

Chapter 4

Education in Louisiana

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries few Louisianians attended school and many of those who did patronized private institutions of learning. Louisiana was not alone: neglect of public education characterized much of the South through the antebellum period and even into the twentieth century. A majority of early Louisianians were illiterate, or at best could only sign their names. They learned trades and skills at home, in the fields, forests, and waters, or in the shops of master craftsmen. The privileged few received an education in the humanities and sciences from tutors, private academies, schools in the North and Europe, and most frequently parochial schools, especially Catholic ones.

Colonial Education

Members of the religious orders provided most formal education in colonial Louisiana. The Ursuline school in New Orleans, established in 1728, is considered the oldest institution of learning for women in the present territory of the United States. There nuns taught white, black, and Native American girls and women as day students and boarders. In addition to trying to improve the spiritual, moral, and intellectual character of their students, the Ursulines trained some girls to nurse the sick and others to join their order. One of the earliest Ursuline nuns, Marie Madeleine Hachard, described the order's teaching responsibilities in a letter to her father in 1728: "We also conduct a class to instruct Negro and savage women and girls; they come every day from one to two thirty in the afternoon."

Spanish authorities relieved the Ursulines of caring for patients at the military hospital and restricted their duties to education. When Bishop Luis Peñalver y Cárdenas arrived in Louisiana in 1795 to head the new diocese, he praised the school's accomplishments: "Excellent results are obtained from the Ursuline Convent in which a good many girls are educated. . . . This is the nursery of those future matrons who will inculcate in their children the principles which they here imbibe."

Formal schooling for the colony's male children—at least the wealthier white ones—was supplied by members of the Capuchin religious order, numerous private teachers and institutes, and a public school established by the Spanish government. In 1725 Capuchin Father Raphael de Luxembourg established the first school in Louisiana,

located on St. Ann Street in New Orleans. Funds to support the school were scarce, however, and it closed in 1731.

Enterprising instructors opened schools in their homes and business establishments or went to students' homes to tutor them. The colony's wealthiest individuals also had the option of sending their children to schools in Europe. Many leading bureaucrats, planters, and merchants had extensive home libraries. When Jean Baptiste Prevost, agent of the Company of the Indies in Louisiana, died in 1769, his estate inventory listed over three hundred volumes. Colonel and interim governor Francisco Bouligny's library comprised 148 books in 1800.

The Spanish crown introduced free public education for boys to Louisiana. In 1772 a director and three teachers arrived in the colony, commissioned by a royal order to teach Christian doctrine, elementary education, and grammar. They brought with them a large library and established a school on Royal Street in New Orleans.

Few students attended the Spanish public school, even though it was free. New Orleans's French residents did not want their sons taught Spanish language, customs, history, and law. The French population instead supported eight private schools, with an enrollment of some four hundred students.

The majority of Louisianians could not afford formal education or were excluded from schools because they were black or Indian. Like most people in the eighteenth century, they could not read or write and signed documents with their mark. Whites, slaves, and free persons of color in colonial Louisiana acquired skills by learning from others, sometimes through formal apprenticeship arrangements. Tradesmen were always in short supply in Louisiana; officials and colonists thus relied on trained slaves and free people of color to make items that were commonly used or not easily imported. One concession director wrote from Natchez in 1721 that he needed skilled workers, especially locksmiths, edge-tool makers, and sawyers, to teach their trade to the slaves, "for if we succeed in training and perfecting them, they will, in the course of time, bring . . . large profits." Such apprenticeship training was apparently successful. Physician Paul Alliot noted at the end of the colonial period: "There are many workmen of all kinds at New Orleans. All the men of color or free negroes make their sons learn a trade, and give a special education to their daughters." Owners apprenticed their slaves and parents their children to white and free black artisans, for a period of two to six years.

[Antebellum Education](#)

As during the colonial period, most antebellum Louisianians received no formal education at all. Tutors, private academies, and parochial schools trained most of those few who could afford an education. Some parents sent their children, free black as well as white, to the North or to Europe for schooling.

With lax regulations, almost anyone could set up a teaching establishment. Some academies taught the basic subjects of rhetoric, arithmetic, science, geography, composition, philosophy, and languages; others specialized in perfecting musical or

artistic talents. While living in New Orleans in 1821, John James Audubon taught drawing at the rate of two dollars per hour for one student and three dollars for two.

Catholic parochial schools remained the most numerous during the antebellum period as they had during colonial days, but Protestant schools rose in number, especially in north Louisiana. Many Protestant pastors appended schools to their churches and taught with the help of their wives and other congregation members.

Louisiana's first public school system was launched in New Orleans in 1841. From this first effort, public education spread throughout Louisiana, but very slowly and sporadically. By the time the Civil War began few parishes in Louisiana had public schools.

Even in densely populated New Orleans, public schools faced many obstacles. Louisiana and the rest of the South had no tradition of common town schools like those of New England. Moreover, wealthy residents who sent their children abroad or to private schools balked at the idea of paying taxes to provide free education for workers and immigrants. In New Orleans, parents of French or Anglo background wanted their children instructed in French or English, respectively. Despite these varying degrees of resistance, those schools that were established provided white children who attended them with an excellent education.

Division of the city into three municipalities—Latins (French and Spanish) predominant in the First and Third and Americans in the Second Municipalities—in 1836 facilitated implementation of a public school system. Authorities in each municipality set the rules for schools in their district, so that Latins could have French-speaking schools and Americans English-speaking ones.

The model for Louisiana's public school system was that of Massachusetts, which incorporated the plans of education reformer Horace Mann. Many of the early administrators and teachers in Crescent City schools were from New England. In 1855 the city opened its first normal, or teacher-training, school.

John McDonogh, a millionaire planter and merchant who had moved from Baltimore to New Orleans prior to the Louisiana Purchase, gave the New Orleans public school system a substantial financial boost. In his will McDonogh left half his estate to New Orleans and half to Baltimore for the education of white and free black children. When McDonogh died in 1850, his heirs contested the will, which consequently was not executed until 1858. New Orleans established the McDonogh Fund with its settlement of \$704,440. Officials used disbursements from the fund to build several public schools, called McDonogh Schools, only one of which was completed before the Civil War.

Lyceums and libraries aided the public school system by providing lectures, books, and study areas for students and the general public. In the United States lyceums were institutions for popular education that sponsored discussions, lectures, and concerts. In 1860 the First District Public School Board had charge of the Lyceum and Library Society. According to the 1860 city directory, its facilities were open "to the pupils of the Public Schools in all districts of the city, and to adult subscribers" from 8:30 A.M. to 1:00 P.M. and 4:00 P.M. until sunset each day.

Evening schools primarily catered to immigrants and other working-class people. Teachers at these schools helped introduce new arrivals from foreign lands to American values, culture, language, and history. According to *Gardner's New Orleans Directory* of 1860, night schools were "open for persons of all ages . . . employed in some useful occupation during the day." Night-school students could attend classes between 6:30 and 9:00 P.M., from 1 October through 1 April. In the New Orleans area students could choose from eight schools in 1860, four each for females and males. Teachers at the women's schools earned salaries of \$40 per month, \$50 at the men's schools.

Schooling for African Americans

Authorities excluded all African Americans from Louisiana's public schools and after 1830 even prohibited free persons from teaching slaves how to read and write. However, the free black community of New Orleans, which numbered almost 20,000 in 1840, organized its own schools. The Couvent School opened in 1848 in Faubourg Marigny, where many free blacks lived. Its benefactor was Marie Couvent, a former slave. She stipulated that the large estate she inherited from her husband, a free black carpenter, be used to care for and educate poor black orphans. In 1849 Mme. M. Gignac ran a school for African-American children on Ursulines Street in the French Quarter.

The Catholic church also provided education for African Americans. Carmelite and Ursuline nuns taught free black children in classes separate from whites. In 1842 clerical leaders incorporated the Sisters of the Holy Family, an order of African-American nuns, who took charge of a parochial school on Bayou Road in Faubourg Tremé. Black philanthropist Thomy Lafon assisted the educational mission of the Sisters of the Holy Family by building a home for orphans on Tonti Street in Faubourg Tremé and donating it to the sisters in the 1860s.

Higher Education

Louisiana invested much more in higher education than in the basic elements of learning. Many of the so-called colleges, however, were little more than glorified high schools and only admitted men as students. Louisiana's first institution of higher learning was the College of Orleans, which operated between 1811 and 1826 on Ursulines Street in Faubourg Tremé, New Orleans. The state legislature funded the college on the condition that it instruct fifty indigent students free of charge. The state abolished the college in 1826 and replaced it with two primary schools and a central school, which educated graduates of the primary schools.

During the antebellum period state authorities incorporated a number of colleges and academies. Among them were Franklin College in Opelousas, Jefferson College in Convent in St. James Parish, Silliman Female Collegiate Institute (later Silliman College) in Clinton, and the College of Louisiana in Jackson. The state withdrew support for the College of Louisiana in 1845, and Methodist Centenary College took over its campus. Centenary remained in Jackson until 1909, when it moved to Shreveport.

Two major Louisiana universities trace their beginnings to the antebellum period: Tulane University and Louisiana State University. Tulane began as the Medical College of

Louisiana, chartered by the state legislature in 1834 and designated the University of Louisiana by the Constitution of 1845. Occupation and Republican administrations funded the university during and after the Civil War. State monies were never adequate, though, and in the 1880s it became the private Tulane University with a large gift from philanthropist Paul Tulane.

Louisiana State University started as the Louisiana State Seminary of Learning and Military Academy, which opened in 1860 in Pineville, Louisiana. Its first superintendent was William T. Sherman. Sherman and his students abandoned the seminary during the Civil War. The state revived it after the war. After fire destroyed the Pineville campus in 1869, authorities relocated the school to Baton Rouge and renamed it Louisiana State University.

W o m e n's A c a d e m i e s

White women in Louisiana, like most southern white women, rarely had a formal education, and when they did, it was in institutions separate from men. The major universities and colleges did not admit women, and most private and public elementary schools had separate buildings or floors for male and female students. Female religious orders, in particular, educated Louisiana's young women, for example at the Academy of the Sacred Heart in New Orleans. There were other Academies of the Sacred Heart at Convent, Grand Coteau, and elsewhere in Louisiana.

Re construction Re forms in Education

Important advances in education took place in Louisiana during Reconstruction. The Constitution of 1868 provided for at least one free public school in each parish, open to students ages six to eighteen regardless of race. Although before 1870 there were few schools in Louisiana outside of New Orleans, by the end of Reconstruction most parishes had schools. The Louisiana school system increased dramatically from 100 public schools in the state in 1868 to over 1,100 in 1872. More white than black students enrolled in these schools during the period of Radical Reconstruction. The Louisiana school system was not perfect under Reconstruction administrations, but it was much better than the one that followed in the years after Reconstruction. After 1877 segregation returned, with very few schools for African Americans.

The Union army of occupation and the Freedmen's Bureau set up the first public schools for blacks in Louisiana, separate from white schools. General Banks established the first of these schools for freedpersons, one of them the Abraham Lincoln School. In July 1865 the Freedmen's Bureau assumed control of the schools, most of them in or near New Orleans and Baton Rouge. Northern churches sponsored freedmen's aid societies, which provided important assistance to bureau schools in the form of money and teachers.

Radical Reconstruction introduced support for public education for persons of all races and classes in Louisiana. In its 24 July 1867 issue the *New Orleans Tribune*

explained why mixed schools were necessary: "So that we have in the future no superior and inferior classes, but only American citizens." Radical administrations, however, put little effort into making that idea a reality. The goal of making schooling available to every citizen failed in part due to inadequate funding for buildings, books, and teachers.

Money from the John McDonogh estate aided the New Orleans public school system. McDonogh was a wealthy commission merchant, planter, and real estate speculator who died in 1850 without immediate heirs and left most of his estate to the cities of Baltimore and New Orleans for educational purposes. New Orleans administrators established the first McDonogh school in the antebellum period and McDonogh schools No. 2 through 6 during Reconstruction. Both black and white students attended these schools, fulfilling McDonogh's wish that black New Orleanians share his legacy.

Most teachers in Louisiana public schools were white and southern born, but some African Americans and northerners also taught here. There was very little integration in schools outside New Orleans, and many whites in both rural and urban areas refused to send their children to schools with either black children or black teachers. The comments of journalist Edward King confirm these tendencies:

There are a few mixed schools now [1874] in the State, although the mingling of colors has not been insisted upon. . . .

. . . The teachers in those schools exclusively attended by white children are all white; in the few mixed schools there are some colored teachers. The superintendent [of the New Orleans district] said that it would not do to insist upon mixed schools in remote districts, as the people would in that case refuse to have any school at all.

During Reconstruction all-black and mixed public schools flourished, while attendance at white schools dropped. It seems that African Americans wanted to make up for many years of missed opportunities, a trend that Edward King noted: "The colored children in the public schools manifest an earnestness and aptitude which amply demonstrates their claim to be admitted to them. People in all sections [of the state] have ceased grumbling at the 'school-house taxes,' and that in itself is a cheering sign."

William G. Brown served as the first black state superintendent of education in Louisiana from 1872 to 1876. During his administration enrollment and integration of the New Orleans public schools reached its highest point during the Reconstruction era. Born in Trenton, New Jersey, and educated in the West Indies, Brown was also a member of the board of trustees at New Orleans University and editor of the *Louisianian*.

Administrators established normal schools and other institutions of higher education for African Americans in Louisiana during Reconstruction. To train black teachers they set up the Union Normal School in 1869 on the corner of Camp and Race Streets in New Orleans. In 1873 the legislature granted a charter to Union, improving its

status as the New Orleans University. Normal schools for black teachers also flourished in fifteen other locations in the state, at Shreveport, Baton Rouge, Amite, and other sites.

Under provisions of the federal Morrill Act, authorities received a land grant and established the racially integrated Agricultural and Mechanical College in 1874. In 1877, after Reconstruction, the college merged with all-white Louisiana State University.

Two additional universities, which were more like modern-day high schools, educated Louisiana blacks during Reconstruction and beyond. The Congregationalist American Missionary Association established Straight University in 1869, which merged with New Orleans University to become Dillard University in 1935. In 1871 the American Baptist Home Missionary Society founded Leland University in New Orleans. Leland had an integrated faculty as well as student body.

Continued Popularity of Private Schools

The long tradition of support for parochial and private schools continued in Louisiana during Reconstruction, boosted by white opposition to integrated public schools. The number of private schools especially climbed in New Orleans: in 1864 the Crescent City had 140 nonpublic schools enrolling 5,000 male and female pupils; by 1877 there were 222 nonpublic schools with 19,401 students. In Baton Rouge both during and after the war, a majority of white children attended private schools.

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Conclusion

Although formal schooling was not an important part of the everyday life of a majority of colonial and antebellum Louisianians, the learning of skills and ability to at least sign one's name was. Education in a classroom setting was not widespread across the South, whether supported by public funds or private church and institutional monies. Louisianians of high social status and economic means, however, patronized the state's few centers of higher learning or sought education in the North or abroad.

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