

# The Common School and the Threat of Cultural Pluralism

In the 1830s, the desire to establish public schools as a means of creating a common culture was heightened by increased immigration, particularly by the immigration of Irish Catholics. Discriminated against by the English, Irish Catholics threatened Protestant domination of American culture. The growth of public schools paralleled the growth of the immigrant and enslaved populations.

The common school movement of the 1830s and 1840s was, in part, an attempt to halt the drift toward a multicultural society. Self-proclaimed protectors of Protestant Anglo-American culture worried about the Irish immigrants streaming ashore, the growing numbers of enslaved Africans, and the racial violence occurring in northern cities between freed Africans and whites. Also during the 1830s, President Andrew Jackson implemented his final solution for acquiring the lands of the southern Indians by forcing the tribes off their lands and removing them to an area west of the Mississippi. Upon completion of this forced removal, the government was to “civilize” the southern tribes through a system of segregated schools. In addition to the concern about the risk posed to Anglo-American culture, there was a hysterical fear among European Americans during the common school period that Africans and Indians would contaminate white blood. This fear resulted in a demand by some whites for laws forbidding interracial marriages.

Many New Englanders hoped common schools would eradicate these “savage” cultures. The sensuous and emotional rhythms of African and Indian drums and the incense and ritual of the Irish Catholic Church offered a stark contrast to the stiff, repressed, and self-righteous way of life of white New Englanders. With the possibility of a multicultural society existing in North America, many European Americans hoped the common school would assure that the United States was dominated by a unified Protestant Anglo-Saxon culture.

As Carl Kaestle argues in *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780–1860*, the common school movement was primarily

designed to protect the ideology of an American Protestant culture. Most of the common school reformers, Kaestle documents, were native-born Anglo-American Protestants, and their public philosophy “called for government action to provide schooling that would be more common, more equal, more dedicated to public policy, and therefore more effective in creating cultural and political values centering on Protestantism, republicanism, and capitalism.”<sup>1</sup>

## THE INCREASING MULTICULTURAL POPULATION OF THE UNITED STATES

The following tables show the increasing complexity of the U.S. population during the development and expansion of public schools from the 1830s to the 1850s. It is possible, but not necessarily provable, that public schools expanded in order to create a common culture and language. In 1830, six years before Horace Mann became secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, immigration expanded from Ireland and Germany as indicated in Table 5.1. The reader will recall from Chapter 3 that in 1790 60.9 percent of free whites were of English ancestry, 80 percent had English-speaking ancestry, and about 75 percent were Protestant. The reader can see from Table 5.1 that immigration almost quadrupled between the decades 1820–1830 (151,824 immigrants) and 1831–1840 (599,125 immigrants). During the 1820–1830 period the majority of immigrants still came from England (about 59 percent). But this dramatically changed between 1831–1840 with the increase in German immigration to 25.4 percent of the total immigration, reducing the number of immigrants from England to about 39 percent. The percentage of immigrants that did not come from England, as indicated in Table 5.2, rose to 72 percent by 1850.

The domination of immigrants by Irish and Germans during the early common school period of 1830–1840 threatened the Protestant majority among free whites. Almost all Irish during this period were Catholic while Germans were a mixture of Jews, Catholics, and Protestants. Also, the increased German immigration increased the number of free whites whose first language was not English.

Adding to the possible anxiety about multiculturalism among free whites were the growing numbers of the nonwhite population. As indicated in Tables 5.3 and 5.4, the number of enslaved African Americans increased from 2,009,050 in 1830 to 3,953,760 in 1860, while the number of free African Americans increased from 319,576 in 1830 to 488,070 in 1860. And as I discuss in more detail in Chapter 7, an Asian population began to develop as the result of the California gold rush. Not included in these tables or in the U.S. Census for these decades was a growing Mexican American population as a result of the Mexican-American War. I discuss this Mexican American population and their educational experiences in more detail in Chapter 7.

**TABLE 5.1. Immigration to the United States from Countries Other Than England by National Origin, 1820–1860**

Total and National Origin by Decade	Numbers of Immigrants	Percentage of Total Immigration
<i>Total Number of Immigrants</i>		
1820–1830	151,824	100%
1831–1840	599,125	100
1841–1850	1,713,251	100
1851–1860	2,598,214	100
<i>Ireland</i>		
1820–1830	54,338	35.7
1831–1840	207,381	34.6
1841–1850	780,719	45.5
1851–1860	914,119	35.1
<i>Germany</i>		
1820–1830	7,729	5.0
1831–1840	152,454	25.4
1841–1850	434,626	25.3
1851–1860	951,667	36.6
<i>Scandinavia (Sweden, Norway, Denmark)</i>		
1820–1830	283	0.18
1831–1840	2,264	0.37
1841–1850	14,442	0.25
1851–1860	24,680	0.94
<i>Italy</i>		
1820–1830	439	0.28
1831–1840	2,253	0.37
1841–1850	1,870	0.10
1851–1860	9,231	0.35
<i>Greece and Turkey</i>		
1820–1830	41	0.02
1831–1840	56	0.009
1841–1850	75	0.004
1851–1860	114	0.004

Source: Calculated and complied from tables provided in Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life*, 2nd ed. (New York: Perennial, 2002), pp. 124, 129, 146, 165, 189, 202.

**TABLE 5.2. Approximate Percentage of Non-English Immigrants to the United States, 1820–1860**

Decade	Approximate Percentage of Non-English Immigrants to the United States
1820–1830	41.2%
1831–1840	60.7
1841–1850	72.05
1851–1860	72.9

Source: Calculations based on previous Table 5.1, Immigration to the United States from Countries Other Than England by National Origin, 1820–1860.

**TABLE 5.3. Free and Slave Population of the United States by Race, 1830 Census**

Status and Race	Population	Percentage of Total Population
Total Population	12,858,670	100%
Free White	10,530,044	81.9
Free Black	319,576	2.5
Slaves	2,009,050	15.6

Source: *Abstract of the Returns of the Fifth Census, Showing the Number of Free People, The Number of Slaves* (Washington, DC: Duff Green, 1832), p. 47.

**TABLE 5.4. Free, Slave, Native American, and Asian Population of the United States, 1860**

Status and Race	Population	Percentage of Total Population
Total Population	31,443,321	100%
Free White	26,922,537	85.6
Free Black	488,070	1.6
Slaves	3,953,760	12.6
Native Americans	44,021	0.1
Asian	34,933	0.1

Source: Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, *Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, for the United States, Regions, Divisions, and States* (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2002), Table F-1.

## IRISH CATHOLICS: A THREAT TO ANGLO-AMERICAN SCHOOLS AND CULTURE

"No Irish Need Apply," a famous folk song of the common school period, referred to rental and employment signs telling Irish Americans they were not welcome as residents or workers. English colonists in North America stereotyped the Irish as "savages" and "slaves of their passions." These stereotypes developed during the long course of English domination of Ireland, which by 1700 left the Irish owning only 14 percent of Ireland.<sup>2</sup>

By the time of the great Irish immigration to the United States, English exploitation of Irish workers had reduced the average Irish family to a life of misery and famine. Living in one-room mud huts with straw roofs with only a hole cut through the straw for a chimney, the typical Irish family ate little more than a daily ration of potatoes. By 1845, one million Irish had immigrated to the United States. When the smell of decay from the potato blight crossed the land in 1845, another million-and-a-half Irish set sail to escape starvation. For those who stayed behind, the choice was often a deadly one. By 1855, the potato famine had killed one million people.<sup>3</sup>

As the Irish arrived at the great port cities, such as Boston and New York, they found themselves greeted with open hostility. Competing with freed Africans for jobs, the Irish found employment building roads and railroads, working in mines, and digging canals. Irish workers were thought of by other European Americans as "dogs" and "dray horses" to be worked like other animals in the building of the new nation.<sup>4</sup>

Protestant Anglo-Saxons feared that the "drunken Irish," acting mainly out of "passion" rather than reason, might destroy the American dream. The Reverend Theodore Parker warned his congregation of "The Dangerous Classes," who were "inferior in nature, some perhaps only behind us in development . . . a lower form . . . [consisting of] negroes, Indians, Mexicans, Irish, and the like."<sup>5</sup>

The Catholicism of the Irish also bothered Protestants. By the nineteenth century, many Protestants feared that the Catholic Church was the church of Satan, and they worried that the pope had sent an army of Irish Catholics to undermine Protestant churches. Ironically, it was the English who forced the Irish to become Christian and, after the Church of England became Protestant, most Irish remained Catholic. The majority of Irish immigrating to the United States in the nineteenth century were Catholic.<sup>6</sup>

The hostility between Catholics and Protestants resulted in the common school never truly being "common" to all children in the nineteenth century. The common or public schools in the United States in the nineteenth century were dominated by Protestant religious values. This resulted in disputes over the use of state educational funds for the support of public schools. In large part, this conflict resulted from strong anti-Catholic feelings in the Protestant community. In the end, Catholics felt excluded from the common schools and found it necessary to establish their own system of independent parochial schools.

In the 1830s and 1840s, New York City was the scene of religious conflicts when Catholics demanded a share of the state educational funds that were being monopolized

by the Public School Society (originally the New York Free School Society). Until this time, Catholics had been operating their own schools in an attempt to provide children of Catholic parents with an alternative to the Protestant-dominated schools of the Public School Society. Catholics objected to the use of the Protestant version of the Bible and textbooks containing anti-Catholic statements.

The smoldering conflict between Catholics and Protestants in New York City erupted during the 1838 election of Governor William Seward. Governor Seward was a strong advocate of government-sponsored internal improvements and increased state support of education. Although he believed that a centrally controlled and expanded system of education was necessary for the health of society, he also believed that state money for the support of Catholic schools was necessary to achieve this goal.

One of Seward's major concerns was the education of Catholic immigrants, particularly the Irish, for citizenship. Attacking the strong anti-Irish feeling existing in the 1830s and 1840s, he denounced American hatred of "foreigners."<sup>7</sup> While visiting New York City in 1840, Seward concluded that large numbers of New York's Catholic children were not attending public schools because of their anti-Catholic atmosphere. His concern was that immigrant children, particularly the Irish, might grow up to be adult illiterates who would become public burdens and never enter the mainstream of American life. In 1840, he proposed to the state legislature that Catholic schools become part of the state school system while retaining their private charters and religious affiliation. As historian Vincent Lannie writes, "Seward urged the establishment of schools that would be acceptable to this minority group and staffed with teachers who spoke the same language and professed the same religious faith as their pupils. Such schools would be administered by Catholic officials but supported with public funds."<sup>8</sup>

Many Protestants were outraged by Seward's proposal and demanded that no money go for the support of Catholic schools. In a letter to a friend in 1840, Seward reasoned that it was necessary for the state to provide a moral and religious education to all children in order to maintain social stability and "if it cannot be otherwise conferred, may rightly be conferred by the employment for the purpose of teachers professing the same language and religious creed."<sup>9</sup>

Accepting Seward's proposal, New York's Catholic community petitioned the Board of Aldermen of New York City for a portion of the common school fund. The petition enumerated Catholic complaints about Protestant dominance of the public schools. First, the Catholic petitioners attacked the supposed non-sectarianism of the schools operated by the Public School Society. The petition cited a number of instances in which the reports of the Public School Society either called for religious instruction or demonstrated the existence of religious instruction in the schools. This religious instruction included the reading and study of the Bible, which the petition claimed made the school sectarian. The petitioners argued: "Even the reading of the Scriptures in those schools your petitioners cannot regard otherwise than as sectarian; because Protestants would certainly consider as such the introduction of the Catholic Scriptures, which are different from theirs, and the Catholics have the same ground of objection when the Protestant version is made use of."<sup>10</sup>

In addition, the petitioners complained of anti-Catholic statements in selections used for elementary reading lessons. They argued that historical and religious portions of the reading lessons were selected from Protestant writers who were prejudiced against Catholics. The petition stated: "The term 'Popery' is repeatedly found in them. This term is known and employed as one of insult and contempt towards the Catholic religion, and it passes into the minds of children with the feeling of which it is the outward expression."<sup>11</sup>

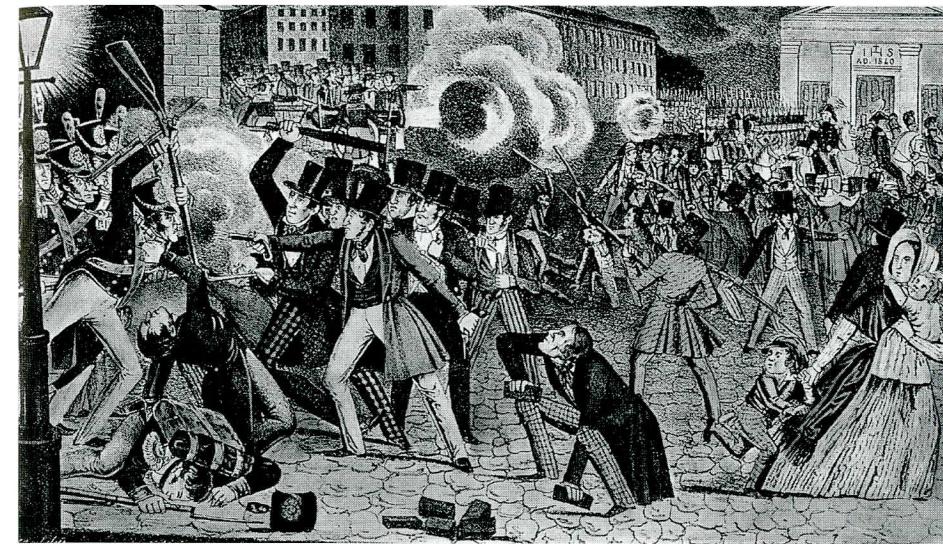
The Catholic petition acknowledged that the members of the Public School Society were trying to remove anti-Catholic sentiments from textbooks. According to the petitioners, this effort was failing because Protestants were unable to clearly discern anti-Catholic statements. As an example, the petition quoted the following passage from a textbook approved by the Public School Society:

Huss, John, a zealous reformer from Popery, who lived in Bohemia, towards the close of the fourteenth, and the beginning of the fifteenth centuries. He was bold and persevering; but at length, trusting himself to the deceitful Catholics, he was by them brought to trial, condemned as a heretic, and burnt at the stake.<sup>12</sup>

The anti-Catholic atmosphere of common schools, according to the Catholic petitioners, forced them to open their own Catholic schools. This situation, they argued, resulted in double taxation whereby they were taxed to support the schools operated by the Public School Society and to support an alternative school system. In the words of the petition, "The expense necessary for this [establishment of Catholic schools], was a second taxation, required not by the laws of the land, but by the no less imperious demands of their conscience."<sup>13</sup> Catholics' claims that they had to assume the burden of double taxation for the maintenance of public and Catholic schools continued into the twentieth century.

The Catholic petitioners recognized that public monies should not be used for the support of religion. They were willing to remove all religious instruction from their schools during school hours. To ensure that money was not used for religious instruction, they recommended that the organization of their schools and the control of the disbursement of money "shall be conducted, and made, by persons unconnected with the religion of your petitioners, even the Public School Society. . . . The public may then be assured that the money will not be applied to the support of the Catholic religion."<sup>14</sup>

Both Governor Seward's proposal and the Catholic petition brought a storm of protest from the Protestant community. The "great debate" began within a month of the presentation of the petition before the Board of Aldermen in the city's Common Council chambers. The Protestant community responded to the Catholic petition with the argument that if Catholics were willing to postpone religious instruction until after school hours, they should be willing to instruct the children attending the Public School Society schools after school hours. The Reverend Mr. Knox of the Dutch Reformed Church claimed that the public schools were not "adverse to feelings of reverence for Catholic peculiarities." The Reverend Mr. Bangs of the Methodist Church argued that all poor and wayward children should be forced to attend public schools. Bangs argued, in the words of Vincent Lannie: "This coercive action of the state would really be an act of compassion, since these



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vagrants would be snatched from the streets and their concomitant vices, and taught to become Christian gentlemen and competent citizens." The strong anti-Catholic feelings of Protestants were evident in Presbyterian minister Gardner Spring's statement that he viewed the Catholic petition "with more alarm on account of the source from which it comes . . . if there was no alternative between infidelity and the dogmas of the Catholic Church, I would choose, sir . . . , to be an infidel tomorrow."<sup>15</sup>

By 1842, the school issue inflamed public feelings to the point of causing a riot between anti-Catholics and Irish Catholics. Beginning in front of the city prison, the riot quickly spread to attacks on unsuspecting Catholic individuals and homes. Some Catholics took refuge in a hotel that was then stormed by anti-Catholic mobs. Rioters even attacked the residence of Bishop Hughes behind the major symbol of Irish Catholicism, St. Patrick's Cathedral.

New York City was not the only place where riots erupted between Catholics and Protestants. In 1843, the Philadelphia public school board ruled that Catholic children could read their own version of the Bible in public schools and that they could be excused from other religious instruction. Protestants claimed that this was an attempt by Catholics to exclude the Bible from the schools. The result of this conflict was the Philadelphia Bible riots, in which thirteen people died and a Catholic church was burned to the ground. Other conflicts of this type, though not of this intensity, occurred around the country.<sup>16</sup>

In the end, Catholics found it necessary to establish their own system of schooling, the organization of which emerged from the work of plenary councils held in Baltimore in 1852, 1866, and 1884. A major theme of these councils was that religious instruction should not be separated from other forms of instruction. At the First Plenary Council, church leaders told parents that they had a responsibility to "watch over the purity of their [children's] faith and morals with jealous

vigilance." To avoid neglecting their children's upbringing, Catholic parents were urged to give their children a Christian education "based on religious principles, accompanied by religious practices and always subordinate to religious influence." The council urged that all possible sacrifices be made for the establishment of Catholic schools.<sup>17</sup>

In 1866, the Second Plenary Council emphasized the principle "that religious teaching and religious training should form part of every system of school education." In addition, concern was expressed about the large number of delinquent Catholic youths who were being sent to Protestant reformatories. The council admitted, "It is a melancholy fact, and a very humiliating avowal for us to make, that a very large proportion of the idle and vicious youth of our principal cities are the children of Catholic parents." It recommended the establishment of Catholic industrial schools to care for delinquent Catholic youths.<sup>18</sup>

The Third Plenary Council, in 1884, sent forth decrees for the establishment of a system of Catholic schools. The council warned that the continued trend toward secular education was resulting in the undermining of Christianity and argued that all religious groups were calling for a Christian education in the schools, reflecting a common concern with the preservation of religious faith. The council claimed it was not condemning the state "for not imparting religious instruction in the public schools as they are now organized; because they well know it does not lie within the province of the State to teach religion." In fact, it considered the creation of Catholic schools as beneficial to the state because such schools would create better citizens by educating better Christians. It declared: "Two objects therefore, dear brethren, we have in view, to multiply our schools, and to perfect them."<sup>19</sup>

To achieve the objective of ensuring a Catholic education, the council decreed that every church establish a parish school and that all Catholic parents send their children to Catholic schools. The following decrees of the Third Plenary Council established the ideals of Catholic education in the United States:

I. That near every church a parish school, where one does not yet exist, is to be built and maintained in perpetuum within two years of the promulgation of this council, unless the bishop should decide that because of serious difficulties a delay may be granted. . . .

IV. That all Catholic parents are bound to send their children to the parish school, unless it is evident that a sufficient training in religion is given either in their own homes, or in other Catholic schools; or when because of sufficient reason, approved by the Bishop, with all due precautions and safeguards, it is licit to send them to other schools. What constitutes a Catholic school is left to the decision of the Bishop.<sup>20</sup>

The origins of the Catholic school system can be found in the centuries-old struggle between Irish and Anglo-Saxon cultures. Transported to the United States, the cultural conflict threatened Protestant Anglo-American cultural domination. The Catholic rebellion against public school reformers gave proof to the argument that the common school reflected a primarily Protestant ideology. Beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth, many Catholics would refer to public schools as Protestant schools.

## SLAVERY AND FREEDOM IN THE NORTH: AFRICAN AMERICANS AND SCHOOLS IN THE NEW REPUBLIC

By the middle of the eighteenth century, there was a dramatic change in the origins of the slave population. The burgeoning northern economy and the development of the southern plantation system increased the demand for enslaved Africans. Increasingly, slave traders arrived with human cargo who had been enslaved in the interior areas of Africa. Unlike the Atlantic Creoles, these enslaved Africans had been farmers and herdsmen living in small villages. Unlike Atlantic Creoles, they had little or no contact with Europeans before being enslaved and marched to the west coast of Africa, where they were shackled in the disease-infested holds of slave ships. They spoke many different languages and had differing religious traditions. By the time they reached the Americas, if they survived the ocean trip, they were often psychologically devastated by the experience of being wrenched out of their villages, separated from their families, marched to the African coast in shackles, forced into the dark holds of sailing ships, and then sold to some unknown Anglo-American in a country that had little resemblance to their homelands.

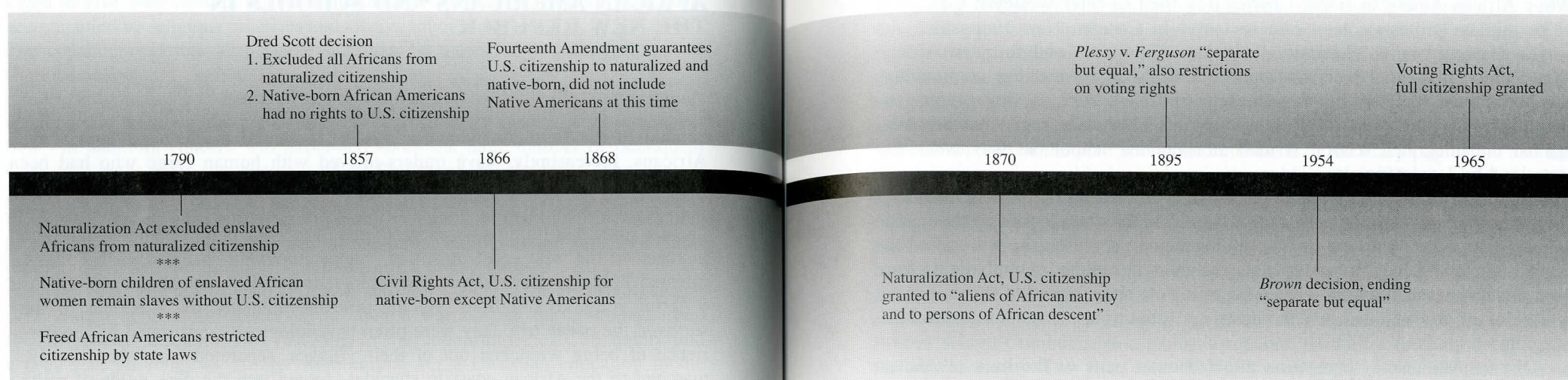
By the middle of the eighteenth century, northern slaves were increasingly owned by artisans and tradesmen to help in the rapidly expanding workshops and warehouses of the northern colonies. In New Jersey, the Hudson Valley, and Long Island enslaved Africans played an important role in expanding the agricultural base of the colonies. Ira Berlin reports that by the middle of the eighteenth century, slave men outnumbered free white laborers in many New Jersey counties, such as 262 to 194 in Monmouth County, 281 to 81 in Middlesex County, and 206 to 8 in Bergen County.<sup>21</sup>

As the northern slave population increased, it became more difficult for slaves to gain their freedom. In addition, free blacks found their rights severely restricted by newly enacted laws. Berlin states, "in various northern colonies, free blacks were barred from voting, attending the militia, sitting on juries," and in many places they were required to carry "special passes to travel, trade, and keep a gun or a dog."<sup>22</sup>

Unlike the Atlantic Creoles, the newly arrived enslaved Africans resisted the adoption of European culture. Many refused to Europeanize their names. Like Native Americans, they resisted the imposition of Christian religion. In Newport, Rhode Island, local clergy could only find approximately thirty Christians among a black population of a thousand. It was estimated that only one-tenth of New York City's black population was Christian. In the middle of the eighteenth century, Americans of African ancestry established festivals that celebrated African traditions. An observer at a festival in Rhode Island wrote, "All the various languages of Africa, mixed with broken and ludicrous English, filled the air, accompanied with the music of the fiddle, tambourine, banjo, [and] drum."<sup>23</sup>

Inevitably, free and enslaved Africans learned to speak English. In most cases, language instruction did not take place in any systematic way. It was

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documented that in fugitive slave notices appearing in New York City's presses between 1771 and 1805, a quarter or more either did not speak English or spoke it poorly.<sup>24</sup> However, some enslaved Africans learned to read and write English well enough to petition the Massachusetts General Court for their freedom by proclaiming, "We have no Property! We have no Wives! No children! We have no City! No country! In common with all other men we have a natural right to our freedoms."<sup>25</sup>

For many northern state legislators, though not for southern, there was an obvious contradiction between the principles of the American Revolution and support of slavery. However, for freed slaves in the North freedom did not mean equality before the law or equality of treatment. The freeing of enslaved Africans highlighted the difference between freedom and equality in the minds of Anglo-Americans of the Revolutionary generation. Also, the treatment of freed slaves underlined the idea that equality meant equality for only a select few.

Petitions for freeing enslaved Africans began appearing during the Revolution. In 1778, the Executive Council of Pennsylvania asked the Assembly to prohibit the further importation of slaves with the goal of eventually abolishing slavery. The Council pointed out that Europeans were "astonished to see a people eager for Liberty holding Negroes in Bondage."<sup>26</sup> During the same year, the governor of New Jersey called on the state legislature to begin the process of gradual abolition of slavery because it was "'odious and disgraceful' for a people professing to idolize liberty."<sup>27</sup> In 1785, the New York legislature passed a bill for the gradual abolition of slavery. In Massachusetts, slavery ended through court action. By 1830, there were still 3,586 enslaved Africans in northern states, two-thirds of them in New Jersey.<sup>28</sup>

Also, abolitionist societies sprang up during the Revolutionary years. These societies would play a key role in the education of freed Africans in the North and South after the Civil War. In addition, these abolitionist societies were central to the antislavery movement of the nineteenth century and supported efforts by African Americans to escape bondage in the South. In general, the abolitionist groups had a strong religious orientation that shaped the type of education they provided to freed African Americans. The Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery was organized in 1775 and joined with Quakers to ensure the speedy end to slavery in that state. Similar organizations played an active role in other northern states.

### Racial Segregation

It was immediately apparent that most Anglo-Americans were not going to accept integrated educational institutions. Racially segregated schools were widely established from the late eighteenth century until the U.S. Supreme Court ruled them unconstitutional in 1954. Segregation meant more than building a racial divide. It also resulted in unequal funding of schools. Educational segregation resulted in unequal educational opportunities.

In 1787, African American leaders in Boston petitioned the legislature for schools because they "now receive no benefit from the free schools."<sup>29</sup> In Pennsylvania and Ohio, school districts were required to build separate educational facilities for African Americans. In Indiana, despite the fact that school laws made no racial distinctions, the white population refused to send their children to schools with African American children. The result was segregated schools. Some Anglo-Americans after the Revolution even protested the provision of any education for African Americans, claiming that it would offend southerners and encourage immigration from Africa.

Resistance to educational integration also extended to higher education. When African American leader Charles Ray tried to enter Wesleyan College in 1832, student protests forced him to leave. In Canaan, New Hampshire, the Noyes Academy in 1835 admitted twenty-eight whites and fourteen African Americans. The school received support from African American communities and abolitionist societies in Massachusetts and New York. However, when the school year began, four-fifths of the residents of Canaan registered a protest against the integrated school. A mob attacked the school but was eventually restrained by local officials.

The residents of Canaan mixed patriotism with racism in protesting the Noyes Academy. For some Americans, racism would always be cloaked in the mantle of patriotism. The protesters in Canaan condemned abolitionism and praised the Constitution and Revolutionary patriots as they removed the school building from its foundations and dragged it by oxen to a new site. Stories of this sort were typical of efforts of African Americans and abolitionist societies to establish integrated schools.

Discrimination and segregation affected other parts of the lives of African Americans in northern states. Attempts to prohibit interracial marriages occurred in New York, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Illinois. In Philadelphia, African Americans were allowed to ride only on the front platforms of horse-drawn streetcars, and in New York City blacks could ride only on "colored-only" vehicles. Race riots broke out in Philadelphia and Cincinnati. In 1834 rioting whites in Philadelphia forced blacks to flee, and in 1841 whites in Cincinnati used a cannon against blacks defending their homes.<sup>30</sup>

### Boston and the Struggle for Equal Educational Opportunity

An important example of the early struggle for equality of educational opportunity occurred in Boston. Boston organized the first comprehensive system of urban schools after the passage of the Massachusetts Education Act of 1789. This

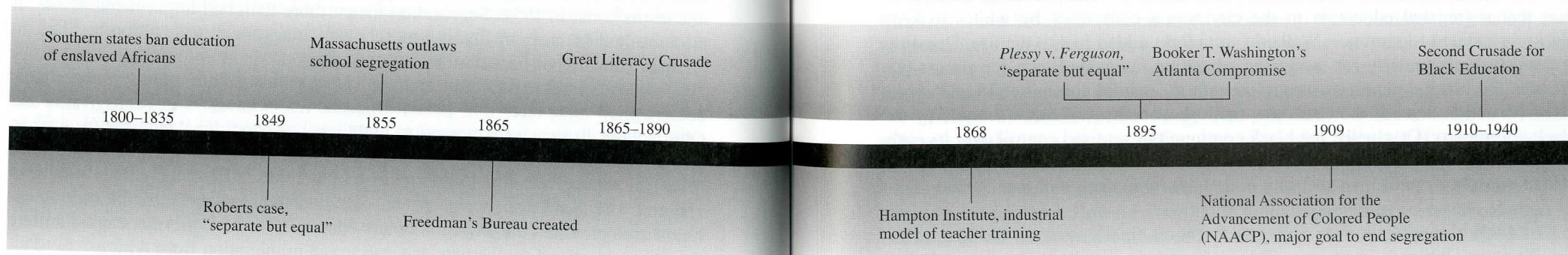
legislation required towns to provide elementary schools for six months of the year and grammar schools in communities with more than 200 families. In 1790, the black population in Boston was 766 out of a total population of 18,038. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, no law or tradition excluded black children from the public schools. Some were enrolled in public schools, while others attended private ones.<sup>31</sup>

However, few black children actually attended school. The low attendance rate was a result of the poor economic conditions of the black population and the hostile reception given black children in the public schools. To protect their children from the prejudice of white children, a committee of African Americans in 1798 asked for a separate system of schools for their children. The Boston School Committee rejected this request, reasoning that if it provided separate schools for blacks it would also need to provide separate schools for other groups. Receiving aid from white philanthropists, the parents opened a school that survived for only a few months. In 1800, a group of thirty-six African Americans again asked the Boston School Committee to establish a separate school for their children. Again the answer was no. Two years later the black community opened another separate private school.<sup>32</sup>

In 1806, the school committee reversed its position and opened a segregated school with a combination of public funds and contributions from white philanthropists. In 1812, the school committee voted for permanent funds for the school and established direct control over it.<sup>33</sup>

The Boston School Committee's decision created a complex situation. First, the committee supported and controlled a segregated school, although no law existed requiring segregation. In theory at least, black children were free to attend public schools other than the one established for them. Second, the African American community supported the segregated school as an alternative to the prejudice existing in the other white-dominated schools. And last, the school was supported by a combination of private and public monies. Private contributions to the school became a major factor when Abiel Smith died in 1815 and left the entire income from his shares in New England turnpikes and bridges and from the U.S. bonds

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he had owned to the support of black schools. The school committee assumed trusteeship of the estate, which meant that it controlled both the school and the majority of private funds supporting the school.<sup>34</sup>

By the 1820s, the African American community realized that a segregated education was resulting in an inferior education for their children. The school committee was appointing inferior teachers to the all-black school and was not maintaining the school building. In 1833, a subcommittee issued a report on the conditions of the schools. The major conclusion of this report was that black schools were inferior to other schools in the quality of education and physical conditions. The report argued that "a classroom better than a basement room in the African Church could be found. After all, Black parents paid taxes which helped to support white schools. They deserved a more equal return on their share of the city's income."<sup>35</sup>

The most important conclusion of the report was that segregated education was not benefiting either race. The Boston School Committee responded to the report by focusing efforts on building a new segregated school. The school committee accepted the idea of segregated education and argued that the real problem was assuring that separate schools for black children were equal to those of whites.

Local black abolitionist David Walker answered this question with a resounding "No!" Walker was representative of an increasingly militant and literate African American community in the northern states. Walker was born in North Carolina in 1779 of a free mother and a slave. According to North Carolina law, Walker was thus born free. He moved to Boston in the early 1820s and became a contributor to and local agent for the nation's first black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, published in New York.

In the newspaper and in his other writings, Walker argued that four principal factors were responsible for the poor situation of blacks in the nation: slavery; the use of religion to justify slavery and prejudice; the African colonization movement, designed to send free blacks back to Africa; and the lack of educational opportunity. White Americans, he argued, were keeping black Americans from receiving any significant amount of education. As proof, he cited laws in the South that made it illegal to educate slaves. In the North, according to Walker, the inferior education blacks received in schools was designed to keep them at a low level of education.<sup>36</sup>

After studying the conditions in Boston schools, Walker reached the conclusion that segregated education in the city was a conspiracy by whites to keep blacks in a state of ignorance. Walker's arguments added fuel to the fire. Demands by the black community for integrated education intensified, and for almost two decades the black community struggled with the school committee to end segregated education. Part of the issue was the loss of control of black schools by the black community. Originally, the black community exercised control over its early private educational endeavors. Over the years, however, the school committee had gained complete control, so that any complaints the black community had about its schools had to be resolved by the committee.

In 1849, the protests over segregated schools finally reached the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court when Benjamin Roberts sued the city for excluding

his five-year-old daughter from the schools. In this particular case, his daughter passed five white primary schools before reaching the black school. Consequently, Roberts decided to enroll her in one of the closer white schools. He lost the case on a decision by the court that the school system had provided equal schools for black children. This was one of the first separate-but-equal rulings in American judicial history.

The issue of segregation in Massachusetts schools was finally resolved in 1855, when the governor signed into law a requirement that no child be denied admission to a public school on the basis of race or religious opinions. In September of that year the Boston public schools were integrated without any violent hostilities.

This early history of segregated education illustrates the ambivalent attitudes of whites about the education of African Americans. On the one hand, whites might feel that containing the threat of African culture to the dominant Protestant culture of the United States required "civilizing" African Americans in the same manner as Native Americans. This meant providing schools. On the other hand, whites who considered Africans a threat to their racial purity and culture, and who believed Africans were "inferior," wanted the "civilizing" or education of African Americans to occur in segregated schools. As a result of the latter beliefs, public education for African Americans in the United States remained primarily segregated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

### Learning in the Plantation System

Literacy was a punishable crime for enslaved Africans in the South. However, by the outbreak of the Civil War in 1860, it is estimated that 5 percent of slaves had learned how to read, sometimes at the risk of life or limb. Individual slaves would sneak books and teach themselves while hiding from their masters. Sometimes self-taught slaves would pass on their skills and knowledge to other slaves. James Anderson quotes a former slave, Ferebe Rogers, about her husband's educational work prior to the Civil War: "On his dyin' bed he said he been de death o' many a nigger 'cause he taught so many to read and write."<sup>37</sup>

It was easier for slaves to learn to read if they worked in cities such as Charleston and Savannah. For enslaved Africans in these communities, as opposed to plantation slaves, there was a chance to earn money to purchase freedom. Also, there was greater assimilation into Anglo-American life. Nevertheless, plantation life sometimes provided the opportunity for clandestine learning.

In *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery*, Leon Litwack relates a number of examples of how literacy spread the word of southern defeats during the Civil War. In one case, discussions of the Civil War by the plantation owners were usually punctuated with the spelling of words so that house slaves could not understand. However, one maid memorized the letters and spelled them out later to an uncle who could read. In Forsyth, Georgia, Edward Glenn, after going to town to get the newspaper, would give it to the local black minister to

read before taking it to the plantation house. Litwack writes, "On the day Glenn would never forget, the preacher threw the newspaper on the ground after reading it, hollered, 'I'm free as a frog!' and ran away. The slave dutifully took the paper to his mistress who read it and began to cry. 'I didn't say no more,' Glenn recalled."<sup>38</sup> In another situation, a Florida slave kept his literacy secret from his owner. One day the owner unexpectedly walked in while he was reading the newspaper and demanded to know what he was doing. "Equal to the moment," Litwack states, "[he] immediately turned the newspaper upside down and declared, 'Confederates done won the war.' The master laughed and left the room, and once again a slave had used the 'darky act' to extricate himself from a precarious situation."<sup>39</sup>

## NATIVE AMERICANS

U.S. political leaders considered education a method for gaining Native American land. A major problem facing the U.S. government after the Revolution was acquiring the lands of Native Americans to the south and west of the lands already controlled by white settlers. Of particular concern were the tribes occupying southern lands in what is now North and South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee. President George Washington and Secretary of War Henry Knox warned the Senate in 1789, "To conciliate the powerful tribes of Indians in the southern District [which included the so-called Five Civilized Tribes—Choctaw, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole] amounting probably to fourteen thousand fighting Men, and to attach them firmly to the United States, may be regarded as highly worthy of the serious attention of government."<sup>40</sup>

Having fought a long and costly war with the British, the U.S. government did not have the resources to immediately embark upon a military campaign against the southern tribes. The easiest route to acquiring their lands was to purchase them through treaties. It is important to understand that the U.S. government treated the purchase of Native American lands as the same thing as bringing the land under the control of the laws of the American government. For instance, the traditional practice in Europe was that if an English citizen bought land in France, French laws would continue to govern the land. In North America, Europeans assumed that the purchase of Native American lands resulted in governance by European American laws. For example, if traditional European practices were followed, then Cherokee land purchased by the U.S. government would have remained under the governance of the Cherokee tribe rather than being placed under the control of U.S. laws.

Therefore, purchase of Indian lands was the same as conquest and it was cheaper than a military campaign. Washington proposed this approach in a 1783 letter to James Duane, who served as head of a select committee on Indian affairs in the Continental Congress. Washington urged the purchase of Indian

lands instead of expropriation. "In a word," Washington wrote, "there is nothing to be obtained by an Indian War but the Soil they live on and this can be had by purchase at less expense, and without bloodshed."<sup>41</sup> The famous Northwest Ordinance of 1787 held out the same promise of peace and negotiation for Indian lands. The ordinance states: "The utmost good faith shall always be observed towards the Indians, their lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent; and in their property, rights and liberty, they never shall be invaded or disturbed."<sup>42</sup>

U.S. government leaders decided that the best methods of convincing the southern tribes to sell their lands were civilization programs. And, in what would later be used by Thomas Jefferson as a means of civilizing Native Americans, Washington proposed the establishment of official U.S. government trading houses on tribal lands as a means of "render[ing] tranquility with the savages permanent by creating ties of interest."<sup>43</sup>

When Thomas Jefferson became president in 1801, he also hoped trading houses would be the means for civilizing Native Americans and gaining their lands. The major flaw in these policies was the assumption that Indians would be willing to sell their lands. As Jefferson noted in a message to Congress in 1803, "the policy has long been gaining strength with them [Native Americans] of refusing absolutely all further sale on any conditions."<sup>44</sup> In the face of this resistance, Jefferson's problem was developing a plan that would cause tribes to sell their lands.

Jefferson was convinced that the cultural transformation of Native Americans was the key to acquiring tribal lands. For Jefferson, the solution to breaking down resistance to selling land involved transforming Native Americans into yeoman farmers who, living on farms and no longer dependent on hunting, would not need vast tracts of wilderness. In his first annual message to Congress in 1801, he informed the members that "efforts to introduce among them [Indians] the implements and practice of husbandry, and of the household arts" was successful. "They are becoming more and more sensible," he stated, "of the superiority of this dependence for clothing and subsistence over the precarious resources of hunting and fishing." He was pleased to report that as a result of learning European American methods of husbandry and agriculture, tribes "begin to experience an increase of population."<sup>45</sup>

As did many other European Americans, Jefferson believed it was important to teach Indians a desire for the accumulation of property and to extinguish the cultural practice of sharing. Like other advocates of "civilizing" the Native Americans, Jefferson linked the creation of the nuclear family with a desire to acquire property and the establishment of a formal government. Writing to the chiefs of the Cherokee Nation in 1806, he congratulated the tribe for beginning a transition from hunting to husbandry and farming. The nuclear family structure resulting from farming, he argued, would create a desire to accumulate and pass on property. "When a man has enclosed and improved his farm," Jefferson wrote, "builds a good house on it and raised plentiful stocks of animals, he will wish when he dies that *these things shall go to his wife and children, who he loves more than he does his other relations, and for whom he will work with pleasure during his life* [emphasis added]."<sup>46</sup>