

Private Schools for Blacks in Early Twentieth Century Richmond, Virginia

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

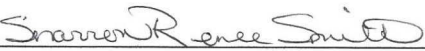
Department of History

The College of William and Mary
August, 2016


APPROVAL PAGE


This Thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

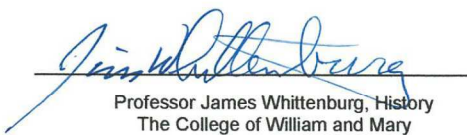
Master of Arts


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ABSTRACT

The Virginia State Constitution of 1869 mandated that public school education be open to both black and white students on a segregated basis. In the city of Richmond, Virginia the public school system indeed offered separate school houses for blacks and whites, but public schools for blacks were conducted in small, overcrowded, poorly equipped and unclean facilities. At the beginning of the twentieth century, public schools for black students in the city of Richmond did not change and would not for many decades. Before 1918, there was no public high school for black students to attend. Whites made it clear in their words and in their actions that they felt that blacks were inferior to whites and that money should not be wasted on the education of black children. Annual reports from the Superintendent of Public Schools for the city of Richmond, Virginia and newspaper articles from both black and whites press evidence that whites were strongly opposed to providing an education to black students that was equal to that of whites. As early as 1866, private schools for blacks became a part of Richmond's educational landscape to provide primary and secondary education to blacks who were denied quality education by the public school system. This thesis concludes that if private schools for blacks were not an option in the city of Richmond in the first half of the twentieth century, some black students would have not received an education beyond the primary level.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My gratitude to Dr. Leisa Meyer for her guidance and support as chair of my thesis committee. Appreciation also goes to committee members Dr. James Whittenburg and Dr. Robert Trent Vinson for reading and critiquing my work.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

At an African American Women's conference held in Charlottesville, Virginia, women of color gathered on a Saturday morning to listen to speakers offer advice on gaining financial freedom, networking, and how to live your "best life." One of the main speakers at the conference was an African American woman in her seventies who shared her life experiences and accomplishments. Martha Dawson had earned a doctorate and served in leadership positions at several colleges and universities. In her presentation she drew attention to the educational roads that she had traveled and highlighted the education that she received as a young girl growing up in Richmond, Virginia, as central to her success in life.

Van de Vyver Catholic School was the name of the school that Martha Dawson attended and she fondly recalled the years that she spent attending this private, Catholic school for blacks, located in Richmond's Jackson Ward. As she described her experiences as a student at Van de Vyver it became clear that this early education had a profound effect on her life; she believed it was critical to her ability to achieve accomplishments, which were many for a black woman growing up in the South well before the Civil Rights era. Along with her thoughtful reflections on Van de Vyver, Dr. Dawson showed the conference participants a copy of a receipt for tuition that her mother paid each week, which was one dollar; she kept it in a scrapbook. Most of the conference participants probably never heard of Van de Vyver Catholic School because they were not

natives of Richmond, Virginia. Many present-day Richmond African Americans are not familiar with Van de Vyver or any other private school for Richmond blacks. Like most private schools they served a smaller population of students and private schools that provided education specifically for Richmond's black students have been absent from the city's landscape for over fifty years.

Dr. Dawson did not share the reasons why her parents chose to send her to a private school, but judging from her age, she would have started elementary school in the 1930's. This was a time of extreme disparity regarding black education in the South.¹ As with so many blacks from the end of slavery well into the twentieth century, receiving a good education was what they sought as a means to having a chance to earn a decent living which would allow access to a good quality of life. Historian James D. Anderson writes "blacks emerged from slavery with a strong belief in the desirability of learning to read and write."² Illiterate ex-slaves talked with pride regarding their peers who learned to read while enslaved and held literate ex-slaves in high esteem.³ Anderson goes on to write, "The former slaves' fundamental belief in the value of literate culture was expressed most clearly in their efforts to secure schooling for themselves and their children."⁴ Though all former slave parents did not reach the level of education that they had hoped, they strived for better when it came to their

¹ "The development of black education in the South was not a story of linear progress; it was slow, haphazard, and things sometimes went from bad to worse. In the early twentieth century, for example, black schools fell even further behind the standards of white schools." See, Adam Fairclough, *Teaching Equality: Black Schools in the Age of Jim Crow* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2001), 10.

² James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South: 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 5.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

children. For some parents, which may have been the case for the aforementioned, it was necessary to send their children to a private school so that they could hopefully move on to a more prosperous future than what the generations before them could have ever imagined.

Martha Dawson's accomplishments were exceptional for a black woman born in the South in the 1920's. Surely she had challenges along the way, but she carved out an incredible life and career for herself. Private schools for blacks like Van de Vyver were a step on a ladder to moving towards one's dreams. The public school system was limiting and in many ways hopeless. Though the Virginia Constitution of 1869 established a statewide system of free public schools, education in Virginia was unsystematic and decentralized with no standards in place regarding teachers, attendance, or length of terms.⁵ Most classes were held in one-room school houses with students ranging in ages from five to nineteen.⁶ The twentieth century brought about educational reform in Virginia, however, all efforts were directed towards schools for white children. As the school systems for whites improved, the greater the disparities between white and black schools became. Disparities from teachers' pay to providing transportation to and from school. White teachers and students always received the greater benefits. Richmond Public Schools were a prime example of these disparities. Van de Vyver was that beacon of light for Martha Dawson and many others.

⁵ "Education in Virginia," Virginia Historical Society Collections and Resources, <http://www.vahistorical.org>.

⁶ Ibid.

My interest in private schools for blacks stemmed from growing up in Richmond, Virginia and periodically hearing different people talk about Van de Vyver, whether it was a former student or a parent of a former student. The only private schools of my generation were predominately white, with a small amount of African Americans that attended them. These particular private schools have been in existence for a very long time which peaked my interest to find answers to why private schools for blacks faded from Richmond's educational landscape. I also became interested in the origins of these schools and the role that they played in the lives of African American children in the early twentieth century. The fact that if one didn't know someone that attended one of the private schools for blacks, at present day it's pretty much like they never even existed, which I find very disappointing.

My father, who grew up in Richmond, was educated in the public school system. When he shares his memories of elementary school he mentions that during that time they went to school half a day which is a reality check that members of my family did not have the same educational advantages that I had generations later. His experiences would have been vastly different if he could have attended a private school. My father attended elementary school in the early to mid- 1940's, almost a decade later than Dr. Dawson. His experiences of half-day instruction show that private schools helped to fill in the gaps that Richmond Public Schools were incapable of filling.

In the quest to uncover substantial documentation on the existence of private schools for blacks I began to question why this part of history is virtually ignored?

It may be true that Richmond Public Schools served the majority of the city's African American students, but some black families sought out other educational options for various reasons which may have been their socio-economic standing or simply the fact that schools were overcrowded. Through my research I discovered private schools for blacks that existed for a short period of time, but also I discovered a list of names of teachers that offered instruction in their homes. This alone suggests that there was a need for these options within Richmond's black community in the early years of the twentieth century which adds to my wonder of the fact that so little is written about private schools like Van de Vyver.

Van de Vyver Catholic School, founded by Bishop Keane in 1887,⁷ was a staple in Richmond's black community for decades. It is the most recognized name for black private school education in Richmond. Though Van de Vyver is best known, other private schools for blacks existed as early as 1866, like St. Philip Church School that was held in the church basement located at 522 St. James Street.⁸ Private schools provided education for blacks when options for elementary and secondary instruction were basically non-existent⁹. According to James D. Anderson, "at the dawn of the twentieth century, nearly two-thirds of the black children of elementary school age were not enrolled in school, primarily because there were not enough school buildings or seating capacity to

⁷ Van De Vyver(formally St. John The Baptist Institute) was a private school for blacks founded in 1887. See, Margaret Meagher, *History of Education in Richmond*, (Richmond, VA, 1939), 122.

⁸ Meagher, 131.

⁹ Anderson, 110.

accommodate the overwhelming majority of these children.”¹⁰ These private schools began in the late 1800’s and reached its pinnacle between 1900 and 1940.

As far as private schools go, Van de Vyver was one of the oldest and largest in Richmond, but there were other smaller private schools as well as teachers that taught in their homes for at least the first half of the twentieth century. These schools held an important place in Richmond’s African American history. Despite the fact that Van de Vyver educated thousands of students over the three-quarters of a century that it existed in the 1900s and it encompassed one entire block on North 1st Street in Richmond’s Jackson Ward, historians have not explored its significance. Today’s generations will probably never know that these schools existed. These private institutions provided an opportunity for blacks to receive an education when Southern whites did not believe blacks were capable of learning and did not deserve an education. Southern whites’ attitudes toward the education of blacks right after the Civil War was based on ignorance with ideas that white children would become “infected” if they were educated with black children.¹¹ Whites also attacked the character of black people by saying that they were immoral and irresponsible so, therefore, they did not deserve an education.¹² Whites also were opposed to the social order and feared that providing education for blacks would threaten white supremacy and that blacks would no longer accept their inferior status working as domestics and in other

¹⁰ Anderson, 110.

¹¹ *The Education of African Americans after the Civil War*, <http://historyengine.richmond.edu>.

¹² Ibid.

menial positions.¹³ Though private schools did not have the capacity to serve all African American students in Richmond, they were an important educational option for many African Americans and in many cases very necessary because there were few other available to them.¹⁴ If it were not for private schools some students would have not received an education that covered both primary and secondary grades. These private schools were a place that offered African American students hope, a sense of security, and a legacy that they could be proud of.

Most Virginia blacks lived in rural areas during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a fact that may explain the absence of research on black education in Virginia cities.¹⁵ Margaret Meagher's *History of Education in Richmond*, published in 1939, briefly discusses black private schools at the turn of the century. In a four page section titled, "Negro Education," she discusses the general attitude as being "favorable" for teaching Negroes the basics of learning well into the later stages of the eighteenth century.¹⁶ Once a law was put into place on January 3, 1805 banning any education of slaves the climate quickly changed leaving house slaves to pick up on what they could learn from the examples set by the whites in the house and field slaves being generally

¹³*Beginnings of Black Education*, <http://www.vahistorical.org>.

¹⁴ The following conditions existed in the education of Negroes in 1906 according to the annual report of the State Superintendent of Schools: Only about half of the Negro children of school age were enrolled in school; there were no public high schools for Negroes. See, Archie G. Richardson, *The Development of Negro Education in Virginia: 1831-1970* (Richmond Virginia Chapter: Phi Delta Kappa, 1976), 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁶ Meagher, 129.

illiterate.¹⁷ Whites were not much better off when it came to literacy.¹⁸ Meagher lists the efforts to educate blacks after the Civil War which included lists of names and locations of private schools for blacks, which could be found in the city of Richmond as early as 1827.¹⁹

This thesis explores several questions that may provide more insight into the role that black private schools played in early twentieth century Richmond, Virginia. It explains the origins of black private schools in Richmond, why they were needed as well as the role that these schools played in the uplift of the black community. In most black communities, attending a private school was a rare opportunity and I will examine the benefits of attending a black private school and how that for some black students in early twentieth century Richmond seeking private education became very necessary for them to receive an education that included primary and secondary instruction which was not always accessible through what was offered from Richmond Public Schools. I argue that without these private schools, some blacks would have not received an education at all.

This study is based on information gathered from the Richmond City Directories for the years 1900 – 1940. The city directories provides information regarding the names and locations of black private schools and teachers providing instruction in their homes. This study also utilizes information gathered from Richmond's local newspapers from the early 1900's, both black and white.

¹⁷ Meagher, 129..

¹⁸ Meagher, 130.

¹⁹ Ibid.

The local newspapers help to provide insight on race relations in the city and how it affected the education of the city's black children. This thesis chronicles the evolution of black private schools in Richmond and hopefully opens the door to a part of Richmond's history that has been closed for too long, a period of considerable change.

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN THE SOUTH

Late nineteenth and early twentieth-century education in the South and in Richmond, Virginia was marked by change, turmoil, and growth. Much attention has been given to the public school system with only a slight mention of private schools. One book in particular looks specifically at the education of blacks in the South.

Historian James D. Anderson's, *The Education of Blacks in the South: 1860-1935* interrogates the general belief by white leaders in Virginia at the turn of the century was that education for blacks should be eliminated.²⁰ White Virginians did not want to waste tax dollars on a group of people that they believed to be inferior.²¹ Articles appeared in the local white newspaper, *The Richmond Dispatch*, basically denouncing the education of blacks and calling it "useless."²² Richmond's white residents wanted to provide a good education for white children only and as the twentieth century progressed educational opportunities for blacks continued to be limited. Before 1920, if a black child was fortunate enough to receive an education, it was primarily through private institutions.²³ If private schools for blacks had not been available to offer secondary education, two generations would have gone by with blacks not progressing beyond the very basic level of reading and writing. Blacks were already behind at the turn of the

²⁰ Anderson, 96.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 197.

century because during slavery the education of blacks was illegal and even after slavery was abolished whites as a whole were not about giving blacks a fair advantage, so if education was available it was of poor quality.

The struggles of blacks began at the very beginning of their lives here in the United States and as Louis Brenner notes in his University of Richmond Honors Thesis “since the Negro’s installation on American soil back in the seventeenth century, it has been necessary for the Negro to struggle and fight to secure and maintain those privileges and benefits which are indigenous to a democratic nation.”²⁴ He writes further, “The field of education has proved to be no exception to this never-ceasing struggle for rights.”²⁵ After the abolishment of slavery in 1865, many decades passed before Southern public school systems offered blacks education beyond the elementary school level. “The total number of Southern blacks entered in public and private secondary schools in 1916 was 20,872.”²⁶ Almost half of the students were enrolled in private high schools.²⁷ In 1916, there were about 216 private schools in the South which suggests that blacks were eager to get an education regardless of what little was offered to them.²⁸ African Americans regarded education as a tool to fight oppression.²⁹ Historian John Hope Franklin writes how “the pursuit of education came to be one of the great preoccupations of African Americans, and ‘enlightenment’ was

²⁴ Louis Brenner, “Negro Education in the City of Richmond” (Honors Thesis, University of Richmond, 1943)

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Anderson, 197.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans, Fifth Edition* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 268.

viewed by many as the single greatest opportunity to escape the increasing proscriptions and indignities that whites heaped on blacks.³⁰ Having access to education was a top priority for blacks.³¹ Scholar Nell Irvin Painter asserts, “In the South, where schools were rigidly segregated by law, black schools systematically starved for money.³² Parents often had to supply buildings and heat as well as give teachers room and board.³³ Black parents refused to let a racist society keep their children from getting the education that was their right as free American citizens. During this period of turmoil private schools for blacks were essential. According to James D. Anderson, “although black children throughout the former slave states depended heavily on the private system for the rare opportunity to attend high school, such dependence was greater in the deep South.³⁴ In 1916, 95 percent of the secondary school age population was not enrolled in public schools.³⁵ This suggests that some children were enrolled in private schools and the bulk of the children may not have attended high school at all, which was very typical in the South well into the first quarter of the twentieth century and in rural areas it was much later. In *The Development of Negro Education in Virginia: 1831-1970*, historian Archie G. Richardson states, “before 1906, blacks in Virginia only attended private high schools supported by the church.”³⁶ Private schools allowed access to education very early on

³⁰ Franklin, 268.

³¹ Nell Irvin Painter, *Creating Black Americans: African American History and Its Meanings, 1619 To The Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 166.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Anderson, 197.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Richardson, 5.

because there was a great need, especially at the high school level. At the turn of the century, there was only one public high school for Richmond blacks to attend, The Colored and Normal High School in Richmond's Jackson Ward.³⁷

During the first quarter of the twentieth century education for blacks presented many challenges. Some were able to overcome these challenges by seeking out other alternatives like private schools, while others never made it beyond learning the basics.³⁸ Students that gained more than an elementary education either left home or in some cases attended the high school that was available at some black colleges.³⁹ In the worst case scenario, students had to forego a secondary education.⁴⁰

Educational scholar, Margaret Meagher found that "at the close of the Civil War, when Richmond was too poverty-stricken to educate even her white children, The Freedman's Bureau and The Peabody Fund, both Northern enterprises, gave money and moral support to Negro education.⁴¹ The Colored Normal School was built in 1867 to train black teachers, which was eventually taken over by Armstrong High School at the close of the century.⁴² Armstrong was the only high school for Richmond blacks until 1937 when Maggie Walker High School was built.⁴³ Private schools made a fair showing in the Richmond City Directory by 1900. Some of the schools were established by whites, but

³⁷ Richardson, 5.

³⁸ Painter, 168.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Meagher, 130.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

most of them were operated by blacks who provided instruction in their homes or through black churches. There was only one public high school to serve all of the black students in Richmond as well as other localities in the state, so as it was throughout the south, blacks found ways to provide elementary and secondary education for their own.⁴⁴ Historian Adam Fairclough asserts “The raising of schools was a collective endeavor that was almost as instrumental in the formation of black communities as the founding of churches. Most schools began life as private institutions, founded on the faith and vision of individual teachers.”⁴⁵ All facets of the black community from churches providing buildings to parents providing funds and labor went in to insuring black students were provided an education.⁴⁶

Black Richmond churches of different denominations also made a great sacrifice to help with the educational needs of black children, with Ebenezer Baptist Church being the first location for Hartshorn Memorial College that provided education for young women.⁴⁷ Historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues that from the first days of freedom, black communities also sought to establish and administer their own schools.⁴⁸ During reconstruction many schools for blacks were established without the aid of whites. These schools were called “Sabbath” schools or “Native” schools, both products of black churches. Higginbotham notes that these schools gave instruction in both

⁴⁴ Adam Fairclough, *Teaching Equality*, 5.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 23-24.

⁴⁸ Higginbotham., 54.

religion and reading, and that “Sabbath schools and other church-housed schools continued to offer needed academic and industrial training as public schools lost ground throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴⁹ Private schools became necessary to educate the black community as public schools in the South for blacks were inadequate and as late as 1910 there were no public schools offering two years of high school for blacks.⁵⁰ Higginbotham writes that “it was the existence of private institutions that made black secondary education possible at all.”⁵¹ Though not an easy road, African Americans were persistent in their quest to live a better life that included education.

⁴⁹ Higginbotham, 54.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 55.

⁵¹ Ibid.

CHAPTER 3

NINETEENTH CENTURY RICHMOND, VIRGINIA:

Black Life and Education

Emancipated slaves flooded from rural areas into cities and Richmond's black population doubled as an estimated 15,000 blacks crossed the threshold of the city seeking opportunities.⁵² As this new population of freedmen entered the city of Richmond in droves looking for a new beginning, that new beginning started with employment so that they could provide housing and basic necessities for themselves and their families. Newly freed blacks entering Richmond, as well as other Southern cities, were looking for whatever opportunities they could find and as historian Tera W. Hunter states in *To 'Joy My Freedom*, "sheer survival and the reconstruction of the family, despite all the difficulties, were the highest priorities of ex-slaves in the post war period."⁵³ African Americans moving from rural areas into cities like Richmond were in search of economic self-sufficiency.⁵⁴ By the end of the war, Richmond had clusters of free blacks in two areas of the city.⁵⁵ This fact may have made the transition for newly freed blacks coming in to the city a little more bearable.

⁵² Virginius Dabney, *Richmond: The Story of a City* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1976), 200.

⁵³ Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), 24.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵⁵ Elsa Barkley Brown and Gregg D. Kimball, "Mapping the Terrain of Black Richmond," *Journal of Urban History* 21, no. 3 (1995): 302.

Historians Elsa Barkley Brown and Greg Kimball found that Richmond had free blacks that were documented as early as 1852.⁵⁶ The 1852 Richmond City Directory had a listing of “Free Colored Housekeepers” which was rare, but indicates that Richmond’s population consisted of free black men and women.⁵⁷ Brown and Kimball’s research also found that “by 1860, clusters of free black residents along Broad and Main streets most likely represent the shops of artisans who jostled for business with white native and immigrant shopkeepers.”⁵⁸ Free blacks were also located in the low-lying areas of the city, which were called Shockoe Valley and Shockoe Bottom as well as the northwestern portion of Richmond, which would come to be known as Jackson Ward.⁵⁹ Free blacks in Richmond owned boarding houses, which were basically small “shacks” that were sometimes occupied by slaves that were working on a “hiring-out or living-out” system.⁶⁰ These boarding houses were probably just as useful after the war to house free blacks coming in to the city. Though blacks were beginning to establish areas within the city where they could build a network of support for each other, in Brown and Kimball’s study of Richmond they found that “black areas followed a familiar storyline for working-class, artisan, and also business and professional people...lack of basic city services- water, paved streets, street lights, adequate police protection, refuse collection- no recreational facilities, playgrounds and parks.”⁶¹ Where blacks resided school

⁵⁶ Brown and Kimball, 302.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 304.

buildings were dilapidated and overcrowded, with one located right across the street from the city jail.⁶² Blacks relied on each other for support.

Post-war Richmond blacks were probably in a duplicate situation as most blacks were in the South during reconstruction. Historian Tera W. Hunter in her study of black women in Atlanta after the Civil War found that African Americans survived poverty and numerous other hardships by pooling the few resources that they had.⁶³ Atlanta blacks held fundraisers, organized mutual aid societies, and built a hospital.⁶⁴ In Richmond, as found by historian Marie Tyler-McGraw, “in asserting their new status, black men and women claimed new roles and created a new history of emancipation, with its own holiday celebrations and pantheon of heroes.”⁶⁵ Black men in Richmond formed militia units where they displayed their new found freedom by parading with weapons when celebrating holidays that were significant to blacks.⁶⁶ Black women in Richmond operated benevolent societies and formed political auxiliaries.⁶⁷ Early leadership in Richmond’s newly free black community came from families that were involved in church and secret societies pre-reconstruction.⁶⁸ According to scholar Steven J. Hoffman, “after the Civil War, newly freed African Americans organized fraternal and benevolent societies.”⁶⁹ These “secret societies” managed entirely by blacks

⁶² Brown and Kimball, 304.

⁶³ Hunter, 24.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Marie Tyler-McGraw, *At the Falls: Richmond, Virginia & It’s People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 167.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 168.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Steven J. Hoffman, *Race, Class, and Power in the Building of Richmond, 1870-1920* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2004), 148.

grew to number in the thousands between 1890 and 1910, providing blacks with benefits and insurance.⁷⁰ These fraternal orders played a key role in the lives of African Americans, recreationally, socially, and financially.⁷¹ Blacks were in the initial stages of creating a new life for themselves. Struggles were guaranteed, but as Tera W. Hunter states, “African American women and men were willing to endure the adversities of food shortages, natural disasters, dilapidated housing, and inadequate clothing in postwar Atlanta because what they left behind in the countryside, by comparison, was much worse.”⁷² She goes on to say, “In the city at least there were reasons to be optimistic that their strength in numbers and their collective strategies of empowerment could be effective.”⁷³ This held true for post-war blacks coming in to Richmond.

Newly freed men had to find jobs, which was not an easy task in an environment where the color of their skin was not readily welcomed. Large percentages of blacks were relegated to unskilled jobs. This held true for men and women. In the south black men sought job opportunities in the growing industrial economy working as laborers in iron and steel mills and in cities like Richmond, it was tobacco factories.⁷⁴ Richmond had a growing manufacturing industry, which made ample use of the black male labor force.⁷⁵ Black men worked in factories doing the heaviest work such as operating rolling mills or as

⁷⁰ Hoffman, 148.

⁷¹ Ibid., 149.

⁷² Hunter, 24-25.

⁷³ Ibid., 25.

⁷⁴ David Brown and Clive Webb, *Race in the American South: From Slavery to Civil Rights* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 183.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

stevedores. They also found jobs in flour mills and in tobacco factories producing chewing tobacco; they did not have access to jobs like manufacturing cigarettes, which were less labor intensive.⁷⁶ Historians David Brown and Clive Webb assert, “Those jobs available to African Americans were the dirtiest and most dangerous, as well as the most poorly paid.”⁷⁷ They also write “Blacks had little prospect of promotion to skilled and supervisory positions because of the protests of whites, who jealously and sometimes violently protected their privileged status within the work force.”⁷⁸

Employment opportunities for black women in the south were also limited. Black women were overwhelmingly employed as laundresses or in some other type of domestic service. Tera W. Hunter found that “By 1880, at least 98 percent of all black female wage-earners in Atlanta were domestics, starting between the average ages of ten and sixteen; remaining in it until sixty-five or longer.”⁷⁹ The percentages were probably not greatly different in other southern cities at that time. Blacks were overworked and greatly underpaid, basically doing jobs that whites did not want to do. Their incomes were not enough to provide for life’s basic necessities.

To add to the mounting list of the “needs” of blacks was learning the rudiments of education. An overwhelming number of blacks could not read and write. Historian Robert A. Margo gathered information from the U.S. census

⁷⁶ Howard N. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 65.

⁷⁷ Brown and Webb, 183.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Hunter, 50

regarding black literacy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and found that in 1880, 76 percent of blacks aged 10 and older were illiterate and by 1900 almost half of blacks ten and older were illiterate.⁸⁰ Though the numbers were declining, southern blacks had a ways to go. This fact would inevitably limit them. When freedom finally came to blacks in the south a different type of oppression greeted them.

Like their counterparts throughout the south, Richmond's blacks struggled to stay alive during the late nineteenth century. The status of blacks did not change after the abolition of slavery. The prejudices of whites along with their own deficiencies kept them at the very bottom of the economic ladder.⁸¹

Though most of Richmond blacks in the late 1800's were struggling to hold on to any job that they could, possessing little economic power, there were a few African Americans that found success through entrepreneurial efforts like selling insurance and selling spirits.⁸² There were black undertakers, junk dealers, and even three black physicians. There were numerous black barbers and hairdressers in Richmond in the 1880's and by 1890, Richmond hosted at least one black-owned bank. The Grand Fountain Order of the True Reformers Savings Bank was the nation's first black owned and operated savings bank, incorporated in 1888.⁸³ According to the 1890 census, there were six black lawyers in Richmond and in January of 1895 Dr. P.B. Ramsey advertised his

⁸⁰ Robert A. Margo, *Race and Schooling in the South: An Economic History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 6-7.

⁸¹ Rabinowitz, 61.

⁸² Ibid., 78.

⁸³ Michael B. Chesson, *Richmond After the War, 1865-1890* (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1981), 195.

dental services in the city's black newspaper, *The Richmond Planet*.⁸⁴ Though it was not easy for blacks to operate and maintain businesses, some were determined to give it their best shot to move beyond the status that whites tried to hold them in. By the late 1880's, historians Brown and Kimball found "Black Richmonders began emphasizing 'race progress' as a way of giving African Americans a history and a status through which they could claim their rights."⁸⁵ Scholars David Brown and Clive Webb write, "A small black business and professional class did emerge in urban areas during the Jim Crow era."⁸⁶ They go on to state "black businesses were scarce and successful black businesses were scarcer still."⁸⁷ It was a tough road for the black businessman, facing competition from white businesses, having limited capital of their own, and many lacking accounting and business management skills.⁸⁸ Though they were at a disadvantage "race progress" was evident by creating an area within the city that housed black businesses, churches, and homes.⁸⁹ Race progress was not simply talked about, but could be seen by the growth of business, the building of large churches, and grand homes.⁹⁰ Race progress continued to be shown at the start of the twentieth century. Richmond blacks worked within their limitations to claim a successful life for themselves. They wanted something better for themselves and their children.

⁸⁴ Rabinowitz, 90

⁸⁵ Brown and Kimball, 315.

⁸⁶ Brown and Webb, 184.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 184.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Brown and Kimball, 315.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

The close of the nineteenth century bore witness to segregated housing for blacks and whites in southern cities. Historians Brown and Webb write, “Disfranchisement was one of several factors that set in motion the imposition of Jim Crow apartheid.”⁹¹ In *Race Relations*, scholars Willis D. Weatherford and Charles S. Johnson write, “Between 1880 and 1907 every southern state enacted laws intended to separate the races and limit the privilege of franchise.”⁹² By 1870, Richmond, like its counterparts had two or three areas in which large numbers of black men and women lived, though black people could be found sprinkled throughout the city.⁹³ Emily Gee pointed out in her thesis about the city of Richmond that the city has a history “bound up in Civil War and race matters.”⁹⁴ After the city fell in 1865, though it took many decades to rebuild, the plans for the “new” city did not include its black residents. Blacks throughout the south lived for the most part in racially segregated areas that offered limited services and limited access to what was outside of their neighborhood and as Leon Litwack declared, it “all attested dramatically to their ‘place’ in the larger society.”⁹⁵ Above all else, blacks were living at the poverty level which gave them little choice regarding where they resided.⁹⁶

⁹¹ Brown and Webb, 189.

⁹² Willis D. Weatherford and Charles S. Johnson, *Race Relations: Adjustment of Whites and Negroes in the United States* (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1934), 311.

⁹³ McGraw, 174.

⁹⁴ Emily Julie Naomi Gee, “Building, Saving, Preserving, Placing: The Richmond of Grace Arents and Mary Wingfield Scott” (Thesis, University of Virginia, 2000)

⁹⁵ Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 20.

⁹⁶ Rabinowitz, 98.

Black people throughout the southern cities as in the case of those living in Richmond were poor. Historians Elsa Barkley Brown and Gregg D. Kimball found “large numbers of black Richmonders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were chronically unemployed and underemployed.”⁹⁷ Their lack of income dictated their way of life and as far as shelter was concerned they had to take what was available to them.⁹⁸ Their low income or like of income also contributed to high degrees of geographic mobility.⁹⁹ In Richmond as well as other cities like Atlanta and Raleigh clusters of housing for black people were often located in close proximity to cemeteries, which in the late nineteenth century meant drainage problems and foul odors.¹⁰⁰ Poor whites also lived close to industrial or other less desirable sites, but according to historian Howard N. Rabinowitz “the alleys and rear dwellings of the cities were almost entirely the province of blacks.”¹⁰¹ In Raleigh this type of area was named Hayti Alley and in Richmond the low-lying areas were called Bacon’s Branch or Shokoe Creek where blacks lived behind major hotels like The Exchange that was a narrow pathway of open sewers that housed disease and crime.¹⁰² Unfortunately, this is where blacks in southern cities tried to survive and raise families and in the words of Rabinowitz “better suited for fish than people.”¹⁰³ Unsanitary living

⁹⁷ Brown and Kimball, 312.

⁹⁸ Rabinowitz, 98.

⁹⁹ Brown and Kimball, 312.

¹⁰⁰ Rabinowitz, 114.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Rabinowitz, 114-115.

¹⁰³ Rabinowitz, 115.

conditions was just one more strike against Richmond blacks attempt to build a life for themselves as freed men and women.

Inadequate, substandard, and not fit for humans all described the neighborhoods of the majority of blacks after the war and through the end of the century. These areas for the most-part would not see any type of change for the better until well into the twentieth century. As was the case in most major cities these areas were well out of sight, far away from the city's center and areas where upper class whites lived. As the saying goes, "out of sight, out of mind." As long as the majority of the residents in these horrid areas were black, then why waste time and money trying to improve them? If this was the best that it got for living conditions one can infer that educational opportunities were just as bad or even worse. Why would whites want to educate a group of people that they had no use for other than manual labor?

Education for blacks largely resembled every other aspect of their lives in a world where freedom meant a life filled with restrictions. Historian Adam Fairclough asserts "The public school crusade of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were slow to include blacks, but include them it eventually did."¹⁰⁴ Eventually encompassed many generations. First and foremost, southern whites truly believed that blacks were uneducable. Historian Archie G. Richardson states, "Prior to the Civil War, it was thought that Negroes should not be educated because they did not need education, they were incapable of

¹⁰⁴ Fairclough, *Teaching Equality*, 3.

learning.”¹⁰⁵ Whites also did not know what they should do or how far they should go in the education of blacks.¹⁰⁶ Historian Leon F. Litwack asserts, “The white south was never of one mind on the question of whether to educate blacks and, if so, to what degree and under whose auspices.”¹⁰⁷ This attitude left the education of blacks in limbo, where progress was slow and they were given second best. School buildings for blacks were for the most part not conducive to learning. Supplies were leftovers from white schools or in many cases students went without supplies and the teachers were not the cream of the crop. The educational struggles that blacks faced in the late nineteenth century were daunting and in the words of Leon F Litwack, “Throughout the south, with few exceptions, the story of black schools became a case study in deliberate and criminal neglect.”¹⁰⁸

Blacks living in cities had a better advantage of receiving an education compared to blacks living in rural areas.¹⁰⁹ Blacks living in cities like Richmond were first educated by Northern missionary societies, then later public education was established. Though education was one of the benefits of freedom, blacks were not viewed in a positive light by whites. At best separate but equal education would be accepted, but in reality whites would do everything possible to ensure that black students would not receive an education that in any way equaled to that of white students. White Richmond agreed with their

¹⁰⁵ Richardson, 1.

¹⁰⁶ Litwack, 90.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 106.

¹⁰⁹ Rabinowitz, 152.

counterparts throughout the south that Negroes had no place in school.¹¹⁰ As quoted in Rabinowitz's study, a *Richmond Dispatch* article argued "hoeing, ploughing, spinning and sewing are more necessary now to the Negro than the singing of 'emancipation' hymns or the study of that multiplication table and alphabet which are supposed to be the panacea for all the ills that Negro flesh is heir to."¹¹¹ This sentiment did not go away for decades to come. Southern whites were threatened by blacks gaining education and they wanted to continue to hold all of the power. Brown and Webb note, "Restrictions on black education were essential to the maintenance of white supremacist rule."¹¹² They also express that "southern whites feared the potentially revolutionary consequences of an educated black population. Education, they believed, would breed black discontent and that African Americans would come to expect more to life than their subordinate status within the southern hierarchy."¹¹³ In Raleigh, North Carolina whites announced that "no man, woman, or child...shall attend school in their employ."¹¹⁴ In Richmond, whites used the same type of threats to dissuade blacks from enrolling in school.¹¹⁵ White ministers of black churches in Richmond even jumped on the bandwagon by discouraging their church members from attending school.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁰ Rabinowitz, 152.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Brown and Webb, 194.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Rabinowitz, 153.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 155.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 156.

It was clear that Richmond Public Schools did not intend to offer black students an education that was equal to that of whites. In an ordinance that was passed in May of 1869, it was established that the Richmond City Council could appropriate a specific sum for the support of public schools.¹¹⁷ In section 4 of the ordinance it states “The Board of Education shall have power to establish rules and regulations for its own government: provided however, that the public schools herein provided for shall be kept separate and apart for white and colored children.”¹¹⁸ This was the beginning of the disparities in Richmond Public Schools that would continue for the next 100 years. Less money was spent on black students compared to that of white students. This was what the south offered black students across the board. Historian Robert A. Margo sites “Around 1890 the public schools in the southern states could be charitably described as backward.”¹¹⁹ He also asserts, “In 1890, per pupil expenditures in southern public schools equaled only 43 percent of the average outside of the region. The average length of the school year was ninety-two days, two months shorter than the average elsewhere.”¹²⁰ Southern schools lagged behind overall which suggests that schools for black students received the worst of what was already below average. Black students were sometimes taught by less qualified teachers and the conditions of the school houses were deplorable. Robert A. Margo found that with black school houses “The exterior surroundings ‘varied

¹¹⁷ As written in Martha Warren Owens “The Development of Public Schools for Negroes in Richmond, Virginia 1865-1900” (Thesis, Virginia State College, 1947)

¹¹⁸ Common Council of the City of Richmond, The Charter and Ordinance of the City of Richmond, 1869, 25.

¹¹⁹ Margo, 20.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

from untidy to positively filthy. Ash heaps often adorned the front yards,...at barely respectable distances leaned ugly outhouses in unscreened and shameful impudence.”¹²¹ Adding to the disparities in the treatment of black students was the fact that black schools were extremely overcrowded. To be fair, white schools were not overwhelmingly better, but there was a difference in what was given to whites as compared to blacks. Blacks received the worst, always. In the city of Richmond for the 1890/91 school year the public school system spent seventy-five cents more per child for whites than for blacks, totaling \$10.25 for whites and \$9.50 for blacks.¹²² This may not seem like a lot of money, but in 1890 it probably made a noticeable difference. Historians Weatherford and Johnson note, in the south, “It is common knowledge that the Negro child did not have as much spent on him as did the white child – and for this we know there was no adequate excuse – but the South did what most parents under similar circumstances would do: if the insufficiency was for their own children and others, they would surely favor their own.”¹²³ The condition of black schools was one of the most noticeable signs that more money was allocated to white schools.

Public schools open to blacks and whites on a segregated basis were mandated by the new Virginia constitution of 1869.¹²⁴ Freedman’s Bureau schools that were already in existence meshed into the Richmond Public School

¹²¹ Margo, 19-20.

¹²² Rabinowitz, 156.

¹²³ Weatherford and Johnson, 356.

¹²⁴ Harry M. Ward, *Richmond: An Illustrated History* (California: Windsor Publications, 1985), 176.

system.¹²⁵ In the first year of RPS, there were 1,008 white students and 1,769 black students, which indicates that black students were eager to enroll in school.¹²⁶ The conditions of the public school houses for black and white students were not stellar, but the schools for black students were definitely the worst.

According to data gathered from Richmond Public Schools, the overarching theme for earliest public schools for blacks were “fit to condemn.” It is hard to imagine the conditions that blacks had to endure in order to learn to read and write. The buildings that housed black students truly showed how little regard whites had for blacks.

The earliest public schools for Richmond blacks were nothing more than shacks. The Valley School, located at the corner of 15th and Marshall Streets was the first of six public schools in Richmond. It was formally the Lancasterian school for whites. This school was described in the 1872/73 superintendent report as “unsatisfactory, old, adjacent streets were muddy, and the city jail was located across the street.”¹²⁷ This particular school at one point in time had close to one thousand students with less than twenty teachers to conduct class.¹²⁸ Though the school was originally built in 1816 as a white charity school, its location was not desirable for any school.¹²⁹ During warm months when the

¹²⁵ Ward., 175.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 176.

¹²⁷ The Valley School, <http://web.richmond.k12.va.us/AboutRPS/RPSHistory/OW/Valley.aspx>

¹²⁸ Ann Field Alexander, *Race Man: The Rise and Fall of the “Fighting Editor,” John Mitchell, Jr.*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 23.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 23.

windows of the school were open the children were exposed to foul odors from the sewage in the streets and if things couldn't get any worse, they could hear the inmates at the jail cursing.¹³⁰ The school was condemned by the 1908/09 school year. This was over thirty years of children being exposed to filth just so they could get an education.

The Richmond Public School system was making unsatisfactory grades across the board. Navy Hill was another school for blacks located at the corner of 6th and Duval Streets that was considered atrocious. One unique thing about the school was that it had all black teachers, though the principal was white.¹³¹ Having black teachers was very important to the African American community. Adam Fairclough notes that black teachers "was an expression of racial pride, cultural difference, and group solidarity."¹³² Well in to the 1930's black schools in Richmond did not even have black principals; only 4, leaving 20 black schools with white principals.¹³³ The downside to this setup was that the school was declared unfit in the 1873/74 annual school report.¹³⁴ It would be twenty years later before another school would be built on this property. With the help of black councilman John Mitchell, Jr., the city appropriated \$20,000 for the 1890/91 school year to construct a new facility at this location.¹³⁵ The new Navy Hill School opened in 1893. Twenty years was a long time to wait for a new school facility. What were students supposed to do in the meantime? Go without

¹³⁰ Alexander, *Race Man*, 23.

¹³¹ Navy Hill, <http://web.richmond.k12.va.us/AboutRPS/RPSHistory/FN/NavyHill.aspx>

¹³² Fairclough, *Teaching Equality*, 8.

¹³³ "Whites Still Direct Nearly 20 Institutions," *The Afro-American*, June 18, 1938, p.3.

¹³⁴ Navy Hill, <http://web.richmond.k12.va.us/AboutRPS/RPSHistory/FN/NavyHill.aspx>

¹³⁵ Ibid.

education or continue to sit in substandard school houses where their learning experience was compromised by the unhealthy environments that they were subjected to?

Clearly there was a need for other options for educating black children and private schools slowly but surely began to surface as early as 1866 in Richmond. St. Philip Church School was the first private school for blacks listed in the city directory. Though it was only listed for one year that does not necessarily mean that its doors were closed after that year. As the end of the century grew near a few more private schools for blacks were listed for the school year 1886/1887 like The Richmond Institute which was located on Main Street, at the corner of 19th Street. There was also St. Francis located at 104 East Jackson Street, and St. John The Baptist Institute offered instruction at 101 East Duval Street. This particular school ran a very interesting ad in *The Richmond Planet*, Richmond's black newspaper, which included a list of reasons why parents should send their children to this school. Number one on the list was the fact that St. John The Baptist Institute offered large, well-lighted and well-ventilated rooms.¹³⁶ This ad at present day is almost amusing, but having knowledge of the conditions of the Richmond Public School system school houses it is definitely understandable that this type of ad was placed in the newspaper. Obviously the conditions of the public schools that black students had to attend were not ideal. They were overcrowded and it can be certain that they were not well-lit or ventilated. With

¹³⁶ *Richmond Planet*, August 31, 1895, 4.

hundreds of students in each class room there was probably not much to be said on a positive note about the learning environment.

Private schools for blacks did not just offer reading, writing, and arithmetic. Blacks were also opening schools that focused on a more practical, vocational education. Richmond blacks were offered an industrial education at The Moore Street Industrial School, organized in 1878 by members of a mission organization at Second Baptist Church.¹³⁷ The industrial school was incorporated by 1887 and some of Richmond's most influential blacks were taught there; with boys learning skills in carpentry and printing and girls learned how to operate sewing machines, making clothes for both women and children.¹³⁸ This school was organized and supported by blacks. By 1891 sixty-two students were learning valuable trades and probably basic reading and writing skills, which one would need to perform jobs such as printing, but also to become valuable members of society.

Late nineteenth century Richmond offered a few more private school options for those who sought out a better learning environment compared to what was being offered by Richmond city schools, which according to the superintendent, were unfit. Fortunately, black students did not allow the deplorable conditions of the public school system deter them from taking advantage of what little those schools offered, but it is clear that private schools were a needed option.

¹³⁷ Chesson, 194.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

At the close of the nineteenth century, education overall was bad in the city of Richmond. Richmond's City Council was not wholly committed to public education for any students. In 1885 the chairman of the school board stressed his concerns of school overcrowding to the city council, revealing that many schools were only providing half-day instruction.¹³⁹ There were so many school aged children who were not granted admission at all.¹⁴⁰ The number of white students denied admission were in the hundreds, while black students that were denied a public education numbered at least one thousand.¹⁴¹ In 1886 the situation did not change for many students, leaving eight hundred black and two hundred white students without a school to attend.¹⁴² If there were not private schools available for blacks to attend, the numbers would have been even greater. The late 1800's set the foundation for what was to come at the turn of the new century. Some blacks progressed, but for the majority of blacks, struggling to survive was the order of the day.

¹³⁹ Chesson, 203.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

CHAPTER 4

TWENTIETH CENTURY RICHMOND, VIRGINIA:

Black Life and Education

At the opening of the twentieth century the city of Richmond was moving forward with growth of population, economic diversity, and industrialization.¹⁴³ The population more than doubled between 1890 and 1920, growing from 81,388 to 171,667 respectively.¹⁴⁴ Prominent Richmond blacks were making their names in business like Maggie L. Walker, the first woman to charter a bank in 1903 and blacks like Richmond lawyer Giles Beecher Jackson who organized the Negro Exhibit at the Jamestown Exhibition of 1907.¹⁴⁵ Giles Jackson would also go on to co-author *The Industrial History of the Negro Race in America* in 1908.¹⁴⁶ Richmond's Jackson Ward, where the majority of the city's blacks resided by 1900 was heralded as the "Black Wall Street of America" and "The Birthplace of Black Capitalism."

Richmond's Jackson Ward was an area north of downtown that was originally built by European immigrants who were attracted to the city's status as a central retail hub.¹⁴⁷ Since the early 1800's, Jackson Ward comprised of Jews, immigrants and blacks due to the limitations that were placed on these individual groups of

¹⁴³ Ward, 189.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Odell R. Byrd, *Black History, Concise and Condensed: A History of Black Richmond* (Richmond, VA: Tambuzi Publications, 1997), 22. Ward, 201.

¹⁴⁶ Byrd, 21.

¹⁴⁷ *Jackson Ward Historic District*, VCU Libraries Digital Collections, <http://dig.library.vcu.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/jwh>.

where they could buy a home, build, and live.¹⁴⁸ Most of Jackson Ward's earlier black residents were uneducated, free or slave, being that literacy was a rare gift in the 1800's.¹⁴⁹ After reconstruction freed slaves began moving into the neighborhood and by 1920 Jackson Ward became one of the "most active and well-known centers of African-American life in the country."¹⁵⁰ By the second half of the nineteenth century black businesses in Jackson Ward grew from "barber shops and corner stores to insurance companies and banks, with five black-owned banks being chartered between 1888 and 1930."¹⁵¹ By the start of the twentieth century "Jackson Ward had grown so much as a commercial center that its residents could do all of their shopping without leaving the neighborhood."¹⁵²

One of Jackson Ward's most prominent and outspoken residents was John Mitchell, Jr. editor of the city's black newspaper, *The Richmond Planet*. Born a slave in the summer of 1863, Mitchell was appointed to the position of editor by age twenty-one.¹⁵³ Mitchell used his position as editor to write messages of uplift to Richmond blacks as well as chastise them for their wrongdoings. In the January 27, 1900 edition of the weekly newspaper Mitchell wrote "Colored men, be polite; teach your children good manners. Be frugal, honest, and God fearing and all will be well with us."¹⁵⁴ In a 1906 edition he wrote "While you are making

¹⁴⁸ Kitty Snow, *On the West Clay Line: Jackson Ward, Carver and Newtowne West* (Richmond, Virginia: Kitty Snow, 2013), 1.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁵⁰ *Jackson Ward Historic District*, VCU Libraries Digital Collections.

¹⁵¹ "Richmond Neighborhoods: Jackson Ward," *Richmond Times Dispatch*, October 3, 2011.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ http://www.virginiamemory.com/online_classroom/shaping_the_constitution/people/john_mitchell_jr.

¹⁵⁴ *The Richmond Planet*, January 27, 1900.

money, save some of it. These are good times although you may not think so.”¹⁵⁵

John Mitchell, Jr was not afraid to speak out regarding the injustices that Richmond whites subjected on its black citizens. It was not uncommon to find statements that addressed such matters like this one written in a January 1900 edition of *The Richmond Planet*, “Colored folks, let us pray for these Negro-haters. God only knows what to do with them.”¹⁵⁶ Mitchell was not afraid to call out the names of politicians who looked to exclude blacks from equal rights and in the January 27, 1900 edition of his paper he wrote “Colored people, let us pray to God to provide a separate hell for John E. Epps and his supporters. So few of these Negro-haters will reach heaven that it is useless to bother the good lord about that place.”¹⁵⁷

John Mitchell, Jr. was a fighter. He was not afraid to speak up for his race and when someone pushed him, he pushed back. In January of 1900 *The Richmond Dispatch* lamented in regards to Jim Crow cars “the whites do not want the blacks in their cars, and are exasperated when they find them there, particularly when the blacks are disorderly, impertinent, and unclean.”¹⁵⁸ Mitchell replied by saying “*The Dispatch* has been in the business of stirring up race hatred for the last thirty-five years and it’s time that it quit its old time

¹⁵⁵ *The Richmond Planet*, January 13, 1906.

¹⁵⁶ *The Richmond Planet*, January 6, 1900.

¹⁵⁷ *The Richmond Planet*, January 27, 1900. John E. Epps, a white lawyer from Richmond, introduced a bill in the General Assembly requiring separate railroad cars for whites and blacks. See, Alexander, *Race Man*, 132.

¹⁵⁸ As written in *The Richmond Planet*, January 20, 1900.

practices.”¹⁵⁹ In a 1908 edition of *The Richmond Planet* an article was written regarding the Southern Educational Association’s position regarding Negro education. Their beliefs included a thorough education at the elementary level and instruction in good hygiene and home cleanliness as they thought this would provide better protection for both races.¹⁶⁰ As far as secondary education was concerned it was thought that industrial education best suited blacks. The Southern Educational Association surely riled Mitchell when they compared the two races stating “on account of economical and psychological differences... we believe that there should be a difference in courses of study and method of teaching, and that there should be an adjustment of the school curricula as shall meet the evident needs of Negro youth.”¹⁶¹ *The Richmond Planet’s* response to the Southern Educational Association was “Trend is to lower the standards of the Negroes education and to give him just enough ‘book learning’ to make him serviceable to the white man.”¹⁶²

John Mitchell, Jr. was a man of many talents. Though most known for his position as editor of *The Richmond Planet*, he was elected to the Richmond City Council in 1890, he led a boycott that eventually bankrupted a segregated street car company, he founded Mechanics Savings Bank in 1901 and he ran for Governor of the state of Virginia on an all-black ticket.¹⁶³ John Mitchell, Jr. was an early advocate for change in the poor conditions of Richmond Public Schools

¹⁵⁹ As written in *The Richmond Planet*, January 20, 1900.

¹⁶⁰ *The Richmond Planet*, 1908, 4.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² *The Richmond Planet*, 1908,4.

¹⁶³ *Richmond Times Dispatch*, February 21, 1996.

for black children. After he graduated from the Richmond Colored Normal School at age 18, he accepted a job teaching at the Fredericksburg Colored School, with a classroom that had over fifty students in attendance on a daily basis.¹⁶⁴ When he returned to Richmond to accept an opening at The Valley School, he was one of sixteen teachers for over eight hundred students.¹⁶⁵ He had firsthand experience at the inferior conditions that black students were subjected to everyday, so while he served on city council, he worked hard to have money allocated to improve the conditions of the public schools in Jackson Ward. Mitchell fought for his race and used his position as editor of Richmond's black newspaper to not only make his voice heard, but the voice of Richmond's black community.

In 1900, most Richmond blacks still faced the same challenges as other blacks throughout the segregated south. Early twentieth century Richmond blacks, unlike the working class Richmond whites, had little reason to look forward to a better way of life for themselves and their families. Blacks continued to live in the worst neighborhoods in Richmond, with dilapidated rental housing, unpaved streets, and no running water.¹⁶⁶ Most had a very hard time maintaining economic stability at the turn of the century as they were still overwhelmingly working as domestics, laborers, and blue-collar workers. Those who were employed in jobs that were outside of the norm were blacksmiths, coopers, electricians, teamsters, mail carriers, and seamstresses. This pattern

¹⁶⁴ Alexander, *Race Man*, 18.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 23.

¹⁶⁶ McGraw, 222.

was prevalent in private family service jobs as well as in tobacco plants. As the turn of the century took hold possibilities for black Richmonders became increasingly limited, as it did for southern blacks as a whole.¹⁶⁷

The beginning of a new century should have been the start of Richmond blacks moving forward to a better way of life, but in 1900 the already racially separated world of Jim Crow sealed the lid on the restrictions for blacks even tighter. The white population in Richmond was growing much faster than blacks and with new people coming into the city, religious and charitable organizations like Sheltering Arms Hospital and Ladies' Hebrew Benevolent Society pushed for better living and working conditions as well as civic and educational improvement.¹⁶⁸ This was not extended to blacks in the city. The new century should have offered forward movement to blacks, but in reality the year 1900 was the beginning of a different type of bondage.

In the south before 1900, Jim Crow laws varied from state to state, but when the twentieth century began Jim Crow became widespread. In historian Richard Wormser's *"The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow"* he titled his chapters on the turn of the century "The Worst of Times" as this new "system" spread like wildfire.¹⁶⁹ All southern states now had Jim Crow waiting rooms with signs posted that read, "white only," "white only served here," "no blacks allowed," "white ladies,"

¹⁶⁷ "Jim Crow imposed an appalling burden on African Americans. It had taken only one generation for the expectations of the future aroused among freedman to become superseded by a sense of despair and fatalism. Poverty, prejudice and violence were the daily realities endured by southern blacks." See, Brown and Webb, 203.

¹⁶⁸ McGraw, 222.

¹⁶⁹ "The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed a proliferation of Jim Crow laws in the South." See, Richard Wormser, *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003), 105.

“colored women,” and so on, and so forth.¹⁷⁰ Even cemeteries were segregated with sections posted for “whites” or “blacks.” The objective of Jim Crow laws was “the total subjugation of blacks and their removal as far as possible, from the mainstream of southern life.”¹⁷¹ Blacks were separated at beaches, theaters, and in neighborhoods and as one woman reflected on the times “if I missed the signs, I only had to follow my nose to the dirtiest, smelliest, and most neglected accommodations.” Richmond was no different from the rest of the south.

As the twentieth century unfolded in Virginia what was once an environment of loose tolerance of blacks quickly turned into a bad dream in which black people were reminded on a daily basis that they were subhuman.¹⁷² Things began to drastically change for Virginia blacks when a new law was put into place that prohibited blacks and white people from riding in the same railroad car.¹⁷³ Before this law became a reality black people sat where they pleased.¹⁷⁴ In Virginia, prior to 1900 there were a number of public accommodations and entertainment venues where black people could enter without being evicted.¹⁷⁵ While there were segregated public spaces including restaurants, bars, theaters and places where people gathered for amusement, there were no statutes

¹⁷⁰ Wormser, 105.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow: A Commemorative Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 33.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ “The Negro sat where he pleased and among white passengers on perhaps a majority of the state’s railroads.” Documented in a study by Charles E. Wynes. See, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 33.

¹⁷⁵ Woodward, 33.

regarding segregation between 1870 and 1900.¹⁷⁶ Though race relations in Virginia were more strictly regulated after 1900, there were many facets of black life that expanded within these new limitations.

As each year of the 1900's passed by, Richmond's black middle class, which was small in number, moved forward in many directions with vigor. While most black Richmonders were among the poor or working class residents of the city, a small group had their feet firmly planted in the middle-class as business owners, ministers, teachers, and lawyers. The black middle-class of Richmond founded literary and debating societies, established Masonic lodges, and organized balls and dances for their enjoyment.¹⁷⁷ Their lifestyle was quite different from the average black wage earner who worked as unskilled and industrial laborers. There was even a growing number of black doctors who practiced at the beginning of the century. Richmond was home of Sarah Garland Jones who was the first black woman to pass the Virginia Board of Medicine Exam. She was listed in the 1900 directory along with Drs. Claiborne Coles, Chas P. White, Robert E. Jones and Richard F. Tancil. Medical care for blacks in the south was inadequate and inferior compared to that of whites, with Jim Crow dictating that the races be kept apart, especially in hospitals.¹⁷⁸ In *Remembering Jim Crow*, a gentlemen recounts health care for blacks in his hometown of Wilson, North Carolina stating "We had two local black physicians. Each with a solo practice.

¹⁷⁶ "There were crosscurrents and uncertainties on both sides, but in spite of this there remained a considerable range of flexibility and tolerance in relations between the races in Virginia between 1870 and 1900" See, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 33.

¹⁷⁷ McGraw, 225.

¹⁷⁸ Litwack, 338.

Their medical resources were limited. The doctors worked hard, and they served their patients as best they could.”¹⁷⁹ Though there were blacks gaining ground in the legal and medical professions, whites made it extremely difficult for them to succeed.¹⁸⁰ Historian Leon Litwack states “Not only did prospective lawyers face the difficult task of obtaining college training, but also the extent to which they practiced their profession might be seriously compromised by local customs and attitudes. Opportunities in the medical profession was equally as difficult”¹⁸¹

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Richmond housed a growing number of black owned businesses from newspapers to medical care, to undertakers among many others.¹⁸² Most of these businesses were located in Richmond’s Jackson Ward, where the majority of black people lived in the early part of the century. Jim Crow laws relegated black people to this particular part of the city, but they made it work the best that they could. In years to come this area of Richmond and the businesses that it produced would become a major part of Richmond’s history. Richmond had a growing population of blacks and they had to provide services to their own community due to racism and in the words of Leon Litwack, “Excluded from the white world, black Southerners drew

¹⁷⁹ William H. Chaffe, Raymond Gavins and Robert Korstad, eds., *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell About Life in the Segregated South* (New York: New Press, 2001), 22.

¹⁸⁰ Litwack, 143.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² John P. Polke Restaurant, 12 W. Broad St, James H. Baker’s Confectionaries, 506 W. Leigh St, Dr. P. B. Ramsey’s Dental Office, Leigh Street, A.D. Price Funeral Home, 212 E. Leigh Street. As advertised in the *Richmond Planet*, January 6, 1900 and January 3, 1903.

inward and constructed their own society, with institutions and separate social and cultural life.”¹⁸³

Richmond blacks not only owned the neighborhood beauty salons, eateries, and funeral parlors. They also owned very large-scale establishments like benevolent and insurance companies, banks, and hotels. These as well as other black businesses were a means of self-help. Richmond blacks were not welcomed at most white Richmond business establishments, so their response to the closed doors of a racist society was to open their own doors.

Black people had a tradition of self-help that started prior to the Civil War in response to the hostility that they faced in America.¹⁸⁴ Life insurance was one of the largest, continuous businesses for blacks throughout the United States, which grew out of the organizations of self-help that started in the 1700's. These organizations offered relief for blacks in terms of sickness, health care, and death benefits. These businesses were very successful in large measure because blacks were discriminated against by white insurance companies. Richmond blacks were offered peace of mind for their families that came with insurance policies beginning in 1893 with the founding of Southern Aid and Insurance Company, which is the nation's oldest black life insurance company.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Litwack, 374.

¹⁸⁴ John Sibley Butler, *Entrepreneurship and Self-Help Among Black Americans: A Reconsideration of Race and Economics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 85.

¹⁸⁵ Southern Aid Society of Virginia 1873-1977, Record of (Accession 36805) The Library of Virginia, <http://www.lva.virginia.gov/findaid/36805.htm>.

Black businesses offered many opportunities to the black community. They offered goods and services to blacks who were discriminated against by white businesses and they were examples to show that blacks could support and maintain themselves. They also provided jobs for black men and women, which added to the growth of Richmond's black middle-class. Though blacks were making progress in business, progress in public education did not budge.

Jim Crow paralyzed the life of Southern blacks for decades. Though in restricted areas like Richmond's Jackson Ward some blacks were able to make a name for themselves, the major goal for black men and women was an education for their children. Jim Crow laws placed similar limits in the area of education as they did in most other aspects of life in the city. Though there were nineteenth century agencies like the Freedmen's Bureau that began erecting schools for blacks for the purpose of teaching black children immediately after the Civil War, efforts to offer blacks anything beyond the basics was something that the majority of Southern whites were not willing to do.¹⁸⁶

Many among the white Richmond middle and upper classes believed that providing an education to blacks would make them uppity and that they would not stay where they "belonged."¹⁸⁷ Black public schools were controlled by Jim Crow statutes which meant that blacks were only taught what whites wanted them to learn and lessons were taught from a "white perspective" showing that they were the superior race.¹⁸⁸ The state of Virginia had starkly drawn lines of race, class

¹⁸⁶ Anne Wallace Sharp, *A Dream Deferred: The Jim Crow Era* (New York: Thomas Gale, 2005), 32.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

and gender and scholar Pippa Holloway argues, “A fairly homogeneous group of white elite males worked to advance a shared economic and political agenda. They sought docile but productive workers, an economic system that perpetuated vast disparities in wealth, and the subordination of African Americans.”¹⁸⁹ Virginia’s white elite males had an enormous degree of control over the state, which included education.¹⁹⁰ Schools throughout the Jim Crow south reminded black people just how very little white society thought of them, how freedom was not what they thought it would be, and how low on the totem pole blacks were at the start of the twentieth century.

At the outset of the twentieth century black students in Richmond were receiving a public school education as mandated by the state of Virginia, but the standard of the education that they received was low compared to whites and was compromised by inadequate learning facilities. Black students often attended schools in small buildings with texts and materials that were in poor condition. In 1900, there were eight school houses for black children in Richmond with the seating capacity of 4,379. There were eleven schoolhouses for white students with a seating capacity of 7,076. Both black and white schools were overcrowded, but the learning environments for blacks were always the worst.¹⁹¹ The situation in Richmond mirrored much of what education was like for black children and teenagers in the south.

¹⁸⁹ Pippa Holloway, *Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia, 1920-1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 7.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Annual Report of the Superintendent of Schools for the year ending, July 31, 1900.

Historians have found that there were great disparities in early twentieth century education provided for black children compared to white children in the south. Robert A. Margo included findings from a report on the conditions of black schools compiled by Thomas Jesse Jones in 1917 that declared “Great progress had been made in improving the South’s schools for white children since the turn of the century.”¹⁹² This included teacher’s salaries, school term length, and buildings which Jones report noted that these improvements were not duplicated in black schools.¹⁹³ Scholar Henry Allen Bullock asserts that in moving toward the twentieth century for black students, “there were already signs that they would get an education inferior in quality to that offered whites.”¹⁹⁴ The money spent on the education of black students in the south slowly crept to a wide gap by the beginning of the century with only 12.2 percent of the total expenditures being spent on black students in the years 1914/1915 and though the budget had been increased the amount spent on black students had dropped to 1.7 percent by the 1929/1930 school year.¹⁹⁵ Leon Litwack writes “it hurt to know that states often used funds appropriated for black schools to improve and sustain the education of whites. In opting for racial segregation, the white south chose a dual school system it could not afford to support. With white and black schools competing for available funds, black schools were certain to be the principal victims.”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹² Margo, 19.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Henry Allen Bullock, *A History of Negro Education in the South: from 1619 to the present* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967), 176.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 179.

¹⁹⁶ Litwack, 106.

In Richmond, public schools for blacks had not changed at all from the conditions of the late nineteenth century. It is hard to imagine what it was like to go to a school house five days a week, whether for half or whole day instruction, and continue to be motivated to learn in buildings that were overcrowded or facilities that were overwhelmed with the smell of raw sewage. This was the story of Richmond Public Schools for blacks in the early to mid - 1900's. This may be one of the main reasons why some black parents sought out private schools for their children.

Efforts to put limits on the education of black children were state wide. In the early 1900's, Senator Camm Patterson of Buckingham proposed a bill that essentially would allow the two races to pay for their own schools according to how much they paid in taxes.¹⁹⁷ Since whites had better jobs compared to blacks, black schools would surely suffer. Ann Field Alexander writes "this greatly jeopardized the future of black education with the great possibility of schools being closed."¹⁹⁸ Patterson spewed hatred against the education of blacks by making statements such as "since the Civil War we have expended \$142,500,000 on the education of the Negroes. That money has been practically wasted" and "The attempt to educate the Negro has been a dismal failure. Our duty is to educate our own children before we educate aliens."¹⁹⁹ The negative statements from whites were not uncommon.

¹⁹⁷ *The Richmond Planet*, January 20, 1906.

¹⁹⁸ Ann Field Alexander, "Black Protest in the New South: John Mitchell, Jr., (1863-1929) and The Richmond Planet" (Ph. D diss., Duke University, 1973)

¹⁹⁹ *The Richmond Planet*, January 20, 1906.

The white newspapers let their stance against the education of blacks be known and as noted by historian Ann Fields Alexander “they took every opportunity available to show their distaste for Richmond’s black citizens.”²⁰⁰ In 1899 it was written in *The Richmond Dispatch* “Education and enfranchisement have had a deplorable effect upon the Negro’s morals.”²⁰¹ At the turn of the twentieth century the “*Dispatch*” continued to fire venom at blacks by printing “it is a serious problem whether with the Negro, taken as a race, the chief result of education has been the development in his mind of the idea that liberty is license.”²⁰² To add insult to injury the paper wrote what could have been on the minds of a good portion of Richmond’s whites by stating “many families distinctly prefer nurses and cooks who cannot read and write.”²⁰³ The newspaper has the power to shape the opinions of the people in the community, so *The Richmond Dispatch*’s demeaning words regarding black education surely aided in the limitations that black schools were given.

Richmond’s black newspaper put a positive spin on blacks and education which helped to keep blacks hopeful in spite of the odds against them. A 1910 article printed in *The Richmond Planet* advertised the twenty-third annual Conference of Negro Teachers and School Improvement League of Virginia that was to be held in Petersburg. The article noted that some of the leading educators in Virginia and North Carolina would be present, pointing out the goals

²⁰⁰ Alexander, “Black Protest in the New South,” 285.

²⁰¹ *The Richmond Dispatch*, May 13, 1899.

²⁰² *The Richmond Dispatch*, June 9, 1900.

²⁰³ Ibid.

of this organization which included “improving the educational, moral, industrial and religious life of the Virginia Negro.”²⁰⁴ With all of the negative attacks on the character of blacks it is evident that there were those who worked hard to disprove what whites thought of them. At this particular gathering it was written that the focus of this meeting was “to do all in our power to solicit the cooperation of white people on our behalf.”²⁰⁵ This was not an easy task and after over twenty years of this group gathering to bring about change in the mindset of whites, it would take almost three-quarters of the twentieth century for the education of black children to see noticeable improvement.

Schools that began instruction for Richmond blacks in the first quarter of the twentieth century did not have a hopeful outlook. At the beginning of the century the education of black children in Virginia as a whole was hanging by a thin thread. State monies were tight and at best if black students were given four months of primary education each year, any money that remained would go to help make the schools for whites better.²⁰⁶ In part one of Louis Brenner’s Honors Thesis titled “Negro Education in the City of Richmond,” section III is titled “The School System 1905-1915,” he noted the poor conditions of schools for blacks in Richmond, in which some were condemned, by pointing out “four schools were housed in two buildings making it necessary to run elementary schools on double shifts with Moore and Navy Hill schools convening from 8:15 am – 12:15 pm and

²⁰⁴ *The Richmond Planet*, June 18, 1910.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Alexander, “Black Protest in the South,” 291.

from 12:30 pm – 4:30 pm, Baker and Valley Schools convened.”²⁰⁷ All of the above mentioned schools were located in Richmond’s Jackson Ward where “at least three hundred children were excluded from the schools due to schools being condemned.”²⁰⁸

The city’s East and West End schools had its share of problems also. Two schools for blacks began instruction in 1906, the 29th Street School and Sidney School (colored). The 29th Street School was located at 1314 N. 29th street in the east end of the city and consisted of four classes.²⁰⁹ There was no information available that pinpoints how long the school operated, but it was reported “to not be suitable for school purposes, having no sewer and water connections.”²¹⁰ This was probably the case before the school opened, but obviously the person that designated properties for black students overlooked those small details. White officials did not seem to think that black children needed or deserved clean buildings. The Sidney School for coloreds, for instance, also opened in 1906. Located on the west side of the city at 1326 Blair Street, the Sidney School was characterized as a “shack” by the school superintendent and was condemned in 1920.²¹¹ Despite the inadequate and unsanitary learning conditions of the Sidney School it remained open for 14 years. Brenner found that “In only two schools were the building and furniture both reported to be in good condition.”²¹²

²⁰⁷ Brenner, 5. This information was gathered from the Annual Report of the Superintendent of the Public Schools of the City of Richmond, Fortieth, 1908-1909, 11.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 5.

²⁰⁹ Twenty-ninth Street

School,<http://web.richmond.k12.va.us/AboutRPS/RPSHistory/OW/TwentyNinthStreet.aspx>

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Sidney School (colored),<http://web.richmond.k12.va.us/AboutRPS/RPSHistory/FN/Sidneycolored.aspx>

²¹² Brenner, 6.

He goes on to note “for the session of 1909/1910 there was not a single school building for the elementary grades which met all the conditions of the state law, with reference to both light and ventilation.”²¹³ Richmond Public Schools were clearly a disappointment to the black community.

Though there were only a few parochial schools operating at the start of the twentieth century, there were a decent amount of black teachers offering private instruction in their homes. The directory for the city of Richmond for the year 1900 listed 21 black teachers that gave private, home instruction. Most of these teachers lived and taught in the Jackson Ward area like Thomas Wyatt, Charles Woodson, and Maria L. Smith. Kitty Snow found that in Jackson Ward “education was so precious that sacrifices were made willingly so that teachers and facilities were available for future generations and before public schools were made available in the early 1900’s, it was common practice to hold classes in private residences with casual arrangements of ages and schedules.”²¹⁴ There were even a few private teachers in the east end of Richmond including Samuel B. Steward and William Powell who taught at his home located on Littlepage at the corner of Friendship. These educational settings were small and not standard classrooms, but they were not overcrowded. Most black students of the public school system did not have their own desks anyway because of the overcrowding. In private schools the students had full day sessions and they were not greeted every school day with the smells that

²¹³ Brenner, 8. This information was gathered from the Annual Report of the Clerk of the School Board and Supervisor of School Property, 1906-1907.

²¹⁴ Snow, 23.

plagued the black public school locations. The teachers could give more personal attention to a small group of students and overall the children were not faced with the negative factors that came with the poor conditions of the Richmond Public Schools. Scholar Adam Fairclough states, “Hundreds of black teachers founded schools between 1880 and 1920. Scattered throughout the south, these private schools could be found in cities and towns, as well as the Piedmont, Piney Woods, and black belt of the rural hinterland.”²¹⁵

As the second decade of the twentieth century opened the number of black teachers who offered private instruction in their homes increased. Instruction offered in private homes was probably the norm, especially at the beginning of the twentieth century due to the fact that black teachers did not have the resources to rent building space or to build a school. Most private instruction was offered by teachers that lived in Jackson Ward, which at the time was called the “black belt” of Richmond. Mrs. Armstead ran a private school for blacks that was not listed in the city directory. Just like many of the others it was probably held in a church basement or at her private residence. Susan B. Lewis attended Mrs. Armstead’s private school in the early part of the twentieth century and enjoyed the years being taught by her.

Susan B. Lewis was born in Richmond in 1906. She resided in the Swansboro district, which was in the south side of the city. Her father was a waiter and her mother was a store owner. She was interviewed in 1991 at the

²¹⁵ Adam Fairclough, *A Class of their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 177-178.

age of 86 regarding her educational experiences in segregated Richmond, Virginia. Mrs. Armstead's was the first school that she attended.

Lewis told the interviewer that her experience at Mrs. Armstead's was "very good."²¹⁶ The teacher she had taught grades one through three in the same class and she noted that her teacher paid particular attention to all of the students and that they all really enjoyed attending Mrs. Armstead's school. This is a very important point. In small settings it was much easier for a teacher to focus on individual students' needs as opposed to the public school system at the time where the classrooms were filled beyond capacity, which would make it hard for a teacher to focus on any particular student. It is not clear why Lewis only went to Mrs. Armstead's for three years. She finished her primary education at Dunbar Elementary School, which was an all-black public school and she completed her secondary education at Armstrong High School in 1923, which was the only public high school for blacks in Richmond at the time. Dunbar School was located at 17th and Maury Streets which was probably not far from where Lewis lived as a child. The school was originally called Maury School (colored) and there was also a school by that name for whites.²¹⁷ The Dunbar School was annexed from Manchester in 1910 and eventually named after black poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar. There were three different buildings erected at this location beginning with the first school built in 1888. The next school structure was constructed in 1915, which would have been the building where Susan

²¹⁶ VCU Special Collection and Archives, African-American Richmond: Educational Segregation and Desegregation, Interview with Susan B. Lewis, 1992.

²¹⁷ Dunbar School, <http://web.richmond.k12.va.us/AboutRPS/RPSHistory/AE/Dunbar.aspx>

Lewis attended classes as a child. The third building was completed in 1950 well after Lewis had finished her education. According to the Richmond Public School records, for the school years 1910/1911 Dunbar School had 588 students enrolled in grades 1 through 7.²¹⁸ This was a few years before Lewis would have been in attendance, but we do not know if the enrollment numbers changed by the time that she started at Dunbar because no other numbers are available. Even if the numbers stayed the same, the school would have been fairly overcrowded. One can only assume that Susan Lewis's parents had a good reason for enrolling her at Dunbar.

Susan Lewis went on to Armstrong Normal School from 1923 to 1925, where she received her license to teach. She taught for a few years then decided to go to college. She attended Virginia State University and Virginia Union University, where she received a B.A. She went on to a career in teaching and retired in 1971 after forty years. Perhaps Mrs. Armstead was one of Lewis's early role models.

As private schools became more necessary due to the poor quality of the Richmond Public School system, Van de Vyver Catholic School expanded its rooms and seating capacity around 1910. Van de Vyver began as St. Francis Catholic School, a two-room venue that housed boys in one room and girls in the other.²¹⁹ The St. Francis School began instruction in 1885 and as the century closed was named St. John The Baptist Institute. In 1910 it was renamed Van

²¹⁸ Dunbar School, <http://web.richmond.k12.va.us/AboutRPS/RPSHistory/AE/Dunbar.aspx>

²¹⁹ "Catholic School Fills the Educational Needs of Blacks," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 1989.

de Vyver.²²⁰ Van de Vyver Catholic School was named for Augustine Van de Vyver, bishop of Richmond from 1888 to 1911.²²¹ The once two-room school grew to encompass an entire block facing 1st Street in Richmond's Jackson Ward district.

Van de Vyver took on many different names between 1900 and 1930 according to the listings in the city directory. In the early 1900's what would eventually become Van de Vyver was listed as St. Joseph's School and J.F. Cooley's Select School. By 1915, the school's title was Van de Vyver and by 1930, the same school was listed as Franciscan Sisters Parochial and High School, Parochial High School, and Van de Vyver Institute. All were located on North 1st Street with addresses ranging from 711-717. Throughout the various name changes this Catholic institution developed into what would become the largest private school for blacks in the city of Richmond and also an institution that filled in the huge gaps that were left by the inadequacies of the Richmond Public School system.

The conditions of Richmond Public Schools continued on the same track for most of the first half of the twentieth century with inadequate facilities and extreme overcrowding. The city's Barton Heights area had the Valley View School (Barton Heights Colored School) – small and plagued with water and sewerage issues from its origins in 1914, - Valley View did not close its doors until 1933, which meant students attended this school for almost twenty years in

²²⁰ "Catholic School Fills the Educational Needs of Blacks," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 1989.

²²¹ Ibid.

this poor condition.²²² Mid-town still offered the Navy Hill School that originally began instruction for blacks in 1869. Though a new 17 room brick school replaced the original structure in 1893, the school was shared with pupils from the Valley School which was condemned in 1909, thus for three years there was only half-day instruction for students to accommodate overcrowding.²²³ The schools for blacks in the Fulton area of Richmond not only had inadequate facilities, but kept changing locations. The Davis (Webster) School with its final location being listed as 4410 Northampton Street began as the Fulton School in 1899 on Orleans St, but then in 1906, moved to a two-room structure located at Nicholson St. near Government Road.²²⁴ The Fulton area at this time had five classes that met at different locations for the black students.²²⁵ The school with its final name change was listed as Webster School in the 1920-23 annual report and in 1920 the School Board Clerk reported that “a new building for a colored school in this district is badly needed.”²²⁶ By 1921, the enrollment at Webster was at a high of 350, so over 100 of these students were moved to George Mason School in Church Hill because there was simply no room for them.²²⁷ It was not until 1923 that black students of the Fulton area were finally given a new brick structure on Northampton Street and all of the classes were brought together.²²⁸ Quite a long journey, to say the least.

²²² Valley View School, <http://web.richmond.k12.va.us/AboutRPS/RPSHistory/OW/ValleyView.aspx>

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Davis (Webster) School, <http://web.richmond.k12.va.us/AboutRPS/RPSHistory/AE/Davis.aspx>

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid.

Former residents of Fulton were interviewed for the Historic Fulton Oral History Project and many of the interviewees shared their experiences growing up in this area, which included their educational experiences. Evelyn Bowman was interviewed in 2011 at the age of 89. She recalled attending Webster Davis School, probably in the early to mid- 1930's. Ms. Bowman said that she was inspired by her 5th grade teacher, Ms. Cumber, but she didn't neglect to mention that "we had hand-me-down books."²²⁹ Books that were written in with torn or missing pages was what Richmond Public Schools had to offer black children because, unfortunately, they were not a priority. Ida Ellett was also interviewed for this project. Ms. Ellett started at Webster Davis School in the late 1920's. Ms. Ellett recalled her mother sending her off to enroll in school, but she did not get accepted the first year when she was six, so she started the next year at age seven.²³⁰ Ms. Ellett admitted that going to school for the first time was a scary experience for her. She stated "I remember going off staying quite a bit of the day and coming back home. I don't know the details but I did not get in that day."²³¹ This may have meant that Ms. Ellett was unable to enroll in school the first year due to overcrowding, which was not unusual for public schools for blacks. Webster Davis was the only Richmond Public School for blacks in the Fulton area of the city and in the words of Ms. Ellett, "at the time only a few kids left the neighborhood to go to another school. So most kids in Fulton never went

²²⁹ VCU Digital Collection, Historic Fulton Oral History Project – Evelyn Bowman,3, <http://dig.library.vcu.edu/cdm/search/collection/ful>.

²³⁰ VCU Digital Collection, Historic Fulton Oral History Project – Ida Ellett, 3, <http://dig.library.vcu.edu/cdm/search/collection/ful>.

²³¹ Ibid.

to a school after Webster Davis, after 5th grade.”²³² Public schools for blacks at the time Ms. Ellett enrolled in elementary school were very small in size, so overcrowding was the order of the day. Also, because whites felt that blacks did not need more than an elementary education, middle schools were not usually on every side of town. If a student wanted to go to middle school they would have to find a way to get there because the school system did not provide transportation for black students. Things were the same for black students all over the city.

The black students in Church Hill only moved once, but after four decades things were not settled. George Mason was the primary school in the area starting with a four-room frame building located on 29th Street. This building was superseded by a six-room brick building in 1888, with both buildings known as the East End School until its name was changed to George Mason in 1909.²³³ The school continued its growth in the 1920’s with a twelve-room addition, but even with more space the school remained overcrowded in the 1920’s and generally offered only part-time instruction.²³⁴ The above is a story of school instability and inadequacy at the primary level, which was usually grade 1 through 6 or 7. The hope of a high school education did not come for some black students at all and for those who were able to attend high school the road was not easy.

²³² VCU Digital Collection, Historic Fulton Oral History Project – Ida Ellett, 3, <http://dig.library.vcu.edu/cdm/search/collection/ful>.

²³³ Mason (George) School, <http://web.richmond.k12.va.us/AboutRPS/RPsHistory/FN/Mason.aspx>

²³⁴ Ibid.

Armstrong High School was the first Richmond Public high school for black students with its origins around 1918. Armstrong High School, named after noted educator and founder of Hampton Institute, Gen. Samuel D. Armstrong, was originally the Colored Normal School that was built in 1867 to train black teachers.²³⁵ The school building originated at 12th and Leigh Sts, but then was condemned in 1909 and moved to 21 E. Leigh. The high and normal schools were separated in 1917.²³⁶

The first public high school for black children was riddled with the same problems that other black public schools faced, overcrowding. Between 1915 and 1920 the enrollment at Armstrong grew so rapidly that it was impossible to house all of the students that applied for admission.²³⁷ Public high schools for Richmond blacks was some thirty plus years overdue and when there was finally a high school for black students, everyone wanted to attend. First and foremost, this was because high school was not readily available before this point. Armstrong was only one of three public high schools for blacks in the entire state of Virginia at this time, so one can surmise that students might have been trying to attend this school from other areas outside of the city.

Armstrong High School moved to a new 3-story building and was described by the school superintendent as modern and sanitary with a library and containing the first lunch room in a colored school.²³⁸ By 1936, reports indicated

²³⁵ Armstrong High School, <http://web.richmond.k12.va.us/AboutRPS/RPSHistory/AE/Armstrong.aspx>

²³⁶ 1918 was the first year that Richmond's first black high school began instruction.

²³⁷ Armstrong High School, <http://web.richmond.k12.va.us/AboutRPS/RPSHistory/AE/Armstrong.aspx>

²³⁸ Ibid.

that Armstrong was on double-shift for the fifth year, meaning students were only being offered half-day instruction.²³⁹

Ida Ellett attended Armstrong High School. She had to travel from her neighborhood in Fulton to the Jackson Ward area of the city to make this a reality. During her interview she pointed out first and foremost, “all the kids in the city of Richmond had to go to that school, if all the kids went to high school, it wouldn’t have worked out.”²⁴⁰ This made it clear that some black students did not go to high school, but also, there were so many students that should have gone, but there simply was not enough room to accommodate them. Armstrong was not only a school for blacks in the city of Richmond, but it was a school for anyone in the state that could make a way to get there because high schools were not made available in the state of Virginia. Ms. Ellett also pointed out the double shift system stating, “The whole 8th – 9th grade went from 12-4 and 10th – 11th went from 8-12.”²⁴¹ When asked about her feelings regarding the school being run on shifts she said “they were glad to have a school to go to.”²⁴² Richmond Public Schools did not offer black students much. The students made the most of what they had because they really wanted to get an education which for many reasons was not easy. Ms. Ellet had to quit school for two years because her family did not have the money to pay for transportation to get her to

²³⁹ Armstrong High School, <http://web.richmond.k12.va.us/AboutRPS/RPSHistory/AE/Armstrong.aspx>

²⁴⁰ VCU Digital Collection, Historic Fulton Oral History Project – Ida Ellett, 6.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid.

school and provide food and clothing.²⁴³ Luckily, she did go back to finish high school.

Maggie Walker High School for blacks was opened on Lombardy Street, not very far from Armstrong, in 1938.²⁴⁴ The city's black student population only had one public high school for almost twenty years and when Maggie Walker finally opened its doors for instruction it was immediately overcrowded from the very first session.²⁴⁵ So what could parents do? Richmond Public Schools were lacking in so many ways. If they wanted their children to receive a solid elementary and high school education, with a full days instruction in a clean and stable facility they needed to at least investigate other options. These options were the home of Pattie Merritt at 627 N. 5th Street in 1900,²⁴⁶ the homes of Daniel L. Davis, Jr. and Ruth V. Evans in the 1920's,²⁴⁷ Dungee's Private School in 1940,²⁴⁸ and Van de Vyver Institute which served black Richmond all of these years and beyond.

Van de Vyver, during its "hey day" served thousands of black students.²⁴⁹ Local historian Dr. Francis Merrill Foster wrote an article about Van de Vyver, published in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, titled 'Catholic School Filled Educational Needs of Blacks.'²⁵⁰ This is exactly what Van de Vyver and other

²⁴³ VCU Digital Collection, Historic Fulton Oral History Project – Ida Ellett, 7.

²⁴⁴ Walker (Maggie L) High School,
<http://web.richmond.k12.va.us/AboutRPS/RPSHistory/OW/Walker.aspx>

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ 1900 Richmond City Directory

²⁴⁷ 1920 Richmond City Directory

²⁴⁸ 1940 Richmond City Directory

²⁴⁹ "Catholic School Fills the Educational Needs of Blacks," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 1989.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

private schools for blacks did, they filled a very important need. Van de Vyver was the hallmark of black Richmond education providing options for black students during a moment in the city's history where the targets of racial injustice included the education of black children.

Van de Vyver ran the gamut of education at different points in time throughout its existence, offering education from kindergarten through high school and from trades to foreign languages. According to historian Francis Foster, "in Van de Vyvers first half century, more than 3,500 pupils were trained in conventional high school classes and trades."²⁵¹ Van de Vyver provided opportunities for a high school education for black students in the earliest years of the twentieth century when there was no public school available to them and also to those students in the 1920's, 30's, and 40's that were either unable to enroll in Armstrong High School because it was overcrowded or for those who enrolled in public high school but their parents wanted them to have something better than a half-day education. Van de Vyver is not given due credit for the huge role that the institution and its teachers played in the education of Richmond's black children.

Van de Vyver offered a well-rounded education. For a portion of its existence it offered trades like dressmaking, tailoring, nursing, printing and auto mechanics, but overall it was initially established to give black students a sound educational foundation. Students enrolled in kindergarten through high school were

²⁵¹ "Catholic School Fills the Educational Needs of Blacks," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 1989.

instructed in reading, writing, arithmetic and Latin. Along with doing their best academically, the students were expected to be paragons of virtue and good manners.

For the first half of the twentieth century private schools for blacks in Richmond filled a huge gap left by the public school system. Private schools were not for everybody but they were very much a need on every level. Richmond Public Schools for black students well into the twentieth century held classes in buildings that were not fit for human occupancy because they were dilapidated and unclean. The Superintendent for Richmond Public Schools reported at the end of the school year for 1940, that Elba School, a black elementary school should be abandoned because “it has no auditorium, no basement, no cafeteria, and in all respects unsuited for modern uses.”²⁵² The schools were always overcrowded and black students were always given leftovers from the white schools whether it was textbooks or the school houses themselves. Black students were always given second best. To add to all of these negatives, because of overcrowding, many black schools only offered half-day instruction. All of the aforementioned made private schools necessary for black students if their parents wanted them to have something better than the average offerings of the public school system.

²⁵² Annual Report of the Superintendent of the Public Schools of the City of Richmond, Virginia for the Scholastic Year Ending June 30, 1940.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

It was clear from the outset that Virginia's mandate for public education for blacks and whites was "separate but in no way equal." From the very beginning black school houses were located in areas that were at close proximity to jails and dumps. The environments were filthy and the buildings used for educational purposes seemed to be fit only for condemnation. Starting at the very first public school for blacks in Richmond, the learning environments were an endless list of buildings that housed students for instruction, but sooner or later, would end up being condemned. Private instruction as an alternative was conducted in homes or churches, was often a far better learning environment than being positioned within hearing distance from a jail.

The public education of black children in Richmond, Virginia paralleled how their parents lived and worked. Black people lived in the worst neighborhoods in the city and if they were lucky enough to find work it was always the jobs that no one else wanted to accept. Public schools for blacks proved to be the same, the worst conditions available.

From the earliest Richmond Public Schools in the late 1800's, it was evident that Richmond black students did not have the same chance as their white peers of gaining a solid foundational education. The south did not change very much after slavery ended. Racist whites wanted to keep blacks in a subservient position and restricting their educational opportunities supported that goal. The

unacceptable conditions of the school houses for black students and the fact that students were piled into such cramped quarters in the late nineteenth century set the tone for what was to come for the first five decades of the twentieth century.

Public school overcrowding was a problem not only in Richmond, but all over the South. How could one be given an adequate education with students practically sitting on top of each other? In *The Color of their Skin*, historian Robert A. Pratt asserts, “most black teachers agreed that the greatest problem facing them under the dual system was the shortage of classroom space.”²⁵³ Richmond Public School teachers echoed Pratt’s findings. Likely not everyone could hear the teacher clearly because there were so many students, and there were never enough desk and supplies to go around. In many cases public schools in Richmond had to do double shifts, which lasted until about 1965. Private schools for blacks were not able to save every black student from this type of set-up, but fortunately they were able to offer a full days’ instruction to black students.

There was also a large disparity in the state monies that were spent to educate black students versus white. This disparity was not an issue in private schools. The differences between black and white public schools grew as the twentieth century progressed. In the south in 1900 for every \$2.00 that was spent on educating black children, \$3.00 was spent on white children. In 1930, the numbers were much more drastic. For every \$7.00 that was spent on an

²⁵³ Robert A. Pratt, *The Color of their Skin: Education and Race in Richmond, Virginia, 1954-1989* (Charlottesville: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 15.

individual white child's education, only \$2.00 was spent on a black child. In the south as a whole, for the school year 1935/36, \$37.87, on average, was spent on educating white children while black children, on average, only received \$13.09.

Black schools in Richmond were far inferior to white schools in terms of teachers' salaries, size of buildings, available facilities, and overall quality. White schools were structurally superior to black schools and black schools did not have the same type of facilities common to white schools such as science labs, athletic fields, and auditoriums. Basic school materials like books, desks, and maps were given to black schools after they were discarded by whites, which meant that they were outdated and in extremely poor condition.

As the twentieth century opened doors to new opportunities to whites, blacks were still at the lowest level of society, which included education. Even as a small percentage of blacks made their mark as entrepreneurs this did not change southern white society's perception of blacks as a whole. If blacks wanted to excel it was clear that they had to create their own opportunities.

Women like Martha Dawson are exceptions to the rule for the era in which she grew up in. Most African-American women that were born in the first third of the twentieth century like Martha Dawson, worked in some type of subservient manner such as cleaning the homes of white people, working as a nanny taking care of white children, or in most rural areas, working in the fields. Martha Dawson was an anomaly. She saw a different vision for her life, unlike the majority of black women of her time.

Martha Dawson did not attend school in a building that was fit to be condemned. She attended Van de Vyver Catholic School. At the conference where she shared her story, she spoke so fondly of Van de Vyver, which suggests that this private school for blacks was not only something that she was proud of, but it was also an inspiration in her life. Her parents may not have known that she would earn her doctorate and that her career path would eventually lead her to becoming a college provost, but I'm sure that they chose to send her to a private school with hopes that it would provide her with a well-balanced education and that it would nurture her spirit so she could become the confident women that I had the opportunity to meet. Richmond Public Schools at the time that Martha Dawson was a young girl greeted black students on a daily basis with the message saying "you are second best." Private schools like Van de Vyver said "welcome."

Private schools for blacks and black teachers offering instruction in their homes answered the call. The first private schools for blacks in Richmond began at least three years before the state of Virginia mandated public education for black and white students. The need for black education was great and Richmond Public Schools did not do the best job of filling those needs so private schools for blacks were in place as an option for parents that were seeking more for their children than what the public system was offering. Private education came at a cost. Adam Fairclough asserts, "Private school education imposed an enormous financial burden upon the students and their families with tuition fees,

books, boarding costs and decent clothes.”²⁵⁴ Leon Litwack writes, “Sufficient numbers of black families were able to afford the tuition to sustain the institutions.”²⁵⁵ It was probably a lot easier for middle-class blacks to send their children to a private school, but poorer families surely made sacrifices to get their children a good education. Private schools for blacks were available for the first half of the twentieth century. They were an alternative. They were very much needed and very much a part of black Richmond’s history that has been given little attention.

²⁵⁴ Fairclough, *A Class of their Own*, 160.

²⁵⁵ Litwack, 65.

APPENDIX A

BLACK PRIVATE SCHOOL TEACHERS (HOME INSTRUCTION) 1900²⁵⁶

1. Thomas Wyatt, 1118 St. James Street
2. Charles Woodson, 908 St. James Street
3. Maria L. Smith, 605 North 1st Street
4. Sally Boisseau, 746 North 3rd Street
5. Mary W. Roper, 17 West Leigh Street
6. Emma R. Roper, 17 West Leigh Street
7. Nannie G. Robinson, 217 East 11th Street
8. Samuel B. Steward, 2818 P Street

²⁵⁶ Richmond City Directory, 1900.

APPENDIX B

BLACK PRIVATE SCHOOL TEACHERS (HOME INSTRUCTION) 1910²⁵⁷

1. Maggie L. Bailey, 1102 North 6th Street
2. Mabel O. Liggin, 507 Mitchell Street
3. Mary Tharps, 305 College Street
4. Fannie Young, 422 West Baker Street
5. Sarah Young, 422 West Baker Street

²⁵⁷ Richmond City Directory, 1910.

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