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Christopher M. Span. *From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse: African American Education in Mississippi, 1862-1875.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. 264 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3290-5.

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Mississippi Blacks' Struggle for Postbellum Education

In this well-researched book, Christopher M. Span captures the story of African American Mississippians' struggle for educational opportunities between 1862 and 1875. The author's contribution lies principally in the detailed character of his narrative. No other state-level study of Reconstruction education has been written with as much depth or with such a full range of primary source materials. The discussion draws heavily on the extant accounts of those involved: John Alvord, the Freedmen's Bureau superintendent of education for the entire occupied South; northern missionary societies and their teachers; nearly a dozen local newspapers; white as well as black state legislators; Henry Pease, Mississippi's first elected superintendent of public education; and, as much as possible, black citizens themselves, thirsting for their first tastes of education. The result is a well-rounded book that is at once both bottom-up and top-down.

From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse will readily become the standard book on its topic–a helpful resource for Reconstruction scholars for decades to come, especially on education in the Deep South. Nonetheless its broader interpretive thrust will hardly come as a surprise to those familiar with the past generation's Reconstruction historiography. Span's work is soundly built from the sources at hand yet strikingly echoes earlier African American-centered studies that have addressed blacks' education throughout the years during and immediately after the Civil War. The emphasis on self-agency found in Leon F. Litwack's *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (1980), Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (1988), and James D. Anderson's *Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (1988) is paralleled throughout. This is a work that will primarily garner attention for the specifics of blacks' struggles at the granular level.

This is not to say, however, that *From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse* merely covers familiar ground with greater precision. The author's quantitative analysis of public school attendance between 1870 and 1875, as explicated below, offers a fresh, new perspective on blacks' commitment to schooling once it became available. Relying on county-level statistics collected by the state's superintendent of public education, Span demonstrates that blacks' well-voiced enthusiasm for education was matched by high levels of public school attendance. Published state-level statistics of this genre have largely if not entirely been overlooked by preceding Reconstruction scholars. In using this material to great effect, Span points to new possibilities for future studies.

From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse is divided into two sections. The first, broken into three chapters, examines African American Mississippians' initial, grassroots efforts to obtain education during and then immediately following the Civil War. Individual chapters center on blacks' own Civil War initiatives; subsequent aid from the Union army, northern missionaries, freedmen's aid societies, and the Freedmen's Bureau; and southern white's resistance to black education even before the state Constitutional Convention of 1868 opened the door to public funding. Comprising two chapters, the book's final portion centers on the constitutional battle itself; blacks' attainments during the first years of public education; and, finally, whites' successful campaign to eviscerate the public system between 1870 and 1875.

Span convincingly shows that from the onset of the Civil War Mississippi ex-slaves were the most ardent, forceful champions for their own education. Arriving in Corinth in early 1862, the first Union troops found black schooling already well underway. In the months and years immediately thereafter, northern observers, including Alvord, surveyed conditions in varied parts of the state and were struck by the number of autonomous, informal schools they encountered. The visitors consistently expressed amazement at the extent of the ex-

slaves' drive and determination to gain the tools of literacy, especially in view of the war's surrounding devastation and hardships. Understandably, the overall number of students nonetheless remained restricted. Span notes that three thousand blacks attended schools across Mississippi in 1865. (The state's African American population between the ages of five and twenty-one exceeded 125,000 in 1870-71.)

Northern missionaries and freedmen's relief volunteers, working first in the camps of the Union army and then in coordination with the Freedmen's Bureau, soon supplemented these self-directed efforts. Arriving in large numbers from 1863, the experiences of white teachers from the American Missionary Association (AMA), the Western Sanitary Commission, and others were broadly similar to those offering freedmen aid elsewhere in the South. Span adroitly emphasizes the underlying friction related to issues of education's purpose and, ultimately, its ties to efforts at social control. White northerners' beliefs in free labor ideals, white racial superiority, and African American Mississippians' need for white supervision frequently collided with the beliefs, aspirations, and growing self-confidence of the black community. While African Americans were openly grateful for white teachers' efforts, many grew more cautious over time, especially as it became clear that northerners' envisioned that public education, when finally established, would be supervised by southern whites. Increasingly blacks demonstrated a clear desire to be taught by members of their own race, even as the number of students doubled in the mid-1860s. Between 1863 and 1870 the proportion of blacks among the state's teachers rose from 10 to 40 percent.

White Mississippians, like their counterparts in other cotton areas where King Cotton had once held sway, perceived the freedmen's educational endeavors as a central challenge to their efforts to fashion a new economic order on subservient black labor. Two dozen planters allowed the Freedmen's Bureau to establish schools on their property in efforts designed deliberately to attract blacks to work as laborers. Most former masters, however, found even this self-serving approach completely unthinkable. Tacit resistance was the order of the day. Schools were occasionally tolerated when African American Mississippians and their allies could find sites and teachers of their own. Nonetheless 95 percent of land remained in white hands, with few owners willing to consider even renting to blacks. White missionary teachers, as symbols of northern occupation, met with unrelenting opposition. Alvord, overseeing the Freedmen's Bureau's entire educational operations, averred that resistance to northern white instruction was notably greater in Mississippi than in any other state. The rise of the Ku Klux Klan and other white militia groups intensified matters further. Cumulatively 260 blacks were lynched, disproportionately in northern and eastern counties between 1868 and 1872; many were tied to acts of educational assertiveness.

At Mississippi's Constitutional Convention of 1868, black delegates kept a steady eye on attaining equal access to public education for African American Mississippians. Ultimately the convention incorporated a comprehensive, permanent tax-supported public school system for all children. While white delegates debated the merits of integrated versus segregated school systems, fearing northern wrath if the former prevailed, their black counterparts showed little commitment to anything other than one that was fully inclusive. Span stresses that black delegates were led by overriding concerns that funding and access be fully equitable for the sake of their constituents' advance as citizens; the cause of integration per se was neither paramount nor openly championed. In its final form, the public school provisions called for funding through a combination of poll and land taxes, in essence a compromise that required extensive sacrifice for all Mississippians, regardless of race or social status.

Using Mississippi's instructional department report, Span shows that from its opening in 1870 the public school system was fraught with difficulties. Despite 250,000 potential students between the ages of five and twenty-one, only four hundred buildings remained from the antebellum era. Only six hundred additional structures were built in 1870-71. Segregation added to the start-up problems since two sets of schools were required for the state's equally divided numbers of black and white children. With whites in control at both the state and county levels, schools for blacks typically had significantly more students. Span's analysis indicates that African American children attended schools with approximately fifty students; those open to whites averaged thirty-eight pupils. Staffing also differed by race. A pool of pre-Civil War, relatively experienced white teachers were willing to step in and lead classes similar to those they had taught earlier. Superintendent Pease, meanwhile, had to scramble to hire an amalgam of local, more recently educated freedmen and northern whites as instructors.

These and other obstacles notwithstanding, blacks seized on the opportunities the new public school system afforded. Nearly 36 percent of African American Mississippian children of school age enrolled for classes in 1870-71. This proportion was lower than that for whites

(55 percent) but, given whites relative educational advantages before 1870 and blacks' greater need for their children's field labor, arguably far more impressive. The number of black students in the state, estimated at three thousand in 1865, mushroomed to more than forty-five thousand after the advent of public schooling. Equally important was the fact that, once enrolled, black students attended their classes with the same frequency as whites. Tenacity was a hallmark of the black experience.

Span uncovers considerable disparity between the schooling dynamics in black-majority counties, on the one hand, and those with white majorities, on the other. African American Mississippians in the former areas were much more likely to fill local classrooms' seats. Predominantly white regions were typically more sparsely settled in general. The combination of relatively small numbers, segregation, and greater distances to schools all conspired and came together to create particularly daunting challenges for black parents. More generally, the author also points to debilitating circumstances of yet another kind: Mississippi blacks' limited access to schooling beyond the rudimentary primary level. The public educational structure needed to establish a strong preparatory footing for future normal school students was sorely lacking.

Extreme white hostility only partially undermined blacks' efforts in the early 1870s. Indeed, African American Mississippian children's attendance rates actually grew at an astounding rate. By 1875-76, 49 percent of the black school age population were enrolled; equally impressive, in absolute terms the number of students doubled, reaching ninety thousand by the end of the five-year period. Pease and his successor, Thomas W. Cardozo, pressed for improvements in other areas as well. An additional 432 schoolhouses were built in 1871-72; the system's overall expenses were pruned judiciously through streamlining of its organizational structure; and a formal classical rather than industrial curriculum was introduced. This progress was not unalloyed–teacher salaries were cut, the length of the school year seldom extended beyond three months, and adequate funds for books did not materialize–but solid progress was made nonetheless.

Span's account of the remaining, final elements of Mississippi's educational story follow the all-too-familiar, dreary lines recounted by other Reconstruction historians. Vigilantism, led by the Ku Klux Klan, became even more vigorous after the state's 1869 constitution was introduced; black schools became the terrorists' target of choice because of their association with African American assertiveness and northern white instruction. The groups' suppression by the federal government from late 1871 until early 1874 provided a respite for Mississippi blacks' teachers and state school officials, allowing for much of the advance noted above. Nonetheless after the 1873 elections, the state's white Democratic leadership embarked on the plan of open intimidation that would restore whites' firm control of state government after 1875. While Mississippi's segregated public school system had been entrenched well enough by blacks and their allies to ensure its permanence, it was quickly reduced to the Jim Crow form that would persist for nearly a century thereafter.

Readers hoping for a nuanced understanding of how cultural, social, and agricultural economic forces shaped African American Mississippians' struggle for educational opportunity will find *From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse* disappointing. Except in chapter 4's black- and white-majority county analyses, Mississippi is largely depicted as a monolithic state. Missing is any reference to the impact of the strikingly differing characteristics of the plantation regions of the Yazoo-Mississippi Valley Delta and Natchez District, on the one hand, and the uplands of the Mississippi Valley to Alabama region dominated by less affluent small-scale cotton farmers and landless whites, on the other. Span's racial majority divisions correspond only imperfectly to this divide. No effort is made to extend the discussion through even cursory attention to the contrasts associated with the prevailing labor systems and white ideologies in each area.

Empathetic readers familiar with mid-nineteenth-century educational patterns, meanwhile, may well be disappointed by Span's limited contextualization of his statistical data. African American Mississippians' accomplishments as presented in *From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse* were far more impressive than they might seem if judged by early twenty-first-century benchmarks. In our contemporary society, views of formal education are shaped by laws that require compulsory attendance from ages five to sixteen, along with the belief that a twelve-year education, if not universal, should be the norm. If these standards are applied to African American Mississippians' children, attendance rates of 36 to 48 percent between 1870 and 1876 might seem eye-opening, given slavery's legacy but, at the same time, far below today's standards.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that well into the Civil War era public education was an intermittent and varied process. Students might complete five

years of class work by age ten–or only at age fourteen, fifteen, or sixteen. Hence the definition of school age as five to twenty-one, not five to sixteen or five to eighteen. Similarly, it is helpful to know that a full high school education did not become the norm until after the turn of the twentieth century; attaining an eighth grade education was an achievement in its own right. These factors led to attendance rates far lower than those today. In a community where all children between the ages of five and twenty-one received eight years of schooling, the secular average attendance rate would be 50 percent. Viewed from this angle, attendance rates of 36 to 48 percent are tremendously impressive.

Future studies might also build on U.S. Census data related to school attendance to place African American Mississippians' accomplishments in comparative context. Tables on state-level attendance rates, broken down by race, are available for 1850, 1860, and 1870 in *Ninth Census ... Statistics of the Population of the United States* (1872). It is tantalizing to consider the extent to which the patterns Span so adeptly parses out are typical relative to those in other southern states or African Americans in the North.

In the final analysis, any reservations about *From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse* are far outweighed by the book's sound, well-detailed explorations. Indeed, it is only because of its careful, well-rounded assessment, including its fruitful use of the reports for the superintendent of education, that suggestions for extension and elaboration come to mind.

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