

1982

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Recommended Citation

Schwartz, Gerald (1982) "An Integrated Free School In Civil War Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 61 : No. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol61/iss2/5>

AN INTEGRATED FREE SCHOOL IN CIVIL WAR FLORIDA

by GERALD SCHWARTZ

DURING the Federal occupation of Jacksonville in February 1864, an attempt was made by Dr. Esther Hill Hawks, an abolitionist lady from New Hampshire, to operate there the state's first racially integrated free school.¹ This kind of an integrated facility, fleeting though it proved to be, was among the first in any southern state.

Esther Hawks was no stranger to teaching black pupils of all ages. She married Dr. John Milton Hawks in 1854, and they came to Manatee, Florida, on their honeymoon. There she clandestinely taught a school for black children despite the danger—should anyone have complained to the authorities—since such schools were illegal.²

By 1857, Esther Hawks had graduated from the New England Female Medical College in Boston and had begun the practice of medicine in Manchester, New Hampshire.³ When the Civil War broke out she was anxious to make a contribution, but was rejected for medical service by Dorothea L. Dix, superintendent of army nurses, by virtue of being too young, too pretty, and hence potentially disruptive.⁴

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1. School Record of Jacksonville, unpublished record contained in the second bound volume of the Milton and Esther Hawks Manuscripts, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
2. Mrs. Wm. Lummus, "Address," *Tributes of Respect and Love From Associates and Friends, Read at the Remembrance Service Held at the Friends' Meeting House on Silsbee Street, Lynn, Massachusetts, May 30, 1906, In Honor of the Late Dr. Esther H. Hawks* (Lynn, Mass., 1906), 26.
3. *Eighth Annual Report of the New-England Female Medical College* (Boston, 1857), 4.
4. Unpublished diaries of Dr. Esther Hill Hawks in possession of Mr. and Mrs. Eldon Porter, Long Beach, North Carolina. The author of this article has edited the Hawks diaries for publication by the University of South Carolina Press. Unless otherwise specified the contents of this article are derived from the Hawks diaries. Where the diaries are quoted verbatim no attempt has been made at correcting Esther Hawks's spelling, punctuation, or other errors.

Dr. Hawks eventually obtained an appointment from the New York Freedman's Aid Society as a teacher of freedmen on the Federally-occupied sea islands of South Carolina, arriving at Port Royal in October 1862. Her medical skills were employed when she unofficially commanded a hospital for the black troops of the Second South Carolina Infantry, holding surgeon's call "for hospital and Regt. and with great success." Later, in July 1863, Hawks treated wounded survivors of the all-black Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Infantry's assault upon Fort Wagner, guarding Charleston harbor. She performed other post-battle services in field hospitals elsewhere. But it was as an educator rather than as a healer that Esther Hawks expended the bulk of her time and energies. She was an enthusiastic teacher of both children and adults, including hundreds of black troops. And what optimism Esther Hawks displayed about the enthusiasm and abilities of her sea island pupils of all ages! Freed blacks, she recorded, "are all eager to go to school, books being the one thing denied them, they have a frantic desire to get possession of them."

It was just a few weeks after the Federals moved into Jacksonville that Dr. Hawks was authorized by the military and the Freedman's Aid Society officials to establish a public school. The provost marshal appropriated the fraternal meeting hall owned by the Odd Fellows at Market and Adams streets as a school building. Esther's husband, Dr. John Milton Hawks, surgeon of the Twenty-first United States Colored Troops, cleaned out the building and furnished it with seats.⁶ The Christian Commission contributed textbooks.⁶ So, too, did the Sanitary Commission, forerunner of the American Red Cross. The wife of Captain William Lee Arthrop of the Thirty-fourth United States Colored Troops volunteered to assist with the teaching. And on Monday morning, February 29, 1864, the school bell clanged, summoning pupils of both races to their lessons.⁷

Initially there was but one black pupil out of a total enrollment of thirty, most of whom were poor whites. On the second day of classes, sixteen new black scholars enrolled. Some of these

5. Ellen M. Patrick, in *Tributes of Respect*, 12.

6. Esther H. Hawks, "Freedmen's School in Florida," *The Commonwealth*, III, September 9, 1864, 1, 2, reprinted in part from the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, XXV, August 20, 1864.

7. School Record.

were natives of Jacksonville, others were recently arrived refugees from plantations as much as eighty miles distant. At day's end, Dr. Hawks was informed by one of her white pupils, Mary Magdalena Lamee, that her mother had made it clear that she could not continue attending if black children were taught there. "O very well," Esther replied, "if your Ma rather you wouldn't learn you must stay away, but the school is free to all."⁸ The school record indicates that Dr. Hawks was saddened by this turn of events. "Said Mary is as ill looking a cub as there is in the lot—but not to blame for Ma's prejudices," she wrote. Actually, Esther Hawks had good reason to bemoan the loss of Mary. She and her brother Frank were apparently the only two pupils of either color advanced enough to read "readily." Some, including one white who was twenty-two years old, did not even know their letters.⁹

Racial tensions continued to increase among parents, despite cooperation and friendliness among pupils of both races.¹⁰ The white children, according to Esther, were, if anything, more poorly dressed and dirtier than the blacks, but there was "an evident disposition among white noses to turn up at colored ones."¹¹ Esther, despite a *New York Tribune* article which quoted her as saying that the races were pursuing studies "harmoniously," anticipated declining white attendance.¹² She was not mistaken; one parent violently withdrew her child who had come to school without permission, threatening to "break his bones."¹³ At the end of six weeks, only one white child remained, though the fifteen whites who had not been withdrawn immediately after integration had made "creditable improvement," in this, the first chance most of them ever had to enjoy schooling.¹⁴ Parental opposition among whites, according to Dr. Hawks, "was greatly augmented by many of our officers, who thought it was quite shocking to have white and black children sent to the same school, encouraging the idea that if kept from this, a free white school would soon be started for them. This has not been done, though the need of such a school is very great. The streets are

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. *New York Tribune*, April 1, 1864, 1.

13. School Record.

14. Hawks, "Freedman's School".

full of white children, who out of school hours, are the friends and playmates of our pupils, and I confess that I dislike to have them exposed to such *demoralizing influences!* The white children come about the door looking wistfully in, but if I ask them to come in they invariably say, 'Ma won't let me come'.¹⁵

By contrast, the enthusiasm of the black pupils "would inspire even the dullest of teachers," Dr. Hawks wrote.¹⁶ The children were not only prompt and regular in attendance, but were quick to learn. "My first class," she noted, "I am trying to initiate into the mysteries of written Arithmetic, and they do *credit* to their *teacher* (!) I think they begin to have an idea of the *whys* of addition. They are delighted with the practice." Ultimately, a class of twenty-four scholars would be able to recite the multiplication table fluently. Some could perform written examples on the slate or blackboard through the first three rules in Adam's *Arithmetic*, and explain the rest intelligibly. Progress was also made in spelling, geography, and other subjects. "Do not forget that these are black children, lately held as property, and quite as unfamiliar with arithmetic and writing as their masters' other 'beasts of burden,' " explained Esther.¹⁷

Nor was the Jacksonville school made up only of children. Fifty black soldiers from different regiments attended regularly. Other men, exempt from military duties and employed as laborers, cooks, and waiters, would hurry in and eagerly urge "please Miss, hear my lesson right soon, I must go in an hour."¹⁸

Not infrequently there were friendly competitions between soldiers and young pupils. One evening Dr. Hawks "yielded to the entreaties of the children," and held a spelling bee. "Thirty of my best scholars, and several soldiers present. Let them 'choose sides' with which they were particularly delighted; then I let them 'spell down' and one of my boys, Sam Muncy and a soldier from the north, gave each other a 'hard try' after out-spelling all the others— then they both missed the same word— a word of four syllables."¹⁹

Esther looked with "pride and pleasure," on the work done by her pupils and herself. "I have," she wrote, "a large, orderly

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. Hawks diaries, May 2, 1864.

and intelligent school; the scholars, . . . most of them have made excellent improvement. They are easily governed— and generally disposed to obey.”²⁰ Dr. Hawks, missing not a single day of teaching during the four months she operated the school, described her work as “a labor of love and of great interest . . . I feel amply rewarded,” she recorded in her diary, “for all my painstaking in the good improvement of the children— and in feeling that I have so great an influence over such a wide circle of children’s hearts. I know they love me, because *I love them!*”²¹

There were others who also supported the young scholars in Jacksonville. The Reverend J. W. Lewis came down to organize an integrated Sunday school, also taught by Esther Hawks. Upon his return to Beaufort, South Carolina, he sent a wide selection of books which formed the nucleus of a library, which Dr. Hawks described as “a source of never-failing delight to the children.”²²

The approach of summer brought with it “so much sickness and lassitude as to make the suspension of the school necessary for a season,” Esther explained to readers of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. “Examinations passed off quite satisfactorily,” Esther noted in her diary on June 29, 1865, “The school behaved admirably, said their lessons, sang their songs and recited their ‘pieces’ to the delight of everyone; Several officers were present and addressed the school. The house was well filled with the friends of the children. An orderly Sergt. from the 54. Mass. here in hospital made the *best* speech of the occasion— forcible and right to the point. I felt proud of him! The children looked bright and clean and some of them were beautifully dressed! Today has been the great day for them. I have long promised them a pic-nic— so great preparations have been on foot for it— and they have all enjoyed themselves till *tired*. The table of refreshments was abundant and looked as nice as any I ever saw. It was spread in the gallery and beautifully decorated with flowers. A soldier with his violin soon made his appearance and little feet and older ones too, danced till weary. Capt. Spaulding of the 7th U.S.C.T. came in and soon after I got a match started, he leading off with little Carrie Williams, I next with Julia and Charley Murry. The children were delighted! Then after another

20. *Ibid.*, May 31, 1864.

21. *Ibid.*, June 29, 1864.

22. Hawks, “Freedman’s School”.

dance three little children aged 5 years sang 'John Brown,' all joining in the chorus. After refreshments they played and danced till dark, a refreshing, shower having given us all new vigor. It has been one of the hottest days of the season."²³

"Amen!!!" It was thus that Esther Hawks closed out her school report. Running the school, as she had repeatedly made clear, had been a gratifying but frustrating experience. It was irritating in part because Dr. Hawks believed that she was "wasting time" that might have otherwise been devoted to her medical practice. It was frustrating also because, as Esther's friend Colonel James Beecher of the Thirty-fifth United States Colored Troops told her, "It has been a *thankless* work— no one knows or cares anything about it or appreciates the amount of labor or of good you have done here."²⁴ It was also disappointing to Esther that her aspirations for fostering racial integration were thwarted. Despite such considerations, Dr. Hawks concluded, "I feel an inward consciousness of duty faithfully performed and I know it is not all in vain."²⁵

The Jacksonville school started by Esther Hill Hawks reopened in the fall of 1864, though with a new teacher. A tuition-free school for white children was also opened supported by the nearby military post fund and by a special tax imposed on traders.

Dr. Hawks wrote in February 1865: "The greater portion of the whites belong to the lowest class or 'Crackers' and are miserably poor and degraded— ignorant and filthy it is seldom we find one who can read, and instead of appreciating the free school priveledge, many of them refuse to go, and in visting among them they offer all kinds of poor excuses for not going. The colored people are far ahead in thrift and industry— tho' many of them are about as dirty— but there is more life— animation— elasticity about them so more hope for their future."²⁶

Within months of making these observations, Esther Hawks took to bewailing the "demoralization" of freedmen. So did others who had devoted themselves to the dream of uplifting the status of former slaves through education. Quickly the idea of integrated

23. Hawks diaries, June 29, 1864.

24. *Ibid.*, June 19, 1864.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, February 5, 1864.

education yielded to the hope of adequate, albeit racially-segregated, education. By 1877 when radical reconstruction was terminated in Florida and elsewhere in the South, a lack of funding and public interest, along with a myriad of other factors had eroded even that hope. Public schools in Jacksonville would not be integrated– or more accurately reintegrated– until the academic year 1970-1971.