

Hartford's African Schools, 1830-1868

BY DAVID O. WHITE*

Education in Connecticut before 1800 was by means of individual, private, and public schooling. Children were taught trades as apprentices, received religious instruction, and a few were prepared for careers in law, medicine and theology. The concept of providing an education for every child at the public's expense did exist during the eighteenth century, but it was not widely accepted. Some communities, including Hartford, appointed a committee to manage the instruction of their youth. During the 1760's Hartford's committee divided its school into two districts, one in the northern section of the city and the other in the southern portion, but in subsequent years these districts were subdivided until there were ten by the early nineteenth century.

The State of Connecticut assisted the district schools in 1795 by establishing a fund from the sale of land it owned in Ohio, and this enabled Hartford and other towns to obtain money for their schools, although they tended to rely on this fund rather than improve their educational systems through taxation. By the 1830's the district system had numerous problems in that parents generally lacked interest in the schools; teachers were poorly trained and poorly paid; there were few books and little equipment; and adequate buildings were a rarity. Above all, many children never went to the district schools because attendance was not compulsory. More money was spent for education by private institutions in Connecticut than by those in the districts even though the former taught only one-eighth of the state's students.

Black children in Connecticut faced additional handicaps if they wanted to attend the district schools. Slaves were sometimes taught to read and write by their owners, but regular schooling was rare, and free blacks also found that there was little formal education available to them. James Mars, a Connecticut slave who was born in 1790, wrote that his schooling was "broken and unsteady" because he was constantly required to work on his owner's farm. Jeremiah Asher was a member of the only black family in North Branford in 1816 and was therefore permitted to attend that town's district school. Asher, who later lived in Hartford, wrote in 1850 that most of the district systems in Connecticut excluded blacks unless there were enough black students available to merit the establishment of a separate facility. Those blacks who did attend the white schools were not always treated equally with the white students, as in the case of Erastus Boston, the son of a Hartford area family, who was the only black student in the 1817 school of the Rocky Hill District. Boston was kept segregated from the white pupils, and, as a source of punishment for girls in the class who misbehaved, the teacher made them sit in the same row with him.

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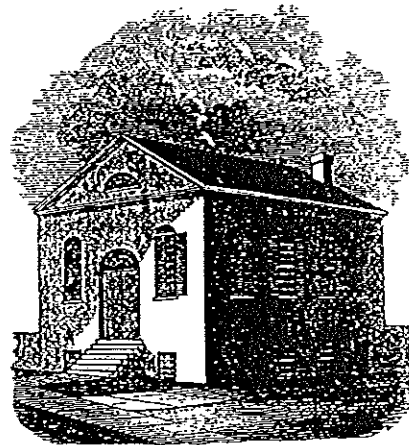
In 1830 Hartford's blacks asked for a separate school for their children, although the reasons behind this request were not disclosed. Discrimination in the classroom by white teachers may have been one, and that many blacks were not permitted or did not attend the district schools at all may have been another. How soon a separate facility was established is uncertain, but in 1833 Amos G. Beman of Middletown was certified by Hartford's examining committee to be its instructor. Beman, the son of a black minister, left the African school five years later and became licensed as a minister in the Congregational Church. The school, probably held in one of two black churches in Hartford, had been separated into two district facilities by 1840. One, which met in the Talcott Street Congregational Church, was located in the first district and known as the North African School; the other, the South African School, was in the second district and met in the Zion Methodist Church on Elm Street. In 1842 there was apprehension expressed by whites that these schools might be church operated; nevertheless, both were nondenominational.

These two African schools were not completely satisfactory because, unlike many of those in the white districts, they had no building of their own, their teachers were poorly paid, and they received little help from the white community. In 1846 the Reverend James Pennington of the Talcott Street Church requested that the Hartford school committee correct these problems which had made the education of black children "exceedingly irregular, deficient, and onerous." The school committee eventually took action upon this request and provided better supplies and equipment for the two schools. However, it still failed to provide a separate building where the black students could hold classes. When Hartford's blacks petitioned for a proper building, the committee gave them the choice of attending the white institutions or having their own. They chose the latter and, in 1852, a new building was erected on Pearl Street to which the black district schools moved and formed two separate departments.

All of the teachers of the African schools were black, although whites were used in emergency situations in 1861 and 1867. Of the black teachers, Augustus Washington had the best education, having spent two years at Dartmouth College. On the other hand, the background of another teacher, Ann Plato, is virtually unknown. There was a family of blacks named Plato that lived in Hartford throughout much of the nineteenth century, but her relationship to this family is unclear. It is known that she was a member of the Reverend Mr. Pennington's church and that she wrote a book of poetry in 1841, which was one of the few publications of a black American woman before the Civil War. Another teacher, Selah Africanus, was active in civil rights and was a participant in the 1849 convention of Connecticut blacks held at New Haven. It is interesting to note that several of the teachers at these schools, although well educated, could not find better employment when they stopped teaching school; Betsy Fish, for instance, was later a washerwoman, and Nathaniel Stubbs was a waiter. Edwin C. Freeman, who was connected with the school for most of 1852 to 1866, was later a porter with Travelers Insurance Company, although, because of his education, he was also employed in other capacities. The names of these teachers are found in city directories and annual Board of Visitors reports. The papers of Amos L. Beman at Yale's Beinecke Library and visitor reports in Thomas Robbins' school papers reveal several others. In the list below it is possible that James Pennington taught in the African school before 1842.

1833-38	Amos G. Beman		Talcott St.
1842	Rev. Mr. Pennington, Mrs. Pennington, Assistant		Talcott St.
1843	Rev. James Pennington, Mrs. Pennington, Assistant		Talcott St.
1844-45	Augustus Washington, Miss Emily M. Thompson, Assistant	1st Dist.	Talcott St.
	Ann Plato	2nd Dist.	Elm St.
1845	Augustus Washington	1st Dist.	Talcott St.
	Maria Adelaide Howard	1st Dist.	
	Ann Plato	2nd Dist.	Elm St.
1846	No teacher listed	1st Dist.	Talcott St.
	Ann Plato	2nd Dist.	Elm St.
1847	Selah Africanus	1st Dist.	Talcott St.
	Ann Plato	2nd Dist.	Elm St.
1848	Selah Africanus	1st Dist.	Talcott St.
	Betsy Fish	2nd Dist.	Elm St.
1849	Selah Africanus	1st Dist.	Talcott St.
	Betsy Fish	2nd Dist.	Elm St.
1850	Selah Africanus	1st Dist.	Talcott St.
	Betsy Fish	2nd Dist.	Elm St.
1851	Mr. Green	1st Dist.	Talcott St.
	Betsy Fish	2nd Dist.	Elm St.
1852-53	Edwin Freeman	1st Dist.	Talcott St.
	Betsy Fish	2nd Dist.	Elm St.
1853-54	Edwin Freeman, Betsy Fish, Assistant		Pearl St.
1854-55	Edwin Freeman	1st Dept.	Pearl St.
	Betsy Fish	2nd Dept.	Pearl St.
1855-56	Edwin Freeman	1st Dept.	Pearl St.
	Betsy Fish	2nd Dept.	Pearl St.
1856-57	Edwin Freeman	1st Dept.	Pearl St.
	Betsy Fish	2nd Dept.	Pearl St.
1857-58	Nathaniel Stubbs	1st Dept.	Pearl St.
	Betsy Fish	2nd Dept.	Pearl St.
1858-59	Nathaniel Stubbs	1st Dept.	Pearl St.
	Betsy Fish	2nd Dept.	Pearl St.
1859-60	Nathaniel Stubbs	1st Dept.	Pearl St.
	Betsy Fish	2nd Dept.	Pearl St.
1860	(Geer's Directory noted for 1860 that the teacher of the African School had resigned and that no successor had been hired.)		
1861	L. M. Winslow, principal; Elmira S. Barker	2nd Dept.	Pearl St.
1862	E. C. Freeman, principal		Pearl St.
1863-64	E. C. Freeman, principal		Pearl St.
1864-65	E. C. Freeman, principal		Pearl St.
1865-66	E. C. Freeman, principal		Pearl St.
1866-67	The High School Committee, Lizzie P. Rowles, principal and teacher.		Pearl St.

Unfortunately, little is known about the general operation of the African schools, although it would appear that they were organized in much the same manner as the other Hartford district schools. The Reverend Thomas Robbins, the first librarian of The Connecticut Historical Society, as a member of the



TALCOTT STREET CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH,
30 Talcott street.

THE Talcott Street Congregational Church in Hartford, was organized on the 28th of August, 1833. Dr. Hawes, pastor of the First Church, and the Pastor of the Second Church, officiated on the occasion. The Church was at first composed of seven members, who came by letter from the First Church in Hartford, and other churches in the vicinity. The Church, since its organization, has been supplied by Reverends D. T. Kimball, John A. Hempsted, E. B. Tyler, Dr. James W. C. Pennington, and C. W. Gardner.

Officers of the Church.—Pastorship vacant; Isaac Cross, Wm. Mitchell, Deacons; Isaac Cross, clerk.

Sabbath School.—Wm. H. Post, Superintendent; J. G. Woodward, Librarian; Library, about 400 vols.

Society.—Holdredge Primus, Samuel R. Freeman, and Edwin C. Freeman, Committee; Isaac Cross, Clerk. Annual meeting in January.

The Talcott Street Congregational Church, Hartford, as it appeared during the pastorate of the Reverend James W. C. Pennington. It was here that the first black school, known as the North African School, was established. Reproduced from a postal card, CHS Collections.

School Society, made visits to all of the city's schools, public and private, during 1844-45. His reports, in the form of notes in the Historical Society's collections, reveal something about what was taught in these facilities, as well as their problems and their accomplishments. Robbins was required to visit each school four times during the year, although between December of 1844 and December of 1845, he made six visits to the First District African School, and four visits to the Second District African School. That Robbins made more visits to the North African School indicates that he had a more than casual interest in its work.

Robbins also had an interest in the South African School, for, when he found it closed on September 26, he made a special visit there the following month. Its teacher, Miss Plato, invited him to several of her scholars' exhibitions and, while there are no dates on these invitations, we know that district and private institutions held several exhibitions each year to allow parents and the public the opportunity to see what their students had learned. Her invitation read:

There will be a public Exhibition of the Second colored School in Elm St. church on wednesday evening. Doors open at half past six o'clock. Exercises commencing at seven.

In connection with this, there will be an Examination in the vestry of said church, on said day; commencing at half past ten in the morning.

Dr. Robins is respectfully invited to attend.

By order of the committee

A. Plato, Teacher

And again:

Dr. Robins —

Is very respectfully invited to attend the Examination of the South District School, under the colored church in Elm street, tomorrow morning at eleven o'clock.

The Exhibition will occur in the evening.

A. Plato, Teacher

Reporters for Connecticut's antislavery newspaper, *The Charter Oak*, which was published in Hartford, visited one of Miss Plato's exhibitions in May of 1846 and wrote of the school's accomplishments. The report concluded that the school was proof of what people could do "when they have the necessary means."

The following accounts of the African schools were taken from Robbins' reports. His first visit was made on December 14, 1844, his last on December 19, 1845, and only on the first did another member of the School Society go with him. The August 26, 1845 visit to the North African institution was evidently his own idea, so that the use of the word "private" indicates this, rather than that the school itself was a private one.

Dec. 14. [1844] African School, Talcott Street.

Teacher, Mr. Augustus Washington. Present 33; whole No. 56. Attendance irregular. Ten learning their letters. Room needs ventilation. Some of the older ones good scholars. Judiciously instructed. Proper religious exercises. Had no singing. Need of writing. Deficiency of Books. The Teacher has supplied a number. Dr. Alcott & Mr. Robbins.—Anti-colonizationism is taught earnestly.

March 22d. [1845] Second coloured School;

Elm Street. Miss Ann Plato. Whole number, Males 26; Females 24-50. Average attendance as stated, 40. Present, an unfavourable day, 22. Quite a deficiency of Books. Much idleness. The teacher takes pains, & is pretty well qualified. She has taught some time. Some of them Read well. The spelling was passable. A few recited a Geography lesson pretty well. The scholars appeared fond of their school. Prayer by the Teacher.

March 31. P.M. First District Coloured School.

Mr. Augustus Washington. Miss Emily M. Thompson Assistant. Number, 52. Average, 42. Present, 27. The school has been much interrupted by vaccination. The first class passed a very good examination in grammar & American Geography. The other classes performed well. Much improvement during the season. Pretty good order. One good composition. Good spelling, with syllabication. Writing appears well; some of them very good. Had a long visit.

June 27. The North African School. In the first District.

Teacher Augustus Washington. A competent good teacher. Well educated. Number of Scholars, 20. The common average 16. The attendance irregular. Present, 14. A woman's school, coloured has been opened, this week, in an adjoining room. Present 14. They are well taught, & doing well. The coloured people are indifferent about schooling, the most of them, & pay but little. The teacher has lately procured a clock. The school rooms are in the basement rooms of the African church. The scholars do well for their opportunity.

July 3d. South District Primary School; African. Mr. Robbins.

Teacher, Miss Plato. Whole number 45. Average 35. Present, wet day, 31. Boys 15; girls 16. The absentees mostly girls. Upper classes read & spell; they spell long words, with syllabication. Good order in school. Twelve writing books, some of them look very well. A good examination in the first rudiments of Arithmetic & Geography. The Teacher well qualified, with some want of patience. Religious exercises. They sing like black birds.

August 26. Visited A. Washington's coloured school, private.

About 20 pupils. It was public examination. They performed very well. Sexes about equal. The parents have paid better than heretofore. The Teacher deserves encouragement.

Sept. 23d. North Coloured School. Solus.

Teacher, Maria Adelaide Howard. Number, 42. Average about 35. Males & Females about equal. They Read pretty well; spell passably; & recite Geography well. During the Quarter they have visibly improved in learning & discipline. The Teacher has succeeded well in her government.

Sept. 26. Went to visit the South Coloured School. Solus.

Found it to have been dismissed a few days since. The Teacher is out of town. They have done well.

Oct. 16. South Coloured School.

Miss Plato. Number, 40. Average attendance 32. Proportions of Males to Females about two to three. Complaint of tardiness. Several usually absent on Monday. The Reading & spelling is fair. Writing, good. Good order. The room in much need of improvement. Manners good for the circumstances. Pretty well supplied with books.

Dec 18 P.M. Mr. Robbins solus. South African School.

Miss Plato. Begun lately. Whole number, 40. Average about 30. Present, wet day M. 4; F. 14-18. Reading & spelling the principal exercises, & pretty well done. Recited tables. Some Geography. Attendance irregular. Have had a long vacation. The school much changed. A hope of progress.

Dec. 19. North African School. Mr. Robbins Solus.

Mr. Augustus Washington, Teacher. Whole Number, M. 44; F. 34-78. Present & Average attendance, 55. Classes large. Some use of Monitors. Good examinations in Geography. Good attention to manners. Well instructed. Good order for so large a school. They read well. Read in spellings. Good attention to spelling, & good performances. Sing well of course.

While Robbins' descriptions of Hartford's schools end with his visits of December, 1845, other school visitors continued to observe the conditions of these educational establishments. Their composite reports during the 1850's and 1860's reveal that by these decades the African school had serious attendance problems. In 1855 there was an average of 82 students attending out of an enrollment of 136 pupils, indicating that parents developed new thoughts about segregated education. The African school had only two grades while many of the other district schools were fully graded. In 1858 a library was finally provided, but it consisted of only 85 volumes. By 1865 parents began to remove their children from the school and, when permitted, to send them to institutions in the districts where they lived. The board of visitors realized that there was nothing to prevent this situation and suggested that the city either improve the education offered at the African school or else sell the building and place its students in those of the other districts. The city did close the African school in 1867, but reopened it the following year, determined to operate a separate facility so that "no colored children should attend the District Schools." The results were limited, as black parents refused to support the reopened facility. When Connecticut passed a law in 1868 requiring children to attend schools in their own district regardless of race, and, as attendance "began rapidly to diminish" at the African school, it was closed. Those pupils who were still enrolled in the school were sent to those within the districts where they lived, and more than thirty years of segregated educational facilities in Hartford came to an end.

NOTE: This article, with footnotes, may be consulted at the Connecticut Historical Society.