Class of 1884: Black education in Louisville and the inaugural graduating class of Central colored high school.

Jordan Tierre Jackson-Collins

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CLASS OF 1884: BLACK EDUCATION IN LOUISVILLE AND THE INAUGURAL GRADUATING CLASS OF CENTRAL COLORED HIGH SCHOOL

By

Jordan Tierre Jackson-Collins
B.A., University of Kentucky, 2014

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences
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for the Degree of

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May 2024
CLASS OF 1884: BLACK EDUCATION IN LOUISVILLE AND THE INAUGURAL GRADUATING CLASS OF CENTRAL COLORED HIGH SCHOOL

By

Jordan Tierre Jackson-Collins

A Thesis Approved on

April 11, 2024

by the following Thesis Committee:

____________________________
W. S. Tkweme

____________________________
Ahmad R. Washington

____________________________
Ricky Jones
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Tree, my pops, who remains the most inquisitive and intellectually sound person I know; Tenise, my mother and my first best friend, who fashioned my love for learning at an early age; Chanel’, my loving wife, my rock and confidante, who saw something in me long before I began seeing anything in myself; Dr. Tkweme, who showed me, very meticulously, how graduate study should go; to young Parker, who has the world before her and should dream big; and finally, to Cashmoe and all the homies, who introduced me to the world and gave me the game.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to those who extended their time, energy, or conversation throughout the many phases of this study. Central High School and its wonderful librarian, Ms. Adrian Layne, are absolutely undivorceable from any fruit it may bear—by allowing me access to the what I have taken to call Central’s hidden archive, its unprocessed collection of school documents and other materials that happen to be as old as the school itself, I have been able to introduce first-hand commentary from 19th century black high school students themselves (an important and heretofore missing element of the rich and extensive written history of black education in Louisville).

The University of Louisville’s Archives and Special Collections folks were extremely helpful in both exposing me to relevant local literature and pointing me in the right direction in terms of chasing down other archival material in the city. Here, the Louisville’s Western Library and its African American Archives Reading Room was immeasurable. The staff made themselves available to me and kept me intrigued as I perused through its African American Archives Reading Room.

Lastly, I am indebted to the University of Louisville’s Pan-African Studies department for providing me with a sound educational foundation and the more important intellectual legroom necessary to try, fail, and experiment with my own thoughts over the course of the two year Master’s program. Each class, paper, discussion, and interaction has helped me develop into a much stronger thinker than I was prior to enrolling in the program.
ABSTRACT

CLASS OF 1884: BLACK EDUCATION IN LOUISVILLE AND THE INAUGURAL GRADUATING CLASS OF CENTRAL COLORED HIGH SCHOOL

Jordan Tierre Jackson-Collins

April 11, 2024

This thesis offers both a historical analysis of the emergence of the black public school system in Louisville, Kentucky and a probe into the academic posture of 19th century black education in the state. It addresses how the early black school in Kentucky worked to shape students’ self-image and worldview by focusing on Louisville’s Central Colored High School, the first public high school for blacks in Kentucky, and more closely, its 1884 yearbook—a collection of student-essays in which each of the seven inaugural graduates wrote lengthy reports concerning their individual outlook on education, American society, and the Negro’s responsibilities as newly minted American citizens. This method brings student-voice to the forefront by offering a thematic and critical investigation of the student-essays themselves; all of which inform the Negro’s fondness for Kentucky, industriousness and black school culture, and the early black school and its affinity for Western writers and thinkers.
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INTRODUCTION

The black school is one of the few most consequential phenomena concerning black culture and identity in all of African American history. That the push for public schools for the newly freed was one of the first independent endeavors taken up by black individuals, organizations, and communities post-emancipation speaks to the import of the institution both as a vessel by which black America would seek to gain access to mainstream society and a means by which the educated Negro would lead the force in defining how blackness would look, feel, and operate for generations to come. Although black students have changed throughout the generations since, the black school has largely remained true to its 19th century roots. Thus, the policies, stated goals, resolutions and overall academic posture of the early black school and its initiatives are important points of analysis concerning the contours of the historical and contemporary black educational experience as we know it.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to identify the ways in which the late 19th century black public high school worked to shape young black students’ ideas of themselves and the world around them. Ultimately, the study seeks to answer the research question: why does 19th century black education seem to promote Western morals, values, beliefs, and principles? The goals of this study are to investigate select student-essays written in the 1884 Central Colored High School Yearbook, the inaugural graduating class of the first public high school for blacks in Kentucky; establish these students’ accounts as a reliable
proxy for the core set of beliefs inherent of the 19th century black public school; introduce the perspectives of the 19th century black high school graduate into academic discourse; and ultimately, to begin thinking about ways in which students-voice can offer useful insight about the state and stages of black education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

James Anderson explains that having been primarily fought for and established by communities of freed slaves in the American south immediately following emancipation and the ratification of the 13th and 14th amendments to the United States Constitution, the black school was a vital point of contention between two diametrically opposed parties. For many black communities, with chattel slavery a discernable relic of the past, they immediately began conceptualizing a medium by which they could make further advancements away from the centuries-old shackles of intellectual bondage. For white liberals, conservatives, educators, philanthropists, and businessmen alike (along with some blacks), public schooling for black people, if harnessed correctly, was considered a means by which white folk could not only teach the newly freed to remember and embrace their low station in the American social order, but also, to hold onto its black working class which had for centuries provided the south with a prodigious economic base. With an illiteracy rate of 90% in 1860 (Anderson, 1988, 30), the prospect of education would have a profound effect on the ways in which the black south would begin to develop a literary and intellectual tradition of its own—a class of literate middle class blacks who were to be responsible for leading the race into the realm of civic participation (Anderson, 1988, 28).
This made the idea and practice of education far more material than the mere “Three Rs” (reading, writing, and arithmetic) typical of the American school. In this context, Heather Williams suggests that education and literacy were both rhetorical devices of freedom. Working double-time to establish a sense of racial pride, literacy would also serve as a means by which African Americans, now free, could become proper American citizens. In its earliest phases, funding for black schools was inherently based upon state discretion. With this, although black schools may have been liberatory in certain aspects, many were beholden to local white power structures in ways that forced them to adhere to white curriculums and codes that spelled trouble for those who may have been caught teaching what would have been considered too racially spirited or radical for the white authority’s liking. Williams suggests that everything about black education during the late 19th century was political, making black teachers not just the messengers of racial uplift, but also, the “message” (Williams, 2009, 125) itself.

In post-emancipation Kentucky, like in other southern states, blacks showed an immediate determination for the establishment of a black public school system. Unlike most others in the region though, theirs was rooted in a state’s history which had never passed any anti-literacy laws prior to emancipation (Robinson, 2010, 71). Michelle Robinson explains that this distinct feature of Kentucky racial politics, along with its large populations of free blacks during the enslavement period and the social system which allowed enslaved blacks to mingle among them, black education in the state would find particularly fertile ground in the wake of emancipation. Although this history would not exempt the earliest black educational associations and organizations from many of the same measures of legal and vigilante white repression as their more southern
counterparts, black education in Kentucky, and namely in its largest and most industrialized city, Louisville, was home to a “unique cultural landscape” (Robinson, 2010, 65). It is here where she suggests that Louisville is an ideal city for a case-study of 19th century black education in the state.

George Wilson’s *A Century of Negro Education in Louisville, 1841-1941* is arguably the foremost resource for Louisville’s black educational history. Wilson explains that black schooling in Louisville began in 1841 (although the school was private and served only a few students) and was pushed forward in 1847 with a black school that served both free and enslaved blacks. Blacks in the state began organizing around the question of self-taxation as a means to fund public schools for Negroes in the city as early as 1866. A city charter would follow within the next few years to establish schools for Negro youth in Louisville. These are perhaps the two most pivotal achievements for black learning in the city. Both combined to create three black primary schools in Louisville by 1875, the most long-standing and prestigious being the Central Colored School.

The only account that could potentially rival Wilson’s seminal text is Ruby Wilkins Doyle’s *Recalling the Record: A Documentary History of the African-American Experience Within the Louisville Public School System (1870-1975)*. As the title suggests, her work presents 317 primary documents that track the key events, figures, and commentary pertaining to the development of public schooling for black youth in Louisville from the Reconstruction period through Jefferson County Public School’s (JCPS) implementation of school desegregation and forced busing. Made up only of
primary sources, the text offers an intimate and detailed look at the annual reports, rules, state legislation and commentary concerning the first black schools in the city.

With these and a few more pieces of local scholarship, one can see how the significance and development of the black school is generally relegated to bare historical accounts in which academics reveal important figures and dates. And while this method is useful, it lacks in providing clear and distinct insight into the mind the black students—those who were most directly affected by the ways in which the progenitors of the black public school project envisioned education as a medium for racial uplift.
CHAPTER ONE
BLACK KENTUCKY

Considering the highly recognizable traditions of slavery, segregation, and color prejudice as the most distinct motifs of the American south, Kentucky can be difficult to understand from a historic perspective. Originally “the county of ‘Kentuckee’” (Smith, 1908, 17) in Virginia, the state with the highest numbers of recorded slaves from the first US Census in 1790 through the end of the Civil War in 1865 (US Census Bureau, 82), Kentucky would gain statehood on June 1, 1792 (Library of Virginia, 2023). In a move towards white nationalism, and as a precursor to the relentless manifest destiny project on the horizon, McDougle’s Slavery in Kentucky points out that the federal government parceled out all the land that would become Kentucky, the state, by 1790 as well (McDougle, 1918, ). To this end, stakes of ownership of the newly acquired territory were awarded on one of three conditions: a “reward for military services which had been rendered in the Revolution;” an order that held “four hundred acres of land would be given to every person or family who had settled in the region before the first of January 1788;” or lastly, “treasury warrants,” in which “a person desiring land in Kentucky would appear at one of the Virginia land offices and make an entry and pay a fee amounting to about two cents per acre” (McDougle, 1918, 4-5). McDougle goes on to suggest that beyond the land itself, a key inheritance for new Kentuckians were these very principles of aristocracy, all conditional to land ownership, which stratified the
state “into three classes, the landed proprietors, their slaves, and the tenant classes of whites” (1918, 7).

There have remained strong patterns of popular and academic ambivalence from 1792 up to now that tend to sway between accentuating or softening Kentucky’s “southern” posture—patterns which, though debatable from both points of view, are further stressed by the fact that throughout the Civil War, Kentucky, a border state, was home to both Union and Confederate strongholds; the former in Frankfort, the Union capital which still stands today; the latter in Bowling Green, which lost its “capital” status in an 1862 battle with Union troops (Kentucky Historical Society, 2024). Oddly enough, although the North may have won this particular battle and ultimately the war altogether, consensus still supports the idea that “Kentucky was viewed as Southern in thought and sympathies” (University of Louisville, 2012) throughout the period. However, while this general sentiment may be true, simplified descriptions of Kentucky’s southern-ness prompt many to mistakenly qualify however southern it may have been in the same vein as South Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, or the south’s other most notorious actors.

While there is certainly some merit to the guilt by association approach, psychology teaches that heuristics, or the “rules-of-thumb that can be applied to guide decision-making based on a more limited subset of the available information” (American Psychological Association, 2017), typically sacrifices exactitude for convenience. Taking this into account then, does the “southern” classification, by default, denote wholesale anti-blackness, or were there outliers from the south? Is slavery the most important factor to an understanding of pre-Civil War southern culture, or are there more in a given
southern society that should be taken into consideration? If so, are they worthy of time and attention, or is the south’s drawn-out protection of the peculiar institution (i.e., slavery), proportionate to the speedier north, a fair stopping point? A look at Kentucky’s historically moderate stance on black learning works well to inform gaps concerning black public schooling in the south. This means that before one can begin to explore why the 19th century black school found particularly fertile ground in Kentucky, and perhaps most importantly, how these developments would influence student-identity for those of Louisville’s Central Colored High School’s class of 1884, the first black high school graduates in the state, one must have a gauge on Kentucky’s antebellum racial politics—a near singularity relative to the south’s pronounced culture of hostility towards any semblance of black intellect.

NO ANTI-LITERACY LAWS IN KENTUCKY

The curtain of ignorance strategically and methodically held over America’s slave class was perhaps the fundamental principle of slavery in the South. Blacks who were caught violating any number of its amorphous codes were subject to an entire range of torment. From 1867 to 1871 alone there were close to 120 documented incidents of white-mob violence across Kentucky varying from “two Negroes killed by mob while in civil custody” (Kentucky State Convention of Colored Citizens, 1871, 3) to a “Negro-school house burned by incendiaries in Christian County” (Kentucky State Convention of Colored Citizens, 1871, 5). According to Harvard Library’s Confronting Anti-Black Racism Project, “Between 1740 and 1867, anti-literacy laws in the United States prohibited enslaved, and sometimes free, Black Americans from learning to read or write” (Harvard Library, n.d.). This system of codes and laws, which “casts slave literacy
as a potential threat to the slave-holding colony” (Rasmussen, 2010, 201), inherently rested on the idea that the more slave communities understood, could articulate or conceive about the world around them, the more they could begin to make a well-founded case for what Frederick Douglass would call “the manhood of the Negro” (Douglass, 1854, 227); the cause of their enslaved or subordinate condition as a result of unjust, unfounded, and ultimately racist theory rather than divine Christian principle; their status as property or second-class citizens in direct contradiction to the “land of the free, home of the brave,” “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” or most explicitly, the “all men are created equal” doctrines manufactured by western academic, cultural, and political machinery.

Bearing in mind that slaves and even free blacks were generally not considered to be human beings by the white world, but rather, “descended from beasts” (Atkinson, 1905, 202), mainstream America’s perceived threat of the slave’s freedom to think and explicate for himself was far more corporeal than intellectual. While the latter certainly presented certain dangers to the establishment, these were far more preferable alternatives for white elites of the day compared to what had already begun to materialize for the slave in the US and abroad as the only viable solution to one’s enslaved condition—organized proletariat and slave violence against the master class. (Escape was always an option for the slave in theory, but where was he to successfully escape prior to 1804 and the Gradual Abolition Act?) As the fervor of 18th century class warfare began to rise on an international scale, and “the slaves might understand that they had rights, which would be fatal to the peace and well-being of the colony” (James, 1963, 22), to fully understand the weight and paranoia behind anti-literacy legislation in America, one must consider the
power of slave-revolts and how they were used by racist whites to reinforce the lopsided network of race and power in 18th and 19th century southern American society.

Although the portrait of Western slavery is generally painted in a way to make slaves appear docile, servile, happy and accommodating, and abolition as a political outcome granted by liberal whites in a sudden moment of clarity rather than one demanded by intransigent blacks over centuries, Stono’s Rebellion of 1739 and especially the Haitian Revolution of 1804 stand as two distinct examples to the contrary. Despite these two historic incidents being separated by sixty-five years and nearly 1,200 miles, they were the two most consequential events in terms of the dragnet of anti-literacy legislation that would be cast over US slave states in direct response.

US policymakers and slave owners alike understood very well that in the same way “they [Haitian slaves] had heard of the revolution [French Revolution] and had constructed it in their own image” (James, 1963, 81-82); that “revolutionary literature was circulating among them [Haitian slaves]” (James, 1963, 81-82), any impending violent struggle for black sovereignty in America would be almost wholly dependent on slaves and free black peoples first creating their own circuits of knowledge—the type that called attention to the shame and immorality of anti-blackness and an end to racial injustice; countered disparaging myths of black sub-humanism; or as seen in Walker’s Appeal, forecasted the day in which “my colour will root some of them out of the very face of the earth” (Walker, 1829, 2).

This deep fear turned obsession would materialize into what was the most recognizable impediment of 19th century southern slave societies. Although the institution continued to operate on the same tenets of violence and fear from which it was founded,
anti-literacy laws specifically reshaped the ways in which slaves and free black people would employ teaching and learning, a black cultural practice as old as American chattel slavery itself (Gomes, 1998, 2). This would force entire black communities, slave and free, into an “expansive veiled yet networked black educational world, one where black Americans said one thing and did another, meaning that the true political intentions undergirding black educational strivings were rarely on full display, given rampant antiblack violence” (Givens, 2021, 6); the mark of 19th century black learning in every sense of the word. Nonetheless, as the south moved towards becoming the most restricted educational and intellectual zone in America, Michelle Robinson’s *Public Discourse Surrounding the Development of African Americans in Louisville, Kentucky* explains that “Kentucky was one of the few states that never passes laws forbidding the education of African-American free men and women or slaves, even prior to emancipation” (Robinson, 2010, 29). Having separated from Virginia just eight years prior to the turn of the century, Kentucky’s lack of any anti-literacy legislation is further accentuated by that of its ex-political base:

> Virginia established laws aimed at disrupting black education and gatherings as early as 1804, though a refined and more direct anti-literacy law would be passed by 1819. The latter outlined “that all meetings or assemblages of slaves, or free negroes or mulattos mixing and associating with such slaves at any meeting house or houses…for teaching them READING OR WRITING, either in the day or night, under whatsoever pretext, shall be deemed and considered an UNLAWFUL ASSEMBLY.” (Givens, 2023, 54)

This means that as southern law makers and laypeople alike, shaken by the threat (real or merely perceived) of armed slave revolts, implemented legal and social restrictions for the express purpose of preventing blacks from developing any individual or widespread literacy, Kentucky, along with a couple more southern states, existed as an outlier.
As seen in the Federal Writer Project’s *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers Project*, a collection “of more than 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery and 500 black-and-white photographs of former slaves” (Library of Congress), life for most 19th century Kentucky slaves naturally revolved around the plantation—headquarters for what Heather Williams refers to as the “grape-vine telegraph which had kept them [slaves] so well informed of the ‘questions that were agitating the country’” (Williams, 2009, 9). It was also ground-zero for some of the worst atrocities committed against those found out by their master to possess the skill to read or especially to write. However, some of the tales recounted by those born into Kentucky slavery reflect the “progressive spirit of our state” (Kentucky State Colored Convention, 1885, 1). One, from Aunt Harriet Mason, “ex-slave” (Federal Writers Project, 1941, 9) born “April 14, 1847” (Federal Writers Project, 1941, 9) in Garrard County, just thirty-five miles south of Lexington, explained, “The slaves were waked up by General Gano who rang a big farm bell about four times in the morning. There was no jail on the place and I never say [sic] a slave whipped or punished in any way. I never saw a slave auctioned off. My Mistus taught all the slaves to read and write…” (Federal Writers Project, 1941, 9). Another, from Bert Mayfield, also born in Garrard County, “May, 29, 1852” (Federal Writers Project, 1941, 13), recalled: “My old Mistus Mag taught me how to read from an old national spelling book, but I did not learn to write. We had no church, but the Bible was read to us on Sunday afternoons by some of the white folks” (Federal Writers Project, 1941, 15). As alluded to above, records indicate though that this alone is not indicative of Kentucky culture in any comprehensive sense—black learners were in no way entirely free from white opposition. Another example. In an instance shortly after the close of the
Civil War, as white Kentuckians reeled at the idea of an open-air market for black education, “One white dissenter fired a shotgun into the schoolyard where black students and their teacher played in Kentucky” (Givens, 2021, 78). In another instance, “A Colored school exhibition at Midway [was] attacked by a mob, July, 31, 1868” (Kentucky State Convention of Colored Citizens, 1871, 2). Yet, both slave narratives above denote that although Kentucky culture was southern in principle, the idea of black literacy was not necessarily the death sentence in the Bluegrass that it was for slaves and other black folk in almost every other state in the region.

BLACK LOUISVILLE AND THE BLACK SCHOOL, 1840-1884

According to McDougle, “bearing in mind that Kentucky was a comparatively new region when it became a State…the slave increase was much more rapid for the first three or four decades than it was in the nation as a whole” (McDougle, 1918, 10). US Census data tracking the rise in Kentucky’s slave population over its first sixty years substantiates the claim:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Kentucky Slave Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1790</td>
<td>11,830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>40,343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1810</td>
<td>80,561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td>126,732</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830</td>
<td>165,213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>182,258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>210,281</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(US Census, 1850)
Per 18th and 19th century southern custom, “the family farm was the keystone of Kentucky culture” (University of Kentucky, 2005). This means that nearly all who happened to be slaves in Kentucky’s most rural areas lived their entire lives tethered to a plantation where they remained isolated from any and everything that was not directly pertinent to its day-to-day operation—least of which their free or otherwise educated “Negro” counterpart. In Louisville though, Kentucky’s largest and most industrial city, slavery looked, likely felt, and certainly operated much differently than it would for those in Kentucky’s less forgiving countryside.

As the “urban center” (Wilson, 1986, 3) of Kentucky, many slaves in mid-19th century Louisville worked as “cooks, maids, gardeners, and butlers;” free blacks in “skilled and semi-skilled occupations such as caterers, bakers, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, and cabinet makers” (Wilson, 1986, 3). Michelle Robinson explains that Louisville’s “social system of permitting slaves to dwell in an urban environment, work profitable jobs, and intermingle with a free, African-American population of significant proportion” created what she characterizes as an “atypical African American community” (Robinson, 2010, vii):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Black Population</th>
<th>Slaves</th>
<th>Free</th>
<th>Black% of City</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1810</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>484</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>36.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td>1,124</td>
<td>1,031</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>28.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830</td>
<td>2,638</td>
<td>2,406</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>4,049</td>
<td>3,420</td>
<td>619</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This unique dynamic, or the “liberal attitude on the part of the white population and a degree of educational culture on the part of some members of the negro population” (Wilson, 1986, 4), set an atmosphere which was “ripe by 1841 for the establishment of a formal educational institution conducted by and for negroes” (Wilson, 1986, 4). The Adams School, founded on December 7, 1841 (Wilson, 1986, 4) by Reverend Henry Adams, “ordained in 1825… preached in Georgia and South Carolina before coming to Louisville in 1829…talented in both English and the classic languages” (Doyle, 2005, 11), opened a private school for blacks in Louisville in “Woods’ Alley between Ninth and Tenth Streets…there were five pupils and one teacher, who was the Reverend Henry Adams…in the course of time the school increased and there were four additional teachers added…in 1864, this school was transferred to the Fifth Street Baptist Church and continued in operation until the public schools were opened” (Cabell, 1938, 17). The school was “privately supported” (Cabell, 1938, 17) by “Quaker friends of Indiana” (Doyle, 2005, 18) and exists on record as “the first movement toward the establishment of schools for the training of Negro people” (Doyle, 2005, 8) in Louisville.

Six years after this, William H. Gibson, a “well educated freedman who had come to Louisville in 1847…in the vanguard of those who worked for the establishment of free public schools for his race…a leader in the establishment of the permanent educational districts in the State” (Doyle, 2005, 9), started a private school for blacks in the basement of a church in downtown Louisville (Doyle, 2005, 8). His was known as an institution
“with instructions to teach no slaves without a written permit from their master or mistress” (Doyle, 2005, 9). Of this, Gibson recalled, “we had hundreds on file; for amid the stricture of the laws and prejudices of slave holders to Negroes learning to read and write there were Christians (white) who did not object and would give these permits” (Doyle, 2005, 10). During what was a—if not the—highpoint of the particularly restrictive nature of southern slavery (note the Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850; Library of Congress, 1850), at least two schools, taught and headed by black teachers, openly operated in Louisville for the singular motive of educating both free blacks and slaves alike—a foremost sign of the city’s “unique cultural landscape” (Robinson, 2010, 63) and a foreshadow to the 1870s local black public school boom to come.

According to Wilson, “the establishment and extension of the educational program of the Freedman’s Bureau, the opening of a number of private schools, and the agitation on the part of Negroes for public education” (Wilson, 1986, 12) marked what he considered the black public school’s “three great movements” (Wilson, 1986, 12) in Kentucky. Although each were important, the branch of the Freedman’s Bureau responsible for black schools in the state, with Clinton B. Fisk as Assistant Commissioner, was broken up by 1870 (Wilson, 1986, 14) under the impression that “the freed people should begin to learn self-reliance…the government has liberated, protected, fed, clothed, and educated you” (Wilson, 1986, 14). And of course, any private schools for black students that were established during the period would have naturally been reserved for families who could afford to send their child to school—a small minority of mid-19th century black Louisville (Hudson, 2011, 305). Of the three, the state conventions
organized by local blacks had the most lasting and profound impact on black public schools in the city.

Black Kentuckians began to officially organize themselves around the issue of education immediately following emancipation:

The African-American leadership, which consisted largely of ministers and educators throughout the state (many of who were residents of Louisville), urged the state to enact a law excising an additional tax of $2.00 to be levied against ‘every male Negro and mulatto over the age eighteen years.’ This tax would be collected in addition to, and in the same manner as, all other taxes so that the trustees of each school district ‘may cause a separate school to be taught in their district for the education of the Negro and mulatto children in said district. (Robinson, 2010, 13-14).

These meetings, first held by the Colored Men of Kentucky in March of 1866 (Colored Men of Kentucky, 1866), consisted of several conventions held between Lexington, Louisville, and Frankfort in 1867, 1869, 1871, 1873, 1877, and 1885, respectively (Colored Conventions Project, n.d.). They were held in theaters and churches and predominately headed by black reverends, the preeminent leaders of the 19th century black community and leading proxy for the inherent connectedness between the 19th century black school and black church. All six meetings featured a general focus on “how they might achieve educational, labor, and legal justice during decades when Black rights were constricting nationally and locally” (Colored Conventions Project, n.d.). Their original constitution held that “This country is indeed our home; here we intend to remain, mingling our efforts with the efforts of our white fellow citizens to sustain and perpetuate its liberties and its interests and making our destinies one in common with the destinies of all other Americans” (Colored Men of Kentucky, 1866, 25), setting the tone for future sessions which would focus exclusively on “Negro/Colored” education (1869, 1877; Colored Convention Project, n.d.). These, which “perfected an organization to
carry on the fight for the principle and had appealed to the justice of the white population in its dealings with the Negro in educational matters” (Wilson, 1986, 18), are widely credited for Louisville’s City Charter of 1870, which provided that Negro schools be established (Botkins, 2018); the Committee on Schools For Negroes in 1870, “which had been given the responsibility of selecting sites for new Negro school buildings” (Wilson, 1986, 25) in the city; the Board of Visitors of Colored Schools, “composed of nine ‘colored’ men” (Doyle, 2005, 78) whose responsibility was to “oversee the ‘colored’ schools by visiting them and reporting back to the School Board [white] to the effectiveness of the teachers and on the every functioning of the schools” (Doyle, 2005, 78); and perhaps most notably, Central Colored School, “built in the central part of the city on the northeast corner of Sixth and Kentucky Streets on a lot which had been purchased by the school board for $5,800” (Doyle, 2005, 88), dedicated on October 7, 1873 (Doyle, 2005, 88) as the first “school building…constructed for the sole purpose of public education for blacks” (Botkins, 2018) in Louisville. Although there would be two more public schools for African Americans in Louisville in its wake, the Eastern Colored School in 1874 and the Western Colored School in 1875, neither would match Central in terms of longevity, prestige, or esteem that it quickly garnered among Louisville’s black communities.

While Central opened as a primary school, its first principal, John M. Maxwell, just three years after opening, “sought and secured permission to establish an advanced class beyond the 8th grade, which he taught himself and was known as the ‘A Grade’” (Wilson, 1986, 92), or what would generally be considered today as the 9th grade (the highest available for black students in 1870s Louisville). The ‘A Grade,’ which was
thought of as “a year of preparation for the teaching profession” (Wilson, 1986, 92), embraced what historian James Anderson calls a “classical liberal curriculum” (Anderson, 1988, 67), or “leadership training” (Anderson, 1988, 28) designed to produce the “literary and professional training to develop a black intelligentsia that would fight for political and civic equality” (Anderson, 1988, 67).

This distinction set Central a world apart from the “Hampton-Tuskegee idea” (Anderson, 1988, 33), or the formidable industrial education model instituted at the onset of the black school phenomena in the post-emancipation south. Set off in 1868 by way of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in neighboring Virginia by Samuel Armstrong, and catapulted by his most accomplished alum, Booker T. Washington, this method of instruction was the “ideological antithesis of the educational and social movement of the ex-slaves” (Anderson, 1988, 33); based wholly “on the assumption that the race is ‘doomed to servitude’” (Anderson, 1988, 34). For Armstrong, Washington and others, “for two hundred and fifty years, the way for redemption of the Negro was being prepared through industrial development…in a certain way every slave plantation in the South was an industrial school” (Washington, 1903, 10-11). It was under this pretense that the first black industrial students were worked “long and hard so that they would embody, accept, and preach an ethic of hard toil or ‘the dignity of labor’” (Anderson, 1988, 34) to their prospective black students of the day.

To the contrary, Principal Maxwell leveraged his most accomplished alum, Georgia G. Moore, who was valedictorian of the ‘A Grade’ in 1882 (Wilson, 1986, 93) and thus largely “credited for the establishment of high school classes for Negroes in Louisville” (Wilson, 1986, 93). By convincing the white “school board that Negroes were
capable of such training” (Wilson, 1986, 93), the ‘A Grade,’ its emphasis on producing polished academics like Ms. Moore, and Principal J.M. Maxwell set the stage for the emergence of Central Colored High school, the first public secondary school for African Americans in Kentucky:

In 1882 the present Colored High School was organized, embracing a three years’ course of study. In this department are taught rhetoric, English and American literature, general history, physiology, natural philosophy, zoology, geology, elements of astronomy, algebra, geometry, plain trigonometry, and Latin, Roman history, Caesar, and Virgil. (Courier Journal, 1888, 23)

The black high school was naturally far less common than primary school and thus virtually inaccessible to all but a chosen few—this held true for the 19th century high school attendance across racial lines (Labaree, 1988), but as the numbers suggest, especially so for black youth in Louisville. For Central Colored High School, the number of graduates remained appropriately small throughout its first ten year period: 1884, 7; 1885, 7; 1886, 6; 1887, 7, 1888, 18; 1889, 14; 1890, 6; 1891, 20; 1892, 13; and in 1893 there was no graduating class due to the reorganization of Central’s three-year high school curriculum into that of a traditional four-year plan (Wilson, 1986, 49). Similar to other southern cities, not only was there a severe lack of educational real-estate and a shortage of qualified black teachers throughout 19th and 20th century Louisville (Johnson, 1991, 90-105), but also, high school was not yet the compulsory facet of American life that it is today. These factors of the early black high school made class-stratification a leading factor for whether black youth would have the privilege to attend—generally speaking, the more well off a prospective student’s parents or family, the more likely one could afford to commit to this new endeavor which at the time could have been considered a mere preoccupation for the masses of low-income black families. For the
few who were able to make the commitment, or those who W.E.B. DuBois would have considered the “college-bred Negro,” (DuBois, Et al., 1903, 54), virtually the only prospective careers open to high school graduates were exactly two—preaching at a black church or teaching in a black school. His study of 1,312 “college-bred Negroes” from an Atlanta conference in 1903 suggests:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>53.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clergymen</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physicians</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawyers</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Govt. Service</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Business</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmers and Artisans</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editors, Secretaries and Clerks</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DuBois, W.E.B; The Negro Problem, 1903, 52

With such an uncompromising reality for even the most privileged and educated black youth, DuBois posited that “the negro problem” (DuBois, Et al., 1903), or 19th century black America’s predicament in “the problem of developing the best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst” (DuBois, 1903, 33), made the concept of the early black high school far more intricate during the Reconstruction, Gilded, and Progressive ages than the idea exists for many
students, teachers, administrators, and parents today. On one hand, there was a plain curriculum, which correlated directly to the content students were being taught. From an instructional standpoint, there was no uniform idea for the future of black Americans as free people. In any given school there would have been a wide range of instructors with an equally diverse set of beliefs of the types of citizens black education should produce. In this sense, the textbook itself was an essential tool for racial, social, cultural, and religious conditioning.

In the earliest black classrooms, textbooks were likely to be one of two types: those written exclusively for freed slaves and those from the wider marker of common textbooks—usually thrown out, outdated versions from white schools (Butchart, 2013). The American Tract Society, who established the Freedman’s Library in 1863, published cheaply made textbooks which were often made available to southern black schools (Butchart, 2013). These would usually include flagrant insults to black readers—characterizing the race as dumb, backwards, and looking to whites to pathetically mimic their culture and values. The primary message of these texts, and those like them, were to teach black students to accept their places as field hands and servants following emancipation. There were others, such as those produced by Lydia Marie Child, who produced the *Freedman’s Book* in 1865, and the African Civilization Society, who produced the *Freedman’s Torchlight*, that sought to build racial pride through accounts of courageous black leaders and freed people as intelligent, independent, and capable of defining their own cultural standards (Butchart, 2013). The latter would rarely make their way to black students themselves, particularly in the south, where most would only have access to the more conservative variety of academic reading material. On the other, a far
more visceral or hidden curriculum, which pointed to the attitudes and lessons of high morality “classical” black teachers would have ordinarily worked to instill in their students (Butchart, 2013). With this, DuBois suggested:

It need hardly be argued that the Negro people need social leadership more than most groups…the preacher was, even before the war, the group leader of the Negroes, and the church their greatest social institution. Naturally this preacher was ignorant and often immoral, and the problem of replacing this older type by better educated men has been a difficult one…to furnish five millions and more of ignorant people with teachers of their own race and blood, in one generation, was not only a very difficult undertaking, but a very important one, in that, it placed before the eyes of almost every Negro child an attainable ideal (DuBois, 1903, 54-55)

Interpreted as such, Central Colored High School existed as the gateway to such an “attainable ideal” for black youth in Louisville from inception until JCPS began the long and arduous process of school desegregation in the 1970s (K’Meyer, 2012). (Many Louisville locals would likely argue that it still stands as such today.) Although DuBois was not born until 1868, among the first generation of natural born black American citizens, and thus would not begin to establish his position as both the leading statesman of black higher learning and most prominent adversary of men like Armstrong, Washington and other proponents of industrial education for the “Negro” until late in the 19th century, his philosophy of black education was most resemblant of the style of principal, teacher, and student who would have matriculated through the early Louisville Central Colored High School program:

If we make money the object of man-training, we shall develop money-makers but not necessarily men; if we make technical skill the object of education, we may possess artisans but not, in nature, men. Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of the schools—intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it—this is the curriculum of that Higher Education which must underlie true life. On this foundation we may build bread winning, skill of hand and quickness of brain, with never a fear lest
the child ad man mistake the means of living for the object of life. 
(DuBois, 1903, 33-34)

Therefore, Central was not only the first public high school in Kentucky to present black youth the opportunity to begin officially studying the fundamentals of reading, writing, and arithmetic at an advanced level (relative to the times), but perhaps more notably, it was the first to present a small yet noteworthy group of black high school-age youth the opportunity to develop, articulate, and document their own outlook concerning the world beyond Louisville and black people’s new place within it.

For all that has been revealed about black education in 19th century Louisville, primary accounts of student witness from Kentucky’s first public black high school have yet to be recognized by the academy and thus have gone for nearly 150 years without any significant analysis. Because of the chasm that has traditionally existed between elite research institutions and the grassroots, or the broader issue of the mishandling of black artifacts altogether, academic discourse remains dominated by intellectuals who either speak for black students or merely record the incidents that shape their educational experiences. While both are certainly useful, this void in existing scholarship is perhaps what Michel Rolph-Trouillot suggests is a distinct feature of an educational and cultural system that hinges on “the play of power in the production of alternate narratives” (Troulliot, 1995, 29). When surveying a phenomenon as intricate and intimate as the embryonic and infant stages of the black school, student witness rather than expert analysis offers the most salient look at the value systems and beliefs therein. Minutes recorded at black Education Conventions, newspaper articles covering opening days, commentary from school officials and the like are very powerful artifacts in that each helps to give the historian a first-hand look at the tone and motives of the institution at its
earliest phase. However, in this particular context, from 1884 until today, there has remained a noticeable gap in the volumes of scholarship covering Central Colored High School and the history of black education in Louisville.

In Central High School today, sitting in the heart of Louisville’s Russel Neighborhood in the West End of the city, I have been privy to discover what can only be considered a hidden archive—a collection of unprocessed historical Central High School materials as old as the school itself; all or at least most of which are completely unengaged in the academic culture at the school and community despite being housed at the institution. Most critical for my work thus far has been the school’s yearbook from 1884, where all seven graduates wrote lengthy essays about their individual outlook on education and society. While all seven are of great import, a close look at a select few emphasize the three most dominant themes to emerge across the board—the Negro’s fondness for Kentucky, industriousness and black school culture, and finally, the early black school and its affinity for Western writers and thinkers.
CHAPTER TWO

THE CENTRAL COLORED HIGH SCHOOL YEARBOOK

Unlike the high school yearbook of recent history, Central Colored High’s 1884 Yearbook presents no catchy mottos, mascot, school colors, superlatives or pictures of the students and staff themselves. Instead, it exists as a large pebbled legal pad, wrapped in a well-made green material with nothing more than “1884” embossed in golden numbers on its front. The brown accents at the top and bottom corners are torn at the edges and the bind at the top crackles with each flip of the page. As I worked with the book for this study, crumbs sometimes fell from the deteriorating cover and dye from the brown and green composite often stained my clothes. Despite the crumbling outer though, each of the sixty sheets inside the journal, carefully penciled in cursive lettering by the young graduates, somehow appear just as sharp today as they likely did 140 years ago. In what appear to have been entered in no specific sequence, the entries were made in the following order:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>Essay Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bettie Daniels</td>
<td>Kentucky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John T. Bell</td>
<td>Valedictory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lillie Prather</td>
<td>William Cullen Bryant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aretha J. Brown</td>
<td>A Rolling Stone Collects No Moss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Starks</td>
<td>A Capital</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although topics from the piece range from a general report on Kentucky geography to the magnificence of Grecian social life, each student-essay works both as an introduction of their voices into preexisting scholarship concerning black education in Louisville, and more specifically, as a snapshot of the 19th century black high school graduate—a glimpse into black education history that perhaps none other than the students themselves are more qualified to offer.

Aretha J. Brown, Lillie Prather, John T. Bell, Lucretia Gibson, Emma Alexander, Bettie Daniels, and John Stark made up Central Colored High School’s class of 1884, the first black students to graduate from a public high school in state history (Wilson, 1986, 39). Although the seven graduates were literally in a class of their own, more importantly, they were progeny of the 19th century black public school project—the design of a vehicle, commonly known as the “black school,” for student-youth to deliver on black America’s firm commitment to civic inclusion and participation; a vessel to transmit the intellectual traditions of the western world in order to produce a literate corps of middle class blacks who were to be responsible for defining (or redefining), formally, what it meant to be “colored” or “Negro” in the new age of freedom; and to carry only the most determined students towards “education, wealth and character” (First Convention of Colored Men of Kentucky, 1866, 27). It would be impossible to separate Central High’s inaugural graduating class from the original idea of black education as it was conceived in the minds of their forefathers, who were just as patriotic as the students themselves would prove to be:
We are “native and to the manner born;” we are part and parcel of the Great American body politic; we love our country and her institutions; we are proud of her greatness and glory in her might; we are intensely American, allied to the free institutions of our country by the sacrifices, the deaths and the slumbering ashes of our sons, our brothers and our fathers, whose patriotism, whose daring and devotion, led them to pledge their lives, their property and their sacred honor, to the maintenance of her freedom, and the majesty of her laws. (First Convention of Colored Men of Kentucky, 1866, 23)

From this perspective, it becomes important to consider this important artifact, Central Colored High School, and the civic, academic, and racial identity of its first students in conjunction with the larger ethos of Reconstruction, Gilded, and Progressive Age popular consciousness.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

As America began to shift away from the dredges of small-town farm labor and an economy based almost wholly on agriculture to the urban landscape and the highly industrialized society of recent history, American identity quickly shifted as well. For example. At the Paris Exposition of 1900, America celebrated “bringing to a close an era of scientific and economic achievements of the greatest magnitude” (Woodward, 1900, 473). Of this, the Louisville Courier Journal reported: “The United States received more gold medals, more silver medals, more bronze medals, and more honorable mentions than any other foreign country exhibiting, and more grand prizes than any other foreign country exhibiting excepting Germany” (Courier Journal, 1900, B5). This was an both an important achievement for the US and a strong foreshadowing of the military, economic, and cultural might developing on the American home front. As Americans began to confirm, dogmatically, the “city on a hill” (Ceaser, 2012, 6) mantra of their Puritan past, more broadly, they began to accept the worldview of American exceptionalism, which provides “the United States has a unique character because of its history and Constitution
that sets it apart from other nations as the greatest in the world” (Ceaser, 2012, 6). During an age when America sped towards its own Industrial Revolution, the Paris Exposition showing was an important symbol of America’s credence that, “The American citizen was educated in a different school. He takes orders from nobody. Personal independence and individual initiative exist in the United States to an extent undreamed of on the continent of Europe. The American miner, the American manufacturer, the American merchant are strong in the faith that they understand their own business and their own interests better than anyone else” (Courier Journal, 1900, B5). Although there were rarely any specific connections made between the “new” class of black American citizens and progressivism in popular discourse from the period, they too would harness the spirit of human advance by means of social reform and institution building—namely, by way of the black public high school.

Because black society had for the first time vis-à-vis emancipation some hope of participating in and reaping the benefits of mainstream American society, its short-term mission regarding the black high school was “to provide the masses of ex-slaves with basic literacy and citizenship training for participation in a democratic society” (Anderson, 1988, 31). Long-term, the black school was to produce the “intellectual and moral development of a responsible leadership class that would organize the masses and lead them to freedom and equality” (Anderson, 1988, 31). While many think of the essence of the black school as a cultural and educational hub for “blackness” in the nationalist context it is used and understood in today, the earliest episodes of the black public high school are embedded in a network which had not as its core value ideals of “blackness” or “African-ness” as something for students to connect (or reconnect) with,
but rather, in one that prioritized tenets of traditional American standards. (So much so that some were inspired to distinguish the education young blacks had received throughout the 19th and 20th century as a categorical “mis-education” (Woodson, 1933.) Although ideals of national and individual progress were not unique to the black school, they are reflective of the post-emancipation black American’s unyielding belief in American principles or the thought that although the world at large may be an uninviting, uncivilized, and desolate place, America was the exception to the rule and thus the benchmark for which early black graduates would ardently strive to meet:

Here [America] we intend to remain, and while we seek to cultivate all those virtues that shall distinguish us as good and useful citizens, our destiny shall be that of earnest and faithful Americans, and we will recognize no principle, we will allow no doctrine that would make our destiny, other than the destiny of our native land and our fellow countrymen. (First Convention of Colored Men of Kentucky, 1866, 23)

At first glance, it would appear that the titles and corresponding messages of the student-essays of Central Colored High School’s 1884 Yearbook are customary of the average, uninspired scholarly subjects and productions typical of high school education as many know it today. However, at a closer look, it becomes evident that its most dominant themes prove the true essence of 19th century black education altogether—black students vying to become genuine Americans. If white youth had only to qualify for American citizenship on the premise of being “free, white, and twenty-one” (Bosmajian, 1969, 271), black America, which had historically fought against and only recently emerged from a centuries-long “property” status by way of the Emancipation Proclamation, would employ the black school as a partial yet essential fulfillment of its right to civic participation.

THE NEGRO’S FONDNESS FOR KENTUCKY
The Kentucky Negro’s fondness for Kentucky is older than the state itself. Mainstream accounts of local history are generally relegated to tales of white heroism, splendor, and perseverance—all microcosmos of American patriotic zeal. Historic accounts glorify men like Christopher Gist, who “provided England and its colonists with the first detailed description of southern Ohio and northeastern Kentucky” (The Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, 2024); Daniel Boone, who as the Vernon Ladies’ Association suggests is Gist’s close rival in mainstream retellings of Kentucky pioneer-ism; and William Clark and Meriwether Lewis, better known as Lewis and Clark, who used Louisville as their launching pad to explore the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 (Journal of Education, 1904) for their prominent roles in the Union taking command of what would eventually become Kentucky. However, they sorely lack in accounting for the white pioneers’ dependence on especially “helpful” slaves. Ones who, although slaves in actual fact, “shared” the responsibility of surviving the unrelenting wilderness and Native American adversaries with their masters.

Marion Lucas’s A History of Blacks in Kentucky from Slavery to Segregation submits that “Blacks and whites entered Kentucky together” (Lucas, 2003, xi), which is all but entirely corrective of many primary historical accounts on its own. Not only do Kentuckians, who are sympathetic to the early pioneers, rarely think of their heroes as slave-owners, but also, most pay no attention to the importance of the black men and women who often steered their masters to and through Kentucky, played intermediary between the master class and local Native American populations, or in some cases, fought side by side with their masters to conquer the area. There is much to unpack from the
earliest iterations of Kentucky slavery, but the most prevalent reading is the intimation of a unique custom—the core strand from which the local institution would develop:

Overall, there existed a strong interdependence among blacks and whites on the Kentucky frontier. The primitive living conditions in the forest and the ever-present Indian [sic] threat forced them to depend upon each other for protection, though the white man was free and the black man usually a slave...A safer, more secure life—but also of unrelieved labor—awaited them in the forts. Thus the frontier years were probably the closest association blacks and whites experienced during slavery. (Lucas, 2003, xii-xiii)

Although this particular quality of early Kentucky slavery naturally waned as the area developed from frontier into legitimate US state, like others across the south, slavery itself remained absolutely fundamental to its self-image until the end of the Civil War. However, unlike the staunchest southern states, the communal spirit forged between slave and master at the onset of Kentucky statehood materialized for black Kentuckians into a tenderness for the Bluegrass that stuck with the local black community even after the war ended.

Proceedings from the earliest Convention of Colored Men of Kentucky, in 1866, show Mr. Hubbard, a Louisville delegate, (19) reference the generous nature of Kentucky whites: “This convention could not have been treated better in any part of this country than it has been here in Lexington, by the whites; this is the first Colored Convention ever held in the state; if they act so well we are not induced to demand our rights” (First Convention of Colored Men of Kentucky, 1866, 10). Another, from 1877, the first State Colored Educational Convention (later to become the Kentucky Negro Educational Association), shows J.M. Maxwell, the first principal of Central Colored School and Central Colored High School, elocate a dignified monologue before Dr. H.A.M. Henderson, the Superintendent of Public Instruction (State Colored Educational Convention, 1877, 6) and other Kentucky educators both black and white:
Ignorance in those who have not had an opportunity for acquiring an education is still an evil, but not a crime with which they are chargeable. The sin of their ignorance lies not at their doors. For those who have been and are still thus unfortunate I have felt heartfelt, sincere, and unbounded sympathy, for I know that there are many pleasures which they can never feel—many flowers in God’s intellectual garden who beauty they can never see, whose fragrance they can never inhale; many fruits growing on the vast trees of knowledge whose sweetness they can never taste. But I rejoice that the prospect is so bright for the coming of that day when in every county, township, and village of this beautiful and rich Commonwealth the portals of knowledge of the elements of a good English education shall be afforded to the humblest child of the State; when from Kentucky as a centre [sic] to earth’s remotest bounds there shall spread the light of a new and more exalted life in the world of mind and heart. (State Colored Educational Convention, 1877, 6)

For the time, Central Colored School and Kentucky itself were considered locally as the nation’s leading symbols for the future of black public schooling.

There was backlash by some white Louisvillians who were upset by the proposal for Central’s original location. At the beginning, it was planned to be built at 6th & York Streets, just one block away from a white primary school at 5th and York. A Colored Man’s Views on the Subject, a Courier Journal article from 1873 explained “There is considerable opposition to the location of the Central Colored School at the corner of Sixth and York Streets. Some of our worthy citizens have held indignation meetings, protesting against it, and requesting the Board of Trustees to reconsider the purchase and rescind [sic] their action in the premises” (Courier Journal, 1873, 1) which forced black and white school officials to relocate the original Central Colored School to 6th & Kentucky instead. However, while certain whites in Louisville and others throughout the south held tightly to their idea of southern heritage, local popular consensus openly lauded Central. On opening day in 1873, The Courier Journal heralded A Notable Event:

Americans generally boast of their liberal and excellent system of common schools; and of all the leading cities of this country, Louisville can claim with pride that, in regard to her schools and her school system, she does not stand second in the list. Her magnificent school structures attract the attention of every
stranger who visits the city. The dedication of the elegant Central Colored School yesterday gave evidence of the fact that we are not behindhand as regards the education of the colored people. This structure is only the beginning of what may be expected, as from time to time other suitable buildings will be erected to supply the increasing educational wants of the large colored population of this city. (Courier Journal, 1873, 3)

If the class of 1884 had any liberty whatsoever as to the content of their respective yearbook essays, there is no surprise that the state of Kentucky itself would have gotten significant attention. Although age restrictions were not nearly as rigid in the 19th century high school setting (particularly for the black high school) as they are today, Central’s class of 1884 was likely born into the first generation after abolition. It is unlikely considering the level of privilege that would have been necessary to qualify as a candidate for not only academic success as a black youth in the 19th century in general, but more specifically, as one of the first seven to graduate in an entire southern state, but there is a chance that any one of Central High School’s inaugural graduates would have had parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents or otherwise who were once enslaved themselves, meaning the tales and perspectives one would have grown up accustomed to hearing in the household would have been direct linkages to antebellum Kentucky.

As I tried to prove in the opening sections of this work, although the students’ forebearers could have very well been Kentucky slaves, this does not necessarily mean that their progenitors would have had a disdain for the state or even for white people. On the contrary, as evidenced in the slave narratives produced by the Federal Writers’ Project, there is a strong chance that some would have professed fond memories of their days on the Kentucky plantation. Yet, considering the exclusivity of the American high school during the Reconstruction and Gilded ages it is much more plausible that these seven graduates, likely born in Louisville which had “by far the largest concentration of
free African Americans in Kentucky and the largest free African American community in a slave state—west of Baltimore” (Hudson, 2011, 325), would have come from a free Louisville family or those who had otherwise enjoyed some level of privilege as a business owner or local merchant. In this instance, Central High’s first graduates would have most likely grown up accustomed to hearing stories of how favorable the state and its white elites had been to their respective family. Although such families and the children they sent to school would have had the advantage of a certain level of cultural and personal dissociation from who Ella Baker would have called the “uncouth masses” (Grant, 1999, 54), all were matched against the prevailing notions of black inferiority regardless of class. The struggle against racist stereotypes are older than America itself, but presented a unique challenge to the growing numbers of educated African Americans nonetheless.

INDUSTRIOUSNESS AND BLACK SCHOOL CULTURE

Black America has long had to contend with unfounded clichés, or a “host of prepackaged expectations that have very real consequences for the beliefs and behaviors of both the user of stereotypes and for those being stereotyped” (Reyna, 2000, 86), perpetuated by American mainstream political, educational, news, and entertainment outlets. Here, Reyna’s use of “prepackaged expectations” implies a Western controlling interest that tracks the origin of the many venomous stereotypes ascribed to America’s black population to the dawn of European colonialism itself. By the same token, one of the most consistent throughlines of DuBois’ voluminous scholarship is the idea that the Western world has carefully misrepresented the fact, significance, and complexity of Africa’s history. In *The World and Africa* he lays bare the subterfuge of America’s leading
institutions and historians, who “studiously ignored the Negro on the Nile and in the world and talked as though Black folk were nonexistent and unimportant” (DuBois, 1965, xxxii). While being pushed to the margins of “civilization” is one thing, as colonial forces across the European continent leveraged their respective military powers in a competition amongst themselves to determine which would emerge with majority share of the colonial stake, DuBois argues that it first meticulously designed and then relied upon its own “race” construct as a means to exalt Christianity and whiteness on the whole, and thereafter to justify its repudiation, enslavement, and domination of the African continent’s many ethnic groups and natural resources.

It is here where psychology, or the study of human psyche and actions, weighs in as arguably the most influential branch of social science pertaining to the development of self-image and subsequent worldview. The growing number of psychologists unsympathetic to the white-supremacist dogma, influence, and practices of traditional psychology suggest that Western culture has perpetually supported the construction of stratifications that, although drawn along a number of different lines (e.g., race, class, sex and gender, intelligence, etc.), all function to grade and ultimately organize societies into distinct spectrums of racial rank—one that invariably comes back to Protestant white men and Western culture as the norm or standard by which all other peoples must be understood. In *Even the Rat was White*, Robert Guthrie maintains:

> Since Europeans believed humans originally were white, the blackness of Africans was seen as a degeneration of mankind. This explains the impact of English language in placing extreme negative connotations on the concept of blackness contributing to the immediate fears and disdain English-speaking people had for Africans. And because the Africans’ skin color struck Europeans as unusual, a number of explanations, religious and philosophical, were advanced to explain this difference. (Guthrie, 1976, 6)
Guthrie’s allusion to the “number of explanations” most notably includes the West’s blanket evaluation of the African’s lack of ambition or capacity for civilization minus white intervention; the “lazy nigger” myth which has held steady from the early days of Europe’s impetus to begin discerning what it originally perceived as observable differences between Europe and Africa—what Rudyard Kipling and other imperialists quickly and unanimously deduced was divine proof of the black world’s uncivilized state and the Empire’s responsibility to impose its way of life on nearly African, Asian, and Caribbean peoples (Kipling, 1899).

Therefore, the African American’s struggle against racist stereotypes in the US is by definition inseparable from the ways in which the West, and most appropriately, America, came to see all white Americans as the epitome of high culture, politics, society, freedom, and civilization altogether; the 4 million Africans shipped to America via the Transatlantic slave trade and their descendants as white America’s eternal footstool, whose congenital laziness was the God-given proof of his natural station as the white man’s subservient. This basic framework has both conspicuously and inconspicuously continued to shape the individual and wholesale American worldview for centuries. As an indelible artifact of mid-19th century American culture, black caricatures, contrary to their original function, worked to promote the embrace of industriousness as a central tenet of black education during the Reconstruction, Gilded, and Progressive ages, and more specifically, situated Central Colored High School as an intended counter to the contrived and fallacious myth of the “lazy nigger.”

Reyna argues that “to understand the consequences that stereotypes may have in achievement settings, it is important to first examine the information that stereotypes
convey and the ramifications of this information…for example, the stereotype that
‘Blacks are lazy’ is not just a putative description of African Americans, but it is an
explanation of why African Americans are not successful in our society’ (2000, 86-87).
In this context, the 19th century was absolutely pivotal concerning the germination of the
“lazy nigger” myth in American popular consciousness. J. Stanley Lemons’ Black
Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920 explains:

The minstrel show was America’s first national, popular entertainment form, and
it came from two of the classic stereotyped characters of blacks. One was Zip
Coon and the other was Jim Crow. Zip Coon was a preposterous, citified
dandy…easily recognized in his bright, loud, exaggerated clothes…he was a high-
stepping strutter with a mismatched vocabulary…he put on airs, acted elegant, but
was betrayed by his pompous speech filled with malapropisms. Jim Crow
represented the slow-thinking, slow-moving country and plantation darkey. He
wore tatters and rags and a battered hat. He spent his time sleepin’, fishin’, huntin’
‘possums, or shufflin’ along slower than molasses in January, except when
stealing chickens or dancing on the levee. (Lemons, 1977, 102)

Although both portrayals were clearly ridiculous, the ubiquity of these black caricatures
throughout the mid to late 1800s in popular American culture works well for “gaining an
insight into what masses of people are [were] thinking, feeling, and dreaming” (Lemons,
1977, 103) as it pertained to the Negro, his imminent freedom and eventual progress
following emancipation (particularly during the Reconstruction period). In fact, Lemons
go on to explain that “they were so familiar that few people had any notion that they
degraded black Americans. Most people thought the caricatures were simply funny”
(Lemons, 1977, 102). However, going back to Reyna’s point about the “beliefs and
behaviors…for those being stereotyped” above, it becomes clear that at least factions of
Black Americans were painfully aware of the offensiveness of such iconography, which is
indicated in this context by the second most dominant theme of the student-essays in
Central Colored High’s 1884 Yearbook—industriousness, or as the young graduate Aretha J. Brown explained, the idea that “the rolling stone collects no moss” (1884).

THE BLACK SCHOOL AND WESTERN WRITERS AND THINKERS

Popular and academic American consensus has long-established this core tenet of the Westerner’s self-image: “As everyone knows, the main reasons for the rise of western civilization were Greece and Rome…They were great thinkers and they didn’t sit back and just exist. They wanted to know why they existed…the greatest accomplishment of the Greeks was the rationalization of man, government, and that what cannot be seen” (The History Teacher, 1968, 49). Scholarly sources such as these, and there are many, put forward the idea that ancient European empires perfected both the power of reasoning and democracy (or “freedom” as it is often made synonymous with); both of which having since been made interchangeable with whiteness (DuBois, 1947, 2). This theatrical version of world history pertaining to the innate enlightenment or goodness of Europe’s most powerful nations and their traditions completely disregard “how critical a part Africa has played in human history, past and present” (DuBois, 1947, xxxi) and methods by which Europe and the Western worldview has reached such global esteem.

Yes: as a consequence of Europe’s military and economic might, France, Germany, England, and Great Britain (DuBois, 1947, 2) were regarded as global models of “civilization” for the centuries prior to what DuBois referred to as the Collapse of Europe (1947, 1-10). Only troubled by the first world war and then the independence movements on the African and Asian continents of the 1960s, the Western principles of Christianity, industry, and a reverence for white sociocultural icons and standards existed as a fundamental element of institution building by which colonial subjects were
generally made most vulnerable. In this case, although each are significant, neither
military strength nor the power of a nation’s dollar proved as mighty as the schoolhouse.

There are a number of applications in which this applies to examples of human
thought and endeavor (Malcolm’s “house nigger/field nigger” analogy; Message to the
Grassroots, 1963), but as it pertains to the 19th century black public school project, the
tone was set in a way in 19th century America that prompted most black school officials
and their students to espouse Western ideals as the ultimate goals for the black school
itself—a key piece of context behind the noticeably strong vestiges of Western influence
in the Central High School 1884 Yearbook. Why then, did the students appear to lessen
their “blackness?” At the inception of this distinctly black phenomenon, why did students
only speak about their race as a matter of coincidence—not as a form or method of their
identity?

As an American institution, much of what black educational leaders and students
aspired to mimic the dominant society in which they hoped to successfully integrate.
Examples abound, but one of the more salient pieces of evidence is seen in the
convictions of the First Annual Meeting of the Colored Teachers Association in 1861.
Held in Springfield, Ohio, it was one of the first formal meetings conducted by and for
black people around the issues of black education; a precursor to the many black teacher
associations that would emerge in its wake in the decades to follow. In its ‘ADDRESS to
the Patrons and Friends of Colored Schools’ (Colored Teachers Association, 1861, 9) it
set forth:

It is a question with many to understand why we should spend so much time and
money in educating our children, when it is known they are no allowed to fill the
places of lawyers, senators, judges or presidents. We verily admit all this; but does
this truth afford the slightest reason that we should refuse to cultivate our
faculties, refuse to assimilate ourselves to the Divine Archetype, and become the representatives of His infinite and perfect wisdom? (Colored Teachers Association, 1861, 9)

Beyond meeting the religious obligations of “His” (Christ’s) heavenly call it is perceivable that education, in the mind’s eye of its earliest progenitors, was directly applicable as a cure for the Negro’s “dread reality of his own imbecility” (Colored Teachers Association, 1861, 10). This of course would include a successful integration into white society by the Negro’s shedding of the cultural habits and idiosyncrasies he was thought to have picked up over the long period of enslavement. In this context, it is important to note that Ohio had traditionally been considered progressive concerning both freedom and education for black people. Not only was it an ideal location for runaway slaves from the area (Rowe, 2009, 927), but its famed Oberlin College “regularly admitted black students beginning in 1835, after trustee and abolitionist, the Rev. John Keep, cast the deciding vote to allow them entry” (Oberlin College, 2024). To say it is highly feasible that early black educational organizers from Ohio in particular may have operated from an advantaged perspective pertaining to matters of social reform or racial uplift tactics than those in the more hostile south.

The same can be said for those at the onset of the black public school movement in Louisville. As the national question of abolition pushed northern and southern forces to a Civil War, the deadliest in American history (Lambert, n.d.), black people not only literally joined the fight for abolition but began discussing how to best go about preparing the race, which had for centuries been reduced to “imbecility” by racist legal and cultural policy, for civic participation in mainstream American society. The relevance to the strands of Westernism here lies in the kinship between the black school and its primary use as a tool to equip certain individuals with the intellectual, professional, and personal
tools necessary to achieve social mobility in the dominant society. With its stated goals to work towards equality on behalf of black folk in America, assimilationist principles were by definition a core element of the early black school. One of the most palpable characteristics of the student-essays in Central’s 1884 Yearbook is the Western frame of reference from which students spoke and articulated their concerns. The titles alone are suggestive and each could be a standalone piece in highlighting this particular facet of early black education.

Lillie Prather’s *William Cullen Bryant* for example offers a unique perspective on the widely held high praise for Western writers as the epitome of “good” or meaningful literature. Her essay presents a biography of the life and accomplishments of the American author, journalist, and editor William Cullen Bryant. She emphasized his “extraordinary ferocity” (Prather, 1884) as a young scholar and explains his falling out of love with law practice, his love instead for poetry, and his subsequent successful career as a writer. In what could be perceived as a mere school project, the piece is a genuine reflection of the academic and intellectual climate of the day. Not only was there yet to be an established black literary tradition for black schools and students to pull from, but if young black graduates truly expected to make it as “thinkers” (skilled laborers) rather than the “doers” (manual laborers) black folk had been largely relegated to in the past, they would have had no alternative but to comply with the unnamed credo of whiteness part and parcel of 19th century American society. In this context, beyond providing a mere biography of a white luminary, Daniels’ essay is an important glimpse between the foundation set by the early black school and rhetoric used in the Negro’s forthcoming organized struggle to integrate America.
From one of the most famous men in American history and, most notably, the charismatic leader of the Montgomery Bus boycott of 1955 and Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is most known for his moving orations concerning the racial inequalities that continued to plague America well into the 20th century. In one of the more famous episodes from his career as the movement’s leading figure, the Selma to Montgomery March campaign of 1965, after reaching the state capitol in Montgomery, King appropriately delivered a riveting speech. From the steps of the building, King cites the same William Cullen Bryant as the young graduate Aretha Brown. His “truth crushed to earth will rise again” (Bryant, 1840) both recognized the determination of the many protestors who persevered despite being regularly brutalized by southern law enforcement and foreshadowed the nearing Voting Rights Act which would pass later that year.

Although the student-essays cover a wide range of topics, each demonstrate that the early black school determined the precedent by which black folk would seek entry into American society for nearly another century; a strong indicator that systems are only capable of producing individuals and institutions that embody the principles of said system. For the first hundred years of black education, prior to the late 1960s and what Cleveland Sellers referred to as the age of “black consciousness” (Sellers, 1973, 165), black students were taught the contours of racial uplift by means of embracing American nationalism rather than “a perpetual search for racial meanings…the construction of… a value system geared to the unique cultural and political experience of blacks in this country” (Sellers, 1973, 166).
CHAPTER THREE

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SELECT ESSAYS FROM THE CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL
1884 YEARBOOK

DANIELS, BETTY. *KENTUCKY.*

Bettie Daniels’ *Kentucky,* the first of the seven student-essays, sets the tone for the six that follow. Although it presents itself as a basic report of Kentucky culture, history, and geography, in actuality it offers a multi-faceted portrayal of the unique quality of 19th century Kentucky racial politics of education and a vivid depiction of local popular consensus which supported the idea of Kentucky’s position as a leader in black public education. Her essay opens with a somewhat standard description of the Bluegrass State: “This state is situated between 36°-30’ and 39°-10’ north latitude and 81°-26’ west longitude. It is three hundred miles from east to west, and one hundred and fifty miles in mean breadth; and contains 42600 square miles” (Daniels, 1884). Taken on its own, Daniels’ rundown of these especially precise details takes on an entirely different meaning in light considering that just twenty years prior it could have easily gotten the purveyor of such knowledge killed from fear of its helping a fugitive slave more skillfully navigate Kentucky on their way to freedom or otherwise make use of its local network of the Underground Railroad (Hudson, 2011, 321-324). Here, Daniel’s command of Kentucky’s longitude and latitude, its square mileage and topography, is presented as an academic aside. But what is more revealing is that she and her classmates are likely the first of her age-range with such a perspective. While it may seem that this somewhat
rudimentary introduction to her account of Kentucky serves as a mere background or corollary setup for some more profound point later in the essay, the acuity of her brief opening alone offers a rather defined snapshot of the sophisticated makeup of 19th century black public schooling in Louisville. Where many southern black public schools during the period struggled to maintain with limited learning materials, largely “unqualified” teachers, meager schoolhouses, and very few opportunities to apply what one had learned as a means to procure a productive life (Span, 2009, Chap. 4), Kentucky’s lone black high school had available what appear to have been modern (if not advanced) implements to learn from and work with.

Daniels quickly taps into a much deeper and more characteristic dimension of Kentucky’s history of racial politics of education. As established in Sections 1 and 2 above, blacks in Kentucky historically had the advantage of a relatively permissive society as it related to learning and schooling, and the black officials and students who were at the forefront of the “Colored” public school project in Louisville regularly acknowledged Kentucky’s liberal whites for the opportunities afforded them. These would often come in one of two forms: outright gratitude to Kentucky’s liberal whites specifically, or a more poetic, colorful depiction of Kentucky’s beauty—an allegory for the Kentucky Negro’s deep admiration for the state. To the latter, Daniels’ offers an ode to Kentucky that was all but uniform in many of the black educational speeches and materials of the period:

Everything assumes a dignity and splendor which has not been observed in any other part of the world...Even the wild flowers are full and perfect, as if they had been cultivated by the hands of a florist...Everything here gives delight; and, in that wild effulgence which beams around us, we feel a glow of gratitude for the elevation which our all bountiful [sic] Creator has bestowed upon us. Ky [sic] presents attractions which are found in but few, if any other region of the world.
She is rich in a genial climate, rich in a prolific soil, rich in her agricultural products, which in her beautiful frame, rich in the abundant area of her mountains and above all rich in a population at one industrious, enterprising, intelligent and patriotic. (Daniels, 1884)

In this sense, the Kentucky Negro’s affinity for the Bluegrass is directly attributed to the sense of togetherness between blacks and whites forged throughout the early years of the state’s history, and Kentuckians’ responsibility, both black and white, to uphold its heritage as a particularly good-natured southern state.). This played a major role in the black-led organized effort to leverage the state’s relatively modest racial attitude for the assembly of a black public school system post-emancipation. In 1874, just one year after the dedication of Central Colored School (the primary school from which Central Colored High School would emerge in 1882), at the dedication of Eastern Colored School at Jackson and Breckenridge Streets in Louisville’s East End, Horace Morris, a leading statesman for local black education and “member of the Colored Board of Visitors” (Doyle, 2005, 91), gave an address with a tone and message similar to that of Daniels’ Kentucky. At the affair in which “many people were assembled” (Doyle, 2005, 91), he paints a like picture of Kentucky’s distinction, beauty, and most importantly, its black educated class’s gratitude for the munificence of Kentucky’s liberal whites:

As Kentuckians, we feel proud—aye, a little bit vain—over the beautiful buildings you have erected for us, for nowhere in this great country—Washington city probably excepted—are such magnificent buildings to be found, and nowhere else, excepting no locality, are they so complete in all their appointments, in all the requirements, the necessary furniture, etc., as here. (Doyle, 2005, 93)

Like Hubbard, Maxwell, Morris and most other local black educational leaders, Daniels put forth the notion that the Central, Eastern, and Western Colored School, which was founded in 1875 “on Magazine Street between Fifteenth and Sixteenth” (Doyle, 2005, 101) in the city’s West End, marking three public schools for Louisville “Negroes”
by the middle of the decade, qualified Kentucky to be a model for black education. Though not without bias considering the Kentucky roots of many who were involved in the development of the local black public school system, and albeit the direct beneficiaries of a comparatively generous state political and educational system, their estimation is not completely unfounded. Lester Lamon explains: “Only a fraction of the black population in the South had received any opportunity to attend either private or public schools during the 1860s. One historian has estimated that only 150,000 black students were regularly attending the roughly 2,6000 schools open to them in 1870...Under these circumstances, educational opportunities for blacks varied widely in the South before 1900. Cities continued to be in far advance of rural counties; but even among cities, schooling differed significantly” (1983, 79-80).

For all that there is to be revealed about the conniving, racist nature of Reconstruction, Gilded, and Progressive era politics of the American south, what DuBois aptly deemed in *Black Reconstruction* as “the propaganda of history” (DuBois, 1935, 711-729), to the contrary, these first-hand accounts of black student and school official witness point to a sincere belief that these periods in Kentucky were profitable for black education both locally and nationally—that blacks in Kentucky would finally have credible public school system and the state would lead the country into a new age of black public schooling.

To close, Daniels explains, poetically: “The wheels of progress do not turn backward. And today Ky. [sic] long known as ‘the dark and bloody ground’ is coming forth to the light of a brighter day, cultivating the cause of public education, which is the great lever of moral and intellectual power, by which her sons and daughters will be able
to meet in equal and glorious combat the children of her sister states” (Daniels, 1884). By opening with the Kentucky Negro’s fondness for Kentucky, Daniels’ summative essay not only symbolized the culmination of a near twenty year, black-led organizational, individual, and communal struggle for a public high school for Louisville’s black youth, but more directly, it establishes a core tenet of the 19th century black public school in that, “When we look back a few years, and contras the educational facilities of forefathers with those of today, those of us who are old enough to remember them, are filled with feelings akin to awe—for surely it is His work, He who molds the destinies of nations as He does those of individuals. It is His work, before whom the countless ages have rolled, and will still roll on until the latest syllable of recorded time” (Doyle, 2005, 93).

Progress was the mantra of early black education in Kentucky. And in this context, both Daniels and Morris were right. At the onset, almost no black children attended school in the south relative to its total population of black school-age youth. However, with Kentucky at the forefront, the proliferation of the black public school gave rise to a sharp increase in attendance among black youth in the region by the turn of the century:

School Attendance in the South, 1880-1950

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Black Males</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Age 5-9</th>
<th>Age 10-14</th>
<th>Age 15-20</th>
<th>Age 5-20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1880</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>21.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1890</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
<td>48.6%</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td>29.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1900</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>28.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1910</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>63.7</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>41.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Age 5-9</td>
<td>Age 10-14</td>
<td>Age 15-20</td>
<td>Age 5-20</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>---------</td>
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<td>---------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>56.2</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>52.3</td>
<td>79.4</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>53.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td>89.1</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>66.4</td>
<td>91.5</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>63.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>70.3</td>
<td>94.6</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>69.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The same pattern can be observed locally. In 1870, the first year of a black public school system in Louisville, with only two primary schools for Louisville’s black youth, “one in the Center Street African Methodist Church, and the other in the Fifth Street African Baptist Church” (Wilson, 1986, 21), very few of the city’s school-age black youth were in attendance:

Population and School Attendance — 1870 (Louisville, KY)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WARDS</th>
<th>COLORED</th>
<th>MALE</th>
<th>FEMALE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>356</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>589</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>1868</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth</td>
<td>2372</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth</td>
<td>1353</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh</td>
<td>883</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eighth</td>
<td>1293</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ninth</td>
<td>2162</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenth</td>
<td>2255</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleventh</td>
<td>1178</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twelfth</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Wilson, George, 1986, 22; *A Century of Negro Education in Louisville, Kentucky* (Louisville Municipal College)

Yet by the 1929-1930 academic year, Louisville’s black public school system thrived:

…nineteen buildings for Negro pupils…54 Negro teachers. The total school enrollment by levels was…Central High School, 909…colored junior high schools, 1,036…colored elementary schools, 5,938…colored kindergarten, 420…colored normal school, 37. The types of services rendered in the white and Negro schools were about the same, except that while provision was made for four teachers of hospital classes, seventeen teachers of upgraded classes, and one teacher of a deaf class for white children. No such provision for such specialized service was made for Negro pupils. (Wilson, 1986, 75)

In this sense, the premonition of Kentucky’s early progenitors of black education proved true: along with an increase in attendance for black school-age youth both in Louisville and across the south came a sharp decrease in illiteracy rates among African
American communities—a vital metric for any dimension of the success of the black public school project of the Reconstruction south: “Their 95 percent illiteracy rate in 1860 had dropped to 70 percent in 1880 and would drop to 30 percent by 1910” (Anderson, 1988, 30). Each of the 1884 Central Colored High School Yearbook student-essays account for the near cultural responsibility in which many black Americans assumed post-emancipation. If the race was to rid itself, completely, of the veil of ignorance kept before it in the centuries prior, it was to first embrace the importance of school attendance and the virtue of hard work—a cornerstone of the 19th century black public school project.

BROWN, A. *A ROLLING STONE COLLECTS NO MOSS.*

Although the Zip Coon and Jim Crow tropes were each insulting in their own right, the shiftless Jim Crow stereotype is the more popular of the two and thus appears to have had the most poignant effect on Central’s first graduates. In the 1884 Yearbook, Aretha Brown explains in no uncertain terms that:

True happiness consists of occupation, and he who has a prize in view is by far happier than he who lives an aimless life…A true man will select his lifework, put his entire energies to the performing of that work, will be a successful man, and a help [underlined] not a hinderance to the progress of the age…But the man who wanders aimless from city to city or from continent is like the “rolling stone” which “gathers no moss.” (Brown, 1884)

There are multiple ways this sentiment can be interpreted. On one hand, Central’s inaugural graduating class, of the first generation of blacks born as “natural” American citizens en masse, would have likely considered the idea of industry in a completely different light than those from their lineage who may have been enslaved in Kentucky. Throughout the near 250-year period of chattel slavery, resistance took many forms. In what is often reduced to the most wildly spirited scenes of slave revolts, the much more
common acts of slave-defiance were far more subtle and occurred far more regularly than the isolated epochs of violence that typically command popular and academic attention. Angela Davis explains that “resistance expressed itself…also in the seemingly trivial forms of feigned illness and studied indolence” (Davis, 1971, 7). This means that as the master class would have naturally demanded daily maximum output from the enslaved who at times either could not or would not push harder than their bodies or prerogatives allowed, rather than finding a sense of achievement in going the extra mile, many resisted against the racist order of the day by virtue of the culture of dissemblance or pride in fooling the master (Fett, 2002, 169-192).

While this tactic was certainly useful throughout the period of enslavement, it served virtually no purpose post-emancipation. Although not directly responsible, the educated black youth of the Reconstruction-Progressive age black school ushered in a more nuanced lease on industriousness. While abolition freed the enslaved from the shackles of bondage, it did not correct for what many enlightened black folk post-emancipation considered the bad habits that were formed over the centuries of slavery. In the Yearbook entry, Brown’s idea of “happiness” is directly connected to industry and the setting and accomplishing of one’s goals, which likely had just as much to do with changing the narrative from an outside perspective as it did for those within.

Looking back at the earliest artifacts of black education in Kentucky, it becomes clear that industriousness was not just a point of emphasis for the young Aretha Brown and her classmates, but part and parcel of the local black educational tradition altogether. As the founding fathers of the movement began organizing in 1866 around the issues of color prejudice and discrimination in the state, they were the earliest in Kentucky to
formally stress the virtue of resolve for black people. At the First Convention of Colored Men, held in the Spring of 1866 in Lexington, KY as the original assembly organized to advocate for the welfare of the race, it established as the opening article of its Constitution: “Art. 1. The objects of this Association are to encourage sound morality, education, temperance, frugality, industry, and to promote everything that pertains to a well ordered and dignified life” (First Convention of Colored Men, 1866, 28). This was to become integral to the way in which black education would be delivered in the state. In Louisville, returning to the Horace Morris Eastern Colored School speech of 1874, he declared:

I know that our ancestors were barbarians…we have the advantage of our white fellow-citizens in this, for we know who our progenitors were, but history tells us that the origin of the Briotns [sic], from whom the whites of this country are mainly descended…like our ancestors, they lived in huts…look at the progress they have made in civilization!

We have got to take hold, to hold on, and never let go the determination to equal our white fellow-citizens. We must patiently mold these young minds—we must teach our sons and daughters to aim at all that is high and noble in life—to emulate all that is worthy of emulation in them, and to strive night and day to that end. (Doyle, 2005, 94-95)

19th century white American society, already blighted by the “lazy nigger” myth among others, would have had very little if any insight to the intricate ways in which black folks were forced to cope with the drudgery of chattel slavery, leaving many susceptible to popular accounts of any number of racist stereotypes pertaining to the Negro’s low station in the American social order. (All of which, in one way or another, reasoned that the cause for black America’s depraved state was not the direct result of slavery and subsequent segregation and economic disempowerment, but a side-effect of its own idleness.) And if liberal and philanthropic whites were to continue investing in or otherwise allowing for black education, it would need to be convinced of black people’s
seriousness and determination as it pertained to learning. To this end, black intelligentsia of the day worked tirelessly in the decades following emancipation to re-write the narrative and prove to mainstream American society that “Negroes”, if given the opportunity, were capable of great intellectual achievement too.

In a local context, one must consider the strong degree of white surveillance over the newly formed black school and the implications of what George Wright referred to as the “relationship between whites and blacks [as] one of paternalism…that though whites were supportive of blacks, their support ‘demanded that blacks be passive and remain in the place assigned them in Louisville’” (Robinson, 2010, 16). Under these circumstances, every speech, assembly, article, and in this instance, student-essay topic written by or concerning the state’s first black public schools must have been carefully planned and even more carefully executed. If the local black public school project was to sustain any long term sentience, which it has, everyone involved at the inception had to remain vigilant that they did not arouse any suspicion of black folk trying to move too fast or too radically towards “the enjoyment of those rights and immunities belonging to the humblest citizen” (Kentucky State Colored Convention, 1885, 1). Under the watchful eye of not just the white Jefferson County School Board or the Board of Visitors of Colored Schools, whose job it was to monitor the day to day operations of the earliest black schools in Louisville and report back to the white school board (not to mention private onlooking white citizens, at least some of whom had a propensity for vigilantism), each word and action pertaining to black education and its endorsement of black people’s rightful place in American society had to be delicately crafted in a way to both encourage
black folks to move with a sense of purpose, but at the same time, to stay within the margins that had been prepared by powerful local whites.

On a more existential level, educated blacks, like the young Brown here and many more, firmly warned black America that shiftlessness was detrimental not only to the race, but to the individual: “A capable person without something to do, if such a state of things continues, will, in time, become incapable mentally and physically… That this is true is proved everyday, by lives that end not naturally, but, in great agony physical and mental, sometimes by the hand of the wretched mortal himself, who stung and goaded by conscience, finds life unendurable and brings his sufferings to a speedy end” (Brown, 1884). Brown’s idea that one’s worth is directly correlated to their level of productivity implies that she believed African Americans in Kentucky had been given a golden opportunity for social mobility and should be put to good use if ignorance, or “that great monster…which has so long been a curse upon us” (Bell, 1884) was to be overcome.

Considering that black academics were the first in America to begin officially extirpating myths of congenital black inferiority (which is to say, by the credibility granted them via mainstream academic institutions), many student-essays penned by Central’s first seven graduates holds distinct grounding in the belief that if black Americans, now black citizens, were to enjoy the fruits of American citizenship, the race needed to mirror the model set by great Western imperialists. Brown suggests:

The selfmade [sic] man here gets the credit which he has earned with his wealth, as a man among men. Labor is the gate through which we pass on the way to future prosperity. What king is so happy as the farmer who, in looking over his broad fields and pastures, feels his bosom to dilate proudly and who feels the strength and truth of the words “I am monarch of all I survey.” What must the feelings of the man who having led a roving ship this, aimless life, when old age steals over him weakening his frame, cannot call one thing of vital consequence
he has accomplished? His reflections will show him that he, like all other “rolling stones has gathered no moss.”

The Western or European model of progress was the framework for Brown’s ideals of success—the most salient indication of the plain curriculum (relative to the hidden curriculum counterpart, which black educators had much more control over) employed in the 19th century black high school classroom. Her essay is a useful proxy for the early black high school’s strong academic focus on the intellectual and literary traditions of the Western world (the latter to be explored in more detail in the next section). This means that her understanding of the world was framed by hard lines between black and white; the victor and the vanquished; the civilized and the barbarian; which left noticeably little room for any alternative perspective (What Chimamanda Adichie has since coined The Danger of a Single Story.) Brown’s high regard for Western ideals of progress is a distinct characteristic not just of her worldview, but that of the black school format overall. Although black America was only recently emancipated from the throes of slavery, a large portion of its self-image was only understood in relation to the plight of other oppressed peoples.

This trend in 19th century black education would manifest itself in a way that lead the young graduate to reveal disdain for Native Americans—a reminder of the very first Kentucky Negro’s allegiance to his master in conquering local Native American populations, and a nod to the celebrated Buffalo Soldier phenomenon of the 1860s and subsequent veneration of black soldier-ism of American war history (National Museum of African American History and Culture, n.d.). Both literally and figuratively, educated African Americans, like their white counterpart, evinced animosity for this dispossessed group—not only for their intense stand against the westward spread of white hegemony
throughout the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries (for the Negro had nothing to gain), but under the pretense of their innate barbarity. Brown explained:

If we would profit by example, such a one as is set by America’s first inhabitants, the roving Indians, we would not take. He is of no material worth the country in which he dwells. He is the same manner of man today that he was a hundred years ago. Crafty, cruel, unreliable, unsocial, a perpetual annoyance, and subject for constant watching to prevent his doing a mischief, he has not advanced one iota. Roving is his inheritance and such he bequeaths to his succeeding progeny. When he dies, civilized people in his immediate vicinity, feel relieved of a great past.

Relative to the other student essays, Brown’s is the most unambiguous concerning the early black high school’s adoption of Western values. She ends with an homage to “some of America’s greatest men, as our two murdered presidents, who, though dead, are now rendered living by their applauding American brethren…These are true Americans” (Brown, 1884). “True Americans,” in this sense, suggests the existence of a “fake” or unauthentic American from whom these men would have been compared, who, by whatever measure, the early black high school academical fought hard to distance themselves from. According to Brown’s definition, one can more effectively investigate the early black school and its affection for the Western literary and intellectual tradition.

ALEXANDER, EMMA J. SOCIAL LIFE IN GREECE; STARKS, JOHN. A CAPITAL.

Central’s inaugural graduating class, like those of the early black high school elsewhere, were taught to preserve and extol the literary and philosophical sentiments of the West. Although there is supporting evidence to the fact from each of the seven student-essays, Alexander’s Social Life in Greece and John Starks’ A Capital both offer the most direct lines of sight to the academic identity of the early black high school graduates and the societal forces responsible for molding them.

Alexander’s Social Life in Greece is just that: it illustrates the 19th century Western academic’s certainty that “Among the nations which stand out in the course of
history, as having done much to promote human knowledge, art, culture, the Greeks are first in the judgement of all competent observers” (Alexander, 1884). This is the opening sentence in Alexander’s essay and appropriately an important starting point for the young graduate and the historian alike. In fact, Alexander could have ended her essay at this juncture and the main idea would have remained just as valid. Anything (and everything) the young graduate can and will offer from the opening lines underpin her idea of the excellence of European writers and thinkers. Here, the young Alexander not only asserts that the Greeks (and thus, the West at large) have both paved and lead the way to human enlightenment, but also, her allusion to “competent observers” offers important insight to what was perhaps the defining tenet of the 19th century educated Negro.

Although W.E.B. DuBois, who would not begin to make his name as the father of Pan-Africanism until the turn of the century, much of his philosophy concerning the political project to liberate and unify Africa from European colonial rule worked to establish clear lines between the “civilized” and “uncivilized” Negro. For example. At the 2nd Pan-African Congress in London, 1921, he advocated for “the recognition of civilized men as civilized despite their race or color” (DuBois, 1921) and political independence “for backward groups” (DuBois, 1921) in Africa. Just a decade prior as DuBois and Marcus Garvey, the charismatic leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and Provisional President of Africa, debated proper methodology to the colonial problem in Africa, the one principle they seemed to agree on was the belief that African peoples were “uncivilized” and thus it was the Western Negro’s responsibility to “reclaim the fallen of the race…to assist in civilizing the backward tribes of Africa…to promote a conscientious Christian worship among the native tribes of Africa” (Lewis, 1987, 50).
While both DuBois’ Pan-Africanism and Garvey’s “Africa for the Africans” are both historic phenomena by now, Alexander and her classmates are even older than both. Her sentiment here of the “competent observers” loosely undergirds the white supremacist myth of latent black inferiority and supports the black-led idea that only educated and distinguished Negroes are capable of recognizing the material and cultural worth of the European intellectual and literary tradition. From the early black academic’s standpoint, the “civilized” Negro was a creature of the late 1800s, made up by a select body of educated black folk who by their volition should have been acknowledged by and treated as such by indiscriminate whites. As the leading men of the race (in which the young Alexander would have likely not made the cut), Africa, and by the late mid-1880s, non-educated black folk, simply existed on the outside of the spectrum of “civilization,” and would stay there until the white power structure would allow for the educated minority to intervene on his behalf. This is an important piece of context as it pertains not only to the educated Negro’s understanding of himself and the world, but in a more academic sense, the importance of the European literary tradition. According to the young Alexander:

The hold which Greek literature retains on our modern education is not the mere result of procedure or fashion. Every thinking person who becomes acquainted with the masterpiece of Greek writing, must see plainly that they stand to us in a far closer relation than the other remains of antiquity. They are not mere objects of curiosity to the archeaologied [sic], not mere treasure-houses of roots and forms to be sought out by comparative grammarians. They are the writings of men like culture with ourselves, who argue with the same logic; who reflect with kind feelings. (Alexander, 1884)

This was a major throughline between these two particular student essays, Alexander and Starks. In Starks’ A Capital, he advocates more for the need for the Negro to find the impetus and fortitude to “do for himself” (Starks, 1884) because “many stand
waiting for assistance while the more ambitions one carries off the prize” (Starks, 1884). Although the historian must regularly account for the secrecy and culture of dissemblance element when deciphering student-narratives from this particular period, there is very little nuance in such sentiments as these. Starks’ claim of those Negroes who “stand and wait for assistance” is not only a clear-cut symbol of the ‘crime of survival’ (Kohler-Hausmann, 2007, 330-331) rhetoric that has in recent history mostly revolved around the notion of the “black welfare queen” (Kohler-Hausmann, 2007, 329), but also, to the larger intracultural politic of privileged black folk blaming the less-accomplished Negro for his lowly station in life and, in the most extreme cases, of certain blacks making the race look “bad.”

The "culture of poverty…” connotes a set of behaviors and attitudes that are transmitted inter-generationally and run counter to national values. It is believed that this subculture impedes progress by preventing individuals from adopting the mores of the larger culture that leads to integration and social mobility (Coward, et al. 1974). Therefore, in order for those within this subculture to achieve some level of integration, they have to be remediated and given a new set of values. (Nunnally, Carter, 2012, 424)

Not only are they an early indication of black folks’ tendency to begin blaming themselves (or other black folk) for their lack of progress post-emancipation, but also, they speak to the larger theme of industriousness in black school culture and the fact that many graduates seem to have received identical plain or indirect lessons in the importance of self-determination. The relevance to the Western worldview here though is Starks’ evidence. To emphasize his point of the detriment of shiftlessness for the Negro, he looks to white luminaries as a model of accomplishment:

There can be mentioned hundreds of men whose names are household words, and many who are yet in the public arena endowed with the qualities which make a true man; While some have gained the highest honors politically other have left valuable contributions to literature by which they will ever be remembered; the man most worthy of mention who has contributed to the literature of his country
is Shakespeare; the greatest dramatical writer that ever lived who by his rare political genius and culturated [sic] mind has left works which will ever keep his name in the memory of the people; another who will never be forgotten is Napoleon who by possessing unusual mental power and great energy succeeded in making himself the leading figure in French affairs. (Starks, 1884)

While the subject matter of these two pieces differ, the main throughline between the two is that the West had set the model for blacks, as a newly freed and now formally educated people, to follow. Both Alexander and Starks use what they perceive to be the magnificence of European writers, thinkers and “doers” (in the specific case of the famed conqueror, Napoleon) as a parable for the usefulness of black education in post-Reconstruction America. Starks ends by asking, “Since others have continued to labor until they have left a name which will never be effaced from the memory of the people, may not the young man of the present day do likewise? Can he not accomplish as much as his predecessors?” (Starks, 1884). To this end, the young graduate was ambitious in thinking ahead about the ways in which the black school could be utilized as a means to leverage black intellectualism and the Negro’s capacity, in whatever degree it may exist, to correct for the centuries of longstanding segregation, economic and political disempowerment, and also, educational inequalities that would continue working against the masses of American blacks for generations to come (Barker, Et al., 1999, 33-52).
CONCLUSION

Examining narratives written by the late 19th century black high school graduate, the generation of black folk largely responsible for setting the contours of black learning and thus the black academic as many still recognize them today, offers a salient look at the dawn of ideals concerning African American leadership, learning, and citizenship that have largely held true through the contemporary. What this corps of educated black Americans conceived about the parameters of blackness are still referenced in both the academic and cultural sense today, and up to this point, whether by scarcity, lack of accessibility or both, this resource has remained generally untapped in axes of historical study. As alluded to in the opening sections above, this has resulted in a prodigiously one-sided and somewhat limited take on black educational history in which the perceived inherent progressiveness of the black school has remained the driving force of historic and cultural analysis. By bringing student-voice to the forefront, not only is one able to engage primary accounts of those who were most directly affected by the conceptualization of what black education should look like, what it was designed to accomplish and the types of citizens it should produce, more importantly, it offers a heretofore missing link between past and present.

The most practical function of such a methodology is the question of how it can be used to inform and improve upon educational practice concerning black youth today. Nearly 150 years after its inception and Central High School’s student body, like the student bodies of most originally black schools still in operation, remains almost
completely black. And while it continues to embody a school spirit and pride that is unmatched relative to most others around JCPS, its student body today, who is expected to live and learn by the principles of its 19th century predecessors, have largely opted out of the foundational values of education and citizenship that have been laid before them. On the other hand, the school itself, for all that may be revealed about the great change it has promulgated since the late 19th century, has virtually remained the same in terms of its academic and cultural posture. (As what is possibly the most shining example, a moment is set aside each morning for the principal to recite the Pledge of Allegiance over the intercom. Not many students stand, place their hands over their hearts or repeat the words, but the moment itself is emblematic of this lasting facet of black education.)

Like American history itself, the history of the black school has developed in phases. This can be easily identified by the stark differences between the concerns, actions, and demands of black student groups from one generation to the next, say, those of the mid-1880s compared to the mid-1960s. Although markedly different, both of which utilized lessons they were taught in black schools to fight tirelessly for freedom, justice, and equality for America’s black student-youth through the means of education. This begs the question of what phase or iteration of black learning the masses of black public high school students find themselves in today. An overwhelming amount of data suggests that black students underperform in every aspect of achievement in the public school sector relative to their white counterpart (Anderson, 2006, 4-35) which suggests in this context that what we may be witnessing today is black students opting out of the tenets of patriotism and broader affinity for the west that went into shaping black learning. In that sense, can the black public school project be deemed a success? How
relevant is the black educational and intellectual tradition to young blacks and, more importantly, how can missing black educational artifacts be introduced into the modern-day classroom in a way that will allow black students to interrogate the foundations of black learning for themselves? Each of these are fundamental to inform our understanding of contemporary black high school learners and to improve upon a tradition that has failed to keep pace with the times.

While there are certainly important historical and cultural distinctions between black communities in any given city (let alone different states) there is a Central High School in every major American city from coast to coast, which is to say, there are local black educational and intellectual histories in towns and cities across the map that contain the heritage of somebody (or bodies) who had to struggle at some point in time to convince local whites of the importance of local black education. How can the role of ordinary citizens who struggled, socially and politically, to define local black educational traditions be utilized to take us beyond the orthodox national black history gaze towards a more practical, encouraging, and relevant learning experience for contemporary black student youth? Further research should include a look at how these local histories can be leveraged to increase classroom engagement among black students, inform them of the local figures who worked to establish black schools in their neighborhoods or cities and then to explore ways in which they relate (or do not relate) to their methods and objectives, and ultimately, provide today’s student-youth an alternative opportunity to engage in positive community development based in local educational and intellectual traditions.
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