TEACHING TENANT FARM CHILDREN: RURAL EDUCATION IN LEON COUNTY, FLORIDA IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

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The locale

On the former cotton plantations of Leon County, Florida, along the south central Georgia border and often straddling it, the end of Reconstruction brought new owners and different ideas for the uses of the land. Because the area remained somewhat isolated after the Civil War, it retained many vestiges of antebellum plantation life, a life that the new plantation owners sought to emulate and the old ones wished to preserve. The region today contains more than a hundred working quail hunting plantations, proving more durable than the cotton kingdom they replaced. The tenant farmers, many of whom stayed on the same or nearby plantations their families had worked as slaves, no longer could grow large fields of cotton for cash but were confined to small, scattered patches as the landscape changed to accommodate the Bobwhite quail.[1] The northern game hunters bought up the hundred-or-so-acre cotton plantations to amass 18,898 acres in 1910 and 81,004 acres by 1930 of Leon County's 426,752 acres.[2] Members of the Hanna family and business associates of Cleveland, Ohio, and Standard Oil executives alone purchased over 70,000 acres in the Thomasville, Georgia-Tallahassee, Florida region.[3] These new forest and quail habitat owners placed restrictions on what their tenants could grow.

Of a total county population in 1900 of 19,885, eighty percent (15,999) were African-Americans; by 1940 the general population increased to 31,646 and blacks to

16,106, a corresponding decrease to fifty percent of the overall population.[4] The number of tenant farmers declined spectacularly (eighty percent) during the half century from 1,775 tenant farmers in 1900 to only 360 in 1950 with declines of fifty-five percent in the number of white tenant farmers and eighty-one percent in black tenant farmers.[5] Black tenant farm families constituted more than ninety percent of all tenants during much of the first half of the twentieth century and between eighty-five and ninety percent of them lived and farmed on the hunting plantations.[6] Harry Brubaker noted that "the plantations were in no sense commercial establishments and their upkeep did not depend upon self-produced profits. The tenants paid their rents in cotton; absentee landlords did not permit them to engage in any practices that interfered with the propagation of quail in so far as these practices were known"[7] The ideal environment for quail was the primitive small field, "patch-crop" type of cultivation. The larger hunting plantations were likely to have had dozens of tenant farmers.[8] In return for altering their farming practices, the tenants often worked for the new owners as gardeners, housekeepers, stablehands, and general laborers. Some men held dual positions; when not farming they worked in the main house, on road maintenance, or in carpentry. Often the women and children worked in the fields while the men labored in trade or service occupations on the plantation.[9]

Despite the absentee owners, the farm managers tightly controlled the lives of the tenants. On Horseshoe, unique among the plantations, farm manager William W. Goode forbade the growing of cotton and required the tenants to plant instead corn, velvet beans, beggarweed, sorghum, cowpeas, potatoes, millet, oats, and vetch. He urged them to raise hogs, chickens, and milk cows. Without cotton as a cash crop the tenants no longer paid rent but could live on the plantation as long as they abided by the rules published in a

booklet that Goode distributed among the tenants.[10] On a typical workday the tenants would get up before sunrise, have breakfast, and go out into the fields until noon. They'd come home for lunch, return to the fields, and arrive back home for five o'clock supper.[11] One tenant family, the Halls, grew rice, greens, peas, and sweet potatoes and killed their own meat--chickens, ducks, turkeys, cattle, and hogs. Because they did not have electricity or refrigeration except an ice box, they smoked a lot of the meat and shared whatever they slaughtered with their neighbors. What the Halls could not grow--staples like sugar and salt--they bought from one of the four stores in Bradfordville by selling extra chickens and eggs. Susie Jones Hall bought material in Tallahassee for five to ten cents a yard and made most of her family's clothes.[12] The plantation took care of most of the tenants' needs: kept the houses, barns, and wells repaired; paid the doctor, midwife, and undertaker; hired tenants as laborers; and advanced money, mules and supplies.[13] The move from the cotton-dominated agricultural and economic base, freed the tenant children to attend school for part of the year.

Education in Leon County

A Florida state law enacted in 1866 provided that schools be established for the newly emancipated slaves. These schools were to be supported by a tuition of fifty cents per month per pupil, and by a tax of one dollar upon all male persons of color between 21 and 45 years of age.[14] The first Leon County Superintendent of Public Instruction, Charles H. Pearce, an African-American, began work when the Board of Public Instruction organized on April 16, 1869; he served his appointed two-year term.[15] Under Pearce, rural schools for blacks and whites sprouted throughout the county. Between

1887 and 1915 the number of schools in Leon County, including the city of Tallahassee, increased from twenty-nine to forty-five. At the same time, white schools increased from twenty-two to forty-four. The most telling difference between them is number of pupils. The twenty-six teachers in twenty-nine black schools handled 2,266 students while the thirty-two teachers taught 481 students in twenty-two white schools. By 1915 the figures had not changed substantially. A 79:1 ratio of pupils to teachers in the black schools compared unfavorably to the 21:1 in white schools.[16]

Rural children attended school under primitive conditions. The wooden one-room buildings lacked insulation and proper ventilation, and lacked indoor plumbing for drinking water or toilets. What toilet facilities existed consisted of rough wood privies. Often the roofs leaked and gaps in the rough wall and floor boards admitted the rain and cold to the unheated buildings. While this area of north Florida rarely sees snow, winter temperatures can drop into the 20s during the school term months. An occasional outdoor fire offered a warming respite to teacher and students alike. Blackboards and desks were luxuries; children sat on backless benches, some so high that their legs dangled in the air unable to reach the floor.[17] Books and supplies, when they had them, were cast-offs from the white schools and never enough to go around.[18]

As early as 1906 Horseshoe Plantation had a school for black children. Because of its vast acreage many tenants living on the east side of the plantation near Pickle, Davis, and Huggle Ponds attended the Dawkins Pond School on neighboring Iamonia Plantation. In the 1920s young Peggy Hall attended the Dawkins Pond School for four months each year--from November or December to March.[19] The school year fell during the hunting season when the children were not needed in the fields. In later years when

the school year expanded, many tenant children left before the session expired or dropped out of school because they had to work. Hall remembered that her father had also attended school at Dawkins Pond. It had one big room with mixed grades. She recalled, "When the teacher would call out 'first grade spelling' you'd know which grade you were in and go to that section of the room. This school went up to the eighth grade. We brought our own lunch. The teacher taught history, geography, spelling, reading, and other subjects I can't remember. Some of my teachers at Dawkins Pond were Violet Ford, Mr. George McGriff, Miss Ruth Thomas, Miss Carr, Miss A. P. Pittman, and Miss Hall from Tallahassee. Teachers didn't stay long at Dawkins Pond; they didn't earn very much. They sometimes took part of their pay in food. They'd drive a buggy to school and on Fridays we'd load the buggies with food. Some families would send food as presents to nice teachers. I finished eighth grade; most people didn't finish tenth grade. The Dawkins Pond School was dismantled and moved to Lake McBride and renamed the Lake McBride School. After they moved the building to Lake McBride it was open for nine months and went up through the tenth grade. After that, students went to Lincoln High School in Tallahassee for the last two years and then to Florida A&M to college if they could. When my children went to the Lake McBride School a bus picked up the children on the plantation. I got to ride the bus with them because I cooked lunch for the students."[20]

In 1906 Leon County had five rural schools on the plantations: Bradley's and Strickland's (both for white children), and Gum Pond, Horseshoe, and Dawkins Pond for the African-American students. The average training for teachers required by the rural schools amounted to the equivalent of an eighth grade education. Since most southern

educational systems did not provide for training African-American teachers, the rural schools lacked an adequate supply of well-trained educators. Employment divided along color lines as well. White teachers could teach either race but African-Americans could only teach black students. Positions of authority and responsibility, including supervisors and janitors, belonged to whites. The school board unanimously agreed in 1930 that the head janitor for all school buildings in the county must be white but that it was permissible to employ black helpers.[21] Which race the teachers taught determined their salary. The teachers in the white schools, Emma Child and Annie M. Owens, earned $30 a month while Julia A. Carr and Ella K. Washington earned $22 a month and Ferdinand Wester earned $25 teaching at the black schools. The following year J. A. Hendry taught at Strickland's for $35 while the new teachers at the black schools received the same pay as their predecessors. In 1912, Violet Ford at Dawkins Pond received $25 a month while the white teacher at Strickland School, Mrs. John Miller, received $35.[22]

At the request of some of the patrons in August 1910, the Board decided to run a school at Forshala Plantation and appointed Miss Frances Van Brunt as teacher at $35 a month. In April 1911 Miss Van Brunt asked the Board to pay her for teaching the seventh month at Forshala School but they refused because the ungraded rural schools were only allowed six months' term.[23] By 1912 the white school on Forshala Plantation which serviced both northern Leon County, Florida, and southern Grady County, Georgia, had outgrown its space and the Board decided to build a new schoolhouse and relocate it to a more central site.[24] Some of the pay differentials and raises can be attributed to the dual track salary scale for white and black schools that widened every decade, the size of the school, and the teaching certificates held. The Board finally raised the salaries for

African-American teachers from $25 to $30 in December 1918.[25] By 1931 the pay differential widened considerably. Mrs. W. A. Strickland earned $90 a month at the Strickland School while her counterparts at the black schools earned $40-50 depending on the size of the school and number of teachers assigned there.[26] As the county experienced the effects of the Depression, the Board cut salaries in 1932; particularly hard-hit were the African-American teachers whose salaries dropped to $37.50 while Mrs. Strickland received a $10 a month pay reduction.[27] Whether to extend the term of a school, particularly at Forshala, often depended on the cooperation of neighboring Grady County which would not pay its share of the salary until after the beginning of the new year.[28] Only five children from Florida attended the Strickland School in 1914 and the Board sought Thomas County, Georgia's financial support for half the teacher's salary since the majority of the pupils came from Georgia.[29]

Two State Rural School Inspectors examined the African-American rural schools of Leon County in 1915 and prepared an unfavorable report, particularly on Mary Whitaker at Gum Pond and George McGriff at Horseshoe. All were excused with the promise of better record keeping and reports except McGriff whose certificate was revoked at the suggestion of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction with no reason given.[30] Qualifications for African-American teachers began to tighten in the 1920s; the Board required all of them to attend a monthly meeting at Florida A&M College, the historically black college in Tallahassee that had a teacher-training program.[31]

The Leon County Board of Public Instruction provided funds for minimal construction of and maintenance on the schoolhouses. Each school had to request funds to build wells and outdoor toilets. Generally, the Board approved inexpensive

conveniences for the black schools and more extensive repairs and renovations for the white schools. In 1908 the Board agreed to pay Mr. J. E. Whitehead $80 to put a new roof on the school house at Gum Pond. At the same time, the Strickland schoolhouse received a new roof, ceiling, paint job, and two water closets.[32] In fall 1911, plantation superintendent R. G. Johnson requested that the Board open a school for white children on Horseshoe. The Board furnished a teacher, Miss Zonita Ellis, a blackboard, and desks, and the patrons provided the building. Only six years later, Johnson requested a new school building which the Board approved and awarded the $798.44 contract to W. B. McCauley for an unceiled 24'x40' building. The Board ordered two toilets built for less than $25 that October.[33] The work authorized at Gum Pond included repairing the weatherboarding, flue, and windows, changing a door, building steps, and installing a sill and pillars under it--all for $60.[34] The Board approved a new corrugated roof at $10 per square foot for Gum Pond in 1924 while the white Strickland school received a cypress shingle roof for $85.[35] The Board agreed to supply material for two toilets, steps and roof repair, and to pay $10 for labor in 1921 for the Dawkins Pond schoolhouse.[36] From the pattern of expenditures noted by the Board, it is clear that they spent much less on black rural schools than on their white counterparts.

When the school board did not initiate the construction of rural schools, the plantation owners either requested a building for their local community or provided one themselves. Where the students lived dictated the location of a schoolhouse, not the artificial political boundary between Georgia and Florida. In 1916, Lewis Steenrod Thompson who owned both Sherwood and Sunny Hill plantations built a new school for the white community on Sherwood Plantation just over the Georgia border in Grady

County. Since it was his money and on his place, they named it Sherwood School. Arthur Chandler Dickey, a white student, helped haul bricks for the foundation at Sherwood School, in the summer of 1916. He went to school there for seventh grade, from 1916 through the spring of 1917. When he enrolled in the fall he stayed only one month and dropped out to run Birdsong Plantation, the family farm, full time. In the middle of the Depression Ed and Betty Komarek bought Birdsong and they let the unused old school building fall down.[37] As the counties in both states opted for consolidation, they closed the rural schools and sent the plantation students to larger schools in their own state.

As populations on the plantations shifted, whenever they felt the need for a building to accommodate the school-age children the parents, farm managers, and owners would request assistance from the Leon County Board. "If you build it they will come" did not always work. A new school started in July 1917 at Iamonia with Mary Brundyge as the teacher but was discontinued that November for lack of proper attendance. The Board ruled in June 1918 that "no school will be allowed to begin with an enrollment of less than six or continue with an average less than five" students.[38] Two years later the Board raised the number of pupils required for the operation of a school to an enrollment of eight and an average of six.[39] Indicative of the Board's growing indifference to the rural schools is the 1920 order to discontinue insurance on small school buildings in the county as the policies expired.[40]

The school year lengthened to eight months for the rural white Strickland school in 1923. However, the Board only paid six months' salary, requiring the Bradfordville School District to pay the seventh and eighth month's salary. The teacher by then earned

$60 a month; a request in 1925 for a salary increase because of large attendance had to come from district funds.[41]

Because many of the schoolhouses were located on plantation property, the owners were free to have them relocated, sold, or torn down. In 1927 the Board deeded the land under the Lake McBride School to Miss Frances Griscom, owner of Water Oak Plantation formerly a part of Horseshoe, in exchange for two acres elsewhere on the plantation.[42] When the Gum Pond School outlived its usefulness, the Board deeded the site to Mr. C. H. Parks for $20 in 1928.[43] When this deed was not accepted in 1931 the Board authorized another one in favor of Capt. K. J. Boyd.[44]

Recognizing the lack of adequate educational facilities for African-Americans throughout the South, the Julius Rosenwald Fund provided matching money to communities where "the state and county authorities and the local colored and white citizens" supported the school with either money collected for that purpose or labor and materials. The schools also had to be maintained by the state and county as a regular part of the public school system and the land deeded to the state or county.[45] Between 1912 and 1932, the years the Rosenwald school building program operated, 125 Florida schools received financial support from the Fund.[46] Eight black schools in Leon County received Rosenwald Fund support between 1921 and 1932. The only plantation area school to receive assistance was Bradfordville; in 1929/30 the Fund contributed $700 and the African-American community raised $1,070 of the $6,550 spent to build the school.[47]

Leon County maintained separate facilities for African-American and white students for as long as legally possible. When the school-age population declined in 1930 to a level insufficient to maintain classes at the Bradfordville and Strickland schools, the

Board voted to furnish a bus for the white students and all pupils from District One who lived two or more miles from Tallahassee to be transported to a larger school for their education.[48] However, they explicitly opposed allowing transportation for the African-American children.[49] If the black students on the plantations wanted to go to school they had to walk; few parents had cars and there was certainly not enough money to hire their own bus unless the plantation provided one.

The budget for the 1932 school year reveals the wide discrepancy in funding the white and black schools in Leon County. The bulk of the money allocated for black schools went to Lincoln High School in Tallahassee ($10,960). Of the rural schools, Lake McBride received $1,200, Horseshoe received $660, Dawkins Pond $540, and Gum Pond $300. The only remaining rural white school, Strickland, received $720 while the Board budgeted $66,360 for the city schools. The total estimated expenditures for forty-five black schools amounted to $32,430 and for eleven white schools $88,760.[50] In the midst of the Depression, the Board determined to reduce expenditures by fifteen percent. While the white teachers lost fifteen percent of their salaries, the African-American students fared far worse. The Board decided to shorten the eight-month school term for black rural schools by one and two months.[51] During the late 1940s and early 1950s progressives in Florida, as well as in other southern states, sought to equalize the educational facilities for blacks and whites.[52] When "separate but equal" failed, the county complied with desegregation. And when the school board instituted consolidation, the plantation rural schools of Leon County closed.

[1] Susan Hamburger, "On the Land for Life: Black Tenant Farmers on Tall Timbers Plantation." (*Florida Historical Quarterly* 66 (1987): 152-159; Hank Margeson and Joseph Kitchens, *Quail Plantations of South Georgia and North Florida* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), pp. 4-5.
[2] William R. Brueckheimer, *Leon County Hunting Plantations; An Historical & Architectural Survey. Final Report: Geographical--Historical Overview* (Tallahassee: Historic Tallahassee Preservation Board, 1988), p. 206; *1993 Florida Statistical Abstract* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), p. 259.
[3] Brueckheimer, p. 102.
[4] Brueckheimer, pp. 57 and 193; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Vital Statistics of the United States 1940* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1943), p. 58.
[5] Brueckheimer, p. 182.
[6] Brueckheimer, p. 185.
[7] Harry F. Brubaker, "Land Classification, Ownership and Use in Leon County, Florida" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1957), pp. 109-10.
[8] Bruckheimer, p. 186.
[9] William W. Goode, "Horseshoe Plantation Log," 6 December 1930.
[10] William W. Goode, "Farm Program for 1931" (Tallahassee: Horseshoe Plantation, 1930), pp. 1-4 and 6.
[11] Peggy Hall Davis interview with author, 22 July 1986.
[12] Davis interview.
[13] Goode, "Farm Program for 1931," p. 6.
[14] *Historical and Architectural Survey of the Frenchtown Neighborhood, Tallahassee, Florida* (Tallahassee, FL: Historic Tallahassee Preservation Board, 1987), pp. 59-60.
[15] Francis A. Rhodes, "A History of Education in Leon County, Florida" (M.A. thesis, University of Florida, 1946), p. 42.
[16] Rhodes, pp. 52-53.
[17] Edwin R. Embree and Julia Waxman, *Investment in People; the Story of the Julius Rosenwald Fund* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), p. 38.
[18] Harry Morgan, *Historical Perspectives on the Education of Black Children* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995), p. 128; Robert A. Margo, *Race and Schooling in the South, 1880-1950: An Economic History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 20.
[19] Davis interview.
[20] Davis interview.
[21] Minutes, 8 July 1930, Board of Public Instruction, Leon County, Florida, unpaged.
[22] Ibid., 25 September 1906-23 March 1914.
[23] Ibid., 11 April 1911.
[24] Ibid., 25 September 1906-23 March 1914.
[25] Ibid., 3 December 1918.
[26] Ibid., 25 September 1931.
[27] Ibid., 6 September 1932.
[28] Ibid., 12 July 1910.
[29] Ibid., 29 September 1914.
[30] Ibid., 9 February 1915.
[31] IBid., 3 August 1926.
[32] Ibid., 8 September 1908.
[33] Ibid., 3 July, 7 August,and 2 October 1917.
[34] Ibid., 10 November and 8 December 1914.
[35] Ibid., 4 March, 1 April, 6 May, 5 November 1924.
[36] Ibid., 1 March 1921.
[37] Robert Joseph Rubanowice, *A Sense of Place in Southern Georgia: Birdsong Plantation, Farm, and Nature Center* (South Georgia Historical Consortium, 1994), pp. 189-90.
[38] Minutes, 3 July and 6 November 1917, and 25 June 1918.
[39] Ibid., 22 June 1920.
[40] Ibid., 6 January 1920.

[41] Ibid., 6 October 1925.
[42] Ibid., 6 December 1927.
[43] Ibid., 4 December 1928.
[44] Ibid., 21 July 1931.
[45] Embree and Waxman, *Investment in People*, p. 39.
[46] Edwin R. Embree, *Julius Rosenwald Fund; Review of Two Decades, 1917-1936* (Chicago, 1936), p. 23.
[47] Julius Rosenwald Fund Papers card file, Fisk University. The other seven schools in Tallahassee and Leon County that received Rosenwald money were Bel Aire, the county training school, Lincoln High School, Ocklocknee, Pleasant Grove, Ward, and Florida A&M College practice school.
[48] Minutes, 16 September 1930.
[49] Ibid., 4 November 1930.
[50] Ibid., 16 June 1931.
[51] Ibid., 17 February 1933.
[52] Joseph A. Tomberlin, "Florida and the School Desegregation Issue, 1954-1959: A Summary View," *Journal of Negro Education* 43 (Fall 1974): 457.