



Learning Freely: Black Education In North Carolina After The Civil War

By: Phoebe Pollitt

Abstract

In the antebellum era, free black children in North Carolina could attend school, but few schools existed to serve this group. All enslaved people were legally banned from any form of schooling on the pain of fines, imprisonment and the whipping post. In September 1864, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton authorized the Superintendent of Freedmen to secure teachers and property for schools for freed people in the South. Northern benevolent groups, which included many free African Americans from the North and the South, as well as the newly freed people themselves, donated thousands of dollars as well as books, clothing, tools and school supplies to these new schools in the Union-held areas. The Federal Government coordinated these efforts and offered protection to teachers and students from violent local attacks.

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LEARNING FREELY

Black Education in North Carolina After the Civil War

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The Freedmen's Bureau worked almost exclusively in the coastal and Piedmont regions, where more people had been enslaved. Highland blacks, no longer legally barred from education, were still barred by lack of schools to attend.

In order to reenter the Union after the war, the former Confederate states had to

provide for free public education for both races in their constitutions. The new school systems were, at best, unevenly administered and financed. In North Carolina in the 1870s, there were over a thousand school districts in which no schools were being held. Rural, Appalachian and African-American communities received little if any financial support from state governments for teachers, school buildings, equipment or transportation until after the turn of the century.

The educational void in Appalachia was partially filled by church home mission societies. A common image of Appalachian mission schools of the late 1800s is of pious white upper class Yankee schoolmarm working to uplift poor, illiterate and isolated white mountain children. The African American mission schools founded by Emily Prudden were a radical departure from this stereotypic vision.

Emily Caroline Prudden was born in 1832 in Orange, Conn. She had a typical New England childhood, growing up on a farm and attending public school through high school. She never married but raised her orphaned niece and nephew from infancy through adulthood. At age 50, Prudden found herself alone, practically deaf, crippled by arthritis and at loose ends. Fate stepped in, in the form of her old school friend, Mrs. Samuel Loomis.

The Reverend and Mrs. Samuel Loomis had moved to South Carolina during Reconstruction to oversee Brainard Institute, a school supported by the New School Presbyterian Church to educate newly freed slaves near Chester, S. C. The school grew dramatically and new staff was constantly needed to manage the expanding student population. Mrs. Loomis asked Prudden to come to Brainard to be housemother to the girls boarding at the school.

After two years at Brainard, Prudden used her own slim inheritance to open a school for white girls about 30 miles from

Brainard in Gaston County, N. C. This school eventually became Linwood College. During Prudden's second year at Linwood she took a summer vacation to Blowing Rock, N.C., in the Blue Ridge Mountains. There were no schools in Blowing Rock. The plight of the local children moved Prudden to open her second school for white girls there.

Prudden thought about the African-American children in Gaston County. There were no public schools for them, and the few private and mission schools in the area only served white children. Despite threats of violence against the school and its occupants, Prudden established Lincoln Academy in 1886. She recalled the school's early days: "The white people protested at my doing this: 'Miss Prudden, you can make nothing out of these lying, good-for-nothing Negroes' . . . I trembled for the safety of the new Home and I gave it to the Lord with absolute trust that He would guard and Bless it. . . ." Lincoln Academy soon had an enrollment of 300 day and boarding pupils. Many students boarded at Lincoln Academy because their families lived too far away for daily travel, and their own counties refused to offer primary or secondary education for blacks.

Prudden would follow a pattern for the next 20 years: she would establish a school, get it on firm footing and find a Protestant church home mission society to take it over as its own. Prudden was a Congregationalist but turned her schools over to a variety of Protestant faiths, including Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Baptists and Mennonites. Students were expected to participate in daily prayers, weekly church services and frequent hymn singing and devotionals. The Bible was studied daily at most schools. Membership and even careers in the church were strongly encouraged.

In the late 1880s, the American Reformed Presbyterians took over Linwood College and the American

Missionary Association, the home mission branch of the Congregational Church, assumed responsibility for Skyland Institute and Lincoln Academy.

All students in Prudden's schools, black or white, received similar curricula, housing, work and religious requirements and qualified staff. This was unusual at a time when southern states were passing Jim Crow laws and the Supreme Court in *Plessy vs. Ferguson* endorsed racial inequality in public education.

**"I trembled for
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Most public schools in North Carolina in the decades after the Civil War had terms of 10 to 12 weeks. Subject matter was often confined to the three Rs and geography. Prudden's schools ran for eight months a year and students were exposed to arts, foreign languages and sciences. In addition to academics, all students were required to learn vocational skills. The girls learned sewing, cooking, housekeeping and nursing while the boys learned farming, animal husbandry and carpentry. Most of Prudden's schools had farms which provided meat and vegetables to eat. The boys built most of the school buildings and dormitories, and the girls prepared the food, cleaned the school and performed other housekeeping tasks. The vocational training prepared the children to join the skilled labor force after graduation while keeping the costs of running the schools low. Tuition was about four dollars a month.

Whenever possible, Prudden and the various denominations hired local graduates to teach in the schools. The faculties and administrators at Douglas, Clarkson and Mt. Herman were all African American, while Lincoln, Lovejoy and Salem had integrated staff.

In 1892, Prudden bought four acres of land in the mountains overlooking Elk Park, N.C., and opened her second school for black children. The Krimmer Mennonites, who wanted to expand their mission in Appalachia, took charge of the school and added an orphanage. They ran

Salem School and Orphanage for 12 years, until constant skirmishes with hostile white neighbors forced them to close.

Over the next several years, Prudden established more schools for both black and white children in the Piedmont areas of North Carolina.

Mount Herman Academy in Brevard was the last school Prudden founded. In 1909, Mrs. Wilke Carpenter Johnstone, a former student at Lincoln Academy and teacher and principal at Lovejoy Academy, had moved with her husband to Brevard. There were no public or private schools for her two young children to attend. Johnstone asked Prudden, then age 77, to help start a school for the African-American children around Transylvania County. The school was constructed in the middle of Brevard's black neighborhood. Unlike the previous schools, there was no farm, no dairy and no boarding department. Some local families did rent out rooms to students who lived too far away for a daily commute. Academic education took on a greater role, vocational education a lesser

one. This was the only school without denominational backing. Instead, the parents purchased their own textbooks and the community sought grants from philanthropic organizations. The Rosenwald Fund donated generously to expand and upgrade the facilities over the years. Transylvania County would not finance public education for blacks until the 1940s.

Taken together, Prudden's schools for African Americans educated fewer than 1,000 African-American children a year from the 1880s through the mid-20th century. Yet despite the lack of financial and social support from state and local governments and harassment by hostile white neighbors, these small, religious, largely self-supporting schools endured and prospered. Generations of black southerners and Appalachians received a modicum of literacy, education and vocational training obtainable only through these mission schools.



Phoebe Pollitt lives and writes in Boone, N.C.

Battlefield (a century and a quarter later)

**Rain filled mist rises from the green hills
where once artillery guns blazed;
their explosions in the valley fills
the heart with terror yet.**

**On overgrown trenches the sun will soon set
as it did then, where young men lay dying
for causes they cherished,
for their sweethearts crying,
or just defending home.**

**Across the once powder-charged bottom (so large)
we wander, imagining this charge
or that attack, almost seeing the stricken fall.**

**At the heart of the heat of the battle we roam,
To arrive at concrete and "The Battleground Mall."**

— Michael J. Pauley

*Michael J. Pauley served four terms as president of West Virginia Writers and worked at the West Virginia Department of Culture and History. He died in August 1992 at the age of 42. This poem is printed with permission from his estate. Thanks to Kirk Judd for making Pauley's work available to **Now and Then**.*