

# 4. AFRICAN AMERICAN EDUCATION IN THE EARLY 20th CENTURY

Modern-day laws and legislation require taxation for funding, mandate attendance, provide transportation and meals, and regulate teachers' pay. Every child is expected to go to school for nine months of the year and all children within a community attend the same schools together. But the way public education functions today is only about 40 years old. For most of this nation's history, children did not attend school more than a few months of the year, and many never received more than an eighth grade education. African American children frequently had no chance to go to school and when they did, they had a tenacious community to thank for the opportunity.

The history of African American formal education in Alabama begins with Emancipation and Reconstruction. Most enslaved people craved education, a commodity they saw as a defining characteristic of their enslavers. Once freed, education was thought of as a way to protect themselves against a return to slavery. Some freedmen learned to read and write as a way to emulate their one-time masters and others thought of it as a practical tool needed for success in life and business.

In the South, education was intimately entwined with religion as former slaves, particularly older generations, strove for literacy in order to read the Bible by themselves. The younger generation was just as eager to learn and constantly encouraged by their parents and grandparents who did not have the opportunity. In many ways, education was put above other concerns. The earliest schools were often in dilapidated shacks.



**(Above)** Engraving of a “Contraband” School of Newly Freed Children Taught Outside, 1863 (Lewis C. Lockwood’s *Mary S. Peake: The Colored Teacher at Fortress Monroe* via *New Georgia Encyclopedia*)

Later, when churches were established, church buildings doubled as classrooms.

The end of the Civil War and slavery created social tensions that may still be unresolved. Immediately after Emancipation, white Alabamians resisted any actual or perceived elevation of their former slaves. Education was a particular sore point, which some said would ruin the freedmen as laborers. However, in the eyes of the Federal government and Northern Reconstructionists, if freedmen were to be citizens, they

should be educated. Yet, many freedmen had little or no experience in education or means of acquiring it, and they needed help.

Assistance came first from the Union Army. As the Federal troops occupied North Alabama during the War, they took in “contraband,” or runaway or freed slaves. One of the things provided for the freed slaves in the Union camps was education. Somewhere near Huntsville, in May 1864, Union Chaplain T. Merrill taught a day and Sabbath school for the freedmen. This typified a pattern in which more often than not, the duty of educating former slaves came down to missionaries and other philanthropic associations. Those willing to help were sometimes provided with old barracks or buildings confiscated by the Union Army.

The first benevolent society in North Alabama to assist with providing education was the Pittsburgh Freedmen’s Aid Commission. By the end of 1865 the Freedmen’s Aid Commission had 11 schools in Huntsville, Athens, and Stevenson. When white Alabamians criticized the freedmen as intellectually inferior, a teacher in Huntsville defended them by saying that despite the need for adequate books, teachers, and schoolhouses, “the freedmen not only known their letters but spell words correctly.”

**(Below)** Engraving of the “James’s Plantation School” in North Carolina, 1868 (North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library via [ncpedia.org](http://ncpedia.org))

