THE INSTITUIONALIZATION OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM IN MISSOURI:

1865-1882

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by

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A Note and Acknowledgements

I began this research to understand where I fit within the historical legacy education in the United States after teaching for nearly a decade in a small school district in central Missouri. I left the profession wondering why we were failing to continue this country’s great legacy of public education 150 years in the making. The reality is that the legacy has been complicated from the get-go, and the Golden Ticket to America’s One-Best System may never materialize. While researching, I connected deeply with nineteenth century columns in the Journal of Education about curriculum, discipline, home life, public expenditure, and teacher wages, and I also felt a familiar disdain for the bureaucracy as politicians drafted policies without any experience inside a classroom. Citizens then, as they are today, were largely onboard with the idea of education; but the devil was (and is) in the details. Agreement proves much more difficult in the nitty gritty. Turns out, the progress we have come to view as inevitable becomes less shiny in the wake of this analysis.

Much of my thanks is reserved for my adviser, Dr. Jeff Pasley, who allowed me to take an independent readings class that was foundational to my understanding of Missouri’s complicated history. He talked to me one-on-one for sometimes over two hours, every week, for an entire semester. Not many people get excited about the combination of education and Missouri history, but he let me run with it, and I am grateful. Thanks also goes to Dr. Emily Crawford-Rossi, who allowed me to take her History of Education Policy course through the Mizzou’s College of Education. I felt right at-home in a Zoom-room full of teachers and educational scholars, and our class conversations encouraged me to rethink how I presented my research on the public education system. I should also thank the academic community in the history department,
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Abstract

By the early 1870s, the public school system in Missouri became an embedded institution in the state’s cultural and political fabric. This thesis provides an explanation of how and why Missouri powerholders solidified a government-supplemented educational system during Reconstruction, along with the strategies used to help the system weather the storm of political upheaval and citizen pushback in the decade after Reconstruction’s close. The post-Civil War system initiated by state-level Radical Republicans was built on Missouri's antebellum common system, incubated in St. Louis, and in its early stages across the state prior to the conflict. The postbellum public system was a product of the Radical agenda to open publicly funded schools to children regardless of skin color, place of birth, gender, or class. Cultural mores held by some Missouri citizens—racism and anti-tax sentiment, among others—resulted in uneven application of reforms at the local level, but powerholders navigated this convoluted terrain through promotion, an emphasis on teacher professionalization, and a push for capacity expansion to further root the system in Missouri communities. The end of Radical Republican leadership in 1870 did not signal the end of the public school system; rather, spurred by urban growth, rural adaptation, and an expanding web of education-adjacent groups and businesses, public schooling survived in a post-Radical political environment. The system's institutionalization required Democrats to critique and modify within the system. This thesis argues that the survival of public schools from 1865 onward was neither assured nor even likely in Missouri, but key leadership choices and the legacy of education in St. Louis resulted in its continuance.
Introduction

When Silas Woodson delivered his inaugural speech in January of 1873, he did so as the first of eleven Missouri Democrats to hold the governor’s office in a line unbroken until after the turn of the twentieth century. His election came only seven years after the close of the United States Civil War, and a mere two years after Radical Republicans lost power in the state. Woodson’s speech signaled not only a changing of the guard, but also a changing of the narrative. Missouri and its citizens were no longer rebuilding in the wake of an unholy rebellion that tore the Union asunder; instead, the Missouri of the early 1870s would now begin to rebuild itself from a half decade of vindictive partisanship inflicted upon the state by its former Radical leadership. “We all know the causes of complaint against those who have moulded [sic] and shaped the policies of the recent past,” Woodson orated, “We know, because we have seen and felt the bad effects of proscriptive partisanship in enactment, and as well as enforcement, of our laws.” Woodson believed the newly elected Democratic majority in the General Assembly would “shun” such practices: “Can we, gentlemen, forget the bitter memories of the past, its hates, its misrule and oppression, and consecrate our official lives to the service of the state?”

Woodson’s speech reveals the selective memories Missouri Democrats held in the early 1870s. Forgotten, at least in the Capitol building that day, were the years of violent conflict unleashed by the South’s secession in the early 1860s to defend the institution of slavery. Woodson was articulating a cumulative sense of anger prevalent amongst the

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political elite and common folk alike against Radical Republicans, the party devoted to complete abolition of slavery in the United States, and who had controlled Missouri politics in the years following the Civil War. Fresh in Democratic minds were Radical contrivances like the Test and Ironclad Oaths, which precluded all ministers, teachers, lawyers, and other public officials from practicing or voting if they held Southern sympathies, and the Registry Act, which sought to enforce former-Confederate disenfranchisement. A retraction of Radical policy, then, would be common sense.

And yet, for all the backlash against Radical Republicans and their policies, Woodson took special care to devote a full section of his speech to the public school system, largely viewed as the product of Radical ideology and inserted into the organic law of the state by that faction in 1865. As far as the public schools were concerned, Woodson assured his audience that “they are safe; having found a home in the lodgment in the Constitution, and a home in the hearts and affections of our people.” Contrary to Republican accusations, he said, the Democratic party championed efficient public schools. Woodson may have surprised a few listeners when he closed his address with “Gentlemen, I do not believe that any party, opposed to the cause of universal education, ought to control the destinies of Missouri.”

In less than a decade, the public school system was no longer a party-line issue in a former slaveholding state: it was here to stay.

This project seeks to understand how and why the public school system in Missouri became entrenched in the decades following the Civil War. An institutional study of Missouri’s nineteenth-century schools helps us see the various moving parts as they were during the formative years of the institution. Educational historian David

\[2 \text{ “Inaugural Address of Woodson,” 12.}\]
Tyack posits that the study of institutions provides historians “a familiar place to stand—firm ground on whose contours they know—to look out on society.”3 Though educational reform is “intrinsically political in origin,” the Missouri system was not an independent state entity; rather, it was the sum of its many local parts functioning in a state with factions allegiant to different political parties, cultural norms, and educational ideologies.4 What value systems would triumph within regulatory and administrative chambers? What strategies did powerholders use to keep the system afloat while under duress? I argue that the survival of public schools from 1865 onward was neither assured nor even likely in Missouri, but key leadership choices and the legacy of education in St. Louis resulted in its continuance. For better or worse, the public school system, while far from unopposed, became institutionalized in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Historians of both post-Civil War Reconstruction and American education struggle to incorporate Missouri into their work.5 In the antebellum years, the state’s Border West locale, its distinctive form of slavery, and its “somewhat diluted” southern identity render the state a peculiar fit for studies that delineate based on regional boundaries.6 Missouri also remained in the Union during the Civil War, which precluded

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5 Historians debate the periodization of Reconstruction. I use 1862-1870 for Missouri’s Reconstruction period because the Union controlled the state after 1862 and Radicals lost power in 1870. Many situate 1865-1877 as federal Reconstruction bookends; others, like W.E.B. Du Bois in his Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880 use a wider swath of time.
it from federal Reconstructionist mandates, allowing Radical Republicanism to manifest within the state as opposed to being under the auspices of national dictums. Because of this, many large-framework Reconstructionist studies reconcile Missouri to the periphery of analysis. Eric Foner’s 1988 perennial study, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, is a representative case. He describes Missouri as experiencing an “internal reconstruction” and lists the state in spots of analysis, though it is absent in his assessment of Radical education policies. He asserts that the federal goal of “creating modern, centralized systems, modeled on the most advanced educational thinking in the North, proved unattainable” because, among other reasons, it was too expensive for states to build a system from the ground up. As I will show, the Missouri experience complicates his conclusion. Historians of American education, too, find the state a difficult setting to analyze. Many of the most-heralded studies omit the state from analysis or, like Reconstructionist histories, allow it to remain as a sideshow. Specific to Reconstruction, scholarship focuses on Peabody-funded states, where a Northern philanthropist aided public schools but required racial segregation for money to be

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8 Foner, 565.

distributed. Missouri was not part of this program and finds itself excluded or exiled from these regional studies.  

Historians of Missouri, too, still tend to gloss over the state’s educational system in the near-postbellum era, oftentimes with an approving glance to its seemingly modern tenets without rigorous analysis. These works link the early school system with its Radical designers and cast it aside as a corollary to the demise of the political party in the early 1870s. Much of this presumption can be traced to a 1911 publication by Claude Phillips, who set the tone for how we understand Missouri educational history when he described the Reconstructionist system as “too theoretical” to survive the Radical fall.  

Missouri’s Reconstruction period was a veritable blind spot for many writing in the early twentieth century, driven by the accepted position that Missourians affiliated with the South in the post-war decades, and therefore lumped the state in with the Southern rejection of a Radically-developed public school system. Because of this, Phillips declined to spend much time on the decade after the Civil War in his foundational text. Missouri compilations follow this lead, as do works centered on adjacent topics—either with brief nods to the time period or brief nods to education.  

More recent scholarship

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12 The Dunning School of the early twentieth century influenced this line of thought. It argued Reconstruction was a messy blunder brought on by Radicalism and Freedmen. From the 1950s forward, Revisionists and Post-Revisionists reassessed the time-period as more successful and revolutionary. The cultural turn of the 1990s provided for more work on race, class, and gender. For a historiography of the Reconstruction, see: Claire Parfait, C., “Reconstruction Reconsidered: A Historiography of Reconstruction, From the Late Nineteenth Century to the 1960s,” *Études anglaises* 4, no. 4 (2009): 440-454.

has begun to take a closer look at the time-period through alternative lenses, but the
standard interpretation initiated by Phillips has limited scholarly inquiry into the
strategies and extended circumstances that fostered the system out of its infancy. Not
only does a closer look situate this story outside of the Radical-fall framework, but a
study of how and why the system became entrenched remains unwritten.

I should offer a quick note on definitions. I will adopt educational historian Carl
Kaestle’s definition of “common school” to mean an elementary school open to all
children in an area in the antebellum period. Slaveholding states assumed the word “all”
to be synonymous with “white.” Further, “common schools” were not always “free
schools” before 1865, in that a small tuition fee was expected for those parents who could
pay. “Subscription schools” were stand-alone enterprises where parents pooled their
resources to pay a teacher, mostly used in the antebellum period. In the postbellum, state-
funded schools will be referred to as “public” schools with the implication that these were
free for all children. Both before and after the Civil War, “private” or “academy” refers to
a school run by a local enterprise, and “parochial” refers to a school run by a religious
group. When in doubt, “common” is pre-war, “public” is post-war.

Missouri’s antebellum system begins the state’s paradoxical blend of Northern
and Southern schooling traditions. Unlike nearly all its slaveholding counterparts,
Missouri followed Horace Mann’s call to open common schools, free and open to all white children, in the wake of an expanded electorate and the desire to increase literacy rates. Mann is known as the father of the American Common School Movement, whose cohort of reformers were mainly Protestant men from New England who believed universal and non-sectarian schools were essential to democratic success. Educational scholars rightly debate the early school reformer’s true intentions, but all recognize the Common School Movement’s rapid expansion throughout New England and the Old Northwest in the 1830s and 1840s. Historian John Rury writes that “great variation” existed in every state’s implementation of antebellum common schools, but more significantly in “South and West than in the northeast.” The slaveholding South largely maintained a system of privately-funded academies or subscription schools to concentrate education in the hands of the social and political elite and strongly opposed common schools.

Missouri’s Border West locale made it an unusual candidate for the Common School Movement’s proliferation before the Civil War, but the state was well on its way

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to grafting a “Northern idea” onto a slaveholding state in the antebellum period. As immigration to the Mississippi Valley progressed throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, religious institutions opened schools for the social elite and those desiring to enter seminary. The impetus for a state-supplemented system came with the United States Congress creating a government for the Territory of Missouri in 1812, which designated profits from the sale of common lands to be used solely for funding community schools. The state’s first Constitution in 1820 set aside 1.2 million acres of land (the sixteenth section of each township and swamp lands) that, when sold at a future date, would go toward Missouri’s school fund. Though progress was slow in the 1820s and 1830s, lawmakers certainly understood the power of education as state law prohibited the education of Black children, freed or enslaved, in 1847; white students, accordingly, were afforded the opportunity to become literate members of society regardless of class to fulfill their duties as citizens of the Republic. The Democratic General Assembly required twenty-five percent of the General Revenue Fund be reserved for townships to organize common schools and created a Superintendent’s office to look after their development in 1853. By decade’s end, forty percent of Missouri’s white children attended a common school at some point during the year.

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19 Kaestle’s *Pillars of the Republic* is considered one of the preeminent works on the Common School Movement. In it, he offers a chapter called “Regional Differences” that seems to define the Midwest as non-slaveholding states and includes ample analysis on Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Illinois. He posits that the Midwest accepted common schools more readily due to their religious and political similarities to New England (this is a slight variation on Rury’s conclusions). Kaestle’s analysis of the South does not include Missouri. He mentions St. Louis once.
21 Missouri Constitution, 1820, p. 20-21, Record Group 5.24, Office of the Secretary of State, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City.
Missouri’s common schools had more than Horace Mann and friends to credit for their unique antebellum establishment. From the outset, St. Louis was ahead of the educational curve. Back in 1817, the Territorial Assembly effectively offered St. Louis home-rule in the educational realm prior to statehood, and then again in 1833 when it created the St. Louis Board of Education to facilitate the organization of schools. St. Louis opened its first common school in 1837, the same year Horace Mann began his role as head of the Massachusetts system.23 Spurred largely by a booming heterogenous immigrant population, coupled with an influx of Yankee businessmen, St. Louis leaders quickly adopted a system reminiscent of large population centers in the East, headed by a City Superintendent with a pyramid of administrators, principals, and teachers below him.24 Leadership worked to turn the reputation of state-funded schools away from the prevailing “pauper” status and into acceptable institutions for all classes of children.25 By 1853, when the statewide mandate went into effect, St. Louis already had nine public schools serving nearly 3,000 students, including the first high school west of the Mississippi River. On the eve of the Civil War, that number was over 12,000.26

St. Louis’ antebellum capacity expansion allowed it to become a vanguard of educational theory. Lancastrian schools—also called monitorial, where students teach each other—dominated, but St. Louis was one of the first to experiment with graded


25 Troen, 17.

26 Scharf, 848.
schools as they became in vogue. The city supported a School for the Deaf and a School for the Blind in the pre-war years, becoming the first in the country to adopt the Braille system. A dearth in qualified teachers led the city to organize the state’s first normal school, a teacher-training institution, in 1857. Black activists and their allies attempted to open schools for free Black children in defiance of state law, but most were unsuccessful in the wake of opposition.

Missouri’s other antebellum common schools were a bit slower to ride the coattails of the St. Louis model, even in the wake of the statewide law. Government-funded education was a relatively new idea, teachers were of the less-than-professional sort, and the reputation as a pauper system pervaded. In the late 1850s, one southeastern Missouri community decided to spend its share of the school fund on whiskey, sugar, and flour for “a general blowout on the fourth of July in honor of free schools and a free people” because the population was too sparsely settled to organize schools for itself.

While acknowledging the issues confronting the start of a new system, State Superintendent William Stark boasted of an increase of over 100,000 students attending public schools during the three years since its inception, hoping “those who have doubted the success of an old system when applied to so new a community of ours” needed only time to come to appreciate the opportunity to offer their children instruction. Regardless of varied reception, the legacy of an established common system served it well after the Civil War, which, as one would expect, disrupted education statewide. Schools closed

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27 Scharf, 1883.
29 “The People’s College: A General Consideration of Education in Missouri,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, June 16, 1877; The community was Iron Mountain, Missouri.
30 1858 Missouri Report, 4.
and the General Assembly halted its annual expenditure. St. Louis attempted to keep its school doors open throughout the conflict.\textsuperscript{31}

Here is where the standard interpretation—that Radicals failed to implement their wacky new system on an unsuspecting populace—requires more thorough interrogation. We begin in Chapter One during the Radical surge to power in Missouri amid the chaos of the Civil War. Crucial to the party’s agenda was a Reconstruction of the public system as one open to all children regardless of skin color, gender, class, or place of birth. In Missouri, this Reconstructed system was built upon an already existing common foundation established in St. Louis and popping up elsewhere; the tricky part came in navigating Missouri’s complicated political spectrum to formulate law. Key to this analysis is Thomas A. Parker’s tenure as Superintendent of Public Schools from 1865-1870. Parker was a tried-and-true Radical who believed in the system’s ability to progress a free and independent society with schools available to all children. This study shows how he used promotion, teacher professionalization, and capacity expansion to sell the system across a diverse, and oftentimes hostile, state.\textsuperscript{32} His loss in the 1870 election makes for an easy association with the fall of Radicalism, but Parker’s fall from grace was not due solely to political expediency. While certainly part of the puzzle, the end of Parker’s tenure was more the result of irking the education community in St. Louis than anything else.

\textsuperscript{31} Scharf, 848.

\textsuperscript{32} The phrase “capacity expansion” comes from educational literature that discuss the building of physical buildings as a policy instrument. Though these studies do not apply their work to the period I study, the concept is the same. See: Lorraine M. McDonnell and Richard F. Elmore. “Getting the Job Done: Alternative Policy Instruments,” \textit{Educational Evolution and Policy Analysis} 9, no. 2 (Summer, 1987): 133-152.
Chapter Two demonstrates how the system became affixed even through political upheaval. While Jefferson City saw power shift away from Radicalism and toward the Democratic Party, St. Louis reemerged as the center of educational support when the school system came under pressure in the late 1860s and early 1870s. The brief tenure of Ira Divoll as State Superintendent, whose candidacy was the machination of the powerful educational community in St. Louis, is almost always overlooked but vital to understanding the rooting of public schooling in Missouri. I detail how his eleven years at the helm of St. Louis Public Schools rendered him an ideal nominee to weather the storm of political transition. John Monteith, a member of the St. Louis education community, took office after Divoll’s death and carried on his legacy, especially with rhetoric centered on crime-prevention.

With the State Superintendent working to implement reform in local districts, St. Louis provided a center of stability for Missouri’s education community. Chapter Two also explores the city’s continued role as a hub of innovative educational practices. William Torrey Harris, the iconic educational theorist, espoused a philosophy bent on institutional stability that would be heard nationwide. Media, too, played an integral role in establishing the system. Publications like the Journal of Education, issued by prominent lecturer and St. Louisan J.B Merwin, developed after the Civil War as part educational propaganda and part commercial venture. The Journal became an outlet for commentary on institutional change in Jefferson City, but it also offered space to those with an interest to see the system through. There was also quite a bit of money to be made in the proliferation of schools. The production of textbooks, schoolhouse plans, and blackboards became a lucrative business. I argue that the expansion and entrenchment of
the system met the needs of many interests—political legitimacy, theoretical good for society, and turning a profit.

Chapter Three removes the bookends of 1865-1875 in Missouri education history and reorients our perspective statewide. In a sense, the training wheels came off, and it was a bumpy ride. The Democratic Party and its politically aligned newspapers regularly critiqued the state-funded education system as a poor use of public expenditure, especially as schools opened for Black students. Thus, the new 1875 Constitution introduced by Democrats was a lesson in limitations, to be sure, but like Governor Silas Woodson promised, many provisions of the Reconstructed system remained. Urban districts boomed under Superintendents fixated on opening schools for their ballooning populations. Many smaller villages saw schoolhouses turn into communal hubs that could withstand changes in political and ideological constructs. Further, the brainchild of Parker and his Radical allies materialized as normal schools opened and educational associations proliferated. The educational community, deeply rooted in St. Louis but expanding across the state in the late 1870s and early 1880s, provided sustainment for those dedicated to the cause.

It is important to note that recognizing the institutionalization of the system does not require our appreciation or support of how it manifested. Its entrenchment does not negate the ways it oftentimes served as a wolf in sheep’s clothing, seemingly offering opportunities for equity only to fall short of its promise. The “communal hubs” in

33 Bassetz, “The New Constitution,” *Missouri Republican* (St. Louis), May 23, 1865, p. 1; “Not Irksome to Them,” Missouri Republican, June 22, 1866; “German Radicalism in our Public Schools,” *Missouri Republican*, June 12, 1867. Oftentimes, the *Missouri Republican* would do less to criticize the necessity of the system and more of how Republicans operated the system. For example, in the column just below the June 12, 1867 column above, the paper lauded the opening of the new O’Fallon Polytechnic Institute, a building part of St. Louis Public Schools, writing “The institution is one which St. Louis can be justly proud.”
Missouri towns did little to reflect the “great equalizer” intent of many of its progenitors; in fact, schools oftentimes served as nothing more than the “great reinforcer” of racial subjugation and classism. The final chapter includes an analysis of how powerholders, sensing that the public school system was firmly rooted, instead decided to mold the schools into conduits for a worldview befitting the white population’s adoption of a southern identity.

Any examination of the Missouri institution needs to consider the context of the state’s political environment, its (usually partisan) newspapers, and the education-reform community. We are lucky enough to have access to the *Missouri Reports of the Public Schools* for both the state and St. Louis to help understand the marriage between top-down policy makers and the communities they served. County-level reports capture the voices of those in charge, and while they purport to speak for their neighbors, they are written from a homogenous class, race, and gendered perspective of those who were the social elite of a given area. That holds true, too, for the *Journals*, whose status as a profitable enterprise required wide readership across geographical areas and a sustained set of buyers to ensure its success. This meant that it appealed to those already interested in educational matters and in many cases was self-admittedly “preaching to the choir” in its advocacy.

Still, educational historians also know that holistic studies must include more than top-down archival sources. My study must grapple with this limitation because it only

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34 These are available in many libraries and archives across the state. Most are also available online through the Missouri State Archives.

35 *The Journal of Education* out of St. Louis is housed at the Missouri State Historical Society in the Reference Collection. I do not know of a digitized hub. It is also sometimes referenced as the *American Journal of Education*, leading to confusion with several other publications with similar names.

analyzes the behavior of powerholders and its influence on a largely generalized population. Among others, my sources give limited voice to the lived experiences of those who taught inside Missouri classrooms, sat in its uncomfortable bench seats, or were given second-rate opportunities on account of their skin color or location of birth. My future work will rectify these omissions using local archives. An institutional study of Missouri’s public schools, though, helps us see how various power structures functioned within their own historical contexts during the formative years of the system.

The Missouri system became institutionalized through administrative strategies and an expanding educational community hellbent on seeing it to grow to fruition. Public schools survived in Missouri’s volatile post-Civil War milieu to become a non-negotiable in political agendas by the early 1870s. To be sure, Missouri’s status as the seedbed for the debate around slavery’s expansion, its official ties to the Union but informally waged battles between civilians, and its premature transition out of Radicalism put the state into a league of its own. Its public school system, then, can only be viewed as a result of that odd amalgamation.
Chapter One
The Reconstruction of Missouri’s Public School System: 1862-1870

The American Civil War was turbulent. At the conflict’s official end in 1865, thousands of young men in blue and gray returned home to hang up their muskets and reassemble their lives. For those in the North, home was a place of victory for the Union and a free-labor system largely left unexposed to the ruin of military campaigns. For those in the South, home was a reminder of the Confederacy’s failure—the war-ravaged landscapes, the devastated economy, and the freedom of Black bondspeople held in shackles for over two centuries. For most of these men and the families they returned to, whether north or south of the Mason-Dixon, home was a place of either mutual celebration or commiseration. The same could not be said for Missouri or its soldiers. As the Civil War raged in a slave-state that never seceded, the conflict exposed fractures within the most intimate bonds of familial loyalty. Slave-owning Unionists and non-slaveholding Confederates fostered a confused dynamic within its borders, and it is no understatement to characterize the fighting as brother versus brother, neighbor versus neighbor. With the Union Army controlling the state from 1862 onward, guerilla warfare and vigilantism plagued the countryside for years after the end of official military campaigns. Unity for Missourians, either in triumph or loss, was not on the table.1

This unsettled environment extended into the political realm. In Missouri, Radical Republicans assumed a majority in the 1864 General Assembly on the backs of 52,000 less voters than in 1860—a shrinking number partly on account of a Test Oath

requirement removing Southern sympathizers from voting eligibility.\textsuperscript{2} On a national level, Radicals in Washington D.C. formed prior to the Civil War as a fervently anti-slavery faction of the Republican Party. The group’s uncompromising stance on abolition contrasted with moderate Republicans, like Abraham Lincoln, and more obviously, with pro-slavery Democrats. In the wake of a Union victory, moderate Republicans (and then Lincoln’s slaveholding, former-Democratic successor, Andrew Johnson) initiated policies favoring leniency toward Confederate states. When national Radicals gained access to power structures in 1866 and subsequent unilateral decision-making after Johnson’s impeachment, they ushered in punitive policies toward former Confederate states.\textsuperscript{3}

Missouri Radicals were not unlike their federal counterparts, but with two distinct differences. First, because the Union controlled the state from early in the conflict, an expulsion of Southern sympathizers from leadership positions came early. This does not mean Radicals in Missouri held unilateral power during the Civil War; rather, the provisional government established in 1861 was a hodge-podge of the state’s gamut of political allegiances. The second reason for distinction was because of the state’s slaveholding yet non-seceded status. Federal Radicals came to impose policies on traitorous citizens living in distant Southern lands; Missouri’s Radicals, alternatively, imposed policies on fellow citizens living down the road or in exile. As a result, Radical ideology developed within the belly of the beast and was unencumbered by Federal military occupation like official Confederate states.\textsuperscript{4} The victorious party, then, intended

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{3} I use the designator national and federal interchangeably.
\textsuperscript{4} For more on the Union’s post-war occupation of the South, see: Gregory P. Downs, \textit{After Appomattox: Military Occupation and the Ends of War} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).
\end{flushright}
to harness the power of public policy to reorient Missouri’s trajectory Northward regardless of local loyalties. Collectively, they believed universal education for all children would help stabilize the turbulent post-war climate and help right the ship after the Southern Rebellion.

The first part of this chapter addresses the development of Missouri’s education policy from 1862-1870 and the public’s reception. I frame the “new” system of inclusivity and accessibility as a Reconstruction of Missouri’s antebellum system. Missouri powerholders, both Radical and non, held cohesive enough ideologies to validate the necessity for an expanded system, but support for public schools reflected a mixture of perspectives. The range of ideologies also extended to Missouri citizens as leaders quickly recognized top-down policy enforcement proved difficult in a state with diverse allegiances and value systems in the late 1860s. Cultural mores—racism and anti-tax sentiment, among others—tempered the implementation of new policy initiatives in several areas. The result was uneven application of reforms at the local level throughout the near-postbellum years. And yet, even with community differences, the statewide system wove itself into the political and social fabric just as the Radical fall threatened to bring the public schools down with it in 1870.

How, then, did the system lodge itself into the social and political fabric? The second part of this chapter follows State Superintendent Thomas A. Parker, a dyed in the wool Methodist and Radical, who approached his position much like the preacher he was by trade. Parker is oftentimes overlooked by historians, leaving unstudied the mechanisms he employed to embed the public school system in Missouri. I argue that he used three mechanisms to combat opposition toward the system: promotion, capacity
expansion, and teacher professionalization. Promotion proved only a moderately successful avenue, but not for want of trying. Long forgotten, but just as important, was Parker’s emphasis on capacity expansion and teacher professionalization, the foundation on which the system would continue well after his fall from political grace. He prioritized funneling students in the school door and finding quality teachers to run the classrooms. By leaving most curricular decisions to the local districts, at least for the time being, Parker could solidify the school system by erecting a physical building in each community that could outlast changes in cultural moods or identities.

This chapter also seeks to complicate the historiographic legacy that a rejection of Parker was a wholesale rejection of Radical education policies. Quite the opposite is true, at least in the political arena, as the fruits of his labors can be seen in the Democratic Party’s unwillingness to eschew the public school system in the early 1870s after it returned to power. To be sure, Parker’s emphasis on promotion, capacity, and professionalization did not, in his five years, squash local hesitancies. In his mind, his mission (and that of the Radicals) would continue after the election of 1870. Instead, his tenure was cut short by political scandal exacerbated by St. Louis elites, but he helped open enough doors and ushered enough children into seats to root the system in Missouri communities. Instead viewing the Parker years as a failure because of the fall of Radicalism, we must disassociate the two to discover the strategies he employed that sustained the system after his fall from grace.

**Missouri Education Reform in the Wake of War**

Most of Missouri’s state-subsidized common schools closed at the official onset of the Civil War in the spring of 1861. Though a neutral state during the conflict, Union
forces installed a provisional government in 1861 with military campaigns mostly ending within Missouri’s borders by 1862. Guerrilla warfare became the dominant fighting method throughout the state, leaving the state’s population hostage to roaming bands of pro-Confederate or pro-Union men who rendered the countryside an unsafe place for whomever encountered them and fell on the wrong side of the given ideological or political coin. Schools, then, were not only placed on the backburner for government expenditure, but parents were also unwilling to send their children off toward the schoolhouse in such a volatile environment.

Missouri’s provisional leadership was a mishmash of political allegiances, but almost all saw the value reopening school doors as quickly as possible. The provisional governor, Hamilton R. Gamble, personified the muddled loyalties of Missourians during the mid-nineteenth century and helps show the convoluted political terrain in which powerholders navigated. Gamble, who was the Chief dissenter in the Dred Scott decision back in 1857, was a staunch Unionist who initiated the Test Oath to disenfranchise Southern sympathizers early in his term. But he was also a slaveholder who clashed with the Radical faction over slave emancipation and owner compensation. Unionist or not, Gamble’s politics certainly fell on the conservative end of the spectrum. Still, by the tail end of 1862, he believed the reestablishment of common schools to be a vital part of the state’s rebuilding process. “The embarrassments produced by the rebellion have deeply affected the Common Schools of the State,” Gamble lamented. He then advised the General Assembly to “devise some practicable scheme for restoring our school system to

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5 Blevins, 61. William Quantrill’s raid on Lawrence, Kansas occurred in August of 1863.
its former successful operation.” Gamble recognized Missouri’s established precedent and insisted that schools play an integral part in stabilizing the fraught environment.

Missouri Secretary of State Mordecai Oliver held similar sentiments, and as the ex-officio Superintendent of Common Schools, he was in a better position to espouse its needs. Like Gamble, he served as a caricature of Missouri’s tenuous coalition of governance. Prior to the war, Oliver affiliated with the Whigs, then the Opposition Party, and then the Unionist Party, all of which were, in some shape or form, anti-Democratic and anti-secessionist. The day after Christmas in 1864, he presented his Report on the Common Schools to the Radical-majority in the General Assembly. With the North’s victory imminent and peace on the horizon, he was encouraged by the “the intelligence of our citizens and their deep interest in the welfare of schools again” when, “[they] threw open many schoolhouse doors, and gathered together in many school rooms children in all parts of the state.” He reported that nearly all counties north of the Missouri River had operational schools and several were reopening in the southern half. For him, the “old system should be returned to” in which the schools were under the guidance of a singularly focused man and the powers of an administrative office.

His reasoning for reopening corresponded with the Radical majority. Pragmatically, Oliver believed organized common schools would attract quality immigrant groups to help rebuild and cultivate untended fields. Further, like most

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8 Missouri Annual Report of Public Schools, 1864, State Documents Collection-Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, RG000.105, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City. (hereafter cited as 1864 Missouri Report.)
9 1864 Missouri Report, 7.
10 1864 Missouri Report, 9.
common school proponents believed, education was a pillar of a (Protestant) Christian republic whereby all men and women undergirded the necessities of liberty. Schools were to provide the intellect and churches the morality. Importantly, Oliver’s Report also demonstrates how much of the historiography glosses over the nuance of Missouri’s political ideological range under Radical rule, particularly with the education of Black children. Because Missouri’s postbellum politicians are often credited with believing education should include universal access, it is important to understand that rationale varied. For Oliver, the state’s obligation to provide schools for freedpersons was because

…they are still human beings, having mind and soul, and agencies capable of much good, by being elevated by education to an appreciation of the interests of society, and to an understanding that there is a better and a higher destiny for them than that of mere animals, and capable of much injury by being left in their ignorant and semi-civilized condition . . . The utter impossibility of the class to be emancipated ever being able to rise to the level of the white race, or that they can ever live on terms of social equality with the two races, leads us to believe, that at some future day, exportation and colonization will be the system resorted to.11

Both Gamble and Oliver help illustrate the contorted reality of Missouri’s wartime political environment. Both were Unionists who despised the Confederate decision to secede, but neither were Radicals. And further, both men recognized the importance of resuming the common school system, established prior to the conflict, as a necessary stabilizer in the war-torn state.

With Oliver’s 1864 Report in mind, the Radical majority in the General Assembly wasted no time implementing its agenda. Missouri became the first slave-holding state to abolish slavery in January 1865 (three months prior to the Civil War’s official end) and quickly moved to modify the state’s pre-war school code. The body fulfilled Oliver’s request to reestablish the Superintendent’s Office, but his ideas on relocation fell on deaf

11 1864 Missouri Report, 11.
ears. Instead, the legislature ordered the word “white” to be removed from definitions of schooling eligibility and required school districts to provide for the instruction of all children regardless of skin color.\textsuperscript{12} These schools were to be separate, but the change from a prohibition of teaching reading and writing to \textit{any} Black person, enslaved or otherwise, to an official mandate for Black education indicated that Radicals believed universal access to be a cornerstone of progress. The law also stipulated that preference for open teaching positions go to veteran Union soldiers, widows, or children of fallen soldiers—and that all trustees take the Test Oath of loyalty.\textsuperscript{13} This version of Radical policy, then, held strong ideological tenets that the public school system should operate as both the great stabilizer, like Gamble and Oliver believed, and the great equalizer.

For all its verve, the General Assembly’s actions were largely ceremonial, at least for the school system. Congressmen chose to await the outcome of a concurrent Constitutional Convention in St. Louis before funding the new initiatives. Radical Charles Drake, along with a majority Radical delegation, squabbled for four months on how to remake Missouri in the image of the North. Drake, like so many other Missouri politicians at the time, had an evolutionary political career beginning in the 1850s. He first was a Whig, then a Know-Nothing (American nativist, anti-immigrant), then a slavery-tolerant Unionist at the beginning of the war, and then careened straight into anti-slavery Radicalism by the mid-1860s. His biographer paints a less-than-flattering picture of Drake’s personality, but he nonetheless dominated the Radical faction, and

\textsuperscript{12} Laws of Missouri, Twenty Third General Assembly, Regular Session, 1864-1865, p. 126, State Documents Collections, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City.

\textsuperscript{13} Eugene Fair, \textit{Public Administration in Missouri}, (Kirksville, MO: Journal Printing Company, 1923).
consequently, the Constitutional Convention. The delegates first order of business was to pass an ordinance of complete emancipation, along with a resolution to support the abolition of slavery across the country. The final version of the Constitution of 1865, completed in May and called the Drake Constitution, not only completely banned slavery, but it also refused compensation for slaveowners. The most notorious provision took the Test Oath to the next level. The newly dubbed Ironclad Oath required men in several public service professions swear allegiance to the Union and deny participation in some eighty-six different acts, which ranged from engaging in the rebellion to verbalizing support for it, prior to continuing their practices. Punishment for violating the Oath was a $500 fine and potential imprisonment. Radicals intended to codify their ideology while they had the chance.

Public schools were a hallmark of that ideology. Article X of The Drake Constitution authorized the legislature to organize a system of free schools “for the gratuitous instruction of all persons in the state” between the ages of five and twenty-one. Section 2 required state funds be allocated based on the number of children, regardless of race, though communities could decide to open integrated or segregated schools. In contrast, Florida, Georgia, Texas, and Arkansas all codified obstruction to Black children attending state-funded public schools by 1867. Missouri was the first of

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16 The Education Committee report was partly destroyed in the Jefferson City Capitol fire of 1911. Prior to 1991, someone decided that clear Scotch tape would serve as a pseudo laminator and taped the entire thing front to back.
the former slave-holding states to revise its Constitution to include the right to public schooling for *every* child regardless of race, and it did so without the federal government holding a gun to its back.

Missouri’s diverse political allegiances still forced Drake to enter a precarious balance between Conservatives, moderate Republicans, and his Radical counterparts. German Radicals, mostly from the St. Louis area, held very little affection for Drake and his Know-Nothing, anti-Catholic rhetoric. Black suffrage garnered the most fervent debate (most Radicals were opposed), but the schooling question also earned ire.\(^{18}\) An editorial took issue with taxation for the education of Black children: “The logic of the Convention is, that they have committed a wrong by denying the negro the right to vote, but they have atoned for that wrong by making the white men labor to support the free negro schools.” The paper did not object to educating former Missouri slaves, but worried the education provision encouraged “every lazy free negro in the United States to come to Missouri and his children shall be educated at the expense of the sweat, toil, and labor of the white man.”\(^{19}\) The vote to approve the new organic law reflected this sentiment. Voters barely ratified the new Constitution in June of 1865, even with Confederate disenfranchisement. Radicalism, while politically dominant, was rarely on stable ground.

The state’s first post-war Superintendent of Public Instruction refused to take the Ironclad Oath and resigned less than a year into his term.\(^{20}\) His successor held no such

\(^{18}\) Parish, 1965.
\(^{20}\) This historical record is quiet on James H. Robinson’s departure. Robinson spent ten months preparing the school system for its relaunch. He supported liberal spending for Black schools and openly reaffirmed the requirement of the Ironclad Oath for all teachers in September 1865. In his only official *Report on Public Instruction* in late 1865, he relayed that many were upset about the Oath and asked, “shall
qualms. Newly elected Radical Governor Thomas Fletcher appointed Thomas A. Parker as State Superintendent of Public Schools near the end of 1865. A native of Indiana, Parker was a young Radical—twenty-eight years old, two years younger than the requirement for officeholders—who had served as a Union chaplain during the Civil War. Parker entered the political fray as a novice, but whatever he lacked in savvy, he more than made up for in idealistic zeal and fidelity to the cause. He spent his initial months in office working alongside the Education Committees in the General Assembly to formulate a revised code for Missouri’s education system.

The resulting legislation, passed in March and called the School Law of 1866, maintained much of the framework of the antebellum common system. The township board (often called the school board) continued to supervise schools while County Commissioners saw their titles renamed to County Superintendents with more responsibility and authority attached to the title. Money still came from township, county, and state levels. In a sense, the new public school system was the third iteration of schooling in Missouri. The first was private schooling for the elite, then common schools in a slave-holding state, and finally public schooling via the Radical push in the wake of the Civil War.

the children be deprived of an education because their fathers and mothers have been rebels?” The state auditor refused a request by Robinson to be compensated for expenses incurred after January 1, 1866. The auditor refused on the grounds that Robinson ceased to hold office after January 1. Please see: 1865 House Journal, Adjourned Session Appendix, 111; 1865 House Journal, Adjourned Session Volume 3 and Index, p. 903, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City.

21 Gamble died in office; his Lieutenant Governor, Willard Hall completed the term.
New provisions did reflect a reimagination of the school system within the Radical ideology of equal opportunity for all with adequate funding. Districts had to submit proof that school doors remain opened for at least three months of the year if monies were to be allocated. It allowed townships to tax for the building of high schools and to keep schools open for longer periods if desired. It allowed school boards to levy taxes to repair schoolhouses or buy land without a public vote. Parker also convinced the legislature to vest the State Superintendent with broad supervision and enforcement powers. The law paid for him to visit each Congressional district for ten days to examine schools and help ensure local compliance. His $2500 salary was fair, a travel expense account made a nice perk, plus an Assistant received $2000 to help fulfill his duties.24 Parker’s goal was to shepherd the system into legitimacy.

The most prominent change in the 1866 law was the requirement for townships to open schools for Black children. Recall, the General Assembly in 1865 made a ceremonial show to strike “white” from the existing school code. The School Law of 1866, though, softened the provision. Instead of a requirement to educate all children, the new law required schools for Black children open only if more than twenty lived in a township. Schools could close if the number of Black children dropped below twelve. When a sufficient population failed to meet the twenty-student threshold, township boards could decide how to handle instruction and could choose to offer none. The law was monumental, especially relative to other former slaveholding states, but the concessions made for compromise are indicative of Missouri’s post-war reality. The contested Convention, the near-miss on ratification, the in-fighting over the legitimacy of

24 Fair, 117.
the Ironclad Oath, and the embedded racial hierarchy resulted in the legislature passing a version of the School Law more palatable to white Missourians. It is within this context that the state, led by Parker and Company, deployed its resources to ensure Missourians met the Radical call for its version of universal education.

**Local Implementation and Administrative Strategy**

After the Civil War, much of the country hitched onto the public school bandwagon. Notions of literate voters, industrial progress, and technological advancement soon became the dominant paradigm.\(^{25}\) In Missouri, though, Parker rarely waved the banner of industrial progress; in fact, while he believed a perk of a universal system was technological (“these temporalities”), he did not believe industrialism to be the end goal. Instead, the ideal was “that every child born into the world has by force of the law an absolute right to be educated,” and Missourians should “admit and consecrate this truth as a right of humanity.”\(^{26}\) He was fervently, and openly, anti-Southern (“those traitors”), and, like most of his Common School Movement allies, in favor of Protestant religious education in the public schools. Just as much as he encouraged the Bible be used in schools, he was just as passionately against offering public monies to schools run by religious organizations, arguing that “sound” educational policy could not be sectarian.\(^ {27}\) He ruffled feathers amongst the Catholic contingent of German Radicals in near St. Louis throughout his tenure, calling opponents to the public schools either “angry

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\(^{26}\) 2\(^{nd}\) *Missouri Annual Report of Public Schools*, 1867, p. 27, State Documents Collection-Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, RG000.105, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City. (hereafter cited as 1867 *Missouri Report*.)

\(^{27}\) 4\(^{th}\) *Missouri Annual Report of Public Schools*, 1867, p. xv, State Documents Collection-Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, RG000.105, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City. (hereafter cited as 1869 *Missouri Report*.)
church men” or “corrupt party men.” He even crafted language for a potential amendment, “No portion of the funds now used for the support of schools, nor of the income therefrom, shall ever be applied in aid of any school or institution established or controlled by any religious body, sect, or denomination,” and published it in the 1869 Report. When St. Louis parochial schools lobbied for a portion of the state fund in 1870, in a failed bid called the Phelan Amendment, Parker vocally opposed the measure. He was much in line with the far fringes of the party, and his supervision of the school system followed accordingly.

Many Missourians, like their fellow countrymen, agreed that public education was a progressive institution worthy of community space. County Superintendents consistently relayed a sense of optimism about their fellow citizens beginning to embrace the institutional system of public schools for white children. Media outlets also urged citizens to recognize the validity of the public schools. A newspaper out of Kansas City pushed for more enthusiasm to recognize the shifting acceptance by reminding its readers that “…this is the year of grace 1865, not 1845. Intelligence is now the test of merit.” Parker sought to capitalize on this wave of support as he travelled the state attending Teacher Institutes and tending speaking engagements with the full understanding that new systems required promotion. He received a warm welcome, at least in the northern reaches of the state.

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28 1869 Missouri Report, 18. Parker spent the rest of his life preaching for the United Methodist Church throughout Illinois. He was a member of the Masonic Lodge and the Knights Templar.
30 Missouri Annual Reports of Public Schools, 1865-1870; State Documents Collection-Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, RG000.105; Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City.
32 The Memphis Reveille, (Memphis, MO) August 20, 1868; Macon Argus, August 5, 1868; The Lancaster Excelsior, Aug 15, 1868; The North Missourian, September 24, 1868.
Post-war Missourians may have thought the school system a quality idea, but cooperation and implementation proved a gargantuan task. Most were certainly not in the zealous league of Parker, and Missouri’s split populace put a large swath out of the Radical contingent, too. Even the annual reports submitted by County Superintendents, which were answers to a brief questionnaire and presented to the General Assembly each January, showcase disjointed acceptance in their varied responses. Some replied with long-winded narratives while others approached the survey pragmatically with bulleted style responses. Some reeked of flattery while others oozed hostility.\(^3\) The reports reflected the inconsistency of imposing a Radical ideology on a public recovering from the Civil War and living amongst neighbors with conflicting loyalties.

Tax aversion was a primary reason for eschewing the system as localities expressed their frustration every year.\(^4\) McDonald County’s Superintendent, in the far southwest corner of the state, reported no public schools open in 1867 because “it was deemed unadvisable to burden our people with the tax. . .”\(^5\) While statements to this extent were rare, several bemoaned the heavy weight of local responsibility. Parker was responsive to the apprehension. He believed that, if anything, over-taxation would subvert the entire system and cautioned schools boards to limit the financial burden to safeguard against retaliation by the public.\(^6\) He listened, too, when County Superintendents took issue with verbiage in the 1866 statute. One wrote that it “should be

\(^3\) This continues throughout Parker’s tenure. See all Reports, but especially the 1867 *Missouri Report* as it is the first to include the County questionnaires, 46-152.


\(^6\) *Fifth Missouri Annual Report of Public Schools*, 1870, State Documents Collection-Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, RG000.105; Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City. (cited hereafter as 1870 *Missouri Report*.)
simplified so as to make it plain English,” while another complained “annotation and marginal references bespeak a desire to understand the incomprehensible [emphasis is original].”\(^{37}\) Parker lobbied to simplify the language, and while future statutes reflected these concerns, County Superintendents still found them cumbersome.\(^{38}\)

Many Missouri communities also struggled to put their lives back together in the wake of the Civil War.\(^{39}\) As such, schools were not the primary concern in many areas of the state, even after the official close of the conflict. In Ozark County, sitting on the state line with Arkansas, its Superintendent relayed that “during the war schools became unorganized . . . they are getting more in the spirit of educating their children, but the county is so sparsely settled.”\(^{40}\) Osage County’s Commissioner reported that his community was too busy rebuilding to concern itself with the condition of the schools. He also took issue with the Ironclad Oath precluding Southern sympathizers from teaching as “a waste of time.”\(^{41}\) The county, in the central part of the state and just south of the Missouri River, did not report a single free person of color living within its borders in 1860 but did have hundreds of slaves on its registers.\(^{42}\) No matter how the policy came packaged, as a public good or worthy investment, for some all that mattered was that the system was the brainchild of Radical Republicans.

Despite pushback, Parker’s fidelity to the new law was evident in his push to open schools for Black students. His rationale was simple: “Justice demands no less. A large part of the wealth of Missouri has been produced by the unrequited labor of slaves. It is

\(^{37}\) 1867 *Missouri Report*, 109, 95.
\(^{38}\) Fair, 119-120.
\(^{39}\) Blevins, 112.
\(^{40}\) 1867 *Missouri Report*, 122.
\(^{41}\) 1867 *Missouri Report*, 120-122.
\(^{42}\) Census of Missouri, 1860, Box 1, final folder, Missouri State Convention, 1861-1863: Office of the Secretary of State, RG005: Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City.
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but a small return that we should give their children, now free, the largest privileges of education.”  

After one full year of Radical education policy, Parker reported over 33,000 Black children receiving some sort of instruction, up from 20,000 the year prior. Most of these children attended charitable schools or private subscription schools, with public school capacity languishing behind. Of the thirty-some public schools open for Black children in 1866, only two came from counties with a predominantly Confederate-leaning population.  

Parker believed that “with proper encouragement” the number of schools open for Black children would grow “as the system is more fully understood and developed.” He trusted that time and promotion would prove the system to work.

That disheartening first year of implementation led Parker to hire James Milton Turner to spearhead the effort to expand the footprint of public schools for Black students. Turner was a formerly enslaved person, firstly self-educated and then at Oberlin College, and used the full backing of Parker and the Freedmen’s Bureau to travel the state and enforce the law. Some interactions proved more fruitful than others. One of his worst came from Fulton, near the middle of the state in Callaway County, where he characterized its population as the “meanest place and people I have ever seen.” Callaway County’s Superintendent predicted Turner’s assessment, reporting “little interest” in the education of Black children, but also with a familiar refrain of “But I hope

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43 1869 Missouri Report, 36.  
45 1867 Missouri Report, 10.  
46 Gary Kremer, James Milton Turner and the Promise of America: The Public Life of a Post-Civil War Black Leader (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1991). The Freedmen’s Bureau was active in Missouri, but its efforts were concentrated across the secessionist South, opening over 1,000 schools during Reconstruction.  
47 Kremer, 31; originally from “Turner to F.A. Seely,” October 23, 1869, Freedmen’s Bureau Letters.
By 1868, after Turner’s visit, little changed in Callaway County.

While it offers a striking anecdote, Callaway County should not be used as a template for the rest of the state. It was part of what would come to be known as “Little Dixie,” the thirteen-county area straddling the Missouri River home to most of the humans enslaved by whites in the antebellum period.\(^{49}\) And yet, this “little sentiment” was commonplace throughout more than just the former slave-holding areas. County Superintendents reported many communities did not want to be taxed for Black schools, with one from Linn County, in north-central Missouri, reporting an “implacable hostility” toward opening classrooms, even among “so-called Radicals.”\(^{50}\) A frequent excuse was that the number of Black children failed to meet the State Law’s threshold for establishing schools with a regular caveat that “there is no apparent prejudice against educating them.”\(^{51}\) Parker was skeptical of the reportedly low numbers of Black children in the state, but if low numbers were a reality, he suggested a remedy. Because “we ought to provide the means of education for every child in the State,” the “simplest manner” was to admit Black children into white schools. Mercer County’s Superintendent, in the far northern reaches of the state, entertained the idea, but scant evidence exists of its implementation anywhere in Missouri.\(^{52}\)

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\(^{48}\) 1867 Missouri Report, 60.


\(^{50}\) 1867 Missouri Report, 105.

\(^{51}\) 1867 Missouri Report, 74.

\(^{52}\) 1867 Missouri Report, 112-113. Mercer’s Superintendent: “The propriety of admitting them to the schools for the whites has even been canvassed, and should the board of education, finding they have the authority, in the absence of separate schools, decide on admitting them into the schools with the white children until such separate schools should be established under the provisions of the law, I apprehend but little or no serious opposition would be experienced.”
Not all counties denied schooling for Black students, which further demonstrates the importance of locality. Twenty counties reported at least one school open in 1867, the most being in St. Louis, Boone, Buchanan, Cooper, and Johnson counties. Columbia had two open schools, one private and one public, with sixty-five students and two Black teachers. St. Joseph’s board built a school to accommodate 150 Black scholars, and Boonville’s school had 125 students with two schools in the middle of construction. By 1869, Parker concluded that Missouri’s schools for Black students were “in the front rank” of other Southern states. “No State where slavery formerly existed has a larger portion of that class in school; in no State have those in school made better progress.”53 The statistics bear this out: by the end of Parker’s tenure, twenty-six counties had at least one school open with nearly 13,000 in public schools.54

Historians Claude Weathersby and Matthew D. Davis argue that anti-Blackness permeated all policy-making decisions even as the laws seemed to improve access to educational opportunity.55 Parker’s belief that schools were the mechanism to engineer racial equality complicates this assertion. He believed that schools were the best way to prove to a racist public that Black children held the same intellectual capacities as their white counterparts. In an official report read aloud to the General Assembly, he relayed his experience that Black schools “were not inferior in enthusiasm, readiness and grasp of thought to any I ever saw in a white school.”56 Parker, though, for all of his progressive ideology, did not operate in isolation. White Missourians, in large part, believed in innate

53 1869 Missouri Report, 33.
56 1869 Missouri Report, 36.
racial divide, and newspapers, Republican-leaning or otherwise, had similar sentiments.\textsuperscript{57} This provided a tenuous lived experience of Black students in Missouri which will be explored more in Chapter Three.\textsuperscript{58} Because of this stark divide, Black access to education highlights how Radical (and more particularly, Parker’s) vision of education manifested disjointly across the state.

As much as Parker was an ideologue, he was also practical. The powers-that-be concentrated less on curriculum or child development at this early juncture; rather, Parker’s proof of progress was in opening physical schools, outfitting them with necessary apparatus, and employing quality teachers. Capacity expansion, in schools for both Black and white children, was key to the system’s success. His priority was revamping schoolhouses, infrastructure, and supplies across the state. When Parker took the helm, County Superintendents reported that blackboards, wall maps, and readers were absent from schoolhouses, and that most buildings were log structures. In one county, children attended schools that were “frequently used to give shade and comfort to the hogs and sheep of the neighborhood.”\textsuperscript{59} Parker focused on developing the physical presence of the schoolhouse to foster its rooting in Missouri communities.

And by all accounts, Parker delivered. From 1866 to 1867, Missourians constructed 1,500 new school buildings, “an increase perhaps unexampled in the history of the West.”\textsuperscript{60} The boom continued throughout his tenure. By 1870, Missouri had thousands more schoolhouses than four years prior, with an increased property value of

\textsuperscript{57} Williams, 141; “Negro Equality in the Public schools” \textit{Daily Missouri Republican} (St. Louis) July 29, 1865.
\textsuperscript{59} 1870 \textit{Missouri Report}, 171.
\textsuperscript{60} 1867 \textit{Missouri Report}, 8.
two million dollars. Log structures remained but were quickly being replaced with frame buildings or, if the affluence of the township afforded, brick or stone. Infrastructure proved a bit more difficult hurdle to overcome. Furniture and apparatus were frequently labeled as a “very inferior class” or “very deficient” in 1866, and while improvement was apparent in the 1870 Report, Parker advocated for better materials to suit students and teachers. Attendance, too increased markedly. Statewide attendance jumped to nearly 300,000 pupils with 2,500 more teachers in classrooms at the end of the Parker Era. Though skepticism remained, parents still sent their children to the schoolhouse to participate in the public system.

With students in seats, Parker looked to revamp the profession. As a fellow teacher, he had a soft spot for those who took on the challenge, believing the profession was “undervalued, underpaid,” and praising “such men and women who love the employment of the teacher, with the attendant discomforts and anxieties, who are willing to be the sowers of the seed and wait patiently for the harvest . . .” Soft spot or not, Parker continued to be pragmatic. His organization of the State Teachers Convention served dual purposes to “elevate” teachers—not only as instructors, but also to promote the legitimacy of the entire system. Teacher Institutes became the primary mechanism to rebrand the profession. The idea of teacher training, of course, was not new—not even in Missouri. Antebellum leaders recognized the necessity of training and advocated for institutions of higher learning to fill the role of instructing teachers. Parker sought to

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61 1870 Missouri Report, 4.
62 1867 Missouri Report, 46-152; 1870 Missouri Report, xvi.
63 1870 Missouri Report, vi.
64 1867 Missouri Report, 33-34.
65 The Memphis Reveille (Memphis, MO), June 16, 1866.
revitalize the concept of Institutes by requiring them in state law, with the hopes to improve the legions of “many inefficient teachers” who were “generally poor” and “not the best.”\textsuperscript{67} These were held over the span of several days so the public could attend, and most were held in a church to accommodate larger crowds. Local papers frequently published notices and summaries after the event which came to serve dual purposes of teacher training and advertising. The results were a steady flow of public support.\textsuperscript{68}

Teacher Institutes fulfilled Parker’s desire for some sort of minimum training for teachers entering the scores of schoolhouses opened after the Civil War. These credentials, while a stopgap for those who could not afford official training or living in the far reaches of the state, were not intended to substitute for normal schools. Parker viewed normal schools as the best way to promote teacher professionalization and pushed for their opening. In 1868, he submitted a plan for the state to be divided into six districts with enrollment open to any qualified candidate, male or female, and for tuition to be free.\textsuperscript{69} While the General Assembly made clear that six was out of the fiscal question, Parker partially fulfilled his goal when the body authorized funding for two state-funded normal schools, one north of the Missouri River and one south in March of 1870. He consistently pushed to include a Normal Department at Lincoln Institute in Jefferson City, founded by the 62\textsuperscript{nd} and 65\textsuperscript{th} Colored Infantry in 1865 to provide higher learning opportunities for Black Americans. In the same month as the normal school provision, he saw the fruits of his (and J. Milton Turner’s) labors when the General Assembly voted to

\textsuperscript{67} 1867 Missouri Report, 46-152.
\textsuperscript{69} Claude Phillips, A History of Education in Missouri: The Essential Facts Concerning the History and Organization of Missouri’s Schools (Jefferson City, MO: Hugh Stephens, 1911), 94.
designate Lincoln as the state normal school for Black teachers. With the General Assembly recognizing the need for trained teachers, Parker’s goal of legitimizing the system began to materialize.

When the General Assembly revised the School Law in March of 1870, it signaled several victories for Parker’s agenda. In addition to expenditures for normal schools, Parker successfully lobbied to lower the threshold to open a school for Black children from twenty to fifteen. The law also required districts to keep more detailed attendance records to receive its share of state money. The Parker Codes, as the laws of 1866, 1868, and 1870 became known, were the epitome of Radical policy, and their namesake believed that Missourians needed only time to embrace the public school system as a great equalizer and a tool of stability for the war-torn state.

**Parker’s Defeat and the Close of Radical Republican Rule**

In the four years Thomas Parker led Missouri’s public school system, the power of Radicalism began to wane even as public schools continued to open. The shift was evident by 1868, when over forty percent of eligible voters cast their ballot for a Democratic nominee even with Southern sympathizers still banned from the polls. Two years later, in 1870, non-Radical (conservative and moderate) Republicans weary of sectional division formed a coalition with Democrats and called themselves the Liberal Republican Party. The political group, led by Missouri’s Senator to the United States Congress Carl Schurz, capitalized on the public’s mood shifting away from revenge

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70 1867 *Missouri Report*, 11.
71 *Laws of Missouri*, Twenty-Fifth General Assembly, Adjourned Session, 1870; State Documents Collections, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City.
72 Thomas Barclay, *The Liberal Republican Movement in Missouri 1865-1871* (Columbia, MO, 1926).
against Confederate actors and toward national reconciliation. The party believed the main tenets of Republicanism—emancipation and destruction of the Confederacy—had been achieved, and thus, the Radical’s agenda of punishment was no longer necessary. Aided by the Supreme Court tossing out the Ironclad Oath as unconstitutional, the Liberal Republican’s landslide victories throughout the state signaled the end of Missouri’s “internal reconstruction,” six years before federal Reconstruction of the South formally closed.73

Parker was also up for reelection in 1870. He continued to promote the system through all available outlets even as the Parker Codes garnered mixed reviews. One of the most supportive outlets was *The Journal of Education* in St. Louis, started by prominent orator and businessman J.B. Merwin in 1868 to provide a space for the educational community to commiserate, exchange ideas, and peruse the latest classroom gadgets. *The Journal* published a monthly column penned by Parker to clarify ambiguities in state policy.74 Where should districts draw boundary lines? Do teachers get paid time off for holidays and attending institutes? Can Boards of Education pass taxes for something other than schoolhouses without a public vote? The questions seemed to be endless, but the *Journal* backed the School Law and Parker at each turn. Its most ardent recommendation was for the law’s enforcement, which was a significant endorsement from Merwin, a longtime promoter of public education whose ties to Abraham Lincoln brought him clout within the educational community nationwide.75

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73 Cummings v. Missouri, 71 U.S. 277 (1867).
74 Thomas Parker, “Correspondence from the State Superintendent,” *Journal of Education* (St. Louis) 1-2 (Sept 1868-Sept 1870), Reference Collection, State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, MO.
75 F.D. Blakeslee, *J.B. Merwin and Abraham Lincoln* (Friends of The Lincoln Collection of Indiana, Inc., 1904). This source is a collection of paraphernalia around J.B. Merwin’s travelling lecture series about his friendship with Lincoln. Merwin dined with Lincoln on the day he was assassinated.
In a very real sense, Parker could preach to the choir with his monthly columns in the Journal. But it was also in his worst interest to run afoul of it, which he did in a big way in early 1870. Parker’s first mistake was to promise “Official Organ” status to the Western Review of Education (called the Review), a competitor of the Journal in St. Louis and published by Ogden H. Fethers, official Recorder for the Missouri Legislature—who also conveniently travelled the state with Parker as one of his Assistants. Designation as an Official Organ meant guaranteed subscribers and a boost in circulation across the state. Parker promised the status to the Review in a letter dated January 12, 1870. But, when the legislature met for its session in January of 1870 to revise the School Law, the Senate struck the clause which allowed local school boards to purchase a journal at the expense of the state. It was odd, then, when the bill came to the House with a clause “in the handwriting of Fethers” that required the state to “furnish” a journal to each township, presumably his Review as the designated Organ. Not surprisingly, the Journal took issue. The paper reported that “this scheme to plunder the school fund was so bare-faced . . .” that legislators denounced it on the floor as nefarious and unbecoming of a government institution. The amendment did not pass, but the trouble for Parker was just beginning.

Piqued by the “Official Organ Ring” episode early in 1870, the Journal took full aim at Parker and friends for a second time in the lead up to the November election. Corroboration of the following is tough, and some sly moves by Merwin are surely to account for much of it—but what matters is that Parker’s name was dragged through the mud just a handful of months before election season. In a time when Americans,

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76 Journal of Education (St. Louis) 2, no. 9 (May 1870): 168, 170, Reference Collection; State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, MO.
especially of the pro-Southern ilk, where beginning to associate Radicalism with
government corruption, any sense of misappropriation would not fare well.\textsuperscript{77} After
passage of the new School Law of 1870, the one that required detailed attendance records
from districts, the \textit{Journal} paid for a copy to be printed and sent to each subscriber.
Parker’s office also had 25,000 copies of the law printed, but a circular was included in
Parker’s version that gave authority to the State Superintendent’s office to dictate a
\textit{School Records} book that County Superintendents should use to fulfill that new
requirement for detailed attendance. The problem was that the new School Law
transferred the power to choose any \textit{School Records} book away from the State
Superintendent to local leaders. After Congressman J.B. Harper, a fellow Radical from
Putnam County and member of the Education Sub-Committee, noticed the discrepancy,
he alerted the Secretary of State and the press. The \textit{Journal} accused Parker and friends of
trying yet again to find a way to get the state to pay for required publications where they
could skim a bit off the top of each copy.\textsuperscript{78}

Parker simultaneously defended himself and admitted to sending the fraudulent
copies. He offered an explanation in a letter, published in the \textit{Journal}, that shifted the
blame onto the Attorney General, whom Parker claimed told him that if a section was not
specifically repealed in the new version of the School Law, then the old version stood.\textsuperscript{79}
The \textit{Journal} insinuated that Parker had furnished the Attorney General with a copy of the
old law—not the new one—so the Attorney General cleared Parker of wrongdoing.

\textsuperscript{77} Phillip Dray, \textit{Capitol Men: The Epic Story of Reconstruction Through the Lives of the First
Black Congressmen} (New York: Mariner, 2010).
\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Journal of Education} (St. Louis) 2, nos. 8-11 (April-July 1870), Reference Collection, State
Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, MO.
\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Journal of Education} (St. Louis) 2, no. 8 (April 1870): 153, Reference Collection, State
Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, MO.
Thomas Neal, Republican congressmen from Bethany, offered an assessment of the situation:

We consider the foisting of Section 39 of the General Statutes into the new school law a piece of high handedness and villainy, that should damn any man who would dare perpetuate it. It is no more nor less a forging of the law, it is the State Superintendent constituting himself into the legislature. . .

The damage was done. One newspaper called Parker a “public vampire” and another charged that he intended to “hood-wink the legislature.” The legitimacy of the scandal is questionable, but what does matter for the sake of posterity is that starting in June, the Journal carried tidbits about other candidates, but most of its pages were devoted to the candidacy of Ira Divoll, an eleven-year veteran of the St. Louis Superintendency and originator of the school-library concept. Divoll’s candidacy will be interrogated in the next chapter, but for now, the Journal carried a full page spread of an endorsement of Divoll by the St. Louis School Board, signed by prominent men of the field and city including the soon-to-be nationally famous educational theorist William Torrey Harris. Divoll won handily.

Because Parker, lost in the election of 1870 along with a huge swath of his fellow party men, his defeat is correlated with the demise of Radicalism and subsequently with the ending of the Reconstruction-era public school system. But Parker’s political defeat did not signal a defeat for Missouri’s public schools. In his final report delivered to the Legislature in early 1871, Parker spotlighted the profound progress of public schools in his five years at the helm. The Missouri system was a-go, and more children had the

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81 *Clinton County Register* (Plattsburg, MO), reprinted in *Journal of Education* (St. Louis) 2, no. 11 (July 1870): 210, Reference Collection, State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, MO.
opportunity to participate in the great equalizer than ever before. Like always, Parker justified his positions through statistics as a capacity-expander and professionalize-er until the end. A table listed data from each of the years Parker held the post—1867, 1868, 1869, and 1870. Each showed drastic improvement. Further, Missourians did not replace the Radical Parker with a partisan committed to dismantling the public school system. Instead, voters elected Divoll on the Liberal Republican ticket, a staunch advocate of public schools, deeply immersed in the system, and one of the most progressive leaders in the state. Divoll took the Ironclad Oath and was not a march away from Radicalism, at least in policy. What Divoll did represent was an alternative to the stained Parker, and, as we will see, the anointed choice of the St. Louis education community. As Missourians struggled to implement the new school system—and even though their value systems were going through a push and pull—voters chose a champion of the public schools entrenched in the system, not an opponent of its centralizing powers. The school doors remained open with or without Radicalism in Jefferson City.

Chapter Two  
St. Louis: Missouri’s Educational Center of Gravity

Ira Divoll was a sickly man. He combatted illness throughout his life—a delayed start to college, a move to St. Louis from New Orleans after a bout with yellow fever, and at the age of forty-seven, he vacated his post as the St. Louis Superintendent of Common Schools due his deteriorating condition. During a sojourn in Texas in February of 1870 on account of pulmonary disease, Divoll consoled William Torrey Harris, his replacement in the St. Louis position. Harris was struggling under the weight of leading the city system. From personal experience with the stressors of the job, Divoll advised, “You are injuring your health by overwork . . . I wish I was there to help you.” Divoll reported that he had gained thirteen pounds since arriving in San Antonio and encouraged Harris to “Take care of your health--‘tis the most sacred duty of life. We don’t half appreciate this matter till it’s too late.” If Divoll was in such a poor state that he “nearly wore out” his life out on the position in St. Louis, why, then, was he elected to replace Thomas Parker in Missouri’s highest educational office just six months after his return from the Texas convalescence?¹ 

Divoll’s decision to accept the nomination for State Superintendent was a calculated choice by St. Louis elites, like Harris and publisher J.B. Merwin, to replace Parker with an insider who also happened to have a crystal-clear reputation as a crusader for the common good. Parker’s five-year tenure had left a complicated legacy. None could dispute the proliferation of school buildings that sprang up from 1865 to 1870, and Teacher Institutes remained a draw for counties, with the opening of normal schools on

¹ Ira Divoll to William Torrey Harris, February 22, 1870, Box 62, folder 8, Ward Parker Collection, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
the horizon. Further, the expansion of egalitarian access remained codified. Still, the Parker Laws, viewed as a product of the Radical agenda, continued to earn the ire of many communities across the state. So, if Parker had fallen on the wrong side of the political coin and the educational community elite, then Divoll was the ideal replacement. His chronic illness was a minor obstacle to his candidacy.

This chapter follows the public school system as its Radical leadership lost control but its new facilitators, Divoll and then John Monteith, were just as inclined to see the system expand during the first half of the 1870s. An analysis of this sort requires a reorientation of both time and geographical focus. I devote considerable space to St. Louis’ antebellum school system to situate the city’s dominance of Missouri’s educational environment. Specifically, Divoll’s entire career warrants discussion because it shines light on how administrative leadership operated in the pre-war common system. It is a story long neglected by historians. By 1870, St. Louis elites used Divoll (a willing participant, to be sure) to reassert themselves as the fulcrum of power where educational theory and educational profit coincided happily alongside each other. As short as his statewide tenure may have been, Divoll’s election was one of the most consequential in offering the system a steady hand and keeping St. Louis as an axis of influence.

Stability was necessary as Missouri’s political environment began its transition toward Democratic leadership in the in the early 1870s. Democrats and their allies had long been skeptical of state-funded education, most vocally at the beginning of the Radical era as blatantly racist, and then, as the system became rooted in the early 1870s,
as cloaked in the language of small government and limited spending.\textsuperscript{2} Thus, while Liberal Republicans, the group of moderate Republicans and Democrats who assumed power in 1870, supported schools, as did Silas Woodson, whose election in 1872 initiated Democratic political hegemony in Missouri for the next forty years, that still did not ensure unabashed acceptance among Missouri’s citizens.\textsuperscript{3} A changing of the political guard in Jefferson City did not relieve Superintendents of their charge to implement the public school system in Missouri communities. Woodson’s inaugural speech, articulated at the beginning of this project, certainly wove the public school system into the political fabric, but powerbrokers still had to confront the ever-shifting ideological norms of Missourians. Divoll’s successor, John Monteith, did so by billing schools less as a “great equalizer” and more as a tangible mechanism to keep young people from the sin of idle hands, and as such, preventing crime and maintaining peace. Monteith was also at the helm when the Democrat-majority General Assembly rewrote the School Law in 1874. Billed by some at the time as a catastrophic change, I contend that careful study shows that the rewrite was much less dramatic. The system’s survival of the Democratic transition was due to a wide net cast by a host of characters, mostly in the St. Louis educational community, that helped the system ease its way into the cultural fabric.

\textbf{St. Louis: Education at the Confluence}

We must shift backward for a moment to understand St. Louis’ status as a cosmopolitan center of the Border West in the antebellum period. From its roots as a

\textsuperscript{2} Many Democrats defended their party’s position on public education. Stilson Hutchins, future founder of \textit{The Washington Post} and one-time Missouri Representative wrote in 1874, “the Democratic Party is neither Confederate or nor federal in the narrow, partisan sense of the words” and went on to focus on the election of two Union men, Ira Divoll and Richard Shannon, to the State Superintendent of Schools. See Stilson Hutchins, “An Open Letter,” \textit{The Sedalia Democrat}, Sept. 27, 1874.

\textsuperscript{3} The Constitution of 1865 mandated two-year gubernatorial terms.
cultural corridor where the Mississippi River joins with the Missouri and the Ohio, historian Stephen Aron dubs the area as an “American Confluence” from the eighteenth century onward. St. Louis navigated imperial jockeying to become an economic and political hub, interconnected with the rest of the country century via river transportation and immigration, by the nineteenth century. From Missouri’s official statehood in 1821 until the eve of the Civil War in 1861, St. Louis’ population increased by 150,000 souls, mostly European immigrants who brought with them a disdain for the strict social hierarchy of their homelands. With them also came the usual changes that accompany an American population boom—increased land value, a proliferation of churches, and expanded social hierarchies.

Schooling was a part of this expanding footprint. The decisions of some early St. Louisans established educational institutions as a hallmark of the Confluence’s relative sophistication. At the turn of the nineteenth century, St. Louisan Thomas Riddick had the bright idea to set aside un-claimed common lands to support schools in the area. By 1817, the territorial government designated a school board for the city with notable committee members being William Clarke, of the Lewis and Clarke expedition fame, Alexander McNair, soon-to-be first governor of the state, Thomas Hart Benton, future bulwark of the state’s Democratic party, and Auguste Chouteau, founder of St. Louis. Though no common schools were established under their leadership, they did have the

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foresight to protect the high-dollar un-claimed lands from pesky speculators.\textsuperscript{7} St. Louisans created an Education Department as an entity independent from city governmental controls, and by 1833 the state authorized the city to manage its own affairs with common education.\textsuperscript{8}

The first St. Louis school available to all white children, regardless of class or lineage, opened its doors in December of 1837 with the Board paying tuition for indigent students and a tuition fee of $2.50 expected of those who could pay.\textsuperscript{9} Powerholders orchestrated propaganda campaigns to shift the reputation of state-funded schools as charitable institutions meant for the poor into accepted places for middle- and upper-class children to attend. To do so, leaders lobbied for funds to build attractive buildings and imported trained teachers from the Northeast.\textsuperscript{10} The landslide passage of an 1849 school tax, proposed just after a cholera epidemic wiped out ten percent of the city’s population that summer, illustrates the success of the St. Louis School Board’s strategy. The tax also helped foot the whopping $50,000 bill for a new high school building, the first co-educational facility of its kind, in 1855. Though they seem ubiquitous now, any sort of education after the elementary levels was typically left to private or parochial academies, in what is best described as a “prep” school equivalent that prepared young people of ability, and means, for college. The state had long approved charters for these institutions, but the St. Louis high school signaled the beginning of public expenditure for

\textsuperscript{7} This is in reference to the New Madrid Certificates. These were issued to settlers living along the New Madrid fault line for relocation on surveyed lands after the earthquake of 1812.
\textsuperscript{9} Benton, 40. 18
\textsuperscript{10} 14-18.
such institutions. The new building solidified the relatively successful transition from “pauper” to “common” in St. Louis, as hundreds of well-to-do families applied for their children to further their education in the new high school. The city, thousands of miles away from the Common School heartbeat in New England, maintained its precocious penchant toward schooling throughout the secessionist crisis of the 1850s and Civil War.

**Divoll Takes the Helm in the 1850s**

Ira Divoll was a pivotal part of St. Louis’ common school expansion into “the high state of efficiency for which they are famous.” A native of Vermont, he came to St. Louis by way of New Orleans when his health required a move to a more hospitable climate in 1855. Back in Louisiana, he dabbled in the educational sphere by opening a private classical school and used those experiences to begin writing about educational causes in his new home of St. Louis. His networking earned him election to the highest seat at the St. Louis common school-table in 1857.

Capacity expansion, like Thomas Parker later emulated statewide, served as proof of progress in the antebellum St. Louis system. Divoll’s colleague, President of the System Samuel H. Bailey, spent umpteen pages opining on the common schools as a “subject second to none in importance as affecting the public welfare.” Divoll was less poetic:

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11 While many may perceive the modern parochial-heavy schools in St. Louis to be the forerunners of the public system, they are more accurately described as parallel movements. A vast majority of parochial schools opened in the 1890s.
12 *Brookfield Gazette* (Brookfield, Missouri), June 10, 1871.
13 William Torrey Harris, “In Memoriam,” *Seventeenth Annual Report of the Board of Directors of the St. Louis Public Schools for the School Year Ending August 1, 1871* (St. Louis: Plate, Olshausen, & Co., 1872), 154. (hereafter cited as 1871 *St. Louis Report*).
14 *Fifth Annual Report of the President, Superintendent, and Secretary to the Board of St. Louis Public Schools for the Year Ending July 1, 1859* (St. Louis: R.P. Studley & Co., 1859), 16. (hereafter cited as 1859 *St. Louis Report*).
I am called upon, not to discuss new theories and principles, nor to write elaborate essays on the subjects of education, but to make such a statement of facts as will enable your constituents, the citizens of St. Louis, who bear the expenses and enjoy the benefits of the Public Schools, to judge correctly of their management, their present condition, their progress and their future prospects.15

With this statement, he set the tone that followed him throughout his career. In an “enterprise never before undertaken and carried out by a city no larger than St. Louis,” Divoll spelled out plans to open more buildings and increase attendance every year he was in office.16 If others spent pages on philosophy, Divoll spent just as much describing how many square feet each school building needed and the exact number of apparatus to be purchased for each. Every report included renderings for new school buildings, floor plans, and sketches of the desk models chosen for the classrooms.

Important here is his articulation for school buildings to be big, but not “such gigantic institutions” like those in New York City, to accommodate for the newly embraced concept of graded schools.17 Graded schools required a principal to oversee the school with teachers assigned to certain age groups, as opposed to the long-used monitorial system where all students learned in one large classroom and taught each other. The practice made its way to the United States via Prussia, where Henry Barnard, a Common School reformer, made study of the practice in 1836 and Horace Mann latched onto the idea in his writings.18 The large population of German immigrants in the city made St. Louis’ experimentation with the concept a relatively smooth operation. Divoll, though, was openly skeptical on this shift toward graded schools in his official

15 1859 St. Louis Report, 17.
16 1859 St. Louis Report, 19.
17 1859 St. Louis Report, 23.
correspondence, especially in its effect on children who had trouble keeping up with his or her peers.¹⁹ His endorsement was more based finance and efficiency: the new system of graded schools would cost $10 per pupil (in the newly built school, of course); the old, $17. The new buildings would hold 600-700 students each.²⁰

Capacity expansion was met with marked increases in attendance in the antebellum period, helped especially by the twenty-five percent share schools began to receive from the General Revenue Fund during the 1853 school year. Between 1857 and 1860, the number of seats available increased by eighty percent.²¹ In another progressive effort to expand access, nearly 500 young men attended night school at the expense of the school board. Divoll pushed for the opening of those classes to women (“the females attended [day school] more regularly and punctually and made greater improvement than males”).²² Its curriculum, too, was thought of as progressive. This was a lasting result of Divoll’s predecessors’ attempts to appeal to upper class St. Louisans with a cultured course of study that included the natural sciences (a relatively new concept at the time) and ancient languages.²³ While the statewide antebellum system offered a loosely outlined set of standards for instruction, like basic reading, writing, and arithmetic, the St. Louis curricular offerings were advanced for the time.

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¹⁹ 1868-1869 *St. Louis Report*, 105-106. Divoll’s words on the ills of the graded system are worth noting because they remain an issue: “The pupil who tries his best and then fails is deeply injured, and is apt to endeavor to preserve his self-respect by some sort of subterfuge. He accuses his teacher of partiality, it may be, or attributes the good success of his companions to assistance from others. The root of all bitterness is loss of self respect; the man or child who goes about thinking himself shut out from participation in the highest by his own natural incapacity is like one inclosed [sic] in a tomb while yet living.”

²⁰ 1859 *St. Louis Report*, 36.

²¹ *Sixth Annual Report of the Superintendent and Secretary to the Board of St. Louis Public Schools for the Year Ending August 1, 1860* (St. Louis: R.P. Studley & Co, 1860), 70. (hereafter cited as 1860 *St. Louis Report*).

²² 1859 *St. Louis Report*, 39.

²³ 1859 *St. Louis Report*, 66.
With the demand for teachers outweighing supply and no normal schools in the state, St. Louis administrators pursued an in-house operation that trained instructors for the newly planned graded school model. The Normal School opened in October of 1857 and graduated 100 pupils a year later with most placed within the district. Further, in the vein of “continued education,” the Board opened a Saturday School for those working professionals who wanted to continue in pedagogical study or exercise. The St. Louis Teachers Association met once a month and the district hosted a Teacher’s Festival at the conclusion of each school year. Because of its focus on teacher development, St. Louis insulated itself from the teacher shortages experienced across the state as the public system began to grow in the late 1850s and early 1860s.

The Civil War disrupted the march forward. With all state aid cut, Divoll called 1861-1862 “the year of calamity to our Public schools.” To keep the school doors open, a Special Committee shortened the school day and year with only core subjects taught and salaries slashed. Even though St. Louis was almost always under the protection of Union authorities, the divided loyalties within the city affected classrooms:

At the beginning of the war, alienations of friendship took place between many who had long sustained the most intimate social relations towards one another. Children partook of the feelings of their parents, and the schools were affected by the madness of the age. For a while, the bitter animosities came near breaking out into open rebellion; but it soon got to be understood that the Public Schools were a loyal institution, and that no hostile demonstrations about the school premises would be brooked for a moment. From that time on, the order and the behavior of the scholars have been as unexceptionable as at any time previous to the war.

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26 Ninth and Tenth Annual Report of the Superintendent and Secretary of the Board of St. Louis Public Schools for the Year Ending August 1, 1863 and August 1, 1864 (St. Louis: R.P. Studley & Co., 1865), 14. (hereafter cited as 1863-64 St. Louis Report).
The Southern Rebellion realigned Missouri’s political fate, including in St. Louis. Under the Radical plan, modeled after the city’s own pre-war system, public education became the banner for stability and equality even in communities that welcomed the former but eschewed the latter.

As documented in the previous chapter, Thomas Parker employed several strategies to bring the Reconstructed system to the far reaches of the state. In St. Louis, Divoll was his counterpart until 1867, shepherding the full reopening of the city’s schools under the new 1866 law. Because the city already was a stronghold of common schooling, the transition was mostly calm and welcomed by St. Louisans with more students filled the city’s public schools on the first day of classes in late 1863 than any year prior.27 Still, the road to equality—the main tenet of the Radical plan—for Black students in St. Louis would prove fragile. Schools for freedpeople and their families popped up as early as 1863, and a Board of Education for Colored Schools administered five buildings and instructed 1,500 students in the city by 1865. Divoll noted in his annual report that schools for Black children were to be opened not just because state law demanded it, but because they were part of the city community and paid taxes—“as a matter of right and justice, as a matter of principle,” Black children were entitled to an education.28 Many St. Louis citizens met his appeals for equality (or at least, some semblance of the concept) with skepticism and, oftentimes, wholesale rejection.29

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27 Troen, 29.
28 Eleventh Annual Report of the Superintendent and Secretary of the Board of St. Louis Public Schools for the Year Ending August 1, 1865 (St. Louis: R.P. Studley & Co., 1865), 27. (hereafter cited as 1865 St. Louis Report).
29 Troen, 87.
students learned in subpar facilities, had their schools labeled by numbers as opposed to names, and were never actively recruited to attend public schools.\(^{30}\)

**The St. Louis Movement’s Influence on Education**

Where Divoll and Parker allied on the benefits of capacity expansion and teacher professionalism, they differed a bit on how to promote the utility of the system to Missourians. Divoll’s pragmatism always outweighed his idealism. In 1865, he firmly argued that “The people must build schoolhouses or prisons,” and while Parker would surely not counter such a statement, his emphasis remained on the Radical “great equalizer” agenda throughout his tenure. Common ground between the two men can be found where Divoll believed that public schools should be “good enough for the rich, and ample and free for all,” but his emphasis on institutions fostering model behavior was the slogan adopted by future Superintendents to persuade the public to sustain public schools in their communities.\(^{31}\)

This ideology was partly the result of major intellectual movements developing in St. Louis, especially after the close of the Civil War. One group formed during the so-called “St. Louis Movement” were the Hegelians, whose followers dedicated their intellectual framework to the writings of George Hegel, a German nineteenth century philosopher.\(^{32}\) The St. Louis Hegelian’s core beliefs centered on the individual’s need to achieve self-actualization through the help of social and governmental institutions. In that vein, members adopted the notion that informal and formal modes of schooling helped people become full and productive members of society. The St. Louis Hegelians were

\(^{30}\) Troen, 88.

\(^{31}\) 1861-1862 *St. Louis Report*, 64.

strictly (at least, in theory) anti-elitist and believed public schools to be a mechanism for class equality.  

William Torrey Harris (before he became one of the most famous educational theorists in the country eventually the United States Commissioner of Education), was Divoll’s assistant and a prominent Hegel acolyte. The Yale graduate came to St. Louis in the late 1850s to chart a new life in the Border West and got his start in the common schools when Divoll recommended him as an English teacher in 1857. As a Hegelian, Harris believed in progressive concepts of institutions, including supporting the relatively early adoption of gender-integrated classrooms. For him, institutions required both female and male participation if a society were to be successful, especially in urban settings where population density required living in more proximity than rural areas. Harris was a prolific writer, beginning locally in St. Louis, and then finding national outlets as he climbed the educational ladder first as principal of the new graded-style Clay School, and then as Divoll’s Assistant Superintendent after the Civil War.

Harris was the logical heir to the Superintendency when Divoll fell too ill to continue the post in 1867. Divoll’s annual reports certainly showed the “almost phenomenal progress of education in the metropolis of the West,” but “another hand could be discerned in the arrangement of details” by 1866. As Divoll’s protégé, Harris continued the work of expanding the system’s footprint with new school buildings when...

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34 Kurt Leidecker, Yankee Teacher: The Life of William Torrey Harris (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946) 86. Harris did not think teaching to be a quick ticket: “The opportunity to teach school is not a very agreeable thing, I must confess. I could do better selling Protean pens if possible.” Leidecker, 99.
36 Leidecker, 173.
he officially took the helm, with furniture arrangement and classroom ventilation garnering more than its fair share of space in his annual *Reports*. In a rare move for his day, Harris paid female teachers the same as their male colleagues and allowed women to remain on staff after marriage.37 Harris also saw early childhood education as a way to combat vagrancy and criminality among youth, much in line with Divoll’s ideological presentations. Harris and St. Louis teacher Elizabeth Blow adopted German educational reformer Francis Froebel’s ideas to encourage play among little ones and opened the country’s first kindergarten in 1873. After opening the program to middle- and upper-class youth and finding them “too entitled” to benefit from the new model, Harris and Blow’s expressed goal was to redirect the trajectory of lower-class children. Above all, kindergartners were to adhere to strict routines while at school and learn the manners of polite society, not so much to promote industrial behavior, but to embed moral codes in children who lacked, in their view, socially desirable familial structures.38 The St. Louis system’s experimentation in educational theory was made possible by its roots as a crossroads of the American West, its early adoption of the common system, and the intellectual movements that permeated the city.

Harris also found value in expanding the educational community’s reach in St. Louis. A big part of that was in publishing. He cofounded the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, the first of its kind in the country, in 1867 to explore his intellectual interests. Both he and Divoll were also intimate friends with J.B. Merwin, the publisher of *The

37 Good, 450.
Journal of Education, the periodical that would lead the accusations against Parker in 1870. Merwin believed teachers and administrators should promote “unity, harmony, and concrete action” to promote the system, and started the Journal in 1868 to give the educational community a space to communicate. With columns devoted to extolling the benefits of graded schools, gender equality in the classroom, and an emphasis on adhering to the school law, Harris’ Hegelian hands are detected all over the Journal.

Divoll and Harris’ desire for more graded schools and better paid teachers married nicely with the commercial side of Merwin’s Journal. Merwin started a school supply company when he saw an opportunity in the market to outfit the school building boom after the Civil War. He sold desks, blackboards, and schoolhouse plans all over the Mississippi River Valley. The Journal provided the ideal vessel to blend his very-real commitment to public education with his very-real business acumen. The first issue in November of 1868 held a modest three pages of advertisements for textbooks and supplies. Among others, Ray’s Arithmetics [sic] offered textbooks and Wharf’s patented Vaporized Air Heating Machine offered warmth for the thousands of school buildings erected across the state. By 1870, two years into the publication, advertisement space tripled and circulation reached 10,000 across eight states. For his part, Harris recognized the benefits of leading a district in a city with “commercial tone” and encouraged the expansion of the system’s reach.

39 Leidecker, 249.
40 Leidecker, 440.
41 Journal of Education (St. Louis) 1, no. 1 (Sept 1868), Reference Collection, State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, MO.
42 Holmes and Harris, 58.
The St. Louis Educational Community Enters the Statewide Political Fray

With Harris firmly at the helm in St. Louis and Merwin cultivating the education community across the West, Ira Divoll could rest easily in his retirement knowing he had done his due for public education. He had a spotless legacy, so much so that the Journal’s first issue in 1868 centered Divoll’s accomplishments on its front pages. Glowing is an understatement:

Very few can know, as the writer of this article knows, the amount of toil which that man expended in overcoming obstacles to the practical working of the schools. It was a common thing for Mr. D to consume the greater part of the night for weeks together in order to collect the requisite data and devise proper means to place the schools on a substantial footing. The honor of establishing the public school library upon a practical basis belongs to St. Louis, and to Mr. Divoll individually.⁴³

After the initial review, Divoll’s name did not grace the pages of the Journal for over a year, which is logical, of course, because Divoll took his leave of the city to journey southward during the winter of 1869-1870 as his health continued to decline. Recall, he had “wore out his life” on shepherding the St. Louis system and was now entitled to rest and relaxation. Oddly, Divoll’s name resurfaced in the February 1870 pages of the Journal. According to the article, the school libraries in St. Louis and St. Joseph were “working wonders” for the people in those communities.⁴⁴ Divoll, reintroduced to subscribers as the lamented Superintendent of old, earned all due credit for the innovation. It reads as innocuous enough. But when we place this peculiar name-drop into context with Parker’s hullabaloo over the “Official Organ” fiasco with the Western

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⁴⁴ “School Libraries,” Journal of Education (St. Louis) 2, no. 6 (Feb. 1870): 109, Reference Collection, State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, MO.
Review just a month earlier, we can make more sense of the sudden reappearance of the school library compliment not too long after.

St. Louis elites, who had developed a thriving system for decades only to have the young Mr. Parker eschew their guidance (and mess with their pocketbooks), wanted to install a loyal ally in the statewide office. With the distaste for Radicalism sweeping the state, it was a good time to hitch St. Louis’ educational wagon to the new Liberal Republican Party in town. But because urban Superintendents at this time were expected to be devoted scholars and above political horse trading (at least in the public eye), the St. Louis men could not be too obvious with their schemes. According to one of William Torrey Harris’ biographers, the campaign to put Divoll into office “had to be handled most diplomatically.” While Harris headed Divoll’s election committee, he also discreetly orchestrated endorsements to be run in major publications like the Missouri Republican and the St. Louis Democrat. As many as ten thousand circulars made their way across the state extolling Divoll’s superiority over Parker.

The Journal took jabs at Parker in each issue leading up to the election while very nearly put a crown on Divoll’s head.” A full-page spread devoted to Divoll’s candidacy extolled that his “labors have had an immense influence throughout Missouri and the

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46 Leidecker, 253.
47 A Candidate, “The State Superintendent,” Journal of Education (St. Louis) 2, no. 84 (April 1870): 151. Reference Collection, State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, MO. The writer opined that a good Superintendent should be willing to devote much time to the position (and if he does, this should leave no time for campaigning for re-election), and that he should be willing to respond to the people “on the first application, for the dear people dislike to write five or six letters upon the same subject without eliciting a response.”
Southwest in molding the system of public education,” and was signed by seventy prominent St. Louis men. Divoll’s letter of acceptance, printed in the *Journal*, read: “in case the people see fit to indorse your action and elect me, I shall enter upon the duties of the office with an earnest desire to serve the cause of popular education in Missouri.” To deflect charges of bias, the *Journal* ran smaller tidbits on other potential candidates, but Divoll’s warranted a hefty amount of copy space. In the last issue published prior to the election, the *Journal* ran the official endorsement of Divoll by the St. Louis Public School Board with usual praises attached.

When the Liberal Republican ticket, that coalition of moderate Republicans and Democrats, annihilated the Radical slate in 1870, Missourians elected Ira Divoll as State Superintendent. The ex-Radical (and ex-Whig, ex-Benton Democrat, and ex-Republican) Benjamin Gratz Brown won the governor’s race. Gratz Brown was one of those men who showcase the revolving door of Missouri’s political allegiances in the mid nineteenth century, and whose victory by over 40,000 votes was a landslide. Outgoing Radical governor Joseph McClurg noted the anger against the Ironclad Oath as the key issue in the election. “As revealed by the ballot box,” he said in his farewell address, Missourians voted “that the past shall be forgotten and the political distinctions on account of race or rebellion, shall no longer exist.”

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51 *Journal of the Missouri Senate*, Twenty-Sixth General Assembly, Regular Session, 1871, p. 16, General Assembly, Record Group 550, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City.
Democratic rule (with a pit stop in Liberal Republicanism) was in. St. Louis elites did very well to hitch their saddles to the winning ticket.

The massive change in Missouri politics did not spawn massive change in Missouri’s school system. Under Liberal Republican leadership, the schools functioned under the same auspices as the last years of Radical rule largely because Ira Divoll and Thomas Parker were cut from the same ideological cloth (at least when it came to the need for universal education) and because St. Louis lobbied to keep the system stabilized.

No major shakeup was in the works. New governor Gratz Brown lauded the system’s endeavors to educate its youth and especially noted the expansion of two new state-sponsored normal schools along with the success of Lincoln Institute’s new normal department. He cautioned that the system’s implementation “has grown up under varied impulses” and required time to produce quality results.52 Because local districts still struggled to find equilibrium with the system, Divoll initiated a canvas of the state asking localities to submit recommendations for improvement of the law.53 Most of his time was spent helping local districts untangle legal jargon and reiterating his commitment to paring down the language of the statute.54 Until the law could be revised, he answered stacks of questions on how to implement the current iteration. Divoll was clearly frustrated with the way Parker ran the administrative side of his office, and he committed to responding to every letter that came across his desk, unlike, apparently, his

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52 *Journal of the Missouri House*, Twenty-Sixth General Assembly, Adjourned Session, 1871, p. 16-17, General Assembly, Record Group 550, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City.
53 *Journal of Education* (St. Louis) 3, no. 6 (April 1871), Reference Collection, State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, MO. Divoll wrote an article titled “Are you ready?” about the upcoming school director election. He wrote, “You now possess fully authority to regulate your school affairs to suit yourselves, but when you vote you give away this authority” to fulfill the duties of the system. “Do you not care to whom you entrust these sacred duties?”
predecessor. Divoll responded to hundreds of local inquiries, frequently with “In my understanding of the law . . .,” or “The law seems to relay . . .”55 The implication was that Divoll had just as hard of a time understanding the regulations as the average County Superintendent.

It is worth noting here that a full six months after the election, the Journal was still resentful toward Thomas Parker. Merwin printed an article that exposed Parker’s final $33,000 bill to the State Treasury, mostly going toward “traveling and other personal expenses OF THE SUPERINTENDENT AND HIS ASSISTANT” [emphasis is original].56 Later, in yet another article, the Journal printed an accusation that 288 pages of Parker’s last Report were blank, costing the state $5,700. Parker’s assistant, Ogden Fethers, happened to be the business partner of the state printer. The periodical called the pair “Two souls with but a single thought, Two hearts that beat as one” in making a business out of their office.57 Old grudges really do die hard. It makes sense, then, that when Divoll requested the appointment of an assistant, O.M. Baker, he stressed that his nominee was over thirty years old (recall, that was a strike against the young Parker) and had unquestionable character. Baker was also a St. Louis man.

The General Assembly never confirmed Baker’s appointment. There was no need. Ira Divoll resigned in early June of 1871 and died weeks later in Wisconsin (he tried again to find a healthier climate after his resignation) on June 21, 1871. Papers across the state and country carried the news with the presumptive compliments toward Divoll’s

55 Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Outgoing Correspondence, State Superintendent of Schools, Letterpress Copybook, 1871-1872, Record Group 105, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City.
56 “For What Object?” Journal of Education (St. Louis) 3, no. 6 (April 1871): 8, Reference Collection, State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, MO.
lifework.\textsuperscript{58} William Torrey Harris no doubt penned the “In Memoriam” that graced the Journal’s July issue. “The great secret of Mr. Divoll’s,” the memorial went, “lay in his sagacity in adapting institutions to the community.” The annual St. Louis Report published the full funeral itinerary. Included is a transcript of Harris’ eulogy, again extolling Divoll’s ability to help citizens help themselves via public schools and libraries. For this “brave, earnest man,” Harris, told the funeral crowd, “the loudest praise is the quiet recognition and adoption of his measures on the part of the community; by this he is enrolled as a public benefactor.”\textsuperscript{59}

Divoll’s death left Governor Gratz Brown in a conundrum. Ira Divoll served many gods—the educational community adored him, St. Louis supported him, and citizens from across the state could find no fault in his character. By all accounts, he was held in “high esteem” by “members of all parties, and in every part of the state.”\textsuperscript{60} The state could “ill afford to spare” him, so who, then, would replace him?\textsuperscript{61} And what would that mean for the Missouri system? Speculation went toward Harris, but Harris was beginning to have national aspirations, not state-level ones. He was also busy organizing the largest meeting of educators in the country, the conference of the National Education Association (NEA) in August where hundreds would spill into St. Louis to share ideas.

\textsuperscript{58} In Missouri: South-West Missourian (Lamar), June 29, 1871; St. Joseph Weekly Gazette, June 29, 1871; In Vermont, Divoll’s home state: Burlington Free Press, June 26, 1871; St. Albans Transcript, July 1, 1871; Vermont Christian Messenger, July 6, 1871; Black River Gazette (Ludlow), August 11, 1871; Across the country: Fort Wayne Daily Gazette (Indiana), June 29, 1871; Scranton Republican, June 20, 1871; Times-Argus (Selma, Alabama), July 21, 1871.

\textsuperscript{59} Seventeenth Annual Report to the Board of Directors of St. Louis Public Schools, 1870-1871, 166-167.

\textsuperscript{60} “Ira Divoll,” Warrenton Banner, July 4, 1871.

\textsuperscript{61} “Gov. Brown to Ira Divoll, Accepting his Resignation,” Journal of Education (St. Louis) 3 no. 9 (July 1871): 12.
and learn of the thriving St. Louis and Missouri systems. The bigtime spotlight was on its way. Another St. Louis man would have to do.

**John Monteith: Idle Hands are the Devil’s Workshop**

Governor B. Gratz Brown appointed the Reverend John Monteith to head Missouri’s public school system in the days following Divoll’s resignation. Monteith was a relative unknown outside of St. Louis. While the “friends of education,” were well acquainted with him as a “well and favorably known” educational reformer, most Missourians had never heard of the new Superintendent.62 Some newspapers speculated that he was a native of Ohio (he was), graduated from Yale (doctor of laws), and may have been around forty-five years old (closer to his late thirties).63 By July, to shore up any confusion, Monteith submitted a circular to Missouri newspapers to introduce himself and to explain his dedication to encouraging education in the state.64 One Missouri newspaper took issue with having another clergyman, like Parker, at the helm.65

Monteith wasted no time raising some ruckus in Jefferson City. He declared all teaching certificates issued prior to January 1871 (that is, under Parker’s leadership) void if the teacher did not apply for re-approval and pass an examination. Many were frustrated by this requirement.66 In another incident, Representative William Leeper, an Independent from Wayne County, called for Monteith’s resignation after he overheard the Superintendent discuss the rampant ignorance of Missouri citizens in March of 1872.

62 *Missouri Republican*, June 19, 1871.
64 “The Public Schools: Circular of the State Superintendent” *Warrenton Missouri Banner* (Warrenton), July 25, 1871, 1.
65 *Shelbina Democrat*, June 12, 1871.
Leeper accused Monteith of openly proclaiming that the state was in dire need of “brains and bibles” and that virtually no one in the state could read or write. It is important to note that Rep. Leeper was one of the most notorious mass-killers of suspected Confederates and Southern-sympathizing guerilla fighters in Missouri during the Civil War and was also on the House’s Education Committee and helped establish schools in the southeastern Ozarks. Leeper was not anti-Republican; rather, Monteith seems to have had a lack of couth that followed him throughout his tenure. Monteith attempted to smooth over the bumps with visits to Teacher’s Institutes, branding the educational system as one where the people must buy-in to the system to help its youth become productive citizens. His normal routine criticized unpractical education, like dead languages and advanced math, and encouraged curriculum development that centered on making good use of idle hands.

Instead of the egalitarian goals promulgated by Parker, Monteith took a cue from his fellow St. Louisans Divoll and Harris to focus on schools as a method of behavior modification and crime prevention. He warned that an uneducated population “may endanger public spaces” as it devolved into violence, and from the ranks of the illiterate, he could see “a vast swarm of population—disturbers of the peace, burglars, thieves, horse-thieves, cut-throats, and murderers” emerge if the state did not commit itself to education. His tune of crime-prevention extended to his reasoning for ensuring schools opened for Black children. In April of 1872, Monteith published a circular calling on all districts to adhere to the law’s provisions to open schools for Black students. Opposition to opening these schools was minimal, so he could not understand why so many districts

67 The People’s Tribune (Jefferson City), March 6, 1862.
68 Iron County Register, April 16, 1863; The Macon Republican, April 16, 1873.
had failed their duty. Should this group of children “grow up in ignorance and graduate in crime? Is it a mark of enlightened wisdom to pay two dollars for the protection of jails instead of one dollar for the peaceful protection of schools?” Under this paradigm, Monteith pushed to ensure localities opened schools for Black students. He opened between fifty and sixty schools and only needed to resort to the forced levying of taxes three times.  

From the federal level, at least comparatively, the pitch was working. The United States’ Commissioner of Education, John Eaton, believed Missouri’s free schools to be “beyond the period of special peril” by the early 1870s. This was in contrast to the likes of other former slaveholding states. North Carolina, the only other slaveholding state to fund common schools in the antebellum era, “lost ground educationally” after abolishing the State Superintendent’s Office; Texas was “the darkest field;” Alabama “suffered from the closing of schools prematurely;” in South Carolina, “very little can be said;” Florida had “little to no progress;” and Arkansas “has yet to make prolonged, energetic, and well-directed efforts” toward universal education. For Eaton, St. Louis was at the forefront, normal schools were opening, and the people were becoming more accepting of a system granting education to all children. He was right—three normal schools had opened under Monteith’s tenure in Cape Girardeau, Kirksville, and Warrensburg. The Missouri School of Mines in Rolla opened with twenty students, and the University of Missouri began

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admitting women to its faculty. From the vantage point of political elites, Missouri was progressing swimmingly.

But all was not well in paradise. Monteith sensed the discontent toward public schools in areas outside of St. Louis. Historian Arthur Lee argues that ire against school taxes gained steam as Missourian’s felt the weight of crushing railroad construction debt in the early 1870s. Thus, schools became the most likely candidate for criticism because school taxes were relatively new and still not wholly accepted. With Democrats slowly but surely reasserting their power hold over Missouri governing bodies, small government became the rallying cry for those looking to halt the statewide expenditure for public schools. The Democratic press, led by its mouthpiece the *Missouri Republican*, questioned the need for public expenditure on schools. In the earliest days of Radical leadership, the criticism was racially-motivated with vitriolic diatribes accusing the state of building “fine school-houses for colored abecedarians.” As the system rooted itself in the 1860s and early 1870s, rhetoric turned toward an acceptance of the institution but critique turned toward the financial, arguing that the system “cost too much money,” and curriculum should be “moulded into a narrower groove” so as not to step on the feet of the church and parents.” Silas Woodson’s 1872 inaugural may have solidified the educational system in the state of Missouri, but the Democratic takeover of the General Assembly proved a formidable obstacle for the Missouri system. The Democratic

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73 “Union Meetings on Thursday Evening,” *Missouri Republican*, March 20, 1866.
majority, elected alongside Woodson, set about codifying its frequent criticisms of the necessity of public schools.\textsuperscript{75}

The General Assembly completed its task in early 1874 by rewriting the school law instead of continuing the pattern of revisions like in 1866, 1868, and 1870.\textsuperscript{76} Aside from simplifying the law’s language, the biggest change abolished the County Superintendent’s office over the course of the year and replaced the position with a County Commissioner, who would have less power to supervise various districts within a county’s borders. The educational community decried the loss of the position, but aside from compiling reports and organizing the County Teacher Institute, the office was ceremonial for many who held the title. Another big change was that textbooks could only be purchased every five years county-wide instead of the haphazard methods used for the past eight years. Otherwise, the state expenditure remained the same, requirements for teachers actually increased, and “stringent” provisions for schools open to Black children remained in the law.\textsuperscript{77} In all, Missouri’s public school system dodged a Democratic bullet with the 1874 provision.

Monteith, for his part, drew a sigh of relief after the law’s passage. The wave of anti-school sentiment gained steam throughout his tenure, partly a result of political shift toward Democratic power and partly a result of railroad debt. Fully cognizant of what might have been, and the looming election coming in November, he told the \textit{St. Louis Post Dispatch} that the law was “the very best we have ever had” and that local districts

\textsuperscript{75} Ninety-four Democrats to thirty-seven Republicans in the House; twenty-three Democrats to eleven Republicans in the Senate.

\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Laws of Missouri}, Twenty-Seventh General Assembly, Adjourner Session, 1874, p. 147-168, State Documents Collections, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City.

would appreciate the clear and concise language of the Legislature.\footnote{78} Aside from normal platitudes, the law can be viewed as the best-case scenario for Monteith. He was a Republican in a Democratic pond, and Missouri’s governing bodies could have very well disrupted the public school system completely in 1874. They did not.

**Monteith’s Defeat**

But Monteith’s relief in early 1874 was not to last. In April, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* printed accusations that Monteith had billed the state for workdays as the Regent of the Normal School on days the board was not in session.\footnote{79} The days were few (six) over the course of two years. After the typical back-and-forth through the press, the charges seem to have stuck. Geo E. Seymour, labeled as a “Jefferson City Correspondent” for the *Dispatch*, detailed the charges as true and verified. Instead of accounting for these errors as a potential mistake, Seymour wondered “What must be the moral tension of that man’s character, whose lapse from virtue is effected by so slight a temptation!”\footnote{80} Other papers carried the interplay, including the *Journal*, who “sincerely regret to be obliged to make this exposé of a former friend.”\footnote{81} It is unclear of how and why Monteith ran afoul of the educational establishment in St. Louis. He had a track record of insulting remarks, but his fidelity to the cause was clear. A hint came from a quick blurb in *The Register* out of Kirksville, stating “The St. Louis Journal of education [sic] is writing up John Monteith as though fearful that he is going to be retained as State

\footnotetext[78]{78} “The New School Law: Superintendent Monteith Says it is a Good thing and Reflects Credit on the Last General Assembly,” *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, April 18, 1874.
\footnotetext[80]{80} Geo. Seymour, “That Question of Fees,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Sept. 21, 1874.
\footnotetext[81]{81} “The Charges Proved,” *Journal of Education* (St. Louis) 4, no. 5 (Nov 1874): 8, Reference Collection, State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, MO.
Superintendent. No danger Merwin. He is dead weight to any party.”82 In the 1874 election, Missourians elected Dr. Richard Shannon, Governor Woodson’s private secretary, from the Democratic ticket.

Notably, Monteith changed his tune toward the law in his 1874 lame duck report to the legislature. He was bitter. Instead of commending the law like he had publicly done in April, he bemoaned that the lines of communication between County Superintendents and himself had been disrupted by the drastic changes in the law, even though the law did not abolish the County Superintendency until the following year. His bitterness, though, was tempered by his own reality check. Monteith acknowledged that the universal system was established while half of the population was disenfranchised, but while all were still taxed for the opening of schools. No wonder citizens were skeptical. He also recognized that the fall of the County Superintendents was due to unqualified men holding the positions: the good ones could not outweigh the “narrow-minded and namby-pamby educators” who brought the position down “very much by its own weight.”83 He applauded the Legislature’s decision to secure the “main features” that would maintain the system instead of getting bogged down in controversial details. His closing was indicative of his feelings: the schools “have successfully launched,” but Missouri’s citizens and her representatives must decide whether it will be “be eminently successful and honorable” or “imperiled by mismanagement and neglect.”84 In welcoming Dr. Shannon as the Superintendent-elect, the Journal made a philosophical plea to recognize schools as “a legitimate and necessary outgrowth of our American institutions . . . they are

82 The Register (Kirksville), July 30, 1874.
83 1874 Missouri Report, 6.
84 1874 Missouri Report, 21.
of the people and for the people; not as rich men or poor men; not as white men or Black
men; but as free men, as citizens.”

The School of Law of 1874 set Missouri on a path toward local autonomy, to be
sure—but it also entrenched public schools as a part of the social fabric. St. Louis had an
integral hand in facilitating its continued growth. By the end of Monteiths’ term,
thousands of students entered Missouri’s public institutions. Politically, too, the tenor
remained in support of the system. Newly inaugurated Democratic governor Charles
Henry Hardin split no hairs in his first address to the Missouri legislature in 1875: “the
cause of education, and all facilities pertaining to its successful progress, should be
widened and extended till every child in the State, be it of whatever race or nationality it
may, shall be educated.” Democrats had accepted the public school system as an
institution, at least on paper. Its manifestation, though, differed across the state and for
the diverse groups of students who entered its doors.

85 *Journal of Education* (St. Louis) 5, no. 3 (February 1875): 1, Reference Collection, State
Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, MO.

102, General Assembly, Record Group 550, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City.
Chapter Three
Missouri Public Schools under Democratic Leadership, 1874-1882

Missourians in the 1870s had a gamut of issues confronting their lives. The state was in massive debt due to the Civil War, the financial crisis of 1873 took its toll, and a plague of grasshoppers destroyed vegetation across the state in 1875. Not only were railroad bonds coming due, but the summer of 1877 saw workers, including railroad men, strike for increased wages in St. Louis. Though quickly squashed, the strike exemplified the tensions between the business elite and the workingmen of industry. On the countryside, Jesse James and friends conducted their first train robbery in the middle of the decade. Fear of James’ gang quickly evolved into sympathy as he fostered a persona admired in many communities. Black Missourians navigated the volatile terrain in a variety of ways. Some left the state, others formed small communities as safe havens, and some organized the fight for an advancement of rights.¹

Politically, economics and trimming the perceived governmental fat dominated the Democratic agenda in the 1870s and early 1880s. In November of 1874, in the same election John Monteith lost his Superintendency, Missouri voters approved a new Constitutional Convention for the second time in ten years.² Now that the Democratic party regained complete control of statewide offices and had a dominant majority in the legislature, the group set about deconstructing the ten-year-old Radically engineered document. The Drake Constitution, called the “Drake Abomination” by the Democratic

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² Isidor Loeb and Floyd C. Shoemaker eds, *Debates of the Missouri Constitutional Convention of 1875 Volume II* (Columbia; State Historical Society of Missouri, 1932): 5. It should be noted that Missouri was still very much a divided population in the mid-1870s. Missouri voters approved the Convention by less than 300 votes out of 222, 315 cast. Citizens questioned the cost and necessity of a complete rewrite especially when the main issue with the document, the Ironclad Oath, was ruled unconstitutional back in 1867.
cohort, would be no more. With sixty Democrats, six Republicans, and two Liberal Republicans—and with fifty percent of the delegates supporters of the former Confederacy—the tenor was not difficult to discern. Much had changed since 1865, and the new Constitution reflected the new normal in the state of Missouri. The Constitution of 1875 banned interracial marriage and granted universal amnesty for all Confederates and their sympathizers. In many ways, the transition toward a southern identity became codified.

An Education Committee of six Democrats (including the future newspaper magnate Joseph Pulitzer) and one Republican headed the Convention’s rewrite of the public schooling provision to better suit the tenor of the day. Interestingly, its own authors considered the new version “much in the same as the Drake Constitution” and continued to safeguard public education from the whims of political parties. It designated the twenty-five percent portion of the General Revenue Fund already earmarked for education as a “minimum,” expanded the mandatory school year from three to four months, and added the governor as a member of the State School Board. Limitations, though, were the name of the Democratic game. To appease the naysayers, the new Constitution narrowed the eligible age for schooling from the original five through twenty-one to ages six through twenty, and maximum tax levies were placed on

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3 Missouri Constitution of 1875, Record Group 5.24, Office of the Secretary of State, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City.
5 Journal of the Missouri Constitutional Convention of 1875, 149. The Democratic members were Joseph Pulitzer, newspaper editor; Archibald McKee, lawyer; William Letcher, lawyer; George W. Carleton, surveyor and former Confederate soldier; Benjamin Massey, businessman; William F. Switzler, lawyer; Dewitt Allen, lawyer. The lone Republican was George Shields, lawyer.
6 Isidor Loeb and Floyd C. Shoemaker eds, Debates of the Missouri Constitutional Convention of 1875 Volume I (Columbia; State Historical Society of Missouri, 1932), 183.
school boards. In an addition that would please former Superintendent Parker, the delegates explicitly denied the use of any school fund monies for private or parochial schools in Section 11, a provision that was one of the first of its kind in state constitutions. Further, the punishment for districts who did not open schools for white children weakened, but the punishment for districts that did not open for Black children became stronger. Schoolhouses were also required to be segregated. For the many friends of the public system fearful of complete demolition under Democratic power, they believed “much reward” could be found in the document. Though some inconsistencies between the 1874 law and 1875 Constitution required rehashing in the legislature (the law still required schooling be available to the old standard of five through twenty-one), the two combined to establish the state’s official position on public education. More limited, yes; institutionalized, to be sure.

Policy without implementation is moot. Political elites in Jefferson City may have viewed the public system as vital, at least in theory, but some Missouri communities teetered precariously close to rendering public education policies dead in the water. Close, but still afloat. As the previous two chapters have shown, public education survived the Democratic transition due to the educational bureaucracy and community nurturing a system into institutionalization. How, then, did the public school system function in post-1874 environment?

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8 Article XI, Missouri Constitution of 1875, Record Group 5.24, Office of the Secretary of State, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City.

9 Eugene Fair, Public Administration in Missouri (Journal Printing Company, 1926), 126.
Powerholders who disagreed with the system were forced to refine, not abolish, the system into an image they found suitable. In this vein, I pay close attention to schools for Black children, German language instruction, and how urban and rural districts developed separately. In larger districts, capacity expansion continued to meet the needs of a growing population. In smaller districts, schoolhouses morphed into communal hubs, finding a utility that could withstand cultural and political shifts. The established bureaucracy in the State Superintendent’s office, too, continued to promote the system as a public good. Dr. Richard Shannon, a Unionist during the Civil War, takes center stage as he played the role of middleman between several competing forces. He fervently believed in the ideological tenants of tax-based universal education, but he also recognized why average Missourians questioned a system created by elites. His ability to speak to several competing groups helped steady the system when many wanted it completely overhauled.

Other institutional mechanisms developed into maturity in the 1870s to help shepherd the system through the early Democratic years. Normal schools created an added layer of insulation. Teacher legitimacy and pedagogical advancement was important, but they also provided communities with economic and cultural status; enough so to find willing lobbyists to carry the torch for their continued progress. The same rings true for the associations that served the educational community. Here, big names established themselves nationally, bringing the country-wide spotlight to the Missouri system’s progress relative to other former slave-holding states. Through these, the public school system advanced forward even as Democrats held the reigns and Missourian’s believed themselves righteous coveters of local authority.
Manifestation of Urban and Rural Systems

Dr. Richard Shannon assumed the office of the State Superintendency in January of 1875 after John Monteith lost his reelection bid. Shannon toed the Democratic party line that education was an embedded part of Missouri’s institutions. In his first report, he acknowledged the “feeling of uneasiness” among the educational community when the Democrats won complete power in the state. Shannon maintained that their fear was unwarranted. Sure, some bitter politicians had spoken foul words toward the system, but “they have always ignominiously failed to have their dangerous views embodied in laws.” According to Shannon, Missourians were mostly on-board with the system and Democrats were simply fulfilling their charge to help perfect a flawed, but worthy system. He admitted some harbored prejudices that had “yet to be removed and determined opposition to be overcome—but it is the fight of the many with the few.”

Shannon clearly understood that many Missouri citizens believed the system to be both inefficient and the product of political and economic elites. One writer in Shelbyville, Missouri, wrote succinctly: “We favor the education of every child. We believe in the prosperity of the legislative enactments compelling children to attend school. We believe the present law imperfect and defective. We want it made less expensive, more simple and effective.” In kind, Shannon’s campaign stops focused on endearing citizens to the efficacy of government-run institutions in the hopes that he

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10 Archives house limited bibliographic information on Shannon.
11 Shannon numbered his first report in 1875 to be the Twenty-Sixth Annual Report instead of the expected tenth. He noted that Thomas Parker decided to label his 1866 as “first” instead of honoring the legacy of Missouri common school education prior to the war, and Shannon sought to correct the error.
13 “Opposed to Public School,” Shelby County Herald, Nov 20, 1872.
could convert those attitudes into support of public schools. He continued Monteith’s rebranding of the system as a force for stability and worthy of state expenditure because he believed public schools were “for the general good,” and as such, “all alike must contribute to support, and all alike should be permitted to partake of the advantages it affords.” Even so, he recognized the managerial issues before him. He wanted the School Fund to have better overseers, and at the local level, district clerks did not do their part to keep necessary statistics. Teacher’s Institutes, too, had lost steam. Lackluster population growth in the late 1870s resulted in a dip in school attendance that did not shoot up until the early 1880s. Thus, the late 1870s tested the institution’s (and Shannon’s) fortitude.

Capacity expansion still served as the primary mechanism to further institutionalize the system as communities built hundreds schoolhouses in the late 1870s. In larger areas, these schoolhouses were built to accommodate growing populations. Urban superintendents continued to operate under the ethos of anti-vagrancy, class stabilization, and crime reduction. The St. Louis Post Dispatch supported the city’s school building boom by publishing articles from other large cities like “Children Smothered in Cellars” and judged the lack of space as “simply revolting.” The implication was that St. Louis could not fall into such disarray. For a gauge, St. Louis City (St. Louis City and St. Louis County officially separated in 1876) added an average

14 “Dr. R.D. Shannon, From the Moberly Enterprise,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, August 4, 1874.
16 “Overcrowded Schools: Dangerous to both Physical and Moral Health; Particulars of a Matter of Public Shame,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Oct 10, 1877. The article is referring to Boston classrooms.
of fifty teachers per year from 1865 to 1883 (going from 184 to 1,065) and the city alone enrolled nearly 60,000 pupils for the school year ending in 1883.\textsuperscript{17}

The early 1870s also saw other urban systems begin to expand as “building fever” possessed larger towns like St. Joseph and Kansas City.\textsuperscript{18} St. Joseph was able to reopen its facilities relatively early in 1864 because the city established a common school system prior to the Civil War. Superintendent Edward B. Neely, who shepherded Buchanan County schools (and then St. Joseph specifically as City Superintendent) well into the twentieth century, believed capacity expansion was contingent on public support. He spent liberally to employ well-qualified teachers, and then, after proving to the community of their efficacy, built “neat and substantial” schools around them.\textsuperscript{19} Like St. Louis’ William Torrey Harris, he developed an apolitical persona; also like Harris, Neely’s workings behind the scenes demonstrates why urban systems provided substantial support statewide in the 1870s. His continued lobbying for funds to build schools, his commitment to holding Institutes, and his courting of public opinion all saw success at the legislative level. Promotion was important, as all Superintendents knew, but holding the keys to administrative and political sway held equal weight. Likewise, Kansas City’s James Greenwood did much the same as Harris and Neely before him. Kansas City came to the public education scene relatively late (1867), but the installation of a bridge over the Missouri river resulted in a population boom in 1869. Greenwood took the helm in 1874 and oversaw one of the fastest capacity expansions in the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[17] Eighteenth Annual Report of the Board of Directors of the St. Louis Public Schools for the School Year Ending on August 1, 1882, 5-6. (hereafter cited as 1882 St. Louis Report).
\item[19] Twenty-Ninth Annual Report of the President and Directors of the St. Louis Public Schools for the Year Ending August 1, 1883 (St. Louis: Nixon-Jones Printing Co, 1884) 22. (hereafter cited as 1883 St. Louis Report).
\end{footnotes}
country.\textsuperscript{20} The supposedly catastrophic 1874 School Law, as articulated by former Superintendent John Monteith, did not make so much as a dent in these urban systems.

All of these population centers saw their capacities increase not only in the elementary level, but they also began the linkage between public schools and colleges through the opening of high schools. High schools in the latter half of the nineteenth century served students who were deemed intellectually capable of succeeding at the collegiate level. These were controversial institutions.\textsuperscript{21} If taxation for elementary levels of public schooling caused skepticism, high schools earned a whole new ballgame of irritation. Dr. Shannon maintained that proper functioning of the entire system relied on the cooperation of elementary levels of education (“the heart”) and higher levels (“the brain”).\textsuperscript{22} Without those, the public school body would fail to function. St. Louis was the first to open a high school in the antebellum years, and by the early 1880s enrolled nearly 1,000 pupils. According to the President of the Board in St. Louis, a large portion of those attending the city High School were from humble means. The public high school, he argued, allowed “class distinctions to be obliterated,” where “the young American learns to respect others for intellectual strength and true moral character.”\textsuperscript{23} Only St. Joseph, Kansas City, and Springfield had high schools in the late 1860s under the Radical guard followed in the 1870s by Lexington, Joplin, Carrollton, Jefferson City, Hannibal,

\textsuperscript{22} 1878 \textit{Missouri Report}, 32-33.
\textsuperscript{23} 1883 \textit{St. Louis Report}, 22.
Mexico and Warrensburg. By the 1880s, the state of Missouri and its communities serviced over 120 public high schools.²⁴

Capacity expansion functioned differently in smaller, more rural communities but still served to keep the public system rooted. Here, these edifices began to take on tangential uses that promoted schoolhouses as communal hubs. Much like today, schoolhouses hosted festivals and entertainment outside of normal school hours. In Neosho, the schoolhouse served as the place for public meetings and Keytesville opened its school doors to various clubs. Countless schoolhouses across the state provided space for funerals, campaign stops, and travelling expositions.²⁵ In one of the more cultural cornerstones, schoolhouses opened their doors to religious groups for use after hours. Thomas Parker lobbied to keep schoolhouses closed for any purpose outside of state-sanctioned schooling, but by the 1870s, smaller communities paid no mind to Parker’s advice and regularly allowed sectarian groups to utilize the space.²⁶ Sunday schools, nightly sermons, church fundraisers, and weekend revivals all took place in public school facilities. After all, the Constitution of 1875 forbade the use of school funds for any private or religious organizations but said nothing of how communities made use of the buildings after their construction.²⁷ These schoolhouses, paid for mostly by local taxes, essentially served as community centers. Many Missouri localities took advantage even if they were skeptical of the public system the school operated under during the day.

²⁵ For festivals and fairs: “Clarence Gleanings,” Shelby County Herald (Shelbyville), June 13, 1877, p. 4; “Suburban Notes,” The Kansas City Journal of Commerce, Feb. 25, 1877, p. 1. For public meetings and clubs: Chariton Courier, July 13, 1878; Lawrence Chieftain (Mount Vernon) Jan. 24, 1877. In Neosho, the meeting resulted in a stabbing between two families who were political rivals. For others: Jefferson Democrat (Hillsboro), June 22, 1877.
²⁷ Section 11, Article IX, Missouri Constitution of 1875.
Physical school buildings aside, local communities certainly differed in how they approached public education after the Democratic transition. Many embraced the system as a public good. A teacher from Kirkwood, a rural St. Louis County district, waxed philosophical about the importance of public schools as “the very-sheet anchor of our hope as a free people.” Even those in the far reaches of the state where “many children are still running wild in the brush” caught the public-school spirit.\(^{28}\) In Nodaway County of northeast Missouri, its “children are taught not to be Democrats, not to be Republicans; but to be good citizens.”\(^{29}\) Other communities encouraged fellow citizens to pay for better schoolhouses to promote a happier educational experience.\(^{30}\)

Others certainly questioned the system. Historian David Thelen, in his *Paths of Resistance: Tradition and Dignity in Industrializing Missouri* (1986), calls this doubting of public schools a “Battle for the Hearts and Minds of Children.”\(^{31}\) Thelen posits that the Radicals developed a system of education to “create an official culture based on economic growth,” and to do so, ripped the reigns of education from the capable hands of parents and placed them in the maniacal hands of the state after the Civil War.\(^{32}\) For Thelen, when traditional Missouri parents realized that the school system was becoming a mainstay in their lives, they resisted by keeping their children home, or if they did send them along to the schoolhouse, allowing them to be tardy. Thelen contends that the most common method of resistance among children “was to gaze out the window at the more interesting things outside the school’s confining wall.”\(^{33}\) He argues that Missourians

\(^{28}\) *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 16, 1877.
\(^{29}\) *Nodaway Democrat* (Maryville) Jan. 15, 1874.
\(^{32}\) Thelen, 110.
\(^{33}\) Thelen, 115.
shunned public schooling by ignoring the teacher, staying home, and going to church instead.

Thelen is correct that localities bemoaned and resisted public schooling, but he errs in a couple of areas. First, as shown in the first chapter of this project, the Radical system’s basis cannot be reduced to a simple conduit for American industrial progress. Stability and equality played major roles in schooling ideology. Second, he overstates resistance (and cherry picks some statistics and quotations) to better fit his paradigmatic argument against an emergent capitalistic economic system after the Civil War.

Attendance in Missouri school districts during the 1870s did not drop catastrophically; in fact, between 1872 and 1884, attendance in public schools went from fifty-six percent to sixty-four percent.\(^{34}\) Parents expressed their discontent, to be sure, but most still sent their children off to the schoolhouse during the school year. Thelen’s work could add to our understanding of the nuance of experiences with public schooling more if he had acknowledged the willingness of communities to install schoolhouses, fund high schools, and court well-trained teachers to work in their districts instead of using tardiness as a strawman for resistance.

**Democratic Policy and Marginalized Groups**

The School Law of 1874 and the Constitution of 1875 further embedded the public system and its funding into Missouri norms. The two also cemented institutionalized racism by requiring separate schools for Black children. The 1865 Constitution left open the option of integration, but the 1875 version mandated school segregation. This allowed Missouri communities to attach racism to a state-sponsored

\(^{34}\) Thelen, 115. Columbia Public Schools, in the middle of the state, reported an 82% attendance rate for the 2019-2020 school year.
entity developed to supposedly engender the common good—and, more consequentially, teach it as normal to their children.

In the first chapter of this project, Callaway County served as an example of an area firmly against opening schools for Black children under the Radical plan. By 1870, the County Superintendent still listed zero schools open for Black children, even though he reported that a “brighter future is before us” as Callaway citizens became more accepting of public schools.35 Just five years later, Richard Shannon used the county as an example of a communal turnaround. He reported that Callaway not only opened eight schools for Black children, but the county had “cheerfully and promptly” accepted policy directives to comply with the law. For him, this was evidence of the “kindly disposition of the intensely southern element of the state toward this race.”36 The numbers tell a more nuanced story with the application of policy in Callaway County. Of the over 1,000 Black school-aged children, only 236 attended schools. This attendance rate is in comparison to almost sixty percent for white children.37 Improvement, though, did continue under the years of Democratic leadership. In 1878, nearly fifty percent of Black children attended a public school in Callaway County with sixty-six percent of white children.38 The County Commissioner was impressed with his community’s advancement, as was Shannon.

If Callaway County’s capacity expansion looked successful, other counties experienced a mixed bag of expansion for Black students. Osage County was one area that changed its tune from its initial reluctance. Back in 1867, its Superintendent railed

35 *Fifth Missouri Annual Report of Public Schools*, 1870, p. 139, State Documents Collection-Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, RG000.105; Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City. (hereafter cited as *1870 Report*).
36 *1875 Missouri Report* 12.
37 *1875 Missouri Report*, 36.
38 *1878 Missouri Report*, 74
against the entire system; by 1878, over seventy percent of Black children attended a public school in the county.\(^{39}\) Most counties in Missouri reported at least one school open by the late 1870s, but several failed to heed the directive. In McDonald County (recall, this county refused to open schools for any children under Parker’s leadership because the tax seemed and “unadvisable burden”), the Commissioner reported forty schoolhouses open to white children with half of the white school-aged population attending school. The Commissioner refused to submit any figures for the number of Black children in the county.\(^{40}\) Ozark County, which reported no schools for any children open in 1867 because the area was in the midst of rebuilding, had over thirty public schools open in 1878. None welcomed Black children.\(^{41}\) Linn County, with that “implacable hostility” even among Radicals back in the 1860s told a similar story in the 1870s.\(^{42}\)

Writing in 1920, historian Henry Sullivan Williams called the decade from 1875-1885 “The Critical Period” for schools open to Black students. His biggest issue stemmed from inconsistent statistics, where localities neglected to enumerate the correct number of children living in an area to evade the law’s requirement to open schools. The legislature toughened its standards on these districts and threatened to remove state-level funding if districts were found in violation, but this was rarely enforced.\(^{43}\) Locality, as ever, dictated the educational experience of children in Missouri.

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\(^{39}\) 1878 Missouri Report, 161.
\(^{40}\) 1878 Missouri Report, 140.
\(^{41}\) 1878 Missouri Report, 160.
\(^{42}\) 1878 Missouri Report, 137.
\(^{43}\) Henry Sullivan Williams, “The Development of the Negro Public School System in Missouri,” The Journal of Negro History 5, no. 2 (April 1920): 159; Shannon preferred diplomacy and “wise counsel” in lieu of bringing a district to court.
Numbers alone cannot articulate the experience of Missouri’s Black children in public schools. Even when schools opened for students of color in the 1860s and beyond, these were typically under-funded and targets for discrimination. Superintendent Shannon accused some clerks of accepting funds for the maintenance of schools for Black students but never distributing them. The reigning paradigm of the day kept white teachers from teaching in non-white schools, further limiting prospects.\textsuperscript{44} Historians Lorenzo Green and Gary Kremer log instances of arson and harassment by white perpetrators to limit the spread of Black schools.\textsuperscript{45} In Lexington, where a Confederate cannon ball lodged itself into the corner of the courthouse, Black men who attempted to organize schoolhouses for their children were targets of intimidation by the white population and eventually forced out of the town.\textsuperscript{46} Thus, while institutionalization promoted the system’s survival, it did not assume its charge as a “great equalizer.” By the mid-1870s, institutionalization meant entrenchment of racial subjugation.

St. Louis, as normal, requires a singular inspection. By 1878, St. Louis City had twelve schools open to Black children employing forty teachers and a forty percent increase in attendance over previous years.\textsuperscript{47} Continuing its tradition of firsts, Missouri’s first high school for Black students opened in 1875 somewhere near Spruce, Poplar, and 11\textsuperscript{th} streets.\textsuperscript{48} Of the nearly 4,000 Black children living in the city, over 3,200 attended

\textsuperscript{44} 1875 Missouri Report, 12.
\textsuperscript{45} Green, 93.
\textsuperscript{46} “Our County Exchanges, From the Lexington Register” published in the Journal of Education (St. Louis) 2, no. 2 (Oct 1869): 27.
\textsuperscript{47} Twenty-Fourth Annual Report of the Board of Directors of the St. Louis Public Schools for the Year Ending August 1, 1878 (St. Louis: Max Olshausen, Printer, 1879), 128. (cited hereafter as 1878 St. Louis Report.)
\textsuperscript{48} For those familiar with the area, Sumner High School opened somewhere in the space three blocks west from where the current Bush Stadium stands.
public schools in the late 1870s. That figure, around eighty percent, compares to about ninety percent of white children living in the city attending public schools. This was a big number relative to the rest of the state, meaning the city got a big chunk of the School Fund and continued to lobby for the system’s expansion throughout the 1870s and 1880s. Historian Selwyn K. Troen attributes the large proportion of public school attendance to Black families enrolling their children in schools that employed Black teachers, of which St. Louis was at the forefront and Superintendent W.T. Harris a proponent. It is important to note that for all of his progressive thoughts on gender and early-childhood education, Harris grounded his ideology on the education of Black students in the supremacy of Western, particularly German, culture.

Powerholders also believed themselves to be forward thinking in their handling of foreign language instruction for immigrants. Immigration to the Mississippi River began in earnest in the antebellum period, with many, mainly from Germany and Ireland, settling in St. Louis or nearby areas. Pre-war common schools typically offered classes solely in English, so upwards of eighty percent of German students attended private or subscription schools. After the Civil War, St. Louis administrator Ira Divoll introduced German language instruction schools as an “experiment” with an expressed intention to keep German parents from removing their children from the public school system.

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49 1878 *St. Louis Report*, 191.
52 Troen, 56-57.
53 *Eleventh Annual Report of the Board of Directors of the St. Louis Public Schools for the year ending August 1, 1865* (St. Louis: R.P. Studley & Co, 1865), 6; *Twelfth Annual Report of the Board of*
addition, Divoll and other County Superintendents defended the decision to hire German-language teachers to teach children in their mother tongue because it would “break down the prejudices of nationality,” and more pedagogically, it was the only way to ensure learning among students. The School Board authorized a new German Department in 1867 and paid bilingual teachers a premium of $100 annually. If a student’s district school did not carry German curriculum, the student could attend an accommodating school free of charge. The number of schools offering German language instruction grew from 1864 onward without much fanfare or opposition as the German contingent comprised a powerful voting block that did not need riling. By the early 1880s, St. Louis expanded its German-English offerings to fifty-seven schools, employed seventy-five specially trained bilingual teachers, and had over 20,000 students taking German-English courses. As late as 1871, the state legislature authorized for the Superintendent’s report to be printed in English and German.

Ideas of public education as a method of Americanization were not new. The nativist Know Nothings wielded some power in the 1850s (Charles Drake was a reformed member, but Germans in St. Louis never forgave him), and the rumblings gained steam in the 1870s with Democrats ascending the political throne. In March 1878, the St. Louis School Board entertained a resolution to abolish German language instruction. To fight the move, citizens arranged meetings, distributed circulars, and lobbied to allow German instruction to remain. Their arguments spanned the spectrum. Some used the same

Directors of the St. Louis Public Schools for the year ending August 1, 1866 (St. Louis: R.P. Studley & Co, 1866), 37.

Fourteenth Annual Report of the Board of Directors of the St. Louis Public Schools for the year ending August 1, 1868 (St. Louis: George Knapp & Co, 1869), 9.

1883 St. Louis Report, 39.
ideology of Horace Mann—that it was be impossible for German children to embrace their charge as citizens of a republic if they were unable to understand important lessons. “The citizens of this country, German as well as English,” one opinion piece went, “have a right to know what laws govern them.”56 If English was the end-goal, then, German language instruction was the conduit for that assimilation. Others saw political expediency. Germans voted in big numbers, and “You might as well attempt to dam up the Nile with bullrushes as to oppose the onrushing tide of German sentiment.”57 It would not do well to undermine such an important bloc. William Torrey Harris, too, supported German in schools. After all, he believed German philosophy was at the forefront of social progress and adopted kindergartens as a model for early childhood education. This sentiment did not remain. Using both the language of fiscal responsibility (German schools cost St. Louis $65-70,000 per year) and the language of Americanization (in a late 1880s Superintendent’s Report, “This is an English-speaking country; the French were defeated and the English tongue declared to be the language of the people”), St. Louis voters elected a School Board that struck the bilingual provisions from its statutes in 1887. The Missouri state legislature followed the next year.58

The institutionalization of public schools in Missouri communities took on various forms based on location and demography. For white students, it meant potential access to literacy and knowledge for some, and maybe a little less freedom to play outside for others. For Black Missourians, it meant separate and subpar schools. For

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56 “A Word from the German Standpoint,” St. Louis Globe-Democrat, April 2, 1878.
German-speaking children, it meant assimilation. In small villages, the schoolhouse served communal needs in addition to a place of learning. In larger urban areas, schoolhouses expanded to meet the needs of a growing population. In all of these, it simply would not do to close newly built schools, no matter which political party was in the majority in Jefferson City. Abolishing the entire system was a non-starter by the 1880s.

Missouri’s Education Web Expands

Educational and political elites cultivated a professional teacher corps to legitimate the Missouri system. Teacher professionalization, in the vein of Thomas A. Parker, was a primary method of sustaining the public schools under the Radical plan. He believed the training of Black teachers to be of the utmost importance and lobbied to sustain the planned opening of schools for Black children throughout the state. Aside from offers from the Society of Friends to send white teachers to teach in Black schools, communities across Missouri rejected integrated teacher-student schools. In 1870, James Milton Turner and Thomas Parker headlined a conference in Jefferson City that asked the legislature to assume responsibility for Lincoln Institute. They were unsuccessful, but the legislature did allocate $5,000 to begin a normal department. Lincoln became a state institution in 1879, but it continued to be the only normal school open to Black scholars until the 1920s.

The educational community was aware of the dearth of Black teachers for Black schools. And yet, while J.B. Merwin’s Journal of Education allotted some space to reminding localities of their obligations to open schools for Black children, most of the

59 1875 Missouri Report, 12.
space was devoted to articulating the need for white teachers in the state. To fill the void, he was instrumental in courting Joseph Baldwin, a big name in the Indiana-educational scene, to start a private normal school in the northern part of the state back in 1867. After the school opened in Kirksville, Baldwin welcomed “Students, however backward” to join at any time.\[61\] Just as Ira Divoll was transitioning into the role of State Superintendent in 1870, legislators granted funds to support two normal schools, one north of the Missouri River and one in the south. Baldwin’s Kirksville facility assumed the role of the northern state-funded normal school while Warrensburg assumed the role of the southern-designated school. The seat of Johnson County was certainly south of the Missouri River, but not by much. A third school opened in Cape Girardeau two years later to appease the legislators from the southeastern edges of the state.\[62\]

City boosters and legislators wanted normal schools in their communities because they served as economic and cultural draws. Kirksville’s elite, along with Merwin, courted Baldwin heavily. After the General Assembly designated it a state-school, Adair County paid nearly $100,000 to improve the campus in 1871.\[63\] Warrensburg’s plight to house a normal school took a more dramatic turn, but no less so in the pursuit of relevance and economic progress. Sedalia (Pettis County), in west-central Missouri, had housed a private normal school in a rented building since 1869. When the legislature promised to charter a school south of the Missouri River in 1870, the city designated $50,000 in bonds to help construct a building with the assumption it would logically fill

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\[61\] *Journal of Education* (St. Louis) 1, no. 2 (November 1868): 43.

\[62\] Baldwin’s State Normal School No. 1 is now Truman State University; Warrensburg’s State Normal School No. 2 is now the University of Central Missouri; Cape Girardeau’s State Normal School No. 3 is now Southeast Missouri State University.

\[63\] Phillips, 102.
the role. Citizens of Warrensburg, thirty miles to the west, saw an opportunity to put their
town on the map. Its city boosters undertook a campaign to discredit Pettis County and
raised $200,000 in bonds to bring the state-funded normal school down the road. The
scheme was successful, and when the cornerstone was laid in August of 1871, speakers
heralded the moment as an investment in Warrensburg’s future. The new head of the
school proclaimed, “Your children and their children to the remotest generations will
reap the fruits of this institution” while newspapers applauded the town’s “pluck, energy
and enterprise.”64 The ceremonies coincided with spending thousands to bring industry,
build schoolhouses, and replat their streets in the hopes that a lack of geographical
uniqueness would draw settlers to the area.65 Normal schools, for all of their value to
support the public school system, also supported local economies.

Missouri’s normal schools grew the state’s credentialed teacher corps to reflect
the reigning paradigms of the day. The curricular offerings of mathematics, natural
sciences, English, literature, elocution, geography, history, and languages looks similar to
today’s. The professional and pedagogical courses also look familiar with courses offered
on instructional methods, school management, and methods of culture. Kirksville and
Warrensburg opened a Practice School, also called a “Model Department,” which took
off in the early 1880s and placed the would-be teachers in the towns’ public classrooms, a
forerunner to today’s right-of-passage known as Student Teaching.66 Shannon himself
administered the two-day exams given at each of the state’s normal schools and

64 “The Cornerstone Celebration,” Warrensburg Standard, August 31, 1871; “A Grand Time,”
(Jefferson City), May 10, 1871.
66 Phillips, 98.
implemented a sliding scale of credentials. Graduates pledged to teach in Missouri public schools upon their graduation, and most fulfilled the commitment. New teachers found employment in urban and rural districts equally and were more likely to plant roots in the communities in which they served. By 1878, Superintendent Shannon relayed that the normal schools were “the most valuable aids to the cause of public education” and had done more for the system within the past six years than any other agency [private, seminary] in two decades combined.

The influence of the educational community in supporting teachers and the system cannot be understated. For all the political maneuvering required, a large contingent of people truly believed the public schools to be the harbingers of their version of a utopia. Following Merwin’s *Journal* offers insight into what educational boosters identified with in the decades following the Civil War. In lieu of bemoaning the ill-preparedness of teachers, the *Journal* largely published columns that can only be described as pep-talks—encouraging teachers to be persistent, that their work mattered, and that “Teaching is a divine calling, and it is what we make of it.” It broached the topic of mental health for teachers, suggesting social picnics as a treatment for job-related stress. Teacher salaries and the hoops necessary to attain wages (“Pay them!”) was a regular topic of writing. It did chastise teachers who failed to complete their duties, but in large part, the *Journal* was a self-help periodical for those in the classroom.

It is no surprise that curriculum and pedagogy were major parts of each issue. From geography to grammar, from languages to elocution, the question of “What Shall

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67 Carrington, 109.
68 Claude Phillips, 105; Carrington, 136.
70 *Journal of Education* (St. Louis) 1, no.5 (January 1869); ibid, vol. 2, no. 11 (July 1870).
We Study?” dominated the pages of every educational periodical, including the *Journal*. An intellectual debate over the proper way to teach mathematics caused a stir and even led editors to publish a warning to calm the engines between rival mathematicians.71 Pedagogically, the *Journal* encouraged teachers to follow what can be considered basic practice today. Of the suggestions: move beyond rote memorization; train pupils to reflect on their learning regularly; look beyond textbooks to find ways to differentiate teaching methods; dedicate time to recess as kids should not sit all day; better yet, promote exercise throughout the day to help “nervousness and fatigue.” On homework (and this still ruffles feathers today): “no study outside of school hours” and “Let the dear children, while at home, play, read, work, scuffle, grow, anything else but study.” Why should teachers follow these guidelines? According to the *Journal* “Because schoolhouses seem a prison, and the furniture instruments of torture.”72

The *Journal* also recognized the barriers to the system’s success. One column challenged readers to help sway public opinion toward accepting teaching as a profession and others warned that “old fogies will growl, but we must meet the rising emergency!” Boosters were quick to lay blame on fellow Missourians: “I have spoken to several of them and they will tell me ‘we go along very well without book larnin and so kin our brats’ [misspellings are original and intended].” Parents, too, were specifically cited as obstacles to progress. The *Journal* noted that a child’s behavior is typically reminiscent of his or her homelife and wished parents recognized the privilege of having access to a free school system. Columns were devoted to “Parents Who ERR” with tips on how to

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71 *Journal of Education* (St. Louis) 2, no. 1 (Sept 1869); ibid, vol 1, no 4 (Dec 1868).
72 *Journal of Education* (St. Louis) 2, no. 7 (Feb 1870); ibid, vol 2, no. 2 (Oct 1869).
navigate troublesome parents who “neutralize” the best efforts of instructors. Any teacher today can connect with many of the Journal’s sentiments.

Teachers and the system also found support in associations. The Missouri Teacher’s Association (now the Missouri State Teacher’s Association or MSTA) predates any national counterpart with its origins in 1856 at St. Louis’ Wyman’s Hall Horace Mann, who had become the contemporary face of the United States’ common schools, attended the group’s first meeting to help organize an agenda. The group’s primary impetus for forming was to advocate for state-funded normal schools and teacher institutes to legitimize the public school system. In memorial after memorial to the legislature, MSTA articulated the need to professionalize the state’s teachers in order stabilize the system. The group’s agenda expanded after the Civil War to include lobbying for changes to the school law, supporting teachers in their pursuit of adequate pay, and fostering a positive relationship between universities and the public system. When Teacher Institutes lost footing in the early 1870s, MSTA reenergized the system, and by the early 1880s, had firmly reestablished Institutes as a method of refreshing working teachers on pedagogy and curriculum. Familiar names, like Thomas Parker, Joseph Baldwin, Edward B. Neely, Ira Divoll, and William Torrey Harris all were officers in the association that brought awareness to the legislature and support to the teacher corps.

The National Education Association’s (NEA) choice to bring its Conference to St. Louis in August of 1871 is indicative the pull of educational associations in the state.

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73 Journal of Education (St. Louis) 2, no. 7 (Feb 1870); ibid, vol 3, no. 1 (Sept 1870).
75 Carrington, 117.
Formed in 1857, the National Teachers Association merged with a slew of other teacher organizations in 1870 to become NEA, the country’s largest contingent of educators, hosting Conferences annually with attendees from every state in the Union. Harris orchestrated the 1871 conference around his two favorite things—educational practice and the city of St. Louis. The conference utilized a type of breakout-session format that focused on professionalization, pedagogy, and curriculum. Tours of the city, including excursions to Shaw’s Botanical Garden, and Iron Mountain, and its public schools were a given.76 The growth of NEA throughout the 1870s and 1880s demonstrates how educational associations legitimized the public school system.

J.B. Merwin’s *Journal* promoted the NEA Conference vigorously.77 Massive spreads detailed the agenda and methods of transportation to attend, and then equally large writeups appeared detailing the umpteen speeches given over the course of the week. The conference was, in the simplest of terms, a big deal for St. Louis and public education. Harris and Merwin had every reason to boost the event’s recognition. For Merwin in particular, public education was a common good, and as noted in Chapter Two, it was also a money maker for his business. By the mid-1870s, advertisements came from across the country for all sorts of new textbooks, apparatus, and equipment to outfit expanding schoolrooms across the state. Perhaps one of the best hallmarks of the viability of the new market was the introduction of swindlers to the education game. In a years-long saga, a man calling himself A.B. Israel toured rural districts in Illinois, Missouri, and Iowa selling fake maps to unsuspecting school directors. Thomas Parker

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warned of the scheme in 1868, and every so often in the *Journal* issued a familiar warning. By 1870, the *Journal* told directors that if the district was dumb enough to buy the fake maps, then it was their own fault. The swindlers were still in operation in 1875 when one newspaper warned “more of Israel’s maps agents are visiting . . . all school directors should keep their eyes open.”\(^78\) The proliferation of schools was an opportunity to turn a profit both above and below board.

The institutionalization of the system by way of normal schools and teacher professionalization helped underpin public education as a necessity in Missouri society. Not only did they act as legitimizing establishments, but these institutions also provided communities with financial and cultural beacons to encourage settlement and economic progress. Commercialization, too, is important to understanding how the system weathered the Democratic shift. Businesses catered to the capacity expansion boom and had good reason to encourage the system’s growth, if not for the good of society, then for the good of economic development.

**The End of Shannon’s Tenure**

As Richard Shannon’s eight years at the helm ended in 1882, he willingly handed over the reins to William E. Coleman, a former Confederate soldier who had lost a leg in the Battle of Allatoona in Georgia and was a subsequent graduate of the state normal school in Kirksville. Shannon left the position with the feeling that he had stabilized a listing ship. During his term, school districts ballooned to around ten thousand, and he had done much work with the General Assembly to uncomplicate the school law and

\(^78\) “Another Warning,” *Journal of Education* (St. Louis) 3 no. 10 (Aug 1871): 6; *Perryville Weekly Union*, July 23, 1875.
ensure the school fund was rightly managed. Richard Shannon left the office behind feeling successful and encouraged by Missouri’s adoption of a publicly funded school system. If capacity expansion is any measure, Shannon was right. By the mid-1880s, over sixty percent of parents sent their children into a school classroom on a regular basis. Urban systems grew quickly under the guidance of Superintendents who placed high value on the system’s ability to tend after and reform would-be criminals and vagrants. Shannon’s entire tenure focused on making the system palatable to a variety of tastes, including skeptical Missourians who questioned any Radical-leaning policies.

Institutionalization of public schools meant that policymakers in Jefferson City worked within the system to reflect the tenor of the day. Democrats fixed segregation into the Constitution, vested localities with textbook control, and put checks on School Board spending. All of this meant that while schools for Black children continued to open and “experienced much growth,” they were not on the same keel as schools for white children. Richard Shannon could profess his dedication to offering equal opportunity, but this did not always translate to practice in local school districts. The case of German language instruction, too, shows how institutionalization required public schools to remain part of the cultural framework, but were modified to fit ideological motives. Americanization became part of the curriculum as much as reading, writing, and arithmetic.


As Missouri districts implemented policy, the educational community continued to grow and further cement the system. Normal schools turned out teachers educated in pedagogy and curriculum who then entered Missouri classrooms. They were supported by a community linked together through journals and associations. St. Louis’ influence persisted as J.B. Merwin fostered communication across the state and William Torrey Harris began to court the national spotlight. Organizations like MSTA and NEA promoted teacher professionalization and lobbied for the system’s expansion. The school system also created a market for goods that helped many see its value, even if they had no children matriculating or had qualms with a taxpayer funded system. After 1872, no major political platform in Missouri denigrated the public school system. In fact, all lauded Missouri’s relatively premature adoption of the schools as a common good. Opponents existed, to be sure, but Democrats and Republicans viewed the system as a rooted part of the Missouri experience.
Conclusion

Silas Woodson’s inaugural speech in 1872 solidified the public school system as an institution in the state of Missouri. Though not always a smooth sail, the system remained a staple through ten more Democratic governorships and strong majorities in the Missouri legislature. By the time a Republican won the gubernatorial office in 1908, Missouri schools enrolled over 900,000 students, over seventy percent of the children in the state. 18,000 teachers worked in Missouri’s public classrooms. The state’s school fund was the largest in the United States, and the General Assembly chartered two new normal schools in Springfield and Maryville to meet the need for credentialed teachers.¹ The outgoing Democratic governor, Joseph “Holy Joe” Folk, remarked that Missouri’s children had the opportunity to meet the obligation as citizens of a democratic society, and, not insignificantly, he noted that statistics show that “crime is reduced as education increases.”² The mantra of behavior modification proved a mainstay.

Racial discrepancies also proved a mainstay but the proliferation of schools for Black children in the earliest years after the Civil War had staying power in comparison to other former slaveholding states. In 1890, when Alabama, Delaware, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, and Tennessee reported no Black students enrolled in public high schools, Missouri had over 350 attendees, more than any Southern state by over 100 pupils. Proportionally, those 350+ students comprised about two percent of the age-eligible Black population, while about four percent of the white population attended a high school. By 1910, those numbers had evened with 10.5 percent of age-eligible

Black children attending a Missouri public high school versus 10.9 percent of white
students. While the numbers leveled in the early twentieth century thanks to the
institutionalization of the Missouri system in comparison to other former slaveholding
states, the quality of infrastructure, apparatus, and resources, along with the experiences
of those in segregated schools, render the data only part of the public education story.

In today’s classrooms, the second half of the nineteenth century rarely garners
much time in secondary-level American history courses. Some attention may be paid to
Reconstruction, railroads, the Indian wars, and Populism, but even those topics wander
into obscurity when teachers hop-skip-and-jump from the Civil War and miraculously
wind-up in 1914. Only so much time exists on the school calendar, and the post-1865
curriculum is a casualty of that reality. The irony is that the public school system, in
which most of these teachers instruct, ingrained itself into our cultural norms during the
same time period most consistently ignored. The public’s understanding of publicly
funded buildings devoted to a liberal arts curriculum, mandated by government offices,
and an education freely available to every child inhabiting a certain area all came to
maturity in the post-Civil War milieu. In Missouri’s particular case, it was largely the
work of political and educational elites who pressed it upon citizenry that had a difficult
time deciding on its efficacy. But because of its precocious start in the antebellum period
and the decisions of early Superintendents to focus on capacity expansion and teacher
professionalization, a majority of Missourians saw some sort of value in public schools

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3 James D. Anderson, *Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of
North Carolina Press, 1988), 188-189. The rest of the South averaged less than three percent of Black
students enrolled in a high school, with several falling under two percent.

4 Reconstruction and Native American analysis are included in Missouri’s 6-12 Social Studies
Grade-Level Expectations. See: Missouri Learning Standards | Missouri Department of Elementary and
Secondary Education (mo.gov).
by the 1880s. Most parents sent their children into classrooms staffed by graduates from normal schools, credentialed by the State Superintendent, and supplied by some commercial venture happily willing to provide the pencils and paper necessary for learning.

The school system State Superintendent William E. Coleman inherited in 1882 was a far cry from the bloated bureaucracy Missourians operate under today, but it was still very much an institutionalized network. In 1884, the minimum school year increased to six months and the school year changed its start date from April to July to give room for summer vacations. In a bit of trivia, Superintendent Coleman declared April 15, 1886 as Arbor Day and asked teachers to develop a program for students along with a tree-planting ceremony. Because the first year of the program was unsuccessful due to the late planting date, Coleman lobbied the General Assembly to designate Arbor Day as an official holiday and affix it to the first Friday of April on the calendar. For him, Arbor Day reflected the intention of Missouri’s public schools: “Let the children plant and name their trees, and they will protect, guard, and cultivate them in the future.” Coleman believed in the system’s ability to raise up children so they would continue to protect the democracy into which they were born. Missouri is still the only state in the Union that celebrates Arbor Day on a different day than the national holiday.

Coleman was able to issue such dictums because he led a system that had been rooted by his predecessors. It would be wrong to describe Missouri’s antebellum

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5 Thirty-Fifth Missouri Annual Report of Public Schools, 1884, State Documents Collection-Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, RG000.105, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City.
commons schools as a cohesive, thriving system. From its earliest iterations, these were classist and racially exclusive places frequented by poor white children. We know Missouri’s antebellum powerholders recognized the validity of education because they saw its benefits in St. Louis and formed a common system to offer those opportunities statewide. The 1847 codified denial to teach Black Missourians to read or write shows their acknowledgement that literacy was a potent tool. But if we remove our modern glasses, we can see how the antebellum system, for all its failings, initiated the concept of common schools and managed to have a large portion of taxation devoted to their maintenance. Of the slaveholding states, only Missouri and North Carolina took this step. This foundation, advanced in St. Louis and spreading elsewhere in the state, poured the foundation for the Radical changes in the wake of a Union victory and abolition of slavery.

Under Thomas Parker’s leadership, the Radical plan adopted the basic framework of the antebellum system but applied it as a universal necessity. Radicals used education as a forceful mechanism to fulfill many goals: educate a newly freed population, punish Southern sympathizers, and stabilize the war-torn environment. Before Robert E. Lee signed the Confederate surrender at Appomattox Courthouse in April of 1865, delegates at Missouri’s Constitutional Convention had already presented their Education Committee Report with the intention to reorient the social and cultural trajectory of the state. Its provisions ensured public education as a right in the organic law, and the Radically engineered School Law of 1866 sat in stark contrast to other Southern states’ decisions to completely deny Black children a seat in the schoolhouse. Nonetheless, the limitations on Black education, like a minimum threshold to open schools, combined with
the still-potent racial hierarchy embedded in the state’s norms, set the tone for how future Missourians continued to segregate their institutions of learning.

It is disappointing to read how historians continue to shrug off Thomas Parker’s attempts to bring “the great equalizer” to a former-slaveholding state. To combat skepticism and apathy, he traversed the state to explain the new law and woo Missourians into realizing the benefits of the system. His commitment to teacher professionalization was rooted in empathy for his fellow educators, but his most successful strategy was capacity expansion. Schoolhouse construction and attendance boomed under Parker’s leadership. The expanded footprint enabled the system to maintain relevancy even as Missourians and their political leaders navigated the convoluted post-war terrain.

Moods and identities did, indeed, change. By the early 1870s, all things Radical in Missouri were shown the door and Liberal Republicans, then Democrats, ushered right in. The educational elite in St. Louis sensed an opportunity to harness the dominant control of the state’s public schools with the candidacy of Ira Divoll on the Liberal Republican ballot. Divoll was a stabilizing force for the St. Louis system during the most turbulent years in memory, and whose reappearance as a candidate for statewide office demonstrates the power the city wielded over state politics.

The St. Louis educational community was strong. The advanced antebellum system created a space for educational theorists and administrators to test new methodologies and foster an organization that sustained it through war, political upheaval, and cultural divisions. William Torrey Harris’ rise in St. Louis on the tails of Ira Divoll maintained St. Louis as a fulcrum of educational experimentation. Graded schools and a public high school were early examples of this penchant, as were the city-
sponsored normal school and kindergartens. The acceptance of German language instruction indicates how early administrators viewed the value of public school curriculum; its subsequent abolishment in the late 1880s is an example of how powerholders worked within the established institution to reflect a shift toward nativism. A major part of this community was cultivated by J.B. Merwin and friends through the publication of the *Journal of Education*. That St. Louis could sustain such a periodical is evidence of the city’s pull, but even more so, its steady gain in readership across the 1870s shows how important St. Louis was in the expansion of the public school system. Merwin created a space where the educational community, and not just the elites controlling the system, could air grievances and gain a sense of how others fared in localities far removed from their own. Instead of reading from newspapers about the failings of public schools, the *Journal* crafted its own narrative to advocate for causes through a pro-education filter. For a system that was already a hard-sell to a skeptical population, the *Journal* was a mouthpiece of support.

Public schools certainly needed the boost as Democrats took unilateral control of all of Missouri’s state offices in the mid-1870s. Missourians were dealing with sweeping issues that created conflicting ideas about the value of publicly supported educational institutions. Much of the skepticism could be attributed to the newness of the system, the chaos of a state reeling from a pro-longed conflict, and distrust of perceived government corruption or financial mismanagement. Classism and racism also divided the population’s reception of taxpayer funded schools. The public system’s growth, though, kept it from being tossed by the wayside in the mid-1870s. Too many entities benefited from its continuation—political parties recognized its embedding, the educational
community rallied around its efficacy as a common good, and businesses saw opportunities to expand their markets. Parents, too, continued to send their children to public schools even as they were challenged in policy and application. The reasons for the sustainment of the Missouri system can be found in the antebellum systems of St. Louis and the state, along with the extensive efforts of Radicals to use the public schools as a tool for social and cultural change after the Civil War. By the time the dust settled after the Constitutional Convention of 1875, Missouri’s system endured as the population boomed in cities and school buildings became communal hubs in rural areas. Politicians and citizens alike contoured the system to fit a worldview that included segregated schools and regulated financial expenditure rather than squash the system.

The reports of the State Superintendents in the 1880s, 1890s, and early 1900s demonstrate the evolved perception of Missouri schools. Like those of the 1860s and 1870s, tables of statistics on capacity expansion and teacher professionalization still filled pages, but no longer did powerholders need to convince citizens that the public school system should remain, as was required of Parker, Divoll, Monteith, and Shannon. Public schools were a done deal. The reports of the early twentieth century showed the new benchmarks of success, like photos of healthy numbers of graduating classes from rural districts, a detailed curriculum for different district sizes, and special trainings for rural teachers at the Cape Girardeau Normal School. The four-hundred-page documents looked similar to Parker’s tomes of four decades prior, but the content echoed the institutionalization of public education in the state. We are better able to understand this change if we recognize the strategies used by powerholders to invest the system into the cultural and political fabric of Missouri.
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