

## Book Review

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Hilary Green, *Educational Reconstruction: African American Schools in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

By Justin McPherson

The topic of African American education in the American South has received a great deal of scholarship. Countless works have been dedicated to examining the South's obstruction of *Brown v. Board of Education*, many of which study the continued impact that obstructionism had on the education system. Fewer authors focus on the initial gains of African Americans in the field of education. *Educational Reconstruction: African American Schools in the Urban South, 1865-1890*, examines the first twenty years of African American work in state funded education. By looking at this period, the book attempts to fill the gap in academic material on the earliest struggles for quality in schools. The author, Dr. Hilary N. Green, is a professor and historian at the University of Alabama. She has done other work on the time period, as well as the African American experience during that time. Dr. Green's primary research interests are "...race, class, and gender in African American history, the American Civil War, Reconstruction, Civil War Memory, the US South, 19th Century America, and the Black Atlantic."<sup>1</sup> She works as an Associate Professor of History in the Department of Gender and Race Studies and serves as the co-program director of the African American Studies program at the University of Alabama.

Green uses the title of the book, "Educational Reconstruction," as a term to discuss the process as well as the period the book covers. The term can best be compared to other historical terminology such as Congressional Reconstruction. "Educational Reconstruction" effectively summarizes the 1865 to 1890 period beginning with the end of the Civil War and concluding with the lifespan, through its failure to pass, of the Blair Education Bill. If passed, the proposed bill would have secured federal funding for public education. The bill was passed by the Senate on three separate occasions and was endorsed by the President. Despite its early success, it died in the House of Representatives each time resulting in a failure to secure federal funding for the new system of public education.

*Educational Reconstruction: African American Schools in the Urban South, 1865-1890* asks the question: "how did urban African Americans and their supporters create, develop, and sustain a system of education during the transition from slavery to freedom?"<sup>2</sup> Green focuses on two southern cities, Richmond, Virginia, and Mobile, Alabama, to narrow the focus and draw a comparison between education and the very idea of emancipation. Southern Black citizens viewed education as the means to upward mobility and the ability to take full benefit of their freedom. In Richmond and Mobile, Black citizens rallied around the schoolhouse as a beacon of freedom. These citizens stood as defenders of the concepts of free public education in the face of all challengers. Green frames this defense as the first step in a community identity as well as the training ground for the education-based challenges that came after.

The book is divided into four sections as well as an epilogue that expands further the initial question. Green begins each of these sections with a chapter that discusses the progress in Richmond and concludes each with a comparative analysis as to the progress in Mobile. Green compiled primary sources from the time period to analyze activists' progress and communities' opinions of that progress. Primary sources range from newspapers, speeches, letters between people directly and indirectly involved, as well as the records taken from the religious and secular outreach groups that operated during the time. The outreach group records were extremely common in Richmond. Green attributes this to the desire of northern outreach

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Hilary N. Green, *Dr. Green – About Me*: <https://hgreen.people.ua.edu/>

<sup>2</sup> Green, *Educational Reconstruction*, 11.

groups to convert the formal confederate capital city into a bastion of advancement. Green notes that when charities and outreach groups reached Richmond the work had started without them.

It is one of the key assumptions of the book that the Black community saw education as a way of legitimizing and protecting their community. This point is argued using primary source documents that discuss the goal of creating an educated citizenry as well as a middle-class cadre capable of self-advocating and using electoralism and more social means to achieve their goals. The white community of Richmond at large was against the education of African Americans. They also resented the growing number of black education professionals fighting for teaching and administration positions in African American schools. Green discusses this at length as positions in African American schools were commonly given to white educators that failed to pass requirements to teach in white schools. While there was some success as a result of these struggles, and Black schools saw both Black teachers and Black principals, schools reverted to their previous habits following the Democratic rise to power after Reconstruction. Ultimately, the violence and arson in Mobile was not found Richmond. The book claims that this is because the Whites in Richmond were primarily concerned with getting Northerners out. Violence would only encourage them to stay.

The expectations in Mobile were different, because their diversity was an added layer to the obvious difficulties of building an education system in the Deep South. Mobile's Creole population benefitted from the Adams-Onís Treaty, which meant that any African American in Alabama claiming French ancestry would be treated and counted as full citizens. This created a large divide between the experiences of Creole and non-Creole Mobilians of color. The Creole population, sometimes referred to as the "Treaty Population," did not see their education restricted even after the Nat Turner Rebellion led to stricter laws about education in the Black community. Green claims that the division led the Creole population to desire a place in the Antebellum South's racial hierarchy. While this was a barrier, the white population's indiscriminate discrimination forged an alliance that led to the advancement of public education. The white community utilized violence in an attempt to intimidate the communities of color in Mobile, but it instead served as an issue that united the communities of color. It is important to note, as Green did, that Mobilians gathered as soon as they were able and were not lacking for purpose. One of the most powerful images the book conjures is that of the Black community of Mobile gathering in 1865. Just eleven days after Confederate Troops had surrendered the city the community sang out: "Free workmen in the cotton-field, And in the sugar cane; Free children in the common school, With nevermore a chain. Then rally, Black Republicans— Aye, rally! We are free! We've waited long to sing the song— The song of liberty."<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, Mobile saw many advancements counteracted as Reconstruction ended and troops were removed. Green draws blame to the lack of unity as well as the indifference or, in some cases, obstruction from the Alabama state government.

The scope of Green's analysis opens at the epilogue of the book. This section is dedicated to the Blair Education Bill. Green claims that the death of this bill marks the end of the Educational Reconstruction period. The book also examines the differences in opinions that led to the defeat of the bill. Green points to the success of the Black community as the first aspect that led to defeat. In the epilogue, Green offers the success of black education as leading to the cooling off of northern resolve. With the school systems having made their achievements, white Northerners grew less concerned with the continuing support. Additionally, white supporters took what Green calls a "convenient off ramp," by aligning themselves with the Booker T. Washington philosophy. This philosophy was not widely supported by the Richmond or Mobile communities, as it focused more on industrial training than higher levels of education. The support that the cities were used to receiving was reallocated from a primarily liberal arts education to an industrial one. Green also notes the loss of support from Blair himself. W. E. B. Du Bois and other prominent members of the civil rights movement lamented the huge setbacks to the movement caused by these developments.

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<sup>3</sup> Green, *Educational Reconstruction*, 65.

After explaining these developments, Dr. Green holds to the book's central themes writing: "As race relations worsened, education-activists and other middle-class reformers were essential in preparing a new generation for future challenges and social mobility, advocating on behalf of the less-educated African Americans, and promoting a vision of freedom, citizenship, and equality still centered on education. They firmly felt that education remained the best vehicle."<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, Educational Reconstruction failed for the same reason many other movements fail: the Republican legislature in Congress was unable to force legislation to support the Black electorate. By the 1890s, the progressive plans had been fully abandoned by the Republican party at large, as many viewed the progress as good enough, and others did not care enough to have an opinion.

This book attempts to answer the question, "how did urban African Americans and their supporters create, develop, and sustain a system of education during the transition slavery to freedom?"<sup>5</sup> Green effectively answers that question with in-depth primary sources and analysis of postwar urban cities Richmond and Mobile. By doing this, Dr. Green provides a historiography of an era that has limited academic work written about it, effectively chronicling advancements in public school education as well as the role the federal government plays in it. A valuable feature of this work is the way it places much of the emphasis on the communities of color. Much written paints this era of education as white Northerners teaching hopeless communities the basic concepts of literacy. Green dissolves this myth by drawing on primary sources of the Freedmen's Bureau. These show a community that was willing and prepared to take charge of their own education. If there is a second focus of this work, it is to show how newly emancipated free communities saw education as a tool to establishing themselves and protecting their futures. With *Educational Reconstruction: African American Schools in the Urban South, 1865-1890*, Green successfully shows the flawed government actions and the resilience of the communities in the process of becoming equal citizens.

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<sup>4</sup> Green, *Educational Reconstruction*, 322.

<sup>5</sup> Green, *Educational Reconstruction*, 11.