children were supported here and there and more or less spasmodically. Some states had elaborate plans but they were not carried out. Public education for all at public expense was, in the South, a Negro idea."

### ***Development of Separate Schools***

The question of separating races in these schools was not at first regarded as important. Negroes wanted education on any terms. In theory of course they knew that the mixed school was the democratic ideal and they were sure that the cost of a double system would eventually force a mixed system. They accepted temporarily separate schools, therefore, without much objection.

The action of the states varied. With Reconstruction, public schools were opened in Charleston, South Carolina, without distinction of color. Twenty-five of the 42 teachers were colored. The South Carolina Act of 1870 for a system of free schools was the most complete legislation that the state had ever enacted. Textbooks were provided at cost or free to the poor but the schools were separated by race.

In Louisiana, by the Constitution of 1863 all children were admitted to schools regardless of color. That prevailed until 1877, although often by administrative action colored children were kept out of white schools. Finally segregated schools prevailed. In Mississippi, separate schools by race were demanded in 1875. In Florida, the colored superintendent, Jonathan E. Gibbs, established schools which at first were mixed but afterward they became by law separated by color.

The state system of schools for North Carolina in 1869 called for separation by race. In Virginia the constitution did not provide for separate schools but laws passed in 1869 separated the schools by color. In the District of Columbia, Negroes from 1807 ran self-supported schools. In 1864

public schools were provided with separate and poorer schools for Negroes. By 1867 the Negro schools began to receive a proportionate share of the funds and there came two separate systems, white and colored, each with its own superintendent. About 1890 the system became unified, with a colored assistant superintendent in charge of the schools for Negroes.

Gradually the South, backed by the dictates of the Supreme Court, settled down to a system of public education with separation of whites and Negroes. There were separate buildings and facilities. Teachers in colored schools were usually colored, although in Charleston and Richmond Southern white teachers were long retained, to the disgust of Negroes and retardation of Negro children. The superintendence of the colored systems was entirely in the hands of the whites, save in a few cases of powerless local colored trustees. The white school authorities could allocate the school funds as they pleased and often did not have to report even to the federal government on federal funds.

There came into use a custom, encouraged by the Southern Education Board and its successor, the General Education Board, where discrimination against Negroes was excused, with the dogma of "first educate the whites and later the Negroes." This changed soon to deliberately poorer and cheaper Negro schools. Then the South moved north and planted "Jimcrow" in schools in localities in 20 Northern states. This situation finally became so great a national disgrace that Negroes and many whites began systematically to complain.

It long seemed useless to bring the matter to the courts. When the Supreme Court declared in 1896 that separate but equal schools meant separate but not equal; and when later to the astonishment even of the white South decreed that the city of Augusta, Georgia, could provide an elaborate high school and night schools for whites and none for Negroes, the Negroes were in despair for years. They were reduced to begging local white school authorities for some pretense of decent treatment and only in case of federal appropriations to demand directly from Congress equal shares.

### ***Fight for Negro School Financing***

As Negro voting power increased, Congress got an improved sense of hearing. First, Negroes secured some increase of justice in the distribution and administration of federal funds. The shares of the Negro Land Grant colleges began slowly to increase and the crisis came in the matter of state-supported professional education. The prohibitive and impossible cost of a double system of public elementary schools had long been clear. Secondary public school education for Negroes was even more idiotic and professional education non-existent.

Then a Negro in Missouri in 1936 sued for a chance at training in law, and the Supreme Court, in an unexpected moment of sanity gave him a favorable verdict in 1938. The Bourbon South began to move. They increased the

inadequate scholarships for Negro professional students to study in states where the school systems were more civilized.

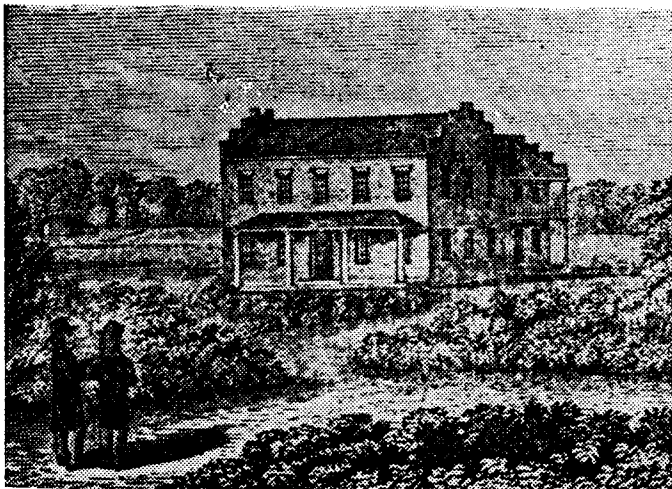
The National Association for Advancement of Colored People now began to take notice. For a time it confined its demands to equal school facilities and equal salaries. Then its work was divided in two parts, one of which, with a separate office, funds, and authority, addressed itself under Arthur Spingarn and Thurgood Marshall to the question of discrimination as such. The South rushed to reform its lines. Whites surrendered a large part of the federal funds which, with the connivance of Northern white philanthropy, they had stolen from Negroes for 25 years and more. They tried hard to induce Negroes to consent to "regional" instead of state professional schools; and they finally admitted a few Negro students to Southern white professional schools about which vast advertisement was spread abroad.

But the Spingarn-Marshall team proceeded to challenge the entire race segregation system on the grounds of unconstitutionality. Few dreamed that the Supreme Court, after recently curtailing freedom of speech and instituting thought control, dare give the Negro the justice denied him in education for 75 years!

Many Southern states had hurriedly begun to increase their appropriations for Negro public schools. The new Ford Foundation hired a Southern white newspaper man to write a book showing how marvellous the new Southern support of Negro public schools was becoming—indeed, he implied, it looked as though they would soon become equal to the white! Right on his head fell the decision of May 17, 1954, and to top all, it was unanimous; Race segregation in public schools was declared unconstitutional.

### *The Fight Ahead*

Of course it has not yet been implemented and South Carolina, Georgia and Mississippi, with the highest illiteracy in the nation, are ready to secede from the union when



*Emlen Institute, a secondary school for Negroes in Mercer County, Ohio, which was founded in 1842.*

it is. At best it will be a generation before the segregated Negro public school entirely disappears. But considering the world-wide advertisement that the United States has at last started to become a democracy without a color line, it is going to be difficult for the South and the Northern copperheads to treat the separate school decision as they have treated Negro disfranchisement since 1876.

Nevertheless this decision, even with its delayed implementation and in accordance with the widespread American contempt of law—the decision faces Negroes with a cruel dilemma. They want their children educated. That is a must, else they continue in semi-slavery. Not even the propaganda of Booker T. Washington with his backing from wealth and fame could bribe black America from this determination. Here they still stand; God helping them, they can do nothing else.

Yet with successfully mixed schools they know what their children must suffer for years from Southern white teachers, from white hoodlums who sit beside them and under school authorities from janitors to superintendents, who hate and despise them. They know, dear God, how they know! Yet they also know that they themselves must accept this verdict and even insist on it. They dare do nothing else, for equality is what they have demanded for 250 years and now that a further push has been achieved with dirty accompaniments, they must accept it in justice to generations to come, white and black. They must eventually surrender race "solidarity" and the idea of American Negro culture to the concept of world humanity, above race and nation. This is the price of Liberty. This is the cost of Oppression.

The best of the Negro teachers will largely go because they will not and cannot teach what many white folks will long want taught. Much teaching of Negro history will leave the school and with it that brave story of Negro resistance. This teaching will be taught more largely in the home or in the church where, under current Christian custom, segregation by race and class will remain until the last possible moment.

Despite all this we Negroes will stand fast and pull through. Some of our literature will for a season descend into the "white folks' n - - - -" type, with fulsome praise of what "good white folk" have done for us. Our leadership in social studies may well succumb to money which millionaires will drop into the laps of young white Southern "scholars" and subservient blacks to undertake the study of Negroes, which Negro scholars began.

Yet we will survive. The labor unions are open now for us as never before and beginning to receive us not with condescension but in brotherhood. Europe is listening to us and not so exclusively to the "professional" whites to tell them about kind slave drivers and "black mammies." Asia has risen to her feet and taken her stand against White Supremacy: and finally Africa too, despite American dollars, artillery and atom bombs imported to back Malan. It's just one more long battle, but we are ready to fight it.