

*Aspects of Black Religious
and Educational Development in
Lexington, Virginia, 1840-1928*

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WRITING in the *Negro History Bulletin* in 1939, Carter G. Woodson, a noted black educator, stated, "A definitive history of the Negro Church . . . would leave practically no phase of the history of the Negro in America untouched."¹ This quote provided great inspiration for me as I searched for a place to begin the task of compiling a history of black people in the Lexington area. The history which follows is by no means complete but represents a mere scratch of the surface.

The churches in Lexington which date from ante-bellum days all have histories which included attempts at slave evangelization. While such evan-

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1. Carter G. Woodson, "The Negro Church, an All-Comprehending Institution," *The Negro History Bulletin* 3 (October 1939): 7.

gelization seemed popular throughout the South, slaveholders alternated from support to nonsupport for these endeavors to bring the gospel to slaves. At times owners were uncomfortable with the idea of religious slaves. At other times owners felt more frightened of slaves who were not religious.

The period following the American Revolution marked a time when evangelists blanketed the South and pursued slaves as a source of new Christian converts. In Virginia, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists each demonstrated concern for the slaves' souls. Slave Sunday schools and slave membership in white churches became fairly common during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.²

The Sabbath School

A particularly religious man, Thomas J. (later General "Stonewall") Jackson worked hard to evangelize slaves of the Lexington area. Reorganizing Dr. William Henry Ruffner's Sabbath School for slaves in 1856, Jackson and other prominent white Presbyterians met on Sunday afternoons to teach the gospel to slaves. In spite of the famous Confederate general's role, detailed records of the Sunday school no longer exist. Except for Colonel J. T. L. Preston, Margaret Junkin Preston, and Anna Morrison Jackson, the names of the other Sunday school teachers have been lost.

Although this school has received considerable attention from historians because of Stonewall Jackson, slave Sunday schools existed in other areas of the South. Unfortunately, little is known about the school's impact on the slaves, or of the obviously dedicated teachers who helped to make it a success. Additionally, other area churches made similar efforts to evangelize slaves, but those efforts failed to receive the attention given to the Jackson Sunday School.

The earliest Presbyterian attempt to evangelize slaves in Virginia began in 1750 under the leadership of the Reverend Samuel Davies of Hanover County. "Since part of the Christian's duty was to read and understand the Bible, Davies devoted considerable time to the task of teaching the Negroes how to read."³ Uninhibited by later laws which prohibited teaching slaves to read, Davies enjoyed a successful ministry.

An early example of local evangelization occurred in 1799, when the Lexington Presbytery admitted the Reverend John Chavis to its pulpit. A

2. Milton C. Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelism* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1975), pp. 30-45.

3. George William Pilcher, "Samuel Davies and the Instruction of Negroes in Virginia," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 74 (July 1966): 294.

North Carolina free black, he had been called as a missionary to local blacks. The Presbyterian church required a well-educated clergy, and Chavis had studied at both Princeton University and Washington College.⁴

Ollinger Crenshaw also cited other early attempts to evangelize local slaves. He noted that John Erskine, a black preacher, appeared in the pulpit of Lexington Presbyterian Church in 1819, and that black and white children attended a local school together in the 1820s.⁵ Baptism of slaves at Lexington's Grace Episcopal Church (later Robert E. Lee Memorial Episcopal Church) appears in church records as beginning in 1843. The list of communicants for April 1, 1852, included the name Susan, "a colored woman." These same records list black baptisms, confirmations, recipients of Holy Communion, and burials.⁶

Dr. William Henry Ruffner and the Reverend Tucker Lacy established the original Sabbath School for Slaves at Lexington Presbyterian Church in 1845. It served about one hundred pupils. Ruffner, a stalwart clergyman and president of Washington College, preferred evangelization of slaves to American missionary efforts abroad. After he left the area in 1848, his Sabbath school languished until reestablished by the pragmatic Thomas J. Jackson in 1856.⁷

In the formative stages of the Jackson school, Major Jackson visited all of the principal slaveholders and encouraged them to send their servants to the school. He then approached the more influential slaves and invited them to come to the school or to send their children. At the actual organizational meeting, Jackson informed the slaves that he had spoken to their owners, and the owners approved his plan. He admonished them to attend regularly, though he explained that the owners would not make attendance mandatory.⁸ In order to insure good attendance, Jackson often visited the owners of regulars who had been absent to make inquiries. In addition he had slips printed with the names of each pupil on which he made out monthly reports. The reports mainly served to reinforce the slaves' attendance.⁹

4. G. C. Shaw, *John Chavis, 1763-1838* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Vail-Ballou Press, 1931), pp. 16, 26.

5. Ollinger Crenshaw, *General Lee's College* (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 76.

6. Records of the Robert E. Lee Memorial Episcopal Church, Lexington, Va.

7. Joseph B. Earnest, Jr., *The Religious Development of the Negro in Virginia* (Charlottesville, Va.: Michie Company, 1914).

8. Margaret Junkin Preston, "The General's Colored Sunday School," *Sunday School Times*, September 3, 1887.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Sabbath school sessions began promptly at three o'clock with Jackson saying the opening prayer. Usually, more than a dozen young white teachers were present for the opening prayer, but attendance of students and teachers both seemed to vary.¹⁰ A strongly worded newspaper article indicated the attendance problem and Jackson's disfavor for voluntary attendance.

To us it seems natural that everyone should wish their young servants to attend this school; if not for reason of their welfare, at least it prevents their mischief. Now those wishing their servants to attend must see to it that they do come—"compel them to come in"—if not we may expect small attendance. This school has not only been badly attended, for so large a place as Lexington, but also the teachers are too few for the numbers that do come.¹¹

Signed "Veritas," the article also charged the other churches with complacency. The Presbyterian writer seemed to challenge teachers from other churches to join the effort.

We fear that other denominations take no interest in this work, because they consider it as a Presbyterian School. To such we would say, that they should bear in mind that this is a monopoly among Presbyterians because they "faithful among the faithless found", receive no help from other churches.¹²

Aside from attendance concerns, three references indicated that the Sabbath school may have conflicted with state laws governing the religious instruction of Negroes. No problem would have existed if the school had limited itself to oral instruction provided by white teachers. All were white, and Margaret Junkin Preston wrote: "The instruction was almost wholly oral, as only a few of the older servants had been taught to read."¹³ Although she left open the possibility of a legal problem, Junkin did not elaborate.

An article signed by G.H.M., a former substitute teacher at the Sabbath school, reported: "Some of the Bourbon Aristocracy criticized his [Jackson's] action, and even went so far as to threaten prosecution."¹⁴ J. D. Davidson wrote of an encounter in front of the County Courthouse which involved Jackson, Colonel S. McD. Reid (clerk of the Court), William McLaughlin (an attorney), and himself. Reid told Jackson that he had examined the statute, conferred with the commonwealth's attorney, and

10. G. H. M., "Stonewall Jackson in Lexington," *Southern Historical Society Papers* 9 (January-December 1881): 43.

11. "The Colored Sunday School," *Lexington Gazette*, November 8, 1860.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Preston, "The General's Colored Sunday School."

14. G. H. M., "Stonewall Jackson in Lexington," p. 44.

determined that the Sunday school constituted an unlawful assembly.¹⁵

Although Margaret Junkin Preston reported that the Sunday school attempted to teach its pupils to read after the Civil War, evidence strongly suggests that the teachers taught reading before the war. In an 1858 letter, Jackson described the format of the school and mentioned a system of rewards. For scholarship, he rewarded slaves with "testaments" or Bibles.¹⁶ The letter also reported an enrollment of ninety-one students and a school-like atmosphere. Teachers kept roll-books in which they noted the pupils' knowledge of the lessons. Examinations and grades were also given.

Lylburn Liggin Downing, born on May 3, 1862, in the household of Governor James McDowell, became the best-known black person associated with the Jackson Sunday School, which continued to operate after the war. Once public school became available to blacks in Lexington, he enrolled. After earning a degree in sacred theology, he served as pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in Roanoke for forty-two years. Although he knew Stonewall Jackson only from stories, Jackson made such a lasting impression on him that he designed a stained-glass window commemorating the Confederate general. Erected in his Roanoke church, the window was restored in 1980.

John Alexander Holmes also attended the Sunday school. He later joined the Methodist Episcopal Church and became a prominent minister. Holmes married Sarah Bollin, and one son, Dr. Dwight Oliver Wendell Holmes, served as president of Morgan State College in Baltimore.

Margaret Junkin Preston reported that three Negro churches had formed in Lexington by 1887, and the Presbyterians decided to permit the Sunday schools of those churches to absorb the Negro children.¹⁷ Two of the three Negro churches formed still exist in Lexington today.

Randolph Street Methodist Church

Due to their notorious anti-slavery stance, the Methodists met difficulty when establishing ministries to Southern slaves in the late eighteenth century. Methodist conferences regularly made declarations against slavery, but the church softened its position by 1816. The Methodist Compromise deemed slaveholders ineligible for membership in states having laws which

15. J. D. Davidson, "Stonewall Jackson in Lexington, Virginia," *Southern Historical Society Papers* 9 (January-December 1881): 45, 46.

16. Thomas J. Jackson to Professor J. L. Campbell, June 7, 1958. Photocopy in author's possession.

17. Preston, "The General's Colored Sunday School."

provided for emancipation and freedom.¹⁸ Coincidentally, the newly organized white Methodists purchased land for a church on Randolph Street in 1816. The property had been owned by Henry McClung.¹⁹

The Methodists in the South often designated black men to serve in ministerial roles called *exhorters*. After 1832 exhorters could only preach in the presence of "respectable" white observers. Licensed at the first meeting of the Methodist Conference for the Lexington Circuit in May of 1832, Isaac Liggins preached to area blacks on the topic of migration to Liberia. Liggins seemed to reflect the views of some of Lexington's white citizenry who still identified with the Virginia Colonization Society eighteen years later.²⁰

By 1864 the white and black members of Lexington's Methodist Church separated. The white members moved into another building on Jefferson Street, while the blacks remained in the Randolph Street building. The Washington Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church accepted the black congregation into its membership.

Although the white members left the Randolph Street building to the black members, its ownership remained an unresolved issue. In 1887 a church court in Atlantic City assigned the church officially to the blacks because they had remained in attendance. The white Methodists won control of the cemetery in the rear of the church, but instead of claiming it, they only removed a few of the bodies. After these removals, cemetery ownership reverted to the black Methodists.

In 1883 the congregation built a parsonage across the street from the church. About 1892 they tore down the frame church building and replaced it with the present brick structure. A black Methodist layman, Richard R. Jones, served as the architect and contractor of the new church. Jones lived in a nearby frame house on Nelson Street. During construction of the church, the congregation worshipped in the carpentry shop adjacent to his home.²¹

In 1917, during the pastorate of Reverend E. A. Haynes, the congregation added the rear portion of the building and installed a pipe organ. Andrew Carnegie, the noted philanthropist, donated half of the cost of the organ. Fire damaged the church in August 1929 and completely demol-

18. Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelization*, p. 38.

19. Albert M. Cupp, *A History of Methodism in Rockbridge County, Virginia* (N.p., 1955), p. 12.

20. *Lexington Gazette*, October 10, 1850, p. 2.

21. Cupp, *History of Methodism in Rockbridge County*, pp. 115-16.

ished the steeple, but a restoration had been completed before the year's end.²²

The white Methodists joined the Methodist Episcopal Church South over the issue of slavery. The Northern church had identified with the abolitionist cause. The black congregation's ability to survive on their own proved one of the most remarkable features of the separation. Formed into a strong community, they persevered through their faith.

In 1947 Hugh Williams lamented that so much of the church's history had only been committed to memory. He recalled the church yard during his boyhood as a neglected place with "dilapidated fences around many of the family burial plots."²³ More recently M. Leroy Richardson and later Margaret Walker have written histories of the church.

Extraordinarily successful in the South, Methodist evangelicals, along with their Baptist brethren, literally claimed the entire black population. In their wake they left isolated cases of black Presbyterians or black Anglicans. Today, the Methodist and Baptist churches represent the largest black congregations in the United States.

First Baptist Church

"Virginia Negroes as a large majority went into the Baptist Church . . . despite the fact that Methodist slaveholders in Virginia were about as numerous or even more numerous at one period than Baptist slaveholders. . . . [T]he Negro slave in Virginia, unlike elsewhere, did not necessarily unite with the church of his master."²⁴ Although the Baptists did not organize in Lexington until 1841, and the Presbyterians represented the majority of the population, no evangelical group appealed to local blacks more than the Baptists.

If the Baptists had any notion about catching up with the Methodists in evangelization of slaves, that is exactly what happened. Symbolically, they baptized a black man as their very first convert in Lexington. After his baptism, Milton Smith served as deacon for the black membership. Like the Presbyterian John Chavis in 1801 and the Methodist exhorter Isaac Liggins in 1832, Smith served in a specific ministerial role to Lexington's blacks.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 117-18.

23. Hugh A. Williams, "History of Randolph Street Methodist Church" (Pamphlet, privately published, 1947).

24. Luther P. Jackson, "Religious Development of the Negro in Virginia from 1760 to 1860," *Journal of Negro History* 16 (April 1931): 236.



Figure 1. *The Lexington African Baptist Church. To the right of the frame building is the present First Baptist Church.*

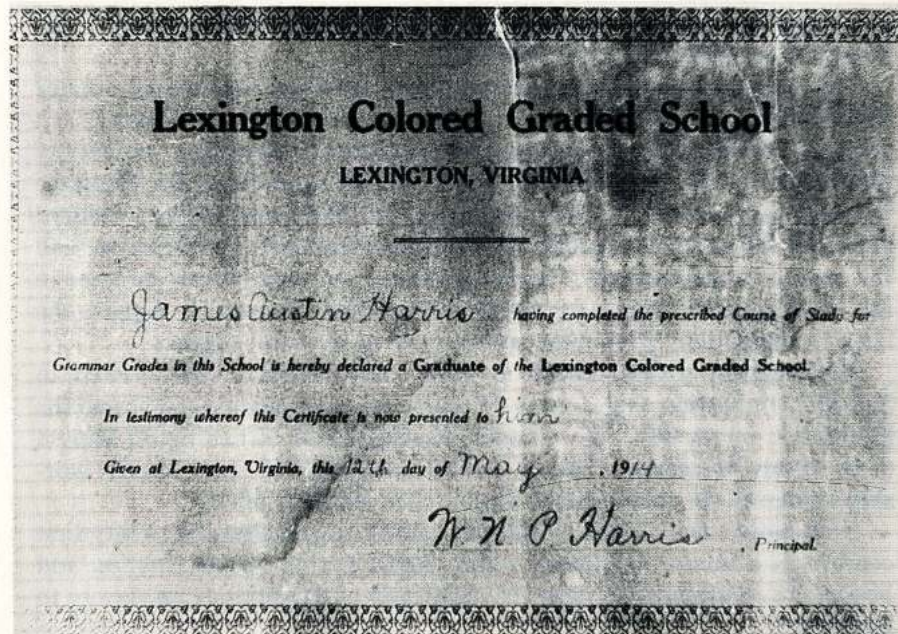


Figure 2. Diploma from the Lexington Colored Graded School awarded to James Austin Harris in 1914. (Photo courtesy Thomas M. Harris, Sr.)

The Baptist church attracted large numbers of black converts for several reasons. Mainly, the church identified with the masses of underprivileged people in the United States. Highly democratic in its governance, the local church did not answer to higher church authorities. The local, democratic nature of the church permitted its black membership to mold its own forms of worship to conform with the community's needs and culture.²⁵ The requirement of seminary training prevented newly emancipated blacks from becoming Presbyterian ministers, but no such barrier prevented entry into the Baptist clergy.

On September 22, 1867, the black and white members of Lexington Baptist Church separated. One black woman, Nancy, remained with the white congregation.²⁶ Two elders, J. B. Cowen and J. William Jones, organized the new Lexington African Baptist Church. For twenty-five

25. *Ibid.*, p. 198.

26. Oren F. Morton, *A History of Rockbridge County* (Baltimore: Regional Publishing Company, 1920), p. 178.

years they held worship services in a frame building on a lot adjacent to the present First Baptist Church building.²⁷

The present building, an impressive brick structure, represented a major undertaking for a small rural congregation in the 1890s. Like many such projects, the effort transcended parish identities and became a community effort. One of the first financial contributions came from the Roanoke Presbyterian minister Lylburn Downing. The Methodist builder, Richard Jones, served as chief carpenter. Brick masons included Irk Poindexter and the Moores from Amherst. The congregation and their friends gathered in the evenings after long work days to join paid laborers in digging the church foundation. Wives held lanterns and gave moral support.

The building project began in 1884, and building costs soared to \$25,000. On Monday night, May 29, 1905, the congregation celebrated the liquidation of the debt. Dr. Charles Manly, pastor of Lexington Baptist (now Manly Memorial) Church, joined Reverend P. S. Lewis in the worship service as the congregation burned their building bond.

Now more than a century old, the church approaches the twenty-first century as a secure institution which began during Reconstruction and helped the community to meet the challenges of transition from slavery to freedom.²⁸

The Lexington Colored Graded School Lylburn Downing School

In 1871 Lexington polled citizens operating schools to ascertain whether they were willing to have their schools merged into the proposed public school system. Two black schools operated at the time—one operated by a Sam Johnson, and the other by the Reverend Milton Smith of the Lexington African Baptist Church. Johnson agreed to have his school become a part of the public system.²⁹ Nothing is known of the fate of Smith's school.

The colored graded school occupied a building located on the lot adjacent to Randolph Street Methodist Church. Built in 1819 as a school for white boys, the building later served as a hospital during the smallpox outbreak in 1860. On October 1, 1862, Jane Cobb of New Jersey purchased the building and reopened it as a school for white boys.

27. "A History of the First Baptist Church" (pamphlet, privately printed).

28. *Ibid.*

29. George W. Diehl, *A Brief History of Public Education in Rockbridge County, Lexington, Buena Vista, 1748-1980* (Lexington: Rockbridge Retired Teachers Association, 1980), p. 28.

After the Civil War, Miss Cobb became involved with the movement of northern Friends who established schools in the South for the children of former slaves.³⁰

On December 2, 1872, Mr. and Mrs. N. C. Brackett of Jefferson County, West Virginia, deeded the building to a board of trustees "for the colored people" of Lexington. Friends from the North, with whom Miss Cobb had become associated, aided this purchase. The trustees included Harvey Harper, William Drummond, Horace Abrams, John Jones, Eli Abner, David Kennedy, and Samuel Edmondson. Later court-appointed trustees included William Price and Hugh Williams. The deed of conveyance provided that the trustees would hold the property for the education of local blacks. Prohibiting control by any church or sect, the deed placed other limitations on the trustees. The building and property could not be sold or leased without consent of the "majority of the colored people of Lexington."³¹

When the Town of Lexington began operating a colored graded school, they rented the Randolph Street school from the trustees for a modest sum. The trustees provided building maintenance.

The subject of a Negro high school came before the School Board at its meeting on April 17, 1899. The board budgeted a sum of \$200 for a teacher's salary if sufficient pupils expressed interest. This action resulted from a petition signed by Harvey Jamison, R. R. Alexander, and James Jackson who represented the black citizenry of Lexington.³²

Reverend W. P. Todd became the principal for the black high school in 1899, but the school closed in April 1900 because of insufficient patronage. The board asked Todd to return to the school by June of the same year because the community wanted a black high school. On June 11, 1901, he reported a total enrollment of nineteen students. The community pledged money for the principal's salary. In 1901 the black community paid \$163.10 of the pledged \$205 and white contributions brought the total amount collected to \$203.37.³³

From 1901 to 1930 the high school ordinarily offered only a two-year program. Some years the school offered a third-year program, but it usually did not. Black families sometimes managed to afford to send children to normal school academies in order to complete their high school educations.

30. Deed Book NN, December 2, 1872, p. 446, Rockbridge County Court House, Lexington, Va.

31. Ibid.

32. Diehl, *Brief History of Public Education*, p. 20.

33. Ibid., p. 37.

Aside from the Lexington Colored Graded School, another black school, the Newtown School, operated on the present Ross Road extension. Closed in 1921, the students from this school transferred to the Lexington Colored Graded School.

Alfred Pleasants, a local black physician, remembered attending the Lexington school. He described an unsafe, dilapidated building that had outlasted its usefulness. Because the building dated to 1819 and had received a minimum of maintenance, the black community badly needed a new school building.

Meeting at the First Baptist Church in early April 1920, the black community decided to secure a new school building. The meeting that night featured speeches on relevant topics. C. M. Wood delivered an address entitled "Lincoln and the School." Reverend R. W. Stennett lectured on "How to Secure a Building." Mrs. Isaac H. Rowland, the school's principal, spoke on "The Need of a New School Building."

The building we now occupy has already outlived its usefulness. . . . Three of the rooms used as classrooms are in the oldest part of the building. The other two classrooms are in the front in what is commonly styled the new part, but they are . . . no better appointed as classrooms than the other three. In every room there are wide cracks in the floor—germ harbingers for nearly half a century.

Mrs. Rowland's accounts verified Alfred Pleasants's description. She noted unsanitary conditions and the lack of heating facilities. According to Mrs. Rowland, the teachers spent one-eighth of their time stoking fires in old stoves. During windy periods, the stovepipes often fell apart, filling the classrooms with smoke. She concluded by challenging black citizens to join the effort to uplift the Negro race.

If the colored citizens of Lexington intend to help in the great propaganda of racial uplift, they must improve their public school. Public education is the basis and we must join the rank and file or the colored children of Lexington will drift toward the open sea; driven there by their environment, the fault of the colored citizens of Lexington who refused to be aroused from their sleep.³⁵

In April 1924, the Lexington Town Council considered the needs of the colored school. Instead of issuing bonds to erect a new building costing \$15,000, the council decided to increase the levy on real and personal property taxes from \$1.70 to \$1.90 per \$100 assessed.³⁶ No complaints about the tax increase appeared in subsequent issues of the local newspaper.

34. *Lexington Gazette*, April 7, 1920, p. 3.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, April 16, 1924, p. 3.

On September 11, 1927, the community dedicated the new school named in honor of Lylburn Downing. At the time of the dedication the faculty consisted of only five teachers: Mrs. Isaac Rowland, principal, Miss Laura Price, Mrs. Kissie Banks, Miss Nellie White, and Miss Jessie Morrison. Mrs. Banks had taught at the Newtown School.

Conclusion

Prior to school desegregation in the early 1960s, Randolph Street Methodist Church, First Baptist Church, and the black school occupied central places in the lives of Lexington's black community. In these places the community freely expressed its common culture and shared its common concerns. More than places of worship, the churches became community centers in a very real sense. The school also served a dual role in the lives of younger blacks. Aside from providing education, the school formed values and fostered ambitions. To some extent these institutions had their origins in Jackson's Sabbath School. Unfortunately, the Sabbath School existed as a paternalistic institution that conveyed values which whites hoped to instill in the black participants. The new institutions provided freedom and the promises and dreams of the future. Today the Sabbath school and the colored public school have faded into the past, but the two churches remain as living monuments to the history of Lexington's black community.