

**Educating the Freedpeople:  
Black Savannahians Journey to Self-Education**

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## **Abstract**

During the Civil War, and especially after, the war-torn southern states faced a new population in need of education. Southern African Americans, many former slaves, had a strong determination to acquire literacy and numeracy after their bondage. Simultaneously, they were attempting to satisfy their basic material needs. However, in southern politics, the need to educate the freedpeople was neither a dominant nor well-received theme. Soon, blacks in the southern countryside realized they could not attain their dream of schooling in the rural areas they had been living and flocked to cities where education was a more debated topic. One of these southern cities was Savannah, Georgia. This paper will examine how the African American community faced numerous hardships when fighting for an education and analyzes those who were educating the black residents in Savannah.

## Introduction

While still in bondage, African Americans attempted to educate themselves. As late as 1861, the city of Savannah publicly whipped Reverend James Simms, a black man, for teaching slaves.<sup>1</sup> Reverend Simms is just one of the many examples of black individuals grasping responsibility for their own education. Further, after achieving a certain level of literacy, there are documented cases of slaves attempting to escape. For example, a man named James Fisher decided to learn to write as means of forging a pass to flee bondage.<sup>2</sup> For years before their emancipation, African Americans wished for an education. Once achieving their freedom, however, blacks could not simply act upon their education without concern of repercussions.

In the latter half of the 1860s, African Americans congregated in Savannah, Georgia with the hopes of building a better life for themselves. Their effort to take control of their lives impacted their history in this area immensely by creating a community which freed them from antebellum customs found in the countryside.<sup>3</sup> In Savannah, the African American community realized their infrastructure was composed of an overwhelmingly illiterate group of people. Even though some had been educated before the war, the influx of uneducated free persons into Savannah was overwhelming. From 1860 to 1880, the black population of Savannah increased from 8,417 to 15,654, effectively making up 51 percent of the total population of the city.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert E. Perdue, *The Negro in Savannah, 1865-1900* (New York: Exposition Press, 1973), 40.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>3</sup> J. W. Blassingame, *Before the Ghetto: The Making of the Black Community in Savannah, Georgia, 1865-1880* (located in the "Journal of Social History" 6, no. 4, 1973), 464.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Statewide, free blacks (who were often the only educated African Americans) made up 0.3 percent of the population in 1860, largely concentrating in urban areas such as Savannah.<sup>5</sup>

In the years before the Civil War, a certain number of “humane” masters educated their slaves despite the risk of punishment from local government. Many times, this education was limited to Christian training. In contrast, whites were provided academic instruction in multiple subjects including geography, history, philosophy, and astronomy.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, clandestine schools for African American children began to appear in Savannah. Most famously amongst the clandestine schools in Savannah was a school taught by a black Frenchman, Julian Froumontaine. Instructing for more than 15 years after the December 22, 1829 statute which restricted the teaching of black men and women (slave or free), Froumontaine educated the first post-Civil War African American teachers of Savannah.<sup>7</sup> Although their teaching was typically crude and included not much more than simple print and how to write a “pass,” the African American community would be strongly influenced by these first teachers.

On January 12, 1865 Union general William T. Sherman and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton met in Savannah, Georgia to discuss emancipation. Amongst them were twenty black leaders of the Savannah community who proudly voiced their opinion. Stanton, who presented a transcript of the discussion to Henry Ward Beecher, stated that “for the first time in the history of this nation, the representatives of the government had gone to these poor debased people to ask

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<sup>5</sup> John C. Inscoe, “Georgia in 1860.” *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, 2009. Accessed December 2, 2018. <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/georgia-1860>.

<sup>6</sup> Joel Spring, *The American School: From the Puritans to No Child Left Behind*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 144.

<sup>7</sup> Richard R. Wright, *A Brief Historical Sketch of Negro Education in Georgia* (Savannah: Robinson Printing House, 1894), 19.

them what they wanted for themselves.”<sup>8</sup> The result of the meeting was Sherman’s famous Special Field Order No. 15, which redistributed about 400,000 acres of land to the newly freed slaves (in 40-acre segments). In addition, this conference evolved a plan to establish an organized system of free schools to support education of Georgia’s freedpeople. To the dismay of the prominent leaders, however, President Andrew Johnson overturned the Order in the fall of 1865, thus returning the land to those who originally owned it. The reversal of Special Field Order No. 15 was not the end of the freedpeople’s hope. Rather, it was only the beginning. Throughout the next few decades, blacks in Savannah acted upon their newfound freedom and dedicated themselves to education.

An early sign of dedication to self-education can be seen through the meeting between Stanton, Sherman, and the prominent black leaders. The gathering provided a platform for the black clergymen to discuss the intellectual development of their race. Although they answered Stanton and Sherman with “Land!” instead of schooling as the best way to care for themselves in the future, they would continue their quest for education soon after the meeting.<sup>9</sup> These same venerable men of Savannah were vocal proponents for education in other aspects following the meeting. With the leadership of Garrison Frazier, they were successfully able to fight laws which prohibited blacks to read or write. Charles Bradwell, Alexander Harris, and Frazier (all of whom were present on January 12, 1865) worked together to “have all the schools opened at once for

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<sup>8</sup> *New York Daily Tribune*, February 13, 1865, accessed October 21, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030213/1865-02-13/ed-1/>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

all colored people who should apply.”<sup>10</sup> Their commitment to education was undoubtedly present when meeting with Stanton and Sherman.

Historians still do not fully understand how former slaves pursued an education for themselves through collective efforts. Instead, the typical discourse for the ascension from slave to citizen emerges as another whitewashed history, dominated by the “white saviors” who gave their lives to a deprived people. Historian Heather Andrea Williams noted this discourse through her research. Attributing the concentration on whites by prior historians studying this topic, Williams has found: “Relying on sources produced by white people to tell a story about black people can be frustrating...Where are the black people?”<sup>11</sup> There is a gap in American history which mainly focuses on how the white citizens of the United States reconstructed the war-torn states into a new industrial entity and lifted the blacks to become citizens. Disregarding the efforts African Americans made to educate themselves from the discussion of post-slavery education prevents historians from fully understanding the effects education had on their society years after. These efforts that black communities did make in the South to educate themselves ultimately helped define their way of life and pull them from poverty.<sup>12</sup> Recognizing this determination and hard-work will also help the understanding of how the southern African American managed to achieve a limited level of agency shortly after the Civil War.

### **Historiography**

The historian, Henry Lee Swint, is credited with being one of the first to write about the northern teacher in the South. In his work, *The Northern Teacher in the South 1862-70*, Swint

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<sup>10</sup> Wright, *A Brief Historical Sketch of Negro Education in Georgia*, 17.

<sup>11</sup> Heather A. Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

seems to only mention African Americans as an afterthought, poorly representing the efforts they made to gain an education. His approach dominantly focuses on the defense of white southern hostility towards black education – writing of the angst most southerners felt towards the northern schoolteachers.<sup>13</sup> Swint’s preference to focus on the “northern savior” illustrates a scholarly work which provides a limited, yet still valuable lens of analysis. Though biased, his vague celebration of the white teacher in the south grants the reader a thorough touchstone for understanding the role of the “Yankee schoolmarm” on the newly freed people.<sup>14</sup>

A historian named John W. Blassingame approaches the question of post-Civil War African American education different than historians such as Swint. Blassingame uses recorded comments from white persons, monthly journals published by a paternalistic organization, governmental records, and the local newspaper as sources. Blassingame approaches the topic of education by exploring how the black population established their community infrastructure within Savannah, Georgia. He believes their effort to take control of their lives impacted their history in Savannah immensely by creating a community which freed them from antebellum customs found in the country-side. He argues that, before they were barred within their current-day “ghettoes,” they began to attempt the building of a lasting community in part because of their urbanization in Savannah, Georgia.<sup>15</sup> While investigating instances in which the black community pushed for education, Blassingame argues that they would not have been successful if not for efforts in building a lasting community first.<sup>16</sup> With the creation of a community, new

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<sup>13</sup> Henry Lee Swint, *The Northern Teacher in the South, 1862-1870* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1941).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, v.

<sup>15</sup> Blassingame, *Before the Ghetto*, 463.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

organizations were formed. They would counteract newfound challenges, such as education, and younger blacks could take advantage of the newly generated leadership positions to further the push for learning.

Herbert G. Gutman, author of the essay, *Schools for Freedom: The Post Emancipation Origins of Afro-American Education*, writes of the ways freedpeople took responsibility when providing education for their own population. Gutman's arguments begin with an analysis of black efforts during the Civil War and end with a look at freedpeople's schools in 1866. Throughout his argument, Gutman proposes that if it was not for their sustained desire for education – rooted in “black working-class cultural values” – blacks' efforts would have been in vain.<sup>17</sup>

Similar to Gutman, historian Heather Andrea Williams attributes much more responsibility to southern blacks than Swint. In *Self-Taught*, Williams argues that black communities often were active agents in their lives during and after slavery.<sup>18</sup> To put together her argument, Williams uses the manuscripts from the American Missionary Association, Union Army records, other military records, autobiographies, black college archives, and records of the Freedmen's Bureau.<sup>19</sup> She uses these sources to “tell this history of freedpeople's role in educating themselves” and to “observe the visions of enslaved people emerge into plans and actions once they escaped slavery.”<sup>20</sup> Although crediting “many white northern missionaries” for

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<sup>17</sup> Herbert G. Gutman, “Schools for Freedom: The Post Emancipation Origins of Afro-American Education,” in *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 55.

<sup>18</sup> Williams, *Self-Taught*, 5.

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

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

their good intentions, Williams concentrates her attention on the freedpeople.<sup>21</sup> By doing this, she could see important elements that have been overlooked, while also being able to see a change in perception. Ultimately, this enables other historians to see the persistent work of African Americans to become a truly free people.<sup>22</sup> The focus Williams chooses to analyze in her scholarly work reveals that the issue of African American agency was achieved by blacks themselves through their persistent struggle during slavery, in the Civil War, and in their first decade of freedom.

Similar to Swint, Ronald E. Butchart was interested in the northern white teacher. In his book, *Schooling the Freed People*, Butchart approaches the study of southern African American education through the lens of the teachers who participated in educating freed slaves – consequently devoting a full chapter to the reexamination of northern white teachers.<sup>23</sup> To produce his argument, the author tries to convince the audience using mostly evidence from the Freedmen’s Teacher Project (FTP) as well as traditional archival sources from the American Missionary Association. Representing two-thirds of all the teachers who worked in black schools from 1861-1876, the FTP provides more than 10,000 individual names.<sup>24</sup> Through the use of this collective biography database (though it remains unfinished for use by the public), Butchart has been able to revise his past research, *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction: Freedmen’s Education, 1862-1875*. Diverging from Swint’s outdated work, Butchart writes of teachers coming from all over to assist in the southern black community’s education. Attempting

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>22</sup> Williams, *Self-Taught*, 5-6.

<sup>23</sup> Ronald E. Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861-1876* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 78.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., xvii.

to answer who was responsible for teaching the former slaves, Butchart considers how teachers impacted the pursuit of agency of African Americans, simultaneously considering how the classroom curriculums and pedagogy influenced their education.

It is clear that black communities did not stay idle when it came to their education. Although Swint, Williams and Butchart all claim that African Americans wanted and received education, they fail to attribute a large role to the black communities – such as that of the black population in Savannah, Georgia. As seen in the writings of the aforementioned authors, historians still believe much of the black success post-slavery was not a direct result of black actions. Butchart notes, “each generation of writers brings its own perspectives and troubles to bear on the past.”<sup>25</sup> Butchart seems to believe that his opinions are not necessarily complete or true, thus leaving the door open for future historians to disprove his claims. Certainly, the authors mentioned have their contradictions which would necessitate revisions by future historians. First published in 1941, Swint’s arguments are outdated and tremendously biased. The opinions and research done by Swint, celebrating the white antebellum south, is often condescending to blacks. Butchart writes on the overwhelming research done on Northern white teachers yet devotes an entire chapter to these individuals. Further, in previous works, Butchart seems to blame “Northern benevolent organizations” for imposing education on African Americans.<sup>26</sup> Williams, on the other hand, focuses all her attention on African Americans. She writes from a perspective which seems completely opposite that of Swint, depicting freedpeoples as the actual

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<sup>25</sup> Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, ix.

<sup>26</sup> Williams, *Self-Taught*, 4.

cause for certain white accomplishments.<sup>27</sup> Whatever the perspective, the authors do understand that African Americans living in the South wanted an education.

If historians looked at the education of African Americans through a lens which considered blacks as a main contributor to their own education, historians would understand the dynamics of a motivated people. Further, understanding the black efforts has larger significance to the history world because it contrasts the view of the white paternalistic northerners and sympathetic white southerners who “reconstructed” the African American’s world after slavery. In fact, it was actually the blacks themselves who built their communities and created a lasting legacy in which to survive.<sup>28</sup> In many history textbooks, Euro-Americans are praised and rarely criticized. While this type of history is informative and somewhat correct, it can be misleading. By overemphasizing the impact of the whites who assisted in black community building in the South after the Civil War, (such as Swint and Butchart), the black community’s effectiveness in constructing their own lives is overshadowed – ultimately contributing to the misconceptions surrounding Euro-American’s influence in many topics.

### **Desire for Education: A Lasting Theme for Blacks in Savannah**

Blacks living in Savannah, Georgia faced an abundance of difficulties concerning their education. In 1770, Georgia passed a law preventing the education of slaves. In 1829, this was updated to specify which type of teaching (reading and writing). The punishments were severe, including a hefty fine and the possibility of public whipping – as was the case for Reverend James Simms in Savannah. In 1850, it seemed that public sentiment towards education was

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>28</sup> Blassingame, *Before the Ghetto*, 484.

improving. After a series of articles by F.C. Adams was published in the *Savannah Morning News*, the Georgia Agricultural Convention petitioned the legislature for permission to educate slaves. When the Georgia House of Representatives passed a bill to repeal the 1829 law, it was rejected in 1852 by the Senate.<sup>29</sup> However, the changed attitude towards black education in Savannah had already made an impact in the city. When James Porter, a free black man, was discovered to be teaching other blacks to read and write, city officials declined to punish him.<sup>30</sup>

Before the decisive conclusion of the Civil War, slaves and freed blacks were already educating themselves through creative and rebellious means – consequently preparing themselves to be the first teachers of other freedpeople once slavery ended. However, they had to do so secretly. One of the most iconic figures in the history of self-education for the African-American community of Savannah, was a black woman named Jane Deveaux. Though the start of Deveaux’s secret school is disputed, it is safe to assume she began teaching between the years of 1833 and 1835. Despite the strict city and state restrictions on teaching blacks as previously mentioned, Deveaux and her mother taught countless black children to read and write. Either teaching in her home or the Third Baptist Church where her father was the minister, Deveaux was able to exist unknown to the surrounding white community until 1865. According to her monthly reports, Deveaux did not operate her school exclusively for the middle class either. This allowed recently enslaved students to afford her tuition (which was on a variable scale of \$1.00 to \$2.50). Most likely, Deveaux varied the tuition based on the student’s ability to pay.<sup>31</sup> Her

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<sup>29</sup> Perdue, *The Negro in Savannah 1865-1900*, 71.

<sup>30</sup> Ralph Otto, *Negro Education in Chatham County*, (paper located in Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia), pages unnumbered.

<sup>31</sup> Williams, *Self-Taught*, 104.

commitment to educating the people of her race went beyond the years of slavery as well. Following the conclusion of the Civil War, Deveaux increased her campaign for literacy, catching the attention of John W. Alvord. Due to her efforts in educating her race, Alvord contended “many colored persons, who, scattered here and there through the south, are now able to contribute somewhat towards the general elevation of the newly emancipated race.”<sup>32</sup>

For years before 1865, enslaved people had placed an immense level of value in the power of literacy. This allowed them to stay informed of the abolition movement and the later progress of the Civil War – greatly significant to an oppressed race craving a sense of hope. Demonstrating this commitment to education, schools for enslaved and free blacks were present before the Civil War even began. One such school in Savannah which met in the former Bryan’s slave mart, symbolized not only the freedpeople’s determination to learn, but also the hope that education would help them hurdle the memory of slavery. As late as 1859, the slave trader Joseph Bryan was still actively selling humans. According to Frederic Bancroft’s, *Slave Trading in the Old South*, Bryan’s custom was to lock the children and adults in cells, and then parade them onto auction blocks in a room filled with white men negotiating prices for the human property.<sup>33</sup> Instead of avoiding the building following the Union victory in Savannah in 1864, African Americans established two schools within its confines. Author Heather Andrea Williams elicits the strong meaning for freedpeople when being taught in Joseph Bryan’s “profane space”:

Students’ recitation of the alphabet drowned out vestigial echoes of the banter between traders and buyers. In a three-story brick building fronting onto Market Street, in full view of the “strongly grated windows” that had once penned them, freedpeople could now prepare themselves for a self-sufficient future rather than “perform their own

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<sup>32</sup> John W. Alvord, *Fifth-Semi Annual Report on Schools and for Freedmen* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1868), 29.

<sup>33</sup> Frederic Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1931), 223.

commodification” in hopes of enticing a “kind” master, or subverting sale to a cruel one.<sup>34</sup>

Their determination to utilize even the most horrendous of areas provides insight into a community whose effort and perseverance to become educated cannot be understated.

African Americans within Savannah were active agents when acquiring their education, and their dedication to the cause did not go unnoticed. When John W. Alvord was touring the South, he observed their fervor for education, writing on January 11, 1865 that blacks in Savannah had “a passionate desire for education.”<sup>35</sup> Three months later, on March 25, 1865 the *Savannah Republican* noted the “earnestness and avidity with which the liberated people see information. All manifest a desire to learn.”<sup>36</sup> Being not only noticed by an abolitionist (John W. Alvord) but also the city’s newspaper displays the distinct opposition to passivity that black Savannahians held when engaging in their pursuit of education. Further, when considering its support of southern black schools, the Freedmen’s Bureau would often base its support of schools on the freedpeople’s own involvement. Without their strong commitment to education, support hardly would have arrived. Consequently, black Savannahian’s intense desire to learn fueled not only the passions of northern whites to make education available, but also provided a certain amount of financial support as well.<sup>37</sup>

Later in 1865, Georgia drafted a new constitution which provided the legislature with power to appropriate money for the “promotion of learning and science” and “for the education

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<sup>34</sup> Williams, *Self-Taught*, 107.

<sup>35</sup> John W. Alvord, *The Freedmen’s Bulletin* (Freedmen’s Bureau, March 1, 1865).

<sup>36</sup> *Savannah Republican*, March 25, 1865.

<sup>37</sup> Williams, *Self-Taught*, 40.

of the people.”<sup>38</sup> As was the case with the United States Declaration of Independence eighty-nine years prior, blacks soon realized they were not to be considered as “the people.” The freedpeople of Savannah recognized that this new state constitution had not yet contemplated the education of black youth and faced yet another difficulty when acquiring schooling. John W. Alvord, an inspector for the Freedmen’s Bureau (which aided former slaves by providing food, housing, legal assistance and established numerous schools), traveled throughout the South to acquire an understanding of black agency in education. It was here that he recognized the challenges facing the freedpeople of Savannah. For example, in his 1868 *Fifth Semi-Annual Report*, Alvord contended that blacks had to personally raise funds to purchase land and lumber for their schools, simultaneously battling the hostile white community who refused to let them rent tools. To compensate, the freedpeople established schools wherever they could – including sheds, a former mule stable, an excavation site under a house, private homes, and churches.<sup>39</sup> These were locations that had been clandestine before the war and remained the site of black education for years after.

Figure 1. “The Freedmen’s Bureau,” Published in *Harper’s Weekly* on July 25, 1868

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<sup>38</sup> 1865 Georgia Constitution, art. 2, sec. 5, cl. 3, accessed December 2, 2018, [https://georgiainfo.galileo.usg.edu/topics/government/related\\_article/constitutions/georgia-constitution-of-1865](https://georgiainfo.galileo.usg.edu/topics/government/related_article/constitutions/georgia-constitution-of-1865).

<sup>39</sup> John W. Alvord, *Fifth Semi-Annual Report* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, Jan. 1, 1868).



Source: Library of Congress, accessed Oct. 25, 2018,  
<http://cdn.loc.gov/service/pnp/cph/3c00000/3c05000/3c05500/3c05555v.jpg>.

In the white community of Savannah, the question of the freedpeople's education was debated fiercely. In the local newspaper, the *Savannah Daily Herald*, editorials were published which revealed the political nature of the topic. A local white community member voiced his opinion on black education:

If the colored people are to live among us, and no one doubts but that they will for many years form a large part of our population, it is absolutely necessary for the welfare and happiness of both races, that they be educated. It does not require a very vivid imagination to foresee the pernicious effects that will surely result to the entire South if the debased negroes are permitted to remain in their present untutored, half-civilized condition...it is not the "ism" or the caprice of a "nigger lover," "nigger worshipper," or "fanatical abolitionist," that suggests the education of the negro population, but it is the teachings of plain, honest, common sense, the results of incontrovertible facts daily witnessed...that the negroes are ignorant all will admit.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *Savannah Daily Tribune*, October 9, 1865.

This man's opinion, published in 1865, shows the paternalistic attitude that had persevered through the South even after the Civil War had concluded, and how the Savannah freedpeople's pursuit of education faced difficulties in the white political sphere. Both northern and southern politicians became enthralled with the possibilities surrounding black education. With the overwhelming poverty of freedpeople and the challenges involved in establishing effective schools, student progress was hindered by a lack of books – an opportunity for white politicians to influence the next generation of readers. In April 1863, the newly formed Educational Association of the Confederate States of America provided a compilation of textbooks which were already published.<sup>41</sup> One of the most prolific authors of these Confederate textbooks was Marinda Branson Moore. Her widely published lessons on spelling and reading conveyed numerous racist ideas, but none more often than her philosophy that freedom was worse than slavery.<sup>42</sup> One such reading lesson about an old slave named Aunt Ann stated, “many poor white folks would be glad to live in [Aunt Ann's] house and eat what Miss Kate sends out for dinner.”<sup>43</sup> African American teachers, desperate for even the most simple teaching materials, would be pressured into purchasing these books which promoted racist values, ignorant themes of honesty, and the idea that blacks were better off than poor whites. Resisting the pressure to purchase these texts must have been immense, as many were much more affordable and ubiquitous than books published by freedpeople – for they were in no position by the end of the Civil War to create their own textbooks. Despite the easy access to these books, there are no

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<sup>41</sup> Williams, *Self-Taught*, 120.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>43</sup> Marinda Branson Moore, *The First Dixie Reader: Designed to Follow the Dixie Primer* (Raleigh, N.C.: Branson, Farrar and Company, 1863), 14, accessed December 2, 2018, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/moore2/men u.html>

reports of black teachers using these Confederate textbooks in Georgia after the Civil War, displaying their commitment to remaining active agents in their education.<sup>44</sup>

To combat the temptation of purchasing biased texts, the American Tract Society, a Boston-Based Congregational Church affiliate, published the *Freedmen's Spelling Book* in 1865 and 1866. According to Isaac W. Brinkerhoff, a contributor to the book prior to its official publishing, the intended purpose was to explain rules very simply and to introduce words that related to “important practical subjects; as occupations, domestic life, civil institutions, morals, education, and natural science.” While teaching spelling and reading were indeed the priority, Brinkerhoff and others wanted to also teach practical information that would be of use to the freedpeople “in the new condition into which Providence has raised them.”<sup>45</sup>

The state did not provide much monetary support for freedpeople's schools through taxes, and classrooms remained in dismal conditions. Even when northern whites served as the teachers, “freedpeople built schools, paid teachers, and made other contributions to the educational effort.”<sup>46</sup> In 1865, when Gilbert L. Eberhart became Superintendent for the Freedmen's Education in Georgia, he began a process in which he researched if anything had been done in establishing schools for the freedpeople. In fact, in his 1866 school report form for the Freedmen's Bureau, he discovered that black teachers in Georgia were not only teaching with a lack of resources, but they were educating the youth under physically challenging conditions.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Williams, *Self-Taught*, 130.

<sup>45</sup> Isaac W. Brinkerhoff, *Advice to Freedmen* (American Tract Society, 1864).

<sup>46</sup> Williams, *Self-Taught*, 40.

<sup>47</sup> G.L. Eberhart, *Freedmen's Bureau School Report Form: Circular No. 8* (Freedmen's Bureau, Oct. 15, 1866).

Blacks in Savannah found it difficult to acquire books, classroom necessities, and even locations to educate their youth. Simultaneously, the black community faced white influence in their texts and a government refusing to assist. Regardless of the innumerable challenges facing them, however, the freedpeople of Savannah persevered and demonstrated their commitment to education.

In addition to a lack of books, freedpeople faced the challenge of acquiring other classroom necessities. In an 1866 statement by the Freedmen's Bureau Superintendent of Education, John W. Alvord captures the plight facing the newly emancipated race: "Not more than two of the school-houses have been properly fitted up with writing-desks, even of the most primitive kind...this is owing to the poverty of the people, and to the large demands upon the funds of the benevolent societies."<sup>48</sup> The conditions within black classrooms in Savannah were an ongoing difficulty. When congressional Reconstruction and military rule was established in Georgia in 1867, however, elected delegates met to debate major issues with their state's welfare – including education.<sup>49</sup> The result was Georgia's 1868 Constitution, which made it clear that the legislature would provide a "thorough system of general education, to be forever free to all children of the State, the expense of which shall be provided for by taxation or otherwise."<sup>50</sup> With this new constitution, education was all but guaranteed for all and prior difficulties seemed

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<sup>48</sup> John W. Alvord, *Second-Semi Annual Report on Schools and Finances* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, July 1, 1866).

<sup>49</sup> LaVerne W. Hill, "Georgia Constitution." *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, 2018. Accessed December 2, 2018. <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/government-politics/georgia-constitution>.

<sup>50</sup> 1868 Georgia Constitution, art. 6, cl. 1, accessed December 2, 2018, [https://georgiainfo.galileo.usg.edu/topics/government/related\\_article/constitutions/georgia-constitution-of-1868](https://georgiainfo.galileo.usg.edu/topics/government/related_article/constitutions/georgia-constitution-of-1868).

as though they would be resolved. Nevertheless, as was the case for black Savannahians, this would not come to fruition. Instead, numerous challenges remained.

In 1872, the Superintendent of the Savannah Public Schools admitted that black schools were still inadequate compared to white schools. However, he stated that “they evinced an earnest desire to obtain an education and developed a healthy attitude for learning.”<sup>51</sup> This passion for learning would be paramount in the success of the black community in Savannah.

### **Savannah as a Case Study: Who was Teaching the Freedpeople?**

Savannah, Georgia provides historians with an excellent example of freedpeople becoming active agents for their lives after the Civil War. African Americans of this city disprove many prior scholars’ work of southern freed black communities being exclusively taught by northern white “saviors.” Through countless statistics and recorded data on black teachers and black participation within their community, it becomes clear that Savannah was an area determined to educate themselves despite the influence of northern white benevolent societies.

Even before the well-known meeting between Savannah’s “principal colored men,” Edwin M. Stanton and General William T. Sherman on January 12, 1865, an all-black organization dedicated to the education of freedpeople, was created.<sup>52</sup> Soon after the capture of the city of Savannah, the Savannah Educational Association was established in January 1865 as means to provide educational opportunities for Savannah’s black population.<sup>53</sup> James Lynch,

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<sup>51</sup> W.H. Baker, *Report of the Commissioner of Education*, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872).

<sup>52</sup> Gutman, “Schools for Freedom,” 64.

<sup>53</sup> Harris and Berry, *Slavery and Freedom in Savannah*, 133.

who would be one of the revered ministers meeting with Stanton and Sherman, sparked the efforts needed to create the massive program of school organization in the years following the Civil War. In the early winter months of 1865, alongside John W. Alvord, Lynch spoke to Savannah blacks in an overflowing Campbell's Church where "hundreds could not gain admission." The men called for the establishment of schools – which, of course, was of great interest to black Savannahians. Soon after the meeting, Lynch and Alvord assessed prospective teachers, finding fifteen suitable black educators.<sup>54</sup>

Per the early efforts of Jane Deveaux, Lynch, and the creation of the Savannah Educational Association, it is clear that the black community of Savannah was actively attempting to educate themselves through their own people. This historically misconstrued subject of study can be further interpreted through the state government's statistics, where black participation in educating the freedpeople is unmistakable. From December 1865 to March 1866, Georgia was unique in asking for the race of its teachers on its annual schooling report. Per the data collection of Heather Andrea Williams, twenty-eight teachers identified as "colored," thirty-seven as "white," and one as "unidentified." Of these sixty-six Georgia teachers who completed the school report, a staggering amount of 42% identified as black. Evidently, in each case where a black teacher completed the form, all the other teachers were also black.<sup>55</sup>

When interpreting Williams' data, it is surprising for numerous reasons. First, when considering the work of prior historians such as Butchart who tend to focus on the vast impact of northern white missionaries, it is surprising to find over two-fifths of the teachers participating in

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<sup>54</sup> Gutman, "Schools for Freedom," 65.

<sup>55</sup> Williams, *Self-Taught*, 100.

the educational survey were actually black. Adding more intrigue to these statistics, it would make sense for an African American in a southern state such as Georgia to not wish to identify as an educator of the newly emancipated race in 1865 and 1866. According to Williams, teaching was “a political act for African Americans in the emancipation period” and was “an act of courage.” Teaching the freedpeople was a challenge to southern whites who wished to maintain the antebellum societal structure, so identifying as a teacher would have been a risk. In addition to Williams’ data collection, considering the number of teachers who submitted monthly reports to the Freedmen’s Bureau, (not Georgia’s government), is also interesting. Figures show that about two-hundred black men and women were responsible for freedpeople’s schools in Georgia between 1866 and 1870, showing that the education of the freedpeople was incorporating, to a large degree, the work of African Americans.<sup>56</sup>

Savannah contrasted the state ratio of black teachers. As Williams found 42% of teachers were African American, Savannah’s percentage was much higher. In 1865, for example, the first schools were exclusively taught by black teachers – there was little white influence.<sup>57</sup> As mentioned before, these places included Bryan’s slave mart and the First African Baptist Church. Teachers included black men and women such as Jane Deveaux, Julien Fromatin, Mary Woodhouse, and James Porter.<sup>58</sup> By 1866, there were twenty-eight schools in Savannah and as reported by the black-run *Loyal Georgian* newspaper, sixteen of them were “under the control of

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<sup>56</sup> Jacqueline Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 62.

<sup>57</sup> Harris and Berry, *Slavery and Freedom in Savannah*, 133.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

an Educational Board of Colored Men, taught by colored teachers, and sustained by the freed people.”<sup>59</sup>

### **Non-Black Savannahian Influence**

Despite the impressive ratio of African American teachers in Savannah schools, they still lacked the numbers. In 1865, for example, there were not more than one hundred African Americans capable of teaching in all of Georgia. Faced with a shortage of teachers and an innumerable amount of other challenges, the black community of Savannah asked for northern missionary assistance. This would mark the beginning of a loss of agency in the sphere of self-education.

S.W. Magill, a missionary from the American Missionary Association (AMA), was sent to Savannah to head the AMA’s educational work in the area. Upon his arrival in late 1865, Magill wished to undermine the progress of the all-black Savannah Educational Association. Speaking of the leadership of the association, he stated “however good men [they] might be, they know nothing about education.”<sup>60</sup> This was spurred by a disagreement between Magill and the leadership. While the Savannah Educational Association wished to hire white teachers as only assistants and additionally hoped the AMA would provide financial support, Magill vigorously pushed for a federal appointment as the head of Savannah’s educational work in 1866. This, of course, would mean that a white non-native Savannahian would be heading the educational efforts of the black community. Magill urged the AMA to withhold funds from the area and to “not praise the Savannah blacks too excessively in print.”<sup>61</sup> After being appointed by Union

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<sup>59</sup> James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press), 11.

<sup>60</sup> Gutman, “Schools for Freedom,” 66.

<sup>61</sup> Gutman, “Schools for Freedom,” 66

officials to supervise the city's educational efforts, Magill reported that the Savannah Educational Association's leadership had "surrendered the principle of excluding white control," because according to Magill, managing Savannah's black schools required "more head than these colored people yet have."<sup>62</sup> This marked the beginning of a brief time when black Savannahians lost control of who was teaching their youth.

In January 1866, following the creation of the Savannah Educational Association, the Georgia Educational Association was founded as means to promote the state's freedpeople to form local associations that would "build schools supported entirely by the colored people."<sup>63</sup> The association found early success with establishing county organizations throughout the state, but their brief (and limited) reclamation of control was soon limited once more. In an October 1866 convention, its power over educational matters was restricted.<sup>64</sup> However, despite this setback, the Georgia Educational Association's efforts between 1865 and 1868 would prepare them for the 1868 Radical Constitutional Convention. More than half of the members of the association would become delegates at the convention, helping to draw up the provisions of the 1868 Georgia Constitution that assured free public education to black and white children.<sup>65</sup>

Per the September 28, 1872 edition of the *Savannah Morning News*, "in the colored schools [of Savannah], supported and taught by Northern societies and teachers, there have been about 1,000 [students]."<sup>66</sup> Frequently, if northern missionaries did not take over black schools,

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> *Savannah Morning News*, August 28, 1872.

native white redemptionists – those who wished for the return of white supremacy and the removal of black rights – filled vacant positions. Tasked with teaching the black community, these individuals were often “hostile [and] judged unfit to teach pupils of their own race.”<sup>67</sup> Despite their defeat, Savannah freedpeople continued to support their own schools. In fact, it was estimated that Savannah blacks had spent more than \$20,000 for salaries and other educational costs. Further, estimates find that the number of school-age children in Savannah in 1865 was about 1,600, with about three-quarters of them at school.<sup>68</sup> This is significant, because while other black communities in southern states began to lose interest in education, Savannah maintained their passion for learning – even though they were losing control.

For years, public officials in the South preferred to hire ex-confederate soldiers’ wives over African Americans.<sup>69</sup> However, a shift began to occur starting in the late 1860s and early 1870s, but only after a long and grueling battle. The eventual decision by the Board of Education in Savannah to return to appointing black teachers, was induced by the black community’s desire for African American teachers and the past success of similar programs in the years before.<sup>70</sup> According to historian Howard N. Rabinowitz, the shift from white to black teachers was ironic in that it was made easier by the earlier neglect of black facilities. Rabinowitz states that when new schools for blacks finally opened again, “it seemed natural to appoint negroes because of black requests, the absence of white teachers to be displaced, and the lower salaries of blacks.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* (United States: Basic Books, 1985), 145.

<sup>68</sup> Gutman, “Schools for Freedom,” 67.

<sup>69</sup> Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love*, 193.

<sup>70</sup> Inscoc, *Georgia in Black and White*, 96-97.

<sup>71</sup> Howard N. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South: 1865-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

The economic consideration was undoubtedly decisive as black teachers could be paid much less than whites. To local governments struggling with money, it simply made more fiscal sense to hire black teachers – a trend which would continue into the following decades.

By 1870, the population of black instructors began to increase once more as education became more common in Georgia. By 1880, the “colored schools were taught mostly by colored teachers.”<sup>72</sup> It becomes clear that freedpeople in Savannah were in fact greatly responsible for the education of their people. However, it is also conducive to this study to mention that without northern teachers, many freedpeople would not have received an education. Despite the challenges and obstacles facing self-education, black Savannahians persevered and once more gained control of their lives.

### **A Committed People**

Though the innumerable obstacles that freedpeople faced while attempting to acquire an education should not be minimized, the efforts and dedication to the schooling of their youth should be recognized as well. As the Civil War concluded and Reconstruction in the South began, the new, overwhelmingly uneducated population of freedpeople in Savannah were tasked with developing their character, acquiring an education and an income, and demonstrating that they were worthy of the freedom they were given. As was the situation in many regions of the United States, black Savannahian’s “intellectual and moral abilities” were subjects of misunderstanding and doubt.<sup>73</sup> However, one aspect of the black Savannah community which was understood, was their commitment to self-education.

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<sup>72</sup> Wright, *A Brief Historical Sketch of Negro Education in Georgia*, 32.

<sup>73</sup> Wright, *A Brief Historical Sketch of Negro Education in Georgia*, 15.

According to historian Herbert G. Gutman, the efforts of other southern black communities “pale in comparison with those of Georgia blacks.”<sup>74</sup> Between the years of 1865 and 1867, black Georgians did more to educate their children than any other Southern state.<sup>75</sup> In many of the southern states, freedpeople invested much less money than Georgian blacks. For every \$100 the Freedmen’s Bureau financed, Alabaman and Floridian blacks paid less than \$25. In seven other states, payments averaged between \$25.00 and \$49.99. In Georgia, however, the black population averaged paying \$77.20 for tuition and the support of their schools.<sup>76</sup>

Poverty, an early decline in interest on the part of Northern benevolent societies, shifting policies of the federal government, and violence targeting black schools closed many schools in the South.<sup>77</sup> However, in Savannah, Georgia, their unique dedication to education resulted in few reported closures. In fact, in March of 1866, Savannah maintained eight schools – the largest with 300 students.<sup>78</sup> In addition, violence had not been ubiquitous – the only notable event had been the public whipping of a Reverend James Simms in 1861. Despite the precautions black parents and teachers took to safeguard against the dangers facing their youth, many black children maintained their education in Savannah due to their community’s commitment to learning.<sup>79</sup> Certainly, it was this self-sustaining behavior of black Savannahians that produced and maintained the schools John W. Alvord reported about on his tour of the South.

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<sup>74</sup> Gutman, “Schools for Freedom,” 63.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>79</sup> Leslie M. Harris and Daina Ramey Berry, *Slavery and Freedom in Savannah* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 133.

## Self-Education: A Legacy

In 1874, Superintendent Niles of Georgia Schools stated that he does not believe “the time has yet come when the interests of colored people would be safe in the hands of the white people of Savannah.”<sup>80</sup> Two years before Niles’ comment, black Savannahians had already begun to endorse their own interests by pressuring the Savannah Board of Education to organize public schools for their youth. In 1872, as a result of political pressure and a change in public attitude towards the education of blacks, the Savannah Board of Education considered the establishment of public schools for blacks, separate from whites. A correspondence between the Board and the American Missionary Association (AMA) was established to discuss the acquisition of the Beach Institute. The Beach Institute, built in 1867, was a schooling site which provided private schooling for blacks. Throughout the communications between the Board of Education and the AMA, prominent white males discuss a proposal in which the Board would convert the facility into a free public school for the black community. The president of the Board of Education of Savannah had met previously with a few select prominent black men from the community who had wished for the Beach Institute in Savannah to be public. It was at this time that they decided to try and convince the AMA to transfer Beach Institute to the Savannah Board of Education. This correspondence between the Board and the AMA displays the significance of a free education (one which did not require tuition) to the black community in Savannah once re-establishing their desire for self-education.

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<sup>80</sup> Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love*, 193.

In the correspondence, the Board of Education gives their perspectives on the impact of a free education for the black community.<sup>81</sup> First, however, an association of prominent “colored citizens” was put together to prompt the conversations with the AMA. These men made the correspondence important as a historical source because in their short contribution, they provide an insight into Savannah’s black community’s thoughts on their current situation. By allowing for the input of these men, the documents provide the Board with insights from the black community. For example, the men state one reason for their request is because “a large number of colored children were not attending school in consequence of there being no free schools.”<sup>82</sup> This brief plea illustrates the importance the black community placed on education.

The correspondence further illustrates the importance of education to black Savannahians when the AMA responded to the Board of Education and the prominent men once again, stating that “we are glad that you, as representative colored citizens of Savannah, are interested with us in securing free Public Schools.”<sup>83</sup> The importance of free education for black residents was a dominant value amongst the Savannah community. The possibility of free public education for their youth engaged prominent men to find means in which they were able to contact northern associations such as the AMA. Although this specific correspondence was unsuccessful, eventually the Beach Institute was granted to the Savannah Board of Education to ensure free education for its black residents for years to come.

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<sup>81</sup> “Board of Education of Savannah to the American Missionary Association of New York, 1872,” *From Slavery to Freedom: Library of Congress, The African-American Pamphlet Collection, 1822-1909*, accessed October 23, 2018, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/rbaapc:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(rbaapc08100div1\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/rbaapc:@field(DOCID+@lit(rbaapc08100div1))).

<sup>82</sup> Board of Education of Savannah to the AMA of New York, 1872, 4.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

### Conclusion:

For years before the Civil War, slaves and freedpeople expressed a deep desire to become an educated people. During and especially after the War, this urge for education only grew. In 1872, Savannah became one of the first two cities, along with Columbus, to open public schools after the Civil War.<sup>84</sup> Despite that these schools were for white children only, the black community's strong commitment to education prompted the local government to engage in the educational considerations of its black citizens. The dedication of this southern community to an uplifting cause enabled its future generations to participate in the everyday acquisition of the "American Dream."

The years of dedication from black men and women, like Jane Deveaux, to educate the youth of Savannah was not met without difficulties. The Beach Institute, which was formally acquired in 1875 after great difficulty, was destroyed by an arsonist who had recently heard of its intentions to educate black youth. In response, the American Missionary Association used this unfortunate event to take back control of the building and its educational program.<sup>85</sup> Despite this setback, the black community remembered its prior challenges. From the risk of fines and public whipping, to the possibility of death from white extremists, Savannah's African American teachers and proponents had hurdled many obstacles in the past. Black teachers faced a shortage of educational materials for years to come, and barely "eked out a living."<sup>86</sup> They were "generally without the means to support schools," yet maintained an intense desire for

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<sup>84</sup> Wright, *A Brief Historical Sketch of Negro Education in Georgia*, 34.

<sup>85</sup> Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love*, 193.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

education.<sup>87</sup> When faced with a shortage of funds, pressure to provide capital arose from Savannah's black community's middle class, allowing for a continuation of their schools.<sup>88</sup> Savannah blacks were certainly proud of their schools, as well, boasting their "self-support" and insisting that such was "the only true road to honor and distinction."<sup>89</sup> John W. Alvord, the Freedmen's Bureau Superintendent of Education, certainly agreed. Understanding that "self-made efforts may not be perfect nor perhaps as good as those taught by men and women from the north," Alvord distinguished black Savannahians for their "vitality," showing that "opportunity will induce development." He finished by stating that their community provided an exemplar of black people "not always [being] dependent on white help and Government charity."<sup>90</sup> Though they would have found much more ease in allowing the white, northern teachers to take control of their destiny, they instead uplifted their race with their vociferous commitment to self-education.

Today, historians such as Swint, Gutman, Butchart and Williams agree that white northerners went south to teach the freedpeople. In the often white-washed history textbooks of modern curriculum, it is unknown that in many black communities African Americans were educating their own race. The freedpeople's population in Savannah is a distinct history when juxtaposed with the overwhelming stories of the "white saviors." In Georgia in particular, there are numerous reasons for the underestimation of black teachers for the years following 1865.

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<sup>87</sup> *Savannah Morning News*, August 26, 1872.

<sup>88</sup> John C. Inscoe, *Georgia in Black and White: Explorations in the Race Relations of a Southern State, 1865-1950* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 96.

<sup>89</sup> Gutman, "Schools for Freedom," 67.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

First, it is imperative to consider that the dominant population of black teachers were clergymen. When listing their occupation on the census, it is more likely for them to have answered with “preacher.” Secondly, when considering the 1870 census in particular, the study was taken in June – a month when many schools were not in session and teachers were likely working the fields. Finally, the underestimation of African American teachers in Georgia could be attributed to the Ku Klux Klan (which had a strong presence in the state during the 1870s).<sup>91</sup> Regardless of the statistics on African American educators across southern states like Georgia, however, Savannah provides a story of a community which was completely dedicated to self-education. Through teaching, building schools, supporting teachers, protesting the local government and claiming education as a civil right, the black Savannahians of post-Civil War Georgia were critical in transforming the mindset of communities across the South – proving that self-education was not only a reality, but a misinterpreted historical concept.

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<sup>91</sup> Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love*, 238-239.

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