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THE BLACK CHURCH AS CONTEXT FOR THE FORMATION  
OF BLACK INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION:  
A CASE STUDY OF SIMMONS COLLEGE

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by  
Michael Todd Bernard  
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**APPROVAL SHEET**

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A CASE STUDY OF SIMMONS COLLEGE

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For my wife, my children, and my grandchildren. You give me purpose.

For my mother, who taught me to read.

For Dad, who taught me that family is everything.

For my grandmother, Viola, who gave me my first typewriter.

Thank God.

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## PREFACE

This study reinvigorated my sense of mission as an African American educator by grabbing ahold of my attention, turning it to the past, and causing me to unearth historical truths of the black struggle for higher education, a struggle that I benefit from and that I must continue to engage in. I am thankful to Dr. Timothy Paul Jones, who first suggested that I delve into the black church's involvement in the establishment of historically black colleges. Without the suggestion made by Dr. Jones and his continued evaluative guidance and counsel during the writing process, I could not have produced this work. I am also thankful to Dr. John David Trentham, who is probably unaware of the force of his uncompromising scholarly leadership. Additionally, I am thankful for the example of Dr. Kevin Jones and the instruction, and the enlightenment I received under the teaching of Dr. Justin Irving, who broadened my perspective on leadership.

I must also express thanks to my sister for her support and to my younger brother, Justin, and my youngest daughter, Holly, who preceded me in obtaining their doctoral degrees from Princeton and Murray, respectively. You lit a fire under me and inspired me to pursue my doctorate. I am grateful for the humor, the encouragement, and the friendship of my cohort, Alair, Josh, and Sam. Moreover, I am thankful to my wife, my children, and my grandchildren, who look up to me, look out for me, and look after me.

Michael Todd Bernard

Louisville, Kentucky

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The United States of America has a long history of resistance to or indifference toward the education of African Americans. Centuries ago, if blacks in America were to taste the liberating sweetness of education, they would largely have to depend on themselves. If blacks were to experience intellectual edification through literacy, then they were going to have to cultivate clandestine ways to emancipate themselves intellectually before their enslaved bodies would ever be freed. If blacks were to prepare for their tomorrows through the acquisition of education, then the development of self-determination was of crucial importance because the pursuit of knowledge—including the pursuit of literacy—was roadblocked legally, and was often met with violent resistance.

Between 1800 and 1835, most Southern states ratified legislation that made it a crime to teach slave children to read and write.<sup>1</sup> The prevention of black literacy was often backed by violent preventative measures. One example of the type of physical violence that would be visited upon a slave seeking literacy is described by James Anderson in his book *The Education of Blacks in the South*:

During the three decades before the Civil War slaves lived in a society in which literacy was forbidden by law and symbolized as a skill that contradicted the status of slaves. As former slave William Henry Heard recalled: “We did not learn to read nor write, as it was against the law for any person to teach any slave to read; and any slave caught writing suffered the penalty of having his forefinger cut from his right hand.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in South*, 45.



Further, Peter Irons, author of *Jim Crow's Children*, renders an account from Arnold Gragston, a former slave who was held in bondage in Macon County, Kentucky. Gragston recalls what would happen if his master was told that one of his slaves had been learning to read: "He would near beat the daylights out of us."<sup>3</sup> Irons's work reinforces the statement made by William Henry Heard, whose account was captured in Anderson's research. Irons notes that a woman who was born into slavery on a Louisiana plantation, Sarah Benjamin, reported that if it was discovered that a slave had learned to read and write, the result of such an educational pursuit would be the cutting off of the slave's finger or thumb.<sup>4</sup>

Through law and custom, black folk had largely been denied the right to learn. As a result, black self-reliance, black self-emancipation, and black self-determination became prevalent themes in the story of black education. Even while vast numbers of people of African descent were enslaved in the United States and legally barred from becoming literate, many of them engaged in living dangerously. Many slaves slipped around at night and crept into "pit schools,"<sup>5</sup> deep holes in the ground, hidden in the woods, where they would be taught by a fellow slave who "had some learnin."<sup>6</sup> The act of placing their bodies at risk in their quest for a little learning reveals that enslaved blacks understood the value of knowledge. It is apparent that they understood that knowledge was so precious that it was worth risking their lives to obtain, and many of them also understood that literacy was so precious that many who made up the white

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Irons, *Jim Crow's Children* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Irons, *Jim Crow's Children*, 11.

<sup>5</sup> Irons, *Jim Crow's Children*, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Irons, *Jim Crow's Children*, 11.

power structure were willing to maim, beat, and kill them to prevent them from obtaining it.

Irons notes that the owner of a slave named Charles Whiteside expressed why education held such value. Whiteside was told by his master that because he had no education, he would remain enslaved because, as the master said, “Education is what makes a man free.”<sup>7</sup> It is precisely because education has the potential to make a man free that whites in power so often wanted to inhibit blacks from obtaining it; and blacks desired to gain it. Indeed, education and freedom have been inseparably bound together in the black mind for centuries. Enlightened slaves knew that an educated slave would prove to be dangerous because intellectual freedom makes confining one to the restrictions of slavery difficult, for it fuels the desire for freedom from physical bondage and introduces one to the notion that the pathway from slavery to freedom is paved by education. Frederick Douglass, for example, recalls that when he was a young slave, his master’s wife began teaching him to read and write. However, when the master discovered that his wife was providing Douglass with lessons in literacy, he vehemently forbade the practice from continuing. Douglass recalls his master’s heated pronouncement:

If you give a n---r an inch, he will take an ell. A n---r should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best n---r in the world. Now if you teach that n---r (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master.<sup>8</sup>

For Douglass, the master’s words were enlightening. He realized at that moment, the “white man’s power to enslave the black man.”<sup>9</sup> Douglass also reveals that

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<sup>7</sup> Irons, *Jim Crow’s Children*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave, Written by Himself* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 36.

<sup>9</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 36.

he understood in that moment, “the pathway from slavery to freedom.”<sup>10</sup> These two revelations are intertwined. The power to enslave involves keeping the slave from being educated and the pathway to freedom is both paved and illuminated by education. Armed with the revelation that education is both enlightening and liberating, Douglass, like other slaves who understood the value of knowledge, became determined to defy his master’s wishes and live dangerously. Douglass explains, “I set out with high hope, and fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read.”<sup>11</sup> In reference to his master’s prohibition on literacy, Douglass articulates the motivation and logic behind his rebellious decision to live dangerously:

What he most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both.<sup>12</sup>

Education, as Douglass’s master says, makes a man unsuitable for slavery. Thus, black education stood in opposition to black bondage. In its affirmation that black people were individuals capable of intellectual thought, black education has been a persistent disruption to the institution of racial slavery and its residual effects.<sup>13</sup>

The power that education has is what prompted Jarvis Givens, author of *Fugitive Pedagogy*, to conclude that the practice of secretly acquiring literacy for religious, practical, and intellectual purposes was parallel to black flight from the sites of

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<sup>10</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 36.

<sup>11</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 36.

<sup>12</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 37.

<sup>13</sup> Jarvis Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy, Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), 16.

their enslavement.<sup>14</sup> According to Heather Williams, blacks in bondage who pursued some form of formal education chose to live dangerously for the following purpose:

Access to the written word, whether scriptural or political, revealed a world beyond bondage in which African Americans could imagine themselves free to think and behave as they chose. Literacy provided the means to write a pass to freedom, to learn of abolitionist activities, or to read the Bible. Because it most often happened in secret, the very act of learning to read and write subverted the master-slave relationship and created a private life for those who were owned by others. Once literate, many used this hard-won skill to disturb the power relations between master and slave, as they fused their desire for literacy with their desire for freedom.<sup>15</sup>

Literacy and freedom were twin desires that afforded blacks in bondage access to a world that, without education, was entirely closed to them.

### **The Involvement of the Historically Black American Church**

The historically black church became instrumental in giving birth to the life of the mind among emancipated African Americans by feeding the hunger for knowledge through organizing and maintaining learning experiences for blacks such as Sabbath schools, and ultimately by filling a void on the black academic landscape through the establishment of historically black colleges.

The former chairman of Harvard University's African American Studies department, Henry Louis Gates, asserts, "Most early schools for freed people were housed in black churches. In rural areas of the deep South, where schools were rare, Northern missionaries used the Bible to encourage literacy . . . Black churches viewed education and literacy as paramount to the success of the African American community."<sup>16</sup> Even in the years prior to the Civil War, some blacks in the North began

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<sup>14</sup> Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*, 30.

<sup>15</sup> Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 7.

<sup>16</sup> Henry L. Gates, *The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song* (New York: Penguin, 2021), 63.

to press their way forward into basements of church buildings they transformed into schools. The spirit and mission of many black churches, which incorporated spiritual and racial elevation and interior strength, was handed off to the colleges they founded, instilling in their students a sense of spiritual, personal, and racial responsibility.

### **Proposition**

Prior to the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which ultimately abolished slavery in 1865, the prohibition on African American literacy was expansive, leaving 95 percent of freed slaves illiterate.<sup>17</sup> Despite poverty, the culture shock that accompanied new freedom, and the escalation of violent backlash by Southern whites, the missionary enthusiasm of those who taught people of African descent coupled with African Americans' enthusiastic desire to learn, reinforced the motivation to develop schools as symbols of freedom and empowerment.<sup>18</sup> As newly freed African Americans matured in knowledge, there became a growing need for formal institutions of education and higher education, especially throughout the South. Historian Nell Irvin Painter observes, "Black churches offered spaces where African Americans could confer and worship as they pleased, free of white surveillance. As black people's largest public meeting places, churches also frequently housed schools . . . southern black churches became symbols of emancipation and the political empowerment of Reconstruction, where education, politics, and social life all converged."<sup>19</sup> The position of the black church as a place of refuge in the black community along with relative nonexistence of schools for the large

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<sup>17</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in South*, 73.

<sup>18</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, *Creating Black Americans, African American History and Its Meanings, 1619 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University, 2007), 78.

<sup>19</sup> Painter, *Creating Black Americans*, 79.

numbers of newly freed slaves and the lofty amount of illiterate former slaves, necessitated the establishment of these church-based academic spaces.

Kentucky serves as an example of a state that, due to its inequitable handling of black schooling, necessitated the involvement of the black church in the education of African Americans. Though Kentucky never joined the Confederacy during the Civil War, the state did ally itself with the post-Civil War South by passing racial segregation statutes after the war. The Kentucky state legislature also declined to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment.<sup>20</sup> Further, Kentucky refused to spend public money to educate its citizens of color.<sup>21</sup> Throughout the 1860s, the only funds black schools received were those that remained from tax money spent to support white common schools.<sup>22</sup> In response to the imbalanced and unjust handling of their academic lives in Kentucky, a state that spent black property tax money on schools that denied black admission,<sup>23</sup> many African Americans in Kentucky exhibited a form of self-determination akin to the form of persistence enslaved blacks had shown by demanding equal or fair treatment in all facets of society education.<sup>24</sup> For example, Elijah Marrs, a future educational leader from Shelby County, Kentucky, enlisted in the Union Army to secure his freedom from slavery. Marrs had acquired literacy as a slave and had acquired a reputation as a “penman” while serving in the army because he would pen letters home on behalf of his fellow black servicemen who had not obtained the ability to read and write.<sup>25</sup> Upon

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<sup>20</sup> John Hardin, *Fifty Years of Segregation, Black Higher Education in Kentucky, 1904–1954* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1997), 7.

<sup>21</sup> Hardin, *Fifty Years of Segregation*, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Hardin, *Fifty Years of Segregation*, 8.

<sup>23</sup> Hardin, *Fifty Years of Segregation*, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Hardin, *Fifty Years of Segregation*, 9.

<sup>25</sup> Williams, *Self-Taught*, 47.

exiting the military, Marrs continued to speak on behalf of African Americans in Kentucky. Williams notes in her book *Self-Taught* that Elijah Marrs, along with his brother Henry, combined their efforts with other African Americans in Shelbyville and La Grange, Kentucky:

[They] set about fashioning political, economic, religious, and educational institutions within black communities. In newspaper editorials, letters to public officials, speeches at conventions, and statements to white citizens, black individuals and organizations demanded land, enfranchisement for black men, the right to testify in courts, fair compensation for their labor, and the right to compete economically. They also asserted a right to education.<sup>26</sup>

Louisville, Kentucky, stands out as a unique setting for the academic advancement of blacks. In 1847, blacks in Louisville managed private schools within the city.<sup>27</sup> At the close of the Civil War, there was a renewed interest in reestablishing these schools; however, teachers were not in great supply. In addition to the challenges already faced by blacks desirous of expanding educational offerings to their brethren, white missionaries who were enthusiastic about the education of those recently freed from slavery, chose to commit their time to teaching in states with a higher concentration of African Americans, which neither Louisville, nor the state of Kentucky, possessed.<sup>28</sup>

The black church in Louisville filled the academic void created by racial indifference and by the enacting of racist policies in Louisville. John Hardin, author of *Fifty Years of Segregation: Black Higher Education in Kentucky, 1904–1954*, submits, “The first important organized group that supported a normal school came from the Kentucky General Association of Colored Baptists, established in 1865.”<sup>29</sup> The

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<sup>26</sup> Williams, *Self-Taught*, 69.

<sup>27</sup> Hardin, *Fifty Years of Segregation*, 8.

<sup>28</sup> Hardin, *Fifty Years of Segregation*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Hardin, *Fifty Years of Segregation*, 8.

Association aimed to open a school that function as a center for training black ministers and educators who would be equipped to provide the teaching that African Americans desperately needed. Eventually, the association opened the Kentucky Normal and Theological Institute in 1879 in Louisville. This school would later be renamed Simmons College.

This historical analysis will discuss the phenomenon of black self-determination, which I describe as black tenacity, or the resolve to live productively and to carve out a promising, hopeful future for oneself and for generations to follow, despite having to endure racial injustice and violent racial resistance to black intellectual progress. Black self-determination is presented as a key component in the pursuit of black education and the historically black church's participation in the education of black folk in pre- and post-antebellum America. Most particularly, this thesis will focus on the historically black American church's involvement in the establishment of the historically black, Simmons College of Kentucky, in Louisville in 1879.

### **Research Concern**

In the years preceding and following the Civil War , the black church's involvement in the education of African Americans and their role in the establishment of what are now known as historically black colleges, was a natural response to the academic realities of the time. The historically black church sought to educate and to elevate black Americans intellectually and spiritually for the purposes of individual advancement, spiritual edification, and for the collective progress of colored folks. Thus, the aim of the historically black church was like that of the historically black colleges, institutions that were about the serious business of fostering the intellectual and spiritual growth of individuals and of a people. Both organizations were seeking to enrich the intellectual, social, and spiritual strengths of a race that had been despised and rejected.



Being the most influential and the most powerful organization in the black community in the late nineteenth century, the black church inevitably helped to fill an academic void by fostering the establishment of historically black colleges. Toward the end of slavery and in the years following emancipation, many black Americans had acquired measures of education and their intellectual development, coupled with their need to navigate the social and economic terrain of the United States as a people who were truly free, demanded that they pursue higher education in a formal setting. Naturally, the black church responded to this need, especially during the last half of the 1800s. The distinct mission of the historically black college was to prepare black men to lead churches and to equip black men and women with the education necessary to be skillful laborers, effective teachers, and productive and influential black citizens who would extinguish the myth of black inferiority. The mission of the historically black college is similar to the unique mission of the historically black church, which was not only to seek and to save those who were lost, but also to influence growth in knowledge, wisdom, and spiritual understanding. Both institutions demonstrated that black Americans were an organized people, a civilized people, a Christlike people, a people who were both able to love God with all of their minds and who were able to engage in the life of the mind—a mission that a large section of the black church of today has sadly lost sight of. Indeed, Eddie Glaude Jr., the head of the African American Studies department at Princeton University submits, “The black church as we’ve known or imagined it, is dead. The idea of this venerable institution as central to black life and as repository for social and moral conscience of the nation has all but disappeared.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Paul Harvey, *Through the Storm, Through the Night: A History of African American Christianity* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 7.

## Significance and Purpose of the Research

In the recent past, much has been written about student life at historically black colleges. A great deal has also been said about the general history of historically black colleges. However, there exists a dearth of substantial investigative material produced regarding the black church's involvement in the establishment and life of historically black colleges. Roland Mitchell spoke to this issue when he wrote,

The fact remains that an archival search of the articles published in the *Journal of Negro Education* over the course of the last fourteen years (1996–2010) demonstrates even in the preeminent space where Black folks discuss Black education there still exists a dearth of research on education and the African American church. It is my firm belief that this dearth of research exists because the two—the Black church and education—have always been so closely intertwined that the relationship has presently escaped mainstream educational research's gaze.<sup>31</sup>

More specifically, there is also a shortage of substantive information regarding the founding and sustaining of Simmons College, the oldest historically black college in the state of Kentucky. Hardin points out, “Kentucky’s black colleges have produced several generations of teachers, public servants, businessmen, and community leaders in an era when racial segregation was the norm and black expectations for success were limited at best, yet the story of these institutions has received little attention from scholars.”<sup>32</sup> However, even Hardin, who discusses Simmons College in his work, does not draw a link between the black church's hand in the education of African Americans in Louisville, and the eventual establishment of Simmons College by the black church.

This dearth of substantial intellectual material is an issue because a lack of knowledge in this realm of historical study leads to psychological and cultural blindness, which further darkens the awareness of black historical contributions and affirms the myth that blacks have not been serious contributors to America beyond slavery. An

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<sup>31</sup> Roland Mitchell, “The African American Church, Education and Self-Determination,” *Journal of Negro Education* 79, no 3 (2010): 203.

<sup>32</sup> Hardin, *Fifty Years of Segregation*, 1.

investigation of the black church's involvement in the education of the Negro provides insight into the determination African Americans have employed as they sought psychological emancipation. This black self-determination was made manifest in desperate, bleak, and seemingly hopeless times. As was observed in a federal report on the Traditionally Black Institutions of Higher Education,

The black colleges were founded and evolved in an environment unlike that of any other group of colleges—one of legal segregation and isolation from the rest of higher education. The population from which these colleges drew their students lived under severe legal, educational, economic, political, and social restrictions. The origin and development of the traditionally black institutions cannot be fully understood except in the context of the educational socioeconomic status of the black population.<sup>33</sup>

In the unfriendly environment of centuries past, blacks who were desirous of an education had to be more than conquerors. This is why the story of the black church and her involvement in black liberation through education and the establishment of black institutions of higher learning is also a story of black self-determination.

### **Introduction to the Research**

This historical analysis investigates the black church's involvement in the education of African Americans during slavery and the necessity of the black church's involvement in the continuance of black education beyond emancipation, which involves the establishment of historically black colleges. To establish historical context, the early part of this study is national in scope. However, this study will narrow its focus and center on the establishment of Simmons College in Louisville, Kentucky.

### **The Relevance of the Research**

Since the study of the black church's role in education and in the establishment of historically black colleges reaches into the past, it is fitting for the study to be one of

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<sup>33</sup> Bobby Lovett, *America's Historically Black Colleges and Universities* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2015), 1.

historical analysis. It would be wrong to assume, however, that a historical study is irrelevant because we are where we are, what we are, and who we are, both nationally and personally, precisely because of the history we have been carrying with us. Even when we forget where we have been, what we have been, and who we have been, it is our history that often enables us to regain our psychological footing; it is our history that reminds us of our cultural and personal identity. We must be ever mindful that we stand amid a historical context.

### **Methodology**

The historical method of research involves investigating a specific topic by gathering evidence from source material for the purpose of producing an informational and instructive narrative. This research will analyze black church involvement in the education of African Americans and the establishment of the historically black Simmons College of Louisville in particular. It is fitting then, that this research will be historiographical in the sense that it will analyze and interpret the historical writings from primary and secondary sources. Authors Leila Villaverde, Joe L. Kincheloe, and Frances Helyar submit that the function of historical analysis is to “expose the frames and parameters of historical writing in order to further one’s understanding of the circumstances of the past.”<sup>34</sup> They continue,

It is the careful study of historical writing and the ways in which historians interpret the past through various theoretical lenses. The key element in historiography is the ability to discern how history is mediated by philosophy, ideology, and politics. Such clarity makes history intelligible and accessible, denoting its contemporary presence and significance. Having ownership over the past links the self to others and vice versa, grounding the present with critical consciousness and the future with proleptic responsibility.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Frances Helyar, Joe Kincheloe, and Leila Villaverde, “Historical Research in Education,” *Doing Educational Research*, no. 1 (2006): 311.

<sup>35</sup> Helyar, Kincheloe, and Villaverde, “Historical Research in Education,” 311.

Historical analysis seeks to maintain the relevance of a segment of our black historical past by determining how history operates among the social sciences and theology, making this study of history understandable and within the intellectual reach of people today offering this knowledge in a way that draws connections from the past to the present with “critical consciousness,” and to the future with the anticipatory responsibility of one who has gained wise maturity as a result of a study of the past.

This study will apply the historical method of weighing and considering findings from primary and secondary sources for the purpose of clarifying the significance of the black church’s essential involvement in the education of enslaved and emancipated African Americans, giving particular attention to the establishment of Simmons College in Louisville, Kentucky.

### **Research Questions**

Since the study of the black church’s role in the establishment of historically black colleges reaches into the past, it is fitting for the study to be one of historical analysis. The research questions are formed so that the study will logically follow the contours of historical analysis.

1. What necessitated the black church’s involvement in the education of blacks?
2. What factors motivated the Kentucky General Association of Colored Baptists to establish an institution of higher education for blacks in Louisville, Kentucky?

### **Delimitations of the Research**

While a discussion of black educational pursuits during and after slavery is contextually necessary, this thesis will not provide an exhaustive study of the entire history of African American education and African American higher education. Thus, this thesis will not examine the origin of every institute of higher education established by the black church throughout all American history. Rather, this study is concerned with

placing the leadership and establishment of Simmons College of Kentucky in a historical context for the purpose of historical analysis.

This study will focus on the concept of black self-determination in the pursuit of learning, the crucial involvement of the historically black church in black education during slavery and the establishment of black spaces for learning, specifically, Simmons College of Kentucky. This thesis will conclude with the presidency of William Simmons, the school's second president and namesake, who ended his tenure at the school in 1890, after serving as its leader for ten years.

### **Terminology and Definitions**

This study uses the following terms:

*Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU).* Any traditionally African American college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of African Americans.<sup>36</sup> Many historically black colleges were established because African Americans were barred from attending other colleges and universities.

*The black church.* Independent, historic, and totally black-controlled Christian denominations, congregations, or religious organizations.<sup>37</sup>

### **Overview of the Research**

The introduction to this thesis establishes the necessary groundwork for the study by expressing the need to establish historical context. The introductory chapter also defines black academic self-determination and asserts that the black church's role in the education of African Americans was essential to the establishment of historically black

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<sup>36</sup> Kofi Lomotey, *Encyclopedia of African American Education* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2010), 80.

<sup>37</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 1.

colleges. Also, the introduction reveals that the central focus of this study will be placed on Simmons College of Kentucky, the state's oldest historically black institution of higher learning.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature pertaining to African American education. This review of literature provides an historical framework that reveals a history of black academic strivings even in the face of resistance to their educational pursuits. In establishing historical context for the study, chapter 2 offers reasons why this doctoral thesis must begin with slavery. Chapter 2 also reveals acts of black self-determination, made evident by clandestine modes of learning such as pit schools and by more conventional forms of education, such as Sabbath schools, which were often housed in black churches. Ultimately, black self-determination led to the formation of historically black colleges, many of which were birthed by the black church.

Chapter 3 tightens the focus of the study on the Commonwealth of Kentucky, expressing that the same academic self-determination that blacks throughout the country mustered, was also activated in the Bluegrass State because of legislative and social resistance to black education. Chapter 3 involves a discussion of the formation of Simmons College of Kentucky, a college established by black church men.

Chapter 4 asserts that black educational leadership is a necessity at historically black colleges like Simmons College because of the unique and shared experiences of African Americans, especially in the nineteenth century. The earliest leaders of Simmons College, for example, were black men who had an intimate knowledge of slavery and the injustices associated with racism. They understood, through lived experience, the academic denials blacks had been subjected to, and their lived experience gave them a keen sense of the achievement gaps that needed closure. Chapter 4 asserts that leaders in black education were better equipped to formulate a curriculum that would provide students with a knowledge building life-affirming education. Further, chapter 4 points out the curriculum differences between W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, the two

most popular black educators of their time, and reveals that their debate regarding the best path to take in black education had a national impact. William Simmons, the president of what was then called the Kentucky Normal and Theological Institute, grappled with both points of view.

Chapter 5 asserts the practical function of black historical analysis, reflects on the revelations contained in this thesis, and discusses the disconnect between today's black church and serious engagement with the life of the mind.

### **Conclusion**

Considering the African American demand for the furtherance of education and the black church's early involvement in the education of black folk, it was natural for the black church to assist in the pursuit of higher education for people of color. Further, if black people were to advance their knowledge and understanding of the Bible, and if they were to maintain and experience their freedom to a fuller extent by being not only free in body but also in mind and spirit, then it was essential that the black church involved itself in the establishment of black spaces for higher learning. Black church involvement in the formation of historically black colleges was especially needed because access to the upper echelons of academe had largely been closed to African Americans. In a sense, the future of the race depended on a union between the black church house and the black schoolhouse.



## CHAPTER 2

### ESTABLISHING THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The act of historical analysis entails investigating primary and secondary sources written about a topic of historical value for the purpose of forming an intelligible narrative of the past and fleshing out themes and concepts that inform the present. When examining the involvement of the black church in the promotion of black education, it is necessary to understand that one of the purposes of historical analysis in this context is not merely to advance one's understanding of the past, but to add clarity and accessibility to the unearthed historical realities revealed by a study of this subject. Intelligibility in this context should not only advance one's knowledge of history, but also should encourage reflection and academic and spiritual action, especially within the souls of black folk.

#### **Beginning with Slavery**

It is fitting for a discussion of black church involvement in black higher education to begin with slavery for several reasons. First, beginning with slavery is appropriate because without slavery and the racial friction and racist ideas birthed during the time of black bondage on American soil, the need for institutions of higher learning for African Americans may never have existed. The earliest historically black colleges were established, not only to help former slaves adjust to living as free citizens in America, but also because blacks were barred from attending many of the predominantly white institutions that were already in existence.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bobby Lovett, *America's Historically Black Colleges and Universities* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2015), 1.

Secondly, it is during slavery that beliefs of black inferiority and white superiority are cultivated. The belief in black intellectual inferiority, though it was often offered as a rationale for slavery in the South, spread throughout the United States. Indeed, the belief in black intellectual inferiority was rooted in slavery, but not restricted to the South, making it a prevailing challenge to black academic pursuits. For instance, Peter Irons cites Andrew Judson, a Npolitician, who would later become a federal judge. “The colored people,” Judson said in 1831 (about three decades before the end of slavery), “can never rise from their menial condition in our country; they ought not be permitted to rise here. They are an inferior race of beings, and never can or ought to be recognized as equals of the whites.”<sup>2</sup>

Dorinda G. Henry submits that “American chattel slavery got its boost by the inference of color-identified, economic classification. The coloring of ‘Blackness,’ during slavery, became the defining moment and criteria by which the imperialist gaze and the establishment of ‘Whiteness,’ equating to superiority in all things tangible, and ‘Blackness,’ equating to inferiority in all thing tangible was actualized.”<sup>3</sup> She argues, “The survival of slavery was therefore predicated upon the enslaver’s control of the enslaved, not only physically but psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually.”<sup>4</sup>

In his book *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, C. Vann Woodward states,

The long experience of slavery in America left its mark on the posterity of both slave and master and influenced relations between them more than a century after the end of the old regime. Slavery was only one of several ways by which the white man has sought to define Negro’s status, his “place,” and assure his subordination. Exploitation of the Negro by the white man goes back to the beginning of relations between the races in modern times, and so do the injustices and brutalities that accompany exploitation. Along with these practices and in justification and defense

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Irons, *Jim Crow’s Children* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 26.

<sup>3</sup> Dorinda G. Henry, *The Black Church Studies Reader* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 281.

<sup>4</sup> Henry, *Black Church Studies Reader*, 281.

of them, were developed the old assumptions of Anglo-Saxon superiority and innate African inferiority, white supremacy, and Negro subordination.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, it was during slavery that the concept of slave and master is not only seen as equivalent to oppressed black bodies and oppressive white bodies, or as the exploited and the exploiter, but also, it is during slavery that the slave and master dynamic begins to be viewed in terms of intellectual inferior and intellectual superior. This dynamic serves as justification and rationalization for the furtherance of slavery. Thus, one of the central opinions that encouraged the perpetuation of slavery was the belief that blacks were mentally inferior and therefore, substandard beings. This “old pro-slavery argument,” Woodward contends, “has its remote ideological roots in the slavery period.”<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the desire for and achievement of literacy among blacks throughout slavery and the eventual carrying out of the spirit of *each one, teach one*, seen in the establishment of pit schools and Sabbath schools countered the myth of black intellectual inferiority.

Ronald Butchart, author of *Schooling the Freed People*, notes that DuBois observed that after emancipation, blacks did not respond to their new freedom like other groups of largely illiterate people who had been freed from slavery. DuBois notes that most former slaves or serfs accepted ignorance as their natural destiny, or they had concluded that their folk wisdom was greater than formal learning. “American Negroes never acted thus,” DuBois wrote. “The very feeling of inferiority which slavery forced upon them fathered an intense desire to rise out of their condition by means of education.”<sup>7</sup> Apparently, the notion of black intellectual inferiority may have helped to fuel black self-determination.

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<sup>5</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 32.

<sup>6</sup> Woodward, *Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 32.

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 38.

In addition, it is appropriate for a discussion of black church involvement in the establishment of historically black institutions of higher learning to begin with slavery because it is within the peculiar institution that we see the irony of white resistance to education played out in striking ways. It is, of course, ironic that whites would show resistance to the teaching of reading and writing to black slaves. There is no need to oppose the education of a race believed to be inferior. Jarvis R. Givens points out that black literacy during the time of American slavery indeed inspired liberation. Givens explains, “A slave having learned to read and write was, according to Douglass’s master, ‘a slave running away with himself.’ Not just stealing away to the north or stealing away to Jesus but stealing away to one’s own imagination, seeking respite in independent thought. The theft of one’s mind was directly relational to, perhaps even a precondition for, the theft of one’s body.”<sup>8</sup> Resistance to black literacy, then, became a way of restricting blacks from coming to know the intellectual promises of reading.

Henry asserts that one of the most powerful methods used for the purpose of subduing and restraining black mental advancement was, of course, the denial of black educational opportunities.<sup>9</sup> She notes, “Laws were quickly enacted to criminalize teaching enslaved Africans how to read.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, black academic achievement and criminality became closely linked transgressions in an anti-black country.<sup>11</sup>

As far back as 1680, the Virginia legislature, in an effort to keep enslaved blacks from running secret schools, passed a law that banned assemblies of blacks for any

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<sup>8</sup> Jarvis Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy, Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), 23.

<sup>9</sup> Henry, *Black Church Studies Reader*, 281.

<sup>10</sup> Henry, *Black Church Studies Reader*, 281.

<sup>11</sup> Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*, 23.

reason, punishable by “twenty lashes on the bare back well laid on.”<sup>12</sup> In 1695, Maryland levied a fine of one thousand pounds of tobacco on tutors who instructed blacks.<sup>13</sup> In 1740, South Carolina made it unlawful for anyone “who shall hereafter teach or cause any slave or slaves to be taught to write or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe in any manner of writing whatsoever.”<sup>14</sup> The criminalization of black education helped to tighten the grip on black minds and bodies, constricting their intellectual expansion.

The effort to tighten the grip on black minds, which began in chattel slavery, expanded over time. Butchart reflects,

Black education was an absurdity. For poor whites, who had long accepted their inferior educational place, the notion of African Americans striving for schooling threatened the foundations of their status, lowly as it was. Thus, for many southerners, black aspirations for schooling challenged the hierarchy that defined their world and insulted both elite status whites and poor whites. Black independence, then, and most especially educated independent black thought and action, contradicted fond white dreams of a docile, independent race.<sup>15</sup>

Butchart reports that as late as 1865, black teachers faced the deadly force of Southern whites who were committed to ending the work of black educational empowerment. For instance, in Franklin County, Tennessee, in 1869, adversaries of black education set fire to a school built for black students, just eight days after it had been built.<sup>16</sup> In 1869, in Dresden, Tennessee, two students from Fisk University established a school for black students, but were taken from their homes later that year. The two students were tied together with rope and dragged over a mile through a wooded area. They were then beaten by about twelve men. After the beating had ceased, they were told

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<sup>12</sup> Irons, *Jim Crow's Children*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Irons, *Jim Crow's Children*, 23.

<sup>14</sup> Irons, *Jim Crow's Children*, 23.

<sup>15</sup> Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 368.

<sup>16</sup> Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 70.

to run. As the two black students fled, they were shot several times.<sup>17</sup> Apparently, living dangerously by pursuing an education extended beyond the emancipation of slaves.

White resistance to black educational progress was also made evident in the judicial system. In 1869, the Supreme Court decided in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that separate public accommodations for separate races did not contradict the Fourteenth Amendment's "equal protection under the law" clause, as long as the separate accommodations were equal.<sup>18</sup> The *Plessy* decision, when applied to schooling, allowed for both legal authorization to current racial injustice against blacks and permitted the expansion of unjust, discriminatory dealings.<sup>19</sup> State governments were granted license to systematically separate Americans based on race. According to Kofi Lomotey, this was "without—as it would quickly become apparent—any requirement that African American schools be treated equally when compared to their white counterparts. The Supreme Court extended its mandate in *Plessy* to education in private institutions of higher education in 1908 when it outlawed the voluntary racial integration."<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, a study of black church involvement in the establishment of HBCUs must begin in slavery because it is within the inhumane, degrading, miserable, and brutal bonds of slavery, that black self-determination manifests itself.

The desire for education displayed by the slave community laid the foundation for the academic pursuit blacks engaged in after emancipation. James Anderson describes the account of ex-slave Charity Bowery: blacks who were in bondage prior to the Civil War would venture off, "up in the country going away under large oaks, and in secret

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<sup>17</sup> Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 338.

<sup>18</sup> Kofi Lomotey, *Encyclopedia of African American Education* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2010), 327.

<sup>19</sup> Lomotey, *Encyclopedia of African American Education*, 327.

<sup>20</sup> Lomotey, *Encyclopedia of African American Education*, 327.

places, sitting in the woods with spelling books.”<sup>21</sup> Another account reveals that slaves had even begun a secret school, where “every window and door was carefully closed to prevent discovery. In that little school hundreds of slaves learned to read and write a legible hand. After toiling all day for their masters, they crept stealthily into this back alley, each with a bundle of pitch-pine splinters for lights.”<sup>22</sup> It is apparent that blacks in bondage understood the value of an education. They understood the value of a well-cultivated mind—and they understood that ignorance was the enemy of freedom. This understanding is made evident by their willingness to sacrifice rest and their personal slavery in order to steal what was being refused to them. Their desire to learn moved them to develop undercover systems of schooling and to navigate the dangerous terrain of the pre-war South to acquire knowledge. These modes of black self-determination in seeking to acquire intellectual strength and academic awareness, is what Givens refers to as the theory of “fugitive pedagogy,” which “accounts for the physical and intellectual acts of subversion engaged in by black people over the course of their educational strivings.”<sup>23</sup>

Givens asserts that the subdued and progressive methods black slaves employed as they sought to become literate, such as climbing into holes in the ground at night to have school, were fugitive pursuits of education.<sup>24</sup> Further, Givens argues that the insistence on black educability—that African-descended people were reasoning rational subjects—disrupted “the chattel principle.”<sup>25</sup> The chattel principle, refers to the

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<sup>21</sup> James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 522.

<sup>22</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in South*, 522.

<sup>23</sup> Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*, 20.

<sup>24</sup> Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*, 21.

<sup>25</sup> Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*, 21.

laws that condemned blacks to chattel slavery and the false logic behind this condemnation—that blacks are inferior. This false logic, Givens argues, was formed to subjugate blacks to a subgenre of the human species, a people who could be legitimately owned as property, even in the womb. Fugitivity can be interpreted as a form of black self-determination because it involves subversive practices of black social and academic life that push against the persistent violence of white supremacy and its practices of surveillance, suppression, and domination that were bound up in and animated by the chattel principle. Fugitive pedagogy is the metanarrative of black educational history. It is the social and rhetorical frame by which we might interpret black Americans’ pursuit to enact humanizing and affirming practices of teaching and learning.<sup>26</sup>

In her book *Self-taught*, Heather Williams reveals some of the subversive, or fugitive education methods enslaved blacks undertook:

They truly had to “steal” an education. Some slaves had spelling books under their hats to be ready whenever they could entreat or bribe a literate person to teach them. Some turned to white children, too young to understand that they violated the slave code, or to poor white men who did not care. Former slaves recounted stories of trading food and money for letters and words . . . Sundays proved to be an important day for enslaved people to learn to read and write . . . African Americans took advantage of their leisure time and whites’ absence on Sundays to become literate. They lurked in their designated places until masters left for Sunday outings, and then they pulled out books and pencils . . . . Some slaves copied letters and words whose meanings they could not yet decipher onto fences and in the dirt. And, more than one hundred years later, when slave cabins were excavated, archeologists were surprised to find, along with the predictable shards of colonoware pottery, food bones, and oyster shells, the remains of graphite pencils and writing slates, some with words and numbers still written on them.<sup>27</sup>

The yearning for education could not be extinguished and these acts of fugitive pedagogy, or fugitive education, further evolved into the establishment of “pit schools.” According to Mandy Jones, a Mississippi slave, many black people in bondage would

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<sup>26</sup> Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*, 21.

<sup>27</sup> Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 20.



“dig pits, and kiver the spot wid bushes an’ vines. Way out in de woods, dey was wods den, an’ de slaves would slip out of de Quarters at night, an’ go to dese pits, an’ some ni--ah dat had some learnin’ would have a school.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, acts of fugitive education, stealthily negotiating the obstacles of white resistance to black mental advancement, were a high demonstration of one of the greatest needs of the hour—black self-determination. It is because of black self-determination that Butchart was able to write, “Slavery’s great failure lay in its inability to crush the black longing to read and write. The dream of literacy would not die despite two and a half centuries of bondage and enforced illiteracy . . . African Americans acted on the possibilities of freedom with an overwhelming surge toward the schoolhouse door.”<sup>29</sup>

### **The Relentless Pursuit of Education**

Thus, black slaves, though they were faced with laws that stood in opposition to their literacy, did not merely accept their plight. Many black slaves actively sought education with all deliberate speed. Regarding black faith, black education, and black self-determination, Givens rightly defines the demanding circumstances surrounding black education: “The Phenomenon of black education was entrenched in the deepest realms of black American life. It was always in crisis; always teetering between strife and a hope and a prayer.”<sup>30</sup> The strife being experienced in black education involved the opposition to and criminalization of learning while black. The hope and prayer among enslaved Africans involved a thirst for a trifecta of freedom—freedom of body, mind, and spirit. On this point, Mitchell asserts, “The very foundation of freedom for enslaved Africans in the U. S. was a dogged faith in a higher power that was sympathetic to His

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<sup>28</sup> Irons, *Jim Crow’s Children*, 21.

<sup>29</sup> Butchart, *Schooling the Freed*, 38.

<sup>30</sup> Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*, 183.

unjustly treated people, combined with an unyielding pursuit of freedom through education to improve their circumstances.”<sup>31</sup> Many black slaves took on the self-determined attitude of Frederick Douglass, and set out with high hope and fixed purpose, at whatever cost, to learn to read.

One such African American was a slave who went by the name Scipio. Scipio received the penalty of death because he taught a young slave how to read and write. Scipio’s young pupil was brutally beaten to make him “forget what he had learned.”<sup>32</sup> When considering the brutal and sometimes deadly consequences blacks faced as a result of their quest for literacy, Anderson observed that in spite of cruel resistance, many African Americans exhibited a kind of rebellious self-determination, which enabled them to both learn for themselves and to eventually teach others also. Anderson says,

No other class of native southerners had experienced literacy in this context. Hence emancipation extruded an ex-slave class with a fundamentally different consciousness of literacy, a class that viewed reading and writing as a contradiction of oppression. . . . In the history of black education, the political significance of slave literacy reaches beyond the antebellum period. Many of the educators and leaders of the postbellum years were men and women who first became literate under slavery. . . . Their ideas about the meaning and purpose of education were shaped partly by the social system of slavery under which they first encountered literacy. After slavery many of the leading black educators emerged from among the rebel literates, those slaves who had sustained their own learning process in defiance of the slaveowners’ authority. They viewed literacy and formal education as a means to liberation and freedom.<sup>33</sup>

Further, with regard to black self-determination, Carter G. Woodson observed how “some of these slaves learned in spite of opposition makes a beautiful story. Knowing the value of learning as a means of escape and having longing for it, too,

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<sup>31</sup> Roland Mitchell, “The African American Church, Education and Self-Determination,” *Journal of Negro Education* 79, no 3 (2010): 203.

<sup>32</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in South*, 17.

<sup>33</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in South*, 17.

because it was forbidden, many slaves continued their education under adverse circumstances.”<sup>34</sup> The adverse circumstances faced by slaves who sought learning motivated them to devise creative ways to learn. These creative ways to learn at a time when black literacy was criminalized are further evidence of a black self-determination that was cultivated during slavery.

### **The Involvement of the Black Church**

The black church had long been an emblem of black self-determination perhaps because—when everything seems to have been lost, when one’s worth seems to have been reduced—the Scriptures serve as a reminder that every human life is valued. The Scriptures serve as a reminder that one will reap what one sows, and the Scriptures serve as a reminder that God’s strength is made perfect in weakness. Indeed, slavery, according to DuBois, “had violated black women, brutalized black men, desecrated black children, and virtually decimated every institution other than the black church.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, black self-determination throughout slavery is not only made evident in the pursuit of education, but also in black spiritual strivings—the black church is the pillar and ground of the truth of black self-determination. Thus, black church involvement in the education of the negro is inevitable.

**Sabbath schools.** Sabbath schools, which began to appear throughout the South in the mid- to late-1800s, are among the earliest, foundational, institutions of learning spawned by the black church. The Sabbath schools, which were schools sponsored by the black church, were established, and sustained almost exclusively by formerly enslaved African Americans, and they functioned mainly at night and on

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<sup>34</sup> Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*, 183.

<sup>35</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, *The Negro Church* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 1903), 24.

weekends, providing literacy instruction.<sup>36</sup> Sabbath schools were both places of academic learning for blacks as well as places of worship. According to Kofi Lomotey, “Freed people learning the rudiments of literacy . . . could expand and demonstrate their newfound skills by reading and reciting the Bible during Sabbath processions. Reading, explaining, and understanding scripture in Sabbath school allowed freed people to coalesce two of their most personal ambitions: becoming literate and being versed in the Bible.”<sup>37</sup>

Regarding the impact of Sabbath schools, Mitchell further asserts,

These two systems, faith, and educational self-determination came together in the establishment of Sabbath schools. Sabbath schools sprang up across the South during and after the Civil War and in effect are the early forebears of Black educational and spiritual self-determination and uplift . . . . History has for the most part overlooked Sabbath schools in favor of the narrative of White northerners coming to the South and subsequently establishing schools for Blacks. However, in both narratives, education as a result of black self-determination or White “do-gooders,” Black churches expended a tremendous amount of resources that in the end played a significant role in raising the literacy rate among the Black community from 6 percent at the close of the Civil War to nearly 77 percent by the 1930s. In this instance it can be argued that the efforts of the Black church, when applied to schooling, equated to exceptional educational outcomes.<sup>38</sup>

Sabbath schools housed in black worship spaces personified the spirit of black self-determination. They were, according to Anderson, “black-dominated, relied on local black communities for support, and generally had all-black teaching staffs. . . . In some areas they constituted the only viable system of free instruction.”<sup>39</sup> Sabbath schools were sustained by black self-determination.

The great Frederick Douglass exhibited black self-determination in his efforts to educate black youth when he taught in a Sabbath school in St. Michael’s, Maryland, in

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<sup>36</sup> Lomotey, *Encyclopedia of African American Education*, 584.

<sup>37</sup> Lomotey, *Encyclopedia of African American Education*, 584.

<sup>38</sup> Mitchell, “The African American Church,” 203.

<sup>39</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in South*, 13.

1835. Amidst dangerous white resistance, Douglass was armed with only “a dozen old spelling-books and a few Testaments,”<sup>40</sup> and taught approximately twenty students. However, Douglass reports, “We had scarcely got to work—*good work*, simply teaching a few colored children how to read the gospel of the Son of God—when in rushed a mob.”<sup>41</sup> It was at the hands of this mob of white attackers, that the Sabbath school led by Douglass met its end.<sup>42</sup> However, Douglass persisted in his quest to educate black children. He searched out between twenty or thirty young black men who were willing to engage in Sabbath school instruction and proceeded to teach them using books that belonged to their “young masters or mistresses.”<sup>43</sup> Even though the Sabbath school was kept “as private as possible,” in accordance with Douglass’s charge to his students, word of the Sabbath school was leaked, and this second Sabbath school met the same fate as the first. White men attack the school “ferociously.” According to historian Hilary J. Moss, the attackers of Douglass’s Sabbath school informed him, “Should slaves become literate . . . they might be inspired to oppose the system that bound them.”<sup>44</sup> Undeterred, Douglass once again, gathered more than forty students and began operating a third Sabbath school in which he succeeded in teaching many of these students to read.<sup>45</sup> Douglass’s persistent push to school African Americans is illustrative of the self-determination and grit exhibited many blacks who desired to educate and to become educated.

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<sup>40</sup> Hilary J. Moss, *Schooling Citizens: The Struggle for African American Education in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 98.

<sup>41</sup> Moss, *Schooling Citizens*, 98.

<sup>42</sup> Moss, *Schooling Citizens*, 98.

<sup>43</sup> Moss, *Schooling Citizens*, 99.

<sup>44</sup> Moss, *Schooling Citizens*, 99.

<sup>45</sup> Moss, *Schooling Citizens*, 99.

Slavery and the denial of educational attainment that frequently accompanied being held in bondage intensified the yearning for education among newly freed blacks. African Americans arose from slavery with a stout faith in the value of learning to read and write.<sup>46</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe observed that freed slaves “rushed not to the grogshop but to the schoolroom—they cried for the spelling-book as bread and pleaded for teachers as a necessity of life.”<sup>47</sup> Booker T. Washington also gave witness to newly freed blacks’ eagerness to become educated citizens. “Few people who were not right in the midst of the scenes,” Washington said, “can form any exact idea of the intense desire which the people of my race showed for education. It was a whole race trying to go to school. Few were too young, and none too old, to make the attempt to learn.”<sup>48</sup> In the face of white opposition and hostility to black academic progress, the criminalization of black education, and the barring of blacks from institutions of higher learning, it is understandable that the black church, which has proven to be the most enduring institution in the black community, would provide intellectual leadership to the black community.

Scholars C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya noted, “No other area of black life received a higher priority from black churches than education. Despite the fact that teaching a slave to read and write was illegal during slavery, one of the most persistent desires of slaves was to be educated. . . . Literacy was the key to the scriptures.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in South*, 25.

<sup>47</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in South*, 25.

<sup>48</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in South*, 25.

<sup>49</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church and the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 25.

Professor of religious studies and Africana at the University of Pennsylvania, Anthea Butler states, “In the Reconstruction period, acquiring a Bible was one of the first things people would do in a home because it showed that you were being settled, that you have a place to live, you had a little bit of money, and then that you could study that Bible. You would know scriptures just as well as your pastor did.”<sup>50</sup>

**The necessity of black church involvement.** Appropriately, the black church was instrumental in the birthing and nurturing of the educational pursuits of African Americans. The resistance to African American academic growth, first seen in slavery, placed blacks in a situation in which they had to “do their own thing” in the realm of higher education since, even after being emancipated, their educational movements were often restricted and resisted. Even DuBois noted in 1935, that “at Harvard, Yale, and Columbia, Negroes are admitted but not welcomed; while at other institutions, like Princeton, they cannot even enroll.”<sup>51</sup>

The need for African Americans to grow and develop without the stifling influences of white bigotry and hypocrisy was ever-present and was not restricted to academics, this need was also felt in the black church, and the fulfillment of the need for black autonomy was sought amongst black members of the body of Christ in ways that mirrored the pursuit of black education. Professor and former chairman of Harvard’s African American studies department, Henry Louis Gates, says that the gospel, the good news pertaining to Jesus Christ, resonated with African American slaves because they had heard of his sacrificial suffering, his death, and his rising again after some had lost

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<sup>50</sup> Anthea Butler, quoted in *The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song*, by Henry L. Gates (New York: Penguin, 2021), 148–49.

<sup>51</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, “Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?,” *Journal of Negro Education* 4, no. 3 (July 1935): 329.

hope.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, as Jonathon Walton, the president of Princeton Theological Seminary, contends, “There is something liberating about the message of the cross particularly to those who are unjustly persecuted, those who are forced to suffer at the hands of an evil empire, those who are forced to deal with nails and whips of an old rugged cross, just like our enslaved who are feeling very acutely the suffering of society can identify with that Jesus.”<sup>53</sup> However, even though the gospel of Christ took hold of the minds of slaves across plantations, so did white resistance. One show of white resistance was South Carolina’s Negro Act in 1740, which “made it illegal to teach enslaved people to read.”<sup>54</sup> The act severely limited the ability of slaves to assemble, making even undercover church gatherings difficult.<sup>55</sup>

**The Invisible Institution.** During slavery, Barbara Savage states that black slaves were “in some cases, expected to attend the same churches that whites were controlling and to listen to sermons that were designed to continue to deny the humanity of black people and certainly to argue for the continued enslavement of black people.”<sup>56</sup> The preaching of this perverted gospel was a thinly veiled effort to provide divine authority and justification for human bondage and to visit brutality upon the disobedient. However, black slaves, in a pattern that was like that which they employed in pursuit of education, developed ways to function as the church, outside of the white boundaries of false doctrine. The church became known as “The Invisible Institution.”<sup>57</sup> Lawrence

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<sup>52</sup> Gates, *The Black Church*, 57.

<sup>53</sup> Gates, *The Black Church*, 56.

<sup>54</sup> Gates, *The Black Church*, 56.

<sup>55</sup> Gates, *The Black Church*, 57.

<sup>56</sup> Gates, *The Black Church*, 58.

<sup>57</sup> Gates, *The Black Church*, 58.



Williams defines the invisible institution as “the black folk church of the plantation in which the preacher, who was ‘called’ to his office and through his personal qualities, achieved a position of dominance. This ‘call’ was supposed to come through some religious experience that indicated God had chosen him as a spiritual leader.”<sup>58</sup> The leadership authority granted a slave preacher was bolstered when he demonstrated more than a mere passing knowledge of the Bible, but could read and decipher the Word himself, and teach others also. According to black historian E. Franklin Frazier, no matter how imperfect, knowledge of Scripture was of utmost importance if a slave preacher was to be thoroughly respected, because the ability to read and to understand the Scriptures and to arrange thoughts rooted in the Scriptures so that these could be clearly taught, put the slave on a social plane with his master.<sup>59</sup> Thus, within the plantation church, the invisible institution, there existed a connection between spiritual and educational edification.

Within the invisible institution, slaves developed secretive ways to worship God, in a fashion similar to that which was employed to become literate, and comparable to the surreptitious ways to worship which are spoken of in the Bible: “They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth” (Heb 11:37–40).<sup>60</sup>

History professor Larry Murphy says that the invisible institution could meet “in makeshift structures with branches and brushes. It could be down by the riverside.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> John Hardin, *Fifty Years of Segregation, Black Higher Education in Kentucky, 1904–1954* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1997), 11.

<sup>59</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken, 1974), 17.

<sup>60</sup> Unless otherwise noted all Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version.

<sup>61</sup> Gates, *The Black Church*, 58.

The crude nature of some of these meeting places would undoubtedly make it difficult for worshippers to be found out at a time when any black assembly required that a white man be present to “see to it that there are no things being told or taught or being instigated.”<sup>62</sup> Savage further explains that within the clandestine, invisible institution, “Black people are able to be among themselves and with themselves and to invent and create a spiritual world that would be sustaining to them, though it needed to be kept secret.”<sup>63</sup> Just as black slaves had stealthily formed ways to educate themselves, and created for themselves secret schools, they also developed undercover ways of worship as the body of Christ in order to learn of him.

Black self-determination in the pursuit of education was able to deepen its roots and flourish within the black church because of the secretive nature the black church meeting places offered. Nell Irvin Painter notes “spaces where African Americans could confer and worship as they pleased, free of white surveillance.”<sup>64</sup> Painter continues,

As black people’s largest public meeting places, churches also frequently housed schools and voluntary associations. Meeting in church, women and children could participate in political discussion, influencing politics without being able to vote. Along with schools, southern black churches became a symbol of emancipation, and the political empowerment of Reconstruction, where education, politics, and social life all converged.<sup>65</sup>

As Minister Al Sharpton stated, “The Black church was our incubator because it was the thing we were totally in charge of. We didn’t have any external forces that had to give us permission. Whatever we wanted to do, it was up to us. It was ours.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Gates, *The Black Church*, 58.

<sup>63</sup> Gates, *The Black Church*, 57.

<sup>64</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, *Creating Black Americans, African American History and Its Meanings, 1619 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University, 2007), 147.

<sup>65</sup> Painter, *Creating Black Americans*, 147.

<sup>66</sup> Gates, *The Black Church*, 145.

## **The Important Connection between the Schoolhouse and the Church House**

The black church was suitable ground for black education because it allowed blacks who were familiar with the plight of their fellow African Americans, to lead empathetically, a characteristic of black academic leadership that persists. The black church became a strong network of schoolhouses, replacing the pit schools of the recent past.<sup>67</sup> With the assistance of benevolent aid, people dispatched from the American Mission Society, the Freedmen's Bureau, an organization ordained by Congress to provide aid to newly freed blacks assisting them in their transition from slavery to freedom, and black churches, schools for newly freed slaves were planted.<sup>68</sup>

In 1868, for example, the African Methodist Episcopal Church sponsored Sabbath schools that enrolled approximately 40,000 students.<sup>69</sup> Freedman's Bureau superintendent T. K. Noble could not ignore the fact that in Kentucky in 1867, houses of worship owned by blacks were "almost the only available schoolhouses in the state."<sup>70</sup> In its efforts to educate people of a darker hue, the nineteenth-century American black church, through its Sabbath schools, and endeavors to establish houses of higher learning for blacks, had demonstrated a self-determination that may never have been accessed in the absence of slavery. Indeed, DuBois observed, "The very feeling of inferiority which slavery forced upon them fathered an intense desire to rise out of their condition by means of education."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Painter, *Creating Black Americans*, 146.

<sup>68</sup> Painter, *Creating Black Americans*, 146.

<sup>69</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in South*, 13.

<sup>70</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in South*, 13.

<sup>71</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 638.

“The Negro churches,” DuBois said, “were the birthplaces of Negro schools and of all agencies which seek to promote the intelligence of the masses.”<sup>72</sup> The black church was pivotal in the shaping of black thought and an inspiration for black self-determination.

Roland Mitchell highlights the relationship between the black church and black education. Mitchell states,

Examples of the institutions founded by African American denominations included Allen University established in South Carolina in 1870 by the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), Lane College founded in Tennessee in 1882 by the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (CME) and Livingstone College established in North Carolina by the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ) in 1879. . . . Similar to their predecessors, the Sabbath schools, history often overlooked these schools founded by African American religious denominations emphasizing schools such as Hampton and Tuskegee started by Whites for the education of Blacks. No doubt the resources made available by the General Education Board, the Peabody Foundation, or even federal sources like the Freedmen’s Bureau were greatly needed but it should not be lost that Blacks made significant sacrifices for establishing Black education. Lacking individual wealth and political power immediately after emancipation, the one African American institution endowed with the ability to pool the needed social, economic, and political capital to support schooling for Blacks by Blacks was the African American church.<sup>73</sup>

Mitchell affirms that other examples of the vibrant association between the Black church and educational consequences are made evident in the black church’s establishment of historically Black colleges. These historically black institutions sustained liberal arts programs highlighting teacher preparation and the training of preachers for the purpose of intellectually and spiritually advancing a race of people who had been enslaved for centuries.<sup>74</sup>

The historical contributions of the early American black church were necessary for the endurance of a race of people who had been enslaved, marginalized, and

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<sup>72</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church and African American Experience*, 250.

<sup>73</sup> Mitchell, “The African American Church,” 203.

<sup>74</sup> Mitchell, “The African American Church,” 203.

eventually Jim Crowed in a land that was founded on the promise of freedom and the pursuit of happiness. The black church was instrumental in organizing people of color and in uniting with non-blacks to edify a people spiritually and intellectually.

At the close of the Civil War, the Sabbath schools which began to appear throughout the South were among the earliest, foundational, institutions of learning produced by the black church. The Sabbath schools were established and sustained almost exclusively by formerly enslaved blacks, and they functioned primarily at night and on weekends, providing literacy instruction to African Americans.<sup>75</sup> Sabbath schools became both places of academic learning for blacks as well as places of worship.

This schoolhouse/church house construction lasted throughout the late 1800s, and resulted in the birth of several historically black institutions of higher learning. In 1867, for example, the American Baptist Home Mission Society sought to further “preach the gospel, and to establish churches and support ministry among the unchurched and destitute” by founding the Augusta Theological Institute in Augusta, Georgia. The Augusta Theological Institute opened in the basement of Springfield Baptist Church, which is considered the oldest independent African American church in the United States. Today it is known as Morehouse College of Atlanta.<sup>76</sup>

In their book *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, Lincoln and Mamiya noted that the impact of Morehouse College and its church roots was not only important to the preservation of African American Christian thought and the promotion of black intellectual fervor, but Morehouse was also vital to the preservation and growth of black culture and socio-cultural awareness. Although it became a secular university in the twentieth century, “Morehouse College still produced outstanding

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<sup>75</sup> Lomotey, *Encyclopedia of African American Education*, 584.

<sup>76</sup> Greg Wiggan, *Last of the Black Titans: The Role of Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the 21st Century* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015), 15.

religious leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who profoundly affected the directions of Black Church history.”<sup>77</sup> They continue, “Where the black cultural heritage was vibrant and alive, so was the black religious tradition. Much of black culture was forged in the heart of black religion and the Black Church. A demise of the black religious tradition would have profound implications for the preservation of black culture.”<sup>78</sup>

Additionally, Spelman College, an all-female institution, was initially founded as Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia, by two white women, Sophia B. Packard and Harriet E. Giles, who found welcome space in the basement of the black Friendship Baptist Church. Tuskegee Institute found its beginnings as a school housed in the basement of Butler Chapel AME Zion Church in Tuskegee, Alabama. Tuskegee eventually became a Baptist affiliated school under Booker T. Washington’s guidance.<sup>79</sup>

Also, the historically black Morris Brown College, a school that derived its name from the second AME bishop, was established to educate black preachers for AME service. Shaw University, another product of the American Baptist Home Mission Society, is an historically black institution founded in 1865, to provide a theological education to freed Blacks. Katharine Drexel, seeking to provide a Catholic postsecondary education for African Americans, decided to use her inheritance to open a high school for black students shortly after the turn of the century. Drexel and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, also established Xavier University of New Orleans, in 1925. Xavier remains the nation’s only historically black Catholic university.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church and African American Experience*, 10.

<sup>78</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church and African American Experience*, 10.

<sup>79</sup> B. Denise Hawkins, “Echoes of Faith: Church Roots Run Deep Among HBCUs,” *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, July 21, 2012, <https://www.diverseeducation.com/demographics/african-american/article/15091579/echoes-of-faith-church-roots-run-deep-among-hbcus>, 1.

<sup>80</sup> Hawkins, “Echoes of Faith,” 1.

Simmons College of Kentucky, originally named Kentucky Normal and Theological Institute, is currently the oldest historically black college in Kentucky. Simmons College is rooted in an 1865 movement initiated by the Kentucky State Convention of Colored Baptist Churches that culminated in the founding of the Institute in 1879.<sup>81</sup> The school was referred to as an “institution that connects with our churches, is a fit place to send our children, and one that our pastors will give their hearty support.”<sup>82</sup>

The results of the efforts to both plant and foster the growth of black students in black institutions established by black churches is well-articulated by Lincoln and Mamiya who said, “All these black schools stressed the importance of religion and moral education for the uplift of the race . . . . The molding of young minds in the crucible of education would become determinative of the future options and economic opportunities for African Americans.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Hawkins, “Echoes of Faith,” 1.

<sup>82</sup> Erin Wiggins Gilliam, “‘A Beacon of Hope’: The African American Baptist Church and the Origins of Black Higher Learning Institutions in Kentucky” (PhD diss., University of Kentucky, 2018), 116.

<sup>83</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church in African American Experience*, 252.

## CHAPTER 3

### BLACK ACADEMIC STRIVINGS IN THE COMMONWEALTH OF KENTUCKY

Black academic strivings in Kentucky mirrored the academic strivings of blacks throughout the United States. There was resistance to the notion of educating blacks both during slavery and after the abolition of slavery. For instance, while still a slave, Henry Morehead attended school in Louisville against the will of his master. Morehead's master believed that education would lead to "rascality," or corrupt behavior. When Morehead continued to attend classes, his master called on the police to disrupt the classes and bring the school to an end, which halted Morehead's education. Just as it had in other parts of the nation, the blatant racism made evident by resistance to black intellectual progress, worked to end the formal education of a black person with a thirst for knowledge. However, despite such resistance, African Americans in Kentucky, as in other parts of the United States, called upon their self-determination and continued to pursue education.

#### **Resistance at Berea College**

Though academic spaces in Kentucky were largely segregated in the mid- to late-1800s and blacks had been the primary educational leaders of African Americans in the Sabbath schools and even within their early institutions of higher learning, a college in Kentucky sought to educate black and white students together. Berea College of Kentucky was founded in 1855 by a group of white men who were anti-slavery and who aimed to educate both black and white students on the same campus.

One of Berea's leading founders was John G. Fee, who became an abolitionist while a student at Lane Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio. Fee was the son of a slaveholding



father who eventually, because of his son's abolitionist activities and rhetoric, disowned him and disinherited him.<sup>1</sup> Fee became the primary founder of a school in the village of Berea, Kentucky. The school sat on land granted to Fee by Cassius Marcellus Clay, a Madison County Kentucky native and son of a wealthy slaveowner. Clay, however, became a disciple of famous abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison and developed antislavery sentiments.<sup>2</sup>

At the end of the Civil War, in 1866, Berea College was revived after putting their academic operations on pause due to the residual, racial effects of John Brown's 1859, raid on the weapons depot at Harpers Ferry, Virginia.<sup>3</sup> John A. R. Rogers, of Oberlin College in Ohio, came to Berea to help Fee transform the college into the first fully integrated school in the South. In 1866, when just three of the black students recruited by Fee walked onto the campus of Berea College, half of the white student body walked out. However, since there were no other schools in the area, many of them were compelled to return under the clear assertion from both Rogers and Fee that they would have to be educated with black Americans or they would receive no schooling at all at Berea College.<sup>4</sup> Berea's mixed student population consisted of ninety-six black students and ninety-one white students in 1866.<sup>5</sup>

White supremacists in Kentucky grew more and more resistant to the idea of equal rights of former slaves and of blacks in general. For example, when Willard W. Wheeler left Lexington after recruiting black students to attend Berea, a mob waylaid

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<sup>1</sup> Bobby Lovett, *America's Historically Black Colleges and Universities* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2015), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Lovett, *America's Historically Black Colleges*, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Lovett, *America's Historically Black Colleges*, 10.

<sup>4</sup> Lovett, *America's Historically Black Colleges*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Lovett, *America's Historically Black Colleges*, 10.

him.<sup>6</sup> Even though Berea's founders anticipated that the school would maintain an equal proportion of black and white students, by 1877, the growth of the black student population at Berea College outpaced white student population growth, perhaps because of the black students' hunger and thirst for the higher education that had been, and was still being denied to them in large pockets of America. Some white students withdrew from Berea, complaining that there were too many blacks.<sup>7</sup> Even amidst the live evidence of black self-determination resulting in black intellectual and social progress, white students at Berea College expressed that they saw blacks as inferior, and they voiced a desire to be given housing in which they would not be forced to room with blacks.<sup>8</sup>

To avoid discouraging whites from enrolling at Berea, white students who were new to the school in the late 1800s were told, "White and colored students never room together and seldom board at the same places. It is no more for white and colored to meet in the same recitation room than it is for them to work together in the same field or in the same house."<sup>9</sup> The hope that blacks and whites could be educated together on the same campus deteriorated under the long, steady pressure of racist opposition. Gradually, African Americans suffered segregation in all aspects of campus and social life.<sup>10</sup> Eventually, because of Kentucky's "Day Law," a law secured by a Kentucky state legislator that was applied to all of Kentucky's colleges by 1904, blacks and whites could not attend the same colleges. The Day Law not only barred integrated learning

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<sup>6</sup> Lovett, *America's Historically Black Colleges*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Lovett, *America's Historically Black Colleges*, 10.

<sup>8</sup> Lovett, *America's Historically Black Colleges*, 10.

<sup>9</sup> James M. McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy from Reconstruction to the NAACP* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 249.

<sup>10</sup> Lovett, *America's Historically Black Colleges*, 10.

throughout Kentucky, it also came with the promise of a thousand-dollar fine for any school that failed to segregate its students.<sup>11</sup> By 1909, black students who had been matriculating at Berea College were forced to leave the school that had been founded on the belief of the Pauline statement that God “hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth.”<sup>12</sup> The trustees of Berea helped to establish the Lincoln Institute, a historically black school of higher learning near Louisville, to serve their displaced students of color.

The ill-informed belief in black inferiority and the need to accommodate whites, along with the racial segregation and the feeling that the black presence is overwhelming and intrusive, and the reality that all one has acquired as a person of color in pursuit of a college degree, could be reduced, or taken away, are the realities of white resistance to the upward academic mobility of African Americans.

### **Efforts to Enrich the Collective Black Mind**

The resistance to black educational pursuits in Kentucky emphasized that if blacks were to accomplish substantive work in the academic realm, they would have to depend on themselves; they would have to be well organized and self-sufficient, characteristics that have long been nurtured by and associated with the black church, which had long been the most influential and the most important organization in the fledgling black community. Further, in the realm of education, the black church was an organization that had already initiated and bolstered black academic pursuits.

For blacks emerging from the nightmare of slavery, education was never sought after as a means of gaining mere status or as a way of simply acquiring the respect

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<sup>11</sup> Luther Adams, *Way up North in Louisville: African American Migration in the Urban South, 1930-1970* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 49.

<sup>12</sup> Lovett, *America's Historically Black Colleges*, 10.

of whites, nor was the acquisition of education seen as a way of gaining acceptance into the larger, more dominant society. Education was sought after because it provided a pathway for the personal enrichment of the black mind as well as the collective furtherance of the black race; a race of people who, though they had been a people of sorrow and associated with grief, refused to allow the blues to have the last word. Education was sought after because growth in knowledge, wisdom, and understanding enabled blacks to experience intellectual, social, and communal resurrection.

In Louisville, as in other parts of the country, black academic goals, and the mission of the black church were similar, especially in their efforts to elevate the race by sharpening, strengthening, and renewing the mind.

In 1865, one year before the establishment of Berea College and the same year the Civil War ended, the Commonwealth of Kentucky's Convention of Colored Baptist Churches began the formation of what is now Simmons College. Simmons College is the result of long, organized, strategic efforts to sustain black in higher education in Louisville.

Early on, Simmons College was a product of the mutual reinforcement of the mission of the black church and the goals of black education, which involved seeking and saving African Americans who had been spiritually, academically, and socially inhibited by racist laws and practices. The mission of the black church and African American institutes of learning also involves providing access to positive intellectual and spiritual growth opportunities to blacks that they would not have access to if these institutions did not exist. Further, the mission of the black church and black institutions of higher learning involves the intellectual and spiritual equipping of black men and women for both service and leadership in both the black community and the global community. Historically, Simmons College has had deep organizational foundations rooted in the black church. These deep Christian roots have contributed to Simmons College's strategic approach to education and has also influenced the longevity of Simmons

College, the oldest historically black college in Kentucky, a school that, from its infancy, was referred to as “an institution that connects with our churches, a fit place to send our children, and one to which our pastors will give hearty support.”<sup>13</sup>

### **The Need for Black Church Involvement in Louisville**

After the Civil War, there was a renewed interest in educating the city’s African American Youth. Private schools for Louisville’s black students existed dating back to 1847, but their progress had been curtailed by the war. There was a desire to resurrect these black private schools.<sup>14</sup> Black schools needed black teachers, or whites who were willing to teach African Americans. However, well-meaning white missionaries were drawn to other states where the black population was denser than it was in Louisville.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the black teaching force in Louisville was in short supply.<sup>16</sup> These problems necessitated the involvement of the black church, an organization that had historically shown a deep interest in the education of black folk.

The academic void created by a lack of educators, racial indifference, and by the enacting of racist policies in Louisville was filled by the Kentucky General Association of Colored Baptist, a black church organization established in 1865. The Association focused on educating black teachers and ministers, equipping them for service in the black community. Ultimately, the Association opened a school to carry out its mission in Louisville; the school would come to be known as Simmons College.

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<sup>13</sup> Erin Wiggins Gilliam, “‘A Beacon of Hope’: The African American Baptist Church and the Origins of Black Higher Learning Institutions in Kentucky” (PhD diss., University of Kentucky, 2018), 116.

<sup>14</sup> John Hardin, *Fifty Years of Segregation, Black Higher Education in Kentucky, 1904–1954* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1997), 8.

<sup>15</sup> Hardin, *Fifty Years of Segregation*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Hardin, *Fifty Years of Segregation*, 8.

**The uniqueness of Louisville's churches.** When compared to nearby Southern states, Louisville, known as the gateway to the South, may have been characterized as a city with a liberal mindset toward blacks both slave and free in the 1800s. This does not mean that racial injustice was non-existent; blacks still had to overcome deeply rooted racist beliefs and endure racial discrimination. However, Louisville had a more relaxed attitude toward race compared to its Southern neighbors, which simply means that in Louisville, racial restrictions placed on blacks were not as stringent, or not enforced with the same relentless forms of violence as in many Southern states. Indeed, Adams asserts that Louisville had been labeled one of the South's most liberal cities when it came to race relations, but "its progressive reputation was accurate only when measured by the standard set by the rest of the South."<sup>17</sup> Thus, racial resistance toward blacks would sometimes rear its ugly head. However, the relaxed attitude toward race offered a more conducive atmosphere for black and white relations which influenced black spiritual and intellectual growth. According to Lawrence H. Williams, author of *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, the liberal attitude toward race in Louisville in the 1800s made the city a "seedbed for the development of such black institutions as the church and the school, even during slavery."<sup>18</sup> On the Christian landscape, Williams notes that it was common among Baptists to allow black churches to be granted membership in white church associations in Louisville, even during slavery and just after emancipation.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Adams, *Way up North in Louisville*, 50.

<sup>18</sup> Lawrence H. Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky, 1879–1930* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1987), 17.

<sup>19</sup> Williams *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 17.

Though slavery did exist in Louisville, genuine slave traffic never developed.<sup>20</sup> Several blacks came to Kentucky with their owners and became members of the first churches “constituted” by whites. These mixed churches became the dominant pattern among Baptists until the end of slavery. Although these churches were considered mixed in the broadest sense, a more narrowed view reveals that blacks were often required to occupy segregated pews either in the gallery or in the rear of the church. This is an example of what George Wright accurately describes in *Life Behind the Veil*, his work on African Americans in Louisville. Wright observes that in the River City, there existed racism in a polite form, as opposed to the more aggressive racism displayed further South.<sup>21</sup> It is asserted that polite racism may become rather impolite and abrasive if blacks refuse to accept their “proper” place.<sup>22</sup> However, blacks were “saved, baptized, and enrolled as members of the same church as whites.”<sup>23</sup> Occasionally, the black membership outnumbered that of whites.<sup>24</sup>

The liberal attitude exhibited by slave masters toward their slaves, and the relatively lax nature of slavery within the city, coupled with the democratic nature of American Protestantism, especially of the Baptist and Methodist varieties, made Louisville ideal for the development of black schools and churches.

**The influence of Henry Adams.** During slavery, it became frequent among the Baptist circles in Louisville for black churches to gain membership into white church

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<sup>20</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 17.

<sup>21</sup> George C. Wright, *Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky 1865-1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 4.

<sup>22</sup> Adams, *Way up North in Louisville*, 50.

<sup>23</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 17.

associations.<sup>25</sup> The Louisville First Baptist Church organized a mission for blacks in 1815, which formed what became known as the African Baptist Church, which would later be called Fifth Street Baptist Church. The church initially consisted of eighteen slaves meeting separately. This group operated as an independent black congregation from 1832 to 1842. Previously, the church existed as an “invisible institution” until it was recognized by Louisville First Baptist.<sup>26</sup> By 1842, the church had grown to a 513-member group, giving it further visibility. The pastor of the church was a “mulatto” named Henry Adams, a man who had also been responsible for establishing the first black school on record in Louisville, on December 7, 1841.<sup>27</sup>

Under Adams’s leadership, the membership of the church grew to over nine hundred people and Adams was said to be, a man of “excellent reputation” who was “running a flourishing church.”<sup>28</sup> However, the Long Run Baptist Association, to which Louisville First Baptist (Walnut Street Baptist) belonged, did not allow voting privileges to be extended to Adams, despite his success and stellar reputation. Instead, he was represented by Walnut Street.<sup>29</sup>

In a speech before the association in 1843, Adams conveyed the attitudes of most black Christians when he said that membership in the association was meaningless without the right of personal representation. But the association refused to honor his request.<sup>30</sup> Thus, from that time until 1869, after the establishment of the all-black Association, Adams did not attend the Long Run Association, but sent a letter instead.

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<sup>25</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 17.

<sup>26</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 18.

<sup>27</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 19.

<sup>30</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 42.



From 1844 to 1869, in response to this discrimination, Adams protested the denial of voting privileges and sent a letter to the association each year expressing his refusal to be represented by the all-white Walnut Street (First Baptist) Church.<sup>31</sup>

At the close of the Civil War, in 1865, Adams began to lead the formulation of an establishment of a separate all-black Baptist association. Though slavery and the Civil War had just recently ended, there were well-established black men of God occupying influential positions of leadership in the church. Adams called upon such men to assist him with the organization of a black Baptist association. Elisha Winfield Green, from Bourbon County, Kentucky, was among the first to be summoned by Adams.

As a slave, Green received permission from his master, John Dobbins, to become licensed to preach in 1845.<sup>32</sup> Upon purchasing his freedom, Green grew in prominence as a preacher, and was called upon, along with several other men of mark, to Louisville, for the purpose of organizing a black Baptist association. In his autobiography, he recalls,

In 1864 I left home with the intention of going to Louisville. . . . When I got to Louisville, Brother Adams said that he had been looking for me on nearly every boat. I spent some considerable time with him and left for home. At this time, I was beginning to be prominent among the ministers of the state. In 1865 I was called to Louisville again by the Rev. H. Adams for the purpose of organizing a convention to take into consideration the propriety of fixing some plan for the education of the rising generation. When we had gotten there the body was organized into a Convention of Colored Baptist Ministers of the State of Kentucky, being also the first body of colored Baptist ministers ever assembled in the state. The Rev. Henry Adams, pastor of the Fifth-street Church, and who was the prime mover in the matter, was made President. Brothers Peter Smith, John Thomas and Tabb Smith, of Frankfort, took an active part in the proceedings of the convention. In this convention we agreed to purchase the "Hill property," at Frankfort, for the purpose of erecting thereon a college in order to educate our people and get a competent and well-educated ministry. We saw from our own ability and looking at the condition of our people just from slavery, that our effort to do this was a good one. Brother Adams, possessing a more competent education than many of us, was recognized as

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<sup>31</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Johnson, *African American Christianity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 126.

a kind of leader in the matter. When the question of educating the coming generation was proposed the convention seemed to have caught a new spirit of enthusiasm. We old brethren just out of slavery, many of us not having had the privilege to learn, thought it a grand thing to build an educational structure upon which, when we were dead, our children would look with pride and call us “blessed.” Many of those pioneers who were prime movers in the educational work of the race, and who used everything necessary to the advancement of the Baptist cause in the state, have fallen to “sleep with their fathers.”<sup>33</sup>

It is apparent that these men who formed the Association, which would eventually become known as the “State Convention of Colored Baptists in Kentucky,”<sup>34</sup> were not merely focused on establishing a black Baptist Convention in which their interests as leaders in the ministry would be taken seriously, they also were united in their focus on education, affirming the inextricable connection between the black church and black academic progress.

Like their predecessors, these black church men recognized the academic void that existed for blacks in the nineteenth century. Black opportunities for formal education were slim, black analphabetism was high, and the clandestine education received by some slaves proved to be mediocre, producing only about five percent literacy rate among black Americans by 1860.<sup>35</sup>

The State Convention of Colored Baptist’s in Kentucky determined that the black church was to take on the responsibility of educating African Americans, thus filling the academic void that existed, and helping to save the souls of black folk. They were enthusiastic about the prospect of planning for the “education of the rising generations,”<sup>36</sup> as Green stated.

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<sup>33</sup> Elisha Winfield Green, *The Life of the Reverend Elisha W. Green* (Maysville, KY: Republican, 1888), 26.

<sup>34</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 19.

<sup>35</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 23.

<sup>36</sup> Green, *Life of Reverend Elisha W. Green*, 26.

The associational model of organization, which emphasized autonomy and democracy, was a pattern of church government the State Convention of Colored Baptists learned and adopted from white Baptists during slavery. The associational model was advantageous as a means of unifying fellow Baptists in doctrine, the communication of a united evangelistic message, and the bolstering of fellowship across geographic lines.<sup>37</sup> The associational model also proved to be an effective way to pool financial resources for the establishment of an institution of higher learning which, along with the solidification of their spiritual legacy, would secure the perpetual academic growth, intellectual development, and social and personal worth of blacks in Kentucky. Further, the associational model encouraged the input of black men who had proven that they possessed a steadfast heavenly vision while being mindful of doing earthly good. Though each of the pastors who had been summoned to Louisville were proven leaders in their own rights, there is no documented resistance to the installation of Henry Adams as the president of the State Convention of Colored Baptists in Kentucky. Indeed, Green, notes that “the Rev. Henry Adams, pastor of the Fifth-Street Church, and who was the prime mover in the matter, was made President.”<sup>38</sup> In the matter of educating blacks in Kentucky, and seeing to it that a learned body of ministers could be developed, Green states, “Brother Adams, possessing a more competent education than many of us, was recognized as a kind of leader in the matter.”<sup>39</sup> An additional factor contributing to Adams being named president of State Convention of Colored Baptists, an association intent on establishing an institution of higher learning for African Americans, was Adams’s experience as an educational leader. Lawrence Williams, in his book *Black*

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<sup>37</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 38.

<sup>38</sup> Green, *Life of Reverend Elisha W. Green*, 26.

<sup>39</sup> Green, *Life of Reverend Elisha W. Green*, 26.

*Higher Education in Kentucky, The History of Simmons University*, points out that in 1841, twenty years prior to the start of the Civil War, the first black school on record in Louisville opened in the Woods Alley area located in the western part of the city.<sup>40</sup> The school was initiated and operated by Henry Adams who, by that time, had already become a prominent black Baptist minister and educator in Louisville. Adams's Fifth Street Baptist Church housed the school until blacks were admitted into Louisville's public school system in 1870.<sup>41</sup>

Obviously, Adams, with his experience as an educational administrator in Kentucky, his intellectual stature, and his reputation as a proven leader, was the viable choice for president of the State Convention of Colored Baptists in Kentucky, now known as the General Association of Baptists in Kentucky. The Convention, led by Adams, represented the largest black church group in the Commonwealth of Kentucky and served as a black Baptist venue for dialogue and for planning the establishment of an institution of higher education that would focus on making real a ministerial teacher training facility under black denominational control.<sup>42</sup>

One of the key points of discussion among the State Convention of Colored Baptists of Kentucky was the location of the school they planned to establish. By the time of their initial meeting in August 1865, land known as "The Hill Property" had been purchased in Frankfort, Kentucky, the state capitol. In 1866, a commission was coordinated to create the school, a charter was approved, and five thousand members were enrolled preceding the school's establishment.<sup>43</sup> However, even in the face of the

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<sup>40</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 23.

<sup>41</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 23.

<sup>42</sup> Hardin, *Fifty Years of Segregation*, 8.

<sup>43</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 51.

overwhelming positive response to the project, the Association, in a meeting in 1869, decided to build the new school in Louisville. The move barely passed in a vote of twenty-five to twenty-four.<sup>44</sup> Green voiced the opinions of others who voted in opposition to the move, considering it to be a mistake since property in Frankfort had already been purchased and paid for.<sup>45</sup>

Williams suggests that the move was based upon the report of the Committee on Colleges and Schools which stated that the white General Association of Baptists in Kentucky had secured a building for the “Literary and Theological culture of Colored ministry of Kentucky, to be established for the time being in Louisville, Kentucky.”<sup>46</sup> Even though the association led by Adams was a “black” association, whites had been present at association meetings beginning one year after its founding in 1865. Further, the white General Association of Baptists in Kentucky endorsed the establishment and work of the black school seeing the endeavor as a formidable factor in the promotion of black intellect. The white association stated, “We commend this school as worthy of the sympathy, progress, and material aid of the Baptists of Kentucky. With your assistance, it will become a powerful factor for good to the colored people of Kentucky; without it there will not remain in the state a single school competent to give our colored people the elements of an education.”<sup>47</sup>

Additionally, Adams, the towering black intellectual and leader of the black Association hailed from Louisville, as did one of the most powerful and influential white Baptist leaders in Kentucky, William Pratt, who assisted in organizing black district

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<sup>44</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 51.

<sup>45</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 51.

<sup>46</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 52.

<sup>47</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 52.

associations throughout the Commonwealth. The white association also offered financial assistance not only for evangelism, but also for education.<sup>48</sup> Thus, the move to Louisville may have been seen as a means for the convergence of both economic and organizational power, which would help to extend the influential reach of the school.

It was with the help of the white Kentucky Baptists that a theological school was opened in Louisville, in the fall of 1874, with eighteen students in attendance.<sup>49</sup> The school could not sustain itself financially, however, and ceased operations after just five months. The General Association of Baptists in Kentucky also provided financial assistance for the education of various black ministers at the Roger Williams Baptist Institute, which was a part of the American Baptist Home Mission Society school in Nashville, Tennessee.<sup>50</sup>

### **The First President of the Kentucky Normal and Theological Institute**

One of the students in attendance at the Roger Williams Baptist Institute was a former Union Army soldier named Elijah P. Marris. Marris was born a slave in Shelby County, Kentucky, in 1840, and was owned by Jesse Robinson in Simpsonville, Kentucky. Early in life, he says, “I took up the idea that I wanted to learn to read and write. I was convinced that there would be something for me to do in the future that I could not accomplish by remaining in ignorance.”<sup>51</sup> Marris also recalls a burning desire to extinguish his ignorance regarding ecclesiastical matters. “Instruction, teaching, was what

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<sup>48</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 52.

<sup>49</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 53.

<sup>50</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 53.

<sup>51</sup> Elijah P. Marris, *Life and History of the Reverend Elijah P. Marris* (Louisville: Bradley & Gilbert, 1885), 12.

I most needed.”<sup>52</sup> Marris engaged in living dangerously by seeking the aid of “white boys, who did all they could in teaching me. They did not know that it was dangerous for a slave to read and write. I availed myself of every opportunity, daily I carried my book in my pocket, and every chance that was offered would be learning my A, B, C’s. Soon I learned to read.”<sup>53</sup>

Sometime in the early 1850s, Marris was sent to the field to cut corn stalks with one of his young masters and was converted: “He, being a Christian, took me in hand and told me that I was a sinner, and that Jesus Christ died to save sinners, and all I had to do was believe that Jesus Christ was able to save . . . from morning until evening he talked. . . . After I had found Christ, I had to go to Old Mass and Old Miss to get permission to join the church. They consented, and then came time to be baptized.”<sup>54</sup> He recounts, “It was extremely cold, and the streams covered with ice an inch thick. I had to again ask permission to be baptized, and with tears in their eyes my request was granted. Reverend Charles Wells, who was then pastor of the Colored Baptist Church, buried about fifty souls that day in the liquid grave.”<sup>55</sup> “Old Mass,” as Marris calls him, was the slave owner Jesse Robinson, who encouraged every boy on his plantation to learn how to read the Bible, which no doubt afforded Marris the opportunity to grow in knowledge, wisdom, and spiritual understanding.<sup>56</sup>

As a soldier in the Union Army, Marris wrote letters home on behalf of his fellow-soldiers who lacked the power of literacy, he also preached barracks sermons and

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<sup>52</sup> Marris, *Life of Reverend Elijah P. Marris*, 14.

<sup>53</sup> Marris, *Life of Reverend Elijah P. Marris*, 12.

<sup>54</sup> Marris, *Life of Reverend Elijah P. Marris*, 15.

<sup>55</sup> Marris, *Life of Reverend Elijah P. Marris*, 15.

<sup>56</sup> Marris, *Life of Reverend Elijah P. Marris*, 5.

led soldiers in prayer,<sup>57</sup> practices that prepared him for his life beyond the Army. After his release from military service, Marris acquired a teaching job in Simpsonville, the town of his upbringing, in the fall of 1866. He was reluctant to take on the task of teaching because he did not feel that he possessed the competence to take on such a serious and impactful affair. But he became compelled by a conviction to, “enter the schoolroom to labor for the development of my race.”<sup>58</sup> Marris recalls,

I was a perfect curiosity to the white people of Simpsonville, simply because I was the first colored schoolteacher they had ever seen, and yet I was not stranger to them. For, just three years from the time I left Simpsonville, a slave to join the United States Army, I returned a free man and a schoolteacher. . . . They would send me sums to solve, such as  $146+12$ ;  $19+200$ , to see if I really knew anything. Then when I would work them out, they would say to my colored friends, “That Elijah is a smart n---r!”<sup>59</sup>

By the time of Marris’s departure from Simpsonville in 1867, his school had an enrollment of about 150 students. In the fall of 1867, Marris taught in Lagrange, Kentucky, after which he embarked on a lecturing tour throughout Indiana and Ohio in 1878.<sup>60</sup> Marris then received a letter from his brother, Henry Marris, in Louisville. “I was off for Louisville, and in a few hours after starting for that point I was knocking on his door. He at once made known to me his intentions. His aim at all times was to promote education. His object in this case was to start a college. . . . The school was opened on the 29th of November 1879.”<sup>61</sup>

The permanent school was planted at Seventh and Kentucky Streets under the direction of Elijah P. Marris, who was named the first president of the school, and his

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<sup>57</sup> Marris, *Life of Reverend Elijah P. Marris*, 5.

<sup>58</sup> Marris, *Life of Reverend Elijah P. Marris*, 78.

<sup>59</sup> Marris, *Life of Reverend Elijah P. Marris*, 80.

<sup>60</sup> Marris, *Life of Reverend Elijah P. Marris*, 163.

<sup>61</sup> Marris, *Life of Reverend Elijah P. Marris*, 119.



brother, Henry C. Marris. The school was originally called the Kentucky Normal and Theological Institute.

Even though they undertook the monumental task of leading an institution of higher learning, Elijah Marris and his brother Henry did not believe that they had the knowledge necessary for the flourishing of such an institution. In his autobiography, Marris states,

If ever I prayed to God for aid and assistance, I did it while I was President of that Institution. My only object was to start the school and then to give away to some man who was better fitted for the place than I. Before the opening of the next session the trustees employed Reverend William J. Simmons, of Lexington to take charge of the school. It was, indeed, a good choice. No better man could have been selected for the place. He is shrewd, energetic, and scholarly, and eminently worthy of the position.<sup>62</sup>

### **The Rise of William Simmons**

Like Elijah Marris, William Simmons had known life as a slave. Simmons was born into slavery in Charleston, South Carolina, on June 29, 1849, to two slave parents, Esther and Edward Simmons.<sup>63</sup> While he was still a child, Simmons's mother took him and his siblings, two sisters, from Charleston to Philadelphia, where they stayed with his uncle, Alexander Tardiff, a shoemaker, who had also fled to the North.<sup>64</sup>

The Simmons family quickly discovered that the North was far from being a promised land flowing with milk and honey. In the introduction to Simmons's book, *Men of Mark*, nineteenth-century pastor Henry M. Turner writes,

These were days of hardships and anxieties so keen for the little family that even now the survivors speak of them in hushed tones and with misty eyes. They were harassed by slave traders who seemed determined to burrow them out of their hiding place. At this time disease laid his hand upon them. Huddled together in the garret

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<sup>62</sup> Marris, *Life of Reverend Elijah P. Marris*, 127.

<sup>63</sup> William J. Simmons, *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive, and Rising* (Cleveland, OH: Rewell, 1887), 40.

<sup>64</sup> Simmons, *Men of Mark*, 40.

of the three-story brick house where they lived, stricken with the small-pox, almost destitute of food, and fearing to call in medical attendance lest by attracting attention they would be carried back into slavery; while death stared them in the face, fugitive slave hunters rapped at the door of the front room which the uncle used as a workshop. These beasts in human flesh, after many inquiries and cross-questionings were so misled by the shrewd uncle that they went away.<sup>65</sup>

Simmons witnessed first-hand that freedom is not something that one fights to acquire and then, once it is achieved, may be followed by a period of rest. Rather, freedom is something that must continually be maintained and striven for. Perpetual freedom is largely the result of self-determination. The results of Simmons's experience would later fuel him as he worked in the educational and spiritual vineyards of Kentucky.

After finding it difficult to earn a living, Simmons's uncle went out to sea. Upon his departure, Simmons witnessed his mother commit to great toil, laboring to take care of herself and her three children. Shortly after Simmons's uncle returned from his tenure at sea, the slave traders also returned, and the family had to be smuggled away to Philadelphia.<sup>66</sup> The family then moved on to Bordentown, New Jersey, where Simmons apprenticed to Dr. Leo H. DeLange, a white dentist from 1862 to 1864.<sup>67</sup> According to Turner, "William had learned so thoroughly all there was to be learned in the profession, that when the doctor was absent, he was able to do a large part of the work. Though often rebuffed by white patients, he operated on some of the best families in the city."<sup>68</sup>

In September 1864, Simmons enlisted in the 41st United States Colored Infantry, serving the Union Army in the Civil War. His army life was not uneventful; he took part in battles around Petersburg, Hatches Run, Appomattox Court House, and was

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<sup>65</sup> Henry M. Turner, introduction to *Men of Mark*, 40.

<sup>66</sup> Simmons, *Men of Mark*, 41.

<sup>67</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 68.

<sup>68</sup> Simmons, *Men of Mark*, 41.

present at the surrender of Robert E. Lee.<sup>69</sup> He was honorably discharged September 13, 1865.

Upon returning to New Jersey, Simmons became the only black member of a white Baptist church, pastored by Rev. J. W. Custis. Through this congregation's connections with the New Jersey State Educational Society, Simmons obtained financing for his education at Madison (now Colgate) University in New York, obtaining a degree in 1868.<sup>70</sup> Simmons then proceeded to the historically black, Howard University in Washington DC, where he obtained another degree in 1873.

Simmons eventually gained notoriety as a “young and scholarly minister of the First (African) Baptist Church” in Lexington, Kentucky, where he had become pastor in 1879.<sup>71</sup> Regarding his speaking ability, Turner wrote, “As an orator Dr. Simmons is pleasing to his audience. A quick thinker and possessing a rich and ready flow of choice language, a figure that can be seen, and a voice that can be heard at a distance. At times, in the heat of debate, the whole grandeur of his soul is transfused into his countenance; and his hearers are electrified as only true eloquence can electrify.”<sup>72</sup> Because of his academic achievements, his leadership ability, his stellar speaking ability, and his ability to engage with whites professionally, Simmons would have qualified as a member of the “talented tenth,” a term popularized by W. E. B. DuBois and applied to the upper tenth of the black race's “exceptional men.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Simmons, *Men of Mark*, 41.

<sup>70</sup> Simmons, *Men of Mark*, 41.

<sup>71</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 76.

<sup>72</sup> Simmons, *Men of Mark*, 57.

<sup>73</sup> Henry L. Gates, *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow* (New York: Penguin, 2019), 191.

Elijah Marris called upon Simmons to give the final address to the students as part of the closing ceremonies at the end of the first academic year of the Kentucky Normal and Theological Institute. Simmons's address, entitled "Iconoclasm," first rendered an articulation of the history of some of America's glorious universities. He then expressed that what these splendid universities have achieved is possible for the Kentucky Normal and Theological Institute to achieve, even though they were, "born in weakness and poverty."<sup>74</sup> It is as if he were recalling his younger days as a slave, though born into weakness and poverty, through the fortitude of his mother, and later, through his own fortitude, he achieved a life and developed an intellect, that may have been deemed impossible. Simmons knew that limits dissolve before the one who has the self-determination to thoroughly engage in the life of the mind.

His address proved to be both interesting and arresting. A writer for the *American Baptist Journal*, who witnessed Simmons's closing address, wrote,

The gem of the entertainment was reserved until the last, and that was the able and masterly address of Rev. Wm. J. Simmons, of Lexington, who, after giving some wholesome advice to the students, gave the history of many of the great universities of the day, assuming that what was possible with them is possible with our school, though born in weakness and poverty. He made a most earnest plea for an educated ministry, arguing that this was only a nucleus around which would cluster achievements that many would be glad to claim in the immediate future. His remarks, and, indeed, the sentiments of all the papers, were received with genuine pleasure by the friends of the institution who were present.<sup>75</sup>

Simmons's plea for an educated ministry revealed his understanding not only of the fact that the church house on Sunday morning may be the only time when many blacks would receive finely articulated direct and practical instruction, but also he reveals an understanding of the centrality of the black church with regards to all forms of black

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<sup>74</sup> Marris, *Life of Reverend Elijah P. Marris*, 127.

<sup>75</sup> Marris, *Life of Reverend Elijah P. Marris*, 127.

achievement, calling it a type of “nucleus around which would cluster achievements that many would be glad to claim in the immediate future.”<sup>76</sup>

It was Simmons’s dynamic and well-polished speech that first attracted the attention of the trustees at the Normal and Theological Institution.<sup>77</sup> Before the opening of the Institution’s second year of operation, William Simmons was appointed president of the school. As president of the Institution, Simmons was given the opportunity to walk the walk. He had spoken of the possibilities of achievement despite dire circumstances, and he was now faced with being the central administrator of a school that had just thirteen students and an empty treasury.<sup>78</sup> However, Simmons had proven himself up to the task of school transformation, having already brought a nearly defunct public school back into successful operation while still a student at Howard University.

Before rendering the impactful speech at the Institute, Simmons had already begun to blossom into the quintessential black academic leader. Turner notes, “While a student, he showed such aptness to teach in conducting a school at a place called Bunker’s Hill, rebuilding it almost from nothing, that the schoolboard promoted him to the principalship of a much larger building, with several hundred scholars. This was the Hillsdale Public School, District of Columbia. . . . As an educator, he has likely no superiors.”<sup>79</sup> Thus, long before taking the reins of the Normal and Theological Institution in Louisville, Simmons had more than just a formal education, he had practical experience with the struggle for freedom as a fugitive slave, he learned the skill of working for and with whites, winning their trust as a dental assistant, he took part in the fight for freedom on Civil War battle fields, and engaged in the practice of each one teach

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<sup>76</sup> Marris, *Life of Reverend Elijah P. Marris*, 127.

<sup>77</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 77.

<sup>78</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 77.

<sup>79</sup> Simmons, *Men of Mark*, 44.

one, having reaped the fruits of matriculation within institutions of higher learning, he committed himself to educating his fellow black Americans. Indeed, Turner continues,

Few men of Professor Simmons ability and standing would have been willing to risk their future in an enterprise like the Normal and Theological Institution, an enterprise without capital and but a few friends. But it can be truly said of Professor Simmons, that he has proven himself master of the situation. The school had been talked of for nearly twenty years, but no one ever dreamed of its being a possibility. When he was elected president, every cloud vanished, and the sunshine of success could be seen on every side. Some of his students already rank among the foremost preachers, teachers, and orators of the State.<sup>80</sup>

Simmons built a friendly business relationship with a business executive named Eckstein Norton, president of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad (L&N), whose financial support would prove beneficial.<sup>81</sup> In Simmons's first year as president, not only was he faced with the problem of a small student body, but also, it reported that the facilities at the Institute were deemed "entirely inadequate for the accommodation of the students attending" by the school's trustees.<sup>82</sup> In response to the need for acceptable facilities, Simmons organized a singing ensemble to raise funds as they toured throughout the United States. To help pay the salaries of those teaching at the Institute, Simmons acquired an annual grant from the American Baptist Home Mission Society, and he persuaded the Kentucky Baptist Association along with John D. Rockefeller to each donate five hundred dollars to the Institute.<sup>83</sup>

Driven by his belief that what had been achieved by Americans who had gained firm intellectual, financial, social, and spiritual footing because of their matriculation in America's towering institutes of higher learning, was also possible for

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<sup>80</sup> Simmons, *Men of Mark*, 46.

<sup>81</sup> Hardin, *Fifty Years of Segregation*, 25.

<sup>82</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 82.

<sup>83</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 83.

African Americans, Simmons gradually began to transform the fledgling Kentucky Normal and Theological Institute of Louisville into a black academic power.

## CHAPTER 4

### BLACK ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP

Black academic leadership has been and remains necessarily unique because of the unique academic needs of black folk in the United States. By the close of the Civil War, Africans in America had experienced being relegated to slavery, barred from literacy, largely forbidden access to quality education, separated from participation in the larger society, and viewed as inferior. This treatment caused most African Americans to be positioned on the lower planes of American society. Thus, by Civil War's end, many citizens of African descent were far behind their white counterparts in most, if not all, aspects of American life and there existed a gaping achievement gap in education. During slavery, for example, approximately ten percent of African Americans could read and write.<sup>1</sup> By 1890, only forty percent of blacks were literate.<sup>2</sup>

Black educational leaders understood the dilemma that would later be articulated by African American educational leader and Baptist minister Benjamin E. Mays, who stated, “He who starts behind in a race must forever remain behind or run faster than the man in front.”<sup>3</sup> As black academic leaders in post-Civil War America, men of mark like Henry Adams, Elisha Green, Elijah Marris, and especially William Simmons, saw clearly that many African Americans, including those they were to lead, were “behind in the race,” and that they must take ownership of their education if they were to

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<sup>1</sup> Jarvis Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy, Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), 26.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Irons, *Jim Crow's Children* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 26.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Desegregation: An Opportunity and a Challenge” (speech presented at Shaw University, Raleigh, NC, 1965).



run faster than the man in front. It is the intimate knowledge of culture and struggle, the deep understanding of what it means to strive in a white world while clothed in black flesh, that makes black academic leaders unique and necessary. This intimate knowledge and understanding also inspires black academic leaders to take on the form of servants.

Leadership theorist Robert Greenleaf asserts, “The servant leader is servant first,” and is a person who takes care to “make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served.”<sup>4</sup> Further, Justin Irving, a leadership professor at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary argues, “The primary focus of the leader must be on serving and caring for the followers who are directly responsible for fulfilling the organization’s mission.”<sup>5</sup> Ronyelle Ricard and M. Christopher Brown, authors of *Ebony Towers in Higher Education*, assert that it is vital that leaders of historically black colleges employ the concepts articulated by Greenleaf and Irving:

Essentially, presidents of black colleges and universities use what Robert Greenleaf identifies as servant leadership. The basic principle of servant leadership is that a great leader is a servant first and a leader second. Despite the challenges and negative perceptions that plague these institutions, many of the presidents stated that they deliberately chose to lead an HBCU. These individuals simply recognized the need and desire to serve. Presidents of black colleges remain committed to serving their institutions by considering their students’ needs as their first priority . . . while black colleges give students the academic tools for individual success, they also encourage them to be active in community service to uplift the condition of all African American people. . . . Historically black colleges must strive to be to students what the black church is to black people.<sup>6</sup>

Except for Henry Adams, the black men who were instrumental in the establishment of what has become Simmons College of Kentucky were well-positioned to be servant leaders because they were black and, like many of their students, they had

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader* (Westfield, IN: Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2008), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Justin A. Irving and Mark L. Strauss, *Leadership in Christian Perspective: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Practices for Servant Leaders* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 88.

<sup>6</sup> Ronyelle Ricard and M. Christopher Brown, *Ebony Towers in Higher Education* (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2008), 108.

known the challenges of coming up from slavery. Elisha Green, Elijah Marrs, and William Simmons knew, through lived experience, the life of an African American slave. Each of them acquired their education in various ways, both clandestine and formal. Each of these men understood how to navigate the racial terrain of America in order to achieve solid social, intellectual, and spiritual footing for themselves and for their black brethren.

Black educational leadership must be rooted in black experience. It is through authentic black lived experience that one gains an intimate and genuine understanding of black culture and history, which help to reveal the plight of the present, which is rooted in the past, and which help to shape a vision for the future. This is why, in an 1896 address to the National Baptist Convention, Emmanuel Love declared that there was a need to “marshall our forces and develop our people in enterprises manned by us. Negro brain should shape, and control Negro thought.”<sup>7</sup> With these words, Love was emphasizing the need for black devotion to the cultivation of black minds at black religious and academic institutions, a practice rooted in the pit schools and Sabbath schools of the past. This devotion to the fostering of the black intellect requires that the black school leader not only to be educated, but also willing to serve black America.

Even with the shared culture and lived experiences similar to those they led, there still existed a debate regarding what African American students, many fresh from slavery, should be taught. This debate touched a broad range of black institutions of higher learning, including Simmons College of Kentucky.

### **Two Instructional Leadership Approaches**

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, black educational leadership began debating the proper course to take in the education of African Americans. There were primarily two schools of thought harbored by two black educational leaders, Booker T.

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<sup>7</sup> Emmanuel Love, quoted in Lawrence H. Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky, 1879–1930* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1987), 84.

Washington, the former slave who would become the force behind the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute which he founded in Tuskegee, Alabama, in 1881, and W. E. B. DuBois, the first black American to obtain a doctorate from Harvard University and co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In their time, Washington and DuBois were the most prominent leaders in African American education, and their debate reached national proportions.

Washington deemed that the best program of studies for black Americans, while it should involve the learning of fundamental literacy and mathematics, must place great emphasis on vocational, or industrial, education.<sup>8</sup> His approach to teaching blacks in the mid- to late-1800s was shared by Samuel Chapman Armstrong, a white veteran who led black troops during the Civil War. Armstrong founded the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia, a school that trained African American educators, among them, Booker T. Washington.<sup>9</sup> By forming a school that trained blacks to be teachers of fellow blacks and by promoting an industrial arts curriculum, Armstrong's pedagogy did not pose a great challenge to the traditional racial disparities of wealth and power in the South. White educational reformers in both the North and the South embraced Armstrong's program as the "most appropriate form of education to assist in bringing racial peace, political stability, and material prosperity to the American South."<sup>10</sup> Armstrong's approach to the education of the Negro was readily accepted by Southern whites because it limited black social and political advancement and intellectual growth and expression. Though Armstrong called himself a "friend of the Negro race,"<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 43.

<sup>9</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in South*, 43.

<sup>10</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in South*, 43.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in South*, 46.

he initiated a campaign in opposition to black political rights, he asserted that “Colored people could afford to let politics severely alone,”<sup>12</sup> and that blacks were not capable of self-governing.<sup>13</sup> The uniting of the pedagogical model formed at Hampton and the one implemented at Washington’s Tuskegee Institute was an ideology that rejected black political participation, thus eliminating the threat of black political power.

Washington’s “Hampton Idea” is grounded in the belief that the South’s agricultural economy relied on black agricultural labor. Armstrong’s philosophy appreciated the need for black contributions to the Southern economy by way of agricultural labor, but silenced the black voice in the political arena, thus stabilizing white political power, and enhancing the development of the Southern economy. According to Anderson, Armstrong’s “major task was to carry this message to black Southerners and seek to obtain their conscious or half-conscious complicity in their own victimization.”<sup>14</sup> Armstrong’s racist views played a role in the formulation of the curriculum of the historically black, Hampton Institute, which he founded and led, giving credence to the notion that black brains should control black thought.

Washington is said to be the archetype of the black educator that Armstrong envisioned.<sup>15</sup> Washington believed that industrial training would provide African Americans with the footing they needed to free themselves from industrial slavery.

In his book *The Future of the American Negro*, Washington states,

After being brought to America, the Negroes were forced to labor for about 250 years under circumstances which were calculated not to inspire them with love and respect for labor. This constitutes a part of the reason why I insist that it is necessary to emphasize the matter of industrial education as a means of giving the black man

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<sup>12</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in South*, 46.

<sup>13</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in South*, 46.

<sup>14</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in South*, 49.

<sup>15</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in South*, 42.

the foundation of a civilization upon which he will grow and prosper. When I speak of industrial education, however, I wish it always understood that I mean, as did General Armstrong, the founder of the Hampton Institute, for thorough academic and religious training to go side by side with industrial training.<sup>16</sup>

According to Washington, “Education in theoretical and practical agriculture . . . should have occupied the first place in our system.”<sup>17</sup> Washington asserted that the job of black colleges and universities was to focus their curriculum on vocational training so that graduates would be prepared to fill positions in the manual labor market,<sup>18</sup> especially in the South, where blacks were urged by Washington remain and to involve themselves in agricultural labor.<sup>19</sup> It is obvious that Washington was heavily influenced by Armstrong, who apparently sought to keep blacks in what he believed to be their proper place within the American South, a place that would not disrupt white political strength while bolstering the Southern economy.

On September 18, 1895, Washington declared his position from the stage of the Cotton States International Exposition in Atlanta, where he gave his popular “Atlanta Compromise” speech; he stated, “In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress . . . no race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. . . . It is at the bottom of life we must begin and not at the top.”<sup>20</sup> Washington sought to compromise with the doctrine of a separate society in which blacks accepted their positions as people who must gradually rise from the lower stratum of society by way of manual labor. Henry Louis Gates Jr., former head of African American studies at

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13. <sup>16</sup> Booker T. Washington, *The Future of the American Negro* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1900),

<sup>17</sup> Washington, *Future of the American Negro*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> Ricard and Brown, *Ebony Towers*, 10

<sup>19</sup> Washington, *Future of the American Negro*, 19.

<sup>20</sup> Gates, *Stony the Road*, 192.

Harvard, states that Washington “essentially accepted Jim Crow or de jure segregation in social and political matters. . . . Washington passionately advocated for a practical industrial education over the impractical liberal arts.”<sup>21</sup> Washington’s words received thunderous applause and gained him wide acceptance among whites. The point of view that Washington adopted from the racist mind of Armstrong, again reveals that black minds must control black thought.

DuBois referred to Washington’s pedagogical views as “accommodationist,”<sup>22</sup> because Washington’s emphasis on industrial education and black acceptance of their place in the Southern economy caused little disturbance to white political, social, and financial interests. DuBois asserted that Washington’s philosophy was one of survival through submission, and thus, crippling to black progress. In his essay, “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others,” DuBois says, “Mr. Washington withdraws many of the high demands of Negroes as men and American citizens . . . manly self-respect is worth more than lands and houses, and a people who voluntarily surrender such respect, or cease striving for it, are not worth civilizing.”<sup>23</sup> DuBois argues that Washington, like his mentor, Armstrong, urges black submission to whites by encouraging blacks to give up political power, by subduing an insistence on civil rights, and by discouraging the liberal arts education of younger generations of African Americans.<sup>24</sup> These sacrifices, according to DuBois, result in black disfranchisement, the distinct civil inferiority of blacks, and the withdrawal of financial aid to black institutions of higher learning.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Gates, *Stony the Road*, 192.

<sup>22</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, *Education and Empowerment: The Essential Writings of W. E. B. DuBois* (East Brunswick, NJ: Hansen, 2014), 12.

<sup>23</sup> DuBois, *Education and Empowerment*, 51.

<sup>24</sup> DuBois, *Education and Empowerment*, 51.

<sup>25</sup> DuBois, *Education and Empowerment*, 51.

DuBois points out the impossibility of black progress in the absence of an empowering pedagogy that equips black folk with a culturally relevant, civically emboldening, leader producing, liberal education.

DuBois's educational perspective was aligned with the leading philanthropic organizations that cemented paths for black colleges to be established and maintained, such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the American Missionary Society, and the American Baptist Home Mission Society.<sup>26</sup> These organizations valued what DuBois called "Higher Learning," that is, they valued higher, or advanced, classical liberal arts training that would educate exceptional black students "to prepare a college-bred black leadership to uplift the black masses from the legacy of slavery."<sup>27</sup> The fulfillment of this mission required the establishment of black colleges and universities that were able to sustain liberal arts education.

The industrial arts form of education espoused by Washington was not the central focus of philanthropic missionary organizations. Anderson observes,

Consistent with their view of the need for a well-trained black leadership, the missionaries made liberal arts rather than industrial training the chief aim of their curriculum. The courses in the black colleges controlled by missionaries were like those in a majority of contemporary liberal arts schools. Freshmen studied Latin, Greek, and mathematics. Sophomores were taught Greek, Latin, French, mathematics, and natural science. Juniors studied the same courses with additional work in German, natural philosophy, history, English, and astronomy. Mental and moral science and political science were added for the seniors.<sup>28</sup>

Only a "smattering" of industrial courses was offered, but "Industrial training had no major role in the philosophy and program of training a leadership class to guide the ex-slaves in their social, economic, and political development."<sup>29</sup> The liberal arts

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<sup>26</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in South*, 240.

<sup>27</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in South*, 241.

<sup>28</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in South*, 246.

<sup>29</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in South*, 241.

teaching and leadership training philosophy of black education was described by American Baptist Home Mission Society philanthropist and minister Henry Lyman Morehouse as “the talented tenth.”<sup>30</sup> Morehouse, whose funding helped to establish Morehouse College in Atlanta, stated, “In all ages, the mighty impulses that have propelled a people onward in their progressive career, have proceeded from a few gifted souls.”<sup>31</sup> These few gifted souls were intellectually disciplined through the process of classical education and cultural refinement, that equipped them with political awareness, moral uprightness, and racial value.

The concept of the talented tenth was championed and popularized by DuBois:

The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the best of this race that they may guide the mass away from the contamination and death of the worst, in their own and other races. Now the training of men is a difficult and intricate task. Its technique is a matter for educational experts, but its object is for the vision of seers. If we make money the object of man-training, we shall develop money-makers but not necessarily; if we make technical skill the object of education, we may possess artisans but not, in nature, men. Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of the schools—intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it—this is the curriculum of that Higher Education which must underlie true life. On this foundation we may build bread winning, skill of hand and quickness of brain, with never a fear lest the child and man mistake the means of living for the object of life.<sup>32</sup>

DuBois articulates that the purpose of education for black folk is to cultivate growth, or to foster manliness. This cultivation of wise maturity must fully equip blacks with the mental strength necessary to lead because, for DuBois, the salvation of the black race was largely dependent on the most educated and intelligent among them.

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<sup>30</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in South*, 241.

<sup>31</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in South*, 246.

<sup>32</sup> DuBois, *Education and Empowerment*, 77.



## **The Instructional Perspective of William Simmons**

It is apparent that Simmons originally organized the Institute he led in Louisville with leanings toward the philosophy of DuBois; however, financial challenges would eventually influence a change of direction for the school. Initially, Simmons began to develop departments and model the curriculum of the Institute after his alma mater and historically black college, Howard University,<sup>33</sup> which was made up of nine departments of study, to include departments such as theology, industrial, college (liberal arts), law, music, and medicine. At the close of Simmons's first year as president, the Institute housed a preparatory department, which focused on basic, foundational education, a high school academy, and a two-year teacher training program. Simmons ended his first term at the school with one hundred and thirteen students.<sup>34</sup> At the time there was no state-supported institution of higher learning for blacks and, other than Berea College, there was no school in the state for training black teachers.<sup>35</sup>

Under the leadership of William Simmons, college courses were added to the school's elementary and secondary education programs and, along with a push from the General Association of Colored Baptists in Kentucky, which desired the passage of a special law to allow the formation a black *state* school, the Kentucky Normal and Theological Institute became the State Colored Baptist University in 1883. The General Association of Colored Baptists, in exchange for the affixing of the word "State" to the name of the black university, agreed to allow each state senator the right to send a

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<sup>33</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 81.

<sup>34</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 78.

<sup>35</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 79.

“properly equipped student” from his district to the university, paid for by the state of Kentucky.<sup>36</sup>

**The continuous struggle for funding.** Despite the school’s new designation as a state university, and the proven skills of William Simmons as a capable educational administrator, his appeals to the Home Mission Society, a white Christian organization, for their financial assistance in 1883 fell on deaf ears. The Home Mission Society believed that the administrators of all-black academic institutions lacked financial acuity in the absence of white oversight.<sup>37</sup> The prevailing attitude the Home Mission Society, coupled with the state of Kentucky allocating only fifty cents per student compelled Simmons to conclude, “In Kentucky, the public school system does not amount to anything . . . we are starving for books.”<sup>38</sup>

Eventually, in 1886, Simmons was able to secure one thousand dollars from the John F. Slater fund, a philanthropic foundation geared toward supporting industrial education for African Americans.<sup>39</sup> The funding from Slater provided courses in shoemaking, chair-caning, and painting.<sup>40</sup> One year prior to the acceptance of the funds from the Slater foundation, the State Colored Baptist University school bulletin offered preparatory remarks stating, “Time has come for art and trades to be taught in connection with literary courses. In many cases the student is inflated with the idea that he has gained the highest point in literary culture. . . . Necessity often drives one from teaching and preaching, and when no art or trade is known the most menial and unproductive labor

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<sup>36</sup> John Hardin, *Fifty Years of Segregation, Black Higher Education in Kentucky, 1904–1954* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1997), 32.

<sup>37</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 83.

<sup>38</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 83.

<sup>39</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 84.

<sup>40</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 84.

must be undertaken.”<sup>41</sup> Previously, William Simmons asserted that black schools had either all-industrial education programs or all-liberal arts programs and schools with both types were deemed unacceptable. Simmons warned, “If the industrial craze is not watched, our literary institutions will be turned into workshops and our scholars into servants and journeymen. Keep the literary and industrial apart. . . . If we cripple the schools established by diverting them largely from their original plan, we shall have no lawyers, doctors, professors, or authors.”<sup>42</sup> However, Simmons was moved to repent of his stance on industrial education when black schools promoting the industrial arts such as the Tuskegee Institute, founded in 1881 and lead by the prominent Booker T. Washington, the Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary, now known as Spelman College in Atlanta, and Fisk, the Nashville, Tennessee, school from which DuBois obtained his bachelor’s degree, were being given large sums of money by the John F. Slater Fund.<sup>43</sup> According to the Slater Fund report, most black schools had implemented industrial arts programs by 1886.<sup>44</sup>

It is probable that the vast amounts of money being allocated by wealthy whites towards industrial arts education for African Americans in Kentucky, coupled with the constant struggle to secure funds for the State Colored Baptist University, influenced Simmons to abruptly resign his post as president of the school in 1890.<sup>45</sup> According to Erin Wiggins Gilliam, “Simmons spent the majority of his time soliciting funds and implementing plans to financially support the institution. As the primary fundraiser and chief representative of the university, Simmons was aware of the various

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<sup>41</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 84.

<sup>42</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 81.

<sup>43</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 82.

<sup>44</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 84.

<sup>45</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 85.

means of funds available for African American education, and he noticed the trend in greater giving to industrial education.”<sup>46</sup> State University acknowledged the exhaustive work Simmons devoted to the school, proclaiming that Simmons served the State University faithfully for ten years. University archives record, “[He] carries with him our thanks and gratitude for his self-sacrificing labors which have done so much in giving our institution its well-merited reputation for thorough and complete training. He has never been unwilling to give his labors, his means, and his ability to this work, and we part with him sincere regret.”<sup>47</sup>

Despite the continual battle to secure funds for the school, Simmons College educated and equipped most of the African American preachers, teachers, lawyers, and doctors in the state of Kentucky.<sup>48</sup> Williams asserts that Louisville’s middle class black community of the 1980s is rooted in Simmons College and is therefore a testimony of the success of Simmons College.<sup>49</sup>

Simmons continued in the field of black educational leadership after leaving Louisville for Bullitt County, where he was appointed president of the Eckstein Norton Institute, named for the L&N Railroad executive who had contributed financially to the Kentucky Normal and Theological Institute when Simmons was president.<sup>50</sup> The Eckstein Norton Institute was thoroughly devoted to the industrial education of blacks. Simmons’s tenure as president of the Eckstein Norton Institute was truncated by his

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<sup>46</sup> Erin Wiggins Gilliam, “‘A Beacon of Hope’: The African American Baptist Church and the Origins of Black Higher Learning Institutions in Kentucky” (PhD diss., University of Kentucky, 2018), 164.

<sup>47</sup> Minutes of the First General Association of Colored Baptists of Kentucky, 1890, Papers of Simmons University, box 2, folder 11, Archives and Special Collections, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky (hereafter cited as Minutes, Simmons University Archives).

<sup>48</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 211.

<sup>49</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 211.

<sup>50</sup> Hardin, *Fifty Years of Segregation*, 15.

sudden death of heart failure on October 30, 1890.<sup>51</sup> He was succeeded by Charles Henry Parrish, a former slave and public-school janitor, who graduated valedictorian of the inaugural graduating class at State University (Simmons College). Parrish, who was hired as a professor at State University, became Simmons's protégé and followed Simmons to the Eckstein Norton Institute.<sup>52</sup> Though the Norton Institute was run efficiently by Parrish, it was forced to merge with the Lincoln Institute in Simpsonville amid decreasing admissions and decreasing financial resources.

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<sup>51</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 85.

<sup>52</sup> Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky*, 87.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

#### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In speaking on the centrality of the black church, W. E. B. DuBois states, “The Negro churches were the birthplaces of Negro schools and of all agencies which seek to promote intelligence of the masses. . . . Night schools and kindergartens are still held in connection with churches, and all Negro celebrities, from a bishop to a poet like Dunbar, are introduced to Negro audiences from pulpits.”<sup>1</sup> The power and influence of the historically black church coupled with its emphasis on black education and the realities of resistance to or indifference toward black education, necessitated its involvement in the establishment and sustaining of African American institutions of learning. For many African Americans, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya point out, “Education was tied to their religion, a coveted doorway to the faith and its promises . . . all of the primary black denominational bodies among the Baptists, Methodists, and Pentecostals established their own colleges . . . the importance of these denominational schools showed the primacy which the black church gave to the area of education.”<sup>2</sup>

Simmons College, originally the Kentucky Normal and Theological Institute, was the brainchild of Henry Adams, an influential Baptist preacher of color who had grown sick and tired of being disrespected solely because of his race. Though Adams

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<sup>1</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 98.

<sup>2</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 251.

pastored a congregation of over nine hundred people and had established the first school of record for African Americans in Louisville, his voice, as a member of the Long Run Baptist Association to which he belonged, was muted—he was not extended the right to be a voting member of the association. After protesting his second-class status on the Long Run Association for twenty-five years and being ignored, Adams organized the State Convention of Colored Baptists in Kentucky. The primary mission of this newly formed organization was not only to hear and act upon black spiritual and moral interests, but also to develop an educated pool of ministers and teachers and to formally educate rising generations of African Americans.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Mission of Simmons College in Historical Context**

The mission of Simmons College of Kentucky was directly linked with the aims of African Americans who understood that if they were not only going to expand their knowledge, but also stabilize their citizenship footing, and secure a more hopeful future for generations to follow, then they would have to acquire higher education. Both the objectives of the initiators of Simmons College and the black community are shared within the black church, an organization that prioritized black education,<sup>4</sup> and whose involvement in promoting the education of African Americans in a country that had done much to stifle the social, political, and intellectual growth of African Americans was necessary.

This research places the establishment of Simmons College of Kentucky within a black historical context culminating with the tenure of William Simmons, who served as president of the College for ten years. The Kentucky Normal and Theological

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<sup>3</sup> Elisha Winfield Green, *The Life of the Reverend Elisha W. Green* (Maysville, KY: Republican, 1888), 26.

<sup>4</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church and the African American Experience*, 251.

Institute, now Simmons College, the product of the State Convention of Colored Baptists, led by Henry Adams, is the oldest historically black college in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. It is the namesake of William Simmons, who took over as president of the school in 1879, its second year in existence. As a former fugitive slave and a graduate of Colgate University and the historically black, Howard University. Simmons possessed a genuine understanding black intellectual and spiritual progress in America.<sup>5</sup> Simmons became a dynamic preacher and teacher who demonstrated a seriousness about the education of the Negro.

### **Filling the Academic Void**

In keeping with the mission to educate generations to come, William Simmons, having noticed that, “Many of my students were woefully ignorant of the work of our great men—even ignorant of their names,”<sup>6</sup> composed a collection of historical analyses entitled *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive, and Rising*, published in 1887.<sup>7</sup> His objective was to fill the void of knowledge about great black men and the central role education played in their lives. Of his work, Simmons says,

It is a suitable book, it is hoped, to be put into the hands of intelligent, aspiring young people everywhere, that they might see the means and manners of men’s elevation, and by this be led to undertake the task of going through high schools and colleges. If the persons herein mentioned could rise and the exalted stations which they have and do now hold, what is there to prevent any young man or woman from achieving greatness? Many, yea, nearly all of these came from the loins of slave fathers, and were the babes of women in bondage, and themselves felt the leaden hand of slavery on their own bodies . . . I wish the book to show to the world—to our oppressors and even our friends—that the Negro race is still alive, and must possess more intellectual vigor than any other section of the human family. . . .

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<sup>5</sup> Lawrence H. Williams, *Black Higher Education in Kentucky, 1879–1930* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1987), 35.

<sup>6</sup> William J. Simmons, *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive, and Rising* (Cleveland, OH: Rewell, 1887), 37.

<sup>7</sup> Bobby Lovett, *America’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2015), 39.



Another thing I would have them notice, that the spirituality of the race was not diminished in slavery.<sup>8</sup>

Simmons's statement captures the importance of black historical analysis. It is not merely a retelling of the past for the purpose of expressing the stories of a culture. Nor is black historical analysis simply the communication of a string of antique facts. As Simmons points out, black historical analysis aims to communicate inspirational truths of black self-determination in a historical context, with the hope that those who engage with such analysis will be moved to cultivate the strength to cast off doubt, to overcome injustice, and to be more than conquerors.

### **Literacy and Biblical Literacy**

Black historical analyses serve as a powerful reminder, especially to African Americans, that steadfast endurance in the face of the resistance and atrocities of the past is a characteristic that we must carry with us in the present. This is a truth that must be forcefully retained in our time, especially in the black church, an organization that has largely forgotten or abandoned its commitment to teaching and learning. Not only will education provide African Americans with a broader range of options, as it has throughout history, but it is also education that will extinguish the spiritually bankrupt proclamations that pass for black preaching in the modern black American church. The declarations being made by so-called preachers of color in black mega churches in cities such as Atlanta, Tulsa, and Dallas, are devoid of biblical literacy and thus promote biblical illiteracy among their congregants. They are the blind leading the blind—preachers who are morally and spiritually disconnected, teaching congregants who fail to engage in serious reading of the biblical text, and who fail to question questionable preachers. Both groups have fallen into the ditch of ignorance and spiritual slavery because they have lost sight of the educational mission of the church.

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<sup>8</sup> Simmons, *Men of Mark*, 6.

In their book *Black Church Studies*, the authors submit that the black church of the twenty-first century has largely been sifted of its intellectual strength:

While education is still perhaps the most powerful and most underutilized resource for the eradication of oppression and the healing of racism . . . available to the black church in the twenty-first century, there are many obstacles to valuing and prioritizing education. . . . The Civil Rights Movement took us all radically closer to a better way of life. . . . but the movement's accomplishments feel as if they are slipping away. . . . The brilliance of Martin Luther King was his ability to move effortlessly from scholarly prose and theory to inspirational sermon if rendering. King's ability to be prophet, preacher, teacher, politician, and minister came—at least in part—from his abilities to think theologically and philosophically. Perhaps King's great legacy is his insistence on critical thinking as a tool for liberation.<sup>9</sup>

Today, the black church is crippled by the prosperity gospel,<sup>10</sup> by a thirst for entertainment rather than divine guidance from the divine text, and by itching ears that long to be scratched and soothed by a perverted message. “Education,” the authors of *Black Church Studies* state, “might be the best way out of the confusion of ignorance and out of the grip of the more recent incarnation of this soul-robbing oppression.”<sup>11</sup>

Aaron E. Lavender argues, “African American churches must acknowledge the existence of a counterfeit gospel . . . the African American church must understand that an entirely different gospel exists today; one that is man-made, self-induced, and false.”<sup>12</sup> The challenge to becoming aware of a false gospel is made formidable by the lack of biblical knowledge among members of the black church. This lack of knowledge is made even more formidable by an indifference to reading, and by black preachers who, like the slave masters of the past, promote, rather than eradicate, biblical ignorance through their

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<sup>9</sup> Stacey Floy-Thomas et al., *Black Church Studies: An Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 169.

<sup>10</sup> Floy-Thomas et al., *Black Church Studies*, 163.

<sup>11</sup> Floy-Thomas et al., *Black Church Studies*, 158.

<sup>12</sup> Aaron E. Lavender, *Enduring Truth: Restoring Sound Theology and Relevance to African American Preaching* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 31.

so-called preaching. This spiritual laziness and biblical illiteracy stand in stark contrast to our slave fore-parents' attitudes toward preaching. They believed, even in the throes of slavery, that biblical knowledge was of extreme importance for one who would endeavor to preach the gospel.<sup>13</sup>

Engagement with black historical analysis empowers us to be better versions of ourselves by serving to prove the genuineness of the words of Pastor Otis Moss, who revealed that throughout our history, we have, despite our historical position in America, had power; we have always had the strength to endure. Moss reminds,

Pharaoh had a position, but Moses had the power. Herod had a position, but John had the power. The cross had a position, but Jesus had the power. Lincoln had a position, but Douglass had the power. Woodrow Wilson had the position, but Ida B. Wells had the power. George Wallace had a position, but Rosa Parks had the power. Lyndon Baines Johnson had the position, but Martin Luther King had the power. We have the power. Don't you ever forget.<sup>14</sup>

For African Americans, our historical past must motivate us to be spiritually and intellectually fruitful, to rid ourselves of intellectual complacency, and to put on the attitude of endurance, just as those self-determined ones who came before us.

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<sup>13</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken, 1974), 17.

<sup>14</sup> Henry L. Gates, *The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song* (New York: Penguin, 2021), 8.

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## ABSTRACT

### THE BLACK CHURCH AS CONTEXT FOR THE FORMATION OF BLACK INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF SIMMONS COLLEGE

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Chair: Dr. Kevin M. Jones

African Americans have long been serious about education. Even when education was denied to black Americans through law, custom, and physical violence, blacks exerted relentless self-determination in the pursuit of literacy. The black church, because of its growth in size, power, and influence, became the logical institution for assisting blacks in their educational strivings, funding, and housing schools in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Black churches also established historically black colleges. In Louisville, Kentucky, the founder of the first school for African Americans, Henry Adams, organized black church men from areas throughout the Commonwealth of Kentucky, to form the Kentucky Normal and Theological Institute, which has come to be known as Simmons College, the oldest historically black college in Kentucky.

The aim of the introductory chapter is to establish the foundation for the thesis by developing historical context, which involves the defining of black self-determination and the essentiality of the black church's involvement in the education of African Americans. Chapter 2 reinforces the historical context of the thesis by previewing literature pertinent to the history of black academic pursuits, especially in the face of resistance. Chapter 3 narrows the focus of black education, examining the formation of Simmons College of Kentucky, a college established by black church leaders within Kentucky who formed an association of African American Baptists. Chapter 4 discusses



the need for wise black academic leadership at historically black colleges such as Simmons College. Chapter 5 reflects on the preceding chapters and suggests that there is a sad divide between the intellectually wanting black church of the present and the black church's intellectual spirit of the past.

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