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“THE NEST OF VILE FANATICS”: WILLIAM N. SHEATS AND THE ORANGE PARK SCHOOL

by JOE M. RICHARDSON

WHEN the Orange Park Normal and Industrial School opened October 7, 1891, probably none of the excited participants imagined that within three years the school would incur the wrath of Florida's superintendent of public instruction and would result in the passage of a state law prohibiting teaching blacks and whites under the same roof. Rather, the school began with enthusiastic community support and the expectation that its influence would reach throughout upper Florida and lower Georgia.¹ The Orange Park school was founded by the American Missionary Association of New York, the most significant benevolent society then engaged in educating blacks. The association had been canvassing Florida for a suitable school location when Orange Park offered to give it ample grounds in the center of town. An AMA visit revealed an attractive village on the St. Johns River with a nucleus of sympathetic Northerners, and an urgent need for a school for black youths. The AMA gratefully accepted the proffered land and in early 1891 began constructing school buildings.²

When classes began the campus consisted of ten lovely acres of oak and orange trees, several classrooms, two dormitories, and a two-story industrial building. Later a "handsome" chapel was added. Amos N. Farnham, previously principal at Atlanta and Claflin universities, directed an excellent faculty of experienced northern teachers. The AMA's stated aim for Orange Park was "to nourish a healthy growth, so far as we shall have means to do so, and to send out new influences from this . . .

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1. *American Missionary*, XLV (November 1891), 384, XLVI (February 1892), 46-47, XLVI (April 1892), 125; Orange Park *Clay Today*, February 13, 1979; Arch Fred Blakey, *Parade of Memories: A History of Clay County, Florida* (Green Cove Springs, 1976), 145-46.
2. *American Missionary*, XLVI (April 1892), 125, XLVI (May 1892), 52; *Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of Florida for the Two Years Ending June 30, 1896* (Tallahassee, 1897), 184.

school which shall be educative and helpful for a large section of the country." It intended to offer education to all who wished to attend, but to focus on preparing black teachers. The AMA believed that "the only true ground to take—the only one sanctioned by the Constitution and by Christianity" was that blacks were entitled to equal rights in both church and state. They must be prepared for the exercise of those rights, thus the importance of training black teachers. The AMA, though non-sectarian, stressed religion as well as academics. The school was "a great deal more than a place for mental development," as youths were instructed in "all things essential to manhood and womanhood." It made "the spiritual force dominant."³

Orange Park Normal and Industrial opened in October 1891 with twenty-six students, sixteen of whom were boarders. Within four months the number had grown to seventy-eight, and the dormitories were almost full. In the fall of 1892 there were 116 students, including some from out of state. A number of the new pupils were in the higher grades which, the AMA thought, showed that the school was "attracting the attention of intelligent as well as appreciative patrons." Certainly the course offerings and faculty compared favorably with any of Florida's normal schools. In addition to the usual subjects taught in grammar and normal classes, Orange Park gave courses in stenography, typing, agriculture, horticulture, and printing.⁴

Closing exercises revealed the type of education offered. The 1892 exercises began with an educational sermon on Sunday night. On Monday evening the literary society presented recitations, essays, and a debate. Tuesday morning was spent with oral reviews. On Tuesday afternoon, among other class exercises, botany students analyzed the Spanish bayonet and the poison flower. One classroom was devoted to the display of needle work, maps, and drawings. During the evening, visitors were treated to an original colloquy on Florida farming. The 1893 closing exercises included entertainment by the girls' Longfellow Society and the boys' Lyceum, a concert, oral reviews,

3. *American Missionary*, XLVI (November 1892), 350, XLVII (October 1893), 309; *The Forty-Sixth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association and the Proceedings at the Annual Meeting held in Hartford, Conn., October 25th to 27th, 1892* (New York 1892), 25.

4. *Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1896*, 184; *American Missionary*, XLVI (April 1892), 125, XLVI (November 1892), 350.

rhetorical exercises, a presentation of Tennyson's *Enoch Arden*, and a manual instruction exhibit. The latter consisted of freehand and mechanical drawings, relief maps, classified botanical specimens, and entomological drawings. By 1894 the AMA could proudly and accurately claim that "this young school is doing a work of inestimable value. On the very spot, where less than a generation ago gangs of slaves toiled under the overseer's lash, and within rifle-shot of the plantation whipping post, their children are now developing into worthy" citizens, and "are growing up into an enlightened Christian manhood and womanhood."⁵

By 1894 the Orange Park Normal and Industrial School had an outstanding faculty of ten and a growing reputation for both normal and industrial training. Its students won more than thirty prizes and honorable mentions for exhibitions at the Southern Florida Fair at Orlando in 1894. One graduate was now an instructor of mechanical industries at "a prominent" Georgia school for black youths. The school had won "high commendation" from even prejudiced and unfriendly sources. Moreover, it was the only school for miles around that was conducted with any regularity and efficiency.⁶ As a result, even though it was a school for blacks, a few local whites began to send their children to Orange Park. As white confidence in the school increased so did white enrollment. The AMA did not solicit white students, but its schools had always been open to all races, and whites were warmly welcomed. Indeed, teachers paid tuition for some of the poorer white students, including two bright youngsters of a crippled father who lived in a tent with a large family, and the son of an invalid white washerwoman. By 1894 there were thirty-five white children in attendance. Unfortunately, Orange Park's excellence and accessibility which encouraged white patronage contributed to its eventual decline.⁷

In 1893 William N. Sheats, "Florida's little giant of educa-

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5. *American Missionary*, XLVI (July 1892), 234, XLVII (September 1893), 282-83, XLVIII (July 1894), 263.
 6. *Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1896*, 188-89; New York *Independent*, quoted in *American Missionary*, XLIX (September 1895), 287.
 7. Wali R. Kharif, "The Refinement of Racial Segregation in Florida After the Civil War" (Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1983), 183-84; *Jacksonville Florida Times-Union*, June 21, 1896; *American Missionary*, XLIX (September 1895), 287.

tion," became superintendent of public instruction.⁸ His wide experience as a teacher and as superintendent of education for Alachua County had properly prepared him for that position, and considerable progress was made in education during his tenure. He even displayed "the type of paternalistic racism that allowed blacks some opportunity," but he also personified the spirit of white supremacy that insisted upon strict segregation and no political rights for blacks. He quarrelled with President Thomas DeS. Tucker of the State Normal and Industrial College for Colored Students in Tallahassee because Sheats believed Tucker placed too much emphasis on academics. And Sheats was an implacable foe of interracial education. As a delegate to the Florida Constitutional Convention of 1885, he had written section 12 which declared that whites and blacks could not be taught together. It was only a matter of time before he attacked the Orange Park school.⁹

Sheats lost little time after his election in making his racial views public. In his first report he claimed that socially blacks were "different being[s]." This sentiment, he continued, "is right, philosophy and the . . . unwritten edict of God endorse it, and it will live, let others think and act to suit them best." Sheats added that "any effort to enforce mixed education of the races . . . would forever destroy the public school system at one swoop," and he warned northern benevolent societies against such activity. He even refused to employ anyone educated in mixed schools. In reply to an application from an Oberlin graduate he wrote, "let me be very frank with you. I have it

8. For more on Sheats's career, see Elizabeth S. Davidson, "Family, Education, Religion, Politics, Birth, Philosophy of Life, Things Accomplished, Achievements, Disappointments, and Many Instances in the Life of William Nicholas Sheats, Superintendent of Education," in William N. Sheats Papers, Microfilm, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville; *Florida School Journal*, V (June 1892), 10-13, Oswald S. Parker, "William N. Sheats, Florida Educator" (Master's thesis, University of Florida, 1949).

9. Arthur O. White, "State Leadership and Black Education in Florida, 1876-1976," *Phylon* XLII (June 1981), 170-71; Leedell W. Neyland and John W. Riley, *The History of Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University* (Gainesville, 1963) 35, 37-38, 43; *Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of Florida for the Two Years Ending June 30, 1894* (Tallahassee, 1895), 44; W. N. Sheats to C. F. Kemp, September 11, 1897, Superintendent of Public Instruction Letterbook, February 25, 1895 to September 25, 1897, 400, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee, Florida (cited hereafter as SPI Letterbook).

from good authority that Oberlin College is a school where both the whites and negroes are educated. If this is true, I do not want any Oberlin graduates . . . as teachers in the schools of Florida."¹⁰ Still Sheats did not attack the Orange Park school until after Clay County residents brought it to his attention.

In January 1894 W. A. Benedict informed Sheats that white teachers were instructing blacks at the Orange Park Normal and Industrial School. Sheats hastened to reply that "I agree with you perfectly in the matter of leaving the education of the negro to the negroes, under the direction and assisted by the state. I am free to confess," he added, "that I want the A.M.A. to keep hands off in Florida." He reminded Benedict that as Alachua County superintendent he had prohibited whites teaching blacks. Ordinarily such teachers, Sheats said, were racial incendiaries attempting to indoctrinate blacks with ideas calculated to make them unfit for residence among whites. Apparently Sheats at first was unaware that Orange Park students were mixed and was concerned primarily with white teachers instructing black students. After hearing rumors to the contrary he wrote principal Amos W. Farnham, asking if "white and negro pupils eat, room, recite and associate together in your school without distinction as to race or color?" and if "in the boarding department white and negro girls room together without distinction as to race?" The letter did not appear particularly threatening. Sheats revealed none of his thoughts regarding mixed education, simply telling Farnham that he realized his school was a "private affair," but wished to be able either to deny or affirm the rumors. It is "for this reason, and this reason alone, I address my inquiry to you" Sheats wrote.¹¹

Farnham correctly perceived Sheats's inquiry as a threat and couched a cautious reply. Orange Park was a private school for blacks, Farnham said, but "we do not refuse anyone on account of race," our "latch-string is out to the public." Although the school was mixed, Farnham revealed that numerous concessions had been made to southern mores. All teachers and students ate in one dining room, teachers at tables separate from all, and

10. Parker, "William N. Sheats," 97; *Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction*, 1894, 70; Sheats to Mrs. A. S. Wilkerson, January 25, 1894, Sheats to M. M. Dinyman, March 16, 1894, SPI Letterbook, 232, 294.

11. Sheats to W. A. Benedict, January 23, 1894, Sheats to A. W. Farnham, February 9, 1894, SPI Letterbook, 225-27, 254.

black and white students at different tables. Teachers rooms were separate from all students, and whites "do not and have not in any instance roomed with Negro pupils. As a rule all white students room on separate floors." Students of the same grade were taught together, and they attended chapel collectively, but tended to segregate themselves by rows. Black and white girls, Farnham said, were uniformly kind to each other, but were not seen playing, walking, or sitting together. "Our boys are less exclusive especially in their sports. They play baseball, 'shinney,' marbles and other games together." Farnham reminded Sheats that the Orange Park institution had a fine corps of teachers, some of whom were connected with people of more than state reputation, and invited him to visit the school. Sheats did not accept Farnham's invitation to visit and took no immediate action, but he apparently was determined to destroy the school as it then existed.¹²

The bitterly cold winter of 1894-1895 destroyed many orange trees around Orange Park. A Jacksonville paper reported that "the beautiful, rich green leaves have turned a russet brown, while the grove has the appearance of a burned district." This disaster portended a calamitous year for Orange Park Normal and Industrial School. B. D. Rowlee, the new principal, had begun the fall session with trepidation; he feared the school had not heard the last of William N. Sheats. Then the ravaged orange crop took jobs away from numerous already impoverished families. Only northern benevolence kept many students, including several whites, in school. It was a winter fraught with self-sacrifice. Among those assisted were two black children of a hardworking, but disabled fisherman, who rowed across Lake Tulula every day to school even in rough, cold weather. Students, too poor to go home for Christmas vacation, were given a tree, presents, and dinner by the faculty. But the freeze, though serious, proved less damaging to the school than the plans of Superintendent Sheats.¹³

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12. Sheats to A. W. Farnham, February 9, 1894, A. W. Farnham to W. N. Sheats, February 28, 1894, SPI Letterbook, 254, 276-77.
 13. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, January 8, 1895; *The Forty-Ninth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association and the Proceedings at the Annual Meeting, Held in Detroit, Mich., October 22 to 24, 1895* (New York, 1895), 52; *American Missionary*, XLIX (August 1895), 263-64, XLIX (September 1895), 287.

Soon after his correspondence with Farnham, Sheats began to lobby for legislation to force Orange Park school to conform to his views. The Florida Constitution prohibited mixed public schools, but it was not illegal for whites to teach blacks. Sheats told the legislature it was time to protect educated blacks in the right to teach their own race. He asked for a law prohibiting "in both public and private schools, any but negroes teaching schools for negroes," except in state summer institutes. More significantly he asked for legislation against unsegregated schools. He reminded the legislature that blacks were prohibited by law and the Constitution from intermarrying or attending public schools with whites. He advised that the statute preventing amalgamation be fortified by making it "a penal offense to teach whites and negroes in the same schools in either public, private or benevolent institutions." The legislature ignored Sheats's first request, but in May 1895, it easily passed a law making it illegal "for any individual, body of individuals, corporation or association to conduct within this state any school of any grade, public, private or parochial wherein white persons and negroes shall be instructed or boarded within the same building, or taught in the same class, or at the same time by the same teachers." The penalty for violating the law was a fine of up to \$500 or imprisonment in the county jail for three to six months for every offense.¹⁴

In response to the Sheats's law the AMA printed an editorial in its journal entitled, "Poor Florida." "There was a 'cold spell in Florida last winter,'" the *American Missionary* read, "and the ice entered some peoples' hearts. When the Legislature assembled a fever had succeeded the chill." Under the influence of these mixed reactions the representatives had passed a disgraceful law. The association belittled the legislature by relating an incident "vouched for by the Florida *Times-Union*." A bill was introduced providing for the killing of rabid dogs. An older member rose and opposed the bill with great gravity on the ground that he saw no reason why "rabbit" dogs should be slaughtered any sooner than other types of dogs. He had a rabbit dog himself. His speech was followed by others detailing the glowing tributes

14. *Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1894*, 71; Florida, *Acts and Resolutions, 1895* (Tallahassee, 1895), 96-97; Sheats to J. C. Hartzwell, June 14, 1895, SPI Letterbook, 27.

of rabbit dogs and the bill was killed. The AMA blamed the law on ignorant and misguided legislators and professed to see opposition to the statute among some Florida whites: "a dark cloud of shame hovers over them, and the air is mephitic." Some Floridians were conscience-stricken, the AMA added. The association was engaging in wishful thinking; an overwhelming majority of Florida whites approved the law. The AMA did, however, receive sympathetic support from several liberal northern journals. The *Advance*, a Chicago journal, condemned "Florida's disgraceful Sheats' law" which had been "specifically designed for the teachers and supporters of Orange Park Academy." The New York *Independent* claimed that Sheats wished to destroy the Orange Park school in order to prevent the raising up of "Colored men and women who should in time be fit to compete with white teachers." The AMA quietly concluded to defy the Sheats's law.¹⁵

Northern criticism seemed only to make Sheats more aggressive in expressing his racial philosophy. When the secretary of the Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church wrote asking if the law was intended to affect any school except Orange Park, Sheats answered that he would not discuss the question with her if she was "a social equality addict" for he could not be "genteel and deferential" to such a woman. Rather he launched into a tirade against mixed schools. There was no doubt that he saw unsegregated schools as leading to interracial marriage. "The preservation of the Caucasian blood (the purity of it) should be the highest duty of every American," he wrote. Sheats could think "of no greater crime against nature than the forcing of minor children into school and necessarily into social relations with that [black] people." In another letter Sheats claimed that "those of us who love the Anglo-Saxon race and this great American republic are willing to do almost anything to preserve race purity." You must know, he added, "what must be the final result of your nefarious doctrine of co-education and of social equality."¹⁶

15. *American Missionary*, XLIX (August 1895), 251, XLIX (November 1895), 346-47, the *Advance*, quoted in *American Missionary*, L (June 1896), 180; New York *Independent*, quoted in *American Missionary*, XLIX (August 1895), 251.
16. Sheats to S. Y. Whetstone, September 18, 1895 quoted in Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, October 7, 1895, Sheats to J. C. Hartzwell, July 2, 1895, quoted in Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, September 5, 1895.

Since Orange Park was the only school in the state with mixed pupils, Sheats singled it out for special condemnation. It was a "social and moral blotch" and a "vile encroachment upon our social and moral system." "What can be the ulterior design of these fanatical equalitists," he raged, "unless it be miscegenation? That is their hope, or are they idiots, for any people educated and taught from infancy that they are equal will intermarry." Since the editor of the *American Missionary* was outraged by the law, Sheats suggested he "must have some hard old cases that he wishes to pair off into some respectable negro family." The AMA, Sheats charged, sought "to subvert the wisdom of the All wise God" who had failed to create the races equal "and no more designed that they should be so considered and treated in social and marital relations than he intended that the gorilla should be so esteemed and treated." At its best, Sheats claimed, "the AMA educated blacks into dreamy and impractical failures and filled them with notions and aspirations never to be realized, namely, wealth, position and white companionship."¹⁷

Sheats made it clear before school began in 1895 that the "antimiscegenation" law, as it was being called in Florida, would be enforced. He printed "several threatening manifestoes" detailing the terrors that would befall teachers if they roomed or ate with black students or taught them in classes with whites. He promised that he would prevent the continuing of the Orange Park school as it had been conducted, law or no law, even if the Supreme Court of the United States should pronounce "against it."¹⁸ The AMA ignored the threats, began classes, and waited for teachers to be arrested. It clearly intended to "test the question whether righteousness" was criminal. "We do not believe that such legislation as is the expression of human prejudice or human passion, when it sets its foot on the sanctities of justice is really law," the Association stated, "and we believe that such legislation, when it stands in the way of Christian work, is to be lawfully opposed. We have put our hand to the plow, and we shall plow the furrow through even though it takes us from Florida to Washington." The AMA was determined to maintain

17. Sheats's statement in Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, October 5, 1895.

18. Sheats also pledged that if the courts decided against his bill he would lead a movement to amend the State Constitution to cease all appropriations to black schools except from taxes paid by blacks.

its "Civil rights and Christian privileges." Initially attendance at Orange Park was small as some had been frightened away, but the faculty confidently said that new students with "new courage" were applying and the school would soon be full.¹⁹

Closing the school proved more difficult than Sheats had anticipated. The attorney general of the state advised that nothing could be done until a grand jury met to indict offenders. Dissatisfied with this, Sheats wrote the Clay County district attorney and other county officials urging them to initiate action against the school. It would take some time for the case to go to court, Sheats explained, and the situation was too serious to permit delay; the school must be closed immediately. Sheats claimed he did not so much object to whites teaching blacks, "if it suits their taste and olfactories," but he strenuously objected "to their injuring innocent" white children by enticing them into the school. It was criminal, he added, to teach young white girls in such circumstances, and he believed the state was obligated to prevent it. "Aside from the fact that some of them may intermarry with negroes a *social taint will attach*" to them which they could never overcome. "In the estimation of decent people, not under the spell of fanaticism, they would be under the law of society something akin to illegitimate." Sheats wished to break up "the nest of vile fanatics at Orange Park" by attacking now. Officials could "at least annoy" teachers and patrons so much they would close the school. "My idea," he continued, "is to prosecute every teacher and every patron *white* and colored separately until anyone would be afraid to violate the law."²⁰

Sheats managed to stir up further animosity among several already irate Clay countians, but there was more grumbling than action. Indictments were not handed down until April 6, 1896. Four days later Principal Rowlee, five teachers, three white patrons, and the local Congregational minister were arrested for violating the Sheats's law. The minister was not on the faculty, but he had conducted a Bible class in the school building with both black and white students. Those arrested were released on bail before ever being placed in jail. After the arrests the AMA

19. *American Missionary*, XLIX (November 1895), 346-47, XLIX (December 1895), 380; *New York Times*, September 29, 1895.

20. Sheats to W. E. Parmenter, Jr., November 22, 1895, Sheats to P. C. Fisher, November 25, 1895, SPI Letterbook, 52-53, 57; State Board of Education Minutes, January 6, 1896, 12, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee, Florida.

assumed its teachers would be safe until the law could be tested in court, and the Orange Park school continued as before. On May 4 State Attorney Augustus G. Hartridge instructed the sheriff to investigate, and if teachers were still in violation, to arrest and rearrest them as long as the school continued. Teachers were informed they would be arrested daily and new bail would be required each day. Since it was impossible for teachers and their patrons to raise that much bail money the school was closed for the remainder of the school term. Sheats had at last succeeded in closing the Orange Park school. The AMA declared, however, that the school would reopen the following year.²¹

Initially, Sheats seemed to have won a resounding victory over the hated "miscegenationist" school. The Orange Park school was closed, and the superintendent's popularity, at least among some Floridians, had soared. The Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union* attributed his renomination for superintendent of public instruction in 1896 largely to the Sheats's law. "The fanatics who aim ultimately at miscegenation in the South had as well make up their mind that they will have to submit to the law of the state," the *Florida Times-Union* said after Sheats's nomination. Moreover, national sentiment seemed to favor Sheats. Soon after the teachers had been arrested the United States Supreme Court accepted the policy of separate but equal accommodations in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. After citing the case, the *Times-Union* gleefully proclaimed that "the religious fanatics" who were fighting the Sheats's law were on "a wild goose chase. . . . We cannot see how the decision leaves a ray of hope for those who attack the law." Nevertheless, the AMA engaged the Jacksonville attorneys Horatio Bisbee, a former Republican congressman from Florida, and Clement D. Rinehart, a recent graduate of Yale Law School to oppose the Sheats's law. Attorney Rinehart vowed that the "case would be fought every inch" from start to finish. The AMA announced that many contribu-

21. Copy of Indictment, April 6, 1896, Records of the Fourth Judicial Circuit of Florida, Clay County Courthouse, Green Cove Springs, Florida; *American Missionary*, L (May 1896), 146, L (June 1896), 181; Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, June 2 1, 1896; *The Fiftieth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association, and the Proceedings at the Annual Meeting Held in Boston, Mass., October 20th to 22d, 1896* (New York, 1896), 15; Clay County Circuit Court Minutes, No. 2, 293, Records of the Fourth Judicial Circuit of Florida, Clay County Courthouse.

tions were being received to assist in taking the case to the United States Supreme Court if necessary.²²

The Sheats's case produced no great courtroom drama. The Fourth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida convened in October 1896 at Green Cove Springs with Judge R. M. Call presiding. On October 21, Bisbee and Rinehart moved that the indictment against the Orange Park teachers be quashed. It should be voided, the attorneys claimed, because the title of the act was too narrow to cover its contents as it was restricted to black and white youths and the law included all blacks and whites; the law created a crime where none existed; it went beyond the police powers of the state; it abridged the natural laws of property, personal association, and contract, thus conflicting with the Fourteenth Amendment; it unlawfully discriminated against teachers, laying restrictions not placed on persons of other professions and businesses; and it was based solely on color and thereby infringed the Fourteenth Amendment. Judge Call accepted the contention that the title was not broad enough to cover the acts' contents and quashed the indictments. The case never went to jury. In the midst of the AMA annual meeting in Boston on October 22, a telegram arrived which read: "Sheats' law this day declared unconstitutional and void." The spontaneous outburst of clapping, cheering, and waving of handkerchiefs "made such a scene as is seldom witnessed in any audience." The Orange Park school was soon reopened without distinction to race or color. "This has been done in no aggressive spirit," the AMA said, "but as being simply in accordance with our privilege and under the advice of our attorney in Florida."²³

Sheats was obviously displeased with Judge Call's decision and made an impassioned plea to the 1897 legislature to close Orange Park school. He had facts, he said, to show that white attendance at the school was not confined to professors' children and the local population. White youth who were "coddled" into attending that institution needed "the protection of the strong arm of the state." No white Floridian aware that a white student

22. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, June 21, 1896; Rowland H. Rerick, *Memoirs of Florida*, 2 vols (Atlanta, Ga., 1902), I, 137-38, 441-442.

23. Copy of motion to quash indictment, October 21, 1896, in records of the Fourth Judicial Circuit of Florida, Clay County Courthouse; *New York Times*, October 23, 24, 1896; Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, October 23, 1896; *American Missionary*, L (December 1896), 379, LI (February 1897), 38.

had been educated at Orange Park, Sheats added, would allow them to teach their children or become social equals. "So let us fail not to protect" white youths at Orange Park "against the social and business ostracism that await them." Just as the state had undertaken to prohibit whites from intermarriage and amalgamation "so let it act in this case." He asked the legislature to amend the 1895 act "so that this school can be compelled to close its doors to white patronage or disband."²⁴ Such a bill was passed by the house but surprisingly failed in the senate. The AMA in the *American Missionary* thanked the "many noble citizens of Florida" for this change of heart and added that it might also be under obligation to "the larger mind and longer sight" of Governor William D. Bloxham.²⁵

The legislature's failure to reenact the Sheats's law did not stop the superintendent's campaign against unsegregated education. In 1897 he reminded a supporter that the 1895 law was still in force "as no one had declared it unconstitutional but *one* circuit judge, possibly for political influence." Even without the law, he said, the Constitution prohibited mixing in public schools. The law was aimed at private and parochial schools. An 1897 trip to Milwaukee made Sheats "more determined than ever to protect the schools of Florida for all time, if it is possible, against the abominable mixed schools which I witnessed." He was especially appalled to find blacks in Milwaukee occasionally teaching white children.²⁶

Although Sheats was unable to destroy Orange Park Normal and Industrial School in 1895, he inflicted severe damage and it ultimately closed its doors. Orange Park continued to operate for a few years, but with few white students. The furor over the Sheats's law effectively intimidated most white parents. Then in 1906, Clay County began a high school at Green Cove Springs for white students, and soon thereafter a school was opened for whites at Orange Park. There was now less reason for white youths to attend the AMA school. In 1911 the Orange Park School Chapel was burned in what the AMA claimed was "a

24. *Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1896*, 51-52.

25. *American Missionary*, LI (September 1897), 213; *Florida House Journal, 1897*, 426-27, 1019.

26. Sheats to Mrs. V. P. Williams, July 17, 1897, Sheats to C. F. Kemp, September 11, 1897, Sheats to J. L. Boone, September 17, 1897, SPI Letterbook, 222-23, 400, 447-48.

vicious but unsuccessful attempt to destroy the whole plant." The main school buildings were saved, but the association was becoming discouraged about its future success at Orange Park.

In the meantime Sheats had been voted out of office. Ironically, the superintendent, who had used race prejudice so effectively to his advantage, lost the 1904 election on the same issue. In 1903 Booker T. Washington was invited to speak to a racially mixed audience at the Gainesville courthouse. Even though the crowd was segregated, Washington's presence angered many whites, and since Sheats apparently had approved the invitation, some of the venom was aimed at him. He lost the race for superintendent of public instruction in 1904.²⁷ He won again in 1912. The following year, with Sheats's support, the legislature passed a law prohibiting whites to teach "negroes in negro schools." The AMA declared the law "so shameful and vicious that no effort should be spared to have it declared unconstitutional and invalid." But national sentiment made a successful appeal unlikely. In December 1913 the AMA announced that the Orange Park Normal and Industrial School had been closed by adverse legislation, "appeal from which has not yet been made." It took eighteen years, but Sheats finally had rid Florida of the "miscegenationist school."²⁸

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27. *Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of Florida for the Two Years Ending June 30, 1904* (Tallahassee, 1905), 263; *Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of Florida for the Two Years Ending June 30, 1910* (Tallahassee, 1911), XLVI; *The Sixty-Fifth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association and the Proceedings at the Annual Meeting Held in Chicago, Illinois, October 17 to 19th, 1911* (New York, 1911), 16.
28. Arthur O. White, "Booker T. Washington's Florida Incident, 1903-1904," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, LI (January 1973), 230; W. N. Sheats [comp.] *Digest of the Laws of the State of Florida With the Regulations of the State Board of Education and the Instruction Forms of the Department of Education* (Tallahassee, 1915), LXXXVII; *American Missionary*, LXVII (October 1913), 409; *The Sixty-Eighth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association and the Proceedings at the Annual Meeting, Held in Providence, R. I., Oct. 20th to 22nd, 1914* (New York, 1914), 14.