"Recruited to Teach the Indians": An African American Genealogy of Navajo Nation Boarding Schools

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This article is a personal and intellectual history of colonial education in the United States. The author—an African American from Atlanta, Georgia—taught elementary school in the Navajo Nation from 2005 to 2007. He was not, however, the first person of African descent to teach on the reservation. Using genealogy as method, the article demonstrates how Indigenous land, Black labor, and racialized education intersected across six generations, culminating in an earlier migration to Navajoland, when hundreds of African American educators staffed Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding and day schools after Brown v. Board of Education ended de jure segregated schools across the U.S. South.

VACANT BUILDINGS WITH SUN-BLEACHED advertisements for 25-cent coffee hint at a heyday when Thoreau, New Mexico, once boasted a hotel, a movie theater, and two saloons. Today most travelers zoom past on I-40. A recent appraisal observed that “the community seems to exist almost exclusively for the schools situated there” (Linford, 2011, p. 266). According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Thoreau schools serve roughly 770 children who reside in town and the surrounding Navajo reservation. Over 85% of the population is Diné (https://factfinder.census.gov/). Most teachers are not.

I taught at Thoreau Elementary from 2005 to 2007. Like many newcomers, I had moved to Thoreau as an employee of Gallup-McKinley County Schools. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) school in Thoreau—Dlo’ay azhi Boarding School—shuttered in 2003. But that “monument to the history of colonial cruelty and dispossession,” per Brenda Child’s text reprinted in this special issue, loomed over students such as 10-year-old Sophie Begaye, who had attended six different schools by the time she entered my fourth-grade classroom.¹ Tall for her age,
sullen, and older than most in our class, she stood out in an otherwise sunny classroom. For months, I did not think she could smile. I eventually discovered why. Sophie hated school because she felt unloved and unsuccessful. Patsy Begaye, her mother, once loathed school too. Patsy had attended the federal boarding school in Tohatchi. The education she received there not only robbed her of fluency in the Diné language, it imparted only the barest English literacy. Patsy wanted more for Sophie. “This year,” she wrote, “I would [like] my child to learn more about math, reading, history” (personal communication, September 2006).

When asked why, as an African American, I left my home in Atlanta to teach on an Indian reservation, I sometimes replied that teaching ran in the family. For thirty years my maternal grandmother, Margery Price Guilford, taught U.S. history to segregated black students at Central High School in Mobile, Alabama. She had only known life under Jim Crow, but nonetheless prepared a generation of pupils to imagine its demise. I was the third generation in my family to earn a college degree, while Navajo people my parents’ age and younger had been forced into schools that harkened back to the “before and after” photographs from the infamous Carlisle Indian Industrial School. American Indians, I believed, needed the kind of education that had benefited my people.

That was the simple answer. Browsing the shelves of our elementary school library I encountered a text that complicated my understanding of how I came to teach in Thoreau. Published the year I was born, in 1982, *Thoreau: Where the Trails Cross* contained interviews with several locals, including Harriet Taylor, who had taught at Dlo’ay azhi Boarding School for 20-plus years. Her words altered the direction of my life: “Teachers were very hard to get. It was during the 1950’s that many of the black teachers from the South were recruited to teach the Indians. At one time, 62% of the Bureau of Indian Affairs teachers on the Navajo Reservation were black” (Trout, 1982, pp. 39–40). The statement floored me. Could it be true that the Navajo Nation had such a preponderance of black educators? Present demographics contained clues. While the groundskeepers, teaching assistants, receptionist, and community liaison at Thoreau Elementary were Diné, our faculty of nineteen included only one Navajo teacher—Verlee Lytle. Along with Renee Aarons-Cooke, I was one of two African American teachers at our school. The rest were Anglo or Hispanic. In 2005, African American teachers at Thoreau Elementary outnumbered Diné teachers two to one.
Gnothi Seauton

I left Thoreau in 2007 to pursue a PhD in African American Studies and American Studies. The past pulled me back to the Navajo Nation, this time as a historian seeking traces of my African American predecessors. Following Child’s call to “narrate another sort of boarding school story, an alternative to what has become a vastly oversimplified history,” this article adopts a genealogical approach. As Paige Raibmon (2008) has argued, “reflecting on the work that settler practice did, and more specifically on many scholars’ own lack of attention to that work, tells us something about the genealogical ties that bind us as scholars to the colonial past we narrate. Our individual choices as scholars do not align by accident” (p. 60). I therefore relate histories of colonization and education through my maternal ancestral line in Alabama. From enslavement to Jim Crow to Black migrants on the Navajo Nation after World War II to my ongoing connections with Sophie Begaye and federal boarding schools, this personal genealogy chronicles the development of a racially differentiated model of colonial education that continues to shape settler and Indigenous societies in the United States.

Charting my family history back six generations leads to Wilcox, Alabama, and the estate files of William and Martha Hobbs, née Holley. A document tucked into their file over 150 years ago captured William and Martha’s aspirations. On the back of an invoice, an unsteady hand had inscribed the ancient Greek words Gnothi seauton—“know thyself.” The pupil rewrote the words again in delicate cursive, then practiced a couplet from John Dryden’s 1675 drama, Aureng-zebe: “Strange cozenage! none would live past years e’er again, Yet all hope pleasure in what yet remain” (Loose Estate Case Files, ca. 1832). Like most parents, William and Martha shared the hope that the future would bring better years than those past. Martha had been illiterate; William likely possessed the numeracy and literacy to balance a ledger. Yet they bequeathed a liberal arts education to their children, knowledge that unlocked pathways toward greater social mobility and, perhaps, personal enlightenment. As the following section demonstrates, Martha and William strategically exploited colonial resources—Indigenous land, enslaved Black labor, and elite education—to secure that brighter future.

A Good English and Classical Education

Martha Holley and William Hobbs were born on the eve of revolution in North Carolina and Georgia, and married in 1795 (Georgia, Compiled
Marriages, 1754–1850). They descended from propertied farmers who were too poor to own slaves. William’s farm outside Augusta was worth $122—valued mostly for its acreage in yellow pine (Georgia, Property Tax Digests, 1793–1892). Then, in August 1814, news arrived that Andrew Jackson had wrested nearly 22 million acres from the Muskogee Nation after the Creek War. Reports described a vast frontier of inexhaustible fecundity. The first townships opened for auction three years later (Bridges, 2016, p. 55; Rohrbough, 1968, pp. 115–118). The Hobbses did not bid for a patent at the federal land office. Instead, they trekked 400 miles west and squatted on un-surveyed Muskogee lands in Wilcox county.

Alabama historian Edwin C. Bridges (2016) observed that most settlers were “people who lived primarily by the work of their own hands.” “Few yeoman farmers,” he added, “owned slaves” (p. 58). That could not be said of Wilcox County, where over half of the 243 families who settled before 1820 claimed African Americans as property (Alabama State Census, 1920–1866). For William Hobbs, slavery fit hand in hand with squatting on federal land. His homestead would cultivate cotton, a commodity far more valuable than Georgia pine. Because the federal government would not survey and auction the land for several years, Hobbs could channel early profits into the liquid capital investment of slaves (Sellers, 1994, p. 1411). The census taker counted seven enslaved people at the Hobbs plantation in 1820. Slaves provided more than unfree labor—the plowing, planting, weeding, and picking that made his cotton plantation profitable. Hobbs counted on their reproductive capacity to increase his property in human children. Enslaved people, moreover, were fungible. As an advertisement for land along the Tombigbee River stated in 1819, “Cash or negroes will be received as payment” (“Notice 3,300 Acres,” p. 3).

Alongside cotton and chattel slavery, education was instrumental to colonizing Alabama. The emergent settler order, grounded in the “diffusion of knowledge and correct habits among the people,” required legislative support (Journal of the House of Representatives, p. 11–12). The General Assembly issued charters, land grants, and taxation exemptions to over 100 private academies and educational institutions before the Civil War (Weeks, 1915, pp. 16–25). White lawmakers believed that society was naturally hierarchical, which meant that knowledge, correct habits, and civility were limited commodities available to the few who could afford tuition (Bridges, 2016, p. 67). Control over who could be educated and to what degree reproduced a ruling elite.

Squatting, slavery, and state-supported education privileged the Hobbses. After nearly a decade squatting in Wilcox County, William
purchased the title to 275 acres adjacent to his homestead in 1826 for $343.75 (Bureau of Land Management, 1826). The U.S. government sold the ceded Muskogee lands for a fraction of what Hobbs invested in enslaved people. Jim, Betsy, Sam, Judy, Anderson, Old Sam, Tilly, Dinny, Freno/Jack, Martha, Sarah and Henry, and Alfred and his mother Lizzy could collectively be sold for at least $4,670—approximately $119,800 today (Loose Estate Case Files, ca. 1832).

On May 20, 1829, an ailing William Hobbs dispensed his possessions to his heirs. His eldest sons, Lewis and William, Jr., received their portions in acreage. To daughter Jane he bequeathed Lizzy and Alfred, along with Lizzy’s “future increase excepting the children she already has not bequeathed.” To Martha, he willed “four certain negroes—namely Freno, Old Sam, Dinny and Tilly—also two horses—Fanny and Soppy also twenty five head of cattle, her choice of my stock.” Finally, he provided specific instructions to his wife Martha regarding her inheritance. “It is my will and desire that my son Eli shall receive a good English and Classical Education,” an education financed “by the proceeds of the crops raised by Mrs. Hobbs with the negroes, horses and land left her after my death” (W. Hobbs, pp. 107–109). Land, labor, and education—settler colonialism as inheritance.

Eli Holley Hobbs attended an academy for young women and men chartered in 1828, the Wilcox Society for the Encouragement of Literature, and studied under Peter Maher, an Irish graduate of Dublin University who garnered “the reputation of being a good classical scholar” (Weeks, 1915, p. 19; Loose Estate Case Files; An Act to Incorporate the Trustees of the Wilcox Society, 1828, p. 43; Smith, 1889, p. 265.). While Eli practiced Latin and Greek, the Alabama General Assembly passed legislation to protect settler society by restricting access to knowledge. The state outlawed teaching literacy to any African American, enslaved or free. Distributing “seditious writings” on abolition became a capital offense (Sellers, 1994, 367–368).

The Hobbs heirs, however, learned that enslaved people were a volatile and violent inheritance. In 1833, Martha Holley Hobbs was found dead. A man she enslaved—Freno or, as he preferred, Jack—was charged with capital murder. He pled not guilty. A jury of twenty-four White men declared otherwise and condemned Jack to the gallows (Sellers, 1994, 245). One wonders if master Eli caught the irony that freno, in Latin, means “to furnish with a bridle, curb” (Lewis, 1915, p. 338). Had Jack killed the woman who kept him and his fellows in bondage? Perhaps he knew himself to be fully human, shirked the bridle, and refused to live any longer as livestock or chattel.
Ancient, Dusky Rivers

The lives of Louisa Teresa Turner and Thomas Hobbs, my enslaved ancestors, ran in counterpoint to the white Hobbs family. Louisa was born to Charity Hunter and Robert Turner around 1856, somewhere along the Tombigbee River in Choctaw County, Alabama (Alabama Deaths and Burials Index, 1928; U.S. Federal Census, 1870, p. 16). What might she have known of poet Langston Hughes’s “ancient, dusky rivers” (1994)? Did distant rivers—the Volta, the Niger, or the Senegal—haunt her dreams? Did her mother’s mother ever speak of the Savannah, the Chattahoochee, or the Alabama, rivers crossed while marching from Virginia chained neck-to-neck in a slave coffle (Baptist, 2014, pp. 25–27; Bridges, 2016, p. 58)? Had the Tombigbee whispered of fugitive freedom in Mobile?

Louisa was still a child when the Civil War reached the Tombigbee and the cotton fields burned (Fleming, 1905, p. 265). Freedom first actualized as movement. “The advance of the army from Mobile upward, was the occasion for the flight of nearly all the colored people from their homes” (“The Destitution of the Freedmen,” 1865, p. 5). Charity and Louisa dared not leave. Local white supremacists terrorized the emancipated, demanding that “no negro shall live in the county unless he remains with his master and is as obedient as heretofore.” According to a local minister, “the roads in Choctaw county stunk with the dead bodies of servants who fled their masters” (Fleming, 1906, p. 69).

Thomas Hobbs could also speak of rivers. He was born around 1849 at Lower Peach Tree, where Lewis Hobbs—William and Martha’s eldest son—had served as postmaster (Record of Appointment of Postmasters, 1848; U.S. Federal Census, 1880, p. 24). Whatever his life before 1865, Thomas chose freedom on the river. He became a steamboat man and moved to Mobile, Alabama. When he deposited his earnings in the Freedman’s Bank on November 4, 1871, the bank teller noted that his parents, “Lewis Hobbs and Mary Hobbs,” were both deceased and recorded his complexion as “white” (Hobbs, Thomas, 1871).

Rivers brought Thomas and Louisa together. The couple likely met during one of Thomas’s steamboat voyages. Louisa gave birth to their first child, Woodie Clay Hobbs, in 1876 (Illinois, Deaths and Stillbirths Index, 1916–1947). They moved to Mobile, where Woodie could attain the formal education that his parents never received in the Black Belt (Green, 2016, p. 37).

Louisa and Thomas raised their children at a crucial moment prior to Jim Crow’s ascension when two divergent educational models converged in Alabama. One stream, the American Missionary Association
model of liberal education, sprang from New England abolitionism and offered African Americans the English and classical education of the White elite. The other model, originating in Hawai‘i at a boarding school for Kanaka Maoli youth, offered manual labor training which became famous at the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia (Anderson, 1988; Watkins, 2001). These two models of education for African Americans would compete for hegemony over the South.

**Emancipation and Education**

The social order that enriched the White Hobbses and other settler-slaveholders collapsed after the Civil War. In 1860, Mary Ann Eleanor Hobbs was the 47-year old widow of Lewis, the oldest Hobbs heir. Her assets included $1,500 in real estate and $11,300 in personal property, including nine slaves, valued at roughly $390,700 today (U.S. Federal Census, 1860, p. 31; U.S. Federal Census—Slave Schedules, 1860, p. 82). Emancipation left her in financial ruins. It also engendered an ideological cataclysm. Pro-slavery apologists had insisted for decades that, without enslavement, “there can be no accumulation of property, no providence for the future, no tastes for comfort or elegancies, which are the characteristics and essentials of civilization” (Harper, 1853, p.4). Even sympathetic White liberals wondered how civil society in Alabama would possibly cope with the sudden incorporation of over 435,000 uneducated and unpropertied Freedmen.

Downriver in Mobile, however, Black people rejoiced and sang their reply on April 23, 1865—“Free workmen in the cotton field, And in the sugar cane; Free children in the common school, With nevermore a chain” (Green, 2016, p. 36). African Americans entered this era determined to advocate for themselves as fellow citizens, not serfs. In November 1865, fifty-six Freedmen from communities across Alabama convened in Mobile to discuss what they might accomplish as a people. The delegates offered reassurances to White Alabamans that labor “will continue to be our purpose” and insisted, “we regard the education of our children and youths as vital to the preservation of our liberties” (“Evolution of Talladega,” 1920, p. 74).

Although most White Americans long remained ambivalent about education for free Black people, during Reconstruction national policymakers, missionaries, philanthropists, and social reformers agreed that education presented the most favorable means to resolve the tension between Black freedom and White supremacy—a quandary White people called “The Negro Problem” (Anderson, 1988). Locally, White support
for public education in Black Belt counties was tepid and segregated from day one.

Back in Choctaw County, Louisa and her mother Charity had worked in cotton fields so her younger siblings could study with a black Virginian named Mr. Fisher who, like his white peers, taught in schoolhouses the county superintendent described as “miserable, poor log huts” (Report of Joseph Hodgson, 1871, p. 46; U.S. United States Federal Census, 1870, p. 16). In 1874, the superintendent reported that “white people are generally opposed to the public school system;” he was frustrated by the difficulty in hiring qualified teachers, “especially in the case of colored schools” (Report of Joseph H. Speed, 1874 p. 76). The solution seemed self-evident to African Americans: the state should train black teachers. Yet even in Mobile, which had a nascent black public-school system as early as 1865, white authorities were reluctant to hire African American teachers.

During Reconstruction the American Missionary Association (AMA) staffed Freedmen’s Bureau schools with white Oberlin and Yale graduates. But as African Americans initiated independent common schools without state support and northern white teachers faced retribution from southern vigilante terrorists, it became “more and more evident that this people must become largely their own educators” (American Missionary Association, 1891, p. 25). In response, the AMA engineered a massive African American teaching corps, planting normal and high schools in southern cities, which in turn supplied students to the colleges and universities that the AMA founded in eight southern states. Most black Alabamans were agriculturalists, which meant that AMA colleges incorporated manual training into the curriculum from the start. At Talladega College, chartered in Alabama in 1867, men received gendered instruction in farming, carpentry, and iron-working, while women received lessons in “house-keeping, laundry-work, and nursing” (American Missionary Association, 1891, p. 31). Dubbed “the first boarding school for the Freedmen of the State,” Talladega housed students above the sixth grade to better serve a rural state where difficult transportation made day schooling impractical. Talladega required boarding pupils to work an hour every day on “hand industry.”

A sharp distinction existed between compulsory labor at AMA residential schools and the industrial boarding school paradigm that emerged in the 1880s, most infamously at Carlisle Indian Industrial School. At Talladega, labor added practical value to an academically-oriented liberal arts education for adolescents and young adults. Carlisle, in contrast, stemmed from another pedagogical model, one that harnessed

Hampton received support from the AMA, but the institution reflected the ideology of its founder, Samuel Chapman Armstrong. Born in the Kingdom of Hawai‘i in 1839, Armstrong attended Williams College in New England and gained U.S. citizenship commanding Black troops during the Civil War. When he established Hampton in 1868, the task of educating a newly enfranchised, illiterate, and free population numbering in the millions had almost no precedent in the United States (Engs, 1999). The precedent existed in Hawai‘i. Armstrong had witnessed an explosion of sugar cultivation on the islands. Unlike sugar plantations in the Caribbean, many American settlers in Hawai‘i were New England Congregationalists who frequently opposed slavery on religious grounds. The Hawaiian government, more importantly, obliged haole planters to pay its subjects satisfactory wages (Takaki, 1983, pp. 3–12). To provide the growing plantation economy with a disciplined laboring class, White missionaries developed a pedagogy at Hilo Boarding School that trained Native Hawaiian teachers to develop ideal subjects through surveillance, routinization, and manual labor, or what Armstrong later called “an equilibrium of mental, moral, and industrial force” (Armstrong, 1884, p. 213; Beyer 2007). He believed this Hawaiian paradigm, applied to the U.S. South, would not inspire overly lofty ambitions Hampton graduates “out of sympathy with those they must teach and lead” (Engs, 1999, p. 116).

Armstrong wrested Hampton from AMA influence in 1872, but independence demanded new revenue streams. He looked to Indian Country. Armstrong wrote to his wife, “I am on the track of some more money—it will be necessary to prove that the darky is an Indian in order to get it: but I can easily do that you know” (Engs, 1999, p. 114). Federal money arrived in 1877, along with Richard Henry Pratt and seventeen American Indian war captives. American Indians continued to study at Hampton after Pratt established Carlisle, and Armstrong asked Booker
T. Washington—an 1875 Hampton graduate—to return and supervise them (Lindsey, 1994). As historian James D. Anderson (1988) has argued, “Washington kept Tuskegee in line with the educational form and content he had received at Hampton” (p. 34). The same could be argued of Pratt and Carlisle, which did not to train students to rejoin segregated communities as teachers, but rather harnessed Hampton’s “form and content” in an attempt to annihilate a people (Fear-Segal, 2007, pp. 170–176). Hampton, Tuskegee, and Carlisle shared a common goal: engineering a laboring caste to serve settler society.

The Education of Woodie Hobbs

Tuskegee at first seemed distant from Thomas and Louisa Hobbs’s home in Mobile. In 1885, they lived 10 minutes from Emerson Normal Institute, a private AMA school offering instruction from primary through grammar school and normal training. Louisa worked from home as a laundress, but political pressure from the AMA and black Mobilians for taxpayer-funded educational opportunities for African Americans meant she could pocket her earnings and send the children to Broad Street Academy, Mobile’s first public high school for African Americans (Green, 2016, pp. 89–104; Sherer, 1970, pp. 271–281). The eldest Hobbs child, Woodie, continued his education at Talladega College in 1895. Enrolling in the Normal Course, Woodie attended weekly agriculture and wood-turning courses, but his curriculum also included lessons in ancient history, algebra, astronomy, and ethics (Catalogue, 1904, p. 19, p. 57). Booker T. Washington’s 1895 Atlanta Compromise speech soon shifted the educational landscape, as he won support from white northern industrialists eager for productive black laborers and from white segregationists insistent upon black political, civil, and social subordination (Anderson, 1988, 71–73). A year later, the U.S. Supreme Court enshrined the “separate but equal” doctrine into Constitutional law. By the time Woodie passed the state teacher’s exam, in 1900, a social order constraining black access to higher education seemed ascendant (Those who are to teach, 1900, p. 8).

In November 1901, Alabama approved a white supremacist constitution that disenfranchised African American citizens. Six months later, eleven white U.S. congressmen visited Broad Street Academy to study the Negro Problem. Principal William Caldwell informed the men, “Thus far, the educational work in this academy has been developed along the lines of intellectual and moral training,” pausing, “but I have reason to believe that as soon as the public funds will justify the expenditure,
manual and industrial training will be added.” The Academy band played “Dixie.” Then, Wisconsin Republican Samuel Stebbins Barney crowed to the students and Black faculty: “Those who become good cooks, good nurses, carpenters and blacksmiths will be much better off than if they become poor lawyers, doctors and preachers. I was told that no graduate of Tuskegee has ever been sent to state prison nor to congress” (Thompson party in Mobile, 1902, p. 8). Thunderclouds darkened the classroom windows.

Of Their Own Accord, They Move On

“Jim Crow laws,” wrote historian C. Vann Woodward (1974), “put the authority of the state or city in the voice of the street car conductor, the railway brakeman, the bus driver, the theater usher, and also into the voice of the hoodlum of public parks and play grounds” (p.107). Jim Crow re-instituted a colonial order at the local level that paralleled the colonial regime in American Indian reservations at the federal level, which invested state authority into the voice of the BIA superintendent, the Indian Health Service doctor, the boarding school teacher, the state social worker, and even into gawking tourists or White belligerents in towns bordering the reservation. African American educators, fleeing one colonial system, would eventually find themselves empowered in the other.

Between 1915 and 1940, nearly 1.5 million Black refugees answered Jim Crow with exodus (Wilkerson, 2010). Louisa and Thomas watched as their children fled Mobile. Woodie left first, enrolling in dentistry school at the University of Illinois rather than teach in Alabama schools. He returned home and opened a practice on Dauphin Street (World War I Draft Registration Card, 1918). Then he and his sister Mary relocated to Chicago. Louie and Ruby found new homes in Columbus, Ohio. By 1928, only the two youngest siblings, Cora and Lula, remained (Louisa Theresa Hobbs Will Records, 1928).

In Mobile, color, class, and property could buffer against institutionalized oppression. My grandmother, Margery Price, was born at 712 Elmira Street, where she lived with her parents James Price and Cora Hobbs and grandmother Louisa. James ran the grocery store he inherited from his father (U.S. Federal Census, 1900, p. 343B; U.S. Federal Census, 1910, p. 4A). Cora governed the house with Congregationalist efficiency. Both had high school degrees. The family owned a 1928 Ford and nearly 150 books. Margery, like her mother, attended Emerson through junior high and studied under Principal Caldwell’s supervision.
at the public high school (Margery Price, Dillard University student records, 1935–1939). Family and mentors assumed Margery would attend college and teach.

In autumn 1935, Margery joined the inaugural class at Dillard University, an AMA school in New Orleans, Louisiana. “At this university we shall train ‘the talented tenth’ not away from the people,” Dean Horace Mann Bond intoned, “but to have those sincere bonds of sympathy and concern for the welfare of the masses, which distinguish true leadership” (“Dillard to Point to Training,” 1935, p. 18). Majoring in history, Margery took one homemaking course. Otherwise her classes confronted the colonial and imperial power relations between Europeans and people of African descent, a process that meant unlearning White supremacy (Dillard University Bulletin, 1935). An elective with White anthropologist Edward H. Spicer historicized the concept of race (Officer, 1995, p. 331). As drama instructor Randolph Emmons (1938) joked, “I have heard frequently students coming from classes making such comments as follows: ‘The African tribes are not as dumb as we thought. Their communal system where everybody eats when there is anything to be had is much better than our capitalistic system where some eat and the others starve’” (p. 266).

The curriculum and ethos Margery gleaned at Dillard emerged from a three-decade long dialectic between the Hampton-Tuskegee Idea and African American socio-political ambitions, the latter exemplified through W. E. B. Du Bois’s consistent and vocal opposition to the former. During the 1920s, young Black women and men organized protests on college campuses across the South against rigid discipline, degraded academic instruction, and manual training. Their movement toppled college presidents and put trustees on notice that a new generation had arrived seeking education for leadership, not subservience (Wolters, 1975). When Margery’s younger sister Theda attended Tuskegee in 1939, the famed agricultural and industrial institute also boasted an accredited college department with an enrollment of 1,282 (“Tuskegee Trains for Living,” 1940, p. 258).

**Thomas Jesse Jones and the Colonial Industrial Education Model**

As African American students revolted against industrial education, one of its greatest advocates—the Welsh-born, Columbia educated sociologist Thomas Jesse Jones—updated the Hampton-Tuskegee Idea and expanded its reach to other colonial contexts. As the educational director
of the Phelps-Stokes Fund, a New York based philanthropy, Jones published four influential studies grounded in the premise that schools should adapt to meet what White policymakers believed to be true about Black and Indigenous peoples’ subpar mental capacities, cultural deficiencies, and socio-economic status. Doing so, he argued, would encourage greater self-sufficiency among the colonized and direct social change in consonance with prevailing authority. The philosophy, theorized at Hampton between 1902 and 1909 and canonized in *Negro Education* (1917), appealed to colonial officials in British Africa who wanted to keep Native Africans away from the liberal, universalistic education that heralded independence in India.

Jones’s two monumental surveys, *Education in Africa* (1922) and *Education in East Africa* (1925), guided the British toward a Hampton-influenced pedagogical model that reached millions of Indigenous peoples in Africa and Oceania. Back in the United States, he deployed insights from British Africa to reshape American Indian education policy along similar lines. He played a critical role in initiating and designing the study that culminated in Lewis Meriam’s 1928 report, *The Problem of Indian Administration*, and afterward orchestrated necessary changes in federal staffing and policy to implement the report’s recommendations (Johnson, 2016, pp. 173–260). His last major educational survey began in January 1939 in the Navajo Nation.

**The Hampton Model and the Navajo Nation**

As in previous surveys, Jones served as chairman of the Navajo inquiry. Rounding out the team were Harold B. Allen, former education director at the Near East Foundation, Ella Deloria, a Columbia University–trained Yankton Dakota anthropologist and educator, and South African educationist Charles Loram. Ella Deloria’s conversations with reservation residents revealed dissatisfaction with Indian New Deal reforms that claimed to make the curriculum more locally relevant. Many Diné believed that “Navajo life can be better taught by the Navajos.” Loram, meanwhile, blasted the “tremendous turnover” in Indian Service and staff who possessed neither the intellectual nor cultural background necessary for the job. “The personnel,” wrote Loram, “don’t ‘stack up’ with people found in the British Service.” The two streams of criticism converged on one solution: hire Navajo teachers (Johnson, 2016, pp. 248–252).

Since there were “practically no Navajo teachers” the survey team suggested that the Civil Service adjust the academic qualifications for
Indian personnel, allowing the BIA to select promising Navajo women and men from “the Government and mission Indian schools, give them an abbreviated course of training, to be supplemented by regular attendance at summer schools, and to begin to use them as teachers” (Jones, 1939, p. 51). This recommendation followed a playbook the AMA and Freedmen’s Bureau utilized for African Americans during the 1860s, which had antecedents in New England and Hawai‘i. By 1940, that model had yielded nearly 34,000 African Americans employed in education (U.S. Census, 1940). It had also influenced Navajo Tribal Council Chairman Jacob C. Morgan, a 1900 Hampton alumnus who taught at Pueblo Bonito Boarding School in Crownpoint, Navajo Nation (Gjeltema, 2004). Despite tactical differences with the BIA, Thomas Jesse Jones believed that a degree of assimilation was inevitable. “Of their own accord, they move on to seek the more advanced forms,” he wrote in The Navajo Indian Problem, “Minorities almost always seek the modes of the majorities. They fear all forms of segregation, for they know that segregation has usually been followed by discrimination” (Jones, 1939, p. 107). Jones understood history as teleological, a progressive march from primitivism toward civilization; therefore, appropriately trained Native teachers—whether African American, Bantu, or Diné—should lead the masses gradually and in harmony with traditional lifeways.

Contrary to Jones’s understanding, colonized peoples frequently made individual choices and formed collective movements in relation to a socio-economic matrix that unevenly distributes resources and power in favor of the colonial status quo. Diné continuance as a sovereign people required that Dinétah—their territorial homelands demarcated by the six sacred mountains—remain politically and geographically segregated within the United States. The BIA did not follow the suggested playbook because the United States had little incentive to develop self-sustaining Navajo schools, colleges, and universities analogous to those established for African Americans. The Diné, conversely, were reluctant to embrace the compulsory educational system their colonizers imposed.

The few Diné individuals who became educators at BIA schools thus overcame tremendous structural hurdles. Kenneth Benally, for example, entered the world on October 12, 1917, born for Táchii’nii and to Tábąąhá clans southwest of Shiprock, Navajo Nation. His parents, Virginia and Lee Tom, were rich in sheep, cattle, and social capital. A year older than Margery Price but racialized within distinct colonial contexts, Benally was the first in his family to enroll in the colonial school system. He was an exceptional student. Still, few presumed that he would
attend college or become a teacher (“Kenneth Benally Termed Exceptional,” 1966, p. 5). The Navajo Nation simply lacked the basic infrastructure to take either for granted. The three BIA high schools there during the 1930s offered vocational instruction akin to Hampton or Tuskegee during the 1890s (Jones, 1939, p. 63). In 1940, Benally graduated from the three-year program at Shiprock Agricultural High School without any normal or pedagogical training—one year after Margery Price left Dillard for a teaching job in Mobile. These racialized differences in African American and American Indian education would coalesce after Kenneth Benally went to war in Europe in 1942. He returned to the Navajo Nation seven years later with his wife Ielene Scott, an Anglo woman from Hobbs, New Mexico, who “wanted to teach Indian children” (“Ielene Scott Benally,” 2007, p. B6). Both spouses accepted positions at Toadlena Boarding School. Ielene received a regular teaching appointment even though she had not yet completed her college degree. Kenneth, fluent in Diné but lacking formal teaching credentials, served as interpreter for a BIA teaching staff that included three African American migrants: Ruth Higgins, Hayward Camper, and Juanita Bacote, the latter a Hampton alumna (Main, 1950).

**Negroes in Indian Service**

In 1951, *Ebony* magazine reported that “among 236,000 Indians who still live on 100 reservations are some 35 young Negro men and women, who are civil service workers in the field forces of the U.S. Indian Office. A total of 19 are employed as teachers”; 11 taught in the Navajo Nation (“Negroes in Indian Service,” p. 35). The threat of court-ordered desegregation had forced southern states to conform to the U.S. Supreme Court’s “separate but equal” standard, which gradually improved school facilities and resources. In April 1949, for example, Margery Price and 374 other black teachers in Mobile received raises after the school board unanimously voted to equalize salaries with whites (“Mobile Equalizes,” p. 11). Still, there were incentives for an early black vanguard to join the BIA. Teaching in Indian Service not only offered a higher salary than most southern states, it also presented an opportunity to escape the routine indignities of Jim Crow since the federal government had initiated non-discrimination and equal opportunity policies in Civil Service employment. Most black teachers, however, could still find work closer to home (Johnson, 2016, pp. 258–292). The calculus changed on March 17, 1954, when the Supreme Court announced that “Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.” The verdict sparked deep uncertainty and appre-

Displaced African American educators were considered a godsend by Navajo Area personnel officers struggling to staff a reservation school system that had rapidly expanded during the postwar Termination Era. In 1954, personnel officials collaborated with the Gallup, New Mexico, branch of the NAACP to recruit 75 African American educators to the Navajo Nation. By the mid-1960s the reservation employed fewer than 44 Diné teachers—including Kenneth Benally, who earned a degree in elementary education in 1960—and 78 American Indians from other tribal nations. The number of Black BIA employees in New Mexico and Arizona had increased to 209. Nearly 80% entered Indian Service through direct recruitment. The BIA capitalized on the fact that each year Black colleges and universities produced new educators who faced an increasingly inhospitable southern job market (Johnson, 2016, pp. 310–312, 339–340). As the BIA’s Navajo personnel office observed in a memorandum on its recruitment practices, “[a] factor of major importance is that school systems in some of these states [that recruiters visited] are peculiar in that minority groups are not employed as teachers in the majority of the public schools. Added to this situation is the fact that an unusually large percentage of individuals in these minority groups are oriented toward careers as teachers because opportunity, while restricted, is better in education than in the various other professional fields” (Hyland, 1961). Lenton Malry, an African American from Louisiana who taught in Kinlechee, Navajo Nation, put it this way: “Elementary Education was about the only thing you could study in those days. We were trying to become teachers and that’s what we were” (October 27, 2009, personal correspondence).

An American Colony

While de facto racial segregation in education has persisted into the 21st century, the demand for African American teachers has collapsed. My parents and mentors expected that I would attend college. No one presumed I would become a teacher.

The Bureau of Indian Education currently operates eight boarding schools in the Navajo Nation (https://bie.edu/schools/). Such schools
persist because they collapse distances on the vast, undeveloped reservation. Their persistence also collapses time, creating spaces in which multiple histories and temporalities accrue and overlap. As one observer told the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1975), “[T]he BIA is a 19th century colonial institution which, as structured, is wholly out of step with the requirements of a new era of self-determination” (p. 10). Published as The Navajo Nation: An American Colony, the report echoed an earlier recommendation from The Navajo Indian Problem. “Adherence to strict certification requirements in all classroom subjects on the reservation,” the 1975 commission argued, “has frustrated attempts to broaden curriculum to include study areas relevant to the Navajo way of life” (p. 75). Therefore, administrators should make allowances for Diné educators possessing “special skills” but lacking credentials. Still, the colonial structure did not bend.

When I joined Teach for America in 2005, I had no idea that two African Americans named Ruth Higgins Duncan and Clyde Duncan once taught at Dłóʼay azhi, the federal boarding school adjacent to Thoreau Elementary. The Duncans would probably not have understood BIA schools as a colonial venture. As leaders in black communities, displaced teachers carried ideals of social equality, self-determination, racial uplift, and collective protest with them to new homes on the reservation. They taught their students survival skills for a white-supremacist society (Johnson, 2016, pp. 398–403). Clyde Duncan organized the first Parent Teacher Association for Diné at Teec Nos Pos community school (Herrick, 1996, p. 49). Clyde explained their purpose at a NAACP fund-raising dinner in Gallup in 1972. “We have not accomplished everything in this great country yet,” he said, “and we are not as free as we would like to be” (“NAACP Aim Defined as Equality for All Colors,” 1972, p. 6).

Teach for America fashioned itself within this long struggle for freedom through education. The organization selected teachers based on our commitment to educational equity and faith that hard work could move mountains. It felt treacherous enacting our mission in Dinétah. From the AMA to Samuel Chapman Armstrong to Ruth and Clyde Duncan to TFA’s 50,000 alumni, the belief that education would uplift black and Indigenous peoples reflected an assimilationist impulse—a unidirectional and progressive movement from savagery to civility,
from ignorance to enlightenment, a movement to erase dangerous cultural differences, stratify populations, and smooth frictions inherent to capitalism and settler colonialism. After three months teaching in Thoreau, this nascent realization crystalized into words. “I am a 21st-century colonialist,” I wrote, “shaping young Navajos to work in the great White American world in the hope that they will be able to change society if they get access to power” (Johnson, 2005, p. 2). I, too, had been subject to a colonizing education that shaped my sentiments, ethics, aesthetics, and attachments in consonance with the dominant settler order. “My anger and frustration with my students for their apathy, laziness, and hopelessness,” I observed in May 2006, “has only been intensified by my own mirrored traits. I have been blind toward the similarities which we share and, as a result, I have lacked empathy” (Johnson, 2006, p. 8).

Back then, the fact that Sophie Begaye had attended six different schools before fourth grade seemed pathological. I know better now. According to Ella Deloria’s 1939 field work some Diné parents had integrated boarding schools for their children into seasonal migration practices (“Impressions from Talks,” 1939, p. 3). As one petition for a boarding school read, “We are not village Indians . . . We move from place to place depending upon the conditions for our sheep. At times we are two or three miles from the school house and at some times we are ten or more miles from the school house” (Members of Greasewood, AZ, Community, April 14, 1932, p. 53). Patsy and Sophie Begaye, in other words, moved in consonance with Diné history and lifeways. Like an arrhythmic heart, the pathology resided in a colonial school system that turned dyssynchronous movement into a life-altering disability.

Sophie taught me to unlearn biases and practice a more loving and empathetic pedagogy. We remained in touch. In November 2010, she sent me a text message asking for help. Patsy had withdrawn her and her younger sister from middle school following a conflict with the principal. Sophie was concerned both for own education and the legal consequences for her mother. Their family did not own a car, nor could they afford to move to another school district. We searched for a reservation boarding school.

Patsy, despite her own negative experience, agreed to enroll her daughters at Toadlena—the same boarding school where Kenneth and Ielene Benally, Ruth Higgins Duncan, Hayward Camper, and Juanita Bacote once taught. I shared the news with my partner, who responded: “yay for boarding schools! errrr. . . .” (personal correspondence, December 17, 2010). I also felt conflicted. To quote Dryden—“Strange
cozenage! . . . Yet all hope pleasure in what yet remain.” Sophie, however, was overjoyed. “YES! its AWESOME!,” she texted.

Sophie had engineered her own return to school. In June 2015, she became the first person in her immediate family to graduate from high school. I was there, beneath a brilliant sky, as hundreds of Diné families celebrated with cowbells, air horns, balloons, and confetti. Sophie pushed through the crowd toward her mother after the ceremony. Tears fell as they embraced.

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### NOTES

1. The names Sophie and Patsy Begaye are pseudonyms.
2. Langston Hughes, 1994, p. 23.

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