

Freedom and Resistance

Life as a Black Public School Teacher in Post-Emancipation Alabama

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Within the story of black public schools in the Reconstructed South are identifiable patterns of black self-determination and white violence, both of which stretch from slavery to today's political landscape. However, that story of freedom and resistance, in all its modern relevance, is best told in its early state, against the tumultuous backdrop of the Reconstruction and through the intimacy of a biographical narrative. The story of Jeremiah Barnes, a public school principal in Tuscaloosa, is one that reveals a common truth about the legacy of early African American education: Black public schools required, revered, and produced renaissance-like leaders that could steer communities toward political, social, and economic enfranchisement, all while withstanding powerful white opposition.

African-American schools in Tuscaloosa went through two periods of educational reconstruction: Freedmen's Bureau schools (1865-1870) and state-funded public schools (1870-1890).¹ This paper focuses primarily on black public schools, but both eras are important to acknowledge when considering the broader effects of education on Reconstruction-era racial politics.

The first period occurred in the fledgling years of the Radical Reconstruction. After the Civil War, state leaders scrambled to piece together a new government. Embedded in conversations of enfranchisement, industrialization, and political representation were visions for a new educational system. In his book *Reconstruction in Alabama*, Michael Fitzgerald illustrates competing visions for education among white state leaders. The moderate Governor Robert Patton secured loans to reopen the public school system created for whites before the war.² He also backed black suffrage,³ but he saw no need for integrating the public schools, claiming that freedmen were "unsuited to industrial pursuits."⁴ Conversely, the more radical Daniel H.

¹ Lecture, October 16, 2018.

² Michael Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama: From Civil War to Redemption in the Cotton South* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2017), 92

³ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 83.

⁴ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 92.

Bingham lumped in education with other civil rights, envisioning a South “yankeeized by the introduction of free schools, free speech, and free labor.”⁵ In debates about what to do with existing debt, he’d later propose seizing Confederate railroads to fund common schools.⁶ Meanwhile, commissioner Wager Swayne was working for more direct black enfranchisement. He decried early moves to criminalize black preaching and vagrancy⁷ and heavily supported the institution of freedmen’s schools,⁸ which were usually built with northern funds. These schools, along with a growing black leadership, were heavily resisted by local whites. In Tuscaloosa, for example, an elite, white “Chivalry” held a demonstration at a freedmen’s school concert and mobbed a black newspaperman who was attending.⁹ But despite the perceived threat that these early schools presented to southern whites, they were largely underfunded. The Freedmen’s Bureau only approved federal funding to build these schools, and for safety reasons, northern societies like the American Missionary Association only operated in large, urban schools. Realizing this, Swayne actually diverted Bureau funds to help staff these schools,¹⁰ but the problem of funding, and distance, remained.

Fitzgerald concludes his observations of white influence on black schools with this fact: resistance ultimately left African-American communities to build their own schools. Especially in rural areas, the responsibility of building a school for black children fell solely on black teachers. Without a centralized public system for all races, emerging African-American churches started to run private fee schools and staff their own teachers.¹¹ Though these schools were still underfunded, black educators – usually literate ministers – were highly revered in their communities, as they became the sole creators of institutions for black community building,

⁵ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 62.

⁶ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 156.

⁷ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 89.

⁸ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 93.

⁹ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 93-94.

¹⁰ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 119.

¹¹ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 119.

economic enfranchisement, and political mobilization. This phenomenon would mark the beginning of a tradition in African-American thought and rhetoric: Education is freedom, and educators hold the key to that freedom.

As African American schools gained footing in the private sector, things started to change in the legislature, as the second period of educational reconstruction welcomed a more stable system. To fulfill their visions of a “progressive” post-war South, Alabama Republicans, both black and white, outnumbered Democrats (70,815 to a measly 1,005) to ratify a new state constitution.¹² The early constitution created a “statewide system of free public schools, open to both races, until age 21.”¹³ Following a move to replace poll taxes with property taxes,¹⁴ the constitution also made provisions for a centralized, elected board with “full legislative power over the schools.” Most radical was the amount of funding allotted to these schools: twenty percent of state revenue.¹⁵ But Reconstruction legislation was far from progressive. In what Fitzgerald describes as a “carrot and stick”¹⁶ approach, white neglect of black schools persisted. The new constitution quickly garnered support, but with the election of a more conservative Governor Smith, the move to ratify lost steam. With that lost steam came regressive policies, as Smith, known for “stiff-arming the freedpeople,”¹⁷ promised that the schools would remain segregated. In fact, he pressed the school board to mandate segregation, determining that “all schools should be racially segregated, unless both races agree.”¹⁸ Fitzgerald summarizes Smith’s leadership in a way that dispels myths of a progressive Reconstruction: “Indeed, no broad integration measure ever passed under Alabama’s Reconstruction government, period.”¹⁹ Praise

¹² Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 168.

¹³ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 159.

¹⁴ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 147.

¹⁵ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 159.

¹⁶ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 230.

¹⁷ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 173.

¹⁸ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 230.

¹⁹ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 165.

for the new constitution, then, was largely misguided, and as the era progressed, promises of quality education in Alabama became all stick and no carrot.

A major shift in Reconstruction politics, called the Redemption, occurred in the middle of the second period. Spurred by the election of Governor Houston in 1874, the Redemption showed a resurgence of white backlash against black civil rights granted in the Radical Reconstruction years.²⁰ Shortly following the institution of a new public school system, the early 1870's were plagued with corruption and chaos. Teachers went without full pay, and record-keeping was lax. According to Superintendent Noah Cloud's records, under a quarter of public schooling funds went to African-American children, even though they made up about a third of the school system.²¹ On top of that, education funds were threatened by railroad debt, which was made worse with property tax cuts.²² By 1872, school funds had \$144,000 in unpaid warrants,²³ and black leaders' efforts to integrate schools were voted down by the House the following year.²⁴ With the eventual downfall of the Republican Party, a new constitution was drafted in 1874. Houston vowed to keep the existing educational system in place, but the generous funding that Radicals regarded as the "most liberal in the Union"²⁵ was fixed to an allotment of \$100,000 a year – most of which would go to teachers, leaving virtually no room for district oversight. Fitzgerald writes that critics called the inevitable school closings a case of "Southern Barbarism," which would lead to "restoration of slavery."²⁶ Those fears were highlighted by school commissioner J.M. McKleroy, who griped that "in many townships there will be no schools for either race, while in many more there will be none for the colored race."²⁷ And, more

²⁰ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 320-324.

²¹ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 231.

²² Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 250.

²³ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 273.

²⁴ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 274.

²⁵ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 159.

²⁶ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 328.

²⁷ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 330.

importantly, they were legitimized by the accounts of several African Americans, whose stories of violence, no pay, and voter intimidation²⁸ hinted at a Reconstruction colored by both neglect and abuse.

It was against this messy backdrop of white resistance and black self-determination that principal Jeremiah Barnes started Colored Public School No. 1 in Tuscaloosa. Barnes' school appears in local news articles as early as 1878, with coverage extending into the next decade. In one article, Tuscaloosa News reporters failed to attend Barnes' school exhibition, but they managed to piece together an account of the event, fraught with tones of white paternalism. The reporters praised his students, who "spoke with remarkable ease," and commended Barnes for creating a space in which they could "[elevate] themselves and their race."²⁹ The element of surprise at Barnes' success speaks to a silenced history, in which white funders neglected black schools and subsequently denied their ability to build them themselves. In another, later report by the Tuscaloosa Gazette, the reporter is clearly shocked by Barnes' students' oratory skills in a model class on reading, arithmetic, and declamations and lauds Barnes as one of the town's "most successful colored teachers."³⁰ Patronizing observations like these were ever-present in the predominantly white local press, but in the commentary following one account, that attitude shifted to a much larger, harsher statement on race, education, and political power. The first report insisted that despite educational progress, black Tuscaloosans should "let politics alone," remarking that, "We never wood have enfranchised them, but now that it has been done, by the results of the war we would not for any consideration remand him to his former condition."³¹ A decade after initial conversations about granting freedpeople education and suffrage, questions of enfranchisement resurface here. Embedded in this remark is a fear and a warning against black

²⁸ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 250, 329, 334.

²⁹ "Colored School Exhibition," Tuscaloosa News, August 1, 1878, 3.

³⁰ Visitor, "Colored Public School, No. 1," The Tuscaloosa Gazette (Tuscaloosa, AL), July 2 1885, 2.

³¹ "Colored School Exhibition," Tuscaloosa News, August 1, 1878, 3.

leadership and mobilization – which is ironic, and almost comical, considering the goal and effect of black education was indeed one of power and freedom. In one fell swoop, these news reports exemplify common, yet hypocritical, white sentiments of early black education: Moderate whites outwardly praised racial uplift but refused to let it threaten their own power structures.

In contrast, black newspapers across the country found Southern black political mobilization of particular interest – and worthy of celebrating. In a 1915 issue of the *Oakland Sunshine*, Barnes was included in a write-up about black community leaders in Alabama that was distributed on a wire service nationwide. Though the article was printed after Reconstruction's death, it speaks volumes about the lasting legacy of black education, despite recurring white resistance. At the reported Free Mason meeting in Selma, Barnes was part of a vote against a bill that would prohibit white teachers from teaching in black schools. Meanwhile, members were also lauded for gains in education, and in order to continue the tradition of success, a report called upon each member of the grand lodge to “teach at least one colored person to read and write,” which the members adopted “without opposition.”³² Barnes' participation in meetings like these not only reveals the relationship between black success and white backlash, but it shows the dual role that many black teachers played as both educators and community leaders.

Sentiments of black educational success were echoed locally. In 1889, the city superintendent reported: “Our city is proud of its public schools, and indeed it has a right to be.”³³ But black educational outcomes hold even more weight when we consider the challenges that African-American educators faced on a daily basis. Superintendent reports, which were published while Barnes' school was still in operation, reveal black teachers assumed more teaching responsibilities than white teachers. While black and white schools in the state received

³² “Masonic Order Meets at Selma,” *Oakland Sunshine*; Vol. 13, Edition 20. Oakland, California; October 23, 1915.

³³ “The Public Schools,” *The Tuscaloosa Gazette* (Tuscaloosa, AL), May 21, 1889, 4.

near-equal resources, black teachers often taught larger batches of students, and they were paid slightly less per pupil.³⁴ These discrepancies, though minor, are symbolic of the Reconstruction's broken promise of equitable education. And in the case of Barnes and his fellow teachers, they also hint at a growing impetus on black leaders to forge their own paths to freedom. But as they did so, they faced a grim reality.

African-American school teachers, especially during the Redemption period, were targets of white violence. In Tuscaloosa, whites killed the wife of black teacher Moses Hughes,³⁵ and another teacher, Edward Carter, fled town after Klan members shot at him and raped his daughter.³⁶ Unlike Carter and Hughes, Barnes stayed in Tuscaloosa long enough to write his will in 1908. In the will, Barnes drew a map of his property, which was located in West Tuscaloosa where Pine and Deer Street met. The map shows that Barnes owned several lots of land, some of which he willed to his wife "Dema" and his sons Henry Alexander, William "Smart," and Jesse Ryland, as well as relatives Benjamin Barnes and Cassie Moore. The additional lots, which took up part of a block bordering Broad Street and 30th Ave. West, don't have dimensions, but Jeremiah Barnes' original property is written to be 60 ft. by 120 ft, which is less than a fifth of an acre. That's not huge for a lot size, but the fact that Barnes owned at least four additional lots hints at his relative wealth as an educator. He also owned several valuables, such as a piano that he willed to his granddaughter.³⁷ Barnes' collection of assets is useful in determining his social status, which was likely high. As an educational leader and landowner, his will further confirms what news reports from both black and white outlets were writing: Barnes was a revered and respected member of Tuscaloosa's black community.

³⁴ "Untitled," *The Tuscaloosa Gazette* (Tuscaloosa, AL), March 30, 1882, 3.

³⁵ Lecture, November 6, 2018.

³⁶ United States Congress, Report of the Joint Select Committee Appointed to Inquire Into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States: Mississippi, Volumes II (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 1083-1085.

³⁷ *Wills, 1821-1928*; Author: *Alabama. Probate Court (Tuscaloosa County)*; Probate Place: *Tuscaloosa, Alabama*.

The will also reveals the responsibilities that often came with black leadership. Next to his original property, Barnes marks, “Sold back to Ida.”³⁸ While the prior use for this space remains unclear, there’s room for speculation. According to Barnes’ ancestry profile, a black female teacher named Elsie Carpenter lodged in his home for a period of time. This was a common practice in the Reconstruction era, especially among African American teachers. While black professionals were often targets of physical violence, teachers from out of town also faced economic backlash. Because of low pay, and because most landlords were white, both black and white teachers in black public schools often sought housing from their fellow faculty.³⁹ As a principal, it would have been expected of Barnes to follow suit, and though he does not mention Carpenter in his will, his drawing could reveal a trace of her. More importantly, the mystery of Elsie Carpenter is indicative of a larger theme of community, and it reminds us to view individual stories, such as Barnes’, as a part of a greater whole.

A good way to study the broader effects of these kind of communal relationships is through spatial analysis. According to an 1894 fire insurance map, Barnes’ home bordered Newtown, which is now Tuscaloosa’s predominantly-black West Side community. Back then, Newtown was a largely white settlement. Blocked by a main road, Barnes’ house just barely encroaches that space. To the right of Barnes’ house is the Tuscaloosa city center, which he is relatively close to.⁴⁰ Typically, the closer to urban centers a lot was, the more expensive it was. Most revealing, however, is that Barnes did not live in a rural area. This was likely because many black teachers sought safer city centers, as schools in rural areas were special targets for arson and other forms of white resistance.⁴¹ Klan members, who were often elite, white professionals,⁴² were less likely to burn down a school that was next to their own businesses and community

³⁸ *Wills, 1821-1928*; Author: *Alabama. Probate Court (Tuscaloosa County)*; Probate Place: *Tuscaloosa, Alabama*.

³⁹ Lecture, October 16, 2018.

⁴⁰ Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Tuscaloosa, Tuscaloosa County, Alabama. Sanborn Map Company, June 1889.

⁴¹ Fitzgerald, *Reconstruction in Alabama*, 119.

⁴² Lecture, November 6, 2018.

spaces. Sure enough, the map shows a black school and church smack-dab in the center of the city, while other white schools are located further away.

Strangely, though, Barnes' school is not on the map. In fact, the one "Colored" school it mentions was omitted from the original map's list of "special features," of landmarks that the fire insurance company deemed noteworthy. The only place where the black school is mentioned is in an addendum to the map, which shows close-up sites such as the "colored" church and is color-coded with the materials they were made with. While this arrangement of information can easily hide stories of race, they're not completely silenced. The map's use of bright red and yellow colors, for example, reveal a glaring inequality: Black schools in Tuscaloosa were made of flammable wood, and white schools were made of more fire-resistant brick.⁴³ In addition to location, materials determined the likelihood of white violence, and it's clear that African American schools, even in urban centers, remained targets throughout the Reconstruction and into the twentieth century.

The fire insurance map, when cross referenced with Barnes' will and media reports about his tenure, tells a more holistic story about educational leadership in Tuscaloosa. The location of Barnes' home, his assets, and his role as a Free Mason hint at a tradition of respectability and status among African American educators. Meanwhile, the positioning of black schools, the silences, the mystery of Elsie Carpenter, and the accounts of continued backlash reveal an ever-present white resistance. A collection of these stories leaves us with this: Narratives of black educational experience are not separate, they are persistent, and they are both beautifully and horrifically intertwined. And, together, these narratives tell the story of black educators who had an ultimate responsibility to foster black excellence despite, despite, despite it all.

⁴³ Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Tuscaloosa, Tuscaloosa County, Alabama. Sanborn Map Company, June 1889.

Reflection

About 200 people showed up to the pop-up museum, which was a higher number than I thought. I know a lot of that had to do with advertising and publicity, but I think it also says something about the desperate need for our campus to engage with public history. The turnout showed that students and locals care. But it also showed that many of our administrators don't. Similar to the story of black educational leadership, those silences among white leaders are important to recognize. What Dr. Bell chooses to value about this university makes a statement – a statement that says football, expensive banquets, and robot competitions are more important than acknowledging our past.

Though Bell's absence hinted at this sad, persisting pattern of white resistance, the actual exhibition represented the other side of that story: success! Most of the people who passed by my table engaged in thought-provoking conversation. Personally, the artifacts began to meld together for me, and as the night went on, I was able to tell a fluid story of Jeremiah Barnes by reading (or speaking) between the lines and providing some really useful context. I also learned several things from the participants. For example, I learned from the Hoole librarian that Newtown was actually a white settlement, when I thought it may be an early black settlement, given today's West Side demographics and Barnes' proximity to the area. Several people were intrigued by the Oakland Sunshine article, as it made Reconstruction in Alabama, and specifically black educational leadership, a topic of national importance. It also raised some eyebrows about free masonry and probably encouraged others to look up the roots of what is now a secret society. Another question that was raised was about the map. Where are these places now? If I could do this over again, I would transpose a modern map over the one from 1894, or at least transpose it in my head, so I could answer those questions more accurately. I kept confusing the main road with Lurleen Wallace without realizing that the old bridge close

to the Tuscaloosa News was in use at the time. I would also look more closely for traces of black schools to place on there, or at least see if I could find Colored Public School No. 1.

Overall, though, I was really pleased (and surprised) with the amount of information I was able to get out about Barnes, and I left with questions, which I think is a good thing.

The exhibition also allowed me to meet Dr. Sharony Green, and my newspaper artifact sparked lively conversation between the both of us about anti-black bias, the need for black newspapers, and how both of those topics have affected us in newsrooms. I didn't know she was a professional journalist before teaching, and she talked pretty extensively about the politics of space in the context of print newspapers, and how journalists have the power to decide what is important in multiple ways. I've been fascinated with that idea for a long time, and it was interesting to see how it tied back to my artifacts. Since then, I've been thinking more about spatial politics and why I'm so interested in it. For one, I love maps. And two, I'm fascinated by the convergence of history, contemporary politics, and personal narratives. I've been following education in Tuscaloosa for a long time, in a way that was personal to me. Central to the story of education are things like zoning, and things like housing segregation and access to areas of town – things that everyday people experience daily. The exhibition allowed me to think of my narrow professional goals (of writing about school segregation) in a broader sense of race and space. And now, I'm looking into ways to apply the story of black education in Tuscaloosa to as many realms as I can – historical analysis, abstract theory, travel writing, etc. – with hopes of one day figuring out what the heck I want to do with my life.

Thank you, Dr. Green, for a fabulous class! It's been a treat.