

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON AFRICAN AMERICAN EDUCATION

Early Schooling of African Slaves (1700s)

A few formalized attempts were made during the colonial period to educate nonwhite Americans and the poor. These so-called charity schools were usually organized by religious institutions or funded by philanthropic societies, and sometimes wealthy individuals. Eighteenth-century Williamsburg was home to two such schools: the Brafferton School (1723–1777) at the College of William and Mary, which was designed to convert Native American youth to Christianity and give them a basic education, and the Bray School (1760–1774) funded by the English philanthropic group known as the Associates of Dr. Bray, which offered slave and free black children instruction in reading, writing, and Church of England catechism. Girls also received instruction in knitting and sewing. The school closed after the death of its only schoolmistress, Ann Wager.

Apprenticeships (1700s–1800s)

African slaves and free blacks were apprentices and learned a trade such as blacksmithing, carpentry or shoemaking. Even though the African slaves had mastered a trade, they still did not have their freedom. An apprenticeship was a legal arrangement by which a young person agreed to serve an adult for a specified period of time to learn his or her trade. As part of the apprenticeship contract, the master provided food, clothing, shelter and instruction in reading, writing, arithmetic (the “three R’s”) and the “art and mystery” of the trade.

Common and Segregated Schools (1800s–1900s)

Not all children could attend common schools together. Schooling was far less available to African Americans and Native Americans than to whites. Before the Civil War, free African Americans living primarily in cities in the North and upper South were permitted to attend school, but they were often segregated into separate and usually inferior facilities. Many of these free blacks formed their own schools taught by African American teachers. While it was not against the law to educate slaves in the colonial period, they were generally denied formal instruction. In the wake of Nat Turner’s 1831 slave rebellion in Virginia, however, Southerners began legally prohibiting the education of slaves.

The education so long denied was highly prized by these former slaves and their children. Over the next decades (1860s–1890s), literacy rates among African Americans jumped from 5 to 70 percent. Public schools in the South increased in number after the Civil War, but African-American students and white students were not allowed to attend school together. Black schools were usually poorly equipped and maintained. African Americans continued to face discrimination and exclusion well into the twentieth century.