
The Skillful Use of Higher Education to Protect White Supremacy

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The Skillful Use of Higher Education to Protect White Supremacy

In the post-Civil War years, the control of higher education of the Negro was firmly in the hands of progressives who nevertheless were deeply committed to and protective of the antebellum social order of racial subordination. Liberals at the time believed that through higher education blacks could be taught the habit of thrift, the obedience to law, the love of home, kindness toward one's neighbor, cleanliness of person, and a hunger for practical righteousness.

by Michael Dennis

STATE UNIVERSITIES WERE at the forefront of social reform in the New South at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A new generation of university administrators and faculty members promoted university modernization and social service. As intellectuals, they became the architects of the southern education movement. But it was in their capacity as authorities on racial issues that progressive educators left an indelible mark. Politely distinguishing themselves from the racial extremism that sent lynching rates skyrocketing in the 1890s, progressive educators espoused a form of racial discrimination palatable to middle-class Southerners. As educational experts, university progressives imparted an aura of intellectual legitimacy to a system of instruction designed to maintain black subservience. A group of university presidents and faculty members, not northern industrialists, became the leading propagandists for black industrial education.

Paradoxically, while university progressives advocated education for social improvement, they also propagated a pedagogical scheme that fit conveniently into a scheme for racial submission. Improved standards and the advent of research schools went hand in hand with black proscription. The history of higher education in the South is inextricable from the crystallization of the "highest stage of white supremacy."

Progressives welcomed the stabilization of race relations after the 1890s. Along with most white Southerners, they were convinced that segregation and black proscription would guarantee social order, economic progress, and white supremacy. Progressives believed that, having solved the race "question," the South could turn its attention to other pressing social issues. Disfranchisement had removed the threat that political power might be wielded as an instrument of black advancement. Edwin Alderman, president of the

University of Virginia (UVA) since 1903 and a leading figure in the educational reform movement in North Carolina, echoed these sentiments in a 1908 article titled "The Growing South." Removed from politics, blacks would focus more constructively on achieving economic self-reliance. Equally important was the effect of disfranchisement on whites. Suffrage restrictions had removed a "frightful temptation from the politics of the white people" and placed the exercise of the vote "on the highest plane possible in a republic."

Samuel Mitchell, a professor of history at Richmond College from 1895 until his election to the presidency of the University of South Carolina in 1908, was deeply involved in the crusade for educational reform in Virginia. Mitchell asserted racial conciliation was in perfect harmony with the

"Under the fairest of conditions, this child race, so clogged by appetite and passion, finds it difficult to get on well in this world."

principle underlying the progressive ethos: the "spirit of service." Racial moderates rejected the image of the black

beast and replaced it with the paternalistic counterimage of blacks as dependent children. Discussing the alleged problem of black intemperance, Samuel Mitchell suggested, "Under the fairest conditions, this child-race, so clogged by appetite and passion, finds it difficult to get on well in the world." Morally and intellectually stunted by slavery, blacks were capable of racial improvement only under the guidance of liberal-minded Southerners.

Charles Dabney reinforced Mitchell's sentiments. A graduate of the doctoral program in chemistry at Göttingen University in Germany, Dabney led the agricultural experiment station at the University of North Carolina before accepting the presidency of the University of Tennessee in 1887. From the inception of the southern education movement Dabney played a prominent part, assuming the leadership of the Southern Education Board's propaganda division, the

Bureau of Information. In an address to the Conference for Education in the South in 1901, Dabney implored southern reformers concerned about the education of blacks to recognize the "momentous fact that the negro is a child race, at least 2,000 years behind the Anglo-Saxon in its development." Harmless children, blacks nevertheless needed the supervision of their white superiors.

The key to the progressives' racial accommodation was education. The proper curriculum would equip blacks with the rudimentary skills needed by the new economic order. It would also inculcate them in the middle-class virtues needed for social stability. Thus educated, blacks would quietly assume their subservient but productive place in southern society. As Mitchell explained to P.P. Watson of the Colored Normal College in Orangeburg, South Carolina, the home, the church, and the school were crucial for encouraging in blacks the "habit of thrift, obedience to law, the love of home, kindness toward one's neighbor, cleanliness of person" and a "hunger for practical righteousness." Discussing the ever-thorny "race problem" in an article for the *Southern Workman*, Mitchell rejected the extreme solutions of deportation and repression. He argued that denying education to blacks would perpetuate ignorance and militate against progress. Alternatively, the slow and steady influences of education and religion would make blacks "more useful in industry and more moral in society." Fitting comfortably into the New South vision of economic expansion, progressive theories on black development reinforced the idea that educational reform was no threat to southern orthodoxy.

The racial improvement of the Negro would come only under the tutelage of progressive whites.



Samuel Mitchell
President of the
University of
South Carolina

"Booker T. Washington taught that education should help blacks become more efficient agricultural workers."

Progressive educators accepted unquestioningly the maintenance of racially segregated schools. Mitchell praised Mississippi "heroism" in bearing the burden of a dual system of public education. As a model for the South, Mississippi's system was providing the "capital, initiative [and] brains" for the education of the masses. Yet Mitchell feared that the Magnolia State's admirable "self-reliance" in funding segregated schools had its limits. National aid was needed to sustain the noble endeavor. Echoing Hill, Mitchell underlined

the federal government's responsibility for educating those it had emancipated at great cost. Sparing no rhetorical expense, the president claimed that the future of southern society was at stake: "If it was right to use the national arm to free the slave and to clothe him with citizenship, surely it is right to use the same hand to fit him for civic efficiency. . . . Without this, freedom itself is a delusion to the Negro and a menace to the white man." Segregated education stemmed not only from a concern for white racial sensibilities but also

from the belief that the preservation of social order and white supremacy demanded it.

According to Walter Barnard Hill, chancellor of the University of Georgia, both blacks and whites agreed that segregated schooling was axiomatic for the South. Hill observed that many of "the intelligent Negroes" accepted the wisdom of separate schooling on the premise that integrated education would threaten a "blending of the races . . . between the higher types of their people and the lower types of the white race." Such indiscriminate mixing, Hill argued, would prove deleterious to the "best interests of the Negro race." Compulsory, universal, segregated education would become the standard in the South. Should white officials be less vigilant in the enforcement of compulsory education than expected, the determined efforts of southern blacks to improve the quality of education for their own children would compensate. The chancellor made no mention of how the South would guarantee an equitable distribution of educational revenues between black and white schools.

President Alderman also accepted the a priori rationality of segregated education. In his 1906 assessment of the achievements of a generation of southern reformers, he concluded dogmatically that public schooling for all children regardless of race, class, or religion was a settled issue, "provided that the children of the white and black races shall be taught in separate schools." Two years later Alderman reiterated his point, stressing the beneficent effects of "absolute social separateness" for racial advancement. Educational segregation, progressives maintained, was but one component of the neopaternalist program for black uplift and white racial purity.

Southern white educational reformers and their philanthropic northern allies believed that "the right schooling could train laborers to be better citizens and more efficient

workers.” Progressives “viewed universal education as a sound investment in social stability and economic prosperity.” No less committed to black subordination than their extremist adversaries, racial accommodationists considered education rather than repression a more effective method for accomplishing the same objective.

Committed to maintaining a compliant, black agricultural labor force, educational reformers from both sections applauded the Hampton-Tuskegee model of industrial education. Northern architects of the southern education movement first came into contact with the region through their support for the Hampton Institute. Founded in 1868 by former military officer Samuel Chapman Armstrong, the Hampton Institute enshrined the theory of industrial education. Simply put, theorists of industrial education held that practical training in the skills needed by southern agriculture and industry was best suited to the educational needs of blacks. On the other hand, literature and philosophy was fancy book-learning unnecessary for agricultural and industrial menials. The school’s practical curriculum reflected Armstrong’s conviction that a “particular combination of hard work, political socialization, and social discipline would mold the appropriate kind of conservative black teachers.”

White educators and philanthropists were not the only proponents of industrial education for blacks. Booker T. Washington, an African American educated at Hampton, became one of the leading voices for the Hampton philosophy in the 1890s. In 1881 Washington became principal of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Reflecting the influence of his years at Hampton, Washington espoused the virtues of practical learning for black economic advancement. Education should help blacks improve their homes, their livestock, the land they tilled — in short, to become more efficient agricultural laborers. But Washington held out the hope that economic self-reliance and the habit of thrift would open avenues of social mobility. Classical colleges failed southern blacks by producing teachers who neglected the concrete needs of the schools and communities they served. Schools should not simply produce “ladies and gentlemen.” Instead, education should prepare people for service and practical work.

He viewed the Negro race as 2,000 years behind whites in its development.



*Charles Dabney
President of the
University of
Tennessee*

Critical to Washington’s program was the favor of white Southerners. Black classical colleges inhibited the cause of black education by failing to appeal to the better element of white people. Southerners had to be convinced that an investment in black education would produce the same results as public support for white education. Educated blacks would be more productive and more dependable citizens.

Intelligent white Southerners already believed; the rest now had to be convinced with evidence that “education has actually benefited and helped in some practical way the masses of the Negro people.” Whites would certainly not disparage an education that reduced black crime and disease while encouraging “better service” to whites “on the farm or in the shop.” Until black colleges seized the opportunity to persuade whites that money spent on education was not “a mere sop to the Negro race, or perhaps as money entirely thrown away,” black education would languish. In the meantime, liberal arts colleges did a disservice to black education by creating a climate in which students “yielded to the temptation to become mere agitators, unwilling and unfit to do any kind of useful or constructive work.”

For blacks, at least according to Washington and his supporters, industrial education seemed to offer an opportunity for economic amelioration. It provided a means of achieving racial solidarity against political and social repression. Industrial education held out hope for a cessation of racial antagonism, even while it afforded blacks a measure of control over their destiny.

“The ‘intelligent Negroes’ accepted the wisdom of separate schooling because they feared the blending of the higher types of their people and the lower types of the white race.”

Considering the antagonism of most whites to any form of black instruction, industrial education seemed a pragmatic compromise that would keep the channels of public support open for black schools. Many of the supposed benefits of industrial education proved illusory for both blacks and whites. Yet progressive educators embraced the Hampton-Tuskegee model as the only acceptable hope for black advancement in the South.

For white educators, Charles Dabney clearly articulated the trajectory of progressive thought about black education in his address to the Fourth Conference for Education in the South in 1901. Dabney vigorously endorsed universal edu-

Photo: University of Tennessee.

cation and compulsory attendance laws for both races. Yet rather than nourish intellectual development, education should equip blacks with manual skills. It should also socialize them to a subordinate class position. "The Negro is in the South to stay — he is a necessity for southern industries — and the southern people must educate and elevate him or he will drag them down." As a racial accommodationist, Dabney argued that the neglect of black education would lead to the debasement of whites. Neither Dabney nor his progressive counterparts seemed to recognize how this assertion contradicted the premise of their racial paternalism: the conviction that blacks were not degenerating ineluctably, as racial extremists would have it. Instead, they were innocuous but dependent children capable of moral and mental progress.

Intellectually ambivalent, the element of self-interest in the case for black education was abundantly clear: Educate blacks to meet current economic demands or be prepared to accept the social consequences. On the basis of these assumptions, it was a predictable leap for Dabney to the doctrine of industrial education. Armstrong and Washington had "worked out a sensible plan for the education of the Negro boys who come to their schools." Their practical curricula should be the archetype for public schools in the South. Celebrating industrial education, Dabney excoriated the idea that blacks should be educated in the liberal arts. "Nothing is more ridiculous than the programme of the good religious people from the North who insist upon teaching Latin, Greek, and philosophy to the Negro boys who come to their schools." By dismissing the classical curriculum, Dabney signaled how far the southern education movement had departed from the ideals of the northern educational missionaries.

Chancellor Hill made a more explicit connection between Reconstruction, federal intervention in southern affairs, and liberal education. While defending the idea of government support for education, black and white, Hill castigated the Blair bill of 1890 as an example of misplaced northern idealism. The problem with the bill, which would have given federal aid to states based on the proportion of illiteracy in

each, was that it was "essentially academic." The bill made no racial distinctions and would have provided generous support for instruction in writing, reading, history, geography, and arithmetic. To Hill, the provision for liberal education was based upon the "erroneous idea" espoused by northern missionaries that "the children of the Negro race were ready and ripe for the culture for which the children of the Anglo-Saxon race had been fitted by long centuries." Although the bill would have benefited the South, with its high rate of illiteracy, Hill applauded its defeat. Furthermore, he criticized the unwillingness of its supporters to accept the "liberal and just view" that the distribution of federal funds should be controlled by white Southerners.

Under the aegis of industrial education, northern and southern whites decided to continue the education blacks had received under slavery. Like all New Southerners, Hill admitted the "abuses" of slavery and the timeliness of its demise. Although a noxious institution, the "tutelage" of slavery wrenched blacks out of the "condition of the savage" and set them on the path of racial progress. The education gained from slavery was not in books but in the rigors of labor and "practical ethics." Just as industrial education was designed to inculcate moral virtue, so the discipline of slavery taught the "virtues of order, fidelity, temperance, and obedience." Yet the architects of

Hill taught that the institution of slavery had been beneficial to blacks because it had taught them "order, fidelity, temperance, and obedience."



Walter B. Hill
Chancellor of the
University of
Georgia

"To Hill, the provision of liberal education was based on the 'erroneous idea that the children of the Negro race were ready and ripe for the culture for which the children of the Anglo-Saxon race had been fitted by long centuries.'"

Reconstruction "blundered" by assuming that book learning could be foisted on a backward race unprepared for the rarefied atmosphere of Anglo-Saxon culture. With the recognition that traditional education was "spoiling" black labor capacity,

southern whites decided that the education conducted under slavery should not be abolished but "supplemented." While blacks should be taught the educational rudiments, reformers postulated that education "should be largely manual, industrial, and agricultural, so as to be adapted to the real needs of the masses."

If Hill believed industrial education was the remedy for black indigence, he at least admitted some place for traditional learning in the curriculum. As he wrote to George Foster Peabody, "You know I have no narrow views about

industrial education being the only education for a Negro." Alone among the educators examined here, Hill endorsed liberal higher education for the limited number of blacks privileged enough to take advantage of it. A traditional college education was necessary for the professional training of lawyers and physicians. Yet like Washington, Hill believed that universities should train black exponents of practical education rather than critical thinkers who might entertain ideas of social equality. University education was necessary "in order that the 'lower' education suitable for the masses may be rationally planned and conducted." Like white universities, black colleges would train technical experts to administer a subtly coercive system of education.

Although Hill hoped that technical education would train blacks in subservience, he also wanted schools to reinforce southern commercial agriculture. In company with Charles Dabney, Hill encouraged an education that would bolster the agrarian economy and the largely black agricultural class that supported it. The chancellor disparaged the tendency of traditional education to lure children away from the soil. Technical instruction would reduce rural depopulation and ensure a steady supply of labor for the agricultural sector. Education should "fix the affection upon the soil." Hill was certain that the priority for educators should be the adjustment of education to "the life and work of the agricultural masses." Even while Hill's ostensibly liberal voice permitted educational flexibility, it was muffled by his persistent commitment to racial control and white dominance.

"God made us white and it is our business to stay white."

The chancellor's emphasis on agricultural training harmonized with the northern industrialists' desire for a steady supply of tenant labor. During a period of rural out-migration, philanthropists such as Robert Ogden considered technical education a reliable method for maintaining a stable supply of black agricultural labor. Hill would have agreed with Ogden's assertion that "our great problem is to attach the Negro to the soil and prevent his exodus from the country to the city." For all of their talk of industrial education, they generally believed that Hampton and Tuskegee should train blacks for agricultural work. Most shared Samuel Mitchell's conviction of the "providential" existence of two occupations suited to the racial characteristics of the region's

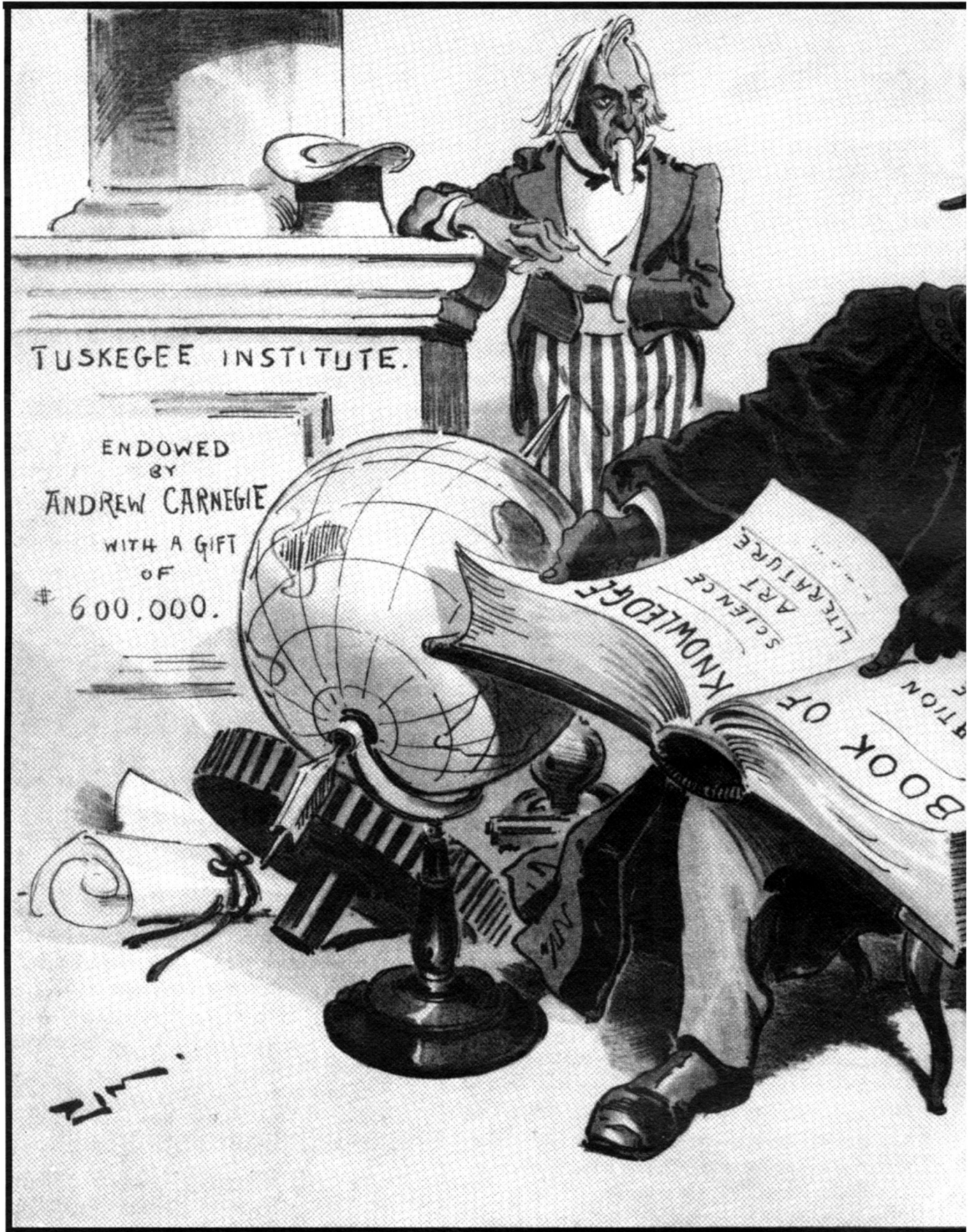
inhabitants: "The field gives the Negro his opportunity, while the factory requires all the skill of the white man." The assortment of blacks and whites into racially determined spheres of work would maximize productivity and minimize racial tension. "Such is the true economical relation of the two races in the South. It is one of inter-dependence." Mitchell was certain about education's role in the division of southern labor: It would make blacks "more useful in industry" by providing training in "very practical things."

"The field gives the Negro his opportunity, while the factory requires all the skill of the white man."

Edwin Alderman also played propagandist for industrial education. Like Hill and Dabney, he built his case for industrial education on a foundation of moderate racial prejudice. Alderman catalogued his racial beliefs in an address he gave while president of Tulane University. According to a local reporter, the president's remarks "accurately and completely" reflected "intelligent public sentiment" on race relations. Blacks, he boldly asserted, were an inferior race that needed the control and leadership of the "more civilized whites." Racial development depended on a recognition of the "disparity" between the two races. Concomitantly, racial progress meant preserving "Caucasian" integrity. The white South, having decided that social equality was "unthinkable," was determined to enforce social separation. "God made us white, and it is our business to stay white."

To be sure, educational progressives were not solely responsible for the inequitable distribution of public funds between white and black schools. Hill and others opposed efforts to divide the educational taxes in proportion to the relative contributions of blacks and whites. Yet shortly after the SEB's founding it resolved to downplay black education. Dabney and the others agreed that "we would not emphasize the *Negro* too much. . . . In the excited state of public sentiment, this was considered wisest." At an SEB meeting in 1906, Alderman claimed that Booker T. Washington's dinner with President Roosevelt had made the discussion of black education imprudent. "It has been like touching a sore tooth," he told the board. In response to George Foster Peabody's suggestion for a crusade on behalf of black education, Alderman argued, "Progress does not lie that way. We want now to influence public sentiment: stop being silent but be wise; go forward, but with forethought." The SEB

The Hampton-Tuskegee Model of Negro Education Saw Literature and Philoso



Education as Fancy Book Learning Unnecessary for Agricultural and Industrial Menials



stressed the idea that white education would inevitably benefit black education. Progressives rarely explained this calculus but continued to make perfunctory overtures toward black instruction. Progressive educators also agreed to avoid any unorthodox pronouncements on the doctrine of "separate but equal." The SEB would then privilege the improvement of white education in its crusade.

Progressives considered industrial education the hope for racial accommodation. They were surprised by the tenacity of both black and white resistance to the Hampton idea. Some of this resistance came from within the state universities. In 1900 Paul B. Barringer, then chair of the UVA faculty, advocated terminating public support for black schools on the grounds that blacks were using education as a "weapon of political offence." Barringer also accused schools of encouraging black indolence and competition with whites. Richard Heath Dabney, professor of history and economics at Virginia, ridiculed the idea of levying taxes to educate the disenfranchised.

Southern white opposition to black education was mounted by a coalition of rural politicians, state school superintendents, industrialists, academics, and newspaper editors. Resistance was spearheaded by some of the region's leading papers, including the *Charleston News and Courier*, the *Charlotte Observer*, and the premier organ of the New South, the *Manufacturer's Record*. Educational reformers were frustrated by the South's inability to understand the social and economic benefits of industrial education. The educational crusade was not aimed at transforming southern society, they argued, but at achieving social stability for economic growth. To the frustration of progressives, opponents of the movement did not differentiate between academic and industrial education, however.

Educational progressives and northern philanthropists retaliated by accusing the opposition of demagoguery. Yet southern white opponents of black education were aware of the nature of the caste system and they "understood better than the philanthropic Northerners what was required to hold it intact." White opponents believed that black education would stimulate demands for political and civil equality. States with black majorities, such as South Carolina, and states where blacks made up the bulk of agricultural laborers

consequently mounted a stiff opposition to universal education. Opponents also argued that educated blacks would compete with whites for nonagricultural jobs. What was at stake were differing conceptions of racial control, not divergent ideas about the status of blacks in society.

Relying largely on the advice of Booker T. Washington, northern philanthropists such as Carnegie and Rockefeller channeled substantial sums of money into the development of Tuskegee-like institutions. Between 1900 and 1910 Andrew Carnegie devoted his entire budget for black education to supporting Tuskegee and Hampton. By 1915, philanthropic appropriations to industrial schools far outweighed those for liberal arts colleges. That year, the Hampton Institute's endowment stood at \$2.7 million, and Tuskegee's had risen to \$1.9 million. Cumulatively, these funds accounted for more than half of the total endowment of private black colleges in the United States. By comparison, Lincoln University, the most generously funded black liberal arts college of the period, could claim only \$700,000 for its

endowment. As one historian has commented, the consequences of the philanthropists' "primarily industrial orientation was fiscal disinterest in Negro colleges that promoted liberal education and more generous attention to the recognized industrial institutions."

Despite progressive optimism, industrial education failed to achieve uncontested dominance in the late nineteenth-century South. Samuel Chapman Armstrong, Hampton's founder, was encouraged by the adoption of industrial courses at several black colleges in the 1880s. Schools operated

by northern mission societies offered practical training courses at the secondary and college level, often financed by the Slater Fund. Yet industrial edu-

cation at most black colleges was of marginal significance. Colleges supervised by black religious organizations, such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, were even more adamant about assigning industrial training an inferior position in the college curriculum. Unlike the Hampton Institute, the leaders of the missionary colleges maintained a traditional education that would produce engineers, architects, and factory supervisors. Whereas the Hampton program was

"Blacks are an inferior race that need the control and leadership of the more civilized whites."



Edwin Alderman
President of the
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"Nothing is more ridiculous than the program of the good religious people from the North who insist upon teaching Latin, Greek, and philosophy to Negro boys."

predicated on racial control, private black colleges promoted liberal and professional education favorable to black social mobility.

Only in 1898 did the Hampton model begin to achieve favored status among northern philanthropists and white middle-class educators. By the end of the century, advocates of the Hampton model realized that industrial training had not supplanted liberal education at most black colleges. They also understood that missionary educators would oppose the advance of technical education at black schools. In the face of opposition, proponents of the Hampton program began to disseminate industrial education with "dogmatic determination." Educational progressives collaborated in the effort to attract northern financial support for the program and expand its reach throughout the South. While northern philanthropy underwrote industrial education in the South, progressives such as Alderman and Mitchell provided it an ideological framework. To be sure, northern educational modernizers extolled the virtues of vocational instruction for southern blacks. Yet university progressives provided the intellectual medium between northern dollars and southern opinion. Addressing northern audiences, they offered their ideas as representative of the region's better sort. They lent the prestige of their institutions to the movement for a segregated system of education that was anything but equal. Northern reformers applauded people such as Alderman, Dabney, Mitchell, and Hill for promoting the realignment of southern schools according to "northern standards of efficiency and social organization."

Simultaneously, university progressives established themselves as authorities on the race question. Cloaked in pseudoscientific language that appealed to the sensibilities of the era, university progressives marketed industrial education as a rational method of racial control. Industrial training was not the brainchild of university progressives; the Hampton Institute had been preaching it since 1868. But university-based progressives cemented the association between the southern education movement and the Hampton-Tuskegee program. At a crucial point in the development of southern education, university progressives became the advertising agents of an educational philosophy premised on black subordination. Industrial education joined sharecropping, the crop lien, low-wage extractive manufacturing, illiteracy, and disfranchisement as pillars of an impoverished and racially stratified New South.

Progressive educators wanted to transform the social order from one mired in poverty and racial conflict to one built on industrial productivity and racial harmony. Central to their scheme for a New South, however, was an insidious program of social engineering and racial control. Cloaking their ideas in the language of objectivity and evangelical uplift, they clouded the elements of coercion and racism inherent in progressive education. Southern higher education became entangled in the cross-sectional crusade to educate blacks in subservience. Its history was inseparable from the chronicle of the Jim Crow South.

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Plantation Songs at Tuskegee



Booker T. Washington

"Booker T. Washington's reconciliationist gestures at times seemed to have no limits. In November 1902 he invited General John B. Gordon, the commander of the United Confederate Veterans and former governor of Georgia, to speak at Tuskegee. Some 1,800 students, teachers, and citizens of the town filled the college auditorium and jumped to their feet with salvos of welcome as the old Confederate soldier took the podium. To this black audience, Gordon delivered the lecture, 'The Last Days of the Confederacy.' After describing the pathetic demise of the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox, Gordon paid tribute to the 'Negro race who with so much faithfulness befriended and cared for the wives and sisters of the Confederate soldiers who went to the front of a war having for its issue the continuation of slavery.' On this day at Tuskegee, everyone was a loyal Southerner. 'I declare to you that the Southern white man is the best friend the Negro in the South has,' the old general assured the black youth. Gordon also paid 'a beautiful tribute to the old plantation songs sung with so much power' by the students. Here was a kind of racial reconciliation unique to the South; wrapped in ceremonial paternalism, promoted officially by Tuskegee, the old and new met on scripted Southern terms of forgetting."

— David W. Blight
Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory
(Belknap Press, 2001)