

THE SHAPING OF ALABAMA'S  
EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

*Localism, Community and Domain as  
Persistent Influences on the Development  
of Alabama's Public Schools, 1865-1915*

by

EDITH ZIEGLER

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# Abstract

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In the period between the end of the American Civil War in 1865 and 1915 – the year when a number of educational reform bills were enacted by its state legislature - Alabama developed the structure for a modern educational system. This included graded “elementary” schools, county high schools, a tertiary sector of normal schools, agricultural colleges and polytechnic institutes, and a state university supported with public funds. This was a signal achievement for a great many educationists, elected office-holders, politicians, professional organisations and for other activists committed to modernising reform. Yet the progress was insufficient. Elementary schools were frequently staffed with poorly trained teachers who gave lessons in schoolhouses of dubious quality lacking adequate equipment. Attendance was not yet compulsory, the state’s rate of illiteracy was a matter of shame, and there were huge inequities in the respective provisions for black and white students. In a 1912 national survey of educational efficiency, Alabama’s “general rank” was at the very bottom.

The history of public education in Alabama in the period covered by this thesis has usually been written as a narrative of frustratingly slow but progressive development in which some determined men and women maintained their resolve to achieve an effective schooling system and to rid Alabama of its negative educational reputation. Over time these modernising reformers had some success though they had to fight against general legislative disinclination to increase educational funding and constitutional constraints on taxation. But, in this predominantly rural state, there was also a countervailing and valid cultural aspect to the rate and nature of reform which has not been adequately explored.

This thesis will show that the cultural traditions of rural localism, including self-reliance, autonomous community decision-making, and a cluster of ideas about the purpose of the school and the content of the curriculum, had a pertinacity and pervasiveness that made them significant factors in the way in which Alabama’s public schooling system was shaped. These factors influenced the pace of the development and expansion of the system as well. Those intent on modernising reform (even those armed with the authority of the state) were bound to respect and engage these traditions if they wished to succeed. Where they did so, the reformers had their greatest success. Hence cultural localism, rather than just being an irritating retardant to modernisation, was part of an evolving cultural dialectic and helped to set the terms of discourse within the educational polity and to shape reform agendas. Black localism was a projection of racial pride and the educational experience of Alabama’s black citizens offers a counterpoint for the topic.

# Certification

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I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

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Edith Ziegler

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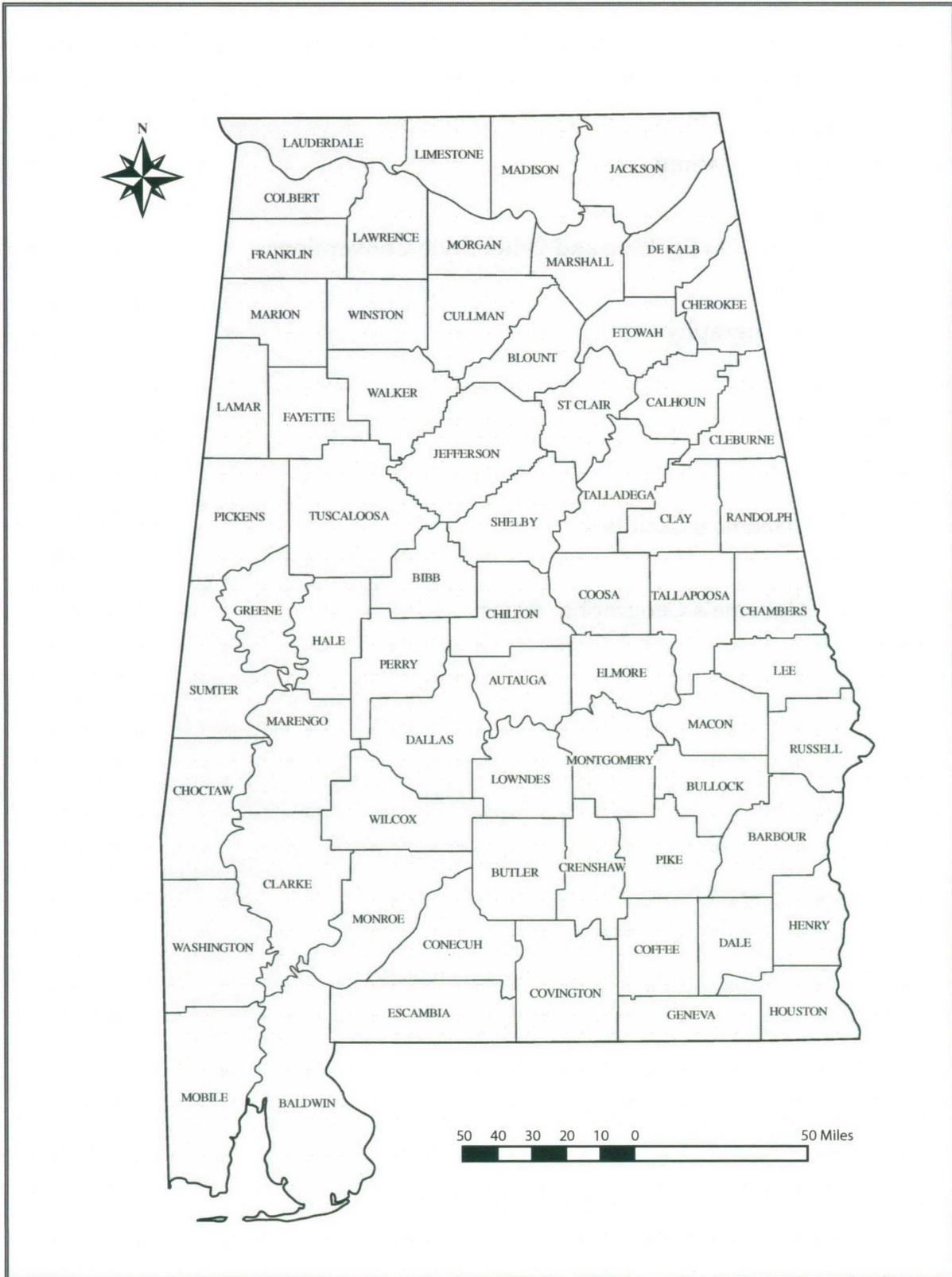
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*Alabama Counties*

Map produced by Dept. of Geography, College of Arts and Sciences, University of Alabama  
 Downloaded from <http://alabamamaps.ua.edu/contemporarymaps/alabama/basemaps>.