

In 1855 the Commonwealth of Massachusetts became the first American State to officially desegregate its public school system. That development (which the U.S. Supreme Court was to cite as a precedent for its landmark: *Brown vs. the Board of Education* decision of 1954) was principally brought about by the efforts of black community leaders who, in tandem with leading white abolitionists, had begun to attack the city's separate school establishment in the early 1840's. The desegregation effort which culminated in the abolition of separate schools in the State in 1855 has been examined by a good number of scholars. Surprisingly, the *ESTABLISHMENT* of the separate school system in the state's capital city has never been told. In the years preceding the outbreak of the American Civil War, Boston's Negro population was the largest of any city in the Bay State. This paper describes *how* and *when* the separate schools in the city were organized, and the role of blacks themselves in establishing the system of segregated education in the first instance. The account begins at the turn of the century; by the 1840's, when America was swept by its first great Age of Reform, separatism was infensible on two grounds, principally: it vitiated the propaganda efforts of those seeking to abolish slavery in America and, two, it gave whites a justification to perpetuate caste. But for a full half century Blacks in Boston were educated separately; these forgotten years are narrated in this article.

GEORGE A. LEVESQUE*

White Bureaucracy, Black Community: The Contest Over Local Control of Education In Antebellum Boston

In looking into the history of the separate Schools for colored children, your Committee has been much impressed with the fact, that these special Schools were established at the urgent and repeated requests of the colored people themselves. So long ago, at least, as 1795, or 1800 or 1812, all colored children who were disposed to do so, attended the same schools with the white children. . . . But very few were willing to avail themselves of the privilege.

Report to the Primary School Committee, June 15, 1846 . . .

REPORT TO THE PRIMARY SCHOOL COMMITTEE, JUNE 15, 1846

In 1846 a sub-committee of the Primary School Committee and three years later a special committee of the Grammar School Board — the two agencies with plenary oversight of public education in Boston — issued two long reports in response to petitions from black parents opposed to exclusive schools. In the first, Negro parents charged that “the establishment of exclusive schools” denied them equal privileges; deprived them of the “harmonizing, socializing influence . . .” of integrated education; and was an unnecessary municipal expense, “unlawful, and . . . if not in intention, in fact, insulting.” Exclusive schools, Charles Sumner told the state's highest court in 1849, were unequal,

*Department of History, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois.

a "practical inconvenience," "a violation of equality" and "in the nature of Caste."¹

In reply to these charges both repeatedly emphasized what their authors obviously believed was a significant point of rebuttal, and one too frequently overlooked, namely, "that these Schools were established at the urgent and repeated requests of the colored people themselves." "We did not originate the system," one report protested, "the system has grown up without the help of law . . .," and "the only reference to separate schools for colored children, on the municipal Records of Boston, is a mention of the fact that the colored people themselves petitioned for them, and, on being denied, petitioned again for the same privilege." The fact that Negroes came to be educated in separate schools, echoed the 1849 report, "was an indulgence to their own desires, their own preferences, — haply to their honest prejudices. . . ." That the views and feelings of blacks might have changed over time (a point of view emphasized in a dissenting minority report) the Committee (1846) could not believe; and even if an index of change could be measured, "it is by no means certain that they [Negro] parents understand their true interests."² Intellectual catatonia of this sort was an obvious vulnerability in the School Committee's argument, but there was no explaining away a central fact: the *establishment* of Boston's racially separate school system was desired by, worked for, and, in part, paid for by, Negroes themselves.

Why blacks sought to establish their own separate schools is a focus of this paper; more specifically, the purpose is to analyse the transitional stage between establishment of separate schools at the turn of the century (the forgotten years of Jim Crow education in Boston), and the effort to disestablish, which would get underway in earnest in the mid 1840's. This transitional "Middle Stage" witnessed the contest over local control of education in Boston's publicly supported separate schools, a contest waged between the city's educational bureaucracy and the black community. Ostensibly, the disenchantment of blacks and their white supporters over the establishment's air-tight control of education was fed by white indifference to specific grievances. Alone, however, the grievances, real as these were, could not have generated the crisis. Fundamentally, the confrontation should be viewed as the natural consequence of a maturing community consciousness; by the 1830's and '40's, this "sense of self," fed as it was by the maturation of numerous all-black institutions, and given direction by an exceptional leadership class, was reaching its apogee. Under these circumstances, it was all but inevitable that blacks would chafe at what they perceived as excessive and arbitrary restraints on their freedom of action where the education of their children was concerned. For their part, school

¹*Report to the Primary School Committee, June 15, 1846, on the Petition Of Sundry Colored Persons for the Abolition of the Schools For Colored Children with the City Solicitor's Opinion.* Boston City Docs. No. 23, (Boston, 1846), 2, 10. Hereafter, *Report to the Primary School Committee* (1846). *Report of a Special Committee of the Grammar School Board, . . . August 29, 1849, on the Petition of Sundry Colored Persons, praying for the Abolition of the Smith School. . . .* Boston City Docs. No. 42 (Boston, 1849), 4. Hereafter *Report of a Special Committee of the Grammar School Board* (1849). Charles Sumner, *Argument of Charles Sumner, Esq. Against the Constitutionality of Separate Colored Schools, in The Case of Sarah C. Roberts vs. The City of Boston . . . Supreme Court of Mass., Dec. 4, 1849.* (Boston, 1849), 14, 16, 23-25.

²*Report to the Primary School Committee* (1846), 15, 23-27; *Report of a Special Committee* (1849), 23. Even the City Solicitor's opinion which sustained the School Committee's legal right to maintain separate schools accorded it this authority because such power had been "exercised . . . for many years, [and] under the sanction of some of our ablest jurists . . ." *Ibid.*, 34. "[C]ustom and expediency, with a wise regard to the welfare of the colored race, have practically settled the usage," concluded the *Report of a Special Committee of the Grammar School Board* (1849), Appendix, note A., 53.

officials fiercely resisted challenges to their authority; intuitively, or perhaps consciously, Board members saw their liberal paternalism as a form of social control. But less esoteric motivations explain their intransigence at compromising the near absolute control they exercised over the city's educational system. Power, once obtained, is rarely relinquished without a struggle, and the Board in this instance was doing what elites have always done when their hegemony has been threatened from without.

The establishment of separate schools, followed by the confrontation in black and white over the direction of affairs in these same institutions — a confrontation which emerged only two decades after separate schools were begun — is instructive on several counts: not least important, an appreciation of how separate schools got started in Boston helps explain why Boston blacks would themselves become so polarized when the fight for disestablishment was being waged in earnest in the 1840's and early 1850's. On a less provincial note, the small size of the city's black population, and the openness with which the issue of local control was fought, affords an ideal case study for analysing a problem seemingly endemic to the educational enterprise, namely, the confrontation between centralization and decentralization, between bureaucracy and community. Finally, that this essay would turn out to be relevant to the issues of our time was an unexpected byproduct, not the occasion for its undertaking.

Exactly why the small black population of Boston (not quite twelve hundred strong in 1800) wished to have its own schools was never made explicit. Neither the Commonwealth nor the city had legislation requiring segregated schools, nor was likely to do so. But like other nineteenth-century Americans, and perhaps more than most of these, Negroes had drunk deep in the emerging philosophy which was exalting education over religion as the new panacea. "The nurseries of virtue and liberty," the great source of "individual happiness" — this was the free public school system. Yet, as clearly as 1787, two years before Massachusetts lawmakers enacted the first comprehensive state school law in the new nation, Negroes, complaining that they received "no benefit from the free schools," petitioned the legislature asking that they be provided with schools of their own; but the request, the first for separate schools in the Commonwealth, was denied.³

What Negroes meant in saying they received no benefit from the free schools is not clear; what seems clear, however, is that the reference implied more than simple non-attendance. Admittedly, Negro attendance at the public schools was small; but to see this as "the leading motive" for the establishment of separate schools, as the Primary School Committee did, was fatuous. The irony in a situation where Negroes first eagerly sought, and then as earnestly fought, segregated schools, has often been noted; but seen in its proper historical perspective the reasons behind the insistent requests for separate schools are readily apparent. For reasons compounded of chronic impecuniosity, prejudice toward them and, perhaps most importantly, white indifference to their educational needs, Boston blacks had come to believe that the best of the educational cornucopia could be harvested in schools of their own establishment and over which

³Oliver Warner, *Abstract of the Census of Mass., 1865 . . .* (Boston, 1867), 231, 301; *Message of Governor John Davis (January 21, 1834)* Mass Acts and Resolves, 1834; Herbert Aptheker, ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* (New York, 1951), 19-20; Stanley K. Schultz, *The Culture Factory: Boston Public Schools, 1789-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 157-60.

they could exercise a more direct control.⁴ Thus while essentially true, "as every one knew," that "the colored children in Boston possessed equal rights with others . . ." there were, if the Committee could but have appreciated them, very compelling reasons why "not more than two or three . . ." blacks were attending the public schools.

Following the state's refusal in 1787 to get involved in administering and financing a dual school system, blacks in 1798 revived their efforts, this time at the municipal level; but Boston, like the Commonwealth a decade earlier, turned a deaf ear to the request. Not only was the city ill-prepared to assume the financial burden of a dual school system, but town fathers believed the existing free schools made adequate provision for all. If black parents wished to establish a separate school among themselves, town authorities would not object; but the city would not actively cooperate in the venture.⁵

With authorization, in the form of a license from the selectmen, Boston blacks established the first separate school in Massachusetts. The African School, as it was affectedly called, was set up in the home of Primus (Prince) Hall in the heart of the black community at the corner of George and May Streets. Support for the school came "principally" from a few "benevolent white gentlemen" and some Negro contributors. This school, first kept by a white teacher named Elisha Sylvester, operated for about three months when an outbreak of yellow fever in the city dispersed it.⁶

Undeterred by this disappointment, Negroes renewed their efforts for a school of their own. In 1800 sixty-six Negro petitioners once again asked the School Committee to establish a separate school. Despite a strong recommendation from its own sub-committee which included, among others, the Reverend John T. Kirkland of Harvard, the popular minister William Emerson and young Josiah Quincy, the School Committee denied the request. However, in 1801 a number of white benefactors, including most of the members of the sub-committee who had urged the city to assist in financing the separate Negro school, revived the school. For two years these provided the entire support, including the salary for two young Harvard students who taught at the school. In 1803 the contributors, apparently convinced that a school in a private dwelling was inadequate, offered to continue their support on the condition that blacks provide a room apart for the purpose. Accordingly, a carpenter's shop in Belknap Street was acquired, furnished as a schoolroom, and here the business of black education continued for another three years, until 1806.⁷

⁴*Report to the Primary School Committee* (1846), 19; *Report of the Minority Of The Committee of the Primary School Board . . .* (1846), 16-17; *Roberts v. The City of Boston*, (1849) 5 Cushing, 199-200. "Schools for colored children," Chief Justice Shaw wrote in his decision, "were originally established at the request of colored citizens, whose children could not (my emphasis) attend the public schools, on account of the prejudice then existing against them."

⁵*Report of a Special Committee of the Grammar School Board* (1849), 18; Morse, *A Discourse, Delivered at the African Meeting-House, in Boston, July 4, 1808 . . .* (Boston, 1808), 18.

⁶*Mr. Minor's Address Delivered at The Dedication of the Smith School, March 3, 1835* (Boston, 1835) BPL. Hereafter: *Mr. Minor's Address* (1835); David Lee Child, *et al.*, "Report on African Schools, October 15, 1833" Ms. *Records of the School Committee of Boston II*, (1815-1826) Rare Book Room, BPL. Hereafter: Child, "Report on African Schools" (1833).

⁷Ms *Records of the School Committee of Boston, I* (1792-1814) Rare Book Room, BPL. Hereafter: SCR I, II, etc.; Child, "Report on African Schools" (1833); *Mr. Minor's Address* (1835), claims the school was continued until 1808; *Report to the Primary School Committee* (1846), 16.

In that year the African (Baptist) Meetinghouse in Belknap Street, erected by subscriptions pledged by both black and white donors, was completed. By written and oral agreement the first floor of the three-story structure was to serve as the new schoolroom. The \$1,000 dollars collectively contributed by Judge Parsons, Lieutenant Governor Phillips, Abiel Smith and seven others was expressly given to assist the building of the Church "for the special purpose of coupling with it a school. . . ."⁸ While relations were not always smooth, the Church-School association begun in 1806 continued, with modifications, until 1835, the year the new city-owned Smith school was opened. Soon after the school settled into its new headquarters — perhaps as early as 1806, but definitely by 1812 — the School Committee, undoubtedly impressed by the financial and other exertions blacks and their white supporters had made in establishing a separate school, and perhaps eager to exercise some control over this autonomous school developing outside the system of public schools, began, with a contribution of \$200 dollars, the practice of subsidizing separate education in Boston.⁹ The city's outlay, combined with the three hundred dollars contributed annually by blacks, made up the operating budget until 1815. In succeeding years income devised from the bequest of Abiel Smith constituted the prime source of support for the city's black schools.

Smith, who died in 1815, was a wealthy Boston merchant and early supporter of Negro education. Designating the selectmen as trustees, Smith left the city nearly eighty shares in New England turnpikes and bridges, among other shares, plus four thousand dollars in United States bonds, the net income from which was to be used for "the maintenance and support of a school or schools . . . for the . . . people of color . . . either clear or mixed. . . ."¹⁰ In January 1816 the selectmen voted to accept the terms of Abiel Smith's endowment, assuring Smith's brother, who was executor of his estate, that no exertions would be spared, to promote the intentions outlined in the will. As trustees of a patrimony which would in time yield an income of about \$5,000 dollars annually,

⁸*Report of a Special Committee of the Grammar School Board (1849), "Appendix," 69.*

⁹Existing records provide conflicting information on two important dates: the year the African school was established and the year the School Committee first voted funds for its support. On the first point, *Mr. Minot's Address (1835)*; Child's "Report on African Schools" (1833); Arthur W. Brayley, *School and Schoolboys in Old Boston (Boston, 1894)*, 48, give 1808 while the *Report to the Primary School Committee (1846)* 16, and *Report of a Special Committee of the Grammar School Board (1849)*, 19, give the date as 1806. On the beginning of public financial assistance the *Report to the Primary School Committee (1846)*, 16, gives the date as 1806 while the *Report of a Special Committee of the Grammar School Board (1849)*, 18, gives the year as 1806 in the body of its report but later concluded that "the earliest pecuniary assistance" from Boston municipal authorities was given in 1812. See "Appendix," 68. The agreement of the two reports on the first uncertainty argues strongly for the 1806 dating. Both reports were carefully prepared and are generally reliable on nearly all the *factual* data they provide on the city's separate schools. I have accepted their dating on the first point. On the beginning of city assistance most of the best evidence agrees on 1812 but support might have been received as early as 1806 or 1808. Whatever the exact date of its start, the city's grant-in-aid was continued, apparently uninterrupted, until 1815 when "the entire charge of the school was assumed by the Board of Selectmen" with monies derived from the bequest of Abiel Smith. See "Appendix" to the *Report of a Special Committee (1849)*, 68. Thus Boston was decidedly in the business of subsidizing segregated schools considerably *before* 1820, the date most commonly cited by historians. Apparently the first to date city support from 1820 was George W. Williams, *History of the Negro Race in America from 1619-1880*, II (New York, 1882), 162, and the error was subsequently copied by others. See e.g., John Daniels, *In Freedom's Birthplace (Boston, 1914)*, 23, Louis Ruchames, "Race and Education in Massachusetts" *Negro History Bulletin* (Dec., 1949), 53; Dwight L. Dumond, *Antislavery: The Crusade for Freedom in America (Ann Arbor, 1961)*, 121 and John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* 4th ed., New York, 1974, 115.

¹⁰Child, "Report on African Schools" (1833), 402; "Selectmen's Minutes, 1816," *Records . . . Early History of Boston . . . 1811-1818*, V. 38 (Boston, 1908), 159-160.

the city's initial misgivings about separate education seemed to vanish. Boston's separate Negro school was now in the orbit of the larger system of public education. And whether they realized it or not, Negroes had exchanged for a measure of financial support nearly all autonomous control of their small educational experiment, one of the concerns which had prompted them to desire their own schools in the first place. More significantly, although hardly realized at the time, the end result of Smith's largesse was to guarantee that separate education would proliferate and become a fixture in the city's educational system — a development Negroes themselves would come to deplore.¹¹

As if to emphasize that the African school, though separate, was now subject to the caprice of the School Committee, the Board in 1817 dismissed the Negro Master, Peter Tracy, giving no reason for the dismissal and without consulting Negro parents. Two years later the Committee asked that the pastor of the African Baptist Church provide them with quarterly reports on "the general state of the African School." In March 1821 the Board turned the general supervision of the school over to an Annual Sub-Committee for the African School. Thus by 1820 the African School, which offered to give students between ages seven and fourteen "a practical" and "useful" — not a "showy education," was a going concern, theoretically under the firm control of the School Board.¹²

No sooner had the African Grammar School been brought under the aegis of the Grammar School Board than the Primary School Committee, first established in 1818, sought a similar jurisdiction over younger scholars aged four through seven. In July 1820, only two years after primary schools were begun in Boston, the first black primary school opened. Located in a room adjacent to the Grammar School in the Belknap Street church, its first teacher was a young black woman named Charlotte Foster. Enrollment at the school increased so rapidly that within a few months the Committee approved the opening of a second primary school, also located in Belknap Street. At some undetermined date, perhaps also in 1820 or possibly 1821, a third primary school opened in North Square, later removed to Robinson's Alley, both in the North End — the first a block south, and Robinson's Alley a block north of the Bay side of Hanover Street.¹³

The suspicion that the third primary in the North End was begun without the knowledge or authorization of school authorities arises from a request of the general School Committee in November 1824, authorizing an inquiry by the Sub-Committee of the African School into the "origins" of the school for blacks in the North End and in its current claims on the public treasury. Unabashedly announcing an abysmal ignorance concerning the city's separate schools, the Committee instructed the Sub-Committee to submit a report on the number of

¹¹*Report of a Special Committee of the Grammar School Board* (1849), 20, "Appendix," 68-69; Child, "Report on African Schools" (1833), 402.

¹²*Report to the Primary School Board* (1846), 17; *Report of the Annual Examination of the Public Schools of the City of Boston*, Boston City Docs. No. 38 (Boston, 1850), 8.

¹³*Report to the Primary School Committee* (1846), 18. On June 17, 1820, one Mary Webb sought permission of the Primary School Committee to establish a "free African School" in the North End. The request was referred to the sub-committee for North End Schools, but what action it took, if any, is not recorded. Either the sub-committee approved the request without informing the parent Primary School Committee or, as appears more likely, Mrs. Webb started her school without the consent or knowledge of either committee. SCR, II (1815-1836), June 17, 1820. 1820 was also given as the date of the first black primary school in the city of Boston by Chief Justice Shaw in *Roberts vs. The City of Boston* (1849) 5 Cushing, 199. Schultz, *The Culture Factory: Boston Public Schools, 1789-1860*, 165, citing Joseph M. Wightman, *Annals of the Boston Primary School Committee, From Its First Establishment in 1818, to Its Dissolution in 1855* (Boston, 1860), 69, errs in dating the opening of the first black primary school on August, 1822, by two full years.

black schools in the city, the cost of maintaining these, the names of their teachers, the number, age, and sex of the children attending them "together with such other circumstances . . . as may be deemed important." However, long before the report was submitted — and it would not be submitted until 1832! — the Committee voted to discontinue the black school in Robinson's Alley kept by one Mrs. Parkman, after the 31st of December, 1825.¹⁴

Completing the system of separate schools was the Intermediate School where those above age seven and not qualified for admission to the grammar school (qualification being measured by literacy) matriculated. As the Primary School Committee learned in 1832, many of the children in the city's three primary schools (eighteen in one of the two primaries in Belknap Street!) were more than eight years old. For similarly aged white children special intermediate schools were being established. The need for such schools being manifest for black students, requests were submitted in 1837 by both the Master of the Smith School and the sub-committee of the primary schools asking that the Board allow the rooms in the Smith School then being used as a primary school to be used instead as an intermediate school "for children too old for the primary school, and not qualified to join any of the classes of the Smith School." The request was granted, and the arrangement seemingly endured until 1848. A proposal made in that year that the intermediate school be united with the Smith School and come under the oversight of its principal, was disapproved. The intermediate school contained in one of the lower rooms of the grammar school (where the primary school was located) and thus remained under the direction of the Primary School Committee.¹⁵

By the mid 1830's, the modest request made by blacks a generation earlier for a school of their own had grown into a three-tiered system of publically supported segregated schools. Since the request for separate schools had emanated from blacks themselves, and since the development of primary and intermediate schools appeared to have kept pace with those which school authorities had made available to white children one would expect to find that Negroes were generally content with the progress they had made in three short years. This, however, was not the case; long before the movement for the abolition of separate schools had become a *cause célèbre* in the mid 1840's, many Negroes had become disenchanted with many aspects of separate education — including inadequate facilities, but more particularly the airtight (Negroes might have said arbitrary) control exercised by school authorities over all facets of separate education.

¹⁴SCR, II (1815-1836), November 22, 1825; May 8, 1832. Black primary schools continued to be intermittently begun and discontinued until separate schools were abolished by legislative fiat in 1855. In 1846 the *Report to the Primary School Committee*, 18, noted that a black primary school was established (obviously re-established) in the North part of the city, in February 1831 and discontinued in September 1835 "in consequence of the very small number of attendants, there being only ten or twelve." Then, as the belated 1832 report disclosed, there were in 1832 but two black primary schools, one in Belknap street. The *Report of a Special Committee of the Grammar School Board* (1849), 20, disclosed that Boston in that year had three primary schools in addition to the Smith Grammar school.

¹⁵"Report of the Annual Examination of the Public Schools of the City of Boston" Boston City Docs. No. 38 (Boston, 1850), 8; SCR, III (1837-1841), Nov. 14, 1837; SCR, V (1846-1849), Nov. 1, 1848; *Semi-Weekly Republican* Nov. 18, 1848. The entry in the *Republican* could be read as saying the intermediate school replaced the primary school in 1848, but as there were two primaries in Belknap street the year following, this is not likely. In light of the above, Schultz's belief concerning intermediate schools: that "no such alternative was given Black youth," *The Culture Factory: Boston Public Schools, 1789-1860*, 165, is totally mystifying.

One indication that things were not going well with the Negro schools was reflected in the reiterated complaints of school authorities over poor attendance at the schools. The intermittent starting and dissolution of black primary schools in the 1820's and 1830's, as we have seen, was charged principally to "the diminution of attendance." In 1832 the report prepared at the request of the School Committee put the number of scholars in the African school at 73 (37 boys, 36 girls) with an average attendance of about 40. What, school authorities wished to know, were "the causes of tardiness and non-attendance . . ." at the school.

At the grammar school, and we can only assume matters were worse in the primary and later at the intermediate schools, unequal and inadequate facilities were in part responsible. The African School room in the Baptist Meetinghouse in Smith Court was described as "low and confined," "hot and stifled in Summer and cold in Winter." But the "greatest objection" to the school lay in the "obvious contrast" between the accommodations provided for black and white children. Here was to be found the "principal cause of this School being so thinly attended." "If any distinction be made between them, and others, it ought to be in their favor, and not against them." Negroes paid their fair share of taxes and in this light it was only "just and expedient that a suitable building be . . . provided, at the expense of the City, . . . for the accommodation of the African School. . . ."¹⁶ Another report the following year (1834) was even more succinct: the African school was in a "depressed condition," poorly attended "and actually conferring very limited benefits . . .;" the principal cause for this state of affairs, the School Committee was made to learn, was "very obvious." White indifference, reflected in the failure to provide adequate accommodations, had bred apathy on the part of both teachers and pupils and discouraged blacks from taking an interest in the school. The remedy was for the city to erect a new school building for black students; justice and sound policy required Boston, the Commonwealth's capital city, do at least as much as other cities had done for their smaller black populations. In the summer of 1834 an "urgent memorial" was submitted to the City Council urging an appropriation for a new African School House, and the request was granted. Completed in 1835 and located only a few hundred feet from its former headquarters in the Belknap Street church, the \$20,000 structure, said to be able to accommodate nearly two hundred students, was named the Smith School in honor of the longtime benefactor of black education, Abiel Smith.

At the dedication ceremonies opening the new school in March 1835, Negroes were told by Judge William Minot that lack of education was responsible for their unequal treatment "and that to education you must look for a remedy." The vehicle of change, blacks were told, was education, and they now had a firm grasp on the means to accelerate its course.

But you must be patient, and not expect in a few years these results which it has cost nations whole ages to reach. The character of a race is altered by slow and unsensible degrees. . . . You cannot hope to be exempted from the laws which govern our moral and intellectual nature; and it would be folly impatiently

¹⁶*Report to the Primary School Committee* (1846), 18; SCR, II (1815-1836), May 8, 1832; Child, "Report on African Schools" (1833). In 1830 the number of black children in Boston under ten years of age was placed at 372. Because the number of those attending primary schools was so small, the number of those under ten in 1830 (presumably not significantly different two years later) affords some indication of Negro non-attendance. If we assume that but 300 of the 372 should have been attending the African school, then merely 1 in 8 of those eligible was attending with any degree of regularity.

to reject the first degrees of improvement, because they are distant from perfection.¹⁷

Although it was apparent to both blacks and whites that the separate schools were by no means the equal of those provided white children, dissatisfaction with the schools went beyond physical inequalities. Judge Minot's reference to Negro impatience was also reflected in the manner in which Negroes reacted to the realization that control of separate schools had slipped entirely from their grasp.

The issue driving this point home more than any other was the impotence local blacks felt in influencing the choice of teachers at the separate schools and the School Committee's indifference to Negro expressions of complaint (or support) for these teachers. During the first twenty years of separate grammar schools in Boston, most of the teachers had been black (see Table 1). Beginning in 1818 with the appointment of James Waldack, and extending through 1848, all teachers — save the three year term of John B. Russwurm, 1821-1824 — were white.

In 1833 Negroes presented the School Committee a petition in which they charged that the Rev. William Bascom, Russwurm's successor in 1824, had taken "improper familiarities" with several of the female students at the school, and demanded that he be removed. The School Committee launched an immediate investigation, but dismissed all charges against Bascom. Not only was the evidence supporting the alleged "moral improprieties" two years old, but the charges, investigation revealed, had been pressed on the testimony of three female students "each of whom were [sic] declared by other witnesses . . . to be of bad character." Additional complaints charging "criminal neglect of the school and want of interest in its welfare . . ." were sent to the school's subcommittee, the limbo to which the Board relegated complaints not worthy of its consideration. Although never adequately investigated, and certainly never disproved, school authorities believed the complaints against Bascom — the Bascom they themselves had hired — were without foundation. Nonetheless, the charges had sufficiently compromised Bascom's usefulness as a teacher of black children, and the following year the School Committee transferred him to another school; without consulting black parents they then hired another white master, Abner Forbes, in his place. If black leaders had any doubts about their powerlessness, the "Bascom Affair" should have laid them to rest. If it did not, coming battles between school authorities and black parents left no room for doubt. The Committee regarded local control of education as nothing less than heretical; education was important business, and the interests of all were served by keeping, undiluted, plenary control over this important business where the law placed it: with the Board of Education.¹⁸

¹⁷SCR, II (1815-1836) March 27, 1834; Lemuel Shattuck, *Report to the Committee of the City Council . . . Census of Boston . . . for 1845 . . .* (Boston, 1846), "Appendix R," 28; the price of the structure was its estimated value in 1845; *Mr. Minot's Address* (1835).

¹⁸SCR, II (1815-1836), October 4, 1833, Nov. 12, 1833, Jan. 21, 1834. As an inducement to Forbes to take charge of the African Grammar school, the School Committee recommended that his salary be augmented by \$200 to a total of \$800. In his first year at the African school, William Bascom was paid \$300; \$700 in 1829 and \$800 in 1832. For the 1832-33 school year, William Bascom at the African school was earning \$200 more than Abner Forbes, then at the Franklin school. The difference in Bascom's favor in this instance was no doubt the result of his greater experience. Over the years, since 1819, in fact, the salary of teachers at the African grammar school was considerably less than that paid teachers at other grammar schools. In that year the salary of schoolmasters was \$1,200 yearly. But the best evidence that salaries paid teachers at the African school were less than those paid teachers at other schools comes from the School Committee itself. In 1836 it voted that the salary of the master of the Smith school be "the same as that of other grammar school Masters." For 1837 he recommended salary was \$1,600. SCR, II (1815-1836), June 21, 1819; July 23, 1824; Sept. 4, 1829; March 27, 1834; Aug. 9, 1936.

Sobered somewhat by the outcry among Negroes over the Bascom episode, and less certain of its authority than the Board had reason to be, the Primary School Committee in 1836 consulted black parents when a vacancy developed at the black primary school. Asked if they had a preference for a black teacher, which they did, a young black named Miss Woodson, whom the Committee acknowledged to be qualified in "character," "capacity" and "attainments" ("in regard to all of which highly favorable testimony was offered") began her responsibilities at the school. This was in 1836. Five years later the Committee arrived, belatedly, at quite a different assessment of Miss Woodson's abilities; believing that good teachers were born not made, the Committee charged that Miss Woodson "was not naturally qualified . . ." and that "at no time since her appointment . . ." had she given satisfaction in the "management and instruction of her school." Given such gross and palpable incompetence, why had the Committee suffered the young teacher for five years? For one, the low state of the school was "in great measure" due to the "material" she had to work with, but more than this, the Committee held back on firing her out of a desire "to give the experiment [!] of a colored teacher a long and fair trial, and a reluctance to wound the feelings of the colored people by her removal." Now, however, the "welfare" of the children was paramount and the Committee had no choice but to replace the Negro teacher, which it did, and a Miss Symmes, a white teacher, was hired in her stead.

Blacks were outraged by the Committee's display of muscle-flexing, and feeling in the community against the hiring of a white teacher ran high. As blacks saw it, their desire to have Miss Woodson retained should have been decisive in influencing the Committee's decision; "they alone," they wrote, "were the parties interested and had a right to decide the question, and . . . if the colored people preferred Miss Woodson as a teacher . . . , their wishes should have been law to the Committee. . . ." The argument for local control could not have been put more succinctly or forthrightly, but the Primary Committee held firm. To accede to such a view, it clearly recognized, was to divest itself of a large part of its authority. Failing to get satisfaction from the Committee, Negroes appealed to the School Board to reverse the Committee's action. Fully cognizant that the issue in the Woodson case spoke directly to the question of power, the Board used the occasion not only to reemphasize its abhorrence of local control, but to spell out its own authority vis-à-vis the Primary School Committee. The latter, as a body appointed by the Board, acted only in the capacity of agent, and exercised only "deputed functions." "The power of supervision over the doings of the primary school committee . . ." was clearly the Boards' to exercise. On the question of local control the Board was more definitive than ever: it would delegate none of its sovereignty to the local community. The wishes of parents were to be "considered," but surely opinions were never intended to be "decisive," for the personal and emotional involvement of blacks disqualified them from making the best decision. If blacks believed they were wronged by this decision, it was an "imagined" wrong occasioned by their "partisanship" and "passion." The choice of teachers, the Board concluded, should remain where the law put it — "in the hands of intelligent gentlemen who can examine fairly, judge calmly and decide dispassionately." It was unfortunate that blacks could not see the subject in the same light; but if they took counsel of their reason and not their feelings, they too would recognize that the Committee acted "from no other motives than a wish to promote the welfare of their children. . . ." ¹⁹

¹⁹SCR, III (1837-1841) March 9, 1841. Some members of the Primary School Committee disagreed with the School Board when it arrogated to itself supreme authority over school matters. In 1846 a majority report of the Primary School Committee opposed a Negro

Blacks had lost another round, and in the process had afforded the Board the opportunity of articulating more clearly than at any previous time its own conception of its authority and its unalterable opposition to neighborhood control — or even influence — over school affairs. The final, and in many ways the most dramatic confrontation, underscoring white intransigence and Negro impotence revolved around one Abner Forbes, the white schoolmaster at the Smith School. Forbes, who had been brought to the Smith School in 1834 to replace William Bascom (and persuaded by abolitionists, so it was rumored, to take the job), was a graduate of Williams College. His early teaching experience was as a private tutor in Washington, D.C., and in the public schools of Massachusetts. In 1844, after ten years of seemingly satisfactory service at the black grammar school, Negroes discovered that Forbes was totally unfit as a teacher, so they submitted a number of charges against him to the School Committee. As summarized by an investigating sub-committee, the charges in the original complaint as well as those disclosed by the Committee's own investigation were reducible to five distinct complaints: I. cruelty in discipline; II. indiscretion in discipline, manifested in adopting unusual modes of punishment, undue severity, making improper remarks before the students and in exhibitions of ill-temper; III. excessive absence from school and neglect of duty; IV. improper treatment of students' parents; and V. "Entertaining opinions of the intellectual character of the colored race . . . that disqualify him to be a teacher of colored children."²⁰

The Committee's investigation took all of six and a half days, during which they heard eighty-six witnesses, seventeen of whom were examined a second time. Both the complainants and Master Forbes were represented by counsel, and testimony was heard from children, parents and Forbes, some of it given "in an excited state of feeling." Following the hearing, the Committee reported separately on each of the five charges. The first was dismissed out of hand, the Committee being satisfied that it was "without foundation." Regarding the second charge, the Committee thought the evidence "conclusive" that Forbes had indeed adopted unusual modes of punishment (whipping boys on the feet, for example), "but not conclusive in relation to either of the other specifications under the head of indiscretion." Evidence on the charge of undue absence and neglect of duty was inconclusive, and only one specific instance of rudeness towards parents was cited, thus negating, in the opinion of the investigating committee, the charge that such "unhandsome treatment toward . . . parents . . . was habitual with the master." The most animated discussion concerned the fifth charge which claimed Forbes held views about the educability of blacks which disqualified him to be a teacher in a Negro school. Oral testimony of witnesses was inconclusive on this point, however, and the sub-committee contented itself with supplying the parent Committee with a two-year-old statement which Forbes had written in answer to a similar charge made against him by

request that separate schools be abolished on the grounds (among others) that such a ruling "properly belongs to the Grammar School Committee . . . as that body is chosen by the direct vote of the citizens. It would be indecorous, if not illegal, for us to abolish the *Primary Schools* for colored children, while they retain the Smith School." *Report to the Primary School Committee* (1846), 26. In a dissenting Minority Report representing the views of about a fourth of the membership of the Primary School Committee, the role of the two committees was viewed quite differently. "The powers and duties of the two committees are, it is believed, entirely distinct and independent, neither having any control or check over the other, or over the schools placed within the sole and particular charge of each." *Report of the Minority of the Committee of the Primary School Board on the Caste Schools of the City of Boston; with some Remarks on the City Solicitor's Opinion*. Boston City Docs. No. 40 (Boston, 1846), 16.

²⁰*Boston Public School for Colored Children*, newspaper clippings BPL, n.d., most probably 1844. *Sub-Committee reports on Charges against Master Forbes of the Smith school*, SCR, IV (1842-1845), May 7, 1844.

one of the city newspapers. Forbes' statement, in which he expressed his belief that Negroes belonged to the human race, that they were rational and accountable beings, and as capable as whites of acquiring knowledge, was laid before the Committee "Without comment."

On the basis of its investigation, the investigators concluded that Forbes was "a valuable instructor," but that his usefulness at the Smith School was now impaired. Dismissal would be an act of injustice to Forbes, however, and set a bad precedent. Under the circumstances the report recommended Forbes be transferred to another school at the end of the school year with the teacher whose place he was assuming replacing him at the Smith School.²¹

Since the school authorities had consistently opposed what they saw as Negro interference in school affairs, it seems difficult to understand that blacks admitted being surprised as well as disappointed with the Committee's decision to acquit Master Forbes. At a meeting called to discuss school matters blacks reaffirmed their "deep conviction" that Forbes was "totally unworthy of his present responsible station . . ." and the meeting "recommended" that black parents "withdraw their children from the exclusive schools . . ." Not content with the simple rejoinder and determined to fully inform the public of the justification for their stand, a Committee of Negro Parents issued their own angry report, "a plain and impartial statement" reviewing the entire controversy. The charge that Forbes had inflicted cruel and unusual punishments the parents believed had been proven. Not only had boys been whipped on the feet, they were pinched, compelled to stand in a constrained posture (on one foot!), their hair and ears had been pulled and a girl had been feruled on the back of the hand. The Parents' Report, intended for public consumption, emphasized that Negro parents were not opposed to corporal punishment in principle, but they did oppose the "unusual modes and *indiscreet application*" of corporal punishment. Moreover, complained the parents, Forbes punished children on the testimony of others, and his discipline was erratic and uncertain. "An offence which today would be *winked at* . . . would receive condign punishment tomorrow." Secondly, the language and general deportment of Master Forbes was, at least, censurable. Forbes' reputed reply to Mrs. Angeline B. Gardner, when she came to the school to fetch her child kept in detention: "Out you vile wretch . . . if you don't go out I'll pull you in the House of Correction," — was clearly "a case of ungovernable temper — unjustifiable abuse of a mother — ungentlemanly language to a female — and a want of frankness, to say no more, in his representation of the circumstances of the case" (Forbes had denied any recollection of having used such language). The sting of the third complaint, neglect of duty, had been attenuated somewhat by Forbes' own admission that the charge was to a degree justified. The last and major complaint — that Forbes held opinions about innate Negro inferiority — was further substantiated by introducing in evidence an article which had appeared in the *Boston Courier* in 1842, the burden of which was to show that Negroes were, by nature, an inferior race. Although the piece was signed "Clarkson," Negroes suspected Forbes to be its author "as he had frequently avowed similar opinions." Forbes denied the article was his and in a rejoinder signed "The Teacher" equivocally declared blacks to be equal to whites in intellectual capacity: ("I believe there is no human art or science, the acquiring of which has been specially denied them . . . by nature, if they can enjoy facilities suited to *their natures*.")

Understandably, the Parents' Report asked what the paragraph meant. What was the purpose of the words "suited to their natures?" Why was "their" written

²¹Sub-Committee Report (1844), SCR, IV (1842-1845), May 7, 1844.

in italics? "What can it be construed to amount to," the parents inquired, if not "a distinct avowal . . . that the natures of the colored people are different from the whites, requiring other and peculiar facilities?" Not satisfied with this rebuttal of the School Committee's investigation of the controversy, the parents concluded their report with a parting shot at the Committee on a point where they realized school authorities were unusually sensitive — the issue of local control. Board members were again reminded that they were "the mere representatives" of their employers — "the parents, the people, the tax-payers —" and that they were "somewhat bound" to accept the views of "their constituents" when these called for the dismissal of a teacher. The improved character and standing of blacks in Boston was due largely to the educational facilities available to the young. Whatever stood to deprive Negroes of, or to lessen their eagerness for, education not only hurt them as a class, but "would be," as well, "a great public evil. . . ." Forbes was just such an obstacle and he should be forthwith dismissed from his duties for the good of all concerned.²²

While the School Committee's refusal to censure Master Forbes was justification enough to warrant the Parents' response, a number of considerations lend credence to the supposition voiced by some that the sudden and bitter denunciation of Forbes was intended to serve a larger objective. "The fact is," an informant wrote Horace Mann, "the Abolitionists are determined to scatter the colored children among the whites and to do this they must kill the Colored School by killing Forbes. . . ." The object of the "frivolous" charges levelled against Forbes, wrote a Bostonian who completely endorsed the action of the Committee, was "to crush the school, to crush the teacher, to intimidate the Committee, and to force amalgamation upon the public schools." Not only was the "persecution" of Forbes an excuse to mask the objective of doing away with separate schools entirely, but the contrived controversy, others believed, was the work of "certain prominent leaders of the party called Abolitionists . . ." and "others who *profess* extraordinary sympathy for 'the colored people' . . ." It was they who "succeeded in sowing among the blacks the seeds of discontent and dissatisfaction, and stirred them up to the project of petitioning the School Board for the distribution and admission of the colored children into the Grammar Schools of the City." The case against Master Forbes, in the opinion of many, was no more than "a collateral measure" intended to camouflage the main objective: the ending of separate Negro schools in Boston.²³

The belief that all calls for reform coming out of the black community were "planted" by white "agitators" was one of the verities of life for many antebellum Americans who fervently believed the dogmas about Negro docility and Negro stupidity. On the school desegregation question, however, Negroes were adamant in denouncing suspicions that they had to be coaxed by whites to oppose caste schools. "That our feelings have been aroused by the abolitionists for the sake of agitation," they would write some years later, was "unwarrantable and unjust. . . . On this subject we are unadvised; we claim what we are convinced is our right. The cause of equal school privilege originated with us. Unaided and unbiased we commenced the struggle."²⁴

²²*Boston Atlas*, n.d. [1844] *Boston Public School for Colored Children*, newspaper clippings, BPL; John T. Hilton, et al., *Report Of Committee of Parents . . . interested in the Smith School . . . Boston Public Schools for Colored Children*, newspaper clippings, BPL, n.d. [most probably July 30, 1844]. The other committee members were Henry L. W. Thacker, Jonas W. Clark, William C. Nell and Robert Morris, the attorney to the committee.

²³William B. Fowle to Horace Mann, Boston, July 11, 1844. Mann Papers, MHS; *Boston Public School for Colored Children*, newspaper clippings, BPL: in order of citation — *Boston Courier* [1844]; *ibid*; *Boston Daily Advertiser* [1844].

²⁴*The Liberator*, April 4, 1851. The author of this statement was most probably William C. Nell.

While the point was well taken, a number of considerations support the belief that the charges against Forbes, while not unjustified, were pressed to the extreme in order to underscore the inherent frailty of separate schools and hopefully to speed their dissolution. The suddenness of the outburst against Forbes after a ten-year tenure, largely without incident, is one such consideration. Secondly, while Negroes had sufficient reason to be angry over the Committee's failure to censure Forbes, the fact remains that, *before* the Parents' report again asked for his dismissal, school officials had announced that Forbes would not be rehired at the Smith School. Thirdly, while it was true that blacks, some at least, did not need encouragement from whites to be reminded of the shortcomings of separate schools, there can be no doubt that white abolitionists — now that the campaigns against Jim Crow carriers and the state's anti-miscegenation law were successfully behind them — were most eager to launch another reform effort. Lastly, and most significantly, the Forbes controversy was used, if not manufactured, by the fast emerging faction opposed to separate schools, as both a diversionary tactic and a rallying cry. Leaders like Nell, John T. Hilton, Jonas W. Clark, Robert Morris, *et al.*, recognized full well that after nearly half a century of separate education, there would be those who would resist the bold course they envisioned: the total deracination of the city's separate schools, even of the very concept of separate education. The Forbes controversy not only side-stepped the "real" objective, with all of its potential for popular polarization, but the controversy, like all controversy, was calculated to generate essential community interest.

The timing and the vehemence of the outburst against Forbes, then, was not coincidental; by 1844 the opposition forces in the black community had concluded that the decade-long strategy of trying to share authority with school officials had played itself out. The refusal of the latter to allow blacks a role in decisions affecting teachers and conditions in the separate schools had merely postponed the inevitable. An extremely vocal, articulate, group — inspired by and themselves inspiring a ripening community consciousness — and representing (perhaps) half or more of the interested parties in the community, but now concluded that separate schools were anathema, and that the whole system of separate education should be abolished. On this note, the transitional period, during which the abolition forces might have been content with a share of educational decision making, was brought to a close; the overt effort to abolish, an effort blacks would be required to wage among themselves as well as against school authorities, was about to be set in motion.²⁵

²⁵It would require a decade more of opposition and confrontation by Boston blacks and their supporters before separate schools in the Commonwealth were officially done away with. In early April, 1855, the Massachusetts legislature enacted legislation abolishing caste schools in the Bay State, and the measure was signed by Know-Nothing Governor Henry J. Gardner, April 28, 1855. For a brief account of the desegregation effort see Donald M. Jacobs, "The Nineteenth Century Struggle Over Segregated Education in the Boston Schools," Vol. 39, No. 1 *Journal of Negro Education* (Winter, 1970), 76-85. For a more detailed treatment see Stanley K. Schultz, *The Culture Factory: Boston Public Schools, 1789-1860* (Oxford University Press, 1973), Chapter 8, and George A. Levesque, "Black Boston: Negro Life in Garrison's Boston, 1800-1860," (Unpub. Ph.D. disser., State Univ. of New York — Binghamton, 1976), Chapter 6.

TABLE 1

BLACK AND WHITE TEACHERS OF BLACK CHILDREN IN BOSTON'S SEPARATE GRAMMAR SCHOOL, 1798-1855*

YEAR(S)	NAME	RACE	SCHOOL
1798 - 1806 (?)	Messrs. Elisha Sylvester Brown Williams	White	Home of Primas Hall, corner of George and May Streets; converted carpenter shop, Belknap Street
1799	Nester Pendleton	Black	
1806(?) - 1818	Messrs. Cyrus Vassal Prince Saunders Willey	Black Black Black	Basement Room in the African Baptist Church, Belknap Street
1812 - 1817	Peter Tracy	Black	
1818 - 1820	James Waldack	White	"
1821 - 1824	John B. Russwurm	Black	"
1824 - 1834	Rev. William Bascum	White	"
1834 - 1844	Abner Forbes	White	Smith Grammar School, Belknap Street
1845 - 1848	Ambrose Wellington	White	"
1849 - 1855	Thomas Paul	Black	"

*Derived from: School Committee *Records*, V (1846-1849) August 11, 1848; Sept. 12, 1849; *Report of a Special Committee of the Grammar School Board* (1849), "Appendix;" *Report to the Primary School Committee* (1846), 16, 17; *Records related to the Early History of Boston containing Minutes of the Selectmen's Meetings, 1799-1810* V. 3 3 (Boston, 1904), 14.

RESUME

En 1855 le Commonwealth du Massachusetts devint le premier état à détruire la ségrégation dans son système d'écoles publiques. Ce développement (que la Cour Suprême citerait plus tard comme étant un précédent et qui allait faire époque: *Brown vs le Ministère d'Education*, décision de 1954) fut effectué grâce surtout aux efforts des chefs de la communauté noire qui, en coopération avec certains chefs abolitionnistes blancs, commencèrent dès 1840 à lancer des attaques contre le système établi d'écoles séparées. Ces efforts concertés contre la ségrégation qui amenèrent l'abolition des écoles séparées dans cet état en 1855 ont été examinés par un bon nombre d'intellectuels. Il est surprenant de constater que l'établissement du système d'écoles séparées dans la ville capitale de l'état, n'a jamais été raconté quand on sait que Boston avait la plus grande population noire de l'état de Bay dans les années qui précèdent la guerre civile des Etats-Unis. Comme le titre de cette étude l'indique, "Avant l'intégration: Les années oubliées dans l'Education de Jim Crow à Boston", nous verrons quand et comment les écoles séparées de la ville furent organisées, et en premier lieu, le rôle joué par les noirs eux-mêmes dans l'établissement de ce système de ségrégation en éducation. Notre récit commence au tout début du dix-neuvième siècle, vers 1840, lorsque la première grande vague de l'Epoque de la Réforme envahit l'Amérique entière. Il devint impossible de soutenir la ségrégation pour deux raisons principales: un tel appui annullait tout effort de propagande pour l'abolition de l'esclavage en Amérique et deuxièmement, permettait aux blancs de justifier la caste à perpétuité. Néanmoins, pendant plus d'un demi siècle, les noirs de Boston furent éduqués séparément. Cette étude est donc le récit de ces "années oubliées".