

# Determination and Persistence: Building the African American Teacher Corps through Summer and Intermittent Teaching, 1860s–1890s

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*This paper explores trends in summer and intermittent teaching practices among African American students in the post-Civil War South, focusing on student activities in the field, the institutions they attended, and the communities they served. Transitioning out of the restrictions and impoverishment of slavery while simultaneously seeking to support themselves and others was an arduous and tenuous process. How could African American youth and young adults obtain the advanced education they sought while sustaining themselves in the process? Individual and family resources were limited for most, while ambitions, both personal and racial, loomed large. Teaching, widely recognized as a means to racial uplift, was the future occupation of choice for many of these students.*

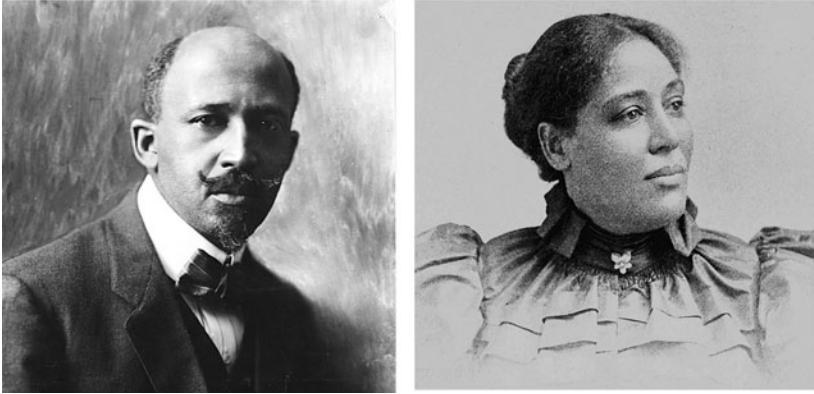
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In one of the best-known chapters from his classic collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois relates the tale of teaching in rural Tennessee in the summer of 1886, following his sophomore year at Fisk University. “Once upon a time I taught school in the hills of Tennessee,” Du Bois reminisced, when “all Fisk men thought that Tennessee—beyond the Veil—was theirs alone, and in vacation time they sallied forth in lusty bands to meet the county school-

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**Figure 1.** *Left*, W. E. B. Du Bois, ca. 1907. Wikimedia Commons. Source: W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, University of Massachusetts Amherst Digital Collections. *Right*, Mrs. Margaret Murray Washington, in M. B. Thrasher, "Tuskegee Institute and Its President," *Popular Science Monthly* 55 (Sept. 1899), 595.

commissioners. Young and happy, I too went."<sup>1</sup> Summer schoolteaching, however, was much more than just a male adventure, and over the years many African American women joined their brethren in the field. Margaret Murray, the future Mrs. Booker T. Washington and Du Bois's classmate at Fisk, supported herself via stints of summer teaching while in school; Anna Julia (Haywood) Cooper did likewise, long before the publication of her famous feminist text, *A Voice from the South*. In fact, summer and intermittent teaching was part of the life course for a broad spectrum of African American youth and young adults, famous names and rank-and-file alike, from the early emancipation years of the 1860s through the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>

The intent of this paper is to examine and explore the many dimensions of this complex social practice, one that involved African American students at various levels of education, the institutions they attended, and the communities they served. Transitioning out of the restrictions and impoverishment of slavery while simultaneously seeking to support themselves and others within networks of kinship and

<sup>1</sup>W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: New American Library, 1969), 96.

<sup>2</sup>Henry Hugh Proctor, *Between Black and White* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1925), 30; Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 35; and Francis Richardson Keller, "An Educational Controversy: Anna Julia Cooper's Vision of Resolution," *NWSA Journal* 11, no. 3 (Autumn 1999), 53, 56.

community was both an arduous and a tenuous process. Stories of late nineteenth-century African American college and normal school students roaming the countryside in search of summer teaching positions might be the “stuff of legend,” as historian Glenda Gilmore has aptly characterized these activities, but underlying the undoubted heroics was a very real tension, balancing immediate needs with future hopes and dreams. How could African American youth and young adults obtain the advanced education they sought while sustaining themselves in the process? Individual and family resources were limited for most, while ambitions, both personal and racial, loomed large. Teaching was the future occupation of choice for many of these students, a respected and dignified profession for the best practitioners, while also widely recognized as a means to aid the process of racial uplift.<sup>3</sup>

Given the demanding role that farm labor continued to play in the lives of former slaves throughout the postwar South, as tenancy in its various formats developed into an overarching economic system, it was not coincidental that one of the first pathways into teaching for an untold number of African Americans students was related to the rhythms of agricultural production. The key point of entry was the “laid by” interim, the period after planting and before harvesting in the spring-fall (or the reverse in the winter-spring). Enrollments at African American schools of all types and at all levels were affected by the relentlessness of this age-old cadence well into the twentieth century. In fact, after the hard-fought establishment of common school systems in the South in the late 1860s and early 1870s, it was often the case that public schools, especially for African Americans in rural districts, were open *only* during the summer or winter months when the crops were “laid by.”<sup>4</sup>

At first, through the mid to late years of the 1860s, a number of African American youth, assistant teachers at schools for freedpersons, took the place of “Yankee schoolmarms” when the latter left their southern posts to return to the North during the stifling summer heat of June, July, and August. However, the most enduring and consistent avenue for summer and intermittent “schoolkeeping” came about as a result of the post-Civil War institutionalization of various public and especially private high schools, normal schools, and colleges and universities for Black students, and the needs of their largely low-income clientele to obtain funds to pay for their education. By 1870, approximately seventy-four institutions in the South provided some

<sup>3</sup> Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 35.

<sup>4</sup> A. K. Spence, “Vacationing,” *American Missionary* 37, no. 10 (Oct. 1883), 329; and “Lewis High School,” *American Missionary* 35, no. 11 (Nov. 1881), 336.

form of “advanced education” (high schools, normal schools, and colleges and universities) for African American students; by 1880, over a hundred distinct programs had been established at these schools and others (including schools of law and theology) for Black professional training and development. As David Allmendinger points out in his work *Paupers and Scholars*, intermittent and vacation-period school-teaching in the United States dates back at least to the eighteenth century and became more widespread across the first third of the nineteenth century as young White men in the North from low-income and middling origins sought social mobility through college matriculation.<sup>5</sup>

Similar motivations influenced African American students of both genders as they confronted conditions in the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction South, creating trends that would persist for the next several decades. Two students from Richmond Colored Normal and High School taught in country schools in the summer of 1868, less than a year after that school opened in Virginia’s capital. That same summer, fifteen students from the Swayne School, soon to be renamed Talladega College, went out to teach in rural Alabama. These young men and women ranged in age from sixteen to twenty-two and “taught in churches, log houses, bough houses, and cabins vacated for the purpose. Two or three earned little more than their expenses. The others brought back from ten to forty dollars for three month’s labor, with which they are paying their way in the school.”<sup>6</sup> Anna Pitts and her sister Sarah took turns teaching school and attending the newly founded Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in the spring and fall of 1869.<sup>7</sup>

### Trends at Fisk and Atlanta Universities

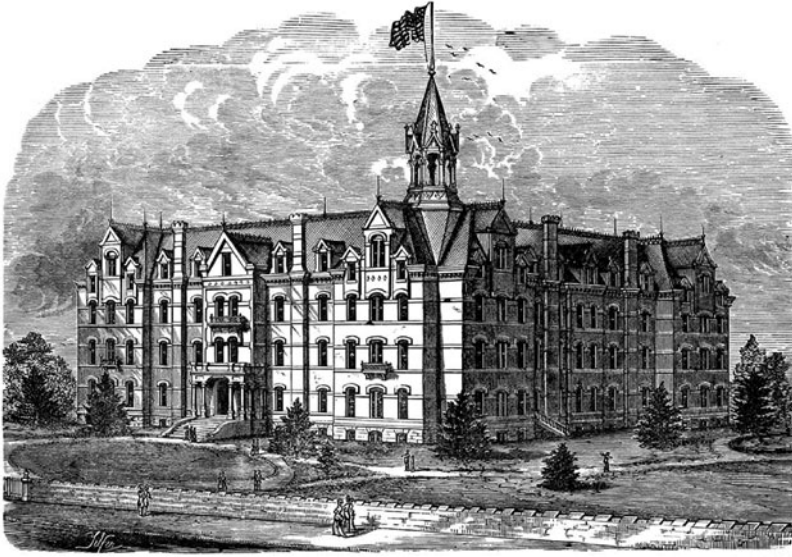
Even before it was incorporated as Fisk University in 1867, several students from the Fisk Free Colored School in Nashville spent the

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<sup>5</sup>Betty Mansfield, *That Fateful Class: Black Teachers of Virginia’s Freedmen, 1861–1882* (PhD diss., Catholic University of America, 1980), 191–192; Peter Kolchin, *First Freedom: The Responses of Alabama’s Blacks to Emancipation and Reconstruction* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1972), 87; J. W. Alvord, *Tenth Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen*, July 1, 1870 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1870), 5, 52–54; *Report of the Commissioner of Education for the Year 1880* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1882), lviii–lxii; and David F. Allmendinger Jr., *Paupers and Scholars: The Transformation of Student Life in Nineteenth-Century New England* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1975), 91–94.

<sup>6</sup>“Talladega Normal School—Its Students as Teachers,” *American Missionary* 13, no. 3 (March 1869), 62.

<sup>7</sup>Mansfield, *That Fateful Class*, 288–91.



**Figure 2.** Fisk University—Jubilee Hall, 1883. Wikimedia Commons. Source: G. D. Pike, *The Jubilee Singers, and Their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1873), frontispiece.

summer of 1866 teaching in rural schools. In 1869, Fisk reported “nearly all” of its entire normal school enrollment, forty-one students, taught over the summer, with “most of the schools continuing up to the first of December.”<sup>8</sup> In an ugly incident that summer, documented in one of the Freedmen’s Bureau’s *Semi-Annual Reports on Schools for Freedmen*, two young Fisk students, Thomas Wells and Israel Aiken, were abducted from their boarding house in the town of Dresden, Tennessee, “by men armed and masked, forced to the woods, there severely whipped, and, under pain of death, ordered to discontinue teaching.” Putting this incident in context, the report noted:

During the months of July and August many of the localities [in Tennessee] were temporarily supplied with teachers from the classes of advanced students of the several normal schools. . . . Some of their teachers were slaves (common field boys) before the war, who went back to their home localities, possessing more than an ordinary education, opened or reopened schools, and have been particularly well received.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup>“Fisk University,” *American Missionary* 13, no. 10 (Oct. 1869), 219. See also, Joe M. Richardson, “Fisk University: The First Critical Years,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1970), 32.

<sup>9</sup>J. W. Alvord, *Ninth Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1870), 48.

Acts of terror and intimidation, however, could not stop the flow of Black students streaming into the countryside seeking teaching assignments to pay for their education. By the 1872–1873 school year, an estimated 43 percent of Fisk University’s total enrollment, 110 of 256 students, were part-time schoolteachers and part-time students. They averaged five to six months in the field.<sup>10</sup>

Additional evidence from Fisk, and from Atlanta University, opened for classes in 1869, provides intriguing perspectives on summer and intermittent teaching over the last third of the nineteenth century. Administrators at both Fisk and Atlanta Universities were quite supportive of their student-teachers’ initiative. Annual catalogs for both schools, for example, called upon southern officials to contact the institutions if their locales needed teachers, specifically mentioning the summer vacation months. The catalogs also informed current and prospective students that if they sought summer teaching positions they would be given certificates “of membership and standing,” providing proof of their enrollment. At Atlanta University, a cursory statement to this effect first appeared in its 1869–1870 catalog, with an expanded version appearing in the mid-1870s and continuing thereafter; by the early 1870s, “Teaching” (later changed to “Opportunities for Teaching”) was a regular section in the Fisk catalog.<sup>11</sup>

Administrators at both Fisk and Atlanta Universities realized that many of their students needed such paid positions to remain in school. Tuition and board for students in the college and normal departments at Fisk was \$12, payable monthly “in advance,” in 1874–1875, the same as it was in 1906–1907. (This did not include incidental costs, such as travel, clothing, books, library/laboratory fees, and a variety of charges in the popular music department.) Students who did not board at the school paid rates that varied over the years from \$2.75 to \$7.50 for tuition per term. Costs at Atlanta University were broadly similar over these years: \$12 per month for tuition and board for students in the college and normal

<sup>10</sup>Joe M. Richardson, *A History of Fisk University, 1865–1946* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1980), 6, 17.

<sup>11</sup>*Catalogue of the Normal and Preparatory Departments of Atlanta University, 1869–70* (Atlanta: Economical Book and Job Printing House, 1870), 12, and unpagged appendix; *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Atlanta University, June 1874* (Atlanta: Atlanta University, 1874), 25; *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Fisk University, 1874–75* (Nashville, TN: Wheeler, Marshall & Bruce, 1875), 27–28; and *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Fisk University for the College Year 1883–84* (Nashville, TN: Marshall & Bruce, 1884), 21–22. See also, *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Talladega College, 1883–84* (Atlanta: Constitution Publishing, 1884), 33.

departments and \$2 monthly for tuition alone in 1875; \$10 monthly for board and \$2 monthly tuition in 1906–1907.<sup>12</sup>

For many young Black women and men, meeting these education-related expenses was a major challenge. To put the costs—around \$100 in tuition and board, plus books and incidentals, per school year—in then-contemporary perspective, economists have estimated that annual incomes of \$100 to \$150 *in cash and credit* were common for thousands of Black and White cotton-growing families in the late nineteenth century, and that for a substantial number of others it was much less. (The caveat “in cash and credit” is an important point, since, as historian Sharon Ann Holt and others have recognized, “Southern farms operated on credit more than on currency,” a fact that makes computing the “incomes” of tenant families complicated.)<sup>13</sup>

In another measure, Du Bois, in a study of 271 African American farm families living in a Black Belt county in Georgia in 1898 and 1899, found that only fifty-three of the families (20 percent) “cleared” any money at all after one year’s work, with only five families “clearing” \$100 or more. Turning to 124 “fairly representative Negro families of Atlanta,” the median family annual income in 1900 was between \$300 and \$400.<sup>14</sup> In another “social sketch” by Du Bois—focusing on the 250 to 300 African American families living in Covington, the county seat of Newton County, Georgia, in 1899—the annual income of the “mass of Negroes” was between \$100 and \$300, while for fifty families of the “better class,” the median was between \$300 and \$500. Men and older boys typically worked as porters in stores, draymen, waiters, and general laborers, earning \$10 to \$12 a month, while women and older girls often worked as cooks (\$4 to \$6 a month), nurses (\$1.50 to \$3 a month), and dayworkers (sewing, washing, scrubbing, 40 to 50 cents a day and “one or two meals”). The study also noted that although the town had a public school (three teachers, 250 students) open for nine months during the year, “Many girls and some of the boys are sent to Atlanta and Augusta to school.” One

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<sup>12</sup> *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Fisk University, 1874–75*, 30; *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Fisk University, 1906–1907* (Nashville, TN: Press of Folk-Keelin, 1907), 22–23; *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Atlanta University, June 1875* (Atlanta: Constitution Steam-Power Book and Job Press, 1875), 28; and *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Atlanta University, 1906–1907* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1907), 19.

<sup>13</sup> See Gilbert Fite, “Southern Agriculture Since the Civil War: An Overview,” *Agricultural History* 53, no. 1 (Jan. 1979), 8; and Sharon Ann Holt, *Making Freedom Pay: North Carolina Freedpeople Working for Themselves* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 25.

<sup>14</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Negro Landholder of Georgia,” *Bulletin of the Department of Labor* 35 (July 1901), 663–64.

explanation for this gender difference was that, “there is practically no work for colored girls except domestic service,” but this type of work was a decidedly “unpopular calling.” Note, too, that in all of these cases, whether in a large town (Covington), a city (Atlanta), or in the rural Black Belt, losing the potential income older children might contribute to the family coffers by sending them off to school was a major consideration that required careful deliberation.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, given that most students could not rely on family resources to pay for their education, many turned to summer and intermittent teaching. An 1881 report, published in the faculty-led *Fisk Expositor*, provides a number of intriguing details. Of the students then attending the school in its college, college preparatory, and normal departments (unstated, but numbering 110 in the 1883-1884 school year), fully ninety had “at some point” been engaged in teaching school. During the 1880 calendar year, seventy-two students in those departments taught school for a total of 309 months (average 4.29 months). Most, thirty-two, taught in Tennessee, while twenty-two traveled to Mississippi, eight to Texas, four to Alabama, with the rest scattered in other states. These student-teachers taught an estimated total of 5,641 students (average 78.3 per teacher), with an average daily attendance of 3,717 (average 51.6). In addition to their teaching duties, sixty-seven of the seventy-two also taught Sunday schools. Total attendance at these Sabbath programs was 3,963. The students grossed \$9,129 in salaries. Subtracting \$3,236 for the collective cost of board and travel, the students garnered a net gain of \$5,893 (average \$81.84, or \$19.07 per month).<sup>16</sup>

This 1881 report drew several inferences from the data. First, “Nearly all of the students in Fisk University of sufficient age and advancement in scholarship teach during their course of study,” including approximately 80 percent of the students in the small but growing college department. Second, the report noted that although the average net gain was around \$81.84, this was not enough for students to support themselves for a full academic year. “Parents should consider this fact, not fully understood, as it would appear, by some of those able to assist their children.” Third, the report highlighted a litany of socioemotional and other benefits the student-teachers reaped

<sup>15</sup>W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Negro in the Black Belt: Some Social Sketches,” *Bulletin of the Department of Labor* 22 (May 1899), 406-11. See also, Robert Higgs, *Competition and Coercion: Blacks in the American Economy, 1865-1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 95-101.

<sup>16</sup>“Statistics of Teaching by Students Now in Fisk University,” *Fisk Expositor* (Jan. 1881), 5, reprinted under same title in *American Missionary* 35, no. 4 (April 1881), 114-15; and *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Fisk University for the College Year 1883-84*, 28.



from their time in the field: the student “grows strong by contending with difficulties. He learns the value of education by its cost. He obtains practical experience. . . . He is also kept in sympathy with the people among whom his future labors are to lie.” Finally, the report noted that the students’ activities in summer and intermittent teaching demonstrated the university’s extended influence, proudly estimating that more than 15,000 African American children across the South were taught by current and former Fisk students.<sup>17</sup>

Evidence regarding trends at Atlanta University also reveals consistently high levels of student engagement in summer and intermittent teaching. As early as 1870, John Langston, an African American Inspector of Schools for the Freedmen’s Bureau, reported that at least forty Atlanta University students were teaching during their summer vacation, supervising three thousand Black pupils in day, night, and Sabbath schools. (He also noted, “If not in the same large measure . . . what I here say of the students of Atlanta University may be said of several other normal schools in the South.”)<sup>18</sup> One of the students out in the field that summer was R. R. Wright, valedictorian of Atlanta University’s first baccalaureate class in 1876 and the future president of Georgia State Industrial College for Colored Youth (1891–1921), the state’s Black land grant. Only fifteen years old when he took his first summer teaching position in 1870, Wright spent every vacation period but one until his graduation teaching schools in rural Georgia. In 1875, the notoriously conservative *Atlanta Constitution* reported that around eighty Atlanta University students had been out teaching over the past year, “with satisfaction to the school authorities and their patrons, and without a single case of disturbance or complaint.”<sup>19</sup>

Three years later, in 1878, Cyrus W. Francis, a professor of Ethics and Christian Evidences at Atlanta University and a member of its board of trustees, reported:

In the last catalogue were the names of 214 pupils, and of these, more than 150 are known to have engaged in teaching during the year. In the previous year, out of 240, more than 175 were at work in this same way. And this number includes nearly every person in school whose age and attainments give him even the smallest fitness for the work. . . . It is the practice of the pupils to pass directly from school to their work in teaching, and

<sup>17</sup>“Statistics of Teaching by Students,” 114–15.

<sup>18</sup>“Report of John M. Langston, Inspector,” *Tenth Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen*, 48.

<sup>19</sup>June O. Patton, “Major Richard Robert Wright, Sr., and Black Higher Education in Georgia, 1880–1920” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1980), 84; and “The Colored University,” *American Missionary* 19, no. 3 (March 1875), 54.



**Figure 3.** Atlanta University, *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Atlanta University, 1886-1887* (Atlanta: Constitution Book Office Print, 1887), frontispiece. HaithiTrust, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101067479749&view=1up&seq=284&size=125>.

many have done so for a number of years, without going home or having a rest. They have in day schools an average attendance of thirty-five or forty, and most have night-schools, and nearly all organize Sabbath-schools and temperance societies. . . . They, for the most part, find their own places, collect the pupils, secure a building. . . . And so, all through the hot months, the work goes on from year to year. The seed is widely scattered, but it is not lost.<sup>20</sup>

By 1885, more than two hundred Atlanta University students taught for at least a portion of their summer vacation, if not more. The school's catalog that year listed 338 enrolled above the primary grades, indicating that close to 60 percent of the remaining student body taught at some point during the year. In this regard, a few years earlier, in 1883, a discussion of the school's grammar division in the *Atlanta University Bulletin* noted that the five-year program was "unable to give much normal instruction in this department, yet our work is made to take as much of that nature as possible, as so many of the students engage in teaching during the summer."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup>C. W. Francis, "Its Work," *American Missionary* 32, no. 3 (March 1878), 76-77.

<sup>21</sup>T. N. Chase, "Students' Vacation Reports," *American Missionary* 40, no. 1 (Jan. 1886), 20-21; and Charles P. Sinnott, "Grammar and Normal Departments," *Bulletin of Atlanta University* 1 (June 1883), 8-9. The employment of "grammar" and

In April 1891, the *Bulletin* published its most detailed report on summer teaching, a survey of fifty-nine Atlanta University students who had taught the previous year and who had not yet left campus (before the end of term) for their next teaching positions. The fifty-nine students represented four divisions at Atlanta University: the College, Preparatory, Normal, and Grammar departments. Included were students in the third and fourth grammar grades who “sustained a fair record” in their prior teaching positions.<sup>22</sup>

Among those surveyed, the shortest time spent teaching the previous year was one month, the longest stint was ten months. The schools they taught at had an average enrollment of seventy students, with the largest having 128 enrolled and the smallest twenty-four; eleven had over one hundred enrolled, only nine had less than fifty. Most of the schools had a four-month school term. Average salary for the student-teachers was \$31 per month; four earned \$50 or more per month, six earned less than \$20 per month. While a grammar school student earned the single highest salary, overall, salaries were correlated with student grade level, averaging \$42.50 monthly for students in the college department and \$28 for those in the grammar grades. Interestingly, the report noted that the computation of average salaries included funds from two sources, monies paid by the state of Georgia (via counties and towns) and that paid by patrons. Although no breakdown was provided for the specific monetary contributions African American parents made, forty-six of the fifty-nine student-teachers received funds from their constituencies, with the evidence indicating that “those teaching the smaller schools in the more isolated communities received a larger proportion of aid from patrons than the others.”<sup>23</sup>

Addressing the extent to which Atlanta University students could “help themselves” in pursuing their degree ambitions, the report provided two detailed examples. In one, the student was one of the higher paid of those in the sample, receiving \$190 for four months of teaching. From this gross, boarding with families cost \$28 for the four-month period, while \$57 was taken from the student’s allotted salary to pay for the salaries of assistant teachers, as required by Georgia state law when a school reached specified enrollment levels. Thus, not including funds spent traveling to and from the teaching site and other incidental

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“intermediate” students for teaching assignments was not uncommon. See, for example, E. C. Silsby, “Influence of Talladega College,” *American Missionary* 48, no. 3 (March 1894), 127; and George Burrage, “Ballard Normal School,” *American Missionary* 55, no. 1 (Jan. 1901), 59.

<sup>22</sup>“Our Summer Schools,” *Bulletin of Atlanta University* 27 (April 1891), 4-5.

<sup>23</sup>“Our Summer Schools,” 4-5, quote on page 4.

expenditures, this student-teacher cleared approximately \$105 for the upcoming school year. Board at Atlanta University in the 1890-91 school year was \$10 per month (including room, fuel, lights, and washing); tuition was \$2 per month for those in the college department and \$1.50 per month for those in the normal, college prep, and grammar school departments. Thus, not including the cost of books, clothing, or other incidentals, students at Atlanta University needed, at a minimum, between \$103.50 and \$108 per nine-month academic year. Even for one of the better paid students, then, four months of summer teaching would come close, but might not fully cover necessary university costs.

The other example in the report came in the form of firsthand testimony from one of the student-teachers. This individual, twenty years old, had come to say good-bye to a faculty member since he, the student, was departing “in the morning to open his summer school, leaving the University five weeks before the close.” The student explained:

I taught three months last year. My county paid me \$51.65, I received from my patrons \$15.00. I received for picking cotton evenings after school \$7.04. My father gave me \$10.00. He has a family of ten besides myself, and earns \$15.00 a month carrying milk to town. My entire income was \$83.69. I paid \$15 for board in the summer and deposited \$60.00 with the treasurer. . . . The balance I have worked extra hours to earn, and some kind people in the North have paid a part. I paid \$3.00 for my books, \$2.00 for car fare, \$5.00 has been spent for clothing, etc. A friend sent me \$1.00 to help me [go from] home to my school, and one of the teachers loaned me another dollar, so that I have my car fare home.<sup>24</sup>

As the report concluded, “The two cases cited above serve as types, and will indicate the extent of self-help possible to our students while in attendance upon the University. . . . The figures, however, show that though many can do much in self-support, few, if any, can do it all.”<sup>25</sup>

### **Securing a School and Settling In**

Yet despite frequent financial shortfalls—and other difficulties to be discussed—across the last three decades of the nineteenth century, African American youth at all types of advanced educational institutions continued to flock into the field seeking summer and interim teaching positions. Among the first of the many obstacles to overcome

<sup>24</sup>“Our Summer Schools,” 4.

<sup>25</sup>“Our Summer Schools,” 4.

were the complications associated with actually securing a school in which to teach.

As noted, many students had to leave school before the end of the spring term, sometimes in order to fulfill a previously arranged commitment, at other times to get a head start on what was well known to be a formidable process. “Long before vacation begins we teach thinning classes,” longtime Fisk University professor A. K. Spence lamented in 1883, with another discussion of trends at Fisk mentioning students leaving for prospective teaching opportunities a full three months before the late May examination and graduation exercises. “This is hard on scholarship, but necessary for the purse,” Spence rationalized.<sup>26</sup> Anticipating such early withdrawals, and as an aid to its students, Talladega College in the late 1870s began to hold a teachers’ institute on campus, sometimes as early as late March, two and a half months before the spring term ended in mid-June. This institute continued into the 1880s, “giving special training to those who are so soon to go out and teach.”<sup>27</sup> Similarly, in 1889, Tougaloo University in Mississippi announced plans to establish a special teacher training course to complement its normal department. “The necessity under which many [students] labor, of teaching school in order to pay their own school bills, makes attendance somewhat irregular,” the school explained in its rationale for the new initiative.<sup>28</sup> There was no set date when rural primary schools opened or closed in the late nineteenth-century South, where traditions of decentralized local control by county officials—and by the patrons of subscription schools—were influenced by a host of financial, agricultural, and idiosyncratic rationales.

After leaving the institution, whether before end-of-year examinations or at the close of the term, the search for a school in which to teach for the summer began in earnest. The quest in many ways resembled a maze, with multiple pathways and multiple offshoots. Dead ends were not uncommon.<sup>29</sup>

Although the specific location was sometimes known in advance, hearsay and word of mouth among the student-teachers seem to have been the most common factors in deciding where to go, instrumentalities that undoubtedly built up over time. Seemingly, in most cases, a

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<sup>26</sup>Spence, “Vacationing,” 329-30; and Harriet Cushman, “Fisk University,” *American Missionary* 40, no. 7 (July 1886), 195-96.

<sup>27</sup>Henry S. DeForest, “Teachers’ Institute at Talladega,” *American Missionary* 36, no. 5 (May 1882), 140-41.

<sup>28</sup>“Tougaloo University,” *American Missionary* 43, no. 6 (June 1889), 162-63.

<sup>29</sup>On dead ends, see, for example, K. K. Koons, “Tougaloo, Miss.,” *American Missionary* 35, no. 11 (Nov. 1881), 338.



**Figure 4.** Senior preparatory class of Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, before 1906. African American Photographs Assembled for 1900 Paris Exposition, Library of Congress, <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3c12768/>.

general location was identified, a certain county within a certain state. After traveling to the county, usually by train, the next step, if a “government” school was sought, was to obtain a license or certificate to teach. This frequently entailed taking an examination, sometimes at a local teachers’ institute, or obtaining one through other means at the discretion of the local White school official. Outcomes on the exam would determine if the student-teacher received a license and, if so, the “grade” of the license. The “class” or “grade” of the license-certificate (typically Grades 1, 2, or 3) was particularly important since, in most cases, it was the main criteria for salary scales in the locality. These license-certificates were mostly good for one year and were valid only in the county or locality in which they were offered.

This portion of the process had its own potential pitfalls. Sometimes an examination was offered at the local teachers’ institute, as was the case in Du Bois’s experience: “First, there was a Teachers’ Institute at the county-seat . . . white teachers in the morning, Negroes at night.”<sup>30</sup> Sometimes the exam lasted for one day, sometimes two. If,

<sup>30</sup>Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 96-97.

as was often the case, no teacher's institute was held, or the student-teacher missed the meeting, sometimes the county superintendent was available to give the examination; sometimes the applicant was told to return at another time and hope for the best. And then, as Spence explained, sometimes, "The Superintendent holds an institute to prepare students to pass his own examination, charging them five dollars apiece. Those who attend are sure to pass."<sup>31</sup> Spence added that, although there were exceptions:

It is quite a common rule never to give a first-class certificate, no matter what the scholarship, to a colored student, as in most States it increases his pay, and perhaps it would not seem fit for a colored boy or girl to get a better certificate than some white young man or woman.<sup>32</sup>

Then came another hurdle: sometimes the superintendent would assign the student-teacher to a school after they received their license; seemingly more often, individuals would have to locate a school on their own. In fact, regardless of whether the student-teacher intended to teach in a public school or expected from the start to teach in a private "subscription school"—that is, a school entirely funded and overseen by local African American parents—extensive "hunting" was in order. The literature is replete with evocative narratives in this regard. Said Du Bois, upon leaving the teachers' institute where he received his license:

I am sure that the man who has never hunted a country school has something to learn of the pleasure of the chase. I see now the white, hot roads lazily rise and fall and wind before me under the burning July sun; I feel the deep weariness of heart and limb as ten, eight, six miles stretch relentlessly ahead. . . . So I walked on and on—horses were too expensive—until I had wandered beyond railways, beyond stage lines, to a land of "varmints" and rattlesnakes, where the coming of a stranger was an event.<sup>33</sup>

Another Fisk student wrote of confronting similar "varmints" as he "set out in the hot sun and sand, with my satchel on my back, to the desired plantation. On my way, I saw two million lizzards [*sic*], one billion spiders, and a trillion scorpions, to say nothing of tarantulas and centipedes that appeared in countless numbers along my path."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Spence, "Vacationing," 330. See also, Richard H. Brodhead, ed., *The Journals of Charles W. Chesnut* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 67; "A Student's Letter," *American Missionary* 39, no. 6 (June 1885), 174; and "Letters from Hampton Graduates," *American Missionary* 8, no. 2 (Feb. 1879), 18.

<sup>32</sup> Spence, "Vacationing," 330.

<sup>33</sup> Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 97.

<sup>34</sup> W. B. Ross, "Student's Letter: How I Won My School," *American Missionary* 42, no. 9 (Sept. 1888), 252-253.

As a student at Talladega College explained in a more matter-of-fact manner:

Hearing that a teacher was wanted some fifty miles away, I boarded the train and rode about twenty-three miles, getting off at two o'clock, Friday afternoon . . . the journey lay before me [was still] a distance of about twenty-seven miles, and beyond two chains of mountains and a river. I was delayed a short time at the railroad town and failed to walk more than six miles that evening. I spent the night at the house of a farmer, and the next morning I set out very early.

The roads were among the mountains, and it was sometimes very difficult to find my way, and I did go out of my way several miles; but about two o'clock in the afternoon I came to a river about seventy-five or a hundred yards wide, and was put across in a private canoe. I was in the neighborhood for which I had started; was very tired, having had no dinner, and knew no one, neither did any one know of me.<sup>35</sup>

Note, too, that every instance of travel—from the institution to the prospective county, and then in search of a school—was particularly fraught with hazards for African American women. As one young lady from Tougaloo University commented, “On my way I met with no insults or rude jests, which was noteworthy. . . . I so often hear ‘the girls’ speak of being treated impolitely when traveling.”<sup>36</sup>

Once arriving at a possible school site, convincing the local Black patrons that the teacher was the right person to hire was the next step. Sometimes the obligatory community meeting was held right away; sometimes the student-teacher first had to organize support for their “application” by visiting individual homes, often starting with the de facto African American school trustees. Occasionally, multiple candidates were considered, perhaps including a local resident, with debates raised over differing qualifications. If local Whites had direct or indirect influence over the decision (which seems to have varied widely, since this was *not* a factor that was consistently raised in the evidence), they tended to favor “home talent” regardless of qualifications. Among the issues raised in this regard were taking money from the community and fears that “foreign students” might be too independent—they “may teach things not in the book.”<sup>37</sup> In one case, after a young

<sup>35</sup>“How I Secured Work for the Summer,” *American Missionary* 48, no. 9 (Sept. 1894), 326-27.

<sup>36</sup>“A Student’s Letter,” 174-75.

<sup>37</sup>Spence, “Vacationing,” 330. See also, “How I Secured Work for the Summer,” 326-27; T. N. Chase, “Students’ Reports of Summer Work,” *American Missionary* 32, no. 12 (Dec. 1878), 384; Ross, “Student’s Letter: How I Won My School,” 252-53; and H. S. Bennett, “Interesting Exercise in Fisk University,” *American Missionary* 36, no. 1 (Jan. 1882), 14.



woman from Atlanta University was hired, she reported that, “The white people did not want teachers from Atlanta, because they took the money out of the county. They kept me, however, and wanted the people to watch me.”<sup>38</sup>

Frequently, the local Black community had to approve the candidate’s denominational affiliation. Baptists or Methodists were by far the most preferred. This was sometimes a major hurdle for students attending American Missionary Association (AMA)-affiliated schools such as Fisk or Atlanta Universities, given the AMA’s close relationship with the Congregationalist Church. While some student-teachers might have been tempted to dissemble, others upheld their beliefs. When disagreements arose, the local pastor’s views were influential. In one instance, “the minister refused to allow the teacher to open his school in the church, the only available place, and work was delayed until he could be brought over to the candidate.”<sup>39</sup> On another occasion, the student-teacher reported that when “the Methodist minister found that I was neither Methodist or Baptist, he threatened his deacon who had charge of the schoolhouse to turn him out of church if he let me teach in it.” Eventually, a newly built log cabin was used as the school facility.<sup>40</sup>

Once the student-teacher was hired—which sometimes necessitated a quick trip to inform the county superintendent—school began. On rare occasions, the school facilities were admirable, as was the case for one student-teacher attending LeMoyné Normal Institute in Memphis who taught in a community of “thriving farmers.” But far more common were facilities like the one where another student from LeMoyné taught during the 1879-1880 school year:

The log school-house had no windows except board shutters; the seats were boards fastened upon blocks of wood; the blackboard was of her own manufacture. The building was so small [80 students attending] that in pleasant weather she heard her recitations in a bush-arbor built against the side of the house.<sup>41</sup>

This conforms to Du Bois’s description of the school where he taught: “The schoolhouse was a log hut, where Colonel Wheeler used to shelter his corn. . . . There was an entrance where a door

<sup>38</sup>Chase, “Students’ Reports of Summer Work,” 383.

<sup>39</sup>Edgar H. Webster, “Our Students’ Summer Work,” *Bulletin of Atlanta University* 12 (Oct. 1889), 3.

<sup>40</sup>Chase, “Students’ Vacation Reports,” 21. See also, H. S. Bennett, “Student Teaching,” *American Missionary* 36, no. 11 (Nov. 1882), 331; Spence, “Vacationing,” 330-31; and Ross, “How I Secured Work for the Summer,” 327.

<sup>41</sup>L. A. Parmelee, “Student Teachers from LeMoyné,” *American Missionary* 34, no. 2 (Feb. 1880), 52.

once was . . . great chinks between the logs served as windows . . . Seats for the children . . . [were] rough plank benches without backs, and at times without legs.”<sup>42</sup>

Frequently, initial attendance at the school was low, at least compared with the eventual number of students enrolled. The “laid by” period was not an exact measure of when fieldwork ended, especially for older boys and girls, and word that a school was open needed to circulate widely, while family preparations had to be made. Said one student-teacher from Tougaloo University in 1885, “Monday morning I opened my school with twenty scholars. By the last of the week I had sixty-five; and now ninety-three.”<sup>43</sup> For another student-teacher, from Straight University in 1892, nine were present when the school opened, then “interest was awakened among the people, and the attendance became eighty-five.”<sup>44</sup> Especially if it was a subscription school, or if salary was based, in part, on average attendance, increasing the student body called for additional community canvassing.<sup>45</sup>

“Boarding around,” that is, living with various members of the community for varied periods of time, was an inseparable part of most student-teachers’ experiences. As noted clergyman and lecturer Henry Hugh Proctor recounted in his memoir, recalling his summer teaching experiences while a student at Fisk in the 1880s, “It was considered a slight not to visit every family in the district and spend the night with them. In most cases this was very pleasant, but in the nature of the case there were some places not so inviting.”<sup>46</sup> This also conforms with Du Bois’s experiences. After explaining that he enjoyed staying with one family, “for they had four rooms and plenty of good country fare,” Du Bois noted that, on the other hand, “Often, to keep the peace, I must go where life is less lovely.”<sup>47</sup>

## Delayed Return to School

Just as many of the student-teachers had to leave their institutions before the end of the spring term in order to find or to fulfill their

<sup>42</sup>Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 99.

<sup>43</sup>“A Student’s Letter,” 174.

<sup>44</sup>“Straight University, New Orleans, LA,” *American Missionary* 46, no. 11 (Nov. 1892), 353.

<sup>45</sup>Webster, “Our Students’ Summer Work,” 3; and “Our Summer Schools,” *Bulletin of Atlanta University* 27 (April 1891), 5.

<sup>46</sup>Proctor, *Between Black and White*, 18.

<sup>47</sup>Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 101. See also, T. N. Chase, “Home Life Among the Negroes—An Incident,” *American Missionary* 33, no. 2 (Feb. 1879), 52; and S. E. Lathrop, “Experiences of Student-Teachers,” *American Missionary* 38, no. 9 (Sept. 1884), 275.

summer teaching opportunities, many did not return at the beginning of the fall term, if they returned at all for that semester or even for the entire academic year. Accounts were straightforward and to the point, as in this 1872 account from Trinity School, in Athens, Alabama: “Several of our students have already opened schools in the country. . . . They will teach till the opening of our school in the fall, or perhaps till Christmas, when they will return to resume their studies with us till another summer.”<sup>48</sup> Similarly, a report from Burrell School in Selma, Alabama, in 1881 stated, “As yet, last year’s scholars who have been employed in teaching have not returned. From a number of these we have received word . . . and learned of their expectations to be with us again.”<sup>49</sup> And from Straight University in New Orleans in 1892: “Many of the more advanced students cannot resume their work at the University until December or January, as they are compelled to earn money to defray their expenses, and to assist those who are dependent upon them.”<sup>50</sup>

Reasons varied for the delay in returning to school. Family matters factored into this, of course, with a need to return home, at least briefly, for chores and other obligations after spending many months away from parents and siblings. Also, as explained, in some cases the country school term was longer than the typical three-month summer vacation period, and the students stayed on to fulfill their commitments and earn the needed funds. In other cases, the salary earned was less than anticipated, either because the school did not start on the expected date or because of arbitrary decisions by local authorities. For example, after his first week of teaching in North Carolina in the summer of 1875, author Charles Chesnutt was told that the school would only continue for two months instead of three, and moreover, it was deemed a second-grade school and thus he would not receive first-grade pay. In still other instances, the net salary earned was simply not sufficient to meet the student’s tuition and board for the upcoming school term.<sup>51</sup>

Another common reason for the delay in returning to school at the beginning of the fall term was “the uncertainty of the emolument,” as one commentary characterized the unpredictability of available funds

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<sup>48</sup>M.F. Wells, “Trinity School, Athens,” *American Missionary* 16, no. 9 (Sept. 1872), 202.

<sup>49</sup>E. C. Silsby, “Burrell School,” *American Missionary* 35, no. 11 (Nov. 1881), 337.

<sup>50</sup>“Straight University,” 353.

<sup>51</sup>Brodhead, *Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt*, 72. See also, “Talladega, Ala.,” *American Missionary* 46, no. 12 (Dec. 1892), 402; “Straight University,” 353; and “Knox School,” *American Missionary* 46, no. 12 (Dec. 1892), 401.

to pay the teacher's salary. As a November 1890 commentary in *The Bulletin of Atlanta University* noted:

Our usual experience is that scholars continue to come all the way up to Christmas, as many are kept till that time by work on the farm or by the necessity of waiting till they can receive their pay for teaching during the summer months. This year will present no exception to the rule and we may expect students in large numbers for weeks to come.<sup>52</sup>

One common factor that contributed to this "uncertainty" was the practice of paying teachers in "scrip," that is, promissory notes also called "warrants," that could be redeemed at some point in the future. Given a general lack of funds for all state government projects, scrip made its appearance virtually concurrent with the initiation of southern school systems. The 1873 US Commissioner of Education's report documented a litany of woes arising from this practice. In Arkansas, to cite one of many examples, "The State-certificates . . . [have] fallen to less than half their face-value, school-sessions have had to be cut down to three months, and teachers, unable to secure even half their salaries, have very often abandoned the profession or left the State."<sup>53</sup> Into the 1890s, both Black and White educators in Virginia continued to complain about the necessity of teachers having to "shave their warrants," occasionally as much as 50 percent, in order to get paid; as late as 1899 in South Carolina, and 1901 in Georgia, the state superintendents of education decried the "annual embarrassment growing out of the delay in paying our teachers."<sup>54</sup> So extensive was this problem that Fisk University sought to remedy the precarious position many of its student-teachers faced. As early as its 1874-1875 catalog, the university announced that "those who have received warrants for teaching during the past year, and have not money, but desire to enter our Boarding Department, may do so . . . by depositing their warrants with the Assistant Treasurer until the money is obtained, provided

<sup>52</sup>"Our Summer Schools," 4; Richardson, "Fisk University," 37; and "A Great Opportunity," *Bulletin of Atlanta University* 22 (Nov. 1890), 1.

<sup>53</sup>*Report of the Commissioner of Education for the Year 1873* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1875), xiii-xiv, 4.

<sup>54</sup>*Twentieth Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the Commonwealth of Virginia, School Year Closing July 31, 1890* (Richmond, VA: J. H. O'Bannon Public Printing, 1891), 149; *Twenty-First Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the Commonwealth of Virginia, School Year Closing July 31, 1891* (Richmond, VA: J. H. O'Bannon Public Printing, 1891), 198-200; *Thirty-First Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Education of the State of South Carolina* (Columbia, SC: Bryant Publishing, 1900), 16-17; and *Thirtieth Annual Report from the Department of Education of the State of Georgia for 1901* (Atlanta: Geo. Harrison, State Printer, 1902), 13-14.

it is within a reasonable length of time.” A notice to this effect continued into the early 1900s.<sup>55</sup>

### The Travails of Joseph Charles Price

All in all, African American students experienced considerable difficulties in their attempts to further their education through summer and intermittent teaching. The diary of Joseph Charles Price—one of the few in-depth firsthand narratives—describes his struggles teaching in his home state of North Carolina during the summer of 1877 and relates many of the common problems students faced. At the time, Price was a twenty-three-year-old junior at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. He would later become a leading official in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and, in 1882, at age twenty-eight, he became president of the church’s flagship institution, Livingstone College, in Salisbury, North Carolina.

After a three-week delay, on Monday, June 11, 1877, Price began his summer teaching at a subscription school in Wilson, North Carolina. But because of the postponement, he believes that his prospects for reentering Lincoln on time in the fall “are very dark.” His Sabbath school, separate from the private facility, opened on Sunday, June 17. He had “quite a nice time” at its initial session.<sup>56</sup>

Price enjoyed teaching at the subscription school. Enrollment, he noted, “has increased surprisingly. . . . The students in general are very bright. They are good in Math—but very deficient in grammar; so I devote much time to this branch of study.” On Wednesday, June 27, in the middle of his third (and last) week of teaching at the private school, Price received word that the public school he anticipated teaching at might not start as planned the following Monday. The school committee suddenly indicated it was “undecided,” and the African American community, he complained, was “too ‘weak kneed.’ They know their rights but fail to demand them.” If the public school did not open, he intended to look elsewhere, and again noted he might not be able to return to Lincoln for the upcoming academic year. “This is a sad thought.”<sup>57</sup>

That Friday, the day the private school closed, Price received word that the public school would indeed open on Monday, July 2, as initially planned. By Tuesday, July 3, eighty-two were attending;

<sup>55</sup> *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Fisk University, 1874-75*, 31; and *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Fisk University, 1903-1904* (Nashville, TN: Brandon Publishing Co., 1904), 24.

<sup>56</sup> Josephine Price Sherrill, “A Negro School-Master of the 1870’s,” *Journal of Negro Education* 30, no. 2 (Spring 1961), 164.

<sup>57</sup> Sherrill, “A Negro School-Master,” 166.

by Monday, July 9, attendance was up to 101. He was still teaching Sunday school, and by the end of the month 110 were attending the Sabbath activities.

Three weeks after the public school opened, on Monday, July 23, Price received word from a school committee member that the public school had been officially closed the previous Friday: "He gave no reason." Price was outraged. "It is a shame," he wrote, that "100 boys and girls should be deprived of school privileges, and should be doomed to walk the streets. Prejudice is the prime cause. . . . They think the negroes are advancing too far for them."<sup>58</sup> After a community protest meeting on Wednesday, on Saturday, July 28, the school committee relented and indicated it would allow the public school to remain open for one more week. Actually, it resumed for only four more days and officially closed on Thursday, August 2.

Though the sequence of events is unclear, by Friday, August 10, Price was again teaching at a private subscription school in Wilson. (How he obtained this school, or if it is the same one where he initially taught that summer, is unexplained.) On Saturday, August 25, Price took a quick trip to New Berne, North Carolina, his hometown, in search of a new public school teaching opportunity. "Saw the school officials immediately; the result was favorable," he wrote.<sup>59</sup> On Thursday, August 30, the day before his school in Wilson closed, he received a note from New Berne that his appointment had been held up for one week.

On Tuesday, September 4, having arrived in New Berne the day before, Price notified the school committee he would not accept their offer to teach for \$30 per month. Instead, he accepted an opportunity to open a subscription school at Johnson's Chapel, "\$35 guaranteed." Two days later, on Thursday, September 6, Price wrote President Isaac Rendall at Lincoln "informing him of my inability to return to school this academic year. My means are too limited. I hate to lose a year but I can not do otherwise now." On Sunday, September 9, he opened his new pay school with twenty-nine students in attendance. He anticipated remaining in New Berne for eight to nine months. (Price graduated from Lincoln University two years later, in the spring of 1879, the valedictorian of his senior class. He died in 1893 at age thirty-nine while president of Livingstone College.)<sup>60</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Sherrill, "A Negro School-Master," 169.

<sup>59</sup> Sherrill, "A Negro School-Master," 171.

<sup>60</sup> Sherrill, "A Negro School-Master," 172; and *Catalogue of Lincoln University for the Academical Year, 1879-80* (Oxford, PA: Press Print, 1880), 15.

## Back on Campus: The Institutional Response

Student-teachers who managed to return at the beginning of the fall term were greeted, at least at Fisk and Atlanta Universities, by what was essentially a “listening session” hosted by faculty and administrators. Specifically, they were asked to provide firsthand accounts of their teaching experiences. The meetings, however, were more than just casual affairs designed to exchange greetings and share anecdotes of successes and difficulties. Although humorous and doleful moments were surely shared—Henry Proctor, for example, remembered that Du Bois “on his return brought back a great stock of incidents”—the meetings had more serious purposes in mind.<sup>61</sup> That is, at both Fisk and Atlanta Universities, “It was expected that those who spoke would give as correct an idea as possible of the colored people, their interest in education, the condition of the crops, whether the people were getting possession of land, and all other items of interest relating to their work.”<sup>62</sup>

Both institutions held these meetings during the opening week of the school year so that the experiences and impressions were still fresh in students’ hearts and minds; both schools openly acknowledged that many of the student-teachers would unfortunately be absent as they continued their work in the field. Atlanta University conducted such meetings as early as 1875, if not before; it is unknown when Fisk started this practice, although its importance was highlighted by the presence of the school’s founder and president, Erastus Cravath, who presided over several of the meetings in the 1880s. Cravath himself had taught winter vacation schools when he was a student at Oberlin College in Ohio in the 1850s.<sup>63</sup>

Thus, school administrators framed the summer teaching experiences as “teachable moments,” with the fall meetings asking student-teachers to reflect upon the social, political, and economic contexts in which their pedagogical and interpersonal actions were grounded. The scattered evidence available indicates that, unlike the euphemistic recollections of “boarding around,” the student-teachers were frank in their observations. Excerpts from one 1889 Atlanta University report provide a sense of the diversity and commonalities of student-teacher observations:

<sup>61</sup>Proctor, *Between Black and White*, 29.

<sup>62</sup>Bennett, “Interesting Exercise in Fisk University,” 14.

<sup>63</sup>T. N. Chase, “Interesting Facts—Experiences of Colored Teachers,” *American Missionary* 19 no. 1 (Jan. 1875), 4; and “Rev. Erastus Milo Cravath, DD,” *American Missionary* 48, no. 2 (Feb. 1894), 78.



**Figure 5.** Junior normal class of Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, seated on steps outside of building, between 1890 and 1906. African American Photographs Assembled for 1900 Paris Exposition, Library of Congress, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3c12357>.

The people where I taught own nothing; they never go away from home; their ideas are vague, and they are superstitious, but are desirous that their children should learn. Some children walk four and a half miles in order to attend school.

There are 640 acres in the vicinity of the school owned by colored men.

The land is all owned by whites. In middle Georgia, the rent is 1000 pounds of cotton for a one-horse farm (25 acres) while in South Georgia it is only 500 pounds. The people own nothing; many besides hiring the land [as sharecroppers] have to hire their mules and their tools. The average colored tenant works for his food and clothes.

Patrons are not much interested in education, but the children are very eager to learn.

My Sundays were my busiest days. I attended Methodist Sunday school in the morning, Baptist Church and Sunday school in the afternoon. We organized a "Band of Hope," a temperance society, which grew to the number of 132 members. Two grocers gave up the sale of cigarettes. The people are laborers, the women are washerwomen, a working set. People are in favor of education and of sending their children off to school.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>64</sup>Webster, "Our Students' Summer Work," 3-4. For more on student-teacher observations, see Chase, "Students' Reports of Summer Work," 383-85; Koons,



School administrators and faculty had multiple reasons to support their student-teachers' activities. Certainly, a degree of institutional self-interest was involved. Simply put, fluctuations in attendance had to be tolerated in the interest of maintaining paid enrollments. Moreover, it was not without consequence that some of the student-teachers returned to their home institution with several of their own students as prospective enrollees. E. P. Lord, principal of Talladega College in Alabama, noted in 1878 that the student-teachers at his school

are taking a personal pride in bringing back the best scholars from their summer schools. One young man, having failed to collect any funds from his summer school in Georgia, started with his most advanced pupils on foot, their satchels up on their backs. . . . From Mississippi, another young man brought back two.<sup>65</sup>

Similarly, in November 1881, Hampton Institute administrator Helen Ludlow noted that sixty-one of the school's new students "reported having come through the agency of our graduate teachers, and fourteen more through that of undergraduates."<sup>66</sup> That same year, Atlanta University was pleased to report that enrollments for the year were larger than expected, in part because of new pupils student-teachers recruited over the summer. "This mode of recruiting," the commentary remarked, "has always been effective." (Note, too, that this mobilizing of prospective enrollees by the student-teachers—even if unintentional—reflects high levels of trust between them and at least some of the families of the community. Undoubtedly, the student-teachers earned this trust not only as a result of their teaching practices but also from such interactions as "boarding around," connecting at Sabbath day events, and other organic interactions that would have occurred over the course of several months.)<sup>67</sup>

Institutions also supported summer and intermittent teaching because of its effects on the students. One particularly important outcome was that the student-teachers "gain strength of character by assuming responsibility."<sup>68</sup> As William Donnell expressed this theme in personal terms at the annual fall Fisk meeting in 1881, persevering in the face of considerable opposition in Arkansas over the

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"Tougaloo, Miss.," 338; Bennett, "Student Teaching," 330-31; Spence, "Vacationing," 329-30; and Chase, "Students' Vacation Reports," 20-21.

<sup>65</sup>E. P. Lord, "Talladega College," *American Missionary* 32, no. 4 (April 1878), 110.

<sup>66</sup>Helen W. Ludlow, "Hampton, Va.," *American Missionary* 35, no. 11 (Nov. 1881), 334.

<sup>67</sup>C. W. Francis, "Atlanta University," *American Missionary* 35, no. 11 (Nov. 1881), 335.

<sup>68</sup>"The Educational Work in Fisk University," *American Missionary* 17, no. 3 (March 1873), 53.

summer taught him that he had “a little man” in him.<sup>69</sup> Such experiences sometimes also broke down myths of racial superiority. Said one young African American woman, a LeMoyne student who taught in a country school during the summer of 1879, “Would you believe it, that the white people didn’t know as much as I do.”<sup>70</sup>

## Conclusion

Those who have been out in the dark regions to teach the people can sympathize with those of us who go into such places. They know something of the troubles that meet us.<sup>71</sup>

Over the course of the first generation post-slavery, from the mid-1860s through the 1890s, steadily growing numbers of African American youth and young adults sought various forms of advanced education for reasons of personal fulfillment, social mobility, and racial-group uplift. The vast majority of these students sought to become teachers, recognizing the expansive opportunities at hand in building Black schooling literally from the ground up. Simultaneously, they sought to craft traditions of an educated professional African American teacher corps engaged in racial advancement.

The pressures and temptations to abandon their efforts at matriculation and graduation were manifold. Across these years, from the early emancipation period onward, the demand for African American teachers far exceeded the supply of trained personnel. As one administrator at the AMA’s Trinity School lamented in the late-1880s, “The great struggle with us is to hold our students long enough to take them through even an elementary normal course. Parents in their ignorance and their extreme poverty are in such a hurry to have their children teach and earn money to help support the younger ones.”<sup>72</sup> By 1900, there were slightly over 27,000 African American teachers in the South.<sup>73</sup> Many were self-described “home girls,” as one young Black woman characterized herself and her colleagues in Du Bois’s 1901 study *The Negro Common School*, teaching in the communities in which they were born and raised: “We work very hard for the upbuilding of our colored race . . . though we have

<sup>69</sup> Bennett, “Interesting Exercise in Fisk University,” 14.

<sup>70</sup> Parmelee, “Student Teachers from LeMoyne,” 52.

<sup>71</sup> Rebecca Michel, “A Colored Girl’s Experience as a Teacher,” *American Missionary* 33, no. 9 (Sept. 1879), 270.

<sup>72</sup> M.F. Wells, “Trinity School, Athens, Ala.,” *American Missionary*, 42 no.9 (Sept. 1888), 251.

<sup>73</sup> *Report of the Commissioner of Education for the year 1899-1900*, Vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1901), 2502.

but very little education.”<sup>74</sup> As an 1881 Fisk report described the situation, “The great mass of teachers among the colored people, as among the white, teach with little if any more preparation than what is gained in the common schools.”<sup>75</sup>

Yet small cohorts of young African American women and men persevered in their attempts to achieve their educational aspirations. As noted, in 1870, there were around seventy-four advanced educational institutions for African Americans.<sup>76</sup> By 1894–1895, according to the US Commissioner of Education’s report, 162 schools “of secondary and higher grade” for African American students existed: thirty-two colleges; seventy-three normal schools; and fifty-seven schools of secondary grade, with a total enrollment of 37,102. While the majority of the students in these schools, 63 percent, were in the elementary grades, 11,724 (32 percent) were in secondary or normal programs, and 1,958 (5 percent) were in college departments. For the last third of the nineteenth century, summer and intermittent teaching was an essential pathway many of these upper-level students utilized in sustaining these enrollments and the aspirations their numbers represented.<sup>77</sup>

Summer teaching was not the only type of labor students engaged in to pay for their studies. Over the course of Proctor’s seven years at Fisk, before he graduated from the college department in 1891, “I dug ditches, set type, taught and preached to help pay my way.”<sup>78</sup> Other students, both men and women, hired out as domestic or farm laborers, sometimes for the entire vacation period, sometimes before or after summer teaching. Some young Black men secured jobs as sleeping car porters on the railroads. Others became waiters at summer resorts or clerks in city or town stores. Some were hired to work at teacher institutes. Young African American women had fewer remunerative options than Black men, but for several decades after the Civil War, summer and intermittent student teaching was a normative practice among students of both genders attending institutions for advanced education. As Spence at Fisk University put it in 1883, “As usual, most of those advanced enough to do so taught school.”<sup>79</sup>

<sup>74</sup>W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Negro Common School* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1901), 102.

<sup>75</sup>“Statistics of Teaching by Students Now in Fisk University,” 115.

<sup>76</sup>Alvord, *Tenth Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen*, 5, 52–54. Some sixty-eight of those schools are listed in an appendix by name and location.

<sup>77</sup>*Report of the Commissioner of Education for the Year 1894–1895* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1895), 1334.

<sup>78</sup>Proctor, *Between Black and White*, 27.

<sup>79</sup>Spence, “Vacationing,” 329. See also, “The Work of a Student Teacher,” *American Missionary* 47, no. 4 (April 1893), 116; A. K. Spence, “College Work in Fisk University,” *American Missionary* 36, no. 4 (April 1882), 108–109; Chase,

It is difficult to determine with any degree of accuracy when summer teaching and its distinctive hunt for schools began to fade as a multifaceted, multipurpose practice. Although the evidence is not definitive, summer teaching was still a popular activity into the early 1890s. But by its 1906–1907 catalog, Fisk University dropped its “Opportunities for Teaching” statement, the decades-old annual announcement promoting vacation teaching. The university’s 1907–1908 catalog no longer carried the announcement that “warrants” from teaching assignments could be deposited with the school’s treasurer until the funds were obtained. Similarly, Atlanta University’s 1910–1911 catalog no longer carried its traditional “Teaching in Vacation” section, one that dated back to the 1869–1870 school year. Surely, neither Fisk nor Atlanta University students had completely ended their practice of summer teaching by 1910, but the absence of these announcements in the university catalogs after several decades of inclusion indicates that, from the institution’s perspective, it was a less pressing concern.<sup>80</sup>

Several reasons can be offered to explain why summer teaching might have tapered off in the mid to late 1890s and continued to do so after the turn of the century. First, there was the upsurge of virulent White supremacy across the region in the 1890s, continuing virtually unchecked through the World War I years. Funding for Black schools stagnated in many southern states, if it was not actually reduced, while African American education, especially higher education, was viewed through a more overtly hostile White ideological lens. Concurrently, African American teaching dramatically feminized. In 1890, women made up only an estimated 51.3 percent of the South’s Black teaching force, compared with an estimated 62.2 of White teaching positions and 65.5 percent of all teachers nationwide. By 1910, 76.3 percent of the African American teachers in the South were women, surpassing the percentage of White women teachers in the region (75.2 percent) for the first time. By 1920, 82.5 percent of the Black teachers in the South were women.<sup>81</sup>

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“Students’ Vacation Reports,” 21; and W. W. Patton, “Howard University,” *American Missionary* 35, no. 11 (Nov. 1881), 333.

<sup>80</sup> *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Fisk University, 1906–1907*; *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Fisk University, 1907–1908* (Nashville, TN: Press of Marshall & Bruce, 1908); and *Atlanta University Bulletin, The Catalogue, 1910–1911* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, April 1911).

<sup>81</sup> Michael Fultz, “African-American Teachers in the South, 1890–1940: Growth, Feminization, and Salary Discrimination,” *Teachers College Record*, 96, no. 3 (Spring 1995), 544–68. See also, Robert Margo, *Race and Schooling in the South, 1880–1950: An Economic History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 18–28.

These trends imply that Black male students especially would be less prone to seek summer teaching positions. The rural South, particularly for educated, nonlocal Black “outsiders” who might be considered “uppity,” was more dangerous and train travel more restrictive. Opportunities to actually obtain a position if male were less likely and, if successful, possibly less remunerative. Several of these issues would have affected the scope of school-seeking behaviors among young Black women as well. The efforts of local White officials to circumscribe African American education—and African American ambitions—by underfunding Black schools meant that they would have favored local “home girls” even more than in the past since their lower-grade or emergency teaching certificates bureaucratically justified the lowest possible salaries. Add too the fact that the administration of southern schooling changed over time: the length of school terms modestly grew, increasing teacher costs, while seasonal schooling became somewhat less pervasive. Thus, while Fisk student Maggie Murray might have left Nashville in the spring and summer of 1882 to go to Mississippi to teach for five months, thirty years later, in 1912, her counterpart was less likely to do so, and arguably less likely to get a well-paid position if she did.<sup>82</sup>

But although summer teaching and the hunt for public and subscription schools may have become less pervasive after the turn of the century than it had been in its 1860s-1890s iterations, that does not mean patterns of intermittent teaching—intermittent schooling for African American teachers died out. The underlying issues that animated this practice—the tension between Black aspirations for

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<sup>82</sup>Bennett, “Interesting Exercise in Fisk University,” 14. Another explanation for why summer teaching seems to have moderated over the course of the 1890s, admittedly speculative, relates to the overall economic context in the South during this decade. These years were marked by declining cotton prices, with effects exacerbated by the Depression of 1893 and its aftermath. Cotton farmers received around 8 cents a pound for much of the 1880s; in 1894, prices hit a low of 4.5 cents a pound. Bank failures, along with a general drying up of credit, characterized the southern scene just as in the North. The slow but steady process of expanding Black landownership in states like Georgia, for example, stalled dramatically between 1893 and 1902. This context must have affected African American tenant farmers as well, and overall, negatively affected the ability of rural Black communities to provide “subscription schools” for the children of their locality and/or to augment teachers’ salaries at public schools. From the perspective of Black student-teachers, these subscription schools offered alternative possibilities for employment, and sometimes, as in the case of Joseph Charles Price, may even have been preferred, either because of higher salaries or to avoid White oversight. If, as seems plausible, the economic context of the 1890s affected the availability of, and salaries at, these private Black facilities (and public schools as well), the difficulties in securing sufficient funding for Black student-teachers would have been adversely impacted. See Fite, “Southern Agriculture Since the Civil War,” 3-21; and Robert Higgs, “Accumulation of Property by Southern Blacks Before World War I,” *American Economic Review* 72, no. 4 (Sept. 1982), 735.

advanced education, for meaningful employment, and the difficulties of meeting the financial costs to fulfill these dreams—remained all too real. By the early 1920s, however, innovations within Black higher education created new pathways for teacher matriculation.

The key administrative change Black colleges and normal schools implemented in the immediate post-World War I years was the “quarter system,” dividing the school year into four terms of an equal number of days or weeks, usually sixty days or twelve weeks, with any three quarters the equivalent of one full academic year. In the fall of 1919, Fisk University began to apply its version of the new arrangements. The summer quarter, the school’s catalog announced, “offers a special opportunity for those who teach during the winter and have no time to add to their knowledge except in the summer.” This summer quarter was itself subsequently divided into two six-week terms in order to facilitate even more flexible enrollments.<sup>83</sup>

Fisk may have been a pioneer among Black educational institutions in implementing the quarter system, but it was not alone. The effects, especially at several of the public Black land-grant and normal schools, were dramatic and paved the way for a tremendous expansion of Black teacher enrollments. For example, in the fall term of 1920, the State Normal School for Colored Students in Montgomery, Alabama, began to enroll students in its newly authorized junior college program. That same fall, the school initiated its own quarter system, dividing the annual school term into four quarters of sixty days each. In 1924, the sixty-day summer quarter was divided into two terms to further accommodate varying schedules, and an additional six-week curriculum was offered for those potential matriculants who could not enroll for the full spring quarter. These new arrangements opened new possibilities for students to pursue advanced education. For example, of the twenty-four students who enrolled in the State Normal Junior College in March 1925:

Three persons had taught short-term schools and were returning to continue the second year of Junior college work; six persons had taught and were returning after having done two quarters of Junior college work previously; three young men had been in attendance during the fall Quarter and had been out teaching short-term rural schools during the winter Quarter; six persons had taught short-term rural schools and were coming in to begin the Junior college course; while the remaining six persons were just out of high school and beginning their Junior College course without having taught.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>83</sup>“Annual Catalogue Number 1919-1920,” *Fisk University News* 10, no. 7 (March 1920), 5, 22.

<sup>84</sup>“Five Years of Junior College Work at State Normal,” in *Fifty-fourth Commencement of The State Normal School, Montgomery, Alabama, Wednesday, May 27th, 1925*, box 6, ASU History, 1921-1925, Alabama State University (ASU) Archives, n.p.

The new flexible schedule, combined with opportunities to renew teaching certificates via enrollment and to accrue college credits, proved irresistible. By 1929, the year State Normal initiated a four-year baccalaureate program, summer enrollments exceed 2,300 (up from around 400 in 1920-1921), while enrollments in the new extension classes, begun during the 1921-22 academic year and expanded thereafter, had grown to 1,437. Again, student persistence combined with institutional responsiveness allowed for the creation of new opportunities for advancement.<sup>85</sup>

The legacy of the struggles of the first postwar generation of prospective African American teachers is the foundation that was established. The successes achieved should not obscure, but rather highlight, the “troubles” endured by this generation of young Black men and women. Many African American students and teachers of this period would have felt deep empathy with the sentiments that Talladega College student B. H. Hudson expressed in an 1876 letter:

I have taught for several years past, during vacation. My salary has been small, mostly paid in State money, worth from eighty to ninety cents on the dollar. I have often failed to get my pay, even in State money. My aim is to complete a normal course of study, if I can, though the way sometimes seems dark.<sup>86</sup>

With fits and starts, through hard work and dedication, African American common schooling expanded through the efforts of these student-teachers, though it was not allowed to prosper. Advanced African American education was sustained. No less important, the ideal of the professional well-educated African American classroom instructor was kept alive, personified in the persistence and resilience of the many young Black women and men who sought to rise to their era’s academic and social challenges.

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<sup>85</sup>Michael Fultz, “An African American Educator in the Context of His Time: George Washington Trenholm, 1871-1925,” *Alabama Review* 73, no.3 (July 2020), 246-267; *Catalogue of the Faculty and Students, 1920-21*, folder 7, box 21, Harper Council Collection, ASU Archives, 19, 31; *Catalogue of the Faculty and Students for 1922-1923*, box 21, College Programs and Reports, Harper Council Collection, ASU Archives, 23; and *Catalogue of the Faculty of 1935-36*, folder 7, box 21, Harper Council Collection, ASU Archives, 36.

<sup>86</sup>“From B. H. Hudson,” *American Missionary* 20, no. 10 (Oct. 1876), 223.