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'Lessons and Legacies: The Meaning of Berea's 19th Century Interracial Education in the 21st Century'

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Lessons and Legacies: The Meaning of Berea's 19th Century Interracial Education in the 21st Century

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Introduction

Racial coeducation, in nineteenth-century United States of America, referred to the education of white students with black students. In the post Civil War South, this type of mixing was a bold experiment rarely sustained except at one private college in Berea, Kentucky. Berea College reopened in 1866 after the Civil War ended and admitted, into its primary and secondary grades, several black children and young adults, some of whom had been Union Army soldiers.^[1] It was to be the only school in the South to maintain racial coeducation on a large scale for any length of time, a period of almost four decades.^[2]

This essay explores key aspects of Berea College's practice of social equality by addressing three key questions:

- What was the nature of interracial education during the latter 19th century and who were the people involved?
- How could interracial education develop in a former slavery state like Kentucky?
- Why did Berea College's interracial education stop shortly after the turn of the 20th century?

For an educational institution whose origins are symbolized by the Biblical verse, "God hath made of one blood all peoples of the Earth," the founding men and women realized their issues and controversies were unique. Numerous documents they created continue to provide a rich legacy for subsequent generations to study.^[3]

Berea's Bold Spirit

Where the foothills of the Cumberland Mountains slope downward to meet the central plains of Kentucky's Bluegrass lies the interracial institution known as Berea College. Originally founded by reverend John G. Fee in 1855, the school was dedicated to Christian principles of anti-rum, anti-caste prejudice and anti-sectarianism. Although some care had been taken by its abolitionist founders to select a friendly site, Berea was always regarded with outright suspicion by many neighboring residents. In the aftermath of John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859, local anti-abolition sentiments grew so hostile that Berea school families were forced (by armed escorts) out of the state of Kentucky altogether. They went into exile in Ohio. After the Civil War ended, most of the original families returned to reopen their school "for all persons of good character."^[4]



Reverend John G. and Matilda H. Fee, founder of Berea College. (Courtesy of Berea College Archives).

The newly reopened school received its first young black pupils in spring 1866. [5] They were children of freed slaves who had been among the first to flock to Berea. The school's principal, J.A.R. Rogers, later recalled that historic moment when these children of freed slaves made Berea a mixed school:

That was a memorable day when the first came. The colored pupils were admitted to the lowest department, the only one they were prepared to enter but a panic struck the whole school. Soon scholars from every department began to leave. For a time I tried to have the departments move on

as usual without paying any attention to the defection, but students were leaving so rapidly, that I addressed them and showed them the folly and guilt of such prejudice. I remember at last turning to those who were left and saying "Will ye also go away?" [6]

Many white students who left eventually returned to school. Mostly children of local residents, these students realized that the Berea school offered the best education available in the area. Within its first year, Berea's mixed enrollment grew from less than 100 to over 160, one-half of whom were black. [7] By the end of its first decade, the "school" had been formally organized into a "college" consisting of primary, secondary, and college departments, complete with two dormitories and a boarding hall. The board of trustees and the college's first president, E. Henry Fairchild, formerly a professor at racially mixed Oberlin College in Ohio, formed the governing body. Under Fairchild's presidency (1869-89), total enrollments grew to approximately 450 students, one-half to two-thirds of them black. [8]



A group of interracial students at Berea College, circa 1887 (Courtesy of Berea College Archives)

The seemingly peaceful character of racial coeducation that some alumni later described can be explained by four reasons. The first is the small size of the college and the relative minority of white students. Whites had to interact with blacks in order to participate in school; nearly all school activities, such as baseball teams, the brass band, and the literary societies, were racially mixed, as were both male and female dormitories, where it was not uncommon for whites to room with blacks. [9]

The second reason for racial harmony on campus resulted from the strong organizational ties between Berea College and Oberlin College. Located in the "free" state of Ohio, Oberlin College had begun racial coeducation shortly after its founding in 1833. However, Oberlin served not just as a source of personnel for Berea, such as Principal John A. R. Rogers and his wife Elizabeth Embree Rogers along with President E. Henry Fairchild, but also Oberlin was a link to financial support. Members of the same group of Congregationalists in Oberlin had provided money through the American Missionary Association (AMA) to help establish Berea. [See Elizabeth Embree Rogers' "Personal History of Berea", unpublished typescript (circa 1910), BCA. **RG 1 Box 16/7, RG 1 Box 16/8**]

Third, the religious zeal of former abolitionists like Reverend Fee, the Rogers, and the Fairchild families provided moral support for the college's commitment to overcome caste prejudice by

coeducation of the races. President Fairchild explained this guiding philosophy in his inaugural address:

How soon will [white] people be prepared to give equal rights and protection to colored people, if from childhood they are taught that colored children are not fit to be near them as equals, but as inferiors may be all about them? If as children they are not allowed to meet in the same schools and Sabbath-schools, how, as men, will they be able to meet at the polls, sit on juries . . . and testify in all cases on an equal footing with them? [10]

Fairchild's statement captured the essence of the bold "Berea Spirit" which opposed conventional race relations in the South.

Fourth, Berea was awarded thousands of dollars, from the Freedmen's Bureau. These funds were used for financial scholarships for freedmen and for building the first dormitory, a four-storied wooden "marvel" known as Howard Hall, named after Freedmen Bureau's Commissioner and former Union Army General, O.O. Howard. [11] The government's aid saved the fledging school since the unconventionality of Berea College, in most cases, limited the type of financial support it received, and school fees paid by students provided a small part of operating expenses.

Thus, the financial support from the Freedmen's Bureau and the donations from the AMA's wealthy philanthropists in northern states like Massachusetts, Illinois and Ohio meant that Berea College could afford to be independent of local constraints imposed by wealthy southerners who disdained the interracial education being practiced at the school. The AMA's network of first & second generation abolitionists provided generous support for the college and its workers for nearly twenty years after the Civil War ended.

However, by the late 1880s, many former abolitionists became a vanishing breed, and the younger generation of benefactors proved less interested in contributing to racially mixed or all-black schools. Moreover, the federal government had ceased its financial support with the closing of the Freedmen's Bureau. The college was experiencing a gradual decline in donations and was delaying new developments due to demands to meet current operating expenses. Deficits continued to increase during the two years when Fairchild's successor, Baptist minister William B. Stewart, held the presidency. Dire financial conditions probably facilitated Stewart's critics' ability to persuade the Board of Trustees to obtain quickly Stewart's resignation. [12]

Berea's Promise

After the board accepted Stewart's resignation, it promptly offered the position to Oberlin College professor of Greek William Goodell Frost in 1892. After deliberation and discussion with Eleanor Marsh, his new bride, Frost accepted the invitation to assume the office of president. [13] In his written correspondence to the board, Frost addressed three factors which influenced his decision to accept the presidency:

The peculiar work of Berea for years to come, that which secures for her the support of men and the blessing of heaven is for the colored race. And her work for this race is a work for fundamental morality and the welfare of the whole country. It is a principle of absolute righteousness that every man should be regarded according to his worth and not according to any accident of birth. Character is more than color.

How shall Berea do most for this cause: (a) By actually elevating to the level of cultured manhood as many members of the race as possible. But many other schools are doing this work. Berea's peculiar opportunity is (b) to do this in connection with the education of white students, thus teaching the races to live and work together, and (c) to afford an object lesson to the whole country, making it possible for advocates of justice everywhere to say

"There is Berea with hundreds of white and colored students working together in friendly relations on the soil of slavery. . ."

We must get more students, and especially more white students. [14]

Frost's letter to the brethren at Berea contains two very important points. One is the indication of Frost's optimistic attitude about Berea's peculiar work for blacks; he thinks it is work that will be supported by men and blessed by heaven. The second point is Frost's definition of Berea's work. He emphasizes that many schools are educating black students, but Berea has a special opportunity to educate blacks with whites in a way that would teach the "races to live and work together." These points are the very basis of Frost's later disappointments, even though his sentiments echo the spirit of Fairchild's inaugural address.

Nevertheless, Frost's policies to increase white enrolments and obtain new funding sources coincided with an increase in racial hostility in the South and the rest of the United States. Berea's work may have been blessed by heaven but it was not supported by enough generous white men, or white women, to meet even the college's payroll. Frost had studied Berea's current operations prior to accepting the presidency, so he knew about the college's budget deficits. [15]

Recognizing the urgent need for more money, Frost arrived at Berea College eager to commence work, but spent most of the first year recovering from typhoid fever. While convalescing, he sought accounts of the college's history from retired Berea workers and included these details into speeches and newspaper articles to tell potential benefactors about the great changes their donations could work. On numerous occasions when writers criticized Berea for being a racially mixed school, Frost would emphasize its unique heritage, one made possible by missionary pioneers like the Reverend Fee, Principal Rogers, and President Fairchild. [16]

Building a New Constituency

Frost, an energetic, 38 year old president, expanded the scope of his duties by assuming both the admissions and development functions. In his admission travels, he visited adjacent counties to see the mountain communities from which Berea could draw more white students. Here he made speeches about Berea and met poor families living in conditions he thought reminiscent of his ancestors from the 18th century. Often he described these Anglo-Saxon mountaineers to eastern philanthropists as "our contemporary ancestors." [17]

In his development travel, Frost went with Berea's financial agent Eugene P. Fairchild, to states in the North and the East soliciting funds for Berea's expansion. Frost needed money to meet Berea's current operating expenses, but he also wanted more money for the long-term security of endowments. What Frost first encountered awakened him to the dismal aspects of fundraising. Writing from Boston (1894) to his wife Eleanor Marsh in Berea, he shared his discouragements:

"Well, I have had a good cry! Have been working for today's interview a long time, and the last of old friends of Berea prove, like all the rest, to be no special friend after all. So it simply comes to this: We must build up a new constituency from the bottom. Not one of all the donors who were on the list has increased his subscription at [Eugene P.] Fairchild's solicitation, and scarcely one new one has been enlisted by him." [18]

This lack of success clearly indicated the need for a different strategy. Prospective donors had to be instructed, not merely told, about Berea's peculiar work in educating black and white youths. In addition to Eleanor Marsh's fundraising trips, Frost was assisted in his fundraising endeavors by several alumni, chief among them being the Reverend William E. Barton, a white alumnus (class of 1885) and a newly elected trustee then living in Boston. A close friendship developed as both men shared a kinship of ideas. In fact, one of Barton's early letters to Frost contains two clues concerning the direction of Berea's proposed expansion:

"If Berea were simply a preparatory school for colored youth,. . .it would not pay. If we can reach a larger number of young people from the mountains, if we can reach out toward the North and pick out of many communities the very best of their young people, who without the help of Berea would never obtain an education, and give them the mental and moral and spiritual development that will make them a power for good in the world, there is a net gain - it is all net gain - to the kingdom of God that justifies a good deal of work." [19]

Barton's emphasis on educating students from the North with the southern mountaineers would later appear to donors as Berea's attempt to "efface sectional lines" between the North and the South. Also, the inability of students to acquire an education if it were not for Berea's help emerged as official admissions policy. Both issues - erasing sectionalism and educating poor students - became Berea's specialties as Barton's assistance proved instrumental in Frost's wooing new donors in the Boston area. This assistance included arranging special hotel dinners (expenses paid by Barton's colleagues) and public meetings with Frost as featured speaker. In his speeches, Frost introduced the wealthy Americans to their "contemporary ancestors" who were living in the Appalachian Mountains. By telling interesting anecdotes and describing colorful dialects, Frost captured the romantic imaginations of his listeners. Donors who had been reluctant to contribute to a "colored" school were delighted to contribute to a Berea College that served the educational needs of their "contemporary ancestors." [20]



Berea College Students in the Library of Lincoln Hall (Courtesy of Berea College Archives)

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Endnotes:

[1] After President Abraham Lincoln opened the military enlistment to slaves who would be granted freedom, thousands of slave men made their way to the Union's fort at Camp Nelson (Jessamine County) and most brought their families. Aided by the American Missionary Association, Reverend Fee worked with the freedmen soldiers and their refugee families at the camp and after the War, invited many to move to Berea to help build up an interracial school, church and community. See Richard Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky: A Civil War History*. Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 2002; and Richard Sears, *Day of Small Things: Abolitionism in the Midst of Slavery, Berea Kentucky, 1854-1864*. Lanham, MD: university Press of America, 1886.

[2] Mayville College in Tennessee admitted black men but not black women along with admittance of white men and women. Its enrollments of Blacks were always few. See Ralph Waldo Lloyd's *Maryville College: A History of 150 Years, 1819-1969*, (Maryville, TN: Maryville College Press, 1969).

[3] As a black student on the predominantly white campus of Berea College in 1971, I heard rumors about how the College used to be predominantly black. The campus gossip may have been sparked from research being conducted by history professor, Dave Nelson, who subsequently published his analysis in the article, "Experiment in Interracial Education at Berea College, 1858-1908", *Journal of Negro History*, LIX, no.1 (January 1974). Nelson and I differ somewhat on interpretations of some primary sources regarding reasons why Berea College interracial education ended.

[4] When confronted with the mob's ultimatum to leave the state, the families banded together to pray while some of their members hurried to the capitol in Frankfort to seek protection from the governor. The governor refused to render any means of protection, disavowing responsibility for the group's safety. When the group heard this news, they decided the wiser course of action would be to leave. See **378.7691 F295a c.2, John G. Fee's Autobiography (Chicago, 1891), 146-55**, and American Missionary 4 (1860: 13-14, 39-46, 63-65.)

[5] See Richard Drake's *One Apostle was a Lumberman*, (Berea, 1975), which notes that the first blacks who were taught at Berea were a group of ministers; however, this group did not matriculate through the school.

[6] J.A. R. Rogers to Berea College president William G. Frost, February 17, 1893, Frost Papers (hereinafter cited as FP), Box 4, Berea College Archives (hereinafter cited as BCA).

[7] See *Berea College Catalogue, 1866-67 (Cincinnati, 1867)*.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] From black alumni, see Elgetha Brand Bell's letter to Elizabeth peck, May 14, 1956, BCA Record Group (thereafter RG) 8, Box 2, and the file on Angus A. Burleigh, Box 3. From a white alumnus and faculty member, see E. G. Dodge's letter to William G. Frost, April 11, 1925, Box 13, FP.

[10] See E. Henry Fairchild's inaugural address, *Berea College Catalogue, 1870* (Cincinnati, 1870), 12-13.

[11] Note General Howard's funding and the description of Berea's progress in racial harmony which are mentioned in Fee's letter to AMA field agent, Brother E. M. Cravath, September 3, 1867. AMA microfilm. Also, see Elizabeth Peck, *Berea College's First Hundred Years*. Berea, Kentucky: Berea College Press, 1955.

[12] See William B. Stewart Papers, Box 1 BCA. See also the President's Report of June 24, 1891. There is some speculation that Stewart's resignation was manipulated by certain persons who wanted William G. Frost as president.

[13] See Frost's letter to his mother, Maria Goodell Frost, November 20, 1892, Box 2, Folder 1,FP. Frost, born in 1854, grew up with the Oberlin influence of evangelism and social reforms; his mother was the daughter of abolitionist William Goodell, while his father, the Reverend Lewis P. Frost, had graduated from Oberlin in 1848. Frost followed suit in 1876. See his autobiography, *For the Mountains (New York, 1937)*.

[14] Frost to the "Brethren at Berea," July 16, 1892, Box 4, FP.

[15] Berea College's treasurer's report, June 23, 1892, Board of Trustee Annual Reports, RG 2, Box 1, BCA. It was several years before Frost chose to accept his full presidential salary.

[16] For Frost's historical sketch of Berea College, see Box 3, Folder 6, FP.

[17] Frost to Maria G. Frost, August 29, 1893, Box 2, FP.

[18] Frost to Eleanor Marsh Frost (hereinafter EMF), November 26, 1894, Box 1, FP.

[19] William E. Barton to Frost October 4, 1893, Box 4, FP. Barton's interests in Berea led him to write several articles about the Cumberland Mountain people and about black spirituals (which he collected). Most of his articles appeared in the **Berea Quarterly** [\[051 B487q 1900-1904\]](#), [\[051 B487q 1904-1909\]](#), a public relations publication edited by Frost from 1895 to 1916.

[20] See Frost to EMF, November 13, 1894, Box 1; excerpts from the Diary of EMF, March 18, 1898, Box 43, both in FP.
