These Separate Schools: Black Politics and Education in Washington, D.C., 1900-1930

By

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Abstract

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“These Separate Schools: Black Politics and Education in Washington, D.C., 1900-1930,” chronicles the efforts of black Washingtonians to achieve equitable public funding and administrative autonomy in their public schools and at Howard University. This project argues that over the course of the early twentieth century, black Washingtonians came to understand their two-pronged goals of administrative autonomy and equitable allocation of resources in both their public schools and at Howard in terms of civil rights. At the turn of the twentieth century, many African Americans in Washington defended their educational institutions as venues for individually demonstrating their own good citizenship and respectability, in other words as means to social and economic uplift. By the 1910s and 1920s, however, they spoke about equal educational opportunity as a civil right, guaranteed to all citizens by the Constitution. Also, while these struggles for educational equality began in the public schools, they were soon taken up by leaders at Howard University and its law school.

In addition to educational equality, administrative autonomy was another key part of black Washingtonians’ rights agenda. Black Washingtonians were able to carve out a nearly autonomous space first in the segregated public schools in the 1900s and 1910s and then at Howard University in the 1920s, and they considered this degree of independence critical to improving and maintaining the quality of their schools. Although they fully acknowledged and abhorred the fact that racial segregation was intended to subjugate their race, by persistently pressing for autonomy, black Washingtonians imbued the institution of racial separation in Washington’s black schools and black university with new meaning. Rather than solely symbolizing oppression, through their efforts racial separation became a marker of leadership and power. Taken together, the battle for equalizing primary, secondary, and higher education was a critical component of the black civil rights agenda in this period, even within the context of racial segregation.

“These Separate Schools” challenges the notion that the battle for educational equality began in the 1930s and 1940s in the courtroom and demonstrates instead that it began in the early twentieth century with the activism of ordinary black citizens in Washington, D.C., which in this period was governed by Congress. Contrary to typical portrayals of African-American political participation during the Jim Crow Era, this project shows that black Washingtonians were deeply involved in early twentieth-century political life on multiple levels. Locally, they were
instrumental in the District’s unique educational politics; nationally, they shaped federal
government race policy and Congressional legislation; and, ideologically, they were leaders in a
national conversation about civil rights, black advancement, and the role of education in
American democracy.
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Over the course of my research I discovered a small, but vibrant community interested in the local history of Washington, D.C., many of whom are connected to the Historical Society of Washington, D.C. Early on in my research, librarians at HSW’s Kiplinger Research Library guided me through some of their material, as well as their archive of their journal The Records of the Columbia Historical Society. They also gave me the opportunity to present a version of Chapter Two at the D.C. Historical Studies Conference in 2010, where I made several valuable connections with other scholars and community members. Another hub for local history in Washington is in the Washingtoniana division at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library and I thank the group of librarians there for help finding books, manuscripts, and microfilm of D.C. newspapers.

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INTRODUCTION

In a 1935 essay in the *Journal of Negro Education*, W.E.B. Du Bois posed the question, “Does the Negro need separate schools?” His answer was an emphatic “God knows he does.”\(^1\) Du Bois’s attitude toward racially segregated schools was pragmatic: as long as whites believed in the inferiority of black people, black children and young adults were better off in separate schools and universities. He held this opinion with certain qualifications, however. Separate black schools held the promise of a better education only if the community believed in and invested in their schools and their teachers. With sufficient resources and support, black children and college students, Du Bois believed, had a better chance of flourishing in separate schools where they would learn about black history and culture, be taught by teachers who empathized with them and believed in them, and be sheltered from discrimination, abuse, and neglect in classrooms and schools controlled by whites.\(^2\)

Du Bois pointed to Washington, D.C. as one example of such a system. “I have long been convinced,” he remarked, “that the Negroes in the public schools of Harlem are not getting an education that is in any sense comparable in efficiency, discipline, and human development with that which Negroes are getting in the separate public schools of Washington, D.C.”\(^3\) The qualities that Du Bois identified as characterizing an effective school system largely described the District’s black schools. The fact that Washington was, in fact, the only example Du Bois pointed to of the kind of segregated public school system he had in mind further suggests that its schools were both exemplary and unique.

As Du Bois suggested, Washington was home to black America’s strongest educational institutions in the Jim Crow period. Those who were not lucky enough to be from Washington flocked there to send their children to its public schools, to finish their high school education at Howard University’s preparatory school, to earn a bachelor’s degree from Howard, or to receive advanced training at one of Howard’s professional schools, one of the most important of which was the law school. Black teachers from around the country contacted their distant relatives in the District to see if they could pull the right strings to try to work their way into the exclusive teaching force of the segregated black schools. The nationwide web of black intelligentsia were all connected to Howard in some capacity, whether they had studied there, taught there, or given a lecture when passing through town, and a large percentage of black professionals had been trained there. Many who were affiliated with Howard also had direct and indirect connections to the public schools and public school teachers, many of whom were educated and accomplished enough to also be included among the black intelligentsia.

Washington’s segregated black public schools, Howard University, and Howard Law School earned their distinction through the persistent efforts of local blacks, and this dissertation chronicles those efforts in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Black parents, teachers, school officials, Howard deans and professors, and other representatives of the race lobbied Congress, wrote forceful letters, gave impassioned speeches, circulated petitions, published books and articles, and, sometimes, took to the streets to demand sufficient resources for their public schools and legislation to protect the status of their public schools and Howard University and its law school. Howard, although private, received a yearly congressional

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2 Ibid., 328-35.
3 Ibid., 330.
appropriation. Because both the public schools and Howard served so many functions—for those who studied there, worked there, and for the black community in general—they were fundamental institutions in black Washington and primary sites of blacks’ struggle for equality.

This project makes three related arguments. First, equal educational opportunity was a critical component of the black civil rights agenda in this period, even within the context of racial segregation. In fact, black Washingtonians were able to carve out a nearly autonomous space first in the segregated public schools in the 1900s and 1910s and then at Howard University in the 1920s, and they considered this degree of independence critical to improving and maintaining the quality of their schools. Although they fully acknowledged and abhorred the fact that racial segregation was intended to subjugate their race, by persistently pressing for autonomy, black Washingtonians imbued the institution of racial separation in Washington’s black schools and black university with new meaning. Rather than solely symbolizing oppression, through their efforts racial separation became a marker of leadership and power. Second, over the course of the early twentieth century, black Washingtonians came to understand their two-pronged goals of administrative autonomy and equitable allocation of resources in both their public schools and at Howard in terms of civil rights. At the turn of the twentieth century, many African Americans in Washington defended their educational institutions as venues for individually demonstrating their own good citizenship and respectability, in other words as means to social and economic uplift. By the 1910s and 1920s, however, they spoke about equal educational opportunity as a civil right, guaranteed to all citizens by the Constitution. Implicit in each of these threads is the overarching argument that, contrary to typical portrayals of African-American political participation during the Jim Crow Era, black Washingtonians were deeply involved in early twentieth-century political life on multiple levels. Locally, they were instrumental in the District’s unique educational politics; nationally, they shaped federal government race policy and Congressional legislation; and, ideologically, they were leaders in a national conversation about civil rights, black advancement, and the role of education in American democracy.

Black Washingtonians’ struggle for quality education in the public schools began with the preservation of the black schools’ autonomy from the white schools. Beginning in 1900, a black assistant superintendent, who served under a white superintendent, oversaw the black schools.4 In addition to this official and his subordinates, three black members represented the black schools on the appointed nine-member board of education. Through legislative and bureaucratic battles, in addition to everyday assertions of power, black Washingtonians protected their administrative autonomy within this “dual system,” as it was referred to, and ensured that only blacks would be given jobs in the black public schools, from the top school official down to the night-duty janitor. If black children were to be separated from white children in the public schools, black Washingtonians wanted to have complete control over curriculum and management and sole access to employment opportunities in their schools. Indeed, because black Washingtonians continued to push successfully for control over their schools, black school leaders and advocates in Washington were able to maintain a rigorous curriculum and sufficient facilities for the District’s black students and attract some of the nation’s most qualified teachers, who were among the most well regarded members of Washington’s black community. School

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4 From the advent of the black public schools in 1868 until an administrative restructuring of the public schools in 1900, the black schools had their own superintendent. George Frederick Thompson Cook served as the Superintendent for the Colored Schools during this entire thirty-two-year period. A new law passed in 1900, which is the subject of Chapter Two, consolidated the black and white public schools under one white superintendent.
integration was a nonstarter in this period in the South; it was both politically untenable and more likely to lead to white domination than to equality. Thus, black Washingtonians tolerated school segregation as a steppingstone to integration and full equality, but only if they were guaranteed the right to manage their own schools. In this way, the black schools thrived both in spite of and, to some extent, because of segregation.

The rights-based argument for autonomy and equal resources that black Washingtonians initially employed in the public schools was soon picked up by members of the Howard University community to agitate for the university’s first black president and for increased financial support from the federal government. While black Washingtonians had gently alluded to the law and citizenship in defending their schools in the very early part of the twentieth century, the advent of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and its District branch in the 1910s strengthened their claim that equal educational opportunity was a civil right.

As both this vision of a rights-based articulation of black educational autonomy and the black leadership advancing these arguments solidified, leaders at Howard, many of whom were active in the NAACP and connected to public school leaders in other ways, employed the same rhetoric. Thus, when members of the Howard community first demanded a black president and then lobbied for a firmer financial commitment from the federal government to Howard’s budget in order to move toward equalizing blacks’ opportunities for higher education, they were influenced by both the people and ideas surrounding advocacy for autonomy and equality in the public schools.

Finally, the move by Howard’s administration to greatly enhance the university’s law school was the next logical step in ensuring that blacks’ civil rights claims, including the right to equal educational opportunity, were protected by law. Since blacks’ citizenship rights had been ignored for so long, it would be up to impeccably trained black lawyers to finally force the federal and state governments to uphold them. Black Washingtonians’ efforts to secure and sustain black leadership and to obtain sufficient government funding in the public schools and at Howard University were not just about building an excellent university and public schools behind the color line; these efforts were, in fact, part of a creative strategy to chip away at the color line and to expand their claim to equal rights.

That segregated schooling, especially in border states, provided blacks with vital sources of employment, opportunities for social advancement, and a degree of curricular control is not a new argument. To be sure, there is a large body of literature that questions the efficacy of Brown v. Board of Education and the school desegregation battles of the 1950s and 1960s in bringing about educational equality, especially in light of the decline of urban public schools that followed. However, this dissertation goes beyond the point that, although racial segregation in public schools was profoundly unjust, there were advantages to racial separation in the context of white supremacist regimes. More importantly, this study examines the continued negotiations both within the black community and between blacks and whites that produced and gave meaning to racial separation in Washington’s public schools and at Howard. Segregation in

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Washington’s educational institutions at times meant black subjugation. But, through their rhetoric and political activism, black Washingtonians also imbued racial separation with positive meaning: black leadership, black autonomy, the study of African American history and culture, and the right to equal educational opportunity, equal employment opportunity, and equal pay for equal work. Racial segregation, then, was neither a monolithic institution nor did it mean complete separation between whites and blacks. Rather, racial segregation was a social structure rooted in white supremacy, the meaning of which was constantly changing through a continual process of negotiation between blacks and whites.

This dissertation often uses the word “autonomy” to describe the relationship between separate black institutions and the white power structure, but this usage calls for qualification. Neither the black public schools nor Howard University were strictly autonomous. Although black Washingtonians won victories that enabled them to control many aspects of their public schools, they were funded by Congress and their administrators had to answer to the House and Senate District committees, the local Board of Commissioners, and the Board of Education. Similarly, while the appointment of Mordecai Johnson as Howard University’s first black president heralded an era in which all of the highest level decision-makers at Howard were black, the lion’s share of the university’s budget was, once again, appropriated by Congress or administered through white philanthropists. In this context, the power that blacks actually wielded over their educational institutions might more accurately be labeled “localized decision-making authority” or “circumscribed autonomy.”

However, I use the word “autonomy” for several reasons. First, that was the word black Washingtonians used to describe what they were fighting for in the administration of their public schools. This was most apparent in the 1920 Senate hearings that are the subject of Chapter Three. Second, “autonomy” is a powerful word and I want to emphasize the actual political power that black Washingtonians had as well as the power they thought they deserved. Finally, just as segregation was not a unitary institution, notions of autonomy were neither constant nor unchanging. For example, when NAACP District branch president Archibald Grimké called for Congress to recognize the autonomy of Washington’s black public schools, he referred to something different from what Marcus Garvey or black emigrationists meant when they used the word. Black Washingtonians wanted autonomous administration of their public schools and Howard University, but they also wanted recognition of their citizenship through full inclusion in American society and politics. Of course, it must never be forgotten that the degree of autonomy black Washingtonians had and fought for was in the context of a white supremacist regime that denied blacks nearly all of their citizenship rights and some of their human rights. In fact, it was because of this white supremacist context that black Washingtonians asserted what political authority they had to call for control over their schools.

The issue of black autonomy relates to the larger goal of this project, which is to contribute to the understanding of how African Americans engaged in politics in the era before the civil rights movement. Black Washingtonians took advantage of this historical moment in education, during which the shape of educational bureaucracies and the roles of school and university administrators were in flux, to use politics to mold a system that nearly paralleled the white system, as separate from it, but also as equal to it as possible. By proving this, this project is in conversation with a body of literature that recovers the political agency of working-class blacks, in particular, by expanding the notion of what constitutes politics. In the words of historian Robin D.G. Kelley, politics consists of “the daily confrontations, evasive actions, and stifled thoughts [that comprise] the many battles to roll back constraints and exercise some
power over, or create some space within, the institutions and social relationships that dominate our lives.” Through this conceptualization of politics, Kelley and others have used black cultural production, social interactions, and everyday forms of self-expression to show that Jim Crow era disfranchisement did not bring an end to black politics. Unlike these historians, however, this dissertation exposes not small cases of individual or small-group resistance among working-class blacks, but mainstream political action undertaken by black elites, whose efforts resulted in major political victories. Through their persistent efforts in the realms of formal politics and legislation, even within the greatly politically circumscribed context of Jim Crow, black Washingtonians not only had a voice in these political arenas, but they were sometimes successful in achieving their political goals. Exposing this once again changes the way we understand the history of black politics and shows that throughout the Jim Crow period black Americans across the social spectrum continued to be politically minded and politically active.

The study of schools and education will necessarily be a local endeavor and Washington, D.C. is perhaps the most illuminating and significant place in which to study the politics of black education in this period. Before hundreds of thousands of blacks made their exodus from southern plantations, towns, and cities to what they hoped would be the promised land of the urban north and West, Washington was the center of black America. It had had the largest urban black population since the Civil War, who in the generations since emancipation had built a vibrant community life. Washington’s black schools, churches, women’s clubs, fraternal organizations, Howard University, and the city’s elite society in general garnered the attention—and sometimes the envy—of the rest of black America.

In addition to the centrality of Washington’s black community and its schools, Washington, D.C.’s unique political climate and its status vis-à-vis the federal government meant that it was, in a sense, the United States writ small. Beginning in the late 1870s, Washingtonians had no elected officials. With Congress as their legislature and a three-member Board of Commissioners as their executive, Washingtonians elected neither their lawmakers nor their top executive officials. Without the vote, they had to expend their pent-up political energy elsewhere, which resulted in the heightened politicization of the public schools. In addition, issues that were generally under the jurisdiction of state and local governments—education, infrastructure, police and fire departments, transportation, etc.—were determined by the federal government. An examination of the politics of education in Washington provides a rare window into how Congress put policy into practice on a local level and reveals that in the nation’s capital, it was responsible for disfranchisement and discrimination. Thus, while this is certainly a local

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8 Ever since a brief, failed experiment with elected officials in the 1870s, Congress and the appointed three-person Board of Commissioners had governed Washington. District residents did not have an elected local government until the Home Rule Act was passed in 1973, providing for an elected mayor and thirteen-member city council.
9 The decision making power in the schools rested with the nine-member Board of Education, which by custom—not law—always had three black members, and two school chiefs: a white superintendent and a black assistant superintendent.
story, it is also a national story with broad implications for understanding the federal government’s stance on race, education, and equality.

The absence of electoral politics also had the perverse effect of affording a greater degree of political parity among blacks and whites in Washington than elsewhere in the South because all Washingtonians were disfranchised. This is not say that the District was a racially egalitarian place. As in the rest of the South, black Washingtonians rights were circumscribed by the stranglehold of Jim Crow; but, unlike the Deep South, more of the segregation in Washington was customary and not legally mandated. Significantly, this was also true of racial segregation in the public schools, although black and white children had attended separate schools since the advent of school system. Even though Washington was a Southern city at heart, black Washingtonians leveraged the high stakes of federal government rule and D.C.’s role as the capital of one of the world’s most powerful democracies to preserve a greater degree of equality than elsewhere in the South. While black Washingtonians certainly suffered under Jim Crow, they took advantage of Washington’s unique character to retain a significant measure of their political voice.

Because of Washington, D.C.’s unique place in American and African-American history, a growing body of literature seeks to understand Washington and its black community, and this project both adds to and challenges this scholarship. Much of the literature on black Washington in this period focuses on its social institutions because it presumes that, as a result of disfranchisement and Jim Crow, black Washingtonians were not politically active. The federal government is often largely absent beyond its role as an employer of a large swath of the community’s middle class—at least until Woodrow Wilson’s administration began scaling back the number of black employees. These studies tend to promote an image of black Washington as cordoned off from white Washington and rife with intraracial class conflict. This project,

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10 According to To Secure These Rights, public education in Washington “operates under congressional legislation which assumes the fact of segregation but nowhere makes it mandatory.” For example, the laws passed by Congress that governed the schools provided for a white school superintendent and a black assistant superintendent and also required that funding be allocated proportionally to black and white schools, but no where in the code did Congress mandate that black and white children attend segregated schools. This may be surprising to those familiar with the Supreme Court case Bolling v. Sharpe, the companion case to Brown v. Board of Education in Washington, D.C. While the central issue in Bolling was whether school segregation in D.C. violated the due process clause of the Fifth Amendment, George E.C. Hayes, one of the lawyers for the petitioners in Bolling, argued that the District of Columbia Board of Education did not have the legal authority to maintain segregated schools in the first place. Milton Korman, the lawyer representing the respondents, focused his case on arguing that Congress in fact had intended to legislate segregation through the series of laws that assumed it. In his decision, Chief Justice Earl Warren ignored this debate over the D.C. code and ruled only on the due process question. President’s Committee on Civil Rights, To Secure These Rights, The Report of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1947), 90; Richard Kluger, Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America’s Struggle for Equality (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 581-3.

11 The notable exception to this tendency is Howard Gillette’s Between Justice and Beauty, which argues that throughout Washington’s history as the national capital, the city has never been able to complete beautification projects in the parts of the city that house the federal government while either preserving or expanding social justice. He argues that, in fact, the opposite is true: the periods of the most extensive beautification projects have been the periods of the most social injustice and some of the worst decay in other parts of the city (especially in black neighborhoods). Howard Gillette, Jr., Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington, D.C. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

however, shifts the focus from black Washington’s social life to the intellectual and political connections between the black community of the nation’s capital and the rest of the nation—black and white. The starting point of this study is black Washingtonians’ efforts to claim expanded rights through education and participation through local and national politics, and not the imposition of social segregation through Jim Crow.

As historians of black politics have broadened their notion of political action, civil rights historians have also broadened the conception of the civil rights movement and lengthened its periodization into what has become known as the “long civil rights movement.” This work has exposed rights activists’ more far-reaching goals in the 1930s and 1940s, which were geared toward economic equality for poor and working-class blacks—and, in many cases, poor and working-class whites—in both the North and the South and in both industry and agriculture just as much as and, in some places, through integration and voting rights.13 Many of these historians locate the origins of the civil rights movement in 1930s radicalism and working- and middle-class blacks’ increased politicization during World War II, which reinforces the notion that blacks were either politically dormant or their civil rights goals and strategies were too conservative prior to the 1930s.14 Although the struggles for equality in this study preceded even the dominant conceptualization of the long civil rights movement, the story told here challenges the argument that the origins of the civil rights movement were class-based rather than race-based. Activism centered on race and education were not just relics of Reconstruction that resurfaced in the 1940s and 1950s; rather, this kind of activism was central to the civil rights struggle from the turn of the twentieth century and the founding of the NAACP in 1909 through the long civil rights movement and, in some cases, it became quite radical.

Many of this dissertation’s subjects—its thinkers, teachers, school officials, and political actors—are elites. This is not because poor and working-class blacks were apolitical, but rather it is because the dissertation focuses on formal expressions of political language and ideas, which are much more accessible if one looks at elites than at the masses, who tend to leave less behind than their elite counterparts. Kevin Gaines’s Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century, and a much older book, Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington by August Meier, have in different ways influenced this study’s approach to the ideas of the middle-class and elite blacks in Washington, D.C. The subject of Gaines’s book is racial uplift ideology, which was an idea popular among black elites and intellectuals that the key to eventual African-American equality

13 Jacqueyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” Journal of American History 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233-1263. In this article, Hall identified an emerging understanding in historical literature of what she termed the “long civil rights movement,” which calls attention to the vigorous and widespread rights agitation beyond the Deep South and prior to the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education verdict and the 1955 Montgomery bus boycotts, which had traditionally marked the beginning of the movement. Much of this literature suggests that had the movement adhered more closely to its more radical roots and had there not been such strong conservative opposition from the inception of civil rights activism in the 1930s (the notion of a backlash in the 1970s is a false characterization, as conservative opposition to civil rights had been consistent), the movement itself might have continued to emphasize—and perhaps win—broad economic rights rather than narrow race-based rights.

was black elites’ demonstration of their respectability through education and moral rectitude. In time, this would prove through what Gaines calls “evolutionary class differentiation” that at least elite blacks were worthy of full citizenship and that, with their help, the rest of the race would eventually qualify for full citizenship, too. Gaines’s work also charts an African-American intellectual history that goes beyond the crude dichotomy between Booker T. Washington’s conservative “cast down your bucket where you are” philosophy and W.E.B. Du Bois’s encouragement of civil rights agitation. August Meier’s book is a more traditional analysis of black Americans’ political ideologies regarding some of the most important issues of the day, such as education, voting rights, economic opportunity, and political participation. Although Meier hews more closely to the Du Bois-Washington divide, he is also deeply engaged with the paradox of the project of achieving egalitarian racial integration through segregated institutions, and recognizes that the labels “integrationism” and “separatism” are reductionist and inappropriate for describing black thought in the Jim Crow period.\(^\text{15}\)

This project, too, seeks to understand the complexity and contradictions of black political thought in this period and explores how, whether for pragmatic or ideological reasons, individuals sometimes acted inconsistently. Understanding racial uplift ideology and how deeply embedded it was in notions of black progress is critical for understanding the many connections between education and strategies to achieve equality and racial advancement. Even as rights-based arguments for black educational equality eclipsed uplift-based arguments, the tenets of uplift, self-improvement, and proving one’s respectability persisted. As Meier and Gaines do, this project also expands the conception of black political thought in this period beyond the Du Bois-Washington dualism.

In the literature on the history of education and the Progressive Era, there is a question of to what extent blacks participated in progressive reform. The scholarship on this topic shows how different Washington, D.C.’s public schools and Howard University were from the rest of the country. Historians have revealed the atrociousness of black public schools in the Jim Crow South; the tremendous paucity of resources they received from state and local governments; the neglectful, at best, and malevolent, at worst, white school boards and superintendents who ran their schools; and how, despite these hurdles, schools and teachers played important roles in African-American communities. There are also several useful works on the contributions of northern white philanthropists, especially John D. Rockefeller through the General Education Board and Julius Rosenwald, which show how some black schools were able to implement Progressive Era educational reforms through private funds where public funds were paltry or unavailable. Many historians also analyze Booker T. Washington’s “Tuskegee Machine” and the extraordinary tensions between supporters of industrial versus classical education.\(^\text{16}\)


Perhaps the most critical difference in Washington, D.C. was that since Reconstruction there had been no question that public schools for black children in Washington would be publicly funded and black Washingtonians’ confidence in their right to an equitable proportion of government funding only increased as time went on. While black Washingtonians certainly dealt with discrimination, inequality, and threats to their autonomy, the day-to-day issues that black Washingtonians dealt with in their public schools resembled those of the rest of urban America during the Progressive Era. They established kindergartens and junior high schools, increased training requirements for teachers, normalized the salary schedule, tried to limit favoritism in favor of standardization and meritocracy, and implemented modern curricular reforms. At Howard University and its professional schools, they debated whether advanced degrees or experience better prepared people for white collar employment, reformed their curriculum to meet current academic standards and earn accreditation, and undertook professionalization measures across the university. Black Washingtonians fully participated in the bureaucratization and professionalization of that characterized progressive reform.

This dissertation develops both chronologically and thematically through a series of episodes in the public schools and at Howard, focusing first on the public schools from 1900 to 1920, and then on Howard University in the 1920s. This organization highlights the development of the visions of black autonomy and equal educational opportunity and the rhetorical and political strategies black Washingtonians used in their efforts to realize these visions. It also shows how, as their visions and leadership solidified, black Washingtonians used the black community’s experiences in the public schools to advance their struggles for appointing a black president, securing guaranteed funding from Congress, and substantially upgrading the law school.

The first chapter introduces Washington, D.C.’s unique politics, racial climate, and society and argues that education was central to local politics. This chapter shows that, despite the fact that all Washingtonians were disfranchised, they were incredibly politically minded and politically active. It also begins to develop the connection that blacks made between education and their constitutional rights in order to explain how education became an increasingly important part of African Americans’ struggle for rights and equality.

The following two chapters show how blacks in Washington used their political power to win and maintain control over their public schools, secure resources, and build national prestige of the system as a whole and of M Street High School in particular. The district’s black community took advantage of white residents’ and Congress’s simultaneous commitments to racial segregation and rhetorical equality to create a nearly autonomous school system, which, although under-funded compared with the white schools, had the most resources and the strongest academic program of any segregated school system in the country. Chapter Two follows the campaign black Washingtonians waged during the first decade of the twentieth century first to secure a permanent position for a black assistant superintendent of the black schools and then to make sure that official had sole authority over the black schools. It looks at two different congressional reorganizations of the public schools, first in 1900 and then again in 1906. In the 1900 reorganization, Congress removed the position of black “Superintendent of the Colored Schools” and instead replaced it with a black “Assistant Superintendent” who was subordinate to a white superintendent. M Street High School principal Anna Julia Cooper and other advocates for the autonomy of the black schools opposed white encroachment on their authority over their schools and pushed Congress to restructure the school administration once
again in 1906, this time giving “sole authority” over the black schools to the black assistant superintendent.

Chapter Three follows black Washingtonians’ continuous school equalization efforts through the leadership of the District branch of the NAACP to obtain their share of congressional appropriations for buildings, equipment, and salaries, and a struggle within the black community over the controversial tenure of Roscoe Conkling Bruce as Assistant Superintendent of the Colored Schools. The controversy over Roscoe Bruce, which stemmed from both general grievances against his administration as well as particular scandals, was led by an organization called the Parents’ League, which made its voice heard through large mass meetings and public protests. Despite the fact that the Parents’ League did not represent the political views or strategies of the increasingly prominent NAACP, their clamor resulted in a series of congressional hearings on the public schools, which gave black Washingtonians—Parents’ League members, school officials, and NAACP activists—an official forum for protesting the increased injustice and inequality in the public schools. In this hearing and in other venues in the late 1910s, the NAACP’s focus on law and politics, rather than displays of morality and uplift, as means to achieving equality clearly influenced black Washingtonians’ own understandings of their rights. By the end of the congressional hearings on the public schools in 1920, black Washingtonians were clearly articulating an increasingly cogent vision of the relationship among black administrative autonomy, equal educational opportunity, and citizenship rights.

The second half of the dissertation argues that black Washingtonians took the issues of black leadership, autonomy, and educational equity that were being worked out in the public schools in the first two decades of the twentieth century to Howard University and its law school in the 1920s. The public schools and Howard were deeply connected, as many teachers in the public schools—especially at M Street High School—had either gone to Howard or had teaching experience at both the high school and the university, and many of the public school administrators and school board members also had Howard connections. In addition, it was the aspiration of most of the black public schools’ top students to matriculate at Howard after graduation.

Chapter Four looks at a brief but important period in Howard University’s history, in which the university trustees appointed Mordecai Johnson as the university’s first black president, who then won a critical legislative victory when Congress amended the school’s charter to officially authorize the federal government’s yearly appropriation to Howard’s budget. Johnson’s appointment was a crucial step in the direction of black autonomy for the nation’s preeminent black university. At the same time, the university’s efforts to secure closer financial ties to the federal government reflected that Howard’s leaders realized they needed external support. The arguments they made about federal government support, however, emphasized the national government’s obligation to ensure that black citizens had equal access to higher education. They saw the cemented financial relationship to Congress not as a threat to their authority, but rather as a commitment by the federal government’s to guarantee and protect their right to equal educational opportunity.

In the fifth and final chapter, I look at one of Mordecai Johnson’s highest priorities as Howard’s first black president: the transformation of Howard Law School from a mediocre, evening school into an accredited, highly respected law school in the late 1920s, which was effected by law school vice dean Charles Hamilton Houston. This chapter interprets this transformation as a contested process of professionalization in the years just before the coalescence of a conception of black civil rights in the 1930s. It also considers Charles
Houston’s conceptions of the social and political roles of black lawyers in blacks’ struggle for rights. As black Washingtonians had begun to think of their right to administrative autonomy and quality education in legal and political terms, Houston espoused the notion that black lawyers should be “social engineers” who would be critical in securing the right of all black Americans to educational equality. The Howard chapters build on the chapters about the public schools by charting the increasing development of the idea that education was a civil right.

This narrative of race and the politics of education in the nation’s capital challenges the dominant account of the backstory to the NAACP’s legal strategy against unequal and segregated education that ultimately led to the prosecution of Brown v. Board of Education. Typically, scholars point to the collaboration between Howard University Law School faculty and the NAACP legal team in the 1930s for the origins of the battle for educational equality and they consider the 1938 Supreme Court case Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada, which attacked racial inequality in higher education, to be the first real instance of either a legal or political attack against educational inequality. However, by looking at the efforts of local blacks in Washington, D.C. to preserve control over their public schools and to fight for educational equality in both the public schools and at Howard, it becomes apparent that ordinary citizens were waging legal and political battles for equal educational opportunity well before the onslaught of civil rights litigation began in the 1930s. What is more, these battles and the notion that education was a civil right began in the public schools themselves and then migrated upward to Howard University and higher education more generally. The ideas that influenced the Brown litigation in the mid-twentieth century were not the products of liberal legal scholars in the 1930s, but rather they emerged from rhetoric and strategies that had been used by ordinary black Washingtonians to protect the status of their public schools since the turn of the twentieth century.

Finally, because these ordinary citizens were residents of the District of Columbia, they brought forth their civil rights claims not to local or state authorities, but to the United States Congress. Congress, in turn, acted as an example to the nation not by guaranteeing local blacks their constitutional rights, which was fully in their power, but rather by denying them those rights. In response, black Washingtonians never gave up fighting for what they always knew was theirs: full citizenship rights in the city that was the capital of the world’s most powerful democracy.

17 See Kluger, Simple Justice; Patterson, Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy; and Klarman, From Jim Crow to Civil Rights.
CHAPTER ONE

“90,000 Strong”

Black Washington at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

On a warm June evening in 1905, thousands of black Washingtonians crowded into Washington D.C.’s Convention Hall to celebrate the graduation of nearly two hundred young men and women from Washington’s three black secondary schools. The palatial, decade-old hall, which had been decorated with red, white, and blue flowers for the occasion, was filled to capacity with the graduates’ families and friends, school officials, and two of the three District Commissioners. All were eager to commemorate the first joint commencement ceremony among the black normal school, the vaunted M Street High School, and the three-year old Armstrong Manual Training School, and to hear the speaker for the occasion: Booker T. Washington.¹

As the most famous African American in the country and the undisputed leader of his race, Washington had reason to accept the invitation to speak at a high school graduation, for this was no ordinary audience. “The influence of a man of our race who resides in the District of Columbia is far from local—it is national,” he pronounced. “In the words and in the thoughts of another—‘It is almost continental, almost IMPERIAL!’ No other group of ninety thousand members of our race…to be found in this or in any other country, is so high in the general average intelligence as is true of the ninety thousand of our people to be found in the District of Columbia.” This fact, according to Washington, brought with it tremendous responsibility:

…you do not teach alone in the District of Columbia, twenty thousand children, but in a very large degree you are the teachers of the THREE MILLIONS of children of our race scattered throughout this nation….Failure here is not local but national, and success here is not local but national, reaching the people in every part of this country.²

At a moment when a cohort of critics threatened his preeminence, Washington’s remarks were surely meant to flatter his audience, but they were also largely true.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Washington, D.C. was the center of black America. It had the largest concentration of African Americans of any city in the United States, who, in the two generations since emancipation, had cultivated a robust community.³ The city was home to both a large number of the country’s elite black families as well as a growing number of aspiring-class blacks who gravitated toward the District because of its unique educational and employment opportunities.⁴ Even those who did not live in Washington kept tabs on those who

³ Black Washingtonians were not starting from scratch during the post-Civil War period. The nation’s capital had been home to a large free black population since the early nineteenth century. These pioneers established important cultural and social institutions and spawned the tradition of vibrant community life.
⁴ Historian Michele Mitchell uses the term “aspiring class” to describe the tenuous African-American middle class, who were between the working poor and the elite, in the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth century. Membership in the aspiring class was not determined by wealth or occupation, but rather a set of beliefs, which, according to Mitchell, included “an abiding concern with propriety” and “a belief that morality, thrift, and hard work were essential to black progress.” Through espousing these values and displaying respectability, one with little wealth or education could be a part of the aspiring class. Michele Mitchell, Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 9-10
did. The *Boston Guardian, Cleveland Gazette, New York Age, Pittsburgh Courier, Chicago Defender* all had columns covering the goings on in Washington society.5

The other critical component of black Washingtonians’ influence, of course, was that Washington, D.C. was not just any city but the nation’s capital. Locals were intimately connected to the federal government not only because they lived in its backyard, but, more importantly, because it was also their local government. According to the Constitution, the nation’s capital fell under the jurisdiction of Congress, as opposed to a state legislature. After some experimentation with elected bodies governing the District together with Congress, for nearly 100 years beginning in the 1870s, Washingtonians had no elected officials. The senators and representatives who were the nation’s legislators were also Washington’s local lawmakers and keepers of the city’s purse strings. What is more, while Washington had always been a site for the federal government to exercise local authority, it became a vital laboratory for political experimentation during the Civil War and Reconstruction, especially when it came to policies concerning African Americans.6 The rest of the country, and African Americans in particular, were keenly interested in how the federal government handled local race relations. As Booker T. Washington alluded to in his graduation address, because the rest of the nation was keeping an eye on black Washington, local affairs had national implications.

This chapter shows how Washington, D.C.’s distinctive political culture helps illuminate the politics of black education in the heyday of white supremacy. For all Americans, but especially for black Americans in the generations after emancipation, education held the promise of freedom, citizenship, and equality, and it was bound up in emerging understandings of civil rights. The black public schools were perhaps one of the best sites to observe the complexity of discourse and strategy for racial advancement because education itself was both a vital component of racial uplift ideology and self-improvement, on one hand, and deeply connected to politics and democracy, on the other hand. Even the most conservative black Washingtonians, who in other instances cautioned blacks against political action or rights agitation, leveraged the rights they had been guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment to advocate for their public schools. Disfranchisement did not arrest political life in Washington. Instead, the absence of elections created alternative arenas for political contests and avenues for harnessing control over public life. In a city in which every citizen was disfranchised, black Washingtonians engaged in District politics through the public schools with the more immediate goals of shaping school policy and redistributing power in the nation’s capital and the ultimate goal of achieving racial equality on a much broader scale.

**The “Curious Condition” of District Politics**

The political status of Washington, D.C. vis-a-vis the federal government is convoluted, but critical to understanding the local political culture. The Constitution mandated that the national capital be a “federal city” in the sense that it was to be under the jurisdiction of Congress and independent of any state. However, from the passage of the Residence Act in 1790,


6 Kate Masur, *An Example for All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle over Equality in Washington, D.C.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 1. Masur quotes Senator Charles Sumner, who called Washington “an example for all the land,” in terms of the democratic and racially egalitarian local policies congressional Republicans enacted during Reconstruction, which, Sumner hoped, would influence the rest of the country. See Green, *Secret City*, 76.
which established Washington, D.C. as the permanent capital of the newly independent United States, there has been a continual tension between Washington’s role as the seat of the federal government and the District’s existence as a local place. On the one hand, as America’s federal city, Washington was intended to look the part, from the grand avenues in Pierre L’Enfant’s original plan for the city to the elegant monuments and parks called for in the McMillan Plan at the turn of the twentieth century to recent examples of urban renewal in Chinatown, parts of downtown, and the Southwest quadrant. While these efforts have made the city more appealing to visitors, they have done less to make the city more livable for its residents. On the other hand, there has always existed an American city apart from the federal government, with local communities comprised of local citizens. A recurring point of tension has always been that despite the fact that the federal government gave itself the authority to create and maintain D.C.’s public services and institutions, it has seldom been forthcoming with the resources to sustain them.

While the story of formal political power for much of Washington, D.C.’s history has been, in part, a tug-of-war between Congress and local actors, the disconnect between the federal city and the local place has been overemphasized. After all, Congress was not only the District’s legislature, but the federal government was also the city’s largest employer. The Civil War and Reconstruction had expanded the scope of the federal government’s power and the size of its bureaucracy to such an extent that the city’s boosters had given up on trying to establish Washington as an industrial hub. By the turn of the twentieth century, D.C. had grown into its role as the nation’s capital and the business of the federal government had won the nation’s attention. Because of this, Washingtonians were content to have the federal government as the city’s primary industry. Although there was some private manufacturing in Washington and many of the well-to-do were engaged in banking or real estate, the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, the Smithsonian Institution, the United States Navy Yard, and the Government Printing Office together employed thousands of men and women. All things considered, even though citizens of Washington often sparred with Congress over the District’s laws and finances, the city was too deeply connected to the federal government to exist without it.⁷

Still, Congress’s involvement in local affairs ebbed and flowed depending on the administration and the health of the city’s economy, but it generally preferred to remain aloof.⁸ Early in Washington’s history as the nation’s capital, Congress ceded some of its power by establishing an eight-member board of aldermen, a twelve-member board of common council, and a mayor, all of whom were elected.⁹ According to historian David L. Lewis, this action was not motivated by an effort to make Washington more democratic, but rather to absolve Congress of some of its responsibility for the city’s finances. In fact, during almost the entire period Washingtonians enjoyed elected local governance, the vast majority of Washingtonians (blacks and women) could not vote. And never during this period did Washingtonians have representation at the federal level.¹⁰

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⁹ The mayor was initially appointed by the President, but in 1820, Congress provided for mayoral elections.
¹⁰ Lewis, *District of Columbia*, 22.
Starting during the Civil War, the Republican Congress took a more active role in local governance, and black Washingtonians took advantage of the Republican Party’s increasing commitment to racial equality by mounting campaigns for expansive civil and political rights. Even before the end of the Civil War, their activism had resulted in the insertion of an anti-discrimination clause in the incorporation of Metropolitan Railroad, the company that maintained the city’s streetcars. In 1867, several months after black Washingtonians had celebrated the passage of the 1866 Civil Rights Act, black men earned the right to vote for local officials and to hold office in the District of Columbia. Black male Washingtonians took advantage of the franchise while they had it, going to the polls in large numbers, electing blacks and whites supportive of their civil rights agenda to local offices, and earning political appointments.

However, in large part to curtail the power of Washington, D.C.’s ambitious and increasingly influential black population, which during Reconstruction constituted about one-third of the city’s population, Congress made a bold move: it disfranchised not just black Washingtonians, but all Washingtonians. First, Congress severely limited the electorate’s power with the District of Columbia Organic Act of 1871. The act unified the previously separate Washington City, Washington County, and Georgetown into a single municipality and established a territorial government with a popularly elected House of Delegates, an appointed governor and council, and a non-voting delegate to the U.S. House of Representatives. In addition, it gave the territorial legislature and the appointed Board of Public Works much greater power over the city’s budget and lessened the financial contributions of the federal government. While Washington’s white boosters and the Congress that passed the bill claimed that they were in favor of the territorial government to support business interests, in reality they sought to roll back the power of the recently enfranchised black male populace.

When, only three years after the territorial government’s advent, influential Board of Public Works member Alexander Shepherd had driven the city into bankruptcy through his virtually unchecked spending on sanitation, roads, parks, landscaping, public buildings, and other public works improvements, Congress pulled the plug on District voting rights altogether. Even though “Boss Shepherd,” as he came to be known, had vastly improved Washington’s infrastructure and public spaces, his profligacy led Congress to strengthen its control over Washington as never before. In 1874 Congress established a provisional government, which provided for direct Congressional rule with no elected officials and larger contributions to the city’s government in exchange for much less local fiscal control. This government became permanent with the District Organic Act of 1878. For nearly one hundred years, from 1874 until 1973, when Congress granted home rule to the District of Columbia, Washingtonians had no elected officials.

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11 Masur, An Example for All the Land, 100-12.
13 Masur, An Example for All the Land, 194-213. Masur shows how the “consolidation” movement, or the effort to consolidate the governments of Washington City, Washington County, and Georgetown, was made up of a coalition of white Republican businessmen who thought their interests would be better protected through presidentially appointed officials than democracy and more unabashed opponents of black suffrage. As Radical Reconstruction wore on and the Republican Party’s commitment to racial equality waned, there was less political will in Congress to protect African Americans’ newly acquired rights. See also Green, Secret City, 101-6.
14 Some of the clearest explanations of this period are: Constance McLaughlin Green, Washington: Village and Capital, 1800-1878 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962); Green, Secret City; Gillette, Between Justice and Beauty; Masur, An Example for All the Land; and Lewis, District of Columbia.
The only local governing body was a three-person Board of Commissioners, initially appointed by the President and then by the justices on the District Supreme Court (who were presidential appointees), one of whom had to be a member of the Army Corps of Engineers and all of whom had to have lived in the District for at least three years. The Board of Commissioners, which was effectively both the executive branch of city government and the official liaison between D.C. and Congress, had the power to appoint police, public health, and school board officials, and was required to submit yearly reports to Congress with budgetary and legislative recommendations. Congress, and the joint House and Senate Committee on the District of Columbia, acted as the legislature. Half of D.C.’s annual budget came from the federal government, with the other half supplied by property taxes. All expenditures and most appointments of officials had to be approved by Congress, which generally lived up to its reputation for stinginess and neglect with regard to District affairs.\(^\text{15}\)

There were several significant consequences of this system of governance. One was that because Congress was their legislature and they had no elected representatives, Washingtonians were more directly connected to the federal government than any other citizens. Congressional news was local news and House and Senate District Committee hearings resembled city council meetings, with community members in regular attendance expressing their concerns about local affairs, especially when a school bill was on the agenda. In many respects, Washington could be thought of as the United States writ small, or, put another way, as a window into how Congress thought local affairs should be administered.

A related consequence was that because Washingtonians’ formal political participation was curtailed, they found other arenas for political expression. This resulted in what Senator James Dolliver of Iowa recognized as the heightened politicization of other institutions, most notably, the Board of Education. At a Congressional hearing about the reorganization of D.C. public schools in 1908, he described how the absence of electoral contests created a “curious condition” in District politics:

> The ordinary enthusiasms of politics are absent…and the pent-up political vigor of the community has a very feeble and a very limited chance to express itself. The result is that wherever you get a board of education or anything else you have a pretty lively institution, because it deals with all the local and personal aspirations of the town which in other communities find expression in many directions, such as running for office and occupying various other positions.\(^\text{16}\)

Howard University professor and prominent black intellectual Kelly Miller observed the same phenomenon. In a House of Representatives hearing on the public schools two years earlier, he surmised that no matter how satisfied Washingtonians were with their schools, they would continually agitate for reform because, “in the city of Washington we have little general business on a large scale and no national politics, [so] the feelings of the population are thrown off about our public school system….”\(^\text{17}\) Both characterizations of the nature of District politics helped explain how the public schools, which are and have always been political battlegrounds, were primary theaters of political warfare for voteless Washingtonians.


\(^{16}\) Senate Committee on the District of Columbia, *To Establish the Direction and Control of Public Education in the District of Columbia: Hearing on Senate Bill 4032*, 60th Cong., 1908, Charles Sumner School Museum and Archives, Washington, D.C. [Hereafter cited as Sumner School Archives.]

A final—and somewhat ironic—consequence was that black and white Washingtonians were probably on more equal political footing than in any other part of the South, especially by the early twentieth century. Mary Church Terrell, recalling her days lobbying Congress as a member of the Board of Education, expressed a sense of solidarity in the lack of representation that all Washingtonians shared: “Since the citizens of the District of Columbia are all disfranchised, black, white, grizzle and gray, men and women, sane and insane, there is nobody for us to look to in time of trouble except the Congressmen upon whose political doorstep we have been laid.”18 This is not to say that Washington was a racially harmonious place or that white supremacy was not one of the city’s defining ideologies.19 Still, the fact that blacks and whites maintained the same formal political rights—or lack thereof—throughout what many refer to as the nadir of black life in the United States after emancipation meant that black Washingtonians wielded relatively more political power than their Deep South counterparts. This not only gave black Washingtonians more of a voice in local affairs but it also provided space and resources for vibrant and engaged community institutions.

Taken together, Washington, D.C.’s political status vis-à-vis the federal government, its citizens’ disfranchisement, and the active role in local politics that black Washingtonians had grown accustomed to make it an ideal site to study the politics of black education in the age of Jim Crow. The absence of elected local governance heightened the prominence of the Board of Education and inspired Washingtonians to exert power and influence in whatever ways they could. They testified at congressional hearings, lobbied individual congressmen who sat on the House or Senate District committee, formed citizens associations to represent their interests to the commissioners, held mass meetings at churches and organizational halls, signed petitions, wrote letters to congressmen and to the commissioners, and held demonstrations. In this context, black Washingtonians were just as politically enthusiastic as their white counterparts and they used their status as the nation’s largest and best-educated black community to influence local and, at times, national policy.

**Chocolate City**

In the song “Chocolate City,” released in 1975 on an eponymously named album, the funk band Parliament celebrated black Washington during an era in which urban blackness had come to be associated more with violence and decay than power and pride. “It’s my piece of the rock, and I dig you, C.C.,” the song proclaimed, affectionately truncating the nickname “Chocolate City” to “C.C.” Although the song was largely positive and even laudatory, it was also sprinkled with sarcasm (“They still call it the White House/But that’s a temporary condition, too.”) and, at certain moments, bitterness (“Hey, uh, we didn't get our forty acres and a mule/But we did get you, CC.”). Parliament lovingly embraced Chocolate City’s blackness, juxtaposed against its “vanilla” suburbs, and this song was a proclamation of that love in the face of the political abandonment and racial inequality that persisted after the civil rights movement.20

While the context was, of course, entirely different from that of the post-civil rights era,

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19 On the contrary, one reason white residents allowed the franchise to be taken from them so soon after it was introduced was that they quickly realized that blacks made up such a significant voting bloc that they wielded a great deal of power and were able to elect black officials rather easily. Green, *Washington: Village and Capital*, 393; Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty*, 66; Katherine Masur, “Reconstructing the Nation’s Capital: The Politics of Race and Citizenship in the District of Columbia, 1862-1878,” PhD diss. University of Michigan, 2001.
turn-of-the-twentieth-century Washington was in many ways its own kind of “Chocolate City.” First, black Washingtonians harbored similarly conflicting feelings about their city. On the one hand, they were deeply proud of their community’s accomplishments in less than two generations since emancipation and they took advantage of every opportunity to celebrate how far they had come. On the other hand, they also recognized how short their freedom fell from the promises of the Reconstruction era, so they registered their discontent with the continuance of racial inequality and worked in various ways to overcome prejudice and reform discriminatory institutions. In addition, while D.C. was not majority black at the turn of the twentieth century as it was when Parliament released their album (“The last percentage count was eighty,” according to the song), Washington had the largest population of African Americans—both numerically and proportionately—of any city in the country. Just as Parliament boasted about the quantity of African Americans in Washington in the 1970s, black Washingtonians repeatedly referenced that they were “90,000 strong” in the District and that because they made up roughly one-third of the city’s population meant that they were entitled to one-third of its resources. 21 Without the vote, they could not make their presence felt at the ballot box, so instead they referenced the significance of their population in speeches, newspaper articles, requests for school funding submitted to the Board of Commissioners, and petitions to Congress. Black Washingtonians were proud and protective of their turn-of-the-century Chocolate City and they saw it as a bastion of accomplishment and opportunity in the face of Jim Crow.

In 1900, Washington, D.C. was home to an impressive number of influential black social institutions, which structured black life in the District and beyond. Membership at the city’s churches, such as the prominent trio of the Metropolitan AME, the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian, and the Nineteenth Street Baptist, flourished. Clubs and charitable organizations, such as the black YMCA, the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, and the Colored Social Settlement involved large numbers of both elite and poorer black Washingtonians. A cohort of some of the foremost African-American women, including Ida Wells-Barnett, Mary Church Terrell, Margaret Murray Washington, and Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, established the National Association of Colored Women in Washington as the national hub of the black women’s club movement in 1896. Some of Washington’s most elite black intellectuals gathered in the American Negro Academy (ANA), a black learned society founded by Alexander Crummell, to discuss black scholarship and black citizenship more generally. Local black men and women, as well as renowned visitors from around the world, gathered by the hundreds at meetings of the Bethel Literary and Historical Association to hear talks about art, literature, and history, and to debate strategies for advancing the status of African Americans and improving race relations. 22

One of the most widely read black newspapers of the period, the Washington Bee, chronicled life and politics in Washington for a national readership. The Bee’s editor, William Calvin Chase, who ran the newspaper from its inception in 1882 until he died in 1921, adopted the motto, “Honey for friends, stings for enemies,” to sum up his editorial approach. Indeed, he used his newspaper as a bully pulpit to call attention to racial injustice, praise race leaders who he thought were doing good work, and also to gossip about local elites and dole out vicious

21 According to the 1900 census, there were 86,702 blacks in Washington and 191,532 whites; the city was 31.1% black. In 1910, there were 94,446 blacks and 236,128 whites; the city was 28.5% black. The proportion remained roughly the same until the 1940s. By 1910, the only other city that had more than 90,000 African Americans was New York, but, because Washington is so much smaller than New York, the proportion of blacks there was much higher. Thirteenth Census of the United States, 573; Meier, Negro Thought in America, 274.

criticism to those he disagreed with. While Chase was always an advocate for race progress, his politics were inconsistent. This was a result both of his volatile and eccentric personality as well as his business’s bouts of financial trouble, which led him to approach the most well-connected black leader at the time, Booker T. Washington, for help keeping the paper afloat. Still, between the Bee’s articles, Chase’s editorials, articles reprinted from other newspapers, and letters and contributions from others, the Bee was an invaluable barometer of black thought in this period.\(^{23}\)

Washington’s black educational institutions also thrived. Howard University attracted some of the nation’s most influential black intellectuals and trained hundreds of future race leaders as undergraduates and as doctors, dentists, pharmacists, and lawyers in its graduate schools. Black parents sent their children to well-regarded public grade schools, which were staffed by teachers who had graduated from the Myrtilla Miner Normal School. The most promising students went on to M Street High School (which became Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in 1916), which was one of the best public high schools in the country. M Street’s teachers and administrators often held bachelors degrees from Howard University or private northern colleges, and some also held advanced degrees. Young men and women who earned diplomas from M Street or Armstrong Manual Training School aspired to teach in the public schools or secure steady, reputable, white-collar employment with the federal government as clerks or stenographers. Taken together, at the turn of the twentieth century, no other city had as many opportunities for African Americans as Washington, D.C.\(^{24}\)

Although black Washingtonians were undeniably better off than their Deep South counterparts, they still faced tremendous discrimination and inequality. The starkest example of this was racial segregation. Most of the District’s public recreational spaces were segregated: blacks and whites used separate playgrounds, tennis courts, and swimming pools, and the city’s one eighteen-hole golf courts was exclusively for whites. While federal government institutions such as the Capitol building, the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian museums, and the National Zoo were technically open to blacks, Howard sociologist William H. Jones observed that very few blacks patronized them. For those who did he noted, “[B]oth races mingle freely, but are careful about maintaining their social distances.” Washington’s largest park, Rock Creek Park, was also open to both races, but blacks tended to stay away other than the first Monday after Easter when, according to Jones, whites “seem to understand that this is the Negroes’ day and either remain at home or go elsewhere.”\(^{25}\)

Whereas some of these publicly maintained institutions and recreational areas were not legally segregated, most privately owned theaters, restaurants, dance halls, bars, and other facilities were. Black Washingtonians could see first-rate theatrical productions and musical performances at the Howard Theatre and first-run films at the black-owned Lincoln Theater, but were either forced to sit in the balcony or were completely excluded from the city’s other theaters. Glen Echo, an amusement park northwest of the city in suburban Maryland, also prohibited blacks, so black Washingtonians and their families instead went to Suburban Gardens, which, despite its name, was located within city limits in the Deanwood neighborhood in


\(^{24}\) Jacqueline M. Moore’s book Leading the Race provides a comprehensive overview of black Washington at the turn of the twentieth century.

Black Washingtonians also faced discrimination in housing. In her memoir *A Colored Woman in a White World*, Mary Church Terrell devoted a whole chapter, euphemistically called “Buying a Home under Difficulties,” to her and her husband Robert Terrell’s struggles to buy a home in Washington in the first decades of the twentieth century. Terrell chronicled several different housing searches over the years. The first time, they fell in love with a house two houses beyond the border between the black neighborhood known as Howard Town and Le Droit Park, which at that point was still all white.27 When the previous owner refused to sell it to a black couple, a friend of theirs helped them find a sympathetic (and wealthy) white man to buy the house instead and then immediately sell it to the Terrells. The second time, nearly twenty years later, Terrell put a deposit on a house in a different neighborhood, only to have the deal fall through months later. Her real estate agent said that it was probably for the better because, he told her, had they moved there, “Neither the milkman nor the iceman would have served you. And every time you or the other members of your family appeared on the street, the boys in the neighborhood would have pelted you with bricks and stones.” After that experience, Terrell and her family lived in several rental homes to avoid such humiliation. To purchase the final house they bought several years later, they had to pay several thousand dollars more than the asking price, which Terrell said was common for blacks in both home purchases and rentals.28 As a result of these methods of discrimination that Mary Church Terrell encountered in addition to racial covenants put in place by white neighborhoods around the city, by the 1920s residential segregation had been cemented in Washington.29

Working-class blacks, too, were increasingly ghettoized. While thousands of poor blacks had lived in ramshackle homes in Washington’s alleys since the nineteenth century, these alley communities had previously been scattered throughout the city, often behind the homes of wealthy whites. In the twentieth century, however, the alley communities had also come to be located in more densely populated areas of the city with much higher concentrations of blacks of all classes. And, just as blacks who purchased homes often had to pay a premium, alley landlords often rented alley dwellings to working-class blacks at prices far higher than they were worth.30

Blacks across social classes were discriminated against in employment as well. The study *Segregation in Washington*, which was published by a federal government committee in 1948, gave an accurate picture of employment for blacks during the preceding half century when it said, “If Horatio Alger had a colored face, he would have a hard time in the capital today.”

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26Ibid., 100-36.
27 Terrell, 114. According to Terrell, there was actually one black family living in Le Droit Park at the time, but she did not say who they were. She said that whites in Le Droit Park went to such lengths to keep blacks out of their neighborhood that they erected a makeshift fence to keep black residents of Howard Town from even passing through Le Droit Park on their way downtown.
28 Ibid., 114-19.
29 Residential segregation was one of the District NAACP branch’s foremost issues in the 1920s. One of the best known cases that NAACP lawyers filed against housing discrimination was *Corrigan v. Buckley*, which targeted racial covenants—agreements among neighbors not to sell their homes to blacks—in Washington, D.C. The case made it to the U.S. Supreme Court, where the justices refused to rule on the issue of the legality or judicial enforceability of racial covenants because the covenants themselves were enacted by individuals, not the state. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 144; see also Kenesaw M. Landis, *Segregation in Washington: A Report of the National Committee on Segregation in the Nation’s Capital* (Chicago: The National Committee on Segregation in the Nation’s Capital, 1948), 30-8.
Almost all skilled jobs were filled by whites, whereas most janitors, charmen, and domestics—in other words, the lowest paid, least skilled workers—were black. Indeed, Horatio Alger would have had a difficult time moving up in the world if employment discrimination based on the color of his skin prevented him from advancing beyond being a messenger for a government agency. While the federal government had been an important source of middle-class, white-collar work for blacks since the late nineteenth century, black workers were gradually segregated, demoted, and altogether excluded starting during Woodrow Wilson’s administration. While black men and women had been stenographers and clerks under Republican administrations, beginning in the 1910s they were relegated to being janitors, cooks, or messengers.

Given the extent and nature of discrimination black Washingtonians faced during what has been called the “nadir” of American race relations, it is tempting to conclude that the black community in Washington inhabited a “secret city,” as historian Constance McLaughlin Green did in her 1967 book about black Washington. Even as historians like Green, Jacqueline Moore, Willard Gatewood, and others, have used the notion of the “secret city” or the “veil” to explore the vibrancy of black life apart from whites, others have shown that segregation itself was less about total separation and black invisibility than it was a system of controlling the interactions between blacks and whites. Each time Congress or individual white Washingtonians discriminated against blacks or tried to impose a new type of segregation, black Washingtonians pushed back. Sometimes blacks acted first by pushing the boundaries of the institution of segregation and eliciting responses from whites. For example, black Washingtonians engaged in numerous legislative battles against streetcar segregation, black federal government employees protested against increased segregation in their workplaces, and even black domestics resisted abuse from their employers. Taken together, there was a great extent and variety of political action among black Washingtonians during the so-called “nadir” in post-emancipation black freedom. In addition, rather than creating a completely separate and secret society apart from whites, segregation as an institution and the competing forces of white supremacy and equality were always in flux and were continually being negotiated by both whites and blacks. With these facts in mind, it was appropriate both to trumpet black Washingtonians’ achievements while at the same time exposing all of the ways in which social, economic, and political life in the nation’s capital were constructed upon a foundation of white supremacy.

Another troubling characteristic of black society was its class and color stratification. In the early years of the twentieth century, black Washington’s well-educated, accomplished, and upwardly mobile elite took pains to separate themselves from poor and working class blacks. In addition, even within the upper echelons of black society, lighter-skinned blacks sought to exclude those with darker complexions. These black elites, referred to as the “Black Four Hundred,” “colored aristocracy,” “upper tens,” “first families,” or simply “best society,” formed exclusive clubs such as the Lotus Club, Monday Night Literary, Monocan Club, What Good Are We Club, and dozens of others. Many of these clubs had unspoken rules about the social

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31 Landis, Segregation in Washington, 54-5.
33 Green, Secret City; Moore, Leading the Race; Gatewood, Aristocrats of Color; Moss, The American Negro Academy; Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, Living in, Living out: African American Domestics in Washington, D.C., 1910-1940 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994); Masur, An Example for All the Land; Yellin, “In the Nation’s Service.”
standing and complexion of their members and guests. There were even rumors about color discrimination in the schools, including lighter-complexioned students excluding darker students from on-campus clubs, light-skinned parents trying to prevent darker children from attending M Street High School, and administrators favoring paler teachers as new hires and for promotions. Historian Constance McLaughlin Green quoted from a black newspaper, which lamented, “There is more discrimination among the colored people than there is among the white against the colored.”

Historians have come to different conclusions about the extent of class and color stratification among black Washingtonians and how to interpret these social divisions. Some, such as Constance McLaughlin Green and Audrey Elisa Kerr, emphasized that there was a rigorous class and color hierarchy that structured intra-racial relations in early twentieth-century Washington. In her book on the black elite, Jacqueline Moore argued that relations among elite and working-class blacks actually improved in the first decades of the twentieth century as white supremacy became increasingly entrenched. Green also conceded that black Washingtonians of different social strata banded together as Jim Crow tightened its stranglehold in Washington. Alfred Moss, in his book on the American Negro Academy, and Willard Gatewood, in his study of the black elite at the turn of the twentieth century, both acknowledged the snobbery of black intellectuals and aristocrats, respectively, and admit that their condescension toward the black masses often turned to outright scorn. At the same time, both authors noted that the black elites’ conceit also created a sense of noblesse oblige and led them to believe in their responsibility for the advancement of the race as a whole, an attitude that often resulted in good works and collaboration.

While the black elite were fragmented, competitive, and generally not of one mind on most topics, one philosophical thread that united them was their faith in racial uplift ideology. Uplift ideology was complicated, but it can best be understood as a belief that black advancement and racial equality would come about through representative black elites demonstrating their good citizenship and respectability to white Americans and doing their part to educate poorer blacks intellectually and morally to eventually improve their status as well. This belief system had several key elements. It depended on class differentiation and the ability of whites to distinguish “respectable” blacks from their inferiors. It also held that social status was evolutionary, meaning that those at the bottom of the social hierarchy had hope of improving themselves through education. More generally, it assumed that white supremacy was a result of whites’ attitudes and perceptions, which could be changed if given enough examples of how far a certain class of black Americans had come since slavery.

If blacks demonstrated their respectability and proved their good citizenship, so the theory went, whites should change their minds. In this way, racial uplift ideology forced black

35 Green, Secret City; Kerr, The Paper Bag Principle. The subject of Kerr’s book, in fact, is the perceived and rumored roles of light skin color among blacks in Washington. The title of her book refers to “paper bag” tests, which were part of both the practice and lore of this entrenched “colorism” in Washington’s black community.
36 Moss, The American Negro Academy; Gatewood, Aristocrats of Color; Graham, Our Kind of People. Elitism is also, of course, one of the central problem’s of W.E.B. DuBois’s theory of the responsibility of the race’s “talented tenth” to uplift the race as a whole.
elites to confront the same tragic “twoness” W.E.B. Du Bois captured in his “double-consciousness” concept: they simultaneously nurtured an evolving race consciousness as they perceived themselves through the censorious gaze of whites. Another reason uplift ideology was so potent in black society was that working-class blacks were also concerned with their public perception. Historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham described black Baptist women’s efforts to redefine the popular representation of themselves and black Americans in general as the “politics of respectability,” whereby these women sought to counter symbolic representations of white supremacy through demonstrating morals, manners, and skill at women’s work.

Racial uplift ideology helped explain elite black Washingtonians’ perceptions of themselves and their role in Washington’s larger black community. It also added depth to the tremendous importance of education in African Americans’ lives in this period. Black schools themselves were particularly important institutions not only because of the centrality of schooling in the uplift of the black masses but also because they were a critical site for black elites to demonstrate their abilities as teachers and administrators both to other members of their race as well as to white America. The black schools in Washington, D.C.—including both the first-rate public schools and Howard University—were seen as points of pride for African Americans in general and were central to their hopes for the advancement of their race.

“O Howard, We’ll Sing of Thee”

At the turn of the twentieth century, Howard University was, like many American universities, in a period of transition. Freedman’s Bureau commissioner General Oliver O. Howard, along with a group of Congregational Church members, founded the university in 1867 as the first biracial university in the South. The student body initially was biracial, the faculty was primarily white until the racial balance began to shift at the turn of the twentieth century, and by the second decade of the twentieth century it was seen by all as a truly “Negro” university. When Howard was founded, its only academic programs were in theology, medicine, and teacher training, and over the next several decades the administration continued to expand its programs and course offerings to include a complete liberal arts curriculum; applied sciences and engineering; and graduate programs in law, dentistry, and pharmacy. Quickly, Howard University became the primary training ground for black doctors, lawyers, pharmacists, and dentists in the United States. It was also the college many local high school graduates aspired to attend and it drew from the most talented graduates of black high schools and preparatory schools around the country.

Despite Howard’s growth in its first few decades, it remained deficient in a variety of areas. The university still had a preparatory program, in which students could take secondary and even elementary coursework. This program helped students, especially those who came from parts of the South where they could not have gotten a high school education, complete the necessary coursework to matriculate as a Howard undergraduate. Some students did, in fact, go on to be successful university students, but some did not, and others left the university with a “certificate”—the equivalent of an associate degree—rather than a bachelor’s degree. While the Preparatory Department was designed to increase university access to a broader range of

students, it also damaged the university’s academic reputation. Further weakening Howard’s status were the facts that several of its programs were not accredited and that it was not uncommon for faculty to teach outside their areas of specialization. Howard historian Walter Dyson recounted examples of a criminal law professor who also taught agriculture and a political science professor who was simultaneously an economics professor, university treasurer, dean of men, assistant to the university president, and head of religious studies. These “Jacks of all trades” not only devalued the scholarship coming out of the university and the bachelor’s degrees its students received, but were also a sign that Howard was behind the times in terms of a more general modernization of higher education.

A final stumbling block to higher achievement was financial. Howard was initially funded by the Freedman’s Bureau, and then, after the Freedman’s Bureau was dissolved, it went several years with no federal government support at all. Seeing that the university was unable to grow without an infusion of funds, in 1879 Congress approved the federal government’s first appropriation to Howard—a modest $10,000—and these appropriations would continue each year, although they were not guaranteed until 1928. In the intervening years, the university administration remained in the dark about the extent of funding they would receive from Congress until they began debating the next year’s appropriation bill. Various university presidents and deans did court contributions from private philanthropies and, depending on the year, they tended to be quite successful. Still, financial uncertainty plagued Howard until well into the twentieth century.

While Howard had its shortcomings, it was still considered the best black university in the country. Fisk University, in Nashville, and Atlanta University were also strong, but Howard eclipsed them, in part because Howard tended to have an easier time courting top faculty because the lifestyle was better for blacks in Washington than it was in Nashville and Atlanta. This fact, along with a steadier flow of federal government funds and a series of presidents committed to improving the quality of scholarship and education at Howard, led to improvements in the university’s physical plant and academic programs in the first decades of the twentieth century.

As Howard’s academic programs, campus, and alumni community expanded, so too did its reach into the local community. Howard’s campus is perched on top of a hill that overlooks some of Washington, D.C.’s most renowned black neighborhoods: Shaw, U Street, and LeDroit Park. While Washington’s neighborhoods had been racially integrated since the influx of migrants during the Civil War, racial restrictions began to tighten at the turn of the twentieth century, which resulted in a concentration of black residents in these areas and the efflorescence of the storied U Street corridor. Elite and middle-class blacks, some of whom were connected to Howard, bought homes in Shaw and also in what was called the “Strivers’ Section,” a few blocks west of Shaw. As the black population continued to expand and as more black intellectuals came into Howard’s orbit, they began to purchase the exquisite Victorian homes in LeDroit Park, which had originally excluded blacks.

By the 1910s, Howard was becoming a modern university, not only academically, but socially as well. Until that point, both because of its strong affiliation with various Protestant denominations and social trends more generally, campus life other than academics did not

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40 Ibid.; Holloway, Confronting the Veil; Kluger, Simple Justice, 123-25.

41 Dyson, Howard University, 301-14.

42 Holloway, Confronting the Veil, 37-40.
include much beyond chapel services. In the second and third decades of the twentieth century, however, publications, clubs, theater, choral groups, fraternities and sororities, and sporting events were all important parts of life on the “hilltop,” as Howard’s campus was known. While Howard had previously had no publications other than a sporadically published yearbook and a struggling university press, the Alumni Association began distributing a newsletter in 1922 and a group of students initiated The Hilltop, a monthly student newspaper, in 1924, which together helped unite the student and alumni communities. The Howard Theatre hosted performances several nights a week by the acclaimed acting troupe the Howard University Players, in addition to pageants and cabarets, and the university’s seven fraternities and sororities regularly sponsored dances and other social events.

Sports became a popular attraction at Howard in the 1920s. Howard’s baseball, basketball, and football teams drew black sports fans from around the city to watch them compete against other black universities. The main event, though, was the Thanksgiving football game between Howard and Lincoln University, which was played at Howard’s stadium every other year. The Howard-Lincoln game was one of the most highly anticipated social events for blacks up and down the eastern seaboard, with more than 10,000 people traveling from around the region to watch the game in the university’s 20,000-seat stadium and participate in the weekend’s festivities. Davy Carr, the narrator in Edward Christopher Williams’s 1926 novel When Washington Was in Vogue set in 1920s Washington, summed up his experience at the game:

The scene was the American League Ball Park on Georgia Avenue, situated a short block from the center of colored Washington, on the edge of its best residential district, and on the road from that district to the University. The park seats, I am told, twenty-two thousand people. While I lay no claim to proficiency in estimating crowds, I should say there were about twelve thousand people present. However, it was not the size, but the average quality of the crowd which was interesting and significant. Almost everyone was well dressed, large numbers were richly dressed, and too many were overdressed. All the great centers of colored population were represented, from Atlanta to Boston, and from Chicago to Atlantic City. Most of the women came to show their clothes, and, with the exception of the students, and those who had bets on the game, the major part of the crowd paid little attention to the contest itself, for the people and not the game were the real center of interest for most of them. From the viewpoint of the majority of the spectators, it was a social function, and not an athletic contest.

Writing in 1927, Howard sociologist William H. Jones confirmed this portrayal. He likened the biennial event to Carnival in New Orleans, with members of the black elite parading up and down U Street displaying their fanciest new clothes and driving their swankiest new cars. All of these events—the Howard-Lincoln game, other sports games, dances, performances—attracted not only those who were affiliated with Howard, but members of the entire black community. According to Jones, Howard played a vital role in the social life of black Washington. “Throughout the entire school year,” he wrote, “the University meets the

43 Dyson, Howard University, 124-5.
44 Ibid., 229.
47 Jones, 73-4.
recreational needs of scores of colored persons through its athletics and other forms of entertainment.\textsuperscript{48}

In addition to this larger role in black culture and life, Howard developed a strong connection to the local public schools. It was not uncommon for eventual Howard faculty to cut their teeth at M Street High School or for Howard alumni to remain in the District to teach. Some Howard professors and administrators served as members of the Board of Education, while others who never officially served in the public schools still lobbied Congress on their behalf. Howard professors were often recruited to speak at lecture series for public school teachers and, if they had children, it was likely that they would have some of these teachers. Finally, a large portion of the young men and women who graduated from M Street High School, the lone black academic high school, dreamed of matriculating at Howard after graduation. While at the turn of the twentieth century Howard was not quite the “capstone of Negro education” that Dyson would call it several decades later, it was steadily expanding and beginning to attract leading black intellectuals.

**The Segregated Schools in the Nation’s Capital**

Even though 1905 marked the centennial for the white schools in Washington, D.C.—the first “colored” school opened in 1807, two years after the first white school—Winfield Scott Montgomery, Assistant Superintendent of the black public schools at the time, contributed a lengthy account of the history of black education in the District for the Board of Education’s 1905 report. He divided the black public schools’ ninety-eight-year history into three epochs: the “pioneer,” the “philanthropic,” and, finally, the true “public school” period. The pioneer period lasted until the abolition of slavery in the District in 1862 and was characterized by small private and church schools, often run by members of the city’s large free black population. The philanthropic phase was in the short period between 1862 and 1868, while, in Montgomery’s words, “the great North was pouring out its blood and money to preserve the union,” and benevolent white northerners (usually women) gathered in Washington to open schools for the masses of freed slaves and contrabands who flooded the city in the final years of the Civil War. The public school period began when the Reconstruction government started financing these schools that had already been established, and continued through the District’s multiple forms of governance in the final decades of the nineteenth century.

More than a dispassionate sketch of these epochs in the history of black schools, Montgomery’s piece was suffused with pride in the educational achievements and aspirations of his forebears. He told of the slave who “hungered and thirsted after knowledge;” the founders of the pioneer period who “struggled against uncommon obstacles;” previous superintendents who “faithfully, conscientiously, and efficiently” performed their duties to build a school system “like a magnificent ship” ready to “sail forth to meet the future;” freedmen who were eager to “appreciate, enjoy, and contribute to the civilization and Christianity of which they were the splendid representatives;” and the first cohort of black women to teach in the new public school system during Reconstruction, who were characterized by their “sympathy with and ability and willingness to enter into and appreciate the feelings and aspirations of the learner.” Montgomery also made clear that the black school buildings themselves were points of pride. He described the Metropolitan AME Church, which for a time housed a school organized by the African Civilization Society, as “the largest and noblest edifice of its kind among the race here.”

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 78.
addition, the Miner Normal School, built in 1877, was an “imposing and commodious building” and “no more strikingly beautiful structure can be found among the numerous fine school buildings in the city” than Armstrong Manual Training School.

Montgomery used these characterizations as evidence against the inferiority of African Americans. “These early efforts, these results,” he insisted, “were, are, and must ever be a potent argument against inferiority and incapacity in a race whose thralldom was instituted and justified on those grounds.” He lauded the slaves and the “pauper pupils” who sought education during the pioneer period and used their determination to prove that “inferiority, inherent, hopeless then can not be successfully predicated of any people who against the most appalling obstacles, amidst the most galling conditions, literally broke into the temple of knowledge.” After describing the ascendance of the black schools with the dramatic increases in enrollment and the numbers of buildings and teachers, he made a final plea that the history of black education in the District showed that “this race…has earned and deserves the consideration and assistance of their fellowmen.” This last statement struck a different tone from the rest of piece. Rather than suggesting black autonomy and self-help, it instead demonstrated a demand for inclusion and access to the perquisites of freedom and democracy.

What stood out most from Montgomery’s piece were these two potentially conflicting threads: first, pride in his forebears for the value they placed on education and their success in sustaining and expanding black schools to become permanent institutions of racial uplift. Second, Montgomery closely associated the ideas of freedom, public education, and the federal government’s obligation to educate blacks and finance their schools. Racial uplift ideology valued education and “respectability” with the hope that through exhibiting these middle-class virtues, the race as a whole would achieve self-respect and, in turn, the respect of whites. In this conception, it was thought that blacks could and would elevate their position in society on their own through their comportment. As Montgomery put it, “self-help, self-activity, not mere passivity, are the open sesame of permanent progress and appreciation.” The second idea revealed a reliance on the government and, by extension, a belief that government-funded quality education was fundamental to American democracy and, indeed, a vital right of citizenship, which black Americans had been granted in the Fourteenth Amendment. Montgomery said as much in his assessment of the advent of federally financed public schools for blacks in the wake of the Civil War: “The freshly freed slave felt that the Government owed him an education. He had earned it by centuries of unrequited toil in the sweat and blood of bondage and deserved it for the manhood shown in the nation’s peril, in heroism on ‘the tented field’ and ‘in the imminent deadly breach.’” Indeed, according to Montgomery, continued government assistance, which had begun in the wake of the Civil War, was “natural and right.”

Often, Jim Crow era black thought is seen through the lens of two opposing political ideologies, where Booker T. Washington represents the conservative advocate of accommodation, self-help, industrial education, and economic stability before political inclusion, and W.E.B. DuBois is the progressive proponent of agitation, liberal arts education, and immediate political action to claim the rights guaranteed to blacks in the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments. Winfield Scott Montgomery’s piece was just one example of how these two views were not mutually exclusive. This simplistic dichotomy, in fact, obscures the


50 Ibid., 110.

51 Ibid., 116.
complexity of black thought and political action and is too blunt a tool to understand blacks’
political strategies and goals in this period. Even though the conflict between Washington and
DuBois became a socially and politically resonant trope among African Americans, most
people—including Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois—expressed more nuanced
understandings of their rights and employed more complex strategies for racial advancement
than their decision to support one side over the other implies. Moreover, education—especially
public education—is an inherently political endeavor. Montgomery’s history is just one example
of how African Americans often encouraged self-help and espoused racial uplift ideology while
actively engaging in politics, invoking the language of civil and political rights, and demanding
justice.

From the beginning, the black public schools in Washington were closely connected to
the federal government. Black public schools were created through an 1862 act of the
Freedman’s Relief Association, but the budgetary and administrative structures of this initial
system were so unworkable that adequate black public schools did not really exist until the late
1860s, when Radical Republicans held full control of the Reconstruction Congress.52 With the
help of Radical Republicans, Congress legislated that school funds would be taken from the
federal government’s general budget and distributed proportionately to black and white schools
based on population. Once the basic source of the budget was sorted out, the next ten years were
a period of experimentation with the structure of the black schools’ administration and their
relationship to the white public schools.

From the public schools’ inception in Washington, it was not a foregone conclusion that
they would be racially segregated. Throughout what Assistant Superintendent Winfield Scott
Montgomery labeled the “pioneer” period of black schools in D.C., black students were often
taught in separate schools because of laws and customs regarding slave education. Also, because
the early white public schools received minimal public support, it became the trend for
community groups and churches to open their own schools. For free blacks this had meant
starting their own schools independent from whites. While in light of D.C.’s history it was
unsurprising that the schoolhouses would be segregated, there were several attempts before the
end of Reconstruction to integrate the schools. Charles Sumner, one of the Civil War era’s
greatest champions of racial equality, introduced several bills to integrate the schools, some of
which nearly passed. In addition, there was at least one movement of white and black community
members to open an integrated schoolhouse in their neighborhood, and there were several black

52 In the 1862 act, the entire budget of the black schools was to come from taxes on black-owned property, of which
just ten percent was to be allocated the public schools. There were several problems with this financial scheme.
Most obviously, the majority of blacks who lived in the District were propertyless and the black population that was
theoretically entitled to an education from these new public schools swelled daily with freed people and contrabands
from Maryland, Virginia, and other nearby slave states. Thus, this ten percent figure would have been far too little to
finance adequate schools. Second, District tax collectors did not record race, so it was impossible to distinguish
black property taxes from white taxes. Also, in the initial act, the black schools were placed under the board of
trustees that already existed for the white schools, but it quickly became clear that the white board was indifferent to
Schools, District of Columbia,” James C. Wright Papers, Box 120-2 folder 83, Manuscript Division, Moorland-
Spingarn Research Center Howard University [hereafter cited as Man. Div. MSRC]; Williston Lofton, “The
Accommodations,” PhD diss., American University, 1944, 128-131; Lillian Dabney, “The History of Schools for
Negroes in the District of Columbia, 1807-1947,” PhD. diss., Catholic University of America, 1949, 112; Green,
Secret City, 67.
families who tried to cross the hardening color line by sending their children to white schools.\textsuperscript{53} The segregated system that resulted was never actually legally mandated, but was often treated as if it were.\textsuperscript{54} Still, the fact that there was no law on the books mandating racial separation in the public schools, as there was by this point in nearly every southern state, was legally and symbolically significant. It gave black Washingtonians more leverage in the many debates over reorganizing the school administration over the years and it left the issue of the distribution of power between whites and blacks in the schools much more open than in places with a more strictly legislated racial hierarchy.

Until 1874, the black schools alternated between being governed by a single board of trustees together with the white schools and having their own, each of which had advantages and disadvantages for the black schools. While being included in the administrative structure of the white schools signaled a spirit of integration and equality on the one hand, the black schools also risked either neglect or dictatorial control by prejudiced whites. It was clear in 1872, a point at which the black schools had their own board of trustees, that when the final white member of the board of trustees for the black schools was replaced with a black man, many black Washingtonians celebrated the autonomy and the opportunities for leadership positions that they were afforded through having their own board.\textsuperscript{55} But, in 1874, Congress disbanded the black board and established a single board of trustees for all public schools appointed by the Board of Commissioners. It became customary that even as the number of trustees fluctuated, the racial composition of the board reflected the general population, which hovered around one quarter to one third black.\textsuperscript{56}

The administrative structure of D.C. public schools, until the schools were reorganized in 1900, can be broken down into five basic levels: the Board of Trustees, superintendents, supervising principals, principals, and teachers, each of whom worked in one of the District’s eleven school divisions. At the top was the Board of Trustees, which was renamed the Board of Education in the 1900 school reorganization. While the number of trustees fluctuated, in 1900 there were eleven, one for each division, and they were appointed by the Board of Commissioners. The trustees were figureheads with no real executive authority over the schools and their most important function was to submit a yearly report to the Board of Commissioners, who would then relay the report (the most important part of which was the budget) to Congress. Neither the trustees nor the commissioners had control over the budget—all appropriations for the schools came directly from Congress.

The Board of Trustees united two roughly parallel systems—one white and one black. Each system had a superintendent, who wielded considerable authority over their respective school systems and acted as an emissary between the supervising principals and the board, letting board members know what was happening in the schools. As of 1900, the elementary schools were divided into eleven divisions first by race and then by geography. The first six divisions, each of which contained a cluster of elementary schools presided over by a supervising principal, comprised all of the white elementary schools in Washington City (as opposed to county). The seventh and eighth divisions straddled Washington City and Washington County and were divided internally by race. The black elementary schools fell under divisions nine, ten,

\textsuperscript{53} Green, \textit{Secret City}, 100-2.
\textsuperscript{54} President’s Committee on Civil Rights, \textit{To Secure These Rights}; Kluger, \textit{Simple Justice}, 581-83.
and eleven, each with a supervising principal, and, since D.C.’s neighborhoods were still relatively integrated at this point, these districts overlapped geographically with the white divisions. In February and March, 1900, the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia would conduct an investigation that would result in some dramatic changes to this delicate balance of power between the white and black schools.

Thanks to contemporary debates about education policy, it is a truism in twenty-first-century American society that education is political. The truth is that education—especially public education—has always served a political function in the United States. The notion of the importance of an educated citizenry for the proper functioning of American democracy dates back to the founding of the United States, but as education historian James Anderson points out, so too does the notion of the education of the oppressed to prepare them for second-class citizenship. Another education historian, Ronald Butchart, makes the point that because education is designed to have an outcome that both stems from particular beliefs about people’s abilities and influences their future opportunities, education, like politics, is ultimately about the distribution of “justice, goods, and resources.” While for some the role of education has been to groom them for inclusion in the democratic citizenry by furnishing them with certain social and cultural resources, for others its role has been ensure their social, intellectual, and political inferiority.  

Public education has also been linked to politics on a more practical level, especially since the period of Progressive reform in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Progressives influenced pedagogy in American schools and altered the ways schools and public school systems were administered through instituting uniform standards and procedures for hiring and firing personnel, implementing increasingly bureaucratic administrative structures, and perpetuating the idea that schools should be run by “experts” with advanced training in the science of education. Although Progressives claimed that these reforms removed education from politics by placing policy decisions in the hands of social scientists rather than politicians, they in fact had the opposite effect. Education professionals (superintendents, principals, directors of instruction) wrangled with boards of education, legislatures passed myriad new regulations, and political bargaining became de rigueur. While the Progressive quest for school reform began in the better-funded northern urban school districts in the latter part of the nineteenth century, by the first decades of the twentieth century, southern and rural school districts also implemented reforms, although they often had less public funding to work with.

Schooling for black children during the same period, rather than evoking notions of Progressive reform and bureaucratization, instead conjures images of extreme poverty and neglect. The conditions in which the vast majority of African Americans went to school in the Jim Crow South are by now well known, thanks to historians like Leon Litwack, James Anderson, and Adam Fairclough, and to scholars in the first half of the twentieth century, such as Carter Woodson, W.E.B. DuBois, and, later, Horace Mann Bond and Gunnar Myrdal.

Anderson, The Education of Blacks in the South, 1-3; 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), xix; Woodson, The Mis-Education of the Negro. Education, of course, has also played a critical role in “Americanizing” immigrants to the United States. Education historians David Tyack and Larry Cuban quote Hannah Arendt, who noted that education has served both a broader and deeper political function in the United States than elsewhere because of “‘the role that continuous immigration plays in the country’s political consciousness and frame of mind.’” David Tyack and Larry Cuban, Tinkering toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 2.

Tyack and Cuban, 16-24; see also Tyack, The One Best System.
schools for black children were usually unheated, one-room shacks; textbooks at the “colored” schools, if there were any, were hand-me-downs from the white schools; the school length of the school year was determined based on the planting and harvesting seasons rather than pedagogical standards; funding for the colored schools was a small fraction of that allocated to schools for white pupils; if black communities sought private funding, they often had to appeal to white philanthropists’ partiality toward industrial education as opposed to a classical or liberal arts curriculum. Even in the post-Great Migration North, where anti-segregation laws that had been passed in many states during the post-Civil War years were still on the books, most black children were educated in separate and inferior schools. What made these material inequalities even more insidious was the way in which they institutionalized black subservience to the white power structure.59

According to many historians, the role of African Americans in both the politics of education in American life and in Progressive era reforms in particular has been that of the oppressed minority who has been schooled for second-class citizenship. To begin with, blacks’ disfranchisement throughout the South and lack of political representation were sometimes insurmountable obstacles to negotiating with state and local governments for better resources. When black teachers and administrators wanted to institute Progressive reforms, like opening high schools for black children, or when they sought private funding after the paltry allotment from public coffers ran dry, they had to appeal to whites from philanthropic foundations. In many communities, black families also pooled their own resources and contributed their own labor to building and improving schools. In most accounts, black educational advancement came at the hands of dedicated black teachers and community leaders with the financial help of private white philanthropies, in a realm almost entirely cut off from the white power structure, and blacks were largely removed from Progressive education reforms.

Just as Washington’s politics and black society were different from the rest of the South, so were its public schools. In Washington, D.C., however, where all residents were disfranchised, blacks maintained the same formal political rights as whites and blacks took advantage of their access to congressmen and school district officials to reform their schools. Black Washingtonians served alongside whites on the school board; black schools had black principals, black administrators, and a black superintendent; representatives from the black community testified at congressional hearings to advocate for their schools; and the black public schools remained just as current with Progressive curricular reforms, innovations in teacher training, and the introduction of kindergartens and junior high schools as the white public schools. While most southern school districts did not have any high schools until the early twentieth century (and high schools for African Americans came years—or decades—later), black Washingtonians opened a public high school for their children in 1870, several years before white Washingtonians, and it went on to become one of the best public high schools in the country. Taken together, these characteristics that distinguished the segregated public schools in Washington meant that the material conditions of schooling and the quality of education were better for black children in Washington than in most other parts of the country. What is more, thanks to the political activism of black Washingtonians, the black public schools in Washington

became bastions of power, progress, and autonomy. Through their efforts, black Washingtonians not only improved the quality of their segregated schools, but they also altered the nature and the meaning of segregation.

The Capstone of Black Public Education

While there were certainly divisions in the black community, one sentiment shared by most elite and middle-class blacks was the same degree of pride in and passion for their schools as exhibited by Assistant Superintendent Montgomery earlier in the chapter. The school that black Washingtonians were the most proud of was the colored high school, unofficially but affectionately known as M Street High School. M Street, which changed its name to Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in 1916, was a full-fledged academic high school that offered rigorous courses in every academic subject, whose graduates frequently went on to the best universities and continued on to careers as race leaders. Mary Church Terrell, one of the most prominent black women in Washington who at various points served as a teacher at M Street and Board of Education member, was not exaggerating when she said, “It would be difficult to name a high school, the graduates or former pupils of which have achieved success in such numbers and of such brilliancy as have those trained in the high school for Negroes in the District of Columbia.”

This was certainly true among black high schools. According to Crisis magazine, in 1917 Dunbar (as it was known at that point) had 146 graduating seniors, which was far more than any other black high school in the country. Fifty-nine of its graduates that year continued on to college, while fifty-seven went to normal school. Some of its best known alumni were Howard University historian Rayford Logan, civil rights lawyer Charles Houston, National Training School for Women founder and president Nannie Helen Burroughs, D.C. Municipal Court judge Robert Terrell, in addition to many locally and nationally known leaders in medicine, education, business, and law.

Equally as impressive as the students at M Street were its teachers and principals. As of 1917, when Terrell wrote a history of the black high school for the Journal of Negro History, Dunbar had had ten principals, two of whom had gone to Harvard, three to Oberlin, one to Dartmouth, one to Amherst, one to Western Reserve University, and one to the University of Glasgow in Scotland. Many of its teachers also held undergraduate and graduate degrees, which was rare in this period in both black and white public high schools. It was also not uncommon for professors at Howard to teach classes at M Street. Anna Julia Cooper, the intellectual and women’s rights advocate who went to college at Oberlin and later earned a Ph.D. at the Sorbonne, taught Latin for a number of years; Charles Houston, who went to Amherst and Harvard Law School, began his career as an English teacher at Dunbar; the eminent scholar of African-American history, Carter Woodson, often taught history classes at the high school.

It wasn’t only the high school that served an important role in black Washington; the elementary schools, too, were seen as engines of good citizenship and race progress for both students and teachers, especially since few black children made it to high school. School

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61 “Colored High Schools,” Crisis 14, no. 3 (July 1917): 124.
63 Ibid., 261.
enrollment statistics for the 1909-1910 school year show that white students were more evenly distributed among primary (first through fourth grade), intermediate (fifth through eighth grade), and secondary (ninth through twelfth grade) classrooms than black students and that black boys, especially, experienced a much more severe decline in enrollment after the primary grades than white boys.\textsuperscript{64} In Assistant Superintendent Roscoe Conkling Bruce’s analysis of these statistics, he said first that what was surprising about the overall enrollment statistics was not how great the differences were between the proportions of white and black students in the secondary and primary grades, but rather how small the differences were, given the “industrial and commercial disadvantages” black children and their families faced. This was an indication, he argued, of the extent to which “the colored Washingtonian has availed himself of those facilities with admirable enthusiasm and persistence.”\textsuperscript{65} Still, the statistics showed that until the third decade of the twentieth century, for the majority of black Washingtonians and their children, their involvement with the public schools ended by fifth grade.

The more remarkable (yet still unsurprising) statistic, according to him, was the drop off among black boys after the primary grades. Bruce attributed this to the fact that because boys were able to find better paying work at a younger age than girls, many parents pulled their sons out of school while allowing their daughters to stay a few extra years. In addition, more girls than boys wanted to attend high school because earning a high school diploma paved the way for admission to normal school and an elementary school teaching job—a career path to which boys were “seldom attracted.” For boys, high school was only necessary if they planned to go into the professions, which Bruce noted rather cynically were “overcrowded and in any event require special powers and a prolonged and expensive preparation.” The result was that at M Street High School, sixty-nine percent of the students were girls, and while twenty-nine percent of the girls who started at M Street made it to their senior year, only twenty-one percent of boys did, meaning that the graduating classes at M Street were often seventy to eighty percent female.\textsuperscript{66} Many of these female graduates aspired to be teachers and took the exams to enter the black Normal School Number Two, which was renamed Myrtilla Miner Normal School.\textsuperscript{67}

Actual conditions within the black elementary and secondary schools were uneven and many students came from families with few resources. One of the primary problems in the

\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
 & Primary grades & Intermediate grades & Secondary grades \\
\hline
Percent of white students & 48 & 39 & 13 \\
Percent of black students & 61 & 30 & 9 \\
\hline
Percent of black girls & 37 [sic—I believe the correct number is 57] & 33 & 10 \\
Percent of black boys & 67 & 26 & 7 \\
Percent of white girls & 46 & 40 & 14 \\
Percent of white boys & 50 & 39 & 11 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}


\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 206.

\textsuperscript{66} The national averages for the 1906-7 school year were twenty-five percent for boys and thirty-one percent for girls, which indicates white students who began high school had a higher rate of making it to the fourth year and there was a slightly smaller gender imbalance for whites than for blacks. Ibid., 207.

\textsuperscript{67} In the 1924 Dunbar High yearbook, beside the graduating seniors’ pictures they have written a few sentences about themselves. Included in this are their plans for the future, and almost all of the girls plan to become teachers and some specifically say they plan to begin at Miner Normal School the following year. 1924 Paul Laurence Dunbar High School Yearbook, Sumner School Archives.
schools was overcrowding. At various points, black elementary schools, which were often in small older buildings that had previously been white elementary schools, became so crowded that schools were forced to implement half-day schedules, where one half of the students would go to school in the morning and the other half in the afternoon. Overcrowding was a problem at M Street, too, where for several years there were sometimes two classes being conducted simultaneously in the same classroom because of lack of space. In both elementary and secondary schools, black students were often given leftover or old textbooks from the white schools, and there were often not enough for every student.\textsuperscript{68} As for the students, since most black Washingtonians were members of the poor and working classes, so too were the students. While school attendance improved over the years (hence the problems with overcrowding), one school board report said that truancy was still a problem in part because many children lacked shoes and that parents could not send their children to school barefoot.\textsuperscript{69} Among the high school population, however, many more students came from black Washington’s aspiring class. Many students at M Street and Armstrong, for example, had at least one parent who was a government employee.\textsuperscript{70} Even black children from families with slightly greater financial resources, of course, still suffered from these racial inequalities.

One way in which black teachers compensated for these disparities in resources and for black children’s more general lack of access to the city’s cultural institutions was by taking it upon themselves to improve their craft and provide students with extra enrichment. Longtime Dunbar teacher Mary Gibson Hundley said that she and other Dunbar teachers joined national organizations for teachers (since blacks were barred from local ones), visited New York City and other northern places where blacks were freer to move about, saved money to travel abroad, and read and studied alone. Since black students would be unable to participate in these cultural experiences on their own, Hundley said the Dunbar teachers brought their own experiences to the school to share with their students.\textsuperscript{71}

While the black and white schools in Washington were unequal by most measures, in some instances there was parity between the two systems. In the 1904-1905 school year, for example, the school board sponsored two parallel lecture series—one for whites and the other for blacks—that were open to the community. In some cases, the same speakers delivered the same talks in front of each audience on topics like “The Yellowstone Park,” “Spanish Architecture,” and “Bird Notes,” but black community members also heard Howard University professor Kelly Miller give a talk on “The Drift and Tendency of the Negro Population,” and National Association of Colored Women (NACW) founder Mary Church Terrell on her experiences in Europe at the woman’s congress. When the kindergarten movement swept D.C., the Board of Education opened a proportional number of kindergartens for white and black students and provided training for all new kindergarten teachers. To celebrate Shakespeare’s tercentenary in 1915, both black and white students and teachers held Shakespeare festivals on the same weekend at separate locations. The parity between the systems extended also to the curriculum, where, from the yearly Board of Education reports, it seemed that black and white children received the same quality of instruction and took comparable exams. It is also evident from these reports that black schools only obtained this level of instruction and extent of extracurricular

\textsuperscript{68} Moore, \textit{Leading the Race}, 86-90.
\textsuperscript{69} Report of the Board of Education to the Commissioners of the District of Columbia, 1909-10.
\textsuperscript{70} Hundley, \textit{The Dunbar Story}, 31; Report of the Board of Education to the Commissioners of the District of Columbia, 1903-04.
\textsuperscript{71} Hundley, \textit{The Dunbar Story}, 14.
programming because of the pressure they exerted on the Board of Education, the Board of Commissioners, and Congress.  

However, in spite of these instances of parity between the two systems and District of Columbia Commissioner Henry B.F. MacFarland’s proclamation that District schools provided “equal opportunity for all,” the most glaring inequalities between the two systems were appropriations, resources, and salaries, which will be addressed in more depth in Chapter Three. While the quality of the black schools in Washington compared with black schools elsewhere in the South merits emphasis, they were still not given the same kinds of resources as the white schools. By law, the black schools were to receive funds proportional to the number of black students, who were generally around one third of the school population. This was not the practice. Although both black and white administrators complained of Congress’s stinginess toward the schools, it was clear that black schools bore the brunt of congressional tightfistedness.

In addition to disparities in facilities, black teachers and administrators were paid less than their white counterparts. The administrative structure of the school district was such that the white schools had “directors” of instruction for each subject, while the black schools had “assistant directors.” The black assistant directors were not, in fact, assistants to the white directors; they were the directors of instruction for the black schools. The districtwide directors of drawing, music, physical training, and primary instruction were all white, but each of these fields also had a black assistant director who made $200 to $400 less per year than the white directors, even though they had comparable responsibilities. These position titles were a reflection of the inferior status—and inferior salaries—of black administrators in the bureaucratic structure. The following table of salary figures from 1900 further illustrates the salary differentials between white and black staff in the public schools:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>White Schools</th>
<th>Black Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>$3600</td>
<td>$2500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervising principals</td>
<td>$2000</td>
<td>$2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of primary work</td>
<td>$1500</td>
<td>$1100 (“Assistant Director”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarian</td>
<td>$695</td>
<td>No librarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerk</td>
<td>$1200</td>
<td>$800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messenger</td>
<td>$300</td>
<td>$200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Black teachers, too, were paid less than their white counterparts. In 1900, a group of black teachers sent a petition to Congress asking for raises to make their salaries comparable to teachers in the white schools. They noted that black teachers earned an average of $74.51, or roughly ten percent, less than white teachers. As the twentieth century progressed, the financial disparities between the black schools and the white schools widened. As will be discussed in Chapter Three, this became the target of a persistent equalization campaign waged by the District branch of the NAACP and various community leaders.

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72 Report of the Board of Education to the Commissioners of the District of Columbia, 1900-01 through 1929-30.
73 Board of Education Report to the Board of Commissioners, 1909-10.
74 Unsigned letter to Honorable Committee on Schools for the District of Columbia, March 12, 1900, folder 80, James C. Wright Collection, Man. Div. MSRC.
Since teaching was one of the few professions open to blacks and Washington had one of the best black school systems in the South, a job as a public school teacher in the city held the promise of both a higher salary and social advancement. This also meant that there was fierce competition for these highly coveted jobs. While the prerequisites to become a public school teacher in Washington changed somewhat over the first decades of the twentieth century, the general requirements were that one had to graduate from high school, complete two years of normal school (including practice teaching), and pass a rigorous exam. Normal school graduates were ranked based on their exam scores and given positions as first grade teachers according to their rankings until the available positions were filled. In this period, all teachers in Washington began their careers teaching first grade and were promoted to higher grades and increased salaries based on experience and positive evaluations from their principals. Despite school officials’ claims that they used standard formulas—products of late-nineteenth century civil service reform—for hiring teachers out of normal school and for promotions, the processes of hiring, promoting, and, especially, firing were often tainted by scandals and accusations of favoritism and inside dealing.

When Mary Church Terrell was a member of the Board of Education, she was bombarded with letters and visits to her home from local normal school graduates and their parents and young black teachers from other parts of the country who hoped to relocate to Washington, all trying to get an edge in the hiring process. The sense of urgency in these letters indicated how desirable District teaching positions were and the extent to which black women, especially, believed that winning—or losing—a job in the D.C. public schools would change their lives. For example, in 1906 Terrell received a number of letters about a proposed change in the District’s hiring policy, which would have given job preference to the most recent normal school graduates, or perhaps even to “new blood” from other cities, as opposed to those who had graduated the previous year and were unable to get jobs. Three women who graduated from the black normal school in 1905 and had not received appointments were particularly incensed that these jobs might go to non-Washingtonians and hoped that Terrell shared their snobbery. “From what source,” they asked in a letter to Terrell, “can we draw teachers better prepared and fitted than the products of our own educational system?” “Certainly nowhere,” they concluded.

The father of one of these women, Christian A. Fleetwood, also exchanged a series of letters with Terrell, in which he exhibited a thorough knowledge of the rules and policies of the Board of Education and a great deal of political and social savvy. After carefully dissecting the policies governing hiring practices, Fleetwood suggested that Terrell consult with her husband, Municipal Court Judge Robert Terrell, about the particularities of the legal issues involved. In case that wasn’t convincing, he also slipped in, “I assume you are interested [in this issue] of

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75 It was much more difficult for black normal school graduates to obtain teaching jobs in the District than for white graduates of the white normal school. In 1920, it was estimated that ninety percent of white normal school graduates and fifty percent of black normal school graduates eventually got local teaching jobs. This figure is deceptively high, however, because admission to normal school was competitive, and some students began but did not graduate from normal school, so many who aspired to be teachers were weeded out along the way. Board of Education Report to the Board of Commissioners, 1919-20.

76 Terrell’s papers at the Library of Congress are filled with these letters, and she also talks about this in her memoir. “I had scarcely been appointed before people came running to me,” she recalls, both to tell her about “the shortcomings and the evil deeds of some of the teachers,” and to get help obtaining a position in the schools. See Mary Church Terrell Papers, Container 4, LOC; Terrell, A Colored Woman in a White World, 129.

77 Jennie Fearing, Eleanora Curtis, and Edith Fleetwood to Mary Church Terrell, August 7, 1906, MCT, LOC.
course, as a matter of interest to your friends, and incidentally to your prestige.” Fleetwood employed a two-pronged attack to try to help his daughter’s case. First, he tackled the school system’s increasingly complex legal and bureaucratic apparatus. Second, he appealed to the preoccupation with social status that had shaped black society in Washington for generations. He was clearly aware of and conversant in both the series of Progressive reforms that were intended to shape the school system into a modern meritocracy as well as the enduring power of strict social hierarchy in black Washington. Both arguments had cache.

In her memoir *A Colored Woman in a White World*, Terrell also remembered her time on the Board of Education as an interracial balancing act, in which she did her best to advocate for members of her race, but also to act fairly and maintain good relationships with white board members and white citizens. She talked about the care she took in navigating the color line on the Board in one incident in which she convinced the white board members to vote with her when the black vote was split, despite the tacit agreement that white board members would only vote for black candidates when all three black members were in agreement. Despite some of the less than empathetic responses she got from some congressmen, she continued her efforts, knowing that it was her political right and duty as a member of the Board of Education. Terrell told one story, for example, of a congressman whom she approached asking for a black school officer’s salary to be raised to $4000—which would have equalized his salary with an analogous white school officer—who responded to her request, “Why, no colored man in the world is worth that much.”

Terrell’s descriptions of the ways she dealt with other members of the Board to garner votes for job candidates or for particular measures revealed that she was frequently engaged in political negotiations. However, she disagreed with some of her friends who saw her as a “politician.” In particular, she took issue with their interpretation that she achieved a high degree of “influence” on the Board “by being mysterious, ‘keepin’ ‘em guessin’,’ and working in the dark.” She reasoned that she had not been a politician because rather than acting in the dark, as her friends suggested, she was very open both with people who came asking for favors and with her fellow board members and never engaged in backroom dealings. Despite Terrell’s assertion that labeling her a politician “could not have been farther from the facts,” she was evidently involved in politics on a number of levels. Beyond the politics of the Board itself, Terrell’s position enabled her to lobby congressional committees on behalf of the black public schools, representing the needs of black students, teachers, and administrators. Terrell, as one of the founding members of the National Association of Colored Women, longstanding school board member, and wife of Municipal Court judge Robert Terrell, was one of the most prominent black women of this period, and she represented Washington, D.C.’s possibilities for African Americans. She was powerful, influential, and respected among both blacks and whites. She had the ear of many members of the federal government and used her status to advocate for her race.

Washington, D.C. was also seen as a land of possibility among more middling and working-class blacks in the South. In his 1908 book *Following the Color Line*, an account of black life in the North and South, journalist Ray Stannard Baker captured the promise of the nation’s capital in a conversation with a “prosperous tailor” from Columbia, South Carolina, who, in the wake of the Atlanta riot, was getting ready to make his northern pilgrimage:

“Yes,” he said, “I am going away. It’s getting to be too dangerous for a coloured man down here.”

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78 C.A. Fleetwood to March Church Terrell, September 27, 1906, container 4 MCT, LOC.
It was just after the Atlanta riot.
“Where are you going?” I asked.
“I think I shall go to Washington,” he said.
“Why Washington?”
“Well, you see, I want to be as near the flag as I can.”

Non-elite blacks also recognized the importance of black Washington’s proximity to the federal government. They held out hope that even as southern state governments trampled blacks’ rights and as lynch mobs spread a reign of terror throughout the South that the national government, compelled by the Constitution to protect the right of all citizens, would guarantee black Americans’ freedom and equality.

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CHAPTER TWO

“We Want Our Own”

Battles over Washington’s Black Public Schools at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

Several days into a congressional hearing on a series of D.C. public schools bills, D.C. school superintendent Alexander T. Stuart took the witness stand to clarify the subcommittee’s confusion over the administrative hierarchy in the racially segregated school system. Questioning Stuart was chair of the education subcommittee of the House Committee on the District of Columbia, Pennsylvania Republican Edward Morrell, who struggled to grasp Washington’s complex Jim Crow system, which was based more on tacit understandings than legal code. When Morrell’s patience for trying to understand the logic of this peculiar system of racial separation seemed to be at a breaking point, Stuart commiserated with the representative. “The precise relations of the colored schools to the white schools,” he explained, “and the respective autonomy, we will say, of the two systems has always been one of the most difficult questions in the District of Columbia.”1 Stuart’s assessment was right, especially during the tumultuous period between 1900 and 1906 when congress twice restructured the public school administration to alter the balance of power between white and black Washingtonians in their most important public institution.

This chapter looks at the public school reorganization battles of 1900 and 1906 to observe how black Washingtonians altered the nature and meaning of racial segregation by establishing and defending their right to control their schools. Beginning during Reconstruction, black Washingtonians had their own school superintendent and had enjoyed autonomous leadership of a “colored” school system that was nearly entirely separate from, but nearly equitably financed and as academically rigorous as, the white schools. In 1900, several bills in the House and Senate District committees planned to remove the black superintendent and unite the two systems under a single white superintendent, which threatened this autonomy, and the black community fought back. While they successfully secured a black assistant superintendent who would have some control over the black elementary schools, they lost control over the venerable M Street High School and the normal school that trained black teachers. However, just four years after the implementation of the new administrative organization, M Street principal Anna Julia Cooper and her champions in the black community took advantage of the lack of specificity in the 1900 school law to challenge white authority, regain control over M Street High, and lobby congress to pass another school reorganization bill in 1906 that gave black Washingtonians clear authority over their public schools. In each of these battles, it became clear that black Washingtonians’ common attitude toward racial segregation in the public schools was that, while they foresaw a future of egalitarian racial integration, they knew that until whites were committed to racial equality, blacks’ best hope for racial advancement—as it related to education—was through schools that were as separate from the white schools as possible.

From the first school reorganization in 1900 to the second in 1906, however, black Washingtonians shifted emphasis in how they demanded their right to independent school management. In the first instance, their primary contention adhered closely to racial uplift ideology, as they argued that the black superintendent was an important figure for children and

1 School Reorganization Hearings, 1906, 124.
the less educated to look up to in the black community and that school leadership was both an important lesson in self-governance for a people only one generation removed from slavery as well as a crucial site to demonstrate their good citizenship to white Americans. After losing their school system’s autonomy in 1900, while these factors were still important for many black Washingtonians during the next school reorganization battle in 1906, the most vocal advocates for school autonomy emphasized their right to be protected by laws that clearly established their authority over their schools and the equitable distribution of resources, as opposed to whites’ moral obligation to grant them the chance to experiment with self-government. By turning school autonomy into a legal issue and a political right, black Washingtonians wrested control over the meaning of racial segregation from whites and were instrumental in establishing and nurturing one of the strongest public school systems in the country.

Opening Salvo

The black public schools got off to an inauspicious start at the turn of the twentieth century. At almost the same moment in the winter of 1900 that the Senate committee commenced an investigation into the administration of the public schools, which Congress looked into periodically, the Board of Trustees voted in a closed-door meeting that it was time for George F.T. Cook, a revered member of the black community, to relinquish his three-decade tenure as superintendent of the black public schools. This came after a brief investigation into complaints of inefficiency and general discontent among a few members of the black community. These kinds of complaints were too common in the black schools and the extent of politicking for school positions in the black community backfired in the realm of public opinion. Many white Washingtonians, as well as some blacks, thought the black public schools were too tainted by scandal. At one point, Board of Education President Rear-Admiral George W. Baird complained to a congressional committee that during his tenure on the board, “Ninety-five percent of the trouble we had was among the colored people. They were very restless, never satisfied, and when there was a complaint and we would go into an investigation of one of them the whole of them would be on the side of the defense.”

School board member Coralie Cook addressed the contentiousness within the black community a number of years later before the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia. She lamented that the “enormous pressure” for positions in the schools and the frequent infighting that resulted were just two examples of the “handicaps and misfortunes of educated colored persons.” Moreover, she tried to correct what she identified as a common misconception among whites that “what might easily be mistaken for a color problem, upon closer observation, discloses itself as an economic problem.” While the antagonisms within the black community were related to the complex calculus that went into determining social class, public perception, and prestige—of which economics were certainly a part, as Cook pointed out—white Washingtonians believed they were a color problem, which indicated that blacks, as a group, were irresponsible and unprepared for self-governance.

Upon the Board of Trustees’ vote, District Commissioner John Wesley Ross began assembling a list of potential replacements for Superintendent Cook. Among the favorites were Robert Terrell, trained lawyer, M Street High School principal, and husband of prominent school

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2 Hearing on Senate Bill 4032, 1908, Summer School Archives.
board member and women’s club activist Mary Church Terrell; William Hooper Councill, president of the State Agricultural and Mechanical College for Negroes in Huntsville, Alabama, who had a reputation for sycophancy toward southern white Democrats; W.E.B. Du Bois, who was also entertaining offers to leave Atlanta University for either Tuskegee Institute or Howard University; and several other prominent black educators not from Washington, D.C.  

Early on in the search for Cook’s replacement, before the bill that would reorganize the schools had been fully drafted, Commissioner Ross consulted Booker T. Washington, who at this point was at the apex of his influence over white and black America and had not yet begun to spar with W.E.B. Du Bois. The appointment would already be political, but involving the “Wizard of Tuskegee” would make it even more so. T. Thomas Fortune, editor of the Tuskegee-backed newspaper the New York Age, cautioned Washington against William Councill because of his relationship with the Democratic Party in Alabama and instead urged him to support Terrell, who he thought was “the best man in the situation and because he is your and my good and active friend.” Washington, however, had initially supported W.E.B. Du Bois, who had made a name for himself at Atlanta University, but was eager to leave the Deep South for D.C. and thought the position as head of the black schools would be a good opportunity. Du Bois wrote Washington asking for an endorsement letter for the position, which Washington wrote and sent to Du Bois, but then asked him not to use. Washington explained that he had already spoken with Commissioner Ross and endorsed Du Bois and he told Du Bois that presenting the letter in addition would “tend to put you in the position of seeking the position.”  

After Washington had lent his support to Du Bois, several of his friends in the District lamented his choice. Richard W. Thompson, government clerk and editor of the short-lived, Tuskegee-backed newspaper the Colored American, advised Washington that Robert Terrell would be the most “popular” man for the job because he was “young, full of originality, ambitious, clean, thoroughly educated, and a ‘good mixer,’” and, perhaps most importantly, “would be a man long identified with District interests.” Du Bois, said Thompson, “would be the most acceptable man in the country…from a scholarly standpoint,” and would “command respect because of his attainments, but not popularity.” T. Thomas Fortune and William A. Pledger, lawyer, journalist, and avid Republican, agreed with Thompson, insisting that the black community preferred a “District man” for the job rather than an outsider. Pledger went so far as to say that he was sorry Washington had endorsed Du Bois because “he is not of your people” and that Booker T. Washington’s friends in D.C. were “almost to a man against him.”  

The opinions expressed by these elites reflect some of their larger concerns and some of the issues that divided the black community. First, their misgivings about W.E.B. Du Bois reflect the nascent rivalry developing between him and Booker T. Washington and these men’s efforts to shore up Washington’s base in the District. Their support of Robert Terrell over Du Bois also exposes their resentment of outsiders and their preference for practitioners rather than academicians in school leadership. The former was a common complaint of Washingtonians, who felt that their resources were easily taken advantage of by newcomers and transients. Indeed, by drawing Booker T. Washington into the decision, Commissioner Ross undermined local power. The latter was also a much broader concern among many professions in the early

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8 Ibid., 465-66
twentieth century, as more people began preparing for professions such as law, medicine, and teaching by going to professional schools and receiving their training in classrooms rather than through apprenticeships. Finally, by suggesting that Robert Terrell was a “good mixer,” Richard Thompson probably meant both that he mixed with a broad swath of black Washingtonians—which was no easy feat in the socially stratified black community—but also that he got along with white elites, which was a critical prerequisite for any black political appointee.

The contention over George F.T. Cook’s replacement quickly became moot once it was clear that the new administrative organization of the schools would take the power of appointment out of the hands of the commissioners and give it instead to the new Board of Education. Had Cook’s ouster and the brief search for his replacement been made public right away, there surely would have been an uproar from the black community and widespread debate over who should take Cook’s place. Instead, the Board of Trustees’ decision was not made public until mid-March, by which point Congress was ready to legislate black school leadership out of existence altogether. This threat caused members of the black community to band together to salvage their schools’ autonomy.

The Reorganization of 1900

Congress’s reorganization of the public schools in 1900 was the first major restructuring of the system since 1874. Between 1874 and 1900, there had been two parallel systems united only by an interracial Board of Trustees and the fact that both systems received appropriations from the Congress. The new administrative structure, however, removed the separate white and black superintendents and replaced them with one superintendent, who, by custom, would always be white, and two assistant superintendents, one white and one black. In addition, while Congress retained the former structure that broke up the district into geographical and racial divisions, each with its own supervising principal, it also created a new Director of High Schools, who was to oversee all three academic high schools, including M Street. By tacit understanding, this person would also be white. Finally, the new plan changed the name of the Board of Trustees to the Board of Education and reduced the number of board members from eleven to seven, maintaining the unwritten rule that blacks and whites would be proportionally represented, which meant that there would always be two black and five white members. While the proportion of black board members to white board members would remain roughly the same as it was before (there had previously been seven whites and four blacks), having only two black members seemed to be an effort to lessen black influence on the Board. Taken together, the school reorganization of 1900 was a clear attempt to give blacks less control over their schools.

Congress’s decision to restructure D.C. public schools the way that it did seems to have come as a surprise to black Washingtonians because, at that point, most of the public complaints about the schools came from white parents and teachers, not from the black community. After receiving complaints from white parents and several powerful white citizens about their superintendent William Powell, who had initiated new and—to them—radical methods of teaching grammar, spelling, and arithmetic orally and relying less on textbooks, the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia convened a subcommittee to investigate the schools. In late February and early March, the subcommittee—called the “Subcommittee on the Subject of Course of Instruction in Public Schools of the District of Columbia”—conducted a several-day long hearing, during which they heard testimony from members of the Board of Trustees, each of the eleven supervising principals, Superintendent Powell, and dozens of parents, teachers, and
educational experts who either came to the hearings to testify in person or sent letters expressing their thoughts on the state of public education in Washington. Most of the testimony addressed Powell’s teaching methods and the concerns that had prompted the investigation.

At one point during the hearing, however, New Hampshire Republican Jacob Gallinger interrupted subcommittee chairman Nevada Republican William Stewart’s grilling of Superintendent Powell to read aloud a letter he had received from “an exceedingly intelligent colored man,” whom Gallinger refused to identify. He acknowledged that the substance of the letter had “not a direct bearing upon anything that we are required to investigate,” but nonetheless had “some pretty serious accusations,” which he deemed “serious” enough (he used the word not once, but twice in justifying the interruption) to be heard. The letter, in fact, had nothing to do with the teaching methods that the subcommittee had been charged to investigate and had nothing to do with Superintendent Powell at all. Rather, it contained harsh allegations of nepotism and favoritism on the part of the black members of the Board of Trustees, in addition to their gross misuse of taxpayer dollars for unapproved, superfluous teaching positions for the beneficiaries of this patronage instead of for supplies and maintenance.9

Perhaps even more damaging was the testimony from white school trustee General George Harries, who volunteered his own commentary once Gallinger had finished reading the letter. Harries, apparently needing to air some pent-up ill will toward the black schools, corroborated much of what the anonymous letter alleged and informed the subcommittee that the trustees were about to fire George F.T. Cook, who had been the superintendent of the black schools for nearly thirty years. Worse, he insisted that these misdeeds were proof that black Washingtonians should not have control over their own schools. He cautioned the Senate committee, “I do not think we ought to let them alone, because, frankly—and I say it to them just as I do here—I do not think they are fit to be let alone. I think they have got to have some assistance, perhaps not exclusively, but we have our heredity, and we have a little more civilization than they have, and I think we have a keener sense of what is right and what is wrong than they have.”10

The following day, the Washington Post coverage of the Senate hearings emphasized the accusations against the black schools and Harries’s opinion that the black schools should have a white superintendent and minimized the evident problems in the white schools. Moreover, while the articles in the Post suggested that the issues in the white schools had more to do with the organization of the system and the administrative structure, they followed Harries’s cue and implied and sometimes explicitly stated that the problems in the black schools had to do with what they saw as the inherent corruption and deficiencies of blacks as leaders.11 William Calvin Chase, the vocal editor of the black newspaper the Washington Bee, was quick to point out this shift in focus from the white schools to the black schools. Without mentioning him by name, Chase attacked Harries, saying, “But the enemies of the race and particularly those who do not believe that the colored people are capable of managing their own schools are attempting to shift

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10 Ibid.
11 A particular Washington Post article on February 20 quoted Superintendent Powell extensively on his optimism about the state of instruction in the schools, but the extent to which he was handicapped because of his inability to fire teachers. The second half of the article goes into detail about the allegations against one of the black school trustees and the suggestion from white trustee General Harries that this is an indication that it “might be better to have white superintendents for them.” “Powell as a Witness, Superintendent Praises the Public School System, The Senatorial Investigation,” Washington Post, February 20, 1900.
the responsibility of their own misconduct and divert public attention to the colored schools.” He emphasized, “It will not enhance the system of white schools to belittle that of the colored.” In a letter sent to Senator William Stewart, chairman of the subcommittee, Henry Johnson, of Anacostia, echoed Chase’s point in much stronger language:

> Senator: The injection of the colored schools by Gen. George H. Harries into the pending investigation of certain charges brought against schools under the immediate supervision of Superintendent Powell reminds the writer of the story told on a man who said he had a trance, during which he visited the infernal regions, and upon being asked if he saw any Democrats there replied: “Oh yes; plenty Democrats.” Any Republicans? “Oh, yes; lots of them, and each had a ‘nigger’ between him and the flames.” General Harries, with characteristic military strategy, sought to create a diversion from the real point of criticism by putting the “nigger” in front to draw the fire of public opinion.

In his editorial, Chase also questioned by what logic it made sense that the black schools would be in better hands under a white superintendent, when it was white Superintendent William Powell whose alleged misconduct necessitated the Senate hearing in the first place.

General Harries had intentionally struck a sensitive nerve. “The one ghost that stalks before them continually is the probability [author’s emphasis] that at some point or other Superintendent Powell will have the supervision of the colored schools,” Harries explained. “…That is the one thing they are afraid of—that the schools will come under white supervision and white superintendents…although we know it would be for their own benefit.” While General Harries certainly did not speak for all white Washingtonians, most shared his view that racial segregation was a long-term measure to combat the “negro problem.” Indeed, by noting the “probability” that the black schools would come under white supervision, Harries was not, of course, proposing egalitarian racial integration, but rather a hardened, more repressive form of segregation.

William Calvin Chase, and much of the rest of the black community, saw that their control over their schools was threatened. He warned that any indication that the leadership of the white schools intended to encroach upon the black schools’ autonomy was “an expression of the old antebellum idea, that the colored people are unfit for self government.” With these words, Chase made clear that the issue of who would run the black schools reached far beyond the classroom walls, the trustee meetings, and even the halls of Congress. In a period when blacks were denied most of their citizenship rights, the autonomous management of their own schools had become for black Washingtonians a key political right.

“We Have Been Separated”

By the turn of the twentieth century, black and white Washingtonians had developed different attitudes toward the segregated system. In matters related to the schools, whites tended to address segregation in one of three ways. Some used white supremacist arguments to defend the practice, some took segregation for granted to such an extent that they seemed to forget—or

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14 Public School Hearings, 1900, 51.
at least failed to acknowledge—that there was any alternative, and some acknowledged that while black and white children attended school together in other parts of the United States, local conditions made that inconceivable in Washington. The language white Washingtonians used often depended upon the circumstance and what argument they were trying to support.

In spite of General Harries’s testimony during the Senate subcommittee hearing on the schools, outright white supremacist language seems to have been used only rarely in formal political settings in Washington. However, in another Senate hearing that was held to investigate another potential school reorganization in 1908, Rear Admiral George Baird, former president of the Board of Education, also took his opportunity as a witness to voice his views on black inferiority. In outlining his reasons for caring about the education of black children, he explained that it was not because he had “any particular love for them, but because they are imitative animals. Some imitate the better class of people and they are the good negroes, and some imitate the criminal class, and they exaggerate it. So I thought if we could lick them…into shape when they are little fellows,” he reasoned, “we would be doing a good thing for the whole Republic and for the colored people as well.”16 This kind of reasoning was often used to justify segregated education because just one or two generations removed from slavery, so the argument went, black children still had different educational needs from white children, and thus needed to be “licked into shape” in school rather than educated. While such explicitly pejorative language might have been rare among high-profile or politically active whites—thanks to black Washingtonians’ diligence in speaking out against overt racism—Baird’s tone shows the kinds of attitude black Washingtonians were up against when they fought for educational parity, even if most of the time it went unspoken.

A second, and more common, public attitude toward segregation was a tendency to ignore that it was even a salient characteristic of District schools. This attitude can be found in a speech given by District Commissioner Henry MacFarland that was reprinted in the 1905 Board of Education report. MacFarland, who was fairly well-liked in the black community, extolled D.C. public schools as “the most democratic of our institutions,” which ensured “absolute equality of opportunity for all, an opportunity unexcelled in this respect and perhaps unequaled elsewhere.” To him, public schools in turn-of-the-century Washington were the pinnacle of democracy in contrast to the period before emancipation, when “colored children were not admitted to public schools, although the school fund was partly taken from a tax on slaves, so that human slavery contributed to free education.” According to this logic, the mere existence of public education for black children indicated the full flowering of democracy, so much so that, “even the author of ‘all men are created equal…’ would not have imagined such a realization of his theories.”17 MacFarland’s appraisal of D.C. public schools reflects a complete internalization of the separate-but-equal doctrine. The same attitude pervades the testimony of the frequent Congressional hearings on school reorganization, in which congressmen and citizens consider nearly endless permutations of school organization, with almost no mention of the fact that the schools are segregated, which was the most basic principle upon which they were organized. When MacFarland and others employed this effusive rhetoric it was often because they were trying to coax more money for the schools out of the House and Senate District committees, which set the school system’s budget every year. Significantly, MacFarland’s emphasis on the equality of opportunity afforded through D.C.’s public school system was probably designed to

16 Hearing on Senate Bill 4032, 1908, Sumner School Archives.
encourage the congressmen to appropriate enough money for the black schools to sustain this optimistically democratic image.

One fact that everyone agreed on was that segregated schools were expensive, and it was in the context of working out the schools’ budget that white Washingtonians sometimes reminded Congress that racial segregation was a fact of life in D.C. In Congress and in the Board of Trustees, there was a constant tension between economic efficiency and racial segregation and a corresponding tension between including the black schools in the overall administrative structure and keeping them separate. In testimony before the District Committee of the House of Representatives in 1906, Charles Needham, school board member and President of George Washington University, explained the situation succinctly:

We maintain two systems here, one for colored and one for white pupils, which necessitates a duplication to some extent of work and adds considerably to the expense of maintaining a public school system here as compared with other cities where it is administered under one system. Necessarily there is a duplication—it can not be otherwise—and it is impossible to administer it as economically where you have two systems as where you have one...

For Needham, segregation was not something that was in need of justification; rather, he used segregation to justify the school budget.

The 1911 Board of Education Report to the District Commissioners catalogued this duplication in more detail. The report explained that the dual system required two assistant superintendents instead of one, two district-wide directors of instruction for each subject, more teachers because elementary school class size tended to be smaller than average, and extra clerks and messengers. They also had to maintain two manual training schools, each with its own set of costly equipment to teach cooking, sewing, woodworking, and other skills; two normal schools for training new teachers; an extra high school (since, for many years, M Street High School, which would later become Dunbar High, was the only academic high school for black children in the city); and a vast number of small eight-room elementary schoolhouses scattered throughout the city, which at this point was far less residentially segregated than it would become, to accommodate pockets of black and white children instead of larger, more economical schools for all of the children in a given neighborhood. The language of the report, like Needham’s testimony, insists on the necessity of the segregated system. “It is obvious that were it not for the exactions of the race question no city the size of Washington would consider it necessary or wise to maintain two [separate systems],” this section of the report begins. For emphasis, the last line reminds Congress, “an economical organization of pupils must give way to one more expensive for local reasons which are practically insurmountable.”

These two allusions to the exigencies of the local racial climate—from Charles Needham and the 1911 Board of Education Report—can be read in two ways. The obvious interpretation is that the “exactions of the race question” in Washington allude to the typical characteristics of a Jim Crow society, in which whites socially and politically subjugate blacks through various legal and extralegal methods because of alleged black inferiority and the impossibility of egalitarian coexistence. While classic white supremacy was certainly part of Washington’s racial climate, the power of the black community not only to voice its demands but also to use the political process to have them met was a potent counterforce. Thus, a more complete interpretation of these explanations of the need for a costly separate school system for blacks involves both the

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18 School Reorganization Hearings, 1906, 21 (statement of Charles Needham, Board of Education member).
fact of racial separation and recognition that the black school system approximated the white system to the extent that it did only because of the effort of the black community. In other words, not all segregated school systems had to be as expensive as Washington’s because in many other southern school districts, officials were able to get away with spending very little on the black schools. This was impossible in Washington, however, because of the power exercised by its black community.

One notable commonality among how whites addressed segregation was that there was never any serious suggestion of racial segregation coming to an end. Southern and northern congressmen on the House and Senate committees on the District of Columbia, who were always so miserly with their appropriations for the District, never so much as implied integrating schools as a cost saving measure. Even those who acknowledged that the particular nature of the “race question” in Washington required that the city’s black and white schoolchildren be educated separately, from the language they used to talk about race and racial separation, it does not seem that any whites could imagine a future where segregation would no longer be necessary.

Black Washingtonians, of course, had different ideas about school segregation. At the turn of the twentieth century, most black Washingtonians viewed the right to manage their own segregated schools as a steppingstone to eventual but assured full equality. The importance to black Washingtonians of maintaining control over their public schools became clear when they defended their schools’ autonomy in the face of the threat of a white takeover during the debates over the 1900 school reorganization.

“We Want Our Own”

William Calvin Chase’s editorials in the Washington Bee provide a good starting point for understanding how black Washingtonians saw the segregated school system, especially in the context of the proposed school reorganization in 1900. Even though many whites, when called upon to justify school segregation, claimed that racial separation was better for both races to keep the peace between blacks and whites and to allow blacks to receive special instruction to make up for generations of no formal education at all, Chase called attention to the fact that segregation, as imposed by whites, was not a benevolent institution, but rather a constant reminder of white Americans’ belief in African-American inferiority. However, Chase advanced what he called a “liberal construction” of racial segregation, which held that if whites believed black children were not yet ready to be educated with their children, educated blacks had the right to manage their own schools both to prove their leadership ability and to carry out an educational program that fit the specific needs of black children. Moreover, Chase argued that until whites recognized black equality, the preservation of separate black-run institutions was vital to keeping alive any hope of future racial equality both because of the symbolic significance of independent management as self-governance as well as the practical significance of ensuring the continued availability of stable, middle-class jobs for blacks as public school teachers.

In an editorial titled “We Want Our Own,” which Chase wrote as the public school hearings were getting underway, he straightforwardly outlined his position:

We want our own superintendent, we want our own supervising principals and teachers and, if we receive but the encouragement we deserve and hope for, we will in time prove to all our entire capacity to conduct a splendid system of schools and reflect credit upon
ourselves and our friends. We have been separated and desire to be permitted to remain so until the objection to our full recognition as citizens in the broadest sense is removed.  

By demanding community control—as opposed to acquiescing to segregation—Chase and other black Washingtonians transformed an institution that whites had created as an instrument of white supremacy and a means of maintaining social inequality, into a stronghold of self-governance and opportunity, and, in so doing, created new meaning for segregation itself.

While Chase should not be considered a radical, other black Washingtonians responded to the proposed reorganization with views that were more conservative than his, or at least refused to speak as openly about racial injustice for political or pragmatic reasons. One such example was Winfield Scott Montgomery, who at this point was supervising principal of the (black) ninth division, but who would be appointed Assistant Superintendent of the black schools once the reorganization took effect. Montgomery was born into slavery near Vicksburg, Mississippi, in 1854, but during the Civil War he and his brother Henry Percival Montgomery escaped to Union ranks. After serving in the Eighth Vermont Volunteer Regiment, Montgomery was sent back to Vermont and was taken in by a family that sent him to a preparatory academy, where he performed well enough to be admitted to Dartmouth College. At Dartmouth, Montgomery became the first black member of Phi Beta Kappa and, upon graduating, he left New England to begin his career in Washington’s public schools, working his way up from a high school teaching position to principal of M Street High School to supervising principal.  

Montgomery’s long and relatively scandal-free record in the public schools suggest that he was well-liked by the black community and agreeable enough to white Washingtonians to spend nearly two decades in school leadership roles. Montgomery was the first representative of the black schools to testify after Sen. Gallinger’s release of the disparaging letter and Harries’s reproachful testimony, and he was not called to testify until the following day, after even more damage had been done by the unflattering coverage of the hearing in the Washington Post.

Montgomery’s tone at the hearing was notably different from Chase’s editorials and many of the letters that would be sent to the Senate subcommittee in the coming weeks. The context of a congressional hearing was different from a newspaper editorial, of course, but it was evident that the two had different approaches nonetheless. As he was being questioned about the particular educational needs of the black children under his supervision, Montgomery politely brought up the issues that had been raised the day before and only gently pushed back against the suggestion that a white superintendent should take charge of the black schools. “I have not any objection to that if it be the best thing,” he began, “but I can not bring myself to so believe…I think, sir, that the colored people ought not to be forced to give up the only object lesson in the executive line (and a grand one it is) that they have here, and I believe that these schools are pretty well managed.” He also made the familiar point that black administrators would necessarily have a closer connection to black children and familiarity with their needs than whites.  

Montgomery’s tone and language were almost ingratiating, from the way he began (“I have not any objection to that if it be the best thing”) to how he brought up what a “grand lesson” blacks were learning through the opportunity to manage their own schools.

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20 “We Want Our Own,” Washington Bee, February 17, 1900.
22 Public School Hearings, 1900, 92 (statement of Winfield Scott Montgomery, Ninth Division Supervising Principal).
Montgomery, it appeared, had taken a page out of Booker T. Washington’s book when it came to getting concessions (or personal prestige and funding) from whites. However, during his brief testimony, Montgomery twice insisted that the black schools deserved a congressional investigation to look into the allegations and determine the best way to proceed. This may seem like a small matter, but his request for an investigation was an important invocation of the black schools’ right to due process, which was a key political right largely denied to blacks in this period. In analyses of black attitudes toward civil and political rights in this period, it is tempting to refer to the nascent rivalry between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B Du Bois (whose book *Souls of Black Folk* with his sharp criticism of Washington would come out just three years later), who are often used to represent two oppositional strategies: Washington’s accommodationism versus Du Bois’s political activism. Winfield Scott Montgomery, who in many ways seemed to be clearly in Washington’s camp, illustrates the crudeness of this dichotomy. Virtually no African Americans, including advocates of accommodation and even Booker T. Washington himself, ceased civil rights activism, even at the height of white supremacy.

There were other examples, of course, of black Washingtonians who defended their schools and their race more forcefully than Winfield Scott Montgomery during the battle to preserve their schools’ autonomy. Testifying after Montgomery, J.H.N. Waring, supervising principal of the tenth division, emphatically endorsed the retention of a black superintendent for the same reason Montgomery used—the sympathy among blacks that would be absent between a white superintendent and black pupils—and also because of the symbolic importance of having a black superintendent. “The position of a colored superintendent, the only one in this country and in the world, so far as we know, is an inspiration to our boys,” Waring insisted, “and such an inspiration as I, for one, would hate to see taken from them.”

Using statistics to show that the student to teacher ratio was roughly even in the white schools and the black schools—to disprove the allegation that black teachers had swindled more than their fair share of teaching positions—and to show that attendance rates at black elementary schools were actually slightly better than in the white schools, Anacostia resident Henry Johnson argued that the black schools were in “excellent hands and condition.” Further, he made the point that the current success of the schools was thanks to the black men and women who had worked assiduously for the past forty years to expand and improve them since their fledgling years during the Civil War. N.B. Marshall, from Northwest, made the same point in a letter to the Senate subcommittee, and, like Waring, emphasized the singularity of D.C. schools:

> … in no other city of this country can you find separate colored schools as well organized and as efficiently managed and instructed as are the colored schools in the city of Washington, D.C. They are the most eminent examples of their kind in the whole United States of the capacity of the negro citizens for executive administration…Abolish this system and you strike a death blow to the pride, incentive, and esprit du corps of the colored citizens of Washington.

Each plea that Montgomery, Waring, Johnson, and Marshall made to the Senate committee appealed to morality, which was one of the central targets of racial uplift ideology, rather than law or justice. Most of the arguments black witnesses used during the Senate hearing were about the black superintendent’s role in providing a role model for black children and the black community and the significance of having a competent, professional, respected black man

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23 Ibid., 97 (statement of J.H.N. Waring, Tenth Division Supervising Principal).
24 Ibid., 208 (N.B. Marshall to William Stewart, February 29, 1900).
in this important public role as a demonstration to white America of the race’s capabilities. The language of racial uplift (pride, being looked up to by blacks around the country, and a chance to prove abilities to whites) was widespread in part because it was palatable to whites but also because many black elites believed that racial equality would be realized by changing whites’ attitudes through demonstrating black moral rectitude and educational achievement. While, by 1900, the promise of uplift ideology as a strategy for racial advancement was probably beginning to look naïve—if not altogether hopeless—to blacks in the Deep South, whose freedom was increasingly circumscribed by Jim Crow laws and whose lives were increasingly threatened by lynch mobs, elite and even poorer and working-class black Washingtonians had not experienced the same kinds of discrimination and violence. Thus, blacks in Washington held out hope that through elites demonstrating their competency as leaders and uplifting the black masses, they could force the steady forward march of prejudice to reverse course.

Still, even though most advocates for the black public schools relied on appeals to morality and racial uplift ideology, others, like William Calvin Chase in some of his articles, characterized the right to autonomous management of their schools as a political right. For example, N.B. Marshall went beyond uplift later on in his letter and made a direct connection between school governance and black citizenship and political rights. First, he said that removing the black assistant superintendent would “retard and stifle [blacks’] civic emotions” and would be “not only reactionary, but dangerous.” He ended his letter with an even stronger appeal:

Since reason and justice fail to lend their support to the proposed abolition of the office of superintendent of colored schools of the District of Columbia, I profoundly trust that your committee, morally pledged as it is to promote the highest interests of the citizens of this District, will not be influenced by that local and national spirit of greed and barbarous prejudice which seeks to strip from the negro his few remaining vestments of public rights.

Here, Marshall seemed to be making both a moral and legal claim to the retention of the office of the black superintendent by calling on the Senators’ morality to prevent them from trampling black rights. By drawing attention to black Washingtonians’ status as “citizens of this District” and the importance of safeguarding their “public rights,” Marshall relied on both the committee’s morality as well as its legal obligation.

After the hearing ended, there were several weeks of relative quiet until Congress published the report from the subcommittee hearings. In the report, the subcommittee recommended reducing the number of school board members from eleven to five, and having them be appointed by the president rather than the commissioners. While black Washingtonians worried that having such a small board would mean having only one representative—or, worse, no representatives at all—on the central school governing body, the initial version of the school bill also abolished the office of the black superintendent by appropriating salaries for only one superintendent and a single assistant superintendent, neither of whom would be black.

Upon the release of the report, the schools became a central issue in local politics and debate extended beyond the walls of the Capitol. Robert Terrell and Richard W. Thompson each

25 In Kevin Gaines’s analysis of racial uplift ideology, what he calls “evolutionary class differentiation” was a key aspect of advancing the race. Gaines asserts that uplift ideology was rooted in intraracial class-based inequality through elites distinguishing themselves from the masses by demonstrating their superiority. Gaines, Uplifting the Race, 3-4.

26 Public School Hearings, 1900, 212 (N.B. Marshall to William Stewart, February 29, 1900).

wrote to Booker T. Washington, with whom they had been in regular correspondence over the issue of appointing a new black superintendent, to inform him of the developments. Both indicated that they hoped to fight congress’s proposals. Thompson told Washington that he planned to make the school situation the topic for the next meeting of the Second Baptist Lyceum, not as an “indignation meeting,” but rather as “a calm inquiry for the purpose of educating our people on a current public question and to make an expression that shall be typical of the best local thought.”28 However, when the lyceum was held the first week in April, because of the efforts of several black pastors who were part of the Second Baptist Lyceum, the event became a mass meeting, which according to the Washington Post filled the Second Baptist Church “to the doors” with citizens eager to protest the removal of the black superintendent and to coordinate opposition to the bill. The journalist covering the meeting for the Post reported that Honorable John P. Green, lawyer, politician, and black rights activist who had traveled to Washington from Cleveland for the event, alleged, “the authorities had no right to foist upon the negroes teachers not in every way equal to the teachers of the white youth.” Further, Green declared, “If they don’t give us our rights, we will send word to the negroes in other States and fight at the polls for our rights.”29 This was perhaps one of the clearest articulations of school autonomy as a political right.

Intensifying black Washingtonians’ anger over the school situation that day was news of an offensive statement made by District Commissioner John B. Wight in front of the Senate Subcommittee on Appropriations. While the meeting had been convened to mobilize opposition to a plan that would remove the black superintendent and reduce the number of school board members, Wight’s comment, “classing negroes as criminals with no regard for human life, and worse than safe-crackers,” incited the fury of those in attendance, who called for his immediate removal. Those who took the podium to criticize Wight were not only deeply angered by the commissioner’s words, but also recognized his transgression as poor politics, pointing out that what he said was “unwise” and “showed a thorough lack of judgment.” One pastor remarked, “A man can think as he pleases, but, to say the least, it was highly indiscreet for a public servant to express himself as Mr. Wight has done.”30 It seems that Wight’s blunder gave black Washingtonians some leverage on the school reorganization. William Calvin Chase, who was the first to steer the conversation toward Wight’s remarks, connected Wight’s public defamation to school politics: “the reason why our public schools are in the condition they are to-day is because we have been called safe-crackers. It is because one Commissioner does not regard us as respectable or decent….We are not cowards, and we are not afraid to express our opinion.” The citizens gathered at the church then passed a resolution demanding both that President McKinley remove Wight from his position and that Congress amend the school bill to retain the office of the black superintendent and to increase the number of school board members from five to seven, three of whom were to be black, and together these four officials would supervise the black schools autonomously. To give their words a broader impact, they added that if Wight could not be dismissed immediately, “we, in the name of 90,000 people of the District, and in the name of ten millions of colored people of the United States, protest against his reappointment at the expiration of his term as

30 Ibid.
The following week, at a second public meeting—this time at Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, one of the most prominent black churches in Washington—community leaders drafted another petition to send to Congress, and adopted a more conciliatory tone. They wrote, “We…respectfully, but earnestly, remonstrate against that portion of the measure which eliminates the office of superintendent of the colored schools, and we ask your honorable body to amend the bill….” They marshaled the history of the black public schools’ success as evidence that black Washingtonians deserved to continue to supervise their own schools and, using familiar language, warned that stripping them of their control “will divest these people and their children of the only lofty inspiration they have beaconing them on in the development of noble and worthy citizenship.”

Although various representatives of the black community expressed themselves in different ways and used different arguments to defend their schools, the vast majority essentially fought this battle to preserve racial segregation in Washington’s public schools. They feared a white takeover not only because of what would happen to their schools and their community if their control were diminished, but also what it might mean for future claims to civil rights. They were keenly aware that throughout the rest of the South, educational advances made during Reconstruction were being steadily reversed and that white-run school districts stripped black schools of resources and denied them the power to advocate for improvements. Even though, in this particular battle, black Washingtonians were unsuccessful in preserving the degree of autonomy they had enjoyed for the previous twenty-five years, they framed the debate about the public school administration and made their protestations heard. While most black Washingtonians who advocated for their schools during the school reorganization in 1900 used the language of racial uplift, in ensuing battles, more would turn the conversation toward citizenship and political rights. In the meantime, by influencing the institutional structure of the segregated public schools, black Washingtonians altered the meaning of segregation itself.

The New Order

When the dust settled in the summer of 1900, after Congress voted on the appropriations bill that contained the new plan for the school system and once the reorganization took effect, the public schools had a new superintendent, two new assistant superintendents (one black and one white), a new director of high schools, and several new supervising principals, all of whom had been appointed by the newly constituted Board of Education. Because of the petitions, letters, and personal visits from black Washingtonians, the bill contained provisions for a black assistant superintendent to oversee the black schools and it ultimately increased the proposed number of representatives on the Board of Education from five to seven. The three District Commissioners, led by Henry B. F. Macfarland, who replaced John Ross as the commissioner assigned to public school affairs, named the new seven-member board, which by tacit understanding had five white and two black members, which was one fewer than some blacks had hoped for, and also five men and two women. While the old school Board of Trustees had been made up of representatives from different sections of the city, most of the new members of the Board of

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31 Ibid.
Education came from Northwest, leaving the tens of thousands of blacks who lived in Southwest geographically unrepresented.

There was wrangling among both white and black Washingtonians over appointments to the board. The Washington Post reported that Commissioner Macfarland received numerous unsolicited applications from whites, in addition to nominations from each white citizens association. And, while the black community agreed that Bettie Francis, wife of prominent doctor and Howard University professor John R. Francis, should continue her service on the new board, there was intense debate over the other black representative. Several weeks into the process of appointing new board members, William Calvin Chase reported, “The fight for the Trusteeship of public schools is waging hotly,” and that more than two-dozen “would be representative Negroes” were angling for the open position. Chase, whose especially colorful language over this issue suggests that he was by no means a disinterested observer, found several of the candidates particularly odious for their unabashed self-promotion, disconnect from the black community, or reputation for kowtowing to white officials to receive political appointments and advance their own careers.33 Although Chase never endorsed a particular person, he preferred someone humble yet accomplished, familiar with the schools yet removed enough to be immune from allegations of favoritism, experienced in public service yet not a politician. Such an ideal candidate would be difficult, if not impossible, to find. In the end, Commissioner Macfarland chose James F. Bundy, lawyer and secretary and treasurer of Howard University Law School, over the protest of a number of vocal representatives of the black community—Baptist ministers and members of the old establishment—who accused Macfarland of neglecting their input.34 Once the appointment was a fait accompli, Chase spilled no more ink on the new board member other than to say that Bundy had “good sense.”35

The new board, which, in addition to Bettie Francis and James Bundy was made up of two prominent white businessmen, a lawyer, a doctor, and the “talented and educated” mother and wife of a longtime Washington Post reporter, was charged with the immediate duty of appointing the new public school administration, including a new superintendent to replace William Powell and a new assistant superintendent of the black schools. As the white superintendent, the board appointed native Washingtonian and longtime teacher and supervising principal Alexander T. Stuart.36 To occupy the newly created position of Assistant Superintendent for the black schools, the board settled on Winfield Scott Montgomery, longtime teacher and former ninth division supervising principal. While Montgomery had not been on the original short list of candidates for the post, his selection made sense because of his long tenure in the public schools, his business connections, and his relatively scandal-free and uncontroversial record.

As soon as the new administrative structure was in place, in the summer and fall of 1900, black Washingtonians began complaining about their loss of control and expressing fears about its further erosion. One of Superintendent Stuart’s first acts was to further consolidate the black and white school systems by abolishing the dual system of separate directors of instruction for each subject. Instead, he had all of the white directors keep their titles and made all of the black

36 “New Head of Schools,” Washington Post, July 8, 1900.
directors assistants to the white directors, who had suddenly been made their superiors, complete
with high salaries and the authority to dictate what would be taught in the black schools.
Representing the outrage of the black community, school board member Bettie Francis protested
Stuart’s decision, but to no avail. Stuart mobilized what would become a common defense of
racial consolidation and argued that having one uniform system that used the same materials and
teaching methods would make for the fairest administration and the “best government of the
schools.”37 In his report to Congress at the end of the 1900-1901 school year, Stuart gushed,
“The wisdom of Congress in placing both white and colored schools under one superintendent,
and thus assuring both an equality in every department of school administration, has been fully
vindicated by the excellent results which have followed.” It was, of course, too soon to see many
results after only one school year, but Stuart had the input of white directors of instruction, like
physical education director Rebecca Stoneroad, who patronizingly attested to the “spirit in which
the colored teachers have fallen into new ways and striven earnestly to do their best,” under her
supervision.38

This notion of equality was, of course, disingenuous at best, and the black community
instead saw Stuart’s actions as encroachment on their decades-old autonomy. William Calvin
Chase alleged that rather than being based upon the principles of economy and good
government, the new notion that the black and white school constituted one system was “based
upon the erroneous presumption that all white people are better than all colored people or that
colored teachers are inferior to white ones and that therefore there is no injustice in displacing
colored supervisors, directors, principals and teachers and putting white persons in their stead.”
Chase, and presumably many of his readers, feared that subordinating the black directors of
subjects was only the first step in replacing all black teachers and administrators with whites.
Chase urged the black community to defend against this until whites really believed in black
equality, which should be the only circumstance in which blacks acquiesce to racial
consolidation. Until then, Chase argued, echoing a familiar assertion from the reorganization
battle, “In the interest of justice and common decency...the colored people may justly claim the
right to be permitted to work out their own salvation.”39

One problem for black Washingtonians, as Congress and the white school administrators
began rolling back the black schools’ autonomy, was that the laws governing the schools,
including distribution of authority and the nature of racial separation, were vague and
nonspecific. As discussed in the previous chapter, unlike most Southern states by the first decade
of the twentieth century, racial segregation was not legally mandated in Washington D.C. public
schools because Congress had never passed a law making it so. While this had some symbolic
value for blacks in Washington, it also helped whites poke holes in the web of tacit
understandings that let blacks administer their own schools. In addition, the school laws that
were on the books were perfunctory and left it up to the school board to determine the standard
operating procedures and to handle the perceived infractions of school employees. This situation
was exacerbated by the school reorganization in 1900. Congress passed the school reorganization
in an appropriations bill that allocated salaries for school officials and teachers, but did not
describe the duties these individuals were being paid to perform. It created new positions such as
assistant superintendent for the colored schools and director of high schools without enumerating
their responsibilities or establishing a clear administrative hierarchy. This lack of clarity would

38 Report of the Board of Education to the District of Columbia Commissioners, 1901.
result in a bitter controversy involving Winfield Scott Montgomery, white superintendent Alexander Stuart and his replacement William Chancellor, M Street High School principal Anna Julia Cooper, white director of high schools Percy Hughes, the Board of Education, and, eventually, Congress, when, by mid-1906, it became clear that the school administration needed to be reorganized once again.

The M Street High School Controversy

A series of scandals that came to a head in the 1905-1906 school year became known as the M Street High School controversy. While there were a number of allegations being hurled at different targets, the core of the controversy was a dispute between M Street High School principal Anna Julia Cooper and white director of high schools Percy Hughes. Hughes accused Cooper of circumventing standardized high school requirements by advancing students who had failed certain subjects and by deviating from the citywide curriculum. From black Washingtonians’ perspective, however, Hughes displayed a distaste for black education generally, and for Anna Julia Cooper personally, by trying to weaken the classical curriculum at M Street (of which Cooper and the rest of the M Street community were very proud) and by usurping Cooper’s authority as principal. Moreover, they thought Hughes had no right to meddle in the affairs of the black high school because it had always come under the control of black administrators. Cooper acted on this conviction when she defied Hughes’s orders to send several M Street students back to eighth grade. In large part, the lack of specificity in the new school law as to the chain of command among the principal, director of high schools, and the black assistant superintendent created the circumstances for this power struggle. In the end, black Washingtonians would push for a second school reorganization that would more clearly delineate the authority of the black assistant superintendent, giving him—and not the director of high schools—the final say in matters related to the black high school. Although Anna Julia Cooper ultimately lost her position as principal as a result of the controversy, on balance, the episode had favorable results for the black public schools because they regained some of the autonomy they had lost six years earlier. What is more, black Washingtonians began to move away from the reasoning of racial uplift, which held that they deserved to manage their own schools in order to prove their capacity to whites, and instead began to demand the right to school autonomy to protect the quality of black education and to ensure that those who ran the schools would work toward the best interest of the race.

While the black high school in Washington was considered to be the pinnacle of black secondary education throughout the late nineteenth century, by the early twentieth century it ranked with the best public high schools nationwide—white or black—based on where its graduates were admitted to college and its national reputation. As was recounted in the previous chapter, M Street High School alumni went on to prestigious universities and high-status and influential careers. Female graduates became public school teachers in the local school or stenographers in the federal government, and men earned employment as federal government clerks, lawyers, doctors, professors, and businessmen. Students at M Street were successful under the stewardship of principal Robert Terrell and his predecessors, but once Anna Julia Cooper became principal in 1902, she emboldened her students to have even loftier aspirations by encouraging more students to try to graduate from high school, by making the curriculum more rigorous, and by establishing connections with and acquiring scholarships from elite northern universities.
Anna Julia Cooper is best known for her book *A Voice from the South*, which she completed in 1892 while she was teaching at M Street and which is often referred to as the first book-length black feminist work. Cooper had a long and varied career as an educator and activist, in addition to her scholarship. She was born into slavery shortly before the outbreak of the Civil War in Raleigh, North Carolina. Making good on her early aspirations to become a teacher, Cooper began teaching at St. Augustine’s Normal and Collegiate Institute in Raleigh upon completing her own studies at the school. After a brief marriage to George A.C. Cooper, who died only two years into their marriage, Cooper enrolled at Oberlin College, where she completed her degree and was eventually awarded a masters degree in math through her coursework at Oberlin and her teaching at Wilberforce University. In 1887, black superintendent George F.T. Cook and school trustee John R. Francis (Bettie Francis’s husband) recruited her to teach math and science at M Street, where she would also teach Latin and eventually work her way through the ranks to become assistant principal of girls and then principal, replacing Robert Terrell after he was appointed justice of the peace.40

Anna Julia Cooper was promoted to principal several months before Percy Hughes, who had been principal of the white Central High School, was promoted to director of high schools and neither wasted any time implementing their agendas. Cooper set to securing scholarships from Ivy League and other elite universities, with the help of teachers, some of whom were alumnae from those schools, which would be set aside for M Street’s top graduates. To make sure her students were prepared for college and the professions, she assessed M Street’s curriculum to make sure that it was at least on par with the standard college preparatory schools. When French chronicler of the United States Abbé Felix Klein from the Catholic University in Paris visited M Street during his research for his book *In the Land of the Strenuous Life* in 1903, he observed the extreme orderliness in the halls and classrooms and admired Cooper’s commitment to academic rigor. He even sat in on Cooper’s lesson on the Aeneid, and was so enthralled by her analysis of the poem and the students’ commentary that he unintentionally stayed the full hour. His experience at M Street was so powerful that he marveled at the American race problem: “To see these 530 young negroes and negresses, well dressed and well bred, under teachers of their own race, pursuing the same studies as our average college students, who would dream of the existence of a terrible race-question in the United States?”41

Percy Hughes, meanwhile, promptly earned the ire of black Washingtonians when, in his first report to the District commissioners as director of high schools, he stated that students at M Street were unprepared for high school work. He recounted that “modifications were made” in the English and algebra curricula for first year students and “a further revision and modification of some other lines of work ought to, and I believe will, result in very desirable improvements.”42 In particular, Hughes proposed to change the M Street curriculum so that algebra students would begin the school year with six weeks of remedial work and he suggested similar remediation in the English classes. The black community saw these adjustments as an attempt to keep M Street students behind their counterparts in the white high schools. Moreover, this degree of encroachment on the part of a white administrator in the black schools was unprecedented and, regardless of whether Hughes had the authority to make changes to the

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curriculum at M Street, black Washingtonians resented his intrusion. According to the *Washington Post*, one of the black members of the school board (the paper neglected to say whether it was Bettie Francis or James Bundy) got ahold of the report, copied the page with the offending comment, and distributed it among the black community, which “raised a storm of denunciation and criticism.”43 While his brief comments in the report to the commissioners seemed innocuous enough, to black Washingtonians it was a sign that their worst fears were coming true, especially because there was insufficient data to confirm that students at M Street were on average weaker than the city’s white students. Hughes was usurping blacks’ authority over the jewel in the crown of their public schools and using his power to weaken the curriculum of the most prestigious black high school in the country.

Hughes only deepened the black community’s antipathy toward him by not backing down from his claims about the academic weaknesses of M Street students and instead launching more charges at Anna Julia Cooper and M Street High School. Shortly after the uproar over his report, rumors surfaced that a group of male students at M Street had been drinking and smoking cigarettes during lunch and before and after school and that, on occasion, at least one of these boys had come to class intoxicated. As the school board’s half-hearted investigation into these allegations wore on for over a year, Hughes was bolstered by a series of editorials in the *Washington Post* from Thomas S. Leisenring, an officious white citizen with no apparent connection to either the white or black public schools. Leisenring accused Anna Julia Cooper first of negligence, because she had permitted this kind of behavior, and then of fraud for claiming that she was unaware of the illegal activity.44 Cooper tried to resolve the situation by conducting her own brief enquiry, during which she found no evidence of any wrongdoings, but was then criticized for being too cursory when one of the boys confessed to having gotten drunk with some of classmates and signed an affidavit admitting his guilt.45 Regardless of the veracity of these rumors and the way Cooper handled them, it was clear that pursuing these charges was meant to malign Cooper’s reputation and to call into question her professional capacity.

The set of disputes that ended up being the biggest bones of contention between Anna Julia Cooper and Percy Hughes involved Cooper’s outright defiance of Hughes’s orders regarding the advancement and graduation of several M Street students. After Hughes administered English and algebra tests to first-year students at all of the high schools, early in his tenure as director of high schools, he ordered Cooper to send four M Street students whose scores were so low that he considered them “unqualified” for high school back to eighth grade. Cooper, who disagreed with Hughes’s orders and surely resented being told how to run her own school, went around Hughes and appealed to black assistant superintendent Winfield Scott Montgomery and black school board members Bettie Francis and James Bundy. Superintendent Alexander Stuart got wind of Cooper’s appeal and he revoked Hughes’s order to send the students back.46

Cooper’s next act of defiance came at the end of that school year when, as graduation approached, she went to Hughes to discuss two M Street students who desired to graduate but

had not passed each quarter of geometry during their sophomore year.\(^{47}\) Hughes told Cooper that in order for these students to graduate, they had to pass exams on the subject. After the students’ exam results came in, Cooper reported back to Hughes that one of the girls had scored sixty-five percent, ten percentage points shy of passing, but urged Hughes to allow her to graduate anyway because she had tried her best and had studied for the exam under difficult circumstances. Trusting Cooper’s estimation, Hughes approved the student’s graduation, only to find out later that Cooper had lied about the girl’s exam score and that she had actually scored below fifty percent.\(^{48}\)

Finally, at the end of the 1904-1905 school year, Cooper flouted Hughes’s authority once again when two more students with slightly flawed academic records wished to graduate.\(^{49}\) This time, Cooper went directly to the Board of Education through James Bundy, one of the two black members, who referred the matter to black assistant superintendent Winfield Scott Montgomery instead of Hughes, who was supposed to have discretion in such cases. Montgomery consulted Hughes, who told him that the students should not be allowed to graduate, but Montgomery disregarded Hughes’s input and told the board to issue each of the students a diploma. In protest, Hughes refused to sign the diplomas, which were invalid until he signed them. Cooper instructed the students to participate in the graduation ceremony anyway, confident that the school board would coerce him to give in, and the two students received unsigned diplomas during the graduation ceremony. Hughes held out until the end of the summer when, after pressure from the students’ parents, the board forced Hughes to sign the diplomas.\(^{50}\)

In each of these cases, Cooper—acting in some instances with the help of Montgomery, the black school board members, and the students, parents and teachers who were involved—subverted Hughes’s authority in order to establish the autonomy of M Street High School. In addition to reclaiming black authority over the school, Cooper was acting on her belief that every student who was willing to take on high school work should be given the opportunity to try, even it meant failing courses and retaking examinations. Cooper gave these particular students the benefit of the doubt in allowing them to advance and graduate because she was satisfied with their academic work and empathized with their difficult personal lives, but she held back most students who did not succeed and allowed them to repeat courses until they passed. In contrast, Hughes thought that high schools should be more elite institutions and that students who failed should be dismissed. While this disagreement to some extent was due to their different educational philosophies, it also had to do with race and the role of education in African Americans’ struggles for racial advancement, which is why black Washingtonians took this controversy so seriously. They saw Hughes as a threat to their long-held, though unofficial, right to self-governance in the public schools. Moreover, they viewed his stance on the black schools as a demonstration of his belief in the inferiority of their race and as the first steps in a plan to

\(^{47}\) The way Hughes talks about this in the House subcommittee hearings on the public schools in 1906 is that these students had “conditions” in their second year geometry courses. In Washington high schools, rather than failing a course and being prohibited from advancing to the next course, students were sometimes allowed to continue, but with “conditions” in their previous courses, and they were supposed to have all conditions removed in order to graduate. It seems that having a condition on one’s record meant that the student had failed to demonstrate understanding of a particular topic and to have that condition removed, the student had to pass an exam on that subject.

\(^{48}\) School Reorganization Hearings, 1906 99-100 (statement of P.M. Hughes, Director of High Schools).

\(^{49}\) One of the students, Grace Daniels, had failed English the second quarter of her first year, but had passed every quarter of every other course.

\(^{50}\) School Reorganization Hearings, 1906 97-100 (statement of P.M. Hughes).
deprive black Americans of a quality classical education and, in effect, to deprive them of their best avenue for racial advancement. It was not just that Cooper and her supporters wanted control; it was that they wanted control over their most important institutions—the public schools—and over the progress of the race. Hughes, however, attacked Cooper and sought to have her punished for what he saw as nothing but obdurate insubordination.

The black community was remarkably unified in its defense of Anna Julia Cooper. Her defenders attested to both her personal and professional accomplishments as principal as well as M Street High School’s broader significance in racial advancement. In public meetings, in newspaper editorials, and at Board of Education meetings, black Washingtonians extolled Cooper’s intelligence, dedication, and integrity, and had nothing but praise for her tenure as principal, especially the work she had done to obtain scholarships and send more of M Street’s brightest students to top universities. Groups of citizens banded together for the express purpose of supporting Cooper, as was the case with an organization that called itself the Colored Citizens of East Washington, and other groups, such as the M Street High School Alumni Association, which claimed to represent two thousand graduates, held special meetings to express their support and to pass and present resolutions to the school board and congress. At one point, M Street High School students called a mass meeting after school where they passed a resolution supporting Cooper and expressing confidence in their scholastic abilities that was signed by nearly five hundred students.51

William Calvin Chase was quick to make clear that the Bee supported Anna Julia Cooper, calling her “the best principal the school has ever had.” Moreover, Chase used the controversy at M Street to demonstrate black Washingtonians’ desire for control over their separate schools: “The colored population don’t ask for mixed schools,” Chase insisted. “All they ask is to be let alone. Why should our school be interfered with?...The people demand that Mrs. Cooper be let alone.” In the same issue of the Bee, Chase printed a letter from a group calling itself the “Principals Association,” which was most likely a group of black elementary school principals, also backing Cooper. The principals highlighted Cooper’s character (including her “highest and purest womanhood”) and her glowing track record as principal of M Street (including the twenty-eight students she helped place in the country’s foremost universities and the seventeen scholarships she obtained for M Street graduates). They closed their letter by insisting that with a teaching corps “imbued with lofty ideals for the development and uplift of our race,” Cooper’s future administration would be more harmonious and if the school board retained Cooper, “the best interests of the community will be safeguarded.”52

The severity of the allegations against Cooper, Percy Hughes’s steadfastness in having her reprimanded, and the uproarious response from black Washingtonians finally spurred the Board of Education to step in. In October of 1905, roughly a year and a half after the controversy began, it conducted a formal hearing, during which it became apparent that the struggle between Cooper and Hughes had been more about power and principle than about curriculum and discipline. In the report that it issued at the conclusion of the hearings, the Board of Education called Cooper’s actions “irregular” and “improper” and chided her for not following her superior’s orders. However, the board exonerated Cooper in the matter of the drunken students. They found that Cooper had, in fact, disciplined two students for drinking, but that it had been an isolated incident that Cooper wanted to keep under wraps to prevent the issue from receiving

52 “Our High School,” and untitled letter, Washington Bee, September 1905, Summer School Archives.
undue public attention. While Hughes probably would have liked the board to fire Cooper, they instead censured her for disobeying her superiors and instructed her to “recognize the authority of her superior officer, the Director of High Schools” in the future, but imposed no formal punishment.\(^{53}\)

The Board of Education’s report, including its unanimously adopted resolution, was notable in two ways. First, it made clear that one of the primary reasons Cooper was permitted to keep her position was because the black community wanted her to remain principal. In two separate places in the report, the board referred to Cooper’s “excellent reputation among her people” and the “very strong desire of a large proportion of the colored race in this District to have Mrs. Cooper retained as principal.”\(^{54}\) The black community actions to support Cooper were successful.

The second noteworthy feature of the report was the care the board members took to declare their commitment to equality. In the resolution the board adopted to conclude the investigation, it guaranteed to every child,

> …an equal opportunity to acquire a common school education in a favorable environment and under the best teachers obtainable; that the advanced courses of the high, manual training, and normal schools are open to all who are able to attain such reasonable standards of scholarship as are everywhere recognized as essential to advancement toward the higher learning; that the same text-books are prescribed, and in the graded schools furnished without cost, to all alike…\(^{55}\)

The board members went even further to defend their record of egalitarianism by attesting to the following:

> …that no discrimination has ever been made by the Board in the cost and completeness of equipment of new school buildings in favor of any section of the city on any class of citizens; and, so far as the Board has been able to influence legislation, teachers doing like work have received like pay, while pupils performing kindred tasks have shared kindred honors.\(^{56}\)

In the board’s resolution, it said much more than it needed to say to lay the M Street controversy to rest. While the hearing transcripts are unavailable, it is clear from the language in this report that the black community forced the Board of Education to address more than the dispute between Anna Julia Cooper and Percy Hughes and to confront the issues of educational equality and racial discrimination more broadly. Such firm and sweeping commitments to fairness and equality—not to mention defensiveness from white leaders—were not commonly part of white supremacist regimes in the Jim Crow South. The board clearly felt an obligation to placate the black community and the powerful language they used, assuring “equal opportunity” and “no discrimination,” reflected black Washingtonians’ more legalistic—as opposed to moralistic—assertion of their educational rights.

While guaranteeing black Washingtonians an education equal to that which white Washingtonians had access to, the Board of Education did not guarantee black autonomy. The resolution cautioned, “the Board believes that this equality of participation in the advantages of free education should carry with it an equality of obligation,” and confirmed, “it has been the

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\(^{54}\) Ibid., 488, 489.

\(^{55}\) Ibid., 490.

\(^{56}\) Ibid.
steadfast policy of the Board to regard the public school system as a unit for all administrative purposes.” With this, the board made sure to claim some control over the meaning of equality. White Washingtonians, including school superintendent Alexander Stuart, used the mandate of educational equality to defend unified management of the black and white public schools under administrators who by presumption if not by law would be white. Stuart, Hughes, and others would continue to use this notion of equality in the impending House of Representatives investigation into the schools.

The Reorganization of 1906

As with the 1900 school reorganization, the series of congressional bills that eventually became the school reorganization of 1906 addressed much more than the issues in the black schools and the controversy at M Street High School. The most pressing school-related issue for Washingtonians was the vast discrepancy between the paltry salaries D.C. public school teachers received compared with their counterparts in other urban school districts. Other important matters in the bills were whether the President, rather than the District commissioners, should appoint members of the Board of Education; the proper balance between graduate education and experience that superintendents and assistant superintendents should be required to have in order to be appointed; the power of the Board of Education vis-à-vis the superintendent; whether school board members should be paid small stipends for attending meetings; and to what extent school board meetings should be open to the public.

Subcommittee members did not permit witnesses to testify about anything unrelated to these matters and admonished those who strayed from the budgetary and administrative issues that were contained in the bills. For example, when Thomas Leisenring rehearsed before the subcommittee the same charges against Anna Julia Cooper and M Street High School that he had before the school board the previous year, Massachusetts Republican William Greene was, “severe with the witness,” according to the Washington Post coverage of the hearing, and prevented Leisenring from reading a prepared statement, which Greene regarded as “improper.” In addition to the fact that Leisenring had earned a reputation as a mulish bully, the subcommittee members knew that the Board of Education had already ruled on the M Street controversy and they did not want to hear about disputes involving the black schools unless they had to do with the proposed bills. Moreover, the congressmen were only interested in hearing

57 Ibid., 489, 490.
58 During Commissioner Henry B.F. Macfarland’s testimony at the hearing, he presented data from a 1905 National Educational Association report, which showed just how low teachers’ and administrators’ salaries were in Washington, D.C. Among a selection of thirty large and mid-size cities in the North, Midwest, West, and border states, male high school teachers in Washington earned more than $100 less per year than the next lowest paid male high school teachers in Minneapolis, Minnesota ($896 in Washington versus $1,064 in Minneapolis). Female high school teachers in the District were paid on average $839 per year, which was considerably better than their counterparts in New Orleans ($747) and Rochester, New York ($761), but in the bottom quartile overall. Salaries for elementary school principals ranked twenty-fifth out of thirty, while elementary school teachers’ salaries placed them in the bottom half. In addition, while forty-three American cities spent more than twenty five percent of their revenues for school purposes, Washington spent just under twenty-two percent, which placed it fifty-seventh in terms of percentage of revenue spent on schools. Significantly, this data is not disaggregated by race. Presumably, one important reason why teachers’ salaries lagged in Washington was because between one quarter and one third of them were black. School Reorganization Hearings, 1906, 13-17 (statement of H.B.F. Macfarland, D.C. Commissioner).
constructive feedback about the bills and school policy, not impertinent remarks about school officials. This policy helped the representatives of the black community who testified during the hearing because it allowed them to focus on the most important issue for the black public schools: recovering the autonomy they had lost in 1900.

The portion of the 1906 hearings that addressed the black schools followed a much different course from the 1900 hearings. Whereas white Washingtonians controlled the conversation about the issues in the black schools during the 1900 hearings, in 1906 black Washingtonians were on the offensive as they presented their demands and forced white Washingtonians and the members of the House subcommittee to respond to their grievances. The primary goal of those who testified from the black community was to make sure that the legislation clearly established the authority of the black assistant superintendent over all of the black schools—including the high school and the manual training school. While during the debates over the 1900 school reorganization black Washingtonians had argued that they were entitled to manage their own schools to demonstrate their abilities to whites, this time they emphasized the quality of their schools under black leadership and the school board’s and the government’s responsibility to maintain equality by continuing to give black Washingtonians a voice in the administration of their schools.

Namayoka Curtis, a prominent community activist and mother, articulated clear demands on behalf of the 365 mothers of M Street High School students whom she claimed to represent. Curtis asked the congressmen to give the black assistant superintendent sole charge of the black high school and normal school and told the committee plainly, “we as colored people do not feel that we wish a director of high schools.” Because black Washingtonians were one-third of the local population, she went on to request a reconfiguration of the Board of Education so that black Washingtonians would have exactly one-third representation on the board. Curtis said nothing about the impact of having a more powerful black assistant superintendent on the morale in the black schools, nor did she argue for the symbolic importance of such a figure. Rather, she backed up her constituents’ demands by reminding the congressmen of the accomplishments of M Street’s graduates under black leadership to show that M Street was by no means a second-class school and she admonished the school administrators who, in her view, sought to tarnish the school’s reputation.60

Kelly Miller, renowned at this time as a Howard University professor and prolific writer on race relations, also presented the black community’s demands. Testifying on behalf of the Civic Club, an organization of fifty prominent black men, Miller argued that the Board of Education had misinterpreted the school law that Congress had passed in 1900 and had not given the black assistant superintendent the control over the black schools that the law had intended. Miller chose his words carefully: “We do not feel that the present school board has carried out the intention of Congress in the organic law constituting this school board,” Miller began, “which says that there shall be one assistant superintendent who shall have charge of the colored schools.” Miller deftly faulted the school board—not Percy Hughes, Anna Julia Cooper, Alexander Stuart, Winfield Scott Montgomery, or any other individual—and characterized the lack of racial balance in the school administration’s power structure as a misunderstanding of a law that he alleged was already in place. Rather than dwell on the M Street controversy, Miller encouraged the congressional subcommittee to take this opportunity to draft clearer legislation that “would make the reading of it so plain that it will be impossible for anyone to misunderstand

60 School Reorganization Hearings, 1906, 120-21 (statement of Mrs. A.M. Curtis, community member).
it: that the assistant superintendent in charge of the colored schools shall have charge of all the grades and branches and departments of instruction thereof."  

Other representatives from the black community reaffirmed Miller’s call for a school bill that left no doubt as to the black assistant superintendent’s jurisdiction. Many who testified referred to the fact that from the inception of the public schools until 1900, the autonomy of the black schools was not protected by law, but had persisted because of common understandings passed down from one administration to the next. In the years since Congress passed the 1900 school bill however, it became clear to the black community that they could no longer assume that white school administrators, members of Congress, and white Washingtonians in general were willing to permit the same degree of autonomy for the black schools. Not wanting to stir up any more controversy by attacking the current school administration, those who testified on behalf of black Washingtonians emphasized that, while they thought superintendent A.T. Stuart and the current members of the Board of Education generally treated the black community fairly, they wanted legislation in place to safeguard their control over their schools since they could not be sure what kinds of people would lead the school system in the future.

Several more of Washington’s most prominent black men, representing the Civic Club and the venerated Bethel Literary and Historical Association, echoed Curtis’s and Miller’s requests for proportional representation on the school board and full control over the black secondary schools. William A. Joiner presented the Bethel Literary and Historical Association’s official statement, which contained seven concisely worded demands that the organization’s leaders had come up with the previous year. In addition to requesting higher salaries and a merit-based promotion system for all teachers, they demanded a nine-member school board (“because such a number can be most equitably divided”), power and autonomy for the black schools, and equality of curricular standards and resources among the white and black schools. The Bethel Literary explained that based on past experience, having a black assistant superintendent to oversee the black schools was necessary because “the interests of these schools are most carefully guarded by those who are most deeply interested in the children who attend them.”

Some of those who testified adopted more forceful tones and registered their displeasure with the current system less guardedly. Bethel Literary member and dean of teacher education at Howard University Professor Lewis B. Moore attacked both the present system under the 1900 law and one of the proposed school bills:

The present provisions, as well as those hinted at in the Goulden bill, say to the colored people in effect: Though you form one-third of the population you shall have no voice in the management of your schools, not in the course of study, nor appointment of teachers, nor location of school buildings. Equity alone would require that this should be corrected at once.

Moore did not stop there. He went on to allege that the bill drafted by New York Democrat Representative Joseph A. Goulden was “in the position of discriminating somewhat, though possibly not intentionally, against the colored schools.” Though Moore hedged by adding that the discriminatory measures in Goulden’s bill might be unintentional, to allege discrimination at all was incendiary. Moreover, Moore seemed to think it was unnecessary to explain why black

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61 Ibid., 88-9 (statement of Kelly Miller, Howard University Professor).
62 Ibid., 414 (statement of Mrs. A.M. Curtis); Ibid., 225 (statement of Shelby Davidson, Civic Club member).
63 Ibid., 199-200 (statement of Lewis B. Moore, Howard University Professor).
64 Ibid., 201.
65 Ibid.
Washingtonians deserved a voice in managing their schools because “equity alone” should be enough of a reason.

Speaking on Moore’s heels, William S. Lofton, a prominent dentist and Civic Club member, was also aggressive. He criticized the abolition of the office of the black superintendent and the demotion of all of the black directors of instruction to assistant directors, all of which were results of the 1900 school reorganization, and insisted that the black community was not satisfied with the new order. He then lodged a sharper criticism at the segregated system more generally:

I know the statement has been made to your committee that the present system is necessarily expensive, because of the dual system. Why try to place this responsibility upon the colored citizens? Isn’t the dual system, or the separate school system, the outgrowth of sentiment and prejudice against the negro? The colored brother has not been asked whether he wanted it or whether he did not want it.66

Here, Lofton attempted to shift the burden of what many referred to as the “negro problem” from blacks to whites. This challenged the predominant way whites and even most blacks in Washington accounted for segregation, attributing it to the “state of public feeling as it exists,” according to Kelly Miller; “social conditions which no legislation can go very far toward helping,” in the words of Howard professor Lewis B. Moore; “social conditions…in this latitude,” in white public school activist Alice Gitterman’s estimation; and the “exactions of the race question,” according to school board member and George Washington University president Charles Needham. Lofton subverted both the notions that blacks were to blame for the necessity of segregation and that segregation was a basic (if lamentable) fact of ethereal social conditions that people’s actions could do nothing to change.

This assertive testimony from black Washingtonians during the subcommittee hearing put leaders and spokesmen from the white community and the congressmen who had drafted the proposed school bills on the defensive. One common response from both white school leaders and congressmen was to defend their record of treating the white and black schools equally, as the Board of Education had done in its report after the M Street controversy investigation.67 Superintendent A.T. Stuart, Percy Hughes, several congressmen, and white members of the school board, all of whom had deep knowledge of school system, argued that the black schools had never intentionally been deprived of resources, had never been forced to weaken their curriculum, and had never been housed in inferior school buildings. In short, they insisted that black children who attended the public schools had been given an education equal to that which white children received.

However, like the Board of Education, white school representatives maintained that a unified administration of the segregated schools, including a single director of high schools, was essential to ensuring this degree of equality. William C. Dodge, a former member of the school Board of Trustees, cautioned that having a separate administration for the black schools would “prove injurious.” He reminded the committee that the “full intent of the law…was to give the colored the same advantages in all respects as the whites have in securing an education,” and that “in order that the system shall be faithfully and effectively applied and carried out, it is

66 Ibid., 209 (statement of William S. Lofton, Dentist and Civic Club member).
67 Congress, in addition to conceiving broad structural reorganizations of the schools, also passed yearly appropriations bills allocating funds to the black schools and the white schools, so there is a long and well documented record of Congress’s treatment of the black public schools.
absolutely essential that there should be one and the same controlling authority for both.”

Superintendent A.T. Stuart insisted that having a single director of high schools was necessary to protect against “leaving off any given school from those advantages” of standardized instruction and to guarantee that all schools would be “unified in opportunity and unified in responsibility.” Other white Washingtonians also testified as to the importance of maintaining unified school management to ensure “unity,” “equality,” and the “same advantages” in all of the public schools. Arguing that a more unified school administration was necessary to preserve equality was a clever move on the part of white Washingtonians. They turned the black community’s demand for equality on its head by insisting that more autonomy for the black schools would thwart rather than promote equality. Even if the actual egalitarianism of a system that removed power from local blacks and consolidated control under white administrators was dubious, the fact that white Washingtonians used egalitarianism as a defense of schools’ administrative structure shows the extent to which black Washingtonians had politicized the issue of equality.

There were, however, limits to the unity that white Washingtonians espoused. In response to Superintendent Stuart’s insistence upon the need for a single (white) director of high schools, Kelly Miller offered a solution that aroused some contention. He suggested that the position of director of high schools be retained, but that in matters regarding M Street High School (and any future black secondary schools), the director of high schools should report to the black assistant superintendent. In effect, this would make the white director of high schools subordinate to the black assistant superintendent. White school activist Alice Gitterman interjected to ask the subcommittee chairman Representative Morrell, “whether in [Miller’s] opinion it would be practicable to get in Washington a white director of secondary schools who would be willing to report, as far as the colored schools are concerned, to a colored assistant superintendent as his superior?” Miller responded that he thought that the schools in Washington had “sensible directors” who would “do their duty as laid down in the law.”

Representative Morrell replied by suggesting a solution that was exactly the opposite of Miller’s. He thought that the white director of high schools should officially delegate authority over the black secondary schools to the black assistant superintendent and that the black assistant superintendent should then report back to the white director of high schools. In Morrell’s vision, the white director of high schools would be the black assistant superintendent’s superior. While Morrell evaded Alice Gitterman’s question—and even tried to suggest that he was confused by having her repeat her question—proposing that the white high school director be superior to the black assistant superintendent showed that he empathized with the central problem of whether it was appropriate for a white man to have a black boss. Superintendent Stuart feared that Morrell’s solution would saddle the black assistant superintendent with too much responsibility, especially because since a small minority of public school students were in secondary schools (a vast majority were in the elementary grades and never made it to high school), superintendents and assistant superintendents were often much more familiar with elementary education. Stuart pointed out that this could be solved by creating a new assistant (black) director of high schools position, but that would both lessen the extent of unity among the black schools and the white

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68 School Reorganization Hearings, 1906, 213 (statement of William C. Dodge, former Board of Education member).
69 Ibid., 148 (statement of A.T. Stuart, D.C. Schools Superintendent).
70 Ibid., 150-51 (statement of Kelly Miller).
schools and would make the system even more top heavy than it already was, something Congress hoped to avoid.  

While the impossibility of blacks supervising whites was one way in which administrative unity was limited, another limitation recognized by both blacks and whites was the need for the black community’s involvement in the administration of their schools, to at least some extent. However, a pressing concern of the congressional subcommittee was the top heaviness of the current system, which they described as having a chain of command that ran not only vertically, but also horizontally and even diagonally. One goal of the 1906 restructuring was to get rid of what they saw as superfluous administrative positions. The most basic reason for the duplication of authority was, of course, that the public schools were really two separate systems united under the Board of Education. When members of the subcommittee questioned the need for assistant superintendents or assistant directors of instruction, which they saw as examples of inefficiency, white school representatives came to the black community’s defense.

In one instance, Representative Morrell suggested dispensing with assistant superintendents altogether and having the supervising principals report directly to the superintendent. Superintendent Stuart seemed caught off guard. “You know that one of the assistant superintendents is white and the other is colored,” he replied, “and, of course, the temper of the colored people throughout this city (with which I am heartily in sympathy) is that they should have an assistant superintendent of colored schools.” When Morrell pressed him about the superfluity of the assistant superintendents, Stuart insisted, “Our situation is very unique here in the matter of the colored schools. I would have to have, under any circumstances, an assistant superintendent of colored schools.” He added, “it would be a very great injustice for me” to dispense with the colored assistant superintendent.  

Alice Gitterman, too, argued that the black assistant superintendent should be “practically the superintendent of the colored schools” and should have clearly specified duties.

In another exchange, Massachusetts Republican William Greene acknowledged the value of directors of instruction, whose job it was to ensure uniformity within special subjects like music, drawing, and physical culture across the school district, but questioned the need for assistant directors of instruction. Stuart and Gitterman realized that Greene was not versed in the euphemisms Washingtonians sometimes used to soften the tone of racial discrimination. Stuart clarified, “The word ‘assistant’ in Washington means ‘colored.’” Whether recognizing the absurdity of this nomenclature or finding humor in the need explain a system of racial separation that they had internalized, the audience reacted to Stuart’s explanation with laughter, according to the hearing transcript. Once the audience’s laughter subsided, Stuart reiterated that there was an apparent duplication of supervision because the white directors of instruction and the black assistant directors each took charge over separate corps of teachers. Stuart’s matter-of-factness and seeming unwillingness to relinquish these positions suggests that he also supported black community control over instruction in special subjects.

Euphemistic labeling and indirect speech seemed to pervade the lexicon of Washingtonians in regard to race and segregation. Beyond calling what would otherwise have been called “colored” directors of subjects “assistant directors,” it was common to refer to the “dual system” of education, rather than use the more precise vocabulary of “segregation” or

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71 Ibid (statement of Pennsylvania Representative Edward Morrell).
72 Ibid., 303 (statement of A.T. Stuart).
73 Ibid., 343 (statement of Alice Gitterman).
74 Ibid., 364-65 (statement of A.T. Stuart).
“separation.” In addition, the racial designations of schools and even the race of individual people were seldom voiced. At this time, the school system was divided into thirteen divisions, but that all of the white schools came under the first nine divisions and the black schools made up the final four divisions was only understood—it was not legally codified. However, all Washingtonians knew these racial designations and used them as code words for talking about what was going on in the schools. For example, since the thirteenth division was all black, one need not mention the race of a teacher, administrator, or student associated with that division because division numbers were code words for racial designations.

When blacks dared to breach this polite vocabulary, they sometimes paid for their directness. Early in the hearings, Representative William Greene attacked pharmacist and Bethel Literary and Historical Association member O.M. Atwood for accusing the Board of Education of discriminating against the black community. While Atwood’s initial statement is not included in the hearing transcript, an excerpt from the rest of the exchange illustrates the severity of such an allegation:

Mr. Greene: You claim there is discrimination against the colored people?
Doctor Atwood: I do not claim that.
Mr. Greene: What do you mean, then?
Doctor Atwood: I mean simply that whenever there are any evils complained of in the white schools they get to them immediately, but not so with the colored schools.
Mr. Greene: Then you mean to say there is discrimination against the colored schools?
Doctor Atwood: If you desire to put it that way.
Mr. Greene: I ask you that. […]
Mr. Greene: You mean to say that the colored people are discriminated against as compared with the white schools, and that it is the fault of the board that they are discriminated against?
Dr. Atwood: I do not like the word discriminate.
Mr. Greene: Call it what you please.75

Clearly, race and racial policy were highly sensitive subjects, for blacks as well as whites.

As black Washingtonians advocated for specific legislation that clearly delineated blacks’ roles, they were divided on what, exactly, they wanted this legislation to say. In particular, they disagreed about whether the word “colored” should appear in the new school bill. Some argued that explicitly including racial specifications in the bill was pernicious because it would validate and legally mandate segregation in a more formal and official way than had been done in the past. Others, however, thought that requiring that the school district only hire black men and women as officials and teachers in the black schools was beneficial because it would protect black jobs and autonomy.

Kelly Miller was the first to bring this matter to the committee’s attention. He took issue with a line in one of the proposed bills that read, “And in the colored schools there shall be officers and teachers, all of whom shall be colored, as follows.” Miller mounted strong opposition to this language:

We, as colored people, have been fighting for forty years against black laws in the different States. If legislation of this sort goes into effect, describing that certain positions must be filled by people of certain colors, it gives national sanction in a certain

75 Ibid., 77-8 (statement of O.M. Atwood, pharmacist and Bethel Literary and Historical Association member).
way to black laws, which we have been fighting against, and it does not seem to be at all
necessary to so describe the race identity who are to fill the places in the public schools. When Representative Edward Morrell asked Miller to suggest alternative labels, Miller replied
that he thought no labels were necessary at all because blacks had been hired to work in black
schools and whites at white schools with no such legislation for decades. He was confident that
the “general sentiment of the community” would “keep the board straight” and perpetuate this
unspoken policy.

Howard University Professor and Bethel Literary member William Joiner also referred to
the historical significance of black laws to forewarn the congressmen against passing a bill that
contained racial designations. He pointed to the fear “that that which is now meant for our good
may prove a link in the chain that shall grow and grow and cover misdeeds and
misconstructions….” He used his home state of Illinois as an example of a place where once the
words “white” and “black” had made it into the law books, they were difficult to erase, and
cautioned again that “if a limitation may be put for our good it may be put to our injury.”

While Joiner was one of the only black Washingtonians who testified who clearly agreed
with Miller, aging Union general William Birney also thought the bills should not make
reference to color. He expressed his opinion that it was “bad statesmanship and bad policy to
legislate for hyphenated classes,” and that laws should be written for all Americans rather than
for particular subgroups. Birney, who was a lawyer and former United States Attorney for the
District of Columbia, had been a staunch abolitionist, so he was presumably still at least
somewhat sympathetic to the rights and interests of African Americans. The few other white
Washingtonians who offered their views on this matter agreed with Birney and Miller, although
many of them explained their position by referring to the specter of “class legislation.”

Although Miller’s assertion that including the word “colored” would amount to black laws and
Birney’s and others’ that legislation should not be written for particular groups of people differed
in tone and emphasis, they were all concerned that the school legislation promote equality.

Other black Washingtonians, however, wanted to keep the word in the bill because they
thought it would ensure that blacks would continue to receive teaching and administrative
positions in the public schools. Just after Miller’s objection, Doctor J.L. Wilder insisted, “the
colored people in this community are perfectly well satisfied with the wording of the Foster bill.
We wanted it specifically stated what we are to get.” He went on to say that if the matter were
left open to interpretation he was sure that he would live to see white men at the helm of the
city’s black schools. Inventor, lawyer, and civil servant Shelby Davidson agreed. While it
might be better if color were not mentioned in the bills at all, he reasoned that if the bills dealt
with the matter of race, then the word “colored” must appear, “as a protection to us,” he said. He

76 Ibid., 153 (statement of Kelly Miller).
77 Ibid., 154.
78 Ibid., 204 (statement of William Joiner, Howard University professor).
79 Ibid., 218 (statement of William Birney, former Union Army general).
80 In the postbellum years, “class legislation” was understood as special or partial laws, or laws that applied only to
certain people and not to others, which violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. It is
interesting to see it brought up here because in this period the concept was more commonly associated with labor
laws (efforts to impose a minimum wage, maximum hours, safe working conditions, etc.) rather than laws about
Jurisprudence (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); Melissa L. Saunders, “Equal Protection, Class Legislation,
81 School Reorganization Hearings, 1906, 154 (statement of Dr. J.L. Wilder).
also thought that remaining silent on the issue would provide an opening for white teachers to teach at black schools and for white administrators to take over the black divisions. A couple of months after the hearings but before Congress had drafted and voted on a final school bill, William Calvin Chase printed a succinct and strongly worded editorial about the course of Congress’s deliberations on a new school bill and the state of segregated education in Washington more generally. In Chase’s estimation, a consensus had been reached among the congressmen and witnesses that racial separation had the sanction of the majority of Washingtonians—both black and white. Collectively, witnesses thought that the black schools and the white schools should be autonomous in their day-to-day administration but united in their general direction under a white superintendent and a proportionately interracial board of education, although the exact racial makeup of the board should not be mentioned in the law. Chase bristled at these policies. Not providing for black representation on the school board and leaving open the possibility of white teachers being installed in black schools were “a palpable mendacity and insult” against which the black community of Washington, D.C., would “fight to the last ditch,” he threatened. Chase then offered a considered retort to whites’ allegations of “class legislation” and blacks’ concerns that by insisting on reserving several school board seats for blacks they would relinquish their right to oppose other racial legislation that went against their interests. He averred that demanding special consideration in this case was not inconsistent with blacks’ claims to political and civil equality because racial separation had been imposed by whites as an enactment of white supremacist ideology, against the will of the black community. Since racial mixing in the schools, which would be the truest manifestation of equality, was unthinkable in the near future, blacks had to work within the confines of their present condition to maintain a voice in the education of their children. Chase concluded his missive poignantly:

When the people at large arrive at the point where they will acknowledge the equality of all men and wipe out all vestiges of race or class distinction by mixing the schools, opening all the avenues of civil enjoyment to all without distinction and establishing open and fair competition in the effort for place and power, we will be willing to have the law shorn of all local class or race distinctions. But at this time when conditions are fast running toward the humiliation of the colored people and their complete elimination from places of honor and trust, we prefer our rights well deferred and beyond the reach of caprice.

Chase identified how complicated the notion of equality was in a profoundly unequal world. While some of the white school administrators and congressmen insisted that a more unified public school system was the only way to ensure “equality of opportunity” for all students, Chase, in addition to several representatives of the black community who testified at the hearings, exposed the fallaciousness of their claim. The black community’s struggle with Percy Hughes in the M Street High School controversy was evidence of at least some whites’ commitment to white supremacy. What would happen to black teachers and black children, they wondered, if someone like Percy Hughes were to become superintendent in a more unified system? As witnesses of blacks’ experiences throughout the South, whose educational opportunities, which had been greatly expanded during Reconstruction, had been steadily constricted by white southern “Redeemers,” and whose political and civil rights had been curtailed by Jim Crow laws, intimidation, and violence, black Washingtonians had reason to suspect that, at least in the short term, white racial attitudes and conditions for blacks were bound

82 Ibid., 224 (statement of Shelby Davidson).
to worsen rather than improve. So, while black Washingtonians held onto the long-term ideal of racial equality, they fought for more pragmatic goals in 1906, insisting on the autonomy of their public schools and on retaining black teachers and administrators, who would be careful guardians of blacks’ interests.

The school bill finally made it through the House of Representatives and the Senate in mid-June. It raised teachers’ salaries, normalized salary schedules, dissolved the old Board of Education, created a new board appointed by the District Supreme Court rather than the District commissioners, made the board’s meetings open to the public, and imposed more widespread use of civil service examinations. Victories for black Washingtonians included the abolishment of the Director of High Schools and a somewhat clearer separation of the authority of the white superintendent, who was to be the general supervisor over the white schools, and the black assistant superintendent, who was given “sole charge” of the black schools and had parallel duties to the white superintendent. The final bill did increase the Board of Education from seven members to nine (which the black community had urged because fully one third of the members would represent the black schools), but did not specify that three seats would be allocated to blacks. However, because black Washingtonians had insisted on equitable representation on the school board during the House hearings, the District Supreme Court was obliged to appoint three African Americans and this practice would continue.84

The black community seemed to have perceived the legislation as a modest victory. It gave the black assistant superintendent clearer control over M Street High School and gave the black community increased representation on the Board of Education. It stopped short of complete autonomy for the black schools, however, and provided no mechanism for ensuring equitable funding of the black schools, which would become an increasing problem over the next two decades.

In addition, the constitution of a new board of education aroused more controversy than it abated. The appointment of the new black members of the school board was contentious, with even more hopefuls vying for appointments than in 1900. The District Supreme Court finally settled on Mary Church Terrell, who had been a member of the former school Board of Trustees, retired doctor and Howard Medical School alumnus Oliver Atwood, and John F. Cook, Jr., whose brother was former black school superintendent George F.T. Cook and who was part of the socially prominent Cook family. William Calvin Chase commented that the judges’ appointments reflected that the Court “paid no more attention to [the people’s] demands and requests any more than March winds to the feelings of pedestrians upon a mountain,” but judging from the sheer number of aspirants, it is unlikely that any three appointees would have satisfied the majority of the black community.85

The board did nothing to ingratiate itself with black Washingtonians, however, when one of its earliest actions was to depose Anna Julia Cooper as principal of M Street. This was part of a sweeping action whereby the new board dismissed dozens of teachers and administrators who had received less than stellar ratings during the previous school year. But while most of the dismissed teachers were reappointed, Cooper, along with the white principal of Central High School, were not. This action was endorsed by the new white superintendent William

Chancellor, who replaced A.T. Stuart after his retirement. Given the amount of controversy that had surrounded Cooper during her tenure, her ouster was unsurprising, but black Washingtonians reacted uproariously to what they saw as a gross abuse of power on behalf of the Board of Education and a great breach of trust on the part of the newly appointed superintendent.86

Several groups of black Washingtonians, led by the city’s powerful black clergy, organized to protest what they saw as a slap in the face after a long battle for more power over their schools and a clear violation of the new legislation. One group, which called itself the Citizens’ Committee on Public School Affairs, issued a public letter in which its representatives accused the school board of creating an oligarchy that ruled based on “personal spite” and colluding with the new superintendent (who they had appointed) to illegally depose Anna Julia Cooper. What is notable about their letter is that, even though its authors used exaggerated and emotive language, they based each of their nine claims against the Board of Education and Superintendent Chancellor on their understanding of the school law and their right to be heard. They began each claim with the phrase, “The Public Wants to Know and Should Know,” typed in boldface, reflecting that they saw themselves as full citizens of the District of Columbia and that Congress, the courts, and local officials were obligated to treat them as such. The Citizens’ Committee leaders ended their letter by reiterating their status as “public Spirited Citizens” and insisting on “justice, ‘the square deal,’ and obedience to the law of the land.”87

Several days after the Citizens’ Committee issued this public letter, another group of black Washingtonians led by an overlapping group of ministers gathered at Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. This group adopted a series of resolutions reprimanding the Board of Education and drafted a petition to the board to reinstate Anna Julia Cooper. Metropolitan AME Church pastor Edward Hughes Hunter, who was one of the clergymen involved in drafting the Citizens’ Committee’s public letter, gave an impassioned speech in which he chided the school board for abusing the new school law. He ended his speech with a call to arms: “I trust that every colored person in the District of Columbia will rise up and fight this matter to the end. The colored people must stand up for their rights.”88 Anna Julia Cooper was not reinstated (although she would come back to teach in the D.C. public schools several years later), but through the battle they waged to support her and to broaden their legal authority over their public schools, black Washingtonians had forced a conversation linking public education with race, equality, and citizenship rights.

In these early twentieth-century struggles over their schools, black Washingtonians both recognized the inherent inequality in segregated schools, but sought to take advantage of this racial separation to harness control over one of the city’s most important public institutions. They did not see themselves as acquiescing to segregation, but rather fighting for their schools’ autonomy as part of a long-term strategy of racial advancement. While racial discrimination persisted, black Washingtonians had altered the boundaries and the meanings of segregation.

86 Hutchinson, Anna J. Cooper, 81; Moore, Leading the Race, 98-99.
CHAPTER THREE

“When Truth Gets a Hearing”

Democracy and the Black Public Schools in the 1910s

In the spring of 1915, M Street High School teacher Tessa Lee sent a letter to the NAACP’s national secretary May Childs Nerney with ideas about how to get black high school students in Washington and their parents involved in the organization. “My idea is this,” Lee wrote to Nerney, “to have a big meeting here at the Howard Theatre for High School children; to have the speakers who will attract a large crowd and advertise it well through the schools and churches.” She also suggested that the organization offer a prize of ten dollars to the child who recruited the largest number of new adult members. Lee told Nerney that this idea had come to her after she had polled her students, asking how many of their parents were members of the NAACP, which by that point had been a growing presence in the nation’s capital for two years. She was surprised—and evidently dismayed—to learn that not only were very few of their parents members, but that the students themselves were unfamiliar with the organization. She reported to Nerney, “In a vague way they know the NAACP exists but they really do not know the real workings of the Association.” Lee’s final suggestion was that the association’s rules committee open membership to high school students, allowing them to join for twenty-five cents, or one-quarter of the one-dollar membership fee that adults paid.1

Tessa Lee’s correspondence with May Childs Nerney illustrates the changing nature of the black rights struggle as the twentieth century wore on. Although it was still a young organization, by 1915 the District branch of the National Association of Colored People (NAACP) was waging local battles against segregation in the federal government, threats to segregate streetcars, and screenings of the film The Birth of a Nation. Because of their presence in the nation’s capital, the District branch also became watchdogs against discriminatory national legislation and they spearheaded the national anti-lynching campaign. Lee’s letter showed the extent to which the NAACP was trying to make all black citizens—not just the elites who led the legislative and courtroom campaigns—more politically aware and involved. Her own involvement with the association reflected its popularity among black teachers and school staff in Washington, who were concerned with issues of fair employment for themselves and their colleagues and equal educational opportunity for their students.

The local and national context of Tessa Lee’s letter had changed since the struggle for school autonomy ten years earlier. The return of the Democratic Party to Washington with Woodrow Wilson’s presidency had upended the Republican Party’s decades-old patronage system for black federal government workers and Wilson’s administration supported Jim Crow segregation not only within federal government offices but also throughout the city. Blacks who had supported Wilson’s candidacy because of his vague promises to respond to their concerns bit their tongues. The United States entered a world war to “make the world safe for democracy;” tens of thousands of black troops joined the effort, hoping that their service would be recognized and make their own country more democratic, as well. Instead, they were mistreated in the military and were welcomed home with a nationwide succession of race riots during the summer of 1919, one of which tore through D.C. Meanwhile, the NAACP had established itself as a force

1 Tessa Lee to May Childs Nerney, undated, folder 511, Archibald Grimké Collection, Man. Div. MSRC.
against racial discrimination in large part thanks to the Washington branch, which had become the organization’s largest and most active division.

With this change in circumstances, the local political calculus had changed as well. The NAACP aimed to unify the black community in its pursuit of racial justice, both to increase the organization’s membership and fill its coffers as well as to establish control over the direction of the anti-discrimination movement. To this end, the District branch attacked racial discrimination on multiple fronts, one of the most important of which was in the public schools. While the organization, with Archibald Grimké at its head, was concerned about the quality of education for the District’s black students, it was just as concerned with economic justice, and therefore pursued salary equalization measures for black teachers and school employees and a management and compensation structure that paralleled those of the white schools.

During the decade between the 1906 school reorganization battle and the NAACP’s realization as a potent force in local politics, the black community’s concerns with its schools was focused inward. They were becoming accustomed to at times unpopular assistant superintendent, Roscoe C. Bruce, and his role in the school system’s administrative structure, as well as tending to a number of scandals and disputes within their schools. Out of these struggles sprouted a grassroots organization known as the Parents’ League, which mounted an effort in 1919 to oust Roscoe Bruce and whose strategies contrasted sharply with the NAACP’s. While at this point the NAACP exerted most of its political pressure in legislatures, courtrooms, and orderly mass meetings, the Parents’ League was rowdy, disruptive, and failed to articulate a clear political program. Despite the fact that the NAACP and elite blacks involved in the association largely saw the Parents’ League as a distraction from more important concerns, the extent of the Parents’ League’s disruptiveness prompted a Senate investigation of the public schools, which, in turn, gave black Washingtonian’s an official forum for their mounting concerns about injustice and inequality in the public schools. This chapter, then, chronicles two parallel struggles in the black public schools: the Parents’ League’s fight to oust Roscoe Bruce and the NAACP’s crusade for equal resources.

In the concerns and demands that NAACP members and officials articulated in the mid-1910s and during the Senate investigation in 1920, one sees an evolution in the language, strategies, and nature of their claims. Even more than they did in 1906, black Washingtonians strategically used the avenues of law and politics, rather than appeals to conscience and morality, to call for equal resources in their public schools. They used the language of justice and citizenship rights to equal educational opportunity. By the end of the Senate hearings on the public schools in 1920, black Washingtonians had made the case for the relationship among black administrative autonomy, educational opportunity, and citizenship rights.

Roscoe Conkling Bruce and the Colored Schools

Two months into the 1906-1907 school year, Roscoe Conkling Bruce’s first year as Assistant Superintendent of the Colored Schools, William Calvin Chase and the Washington Bee were already reporting on the public’s misgivings about their new assistant superintendent. While people were pleased that Bruce had local roots (he was the only son of former Mississippi Senator Blanche Kelso Bruce and had grown up in Washington) they were concerned about his youth and inexperience. Bruce graduated near the top of his class from M Street High School and went on to excel at Harvard University, but he had only been out of college for four years. He had spent three of those years as head of the Education Department at Tuskegee Institute, and the
fourth year as principal of Armstrong Manual Training School, Washington, D.C.’s other black secondary school. But, he had no experience or training to prepare him for the responsibilities involved in managing a public school system. Never at a loss for words when it came to criticizing public figures, Chase called the new head of the black public schools an irresponsible “schoolboy” who was “not big enough” for the job and had not yet “relieved himself of the fur that comes on a young chicken after it is out of a shell.”

Another concern among many of the District’s black elite was Roscoe Bruce’s close ties to Booker T. Washington. Bruce’s arrival in Washington, D.C. coincided with the advent of the Niagara Movement and the coalescence of a group of prominent African Americans—the foremost of whom was W.E.B. Du Bois—who opposed Booker T. Washington’s philosophies and strategies. Almost as much as they opposed Washington’s views, they opposed his style. He was often sycophantic toward whites and maintained “quasi-dictatorial power” over black America, in the words of historian August Meier. In Bruce’s case, it appeared that the black elite in Washington, D.C. were more concerned that Bruce’s arrival in the public schools was an indication that Booker T. Washington was trying to increase his own power within the District’s black society. Even before they were aware of his particular plans for the black school in D.C., local elites were skeptical of Bruce because he was coming straight from Tuskegee.

In Bruce’s first several years as assistant superintendent he did lobby for the expansion of industrial training for black children beyond what was then being offered at the elementary and secondary level. He proposed either that Armstrong Manual Training School be transformed into a vocational or technical high school, or that Congress fund the erection of an entirely new school to train black pupils to enter fields like carpentry, shoe repair, tailoring, bricklaying, plumbing, and electrical work upon graduation. As a manual training school, Armstrong’s curriculum included a roughly even distribution between classes that taught skills like sewing to girls and basic woodwork to boys and traditional academic subjects like literature, languages, math, and science. By contrast, M Street High School offered only a classic liberal arts curriculum. The problem with this, according to Bruce, was that black children in Washington were not being trained for occupations available to blacks and thus were not able to achieve “economic independence” with the skills and knowledge they had acquired from their public school education. While black girls had the hope of using their liberal arts education from M Street or Armstrong to enter the teaching profession, it was rare for black boys to become teachers in the elementary grades. Unless they were very bright or from an elite family and planned to join the rarified ranks of the black professional elite, black boys’ “literary” education would be of little use to them when it came to getting a job. And, since very few black children made it beyond eighth grade, Bruce thought that black pupils should receive more advanced technical training in the elementary years as well.

While some thought this smacked of Booker T. Washington’s advocacy for industrial education, this kind of thinking was not uncommon among early twentieth century school leaders and educators more generally, a group that education historian David Tyack labels

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2 Washington Bee, November 16, 1907; “Bruce’s Impudence,” Washington Bee, November 23, 1907.
3 Meier, Negro Thought in America, 115.
5 Report of the Board of Education to the Commissioners of the District of Columbia, 1907-08; see also Roscoe C. Bruce’s reports in the 1908-09 and 1909-10 Board of Education reports.
“administrative progressives.” Like other administrative progressives, Bruce believed that schooling should prepare children for the social stratification they would face when they reached adulthood. Thus, he did not want to do anything to alter the curriculum at M Street and agreed that it was important to have a classically trained elite. “M Street is, and must always remain, a high school of the literary type,” Bruce insisted. “From the M Street High School must continue to come bodies of young men and women with a basic literary education, destined for leadership by professional service—our teachers, our physicians, our clergymen.” After all, he was a product of M Street High School and had been successful enough there to excel at Harvard University. For those “destined” for more modest careers, however, Bruce thought it was at best a disservice and at worst discrimination not to offer them proper training. Bruce’s paternalistic and condescending characterization of the “Negro farm hand…wholly unprepared for the complications, the competitions, the moral stress of city life,” who migrated to Washington from the rural South sounded much like many administrative progressives’ depictions of southern and eastern European immigrants to other northern cities. Progressive educators, especially given their emphasis on reforming urban education, seemed to have influenced Bruce’s educational philosophy just as much as the Tuskegee model did.

Not all elite black Washingtonians were threatened by Bruce, however. Mary Church Terrell came to Bruce’s defense in a letter she wrote shortly after took the job as principal of Armstrong. “I strongly advocated the appointment of Roscoe Conkling Bruce,” she proclaimed, “because I am acquainted with no Colored person in this country who has done more to prove the Colored man’s capacity for the highest and best education it is possible to secure in the United States.” She used as evidence both his track record at Tuskegee, where he garnered “unstinted praise” for his stewardship of the Academic Department, as well as his achievements at Harvard, both in the classroom and on the debate team.

For his detractors, the biggest strike against Bruce appeared not to have been his educational philosophies, but rather his personality. A range of negative qualities peppered articles in the Washington Bee and the New York Age that chronicled Bruce’s public relations debacles. In terms of his personality, people thought he was “insincere,” “opportunistic,” and “immoral.” Professionally, he faced allegations that he was slow to take action on important matters; either tyrannical and arbitrary in his leadership or too weak to stand up for the colored schools to the white members of the board and the white superintendent, depending on the issue; and that he was guilty of favoritism and discrimination. It was also rumored that Booker T. Washington must have been unhappy with Bruce’s performance at Tuskegee because he was known “to let go only those who fail to make good.”

The favoritism charge seemed to be true, given incidents with several teachers and administrators who were fired, demoted, or promoted without regard to ratings, test scores, or

6 Tyack defines the “administrative progressives” as the large group of education professionals and businessmen who controlled urban education in many cities between 1890 and 1940. Important elements of their ideology were bureaucratic centralization, rational social organization, and alliances between professional educators and businessmen. They also believed that inequality was a natural byproduct of freedom and that, rather than fight social hierarchy, which was futile, the more appropriate response was to tailor schools to each “layer” of society. Tyack, The One Best System, 126-29.

7 Report of the Board of Education to the Commissioners of the District of Columbia, 1907-08.

8 Mary Church Terrell to Mr. Pinkett, September 9, 1906, container 4, MCT, LOC.

professional references. One such case occurred over the summer of 1910, when Bruce demoted and transferred Belle Kinner, an accomplished and much-loved teacher, out of the Deanwood School and replaced her with F.L. Cardoza, a friend of Bruce who had been working as the business manager of a newsletter he published. Deanwood was an out-of-the-way neighborhood on the northeastern edge of the District, which was home to a growing population of aspiring-class blacks. Its almost rural feel fostered a close-knit community and one of its most important institutions was its grade school. The community reacted uproariously when Kinner was transferred, especially since Bruce had recently publicly praised her for her work to increase enrollment at the school. Their movement quickly earned the support of black Washingtonians from other parts of the city and they immediately took their case to the Board of Education, calling not just for Kinner’s reinstatement, but also for Bruce’s removal as assistant superintendent. “If ever there was an act of injustice perpetrated upon a school teacher,” William Calvin Chase charged, this was an egregious example.\(^\text{10}\) The citizens of Deanwood and their supporters organized several mass meetings and visits to the school board over the summer and the first few months of the next school year and Chase continued to dole out invectives against Bruce in weekly editorials.

While nepotism and favoritism were widespread in the black schools, as Mary Church Terrell recounted in her memoir and as many black Washingtonians publicly lamented, Roscoe Bruce’s brand of favoritism was different. Unlike others whose motives were to help out friends and family members—which was, of course, against school policy—Bruce had a reputation for drawing a “color line” in the black schools by showing preferences for those with lighter skin and higher social status and for kowtowing to whites rather than representing the interests of members of his own race.\(^\text{11}\) For example, when nothing came of the Deanwood community’s protests at the Board of Education to reinstate Kinner and reprimand Bruce, one citizen seemed angry but unsurprised because, he said, Bruce was “just the kind of Negro white people want.”\(^\text{12}\) This was why the Belle Kinner case, which seemed like a relatively minor incident, aroused such an extreme response. It was just one example among many that proved Bruce’s commitment to favoritism, colorism, and elitism rather than merit and suggested that he was colluding with powerful whites to maintain his position.

While there is little direct evidence of Bruce’s “colorism” or collusion with whites, the abundance of charges of favoritism, many of which were accompanied by allegations of color discrimination, suggest his guilt.\(^\text{13}\) In addition, scandals that were serious enough to make it to the school board and the office of the white superintendent occurred with such frequency that it seems unlikely that he would have been able to retain his position without behind-the-scenes negotiations with powerful whites. The combination of Bruce’s support for the expansion of non-academic industrial education and his oblique and overly diplomatic way of addressing the increasing inequality between the black schools and the white schools are further evidence of his efforts to please whites—and retain his job—rather than advocate for his constituents.

\(^\text{10}\) Untitled editorial, \emph{Washington Bee}, July 16, 1910.
\(^\text{11}\) “Great Scott,” \emph{Washington Bee}, January 11, 1908.
\(^\text{13}\) Lawrence Otis Graham, in his biography of the Bruce family, is rather adamant about Bruce’s close relationships with white elites and his aloofness from the black community. Although Graham does not thoroughly cite his sources, his conclusions seem to be drawn from a combination of his impressions of William Calvin Chase’s commentary on Bruce and personal interviews with Bruce’s descendants. Graham, \emph{The Senator and the Socialite}, 246-307.
As the skirmishes in the public schools wore on, another battle was brewing against the proliferation of discriminatory policies being implemented by President Woodrow Wilson’s administration. A new organization, the NAACP, took root in Washington, initially to fight the battle against the federal government, but it would quickly broaden its efforts and become an important advocate for the black public schools. While the schools had always been at the forefront of black Washingtonians’ political activities, the NAACP’s presence changed the nature of the debate. Pleas for black uplift, morality, and fairness for its own sake were deemphasized because they were no longer salient. Instead, the NAACP’s leaders used the language of justice before the law and constitutional rights to bolster their claims to racial equality, which were much more direct than they had been in the past. Now, black Washingtonians waged battles on multiple fronts. Those who saw themselves as victims of an unjust administration in the public schools, which especially threatened lower status blacks and their children, fought to get rid of Roscoe C. Bruce. At the same time, the NAACP, led by Washington branch president Archibald Grimké, waged a school equalization battle in Congress.

The NAACP Comes to Washington

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) came to be as a result of a series of meetings organized by Oswald Garrison Villard (grandson of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison), social settlement worker Mary White Ovington, socialist writer William English Walling, a couple dozen other liberal white New Yorkers, and a handful of blacks, including W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell between 1908 and 1910. Its founders intended for it to be an integrated, biracial organization that would spearhead a national movement to fight race prejudice and discrimination, reclaim black voting rights, secure equal treatment before the law, ensure equal educational opportunity for black children, and promote justice in employment. The NAACP was headquartered in New York, but by 1912 it had eleven local branches, most of which were in northern cities like Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago. Circulation of The Crisis, the organization’s print organ edited by W.E.B. Du Bois, had reached 27,000.14

Given the centrality of Washington, D.C. to black America in this period, before hundreds of thousands of blacks had begun their mass exodus from the rural South to points North and West, it is surprising that the District was not among the NAACP’s first branches. As of 1912, there were over 100 black Washingtonians involved in a fledgling local branch that was trying to earn official recognition from national headquarters, but the District Branch would not be accepted into the national organization until the following year. There were several explanations for Washington’s lag. One was the national association’s emphasis on maintaining a racially integrated membership. While there were plenty of blacks in Washington eager to fight for racial equality, there were far fewer local whites. NAACP officers in New York had hoped that congressmen, aging Union Army veterans, and white Howard professors would fill in the ranks, but many did not.15 Some chose not to join the local branch for professional or political reasons. Minnesota Senator Moses Clapp, for example, preferred to remain on the sidelines because he felt that he should not belong to an organization that would be affected by

15 NAACP Memo re: May 6, 1913 board meeting to May Childs Nerney, May 17, 1913, Box G-34, Part I, NAACP Papers, LOC. [Hereafter cited as NAACP LOC.]
congressional legislation, even though he was sympathetic to the cause. Many were also discouraged by the unseemly battle to wrest branch leadership away from Shiloh Baptist Church pastor Reverend J. Milton Waldron.

Waldron had been elected president of the small group that was trying to become the official Washington branch of the NAACP in the spring of 1913, but, at that point, group membership was more about politicking and power grabbing among local black elites than it was about race progress. In addition to being a preacher at a large church in Northwest Washington, J. Milton Waldron was both a former president of William Monroe Trotter's National Independent Political League (NIPL) as well as a reputed Democrat who had been known to genuflect to southern whites. In his involvement with the NIPL, it was rumored that Waldron mailed letters to black federal employees, soliciting one-dollar donations to the organization in exchange for employment protection. In addition, during a visit to Virginia the previous year, he had given a speech to a white audience in which he proclaimed that southern whites were blacks' “best friends in everything essential except politics,” and that black disfranchisement in the South was “more largely due to their want of wisdom in the use of the franchise than to any other thing.”

Waldron also had a hand in school affairs and was aligned with a contingent of black ministers and several others against Roscoe C. Bruce, allegedly because Bruce had offended him at some point in the past. Suspicious of his politics, many elite blacks were reluctant to associate themselves with the local branch as long as Waldron was at the helm.

Because of his checkered political past and current reputation, J. Milton Waldron was already not the national board’s preference to lead the Washington branch, but he aroused further controversy when it became even clearer that he intended to use his position as branch president to advance his own political ambitions. While he was serving as president of the unrecognized Washington branch, he became a candidate for the office of the recorder of deeds in Washington, a patronage position typically filled by African Americans. However, it was against NAACP policy for officers to hold or seek political office, and Waldron was not shy about seeking endorsements. When Oswald Garrison Villard asked him either to discontinue his campaign for the recorder of deeds position or to resign as president of the local branch, he refused to do either. Instead, he began vilifying Villard and the national board publicly and threatened that the entire Washington group would demand that the organization refund their membership dues and financial contributions if the national board removed him from office. Many local blacks were already wary of Waldron, whom William Calvin Chase referred to as a “preacher politician,” and his office seeking, so, in late June, the small local NAACP group responded to his obstinacy by voting to oust him as president so the national board did not have to.

The Waldron debacle had particularly rankled the national NAACP board in New York because Woodrow Wilson, only the second Democratic president elected since the Civil War, had just been inaugurated, and had brought Jim Crow with him. Since Reconstruction, but especially since civil service reform in the 1880s, the federal government’s increasingly large bureaucracy had been an important source of stable, decently paid employment for local blacks.

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16 Moses Clapp to Oswald Garrison Villard, September 16, 1913, Box G-34, NAACP LOC.
18 “The Second Emancipation of the Race: The colored man learning to use his ballot for his own protection; supporting men and measures rather than parties,” leaflet, Box G-34, NAACP LOC.
20 May Childs Nerney to Joel Spingarn, July 7, 1913, Box G-34, NAACP LOC; Mary White Ovington to Joel Spingarn, July 29, 1913, Box G-34, NAACP LOC; “Questions for Rev. Waldron,” Washington Bee, December 7, 1912; “Waldron Removed,” Washington Bee, June 28, 1913.
In fact, by the time Wilson took office in 1913, the combination of public school teaching jobs and positions in federal government agencies had been the socioeconomic backbone of Washington’s black middle class for three decades. During Wilson’s first months in office, however, treasury secretary William McAdoo and postmaster general Albert Burleson led the way in instituting a range of segregationist policies in their departments, with Wilson’s approval. First to go were integrated bathrooms and lunchrooms (in the post office building, blacks were made to use the bathroom on the eighth floor, while in the treasury department they now had to go down to the basement). Segregated workspaces followed, and then government departments began requiring job applicants to submit a photograph of themselves as part of their application, which many presumed was to discern the race of the applicant. Word of these discriminatory policies spread quickly and the NAACP national board in New York saw this as a critical opportunity to extend their reach into Washington and, more importantly, federal government race policy. 21

Getting rid of Waldron was critical to the District Branch’s growth. Once Waldron was voted out, the national board considered building a local branch themselves, but, in the words of national secretary May Childs Nerney, they decided that would be “paternalism raised to the nth power.” 22 They preferred that the Washington Branch grow more organically. For months, the national board had been trying to coax Archibald Grimké, who was affiliated with the Boston branch even though he lived in Washington, to step in as branch president, but he had refused to become involved in the local branch while it was embroiled in controversy. 23 Grimké was the son of a slave, Nancy Weston, and her master Henry Grimké. After the Civil War, Archibald Grimké and his brother Francis attended Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and Archibald went on to study law at Harvard University. After graduating from Harvard Law School, he practiced law, became involved in local politics, and began to write articles about racial discrimination and other issues. He served as United States consul to the Dominican Republic from 1894 to 1898, during Grover Cleveland’s second term, and, upon his return, joined his brother Francis, who was the preacher at the prominent Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, in Washington. There, he became active in the black intelligentsia through his involvement in the American Negro Academy, Bethel Literary and Historical Association, and the Niagara Movement. His experience in politics and his skill at writing and speaking about race issues made him an ideal NAACP leader, and, by August, he was branch president. 24

With a well-respected leader committed to political activism guiding the Washington Branch, the NAACP jumped into the fight against segregation in the federal government. In mid-August, they issued a strongly worded letter to Woodrow Wilson criticizing his administration’s actions. “The very presence of the Capitol and of the Federal flag has drawn colored people to the District of Columbia in the belief that living there under the shadow of the National Government itself they were safe from the persecution and discrimination which follow them elsewhere because of their dark skins,” the letter began. “Today they learn that, though their ancestors have fought in every war in behalf of the United States, in the fiftieth year after Gettysburg and Emancipation, this Government, founded on the theory of complete equality and freedom for all citizens, has…set the colored apart as if mere contact with them were contamination…Men and women alike have the badge of inferiority pressed upon them by

21 Sullivan, Lift Every Voice; Yellin, “In the Nation’s Service.”
22 May Childs Nerney to Joel Spingarn, July 31, 1913, Box G-34, NAACP LOC.
23 May Childs Nerney to Joel Spingarn, July 7, 1913, Box G-34, NAACP LOC.
24 Gatewood, Aristocrats of Color, 41, 313-17; Meier, Negro Thought in America, 242-44.
Government decree.” The letter, which was reprinted in black publications around the country, ended with a plea for Wilson to “prevent a gross injustice” by having the segregation orders revoked. The fight to repeal segregation in the federal government continued, with lobbying visits to the offices of sympathetic congressmen, protests among workers, letter-writing campaigns, petitions, and attempts to schedule appointments with Woodrow Wilson himself to deliver their protestations in person.

In the meantime, interest and membership in the Washington Branch soared. The New York headquarters organized a mass meeting at the Metropolitan AME Church in October, which, according to the Washington Bee, was “the greatest meeting in the history of this city,” and attracted over 10,000 people. D.C. branch executive committee member—and M Street High School history teacher—Neval Thomas said that they had chosen to hold the meeting at Metropolitan AME because it only held 2,000 people and they wanted the crowd to spill out into the streets. They planned for an overflow meeting to take place on the street outside the church because, according to Thomas, “if you are in the streets it will have some effect upon public opinion.” Indeed, Thomas happily reported, “A good many white people were not able to get their automobiles through that street that night.” In the wake of the meeting, the Bee gushed, “Never before in the history of Washington have the citizens manifested such an interest.” Not surprisingly, many of the branch’s new and most passionate members were federal government workers, many of whom aided the anti-segregation campaign by gathering information about the nature and extent of racial discrimination in various federal departments and by writing letters to congressmen, the secretaries of their federal department employers, or directly to President Wilson.

The battle against federal government segregation was not the Washington branch’s only concern, however. NAACP headquarters in New York used the organization’s presence in Washington to keep tabs on discriminatory congressional legislation, most of which targeted the local population. Bills to prohibit intermarriage between blacks and whites, to mandate Jim Crow cars in the city’s streetcars, and to segregate parks, pools, and other public places in the District were introduced routinely by southern congressmen, but many of these bills failed thanks to the effective lobbying of the local NAACP. In addition, because of the increased presence of black activists on Capitol Hill, there was more coverage of congressional activity in the black press, which helped generate more local and national support for anti-discrimination activism. Other well-known campaigns that the NAACP would lead in Washington in the 1910s were the efforts to ban movie theaters from showing D.W. Griffith’s 1915 film The Birth of a Nation, an apologia

25 National Board of the NAACP to Woodrow Wilson, August 15, 1913, Box G-34, NAACP LOC.
26 Eric Yellin’s dissertation offers the best account of federal government segregation under Woodrow Wilson and black Washingtonians’ efforts to fight against it. In his analysis, while the NAACP was certainly passionate about fighting segregation and discrimination on principle, the organization was also opportunistic in its efforts to publicize this particular campaign, realizing that it was the perfect chance to make the association national in scope. Yellin, “Protestors and Advocates: Protecting Citizens and Workers in Washington, D.C., 1913-1920,” in “In the Nation’s Service.”
27 The District branch had nearly 7,000 members by 1918; Boston was second with 2,500. “National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Results of the Drive,” Crisis 16, no. 4, August, 1918, 172.
28 District of Columbia Branch Report from “Annual Conference Speeches, 2nd Session,” May 1914, 25, Box B-1, NAACP LOC.
29 The Bee actually estimated that there were 4,000 inside the church and 8,000 more gathered outside. “Race Segregation,” Washington Bee, November 1, 1913.
30 Yellin, “In the Nation’s Service,” 194-256.
31 Report of the National Secretary from 1914 Annual Conference, Box B-1, NAACP LOC.
to the Ku Klux Klan and white supremacy; the anti-lynching campaign, including an effort to get Congress to pass legislation making lynching a federal crime; and the fight for equal treatment of black soldiers during World War I. Blacks had certainly had a presence in congressmen’s offices prior to the advent of the NAACP and to some extent the NAACP piggybacked on these earlier efforts. Nevertheless, the increased institutional and financial support that the NAACP provided helped channel the efforts of a small group of black elites into a mass movement.

In addition to federal government workers, the other group that joined the new Washington branch in droves were teachers and principals in the public schools. Besides Archibald Grimké, the branch’s three other officers worked in the public schools: vice president Charlotte Hunter taught at Miner Normal School and would soon move to M Street High School, secretary W.B. Hartgrove was a teacher as well, and treasurer Garnet Wilkinson was a teacher at M Street, and later in his career would serve as principal of Armstrong Manual Training School, principal of Dunbar High School, and assistant superintendent. On the branch’s executive committee, one of its most vocal members was M Street High School history teacher Neval Thomas, in addition to Hunter, who served as chairman. Many of the group’s other members also worked in the public schools or had family members who did. Like federal government workers, black public school teachers got involved in the NAACP to protect their jobs and their salaries, as well as to protest racial discrimination and inequality. They, too, depended on the federal government for their livelihoods and social standing. The District Branch of the NAACP, and Archibald Grimké in particular, became their advocates in a longstanding battle for equitable appropriations for resources, building expenses, and salaries in the public schools.

Despite his ties to Booker T. Washington, assistant superintendent Roscoe C. Bruce was among the branch’s earliest members and, at one point, Archibald Grimké even asked him to become an officer. Bruce, however, said he preferred to exert his influence behind the scenes. He told Grimké, “Recognition is superfluous….To serve a cause so great and holy is satisfaction enough for any mortal.” Bruce also said that he feared that his open involvement would jeopardize congressional appropriations for the black schools, which was not an irrational concern. Instead, he helped organize a group called the “Committee of Fifty and More” in late 1913 and early 1914, in which each member donated twenty-five dollars and pledged to give speeches around the city to recruit more members. One committee member, night school teacher Smith Wormley, reportedly raised thirty-five dollars, enough to pay for thirty-five individual memberships, in his class by collecting ten cents per week from each student, while he taught them about the association’s goals and principles.

Shortly after Archibald Grimké assumed the presidency of the Washington branch, he got in touch with Bruce to inquire about the status of the following year’s congressional appropriation for the black schools. Since blacks represented nearly one-third of the District’s population and black schoolchildren were almost exactly one-third of the school district’s students, an equitable appropriation would allocate one-third of the school funding to the black schools. In Bruce’s response to Grimké’s inquiry, he told him that, based on the appropriations

32 Roscoe C. Bruce to Archibald Grimké, January 4, 1914, Folder 494, Box 39-25, Archibald Grimké Collection, Man. Div. MSRC.

bills in the House and the Senate, the black schools were expecting to receive between eighteen and twenty percent of the school funds. However, the previous year they had received forty percent, and the year before that eighty-nine percent. Bruce explained that this had been to compensate for the “gross disproportions of the past.” Indeed, in 1909, the black schools had received $32,000, which was only three percent of the $993,000 that the white schools had gotten. Taking into consideration that the three-year average appropriation for 1913, 1914, and 1915 would be thirty-one percent, Bruce assured Grimké, “That isn’t so bad!” Even so, in the spring of 1914, Grimké sent letters to District Commissioner Oliver P. Newman and to Missouri Representative Leonidas C. Dyer, one of black Washingtonians’ “white friends” in Congress, expressing concern over a delay in construction of a new M Street High School. This round of correspondence initiated an ongoing conversation among the District NAACP branch and the Board of Education, Board of Commissioners, and congressmen over school funding.

Construction of a new high school was the most immediate concern in the black public schools. In the 1915 schools appropriation, the black schools had secured money from Congress to build a new, larger high school to relieve overcrowding at M Street and to enjoy the same modern facilities that the students and teachers at all-white Central High School were about to receive in their newly renovated building. When construction on the school was delayed by more than a year, Grimké exchanged a series of letters with several congressmen and the Board of Commissioners to voice a “strenuous complaint” against the “absolutely unwarrantable delay” in getting bids for the project. Worse yet, while the black community still waited for construction bids on their high school, a brand new Central High School for white students, complete with large stadium and modern facilities, had been nearly completed. In addition, the white schools were slated to receive a $600,000 appropriation to build a new Eastern High School, bringing the total number of high schools for white students to four, even though the appropriation for Dunbar, the only academic high school for black youth, had been only $550,000 and it had twice as many students as Eastern.

Once the new M Street (which would be renamed Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in 1916) was finished, the school had been built much more cheaply than Central and other white high schools. While Central had cost an average of $18,582 per classroom, Dunbar’s classrooms had only cost $8,428 each. Two years after the new Dunbar opened, it was already overcrowded and Grimké was again lobbying Congress on behalf of black Washingtonians for money to purchase land adjacent to the school to be used as an athletic field. Grimké pleaded, “It is highly regrettable and a source of the keenest distress to the colored community that at the time when the Central High School was being given this splendid stadium, similar provision was not made for the colored academic high school.” Black parents had been complaining for years about the lack of athletic facilities and playing fields at M Street. Students there were forced to

34 Roscoe C. Bruce to A.T. Stuart, February 16, 1909, Container 4, MCT, LOC.
35 Roscoe C. Bruce to Archibald Grimké, March 10, 1914, Folder 496, Box 39-25, Archibald Grimké Collection, Man. Div. MSRC.
36 Archibald Grimké to Commissioner Oliver P. Newman, June 12, 1915, Archibald Grimké Collection, Man. Div. MSRC.
37 Archibald Grimké to Major C.W. Kutz, October 21, 1915, Archibald Grimké Collection, Man. Div. MSRC.
spend their lunch hour in the street, and even when one student was hit by a car directly outside the school Congress remained intransigent about funding the expansion of the campus.\footnote{Public School Hearings, 1920, 1143 (statement of Garnet Wilkinson, principal of Dunbar High School).}

Complicating the apportionment of school funds was the fact that the school budget had to pass through multiple levels of bureaucracy and legislation, and the numbers could be changed at any point along the way. The budget for the black schools was generated by the black assistant superintendent with the help of the four supervising principals, who let him know the needs of each of their divisions. Once he had compiled their requests, Bruce sent it up to the Board of Education, which, in turn, passed it along to the Board of Commissioners as part of its yearly report on the schools. The commissioners then sent their budget to the House and Senate Appropriations Committees, where the District’s yearly appropriation from the federal government was worked out. Once Congress passed the fiscal year’s appropriation bill, the commissioners administered the school funds. In some years the funds were earmarked for specific uses, but in others they were doled out in one lump sum. Whether the funds were divided up or pooled together, there was ample opportunity for cutting, skimming, and transferring money both on the way up to Congress and on the way back down to the schools.

According to Archibald Grimké, the commissioners were to be blamed for the fact that the colored schools were being shortchanged. Basing his analysis both on a study conducted by Republican Representative from New York Jacob Olcott in 1910 and the budget figures since he had become NAACP branch president, Grimké found that “the commissioners still persist in apportioning the school funds according to their own prejudices, rather than according to equity and justice.” He found that the commissioners had been consistently removing items for the colored schools from the school board’s budget. In the 1919-1920 budget, for example, Roscoe Bruce had asked for more than $200,000 for buildings and grounds to be distributed among various schools, but the commissioners removed every single one of these items and instead only requested money for buildings and grounds for the white schools. Because of the commissioners, the black schools had been receiving significantly less than their one-third share of the school appropriation.\footnote{Ibid., 1239-41 (statement of Archibald H. Grimké, President of the Washington Branch of the NAACP).}

Another constant struggle for the black schools took place over the proportion of teachers in the upper tiers of the salary schedule. An episode from the 1919-1920 school year illustrated the problem. In its yearly school appropriation, Congress provided for salary increases for twenty-eight teachers. When the Board of Education distributed these raises, they gave just three of them to black teachers and the rest to white teachers, even though a proportional distribution would have given raises to at least six black teachers. The reason for the uneven distribution was that at this particular moment, a larger proportion of white teachers qualified for promotions than black teachers. While some argued that the salary increases should be given to the most deserving teachers, regardless of race, others argued that they should first be allocated proportionally to white schools and black schools and then given to the most qualified teachers in each group. Distributing the higher salaries by race made sense because there were separate boards of examiners for white teachers and black teachers, which meant that in all other matters they were evaluated separately.\footnote{Board of Education Report to the Board of Commissioners, 1919-20.}

In this case, Bruce protested the inequitable salary distribution to the Board of Education, arguing for consistency in the school district’s policy of racial separation. “The law knows no joint board of examiners,” Bruce argued, “It authorizes a separate board for the separate colored
schools. In no other instance do the names of white and colored teachers appear upon a joint list of eligibles. Why in this instance?" If black Washingtonians had to put up with racial separation, they at least wanted to be able to benefit from its potential economic advantages. Bruce did not end his complaint with an argument about fairness, however. He went on to explain that this dispute was about more than just teachers’ salaries:

I have spoken thus frankly because grievances of this type are long inarticulate. They tend to transform themselves into animosities... Good feeling is endangered. The delicacy of race relationships and the importance of good feeling are such that whatever tends to endanger confidence and good will should be brusquely brought out into the light, examined with care, and disposed of justly and decisively.\(^{43}\)

Although Bruce alluded to fairness and justice, he avoided any mention of citizenship or equality, and rested his case with the gentle and oblique language about the “delicacy of race relationships.” This differed significantly from the kind of language Archibald Grimké and Neval Thomas had begun to use, for example, and even from the writings and speeches of the increasingly liberal Howard dean Kelly Miller. They, along with others who joined the more activist movement for black equality, tended to articulate their demands much more directly, supporting them with no justification other than the constitutional guarantee of equality.

In this instance, Bruce’s warning about the importance of preserving “good feeling” between the races was enough to win this battle with the board and it was decided that future promotions should be allocated proportionally. While Bruce did stand up to white officials to make demands on behalf of black teachers, his deferential tone was starting to sound anachronistic. In addition, this particular battle was minor and only affected a small group of the most elite, highest paid teachers, which must not have ameliorated Bruce’s reputation for favoring his elite friends over those on lower rungs of the social ladder. Moments like these served to further complicate Bruce’s politics. On one hand, he was a member of the NAACP and, as this instance shows, he had at least some inclination to make demands on behalf of the black community he represented. On the other hand, his deference to powerful whites, aversion to forthright language when dealing with racial topics, and his preferential treatment of elites suggested that he was reluctant to identify with the increasingly activist movement for racial justice. Taken together, Bruce’s comments and actions illustrated the complexities of black politics in this period.

The solution Archibald Grimké and his NAACP colleagues proposed to the problem of inequality in Washington’s public schools was legislation. He asked Congress to pass a clear and specific law that would require the commissioners to appropriate funds in proportion to the school population. During the 1920 Senate investigation of the schools, other representatives of the black community made similar demands. Dunbar principal Garnet Wilkinson told the Senate select committee that he thought Congress should pass a law that mandated that the black assistant superintendent be present at all school appropriations hearings to safeguard the interests of the black schools.\(^{44}\) Grimké and Wilkinson’s focus on using legislation to secure black equality was consistent with the NAACP’s strategy. So, too, were the straightforwardness of their demands and their confidence in their constitutional rights.

With the arrival of the NAACP in Washington, the kinds of demands black Washingtonians made and the language they used to support them changed. They used fewer euphemisms, equivocated less, and were generally less deferential. Instead, they tended to speak

\(^{43}\) Ibid.

\(^{44}\) Public School Hearings, 1920, 1142-43; 1240-41 (statement of Archibald H. Grimké).
more directly about racial injustice and they demanded that the federal government pass laws to protect their constitutional rights and reject bills that threatened them. While those on the front lines of the school battles in the early 1900s appealed to white leaders’ morality and compassion to give them the opportunity to run their own schools, by the late 1910s black leaders were forging a political conversation that defended black education based on justice, constitutional rights, and the law.

In the 1910s, Archibald Grimké, Neval Thomas, and others affiliated with the Washington branch of the NAACP crafted a school equalization strategy built around the constitutional guarantee of equality before the law and the implementation of unambiguous laws to protect that right. As will be shown later in the chapter, the NAACP also strongly supported the autonomy of the black schools. In addition to fighting for legislation that would guarantee equal pay for equal work for black teachers and administrators and for equitable funding for the black schools, Grimké and the NAACP also pushed for laws even more explicit than the 1906 school law that gave blacks sole control over their own schools. While the District branch energetically—and very successfully—recruited new members, its political strategy in Washington was executed primarily by those at the top. Augmenting its membership was important to increase the force behind its demands and to raise money, but its dues paying members were not the face of the organization.

As the NAACP pushed forward its legislative agenda in Washington, tensions in the black public schools were only getting worse. Opposition to Bruce was more widespread than at any other point in his tenure and the proliferation of scandals continued. While this was not directly related to Grimké’s activities on behalf of the black schools, black elites worried that the uproar was beginning to reflect poorly on the schools. For several years, when the Roscoe Bruce debacle flared up just as the NAACP was pressing Congress for school equalization legislation, black Washingtonians were battling for better schools on two fronts—within their own community and against powerful whites who were increasingly sympathetic to black Washingtonians’ claims to civil rights.

Trouble in the Black Schools: The Moens Scandal, the Parents’ League, and the Struggle to Oust Roscoe C. Bruce

“All Washington Ablaze,” proclaimed the headline for the Washington Bee’s lead story on the last Saturday of May 1919. The article was not about the city’s race riots between white Naval officers and local black civilians—that would not occur until mid-summer. Rather, the article was part of a long series of front-page stories and editorials that chronicled the struggles of the Parents’ League, an organization that had coalesced several weeks earlier with the single mission of getting Roscoe C. Bruce, the Assistant Superintendent for the Colored Schools, fired. The League had organized simultaneous mass meetings at five of the District’s large black churches the previous Tuesday evening and its supporters numbered in the thousands. The Bee reported that all of the churches were “packed” and that “standing room was at a premium.”

This was not the first Tuesday evening that churches were filled with black Washingtonians listening to impassioned speeches about the failures of their assistant superintendent and plotting their movement to get rid of him. Crowds numbering in the hundreds or thousands—depending on who was reporting—had been gathering weekly and sometimes more often during the previous month to plan their assault against Bruce, who had occupied his

office for the past thirteen years. They had amassed thousands of signatures for a petition expressing their discontent with Bruce’s “inefficiency” as a leader, alleging that he had “forfeited the confidence and lost the respect of the parents of the children in the colored public schools of the District,” and calling for his immediate removal. Members of the League had been picketing the Franklin School, the building that housed the Board of Education, and had also taken turns picketing Dunbar High School and even the homes of several school officials. Large delegations had become fixtures at school board meetings, “taxing” the capacity of the boardroom, according to the Washington Post.46

The Parents’ League did not garner the support of all of black Washington, however. The group was spearheaded by a group of pastors from some of the city’s large black churches, their wives, and several other disgruntled community leaders, but its members were more middling black Washingtonians. It faced outspoken opposition from a number of elite blacks, including two of the three black members of the Board of Education. In addition, several prominent members of the increasingly powerful District Branch of the NAACP spurned the Parents’ League and stood by Bruce, who was a member and a generous donor. To a large extent, these were the foes the Parents’ League targeted directly, but the group was also up against the District’s white power structure, which included the white members of the Board of Education, school superintendent Ernest Thurston, and the congressmen on the House and Senate Committees on the District of Columbia.

The movement to oust Roscoe Bruce had formed in response to a scandal that rocked the black community. The central figure in the scandal was not Bruce, however. It was Herman Marie Bernelot Moens, a Dutch anthropologist who had been in the United States for several years studying the physical characteristics of African Americans. Moens was a noted zoologist and botanist in Holland and he exemplified an important moment in the intersection between race and social science. Moens’s interest in anthropology was inspired by Franz Boas’s use of science to disprove biological bases for racial inequality and he was particularly interested in mixed-race people, so he made the District’s black community a focus of his investigation, since Washington reputedly had a large population of lighter-skinned blacks.47

Armed with references from reputable European scientists, Moens was welcomed into both black and white Washington society. He was a guest at the exclusive Cosmos Club, where he rubbed elbows with some of Washington’s most reputable residents, and was also given access to several of the black schools, including Miner Normal School and Dunbar High School, to use their students and teachers as research subjects. Meanwhile, the U.S. government, which was on high alert during the first world war, suspected that Moens was a German spy, so the Justice Department’s Bureau of Investigation (BI) had him under close surveillance. The bureau’s reconnaissance failed to turn up evidence of espionage, but it did recover a series of nude photographs of several different black women and girls, some of whom, it was rumored,


were public school teachers and their students. In spring 1919, Moens was tried and convicted for possessing obscene photographs.48

Almost more important than the incident itself and the facts of the case were the ways in which the episode was spun in the media and in public debate. Although news of Moens’s nefarious activities seemed not to have broken until he was put on trial in March 1919, as soon as the trial began, rumors about Moens and his nude subjects tore through black Washington. Word spread that Moens was, in fact, a German spy, which, in turn, raised questions about the loyalty of those he had been consorting with. It was also rumored that a number of Moens’s subjects were public school teachers, and that they not only had offered their own bodies to this ignominious interloper, but that they also had brought their students to his studio without their parents’ permission. Moens’s primary accomplice, the story went, was Dunbar High School teacher Charlotte Hunter, who, in addition to being the vice president of the Washington NAACP branch and teaching high school, had rented Moens a room in a property she owned and had given him open access to female students at Dunbar. Black Washingtonians were outraged that the reputation of their schools and their community had been disgraced.49

As chief arbiter of black Washington’s rumor mill, William Calvin Chase both fueled and channeled black Washingtonians’ anger through his sensationalized coverage and editorials in the Washington Bee. In its initial articles on the trial, the Bee’s reporters used suggestive details to titillate readers’ imaginations about the depravity of those who were involved with Moens and to spin the story into a more involved sex scandal. For example, the paper reported that the BI detective who arrested Moens at the room he was renting from Hunter found the two of them eating soup together, he wearing a “neglige” and she in a “house dress.” The same article referred to unspecified “unnatural acts” that Moens engaged in with one woman and reported that certain details from the testimony were “too revolting to print.”50 The Bee also helped its readers place blame for the scandal, which many feared would do severe damage to their schools’ reputation. Charlotte Hunter was most immediately at fault, for directly abetting Moens, but the teachers he photographed were to blame as well. The “vulgar pictures,” Chase exclaimed, were “a disgrace to society and a gross reflection on the woman who had the nerve to stand before a camera in a naked condition…. Society will not be renovated until those females are thrown out of the schools and society.” Chase also blamed the Board of Education for authorizing Moens to take photographs in the schools in the first place. After the jury delivered its verdict, Chase said that Hunter, the teachers involved, and the members of the school board should also be put on trial for their actions.51

In addition to assigning guilt, Chase also advanced a particularly sinister analysis of what had motivated the guilty parties. He alleged that this group of “so-called intelligent and educated colored people” was so “intoxicated over a white foreign face” and the misguided notion that the same amount of black blood flowed through white and black people’s veins as to be blind to Moens’s suspicious character. Further, Chase accused these black elites, who were “too black to be white and too white to be black” of being ashamed of their color, wanting to be white, and using their lighter skin to escape from the “common people.” He charged them with “race

49 Ibid.
prejudice, segregation, and discrimination among themselves." As has been discussed earlier, the practice of lighter-skinned black elites "drawing the color line" between themselves and their social inferiors was a problem in black society in Washington, given its rigid and competitive social hierarchy. Regardless of the accuracy of Chase’s interpretation in this case, it took flight.

The Moens scandal was suddenly about much more than indecent photographs. A large contingent of the black community, inspired by William Calvin Chase’s editorials, took to the notion that they were the victims of a crime perpetrated not by Herman Moens but by those who thought of themselves as their social superiors. They had been betrayed by elites, who exposed them to disgrace and humiliation. A group of parents, community leaders, and ministers heeded Chase’s call for holding individuals accountable for this infiltration of immorality into the schools, so they mounted a campaign to ferret out and punish the offenders. Reverend J. Milton Waldron, a leader of the nascent movement, announced, “Washington has the worst reputation among our people of any other large city in the country…because of the conduct of certain public school teachers here…. We ought to get rid of these immoral teachers in order to protect our children and parents and the good teachers and to redeem our city from the odium that rests upon it.”

Like Chase and Waldron, this group, which called itself the Parents’ League, blamed Charlotte Hunter, the other teachers in the nude photographs, and the Board of Education, but their ultimate target was Roscoe C. Bruce. The League adopted the motto “We Stand for Better Schools,” but what they actually stood for was less nebulous than their motto suggested: to remove Bruce from office.

The anti-Roscoe Conkling Bruce sentiment began almost as soon as he was appointed, but the Moens scandal created the conditions for a full-fledged movement for his ouster. Shortly after the jury delivered its guilty verdict against Moens, a group of black Washingtonians, led by several ministers, a minister’s wife, and several other men and women who were active in the black community, came together to form an organization called the Parents’ League. The group’s leaders were a mix of people, many of whom were connected either to the Baptist or Methodist Church or had personal reasons for wanting Bruce out of Washington. The league’s president was Frances Tanner, whose husband Rev. Carlton Tanner was a minister at an AME church and was also active in the league. The Tanners had not lived in Washington very long, but they seem to have been well connected, probably through Carlton Tanner’s congregation and through his father, the eminent AME church official Bishop Benjamin Tucker Tanner. Among the group’s other leaders were Rev. James L. Pinn, Rev. W.D. Jarvis, and Rev. J. Milton Waldron, the Shiloh Baptist Church minister who had been ousted as the Washington NAACP branch president and who was a longtime foe of Roscoe Bruce. Nannie Helen Burroughs, founder of the National Training School for Women and Girls and labor activist for domestic workers, supported the movement and spoke at several of its meetings. William Calvin Chase was a perennial on the dais and, according to his newspaper, was usually received with “tremendous” applause. Another figure who frequented the League’s meetings was Anna Evans Murray, whose husband was Library of Congress librarian Daniel Murray and whose brother was Bruce Evans, the former principal of Armstrong Manual Training School who Bruce had tactlessly discharged several

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years earlier. Some of the group’s other leaders were also leaders in local neighborhood associations, who would have been familiar with political organizing.55

The Parents’ League’s strategy was to be disruptive enough to convince the Board of Education to fire Hunter and Bruce and investigate who the other teachers were in the Moens scandal and fire them too. In the first weeks of its existence, in spring 1919, the League held weekly meetings and rallies at churches around the city, some of which attracted thousands of attendees, during which the group’s leaders plotted their strategy to take their demands to the Board of Education and, if necessary, to Congress. Their first target was Charlotte Hunter, who, in their opinion, should have been dismissed from the schools as soon as Moens was convicted. The morning after the Parents’ League’s first mass meeting and just days after Moens’s conviction, a large contingent picketed Dunbar High School demanding her removal. They were so effective that Hunter did not return the following day and eventually resigned. League members also picketed outside the Franklin School during Board of Education meetings and in some instances even staged small demonstrations in front of school board members’ homes.

Outside the Franklin school and in school board meetings, they threatened to storm Congress if the Board of Education ignored them or refused to carry out their demands.56 As a means of demonstrating their widespread support within the black community, the Parents’ League also circulated a petition demanding Bruce’s immediate removal. Although their figures were quite dubious, they claimed they had amassed 20,000 distinct signatures from District parents.57

The group’s foes discredited the Parents’ League by portraying its leaders as power-hungry and reckless and its followers as an uneducated, disreputable mob. Black school board member J. Hayden Johnson accused Parents’ League leaders of vindictiveness and being more concerned with personal disputes than with reforming the schools. White school board president John Van Schaick commented that many of the Parents’ League’s supporters were “one-third child, one-third savage, and one-third shell-game man.”58 Van Schaick, who was not popular among black Washingtonians in general, nonetheless reflected the opinion’s of Bruce’s supporters when he characterized the Parents’ League as acting in the “mob spirit,” using violence, encouraging the “destruction of our institutions,” and violating the law with their protest methods.59 In a memo he wrote to Superintendent Ernest Thurston, Roscoe Bruce portrayed the Parents’ League’s leaders as a “shrewd [and] active” cabal who harbored personal grievances against him and who opportunistically used the Moens scandal to turn their personal vendettas into a movement with mass appeal. In a separate letter to John Van Schaick, Bruce called the Parents’ League’s followers “untutored” and “easily misguided,” and in his Senate testimony he added that they were “ignorant and disadvantaged” and too easily “entertained,

55 This information about the Parents’ League’s leadership was gleaned from a series of articles in the Washington Bee in April and May 1919.
57 The actual number of distinct signatures would be hotly disputed. While the Parents’ League continued to say that they had the support of 20,000 District parents, some estimates had the number of valid signatures as low as 2,000. It is practically impossible that there were actually 20,000 signatures, given that school enrollment was around 16,000, and many households had more than one child in the public schools. H. Barrett Learned and Coralie Franklin Cook, “Majority Report of the Special Committee of the Board of Education,” October 8, 1919, 15, Bruce Affair folder, Sumner School Archives. [Hereafter cited as “Majority Report.”]
58 Public School Hearings, 1920, 124, 511 (statements of John Van Schaick, Board of Education president, and J. Hayden Johnson, Board of Education member, respectively).
59 Ibid., 98-9 (statement of John Van Schaick).
With Roscoe Bruce’s support, group of teachers and principals who opposed the League circulated a letter to all of the black public schools accusing the Parents’ League of spreading “untrue and unjust propaganda” that had damaged both their personal reputations and that of the black schools more generally. They announced that they were collecting money to hire a lawyer to initiate libel suits against Frances Tanner and the Parents’ League and they invited others to join their cause and seek legal damages for what they alleged was “irreparable injury wrought” by the Parents’ League.

While the Parents’ League’s opponents never filed a lawsuit, the battle had escalated to the point that the Board of Education conducted an investigation of the Parents’ League’s charges against Bruce. George C. Smith, chairman of the committee on public schools for the Central Northwest Citizens’ Association and a representative of the Parents’ League, had drafted a document charging that Bruce was an unfit pedagogue and administrator, that he lacked proper educational training or professional experience for his duties, and that he lacked the moral compass necessary for someone serving in such an important public position. Smith was trained as a lawyer, so he phrased his complaints using formal legal language, which was a sharp contrast to how the Parents’ League had chosen to frame their concerns. School board president George Hamilton passed the charges along to Conrad Syme, the city’s corporation counsel, for his opinion on whether they were sufficient to require an investigation. Syme’s answer was an emphatic “no.” He concluded, “The various complaints made are characterized by the exaggeration usually found in such documents and by a vagueness and generality which can not be made the basis of any intelligent action, and which ought not to be asked of such a body as the board of education.” The board decided to override Syme’s recommendation and proceed with an investigation into Roscoe Bruce’s tenure because of the intensity of the Parents’ League’s demand for action as an attempt to stave off congressional intervention and put the matter to rest. However, they decided to ignore the League’s claims about Bruce’s immorality because the corporation counsel had declared them baseless. Since this was the League’s primary claim, the board had effectively changed the nature of the debate over Bruce and redirected the conversation to the question of his professional performance.

In the summer of 1919, the school board voted to appoint three members to a special committee that would conduct the investigation. School board president John Van Schaick selected two black board members and one white member to serve on the subcommittee: Coralie Franklin Cook, a peer of Mary Church Terrell and Anna Julia Cooper in the National Association of Colored Women and the NAACP, Howard University oratory professor, and known Bruce supporter; Fountain Peyton, attorney, Howard Law School alumnus, and Bruce’s sole foe on the school board; and H. Barrett Learned, Department of Justice employee and the lone white member and chairman of the committee who was supposed to neutralize Cook’s and Peyton’s opposing views. Thirty-four witnesses testified over the course of the two-week long hearing in August and the committee delivered its verdict in October.

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60 Ibid., 999-1002 (statement of Roscoe C. Bruce, Assistant Superintendent of the Colored Schools).
63 School board president John Van Schaick was on leave from the school board while he served with the Red Cross during the war. Hamilton served as the interim board president during his absence.
Although the purpose of the investigation was to settle the Bruce matter, it had the opposite effect, in large part because the three-person committee was divided. Two members of the committee, Coralie Cook and H. Barrett Learned, issued a majority report declaring that Roscoe Bruce was educationally and administratively fit to serve as assistant superintendent for the black schools and they recommended that he continue to serve. They attributed most of the animosity toward Bruce to gossip, personality conflicts, and the great degree of competition for public school employment, and conceded only that Bruce might be perceived as a stronger leader if he were “a little less diplomatic in speech,” but that he was otherwise a man of “right and fair intentions.”65 As for the original charges against Bruce that he had not adequately protected the black schools from Herman Moens, they asserted that Bruce had been largely kept in the dark regarding the suspicions surrounding Moens and that he had acted responsibly when he was properly informed.66 Cook and Learned did not, however, have the final word.

Fountain Peyton, who disagreed with both the investigation’s procedure and his colleague’s conclusions, produced a sharply worded minority report, in which he said that Bruce was “undependable, lacking in directness, candor, frankness and truthfulness…and lacking in backbone and manly insistence.”67 He concluded with the warning, “Every day [Bruce] remains at the head of the colored schools but serves to bring nearer their complete disintegration…ruin and destruction can but follow.”68 More controversial than Peyton’s disagreement with the majority report’s conclusions were his allegations that the investigation was a sham and that its results were fixed from the start. He said that H. Barrett Learned was not a disinterested third party, but rather that it was well known that he was a Bruce partisan. Much worse, school board chair John Van Schaick had visited Peyton’s law office before the hearings had begun and, according to Peyton, had told him not to approach the investigation “with a fighting spirit, but to join in with Mrs. Cook and Dr. Learned and bring in a harmonious verdict.”69 These circumstances, combined with the fact that the Board of Education refused to make the 700-page hearing transcript available to the public, suggested that there was at least a kernel of truth to Peyton’s complaints.70

The Parents’ League’s efforts to oust Bruce revealed fissures within the black community in Washington over protest methods, where black Washingtonians should focus their political energy, and the larger issues of class, democracy, and power. At the heart of some of the Parents’ League’s complaints and methods was the demand to be heard. They felt that their interests were not being represented by the elite blacks who had the ear of the black wing of the school board and the small group of congressmen who were sympathetic to the needs and demands of the black community. Fountain Peyton’s minority report, then, was not only an assertion of his own analysis of the school board’s investigation, but also an attempt to represent a large body of his constituents who were otherwise unrepresented in the nation’s undemocratic capital city. Even though the Parents’ League lost their struggle at the local level, the trouble they aroused did

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65 “Majority Report,” 2, 5, Sumner School Archives.
66 Ibid., 1-16.
67 “In the Matter of the Investigation of the Educational and Administrative Efficiency of Mr. Roscoe C. Bruce, Assistant Superintendent in Charge of the Colored Schools of the District of Columbia: Report of Fountain Peyton, of the Committee Appointed by the Board of Education of the District of Columbia to Conduct the Above-Named Investigation,” October 1919, 16, Bruce Affair folder, Sumner School Archives. [Hereafter cited as “Minority Report.”]
68 Ibid., 15.
69 Public School Hearings, 1920, 745-46 (statement of Fountain Peyton, Board of Education member).
70 “Minority Report,” 1-30.
eventually spark the Senate to intervene with its own investigation in 1920, which had been one of the League’s goals from the beginning. In a sense, the feud between the Parents’ League and its opponents ended in victory for the entire black community when the Senate convened a set of hearings to give black Washingtonians a forum for their grievances about the lack of equal educational opportunity for blacks in Washington’s segregated public schools.

The 1920 Senate Hearings on the Public Schools

The contention that remained in the black community and the lingering opposition to Bruce’s administration after the school board’s investigation prompted the Senate to conduct its own investigation into the public schools. Five senators, three Republicans and two Democrats, were selected from the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia to conduct hearings, which took place over the course of several weeks in the spring of 1920 and ultimately produced more than 1,300 pages of testimony. As in the 1906 congressional investigation, the committee members—Republicans Lawrence Sherman of Illinois, William Dillingham of Vermont, and Arthur Capper of Kansas and Democrats Pat Harrison of Mississippi and David Walsh of Massachusetts—were charged with the task of investigating the school system as a whole, including a range of issues that were unrelated to Roscoe Bruce or the black schools in general. However, a large portion of the hearings was devoted to the black schools directly and some of the testimony addressed the black schools implicitly. Of the more than three-dozen witnesses the committee called to testify, roughly one-third were black. In addition to calling each of the nine school board members, several retired board members, and the superintendent and assistant superintendents to the witness stand, the committee also heard from teachers, representatives of neighborhood associations and citizens’ groups, Parents’ League members, and Archibald Grimké, in his capacity as president of the District branch of the NAACP.71

Several things stood out in the hearing testimony. Foremost, the two primary issues that rose to the foreground regarding the black schools were still the same issues that both the 1900 and 1906 investigations had dealt with: the autonomy of the black public schools relative to the larger system and the unequal distribution of resources between the white schools and the black schools. One matter that was a recurring topic in Washington that had not been a major concern in the earlier hearings was how the Board of Education members were chosen. The Senate committee asked many of the witnesses whether they thought that the school board should continue to be appointed by the District Supreme Court or whether congress should institute a different system. The answers to this question—from both white and black Washingtonians—shed light on the state of the fraught relationship between race and democracy in the District. In general, what stood out most in the testimony from the cohort of black Washingtonians who spoke before the senators was how explicit they were about racial inequality and how forthrightly they articulated their demands. Although Archibald Grimké was the only NAACP official the Senate committee heard from at the hearing in his official capacity as District branch president, many of the black Washingtonians who testified were members of the organization and supported its goals and strategies.72 Thus, they made strong claims to resources, power, and rights as never before.

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71 Public School Hearings, 1920, 1-5 (front matter).
72 Archibald Grimké was unable to attend the hearing, so he submitted a number of prepared statements, which were entered into the official record.
The method of selection of school board members had become an issue in Washington in the late 1910s as a result of informal allegations that the school board was not effectively serving the interests of Washingtonians and their schools. There were nebulous charges of “office-seeking,” partisanship, and incompetence, which called into question the body’s representativeness. In addition, there had been reports over the previous few years that the Board of Commissioners was making a move to wrest the power of appointing the school board away from the District Supreme Court judges, as well as murmurs in different circles that the board ought to be elected. Thus, the Senate committee sought evidence from many of the witnesses about the selection process of board members.

The issue of the manner of choosing school board members first came up during the testimony of the hearings’ second witness, white school board member Charles P. Neill. Neill was a longtime Washingtonian who had only been a board member for two months. He had a doctorate in economics, but he was currently working as an arbitrator for Southeastern Railways because, he said, teaching did not “pay enough for him to live on.”

Before working for the railway, Neill had worked for the Department of Labor under Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and, briefly, Woodrow Wilson. His 1906 study of the meatpacking industry in Chicago inspired Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle. Several of his other personal and professional affiliations suggested that he was a Progressive.

When asked about his background and social affiliations, Neill reported that he was a member of “pretty nearly all of the clubs in town,” which suggested that he was both prominent and an accurate barometer of some of the opinions of elite white Washingtonians.

Senator Harrison seemed particularly concerned about the phenomenon of “office-seeking” and he pressed Neill on the circumstances under which he was appointed. Neill insisted that he was approached by school board president John Van Schaick and only accepted the appointment from the District Supreme Court reluctantly. Harrison and several other committee members continued to hound Neill about favoritism on the board and the body’s decision making process and finally Neill admitted that he thought the board should be elected.

Rather than acting as nine independent members of an appointed body, Neill thought that the school board should be a more accurate reflection of public opinion. “If the board is to consider the public view,” Neill insisted, “then as a member of the board I should insist that Congress furnish an orderly legal process of ascertaining public opinion.” Neill seemed to be dancing around the issue of the franchise, but Harrison, the Democrat from Mississippi, refused to let him. He retorted, “I am anxious about that. There is a good deal of discussion about this voting business in the District,” and then asked Neill who should be eligible to vote. When Neill responded that everyone over the age of twenty-one, regardless of whether they had children in the public schools, should be eligible, Harrison asked, “You would let everybody vote irrespective of race, color, or previous condition of servitude?” Neill worded his response to the Senator from Mississippi carefully: “I say that in a matter of that kind I would apply the same

\[73\] Public School Hearings, 1920, 245 (statement of Charles P. Neill, Board of Education member).
\[74\] “An inventory of the Charles Patrick Neill Papers at The American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives,” biographical note in the finding aid, Charles Patrick Neill Papers, The American Catholic Research Center and University Archives, Washington, D.C.
\[75\] Public School Hearings, 1920, 245 (statement of Charles P. Neill).
\[76\] Ibid., 248.
\[77\] Ibid., 263.
test you apply in determining the qualifications of the man who votes at an election to determine who shall be President of the United States or governor of a particular State.”

The issue of suffrage came up several times more during the questioning of white school board members. Without elaborating on the details, white board member Margarita Spalding Gerry, who had been on the board for four years, explained, “There are certain organizations in the city which, for certain projects of their own, are definitely committed to overturning the board of education, in order to make that an opening wedge in suffrage for the District.” Although she did not express her opinion directly, Gerry seemed distressed about the possibility that they might succeed.

Later on, former school board president Henry Blair, who had lived in Washington since childhood and served as board president from 1912 through 1916, offered a different perspective. Once again, Harrison led the questioning. After Blair told the committee that he opposed the Board of Commissioners’ effort to secure the authority to appoint the school board, he admitted that he thought the District Supreme Court should not be vested with that power either. “I’ve never been convinced—and I want to be frank about this,” Blair said to Harrison, “that the appointing of the school board by the judges of the supreme court was a proper judicial function.” As an attorney, Blair thought the current system was ill advised. Senator Harrison seemed perplexed. “If you take the authority away from the supreme court judges…and not give it to the Commissioners of the District, with whom would you lodge that authority,” Harrison asked. Blair rejoined unequivocally, “I have been in favor of suffrage in the District of Columbia from the day I was old enough to appreciate suffrage. I think that if the mistakes of the school board were made by an elective board the community is competent and able to correct its mistakes, and that is where it belongs.” Moreover, Blair, like Neill, thought that all “qualified voters” deserved the franchise and that electing their school board would be “an excellent point for the District to begin learning the lesson of suffrage.”

While Charles Neill and Henry Blair, two prominent and presumably representative white Washingtonians, supported suffrage, from Mississippi Senator Pat Harrison’s skeptical reactions to their testimony it was clear that he opposed it. Although both Neill and Blair carefully avoided talking about race, they clearly thought that the District government needed to be more democratic, starting with the schools. Neill’s and Blair’s attitudes and refusal to take Harrison’s bait to discuss the issue of an interracial democracy suggested that they thought it was a possible and, indeed, fair solution to the District’s education-related political turmoil. Harrison, however, representing the segregationist southern Democrats, could not even imagine opening up the possibility for black suffrage in the nation’s capital.

Black Washingtonians, of course, had opinions on this issue as well. William H. Wilson, who was a doctor and representative of a citizens’ group of prominent black doctors called the Physicians Reading Circle, held a nuanced view of the role of school politics in the larger issue of suffrage. While Wilson thought that all Washingtonians, based on their status as citizens, deserved the franchise, he testified that he opposed the “piecemeal” or “makeshift” suffrage that the election of the school board would represent because it “would place the education of the young in the domain of guttersniping politicians.” Echoing commentary from other Washingtonians quoted in previous chapters, Wilson warned, “With no other outlet for their energies, the activities of the Parents’ League convince me that no high-grade colored man could

78 Ibid., 264.
79 Ibid., 455 (statement of Margarita Spalding Gerry, Board of Education member).
80 Ibid., 817-23 (statement of Henry P. Blair, former Board of Education President).
ever be elected.” Instead, Wilson insisted that the custom of appointing three black members of
the school board should be legislated and formalized. “At present the [appointment of three black
members] is a matter merely of spirit and custom, susceptible of violation by the appointing
power,” Wilson cautioned. 81 For Wilson, he thought that the most secure way of ensuring
interracial democracy and a representative voice for black Washingtonians was through
legislatively race-based appointments of school board members. While his views certainly
discriminated against working-class blacks, whom he saw as his social inferiors, they spoke to
the same fears from more than a decade earlier about blacks losing their political voice altogether
in a system that relied too heavily on customary patronage and tacit understandings about race
relations, rather than law.

Perhaps the most surprising unequivocal support for an elected school board, given his
reputation for favoritism and elitism, came from Assistant Superintendent Roscoe Bruce. In a
memorandum that he read aloud at the hearing, Bruce stated,

Speaking merely as a citizen of the District of Columbia, I may say that I earnestly hope
if any change is made in the mode of selecting members of the board of education, resort
will be had to election by the entire population of appropriate age in the city of
Washington. The voice of the people as thus definitely and responsibly expressed would
be unmistakable… I have no doubt whatever that election of members of a small board of
education by the people at large, without discrimination of race or creed or sex, would
prove in the long run to be wholesome for all purposes of good government and good
schools. 82

Bruce also suggested that elections were the only way to ensure that a group like the Parents’
League, which he thought really only represented a minority of the black community, did not end
up having disproportionate influence on school politics. The directness of Bruce’s demands and
his confidence in his and his community’s citizenship rights sounded much more like the kinds
of assertive claims the NAACP had been making over the previous few years than the tentative
requests Bruce had made ten years earlier. None of the senators on the committee addressed
either Bruce’s or Wilson’s opinions, likely because they had never spoken to a black person
about their views on democracy and were unsure how to respond to such direct statements about
blacks’ political rights.

While Congress did not, of course, act on these requests to institute an elected board of
education in the District, this testimony showed that there was a movement for a more a
democratic Washington in the early 1920s. It also reflected the continued importance of the
public schools in local politics and how black Washingtonians tried to use the politics of
education to leverage their political rights more generally. The black Washingtonians who
testified in this series of hearings took advantage of the opportunity to voice their claims about
democracy and political rights to the federal government.

A more familiar issue that many more black Washingtonians addressed in their testimony
was the autonomy of the black public schools and the authority of the black assistant
superintendent. While the school law passed in 1906 was intended to clarify the black assistant
superintendent’s role and the scope of his power, Roscoe Bruce had been butting heads with
Superintendent Ernest Thurston since Thurston’s appointment in 1914, in large part because of
the lingering lack of clarity in the division of power between the two officials. The power
struggles between both Bruce and Thurston and Thurston and the Board of Education, in fact,

81 Ibid., 1235 (statement of William H. Wilson, representative of the Physicians Reading Circle).
82 Ibid., 1041 (statement of Roscoe C. Bruce, Assistant Superintendent of the Colored Schools).
had loomed in the background throughout the Parents’ League’s fight against Bruce and the allegations against the school board. Relations between Thurston and other school officials grew so sour by 1920 that the school board voted not to renew his appointment beyond the 1919-20 school year. This move by the board had also factored into Congress’s decision to investigate the schools.

Over the course of Ernest Thurston’s six years as superintendent, his problems with the black school leaders and the black community were both specific and general. There were a number of cases having to do with transferring, hiring, and promoting teachers in the black schools in which the black community thought Thurston overstepped his authority. In one instance at the Randall School, Thurston went over Bruce’s head (at least in the black community’s view) to promote seventh-grade teacher Miss M.E. Wilson to principal, rather than the candidate Bruce and other influential blacks preferred, the principal of a different grade school referred to only as Mr. Syphax in the hearing transcript. Syphax was more senior than Wilson, but Thurston was impressed with Wilson’s qualifications, so he promoted Wilson over Bruce’s objections. Black school board members Coralie Cook and Hayden Johnson, along with several influential black Washingtonians, immediately and vehemently criticized Thurston’s actions and, according to Thurston, accused him of “discrimination against the assistant superintendent, overpowering the assistant superintendent.”

Cook interrupted Thurston’s testimony to explain the exact charges. To make her case, she quoted from the 1906 school law:

A teacher shall not be promoted from one class to another except by the board of education, upon the recommendation of the officer having direct supervision of such teacher, and, in the case of colored teachers, upon the additional recommendation of the colored assistant superintendent. Such recommendations shall in each case be made through and with the approval of the superintendent of schools.

According to Cook’s interpretation of the law, the superintendent’s approval was merely a formality; what really mattered was the black assistant superintendent’s recommendation.

Several other incidents like the Randall School case, combined with Thurston’s overt exasperation with the amount of discord within the black schools made him unpopular in the black community. For his part, Thurston insisted that he was merely doing his best to act according to the law. In a ten-page statement he sent to the Board of Education the week before the hearings began, he tried to account for his actions. He brought up that the school law gave the black assistant superintendent charge of the black schools “under the direction of the superintendent.” He went on, “I have no desire to dominate the colored schools. I have no slightest objection to a separate superintendent of colored schools, and to a completely separated colored organization if the community desires it. But this should be brought about by law and not by ignoring present legal provisions.” Black Washingtonians, however, did not interpret the law as he did and his actions precipitated yet another round of calls for more autonomy for the black schools.

One of the most outspoken proponents of black school autonomy was Coralie Franklin Cook. Cook was the wife of Howard University professor George Cook and an oratory professor at Howard, in addition to her position on the Board of Education and her involvement with

83 Ibid., 563-74 (statement of Ernest Thurston, Superintendent of Washington, D.C. Public Schools).
84 Ibid., 591 (statement of Coralie F. Cook).
85 Ibid., 18 (Ernest Thurston to the Board of Education of the District of Columbia, March 3, 1900, found in statement of John Van Schaick, Jr., Board of Education President).
numerous national and local organizations, including the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) and the NAACP. Cook, along with the rest of the black community, did not favor completely dividing the schools into separate systems for whites and blacks, as Thurston suggested in his testimony. She acknowledged that, at least in theory, the present institutional structure was more “democratic” than either the nineteenth-century system of complete separation or the organization that was in place from 1900 to 1906 that had robbed the black schools of their autonomy entirely. At issue for Cook was the implementation of the current organization. Cook’s primary strategy in advocating for the autonomy of the black schools was to argue for a particular interpretation of the school law based on a combination of the actual law as it was written in addition to notions of justice, rights, and equality.

Cook wasted no time making her case to the Senate committee and she launched into her argument as soon as she took the witness stand. She began with a brief summary of the black community’s struggle for authority over their schools between 1900 and 1906 and then quoted from the most pertinent section of the 1906 school law: “The colored assistant superintendent, under the direction of the superintendent of schools, shall have sole charge of all teachers, classes, and schools in which the colored children are taught.” Cook argued, “In this language…the intent of the law to make this group of schools autonomous is so plain as to admit of no denial.” The word “sole,” she insisted, made all the difference. She then gave several examples of the ways in which, in her words, “illiberal interpretation of the law…may lead to almost endless evils.” She said that these “illiberal interpretations” had led Superintendent Thurston to exercise veto power over the black assistant superintendent, to ignore his recommendations about employment and promotions of teachers and principals in the black schools, and to generally look upon Roscoe Bruce as “persona non grata,” all of which were both unjust and demoralizing for the black community.

Cook argued that this discrepancy between what black Washingtonians recognized as the intent of the law and the “illiberal interpretation” of the law accounted for much of the discord in the black schools, especially the Roscoe Bruce-Parents’ League affair. She maintained that Bruce had been victimized by Thurston’s unjust application of the 1906 school law, which left him with “a maximum of responsibility with a minimum of authority.” In other words, the black community blamed Bruce for things he had no control over. Cook thought this was unjust not only because it went against the spirit of the law, but also because it misleadingly called into question the ability of black officials to run their own schools.

Cook also drew a connection between the autonomy of the black schools and school funding. Because the budget for the entire school system was pooled together in the congressional appropriation and administered to the schools by the Board of Commissioners, the commissioners divided the funds based on their own discretion. As Archibald Grimké had pointed out several years earlier and as Cook reminded the Senate committee, this often resulted in disproportionately low appropriations for the black schools. The issue of equal funding, in fact, was near the top of the lists of concerns among black Washingtonians. She reported, “There has been a great deal of compliant from the community that they did not have their fair

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86 This biographical information was gleaned from the following sources: Christopher Buck, Alain Locke: Faith and Philosophy (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2005), 78; Sharon Harley, “Beyond the Classroom: The Organizational Lives of Black Female Educators in the District of Columbia, 1890-1930,” The Journal of Negro Education 51, no. 3 (Summer, 1982): 260-262.
87 Public School Hearings, 1920, 324 (statement of Coralie Cook).
88 Ibid., 311-13, 329.
89 Ibid., 328-29.
appropriation.” Cook urged the Senate committee both to recognize the independent authority of the black assistant superintendent and to change the system of appropriating funds to the schools such that the black schools received separate, guaranteed funding proportional to the District’s school-age population. Cook read from an act passed by Congress in 1864, which was later repealed, mandating proportional funding for the black and white public schools as an example of the kind of legislation she had in mind.90

What stood out most from Coralie Cook’s testimony in particular was her consistent emphasis on the law and legislation as a means of guaranteeing fairness and equality. At certain moments, especially when she was being questioned by Mississippi Senator Pat Harrison, she appealed to morality (at one point when Harrison was being particularly combative about Roscoe Bruce’s authority, Cook retorted, “The position of assistant superintendent of colored schools is something that is very dear to the hearts of the colored people,” to get him to back off), but, for the most part, she defending her arguments by quoting from the school law.91 This was notable because Cook was neither a trained lawyer nor typically involved in the legislative arm of the District branch of the NAACP. She was simply a citizen who knew that the school law of Washington, D.C. had been passed to give the black community certain legal rights. While she did not invoke constitutional rights, as Archibald Grimké did in the statement he submitted to the hearing committee, she clearly had at least an implicit understanding that the black community deserved equal protection under the laws that governed the District’s schools.

Coralie Cook was not the only member of the black community to testify about these issues, of course. Black board member J. Hayden Johnson expressed views similar to Cook’s about the autonomy of the black assistant superintendent and the proportional division of school funds. He told the Senate committee about the glaring deficiencies in black schools’ facilities, including the lack of athletic fields at Dunbar High School, which had more than 1,200 students, and a number of schools that, because of overcrowding, had to conduct classes in portable classrooms made of wood panels with no insulation. The black community responded to these conditions by creating a school betterment society, which, in addition to demanding improvements in buildings and grounds in the black schools also demanded more teachers, better salaries for teachers and staff, and a business manager to efficiently manage the budget for the black schools.92 Like Cook, Johnson’s proposed solution for this inequity was proportional and separate school funds. When Kansas Republican Senator Arthur Capper asked Johnson, “Do you think the colored schools are not getting the same attention, the same facilities, the same advantages that the white schools are getting in this city,” Johnson responded affirmatively and emphasized that the black schools deserved not only a “larger distribution” of funds, but a “separate distribution.”93

Johnson also invoked the school law to argue for more autonomy for the black assistant superintendent. As Cook had done, he insisted that the “spirit of the law” was that the assistant superintendent had the authority to make personnel and curricular decisions in the black schools. Even under attack from Senator Pat Harrison, Johnson held his ground. Harrison asked, “You really think that the assistant superintendent of the colored schools is the man to make

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90 Ibid., 330, 398-99.
91 Ibid., 359.
92 Public School Hearings, 1920, 469-71 (statement of J. Hayden Johnson, Board of Education member).
93 Ibid., 474.
recommendations for promotions in the colored schools, do you?” Johnson appealed to the law for his answer: “Yes; that the intent and spirit of the law gives him that right.”

Dunbar High School Principal and Garnet Wilkinson took his demands for more democratic allocation of school funds one step further. Wilkinson argued that the black assistant superintendent should be present at congressional appropriations hearings on school funding. His request was unambiguous, “I should like to recommend to this committee that the board of education provide that the assistant superintendent in charge of colored schools may always appear at the hearings of committees on appropriation measures for the schools.” He said that no matter the sums the black schools required and the promises made to them by the Board of Education, the Board of Commissioners, and the superintendent, there was consistently “an awful discrepancy in the appropriations for colored schools.” He, too, demanded separate appropriations for the black and white schools. When Senators Capper and Republican William Dillingham of Vermont, who were generally more sympathetic to the complaints of the black witnesses than Senator Harrison, reacted somewhat skeptically to Wilkinson’s bold request, Wilkinson was adamant that it was the only way to ensure fairness and equality. He insisted, “I should like to have the assistant superintendent in charge of [colored] schools present at any hearings when appropriations are to be made for the schools. It now devolves upon the superintendent or the board of education. It is our earnest wish that we be heard ourselves.”

Garnet Wilkinson’s request to have the black assistant superintendent present at congressional appropriations committee hearings was an acknowledgement of the undemocratic way education politics functioned in the District and a demand to institutionalize black representation to make the system more democratic. Wilkinson’s views were undoubtedly influenced by his involvement with the NAACP. He had been involved with the branch from its inception, first as treasurer and then as an active member. Several teachers at Dunbar—including Charlotte Hunter and Neval Thomas—were also heavily involved with the association, creating a professional community that was very much in tune with racial justice. As with Cook, Johnson, and other black Washingtonians, Wilkinson recognized that the only way to move toward racial equality was to legislate more authority for representatives of the black community. With the leader of the black public schools present at the appropriations hearings, the black community would be certain to have an advocate.

As was mentioned earlier in regard to his recommendation for an elected school board, Roscoe Bruce made some of the most forthright and ambitious demands of any representative of the black community. In addition to an elected board, Bruce proposed that 1) his title be changed from “assistant superintendent” to “associate superintendent” in order “to indicate the larger measure of freedom and independence already accorded the office by the letter and spirit of the law of 1906;” 2) the titles of black “assistant directors” of special subjects be changed to “directors of special subjects for colored schools,” since, in Bruce’s words, “The word ‘assistant’ was intended to mean and has in practice meant ‘colored.’ But these officers are in charge of the teaching of the several subjects in the colored schools,” and that their salaries be equalized with the white directors of instruction; 3) high school principals’ salaries in the black schools be equalized with those of the white schools; and 4) Dunbar and Armstrong High Schools be provided with deans of girls, as are the white high schools. These were in addition to other more specific requests to address the needs of individual schools.

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94 Ibid., 478-81.
96 Public School Hearings, 1920, 1038 (statement of Roscoe C. Bruce).
From Bruce’s extensive list of demands, it was clear that he was trying to equalize the schools for blacks with the schools for whites in every sense. The breadth of his demands was provocative. Whereas many of the other black Washingtonians who testified focused their complaints on particular areas, Bruce intended to show the Senate committee what it would mean to have two truly equal divisions within Washington’s “dual system,” as the segregated system was referred to. Bruce’s tone throughout his testimony was firm and direct, rather than pleading, and he saw no need to praise or defer to the senators or white school officials. Both the content of Bruce’s demands, as well as his style and method of argument, reflected an increased confidence in blacks’ legal and political rights.

At one point, Bruce shared a memorandum from the District branch of the NAACP about the black schools’ right to a separate board of examiners, which foreshadowed the language Archibald Grimké used in the statements he submitted to the Senate committee. The memo read,

…[T]he colored community is gravely exercised over the attempt to destroy without good reason or any reason the separate board of examiners for colored schools. The colored people know that, for example, it is advantageous to have a separate list of eligibles in colored schools to be promoted…for the just allocation of salaries to the colored schools is a very serious matter, in which the rights of these schools need special protection…But fundamentally in the suppression of the separate board of examiners for colored schools is unquestionably another blow aimed at the autonomy of the colored schools, as wisely established by the act of 1906.97

This memo is notable for a number of reasons. First, it very explicitly demanded the protection of black teachers’ rights. Second, it indicated that the black schools had a legal right to autonomy. Finally, it argued for more complete separation between the black and white schools as a way of achieving fuller equality.

The black community’s rights to school autonomy and equal educational resources received their clearest articulation in Archibald Grimké’s written statement, which was read aloud since he was unable to appear at the hearing in person. Grimké made many of the same substantive demands as Coralie Cook, J. Hayden Johnson, Garnet Wilkinson, and others, but he even more explicitly used the language of justice, equality, and civil rights. As with the rest of the black Washingtonians who testified, Grimké demanded legislation guaranteeing the black schools an equitable proportion of school funding. He accused the District commissioners of distributing school funds “according to their own prejudices, rather than according to equity and justice,” and argued that equality would not be guaranteed until it had been legislated. “The colored people seek no charity, but merely their rightful share,” Grimké wrote, and asked Congress to “place no consideration above justice” and pass a law requiring proportional funding. In the portion of his statement where he asked Congress to eliminate the word “assistant” from the titles of directors of instruction in the black schools, he insisted, “Even the white directors have acknowledged the injustice of this practice, and have been American enough to ask that the term ‘assistant’ as applied to those directors in charge of colored schools be eliminated.”98 Grimké deliberately used words and phrases such as “justice,” “equality,” and “American enough” throughout his testimony to remind Congress of black Washingtonians’ citizenship rights.

Grimké also left no question as to the black community’s right to educational autonomy. Three separate times in his ten-page statement, Grimké repeated the sentence, “Let the autonomy

97 Ibid., 1037.
98 Public School Hearings, 1920, 1240-42 (statement of Archibald Grimké).
of these separate schools remain inviolate.” He insisted that complete authority over their schools was the only way to preserve equality in a segregated system. He laid his case out to the committee plainly:

As long as the colored children in the Capital of the Nation are forced to attend separate public schools, it is indispensable that their teachers and supervisory and administrative officers be men and women of color. Separate schools in this community are not the result of the free choice of the colored people. The logical and equitable result of this doctrine is to provide these separate colored schools, on the basis not of color but of equal pay for equal work, with a staff of teachers and officer of every grade, composed exclusively of men and women of color…If the existing law is in any way ambiguous [about the authority of the black assistant superintendent], it is earnestly hoped that the Sixty-Sixth Congress in legislating for the public schools of the District of Columbia, will make the law so clear and forceful that the colored children may have the very same opportunity as the white for the training of hand, head, and heart. The colored people are insistent that the autonomy of these separate schools, as fixed by the organic school law, be preserved inviolate.99

With this statement, Grimké forcefully asserted the importance and necessity of the preservation of the autonomy of the black public schools. In addition, by calling on Congress to use its authority as Washington, D.C.’s legislature to guarantee black children in Washington “the very same opportunity,” in his words, he drew attention to the federal government’s responsibility to protect blacks’ right to equal educational opportunity. Of course, Grimké, along with most black Americans in the 1920s, thought that segregation was reprehensible and anathema to American democracy. However, by making such a convincing case for black Washingtonians’ right to autonomy in their public schools, he transformed the perception of Washington’s segregated schools from symbols of white oppression to beacons of black leadership and power. Grimké recognized that given the institutionalization of white supremacy in the form of racial segregation and the widespread denial of black citizenship rights, autonomy was black Washingtonians’ best hope for educational equality.

99 Ibid., 1243-44.
CHAPTER FOUR

“Education for Freedom”

Black Leadership and the Federal Appropriation at Howard University, 1925-1928

When Howard University held its annual opening exercises to mark the beginning of its fifty-ninth academic year one morning in late September 1926, it was the first time a black man stood before the Howard community as university president.1 Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, who had been appointed by the university trustees in June, delivered his opening address to an “overflow crowd,” according to the Washington Tribune, which was the black weekly newspaper that replaced the Washington Bee after William Calvin Chase’s death. The paper reported that “every available seat was taken before noon” in the Andrew Rankin Memorial Chapel and the university’s longest serving faculty members affirmed that “it was the largest gathering of students, faculty members, alumni and visitors at any opening exercise at the university within their memory.”2

Johnson’s short speech did not disappoint. After a brief account of the university’s history, he praised the faculty, administrators, and alumni, and spoke inspiringly of Howard students’ responsibility as some of the very few college-educated members of their race. Johnson acknowledged that the mid-1920s was a critical time for black Americans, who shared a heightened “self-consciousness,” “self-expression,” and “self-respect.” “It is under the leadership of men and women like yourselves,” he counseled the students who sat before him, “that this eager people, still poor and still but rudely organized and directed, may be transformed into an indispensably constructive element of the American population.” According to the Tribune reporter, Johnson “spoke with fervor” and was “persuasive and forceful and showed deep sincerity.”3

Indeed, Mordecai Johnson’s appointment as Howard University’s first black president was a seminal moment in the black struggle for freedom and equality because of Johnson’s race, his commitment to equal rights for blacks, and Howard’s vital importance to black life in American more generally. This chapter chronicles a brief but important period in Howard University’s history, in which the university acquired its first black president and then secured a critical legislative victory when Congress amended its charter to officially authorize the federal government’s yearly appropriation to Howard’s budget. Johnson’s appointment came as a result of the growing consensus around the need for black leadership of black schools to uphold the principle of black equality and capacity for leadership, to better represent blacks’ interests, and to use separate black institutions to further the struggle for black rights and equality. With his efforts to get Congress to pass the bill authorizing federal appropriations, however, Johnson also

1 John Mercer Langston, who was the son of a white father and a black mother and worked variously as a lawyer, educator, Freedmen’s Bureau official, and Howard University Professor and Vice President, had served as Acting President from January 2, 1875-July 2, 1875 upon General Oliver O. Howard’s resignation from the presidency. Since his official title was “Acting President,” he is not considered to be the university’s first black president; Rayford Logan, Howard University: The First Hundred Years, 1867-1967 (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 71-6.
3 Ibid.
expanded the notion of the federal government’s obligation to support black schools and to protect black educational equality.

This chapter also explores the evolution of the notion that equal educational opportunity was a civil right that deserved federal government protection. Despite the importance of their autonomy, black Washingtonians and those in the Howard community recognized that they could not win the struggle for black freedom and equality alone; they needed the federal government to uphold its constitutional commitment to protect the citizenship rights of all Americans, which in this period was beginning to include equal educational opportunity. Both of these concepts—racial autonomy and federal government responsibility for black education—had initially been worked out in Washington, D.C.’s public schools, and the transformations at Howard in the 1920s were an extension of the battles in the black public schools in the previous two decades. As a result of all of these struggles in black Washington’s schools, by the late 1920s the black educational community in Washington had established the logical coexistence of black educational autonomy and federal government protection of equal educational opportunity as a civil right.

The Capstone of Negro Education

Since its fledgling years in the late nineteenth century, Howard University had been known as the “Capstone of Negro Education.” While this was a moniker that Howardites wore with pride, it did not mean much until the early twentieth century when Howard had become a full-fledged university and education for blacks had moved beyond the basics of elementary education. In its first four decades, Howard was something of a cross between a high school and a college, even though it was called a university. By the 1920s, however, Howard had become the focal point around which much of the cultural and intellectual life of black Washington orbited, and the university also had established its national—and, an increasingly global—significance as well. Even from its earliest days, Howard University played a special role in educating freed people and their descendants.

For those familiar with the Reconstruction period and the history of black education, the story of Howard University’s founding has almost an apocryphal quality. In the very early days of Reconstruction, a group of Congregationalist ministers sympathetic to the cause of uplifting the newly freed slaves, a large population of whom had made Washington their home, proposed to start a theological seminary and education for blacks had moved beyond the basics of elementary education. In its first four decades, Howard was something of a cross between a high school and a college, even though it was called a university. By the 1920s, however, Howard had become the focal point around which much of the cultural and intellectual life of black Washington orbited, and the university also had established its national—and, an increasingly global—significance as well. Even from its earliest days, Howard University played a special role in educating freed people and their descendants.

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4 Logan, Howard University, 17-20.
5 Ibid., 25, 34. Logan acknowledges that the records are not clear, but that the daughters of a couple of professors were the first to enroll at the normal school.
Initially, the great majority of administrators, academic deans, and professors were white, but this changed gradually as more blacks became qualified to fill these roles. The members of Howard’s board of trustees were all white when the university was founded, but they quickly elected prominent African Americans to join them. Some of the best-known black trustees in this period were Henry Highland Garnet, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Bishop Benjamin Tucker Tanner, and Francis Grimke, among other leading preachers, lawyers, doctors, intellectuals, and businessmen. By the turn of the twentieth century, seven of the twenty-four trustees were black; all were men. In terms of the faculty, very few members of Howard’s initial departments—normal, collegiate, law, medicine, theology, agriculture—were black. Perhaps the most notable exception was John Mercer Langston, who was dean of the Law Department and also served as acting university president for several months in 1875. As Howard began to amass a cadre of educated black alumni and as the population of black graduates from northern colleges and professional schools grew, the university began to hire more black professors, some of whom took on leadership roles.

Howard’s academic program grew quickly, if somewhat haphazardly. It seems that with each new president—and sometimes more than once under the same president—new schools and departments were created, abolished, renamed, or consolidated. Based on the early success of the Medical Department and the affiliated Freedmen’s Hospital in training doctors, the university opened pharmacy and dentistry programs. The college eventually added a bachelor of science degree, in addition to a bachelor of arts, and became the College of Arts and Sciences, with Kelly Miller, one of Howard’s most prominent professors and administrators, serving as dean. The Law Department became the School of Law and instituted tougher standards both to be admitted and to graduate while the normal department did the same in its transition into the new Teachers College. Despite this growth, Howard provided little in the way of a university education until the twentieth century. According to Howard historian Walter Dyson, it was not until then that “scholarship probably and not character-building, become the chief concern.” Many of its students studied in the Preparatory Department, which was later renamed the Academy, to complete high school work and, in some cases, even elementary work. Perhaps because of this feature, some used to somewhat glibly refer Howard as “Dummies’ Retreat.”

Despite Howard University’s auspicious beginnings and laudatory goals, the university struggled financially. Much of its startup costs had been funded by the Freedmen’s Bureau, but when the bureau was disbanded and the financial panics of the 1870s rocked the nation’s economy, the university nearly went broke and struggled on and off for decades. Coming up with the resources to support a new university is always challenging, but Howard had an especially difficult time. It would be several generations before Howard had much of an endowment or an alumni base that was successful enough to contribute to their alma mater in large sums. Thanks to a small appropriation from Congress, combined with student fees and fluctuating contributions from white philanthropists, the university stayed afloat.

Congress’s initial $10,000 appropriation to Howard in 1879 set what turned out to be a hugely important precedent, both financially and symbolically. After this first small infusion of

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6 Ibid., 64, 102-3, 126-28.
7 Ibid., 48, 71-6.
8 Ibid., 88-9; 92-7, 111-14.
9 Dyson, Howard University, 446.
10 Logan, Howard University, 35, 114.
11 Kluger, Simple Justice, 123.
12 Dyson, Howard University, 303-4.
funds was approved as part of Congress’s yearly civil appropriation bill, Congress contributed to Howard’s budget in increasing amounts every year. The university came to depend on the federal government’s financial support, especially for capital investments like equipment, books, new construction, and building maintenance.13

The symbolic meaning of federal government support was also clear. In his seminal history of the university, Walter Dyson quoted an 1870 newspaper article that reflected the potential importance of Howard University as a site for the federal government to begin to pay back the debt it owed to African Americans: “When asked in the future ‘What shall be done with the present Capitol in case of removal?’ the answer is now ready: ‘Give it to Howard University’ freely and thus make, even in a small way what restitution we can for years of complicity in sustaining that, sum of all villainies, Human Slavery.”14 The argument that the federal government owed blacks for centuries of slavery endured well beyond the demise of Reconstruction. In fact, Congress’s continued financial support showed that at least its more liberal officials believed that the federal government was indebted to blacks not only for the institution of slavery, but also for the ensuing “Negro problem.” In the 1920s, when the university was involved in a legislative battle to officially authorize Congress to make its annual appropriation (the subject of the latter part of this chapter), a congressional committee concluded, “Apart from the precedent established by forty-five years of Congressional action [in appropriating Howard funds] the Committee feels that Federal aid to Howard University is fully justified by the national importance of the Negro problem.”15 The symbolism of the Howard appropriation persisted even into the civil rights era. A 1961 Harper’s Magazine article about the university referred to the federal funds as “conscience money” and suggested that the fact that there were remarkably few strings attached to the money was a further indication of the federal government’s feeling of indebtedness.16 The notion that Howard, which had come to be considered the “national Negro university” by the twentieth century, had a right to federal government assistance was a critical ideological component to the connection between education and black rights and equality that this chapter explores.

Notwithstanding the unevenness of Howard’s academic programs in its earlier years, the university served a vital function by training the vast majority of black professionals in the generations after emancipation. Hundreds—and, soon, thousands—of lawyers, doctors, dentists, pharmacists, and teachers graduated from Howard and went on to practice throughout the country. As of 1915, Howard was the only predominantly black university with a teachers college, which churned out many of the South’s first black high school teachers. The students in the Teachers College celebrated their role in their yearbook: “In a very certain way, then, the college here serves 10,000,000 people as far as its facilities will allow,” the yearbook proclaimed. “Its purpose is to educate leaders; to touch the lives of those who in turn will touch

the lives of countless others and thus multiply its influence infinitely.” Teachers weren’t the only Howard alumni who spread their influence across the country. According to some estimates, by the mid-1920s, nearly half of all black doctors and dentists and more than ninety percent of black lawyers had been trained at Howard. This was in addition to the many young men and women who earned high school diplomas, took undergraduate courses, and earned liberal arts bachelors degrees.

In addition to its role preparing black professionals, Howard was also coming into its own in the 1910s as a center for scholarship on black history and life. Professor and eventual dean Kelly Miller was a vanguard in this movement. Miller, who was born to slave parents months after Abraham Lincoln delivered his Emancipation Proclamation, graduated from Howard’s Preparatory Department in 1882 and from the college four years later and went on to study mathematics at Johns Hopkins. He returned to Howard as a mathematics professor and quickly immersed himself in other aspects of the university and other disciplines. After he became interested in black history, he sought funding from the university for American Negro Academy studies and, in 1901, tried to increase support for research and coursework on the history of blacks both in Africa and the United States. The following year he initiated Howard’s first sociology course to explore the emerging field and contribute to its nascent scholarship on black life. Miller was a prolific scholar in all of these fields, publishing dozens of books and scholarly articles on race relations and the struggle for black equality.

Miller only opened the floodgates for what would be a deluge of black academics studying all aspects of black life, especially after the appointment of Mordecai Johnson as Howard’s first black president. Alain Locke, who would be at the forefront of what would be called the New Negro Renaissance in the 1920s, joined the English Department faculty in 1912 and tried to institute a course on “inter-racial relations,” which was rejected by the board of trustees. Carter Woodson slipped back and forth between Dunbar High School and Howard, serving at various times as professor and dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and the Journal of Negro History while he was at Howard in 1915 and 1916. In the 1920s, even more black academic luminaries, some of whom were Howard alumni and many of whom had received doctorates or law degrees at top northern universities, would join the Howard faculty. Howard was able to attract the top academic talent more so than other black colleges because social and intellectual life for blacks was much more vibrant in Washington and black Washingtonians enjoyed a greater degree of freedom and power than elsewhere in the South. Despite Howard’s growing reputation for black scholarship, in this period the board of trustees was reluctant to permit Howard’s professors to delve too deeply into the “Negro problem.” This would change over the course of the 1920s.

The figure who presided over Howard University’s adolescence was James Stanley Durkee, Howard’s last white president, who served from 1918 to 1926. Durkee, who was
Howard’s eleventh president, fit the standard profile of the university’s previous ten presidents, all of whom were liberal white preachers born in the North: he was born in Nova Scotia, attended Bates College in Maine and Boston University for graduate school, and was an ordained minister who had preached at a Congregationalist church in Boston. Although Durkee had a reputation for aloofness from the black community in Washington, he proved to be one of Howard’s most dynamic presidents. He broadened the university’s academic program, brought its administration more in line with other leading universities by consolidating more power in the office of the presidency as opposed to the board of trustees, achieved more administrative unity among the various professional schools, strengthened alumni relations, and implemented an ambitious building program.

J. Stanley Durkee was also perhaps the first Howard president to define Howard as an institution that was primarily, if not exclusively, devoted to educating black Americans. According to Howard historian Rayford Logan, when Durkee began to refer to Howard’s role in satisfying a “very present and pressing demand for young colored people to gain expert knowledge,” as “the servant principally of a particular racial group,” or even simply as the “only colored school” on the approved list of the Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools of the Middle States and Maryland in his yearly reports to the Department of the Interior, his characterization of Howard’s commitment to black education was unprecedented. Durkee seemed to have had a “liberal construction”—to borrow William Calvin Chase’s phrase discussed in Chapter Two—of this racial separation, as it was clear that he was committed to black advancement and believed that Howard played a vital role in furthering black achievement and racial equality.

He displayed this commitment not only through all of the improvements he brought to Howard during his short tenure, but in other ways as well. Durkee made a concerted effort to replace retiring white professors with qualified black professors, leaving Howard with more black professors—especially at the senior level—than ever before. He also initiated, and in some cases completed, accreditation processes with various academic and professional bodies, including the Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools of the Middle States and Maryland, the Association of American Law Schools, the New York Board of Regents (for the School of Dentistry), the Pharmacy Board of the State of Ohio, and several medical school ratings associations, to give Howard’s academic programs the official stamp of equality. In Durkee’s inaugural address, he spoke of Howard’s past and future service in training race leaders, who, he thought, were on the cusp of leading black Americans to equality. Then he outlined black Americans’ two primary demands. “They demand the RIGHTS OF CITIZENSHIP,” Durkee proclaimed. “Make the standards as high as we should make them, then honor with the franchise, with jury right, with public office, with rights on public conveyances—in short, with full American citizenship. They demand RESPECT FOR THEIR ACHIEVEMENTS, as we ask respect for our own. We must cease our sneering, our lying, our hypocrisy, and we must give to them the full rights of human achievement.”

23 “James Stanley Durkee,” undated pamphlet with no author, J. Stanley Durkee Files, HU Archives MSRC.
24 Ibid., Logan, Howard University, 187-205.
25 Logan, Howard University, 211.
26 Ibid., 211-14.
27 Ibid., 207, 222-27.
Even though Durkee believed in black Americans’ demands for citizenship rights and equality, many blacks were starting to feel that the races of the “we” and the “they” that he referred to in his inaugural address should be reversed. For the president of Howard University, the nation’s premiere black university, “we” should be black Americans and “they” should be whites. Many believed that a white university president espousing the importance of black leadership was not merely ironic, but wrong.

These thoughts were not new in the 1920s. Since the brief period in 1875 when John Mercer Langston served as acting president, just about every time the trustees set out to appoint a new president there were murmurs among the black intelligentsia that it was time for Howard to be led by a black person. When Durkee’s predecessor Stephen M. Newman resigned in 1918, the Washington Bee took up the cause of advocating for a black man to replace him. A series of editorials in the winter and spring of 1918 included comments such as, “There is no reason or cause for keeping any other than a colored American at the head of Howard University. Let there be a colored man president of Howard University,” and, “Will the colored trustees of Howard University demand the election of a colored president? Have they manhood enough to tell the white trustees that Howard is for the colored people and a colored man should be elected president?” William Calvin Chase (perhaps with the help of George H. Richardson, who was associate editor at the Bee) dismissed the notion that it was politically expedient to retain a white man at the helm of the nation’s best university and instead argued that it was time for blacks to “assume the responsibility of managing all lines of business that are peculiarly their own.” In one especially pointed editorial, Chase asked,

How long does Howard’s trustee board expect the race, and the public, white as well as colored, to accept the belief that Howard University CAN PREPARE men and women of the race for every activity in life, while it announces, though the policy of always selecting some second-rate white minister for the presidency, that even those whom they assert the university has splendidly prepared and equipped to establish the claim that colored men are ripe for every endeavor are incapable of serving as president of their alma mater?

Chase argued that this double-standard—claiming to superbly train its students for leadership in the professions but then refusing to hire them—created what he called a “dead line for colored ambition,” which in contemporary parlance would be referred to as a “glass ceiling.”

In typical Bee fashion, once the trustees appointed Durkee, the paper abandoned this stance and supported his administration. One article noted that Durkee intended to make Howard the black equivalent of Harvard or Yale and that he was “an intense believer in the efficiency of the higher education as a solvent for many of the problems that perplex the colored American.” The article also mentioned that while Durkee thought it was important to keep some white professors on the faculty to “foster a proper spirit of racial cooperation and friendly acquaintance,” he planned on enacting a kind of affirmative action policy, whereby if a black candidate and a white candidate were “anything like equal,” he would give the position to the black candidate.

29 Wolters, The New Negro on Campus, 78-82.
32 Ibid.
33 “President Durkee’s Reforms at Howard,” Washington Bee, March 29, 1919.
While this article and others lauded Durkee and his reforms as progressive, many blacks in the Howard community would come to see them as usurpations of the authority of black administrators. This division was expressed clearly in a series of letters to the editor in the *Bee* by R.C. Edmonson, a community member who one editorial called “an impartial man with no axe to grind.”  

Edmonson, who supported the status quo at Howard, wrote his letters in response to an article in the NAACP’s *Crisis* magazine by former Howard English professor G. David Houston that was highly critical of the tradition of white leadership at Howard. Although Houston’s article, called “Weaknesses of the Negro College,” did not refer to Howard University by name, it was clear to readers that that was its subject.

Of the several weaknesses Houston pointed out, the most galling was what he called the “mistake of calling a white man to the presidency.” He listed many reasons why this was offensive and counterproductive to race progress. He argued that a white president of a black university was likely to be ill-equipped to be a university president because any qualified man would choose to work at a white school, which would be more lucrative and prestigious. He also said that the distance white presidents kept from their faculty weakened their authority and inevitably led to power struggles, which had negative consequences both for scholarship and the smooth administration of university affairs. Houston also charged that white administrators had “almost no sympathy with the Negro youth’s aspirations,” which led them to discourage black students. Finally, Houston rejected the contention that a white president would be a better fundraiser because he would be more appealing to philanthropists and congressmen. Instead, he insisted, “the best person to state the needs of a Negro college and to attract friends is the Negro himself. The passionate plea of a white president, receiving a very generous portion of the income, is not likely to unlock philanthropic or federal coffers.” Interestingly, Houston placed a share of the blame for the legacy of white presidency on black members of the board of trustees, some of whom he labeled as “that type of Negro who lacks confidence in his own race.” Still, he blamed the white trustees for appointing blacks with those inclinations.

R.C. Edmonson responded to Houston’s article in a series of meandering letters to the editor, to which the *Bee* afforded a good deal of space across four separate issues. One of his claims was that Houston must have had a personal grudge against President Durkee because of the acrimony that surrounded Houston’s departure from Howard and that Houston’s views were unrepresentative of most black Americans’ attitudes. Acting as though his audience were white northerners, Edmonson insisted, “The colored people perfectly understand the motive and purpose of the Northern white people in establishing Christian Negro colleges. They approve that motive and purpose and consider the bargain an advantageous one.” He went on, “The colored people thoroughly appreciate that, unaided, they are unable to found and support ‘their own colleges’ in sufficient numbers to meet the present or near future.” Edmonson’s biggest fear after Houston’s article appeared was that it would leave a “bad impression” on white northern philanthropists, which in turn would jeopardize their future financial contributions to Howard’s coffers.

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One of Edmonson’s other criticisms, which he teased out over several letters, was more complicated. He surmised that Houston’s article was part of a scheme to rid black schools of white professors and administrators to create openings for the growing numbers of black graduates of northern white universities (Houston was a Harvard alumnus). Edmonson had little respect for these men, who he viewed as lazy, elitist, self-serving, and disloyal to the race first for choosing to earn degrees from white universities rather than black ones and then for preferring to lead the “genteel” life of an academic rather than going into more useful work. In one letter, Edmonson painted a picture of the imagined frenzy that would ensue among the black intelligentsia if their plan came to fruition: “A thousand genteel jobs in Dixie! Imagine the visions of Napoleon’s men as he pictured to them the spoils of Sunny Italy. A thousand genteel jobs in Dixie! It is plain that Scholar Houston does not want a thousand jobs for himself alone. A thousand genteel jobs in Dixie! And more than a thousand feverish expectants. Expectation stands tip-toe at the line of Mason and Dixon.” Edmonson also resented that the article that appeared right after Houston’s, “The Year in Negro Education,” celebrated the graduation of 100 black students from northern white universities while it minimized the more than 500 who had graduated from black colleges throughout the South.37

Despite Edmonson’s hyperbole with this imagined army of gentlemen-professors, his criticism that blacks who graduated from white universities—especially those who then pursued careers in black universities—had betrayed the race was not unique. In his 1933 book The Mis-education of the Negro, eminent scholar of black history Carter Woodson criticized black education in general and reserved special reproach for those who sought out white education and ignored the particular needs of the race. While recognizing that the hegemony of white supremacy in American education was partly to blame, Woodson disdained “highly educated” blacks who internalized their “mis-education” about black inferiority and went on to espouse these beliefs once they returned to their communities after receiving their degrees.38 Although Edmonson’s concerns were not motivated by race pride like Woodson’s were, both pointed to the prevalence of class lines within the black community. Some of Edmonson’s criticisms were not unlike those leveled against Roscoe C. Bruce for his aloofness and elitism, and Edmonson even mentioned the Boule, which was one of Washington’s most selective black fraternal organizations.

This disagreement between G. David Houston and R.C. Edmonson revealed some of the complexities of the emerging debate over racial separation, black autonomy, and equality at Howard. Many blacks felt that the period in which they needed to prove their capacity for leadership had come to an end, and that for Howard to meet the needs of the current and future generations of black Americans, it needed to have all-black leadership. In G. David Houston’s case, he probably nurtured some of these thoughts about black autonomy at Howard during his time in Washington’s public schools. Houston was one of the many black Washingtonians who had strong connections to both Howard University and the public schools. After he began his career teaching English at Tuskegee Institute, he taught at M Street High School before becoming English department chair at Howard. When he left Howard because of professional differences with J. Stanley Durkee, he returned to the public schools as principal of Armstrong Manual Training School. Houston’s time in the public schools coincided with some of their battles over black leadership.39

37 R.C. Edmonson to Editor of The Bee, Washington Bee, August 14, 1920.
38 Woodson, The Mis-Education of the Negro.
Edmonson and others like him, however, believed that Howard’s future was more secure under a white leader for political and economic reasons. Howard depended heavily on federal government appropriations, which the university president had to lobby Congress for each year, and still received more donations from white philanthropists than from the black community. Those in this camp believed that a liberal white president would be able to raise more funds than a black president, which was a surer path to educational equality than taking chances with a black leader. They thought that the time for black leadership in higher education had not yet arrived.

Looking back on this period in 1941, fifteen years into Mordecai Johnson’s tenure as Howard’s president, Mary Church Terrell explained the dilemma the Howard community faced in the mid-1910s:

Some of us thought it would be a fine thing if a Colored man could be elected President of Howard University one of these days. It would be a very long way off, we thought. But if and when such a thing happened, some opined it would be practically impossible for a colored man to succeed…. He could not succeed as well as a white president, it was said, because he could not raise as much money as the latter. In trying to get appropriations for the institution a white president would have the advantage of meeting members of Congress on terms of social equality, sitting at the dinner table with them, and when men eat together they get closer to each other, it was explained. For that reason a white president would be able to raise much more money for Howard University than a colored man, from the very nature of the case. And so, while some thought it would be a fine thing to elect a colored man president to establish a principle, they thought it would really be an injustice to the institution from a financial point of view.40

Many blacks saw the situation as a tradeoff between the principle of black autonomy and Howard’s financial stability. Significantly, both camps agreed on the importance of Howard’s role as the leading liberal arts university for the future of black citizenship and equality. Just a couple of years after Houston and Edmonson’s debate, advocates in the Howard community and the tide of the New Negro Renaissance would finally convince the board of trustees and the rest of the Howard community that black autonomy was paramount and that it was time for the “capstone of Negro education” to have a black president.

The Arrival of Mordecai Johnson

Mordecai Johnson’s tenure as Howard University’s first black president was charmed from the start. His personality, his public presence, and his commitment to the black freedom struggle earned him broad support. By the 1920s, the Howard community wanted a black president not only to symbolize the legacy of black progress, but, much more importantly, to lead the university in a direction that would further black citizenship and equality in the future. This was the next logical step in the ongoing struggle for autonomy and equality that black Washingtonians had begun in the public schools.

In some ways, just as Mordecai Johnson was charmed, J. Stanley Durkee was doomed from the start because of changes in blacks’ attitudes toward black leadership and autonomy in the public schools, at Howard, and more generally. Despite Howard’s important growth during his administration, Durkee faced not only personality clashes, as was the case with English professor G. David Houston, Carter Woodson, and others, but also a series of scandals in 1924

40 Mary Church Terrell, telegram, 1941, in Winston, Education for Freedom.
and 1925 that led to his resignation in the spring of 1926. During this period, which was 
chronicled with an anti-Durkee bent in the black weekly newspaper the *Washington Tribune*, 
Durkee managed to provoke the wrath of more and more members of the Howard community 
and black Washingtonians in general. Durkee’s tumultuous tenure was not so much a result of 
poor leadership, but rather the Howard community’s search for flaws in the man they hoped 
would be Howard’s last white president.41

The first of the challenges to Durkee’s administration, which threatened Howard’s 
congressional appropriation for the following school year, came as a result of a controversial 
sermon by Francis Grimke, pastor of the prestigious Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, 
brother of Archibald Grimke and fellow black rights activist, and Howard University trustee. 
While this issue will be discussed in more detail in the next section of this chapter, several 
Democratic representatives from southern states began what became a yearly practice of 
challenging Howard’s federal funding during an Interior Department appropriations hearing in 
February 1924. These congressmen, led by Representative James Byrnes of South Carolina, 
zeroed in on several remarks Grimke had made during his convocation speech at Howard’s 
School of Religion. In the speech, entitled “What is the trouble with the Christianity of Today?,” 
he criticized American Christianity with statements such as this: “It is a shame, a burning shame, 
that we are under the domination of a Christianity that discriminates against human beings made 
in the image of God and for whom Christ died, on account of race and color.” Two examples he 
cited were the YMCA, for excluding blacks from its membership roles, and former president 
Woodrow Wilson, for publishing an article in which he encouraged American churches to 
become more involved in the spiritual uplift of all Americans without acknowledging that 
America’s white churches also excluded blacks.42

While Howard ended up receiving the full appropriation in the end, Durkee came under 
fire for not defending Grimke. When Grimke was interviewed by a *Washington Tribune* reporter 
before the appropriation issue was resolved, he said that he stood by what he said. Durkee, 
however, chose not to sanction Grimke’s remarks, which many blacks interpreted as a lack of 
commitment to the larger principle of non-discrimination. An editorial in the *Tribune* called 
Durkee’s reaction “cowardly” and insisted, “Neither Dr. Durkee, not any other man is worthy of 
the position of president who will not stand by a principle that is vital to the university which he 
heads.”43 An editorial lamenting the lack of alumni interest in Howard’s affairs that appeared the 
following week continued to reflect this racially inflected ill will toward Durkee. “One difficulty 
of the situation is that a white president and white instructors can hardly inspire young Negroes 
of today with that spirit which should be expected,” the editorial commented. It then cautioned, 
“There will never be the proper relation existing between Howard University and its Alumni so 
long as a man of Durkee’s type is at the head of the University, especially if he is white.”44 
Despite the fact that the Senate restored Howard’s full appropriation weeks later, the damage had 
been done and the precedent had been set for blaming Durkee’s blunders and the growing 
dissatisfaction with his administration not only on his personal shortcomings, but also on his 
race.

42 “Howard University Appropriation Threatened,” *Washington Tribune*, February 2, 1924; “Cutting Howard’s 
February 4, 1924.
43 “Cutting Howard’s Appropriation,” *Washington Tribune*, February 2, 1924
A series of incidents in the late spring and summer of 1925 did much more damage. In May, Howard students went on strike for two weeks protesting the expulsion of several students for cutting too many ROTC classes and demanding that the administration lessen or abolish university-wide ROTC and physical education requirements for male students. While this had little to do with race, it showed that the student body was beginning to lose respect for Durkee. The following month Durkee announced a sweeping reorganization of Howard’s academic programs, which involved demoting Kelly Miller from dean and sociology professor to a traveling field representative of the university and firing four eminent black professors including mathematics professor Alonzo Brown, French professor Metz Lochard, finance instructor Orlando Thornton, and philosophy professor Alain Locke. The Howard community suspected that this “reorganization” was really just an excuse to dismiss faculty who somehow compromised Durkee’s administration. Miller and Durkee had butted heads for years and the rest of the terminated professors had sided with the students during their strike. In addition, both Miller and Locke were two of the country’s foremost black scholars and Locke had just assembled his seminal volume heralding the Harlem Renaissance, The New Negro, and it is possible that Durkee felt threatened by their scholarship.

Also in June news broke that since the winter Durkee had been serving as the president of a music school in Boston that excluded blacks, even as he continued his work at Howard. When black Washingtonians discovered Durkee’s connection to the Curry School of Expression, which had an official policy prohibiting the admission of black students, they reacted uproariously to his hypocrisy of simultaneously serving as presidents of the nation’s leading black university and a school that openly discriminated against blacks. A widely distributed leaflet showed two cartoons of Durkee side-by-side, one of which depicted him as Howard University president and the other as the chief executive of the Curry School. On the left, the Howard cartoon showed him in royal regalia, sitting on a throne in front of Founders Hall, with bags of money piled up on either side (to represent his $10,000 salary, which was more than twice what even the most senior professors earned), addressing the Howard student body saying, “My children! There’s nothing in this world that is too good for you!” On the right, Durkee was standing in the doorway of the Curry School in front of its all-white student body, dressed in a cap and gown, proclaiming, “You cannot matriculate here under any circumstances—no Negroes allowed!” At the top was the adage, “Consistency; Thou Art a Jewel.” The rest of the leaflet was a lengthy diatribe against Durkee excoriating him for insulting, offending, discriminating against, and trying to humiliate the race as a whole. Durkee resigned from the Curry School once the public

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45 Logan, Howard University; Wolters, The New Negro on Campus; “Howard Students Strike,” The Hilltop, May 8, 1925; “Howard Faculty Meets Students,” The Hilltop, May 2, 1925.
46 Several years earlier, Durkee had admonished Miller for publicly involving himself in the debate over Roscoe C. Bruce’s tenures as assistant superintendent of the black schools. In a bizarre turn of events, Miller became so angry with Durkee that he threatened him physically and Durkee responded by calling Miller either a “contemptible pup” or a “contemptible cur” (accounts vary). From that point on, the two were bitter enemies and the popular interpretation of the incident faulted Durkee much more than Miller. “Hearing of the Alumni Association of the Howard University before the Board of Trustees of that Institution,” December 10, 1925, J. Stanley Durkee Files, HU Archives MSRC; Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Board of Trustees, December 10, 1925, HU Archives MSRC.
48 Pamphlet, undated, J. Stanley Durkee Files, HU Archives MSRC.
outcry became too much to bear, but his affiliation with the school became his Achilles heel for the remaining months of his presidency.

In response to this chain of events, in the fall of 1925 members of the Howard community, led by General Alumni Association president George Frazier Miller, organized a series of mass meetings at Washington churches calling for Durkee’s resignation. In November, noted historian and director of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History Carter Woodson declined to speak at an annual gathering of black teachers in Maryland when he discovered he would have to share the stage with J. Stanley Durkee. Woodson announced, “I would not disgrace myself by appearing on the platform with any man who has insulted and exploited the Negro Race to the extent that Durkee has.” In December, after receiving numerous petitions from local branches of the alumni association and an official letter outlining eight specific charges against Durkee from the officers of the General Alumni Association, Howard’s board of trustees conducted an investigation into Durkee’s administration and the faculty’s attitudes toward him.

The overarching theme of the investigation and the accompanying hearings was indignation over Durkee’s involvement with the Curry School. In the alumni association’s list of charges against Durkee, the final one stated that Durkee’s influence at Howard had been “irreparably destroyed by his open affront and insult to race pride and self respect” through his position there. Alumni association member Thomas Dyett testified that Durkee had acted “contrary to the spirit that should permeate the presidency of the University.” Several faculty members offered similar opinions.

Even though the board of trustees exonerated him from the charges against him and endorsed his administration, Durkee was unable to recover from the airing of six years worth of dirty laundry during the trustees’ hearings and had entirely lost the support of the black community. A Tribune editorial noted how starkly the racial lines were drawn that separated Durkee’s supporters from his detractors: almost all of the white deans and faculty supported Durkee while almost all of their black counterparts opposed him. Shortly after the investigation ended, rumors began circulating that Durkee planned to resign from Howard and to return to the pulpit at a large Congregational church in New York.

Even before Durkee submitted his resignation in early March, there was rampant talk of the problems inherent in maintaining the tradition of a white president, and once he announced his resignation this talk accelerated. An article in the student newspaper the Hilltop, which had generally lent Durkee its support—in no small part because it was censored by the administration—acknowledged Durkee’s tremendous achievements in expanding Howard’s infrastructure, but questioned what he had done to promote the Howard community’s “spiritual growth” and “racial consciousness.” At the opening event of an official campaign to convince

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52 Untitled editorial, Washington Tribune, January 2, 1926.
54 Untitled editorial, The Hilltop, February 18, 1926.
the board of trustees to appoint a black successor to Durkee spearheaded by Howard alumni, the president of the medical school alumni association, W.C. McNeil, announced, “A colored president could do much to promote a sense of race justice at the school.” Reflecting the efflorescence of a New Negro consciousness, others voiced the familiar opinion that a black president would better sympathize with the particular challenges that blacks faced and would thus be a better advocate for a black university.

Some stressed that having a white president was a relic of an earlier era during and after Reconstruction when benevolent white northerners swept through the South to help educate and uplift the newly freed slaves. While contemporary blacks recognized the kindness of this missionary zeal, by the 1920s it had become anachronistic and smacked of condescension, at best, and white supremacist tyranny, at worst. One editorial in the Tribune noted that while previous generations were down-trodden and in need of outside support, blacks in the 1920s were “educated, self-assured…[and] fully capable of commanding [their] own institutions.” Indeed, the contemporary black man was “loudly asserting his right to that responsibility.” In his essay “Howard: The National Negro University,” in Alain Locke’s The New Negro, Kelly Miller argued that whites who had established universities like Howard “understood that their tenure was temporary,” and that given Jim Crow segregation in the 1920s, blacks needed to chart their own way:

The two races cannot ride in the same car, send their children to the same school, or attend the same church, and must perforce walk the streets apart. Under such circumstances a perfect meeting of minds is impossible. Any national Negro enterprise must derive its future leadership and guidance from within the race.

In many ways, these attitudes about black leadership and autonomy were similar to those expressed by black Washingtonians in regard to their public schools. As in the 1906 school reorganization battle and again in the Senate investigation of the public schools in the early 1920s, the Howard community had begun to think of black university leadership as a key right at a time when so many other rights were denied to blacks. Also, as with the public schools, blacks in the Howard community increasingly looked for ways to leverage racial autonomy to further race progress and equality. Having sympathetic “white friends” within black educational institutions was no longer necessary and blacks now felt that their presence was, in fact, anathema to black advancement. They felt that they had already more than demonstrated their capacity for leadership and what they needed at this point was a qualified black leader to steer the university in a direction where it could take advantage of its role as the “capstone of Negro education.”

In addition to these logical and rhetorical similarities between the demands for black leadership at Howard and in the public schools, there were also direct connections among people at the two institutions. Longtime Howard trustee Francis Grimke was the younger brother of D.C. NAACP branch president Archibald Grimke, and the two shared a deep commitment to educational equality. Many blacks in the Howard community were active members of the NAACP, and they were surely influenced by the organization’s legislative battles for autonomy and proportional funding of the black public schools. There were also those like G. David

55 “Dr. J. Stanley Durkee Resigns Presidency of Howard to Fill Pulpit of Brooklyn Church,” Washington Tribune, March 5, 1926.
Houston who had worked in both institutions. In fact, Houston, in his *Crisis* article, directly compared the public schools’ administration with Howard’s. “Elementary, secondary and normal schools are intrusted [sic] to the administration of educated Negroes. Why,” he asked, “should the college furnish the exception?” He argued that separate black schools “from the kindergarten through the university” deserved strong black leadership. While black autonomy in the public schools was a critical assertion of blacks’ civil and political rights, Howard’s racial autonomy had the potential to be even more important because of its capacity to produce and publish research, to train black leaders and professionals who would go on to practice around the country after graduation, and to influence broader legislation and public policy because of its location in the capital and its increasing prestige.

In addition to all of these particular circumstances that convinced increasing numbers of the Howard community that it was time for a black president, larger trends in black life and thought also helped explain why the trustees elected the university’s first black president in the 1920s and not before. In terms of black life in America, the late 1910s and early 1920s were a time of profound change. Large numbers of blacks had supported black involvement in World War I based on the hope that they would be rewarded for their patriotism after the war, but when the black soldiers returned from Europe, they were met with even more discrimination and racial violence than before they had served their country. This increase in white oppression, coupled with the nationwide rash of race riots during the summer of 1919 weakened black Americans’ hope for full inclusion in American democracy. Also, during and after the war, hundreds of thousands of blacks left the rural South for cities in the South, North, and West, which increasingly convinced both blacks and whites that the “Negro problem” was more than ever before becoming a national problem. Another demographic fact in the early 1920s was that there were more elite black intellectuals who were qualified for university administration, as well as a critical mass of black college students who were more interested than ever before in learning about black life and history. This was in large part attributable to the New Negro Renaissance, which celebrated blackness, African and African-American culture, and race consciousness, in addition to the spread of Garveyism and Black Nationalist ideology in many circles in black America. Taken together, all of these cultural, political, demographic, and ideological changes in the late 1910s and early 1920s, including the arrival of the New Negro consciousness, contributed to the sense that Howard was ready for a black president.

The board of trustees seemed to agree that it was time for them to appoint a black president of the “national Negro university.” In the same meeting in March in which they accepted J. Stanley Durkee’s letter of resignation, the trustees appointed an eight-member interracial special committee to come up with potential candidates. Each of the trustees were also asked to comment on what they thought the most important factors should be in selecting the next president. According to the trustee meeting minutes, the question was put thusly:

1. Whether the next President should be a white or a colored man.
2. Whether the man to be selected for the Presidency of the Institution shall be considered chiefly with reference to
   a. His scholarship and administrative ability,
   b. Or primarily from the standpoint of his platform gifts or attainments.

While the minutes did not record the trustees’ responses, word spread that they were looking for a black man and that the five white members of the special committee were willing to allow the

59 Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Board of Trustees, March 25, 1926, HU Archives MSRC.
three black members to select the candidates. Black Americans throughout the country began to speculate about whom they would choose. Likely candidates were thought to be Kelly Miller, Morehouse College president John Hope, Howard secretary-treasurer Emmett J. Scott, A.M.E. minister and Harvard Ph.D. Charles Wesley, among others. No one mentioned either of the two men who were actually offered the job: John A. Gregg or Mordecai Wyatt Johnson.60

In June, the trustees appointed forty-nine year-old A.M.E. Bishop John Andrew Gregg to succeed Durkee. The Howard community’s first reaction was surprise. As the Tribune article announcing his selection noted, Gregg was “not so well known to the Washington public.” Judging from those interviewed by Tribune reporters, the black community was conflicted about the choice. On one hand, they had hoped for someone with better educational qualifications, who was foremost a scholar and an educator and perhaps secondarily affiliated with a church. The alumni community had been campaigning for someone with a connection to Howard or from within the university (in particular, they favored Kelly Miller). Although Gregg had served as president of Wilberforce University, he was primarily a minister and had no connection to Howard or Washington, D.C. On the other hand, he was black.

After their initial surprise and disappointment, the Howard community—including the hard-to-please alumni groups—lent him their support. One Tribune editorial called Gregg’s appointment a sign of a “new epoch in Negro culture” and a “great day in race history.” Much less enthusiastically, alumni association president George Franklin Miller at first said, “We, as a body, are resigned to the selection of the board of trustees.” A few days later, however, they unanimously passed a resolution assuring Gregg their “undivided support and cooperation.” Dunbar High School teacher, Howard alumnus, and local NAACP branch president Neval Thomas was somewhat more supportive: “We must all get behind him, and help him to secure his appropriations in Congress, as we have in all other administrations regardless of what we thought of presidential policies, for this is regarded as an experiment, the placement of a Negro at the head of Howard, in spite of the fact that for generations Negroes have proved their capacity for educational leadership.” Still, the black community was disappointed that the trustees had not chosen someone with a more prestigious educational and professional pedigree whose qualifications were incontrovertible.61

Even though the black community warmed to Gregg’s nomination, he resolved the issue himself by declining the offer. The board of bishops of the A.M.E. Church told him that he would have to relinquish his bishopric of he accepted the position at Howard, which was both unprecedented and frowned upon, and that it was unlikely that he would be reinstated should he leave Howard.62 Less than two weeks later the trustees had elected Gregg’s replacement.63

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60 Ibid.; “Committee to Select the President of Howard U. to Meet Monday Next; Tendency Shown to Favor Colored Man for Position,” Washington Tribune, April 30, 1926; “Who Will Be President of Howard?” Washington Tribune, May 21, 1926. The five white trustees on the special committee were Theodore Roosevelt, historian Albert Bushnell Hart, Unitarian minister Ulysses G.B. Pierce, Yale Divinity School president Charles R. Brown, and Brigadier General John H. Sherburne who had commanded the black 92nd Infantry Division (also known as the Buffalo Soldiers) during World War I.


63 Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Board of Trustees, June 30, 1926, HU Archives MSRC.
Mordecai Wyatt Johnson was a thirty-six year-old educator, minister, speaker, and emerging black rights advocate when he was elected as Howard University’s first black president in June 1926. He was unique in this office not only because he was black, but also because he was far younger than his predecessors and at the beginning of his career rather than at the end. Johnson was born in Paris, Tennessee, in 1890 and his mother and father, who was a former slave, supported his education from an early age. He earned bachelors’ degrees from both Morehouse College and the University of Chicago and studied theology at Rochester Theological Seminary and Harvard University, earning masters’ degrees from both institutions. At the age of twenty-seven he became a pastor at the First Baptist Church in Charleston, West Virginia, and over the next several years he began writing articles and speaking around the country, quickly establishing himself as an advocate for black rights and racial equality. In 1923, Howard awarded him an honorary doctorate in divinity for his work. When Johnson was notified of his election, he was traveling in Europe as part of a delegation on interracial cooperation.  

The board of trustees’ rationale for choosing Mordecai Johnson was astoundingly murky considering the magnitude of the decision. The only record of Johnson’s appointment was in the board of trustees meeting minutes from June 30, 1926, which reported the following: After it was announced that Bishop Gregg had turned down the offer, several of the trustees moved to have the board’s executive committee administer the university until the committee had time to find another candidate. Black board member Dr. Michel Dumas, who was a Howard alumnus and practicing physician in Washington, disagreed with this proposal and moved instead to appoint Johnson. This was the first time Johnson’s name appeared in the minutes or elsewhere. Another black trustee, Dr. John R. Hawkins, nominated Howard history department chair Charles Wesley and the board voted by ballot between the two candidates. Johnson won and, while the results of the vote were not recorded, the board adopted a motion to make the vote unanimous.  

This was the extent of the record of Johnson’s appointment and the reasoning behind it. It was likely that Johnson beat Wesley because many agreed that there was too much factionalism at Howard to appoint someone from within the university. Beyond that, however, there was no indication how or why Dumas nominated Johnson or why the trustees settled on him so readily. Historians who have written about the episode have no further insight into the matter. In his definitive institutional history of the university, Howard historian Rayford Logan noted, “The circumstances of the election of Dr. Mordecai W. Johnson…were almost as peculiar as those of Durkee’s resignation.”  

Johnson’s own reflections shed some light on his reactions to his appointment. In a piece he wrote later on about his decision to accept the trustees’ offer, he said that he had come to the conclusion that Howard would be better served by a black president than a white one after World War I. He explained that blacks’ feelings after the war “resulted in their being restless and quick to become antagonistic, even toward those persons of the white group, who…they normally held in esteem and affection.” He thought that this “general situation” after the war was such that a white person was no longer able to understand and address the needs, desires, complaints, and conflicts of the black community at Howard. As a result, he insisted that “any able and honorable colored man in the United States who could secure the majority vote of the Board of Trustees

65 Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Board of Trustees, June 30, 1926, HU Archives MSRC.
66 Logan, Howard University, 242-44; Wolters, The New Negro on Campus, 130-36.
had a bounden duty to the Negro people and to the cause of higher education” to accept the job. Johnson even referred to his move to the Howard presidency as a “call,” which suggested that he likened the Howard presidency to the church pulpit. Rather than serving God, however, he would serve his race, and rather than shepherding congregants from the church pulpit, he would steer the students and faculty of the nation’s leading black university toward advancing racial equality and American democratic values.67

Johnson’s advocacy for black citizenship and criticism of racial discrimination in American society were central to his early career and would shape his thirty-four year tenure as Howard’s first black president. In a pointed commencement address he delivered at Harvard University in 1922, which was later published in The Nation with the title “The Faith of the American Negro,” he attributed the global spread of radical Black Nationalism to the failure of American democracy to include blacks in the body politic. In the wake of black soldiers’ mistreatment during and after WWI, hundreds of thousands of black Americans joined Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Garveyism, as the movement’s philosophy became known, sought to reconnect the African diaspora with Africa and celebrated black pride.68 “Whatever one may think of these radical movements and their destiny,” Johnson explained, “one thing is certain: they are home-grown fruits, with roots deep sprung in the world of black American suffering.” He went on to paint a grim, but accurate, picture of black Americans’ exclusion from public life, saying that they had been reduced to “an economic, political, and social caste.” He argued that this persistent racial discrimination had weakened blacks’ faith in American democracy. Black Americans no longer believed that conditions would improve through their own efforts to receive an education, accumulate wealth, and demonstrate respectability. Rather, Johnson pronounced, they needed “the protection of a just and beneficent public policy in keeping with American ideals.”69

In the next part of the speech, Johnson outlined the rights that blacks demanded. They asked, “for the protection of life, for the security of property, for the liberation of the peons, for the freedom to sell their labor on the open market, for a human being’s chance in the courts, for a better system of public education, and for the boon of the ballot.” With this statement, Johnson made clear that he considered public education to be a constitutionally guaranteed right on par with the most fundamental civil and human rights. Johnson concluded his speech with a call for “public equality under the protection of the Federal Government [in the form of] a public policy initiated by the Federal Government and continuously supervised by a commission of that Government representing the faith and will of the whole American people.”70 For Johnson, this public policy needed to include protections for life, liberty, property, trial by jury, the vote, and, finally, quality education. This speech and subsequent article garnered national attention and solidified his reputation as an unequivocal advocate for black rights, including the right to education.

While Johnson was concerned about the right to equal educational opportunity early in his career, his interest in the issue grew after he assumed the Howard presidency. At the Washington Interracial Seminar, a gathering of prominent black and white Washingtonians held

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67 “My call to Howard University and the circumstances surrounding it,” undated typescript, Mordecai Johnson Collection, folder 13, Man. Div. MSRC.
70 Ibid.
at Howard in November 1930, Johnson focused his speech on inequalities in public elementary, secondary, and higher education in the South. He provided copious statistics about the lack of public funding in southern states for black education and, while he praised black churches and white philanthropists for picking up the slack, he attacked southern governments for maintaining an educational system for blacks that was “far below the standards of education accepted for whites.”

In a separate publication, Johnson made clear that he thought that the federal government—not private philanthropy—should be responsible for ensuring black educational equality in the South by either forcing southern states to fund black schools equitably or else funding them directly. He made his position known in a minority report that he, along with Tuskegee Institute president Robert Russa Moton and president of the black West Virginia State College John W. Davis, submitted to the report Federal Relations to Education, published in 1931 by the National Advisory Committee on Education. In the lengthy report’s very brief section on black education, its authors determined that the federal government should not intervene in black education in the states because, they contended, blacks had advanced “impressively” since slavery and that they had accomplished “vastly more than could have been achieved by any special grant of federal funds, however great.” The committee concluded,

[T]he policies regarding dependence on local autonomy, and regarding federal grants for education in general to be administered by the States, as outlined in this report, when applied to the Negroes, will in the end result in more lasting benefit to them than would federal action directed toward supplying quickly any special educational facilities for the Negro under federal supervision or administration.

Johnson, Moton, and Davis sharply disagreed with the committee’s conclusion about the lack of federal government responsibility for black education and they laid out their argument in their minority report. They argued that black education posed a “unique problem” because of racial segregation; blacks’ “abnormal relation to public life,” i.e. disfranchisement; black schools’ “abnormally low proportion of state and federal support;” and the fact that blacks were “uniquely set apart as by far the most disadvantaged educational group under state jurisdiction.” As a result of these factors, Johnson and his colleagues urged the federal government to supply special grants earmarked for black education in southern states. They insisted, “[T]he Federal Government stands in unique moral, historic, and practical obligation to help these States in the development of an adequate educational opportunity for this heavily disadvantaged group.”

While the authors did not use the language of rights in their minority report, they did use the language of citizenship. They argued that because of their “heavy educational disadvantages” black citizens were “gravely limited in the constructive contribution which they can make to the life of the nation” and, as a result, the “entire structure of the public life” in southern states was “wounded.” The phrase “public life” was another way of talking about inclusion in the larger American economy, society, and political process. In other words, Johnson and his co-authors

74 Ibid., 108.
were making an argument about the relationship between equal educational opportunity and citizenship rights.

In addition to his increased interest in black educational opportunity, Johnson also continued to speak and write about the abrogation of blacks’ status as citizens more generally. In a later address to the Woman’s Auxiliary of the National Council, Johnson again addressed the “race problem” bluntly and forcefully. Central to understanding the “abnormal and unhealthy” relationship between blacks and whites, he argued, was “segregation.” Johnson likened black Americans to a limb that had been cut off from the body of American public life, preventing blood from circulating back and forth between the body and the limb, hindering the normal function of both the body as a whole and the amputated limb. Blacks in the United States, Johnson averred, were “actually cut off from normal relationship to the body of public life.” He attacked the entire political and legal apparatus in the southern states for violating the Constitution by disenfranchising their black citizens and also blamed the rest of the nation for complicity in this “lawlessness.”

Mordecai Johnson’s views on black rights were well known to both white and black Americans, and he seemed to have the respect of both races. A Tribune article reporting on his election noted that he was friendly with philanthropist Julius Rosenwald and federal judge Julian Mack and that he had the unanimous support of both the white and black members of the board of trustees. He was respected by the faculties of both Harvard and Howard and, once he took office, was adept at negotiating with both congressmen and the most fractious members of the Howard community. One reason for this was what the Tribune noted as his simultaneous commitments to black rights and interracialism. The newspaper commented, “Dr. Johnson is regarded as outspoken in his views on the race question, but, at the same time, he is said to be one of the most potent influences in the United States for interracial goodwill and cooperation.”

Another explanation for this widespread respect was probably the color of his skin. Johnson was so light-skinned that he could easily have passed for white. He was what some called a “voluntary Negro.” After hearing Johnson speak at a conference about race relations in early 1927, Philadelphia Quaker Anne Biddle Stirling remarked, “This man colored? Not a feature, not a curl, hardly a shade!” She said, however, that when he opened his mouth to speak, he had “the charm of the deep, mellow voice that is the Negro’s heritage.” In a memorial speech two years after Johnson’s death, former Morehouse College president and Howard School of Religion dean Benjamin Mays characterized Johnson’s unwillingness to pass as white as stubborn. Mays noted that he “could have easily escaped into the white world...But like Moses, he preferred to suffer with his people, Negroes, rather than enjoy the privileges of the white world.” Johnson’s skin color—along with his intelligence, eloquence, and commanding presence—probably made him more agreeable for whites. But his unswerving commitment to black rights and his Moses-like sense of duty to lead his people to freedom cemented his high repute among black Americans.

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75 Mordecai Johnson, “Interracial Contacts,” pamphlet of presentation at Triennial Meeting of The Woman’s Auxiliary to the National Council, Denver, Colorado, [undated], found in Mordecai Johnson Files, HU Archives MSRC.
76 “Mordecai Johnson Elected President,” Washington Tribune, July 2, 1926.
77 Ibid.
78 Anne Biddle Stirling, “Mordecai Johnson: An Impression,” Opportunity, March, 1927, 81-2, found in Mordecai Johnson Files, HU Archives MSRC.
79 Benjamin Mays, “The Relevance of Mordecai Wyatt Johnson for Our Times,” January 1978, address, found in Mordecai Johnson files, HU Archives MSRC.
Because Johnson’s appointment came over the summer, much of the public’s excitement was postponed until the beginning of the school year, but this delay did nothing to dampen the exuberant response from across black America. This chapter began with the scene at Johnson’s first opening exercises and the enthusiasm radiated out from there. A pamphlet distributed at the opening exercises that year contained excerpts from articles and editorials from publications around the country celebrating Johnson’s election and expressing lofty hopes for his career at Howard. An editorial in *The Hilltop*, the student newspaper, said that Howard students’ “hearts [were] eager to receive their new leader with a love and devotion that will make the greatness of Howard secure.” Johnson also scheduled speaking engagements around the city throughout the year, which earned him the support of black Washingtonians outside the Howard community. Midway through his first year, Johnson himself reported to the board of trustees that his relations both within and outside the university had been “most harmonious,” which was saying a lot considering Howard’s reputation for factionalism and the vitriol that had surrounded Durkee’s final years as president. At the end of his first year, Johnson was cheered during an address before the notoriously finicky alumni association, which had heavily supported Kelly Miller during the search for a new president a year earlier. Taken together, these reactions contrasted sharply with the black community’s initial response to Bishop Gregg’s appointment. It was clear that they were excited about Johnson not only because of his race, but, moreover, because of his beliefs and activism on behalf of black rights.

The crowning moment of Mordecai Johnson’s first year as Howard’s first black president was his inaugural address, which the board of trustees decided to postpone until Howard’s June 1927 commencement. Johnson began with a celebration of Howard’s legacy and its historical role in uplifting freedmen and their descendants, and continued with a promising overview of the state of the university’s academic programs. He then launched into a description of his vision for Howard’s vital importance in addressing the hardships that black Americans faced and the pernicious inconsistencies in the relationship between American democracy and black Americans.

He began this part of the speech by characterizing racial discrimination as a national problem—rather than a peculiarly southern phenomenon—and noted Howard’s special fitness to address the issue because of its location in the nation’s capital. In Washington, which he noted was just as southern in spirit as the Deep South, “You have the continuously throbbing will of the whole American people, expressed in the Executive Government and in the Supreme Court, and a constant stream of noble characters who represent the best sentiment of the nation, interacting continually with the Southern mind, tending to assimilate and to transform it to the measure of the national will.” Johnson also stressed the significance that Howard, which educated nearly one-quarter of all black Americans earning post-secondary degrees, was funded in part by the federal government, strengthening its connection to national policy.

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80 “Howard’s New President,” 1926, pamphlet, found in Mordecai Johnson files, HU Archives MSRC.
82 “Dr. Johnson Points Way to Negro Youth,” *Washington Tribune*, November 5, 1926.
83 Minutes of the Board of Trustees of Howard University, February 1, 1927, HU Archives MSRC.
84 “President Johnson Cheered during Address before the Alumni Association Meeting,” *Washington Tribune*, June 10, 1927.
86 Ibid., 7-10.
In the final pages of his address, which was published as a small booklet by Howard University Press, Johnson laid out his plans for Howard’s future role in achieving racial equality, while maintaining black cultural autonomy. In no uncertain terms, he said that he hoped black Americans’ destiny “will be entire public equality and entire good-willed cooperative relations with every element of the American population.” He continued, “I want my country to conquer all of the inhibitions connected with blackness and all of the fears connected with blackness, but I want the original blackness there and I want that blackness to be unashamed and unafraid.” As for Howard’s role in shaping this destiny, he noted that the existence of Howard “tells something about the intent of the American mind,” and he called on Howard graduates to dedicate their lives to working with liberal whites to create the American democratic ideal of a country in which “all men are free, all men are intelligent and all men are self-directing contributors to the common good.”

Johnson’s inaugural address was compelling and forceful. He laid out an agenda both for black cultural and institutional autonomy as well as black citizenship, equality, and full inclusion in American public life. He outlined Howard’s role as an institution and as a community in changing national laws and policy as well as swaying white Americans’ hearts and minds about the meaning of blackness. The Tribune heralded the speech as a “masterpiece” and reported that it was “received in all quarters with the greatest expressions of satisfaction.” An editorial called it an “unqualifiedly sound” statement of guiding principles and predicted that Johnson’s career at Howard would be long and fruitful. A key component of Johnson’s argument here and his outlook in general was that the federal government had a constitutional commitment to uphold black Americans’ citizenship rights. He pointed to Howard University’s special relationship to the federal government—in terms of its geographical proximity and financial bond—to draw the connection between education and the federal government’s protection of black rights and racial equality. Thus, Johnson’s first important act as president was strengthening Congress’s financial commitment to the nation’s leading black institution of higher education.

Education, Rights, and the Federal Appropriation

Although Howard was a private university, a large portion of its budget came from the federal government. As was explained earlier in the chapter, this tradition began out of necessity when the university was having financial troubles in the late 1870s. Subsequently, there was not a single year since the first appropriation in 1879 that Howard was not provided for in the Department of the Interior’s appropriation bill and the university depended on these funds for its survival. It was widely recognized that this financial support was “conscience money”: a way for the nation to compensate blacks for centuries of slavery. However, when southern congressmen began fighting the yearly appropriation in the early 1920s during J. Stanley Durkee’s presidency, Howard’s financial and symbolic relationship with the federal government was threatened. What ensued was a five-year battle in Congress, which began under Durkee but culminated in victory for Mordecai Johnson in 1928, to get a bill passed that officially authorized this yearly appropriation, legally codifying what had previously been only a tacit custom. One of the central arguments Johnson and the congressmen who supported the bill used to push the bill through Congress was that the federal government was obligated to contribute to Howard’s budget

87 Ibid., 13-15.
because of the stark and unjust lack of opportunity for black higher education throughout the country, but especially in the South. Through this lobbying effort, Johnson and his colleagues at Howard transformed the meaning of Howard’s federal appropriation from a nebulous and largely unspoken notion of “conscience money” into a civil right—the right to equal educational opportunity—guaranteed by federal law.

The threat to Howard’s appropriation began during the debates over the interior department’s appropriation bill in 1924. Representative James Byrnes, a Democratic congressman from South Carolina, raised a point of order when the House of Representatives appropriations committee was considering the portion of the bill that appropriated $365,000 to Howard University for the 1925-1926 fiscal year. Byrnes noted that Congress did not have the statutory authority to appropriate funds to Howard, which was true. Nowhere in Howard’s 1867 charter did it mention that Congress was authorized to fund the private institution.89

Points of order on this matter had only been raised twice before in the previous forty-five years and it was clear that Byrnes’s dispute was a result of the heightened racial tension in the 1920s. As was mentioned earlier in the chapter, Byrnes raised his objection in response to Francis Grimke’s provocative sermon that criticized white America, and white churches in particular, for racial discrimination. After he read parts of Grimke’s sermon in the committee hearing, Byrnes insisted, “This sermon shows that Government funds are used to support an institution that is stirring up race hatred.”90

The black community was furious, as numerous articles and editorials in the Tribune and the Hilltop reflected. A Tribune editorial condemned Byrnes for flouting Grimke’s First Amendment rights, even though the author of the editorial thought this was unsurprising given his constituency: “Byrnes, of South Carolina, has grown accustomed to treating the Constitution of the United States as a scrap of paper; for he undoubtedly would not be a member of the Congress of the United States today, but for his contempt of the constitutional rights of his black brother of South Carolina, which he tramples under his feet at every election which he enters to represent his district.”91 It was clear from the start that the black community interpreted Byrnes’s attacks as being directed at more than just Howard University, but at blacks’ rights more generally.

By the time the bill left the committee, all but $157,000, which was allocated to Freedmen’s Hospital, had been cut from the bill. Texas Democrat Thomas Blanton, who seconded Byrnes’s point of order, insisted in his testimony that these cuts were not motivated by race prejudice. “I just wanted to call attention to the fact that this item on the preceding page, for $80,000 for the Freedmen’s Hospital, was subject to a point of order if one had been made,” he told the committee. “Nobody made one, because every member of the House is willing for the colored race here in Washington to have a hospital… We were perfectly willing that it be spent in the name of humanity…and it is a worthy enterprise. No southern man has ever yet refused to do the things here in Congress for the welfare and betterment of the colored race.”92 Blanton seemed not to be aware that Freedmen’s Hospital was actually owned by the federal government.

90 “Cutting Howard’s Appropriation,” Washington Tribune, February 2, 1924.
91 Ibid.
which was authorized to fund it. Moreover, by characterizing Congress’s contribution to Freedmen’s Hospital as a charitable gift, Blanton was trying to downgrade the federal government’s financial commitment by suggesting that it was merely an act of generosity, rather than even a symbolic repayment for centuries of slavery.

Despite the actions in the House, the full amount of the original appropriation was restored two weeks later in the Senate, but the battle lines had been drawn. Byrnes continued to raise points of order and, each year, his objections were sustained by other members of the House. When the appropriations bill would reach the Senate, Howard’s allotment was typically less than half of what they had requested, but the Senate always reinstated the funds to bring it up to the original amount. This routine persisted throughout the mid-1920s.

Although Howard always ended up with the full appropriation that it had asked for in the budget it submitted to the interior department, this yearly ritual was time-consuming and demeaning and the black community reacted accordingly. A Tribune article referred to the “embarrassment” of having its government funding jeopardized each year. The same 1961 Harper’s Magazine article that referred to Congress’s appropriation as “conscience money” called Byrnes’s antics “harassment” and noted that they came in response to expressions of racially liberal views on campus, which were becoming more frequent as blacks became increasingly outspoken about prejudice and discrimination as the decade wore on. Indeed, these challenges put Howard officials in the position of having to beg for money that they, as well as most liberal whites, thought they were owed.

In response to Byrnes’s points of order, Republican congressmen Louis Cramton of Michigan, Frederick Dallinger of Massachusetts, and Daniel Reed of New York, took turns sponsoring a bill to amend Howard’s charter to include language authorizing the federal appropriation. They did this in each session of Congress beginning in 1925 until the bill was finally passed in December 1928. Since these efforts began during J. Stanley Durkee’s administration, the congressmen, led by Representative Cramton, invited Durkee and secretary-treasurer Emmett Scott to testify at the House education committee’s hearings on the bill. Durkee’s and Scott’s testimony was mostly factual responses to the committee members’ questions about the university. Until Mordecai Johnson became president, Cramton and Reed remained the driving forces behind the bill. Once Johnson took office, he formed a closer relationship with Cramton, which helped to finally push the bill through Congress.

During the yearly hearings on the bill to amend Howard’s charter, Cramton, Reed, Dallinger, and several others outlined the reasons the national government should support the university. First, they made the point that Howard was truly a national university, with a rigorous curriculum and alumni who went on to contribute to American society. Its more than 2,000 students were from thirty-eight states and thirteen countries, and it was accredited by the same organizations as the most prestigious schools in the mid-Atlantic region. In each hearing, several congressmen also appealed to the nation’s moral and economic obligation to blacks for slavery and its long-term effects. They compared blacks to Indians, who received government support as restitution for having been “robbed of [their] land” by the federal government. Blacks, they

93 Logan, 40-1, 122-23; A Bill to Amend an Act to Incorporate Howard University: Hearings on H.R. 10604, Before the Committee on Education, 68th Cong., 2nd Sess. 8 (1925) (statement of Representative Louis Cramton, Republican of Michigan). [Hereafter cited as Howard Incorporation Hearings, 1925.]
95 Viorst, “Howard University: Campus and Cause,” 52.
96 Logan, 258-65; Mays, “The Relevance of Mordecai Wyatt Johnson for Our Times.”

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argued, were even more entitled to compensation because they had been “seized by force and brought unwillingly to a strange country, where for generations [they were] the slave[s] of the white man,” and, ever since, had been “compelled to eke out a meager and precarious existence.” They, like Mordecai Johnson, made the case for the national importance of the “Negro problem.”

The congressmen also made a series of points about the unique national role Howard played in training black professionals, especially black doctors. Nationwide, there was a tremendous shortage of black professionals. The 1928 Survey of Negro Colleges and Universities conducted by the interior department counted fifty black architects; 184 black engineers; 145 black designers, draftsmen, and inventors; and 207 chemists. The survey also noted startlingly low numbers of black lawyers, as well as black teachers and preachers with more than an elementary school education. In terms of health professionals, there were 3,500 black doctors and just over 1,000 black dentists. This averaged one black dentist per 10,540 black Americans and one black doctor for every 3,343 blacks. Among whites, there was one white doctor per 553 whites. Although these exact figures were not available at the time of the hearings, the dearth of black professionals was well known and came up during the debates. Indeed, Durkee told the House education committee that Howard needed to churn out 400 newly minted doctors every year for ten years to compensate for the tremendous national shortage of black doctors. As of 1925, however, the medical school only had the resources to accommodate at most sixty per year, only about two-thirds of whom ended up graduating.

While the congressmen who argued in favor of the bill supported the need for more black professionals for general racial uplift, they seized on the shortage of black doctors as a public health concern. Daniel Reed brought up a story told to him by a southern congressman of a black doctor’s vital role in a small town in his district during the 1919 influenza epidemic. At one point, when all of the white doctors were occupied, the town’s lone black doctor made house calls to the homes of white patients and, in some cases, saved their lives. Several others made a similar case, using the recent epidemic as an example that, as New York Democrat Emanuel Celler said, “epidemics like the ‘flu’ do not draw any color line.” Celler also pointed out, however, that this line of argumentation about the need to train black doctors to protect white people from disease was selfish and had nothing to do with the principles of justice and equality of opportunity that should have been at the heart of the debate.

To address these issues, the congressmen first turned their attention toward racial discrimination in medical training. Howard was only one of two black medical schools in the country and the only one at this point with the highest rating from the American Medical Association. While blacks could technically be admitted to other medical schools in the North, they typically could not complete their clinical work there because of racial prejudice and discrimination the universities’ teaching hospitals. In his testimony to the House education committee in 1925, Durkee described the situation as it had been explained to him by “a great leader in the medical profession”: “instead of being bothered to look up and see whether, if they

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99 Howard Incorporation Hearings, 1925, 8 (statement of J. Stanley Durkee, President of Howard University).
have a colored student, he would be permitted without trouble to come to this white patient, [he] simply refuses the student altogether.” Thus, even though black students could complete their first two years of medical school coursework at northern universities, they could not complete their final two years of clinical work there, so many either transferred or quit. At Howard Medical School, however, students completed their clinical training at Freedmen’s Hospital, which was the federal government-owned teaching hospital affiliated with Howard Medical School. Durkee noted that for the previous school year, Howard Medical School had to turn away dozens of transfer students from northern universities who had no place to finish their training.102

Inequalities in opportunities for medical training for blacks were clear, and Cramton and the bill’s other champions also provided evidence that these inequalities were present throughout federally funded higher education. Since the advent of land-grant colleges with the Morrill Act in 1862 and their expansion with the second Morrill Act in 1890, there was a strong precedent for federal financing of public higher education, which southern states, despite their cries to limit federal interference in states’ rights, readily accepted. Although one of the requirements of the second Morrill Act was that states with segregation divide their grants between black and white colleges, records showed that the distribution of funds was utterly imbalanced.103 Statistics drawn from the Federal Board for Vocational Education printed in the 1922 Negro Yearbook indicated that of the land-grant funds the seventeen segregationist southern states received from the federal government, they allocated $3.7 million to white colleges that were closed to blacks and only $150,000 to black colleges. An equitable distribution based on the numbers of blacks and whites enrolled at land grant colleges would have allocated more than four times that amount ($650,000) to schools for blacks.104 More recent figures the interior department’s Bureau of Education provided Louis Cramton in 1928 for the 1925-26 school year indicated that the disparity had grown: those same seventeen segregationist states gave nearly $5 million to white colleges and only $319,777 to black colleges, which should have received $1.6 million. Cramton’s interpretation of these statistics was unequivocal. He told the House, “It is that discrimination that creates this national need for a great colored university.”105

Southern congressmen, who were the most vehement opponents of the legislation to authorize the Howard appropriation, made several arguments to support their views, some of which focused on states’ rights and constitutionality, and some of which appealed to outright racism. The bill’s most vocal opponents were Democrat Bill Lowrey, of Mississippi, and Georgia Democrat Malcolm Tarver. Each year, Lowrey, along with several others, submitted a minority report to the education committee outlining their complaints. They argued that a permanent federal appropriation to Howard was illegal because Howard was a private university and, because it had a school of religion, it was possible that some of the funds would be used for religious instruction. In an effort to sound liberal-minded they noted that there were already an abundance of black colleges throughout the South, many of which were funded by churches and private philanthropy, and that federal government funding would be “hurtful paternalistic pampering” and would deprive Howard of the “opportunity to live and work of its own right, by

102 Howard Incorporation Hearings, 1925, 8 (statement of J. Stanley Durkee).
104 Howard Incorporation Hearings, 1925, 8 (statement of J. Stanley Durkee).
its own strength and in its own way.” They also contended that it was “easy today to get voluntary contributions to Negro education,” and that federal dollars were unnecessary.\footnote{H.R. Rep. No. 1258 (1925).}

While they largely omitted explicitly racist remarks from their brief minority reports, Lowrey, Tarver, and their like-minded colleagues showed no such restraint during the debates over the bill in the House of Representatives. Representative Tarver, who began his testimony avowing, “my position is not the result of race prejudice,” alleged that blacks only wanted to become doctors so that they could “chase that chimera of social equality” in the North. He then claimed that there was, in fact no shortage of black doctors, dentists, lawyers, or pharmacists in the South because “those of their own race realize that few of them are mentally capable of receiving and assimilating the knowledge which is necessary to bring eminence in these professions, and where they have opportunity to patronize negroes who practice them, usually patronize white professional men instead when they are able to employ them.”\footnote{329 Cong. Rec. 5593 (1928) (statement of Rep. Tarver).}

Representative Lowrey agreed. He said that in Mississippi the most obvious reason for the reduced population of black college students was that “the negro has been out of slavery only a few years,” and that the ratio of white college-ready youth to blacks who were prepared for college was likely 50:1.\footnote{329 Cong. Rec. 5599 (1928) (statement of Rep. Lowrey).} He neglected to mention that one of the reasons that blacks—who were by 1926 three generations removed from slavery, not “only a few years” as Lowrey said—in his state were less prepared for college than whites was because of the extraordinarily poor quality of elementary and secondary education for blacks in Mississippi. Lowrey’s fellow Mississippi congressman Thomas Jefferson Busby broadened the scope of the debate when he argued that not only was the Howard appropriation unconstitutional, but Reconstruction as a whole and all of its component institutions, laws, and amendments were constitutionally dubious. He suggested, “our public mind was not at its most favorable condition [during that period], and consequently it might not have taken into consideration with proper and due regard all of the provisions of the Constitution.”\footnote{329 Cong. Rec. 5597 (1928) (statement of Rep. Busby).}

Tribune attacked examples of overt racism, the two papers largely limited their coverage to reprinting portions of the Congressional Record.

Despite the vigorous opposition from southern congressmen, the House finally passed the bill in March, the Senate approved it in the next session, and President Calvin Coolidge signed it into law in December, literally minutes before Senator Park Trammell of Florida tried to recall the bill for further debate. While much of Johnson’s work to get the bill passed was behind closed doors, he later reminisced about his good relations with Louis Cramton, his efforts to lobby the Senate, and the debt he owed to J. Stanley Durkee for his lobbying work the previous few years. The university was so thankful to Cramton, who had been the bill’s most dedicated champion since 1924, that it named an auditorium after him in 1961.112 In spite his humility, Mordecai Johnson was awarded the highest honor for black achievement when the NAACP named him the winner of the Spingarn Medal in 1929 for “his successful administration as first Negro President of the leading Negro University of America; and especially for his leadership in securing, during the past year, legal authority for appropriations to Howard University by the government of the United States.”113 While Johnson would leave his mark on Howard in many other ways over the course of his thirty-four-year administration, this was his first major victory, just two years after he took office.

Almost as soon as the bill had passed, Johnson set to work to take advantage of the federal government’s legally sanctioned financial commitment to Howard. Johnson described the federal government’s past financial contributions as “piecemeal gratuities” that “were not made toward a competent educational service for Negro youth.”114 However, once this legislative obstacle to government financing had been removed, Johnson began working with members of Congress and the interior department to devise a long-term plan for federal financing of Howard’s future growth. After months of negotiations and studies of Howard’s needs, Johnson and federal officials came up with a ten-year plan in which the federal government would contribute increasing amounts to Howard’s budget each year, as Howard would increase its income on its own through its endowment, tuition, and private gifts. In keeping with the proportion of federal contributions to land-grant colleges, however, its share of Howard’s budget would never exceed two-thirds. At its peak in the plan’s tenth year, the federal contribution would be $3.2 million, which was not even in the realm of previous appropriations, which had hovered around $300,000 throughout the mid-1920s. After ten years, the federal government would gradually lessen both the total amount of its appropriation and its proportional contribution to Howard’s budget, while the university would continue to increase its endowment and private gifts. Because, as Howard’s board of trustees noted, federal aid to the university was now a “recognized measure of public policy,” Johnson was able to expand Howard’s campus, strengthen and broaden its academic programs, raise professors’ salaries, increase the size of its student body, and generally expand Howard into a first-class university in a way that had never been possible before in its sixty-year history.115

When news came that the bill had passed, before any of these substantive transformations had taken place, Mordecai Johnson and the Howard community recognized the broader

112 ibid: Teachers’ salaries at Howard University,” undated memo, Mordecai Johnson Collection, Man. Div. MSRC.
113 “The Spingarn Medal,” Crisis, July 1929 36 no. 7, 224.
115 Board of Trustee meeting minutes, November 15, 1930, HU Archives MSRC; “Table 19. Past Income and Expected Income of Howard University Abridged,” undated memo, Mordecai Johnson files, HU Archives, MSRC.
significance of their victory and the newly formalized commitment the federal government had made to black education. A *Tribune* article hailed the symbolic importance of the official authorization of the federal appropriation when it commented, “The passage of this bill means much to Howard University and the Negro race,” and exclaimed, “These southerners have been deprived of their annual opportunity to show the folks back home just how hard they are fighting the Negro.”

Not only was this a victory for black Americans over white supremacy, but it also both preserved Howard’s sovereignty and its status as a private university while it cemented the federal government’s role in financing its future. To emphasize the importance of this newly formalized relationship, Mordecai Johnson invited Louis Cramton to the Washington Interracial Seminar at Howard in late 1930. During the seminar’s question and answer period, Johnson prompted Cramton to discuss the federal government’s relationship to the question of race relations. While Johnson’s question was quite broad, Cramton’s whole answer focused on how the congressional appropriation to Howard symbolized the federal government’s broader commitment to black education and to addressing the “Negro problem” more generally. Cramton explained that Howard’s new charter reflected that “we [the federal government] think that in the development of Howard University, there is an opportunity in which the Federal Government ought to have a share, in order to make a contribution to the far-reaching importance for the handling of the Negro problem in the future.” Both Johnson and Cramton were careful to stress that Howard retained its status as a private institution, however. The amendment to Howard’s charter did not “federalize” the university, as some mistakenly perceived, but rather legally authorized a yearly government grant. Yet, as Cramton clarified, the federal government accepted its financial responsibility to Howard “by reason of its obligations in connection with the Negro problem.”

Thus, the federal government’s new relationship to Howard signaled a firm connection among Howard University, black education in general, black rights, and the government’s obligation to protect those rights.

Taken together, from the congressional debates, committee hearings, Durkee’s and Johnson’s lobbying efforts, and the public reaction to the bill, it was clear that far more was at stake than the narrow question of whether the federal government should be authorized to appropriate modest funds to Howard University. Instead, the debates that swirled around the bill involved the much larger issues of the federal government’s obligation to support black education and protect black rights and equality. New York Representative Fiorello LaGuardia exemplified this attitude in his rebuttal to Representative Busby’s attack black civil rights during the debates on the floor of the House of Representatives. LaGuardia told the House, “I want to suggest to this gentleman [Rep. Busby of Mississippi] that when the Constitution was amended, giving negroes citizenship and equal rights, that amendment carried with it the obligation of giving the negroes an equal opportunity for education in this country.” According to the *Congressional Record*, the House then erupted in applause.

Paradoxically, in just a few years Howard had gained more racial autonomy through its outspoken and powerful first black president and had strengthened its ties to the federal government. In reality, these were two logical steps toward racial equality. Howard finally had black leadership so that it was free to become a true beacon of black cultural and intellectual

autonomy and it finally had the financial security to join the ranks of America’s elite universities. It had scored symbolic victories against white supremacy and inferior educational opportunities for blacks and for the rights of black Americans to steer their own institutions while at the same time being included in American civic life. In altering the conception of the federal government’s commitment to black education, these efforts also altered the nature of the conversation about educational inequality at all levels and the federal government’s obligation to equalize educational opportunity. Above all, these episodes showed that education was clearly a constitutional issue. This notion would alter the course of the black struggle for rights and equality for years to come.
CHAPTER FIVE

Serving the Race

The Professionalization of Legal Education at
Howard University, 1920-1931

The week after Mordecai Johnson opened the 1926-1927 school year, his first as Howard University’s president, he addressed the Howard Law School community at its opening exercises. Sharing the stage with law school Dean Fenton W. Booth, Johnson delivered a characteristically inspiring speech to the law students who sat before him. “I do not know of any greater service a man can render his country today than to be a lawyer,” Johnson declared. He advised the group that their task was to “get justice done in the midst of all complexities and intricacies of modern life,” and that they were “to love justice” rather than covet the financial rewards they would hopefully reap in their chosen profession. Finally, he warned the law students to be steadfast in the face of prejudice and discrimination from judges, other lawyers, and juries, who despite their likely prejudice toward black attorneys were “obliged to listen to [their] pleadings.” Johnson wanted to prepare the group for the injustice they would be up against within the legal system as they pursued justice in American society.¹

Mordecai Johnson’s opening address at Howard Law School reflected his belief in the connection among education, civil rights, and the law. He recognized the critical role that black lawyers would play in “getting justice done” and the first step was a quality legal education. Johnson made his commitment to the law school known in a letter he wrote to Dean Booth just weeks after taking office. “This is the beginning of what I hope to be a very intimate acquaintance with the School of Law,” he informed Booth. “At an early date…I shall be very glad to talk with you about your vision for the future development of the School of Law.”² As recounted in the previous chapter, when Mordecai Johnson replaced J. Stanley Durkee in 1926 and became the university’s first black president, it was clear that a new era was beginning at Howard. In their search for a new president, the trustees deliberately sought a well educated and well spoken black man to represent the race and to call attention to “all the interests and difficulties that the colored people are dealing with.”³ Some of the most pressing “interests and difficulties” that blacks locally and nationally were dealing with were the related quests for black educational autonomy, equal educational opportunity, and equality before the law. Howard University Law School had the potential to become the institutional nucleus for all of these efforts.

It made sense for Howard Law School to be the hub of black legal education for a number of reasons. The two most obvious were Howard’s general preeminence in black higher education and its location in the nation’s capital. Even more important than these factors was the fact that Howard already played a vital role in the black legal profession. The number of black lawyers trained at Howard far exceeded any other individual school: as of 1928, between thirty-five and forty percent of all black lawyers in the country who had attended law school had gone to Howard. The school with the second most black law graduates was Harvard University, from

¹ “Howard Law School Opens,” The Hilltop, October 13, 1926.
² Mordecai Johnson to Fenton W. Booth, October 28, 1926, Mordecai Johnson files, HU Archives MSRC.
³ Members of the Board of Trustees Victor B. Deyber, Dr. Thomas Jesse Jones, and Dr. Jesse Moorland, quoted in Logan, Howard University, 240-42.
which 4.7 percent of black lawyers had graduated.\textsuperscript{4} Howard Law School played such an outsized role in the legal profession that Vice Dean Charles Hamilton Houston once remarked, “Howard trains so many Negro lawyers, that the way this school goes, the way the Negro lawyer is going to go.”\textsuperscript{5}

The late 1920s and early 1930s was a critical moment in black legal education because it was when Howard University Law School became the nucleus for a vision of black legal training and black lawyering that was specifically geared toward a civil rights agenda. To a large extent, this transformation at Howard was a result of the vision and hard work of black lawyer, professor, administrator, and scholar Charles Hamilton Houston. Unlike previous generations who viewed black access to the legal profession in terms of individual uplift and improving one’s own social and economic status, Houston thought that black lawyers had the unique ability and obligation to advance the race as a whole through expanding blacks’ claims to legal justice and civil rights.\textsuperscript{6}

Houston’s timing could not have been better. He arrived at Howard two years before Mordecai Johnson and he and Johnson were of one mind about the role of the law school in black advancement. Moreover, the fact that Houston’s reforms at Howard Law School were implemented under black leadership gave them a different significance than if they had come under a white president. Howard Law School had become not just a first-class law school for black students, but a first-class law school created by black leaders. The larger national context also welcomed the ascendency of black lawyers. The number of black students entering and graduating from college was increasing every year and this new generation of educated blacks had come of age during the age of the New Negro and heightened race consciousness. Finally, the NAACP’s lobbying efforts at the Capitol were well underway, as was its litigation work in regions around the country, but in both arenas the organization’s lobbyists and lawyers were achieving uneven success. For the NAACP’s litigation strategy to work, it needed better trained lawyers and a more developed notion of its civil rights agenda.\textsuperscript{7}

This chapter chronicles the transformation of Howard Law School from an average, part-time school to the best black law school in the country and considers the implications of these improvements for the black legal profession more generally. It stops short of a discussion of Howard’s well-known civil rights work in the 1930s and instead focuses on the meanings of the controversies surrounding the changes at Howard Law School and the social and political significance of black lawyers in the years just before the coalescence of a conception of black civil rights that included voting rights, equal access to employment and housing, equal educational opportunity, and an end to segregation and all other forms of racial discrimination.

While it was not inevitable that black lawyers would become central to the civil rights struggle, it was evident from political and legislative battles like those chronicled in the previous chapters that blacks had developed a legal consciousness built around the notions of democracy, equality,


\textsuperscript{5} “Inquiry into the Policies and Conduct of the Howard University School of Law,” 9 May 1931, box 177-5, folder 1, A. Mercer Daniel Collection, Man. Div. MSRC.


\textsuperscript{7} For an overview of the NAACP’s legal work in this period, see Klarman, \textit{From Jim Crow to Civil Rights}; Kluger, \textit{Simple Justice}, 84-172; and Sullivan, \textit{Lift Every Voice}, 101-89.
and citizenship. The changes in legal education at Howard Law School in the late 1920s and the ideas about the social and political roles of black lawyers championed by Charles Houston and others were critical in creating the conditions for the civil rights legal strategy against educational inequality.

The Howard Law School Accreditation Campaign

Over the course of the 1920s and early 1930s, Howard University trustees, administrators, and faculty transformed Howard Law School from a mediocre, part-time, evening school into a first-rate, full-time, day school. In large part, the changes at the law school were intended to meet increasingly lofty accreditation standards of the American Bar Association (ABA) and the Association of American Law Schools (AALS), the dominant legal professional and educational organizations at the time. To earn accreditation, law schools had to maintain strict admissions standards, employ a certain number of full-time professors, allocate a minimum amount of money to their libraries in their annual budgets, and hold a minimum number and specific types of books and periodicals in their libraries. It took nearly a decade for Howard’s Board of Trustees, President Mordecai Johnson, and law professor and eventual Vice Dean Charles Hamilton Houston to revamp the law school to meet AALS and ABA standards, and their efforts were not always well received by the Howard community. While Johnson and Houston believed that Howard Law School would best serve the race by becoming more elite and training the best and brightest black lawyers, others felt that it should instead hold its doors open for as many aspiring black professionals as possible. The university president and the Amherst College and Harvard Law School-trained vice dean ultimately held sway over their opposition, but the road to accreditation was not easy.

The Law Department at Howard University, which changed its name to the School of Law in 1907, was one of the university’s oldest divisions, but it changed little until the 1920s. Students did not need to have a college education to be admitted and they attended classes part-time in the evening, which allowed professors to practice law during the day and enabled students to hold full-time jobs to finance their education. These practices were common in American legal education in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In fact, the majority of practicing lawyers did not even attend law school. Rather, it was more common to enter the profession through apprenticeships.

Legal training was transformed in the final decades of the nineteenth century, however, by the ascendancy of the law school and the decline of legal apprenticeships. The rise of the law school is credited to Harvard Law School’s Christopher Columbus Langdell, who in his time as dean from 1870 to 1895 transformed Harvard and, in turn, all legal education throughout the country. Among Langdell’s innovations were increasing entrance standards to require that applicants either have a college degree or pass an entrance exam; extending the time it took to earn a law degree from two to three years; hiring full-time law professors who would give up their practices to teach; administering final exams that the students had to pass to be promoted; and, perhaps most importantly from an academic standpoint, introducing the case method of

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8 Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey define legal consciousness as a cultural practice whereby people participate in the process of constructing legality and constructing the social relations that make up their and society’s conceptions of the law and legality. Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey, *The Common Place of Law: Stories from Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 45.

teaching law. None of these new practices was well received by the students and faculty, but Charles Eliot, Harvard’s president at the time, stood by Langdell because he believed in his goal of bringing legal education into the university and making it more academic.

In order to keep up with these new standards in legal education, Howard University began a similar transformation during J. Stanley Durkee’s administration. In 1921, one year after a vote in favor of taking steps to earn AALS membership—a process that ended up consuming the next decade—the board voted to increase admissions standards, which, they said, was an effort to bring Howard “ abreast of the times.” Beginning in 1924, Howard Law School would require that all applicants, with some exceptions, attend at least two years of college. Also in 1921, Howard Law School Dean Fenton Booth initiated an effort to move the law school from a small building downtown to the university campus in order to bring the law students “into the University atmosphere of scholarship and attainment.” This geographical move—from the environs of downtown law offices to Howard’s campus—was intended to symbolize the fuller inclusion of the law school into academe. At another meeting in 1923, the Board of Trustees voted to hire more full-time professors, upgrade the law library and the law school building, lengthen the Master of Laws program by one year, and increase the salaries of all professors, budget permitting. By the start of the 1922-1923 school year, the Board of Trustees was confident that the law school was well on its way to earning AALS accreditation and President Durkee boasted, “The reorganization has been so perfected that by the time the school opens its doors again on October 1, 1923, it will have met every requisite of a standard law school under the rules of the American Association of Law Schools and the demands of the American Bar Association.” While Durkee initiated the first steps toward accreditation, the process stalled until Mordecai Johnson’s administration put the efforts into high gear.

Alongside the changes in legal education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were changes in lawyers’ professional associations. While local and state bar associations had existed across the United States since the colonial period, a national association—the American Bar Association (ABA)—was not founded until 1878. The ABA lacked much authority in its early years because the state and local bar associations were reluctant to relinquish their own power over determining their membership and setting professional standards. Membership grew very slowly at first—never reaching more than 1.3 percent of lawyers nationwide in its first two decades—but by 1920, 9.2 percent of lawyers were members. Blacks were not admitted to the ABA until the 1940s, but the association did allow black law schools to be considered for accreditation. In response to their exclusion from the ABA and the general disregard of blacks in the legal profession, a group of black lawyers founded the National Bar Association (NBA) in 1924. The NBA was founded in Iowa, but it

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12 Annual Report of the President to the Board of Trustees, Howard University, 1921-1922, HU Archives, MSRC.
13 Logan, Howard University, 226; Annual Report of the President to the Board of Trustees, Howard University, 1923.
quickly became national in scope, as hundreds of blacks signed on to the association whose mission was to “strengthen and elevate the Negro lawyer in his profession...to improve his standing at the bar of the country...[to promote] their general uplift and advancement, [and] encouragement of Negro youth of America who will follow their choice of this profession.” Although it had no formal function in accrediting law schools or certifying lawyers, the NBA played an important part in uniting black lawyers and promoting their role in the profession.16

From its inception, the ABA had a Committee on Legal Education (soon to become the Section on Legal Education), which was charged with the responsibility of standardizing legal education. Although Harvard had exerted a powerful influence among the elite schools, by the turn of the twentieth century there were still broad variations among law schools, bar exams, and the relationships between law school and joining the bar. In 1900, the legal education branch of the ABA split from the parent organization to form the Association of American Law Schools (AALS). At its first regular meeting in 1901, the AALS established membership requirements; thirty-two out of 108 law schools subsequently became members.17

Both the ABA and the AALS were characterized by their elitism and exclusivity and neither organization escaped criticism for these qualities. Alfred Zantzinger Reed, who wrote an extensive report on the legal profession for the Carnegie Foundation in 1928, criticized the AALS’s method of selectivity. He condemned the association’s elusive notions of what constituted a “good” or “reputable” law school and said some of the AALS’s membership decisions were based more on a school’s general reputation than how closely it adhered to what many agreed were arbitrary standards.18

One of the AALS’s most controversial decisions was its 1912 resolution to exclude part-time law schools from membership.19 In the past, many students at part-time law schools had worked as clerks at law offices during the day, so their day jobs to some extent supplemented their legal education and vice versa. With the introduction of stenographers, however, law offices ceased hiring clerks, which meant that part-time law students often held completely unrelated jobs during the day. In turn, the evening schools deteriorated and they came to be recognized as nothing more than a cheap, inferior way of earning a law degree. Part-time schools were outraged. Dean Clarence Ashley of New York University Law School, who was former dean of the part-time Metropolis Law School, put together an extensive pamphlet protesting the measure filled with letters from law professors and administrators from across the country and statistics showing that evening students at NYU performed on par with if not better than day students on their law school exams and on state bar exams. Ashley argued that it was the law profession’s “duty to the community” to continue to support evening schools. “True it is not aristocratic to earn one’s own living and pay for one’s own education,” Ashley expounded, “but those who are able to do this possess an element of strength and of character which makes them strong and liberally educated lawyers.”20 Legal historian James Willard Hurst agreed when he pointed out that part-time schools democratized the legal profession and guarded against lawyering

18 Ibid., 26-7.
becoming “the exclusive privilege of the well-to-do.”  

Despite the legal community’s misgivings about the AALS’s and the ABA’s roles in legal education, law schools’ membership in both organizations grew. By 1936, ninety-one of the 190 law schools in the United States were members of the AALS, which meant that fifty-five percent of the nation’s law students were enrolled in accredited schools. The ABA, which had its own accreditation standards and process that were similar to those of the AALS, had ninety-four member schools. By the 1930s, accreditation by both organizations had become an important marker of status and quality for American law schools. Thus, Howard Law School’s efforts to earn AALS and ABA accreditation were part of a national trend in the professionalization of legal education, which, as Mordecai Johnson and Charles Houston realized, were critical to making Howard a legitimate part of the legal establishment.

Law professor Charles Hamilton Houston, who would become vice dean after Fenton Booth’s departure for a judgeship, was well suited to the task of shepherding the law school through its transformation. Born in 1895, Houston was raised in Washington, D.C., graduated from M Street High School, and was one of the few blacks in his class at Amherst College and again at Harvard Law School. After college, Houston briefly taught English at Howard University before serving in the U.S. Army in World War I. His anger over the mistreatment of black soldiers, combined with his growing discontent with American race relations in general, inspired his decision to go to law school and to participate in the black struggle for justice and equality. Before heading off to Harvard, he spent several months teaching at Dunbar High School, his alma mater. Houston excelled at Harvard—he was the first black student to serve on the prestigious Harvard Law Review—and, after studying law in Spain, he returned to Washington to join his father’s legal practice. His father William LePre Houston was an 1892 graduate of Howard Law School, a practicing lawyer, and a part-time professor at his law school alma mater. Charles Houston’s goal, however, was to make a career as a law professor, not as a practicing attorney, so when a full-time position opened at Howard in 1924, he asked his Harvard professors Roscoe Pound and Felix Frankfurter to recommend him and he began that fall.

From the beginning, Charles Houston was dedicated to the university. Throughout his tenure, he was known to be very serious about teaching and he devoted a large portion of his time to planning lectures and exams and working with students. Houston was proud of his teaching job at Howard and maintained ties with some of his professors at Harvard, including Richard Ames, to whom Houston wrote soon after he got there to report, “Work at the Law School moves along encouragingly,” and to tell him optimistically about the raised entrance requirements. Houston also kept in close touch with Roscoe Pound and invited him to visit Howard. Although Pound’s busy schedule kept him from making it there, Houston continued to update him on the school’s progress.

Houston’s devotion to Howard and his connections to Harvard helped underwrite a fundraising drive he initiated in 1926 to purchase more books for the law library. While the

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21 Hurst, The Growth of American Law, 273-5; see also Reed, Present-Day Law Schools, 386-87.
23 McNeil, Groundwork, 15-64.
24 Ibid., 64-7.
25 Houston to Ames, 28 October 1924, Charles Hamilton Houston Correspondence, box 2, folder 1, William LePre Houston Family Collection, LOC.
26 Pound to Houston, 26 December 1925, box 2, folder 2, WLH Family Collection, LOC.
Board of Trustees and university administration thought they had amassed enough books in 1923 to meet the accreditation requirement, the AALS subsequently increased the minimum to 7,500, including certain specific volumes and periodicals, and stipulated that libraries had to have an additional $7,500 for library upkeep available for five years to maintain membership.\textsuperscript{27} This was before Congress changed Howard’s charter to authorize the federal appropriation, so funds were still scarce and uncertain. After Houston was introduced to philanthropist Julius Rosenwald through Felix Frankfurter and U.S. Circuit Court Judge Julian Mack, Rosenwald offered to donate $2,500 to Howard’s law library if the law school could raise $500 from the black community.\textsuperscript{28} While Houston probably would rather not have had to solicit help from a powerful white philanthropist, Rosenwald’s offer was the law school’s best hope for shoring up its library’s collection.

For Rosenwald, who had worked closely with Booker T. Washington and was a generous supporter of black education in the South, it was critical that Howard raise $500 from within the race as a symbolic gesture of self-help and economic independence. Mack, who was familiar with Rosenwald’s philosophies and philanthropic preferences, wrote to Houston, “My own hope is that this amount can be raised primarily by alumni and by Negro friends of the school. I feel sure that this would please Mr. Rosenwald very much more than to get the money from any one or a few white friends.”\textsuperscript{29} Houston took this to heart and in a letter to Rosenwald, he reassured the philanthropist that the contributions would all come from the “Negro lawyers and businessmen of Washington,” and insisted, “By limiting our campaign to Washington I feel that we can stamp the contribution made possible by you, with a definite and helpful meaning.”\textsuperscript{30}

Houston, however, cared less about how responsible the black community looked and more about how professionally the law school would perform, but he also understood the power of uplift and self-help rhetoric, especially among older Howard alumni. He was excited about soliciting donations from members of the black community because he wanted them to be more invested in the school—both financially and philosophically—and he saw their contributions as “concrete evidence that the Negro people are awakening to their responsibility for their higher and professional education.”\textsuperscript{31} Houston made the case for Howard Law School’s important role in protecting blacks’ rights in a pamphlet he put together to court donors. “A competent and loyal Negro bar is indispensable to national safety and progress,” he insisted, and “as the one standardized Negro law school [Howard] carries the chief responsibility of the Negro’s legal education.” In the same publication, Houston also employed uplift rhetoric and threatened that the fundraising drive was “a challenge to our pride and sense of responsibility” and that it was “up to us to prove to [Rosenwald] and the public at large that we sponsor high-grade legal education for Negroes and that within the limit of our means we are ready and willing to accept the responsibility for it and contribute to its cost.”\textsuperscript{32} Houston’s tactics worked and the drive was immensely successful: they surpassed the quota in less than one week.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{27} Association of American Law Schools, Twenty-Third Annual Meeting, 29-31 December 1925, box 177-4, folder 13, A. Mercer Daniel Collection, Man. Div. MSRC.
\textsuperscript{28} Charles Houston to Fenton Booth, 26 April 1926, ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} Mack to Houston, 22 January 1926, ibid.
\textsuperscript{30} Houston to Rosenwald, 24 January 1926, ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Houston to Mack, 8 January 1926, ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Charles Hamilton Houston, “A Personal Message to Friends,” 12 April 1926, box 15, folder 8, WLH Family Collection, LOC.
\textsuperscript{33} Charles Houston to Fenton Booth, 26 April 1926, ibid.
With an adequate library, the next step in satisfying the accreditation requirements was opening a full-time day law school, which went smoothly bureaucratically, but received a vitriolic response from the Howard community and the black press. After an appraisal of the law school by AALS representative H.C. Horack in early 1928, President Mordecai Johnson recommended to the Board of Trustees that they approve a three-year full-time day program at Howard to accompany its four-year part-time evening school and the board immediately voted to inaugurate the new program the following fall. Johnson elevated Charles Houston to vice dean and charged him with the responsibility of building the day program. The next year, after only one new student registered for the evening school, the board voted to discontinue it altogether in favor of the day school.

As had happened in the greater legal community when the AALS first announced its distaste for part-time law schools, many members of the Howard Law School alumni community were outraged by what they interpreted as an elitist act designed to exclude working-class blacks from their alma mater. They voiced their opposition in a barrage of editorials in the black press. “There are among the race’s most capable barristers those who graduated from an evening class,” a Washington Tribune article railed. “These men…could not have hoped to gain their knowledge and prestige without the study of law, which study was made possible by their being able to work during the day and earn money for their tuition.” The article’s mention of the “prestige” bestowed on black lawyers was an argument for the role that Howard Law School played in helping blacks attain middle-class status, which based on the rest of the article seemed to be of more concern to the author than what black lawyers actually accomplished with their credentials. An editorial in the same issue of the Tribune also alleged that getting rid of the evening classes “cut off the opportunity for less fortunate young men.” Several months later the matter was still a hot topic in the Tribune, with another editorial that meted out a deeper attack on the university, saying that Howard existed “for the purpose of offering an opportunity for Negroes to secure an education at a nominal cost [and that] Howard University cannot be ‘Harvardized’ and expect to render the service for which it was organized and is now maintained…. To this editorialist, “Harvardizing” Howard meant ending the law school’s ability to serve working-class members of the race and cutting off an avenue to individual social advancement, which he saw as a critical purpose of Howard Law School.

In a 1931 hearing about the changes at the law school, alumni members of a special committee of the Law School Association again made their objections heard. Harry Jones, a member of the committee, argued that abolishing the evening school effectively “eliminat[ed] the man who is working and wants to go on studying law at the same time” and warned that this type of student would be “left entirely out in the cold.” He pointed to the peculiar “economic condition” of blacks in the nation’s capital, many of whom could not afford to take three years off from work to earn a law degree. Charles Houston, who was the primary witness at this hearing, acknowledged the importance of the evening school to “the disadvantaged man whose mind is just as good as anybody else’s mind, but who is at a financial obligation to take it at a

34 Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Trustees, 7 February 1928; 5 February 1929, HU Archives, MSRC.
36 Annual Report of the President to the Board of Trustees, Howard University, 1930, HU Archives MSRC.
37 “Alumni protests abolition of the night classes,” Washington Tribune, 6 June 1930, found in box 177-5, folder 8, A. Mercer Daniel Collection, Man. Div. MSRC.
38 “Night Law Classes,” ibid.
slower pace.” However, Houston drew the committee’s attention to the fact that he and his opposition held different assessments of Howard Law School’s contribution to the race. “It seems to me that you have two ends in view, and sometimes they are antagonistic,” he told the committee. “On the one hand, you have the desire to serve your public by giving the public competent lawyers, and on the other hand you have the interest of the student to practise the profession of law.” Houston preferred the former objective, while this committee and at least a segment of the alumni community prioritized the latter. Both sides, however, believed that their oppositional preferences were the better strategy to achieve advancement of the race as a whole.

These editorials and the reactions of the alumni committee assigned a particular role to Howard Law School in the black community and a particular role for black lawyers in the race, both based on the tenets of racial uplift ideology. As more blacks exhibited middle-class values, they hoped that the status of the race overall would be elevated. They held that because a law degree was a sign of respectability, it was Howard Law School’s institutional responsibility to provide as many willing and able members of the race with the opportunity to earn one. Charles Houston, along with Mordecai Johnson, rejected this view, however. Reflecting on this period in Howard’s history several decades later, Johnson recalled a conversation he had had with Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis about the future direction of the law school. According to Johnson, Brandeis frankly told him,

> Dr. Johnson, you belong to a minority people who has not yet secured their fundamental civil and constitutional rights. You cannot afford to conduct a law school for the purpose of training a number of men to pass the bar…. If I were you I would put aside the question of quantity altogether. I would select a few of the ablest men you can find and train them how to proceed in the courts of law to secure civil and constitutional rights for your people.

Johnson and Houston were in complete agreement with Justice Brandeis.

The shift from an evening school to a day school resulted in the consequences that both groups had anticipated. Johnson and Houston were able to attract more elite professors and better-prepared students, and enrollment shrank. Howard Law School had ninety students in 1926, sixty-eight in 1930, and only forty-four in 1934. While the Great Depression certainly accounted for some of the decrease, the cancellation of the evening program was also to blame. On the other hand, the school was able to court the most promising black law school graduates to join the faculty. Johnson sent telegrams to the deans of the nation’s top law schools asking for lists of their top black graduates, which brought to Howard the generation’s best black legal scholars, including William Hastie, James Nabrit, and Leon Ransom, among others.

Meanwhile, all six of Howard’s white law professors, including Dean Fenton Booth, resigned. While Booth left because he received an appointment as Chief Justice of the U.S. Court of Claims, the reasons for the other professors’ resignations were more mysterious. Johnson claimed that they had no choice but to quit teaching because their full-time legal practices did not

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40 “Inquiry into the Policies and Conduct of the Howard University School of Law,” 9 May 1931, box 177-5, folder 1, A. Mercer Daniel Collection, Man. Div. MSRC.


42 Charles Hamilton Houston, “A Personal Message to Friends,” 12 April 1926, box 15, folder 8, WLH Family Collection, LOC; Annual Report of the President to the Board of Trustees, Howard University, 1930; Minutes of the meeting of the Board of Trustees, October 23, 1934, HU Archives MSRC.

afford them the time to teach at Howard during the day after Howard changed from an evening school to a day school. The professors said that this was not the case, but they refused to divulge their reasons to the press, and the university administration kept the incident under wraps as well.44 Everyone’s best guess was that their dissatisfaction with Mordecai Johnson, who had a reputation for governing with an iron fist, had compelled them to leave.45

Another barrage of editorials followed, which this time focused more on race than class. Under the headline, “REVOLT AT H.U. LAW SCHOOL,” the African-American newspaper Washington World reported, “Their [the white professors] leaving the faculty is not prompted by any racial feeling, but, according to unofficial information given out this week, is due to their dissatisfaction with the present administration of the law school.”46 While this article sought to dispel the idea that racial issues had led the white professors to resign, others addressed the role of race at Howard head-on. Another article in the World reported that the black community was discouraged from criticizing Mordecai Johnson “because of the fact that he is the first Negro president the university has ever had.” The article extolled the virtue of having a black president—“It is a position that should never be filled by a person of any other race”—but certainly not at the expense of interracial harmony. “The Law School, of all the departments at Howard University,” the article went on, “has profited most from the unselfish service of white friends [who have] not only brought scholarship to the class rooms, but they have also brought rich and valuable experience…. It strikes the public strange that only the white members of the faculty have found cause to complain.”47 The dust over this controversy had still not settled the following year when it was reported that alumni were so upset with Johnson that they were calling for a “white educator” to replace him.48

While those who called for Johnson to be replaced with a white man were in the minority, the controversy over the exodus of the law school’s white professors illustrated some of the black community’s misgivings about the effects of black autonomy. Some were wary of upsetting what little remained of the delicate web of interracial understandings that had structured the relationships between blacks and whites in Washington in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This concern, however, was out of sync with the prevailing attitude that not only had much of this illusory web ceased to exist, but that what was left was not worth preserving. Much more important was securing constitutional rights for African Americans, which in Johnson’s and Houston’s view would be best accomplished by impeccably-trained black lawyers.

Hiring new professors and reshuffling the faculty in the wake of the white professors’ exodus aroused yet more controversy. When Charles Houston became vice dean, he demoted long-time professor, law librarian, and secretary James Waters and accused him of incompetently running the law library. Waters had received both his undergraduate and law degrees at Howard, had taught and run the law library for a number of years, and had been well-liked by his students throughout his career. Houston cared less about how much Waters’s students liked him and was more concerned that the library lacked proper ventilation; that Waters permitted students to talk, to the distress of other students who preferred silence; and that he neglected to develop a card

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46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
Waters himself and the same disgruntled group of alumni were furious over what they saw as a betrayal of Waters’s loyalty and dedication, especially in light of Houston’s concurrent efforts to hire young, inexperienced William Hastie. Hastie had just graduated from Harvard Law School with outstanding reviews from his professors. Despite Hastie’s exemplary academic qualifications, this set of alumni was outraged that Houston preferred someone with no practical experience who had received his education at an elite white school—which also happened to be Houston’s alma mater—over Waters, a Howard alumnus with years of experience.

In the 1931 hearing about the recent changes at the law school, James Waters contested Houston’s actions. Despite Houston’s legitimate grievances about Waters’s performance, Waters said that Houston had told him that Howard needed a more distinguished faculty made up of “‘honor men’ from Yale, Harvard, Columbia and the other great Universities of the country…[and] he frankly informed me that I was not big enough.” According to Waters, Houston also had said that Howard’s faculty had to be capable of “attracting the attention of the great philanthropic boards of the country which would thereby be influenced to give money to the School.”

An article that covered this episode in the *Washington World* altered this last statement and substituted “wealthy white donors” for “great philanthropic boards,” suggesting Houston’s subservience to powerful whites. Waters and his supporters saw Houston’s action as an example of elitism, not justifiable professionalism.

Alumni also protested Houston’s appointment of William Hastie as lecturer in 1930. Houston recruited Hastie from Harvard Law School, where acting dean Joseph Beale called him “very distinctly the best man of all,” and he went on to become one of his generation’s most accomplished black lawyers. Alumnus C.W. Dickerson, in a letter of support for Waters, decried Houston’s lack of regard for senior professors’ loyalty to Howard and wrote, “these men are being sacrificed for men of practically no experience at the bar, and whose qualifications are only exhibited by the degrees they hold.” James Waters complained that Hastie was “only nine months out of law school and has never tried the bar examination.” The *Washington World* opposed Hastie’s appointment because of his lack of experience as a practitioner. An editorial also alleged that Houston’s decision to recruit Hastie “proves the charge that degrees from white schools rather than practical experience is to be the future basis of selection of members of the faculty.” The issue of practical experience versus formal academic training figured prominently in the professionalization of legal education more generally. When Harvard Law School dean Charles Langdell broke with nineteenth-century tradition and appointed James Barr Ames, a very recent graduate of Harvard Law School with almost no practical experience, as assistant professor in 1873, the law school community there had opposed it as well. However, the attack on Hastie’s “white” legal training suggested that his detractors interpreted Hastie’s—and perhaps

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49 “Howard University School of Law re: James Waters Jr.—charges and response, 1931,” box 177-4, folder 17, A. Mercer Daniel Collection, Man. Div. MSRC.
50 “Howard University School of Law re: James Waters Jr.—charges and response, 1931,” ibid.
51 “Inside strife may disrupt school of law,” *Washington World*, 3 April 1931, found in box 177-5, folder 8, A. Mercer Daniel Collection, Man. Div. MSRC.
52 Minutes of the meeting of the Board of Trustees, September 25, 1930, HU Archives MSRC.
53 C.W. Dickerson to undisclosed recipient, March 30, 1931, ibid.
54 “Howard University School of Law re: James Waters Jr.—charges and response, 1931,” box 177-4, folder 17, A. Mercer Daniel Collection, Man. Div. MSRC.

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Houston’s—Harvard degrees as indicators of an aversion to lawyers who had received their training at a black law school and even a more general belief in the inferiority of black higher education.

All of this criticism of Charles Houston and Mordecai Johnson did not go unanswered. One Howard Law student sent in his own angry letter to the editor of the Washington Tribune. “The time has come when we should cease riding on the prestige of our white brothers for, when they cease to lend us their prestige, we fall because of our lack of power and confidence. We don’t need prestige,” J. Byron Hopkins, Jr. wrote. “What we do need, however, is a profound knowledge of the law and the resignation of six white professors will by no means prohibit us from securing it. If it does then we are not worthy of the opportunity of studying law.”57 An editorialist in the Atlanta-based African-American newspaper the Independent, criticized the racialized way people were using the term “Harvardize”: “[The Board of Trustees] are going to charge that President Johnson is seeking to put the standard of Howard out of the reach of the Negroes by Harvardizing the school. Of course, the inference is that the Negro is not ready for a Harvard University of his own, and Howard must be kept within reach of the Negro’s mental ability to conceive and absorb a white man’s civilization.”58 What made this editorial so biting was that its author was attacking not just white members of the Board of Trustees for their implicit belief in black mental inferiority, but many black alumni who were also using the term this way. In fact, black members of the Howard community commonly used the word “Harvardize” to connote the class discrimination inherent in Waters’s demotion, Hastie’s appointment, and the abandonment of the evening program and the potentially objectionable significance of emulating a white institution, even though it happened to be the preeminent law school in the nation.

Charles Houston also had an opportunity to respond to some of the criticism of his actions during the hearings in 1931 conducted by a group of law school alumni to assess the new institutional policies enacted to earn AALS and ABA accreditation. Houston attempted to dodge as much of the personal and institutional politics surrounding the James Waters controversy as he could by focusing on larger issues like the broader importance of having well-trained black lawyers and the role that bringing the law school up to modern professional standards could have in improving the status of the race more generally. While the committee members were concerned with the same issues, they disagreed with Houston’s strategies. When John R. Hawkins, one of the members of the committee, asked Houston why Howard should run a day school that would “close the doors to a great many men,” Houston replied, “Because I think a day school can do better work.” To Hawkins’s allegation that changing Howard from an evening school to a day school was “nothing more than an attempt to get favorable consideration of the American Bar Association and the Association of American Law Schools…[and] an effort to get on the right side of these people, more than it is any effort to help the group of people that we are trying to serve,” Houston responded that accreditation would help Howard woo better teachers.59 He also underscored the importance of accreditation for students who might want to transfer from Howard to another law school and for making Howard more competitive with other law schools in attracting top students. It was not uncommon for black students to attend Howard Law

57 Letter to the editor from J. Byron Hopkins, Jr., The Washington Tribune, September 5, 1930, box 177-5, folder 8, A. Mercer Daniel Collection, Man. Div. MSRC.
School in order to have more extracurricular opportunities than they would at a predominantly white law school and to gain a better understanding of legal problems particular to black Americans. However, because of state-specific bar examinations, a handful of Howard students each year transferred to a school in the state in which they wanted to practice for their final year in order to prepare for the bar. Accreditation would ensure that their Howard credits transferred.  

Reflected in John R. Hawkins’s skepticism about the value of accreditation and in the racialized usage of “Harvardize,” was an uneasiness about the relationship among black autonomy in legal education, racialized professionalism, and black social and political advancement. Because whites had set the standards of the legal profession (and, indeed, excluded blacks from their professional organizations), instituting policies that mirrored the development of the rest of the profession required conforming to what amounted to a white professionalism. Houston, however, was eager to follow the national trend toward the increasing standardization of the profession and underscored that it was better for the race as a whole for black lawyers to adhere to common standards and become part of the institutional world of the profession collectively, and not simply reap the rewards of improved economic standing individually. During the hearing, Houston tried to explain the meaning—however ambiguous—of being recognized by the ABA and the AALS and tried to disassociate the accreditation process with any sort of racial significance. The ABA, Houston said, was “simply a rating agency [and] there are not social features connected with it.” The AALS, however, was more like a “fraternal convention,” and not every school that met its requirements was guaranteed admission. “They have an annual convention [where] the law teachers come and meet one another…. They have a banquet—in other words, [the AALS has] a distinctly private, social club feature…which does not apply to the [ABA].”  

In Houston’s view, membership in each of these groups was neither anathema to black autonomy or racial pride nor was it shamefully elitist. Rather, it was a critical step in the professionalization of black lawyers, which, in turn, would lead to the recognition and realization of blacks’ constitutional rights.

Howard Law School’s efforts to meet the ABA’s and the AALS’s requirements finally paid off ten years after the Board of Trustees had initially raised the entrance requirements in 1920. In 1930, it became the first black law school to receive the official seal of approval from the ABA and the following year it became the first to earn accreditation from the AALS. Membership in these organizations formally placed a degree from Howard Law School on par with degrees from the nation’s foremost law schools. The changes that Houston and the rest of the administration had implemented brought Howard in line with contemporary legal education, which included having a cadre of full-time faculty who were able to dedicate their careers to forming a body of legal theory and strategy specifically geared toward black Americans. Indeed, shortly after the law school received news of its accreditation, Charles Houston overhauled the

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60 “Inquiry into the Policies and Conduct of the Howard University School of Law,” May 9, 1931, box 177-5, folder 1, A. Mercer Daniel Collection, Man. Div. MSRC.
61 “Inquiry into the Policies and Conduct of the Howard University School of Law,” May 9, 1931, ibid.
The school’s transformation was also important symbolically. It was a strong example of what autonomous black leadership could accomplish. Because black administrators Mordecai Johnson and Charles Houston had spearheaded Howard Law School’s entrée into the mainstream legal profession, their actions were interpreted as powerful statements about black ability, educational opportunity, and professional equality. In addition, the law school’s transformation represented a pivotal moment in the transition from viewing black lawyers in terms of individual social and economic uplift (and how the performance of respectability would affect perceptions of the race as a whole) to instead focusing on black lawyers’ function in politics and society and their ability to effect change and actually do something constructive to advance black rights.

The Need for Negro Lawyers

Driving Charles Houston’s zealosity in transforming Howard Law School was his belief that lawyers had an unusual potential for effecting social and political change. He frequently commented that his goal was to train a generation of “social engineers,” not merely knowledgeable lawyers. Black Americans’ recognition of the importance of the law was increasing, as was shown in the black public schools’ and Howard University’s legislative battles and black citizens’ widespread invocation of the law in their testimony. Houston thought that the effectiveness of lobbying efforts for legislation, which even if it passed was easily ignored or unenforced, was nearing its end, however, and that the only way for black Americans’ civil rights to be recognized was through the courts. Houston held this idea when he came to Howard; nurtured and spread it there through his teaching, research, and administration; and built the rest of his career on it when he left Howard for the NAACP in 1935. While lay citizens had done an admirable job advocating for their rights, he insisted that black lawyers would be in a more powerful position to change American society.

The small number of black lawyers in the Jim Crow era and their lack of a commanding professional presence, however, indicated that Howard Law School had a long way to go. In 1910, only 795 (.7 percent) of the nation’s 114,000 lawyers were black. By 1930, blacks still made up only .8 percent of the profession and, while they could join a handful local and state bar associations, they were still excluded from the ABA. In some southern states, in particular, the dearth of black lawyers was alarming. There were thirty-three in Maryland, twenty-six in Tennessee, twenty in Texas, fourteen in Georgia, and only four in Alabama. There were more lawyers in the North and Midwest, especially in states with cities that had been prime sites for black migration from the South in the previous decade: Ohio had ninety-four, Michigan had sixty-three (fifty-one of whom practiced in Detroit), New York had 120 (106 in New York City), and Illinois had the most with 187 (175 in Chicago). Washington, D.C., with ninety-eight practicing black lawyers, was the city with the third greatest number of black lawyers in the

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country—behind only New York City and Chicago—but it had the most per capita.65 Since black lawyers were so marginalized, Howard Law School faced serious challenges in catapulting black lawyers into the mainstream of the legal profession.

Charles Houston’s knowledge of the immense shortage of black lawyers and his dedication to shoring up blacks’ role in the profession inspired him to conduct a deeper study of black lawyers in 1928. Supported by a grant from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Foundation, he took a leave of absence from the law school for a semester to research, in his words, the “status and activities” of black lawyers, as well as “the relation of the individual Negroes to the administration of justice in the United States.”66 Houston sent surveys to northern lawyers and law students and toured the South and parts of the Midwest, interviewing and administering surveys to black lawyers and, in many cases, white lawyers and judges. He wanted to ascertain what it was like to work as a black lawyer in different parts of the country and to what extent black lawyers were involved in their communities and in the social and political life of the cities and states in which they practiced.67

Houston’s assessment of the state of the black legal profession, based on his study, was dismal, but he was optimistic about the future. He based his conclusions both on the extensive survey he distributed to black lawyers nationwide and on his own observations from his travels. When Houston finished a draft of his “Findings on the Negro Lawyer” in 1928, he gave a copy to Carter Woodson, which he used for his book The Negro Professional Man and the Community, with Special Emphasis on the Physician and the Lawyer, published six years later. In Houston’s study, which remained unpublished apart from Woodson’s heavy reliance on it for his book, Houston delved into the issues that shaped the black legal profession and analyzed the distinctions between black lawyers’ practices in the North and the South.

Black lawyers in the South faced more discrimination, were not as well trained, and were far fewer in number than their northern counterparts, even though, as Houston felt, that was where they were “most needed.” The law was an uninviting profession for blacks in the South because of their exclusion from political life in southern states and the greater degree of individual and institutional discrimination in southern justice systems. The few black lawyers there were often encountered discrimination from judges and juries in the courtroom and, to counter this, sometimes chose to team with white lawyers, especially when facing judges known for racial prejudice. Houston found that there were few black lawyers in southern cities and even fewer in smaller towns and that too many of them—especially those of older generations—“depend[ed] more upon [their] contacts with the judge and ‘big white lawyers’ than upon [their] own industry and brains.” It was common practice for black lawyers in the South, who served mainly black clients, either to give their cases to white lawyers or to bring white lawyers with them to court “when the matters involved [threatened to] stir up racial prejudices in any marked degree.” Houston also found that fewer southern lawyers than northern lawyers had gone to law school and those who had tended to have graduated from inferior institutions. Worse yet, according to attitudes expressed in answers to questions from Houston’s survey, “the [southern] lawyer exerts less influence on the community than any other class of professional men.”

66 Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees of Howard University, November 18, 1927.
Community members felt that the older generation of lawyers especially did little to fight lynching, disfranchisement, educational inequality, and other violations of blacks’ rights in the Jim Crow South.\(^{68}\) The state of the black legal profession in the North was better, but northern lawyers faced different challenges from those in the South. First, northern cities had far more practicing black lawyers.\(^{69}\) Unlike in the South, some black lawyers in the North were able to attract white clients and most did not have to recruit white lawyers to help them try their cases. While Houston lauded this professional autonomy, he lamented what had been a tendency among black lawyers in the previous generation, especially, to hire white clerks, seek white clientele, and avoid representing blacks. According to Houston’s survey, the older generation felt that “the two classes of practice [white and black] will not mix,” and they preferred white clients because their business was “more lucrative.” In addition, the most successful northern black businessmen often preferred white lawyers because black lawyers had a collective reputation for “shiftlessness,” “dishonesty,” and “incompetence;” if they did hire a black lawyer, they often paid him less than they would pay a white lawyer for the same work. However, Houston noticed a tremendous improvement in northern black lawyers’ practices since World War I. They were appearing in court more, serving more black clients, varying their practices and the kinds of cases they took on, and actively cultivating black business by locating their offices near the burgeoning black neighborhoods in northern cities. What was more, Houston noted, in this younger generation, “Fearless, outspoken and competent men are taking up the defense of the race and its interests.”\(^{70}\)

Houston felt that the disparate problems northern and southern black lawyers faced involved many of the same larger issues and required similar solutions. In both the North and the South, the older generation of black lawyers was not political enough and did not practice law in a way that would help advance the race. Houston labeled them “self-centered” and carped, “They do not respond to very much that does not touch their pockets.”\(^71\) In both regions, too, black lawyers suffered from varying degrees of prejudice and discrimination from some white members of the legal profession and a lack of respect from elite blacks in other professions. Above all else, the profession was not protecting blacks’ rights and thus was not living up to its unique professional responsibility to the race.

Since it served such a large percentage of the nation’s black lawyers, Houston thought that Howard Law School had the ability to address some of these problems among blacks in the legal profession, especially those that came from within the black community. He thought that Howard—and other schools serving black students—should do a better job of training black lawyers to handle business matters so that they would be more capable of handling a range of cases from black clients. Law professors teaching black students bore the responsibility of inculcating their students with the right professional values: seeking justice should take precedence over filling bank accounts. For example, Houston attacked lawyers who “tend[ed] to

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\(^{68}\) Charles Houston, “Findings on the Negro Lawyer,” (1928), found in Papers of Carter G. Woodson and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History: 1915-1950, reel 5, LOC; see also Woodson, The Negro Professional Man and the Community for statistics on the numbers of black lawyers in certain northern and southern cities. At the time of Houston’s survey there were, for example, seven black lawyers in Atlanta, fourteen in the state of Georgia; two in Birmingham, four in Alabama; three in Houston, twenty in Texas; five in Nashville, twenty-six in Tennessee; and three in New Orleans, eight in Louisiana overall.

\(^{69}\) Woodson, The Negro Professional Man and the Community, 335-40. Even though Washington, D.C. is in the South, the nature of the legal profession there was much closer to northern cities than to southern cities.

\(^{70}\) Houston, “Findings on the Negro Lawyer.”

\(^{71}\) Ibid.
regard the profession as a trade for exploitation, and [who were unmoved to respond] to civic or racial matters which [did] not touch directly upon their own personal interests.”

Law schools should also encourage their graduates to establish practices in the South because, according to Houston, “the chief significance of the Negro lawyer is Southern,” since that was the region in which blacks faced the most injustice.

Houston’s adherence to a progressive civil rights agenda was evident in the social and political roles that he wanted black lawyers to assume and in his emphasis on the unique possibilities and responsibilities of being both black and a lawyer. Houston was insistent about the responsibility of black lawyers to protect southern blacks, especially, from injustice. “The South needs the Negro lawyer,” Houston argued, “to interpret the processes of justice to the people, and to interpret and state their problems to the white body politic and social. One who does not know the situation cannot appreciate the extent to which a Negro in the South smothers a wrong rather than take his trouble to a white man.” Thus, the southern black lawyer had a duty to protect blacks’ rights not only in racial solidarity, but also because of his professional capabilities and responsibilities. In the North, too, Houston anticipated that black lawyers would serve a critical role in the future. He forecasted, “both black and white will look to [black lawyers] for interpretation and a fair solution of contested issues between the races arising out of increasing commercial competition and civic and social consciousness.”

The broader professional and political purposes he saw for black lawyers also distinguished Houston’s position from those who saw the legal profession primarily as a means to elevate one’s social status. He was not concerned with individual lawyers’ ability to ascend the ranks of class hierarchy, nor was he interested in increasing the number of black lawyers in order for them to flaunt their middle-class respectability to whites. Instead, Houston’s goal was the collective advancement of the race through the advancement of the black legal profession.

The race had high hopes for the impact of the newly upgraded Howard Law School and black lawyers because lawyers in general held such a sweeping social and political role in American public life. Roscoe Pound, noted legal scholar, professor, and dean of Harvard Law School, with whom Charles Houston was very close, had a lofty impression of what it meant to be a lawyer in the United States: “Law and hence lawyers are the enemies of autocracy…our constitutional polity is so legal as to be dependent upon lawyers for interpretation, application and maintenance against official absolutism and legislative encroachment.” In Pound’s view, lawyers played a broad and vital political role in the service of American democracy. Legal historian James Willard Hurst noted the many facets of their social function, including their role as “makers of institutions, of social tools, and of patterns of action;” their skill in the “analysis of situations, and in adjustment of social tangles or contests;” “carriers of social tradition, and as a main source of the administrators needed to carry on the complicated affairs not only of modern government but also of modern business.”

Given that lawyers had so much power in American social and political life, Charles Houston, Mordecai Johnson, and their sympathizers wanted blacks to gain access to the highest levels of the profession to share in this power and responsibility.

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72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
76 Hurst, The Growth of American Law, 335.
Law students, too, recognized their responsibility. Howard Law School senior D.A. Launauze-Rolon’s poem in the law school’s section of the university’s 1923 yearbook reflected his optimism in his and his classmates’ impact:

The Law Class of Nineteen-Twenty-Three,
With good knowledge of the past,
And studying the laws of our age,
Plays a part on the world’s stage,
With the firm belief that at last
Righteousness will make men see
The wrong, prejudice, oppression,
And the badge of Segregation.
Is our Class aware of its place
And its great responsibility?
Yes, we’ll try to mark the way
For those friends who now hesitate
Doubting their capability
To be leaders of the race.
The Mystic Bells are ringing now,
Let us all listen to their sound.77

To this graduate being both a lawyer and a “leader of the race” carried with it the responsibility of using the law to convince the world of the injustice of “prejudice,” “oppression,” and what he calls the “badge of Segregation.”

The author of the following year’s law school senior class section in the yearbook expressed a similar sentiment, if less poetically. He wrote, “We…dedicate our lives to this profession with the hope of creating some principles in the fundamental elements of the law, which, woven into constitutional fabrics, will control the body politic to such an extent as will preserve the mutual safety of the ‘Negro’ in this—‘The Land of the free, and Home of the Brave.’”78 Each of these students expressed these feelings before either Mordecai Johnson or Charles Houston had arrived at Howard, but the hope of eradicating prejudice and using the law to bring about freedom, equality, and an end to racial oppression had become more common among this generation of lawyers who came of age during a period of both heightened racism and heightened racial consciousness.

By 1934, black Philadelphia lawyer Fitzhugh Lee Styles observed in his book *The Negro Lawyers’ Contribution to Seventy-One Years of our Progress* that black lawyers were already playing a vital role:

In practically every large city in America, the Negro lawyer is found, educated, alert, aggressive and serving his race. He is a defender of his race in every forum wherever justice and right are at issue concerning and touching the Negro, whether it be legal, economic or social. The lawyer is an advocate, and the Negro lawyer has, as the advocate of the Negro race, contributed to the social and economic progress of the race…On the

77 D.A. Lanauze-Rolon, “Senior Class Law Poem,” The Bison, Howard University yearbook (1923), HU Archives MSRC.
78 The Bison, Howard University yearbook (1924).
alter of race patriotism, the Negro lawyer offers the fruits of special talent and ability as an advocate of right and justice in any forum. 79

Here, Styles, who was a zealous supporter of Charles Houston, shared Houston’s ideals about the power of black lawyers to effect social change. Looking back on the period, contemporary law professor and legal historian J. Clay Smith agreed with Styles in an essay on black bar associations, in which he argued, “The physical presence of the Black lawyer is the greatest deterrent to authoritarian rule.” 80

Charles Houston was unequivocal about the role black lawyers should play in securing black rights. In his 1935 article “The Need for Negro Lawyers” in the Journal of Negro Education, Houston laid out their vital importance. The black lawyer should, he argued, serve “as an interpreter and proponent of [the race’s] rights and aspiration.” To prepare black lawyers for a career serving their race, law schools serving black students should have a “different emphasis” from standard law schools, and should concentrate more on “the subjects having direct application to the economic, political and social problems of the Negro.” Again, Houston emphasized that the South would be black lawyers’ primary battleground and he lauded the young black lawyers who had already opened their practices there for “challenging the established traditional discriminations and oppression of the South.” He ended his article with a strong appeal:

The lines are drawn…and neither the law schools nor the lawyers can retreat. The great work of the Negro lawyer in the next generation must be in the south and the law schools must send their graduates there and stand squarely behind them as they wage their fight for true equality before the law. 81

Blacks had been fighting for recognition of their citizenship rights, including, as Houston does, equality before the law, since Reconstruction and Houston heralded the generation of black lawyers coming of age in the 1930s as the group that would finally win the battle.

While in this article Houston was not specific about which particular inequalities he thought black lawyers should attack first, officials in the NAACP, which would bring Houston on as an official member of its legal team in 1934, were beginning to come to a consensus that ending educational inequality should be a top priority. These views came out at the NAACP’s national convention in Washington, D.C. in May 1932. At this convention Nathan Margold, NAACP attorney and director of the Garland Fund, which was earmarked for the association’s legal campaign, presented a report mapping out his proposal for the NAACP’s legal strategy against racial discrimination. The Margold Report, as it came to be known, laid out a plan whereby the NAACP, in addition to attacking discrimination in housing and transportation, would focus its resources on mounting a direct assault against the constitutionality of segregated schools, rather than launching equalization suits one district at a time. 82

Also at the association’s 1932 convention, Charles Houston, in his address, announced that black lawyers would have to be central in the NAACP’s strengthened and more coordinated legal strategy against racial discrimination. Whereas Margold outlined his views on what issues

79 Fitzhugh Lee Styles, The Negro Lawyers’ Contribution to Seventy-One Years of our Progress (Philadelphia: The Summer Press, 1934), found in Papers of Carter G. Woodson and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History: 1915-1950, reel 17, LOC.
the NAACP should take aim at, Houston described who the central actors should be and how they should strike. It was becoming clear that Houston envisioned that this cadre of black lawyers that he and his colleagues were training at Howard would be active not only in courtroom, but also, and more importantly, in black communities throughout the South. Black lawyers would be critical in educating blacks about their rights, gathering plaintiffs for cases, and fomenting grassroots support for their litigation. Houston’s notion of black lawyers as “social engineers” was starting to take shape and his tightening bond with the NAACP was starting to give it direction.83

In 1934, in the midst of NAACP president Walter White’s efforts to woo Charles Houston away from Howard and toward the association’s legal committee, Houston sketched out his own views about the best approach to attacking educational inequality, which differed from Margold’s. Houston agreed that unequal educational opportunity for black children should be the association’s top priority, but while Margold thought the NAACP lawyers should first challenge the constitutional legality of segregated schools directly, Houston thought that the NAACP should target inequality before it took aim at segregation. This would mean mounting local cases that challenged the inequalities that resulted from racial segregation without challenging segregation itself, which would basically force districts and states to comply with Plessy v. Ferguson’s “separate and equal” doctrine. This approach would enable the NAACP to gather support for its legal campaign—among both black Americans and sympathetic jurists—as it forced southern states to spend considerable amounts of money equalizing their segregated school systems.84

While this part of the story—the equalization campaigns—of the NAACP’s legal strategy that would lead to Brown v. Board of Education is well known, there are several details worth pointing out. First, equalizing black and white schools as a means of combating racial discrimination, which worked within the framework of segregation without acquiescing to it, was precisely what black Washingtonians had been doing in their schools for decades. While black Washingtonians, from William Calvin Chase to Anna Julia Cooper to school board member Coralie Cook to Archibald Grimke, abhorred racial segregation, they fought for control over their schools and equitable resources because they knew that integration was politically and socially untenable, and perhaps even undesirable if it meant white power over black students and teachers. Second, Charles Houston, who had attended M Street High School in the 1910s and whose father had served on the school board in the early 1920s, was appointed to the Board of Education in 1933. William Hastie, Houston’s new recruit to Howard Law School’s faculty who was already becoming one of his generation’s most accomplished black jurists, also graduated from M Street.85 In addition, in a survey of Howard Law School students that Houston conducted as part of his 1928 study of black lawyers, he found that a substantial percentage had graduated from Dunbar High School, as M Street had been called since 1916.86 There is no doubt that this confluence of local experience influenced Houston and his colleagues’ views about the possibilities afforded by black autonomy within a segregated system, the right to equal educational opportunity, and the use of law and policy to articulate and preserve black rights.

By the mid-1930s, Charles Houston’s experiences as an administrator, professor, and scholar at Howard Law School and as a legal strategist and litigator with the NAACP had led

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83 Kluger, Simple Justice, 136; Sullivan, Lift Every Voice, 156; McNeil, Groundwork, 116-17.
85 Kluger, Simple Justice, 159; McNeil, Groundwork, 123-26.
86 Houston, “Findings on the Negro Lawyer.”
him to conclude that equal educational opportunity was a constitutional right. Houston outlined his views that, according to the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, the federal government had an obligation to ensure that segregated schools for black children were on par with those for white children in a 1938 article in the *Journal of Negro Education*. He argued that the three branches of government shared this responsibility to black education: the courts through mandating equitable allocation of resources to “attempt to mollify the grosser inequalities,” Congress by manipulating their control over grants-in-aid to states to “level off the inequalities of education for whites and Negroes in the states,” and the executive branch through supporting these incremental steps toward equalizing educational opportunity and, in time, ending segregation altogether. Put simply, he stated, “The Federal Government…must be used to compel the states as necessary to accord their Negro citizens equal education under the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.”

He concluded his article with a challenge to the federal government to set an example for the states in the one school district under its jurisdiction: Washington, D.C. “It must be meticulous to accord Negroes full equality in the territorial and District of Columbia school systems,” Houston wrote in this national publication. “The precept of the Federal Government to the states must be established primarily by force of the Federal Government’s own example of according Negro citizens the equal protection of the laws.” Here Houston drew attention to the national significance of black Washingtonians’ struggles with the federal government for equal educational opportunity—both in the public schools and at Howard—and employed the themes of citizenship and equality that they had long emphasized. Thanks to the efforts of Houston, Mordecai Johnson, and others, black citizens’ claims to the right to equal educational opportunity could now be handled by in the courts by members of their own race, who proved to be some of the most capable and talented lawyers in the nation’s history—black or white.

One of these lawyers was James Nabrit, who Charles Houston and Mordecai Johnson recruited from private practice trying civil rights cases in Texas to teach at Howard in 1936. Immediately upon his arrival at Howard, Nabrit created the first civil rights course taught at an American law school. He used Houston’s NAACP affiliation and fellow lawyer and law professor William Hastie’s connections to the Department of the Interior to compile a volume of as many civil rights cases as he could find, which he both used as a casebook for his students and distributed widely to civil rights lawyers around the country. In the following years, Nabrit, Hastie, Houston, Thurgood Marshall, Oliver Hill, Robert Carter, and many others spent countless hours at Howard, studying federal procedure, pouring over previous civil right cases, honing their arguments, teaching future generations of black lawyers, and, perhaps most famously, staging mock Supreme Court hearings in the days before delivering their oral arguments in front of the Court to practice their arguments and to anticipate the justices’ questions.

Years later, once he had become Mordecai Johnson’s successor and Howard University’s second black president, Nabrit reminisced in an interview about the extent to which Charles Houston’s vision of Howard Law School was realized. What happened at Howard Law School in those years, Nabrit observed, “was an early indication of what Howard University could do in the field of human relations, in the field of civil rights. This is what we were interested in,

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88 Ibid.
89 James Nabrit, Oral history interview by Vincent J. Browne of Civil Rights Documentation Project (1968), in Man. Div. MSRC.
because there is no black law or white law. There is just one law in the United States.\textsuperscript{90} Through their seminal Supreme Court victories, the work of Charles Houston, James Nabrit, and the rest of the legal team at Howard Law School would finally ensure that the “one law” of the United States was applied equally to protect the rights of all Americans.

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid.
CONCLUSION

“A Paradise of Paradoxes”

The Politics of Segregated Education in Washington, D.C.

In a 1923 article in A. Philip Randolph’s political and literary magazine The Messenger, NAACP District branch executive committee member and future branch president Neval Thomas published an article titled, “District of Columbia—a Paradise of Paradoxes.” An Atlantic Monthly journalist had first used the phrase in 1861 to describe what he considered the paradox of the capital city’s physical shabbiness and its reputation for crime and gambling. Thomas, however, gave the phrase a different meaning:

“A paradise of paradoxes”...would accurately describe [Washington] at any time of its history, from its very foundation in 1800 to this very hour, for the leading men who conceived the plan of locating the capital of the nation here and were the controlling forces for sixty years were slaveholders, and today with the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments easily enforceable in this Federal territory, the great colored population with thousands of them among the most useful citizenry are only half free.”

Thomas went on to enumerate historical and contemporary examples of what he saw as the paradox of grave injustice and inequality in Washington, D.C., home to both the federal government and the nation’s most respected and accomplished black citizens. As the nation’s capital, the District of Columbia should have been a beacon of the principles of freedom and equality, but instead it epitomized the contradiction between powerful white Americans’ inexorable oppression of blacks and America’s democratic ideals.

In Thomas’s brief but temporally sweeping article, he devoted nearly all of his discussion of contemporary racial injustice in the District to the public schools and Howard University. He showed how paltry Howard professors’ salaries were in comparison to professors at elite white universities and, since he wrote the article during the final years of J. Stanley Durkee’s presidency, he chided Durkee for removing several black members from the Board of Trustees and called for the appointment of a black man or woman to replace him. In the public schools, Thomas pointed to inequalities in teachers’ salaries and allocation of funds for facilities and equipment. He applauded the efforts of black Washingtonians to educate themselves and their community through privately funded schools in the early nineteenth century, to press for better public funding since the advent of the black public schools in the late nineteenth century, and to continue their fight through the local branch of the NAACP into the 1920s.

Thomas’s passion for educational equality made sense because, in addition to his involvement with the NAACP, he was also a history teacher at Dunbar High School and an alumnus of Howard University and Howard Law School. His life’s pursuits embodied the relationship between education and black citizenship rights. When Thomas was being considered for the national NAACP’s executive committee in 1924, a number of prominent black Washingtonians wrote letters to the NAACP office in New York endorsing him. Fellow Dunbar

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3 Ibid., 78-87.
teacher W.D. Nixon wrote, “His consistent fight for the rights of our people has endeared him to the public.”

Howard University dean of women Lucy Slowe called him a “man of untiring zeal and interest in those things which tend toward the betterment of the condition of the colored people in Washington.”

Kelly Miller proclaimed Thomas “undoubtedly the clearest voice now sounding in our midst on the one hundred percent right of the Negro race without reserve and without delay.”

Thomas’s commitment to black rights pervaded his history classroom as well. A biographical sketch that was distributed at his memorial service after his death in 1930 noted that he insisted that his students analyze the present in light of the past to inspire “deeper interest and insight into the problems facing our democracy.” The same sketch, which may have been written by one of his adoring former students, observed, “He impressed upon his students pride in human worth and developed in them an appreciation of the right to, and the responsibilities of, all privileges of citizenship.”

A final testament to the relationship between Thomas’s politics and his teaching came during the 1920 Senate hearings on the public schools. Although Thomas did not testify, Mississippi Senator Pat Harrison was threatened enough by his activism that Harrison interrogated Coralie Cook about whether Thomas was a “radical.” Cook, who was a close friend of Thomas, avoided commenting on his radicalism, but she did admit that he believed in “civic equality and political equality.” In response, Senator Harrison asked whether other Dunbar teachers were “as radical in their ideas as Thomas,” seeming not to appreciate the irony of a United States senator labeling civic and political equality radical.

By the 1920s, figures like Neval Thomas, who linked equal education with civil rights, had become common in black Washington. Thomas was joined by educators and rights activists Mary Church Terrell, Coralie Cook, Charlotte Hunter, Kelly Miller, Charles Houston, Archibald Grimké, and many others who pursued educational equality in the name of their rights as citizens. While this pursuit was becoming national in scope by the 1930s, with Charles Houston’s cadre of civil rights lawyers at Howard and his team’s work with the NAACP, local blacks had been carrying out legal and political struggles for educational equality for years. It was no mere coincidence that Howard Law School became the incubator for the civil rights litigation strategy of the 1930s, ‘40s, and ‘50s. The Howard lawyers were building on an established legacy of local civil rights advocacy initiated by black Washingtonians decades earlier.

In addition to Neval Thomas’s own representativeness of the politics of segregated education in Washington, his usage of the phrase “paradise of paradoxes” is also an apt characterization of some of the struggles that have been chronicled in this dissertation. Black Washingtonians’ efforts to claim justice and equality were not linear; in fact, they were often serpentine, counterintuitive, contradictory, and, by some measures, paradoxical both at the time and in hindsight. For example, in both the public schools and at Howard University, black Washingtonians simultaneously argued for their right to greater autonomy and increased financial support from the federal government. While these two goals seem to be at odds, they coexisted logically in a Jim Crow context. An equitable appropriation from the federal government symbolized blacks’ right to equal education and provided them with the resources to

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4 W.D. Nixon to Arthur Spingarn, November 1, 1924, reel 4, container 7, Arthur Spingarn Collection, LOC.
5 Lucy Slowe to Arthur Spingarn, November 12, 1924, reel 4, container 7, Arthur Spingarn Collection, LOC.
6 Kelly Miller to Arthur Spingarn, October 30, 1924, reel 4, container 7, Arthur Spingarn Collection, LOC.
7 Undated leaflet, Neval H. Thomas folder, Sumner School Archives.
8 Public School Hearings, 1920, 413-15.
support an elite university and quality public schools. Autonomous black leadership would ensure that these resources were distributed fairly and would remove racial discrimination as a factor for both students and teachers.

Equalization as a strategy was also limited in scope. By demanding that the black schools be substantially equal to the white schools, equalization was premised on the existence of racial segregation. However, before the Supreme Court deemed separate inherently unequal and at a time when separate and equal was not just fiction but a fairy tale in most of the South, equal educational opportunity as a means to achieving full citizenship rights made sense and black Washingtonians came closer to achieving it than anywhere else. W.E.B. Du Bois put it plainly in his essay “Does the Negro Need Separate Schools”:

I know that this article will forthwith be interpreted by certain illiterate “nitwits” as a plea for segregated Negro Schools and colleges. It is not. It is simply calling a spade a spade. It is saying in plain English: that a separate Negro school, where children are treated like human beings, trained by teachers of their own race, who know what it means to be black in the year of salvation 1935, is infinitely better than making our boys and girls doormats to be spit and trampled upon and lied to by ignorant social climbers, whose sole claim to superiority is ability to kick “niggers” when they are down…theoretically, the Negro needs neither segregated schools nor mixed schools. What he needs is Education.⁹

Equalization was not only a means of demonstrating the financial burden of separate-and-equal or even uplifting the next generation of black children through education, as Du Bois suggested. By demanding equal schools, black Washingtonians forced the federal government to confront blacks’ constitutional right to equal protection of the laws and convincingly argued that education itself was a citizenship right.

The notion of blacks fighting for civil rights but not directly attacking Jim Crow is difficult to grasp because, since Brown v. Board of Education is such a central part of the civil rights narrative, the black civil rights struggle in the twentieth century has become synonymous with the struggle for racial integration.¹⁰ While black Washingtonians in the early twentieth century abhorred segregation and agreed that integration would be a critical component of eventually eradicating white supremacy, these battles for equal resources, autonomy, and financial support from the federal government were not immediately about integration. Labels such as “accommodationism,” “separatism,” and “incrementalism” have been used since the early twentieth century to compartmentalize and pass judgment on different approaches to racial equality and, since the civil rights movement of the 1960s, to distinguish and celebrate the civil rights movement’s integrationist agenda.¹¹

However, as this dissertation has shown, the black struggle for freedom and equality has never been so straightforward. As Neval Thomas pointed out, this is true also of America’s attitude toward the relationship between race and equality and the persistent gap between the nation’s democratic ideals and the reality of inequality. Indeed, if Neval Thomas were to assess the twenty-first century United States, he would see, in broad strokes, what he observed nearly a century ago: diverse groups struggling for equality in a paradise of paradoxes.

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¹⁰ Klarman, From Jim Crow to Civil Rights; Kluger, Simple Justice; Patterson, Brown v. Board of Education.
¹¹ Meier, Negro Thought in America.
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DISSERTATIONS AND THESES