

Report of the Board of Education for Freedmen, Department of the Gulf

The Perspective of Teachers at African American Schools in 1864

During and after the Civil War, teachers spread throughout the South in an effort to educate freed black children and adults. There were many difficulties associated with starting education for African Americans, especially before the war ended in 1864.

Instances of privation [hardship] and peril

In a parish, some distance from New Orleans, a building was procured [obtained], an energetic teacher sent, scholars gathered, and the work begun. (The report) came subsequently, as follows: “Arrived. Went about gathering scholars [students], have forty. Did well enough till it rained, since then have walked three miles a day, ankle deep in thick black mud that pulls off my shoes. Nothing to eat but strong pork and sour bread. Insulted for being a ‘(black) teacher.’ Can’t buy anything on credit, and have’nt a cent of money. The school shed has no floor, and the rains sweep clean across it, through the places where the windows should be. The Provost Marshal won’t help me. Says ‘he don’t believe in (black) teachers.’ The children come rain or shine, plunging through the mud. Pretty picture they are.”

Another class of obstacles is indicated by the following extract from the report of a country teacher:

“I have, in vain, attempted to form a night school. I never dared take more than two pupils, because some of the officers are so opposed to the instruction of negroes. One use to let his dogs loose after supper to but the night-scholars, till I told him I would kill them if they bit my pupils. A great many would come to night-school only they are afraid.”

In Thibodeaux the school-house has been broken open, on successive nights, for months past, the furniture defaced, the books destroyed. Bricks have been hurled through the windows, greatly risking limb and life, and making general commotion. Complaint after complaint has not afforded relief or protection....

Characteristics of the Pupils

The pupils, as a class, are orderly, industrious, and easily governed. They are exceedingly grateful for any interest and kindness shown to them. Another habitude of these colored children is their care of books and school furniture. The walls and fences about the colored schools are not defaced. From the two most prevailing and disgusting vices of school children, profanity and obscenity [swearing], they are singularly free.

Source: The Report of the Board of Education for Freedmen, Department of the Gulf, for the Year 1864 by the U.S. Army, printed in 1865 in New Orleans, available on Google Books

Questions to consider while reading:

- What were the challenges for teachers and students at African American schools?
- According to this report, what were the attitudes of African American pupils?