

In Pursuit of Education: The Creation of a Black Public School System in Washington, D.C. through a Century of Change, 1807–1900

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Walter Licht, School of Arts & Sciences, Department of History

This thesis examines advancements in education for African Americans in the 19th century in Washington, DC with the culminating creation of an independent public school system administered by black educational leaders. The thesis focuses on internal and external factors shaping the black community of Washington and on persisting concerns and commitments for the schooling of African American children. Educational advancement occurred in three different periods in the District: the first during the antebellum period with the founding of the private Bell School House in 1807 through 1862 when Congress during the Civil War established an African American public school system; the second from 1862 to 1872, the so-called Philanthropic Period, when vast numbers of benevolent and religious philanthropic societies created schools to benefit the children of the influx of ex-slaves from the south—during this period, white commitment to education advancements for African Americans was notable; and the third, from 1871 to the turn of the twentieth century, when a separate administrative school system existed by and for African Americans. Black education leaders succeeded in building a well-administered system with dedicated teachers and developed curricula, but growing racial tensions and white opposition to black advancement and class divides within the black community led to an erosion in the leverage of the black community and in the first decade of the twentieth century, administration of segregated public education was centralized in white hands. Although schooling for black children thrived under a separate system with black leadership, control over the system remained fragile and ultimately dissolved.