

# The Right to Learn

Black Education and the Struggle for Equal Schools

**Dr. Nakeyau Patterson**

## Inside this sample

Title and copyright pages, full-book contents, reading guidance, introduction, Chapter 1: Learning Before Permission, and the supporting source-note pages.

Selected pages from the hardcover interior. Original pages 1-8 and source-note pages 84-85 are included. Later chapters listed in the contents are not part of this sample.

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# The Right to Learn

Black Education and the Struggle for Equal Schools

Dr. Nakeyau Patterson

Black History and Human Dignity

RISING PRESS

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Historical quotations and records are identified in the source notes.

The cover illustration is symbolic and does not depict a specific historical event.

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# How to Use This Book

Begin with each chapter's guiding question. As you read, identify what a person, institution, or public authority did and what the evidence lets you say about it. Return to the question after the chapter to consider how your answer has changed.

The numbered references in brackets point to source notes at the back of the book. These notes identify the record, account, or study used, its location, and important limits. A later recollection, a court opinion, and a statistical table can answer different questions.

Each chapter ends with reflection questions and a short inquiry. Work with the evidence provided. The task is to make a supported claim and recognize what remains unknown. You do not need to disclose a personal experience, contact officials, or reenact mistreatment to complete an activity.

Use the timeline to locate selected events and publications. Use the vocabulary to clarify terms, then return to the chapter for their context. The statistics in Chapter 11 are dated examples of reading evidence; identify the school year and the publication date before comparing them.

Teachers and other supporting adults can select excerpts, explain historical language, and offer time to discuss difficult material. Adults remain responsible for present-day decisions and follow-through. Students' questions and reasoning matter without making them responsible for repairing institutions.

# Introduction

## The Students Who Asked for More

On April 23, 1951, students at Robert Russa Moton High School in Farmville, Virginia, went on strike. Sixteen-year-old Barbara Johns helped lead the action. Their school was overcrowded, and some classes met in tar-paper buildings. The students wanted a school that could properly serve them. By walking out, they turned those conditions into a public demand for change. [1]

The strike lasted two weeks. When Oliver Hill and Spottswood Robinson, lawyers from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), became involved, the question grew beyond a better building. They would take the case if the students and their parents agreed to challenge racial segregation itself. The resulting lawsuit, *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County*, became part of *Brown v. Board of Education*. [1]

These young people were asking who had the authority to decide what kind of education they would receive. They could see the classrooms. They could compare conditions. They could organize. Their experiences helped shape a constitutional challenge that reached the Supreme Court.

The 1954 *Brown* ruling declared state-imposed racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. But a decision on paper did not immediately give every child an equal school. In Prince Edward County, officials stopped funding the public schools in 1959 rather than operate them under a desegregation order. The schools remained closed until 1964. Black families and community members organized other ways for children to learn, and some families sent children away to attend school. [2]

To understand this history, we have to hold both parts of it in view: what Black people created, and what public authorities denied. Community effort made learning possible. It did not remove the responsibility of governments to provide public education fairly.

This book follows that relationship across time. We will study people who taught without a recognized schoolroom, families who helped build schools, teachers who sustained communities, students who challenged segregation, and the decisions that

shaped what happened after a school door opened. Brown is an essential part of the story. The story begins much earlier and continues beyond the ruling.

In this book, the right to learn means that every student deserves a real opportunity to learn. Different parts of that claim have been protected, contested, or denied through different laws and decisions. A moral claim, a constitutional ruling, and the daily experience of attending school are related, but they are not interchangeable.

We will ask what a source can tell us and what it cannot. A law shows what authorities tried to require. A memoir preserves what a person later chose to recount. A photograph captures a view, but it may leave the teacher, the budget, or the decision outside the frame. Reading these sources together helps us make claims that the evidence can support.

No one has to become a famous leader or an exceptional scholar to deserve an education. The achievements in these pages matter because they reveal people thinking, creating, and acting under conditions they did not choose. Human dignity is where our study begins.

As you read, keep returning to one question: What would equal education require in the lives of the students who had to attend these schools? The answer takes us beyond a court date and into the work of building, teaching, listening, and following through.

## Chapter 1 Learning Before Permission

**Guiding Question:** What does restricting education reveal about those who impose the restriction?

In 1831, Omar Ibn Said wrote an account of his life in Arabic while enslaved in the United States. He described the teachers with whom he had studied in West Africa and reported twenty-five years of study before his capture. His learning had a history before the people who enslaved him tried to claim control over his life. [3]

That manuscript changes where we begin. If we start the history of Black education only when someone in America offers an enslaved person a lesson, we miss knowledge that already existed. Ibn Said had been a student before his captivity. He brought a language, a religious tradition, and the ability to write about his life.

His account also prevents an easy ending. Scholarship did not make him safe from capture or guarantee his freedom. Knowledge gave him a way to record his experience; the institution of slavery still constrained his life. We should honor the manuscript without pretending that learning by itself could defeat every form of power.

## **A History Larger Than One School**

Other surviving manuscripts make African learning visible. The Library of Congress has exhibited an eighteenth-century arithmetic commentary used by students in Timbuktu and North Africa. Its explanations and examples addressed addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. These are records of people studying and teaching, rather than waiting for education to arrive from somewhere else. [4]

Timbuktu represents a particular scholarly tradition. It cannot stand for every African community, and we should not assume that Ibn Said studied there. Africa contains many regions, languages, and histories. Careful study makes room for those differences.

Formal writing is also only one way to preserve knowledge. A person can teach a language, demonstrate a skill, remember a route, or explain a family practice without putting it on a printed page. Consider something you learned by watching another person do it. The lesson was real even if nobody recorded a grade.

For this book, three words need separate meanings. Learning is the process of developing knowledge or skills. Literacy means the ability to read and write; it can also mean understanding and using specific kinds of information. Schooling is organized instruction through a school or another educational institution. A person can learn outside school, and a skilled person can be denied the opportunity to become literate.

Those distinctions matter when we read about people under slavery. A record that says someone could not read describes one literacy skill, not everything the person understood. We still have to ask what opportunities the person had, which opportunities were withheld, and what knowledge the record leaves out.

## **What the Restrictions Reveal**

Slavery placed human beings under other people's control. Restrictions on learning helped maintain that control, but the rules were not identical everywhere. We need to name the place, the period, and the conduct a law prohibited before making a claim about it.

In 1830, North Carolina passed an act against teaching enslaved people to read or write, with an exception for the use of figures. Its opening statement connected literacy with dissatisfaction and rebellion. The law imposed penalties on people who taught. It shows that lawmakers feared what enslaved people might understand, communicate, and question. [5]

The exception is worth noticing. The act did not prohibit every possible use of numbers, and its wording did not cover every Black learner. Its target was instruction of enslaved people. Calling it a ban on all education for all Black people would erase the details that make the law useful evidence.

The absence of a statute did not necessarily make learning safe. In an essay prepared for the National Park Service, historian Cheryl Janifer LaRoche explains that Maryland had no comparable anti-literacy law, while enslavers still suppressed education through custom and violent punishment. Control could operate through a person's power over another person's daily life as well as through a written rule. [6]

A restriction is evidence about those who imposed it. It does not establish that the people being restricted lacked the capacity to learn. When we confuse denied opportunity with limited ability, we repeat the assumption that the restriction helped create.

## **A Learner Who Kept Looking**

Frederick Douglass described that struggle in his 1845 autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. While he was enslaved in Baltimore, Sophia Auld began teaching him to read. Her husband, Hugh Auld, objected, and the instruction stopped. Douglass recalled that Sophia later opposed his learning from others as well. [7]

He did not accept the end of those lessons as the end of his education. In his account, he described turning boys he met in the neighborhood into teachers. He carried a book when he went on errands and found chances for a lesson. He also

carried bread, which he gave to boys who had less food; they helped him learn to read. [7]

This was an exchange between children whose lives were unequal. Douglass could have bread and still be enslaved. The boys could need food and still possess a freedom denied to him. Paying attention to both conditions helps us avoid turning the episode into a simple story about who had everything and who had nothing.

The account makes Douglass's choices visible. He watched for opportunities, built relationships, and practiced. It also shows how much work a child had to do to get lessons that others could receive more openly. His determination deserves recognition. The barriers do not deserve credit for it.

A common way to tell this story is to focus on one remarkable learner who succeeded. That is part of the history, but it can hide the people who helped and the people whose efforts left fewer written records. Douglass's account lets us see assistance as well as individual persistence.

An account describes selected parts of the past. He published the Narrative years after the childhood events he described. His words give us evidence of his experience and of how he wanted readers to understand slavery. They do not let us reconstruct every lesson or every boy's thoughts.

## **The Schoolroom in a Kitchen**

Susie King Taylor's 1902 memoir preserves another network of learning. Looking back on her childhood in Savannah, Georgia, she recalled that her grandmother sent her and her brother to learn from Mrs. Woodhouse, a free Black woman. The children carried books wrapped in paper so police officers or white observers would not see them. They entered the yard one at a time, arriving at about nine in the morning. A kitchen served as the classroom. [8]

Taylor remembered Mrs. Woodhouse teaching with her daughter, Mary Jane, and described about twenty-five or thirty pupils. This was an organized effort involving a grandmother, teachers, and children. The concealment of the books tells us something about the danger. The schoolroom tells us something about the community's response. [8]

A kitchen is a place where many kinds of work can happen. In this account, it also became a schoolroom. That does not mean children should have had to rely on a

hidden classroom. It means a community found a way to teach while fuller, safer opportunities were being denied.

## **Knowledge Shared With Others**

Douglass's later autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, published in 1855, adds a further part of his educational life. In its eighteenth chapter, he recalled organizing a Sabbath school, with lessons on Sundays, for other enslaved learners. At one point he taught more than forty pupils. A free Black man allowed him to use a room in his house, taking a risk by making space for the lessons. [9]

Douglass withheld that man's name because naming him could still expose him to persecution. The missing name is therefore meaningful. It reflects an effort to protect someone who had helped, rather than proof that nobody helped.

The pupils obtained spelling books and met to learn. In this account, Douglass was a teacher within a group of learners, and the host provided a place where teaching could happen. Knowledge moved through relationships.

The two Douglass books are separate sources, published ten years apart. We can read them together, but we should say which account we are using for each detail. This chapter uses the 1845 Narrative for the childhood reading exchanges and the 1855 book for the Sabbath-school account. Keeping sources attached to claims helps us use a famous person's words carefully.

His satisfaction in teaching is part of the story too. Learning under oppression involved danger, but it also involved curiosity, companionship, and the pleasure of understanding something new. People in these histories had intellectual lives, not only hardships.

## **What Came Before the New Schools**

By now, the starting point should look different. Ibn Said's manuscript shows learning that preceded capture. Douglass's accounts show a learner becoming a teacher. Taylor's memoir preserves a Black family and teaching network. Their experiences were different, and none of them can represent every Black person's life.

Together, these sources help us ask better questions. Instead of assuming there was no education because there was no open schoolhouse, we can look for who taught,

where people met, and how they found materials. Instead of treating a ban as a description of ability, we can examine the power it was designed to protect.

We must also resist making success the condition for respect. The person whose lessons were interrupted, whose book was taken, or whose name was never recorded deserved the same opportunity to learn as a person who left a celebrated autobiography. A history built only around exceptional achievement would miss that claim.

The demand for schools after emancipation, or freedom from enslavement, grew from people who already understood the value of learning and had already found ways to teach. The next chapter follows what happened when families and educators sought rooms, buildings, paid teachers, and a public commitment to schooling. We will ask who did the work, who paid, and who was expected to wait.

A schoolhouse would create new possibilities. The people who wanted it were already thinkers.

## **Reflection Questions**

1. How does Ibn Said's account change a history that begins with Black people receiving education in America? Identify one supported fact and one assumption the fact challenges.
2. Compare North Carolina's 1830 act with LaRoche's account of Maryland. What could restrict learning even where a comparable statute did not exist?
3. In Taylor's account, identify three people or groups who helped make lessons possible. What does each contribute to the story?
4. Why might a historian need to use more than one source to describe a person's education? Explain with one example from this chapter.

## **Read a Law Closely**

*“the use of figures excepted”*

This phrase comes from North Carolina's 1830 act restricting instruction of enslaved people. Here, figures refers to numbers. Read the act's opening statement and first section through Source Note 5 before answering the questions. [5]

1. What kind of instruction does this exception leave outside the ban?

2. Whose learning does the act restrict, and whom does it punish for teaching?
3. What does the law's stated fear of dissatisfaction and rebellion suggest about the lawmakers' purpose?
4. What can this law show about official policy? What other evidence would you need to learn how people taught, learned, or enforced the rule?

**Teacher Note** Discussion leaders can compare the memoir passages and Ibn Said's translated account with the law, asking students which details each source supplies and which questions it leaves open.

# Source Notes

## 1. The Moton student strike and Davis

National Park Service, “Davis v. County School Board,” particularly the sections on the April 23, 1951 strike and the NAACP lawsuit. Supports the school conditions, Barbara Johns's age, two-week strike, lawyers' names, and the shift from equal facilities to challenging segregation. The strike participants and the lawsuit's 117 student plaintiffs are different groups.

<https://www.nps.gov/brvb/learn/historyculture/virginia.htm>

## 2. The ruling and the Prince Edward school closures

Moton Museum, “The Moton Story,” the Walk-out Generation and Lock-out Generation sections. Supports the 1954 constitutional ruling, public-school closure from 1959 to 1964, and community educational responses. See Chapter 7 for the distinction between Brown's state cases and the separately decided District of Columbia companion case.

<https://motonmuseum.org/about/the-moton-story/>

## 3. Omar Ibn Said's education before captivity

Omar Ibn Said, autobiography, 1831, English translation reproduced by the National Humanities Center from the text published in *The American Historical Review* 30, no. 4 (July 1925), edited by John Franklin Jameson. See the translated account of his teachers and twenty-five years of study on PDF page 2. The manuscript was written in Arabic; the English wording is a translation.

<https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/community/text3/religionomaribnsaid.pdf>

## 4. An African mathematical manuscript

Library of Congress, Ancient Manuscripts from the Desert Libraries of Timbuktu, “Arithmetic Primer.” Describes an eighteenth-century commentary by Ahmad ibn Sulayman al-Rasmuki, its arithmetic examples, and its use by students in Timbuktu and North Africa. It does not establish where Ibn Said studied.

<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/mali/mali-exhibit.html#obj11>

## 5. North Carolina's 1830 act

North Carolina General Assembly, 1830 act restricting the teaching of enslaved people to read or write, transcribed in ANCHOR by the Government and Heritage Library. Read the preamble and the first section, including the exception for figures. The statute is the primary source; the surrounding modern explanation is separate.

<https://www.ncanchor.org/anchor/primary-source-bill-prevent>

## **6. Maryland and imposed restrictions on literacy**

Cheryl Janifer LaRoche, “Essay for Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Monument,” section “Sharing Knowledge,” printed page 6, PDF page 7. This is a historian's interpretation, which distinguishes lack of opportunity from inability and discusses restriction through punishment and custom in Maryland.

<https://www.nps.gov/hatu/learn/historyculture/upload/tubmanreport-laroche.pdf>

## **7. Douglass as a learner**

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), chapters VI–VII. The original public-domain passages reproduced by OpenStax support Sophia and Hugh Auld's roles, the neighborhood lessons, and the bread exchanges. The modern OpenStax annotations are not part of Douglass's text.

<https://openstax.org/books/writing-guide/pages/3-4-annotated-sample-reading-from-narrative-of-the-life-of-frederick-douglass-by-frederick-douglass>

## **8. Taylor's childhood schooling**

Susie King Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp* (1902), pages 5–6, excerpt reproduced in the Library of Congress teaching article “Education in Enslaved Communities,” August 16, 2022. The passage is Taylor's retrospective account of her grandmother, Mrs. Woodhouse, Mary Jane, concealed books, pupils, and the kitchen schoolroom.

<https://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2022/08/education-in-enslaved-communities/>

## **9. Douglass as a teacher**

Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), chapter XVIII, pages 204–207, reproduced by Yale Law School's Avalon Project. Supports the Sabbath school, books, free Black host, more than forty learners at one point, and Douglass's reason for withholding the host's name.

[https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th\\_century/douglas01.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/douglas01.asp)

## **10. The community and schools at Tolson's Chapel**

National Park Service, “African Americans and Education During Reconstruction: The Tolson's Chapel Schools,” updated August 8, 2023. Supports Maryland's 1864 abolition, chapel construction in 1866, Johnson's April 1868 assignment and school name, local room and board, liquid-slate walls, Ferguson's autumn 1869 report of twenty-six men ready for winter instruction, and the later public school's segregation. Construction and school use are distinct events; reported interest is not enrollment.

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/african-americans-and-education-during-reconstruction-the-tolson-s-chapel-schools.htm>