

## 2008 NOTABLE AFRICAN AMERICANS IN VIRGINIA HISTORY

Address on the Difficulties  
of the Colored Youth in Obtaining an Education in the Virginias

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“Whatever helps to shape the human being—to make the individual what he is, or hinder him from being that he is not—is part of his education.” (John Stuart Mill)

With this idea of education we fully concur. Of course a work like this must be begun early in life. The parent is a natural teacher of the child . . . The State assumes the discharge of this duty of instruction, and because the work on the whole, under its supervision and control, will be better and more efficiently done. . . . The moral and intellectual education which the state gives to the youth, should be such as to harmonize the moral and intellectual qualities with the physical growth of a healthy human creature, so that . . . we would have men and women in the healthy exercise and full development of their moral and intellectual powers, worthy accessions to society. . . .

Looking especially at the condition of the Colored Youth of the State, we naturally ask what proportion is accommodated and found regularly in attendance upon public instruction. . . . Is the instruction given the best for the purpose of the growth and development of their intellects and morals? Are there any external influences at work tending to cramp the minds of our youth, stunt their growth, and limit the sphere of their future operations? . . .

By examining the report of the Hon. W. H. Ruffner, State Superintendent of Schools, for the year ending September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1874, the information is given that during the school year were 177,317 colored children of school age in this State. There were in operation 994 schools for colored children, and in these were enrolled 52,086 pupils or 52 to a teacher, but the average attendance was only 28,928, 55% of the enrollment. Out of every 18 children of school age in the State, less than three are in regular attendance upon school sessions; and as these schools are open less than half the year, the appalling picture presented is that at the highest estimate by one-tenth of the work necessary to be done has yet been in progress to guarantee the Education of the Colored Youth of the State. . . .

These difficulties are of two classes: —those which are financial, such as the inadequacy of the state and local support, . . . the other division embraces those which are moral in their nature, and relates to the supply and character of teachers who instruct our colored schools. . . .

The report of the State Superintendent admits that the State . . . fails to make ample provisions for her youth. . . .

Educated farm labor, skilled mechanics, will cause increased taxes to fructify in the pockets of the people of the State at large. The State has it in her power, by investing more and more liberally in popular education, to raise larger and larger taxes, and at the same time enable

her citizens to be more and more prosperous . . . and this is one direct result of her trained muscles and brain power. . . .

The general poverty of our people has imposed a serious difficulty to the Education of the Colored Youth of the State. There are no statistics on this point, but every one here who has had any considerable experience in our schools knows how often our most promising pupils are detained from school for weeks and months by being put to work to procure themselves clothes, or to provide for the dire necessities of the parents. Pupils in their teens seldom remain regularly at school, but are summoned to the factory, to the farm, from which they graduate into manhood and womanhood without the training and culture the State owes to her youth.

Let us now consider the moral difficulties under which the Education of the Colored Youth of this State suffers. The first one of this class is the need for well-trained teachers. . . . Virginia created an impression that she did not intend to employ any of that class of well-trained teachers which the North and West, through the well established Normal School were abundantly able to supply. . . . White teachers . . . generally preferred white schools . . . that those white teachers who through the force of circumstances were appointed to teach colored schools, entered upon their work with misgivings, not to say mistrust and disgust. Why? They had been reared in a State in which it had been a penal offence to instruct colored youth; they were accustomed to such expressions as these; the Negro cannot learn; he belongs to an inferior race; his normal condition is that of servitude. . . . Therefore, these teachers influenced as they must have been by these things, could only enter upon the works of education mechanically and partially. As a consequence the work of Educating Colored Youth . . . must fall upon trained teachers of their own race. . . .

The peculiar work of the teacher of colored schools demands as a preparation, more than elements of knowledge and skill in the best methods of imparting that knowledge,—the teacher must inspire confidence in those under his care, and make them know that they are capable of the highest intellectual endeavors and achievements. These pupils throughout their lives . . . as to be impressed that there is a barrier . . . to their arriving at the same plane of civilization attained by white people. . . .

And we see the influences of German immigration in the customs and habits of the present Americans. . . . If the German, the Chinese, why not the Africo-Americans contribute also from his warm impulses, to the general stream, and give it a richer hue?

The finger of destiny makes it evident that the future civilization of America is to embrace all of the excellences, and possibly some of the defects, of all the different civilizations of the world, and that here the ennobling characteristics of different human natures will be found to grace and adorn the coming man. . . .

In conclusion . . . we find the first difficulty of Educating the Colored Youth of the State is caused by the fact that the state and local authorities do not always provide ample accommodations, sufficient facilities, or long enough terms for the schools under their control.

*Second*—That the great hostility to the taxation of the land . . . .

*Third*—That the general poverty of our people prevents them from giving their children the full benefits of the School system.

*Fourth*—That white Southern Teachers as a rule, are, by reason of many beliefs in which they are schooled, not the best teachers for colored schools.

*Fifth*—That the large and increasing demand for Colored Teachers suggests the maintenance of efficient Normal Schools. . . .

*Sixth*—That certain false and wicked ideas . . . have been so widely spread . . . shutting off opportunities for development and promotion.

. . . In this course our future success can be measured in part by the devotion, earnestness and intelligence which are displayed by our present Convention.