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# “Tuskegee Is Her Monument”: Gender and Leadership in Early Public Black Colleges

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## Abstract

This article examines the relationship between gender and leadership in southern public Black colleges from the late nineteenth through the early twentieth century. Public colleges offer a unique view of this relationship because, in an era of disfranchisement, the political stakes of leadership were more obvious than in private schools. I argue that the gap between Black women’s dynamic roles on public campuses and their marginalized representations in school reports reveals the processes that have obscured their public educational leadership in the American South. Analysis of images collected from college catalogs supplements my examination of documentary evidence from archives and published reports. State educational administration was one of the few remaining spaces where Black men could wield political influence. As they worked to produce institutional images that proclaimed their capacity for and right to public leadership, however, they minimized the contributions of Black women.

**Keywords:** African Americans; women; gender; higher education; leadership; Historically Black Colleges and Universities

In 1881, Booker T. Washington solicited Olivia Davidson for help establishing Tuskegee Institute, a school for Black students’ higher learning in Alabama. Davidson had earned a reputation as a teacher committed to the most marginalized students. At twenty-seven years old, she had already taught students in Ohio, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Tennessee. From cities combating epidemics to remote cotton plantations, Davidson brought schooling to communities that had little access to it. She was also dedicated to her development as a teacher. She had earned the highest honors from Virginia’s Hampton Institute and from Framingham State Normal School in Massachusetts. When Davidson first arrived in Alabama, Tuskegee had no permanent buildings and only a meager appropriation from the state to pay a few teachers’ salaries. As the assistant principal, she worked closely with Washington to raise funds, using her personal connections to collect several thousand dollars from wealthy mentors in Massachusetts. Within a few months, they had collected enough money to purchase a farm and erect a large school

building. Davidson continued to make successful fundraising trips each year until her premature death from tuberculosis in 1889.<sup>1</sup>

Although her contemporaries acknowledged that the early growth of Tuskegee was as much her legacy as it was Washington's, Olivia Davidson's name has since receded from public memory. Surviving university records primarily highlight the role of presidents like Booker T. Washington. Davidson's diminished importance in the archival record is not exceptional. Indeed, it reflects broader trends in southern public college leadership in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Black women like Davidson were crucial to the development of public higher education in the post-Civil War South. They served as teachers, department heads, and assistant principals. With higher education open to them for the first time, Black girls and women flocked to state normal schools and colleges in growing numbers throughout the late nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> As the twentieth century dawned, higher overall enrollments and more specialized departments meant that there were greater numbers of female students and teachers on college campuses than ever before.<sup>3</sup> Black women at public colleges, however, weighed their own ambitions against support for their male colleagues and the cause of public higher education. Violent disfranchisement made public education one of the few areas where Black men could retain some political influence. Furthermore, maintaining financial support from southern state governments that were hostile to Black advancement required crafting an institutional image that would be palatable to conservative white officials. Evidence suggests that male administrators produced school catalogs and reports that downplayed the diverse contributions Black women made to public college campuses.

Although Black women built primary schools and ran private colleges throughout the South, the highest administrative positions and salaries remained elusive for them at the region's public colleges and state normal schools. Moreover, the gender disparity among top leaders at public colleges has continued into the twenty-first century. Many of the oldest public Black colleges have had either no women as their presidents or only one woman in that role throughout their history. Alcorn State University, for instance, made news in spring 2021 when it installed its first female president in 150 years. In doing so, the school replaced Prairie View A&M University as the most recent public Black college to break its streak of male presidents. When Alabama State University hired its first female president in 2014, news that her contract contained a clause prohibiting "cohabitation" in the president's residence drew concern about different expectations for men and

<sup>1</sup>Monroe A. Majors, *Noted Negro Women, Their Triumphs and Activities* (Chicago, 1893; repr., Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 53–57, HathiTrust Digital Library; K. Wise Whitehead, "Washington, Olivia Davidson," in Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, eds., *African American National Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), Oxford African American Studies Center, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.38136>.

<sup>2</sup>Normal schools were institutions designed to train teachers through instruction in pedagogy and curriculum. In this article, they are considered part of the patchwork system of nineteenth-century American higher education. For more on the development of public normal schools, see Christine A. Ogren, *The American State Normal School: "An Instrument of Great Good"* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>3</sup>Ogren, *The American State Normal School*, 55–57.

women in leadership roles.<sup>4</sup> So, even as Black women make up the majority of students enrolled in Historically Black Colleges and Universities, women remain disproportionately excluded from the office of presidency.<sup>5</sup>

This article examines the gap between Black women's dynamic roles on campus and their representations in school reports to uncover the processes by which leadership in Black public higher education became gendered masculine. Black women played critical roles in establishing the first institutions of higher learning for Black students in the South, and their impact on campuses only grew as colleges expanded into the twentieth century. At the same time, however, that greater numbers of Black women were finding personal and professional fulfillment working at public Black colleges, public reports obscured the full range of their contributions.

Scholars have missed this story because they have tended to overlook public Black colleges in this period. Historians have examined Black educational activism from slavery to freedom, demonstrating that schools provide an important window onto nineteenth-century Black community building and leadership development. Most of the literature, though, has focused on primary schools or private institutions.<sup>6</sup> Studies that have centered the experiences of Black women reveal they used those educational spaces to carve out their own leadership roles. Mary McLeod Bethune, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Elizabeth Evelyn Wright, and Jennie Dean were among the Black women who established private Black schools in the early Jim Crow South.<sup>7</sup>

Examining public Black colleges offers a different view of the complex relationship between gender, leadership, and Black politics in the American South. In the influential 1996 book *Gender and Jim Crow*, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore argued that Black women stepped forward in the public sphere after violent disfranchisement

<sup>4</sup>"Alcorn State to Inaugurate First Female President," AP News, March 6, 2021; Brooke A. Lewis, "Prairie View A&M Inaugurates Ruth Simmons as New President," *Houston Chronicle*, April 20, 2018; Debbie Elliott, "No 'Cohabitation' for Alabama State's First Female President," NPR, Jan. 17, 2014.

<sup>5</sup>For information on gender disparities and statistics at HBCUs, see Marybeth Gasman, Ufuoma Abiola, and Ashley Freeman, "Gender Disparities at Historically Black Colleges and Universities," *Higher Education Review* 47, no. 1 (Autumn 2014), 68–69; and National Center for Education Statistics, "Fast Facts: Historically Black Colleges and Universities," <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=667>.

<sup>6</sup>James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Ronald Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861–1876* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup>For a recent discussion of Bethune, who founded what would become Bethune-Cookman University in 1904, see Audrey Thomas McCluskey, *A Forgotten Sisterhood: Black Women Educators and Activists in the Jim Crow South* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 55–72. On Brown, see Charles W. Wadlington and Richard F. Knapp, *Charlotte Hawkins Brown and Palmer Memorial Institute: What One Young African American Woman Could Do* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999). For more on the educational leadership of Wright (Voorhees College) and Dean (Manassas Industrial School), see Ángel David Nieves, *An Architecture of Education: African American Women Design the New South* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2018). Other works that discuss Black women carving out leadership roles through education include Stephanie J. Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers during the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), and Ann Short Chirhart, *Torches of Light: Georgia Teachers and the Coming of the Modern South* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2005).

forced Black men to retreat from it.<sup>8</sup> Yet, southern Black men did not retreat from their positions as public college presidents. Public Black colleges allowed Black men to maintain a presence in government affairs even after southern white conservatives returned to power in the 1870s and 1880s. College leaders were in frequent communication with the state superintendent, legislators, and governor to advocate on behalf of their institution. Thus, it was both a significant responsibility and a prestigious opportunity to run a public school—one that underscored the right of African Americans to occupy and lead in public spaces in the post-emancipation era. From the 1890s into the early twentieth century, the tightening vise of disfranchisement, along with the national abandonment of Reconstruction and the rise of stereotypes about Black criminality, threatened Black men's place in civic life. Being a high-level administrator or professor at a public college remained a valuable expression of intellect and one's worthiness of citizenship. In an era of constrained opportunities, it also became one of the best, most lucrative jobs available to Black men. As a result, male administrators clung to their leadership positions. They crafted an image of masculine school leadership that countered images of Black men as corrupt and incompetent. In the process, they narrowed the space for Black women to hold prestigious positions on campus. The history of the early and ongoing contributions of Black women to public Black colleges became less visible in formal school records.

In many cases, Black women worked alongside men to develop public Black colleges in the 1870s and 1880s, as the first wave of public institutions in the South struggled to maintain their footing amid white hostility and economic crises.<sup>9</sup> School leaders could only afford to hire a small corps of faculty members, who were expected to help raise money for building or operational expenses, even if it meant sacrificing portions of their already scant salary. For instance, at Alabama's State Normal and Industrial School, the first corps of teachers worked together to purchase the land in Huntsville on which to build permanent school buildings.<sup>10</sup> In Mississippi, the president of Alcorn University complained to the Board of Trustees in 1885 that given all the responsibilities of his office, the role was "too onerous for any one man to live long to try to do." As a result of having to wear many different hats in this early period, Black educators risked exhaustion and frustration out of fierce commitment to their race.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), xx, 138.

<sup>9</sup>There is currently a debate over the capitalization of terms denoting race and ethnicity. In this article, the author capitalizes "Black" but not "white" when referring to race/ethnicity. Several major publications have made similar decisions. For the most substantive explanations, see the following editorials: "Explaining AP style on Black and white," AP News, July 20, 2020; Nancy Coleman, "Why We're Capitalizing Black," *The New York Times*, July 5, 2020; Mike Laws, "Why we capitalize 'Black' (and not 'white')," *Columbia Journalism Review*, June 16, 2020.

<sup>10</sup>*Bulletin of the State Agricultural and Mechanical College for Negroes, Normal Alabama. Formerly State Normal and Industrial School* (Normal, AL, Oct. 1911), 7, box 1, Alabama A&M University, State Publications, Alabama Department of Archives and History (hereafter ADAH).

<sup>11</sup>*Report of the Trustees and Faculty of the Alcorn A. & M. College, to the Legislature of Mississippi, for the Years 1884–85* (Jackson, MS, 1885), 6, Alcorn A&M College Biennial Reports, 1884–1915, Mississippi Department of Archives and History (hereafter MDAH).

During these early, uncertain years of institution building, Black women educators shaped public Black colleges from high-status positions. In Missouri, for instance, when Inman Page became president of Lincoln Institute in 1880, he dismissed nearly all the white teachers and hired a handful of Black teachers to replace them.<sup>12</sup> The new crop of teachers included several esteemed college graduates, both women and men. Among them was twenty-one-year-old Josephine Silone. Growing up in New York, Silone received more education from a young age than most American girls. She showed such promise as a teenager, especially in the sciences and mathematics, that family friends invited her to live with them in Philadelphia so she could attend the private Institute for Colored Youth. There, she received mentorship from the principal—another talented and ambitious woman—Fanny Jackson Coppin.<sup>13</sup> President Page made women faculty a central component of his reorganization of Lincoln Institute in Missouri. In 1882, women held three of its six faculty positions. Silone taught science courses, Mary Graham taught English language and literature, and Anna Jones taught geography and Latin.<sup>14</sup> Silone had so much success as a chemistry teacher that she was soon given charge of the entire natural science department and assigned the title Professor of Natural Science. By the end of her eight-year tenure at Lincoln, Silone was earning \$1,000 per year.<sup>15</sup> Both her title and salary were rare for Black women in early public colleges, but her talent and leadership acumen were less so.

In Alabama, Olivia Davidson became the face of Tuskegee Institute, alongside Booker T. Washington. Her impact during the school's critical first decade was so significant that it was difficult for observers to put into words. "Miss Davidson's services are inestimable," Washington wrote to a friend soon after she arrived at Tuskegee. "She throws her whole self into the work."<sup>16</sup> She made her biggest contribution to the early growth of the school through fundraising. She and Washington needed to raise money to pay off the loan they had used to buy a plot of land, plus additional funds to erect a permanent school building. First, Davidson canvassed the families in and around the town of Tuskegee. Seeing how impoverished many of the families were, she came up with the idea of seeking food donations, such as cakes, chickens, and breads, instead of solely cash gifts. Then, she organized a series of small festivals to sell the items. After she had raised as much money as she could locally, Davidson traveled north to secure more donations. She spent weeks meeting with individuals and making speeches at churches, Sunday schools, and other organizations. She wrote letters to the monthly journal the *Southern Workman* on behalf of the school, advertising its growth and publicizing its needs to a wide readership that included

<sup>12</sup>William Sherman Savage, *The History of Lincoln University* (Jefferson City, MO: Lincoln University Press, 1939), 43.

<sup>13</sup>Lawson A. Scruggs, *Women of Distinction: Remarkable in Works and Invincible in Character* (Raleigh, NC: L.A. Scruggs, 1893), 40–42, HathiTrust Digital Library.

<sup>14</sup>*32nd and 33rd Reports of the Public Schools of the State of Missouri* (Jefferson City, MO, 1883), 173, box 1, Annual Report of Public Schools, 1867, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City, MO (hereafter MSA).

<sup>15</sup>Scruggs, *Women of Distinction*, 42, 44–45.

<sup>16</sup>Booker T. Washington to James Fowle Baldwin Marshall, [Nov.] 3, 1881, Tuskegee, AL, in Louis R. Harlan et al., eds., *The Booker T. Washington Papers* (hereafter BTW Papers), vol. 2 (14 vols.; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1972–1989), 152.

African Americans, moderate white southerners, and conservative northern philanthropists. Over time, she became known for her successful northern fundraising trips. She had such a gift for engaging and cultivating her personal contacts that one year she raised \$10,000 on a single trip.<sup>17</sup>

Davidson, however, did not confine her energies to attracting wealthy benefactors for Tuskegee. She also gained the trust of colleagues, students, and community members. Davidson and Washington worked closely on many of the early operations decisions, often seeking advice from mutual friends who managed Hampton Institute, their alma mater. Regular correspondence between Washington and the treasurer at Hampton, for instance, contained frequent references to Davidson, her involvement in their discussions, and her work on behalf of Tuskegee. As Washington recalled in his 1900 autobiography, "During the organization of the school and in all matters of discipline she was the one to bring order out of every difficulty. When the last effort had apparently been exhausted and it seemed that things must stop, she was the one to find a way out."<sup>18</sup> Despite her numerous fundraising trips, Davidson also maintained an active presence in the town of Tuskegee. She taught students on campus and adults in local Sunday schools. According to Washington, she brought with her "many valuable and fresh ideas as to the best methods of teaching." In 1886, Davidson was invited to address the Alabama State Teachers' Association, a statewide organization for Black teachers to share pedagogical theories and practices. Davidson used the platform to urge fellow educators to consider how they might shape the futures of young Black girls. Shortly thereafter, she married Booker T. Washington.<sup>19</sup>

Known to her friends as "Saint Olivia," Davidson paid a personal price for her successful but grueling work.<sup>20</sup> Her story serves as a reminder of the sacrifices it took to establish Black colleges in the late nineteenth-century South. When Davidson arrived in Tuskegee, with all her previous experience teaching in several rural communities, she was still struck by the enormity of the task before her. "Ah, Mary dear," she wrote to a former classmate, "I feel very very weak when I look about me at the work there is to be done." She explained that while Black families showed great interest in the school, the faculty had frustratingly few resources to support them. "Think of it," she implored her friend, "a Normal school without even a Dictionary or map of the U.S.!!"<sup>21</sup> Fundraising was thus essential to improving instruction, but it, too, levied a significant personal cost. Booker T. Washington later reflected that the time they spent traveling to promote the new school "was the hardest and most trying part of

<sup>17</sup>Booker T. Washington, "The Story of My Life and Work" (Cincinnati, OH, 1900), BTW Papers, vol. 1, 32–33, 47; Washington, *Up from Slavery* (New York, 1901), BTW Papers, vol. 2, 285, 290; Olivia A. Davidson to the Editor of the *Southern Workman*, June 11, 1883, Tuskegee, AL, BTW Papers, vol. 2, 230–33; Majors, *Noted Negro Women*, 56.

<sup>18</sup>Booker T. Washington to James Fowle Baldwin Marshall, BTW Papers, vol. 2, 137, 142, 150–52; Washington, *Story of My Life*, in BTW Papers, vol. 1, 32.

<sup>19</sup>Washington, *Up from Slavery*, BTW Papers, vol. 1, 290, 282 (quotation on 282); Olivia A. Davidson, "How Shall We Make the Women of Our Race Stronger?," April 21, 1886, Selma, AL, BTW Papers, vol. 2, 298–305; Majors, *Noted Negro Women*, 56.

<sup>20</sup>Mary Elizabeth Preston Stearns to Booker T. Washington, Nov. 8, 1889, College Hill, MA, BTW Papers, vol. 3, 15.

<sup>21</sup>Olivia A. Davidson to Mary Berry, Sept. 12, 1881, Tuskegee, AL, BTW Papers, vol. 2, 147.

the work.” The schedule was demanding and could be filled with embarrassing rejections. Davidson had struggled with poor health for much of her adult life, but her condition worsened during her time at Tuskegee. After the birth of her two children with Washington, she took a step back from many of her campus responsibilities, but she continued to raise money on behalf of the school.<sup>22</sup>

Davidson’s views on gender and work were complicated, but she strove to place Black women and girls at the center of the post-emancipation Black freedom struggle. Like many other reformers, her vision of uplift emphasized moral, rather than structural, solutions to poverty. Her speech before the State Teachers’ Association, entitled “How Shall We Make the Women of Our Race Stronger?,” called for teachers to help strengthen young women physically, morally, and intellectually. “We must work outside the school-room,” she told her fellow educators. “We must see the girls in their homes, make friends with them, be interested in them if we would help them.” No doubt recalling her long-running approach to teaching in impoverished communities, she advised teachers, especially in rural areas, to become beacons of proper moral behavior, temperance, and housekeeping.<sup>23</sup>

After her premature death in 1889, tributes to Davidson linked her inextricably to the growth of Tuskegee Institute. Washington acknowledged that “the success of the school, especially during the first half dozen years of its existence, was due more to Miss Davidson than any one else.”<sup>24</sup> For a time, the assembly room in Porter Hall, the first building constructed on campus, prominently displayed her portrait alongside the portraits of two white patrons of the school. An 1893 anthology on notable Black women declared, “Tuskegee is her monument.”<sup>25</sup> Davidson herself had felt that she was working for a larger cause. In 1882, reflecting to a Hampton mentor on the whirlwind of her first year at the school, she wrote, “As I look back upon what has been accomplished since I came to you to know about the school, it all seems like a story, and not a transaction in real life with which I have been intimately connected.”<sup>26</sup> Davidson was part of a cohort of women who were instrumental in extending public higher education to Black southerners. But, by the early twentieth century, the history of their early leadership had taken on a hazier quality, obscured by the rising image of public school administration as the realm of men.

Higher education during this period was a patchwork system for most middle- and working-class Americans. A clear hierarchy did not exist between secondary schools and colleges. Few Americans received more than a primary education, and the percentage of southerners attending high school was even smaller. As a result, many colleges offered preparatory departments to provide students a bridge from primary school to a more advanced curriculum. Colleges and high schools overlapped in

<sup>22</sup>Washington, *Story of My Life*, BTW Papers, vol. 1, 47; Washington, *Up from Slavery*, BTW Papers, vol. 1, 290; Majors, *Noted Negro Women*, 56.

<sup>23</sup>Davidson, “How Shall We Make the Women of Our Race Stronger?,” BTW Papers, vol. 2, 305.

<sup>24</sup>Washington, *Story of My Life*, BTW Papers, vol. 1, 32.

<sup>25</sup>“An Account of the Tuskegee Negro Conference,” Feb. 20–21, 1895, Tuskegee, AL, BTW Papers, vol. 3, 522; Majors, *Noted Negro Women*, 56.

<sup>26</sup>Olivia A. Davidson to James Fowle Baldwin Marshall, Dec. 8, 1882, Tuskegee, AL, BTW Papers, vol. 2, 213.

this way and even competed for students.<sup>27</sup> Like other institutions of higher learning, public Black colleges offered multiple programs in order to attract and serve the greatest number of students. Their largest enrollment numbers were often in the preparatory department, which could double as a training ground for student teachers in the teacher-training program, but many school leaders also implemented a collegiate program for the brightest and most determined men and women.

In Virginia, the shift in faculty and enrollment demographics in the 1880s and the 1900s exemplified how, as public colleges expanded and curricula became more rigidly defined, women sometimes lost ground. Two of the five original faculty members at Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute were Black women, and they both held high-status positions. Ida Morris served as assistant principal, and Hampton Institute alumna Sallie P. Gregory led the entire normal department. Morris was second only to the principal in terms of both rank and salary, earning \$1,100 in her first year.<sup>28</sup> She was young, but she was also one of the most experienced teachers at the Institute. For almost ten years prior to her appointment at Virginia Normal in 1883, Morris had taught at the Hallowell School for Colored Girls in Alexandria, Virginia, working her way up to become principal in the early 1880s.<sup>29</sup> Like the examples of Coppin, Bethune, and others, Morris's experiences demonstrated how leadership opportunities for women in private education far outpaced those in public colleges. Still, although Morris was not president of the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute, her teaching experience allowed her to rank above male, college-educated colleagues. She worked there for three years before disappearing from school records. Most likely, Morris, who had married one of the male administrators at Virginia Normal in 1884, left full-time teaching after having her first child.<sup>30</sup> It was not uncommon for middle-class women to end or reduce employment once they became wives and mothers.

Through the 1880s and continuing into the early 1890s, Black women had wide-ranging professional opportunities at Virginia Normal. After the faculty expanded in 1886, women continued to hold about half of the positions. And, in 1890, the trustees elected another experienced female teacher, Della Irving Hayden, to be assistant principal.<sup>31</sup> It is striking, then, to see the differences in the composition of the school just one decade later. At the turn of the twentieth century, Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute boasted a strong, diverse curriculum that was technically coed. Yet, no female students were enrolled in the college-level courses. More than one hundred young women were enrolled at Virginia Normal, but they were

<sup>27</sup>Marc A. VanOverbeke, *The Standardization of American Schooling: Linking Secondary and Higher Education, 1870–1910* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>28</sup>"Report: Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute," appendix in *Virginia School Report: Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction* (Richmond, 1884), 10, HathiTrust Digital Library; Meeting dated August 22, 1883, Board of Visitor Minutes, 1883–1902, Virginia State University Special Collections and Archives, Johnston Memorial Library, Petersburg, VA; "The Old Dominion," *New York Globe*, Sept. 8, 1883, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup>"City School Board," *Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser*, Sept. 5, 1874; *Alexandria, Virginia, City Directory, 1881–82* (Richmond, VA, 1882), 115, U. S. City Directories, 1822–1995, Ancestry.com.

<sup>30</sup>"Ida R. Morris," *Virginia, Select Marriages, 1785–1940*, Ancestry.com.

<sup>31</sup>"Report of the Normal and Collegiate Institute," in *Sixteenth Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction* (Richmond, 1886), 187, HathiTrust Digital Library; Majors, *Noted Negro Women*, 36–38.



all in the teacher-training program or in the preparatory department. Similarly, the few female instructors oversaw the normal and preparatory departments. None held the title of professor, and they represented a smaller proportion of the overall faculty compared to the early years of the school. In 1901, women held just three of nine full-time faculty positions at Virginia Normal. A few additional women served as matrons and assistants in the girls' industrial department.<sup>32</sup>

The situation appeared to be similar elsewhere. In the 1870s and 1880s, working- and middle-class women found higher education open to them for the first time, and they leveraged it for professional opportunities to teach in either common schools or public colleges. They taught in girls' industrial departments and in the lower grades, but they also taught more advanced students in mathematics, Greek, and English literature.<sup>33</sup> They helped run the institutions as department chairs and assistant principals. However, as public Black colleges expanded in the 1890s and early 1900s, adding faculty and new academic departments, school reports routinely presented female teachers as confined to the non-collegiate departments or domestic arts. In Alabama at the turn of the century, for instance, the State Normal University listed female faculty only as instructors of courses related to girls' industrial training.<sup>34</sup> At Southern University in Louisiana, which separated the university department from the high school and preparatory departments, female teachers were relegated to the lower schools.<sup>35</sup>

In practice, teachers as well as students likely moved between classes in different departments. Still, official ranks and titles mattered, especially when they dictated salary. Women who were assigned to positions in lower grades earned less than their male colleagues in college departments. After Professor Silone left Missouri's Lincoln Institute in the late 1880s, school reports listed female faculty only as assistant teachers, matrons, or music instructors. Moreover, they only earned about half as much as men on the faculty.<sup>36</sup> Graduates who pursued careers in the public school system likewise found a gendered divide between teaching and administration. Institutional lists of alumni from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century reveal that the majority of public Black college students became educators themselves. For example, out of the fourteen Prairie View graduates in the class of 1898, seven

<sup>32</sup>1901–1902 *Virginia Normal and Industrial Institute Catalogue* (Petersburg, VA, 1902), 4–5, 40, Virginia State University Digital Archives Collection, HBCU Library Alliance.

<sup>33</sup>*Thirtieth Report of the Public Schools of the State of Missouri* (Jefferson City, MO, 1880), 118, box 1, Annual Report of Public Schools, MSA; *Catalogue of the Thirteenth Annual Session of State Normal University, Marion, Ala. 1885–86* (Selma, AL, 1886), box 1, Alabama State University, State Publications, ADAH.

<sup>34</sup>*Catalogue of the State Normal School for Colored Students, at Montgomery, Ala. 1899–1900*, box 1, Alabama State University, State Publications, ADAH.

<sup>35</sup>*Reports: Southern University, 1899–1900* (New Orleans, LA), Southern University Reports, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA.

<sup>36</sup>*Forty-Third Report of the Public Schools of the State of Missouri, for the School Year Ending June 30, 1892* (Jefferson City, MO, 1893), 174, box 2, Annual Report of Public Schools, MSA; *Forty-Fifth Report of the Public Schools of the State of Missouri, for the School Year Ending June 30, 1894* (Jefferson City, MO, 1895), 219, box 2, Annual Report of Public Schools, MSA. For a salary breakdown, see *Fortieth Report of the Public Schools of the State of Missouri, for the School Year Ending June 30, 1889* (Jefferson City, MO, 1890), 129–30, box 2, Annual Report of Public Schools, MSA.

became teachers and six became principals. Not one of the four female graduates, however, was listed as a principal.<sup>37</sup> The alumni records from Prairie View are consistent with scholars' broader observations that as the numbers of women teachers boomed nationally in the late nineteenth century, men worked to attach cultural meanings to administrative work that rendered it more masculine, authoritative, and powerful. By 1900, 57.5 percent of American normal school teachers and instructors were women, but they represented only 17.1 percent of college and university professors.<sup>38</sup>

From the earliest stages, ideas about gender had influenced the development of public Black colleges. As newly elected Reconstruction-era Black politicians collaborated with white Republican allies and local educators to address the need for formal teacher-training programs and higher education for freedpeople, they debated both who and what these schools would teach. It was not guaranteed that public higher education would include women, even though teaching had long been seen as an acceptable occupation for American women, an extension of their natural roles as mothers. In the post-emancipation period, Black women taught classes, boarded students and teachers from nearby schoolhouses, and started their own private schools.<sup>39</sup> Their activism helped force male educators and politicians to consider the extent to which public colleges and state normal schools would serve southern women of all races.

Many male officeholders made the case for institutions where women could receive the same sophisticated teacher training that was available to men. In 1869, the state superintendent of North Carolina recommended establishing public normal institutions separate from the male-only University of North Carolina. "A majority of the Public School teachers will be females—certainly they ought to be," he argued. After all, he went on to declare, "teaching is preeminently woman's sphere and prerogative."<sup>40</sup> Across the region, states heeded similar recommendations, and groups traditionally excluded from elite, private colleges were able to turn to state normal schools. These students included women, African Americans, Native Americans, and poor white men.<sup>41</sup> School leaders also found that Black girls were just as interested in education as boys. In 1877, the founding principal of North Carolina's State Colored Normal School reported, "In deportment and Scholarship, the females have shown themselves in no wise inferior to the males, and the School would be deprived of some of its brightest students and most promising teachers if females were not

<sup>37</sup>Prairie View A&M University Catalogs from 1885 to 1918, Special Collections and Archives, John B. Coleman Library, Prairie View A&M University.

<sup>38</sup>Jackie Blount, *Destined to Rule the Schools: Women and the Superintendency, 1873–1995* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 7; Ogren, *The American State Normal School*, 90.

<sup>39</sup>Williams, *Self-Taught*; Sarah H. Case, *Leaders of Their Race: Educating Black and White Women in the New South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017); Adam Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>40</sup>North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, *Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of North Carolina, for the Year 1869* (Raleigh, NC: M.S. Littlefield, 1869), 6, Documenting the American South, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

<sup>41</sup>Ogren, *The American State Normal School*, 65.



**Figure 1.** A class in chemistry at Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College in 1910. W. N. Hartshorn and George W. Penniman, eds., *An Era of Progress and Promise, 1863–1910: The Religious, Moral, and Educational Development of the American Negro since His Emancipation* (Boston: Priscilla Publishing Co., 1910), 346, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/eraofprogresspro00hart\\_0](https://archive.org/details/eraofprogresspro00hart_0).

permitted.”<sup>42</sup> Some educators and officials argued that all citizens, regardless of race or sex, should have access to public higher education.

However, not all public Black colleges began as coed institutions, especially if they emphasized agricultural and mechanical training. In Mississippi, for example, Alcorn University, founded in 1871, did not accept female students until the 1880s (see [Figure 1](#)).<sup>43</sup> Similarly, in Texas, the Agricultural and Mechanical College for Colored Youth was all male until state officials renamed it the Prairie View Normal School. Even after the reorganization, Prairie View continued to have almost twice as many Black boys enrolled as girls through the

<sup>42</sup>Robert Harris to J. C. Scarborough, Dec. 24, 1877, Fayetteville, NC, Correspondence, 1868–1879, Superintendent of Public Instruction Records, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.

<sup>43</sup>An 1895 report from the president of Alcorn’s Board of Trustees indicates that Alcorn had only just instituted a policy to accept girls, but earlier student rolls indicate there had been a smattering of girls enrolled in the 1880s. Mississippi State Department of Education, “Biennial Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education, to the Legislature of Mississippi, for Scholastic Years 1893–94 and 1894–95” (Jackson, MS: Clarion-Ledger Printing, 1895), 438, in *Biennial Reports of the Departments and Benevolent Institutions of the State of Mississippi*, State Superintendent of Public Education Reports, 1878, MDAH; *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Alcorn A. and M. College, 1887–88* (New Orleans, LA, 1888), folder 2, box 1, College Catalogs, Archives and Special Collections, Alcorn State University, Lorman, MS.

1880s.<sup>44</sup> The imbalance may have owed in part to the biases of the school's third principal, Laurine C. Anderson. In 1885, he reported to board members that, "After nearly six years in this particular work[,] I am led to doubt the wisdom of laying stress upon . . . the particular preparation of girls for the profession of teaching." According to him, since rural schoolteachers faced difficult conditions that would prompt young women to quit the profession at higher rates, training them was a waste of resources.<sup>45</sup> In general, though, fledgling public institutions could ill afford to turn away large segments of prospective students. Enrollment statistics helped school officials justify their existence to state governments wary of public expenditures. Thus, despite some educators' disapproval of higher education for women, all public Black colleges were coed institutions by the 1890s. This was a marked contrast from southern public universities for white students, which typically excluded women for far longer.

Gender also appeared at the center of conversations about what the new institutions would teach. Most educational activists agreed the goal was for all graduates—both women and men—to become financially independent, socially conscious models of success in their communities. Many students never completed the course of study, while others went on to pursue further education after graduation. Either way, educators sought to transform the futures of young Black women and men, who could parlay their college experiences into becoming more informed community leaders, laborers, and professionals.

Nineteenth-century reformers shared a sense that higher education should teach boys and girls how to be good men and women. Many also believed colleges would serve the most Americans by combining students' intellectual development with practical preparation for a career in teaching, farming, or a skilled trade. In the vastly rural South, educators took both of these principles seriously. While most courses in public Black colleges were coed by the turn of the twentieth century, industrial classes remained segregated by sex. Boys generally received training in subjects like carpentry and blacksmithing, and they could be required to work on the school farm. Meanwhile, girls across the region were frequently offered cooking and sewing classes and could be required to work in the laundry (see [Figure 2](#)).<sup>46</sup>

The curriculum design at public Black colleges tied professional advancement to specific gender roles. In contrast to the male-dominated agricultural and mechanical colleges, institutions that emphasized teacher training or a broad range of programs tended to be coed from the start. A founder of the North Carolina State Normal

<sup>44</sup>*Report of the Prairie View State Normal School Located at Prairie View, Waller County, Texas* (Austin, TX, 1899), 6, box 1, Annual Reports, Special Collections and Archives, John B. Coleman Library, Prairie View A&M University; *Report of the Prairie View Normal School, Located in Waller County* (Austin, 1889), viii-ix, box 2, L. L. McInnis Papers, Cushing Library Special Collections, Texas A&M University.

<sup>45</sup>"Principal's Report," 13, folder "May 31-June 8, 1886," box 1, Board of Directors Minutes, 1886-1901, Cushing Library Special Collections, Texas A&M University.

<sup>46</sup>Charles Vincent, *A Centennial History of Southern University and A&M College, 1880-1980* (Baton Rouge, LA: Southern University, 1981), 22; *Fifteenth Annual Catalogue of the State Normal and Industrial School, Huntsville, Alabama, 1889-1890*, box 3, Alabama A&M University, State Publications, ADAH; *Bulletin of the State Agricultural and Mechanical College*, 7, box 1, Alabama A&M University, State Publications, ADAH; *Biennial Report of Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1909-1911* (Nashville, TN, 1911), Biennial Reports, Alcorn A&M College, 1884-1915, MDAH.



**Figure 2.** A portrait of a cooking class at Hampton Institute in Virginia, circa 1899. Frances Benjamin Johnston Collection, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/92500048/>.

School even went so far as to praise Black girls for their “refining influence on the manners of the males.”<sup>47</sup> It was not uncommon for nineteenth-century Americans to believe women were inherently moral beings who could have a civilizing influence on their surroundings. Although such patriarchal ideas had traditionally been reserved for white women, scholars have noted that freedpeople’s aspirations included a redefinition of gender roles, through which Black women could retreat to the domestic sphere and Black men could provide for their families. In the late nineteenth century, Black and white women alike leveraged the idea of separate spheres to carve out space for themselves in higher education and the professional world. In addition to arguing for access to school as a fundamental right, many educational reformers insisted that teacher training and industrial arts courses supported women’s traditional roles as laborers and moral leaders in the domestic sphere.<sup>48</sup> After Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College established a domestic science department at the turn of the twentieth century, the department head reported that with proper instruction, female students “cannot fail to acquire those habits of thrift, industry and thoroughness which characterize the ideal home-makers.”<sup>49</sup> Refrains like this were so common among reformers that it is clear many saw a genuine connection

<sup>47</sup>Robert Harris to J. C. Scarborough, Dec. 24, 1877, Fayetteville, NC, Correspondence, 1868–1879, Superintendent of Public Instruction, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.

<sup>48</sup>Leslie Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham: Gender, Class, and Black Community Development in the Jim Crow South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Blount, *Destined to Rule the Schools*.

<sup>49</sup>*Biennial Report of the Trustees and President of Alcorn A. & M. College, 1902 and 1903* (Jackson, MS, n.d.), 19, *Biennial Reports, Alcorn A&M College, 1884–1915*, MDAH.

between moral comportment, religious piety, and social or economic betterment. But there was also strategy behind this kind of argument. Black women employed it to gain access to higher education, both as students and faculty, and to promote the community-oriented mission of lifting as they climbed.<sup>50</sup>

Historians have come to different conclusions about whether gender-specific vocational education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was designed to prepare Black girls to be servile domestic workers. Some question if schools' emphasis on home economics heightened racial disparity and limited girls' exposure to professional trade training.<sup>51</sup> Public Black colleges, however, never promoted a future in menial labor for any student, male or female. Black communities empowered women to seek education and leadership development. They prepared young women for future work, not as servants, but as heads of classrooms and households.<sup>52</sup>

Yet, as Black women continued to carve out space to thrive as students and faculty at public Black colleges, certain obstacles remained in their way. Male leaders helped cast administrative work as masculine by creating a public narrative of campus life that downplayed the diverse contributions of Black women. Because administrators crafted catalogs and other school reports in part to convince white politicians in the state to continue funding the institution, downplaying Black women's leadership roles was perhaps sound strategy. College education in the South had long been reserved for elite white men, and even as more white southerners gained access to higher learning after the Civil War, leaders of land-grant colleges continued to write about masculinity often. In Texas, for example, when former governor Lawrence Ross accepted the presidency of the all-white Texas A. and M. College in 1890, he emphasized that the mission of the institution was to prepare the next generation of productive Texan men. "Instruction in Agriculture and Horticulture will," he wrote, "induce the young men to seek employment in the country to the development of a self-reliant manhood instead of wasting their lives as is frequently the case in the overcrowded professional ranks in the cities." Like other land-grant colleges, Texas A. and M. offered a combination of theoretical and practical training in agriculture, science, and military arts. It reflected a vision for technical education rooted in the so-called purity of rural environments, the nobility of labor, and virile white masculinity.<sup>53</sup>

Public Black colleges were not simply mimicking white American ideals when they differentiated industrial coursework by sex. To some extent, male-only agricultural departments at Black colleges obscured the ongoing labor of farmwomen in rural Black communities, denying them access to the latest scientific theories and techniques. But Black educators also sought to protect women after generations of

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<sup>50</sup>Case, *Leaders of Their Race*; Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do*, 42. "Lifting as We Climb" was the motto of the National Association of Colored Women, founded in 1896. The motto, coined by Mary Church Terrell, indicated the group's emphasis on racial uplift. See Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, *Lifting as They Climb* (Chicago: National Association of Colored Women, 1933).

<sup>51</sup>Herbert M. Kliebard, *Schooled to Work: Vocationalism and the American Curriculum, 1876–1946* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999), 135–36.

<sup>52</sup>Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do*, 77.

<sup>53</sup>L. S. Ross to A. J. Rose and Members of the Board of Directors, folder "August 20, 1890," box 1, Board of Directors Minutes, Cushing Library Special Collections, Texas A&M University.

vulnerable, back-breaking field work by instead highlighting their roles as feminine, moral leaders of the domestic sphere.

Indeed, what distinguished public Black colleges most was an emphasis on citizenship and uplift. For example, when Alfred Harris, a Black representative in the Virginia House of Delegates, introduced the bill to establish the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute in 1882, he presented the idea of Black institutional control as a way for Black Virginians to test themselves under the watchful gaze of state officials. With this public institution, Harris said, “we can demonstrate to that class of gentlemen in Virginia who do not believe that we can comprehend the higher training that we are their intellectual equals.” Harris concluded his speech with an evocative image of how the institution could uplift the entire race: “I want a place where all of our Blacks, girls and boys, may go and drink from the fountain of knowledge until their ambition is satiated, and then step into the world prepared as good and upright citizens to meet its responsibilities, and battle for a place among men upon their merit.”<sup>54</sup> Many advocates of Black higher education championed it as a way to safeguard citizenship for all African Americans for years to come.

That Black leaders understood the purpose of public higher education through the lens of citizenship helps explain how, less than a decade after slavery, Black southerners pushed to make public claims on state funding for colleges, even though most children in the region were not ready for advanced coursework. Delegates at the Missouri Colored Education Convention in 1870 explained in a statement to fellow people of color that improving the education system was crucial race work because “you need a basis of intelligence from which to exercise the high privileges of your citizenship, the *full* responsibilities of which will, at an early moment, be upon you.” The pending responsibilities they mentioned likely referred to the proposed Fifteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, intended to prohibit governments from denying citizens the right to vote on the basis of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. It was ratified in February 1870, one month after the education convention.<sup>55</sup>

Black leaders in the late nineteenth century were especially likely to connect educational development with claiming the rights and privileges of citizenship, but many of these privileges were themselves gendered. When it came to political associations, Black women in the late nineteenth-century South struggled to retain the space they had temporarily held in the immediate post-emancipation period.<sup>56</sup> Formal voting and political leadership in the South were the exclusive purview of men, but Black men had tenuous holds on both. When a leading Black politician in Louisiana reflected on the nature of Black political advancement, he concluded that “had our educations been such as would have qualified us for the important places, and enabled us to protect and secure those great interests, we would have chosen more

<sup>54</sup>“Normal School,” *Richmond Daily Whig*, Feb. 15, 1882, p. 1.

<sup>55</sup>*Proceedings of the Colored People’s Educational Convention, Held in Jefferson City, Missouri, January 1870* (St. Louis, MO, 1870), 23, HathiTrust Digital Library.

<sup>56</sup>Elsa Barkley Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom,” *Public Culture* 7, no. 1 (Fall 1994), 107–8.

of our own people.”<sup>57</sup> His statement illustrated how, for Black men in particular, the projects of public education and institution building were inextricably linked to public officeholding. The influence worked in both directions. Education and Black men’s voting rights helped increase the number of southern Black officeholders from the 1860s through the 1880s, and, for their part, many Black representatives worked to extend the reach of public education further. Like their counterparts in state governments, the presidents and trustees of public Black colleges were all exclusively male during this period.

Thus, in the late nineteenth century, the reversal of hard-fought political gains delivered a major blow to southern Black communities. Male administrators developed institutional images that reclaimed dignity for Black men in the rural South while obscuring women’s past and present leadership roles. The State Normal and Industrial School of Alabama, now known as Alabama A&M University, offers the best example of this. In 1895, the school printed its catalog, as it did every year. School catalogs were small booklets that commonly helped construct a public institutional image for Black and white audiences alike, by inviting its readers to envision the campus and its surroundings. The author of the State Normal and Industrial School catalog was William Hooper Council, a formerly enslaved man who had opened a small private school in northern Alabama in 1870, advocated for its elevation to a state normal school in Huntsville, and served as its president until his death in 1909.

Among photographs of school buildings, classrooms, and rural farm scenes in the 1895 catalog, one picture stands out for its depiction of Black leadership rooted in a public land-grant college. A picture of a mechanical drawing class portrays five Black boys standing behind individual wooden workbenches, lined up diagonally across the photo’s frame. The picture positions the students, dressed in professional attire, as aspiring members of the middle class rather than future unskilled laborers. Furthermore, while the end of the room farthest from the camera is darkened by shadow, the student closest to the camera stands bathed in soft light from the large nearby window. The teacher, dressed in a full suit, completes the diagonal sight line, looking over this student’s work at his desk. With its geometrical arrangement, the photograph suggests a linear advancement from ignorance to enlightenment, as well as from studious boyhood to middle-class, professional manhood, as achieved by attending the State Normal and Industrial School.<sup>58</sup>

Photographs like this one—rich and fascinating in their symbolism—publicly reinforced Council’s vision of a higher form of education that would allow young Black men from the rural South to acquire both practical training and leadership skills. Cultural scholars have shown that, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Black intellectuals and activists understood the power of photography to shape ideas about race and progress.<sup>59</sup> Much like the argument Shawn Michelle Smith

<sup>57</sup>P. B. S. Pinchback, speech, Pinckney Benton Stewart Pinchback Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Founders Library, Howard University, Washington, DC.

<sup>58</sup>*Normal, or the State Normal and Industrial School, Normal, Alabama* (Normal, AL, 1895), 24, Emory University Digital Library Publications Program.

<sup>59</sup>Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith, eds., *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Deborah Willis and Barbara Krauthamer, *Envisioning Emancipation: Black Americans and the End of Slavery* (Philadelphia:



made about the photographs W. E. B. Du Bois compiled for the American Negro Exhibit at the 1900 Paris Exposition, the depiction by the Alabama State Normal and Industrial School of professional Black male faculty and students publicly resisted the discourse of Black criminality that racist images of Black men promoted.<sup>60</sup> However, unlike Du Bois's "Talented Tenth" that was rooted in urban intellectualism, Councilll used promotional materials for his school to make room for rural Black southerners. With the catalog picture of the mechanical drawing class, Councilll suggested an easy coexistence between vocational training, middle-class respectability, and Black masculinity. Yet, the photograph is also significant for what it left out. In Councilll's vision of public Black leadership development, women were mostly absent.

The 1895 catalog exposed one of the limitations of the educational outlook Councilll shared with many race leaders. Although the catalog depicts women going into church service and posing by a stream, the only reference it makes to their classroom learning is through a photograph of the cooking class. The fact that all the women in the image are dressed in aprons makes it difficult to distinguish the teachers from their students.<sup>61</sup> The catalog's erasure of women from leadership positions on campus perpetuated the public myth of Councilll and other men as solely responsible for the continued success of Alabama State Normal and Industrial School. For instance, in presenting the history of the institution, Councilll made no mention of Christine Shoecraft, one of the school's earliest assistant principals. For four years, Shoecraft, originally from Indiana, served the Alabama school and its neighboring communities. After leaving the State Normal and Industrial School in 1887, she worked with her husband to manage the largest Black-owned publishing house in the United States, affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Councilll himself raved about Shoecraft and her talents for an 1893 anthology on Black women of distinction, praising her not only as "the most popular teacher ever connected to the Huntsville Normal School" but also as "a leader and commander."<sup>62</sup>

According to faculty rosters from the late 1880s, there were several other women who taught advanced subjects or ran departments at the State Normal and Industrial School after Shoecraft left. Carrie Fambro succeeded her as assistant principal, Miss L. E. Joiner ran the highest division of the normal department, and Miss M. R. Barbour taught Latin.<sup>63</sup> By removing Shoecraft and other female educators

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Temple University Press, 2013). Although Laura Wexler primarily wrote about white female photojournalists in *Tender Violence*, her analysis of Frances Benjamin Johnston's 1899 *Hampton Album* underscores how the photographer, the subject, and the person "reading" the photograph all had a part to play in creating and interpreting a racialized narrative. See "Black and White and Color: *The Hampton Album*," in *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 127–76.

<sup>60</sup>Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>61</sup>*Normal, or the State Normal and Industrial School, Normal, Alabama* (Normal, AL, 1895), 24, Emory University Digital Library Publications Program.

<sup>62</sup>Scruggs, *Women of Distinction*, 251–55 (first quotation on 254, second quotation on 253).

<sup>63</sup>*Annual Catalogue of the State Normal and Industrial School, Huntsville, Alabama, 1888–1889 and Fifteenth Annual Catalogue of the State Normal and Industrial School, Huntsville, Alabama, 1889–1890*, box 1, Alabama A&M University, State Publications, ADAH.

from the official history of the school as constructed through institutional catalogs, Council reinforced a false narrative that leadership in public higher education was—and had always been—masculine. The effects of this narrative have been long-lasting. In almost 150 years of operation, Alabama A&M University has never had a woman president.

The performance of traditional gender roles that catalogs engaged in did not represent the full extent of what students were learning at Alabama State Normal and Industrial School or many other public Black colleges. Institutional records could be deceiving in their representations of gender, labor, and leadership. The 1904 catalog for the State Colored Normal School in North Carolina only includes three photographs: one portrait of the coed graduating class and two group images of female students posing amid their coursework. The first depicts a group of women in aprons standing around a long table on a porch. The caption indicates that it was the “Cooking Class—Taught by Miss Emma J. Council.” The second image depicts an interior classroom, where most students sit, neatly dressed in long-sleeved frocks, holding up their needlework. Many of the students, including one standing in the foreground, are looking at the camera, but a second woman stands looking over her shoulder, as if supervising the student’s work. The caption indicates that it was the “Sewing Class—Taught by Mrs. Lena Scott Perry” (see [Figure 3](#).)<sup>64</sup> As the only visual representations of learning and teaching in the catalog, these images crafted a specific narrative of what Black women were doing at the State Colored Normal School.

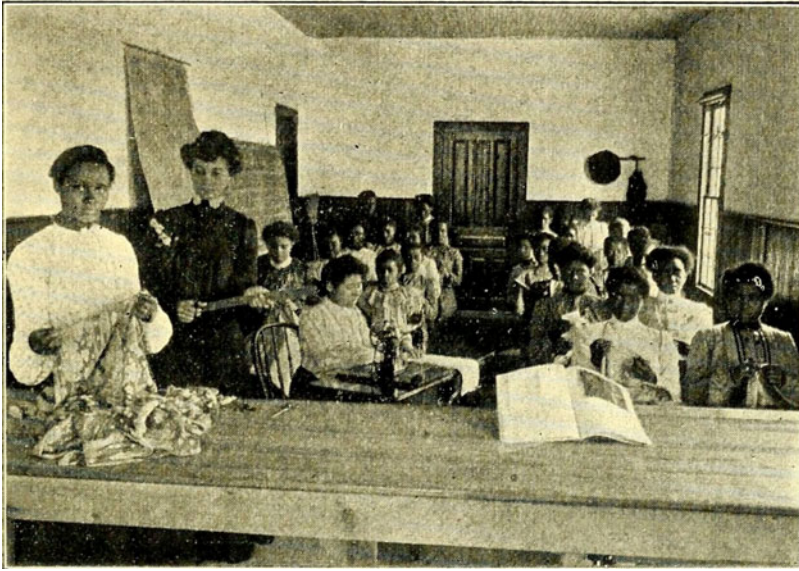
The images, however, did not present the complete picture. Emma Council had first joined the faculty in 1892, when the only full-time teachers on staff were the principal and two assistants, as had been the case since the North Carolina legislature designated it the State Colored Normal School in 1877. All three teachers would have been expected to teach a range of subjects across the preparatory and normal divisions, and records did not list any areas of specialization. In her first several years on the faculty, Council taught classes in North Carolina history, US history, geography, and penmanship.<sup>65</sup> As more students enrolled and the curriculum expanded, the institution brought on more faculty, allowing for more specific teaching concentrations. During the 1903–1904 school year, Council taught classes in reading and spelling for the preparatory department. Lena Scott Perry taught history and geography. Another female teacher taught instrumental music. Although they performed a range of work on campus, the photos in the catalog made their cooking and sewing instruction the most visible.<sup>66</sup>

Other kinds of institutional records could be misleading as well. In 1903, the chair of the English department at Alcorn University in Mississippi submitted information

<sup>64</sup>*Catalogue of the Twenty-Seventh Annual Session of the North Carolina State Colored Normal School, Fayetteville, N.C., for the Year 1903–1904*, Charles W. Chesnutt Library, Fayetteville State University, DigitalNC, lib.digitalnc.org.

<sup>65</sup>See catalogs for the North Carolina State Colored Normal School from 1892 through 1896 in the digitized collection of yearbooks and catalogs, Charles W. Chesnutt Library, Fayetteville State University, DigitalNC, lib.digitalnc.org.

<sup>66</sup>*Catalogue of the Twenty-Seventh Annual Session of the North Carolina State Colored Normal School, 1903–1904*.



**Figure 3.** Portrait from the 1904 catalog for the North Carolina State Colored Normal School, captioned “Sewing Class—Taught by Mrs. Lena Scott Perry.” *North Carolina State Colored Normal School Catalog, 1903–04*, 20, Charles W. Chesnutt Library, Fayetteville State University, North Carolina Yearbooks Digital Collection, <https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/32087>.

as part of a larger report to the white trustees. He complained that the student-teacher ratio in English classes had become uncomfortably high since “the withdrawal of the lady teachers from literary work.”<sup>67</sup> While at first glance there would have been no reason to question the chair’s report, another example from the same 1903 report illuminates how school leaders could craft a public image that marginalized women. The only woman to submit information for the report was Annie Spraggins Gray, who was introduced as writing on behalf of the sewing department. Yet, the body of her report noted that she also taught US history and arithmetic. Despite the English chair’s insistence that female teachers had withdrawn from literary work, Gray had a total of 170 students enrolled in her liberal arts classes, compared with only fifty-two students in her sewing classes.<sup>68</sup> Official school reports in the 1890s and 1900s obscured the diversity of subjects that faculty, especially women, taught.

That leadership at private Black colleges had less overt, immediate political stakes opened the door for Black women to assume greater institutional control. Black women seized opportunities to lead private schools during Reconstruction and beyond. After receiving her bachelor’s degree from Oberlin College, Fanny Jackson Coppin became the first Black woman to head an institution of higher learning

<sup>67</sup>*Biennial Report of the Trustees and President of Alcorn A. & M. College, 1902 and 1903* (Jackson, MS), 20, *Biennial Reports, Alcorn A&M College, 1884–1915*, MDAH.

<sup>68</sup>*Biennial Report of the Trustees and President of Alcorn A. & M. College, 1902 and 1903*.

with her appointment to the Institute for Colored Youth in 1869.<sup>69</sup> She paved the way for other Black women, including Nannie Helen Burroughs, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Elizabeth Evelyn Wright, to help transform American higher education through founding and managing private institutions of higher learning. At public institutions, by contrast, women like Josephine Silone, one of Coppin's brightest students and mentees, would not get the same chance. In light of the prevalence of Black women's leadership opportunities in private schools throughout the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras, the marginalization of Black women in public higher education stands out.

Given the uneven conditions, some prominent female reformers questioned how committed educators were to developing young women as leaders in the first place. Anna Julia Cooper, a respected Black educator and writer in the late nineteenth century, publicly expressed concern for the place of Black women in higher education in her 1892 book, *A Voice from the South*. "I fear the majority of colored men do not yet think it worth while that women aspire to higher education," she wrote. "The three R's, a little music and a good deal of dancing, a first rate dress-maker and a bottle of magnolia balm," she quipped, "are quite enough generally to render charming any woman possessed of tact and the capacity for worshipping masculinity."<sup>70</sup> She accused Black colleges of training women simply to be polite and appealing wives, rather than tending seriously to their intellectual and professional development. We can only wonder how public college catalogs would have been different if women had been in the position to author them instead.

It is hard to find evidence of men conspiring to diminish the roles of Black women in public higher education, but we can speculate about the factors that may explain their tightening grip on the top administrative positions. First, being the head of a public Black college was a more overtly political position than that of a private school principal. Public college leaders corresponded with officeholders at every level of government, and they were sometimes called upon to address the state legislature on behalf of their school. Into the twentieth century, these political arenas were thought of as strictly masculine. In contrast, there was a little more room for women to lead reform efforts through the philanthropic and missionary work that characterized private education. Another explanation for why school reports emphasized traditional gender roles is the onslaught of racial violence and disfranchisement that constrained Black men's opportunities for public leadership from the 1890s onward. Claims that Progressive Era women's movements swept more women into public school leadership do not apply to the restrictive political landscape that Black southerners faced.<sup>71</sup> In the Jim Crow South, being a professor or high-level administrator of a state-supported college was one of the best remaining public careers for Black men. And, as Black men worked to craft institutional images that reclaimed their capacity for and right to public leadership, they cast Black women in traditionally feminine roles.

<sup>69</sup>Linda M. Perkins, "Coppin, Fanny Jackson," *Black Women in America*, 2nd ed., Oxford African American Studies Center Online.

<sup>70</sup>Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South, by a Black Woman of the South* (Xenia, OH: The Aldine Printing House, 1892), 75, Documenting the American South, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

<sup>71</sup>Blount, *Destined to Rule the Schools*.

Every public Black college employed more women teachers at the turn of the twentieth century than it had before. Young Black women both attended and taught at these schools in greater numbers overall. Additionally, women carved out important roles on campus, as mentors, teachers, department heads, and more. At the same time, school reports obscured the full range of their experiences and contributions. In the public performance of leadership, much of their work played out behind the scenes. Hierarchies within academia also helped diminish the status of women's work. College reformers increasingly promoted scientific inquiry and research over teacher training and domestic arts programs that gave female educators significant opportunities in the twentieth century. Women continued to have an influential presence on public campuses. Yet, the highest, most visible administrative roles were marked as masculine.

While public higher education opened doors for many women in the late nineteenth century, the institutional narratives that college presidents created rendered their labor less prestigious, visible, and valuable. Catalogs and state reports erased from public memory the history of leadership provided by Black women like Olivia Davidson, Ida Morris, Christine Shoecraft, Emma Council, and countless others whose names we may never know. Their marginalization illuminates the limitations of public reform in the "New South." Moreover, the compromises Black southerners made to maintain political engagement during Jim Crow narrowly defined the public image of Black leadership for decades to come.

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