

# James Rapier and the Negro Labor Movement, 1869-1872

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**B**ORN OF FREE BLACK PARENTS IN FLORENCE, ALABAMA, a quarter century before the Civil War (1837) , James Thomas Rapier emerged during Reconstruction as one of the South's outstanding political leaders. At the Tennessee Negro suffrage convention (only seven weeks after Appomattox) , Rapier asserted in a keynote address that freedmen under stood "the burdens of citizenship" and were ready to perform them. At the first Alabama Republican state convention (1867) , he helped draft a document, which, among other things, called for free speech, free press, free schools, and "equal rights for all men without distinctions on account of color." And later, at the state's constitutional convention, he strove both to remove the political disabilities of ex-Confederates and secure equal rights for Negroes, arguing for a moderate disfranchisement clause, a lenient oath of office, and a common carriers section in the bill of rights. He served as assessor (1871-1873) and collector (1878-1883) of internal revenue, positions of great political influence, and though defeated (1870) as the first black candidate for state office, he later (1872) won a seat in the United States Congress, where he pushed through legislation making Montgomery a port of delivery, and delivered an eloquent address in support of the 1875 civil rights law. "Not a few rebel scribblers in the press might envy Rapier," one Republican newspaper said, "[for] his talent, education, intelligence and [political] influence."<sup>1</sup>

1. Loren Schwenger, "John H. Rapier, Sr.: A Slave and Freedman in the Ante-Sellout South," *Civil War History*, Vol 20 (March, 1974), 23-24; *Colored Tennes-*

But political influence was not enough. Long before Reconstruction, Rapier realized that fundamental economic and social changes were necessary if Negroes hoped to improve their situation in the South. While attending school in Canada during the ante-bellum period, he wrote that blacks in slavery could neither own property nor secure an education. Whites had all the power, problems had always been solved by whites, and the answer had always been: "Niggers cannot and never will be anything." In 1858 Rapier promised, If I live and God is willing, I will endeavor to do [my] part in solving the problems of [black poverty and illiteracy] in my native land."<sup>2</sup>

The opportunity for Rapier to redeem his promise came during Reconstruction. Despite an act (1866) designed to provide freedmen with 80-acre homesteads, land ownership among Southern Negroes had not increased substantially in the years following the War. The great majority of blacks simply transferred their residence from the plantation's communal quarters to the isolation of the tenant cabin; and as tenants, they relinquished as much as half of their crop to white property owners. A resident of Dallas County, Alabama, interviewed by journalist John W. Trowbridge, candidly commented on the question of black land ownership: "The nigger is going to be made a serf, sure as you live. It won't need any law for that. Planters will have an understanding among themselves: 'You won't hire my niggers and I won't hire yours.' Then what's left to them? Whites are as

*sean*, August 8, 1865; Cincinnati *Daily Commercial*, August 11, 1865; *Daily State Sentinel*, November 25, 1867; *Montgomery Daily Advertiser*, November 9, 1861 *Selma Daily Messenger*, December 8, 1867; *The Official Journal of the Constitutional Convention of the State of Alabama* (Montgomery: Barrett and Brown 1868), 34, 84, 85; Loren Schweningen, "James Rapier and Reconstruction," (Chicago: PhD dissertation, 1972), introduction.

2 James Rapier, Buxton, Canada West, to John H. Rapier, Jr., Florence, Alabama, February 28, 1858, Rapier Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Collection, Howard University, Washington, D. C.

much the masters of blacks as ever." Indeed, as in ante-bellum times, Negroes toiled long hours in the fields, lived at a subsistence level, and worked on land controlled by white plantation owners.<sup>3</sup>

The educational condition of freedmen in the South after the Civil War was little better than their economic plight. Despite the tremendous enthusiasm of emancipated slaves for learning, few freedmen experienced the excitement of the classroom. W. G. Kephart, chaplain of the 10th Iowa Veterans, wrote from Decatur, Alabama, in 1864, "I have never seen any people more ready or eager to learn, and so far as I have had an opportunity to observe, their progress is about the average of white children, under far more favorable circumstances." Yet, Negro children fortunate enough to have a "nigger school" in their community attended school only a few weeks or few months a year, listened to ill-prepared, often almost illiterate teachers, sat in drafty, dilapidated, and decaying schoolhouses, and went without books, educational equipment, and in some instances without proper clothing.<sup>4</sup>

3. William Rogers, *The One-Gallused Rebellion: Agrarianism in Alabama, 1865-1896*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), 7. Though the word "plantation" has been used by historians to mean "a capitalistic type of agricultural organization in which a considerable number of UNFREE laborers were employed under a unified direction and control in the production of a staple crop," it was used during Reconstruction to include free laborers. Lewis C. Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860* (2 vols.: Gloucester, Massachusetts, 1958), I, 302, quoted in Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Statue South* (New York: Random House, 1967), 15; John T. Trowbridge, *The South: A Tour of Its Battle Fields and Ruined Cities, a Journey Through the Desolated States and Talks with the People* (Hartford, Conn.: Park Publishing Co., 1866), 923-31, quoted in Richard N. Current, ed., *Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), 50.

4. W. G. Kephart, Decatur, Alabama, to George Tappan, New York City, May 9, 1864, American Missionary Association Papers, Dillard University, New Orleans, Louisiana, hereafter A.M.A. Papers; *The American Missionary*, July 1864, 179. For numerous other examples of the enthusiasm of Southern Negroes for schooling following the Civil War see: *Twenty-Eighth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association* (New York: n.p., 1879), 30-31; John W. Alvord, *Eighth*

Neither the 1865 Alabama Constitution nor the Conservative state legislature under the Johnson plan of restoration provided state funds for the support of Negro education.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, most whites eschewed the idea of admitting black children to "free public schools."<sup>6</sup> Although blacks, Northern missionaries, and representatives of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandon Lands (commonly called the Freedmen's Bureau) established a few schools in Alabama (in Eufaula, Montgomery, Talladega, Franklin, Huntsville, and Mobile), their combined efforts reached only a few thousand students.<sup>7</sup> As late as July, 1866, according to a report submitted to Congress by John Alvord of the Freedmen's Bureau, Northern missionary societies had initiated only 8 schools for freedmen in Alabama (compared to 123 in Virginia), and had sent only 31 teachers to the field (compared to 200 in Virginia) — the lowest totals in the South.<sup>8</sup> Even after the adoption of the Constitution (1868), partisan bickering between the Republican state school board and a Democratic legislature, plus a lack of sufficient funds, made improvement

*Semi-Annual Report on Schools and Finances for Freedmen* (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1869), 41; "The Education of Freedmen," *The North American Review* (October, 1865), 534; U. S. Congress, *Report of the Joint Com. mittee on Reconstruction*, 39th Congress, 2nd sess., Part III, 1866, 28; L. M. Peck, Union Springs, Alabama, to E. P. Smith, [New York City], July 16, 1867, AM A, Papers; Horace Mann Bond, *Negro Education in Alabama: A Study in Cotton and Steel*, (Washington, D. C.: Associated Publishers, Inc.. 1939), 81.

5 Bond, *Negro Education*, 73-86.

6. *Ibid.*, 77. For Conservative attitudes toward Negro education, see *ibid.*, 105.

7 Alvord, *Sixth Semi-Annual Report on School and Finances for Freedmen* (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, January, 1868), 23; Charles Wheeler, Eufaula, Alabama, to Edward Smith, December 1, 1868, A.M.A. Papers; John Silsby, Montgomery, Alabama, to George Whipple, September 14, 1855, A.M.A. Papers; *The American Missionary*, XIV (August, 1870), 174; Loren Schweningen, "North. em Philanthropy and the American Missionary Association in Reconstruction Alabama," *Alabama Historical Quarterly*, XXXII (fall and winter, 1970), 129-56.

8. The report noted the possibility of Alabama reporting school systems rather than individual schools. John Alvord, *Second Semi-Annual Report on Schools of Freedmen* (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1866), 2.

[Schweninger, L.](#) "James Rapier and the Negro Labor Movement, 1869-1872," *Alabama Review* 28 (July 1975):185-201.

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of Negro education impossible. In fact, as the nation slumped into a severe depression in 1873, the board actually closed the public schools of Alabama on the plea of financial incapacity on the part of the state.<sup>9</sup> Thus, only a small number of freedmen attained an adequate education in Alabama in the years following the Emancipation Proclamation.

From the outset of Reconstruction, Rapier had worked to correct the economic and educational inequities facing blacks. At the constitutional convention (1867) he had proposed a validation-of-contract clause, which, had it been adopted, would have required white planters to honor contracts made with freedmen during the Confederacy; and he had offered a property-exemption section (which was adopted) designed to protect debtors from court confiscation of certain real and personal property. He also donated personal funds for the construction of local schools. "No man in the state has more cheerfully aided [in] building places of learning than he," Montgomery black J. N. Fitzpatrick proclaimed. But Rapier understood that neither convention proposals nor personal philanthropy was enough to solve the problems of hunger and illiteracy in the Reconstruction South.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, he sought to organize a Negro labor union. Surely, he believed, a nationally organized union with local affiliates in the various Southern states, supported by the federal government, could achieve economic and educational reforms that would improve the Negro's lot.

To effectuate this plan Rapier traveled to Washington, D. C., late in 1869 as the lone Alabama representative to the

9. Alvord, *Fourth Semi-Annual Report on Schools and Finances for Freedmen* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, January 1, 1867), 16; Bond, *Negro Education*, 98.

10. J. N. Fitzpatrick, Montgomery, Alabama, to Secretary of the Treasury, Washington, D. C., May, 1882, records of the department of the treasury, applications for collectors of internal revenue, Alabama, R. G. 56, Box 2, National Archives, Washington, D. C.

first National Negro Labor Union Convention. Some 156 black delegates from virtually every state in the nation crowded into Union League Hall on a brisk day in early December to hear speeches on the condition of black workers.<sup>11</sup> "We are here to seek the amelioration and advancement of those who labor for a living," said Isaac Myers, the black Baltimore shipyard proprietor who had called the convention. George T. Downing, the Rhode Island Negro leader who had been chosen permanent chairman, suggested that the United States government secure land for freedmen.<sup>12</sup> Other speakers demanded an eight-hour day, the organization of state and local labor unions, and a graduated income tax—as one delegate put it—"to make the burden of taxation heaviest upon those who have reaped the lion's share of American toil."<sup>13</sup>

Selected as a vice-president of the newly formed National Negro Labor Union (NNLU), Rapier addressed the convention on December 9. Black tillers of the soil, he explained, paid unreasonably high rents for the use of the land, toiled fourteen hours a day in the hot sun, and at the end of the year had little to show for their labor. He charged the assembly to initiate a plan to ease the burden on the Negro tenant farmer. "The eight hour day will amount to nothing in the South," he said, "[but] if they can obtain the wild lands of Kansas or land in other new States, they can live and

*11 National Anti-Slavery Standard*, November 27, 1869. The evidence suggests that Rapier was self-appointed.

*12 Proceedings of the Colored National Labor Convention Held in Washington, D. C., December 6-10, 1869* (Washington, D. C.: Great Republic Newspaper and Printing Establishment, 1869), 3; *Washington Evening Star*, December 6, 1869. This was the second national convention of blacks in the United States; the first, political in nature, was also held in Washington (January, 1869). *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, December 11, 1869.

*13 Washington Evening Star*, December 7, 10, 11, 1869; *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, December 11, 1869; *Proceedings of the Colored National Labor Convention*, 8.

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thrive there without paying tribute."<sup>14</sup> The next day, as a member of the committee on homesteads, Rapier submitted a report, unanimously adopted -by the assemblage, proposing the establishment of a federal land bureau to assist freedmen in obtaining farms.<sup>15</sup>

The Alabama delegate not only suggested that a new federal agency be organized, but also, along with twelve other officers of the convention, memorialized Congress in behalf of Southern blacks. The wages of the average black farm laborer in the South did not exceed \$60 a year, Rapier and the others told Congress. The earnings left him no surplus, and "when he ceased to labor he began to starve." The remedy, according to the petitioners, was to make landowners of a reasonable proportion of the laborers by subdividing the 46,344,059 acres of public domain in the Southern states into homesteads so that "any freedman who shall settle on one of such subdivisions, and cultivate the same for a space of one year, shall receive the patent for the same."<sup>16</sup>

To press their demands further, Rapier, Joseph Rainey of South Carolina, John Harris of North Carolina, Sella Martin of Massachusetts, and some of the other delegates visited President Grant. They asked the President to protect black sharecroppers from the exploitation of grasping landlords,

<sup>14</sup>*Proceedings of the Colored National Labor Convention*, 5, 13.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 23; the Washington *Evening Star*, December 10, 1869. Rapier's report was one of the few adopted immediately by the Convention.

<sup>16</sup>U. S. Congress, *House Miscellaneous Documents*, 41st Cong., 2nd sess., Vol. I, No. 8, 1870, 1, 2, 3; *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, December 18, 1869; Washington *Evening Star*, December 10, 1869. The other memorialists included: J. H. Harris of North Carolina, President of the Convention, T. J. Mackay of South Carolina, Sella Martin of Massachusetts, John P. Sampson of Ohio, W. T. J. Hayes of North Carolina, William J. Wilson of New Jersey, M. Van Horn of Rhode Island, Charles H. Peters of the District of Columbia, William Perkins of Maryland, J. W. Loguen of New York, Caleb Milburn of Delaware, and Joseph H. Rainey of South Carolina. *Proceedings of the Colored National Labor Convention*, 30, 31.

to sanction the cause of Negro land ownership, and to use both his influence and the office of the Presidency to establish a federal land bureau. "I heartily empathize with the working men of the country," Grant said in response, "and so far as it is in my power I will endeavor to secure ample protection for them and for all classes."<sup>17</sup>

When Rapier left the White House he had, in less than a week, met with black leaders from all parts of the nation, served as a committeeman and vice-president at the first National Negro Labor Union Convention, presented a plan for a national agency to ameliorate the plight of black laborers in the South, and pressed his demands on the President of the United States. This was, by any test, a remarkable set of experiences for the thirty-two-year-old Alabamian and an auspicious beginning for one commencing a career as a black labor leader.

In the following months Rapier waited for federal initiative in creating a land bureau, but gradually came to realize that the promises made in Washington to protect Southern black laborers were empty ones. He decided, therefore, to take matters into his own hands. Asking black leaders in the various sections of the state to gather information about Negro schools, churches, and wages,<sup>18</sup> he issued a call in the *Alabama State Journal* for a state convention to consider the organization of the black laboring interests of Alabama.<sup>19</sup>

On January 2, 1871, ninety-eight Negro farmers and farm laborers representing forty-two Alabama counties answered Rapier's call. Assembling in the House of Representatives in Montgomery, they first elected Rapier permanent chairman of the convention (in that capacity he appointed the

<sup>17</sup> Washington *Evening Star*, December 13, 1869.

<sup>18</sup> *Southern Republican*, December 21, 1870; *Alabama State Journal*, December 20, 1870.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

committees on homesteads, condition of colored people, education, and permanent organization) , and immediately launched into a discussion of the condition of the state's Negro laborers.<sup>20</sup> George Washington Cox, the radical chairman of the homesteads committee, recommended that blacks leave Alabama and said, "Here, huddled as we are, so much of the same kind of labor in the market, wages down to starving rates, without land or a house that we can call our own, nothing but misery is in store for the masses."<sup>21</sup> He maintained that government homesteads in Alabama were located in regions where armed bands of men in disguise terrorized freedmen. "In Kansas and other western states," he concluded, "homesteads are available and freedmen can exercise their rights."<sup>22</sup> Another committee chairman, William V. Turner of the committee on the condition of colored people, concurred with Cox. Turner declared that Negro farmers and farm laborers were far worse off in Alabama than in any other section of the United States, and stated, "The poor colored laborer on the first day of January makes a contract for one year, but at the expiration of the year, . . . after twelve months of hard service, he finds himself as poor or poorer than at the beginning."<sup>23</sup> After studying information submitted by black delegates from all sections of the state, Turner concluded that the educational facilities provided for Negro children were grossly inadequate. "In the cities and some of the larger towns," he sadly admitted, "we have apologies for schools. In the country we are almost entirely

<sup>20</sup> *Alabama State Journal*, January 6, 1871. He also selected committees on churches, finance, labor, and printing as well as a committee to investigate the activities of the Freedmen's Savings Bank. *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Southern Republican*, January 11, 1871.

<sup>22</sup> *Alabama State Journal*, January 6, 1871; *Montgomery Daily Advertiser*, January 4, 1871.

<sup>23</sup> *Alabama State Journal*, January 6, 1871.

deprived of educational advantages of any kind, and in some localities 'nigger, schools are not tolerated." The panacea for these evils, according to Turner, was the emigration of blacks to the "broad and free West."<sup>24</sup>

Although most of the delegates agreed with Cox and Turner concerning the deplorable economic and education condition of blacks in Alabama, they rejected emigration as the cure. The convention adopted a resolution instructing all "laboring men in the state under contract for the year to engage their services to planter and businessmen . . . at reasonable wages." Similarly, Republicans outside the convention advised Negroes to remain in Alabama. William Loftin, white editor of the *Alabama State Journal*, suggested that black tenant farmers "improve their pecuniary condition by hard work and consider settling among a more liberal people only if denied the opportunity for improvement."<sup>25</sup> The *Selma Press*, a Republican paper with a white editor, cautioned blacks not to act hastily. One editorial stated, "In many localities black farmers are doing as well as they could reasonably expect to do anywhere, and those who are prospering unmolested in their rights, should deliberate long before making up their minds to encounter the hardships attendant upon starting life anew in a strange land."<sup>26</sup>

Conservatives also warned freedmen to stay in Alabama, but for quite different reasons. The *Alabama Beacon* (Greensboro, Hale County) contended that Negroes could neither adapt to the cold climate of Kansas nor compete with white workers.<sup>27</sup> The *Bluff City Times* (Eufaula, Barbour County) derided the convention members for "consuming so much time discussing the cock and bull stories of political pros-

<sup>24</sup> Montgomery *Daily Advertiser*, January 4, 1871.

<sup>25</sup> *Alabama State Journal*, January 6, 1871.

<sup>26</sup> *Selma Press*, quoted in *New National Era*, January 26, 1871.

<sup>27</sup> *Alabama Beacon*, January 21, 1871.

cription, Ku Klux outrages, destruction of colored churches, denial of school privileges, and the advantages of emigration to Kansas."<sup>28</sup> The *Times* advised blacks to think for themselves, follow their own personal instincts, and disregard the advice of such men as Cox and Turner. "The whole notion of emigration is a carpetbag idea," the Montgomery *Daily Advertiser* added, "conceived by carpetbaggers . . . desirous of organizing a populous negro county in Kansas to which they will follow to hold the offices." The *Advertiser* cautioned blacks to beware of mischievous schemers, and counseled them to remain at home and work honestly and zealously for a living.<sup>29</sup>

As the three-day meeting drew to a close, Rapier called for the report of the committee on permanent organization.<sup>30</sup> "This Association shall be known as the Labor Union of Alabama and it shall be auxiliary to the National Negro Labor Union," the report read; "the object shall be the furtherance of the welfare and education of the laboring classes of the State." The report recommended an annual membership fee of 250, and the yearly election of a union president and executive committee. Shortly before adjourning (after acceptance of the report) , the convention elected a president, Jeremiah Haralson, a member of the state legislature from Dallas County, and a new executive committee: James K. Greene, who represented Hale County at the 1867 constitutional convention, Lazarus J. William, a state legislator from Montgomery, and Rapier. The convention also designated these committee members to attend the next NNLU national meeting, and thanked "the Chairman of the Convention

<sup>28</sup> *Bluff City Times*, January 12, 1871.

<sup>29</sup> *Alabama State Journal*, January 6, 1871; Montgomery *Daily Advertiser*, January 4, 5, 1871. <sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

for his eminent services in behalf of the laboring people of the South, and his marked ability as a presiding officer."<sup>31</sup>

James Rapier registered as a delegate to the second annual>NNLU convention in Washington, D. C., only seven days after he had helped inaugurate the Labor Union of Alabama. Representatives from twenty-two states signed the official register, and for the second time black leaders petitioned the federal government to assist Negro workers.<sup>32</sup> In an opening speech, Rapier sharply scolded Congress for its failure to ameliorate the economic and educational condition of blacks in the South. At the same time, however, he presented a plan for a new agency to assist blacks. "After careful consideration of . . . the great amount of suffering endured by the colored people of the Southern States for want of land, . . . employment, . . . capital, . . . and pay," he said, "[I propose] that the [>NNLU] create a Bureau of Labor." He hoped the new bureau would materially benefit the freedmen of the nation, and suggested (as chairman of the committee to ascertain the best manner of colonizing blacks on the lands of the public domain) that the bureau place

31. John S. Corbin, Judge of Selma City Court, Selma, Alabama, to W. E. Chandler, Washington, D. C., May 18, 1872, William Chandler Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.; *New National Era*, January 29, 1874; the *Montgomery Daily Advertiser*, June 16, 1874. The>NNLU should not be confused with the white National Labor Union. The latter was founded in Baltimore in 1866. Abram L. Harris and Sterling D. Spero, *The Black Worker: The Negro and the Labor Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), 23, 2427.

32 *New National Era*, January 10, 1871. The general mood of the convention was deeply pessimistic. One resolution concluded, "The Government, in giving the Negro his freedom has given him freedom to starve, and in giving him the ballot-box has given him a coffin." *New National Era*, January 10, 1871; Elsie M. Lewis, "The Political Mind of the Negro, 1865-1900," *Journal of Southern History*, XXI (May, 1955), 189-202, reprinted in Charles E. Wynes, editor, *The Negro in the South Since 1865: Selected Essays in American Negro History* (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1955).

within the reach of Negroes all possible information about the availability of homesteads.<sup>33</sup>

Other delegates strongly supported the idea of a bureau of labor. George Downing, an officer at the first NNLU gathering, said: "We come together, talk, resolve, admit our poverty, and our immediate pressing needs, but the essential thing needed, means, is wanting."<sup>34</sup> Perhaps a bureau, with state and local affiliates, would give freedmen the necessary means to improve their condition. Another officer at the first NNLU meeting, Isaac Myers, believed that such an organization could "disseminate information about the public domain." The convention quickly voted to establish the proposed bureau and chose nine delegates to head up the new organization—among them Rapier, Downing, and Myers. On January 11, 1871, at the closing session of the five-day conference, the members empowered nineteen delegates to cooperate with the new bureau in establishing state affiliates of the NNLU in the several states. They selected delegates from every Southern commonwealth except Alabama. It was not deemed necessary to empower a member delegate to establish a union in that state, because Rapier, foreseeing the necessity for local organization, had only a few days before, already established the first state Negro labor union in the South.<sup>35</sup>

Optimistic about the prospects for improving working conditions among freedmen in Alabama, Rapier returned to Montgomery and conferred with a number of local black labor leaders. They agreed to call a second convention, but only after a thorough investigation had been made of three matters: "the working conditions of colored farmers in Ala-

<sup>33</sup>*New National Era*, January 19, 1871.

<sup>34</sup>*Daily Morning Chronicle*, January 12, 1871; *New National Era*, January 12, 19, 1871; *National Standard*, January 14, 1871.

<sup>35</sup>*New National Era*, January 12, 1871.

bama," possible sites for Negro colonization, and the educational opportunities for blacks in the state.<sup>36</sup>

Nearly a full year elapsed before Rapier, in his capacity as executive chairman of the ANLU, called a meeting. About fifty black delegates from various parts of Alabama gathered in Montgomery on January 2, 1872, to hear the results of the investigations.<sup>37</sup> The first report, submitted by a committee on labor and wages, disclosed that black farmers in Alabama earned \$387.31 net in 1869, and that after paying for food, feed, medical attention, clothing, and the "extremely high interest on borrowed money," they were left with nothing. The report urged Congress to pass a freedmen's homestead bill creating a joint stock company to purchase land for all former slaves.<sup>38</sup> A second report, delivered by George Marlow of the committee on emigration, advocated a far different solution to the wage problem—emigration to Kansas. Describing that state as mild and pleasant, with schools in every neighborhood and railroads built in all directions, Marlow said, "You can get good land . . . for \$1.25 an acre. The country is . . . level, with deep, rich soil, producing from 40 to 100 bushels of corn and wheat to the acre. The corn grows nine feet high. I never saw better fruit anywhere than there."<sup>39</sup> An equally sanguine report came from John Simpson, the Autauga County chairman of the committee on education. He announced that the free schools of Alabama were well patronized by black children. "The Board of Education has done all in its power to provide for the education of colored children in Alabama," he asserted, "and thousands are today merrily and prosperously tramping down the

<sup>36</sup> *Alabama State Journal*, December 21, 1871.

<sup>37</sup> U. S. Congress, *Senate Reports*, 46th Cong., 2nd sess., Vol. VIII, Pt. III, No. 693, 1880, 136-37.

<sup>38</sup> In the bill Rapier was listed as a trustee of the company. *Ibid.*, 138-41.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

schoolhouse paths who four years ago had never seen the inside walls, or even the outside walls, of a free school building."<sup>40</sup>

Rapier listened attentively to the committee reports. In general he agreed with the statements on 'wages, labor, and migration to Kansas. He took strong exception, however, to the report on education. Beginning a lengthy address to the convention, he said, "I am convinced that it is impossible for the poor children of this state to get a common school education." Schools remain open only two months a year, state allocations for education amount to only \$1.20 per student, per year, as compared to \$16.45 in Massachusetts; and meanwhile, hundreds of teachers, "unable to work out a simple sum of interest or write a half dozen lines grammatically," put in their time at schoolhouses. "In short," Rapier declared, "Alabama has no public school system worthy of the name." He suggested that an examining board, composed of the best scholars (students and teachers) and the county superintendent, meet twice a year, scrutinize applicants for certification to teach school, and grade the schools according to their teachers, proficiency. "By this operation," he maintained, "many worthless teachers would be cut off, and the calling would be made more a profession."<sup>41</sup> He further advocated that the federal government assume a portion of the responsibility for educating Alabama's children. Calling for a national superintendent of education with cabinet rank, he offered this challenge: "We want a government schoolhouse, with the letters U. S. marked thereon in every township in the State. We want a national series of textbooks which will teach the child that to respect the government is the first duty of a citizen." He suggested using receipts of the internal revenue,

40. *Ibid.*, 146

41 *Ibid.*, 146-47.

in the amount of \$115,000,000 annually, to finance the scheme. "Divided among the several states, Alabama would receive \$2,438,160, a sum sufficient to keep the schools open at least seven months in the year. If to this be added the 'State Fund, we will be able to have our school house doors open nine months in the year."<sup>42</sup> It was in these terms that Rapier advanced a far-sighted reform plan to improve the educational system of Alabama.

Whites in the state, however, paid little attention to his suggestions. Indeed, no Democratic newspaper so much as mentioned the fact that black labor leaders, representing about half of the state's million people, had held a three-day convention to air grievances and suggest reforms. In accord with many other Alabama whites, Arthur Bingham, the new Republican editor of the *Alabama State Journal*, disparagingly commented, "The colored Labor Union met in the hall of the House of Representatives. The number of delegates was not as large as at the former meeting [January, 1871] and not quite so large as was anticipated. The proceedings of both conventions are necessarily of little interest."<sup>43</sup> Strangely enough, this Republican had expressed sentiments also held by the Democratic party.

By early 1872 Rapier realized that because of Republican indifference, the staunch opposition of powerful white landowners, and the lack of federal assistance, the Negro labor movement was doomed. Between 1869 and 1872 he had advocated a federal land bureau to assist freedmen in obtaining homesteads, had established the first state affiliate of the National Negro Labor Union in the South, and had demanded reforms in the public school system. But the federal government created no land bureau, the Alabama Negro Labor

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Alabama State Journal*, January 3, 1872.

Union made no practical gains for freedmen, and Rapier's educational proposals went unnoticed. Not only were the economic and educational conditions for freedmen not improved during this time; in some areas they had in fact deteriorated. It was in these circumstances that Rapier looked again for a political solution to the problems of poverty, landlessness, and illiteracy in the Southern states.